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After the Ordeal

by Paul L. Mathews

It was two days since the *Troika* and its crew had evaded the Long Knives and their allies. Now the battered vessel lay in orbit of an insignificant planetoid whilst the crew effected what repairs they could on the sturdy old ship.

Tatiana Valentine welcomed the distraction. Crammed into a narrow, twisting service duct, she and Boyd tried to repair the *Troika*'s Muon relays, the young Oridian throwing herself into the task with gusto.

Sparks twisted and lunged at her overalls and welding mask as she squinted, focusing on the seam whilst she welded the rupture shut. This was arduous work. The equipment was heavy, the pace monotonous and the requirements exacting—but anything was better than dwelling on the Witch and the death of Matinee.

Finished, Tatiana sat back and flipped up her welding mask, the Oridian blue of her flawless skin flushed and hot. For a moment she watched Boyd as he worked. He too was welding, but his broad shoulders allowed him to focus his work on those higher, harder to reach spots on the relay, his strong arms more capable of holding the equipment above shoulder height for longer periods. He was bandaged from the flesh-wounds he'd sustained in the raid on the Long Knife flagship, and his movements had a pained, mechanical aspect.

At least he came back, Tatiana found herself thinking. Doll Three hadn't been so lucky, blown to bits by the Long Knives.

Boyd dropped the welding lance to one side and flexed his arm with a mumbled curse. He'd been so quiet since the raid, so withdrawn. She could only guess what he was going through. Matinee had been his friend. Matinee and Father...

She turned away sharply. Father. Don't think about it.

Flipping the welding mask back down, angry at herself, she moved on to the next task.

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"Okay, Ivan, that's it," Boyd said over the ship's network. "The relays are sealed. You should be able to get the Graviton drives back online now."

Tatiana listened carefully for Ivan's answer. When it came, it was as she had expected, strained and tight with pain—another legacy of their encounter with the Witch.

"Thank you, Boyd. Once Vast has re-jigged sensor membrane, we shall go," he continued in his broken English. "I would like to reach Bazaar in forty eight hours, maximum."

The signal dropped out, and Boyd's head slumped forward as his eyes shut. Putting his forearm against the bulkhead, he rested his head against it. He looked worn-out.

"Are you okay?" Tatiana moved to touch him, going so far as raising her hand—misshapen and clumsy in its welding glove—but she stopped and lowered her hand. She felt herself blush, and hoped Boyd hadn't noticed.

“Aye, I’m fine,” Boyd murmured, and Tatiana saw his eyes flick to her hand and back to her face. “Just tired, that’s all.” His answer seemed hesitant, and, if anything, she wondered if he looked a little... disappointed? She felt her pulse quicken that little bit. Did he, she wondered with a shortness of breath, want her to touch him?

“You should get some rest,” Tatiana said. “You look ill.”

“Thanks.”

“No, seriously, Boyd. You can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Pushing yourself so hard. You can’t repair the whole ship on your own, y’know.”

“Well, it’s not as if Matinee’s here to help, is it?”

There was no malice on the comment, no barb, but it stung Tatiana. She balked. “Was that aimed at me?” she asked, hurt.

“What?” He looked genuinely confused.

“That. That comment. Was it aimed at me?”

“At you? Why would it be aimed at you?”

“Because you think I just left her to die, don’t you? You and Ivan and Vast. You think when the Witch got hold of her I just left her and ran away, don’t you?”

“Oh, Christ,” he said, stepping toward her. “No, Tatiana—that’s not what I meant at all.”

He reached out to her, but she stepped away. She churned inside. Did he mean it? Did he blame her? He looked genuine enough, but still... Unable to understand, unable to cope, she turned away and ran, hoping that Boyd hadn’t seen the tears in her eyes.

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The headset buzzed in Boyd’s ear, relaying Ivan’s cracked voice as the old man said, “Sensors are repaired. I am on flight deck now and shall set course for the Bazaar. Vast will take over from me in six hours.”

Putting the finishing touches to a wiring loom, Boyd paused before saying, “Are you sure? Six hours is a long shift, Ivan.” He grimaced before biting the bullet and saying, “You’re not as young as you used to be, y’know. And you’re pretty banged up.”

“I am captain. I am sure. You will get rest.”

“Rest. Aye.” Boyd smiled ruefully as he thought of the other million and one things that needed repairing.

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Make that one million.

Four hours later, in the clutter and burnt metal of the Lukin bay and its escape-pods, Boyd was ready to drop. Sitting on a tool-box, he slumped forward with his forearms resting on his thighs and head hung low. Still, he thought, at least the pods are in working order now.

Rubbing at the back of his aching neck, he wondered what to do next. Get some rest? No. To stop was to dwell. To dwell was to think about Matinee and Gregor.

Maybe he should check on Tatiana. He’d upset her. Even he could see that, even with his lack of experience with women. Maybe he should drop by her cabin and apologise—

He stopped himself, and snarled under his breath. Apologise? Who the hell did he think he was? She doesn't need his 'apology'. She needed her Father. She needed time. She needed—Katarina?

He stopped, trying to think, trying to conjure some mental dexterity through the fatigue. Katarina. He couldn't remember when he'd last seen her—or heard from her. Wasn't she supposed to be working on the shuttles?

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Fifteen minutes earlier, and Tatiana—curled up on her bunk in her tidy quarters—had nearly cried herself to sleep before she awoke with a start.

Katarina! Tatiana sat up. There was something wrong with Katarina, she realised as that weird stabbing pain in her stomach and wave of nausea assailed her, just as they always did when Katarina was in trouble. But where was she?

Now, as the door to Matinee's quarters opened, Tatiana saw her sister, and knew she'd been right to worry.

Matinee's old punk CDs lay strewn about the floor, stubbed out cigarettes and empty bottles scattered amongst them. The air was thick with the frenetic anger of music and languid cigarette smoke. A single lamp—sat at side of Matinee's bunk—illuminated the messy scene, and it picked out the sullen, slumped form of Katarina as she sat on the floor at the back of the quarters.

"Katarina?" Tatiana asked. "Are you okay?" There was no immediate response. Instead Katarina just stared up at her sister, dull, sodden eyes boring through thick lashes. She looked like shit, Tatiana thought, looking at the heart she'd scored into her chest to ward off the Witch, the wound leering out from above the low neckline of her bloody vest. She was still wearing the same clothes she been wearing two days ago. Tatiana wasn't even sure she'd washed.

"Katarina?" Tatiana asked again, taking another step toward her sister. "Katarina—are you drunk?"

"Go away," Katarina finally muttered as she took a long drag from a fresh cigarette before washing the smoke down with a swig from a whisky bottle. "Leave me alone."

"What are you doing?" Tatiana asked, and her voice softened, a heavy seam of concern running through it. "Katarina... If Ivan knew you were smoking..."

"He'd what?" Katarina asked with a false smile. "Yell at me? Do you think I care? Do you think I could feel any worse?"

Despite her bravado, Tatiana could see Katarina was hurting badly, her face streaked with mascara tears. "Katarina, I—"

"How could I feel worse, Tatiana? How? We left our parents behind. To die. We left Matinee behind. To die. How could I feel any worse?" Her voice cracked, and, even in this semi-darkness, Tatiana saw the flash of tears. Katarina looked away, and wiped her eyes on her bare forearm.

"Katarina." Tatiana began to flounder a little. She just wanted to comfort her sister, but Katarina's anger and grief were so fierce Tatiana thought they may burn her. She scrambled about to try and find something to say, some way to soothe Katarina's pain. "We didn't leave —"

“Perhaps that’s what Ivan’ll do to me, uh?” Katarina said, words spilling half-formed and slurred. “Leave me behind? Perhaps he’ll leave me behind for the Witch to catch, d’ya think?”

“Katarina, please!” Tatiana said, imploring hands spread wide as tears stung her eyes. She felt her throat contract and her chin go that funny square shape it always did when she tried not to cry. “Please—don’t do this! It’s bad enough to see you so upset, Kat—but to hear you talk like this—”

“Still, if *you’d* had the guts to kill the Witch when you had the chance,” Katarina continued, as if she’d gained so much momentum she was unable to stop, her emotion rushing out of her in a stream of vitriol and grief, “I wouldn’t need to worry, would I?”

At that moment, with that single, cutting remark, Tatiana’s concern and care vanished. Taking another step toward her drunken sister, she grabbed her dirty t-shirt and dragged her to her feet until they were eye to eye. Suddenly the concern had turned to anger.

“And I suppose that’s what you wanted? I suppose you wanted me to kill the Witch, is that it?” Tatiana said with a hiss. Now it was her turn for her emotions—and her mouth—to run away with her. “Well, I don’t think you did, Kat, because I heard you. I heard you with your ‘Oh, please don’t kill me, Miss Witch. I’ll be ever so good. I’ll be your little apprentice. I’ll be your lil’ bitch—’”

“To hell with you!” Katarina shouted. “I was bluffing. I’d have said anything to save my life!”

“So you say. But I know you, Katarina, with your little gothy friends and your stupid séance parties. You’d give your life to be like the Witch, wouldn’t you? Maybe even our lives—”

Katarina slapped Tatiana across the face, stunning her into silence.

“I dare you to say that again,” Katarina whispered, glaring into her sister’s eyes. “I dare y—”

“Enough!”

They turned to see Boyd in the doorway. He looked exhausted and angry. “That’s enough. Both of you. Don’t you think we’re in enough trouble without fighting amongst ourselves? Don’t you think you two should be pulling together instead of punching each other?”

The girls fell silent, and Tatiana felt her anger evaporate only to be replaced by embarrassment. She stepped away from Katarina and stood with her head bowed, hands clasped behind her back. Suddenly she felt very small. Suddenly she remembered what it was like to be told off by Father. “I’m sorry, Boyd,” she muttered. She didn’t hear anything from Katarina.

“Look, we’re all tired. We’re all hurt,” Boyd said, sounding so weary and so drained Tatiana wondered he could stand. “I think you two just need to get some rest, some space—and you, Kat, need to sober up—”

“That’s ‘Your Highness’ to you, Boyd,” Katarina said, sneering. “An’ don’t you ever presume to tell me what to do, okay? You’re not my Father. You’re just staff.”

Tatiana looked up again, as her anger re-ignited, but Katarina had already stormed past Boyd and out of Matinee’s quarters, thrusting the half-empty bottle of liquor into the startled Boyd’s hands.

Boyd didn’t react. He just stood there, staring at the bottle.

“Maybe I should go, too,” Tatiana mumbled, hands still behind her back.

“What? Oh. Yeah,” Boyd said. He had a distance in his eyes Tatiana had never seen before. She put it down to fatigue.

“Okay. I’ll go then,” she said.

Not that she didn’t want to stay. Nothing could have been further from the truth. She wanted to stay and say sorry for the things she’d said—that Katarina had said—but she couldn’t find the words or—Katarina’s words still ringing in her ears—the guts.

Seconds later, in a troubled silence, Tatiana slipped past Boyd and ran away.

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An hour later and Boyd was still staring at that bottle.

By now he’d moved to sit on Matinee’s bunk, but he was enraptured by the whisky. It’d be so easy, wouldn’t it? he thought. Just a few swigs and he could slide into oblivion. No worries, no angst. No guilt. Even if it were just for a short while, it’d be worth it, right?

Nobody’d get hurt, he thought as he started to unscrew the cap. A few missing hours and then back to repairing the ship. Nobody’d be any the wiser, right?

“Put that down, Boyd.”

Wrong.

“Ivan!” Boyd straightened. “I... Um... I thought you were flying the ship...” Boyd’s voice trailed off, and it was his turn to feel like a kid caught with his hands in the sweetie jar.

Ivan didn’t respond straight away. Standing in the doorway, Ivan’s big, heavy frame filled the aperture. Well over six feet tall, his frame was robust and muscular, and only the pure white of his lustrous hair and *sans chin* beard hinted at his advancing years. As he stood there, glaring at Boyd, the Scotsman could believe every one of the stories he’d heard about Ivan and his past, and the barely contained fury behind those eyes illustrated why they’d called the Russian ‘Ivan the Terrible’.

He watched Boyd for a moment or two before continuing. “Do you think that is going to help? Do you think getting drunk is going to help keep Twins alive? Or ship in one piece? Or bring Gregor and Matinee back?”

“Ivan, I—”

“This is rhetorical question, yes? I will talk, and you will listen, yes?”

Boyd nodded like a frightened, chastised child.

“I am not here to tell you what to do. You are grown up. I am leaving now to get rest. I will leave you, and you will do what you think is best. You will either get rest also, or get drunk. Choice is yours.

“But, Boyd, remember. We are long way from home now. If there is any hope of our returning, I need you. I need you focused, and I need you sober, yes? Now Matinee is gone, I need you more than ever.

“Now, you can either do your job, or return to being drunken illiterate you were when Gregor took you under his wing, yes? You decide.”

With this typically brisk diatribes concluded, Ivan left.

Boyd stared at the bottle.

Four hours later, he was roaring drunk.

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Russians*

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