

## Asteroid

by Paul L. Mathews

The *Troika*'s hangar was only partially lit by strip-lights in its ceiling, the green shimmer of the AEGIS shield that maintained its environmental integrity whilst the hangar doors slid shut, the blinking of the Old Bitch's running lights, and the red light that poured from out of the battered shuttle's smoky interior.

All paled in comparison to Ivan's incandescent rage.

"Ivan! No!" Tatiana hung from Ivan's arm, hoping to stop him from hitting Boyd, and her scream drowned out the alarms from within the *Old Bitch*. "Put him down! Please!"

Katarina—leant against the frame of the *Old Bitch*'s door—watched this floorshow with a subtle smile on her crooked lips. Holding the weak, wounded Boyd by the neck, Ivan held him off the floor with one hand as he drew the other back, ready to punch the Scot. Boyd kicked feebly and tried to pry Ivan's fingers from his neck.

"You idiot!" Ivan bellowed, ignoring Tatiana. "Idiot! I leave you to protect twins, and this is what you do? Allow them on planet? Nearly get them killed?"

"It was me," Tatiana shouted to make herself heard over Ivan as she pulled at his arms. "It was my idea! Please, Uncle! Put him down! He's hurt. He needs the med-bay!"

Ivan turned to glare at her. Still wet, bloodied and bruised after her escape from the mutants in the depth of the deserted city, she looked like she'd been to Hell and back. For his part, Ivan's face oscillated between unconcealed rage, confusion and fatigue. Finally he threw Boyd to the deck, the Scotsman sliding across the hangar and hitting a bulkhead with a groan.

"Get him out of here," Ivan said, his voice a low, feral growl. His head dipped and his shoulders sagged as his own wounds—sustained in his fight to the death with Yevgeny on Sauber's Bizarre—began to overcome his anger. "Now!"

Tatiana went to Boyd, helping him up. "Will you help me, please?" she asked Katarina.

Katarina made a face, but acquiesced with a dark mutter. The twins then helped the Scotsman as he staggered out of the hangar, and they left Ivan to glare at them as they left.

#

Ivan's mood did not improve over the next five days. Insular and brooding, he spent most of his time either sleeping—briefly—or flying the *Troika*.

He kept their destination from the crew, and answered the twins' repeated questions to this effect with curt dismissals. All they knew, by the time the ship had reached its secret objective, was the *Troika* had crept still deeper into the Pagentorn Fiefs.

It hadn't been easy. They'd barely outrun a pursuing bounty hunter crossing the Taran Lights, they'd had to skirt round a conflagration between robber barons in near orbit of Raskav's sun, and they'd had to alter course to circumnavigate a long range Long Knife hunter/killer unit at Kaliban's Folly.

Now, however, Ivan eased down the *Troika*'s engines and activated the retros, the ship gliding to a halt before hovering over its destination. Ordering the auto-pilot maintain its position, Ivan then activated the ships PA.

"Everybody, this is Ivan," he said. "I want all you all in hangar. Ivan out."

#

"How long?" Boyd said, mouth full of *faux* bacon and eggs. Sat up in the *Troika*'s clean, bright med-bay, he was eating heartily, trying to sate a ravenous hunger.

"Five days," Doll Two said, "You had a moderate concussion with a GCS of twelve so I placed you in an induced coma whilst I reduced the swelling on your brain—"

"Wait a minute, Dolly." Boyd said through a mouth full of food. "This concussion. Will there be any side-effects?"

"I wouldn't expect so, sir—although I would advise staying out of trouble for the next week or so."

"Stay out of trouble? I can't see that happening, Dolly."

Boyd stopped chewing as he turned to see her enter the med-bay. Oh, Christ, he thought. Tatiana.

Dressed lightly in white tee and matching shorts, she was smiling, and her tone was playful rather than reproachful. The sky-blue skin of her cheeks, however, had a darker hue as she blushed.

"Um. Hello?" He stumbled over the words. Partially because his mouth was full of food, partially because he didn't know what to say.

She smiled as she moved to Boyd's bed. "How are you feeling?" she asked. She put a hand on his shoulder whilst playing with her hair with the other.

"Err... Not bad." He scrabbled about for something else to say. "I'm hungry."

"I can see that."

"I'm... I mean... You..." Whatever nonsense he tried to formulate withered on the vine. He was having difficulty taking his eyes off her. As ever, she looked glorious, even with the cuts and bruises. Just looking at her, with her hips, lips and tits, gave him a feeling in his gut he'd not felt in a long time.

Then he remembered. He'd kissed her, hadn't he? Down on Parlour? His mouth fell open as stared at her. He couldn't believe it. What had he been thinking? She was only seventeen! What the hell was Ivan going to say?

"Dolly asked me to give you a few days whilst she kept you under sedation," Tatiana said. She lowered her voice a little. "I really missed you."

"That's... Um. Look. Tatiana..."

There was a pause. An embarrassed silence. Tatiana was staring at him as if expecting him to say something. All he could do was stare back and remember to close his mouth and chew his food. Slowly.

"Ivan's been really quiet since we left Parlour. Katarina too." Tatiana said after a moment or so, and Boyd got the impression she was searching for something to talk about. "Vast's been busy nursing the engines. We've gone deeper into the Pagentorn's now."

Now Boyd knew what to say. "Deeper?" He swallowed hard, the food slipping down his throat. "He's taken us *deeper*?"

"Yeah. God knows where Ivan's taking us."

"No, me neither," Boyd said, muttering as he glared darkly into the middle distance. That's just stupid, he thought. What the hell are you playing at, Ivan?

They fell into a further silence, and Tatiana—ever so tentatively—moved her hand from Boyd's shoulder to touch his hand. It felt good to the Scotsman, but he fought against the instinct to hold it and withdrew his hand.

She looked confused and flushed deeper. Boyd—suddenly unable to look at her—turned to Doll Two. "When can I get out?"

"Everybody, this is Ivan," the PA squawked before the android could answer. "I want you all in hangar. Ivan out."

"Well, I guess that answers that one."

#

Katarina and Vast were already in the hangar when Tatiana, Boyd and Doll Two reached the hangar. Katarina gave Boyd a filthy look.

He looked away. I probably deserve that, he thought. His gaze fell to the deck, and he remembered finding Matinee's body there, savaged and contorted by the Witch's dragons.

He closed his eyes.

Dammit, Matinee, he thought. How could you get killed? Who the hell do I have to talk to now?

He opened his eyes to see Katarina and Tatiana engaging in stilted conversation. Katarina had a smug aspect to her—no doubt still lording it over her sister that she'd saved their lives back

on Parlour—and Boyd detected something else about her: the faint smell of tobacco. He wondered abstractly if Ivan knew she'd been smoking.

The other door hissed open, and Ivan entered, Stalin at his side. With head low, tail between his legs and eyes cast to the deck, Stalin looked forlorn and dejected.

Ivan leant heavily on a Dante cabinet as it floated five feet off the deck. Six feet in length, two deep and three wide, the cabinet was a hermetically sealed black case. Its sheer surface was punctuated only by a smattering of tiny lights and a diagnostic display that glowed a faint green.

Boyd and Tatiana exchanged glances. A Dante cabinet could only mean one thing.

“Is Matinee in there?” Tatiana’s voice had a nervous shiver.

“Yes,” Ivan replied. “I had Dolly place Matinee in cabinet until she could be buried. Now we are at grave, so you will need vac-suits, yes?”

#

“What the hell is this place?” Katarina asked.

With Ivan’s shuttle at their backs, and the *Troika* hovering above them, Tatiana, Katarina, Ivan, Boyd, Stalin and Vast—all cosseted by bulky vac-suits—were stood on the rocky, uneven surface of an asteroid. Barren and lifeless, it was devoid of atmosphere but possessed a strong artificial gravity.

“Welcome to Potter’s Field,” Ivan replied.

Boyd looked beyond the asteroid’s horizon to see a belt of other asteroids orbiting the beautiful gas giant that dominated the vista. Looking at the giant’s surface, seeing the swirl of the red and brown gasses and the flashes of lightning that plagued its surface, Boyd felt very small. Beyond the gas giant its neighbours—a small system of four planets—span away, their sun defiant and proud amongst the tiny stars. Light years beyond that, the rainbow colours of the majestic Rosberg nebula hung in the darkness, and further still he could make out the hole in the sky called The Well of Never. He counted two comets—tails long and bright—three more nebulae—little more than smudges at this distance—and what looked like a fleet of Karscalian gypsies on the fringes of the system.

Tears welled in his eyes, and a void flourished in the pit of his stomach. Look at that, he thought. It’s so... Words failed him. And look at me: a meat-head from Glasgow.

How the hell did I get here?

“Potter’s Field?” Even the digitization of the suits’ comms network couldn’t hide Tatiana’s mystified tone. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“I have,” Boyd said. “Isn’t this were your old unit used to come and bury its dead? There’re some rare names buried here. Legends, even.” He looked at Ivan. Now, at least, the old man’s insistence they move deeper into the Pagentorn’s made a little sense.

Ivan turned to look at him, his movement restricted by the bulky vac-suit. “Yes,” Ivan said, and Boyd counted his blessings that looks really couldn’t kill. “This is where all the dead from Omega Hammers are buried. Gregor insisted they were all brought here years ago. Even I don’t know why.”

“Omega Hammers?” Katarina inquired.

“Ivan and your father’s old mercenary unit, from before they settled on Oridia,” Boyd said. “Stalin was in the unit too, right?”

“I don’t like to talk about it,” Stalin said, voice a low growl. The cyborg canine looked comical in a doggy vac-suit, and the way he glared at them all, tail between his legs and skinthetic brow furrowed, made his embarrassment obvious.

“Omega Hammers?” Katarina rolled the name about her mouth, savouring it. “Cool...”

“Hey...” Boyd asked suddenly, his eyes narrowing, “What’s that?” He drew his sidearm, and to his side, Vast levelled a rifle.

Over the brow of the asteroid, an android was approaching, walking steadily. Its head was identical to Doll Two’s, but its body taller, bulkier and made with beefier actuators.

“Stand down,” Ivan ordered. “Is... How you say...? *Caretaker*, yes?”

The android’s stride brought it to the little group in double time.

“Zero,” Ivan said to the android by way of greeting. “You received transmission, yes? All is ready?”

“Yes, Master Ivan,” the android confirmed. “The grave has been prepared.”

#

True to Doll Zero’s word, the grave was indeed ready, neatly burnt into the asteroid’s hide. It swallowed Matinee’s Dante cabinet, the silent Ivan positioning it over the grave before powering down its tiny anti-gravity unit.

As the cabinet sank into the hole, Boyd heard tiny sniffles from both Tatiana and Katarina. Matinee had been a friend to both of them, and Boyd—begrudgingly—knew that even that little cow Kat was grieving. He kept his eyes on the cabinet, glad the twins couldn’t see Matinee’s body. He’d helped Doll Two put what was left of it into the cabinet, and it hadn’t been pretty.

The cabinet settled at the bottom of its grave and the group stood for a moment’s quiet contemplation. Katarina finally began to cry as Tatiana comforted her, and Ivan gave Doll Zero a small signal. In an instant, the grave was gone, concealed by a camograph depiction of the asteroid’s unspoilt surface.

“We go,” Ivan said.

“Wait,” Tatiana said, incredulous. “That’s it? No last words? No sermon—”

“Tatiana, there is nobody to talk to,” Ivan said, his tone flat and factual. “Sermon would be waste of oxygen. Now, back to *Troika*.”

There was a pause, a lack of certainty. Vast, Doll Two and Stalin moved to head back to the shuttle, but Boyd and the twins hesitated.

“Back to—” Ivan began.

Boyd’s teeth ground as he clenched his fists. This wasn’t right. “Matinee,” he said, ignoring Ivan and kneeling by the grave. “Thank you. You were a good friend to me, and I’m going to miss you.” He closed his eyes and lowered his head until he felt the coolness of his visor against his forehead. It was scant comfort. “I am so, so sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me, Matty. I may not have been able to beat those damned dragons, but you can bet I would’ve dragged you away before they’d have hurt you.”

Tears began to escape from the corners of his eyes. “I always said you were too bloody brave, didn’t I? That was always the difference between us, wasn’t it, lass...?”

He stopped, throat so tight he couldn’t continue. His hand went over his visor as he hid his face, and gasped as he fought for control. I’m a coward and I’m scared, damn it, Matty, he thought, and I’m so angry at you for leaving me alone.

He remained knelt for a few moments as he regained his composure before, tears drying on his cheeks, he stood. Ivan glared at him. As the twins took Boyd’s cue and—de-activating their comms—knelt by the grave and paid their own brief tributes to their friend and bodyguard, the Scotsman and Ivan continued to glower at each other.

Glare at me all you want, old man, Boyd thought, teeth gritting as his lip curled. I don’t care if you’re mad at me for what I’ve done, for the booze, for the stupid mistake on Parlour. Y’not pushing me about this time. Matinee deserved more.

It didn’t take long, but the girls were soon done, and they began to trudge back to the shuttle.

“Zero,” Ivan began, not taking his eyes off Boyd, “Escort twins back to shuttle. Boyd and I will follow soon, yes?”

“Aye, Master Ivan,” Zero said, moving to stand beside the twins.

“Boyd?”

“It’s okay, Tatiana,” Boyd said. He too refused to look away and continued to stare at Ivan. “I think me and your uncle just need a wee chat. I’m sure we’ll be along soon.”

Moments later, the twins were gone.

“You first, Ivan,” Boyd said. “We don’t have all day.”

Ivan bristled, and Boyd saw that famous flash of anger burst across the Russian’s face. Like the gas giant beyond, he was all fury and lightning. “I left twins in your care,” Boyd could hear the strained quality in his voice, the barely contained danger. “I left their *safely* in your hands. Yet you let them go to city, put themselves in danger?”

“Ivan, please, I’m sorry, okay?” Boyd said, spreading his hands. “If you’d actually taken a moment to talk to me about the whole Parlour thing instead of just trying to bloody strangle me, you’d know tha—”

“Sorry is not enough. Twins could have died.”

“I know that! I nearly died, too, y’know? When Tatiana asked to go to the city, I couldn’t see the danger in it. I made. A. *Mistake*.”

A pause as the two continued to glare at each other.

“I made a mistake. I don’t know how many other ways I can say that, okay? I’ve made a stupid mistake, I’m sorry, and I’ve learnt my lesson. First thing I do when I get back to my quarters is pour all that bloody whisky away. I’m not letting it do that to me again, right?”

There was no response as Ivan stared. Boyd’s courage began to falter. He knew Ivan’s idea of communication ended with breaking stuff and shouting, but this? Boyd would have felt safer in the ground with Matinee. “Look, Ivan, don’t do this to me. Don’t crucify me, please. I know you’re upset, I know losing Gregor’s been tough on you, but…”

He paused before continuing.

“Look, I’ve had two friends, ever—Matinee and Gregor. One we’ve just buried, and the other we left behind to die. Don’t you think I’m upset too? Can’t you at least understand why I hit the bottle? Can’t you at least try and empathise?”

Just for a fraction, Boyd fancied he’d touched something. The storm in Ivan’s countenance seemed to break for a moment, and Boyd saw the big man understood what it was to lose someone. “One more chance,” Ivan said as he turned away and began to trudge back to the shuttle, his voice possessing all the care and empathy of sandpaper. “You have one more chance, yes?”

“Yes, Ivan, I—”

“And Boyd? I see way Tatiana looks at you, yes? You touch her, and next time I come here, I bury *you*.”

#

By the time Ivan and Boyd reached the shuttle, the rest of the group were already aboard, and only Doll Zero waited outside. Boyd boarded as Ivan paused to nod at Zero, the android serf making a brief bow before closing the door behind the Russian. The android was still standing there, watching, when the shuttle finally docked with the *Troika*.

Silence reigned for the whole of the short trip. Vast piloted the shuttle, and the rest sat on the opposing benches that lined the interior. Katarina stared at the ceiling, tears drying black on her face; Stalin sat at Ivan’s feet, head on his paws as he looked about him; and Ivan watched Boyd, probing the Scotsman’s face through narrowed eyes.

Not that the Scotsman noticed. I need a drink, he thought as he ignored the fact Tatiana was also staring at him from across the shuttle. He licked his dry lips, and he pictured the bottle he had under his pillow.

I want... He faltered. I don't know what I want, he thought. Oh, Christ, Tatiana. What am I going to do about you? Ivan's words bored away at his stomach. Ivan meant it. Boyd knew he did. Ivan didn't make empty threats.

Tatiana. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. He could still feel her lips—her body—against his. What the hell was he going to do about Tatiana?

#

Later—hours after the crew had returned to the *Troika*, hours after they'd drifted off into their own silent introspection, and hours after they'd all felt the familiar throb in their bones as the *Troika* had cast off—Tatiana made Boyd's mind up for him.

There was a blurred, fantastical element to the way—brazen and naked under a white, translucent negligee—she'd awoken him in his quarters. Dumbstruck, he'd wondered if he were dreaming as he'd stared at her sweeping curves, her flared hips, her generous breasts and her flawless skin. He hadn't been able to believe this were really happening as she'd joined him in bed and stripped him naked.

Now, however, he didn't care if it were real or not as he gloried in the sweet pressure seizing him as he slid inside her. Now he surrendered as she moved underneath him, as he screwed her, as he squeezed her breasts and filled his mouth, one by one, with her nipples.

Her hands were all over him, scratching, stroking and pulling as she moaned and bit and kissed. The blue of her skin glistened with sweat, her breeding stripped away as she abandoned all heirs and graces, her mouth full of filth and demand.

He closed his eyes, glorying in it all. It was like fucking a goddess, and Boyd continued to heave at her altar.

But then something changed. Something was wrong. What was that smell?

Satsumas? Pine?

“Don't stop, Boyd,” she whispered, “I'm nearly there...”

His eyes opened, and his fantasy turned sour.

White as milk and twice as cold, Portia was underneath him instead, and she took hold of his shoulders whilst wrapping her thighs about him. He tried to struggle, tried to get free, but she was too strong, thighs contracting as, laughing, she held him inside her. All about him were webs and half eaten fish-men.

Then he felt it. It was a tickle at first, then a burning sensation in the tip of his cock. The burning turned to scratching, and he bellowed in pain and fear as he felt tiny spiders crawling down his penis and into his scrotum.

Still screaming as he awoke. Boyd sat up. Panting, his hands went to his groin, and he gulped for breath before, instinctively, he grabbed for the whisky at the side of his bunk. Still trembling, he began to unscrew the top.

He stopped, looking ruefully at the bottle.

He'd meant to pour it away, really he had, but... It was just so hard. He was cut up, confused. Surely if he just kept a bottle? Just one? A few swigs wouldn't hurt, would they?

With a snarl, he threw the bottle clear across the cabin, and it shattered against the wall.

Lying back, afraid to sleep, afraid to dream, Boyd lay sweating and wide-eyed in the darkness as he faced the night, sober and alone.

*The Valentine Chronicles* will continue with *Hearts and Bones*.

Discuss this story—and more—on the [Valentine Chronicles forum](#)

© 2008 Mathew David Spaul. All rights reserved.