

Safe and Sound

by Paul L. Mathews

Part One

Trash City

Tatiana didn't know what was happening. All she knew was the armoured car had been hit by a rocket and now it was upside down. In a heap on the inverted roof, she could see out of the smashed windows to her side. The street—iced over and glistening even at the height of what passed for summer here on Oridia—was suddenly deserted. Where once there had been a throng of Oridians waving flags and political slogans she didn't understand, now all she could see were the rent bodies of her bodyguards strewn about her car. She could hear shouting and a gunfight.

At thirteen she was old enough to know someone was trying to kill her, but too young to know why. She looked about frantically, trying to see her Father. Instead all she could through her smashed window was a door—smoking and torn from its car—with an Imperial flag emblazoned across it. She knew that crest only too well: it was her father's. Her hand went to cover her mouth as tears welled in her eyes. They must have hit his car as well!

She tried to scabble onto her hands and knees, only to cut her delicate hands on the shards of glass all around her. Now on her knees, she looked to her wounded, bloodied hands.

The sound of gunfire intensified, and she looked up. She could see boots moving toward her car—their concave nature and the raised attitude of the heels suggesting the owners were crouched, crabbing sideways toward her vehicle. Her eyes widened and her blood chilled. The boots weren't military issue either, so they couldn't have belonged to her father's men. They must belong to the people who had attacked her cavalcade.

She turned toward the opposite window, knees and hands cut further by broken glass. Reaching it, she began to wrestle with the handle—only to find it jammed. She grabbed the handle and wrestled with it, desperation creeping into her actions as she began to sob. The door wouldn't open. She cried out in despair as she pulled on the handle even harder, the muscles in her thin arms screaming.

She was going to die. She just knew it. There were people out there who wanted to kill her, and she didn't know why. Who were they? Where was Father? Had they—

The door's window shattered, glass covering her. She shrieked, falling backward. An arm reached in, blind hand groping.

“Out you come, Princess,” a disembodied voice said, muffled slightly. It was harsh and cruel—the voice of a child's nightmares. “You're coming with—”

The sentence ended as a shot rang out and, instantly, the arm went limp and the man fell fully into view. An aging Oridian, blue skin dulled by age and blizzard, his face was frozen in an expression of surprise, a bullet between his eyes. His apparel was scruffy, the equipment old and cobbled together. For the briefest moment, Tatiana had the abstract notion that this man looked... forlorn?

Suddenly the car door was wrenched open, the twisted, blackened metal groaning in defiance. Strong, thick arms pulled the wreckage aside, and moments later they reached in and pulled her free.

“It’s okay, Tatiana,” her Father said, his voice thick and sure. It carried all the chill and mystery of an Imperial Russia she knew only in day-dreams. “I’m here.”

Eyes squeezed shut, sobbing in relief and shaking in fear, she flung her arms about her father’s strong neck as he lifted her to his chest with one arm. Burying her head into his shoulder, she heard the sound of his gun as he stood his ground, fighting for her life.

Suddenly, despite it all, she felt safe.

#

Not so many years later, having finally been forced to flee her home in the face of Oridian revolution, Tatiana Valentine—accompanied by her bodyguard Boyd—wandered through a deserted alien city, gazing about in a mixture of wonder and trepidation.

“This place is amazing!” she declared with a huge grin. “And a little spooky.”

Boyd didn’t answer straight away. Tatiana had spotted the city when, the *Troika* having entered Parlour’s orbit, she’d conducted a cursory scan of its surface. Covered in water with the exception of a few tiny islands and archipelagos, the tranquil, glittering surface of the water-world was disturbed only by a handful of these cities. Set in a gargantuan bowl that floated upon the sea, held in place by massive tethers secured to the seabed below, the desolate metropolis was a dense collection of towers and bridges.

Once, the towers would have shone in the sun, Tatiana supposed. But time had taken the burnish off the metal frames, and had stolen the colour from the coral walls. All about them were parks and boulevards suspended between the towers by thick metal cables. There were no signs of life, and the chill breeze carried the scent of brine and the taste of sea-water. Beyond the rim of the bowl lingered a pink sunset, the dense shadows lengthening all around them.

“Spooky? You got that right,” Boyd looked about them through narrowed, reddened eyes.

“It’s pretty, too!” Tatiana said as she stood beaming. This was more like it. Never mind all that skulking about on the *Troika*. This was much better. This was an adventure!

“Um, yeah. I suppose.” Boyd seemed a little distracted, and Tatiana supposed he would be more concerned about watching for danger than relaxing and enjoying the place. “In that kind of run down and forlorn way.”

“So, do you think there’s anybody left alive?” asked Tatiana. “And where do you think they’d be?”

They’d landed their shuttle in a suspended park, decorated with overgrown bushes and uncut grass, that was linked to the surrounding towers by robust suspension bridges. The edge of the park—encircled with a high mesh fence—overlooked a daunting view, the sheer drop interrupted by a complex congestion of bridges and suspended precincts. The bottom of the towers were lost to the darkness thousands of feet below.

Boyd approached the edge and Tatiana guessed he was looking down into this vast, labyrinthine expanse below as his forehead rested against the mesh. She went to stand with him and saw his eyes were closed. She couldn’t be sure, but he looked hung over. She’d seen Katarina look just like that.

The crunching of dry grass under her boot made him look up. Allowing her a weary, laconic smile, he drew one of his many guns and fired a shot into the air, apparently at random. Its report echoed mightily throughout the seemingly deserted metropolis.

A huge phalanx of black, cawing birds burst into the air. Tatiana ducked her head a little. “What the..?”

“Carrion, Princess. Scavengers,” Boyd said, his bloodshot eyes watching the black cloud of birds recede. “Want to know where everybody is?” he continued with a sardonic smile, pointing below. “I’d say what’s left of ‘em is down there. Somewhere.”

#

The bottom of the city was a fetid congestion of squalid factories, slums and warehouses that had once served a thriving economy, but now merely served as a hunting ground for the city’s new ruling elite.

Cloaked in darkness, they were bent and savage, their lives a primal cycle of feasting, copulation and fighting. But now these creatures suddenly had a new enemy, its presence echoing amongst the bowels of the city. As soon as the boom of Boyd’s pistol reverberated about them, they paused in their painful, violent pursuits and looked to the heavens, their multiple, lidless eyes alive and alert in the darkness.

There were intruders in the spires. Intruders...

... And fresh meat.

#

Hundreds of miles away, a scarred and battered submarine forged through the depths of a boundless ocean.

The sub’s bridge was dark and cramped, the claustrophobia of its darkness pierced only by varied and complex instrumentation over which a half-illuminated, amphibian crew bent and poured. Stood in the centre of this benighted space was the vessel’s captain. A prime example of his race, with strong limbs, oily skin and the burdens of rank etched amongst his aging, fish-like features, his hands were behind his back, the webbed fingers twitching as he listened to his officer’s report.

The long range scans were inconclusive at best, the first mate informed him. There were certainly life-signs, but in significantly reduced numbers. At this range, however, it was difficult to ascertain if the city had been subjected to a conventional attack, or one of the enemy’s Mutagens

The captain turned to his navigator, and demanded to know long it would take to reach the city, their home. The viscous delivery of his race’s dialect was rough and throaty.

At best, it would take four hours, the navigator surmised. The captain reflected on this with something approaching a sardonic twist of his flappy, wet lips. Fours hours? What was another four hours after all these months?

With a croak, the captain issued his instructions: Get us home. Best speed.

#

With Ivan, Vast and Stalin at Sauber’s Bazaar, the *Troika*—in a geosynchronous orbit over the city—was manned only by Katarina and the ship’s serf, Doll Two.

“How are things going down there?” Katarina inquired, her usual flat, bored tone peppered with a little apprehension.

“Everything’s good, Kat,” came the reply from Tatiana. “No sign of trouble, and we’re going deeper into the city. Any sign of Uncle Ivan yet?”

“Not yet,” Katarina said. “He’s still on Sauber’s Bazaar. He’ll be hours yet, I guess.”

“Cool. Well, Boyd and I will be back before he does—so he doesn’t need to know we slipped away, okay?”

“Ok, Tatiana. But—”

“Be careful? Oh, don’t be such a worry wart, Kat. I’m always careful!”

With that, Tatiana laughed and her signal dropped out, leaving Katarina alone with her thoughts.

With a heavy sigh, she sat back into her chair, her mood as dark as her gothic *ensemble*.

What’s the point of all this? she thought as she worried the flesh about her thumbnail with the nail of her forefinger, scratching at the skin in rapid, staccato strokes. No sooner had Ivan left for the Bazaar than Tatiana had sneaked off to the planet to have a look around, leaving Katarina behind. As usual. The skin gave way, and her thumb began to bleed. Not that she was bothered about a planet full of deserted cities, but, well... she put the bleeding thumb into her mouth, sucking on it like an insecure child as she glared at the scanner screen, it would’ve been nice to have been asked.

“Coffee, Mistress Katarina?” inquired the androgynous Doll Two as it presented her with a tray of coffee and sandwiches.

“Thanks,” she muttered in reply as she took the steaming cup of black, sour coffee from the silver tray.

“Some sandwiches, Mistress Katarina?” Doll Two pressed, subtly edging the tray into her peripheral vision.

“No.”

There was a pause as Doll Two stood rigidly in place whilst Katarina, just as diligently, ignored her, looking away. “You really should eat, Mistress Katarina,” Doll Two said.

“Master Ivan has noted how little you’ve eaten since we left Oridia. You really should try and cheer up—”

“I’m *fine!*” Katarina shouted. “For God’s sake! Leave me alone!”

She turned away still further as she raised the steaming coffee to her lips. Why should she cheer up? What was she supposed to be so cheerful about? Mother and Father dying? Being chased out of her home? Perhaps she should be giddy with relief that she’d survived the uprising and Matinee hadn’t?

Tears pricked her eyes. Well, she wasn’t relieved. She wished she were dead.

“Leave me alone, Dolly,” Katarina muttered as she closed her eyes, taking some succour in the gentle caress of steam on her face. “Just leave me alone. As usual.”

#

Boyd continued to stare in to the darkened depths of the city below. “I’d hate to have to fly a shuttle outta there in a hurry,” he muttered.

Tatiana looked at him. He really did look worse for wear. “Are you all right?” she asked, gently.

“Yeah, sure. Just a headache, that’s all.”

Tatiana continued to look at him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

Tatiana stiffened a little, then decided to change the subject. She stared down into the convulsion of towers below. “We could go see, find out what’s down there” She peered up at him again. “We can easily get down there, right?”

Boyd looked at her. “Just because we can doesn’t mean we should.”

“And just because we shouldn’t doesn’t mean I can’t, right?” Tatiana said with a wink and a grin.

“What about the shuttle?” Boyd asked. He clearly wasn’t convinced this was a good idea.

“It’ll be fine!” She gave the shuttle a nonchalant glance. Resting and locked up in the park behind them, she was sure it would be okay.

Boyd continued to wrestle with something inside. It was just the same when she’d proposed they come down to the city in the first place. Slurred, bleary eyed, and distracted, he clearly hadn’t comfortable with the notion, but Tatiana wouldn’t be deterred. She was so desperate to get off the *Troika*, so desperate for a distraction from the fear, apprehension and grief their lives had suddenly become that the prospect of exploring the derelict city was irresistible.

“Just like your bloody mother,” Boyd had muttered, giving in—just as he gave in now.

#

As one, the black mass moved, intent on its prey, and the creatures raced each other. Odd, misaligned limbs moved and clung to towers as they ascended the mammoth structures about them, finding purchase on even the smoothest of surfaces. Up they went, looking to the heavens as they ignored the condensation pissing down on them from the city above.

It was feeding time, and none of them wanted to miss out on the best pickings.

#

“Shops!” Tatiana declared. “This gets better and better!”

The causeway they now explored was suspended between two typically huge towers. Punctuated with what had once been small outdoor cafes, crèches and garden displays, the thoroughfare was flanked by numerous shops which sprouted off the boulevard, hanging in individual pods.

Once, reflected Tatiana, the causeway would have been a pretty place indeed, but now it was smashed, derelict and littered with the evidence of looting and—for the first time—they saw some evidence of the city’s former denizens. Skeletons, picked clean of flesh, were dotted about. Although humanoid, Tatiana noted, there was something about their enlarged frontal eminence and the unusually large... what were they called? Superciliary arches? that reminded her of the amphibious Cral of Spyker Minor that her xenobiology teacher had made her study. Most were empty handed, but some held jewellery or other *object d’art* in their bony clutches, as if hoping to ward off the inevitable with these stolen talismans.

Boyd prodded one with the toe of his boot. “Head smashed in,” he said. “Teeth marks on most of the bones...” His voice tailed off. “I’m not liking this, Princess. I think we should get back. Now.”

But Tatiana had already dashed to the first shop-pod. Her omnipresent backpack was already open and ready.

“Tatiana! Stop it! That’s stealing!” she heard Boyd call after her as she began popping stuff in her bag.

“No it’s not. Everybody’s dead,” she shouted. “Besides, who’s going to know?”

“Ivan.”

“Don’t be silly! How’s he going to find out?”

“Are you joking? This is your Uncle we’re talking about.”

She paused, a holographic picture of the sea in hand. Her bag was already stuffed with some faded old antique photos of these aliens in their prime, and something that looked a lot like a nut-cracker.

“Good point,” she muttered, putting down the holographic picture.

#

They moved on, leaving the shops behind, and Tatiana stopped to see what Boyd was staring at.

They were now in the heart of one of the towers, which itself contained a host of individual buildings and structures. To Tatiana, these buildings seemed very sober, very, well... boring. Probably municipal buildings of some type, she thought.

The steps of the large, squat construction at which they were stood were littered with discarded books and small, bright tubes. Some sort of data storage thingy? she wondered as she bent and picked one up to inspect it.

“Do you think that’s a library?” Boyd asked her, looking at the books strewn about the steps.

She nearly didn’t hear him. Instead she was staring at the skeletons, to which she had become accustomed. They weren’t as prevalent here, the doomed inhabitants of the city obviously less keen to ease their dying days with a good book rather than bright, shiny loot.

Tatiana could relate to that, but Boyd probably couldn’t, she thought, smiling to herself. How many times had she wandered down to the kitchens for a glass of milk and found Father and Boyd sitting at the kitchen table with a couple of shots of whisky, reading and discussing some old book or other?

She quickly thrust the thought to the back of her mind as she forced herself to focus on the present.

“Want to go in?” she asked, intruding on Boyd’s fascination with the library, and his obvious desire to have a look inside. Was he thinking of Father too?

“Um...” Boyd seemed a little surprised. “Can we?”

“Sure.” She smiled brightly. “Maybe you can find something to read.”

#

Within the depths of the library, a curled, sleeping form, hidden in shadow, stirred, asleep in a hammock of silken web. All about it the delicate threads of her extended web trembled, their message simple and direct: there were intruders approaching.

With an arachnid swiftness, the shape unfurled an array of legs and scuttled into the dark recesses of the building, intent on intercepting the strangers, intent on defending its home.

Part Two
The Hunter

The dwindling light outside offered scant relief from the darkness within the library, and Tatiana and Boyd had to use 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 webs.

White and stringy, the strands were everywhere. They weren't tightly woven, and the gaps were more than big enough to step through, but Tatiana could see them 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 better keep that," he said, placing the aerosol 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's voice was just as quiet.

He laughed a humourless and empty laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Said the spider to the fly?"

"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. "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 his unease by drawing a 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. She suddenly felt a little sleepy. She sniffed again, nostrils flaring. What *was* that smell?

Her eyes snapped open.

Father’s cologne! It smelt 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.” Was 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, 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?”

#

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 webs, Tatiana noted that Boyd hadn’t looked twice at the tomes, and there were a lot of them to see.

Tatiana hadn’t either. ‘Big webs mean big spiders,’ Boyd had said, and the thought unsettled her. That, and the dark. ‘The Dark’s only good for one thing, *Tsarina*,’ Father always 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. It couldn’t be good, she kept telling herself. Why did she feel so... stupefied? She looked at Boyd, and the glazed look to his eyes told her he was feeling the same. No, this couldn’t be good. But she didn’t care. That smell...

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

#

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.

#

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

Tatiana looked about her. The scent. It was so strong here. She could even feel it on her skin, coating her like dew. The beam of her torch highlighted a haze of liquid that hung in the air. Something wasn't right. Father's cologne was never that strong. She was nearly choking on it

Boyd braced his pistol in both hands and glanced at Tatiana before kicking the door open. Hidden in shadow was a selection of bodies, clutched possessively by cocoons and webs.

Tatiana, her thread-bare nerves finally tearing, shouted out in a combination of shock and fear as she looked into the room. "Oh, God," she said, hand going over her mouth. She shined her torch upon the bodies. 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*..."

#

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.

#

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. Tatiana peered at her. She was pretty, in a sort of alien way. She reminded Tatiana me of her friend Shona. The similarity between the creature and the friend she'd left behind—without having the chance to say goodbye—struck her very distinctly. She found herself wondering if this girl would be her 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.

Tatiana's nostrils twitched as the scent became heavier. The smell of her Father's cologne was 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 trembling 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. She found that a little gross. The thought faded away, however, as she stared some more. This girl even *sounded* like Shona!

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

...And Tatiana smiled back.

#

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.

Slow and coy, 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.

#

Boyd glared at the arachnid. Tatiana watched him closely, wondering what was going through his head. Did he want to shoot her? Be her friend? Did she remind him of Shona as well? The smell of cologne scent was even stronger. 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. Was she, Tatiana wondered, trying to get into striking distance? Or was she just trying to gauge if they were a threat?

“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.”

“Do you know why?” Tatiana asked through her fingers as her hand went to her mouth. Blood hungry creatures? Tore each other apart? That sounded horrible!

“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. “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.

Tatiana blinked, and her blood turned to ice. The shuttle! They’d left it unguarded! Tatiana turned to Boyd. “Do you 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 had changed. It seemed lighter now. Fresh and invigorating. Suddenly Tatiana didn’t feel so sleepy. “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 whom? 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.

#

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 in the horizon.

With only a few automated street lights working, and only a half-moon to show the way, the city was dark and foreboding, and the scant moonlight struggled to find 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.

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

#

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

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 didn’t make sense. Suddenly this ‘Portia’ didn’t look like Shona at all. She just looked bland and ordinary. Why had they brought her? Tatiana breathed in the fresh-air, the scent so thin in the open it barely pricked her senses.

Boyd interrupted her train of thought by saying, “Take this.” He tried to press a gun into her hand.

“No, Boyd!” She pulled 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 thought.

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 was no use. Tatiana looked about her as Boyd opened fire. There were too many of them. It was all over.

Part Three

Falling

As his battered submarine pierced the ocean, the captain studied a report. *En route* to the city, he'd used the time to scan for signs of life. But the new information revealed no signs of survivors, only mutations—bastardized distortions of his people.

They'd done it, he realised. Their enemies had dropped the Mutagents into the city, and now their cancer had ripped his family—his hope—from him.

His head went into his hands, and he wept.

#

Biting down on the stabbing pain in her stomach, Katarina staggered as best she could through the *Troika*. Doubled over, she gasped into her comlink. "Dolly?" Nausea dizzied her as she waited for reply. "Dolly?"

At last, the android's voice clipped through the silence. "Doll Two here. What can I do for you, Miss Katarina?" Her voice sounded tinny over the small comm.

"Get the shuttle ready." The pain always meant one thing, and one thing only: "Tatiana's in trouble."

#

There were too many of them, Tatiana realised. Just too many.

She couldn't see them properly in this darkness. She could see odd, twisted shapes, multi-limbed and hairy, and the occasional blinking as moonlight reflected off eyes and teeth. They smelt of dead fish, and they made a funny sort of clicking and chattering noise.

Yet she continued to punch and kick. All the while, the black, abstract shapes snarled, heaved and lunged at her, but she blocked them all, fighting with a ferocity and passion she didn't even know she possessed: the same ferocity and passion that had made her father famous.

"Boyd!" She dodged sideways as she shouted, punching one of these indistinct creatures in the head as it lunged for her and missed. "Boyd! Are you there?!"

She could hear him. She could hear his guns, and a tirade of foul-mouthed obscenities between reports. "You bitch, Portia!" he shouted. "I'm gonna fu—"

"Boyd! I need help here!" Tatiana shouted. "*Please!*"

Just stay calm, she thought, crouching low on her heels and striking one of the black shapes in its chin with an uppercut. Just keep calm. You can do this. Father taught you how. She breathed deep and exhaled through the mouth. A calmness filled her. A calmness that contrasted vividly with the frenetic fight for survival.

"Stay there, Princess! I'm coming." Boyd's tirade was interrupted by the sound of more gunfire. "Stay ther—" The sentence ended abruptly, cut off by a scream. His scream.

She called to him, "Boyd!" Silence. She tried again, her voice cracking, "Boyd?!"

There was no reply.

Oh, God, no, she prayed. Please, not now. Not Boyd. Another of the shapes—black, blurred mouth gaping and wanton—rushed at her, but she felled it with a straight left. Her inner calm crumbled. She should never have come here. What had she done? Her precise, exacting moves vanished, and instead there her struggle became wild and panicked. One of the shapes lurched for her, but she lashed out with a fist, knocking it the ground, then she kicked and kicked and kicked at the writhing mass as it squirmed and squealed beneath her boot.

What little she could see in this half light was clouded by tears, their vulnerability juxtaposed with the ferocity of her struggle and the readiness of her closed fists. Suddenly she was a little girl again, trapped in that car, crying and afraid, screaming for her father.

But her Father didn't come. Instead one of the creatures jumped onto her back, and she felt claws sinking into her flanks. Jerking her head backward, it connected and she heard bone crunching as the creature let go, falling away from her.

Perhaps this energised her, perhaps the violence around her was some sort of spur, but she breathed deep again, then exhaled as if awoken from a catatonic resignation. She felt the fugue that had besieged her since the confrontation with the Witch lift, and a primal, violent need to survive now screamed inside her like a newborn.

Father wasn't coming. She was on her own. She had to make her own escape. She had to reach the shuttle.

#

Of the three shuttles the *Troika* carried, the newest—and best—was currently in the city below; the second was in Sauber's Bazaar; and the third was now being prepped by Doll 2 as Katarina entered the *Troika*'s hangar.

Shabby and worn out, this shuttle was an evil, cantankerous old thing the crew unlovingly called the *Old Bitch*. Scarred with pock marks and burns, it hinted at numerous adventures and its canopy—angled and narrow—had a distrustful, glaring countenance. Even now it seemed to glower at Katarina as if rebuking the Oridian for daring to disturb its sleep.

"How long 'til she's ready?" Katarina said, her tone forthright.

“Approximately ten minutes,” Dolly said. “She has to be fuelled up and I’m trying to charge up the reserve batteries. They appear to have gone flat.”

Katarina pursed her lips and regarded the old shuttle critically. Why did it always have to be so awkward?

“In the meantime,” Dolly said, “I’ve taken the liberty of preparing a kit-bag for you, Mistress.” With that, she thrust a sizable bag into Katarina’s arms. Katarina ran a calculated gaze over the droid. Despite its features being perfectly blank, Katarina was sure Dolly was proud of itself.

“Oookay,” Katarina said, unzipping the bag and taking a look inside with some trepidation. “Dolly, there’s a packed-lunch in here... and water wings.”

“It pays to be prepared, Your Highness.”

#

Tatiana reached the shuttle, slamming the pressure pad with a high-kick. The door hissed open, and—felling two of her assailants with successive blows—she clambered aboard with one last despairing look over her shoulder. She couldn’t see Boyd, and the hatch slammed shut, muting the sound of the scratching, chittering mass outside.

For all her hours in the gym and good eating, she was exhausted. She glistened with sweat, and the touch-paper blue of her skin was tainted with the imperial blue of her blood.

I’ve got to stop, she thought, collapsing to her hands and knees. One hand went to her chest as she massaged her breastbone. She gasped for breath, lungs on fire. Her every muscle burnt from lactic acid. She didn’t care. All she could think of was Boyd. She’d left him behind...

She squeezed her eyes shut and hammered clenched fists against her temples. It didn’t matter! Not now! Forget him! She had to get out of here. Now.

She rose to her feet, legs like jelly, and staggered to the pilot’s seat. She sat and began to punch in the activation sequence on a console above her. The subtle vibration of the engines stirring rose through her boots and backside and into her spine.

At the same time the shuttle started to rock from side to side. She looked out of the shuttle’s windshield to see the black mass of creatures beyond bearing down in the shuttle. No doubt they were already crawling over it, shaking it in an attempt to get inside.

She hit a switch that brought down the blast shielding on the canopy. Curious as she was to get a closer look at those things, she wasn’t risking them coming through the plexiglass.

Sight fixed on her instrumentation, shuttle rocking with increasing violence, she strapped herself in and ran through the rest of the pre-launch sequence.

#

Finally the *Old Bitch* was ready, and Katarina climbed aboard, heading straight for the pilot’s seat. The inside of the shuttle was as ramshackle as its exterior, with various access panels missing and exposed wiring and looms spilling out into the shuttle’s interior like dirty laundry.

“Nice to be travelling in style,” she muttered as she studied the instrument panels. It was ages since she’d flown any of the shuttles, let alone this piece of crap, and she was both perplexed and nervous. Through the *Old Bitch*’s canopy she could see Parlour mocking her from beyond the hangar door’s AEGIS shield.

She strapped herself into the seat with its dodgy old five point harness, and began the pre-launch sequence.

#

An alarm beeped insistently in Tatiana's ear, drawing her attention to an external sensor.

The creatures were all over the shuttle, burying the craft as they tried to pry it open. Then another alarm sounded, and Tatiana smiled a grim, tight smile.

Pre-flight was over.

This was it. Time to go. She bit her lip. But what about Boyd? He might still be alive.

No, he's gone. Save yourself, something hard and nasty inside her whispered. That's what Father do.

Tatiana opened up the engines, gunning the throttle. Briefly she was slammed into her seat as the startled compensators struggled to adjust. Teeth white and bared, knuckles ashen, she held onto the yoke with grim determination and she fought to control the bucking vessel.

Towers, parapets and bridges suddenly loomed at her, every bit as vicious and deadly as the creatures she'd just escaped. Heaving on the yoke, she threw the shuttle into a slide to slur across the face of a coral tower, missing it by feet, only to face another tower, and another. It was an incessant rush, and she dare not even blink as she tried to avoid collision and gain altitude. Her head lowered, and her eyes narrowed as she glared through her eyelashes at the instrumentation.

"I'd hate to have to fly a shuttle outta here in a hurry," Boyd had said, and now Tatiana knew exactly what he meant.

It doesn't matter, Tatiana, she told herself. You're a Valentine. Failure isn't an option.

#

Finally the *Old Bitch* had left the *Troika*, and now Katarina was nervously guiding it down toward the planet beneath. Previously blue, Parlour's clear surface was now veiled in black with a corona of brilliant white painted about the rim by the setting sun beyond.

The pain in her belly was easing a little, and the nausea seemed to be subsiding. Ever since they'd been kids that pain, that sickness, had told them when the other was either in fear or danger.

What have you gotten into, Tatty? Katarina thought. See? I warned you. Running off. Getting into trouble. As usual.

Suddenly she was penetrating the ionosphere, the belly of the shuttle white hot in re-entry.

She appraised the instrumentation. The readouts didn't look good. The temperature was already high, and getting higher. The shuttle began to shake violently—so violently, in fact, she was having trouble focusing. The harness began to bite into her shoulders, and she felt an acute pain in her temple, as if her brain was trying to get out. If her teeth were anything to go by, the shuttle was about to start shaking itself apart...

Any...

Minute...

Now!

Behind her, without warning, an access panel on the starboard bulkhead was blasted through the air as conduits fractured, spewing coolant into the shuttle. At the same time a section of bodywork on the port bulkhead buckled as a muffled *bang* blurted out from behind, smoke pouring out from the ruptured pipes behind.

Goddam—I'm not even a quarter into the ionosphere, Katarina thought with alarm, and the *Old Bitch*'s already shaking herself apart. "Hang on, Tatty," she said through clenched and vibrating teeth, "I'm coming..."

"...I hope."

#

"Oh, shit," Tatiana muttered through clenched, vibrating teeth. Then her shuttle collided with a bridge. The structure was destroyed on impact, torn in half—but the shuttle paid a heavy price. Damaged, pitched into a spin, the little craft dove.

Tatiana wrestled for control of the bucking yoke—to no avail. The proximity alarm's stutter became a hysterical scream, and the shuttle ploughed nose first into a tower. Slammed forward, belts slicing into her shoulders and belly, Tatiana had the briefest impression of the yoke's MIDAS system bloating outward and catching her, preventing her from hitting the instrument panel—but her brain impacted against the inside of her skull, and she was out like a light.

Slumped and unconscious, she flopped about in the pilot's seat as the unguided shuttle plummeted into the depths of the city.

Part Four

The Fly

Boyd awoke with a start and a small shout. Dazed and confused, he struggled, only to realise he was 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.

#

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.

#

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."

#

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!

#

"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."

#

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.

#

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!"

#

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.

Part Five

Kiss the Rain

“No! No! No!” Tatiana screamed as—eyes wide and body taut—she kicked out at the attacking creature. Her heavy boot smashed into its head, buying her a precious moment. Grabbing a severed cable as it sparked and thrashed above her head, she drove it into the mutant’s face.

It howled, darting back as smoke curled from its skin, to squat blindly before the hole in the ruptured bulkhead. Behind it, Tatiana could see two, then three mutated faces peering in, squeezing into the gap. Moments later, distorted limbs reached into the shuttle, grabbing the wounded creature and dragging it—squealing and thrashing—out into the open air. She caught only glimpses of its death-throws as its brethren began to devour it.

The shuttle was rocking with a sickening violence. Tatiana could almost picture the mutants crawling over the vessel, clawing and prizing away at its damaged hide as they sought out the blue candy inside.

Above her, a panel buckled and fell to the floor with a *clang*, and another face peered in through this new aperture. Then the shielding on the canopy was ripped away, and a host of the amphibious, spiderous mutants slavered and stared as they clawed at the plexiglass.

On all fours—knowing it was only minutes until they were upon her—Tatiana crawled across to the tool locker. She wrenched its warped door away, revealing the emergency de-embarkation tools within.

She was going to die, she admitted to herself, but she was a Valentine, and she wasn’t going without a fight. Grabbing one of the tools—a bulky cross between a wrench and a crowbar—she took a deep breath and, summoning what calm she could, turned to face her fate, the tool brandished in both hands.

They were cramming themselves into the shuttle now. Through the open door, through holes in the bulkheads, through the canopy which they wrenched away, they oozed through every available gap in a glut of mandibles, lidless eyes and claws.

“Who’s first?” Tatiana said, teeth gritted, as she lifted the tool to shoulder height like a baseball bat.

Then came gunfire.

The pervading faces vanished in an instant, fleeing this fresh threat, and Tatiana briefly glimpsed one of the escaping creatures being hit in the face, the head exploding in a miasma of blood and brain. All she could hear outside was a cacophony of squeals and gunshots. She lowered her weapon, confused. Who *was* that?

Seconds later a heavy boot forced its way through the door as the bewildered Tatiana looked on. Then strong arms gathered her up, and a reassuring voice broke through the fear and darkness: “It’s okay, Tatiana, I’m here...”

Her eyes widened. Boyd! she thought. Thank God! Sobbing in relief, shaking with fear, she flung her arms about the Scotsman’s strong neck as he held her to his chest with one arm, holding his revolver with the other.

Seconds later, they were outside, and Tatiana could see the mutants fleeing into the rain and the darkness, driven away by Boyd. If the city had a large intestine, Tatiana realised, this was it. It was dark, cramped, wet and rammed with detritus and the remains of her shuttle.

Burying her head in his neck, she heard the sound of his gun as he stood his ground, fighting for her life.

Suddenly, and despite it all, she felt safe.

Boyd drew back his head to look at her, peering at the bruising on her head. “You okay?”

She was going to answer, and opened her mouth to do so, but words failed her, such was her relief to see him alive. Tears stung her eyes as she looked back at him, at his stubble, at his long hair, at his little scars and dark, wishing-well eyes. Rivulets of water ran down his face, and the combination of rain and sweat made his skin glisten and shine. The sound of the chaos about them receded as, mesmerised, closer to him than she’d ever been, she was lost in the feeling of his strong, stocky body so close to hers. In awe, she hung from his neck, lips parted and eyes bright.

Then she kissed him.

It was a fierce kiss, borne of joy, relief and pent-up longing. And at first he was stunned, frozen by this sudden desire. But then, swiftly, he returned her kiss just as passionately, rain-water and tongues mingling within hungry mouths. Tatiana tingled, electrified with a passion she’d only dreamt of in her sweetest moments of onanism. This was so perfect, every girl’s fantasy—saved from the monsters by her handsome prince.

“Can we go now?” a voice said.

Surprise broke the kiss and Tatiana turned. “Portia?” She hadn’t noticed the strange girl was there, extracting her claws from a fallen mutant as she looked back at the kissing couple.

“You came for me too?”

“Never mind that,” Portia said, her expression darkening. “We need to get out of here. They’ll be back soon, and in greater numbers.”

Ignoring Portia, Boyd took off his heavy leather jacket and put across Tatiana’s shoulders, her thin white clothes now transparent in the pissing rain. She blushed. She could tell he was trying to not look at her chest, but... “We’d better get inside,” he said, looking away. “We can’t defend ourselves properly in the open—”

“Outside? Defend ourselves?” Portia’s tone was sharp. “What do you mean? Why can’t we just escape in the shuttle?”

Tatiana laughed. “Are you joking? Have you seen it? It isn’t going anywhere. I’m lucky to be alive.”

Portia's expression darkened still. "No shuttle?"

"No shuttle," Tatiana said.

"Then how are we going to get out of here?"

Boyd cast a glance around them. "Let's get off this street and then I'll see what I can do about that," he said.

#

The captain's orders had been clear and concise. He wanted a full breakdown of his ship's remaining payload immediately.

It hadn't taken long. A long tour of duty and what seemed like innumerable clashes with their enemies had left the ship with nothing but small arms and limited ammunition.

He mused, chin in his hand, as he sat and stared off into the middle distance. The city. It had to be purged. But how?

#

God, thought Tatiana, Portia's a killing machine.

Tatiana, Boyd and Portia were heading for the nearest tower, and Portia—fingers suddenly taloned and bloody—easily dispensed with what few mutants tried to intercept them. Boyd barely had to fire a shot.

The three of them reached the tower with relative ease, and then they were inside, Boyd extracting a telescopic crowbar from his kit and using it to force the door, which—old and rusty—offered scant resistance.

It was dark inside, and very damp. Their feet were lost in stagnant water as they waded through a narrow, rusted and dilapidated hallway. The light of Boyd's torch on the water cast frenetic, twitching reflections upon the metal of the bare, streaming walls. The sound of their feet sloshing through the water echoed about them.

"That way." Boyd's torch-beam fell upon some metal stairs. They glinted, the blues, beiges and oranges of their rust wet and perilous.

"How?" Portia said, again. There was an urgency in her tone. "How are we going to get out of the city? How?"

"I'm working on it! Stop pestering!" Boyd said, voiced raised and teeth bared, and Tatiana saw a brief flash of alarm cross Portia's face. "Kat? Dolly? Do you read me?" Boyd said over his comms-set as he thrust it in his ear. "Do you copy, over? This is Boyd. Do you copy, over?"

He continued for a few more minutes as Portia shepherded them into the stairwell and they began to ascend.

"It's no use," Boyd said after another fruitless attempt to contact the *Troika*. "I think we're too far down, and there's something interfering with the signal. We need to get higher."

#

The captain settled upon a plan.

Up on the conning tower of his ship, cold air biting at his gills, he could see the city now, steady in the water. It was in utter darkness, cold and daunting.

This was his home—or it had been. He'd grown up here. His children had grown up here. But now it was just a shell. No, worse—a grave. A grave of coral and scavengers that held the last shreds of his hopes and compassion.

He settled upon a plan.

Moments later, he was back on the bridge, summoning what was left of his crew.

#

“We should turn back.” Portia’s voice was low and dense.

“What?” Tatiana said, mystified.

They were further up the stairwell now, the six flights they’d ascended spiralling away into the darkness. Portia gestured towards webs that, increasingly, coated the walls of the stairwell. “We don’t want to be here,” she said. “Believe me. Those webs...”

“Forget it,” Boyd said. “Listen.”

They listened. Below they could hear the telltale scratching and scabbling that betrayed the presence of pursuing mutants.

“We can’t go back,” Boyd said. “The only way out is up.”

Suddenly Tatiana felt the smell of Daddy’s cologne assail her, and her senses suddenly became muted and dull once again.

“We go back,” Portia said.

In an instant, Boyd’s revolver was pressed against Portia’s nose, the Scotsman pulling the hammer back with his thumb. “Cut that shit out, Portia,” he said with a growl.

Tatiana and Portia looked at him in alarm. Hand shaking, eyes blinking and teeth clenched as he fought Portia’s miasmatic control, he clearly wasn’t going to be messed with.

The scent slackened, then vanished as Portia glared at Boyd.

“Good girl.” Boyd smiled sardonically. “Now, let’s go.”

#

The captain outlined his plans to his crew, offering them the chance to leave the sub. Some took the offer—casting off in a life-craft with the sub’s remaining provisions and a distress beacon—but the majority elected to remain at their posts.

This gratified the captain. This was a good crew. A crew to fight beside.

A crew to die beside.

#

“No!” Portia cried, near hysterical. “Put it down!”

She snatched the struggling creature from Boyd. The size of a man’s palm, it was a baby spider. Tatiana peered at it. White, almost opaque, its legs and mandibles waved and snapped as Portia held it with the same care with which you’d hold a child.

“Boyd! Please!” Portia said. “We need to go back!”

Boyd and Tatiana looked about them. They were a further three stories higher, and the webs were thicker here, hiding the walls. This little creature had leapt out of the webs at Tatiana, and Boyd had snatched it from her back. Tatiana looked at Boyd. Even he looked apprehensive.

It was quiet here—but not quiet enough. The silence was punctuated by the dripping of water and, behind them, the increasingly thick noise of creeping mutants.

“Portia, I’m sorry,” Boyd said, his attitude clearly softening. “But we just can’t go back...”

The little alien looked at him a little longer. Then her shoulders sagged and, with a look of paramount sadness, she set the baby spider down. It scampered away, vanishing into the webs and half-light.

“Okay,” she said, “but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

#

“Okay,” Boyd said with a sheepish tone, “my bad.”

They were in a hall that looked as though it may have filled the entire story. It was dominated by a massive window through which they could have seen—if they were looking—the benighted bowels of the city outside. Their attention was held, however, by the webs that strangled the entire room, smothering the ceiling, walls and furniture to the degree they were just shapeless lumps. Amongst this glut of webs they could make out the suggestion of fat, bloated mutants nesting, their sheer black eyes watching the three intruders as they crept across the room.

“Hello there,” Boyd said as he waved at the nearest, most bloated mutant. “Don’t mind us. We’re just passing through...”

In different circumstances Tatiana would have giggled—but not now. The door they’d entered the room in was now blocked by mutants, their black, chaotic shapes pushing through the aperture. In the shadows, she could glimpse more of the creatures gathered on the periphery of the room. But there was something else here, she realised, eyes narrowing as she peered into the darkness. Something different. “Wait!” she suddenly said, pointing. “There!”

She could see them now: Spiders, little white ones, just like the one they’d seen earlier. This place was crawling with them.

“They’re children,” Portia said, breathing into Tatiana’s ear. “Pure breeds. The next evolutionary stage after these mutants.”

“Children?” Tatiana was whispering now. “But... where are the mothers?”

“There,” Portia said with a smile, her eyes glistening. “Look closer.” Portia pointed, and Tatiana complied. Then she gasped, her hand going over her mouth.

In amongst the webs were fat, bloated creatures—more arachnid than amphibious. They were little more than empty vessels, their distended bodies open and sore. Inside, painfully young spiderlings ate at their mothers, gorging as their opaque bodies thickened and hardened. Tatiana could just make out the subtle, incessant rhythm of tiny mouths chewing skin, muscle and bone.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Portia said.

Tatiana felt sick, bile rising in her throat. She shouldn’t be here. She should be at home. She should be riding horses. Fencing. Anything. Anything but this. “Boyd,” she whispered, “Get me out of here. Please.”

He didn’t answer straight away, his eyes fixed ahead, and his expression an odd combination of resignation and anger. She turned to look, only to see the mutants blocking the way ahead. They were trapped. “I’m sorry, Princess,” Boyd said with a weak smile, “looks like I’ve let you down.”

Then she felt something touch her boot. She screamed. A spiderling. It had tried to creep up her leg, bold and hungry. Boyd shot it...

... And the mutants rushed them.

#

The sub was now within striking distance of their home, the officer informed him.

The captain paused, looking at his crew as they all turned to face him expectantly. They knew what was coming.

Take us home, he finally ordered. Ramming speed.

#

Katarina, Tatiana found herself thinking, if you're there, we need you. We need you now...

The instant the battle had started, Portia had gone, fleeing into the darkness, and now Tatiana and Boyd were back to back as they fought to keep this insidious infestation at bay. Mutants and spiderlings lunged and bit, and the combination of Boyd's guns and Tatiana's de-embarkation tool were not enough. There were too many of them! Tatiana realised as she swung her ad-hoc weapon to and fro. Just... Too... Many!

The cuts mounted. The wounds increased. Tatiana could feel her strength failing, her eyesight losing focus and her blood chilling. Behind her, she felt Boyd's struggle abating also. His guns exhausted, he now brandished two knives, but his cuts and thrusts were becoming desperate and forced.

Besieged, with no time for last words, they were overwhelmed, and they fell, buried under a black and white tide.

#

The helmsman dutifully obeyed, and rammed the sub—the last weapon at his captain's disposal—into the city, below the water line.

The nose damaged the casing of the bowl, a distressed web of fractures weaving across its surface in an instant. The engines pushed the rest of the sub into the wound, the crew killed instantly as the vessel concertinaed like a paper bag. When the reactor ruptured and exploded, it delivered the final blow, ripping a huge hole in the bowl.

Water thundered in, and the captain's last mission was complete.

#

I'm... Alive? Tatiana thought as her eyes flickered open. I don't believe it. I'm alive!

She'd been smothered by the creatures, unable to breath as their weight compressed her chest, unable to struggle as she'd felt them biting at her flesh. She'd tried to scream, but her mouth had been filled with something spindly and finely haired. Strength finally gone, she'd been prepared to accept defeat until the massive boom—and a subsequent vibration so violent it shook the root of her teeth and hurt her kidneys—had shaken the whole room. The window shattered instantly as the tower about them vibrated and stammered convulsively

Startled and scarred, the spiders and mutants fled.

Tatiana blinked, wiping the blood from her eyes with the heel of her hand. She turned onto her side, wincing as pain flashed across her torso. "Boyd?" she said, mumbling. "Boyd?"

“H... Hey, Princess.” His voice was strained and heavy with pain. “You having a good time yet?”

He looks awful, Tatiana thought as she climbed unsteadily to her feet. God—look at his wounds! She knelt beside him, as if to tend to him, but she didn’t know where to start.

“You look bloody awful,” Boyd said, coughing.

“Look who’s talking.”

“We need to get out of here,” he said. “Help me up.” She took him by the hand and helped him to his feet. They clung to each other for support, the weakness in their legs not helped the tower shaking so badly. “What—What’s that noise?” Boyd said.

She listened. It was a dull, bass roar. Quiet, unobtrusive almost, it was getting louder. “I... I don’t know,” she admitted.

“Get me to the window,” he said firmly.

She complied, and they limped to the shattered window together, the smashed glass crunching beneath their boots. He looked out and down, and then started laughing.

Confused, she looked down too. It took a moment, her eyes still not fully adjusted to the dark, but she soon worked it out. Water. Lots and lots of water. And it was rushing up at them, filling the bowl as the city about them shivered in fear.

“Christ on a bloody bike,” Boyd laughed. “What next?”

A spotlight pierced the darkness, stabbing them in the eyes. They shouted out and fell backwards, covering their faces. Tatiana felt the broken glass stabbing her backside and elbows. As the roar of the shuttle drowned out that of the water Tatiana squinted, and saw the *Old Bitch* hovering before them.

“Tatiana,” Katarina’s voice came out loud and clear over the *Old Bitch*’s loudspeaker, “you are in *so* much trouble when Ivan finds out about this! Now get on board. We need to get outta here—and fast...”

Part Six

Falling

Katarina couldn’t get the *Old Bitch* near the tower, the building swaying as the city about it shook constantly. Tatiana and Boyd—slumped in the smashed window of the tower—waited, pain and exhaustion scratched into their faces, desperate for the shuttle to get close enough for them to board.

I can’t risk it, Katarina thought. The Old Bitch has barely made it this far—if I smack it against a building as well... “A few stories up!” Her voice was amplified over the Old Bitch’s loudspeaker. “There’s a landing pad on top of the tower. I’ll try and set down there.”

She saw Tatiana give her a weak thumbs up, and paused. This could, Katarina realised, be the last time she saw Tatiana alive. The thought paralysed her.

As if reading her sister’s thoughts, Tatiana smiled and mouthed at her from the smashed window of the swaying tower: “We’ll be okay. Just go. We’ll see you there.”

That was all Katarina needed.

#

Propping each other up, Tatiana and Boyd staggered away from the smashed window as the *Old Bitch* rose out of sight, its engines whining above the rumble of the shaking city and the increasingly loud swelling of water.

A violent vibration rocked the tower, and they were thrown to the floor. Boyd landed badly, and cried out in pain.

“Are you okay?” Tatiana said breathlessly as she crawled to him.

“Aye, spiffing,” he muttered.

She ignored his sarcasm “What’s happening? Where’s all that water come from? Why’s the tower shaking?”

“Looks to me like something’s punched a hole in the bottom of the bowl. Water must be flooding in Christ knows how quickly—an’ the bowl’s sinking. That’s why the tower’s shaking. The whole bloody city’s on its way to the bottom of the ocean.”

“Then we’d better get moving,” she said, dragging Boyd to his feet. “Katarina’ll be waiting.”

#

It hadn’t been easy, but she’d managed to set the *Old Bitch* down on the landing pad. Still strapped in, she remotely opened the shuttle’s side door, ignoring the condensation that began to rain in. Her fingers pestered the *Old Bitch*’s computer, finally managing to elicit something approaching a report.

It didn’t look good. The city was sinking like a stone, and they didn’t have long before the rising tide swallowed them whole.

“Hurry up, Tat...i...” She stopped in her tracks, frowning as she suddenly detected a faint aroma, a familiar scent that Katarina knew all too well. What was that smell? Was that Gemma’s perfume?

#

Tatiana and Boyd dragged their way up a shifting stairwell, blind and stumbling in the near pitch darkness. Of the mutants there was no sign.

“What about Portia?” Tatiana said, her breath stretched thin.

“Who gives a bugger?” Boyd sneered a little. “She’s trouble.”

“She *saved* us both, Boyd.”

“An’ ran when the odds were against us. Twice.”

“She *is* just a girl”

“No, she *looks* like a girl. I’m not so sure.”

#

Katarina had just the briefest glimpse of an intruder in the shuttle before it was upon her. Leaning delicately against Katarina, cheek touching cheek, it began to coo in her ear.

“Let’s go,” it said softly. “Let’s get out of here before it’s too late...”

That voice! The Witch! Katarina had started to try and open the stubborn five point harness that strapped her into her seat, but now she was paralyzed with fear... and excitement. “I... You... I thought...”

Her senses were swimming. The touch of the Witch's cheek against hers felt so cool, so tender. It... tingles... she thought.

Gently, the Witch moved her hands from Katarina's shoulders to caress the young Oridian's wrists. Katarina found herself admiring the Witch's own slender wrists even as tattooed dragons moved about them. Her wrists were so regal, and her touch so gentle, the Princess fancied this was how the Witch would stroke Katarina's breasts.

"We don't have long," the Witch whispered again, her lips against Katarina's ear. "We need to go."

Katarina's brow furrowed and her mouth became thin and drawn. The Witch couldn't be here! Why did she smell like Gemma? Where was Tatiana?

"Let's go," the Witch said again, taking a firmer hold of Katarina's wrists and beginning to ease them—and the *Old Bitch's* yoke—back.

#

"What the hell?" Boyd said.

They staggered out of the stairwell and onto the landing pad, only to see the *Old Bitch* beginning to lift off.

Eyes narrowed against the rain, legs shaking and weak, Tatiana felt her hope beginning to slide away from her. What was Katarina doing? It didn't make sense— "Oh!" She almost doubled over, the pain in her stomach acute and searing. She turned to Boyd, raising her voice over the sound of the *Old Bitch's* engine and the city dying. "Katarina! She's in trouble!"

#

"No. No," Katarina slurred. "I shouldn't... Tatiana..."

"Forget her. She's as good as dead." The Witch breathed in her ear. "You and me, we'll get away together. We'll *be* together. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"God, yeah," Katarina said, her stupefied lips telling no lies. Then she stopped, squeezing her eyes shut. No! This wasn't right! Tatiana. She couldn't just leave her...

"Let's go..." the intruder whispered again, insistent in Katarina's ear.

Oh, but to be with the Witch. To be *like* her. She tilted her head to one side, feeling the skin of the Witch's face against her cheek. It felt cool and smooth, and Katarina revelled in it, thinking, That'd teach Tatiana and the others a lesson. That'd teach 'em not to patronise me, underestimate me. I'm a goddam Valentine too!

"You and me, together. Let's go. All you need to do is fly us out of here. Now."

"No," Katarina said, teeth clenched as she fought to remember who she was, and why she was here. "I came here for my sister, damn you," she said as her eyes snapped open and she looked out of the cockpit at Tatiana and Boyd. "I'm not leaving without her."

Her hand fell to the frame of the pilot's seat, falling onto the emergency blade. Designed to slice the straps of the harness should they become jammed, now Katarina used it to stab at the intruder. The blade sliced across the creature's shoulder, and the interloper squealed and staggered away.

Katarina had the briefest opportunity to assess the location of the shuttle relative to the tower. The *Old Bitch* had already lifted off and drifted away, leaving a ten foot gap between itself

and the swaying building. Taking a firm hold of the yoke, she began to guide the shuttle back toward the building and Tatiana.

Behind her, however, she could sense the intruder was gathering its senses. Katarina knew she had seconds—if that—to do something.

#

“Tatiana!” Katarina shouted over the *Old Bitch*’s loudspeaker, “I’m in trouble! There’s something in h—”

The voice was cut off with something that sounded like an angered squealing.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Tatiana dropped Boyd and sprinted as best she could on fatigued legs.

Boyd shouted after her, “Tatiana! No!”

Ignoring him, ignoring the pain and her own instincts, she reached the edge of the tower and threw herself, legs and arms pumping, into the void between her and her sister.

Through more luck than judgment she cleared the gap, flying into the shuttle via the open side door. She landed poorly and tumbled to the deck, slamming against the opposite wall. The air was driven from her by the impact. By the side of her head, an exposed wiring loom fizzed and chattered as sparks spat out from ruptured wires.

Tatiana looked up to see Portia glaring at her, caught in the act as she tugged at Katarina’s harness...

... And then she lunged at Tatiana.

Tatiana tried to get up first, hoping to somehow beat Portia, but the alien was too quick. She fell upon Tatiana, holding her down with an inhuman strength whilst, mouth agape, she sought to bite with sharp, glinting teeth.

Determined she wasn’t going down without a fight, Tatiana halted Portia’s lunge with a clubbing blow across the jaw. With the creature dazed for the briefest moment, Tatiana seized her by the side of the head and rammed it into the damaged loom—and its exposed wiring—besides their heads.

More sparks and a smell of burning flesh burst out of the aperture, and the lights were suddenly reduced to one flashing emergency beacon—red and angry—that illuminated the howling Portia with a strobe-like flickering. Portia screamed in pain. Pulling away, she fell back onto the deck, thrashing as she clawed at her wounded head.

“Fucking bitch! How dare you!” Shouting, snarling, the same violent will that possessed Tatiana in the park forced her up to leap upon Portia. Straddling the alien, Tatiana seized her by the neck and began to squeeze hard. “I just wanted a friend!” She pulled her head back in reflex as Portia’s claws slashed across her cheek. “But you? You try to leave me? Try to hurt Katarina? Oh, God, am I gonna make you pay.”

Portia tried to fight her off, clawing and scratching at Tatiana. All the alien’s pretences were gone, and she reverted to her true form—spindly, multi-limbed and arachnid with a face made of bulbous eyes and snapping, grasping mandibles.

Tatiana almost choked as her nostrils filled with a sharp, sterile smell, Portia’s scent coating her skin. A primal fear tore at her then, tried to make her run, but Tatiana wasn’t going to run. She’d run from the Long Knives. She’d run from the Witch. She’d run from the mutants. She wasn’t going to run now. She was a Valentine, and the Valentines were no one’s victims.

Portia, however, was not finished. Whatever drove her clearly wasn't about to give in, and she fought back. In a moment of either desperation or inspiration, Portia's hand snaked out, finding an orphaned access panel that had shaken loose during the *Old Bitch's* decent. Grasping it, she clubbed Tatiana about the forehead, the Oridian reeling instantly.

Portia bucked, and Tatiana was thrown from her, landing painfully beside the shuttle's side-door.

Tatiana lay there, dazed, and she could feel blood seeping from a fresh wound on her forehead. Portia? she wondered abstractly, both her senses and grasp of time clouded and bruised. Where's Portia?

The answer—like Portia herself—was swift and ugly. From the darkness on the fringes of her version, the arachnid alien pounced, covering Tatiana with her limbs and the bulk of her torso. Tatiana tried to struggle, but she was losing blood and consciousness.

Tatiana's head fell backwards and out of the shuttle door. Straining, she lifted her head up and looked into Portia's face as the alien prepared to deliver the *coup-de-grace*. The alien's many eyes were dull, and sticky white blood covered its head, oozing from an open swelling—a legacy of Tatiana's brutal attack.

"I'm sorry, Tatiana," Portia said, and the scent in Tatiana's nostrils changed to the comforting opiate of her father's aftershave. "Really. But I'm not going to die here. All I want—all I've ever wanted—is your shuttle, and your spaceship. You're just incidental." With that she lunged at Tatiana, mouth open as she went for the jugular.

Straining against Portia's inhuman strength, Tatiana held her at bay, one hand about Portia's throat whilst the other scrabbled for something—anything—to help fight the alien.

Tatiana closed her eyes, straining her head backward. Her hands slid into her pocket, and found what she was looking for. "Portia, you... bitch!" she said, spitting as her eyes snapped open and she fought against the smell of cologne. "I trusted you, I thought we could be friends!"

With that, Tatiana activated the tiny aerosol Boyd had given her in the library, and sprayed Portia in the eyes and mouth.

The reaction was instantaneous and violent. Hands going to her eyes, Portia howled.

That was all Tatiana needed. She grabbed the choking Portia by the side of her arachnid head, butting the alien square in the face with a blow Boyd would have been proud of. She felt the bones in Portia's head crack and buckle before the alien reeled away, hands going to her face whilst white blood spilled from her smashed face. Tatiana knew this was it, this was her last chance. With gymnastic prowess, Tatiana—drawing her knees up to her own shoulders—thrust her heavy boots against the alien's chest and—still grasping her by the head—heaved Portia over her shoulders...

... and straight out of the shuttle door.

The distorted scream was short-lived. Craning her head, Tatiana saw the alien being swallowed by the advancing tide, the surge of water now little more than two stories below as the cacophony of its approach bludgeoned the air.

Tatiana didn't reflect on what she'd just done, or on the life she'd just taken. She didn't have time.

#

"Katarina! Wake up! Wake up!"

Katarina was being shaken, and shaken roughly. She could feel her arms and head flopping about. Her mouth tasted of blood and copper. She could barely hear the voice over the sound of... What was that? Water?

Her eyes snapped opened.

“Kat! Thank God! We need to get out of here!”

Katarina’s head fell into her hands. “God... My head... It’s pound—”

“Never mind your head!” Tatiana pulled at the harness straps. “We need to get you out of this seat!”

“What? Why?”

“You’re hurt. I need to pilot—”

Katarina shoved her away. “The hell you do! I’m flying the damn shuttle! *I* came here to save *you*, Tat—not the other way around! Now let’s get that drunk on board before it’s too late.”

#

Moments later, Boyd was on board, dragged into the shuttle by the weary Tatiana. Looking over her shoulder, Katarina waited until Tatiana slammed the side-door shut, and then she turned back to the *Old Bitch*’s controls.

Head dipping, eyes narrowed, she eased the shuttle away from the swaying tower. Within seconds, she lifted the nose and gunned the engines.

At last the *Old Bitch* was in full flight, guided by the determined Katarina. With its nose pointing skyward, the shuttle’s anti-gravity Newton systems cosseted the three of them as it ascended rapidly.

Below, the city was being swallowed whole by the tide, and all about them towers and thoroughfares rushed by, quaking as their foundations shook, the city sinking fast as water poured in through its breached hull.

Her head was still foggy from the blow from the pseudo-Witch. She was starting to sweat as her pulse boomed in her ears. The city was grasping for her, trying to swat her out of the sky as bridges and suspended precincts loomed at the *Old Bitch*.

They were among the spires now, and the suspended causeways, arches and precincts were denser here—a choked, criss-crossing gauntlet of cold steel and sharp coral. Leaning hard on the yoke, she just managed to avoid a bridge as it sped past, having to pull the opposite way to steer around a cluster of suspended pods.

This was hard. Harder than Katarina had expected. And, she realised as she bit her bottom lip, it was about to get worse.

She fought. She fought harder than she knew she was able. She bullied the *Old Bitch* into slides and hops, juggling the aging shuttle’s after-burners and VTOL thrusters.

The craft howled and raged at her, blowing systems left, right and centre. The interior was a mess of smoke, klaxons and sparks as the bulkheads strained and flexed.

Katarina couldn’t hold on. She wasn’t going fast enough. The water was catching them. The city was sinking faster and faster as it took more water. The buildings were coming at her too fast. It was only a matter of time until she hit some—

BANG!

It was a glancing blow, Katarina's tortured reactions managing to avert a full on collision with the coral buttress—but it was enough to send the *Old Bitch* into a crazy spin.

The scream tore out of Katarina. She couldn't help it. She was so scared. It was too fast. The water. The towers. The bridges...

She was tired. She was hurt. Her senses were numbed and her limbs were weak. Maybe she should get Tatiana to pilot the shuttle after all.

She lowered her head and clenched her teeth. No! She didn't need her, dammit! She was a Valentine too, and she'd be damned if she was going to give Tatiana the pleasure being asked for help!

C'mon then, you old bitch. Katarina thought as she smiled a dogged smile. Let's see what you've got...

#

Half an hour later, and a signal sprang onto the *Troika*'s scanner. Doll 2 looked at it, askance. Ivan's shuttle. He was coming back. And the Twins were nowhere to be seen.

#

With a bubbling, garrulous lament, the city finally vanished into the sea, and soon all that marked its grave was moonlight playing over heaving, bubbling water, air pockets thrusting their way into the night air.

And into that night air, the *Old Bitch* wearily dragged her sorry carcass toward the stratosphere whilst the shifting, popping grave below receded.

#

I've done it, Katarina thought. Her muscles screamed, her eyes were stinging and she was desperately thirsty. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. It was damp and clammy, soaked in her urine—but she didn't care. She was elated. I've done it. I've saved them. Saved *us*.

In your face, Tatiana...

#

By the time the *Old Bitch* reached the *Troika*, Tatiana had patched both herself and Boyd up as best she could.

He'd taken a heavy blow to the head when the shuttle hit the pod, and now he lay unconscious as she finished attending to his wounds. Packing the aid kit away, she looked at him a little longer. Even in this condition, he looked very sweet. She looked forward to waking—

She stopped. Tatiana! She admonished herself internally. Behave yourself! You're a lady! A Princess!

She turned away, arms resting on raised knees. In her mind's eye, all she could see was the sight of Portia spinning into oblivion, consumed by the foaming tide.

#

It was deathly quiet in the shuttle as it landed, and Katarina dispensed with the jammed harness by slicing its straps with the emergency blade. She looked back at Tatiana. She'd heard her sister—felt her—weeping the same way Katarina had been weeping these past weeks, and she knew Tatiana was, finally, under no illusions. Reality had set in, and it was

cold and ugly. Katarina knew her sister finally understood they'd have to fight, scratch and kill to stay alive. That was their life now.

As they stood in silence by the shuttle door, Tatiana was red-eyed and puffy faced as she held Boyd up.

“And how,” Katarina said as she broke the silence and went to help her sister hold the Scotsman up, “do you plan on keeping all this from Uncle Ivan?”

Tatiana blanched. They both knew getting off Parlour had been a picnic compared to the prospect of facing Ivan's anger. “I... don't know,” she said. “I'll...” Her voice tailed off as the shuttle door slowly—painfully—opened. “Think of... Um... Hi, Uncle.”

He stood there, glowering, and Katarina could see they were about to feel the full force of Ivan's legendary temper...

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Asteroid*

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