

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.

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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.”

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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.”

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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.

To be continued...

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