

Safe and Sound

by Paul L. Mathews

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.

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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.”

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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.

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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.

“Ooookay,” 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.”

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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.

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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.

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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.

*To be continued...*

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