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Safe and Sound

by Paul L. Mathews

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 kicked 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, clawing 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.

Okay, I’m going to die, she admitted to herself, *but I’m a Valentine, and I’m not 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 the gunfire started.

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. *What the..?* She lowered her weapon. *Who..?*

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...”

Boyd! 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?" Portia said, extracting her claws from a fallen mutant as she looked back at the kissing couple.

Surprise broke the kiss and Tatiana turned. "Portia?" She hadn't noticed the strange girl was there. "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 was barely having to fire a shot.

The three of them reached the tower with relative ease, and they were quickly 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.

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“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’s something else here*, she thought, eyes narrowing as she peered into the darkness. *Something different. Wait... 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 did indeed look closer.

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. *I shouldn’t be here. I should be at home. I 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. *Too many!* Tatiana thought 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 its 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 and crumpled 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. *Boyd?* she thought as 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 fact the tower seemed to be 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...”

To be continued...