

Safe and Sound
by Paul L. Mathews

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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