

The Witch  
by Paul L Mathews

The *Troika* may have been an old corvette, but her age belied her speed as she swooped and dived between the warring Oridian and Long Knife starships. Just as the *Troika* contrasted with the massive battleships and tiny fighters, so too did the utter silence contrast vividly with the colour and movement around her. Silent explosions blossomed and died like flowers in the fall. Invisible maser beams shattered lumbering capital ships. Intelligent torpedoes dived and swarmed between the warring vessels. Crew were ripped from their depressurised ships like spilt blood.

To the *Troika*'s portside a crippled Oridian destroyer gave its last by ramming a Long Knife dreadnought, the bigger vessel speared like a fish. To the *Troika*'s aft a flight of fighters were caught in the concussive fury of an exploding frigate. To the *Troika*'s starboard side a squad of the ugly, blade-like Long Knife troop-carriers leached onto an ornate Oridian battleship as the marines onboard disembarked and began their assault. In front of the *Troika* the battle raged as far as the eye could see, all centred around the glittering jewel that was the planet Oridia.

Diving to one side, the *Troika* deployed her own countermeasures: tiny pods that confused pursuing torpedoes and fooled them into detonation. But all the while the Long Knife flagship continued to stalk the corvette. Implacable and silent, the mammoth vessel—built in the semblance of some bastard-sword—cut through the battle as it shrugged off torpedoes, masers and fighters. It was only a matter of time until it caught the *Troika*.

Regardless, the little ship pushed on, her thrusters opened to the maximum as her pilot tried desperately to keep the ship—and crew—in one piece.

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The compact flight-deck was all noise and colour. Klaxons bayed for attention as systems—pushed to their limits—begged for respite. Alarms flashed red. Status bars glowed green. Fuel readouts burned a deepening amber. Monitors flashed bright white as explosions flourished about the vessel.

Terror-stricken, Tatiana Valentine tried to ignore it all, the sky-blue of her half-human, half-Oridian skin shimmering with sweat as she wrestled with the *Troika*'s controls.

She couldn't focus. The ship was shaking so badly her teeth ached. The constant assault of light and noise from the instrumentation was overwhelming, and she was sure she could smell burning.

Were they hit? She looked from read-out to read-out rapidly and without blinking. Her breathing shortened. "Matinee?" she shouted over the cacophony.

"It's okay, your highness, it's just a fire in the main relay casing," replied her co-pilot, Matinee. Sat behind Tatiana, the thirty-something punk—all tattoos and Mohican hair—span in her chair and grabbed an extinguisher. Seconds later, the tiny fire was doused.

"Matinee? Please!" Tatiana turned slightly so she could shout over her shoulder without looking away from her consoles.

“You’re doing great, Princess, really,” Matinee replied as she turned back to her engineering station. Her accent was English with a hint of the East-end.

Tatiana’s eyes were like saucers as she turned back to her instruments. “I can’t *do* this!” she shouted, a hint of hysteria entering her voice. She was supposed to be having a painting lesson today, not fighting for her life! “Where’s everybody else?”

“You *have* to do this!” Matinee shouted as she concentrated on her own instruments, her pierced face and husky voice intense and forthright. “Boyd’s with Ivan in med-bay, your sister’s cack-handed, and Vast’s nursing the engines—”

An alarm bleated in their ears. Tatiana despaired as she looked to the scanner, frozen. Six fighters were slicing their way toward them like scalpels.

The *Troika* bucked and shrieked as the fighters spat at it, their venom and contempt scored in the little corvette’s hide by maser beams. More klaxons sounded, and Tatiana was ripped from her fugue. The ship couldn’t take another hit like that.

Leaning hard, she pushed the *Troika* into a turn the compensators shouldn’t have been able to handle, and raced headfirst toward an Oridian destroyer. Holding her nerve, she waited until the destroyer opened fire, the volley of maser beams lancing past the *Troika* before—the pursuing fighters destroyed or crippled—she pulled the *Troika* out of its collision course with the destroyer. She avoided hitting the bigger vessel by such a narrow margin that the two metal hides grazed each other, sparks cascading in the *Troika*’s wake.

“—And nobody else on this bloody ship could have done that,” Matinee said with a dark smile.

Tatiana ignored her, brow furrowed and sweaty. What was happening? Was it some sort of uprising? It looked like it. But the enemy ships weren’t Oridian.

“Who *are* these people?” Tatiana pitched the *Troika* into a spiralling dive between two Oridian cruisers as the bigger ships engaged a Long Knife dreadnought. “Why are they trying to kill us?”

“They’re the Long Knives. Been after Oridia for centuries, and, judging by those markings, that flagship looks like it belongs to the Blind Admiral.”

“The Blind who? What—”

“Not now, Princess! Concentrate!”

Tatiana looked to the scanners, and her heart sank.

The flagship was gaining.

It was too much. Tears stung her eyes. Where was her father? she thought. He’d know what to do. He’d keep her safe.

The last words she’d heard him speak came back to her. “Get them out of here,” he’d ordered their Uncle, Ivan, as their palace—their *home*—burned down around them. “Get them on the *Troika*. We’ll hold them off.” Then he and her mother had armed themselves. “Go. Go now. We’ll see you on the farm.” Suddenly bowed and weary, he’d looked every one of his sixty-plus years as the weight of a world at war fell upon his Herculean shoulders.

That was the last she’d seen of her parents as they strode off to face the insurgents—a heaving mass of Oridia’s peasantry that had battered its way into the palace was tearing the place apart.

The lights on the *Troika*'s instruments swam as tears filled her eyes and her chin trembled. What had she done? Why had she left him?

Finally breaking, Tatiana cried.

#

“Tatiana?” Katarina Valentine yelled over the ship’s ‘net. “Can’t you keep this damned ship steady? Uncle Ivan’s hurt down here, y’know?”

“What? What’s going on?” Katarina thought there was a constricted element in Tatiana’s voice, as though she were weeping. “Isn’t he stabilised yet? Boyd said it was just a flesh-wound!”

Katarina couldn’t answer straight away. She didn’t quite know how to describe what had happened to Ivan. She could only stand and watch the developments unfold around the examination table for now, whilst feeling altogether useless. She held two Nandomine packs loosely in one hand.

There’d been a savage enough fire-fight as their bodyguards—fighting to get Ivan and the twins to the *Troika* in one piece—had gunned down the marauding peasantry, and Ivan *had* taken a glancing blow. But this? She’d seen her Uncle shake off worse shaving cuts. It didn’t make sense to Katarina as she watched Uncle Ivan convulsing. The old man was thrashing, thick white hair plastered to his sweating brow. His massive frame—more than capable of overpowering most, even in his sixties—bucked and kicked and pushed as Boyd and Doll Two tried to stabilise him.

“Katarina?” Tatiana asked.

“Nandomine!” Boyd shouted.

Katarina thrust the one-use needles into Boyd’s big hands. The brute didn’t even acknowledge her. A bullish Scot with a stocky girth, he was kitted out in body-armour and a kilt. His face read like a war story punctuated with scars. She didn’t like him. At all.

“Katarina?” Tatiana demanded again. “How’s Uncle Ivan?”

Katarina finally managed to respond. “He’s in a lot of pain.”

As if to underline the statement, Ivan bucked on the table, his back arching. The white of his wide, stark eyes matched that of his “sans chin” beard. Something half-way between a cry of anguish and defiance escaped from behind his clenched teeth.

“Hurt?” Tatiana pressed. “How? He was okay when we came aboard.”

“Look!” Katarina snapped, “I don’t *know*, okay?”

“Well, who *does* know, Kat?” Tatiana snapped back. “Boyd? Boyd, are you there?”

“I’m. Here, Princess,” Boyd replied, still struggling to hold down Ivan. The big man let out an agonised howl as he tried to claw at his clothes.

“What’s wrong...? Oh *God*...!”

Katarina felt the *Troika* lurch violently and shudder. “Tatiana!” Katarina shouted into the intercom as she watched Boyd and Doll Two struggle to stay upright, “Will you *please*—”

“You know where the flight-deck is if you think you can do better, Kat,” was Tatiana’s acidic reply. “Boyd, what’s wrong with Ivan?”

Boyd expression darkened still as he watched the featureless Doll Two inject the Nandomine into the old man, the android moving with typical android grace and precision. “I’m... I’m not sure, Princess,” the Scot said, his voice loaded with confusion and anger, “but I can guess.”

He continued holding Ivan down, grimacing with the effort. Even as the drug took hold, Ivan fought it with typical grit and stubbornness. Finally he was still, and—the med-bay shuddering as Tatiana no doubt put the vessel through another barrel-roll—Boyd took a firm hold of the old man’s shirt, ripping it open. “Damn,” he muttered. “I was hoping I was wrong.”

Katarina’s jaw dropped, her eyes wide. A Japanese dragon tattoo, bright and stylised, was moving about Ivan’s torso, squirming and racing across his skin. Its eyes were alive with mischief, if not malice, and Katarina fancied it smiled and winked at her as it continued to swim across Ivan’s body. Red welts and boils festered in its wake.

Katarina was mesmerised. In all the fairy tales, gothic stories and ghostly tales she enjoyed so much, she’d never seen anything like this—yet here it was, as real and as vivid as ink on a page, ravaging her Uncle.

Despite herself, she felt a slight thrill. “What?” She stumbled over the words, stunned. “What is that? What does it mean?”

“It means,” Boyd said with a hiss as his hand fell to the various pouches on his military webbing, “that we’re in worse trouble than I thought.”

With that he drew a knife—a small, military model—from his belt and brandished it as he leaned over Ivan, raising the weapon as if ready to stab down.

“No!” Katarina shouted, lurching forward. “What are you *doing*?”

She tried to reach Boyd, only for Doll Two to intercept, grabbing her firmly by both arms and holding her back. “Now now, Mistress Katarina,” the android said gently. “I’m quite sure Mister Boyd knows exactly what he’s doing.”

Katarina—despite herself—acquiesced. Putting her trust in Doll Two as she always did, she watched helplessly as Boyd—his big, rough hands as steady as could be expected with the ship bucking and lurching—took his knife to Ivan.

The tip of the wicked blade bit into the old man’s skin, and the Scotsman, face creased in concentration, began scoring a shape into Ivan’s chest. Soon it became apparent he was drawing a stylised heart, with tribal flourishes leading from it at right angles.

No sooner was the heart drawn in blood, than the tattooed dragon, its face transforming into an expression of terror and pain, started to convulse and shudder. Katarina could swear she heard a howling—a vague, distant howling that seemed to echo from a distant valley—as the creature shrivelled and contorted before her eyes, the colour fading until the tattoo vanished altogether.

Katarina stared in astonishment.

That, she thought, was awesome. “What is that?” she asked, mystified.

Boyd didn’t get chance to answer. “Katarina? Boyd?” It was Tatiana again, her voice urgent and querulous, “I think you’d better get up here!”

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Tatiana span in her chair to see Boyd and Katarina enter the flight-deck—but it was already too late.

The Long Knife flagship had caught the *Troika*, and now huge magnetic clamps held the tiny vessel in place, lengths of monstrous chain reeling it in like a fish. Above them, the Ragnorak of the flagship's holding-bay was about to swallow them whole.

"I tried, Boyd. I tried to get away from it," Tatiana said, feeling wretched as she struggled to control her voice, "but it was too fast!"

"It's okay, Princess, it's okay."

He moved to lean over the *Troika*'s controls and pushed against Tatiana as he did so, his flak-vest pressing into her as he looked up through the flight-deck's canopy. Tatiana's pulse quickened, and she blushed, looking away. She caught sight of Matinee smirking at her and turned away sharply as the punk winked.

"It's no use, Boyd," Matinee said. "They've got us clamped good an' proper."

"Okay, let's get off the flight-deck. There's nothing we can do here." Boyd leaned back. He took hold of Tatiana by the arms and looked her in the eyes. "You did great, Tatiana. Really," he said, and she thought she was going to drown in his dark eyes right there. "We'd have been blown to bits if you hadn't been flying the *Troika*."

"What? You're kidding, right?" her sister protested. "She gets us captured and you say 'well done'?"

Tatiana didn't have to look at her to know she was seething. Typical Katarina.

"Believe me, Katarina," Boyd said, "if I'm right about who's on that ship, there's nothing Tatiana could have done. Or anybody else for that matter. Now, come on. We've got work to do."

#

The main airlock—like the rest of *Troika*—was old, but clean and well maintained. Katarina knelt by a bulkhead as she watched the rest of the crew gather. From Boyd and Matinee, to Vast—seven Amazonian feet of bright red tattooed bitch—and Doll Three—a military version of the android in med-bay—they were all here. Tatiana dithered on the periphery of the room, fiddling with her hair, an absent look on her face—a sure sign she was nervous. Only Doll Two and Ivan's cyborg dog, Stalin, were absent, having elected to stay with the old man in med-bay.

Katarina had no idea how they were going to get out of this mess. Her head sank into her hands. There were, what? Five of them here? And that included her and Tatiana—both of whom had never fired a gun in their lives. What the hell was going on anyway? Who *were* these 'Long Knives'?

A conspiratorial whisper intruded on her turmoil: "Hey Kat, wanna cig?"

Katarina turned to see Matinee hunker down beside her. Her favourite amongst the bodyguards, Katarina smiled as best she could at the Earther.

"Um, no. I'd better not," Katarina whispered, looking at the cigarette. She didn't usually say 'no', but now wasn't the right time. "Y'know what Uncle Ivan's like..."

Matinee looked up, her attention caught by something above them. Katarina looked as well, to see Vast looming over them. A mute, she raised an inquisitive eyebrow at Matinee.

“The Long Knives, Vast,” Matinee said, as if reading her mind, “It looks like they’re working with the revolutionaries somehow. Looks like they’ve finally made their move.”

Katarina’s brow furrowed. She was sure she’d heard something about these revolutionaries before. Gemma—her best friend and daughter of the Terran ambassador—was always asking how the Oridian royalty had been trying to deal a fairer hand to the peasant classes, about how they were trying to diffuse their growing disenchantment and the rise of violent activism. Katarina—sheltered and ignorant of such matters—never had an answer.

Nor, it suddenly occurred to Katarina, had her parents, obviously.

“An’ I don’t think the Long Knives are alone either,” Boyd said as he moved to stand beside Vast and talk to Matinee. “I think the Witch is with them.”

Matinee didn’t respond straight away, and Katarina saw something in punk’s face she’d never seen before: Fear. Even the normally inscrutable Vast looked faintly disturbed.

“The Witch?” Matinee said finally. “Shit. Isn’t she dead?”

“Apparently not,” Boyd replied.

“Who’s this ‘Witch’?” Katarina said, bemused.

“She’s an old friend of the family,” Matinee replied, and Katarina detected the sarcasm there. “We thought your father had killed her years ago. What makes you think she’s here, Boyd?”

“We caught one of her dragons on Ivan.”

“Did you kill it?” Matinee asked.

Boyd shrugged. “Christ knows.” As he spoke he looked at Tatiana, the Princess moving across the airlock to stand with the group. “We drove it away, but whether it’s actually dead...”

“So what do we do now?” Tatiana asked Boyd. She looked up at him with big, wet eyes.

“Me, Vast an’ Doll Three are going in there,” Boyd said as he jerked his finger back toward the airlock door. “We’re gonna board the Long Knives before they board us.”

“Board *them*?” Tatiana grabbed at the Scotsman’s arm.

Katarina nearly snorted in derision. Tatiana was so into Boyd it wasn’t even funny. An’ he was what? Thirty five? *Forty*? Wasn’t all that pretty either.

“Aye. We need to get you and the *Troika* out of here,” Boyd said, taking hold of Tatiana’s hand and moving it from his arm gently, “and the only way we can do that is to disable the flagship. From the inside.”

Matinee smiled. “You dressing up as Stormtroopers too?”

“Not today.” Boyd smiled back. Grim and heavy, the smile betrayed his apprehension.

“Shame,” Matinee said with a wink, “the Wookiee look suits you.”

Boyd turned back to Tatiana and took hold of her arms. “Tatiana, I need you to get back to the flight-deck and be ready, okay? When I give the signal we’ll need to get outta this holding bay quickly, understand?”

Katarina watched as Tatiana tried to speak, only to choke on the words and nod instead.

“Take care of her,” Boyd urged, turning back to Matinee.

“Don’t worry, Boyd—we’ll be fine,” Katarina said, pointedly, her jibe earning a sharp, withering glare.

“Did you bring the aerosol?” Boyd asked Matinee.

“Yup,” Matinee replied.

“Then you know what to do. Good luck.”

Matinee and Boyd exchanged a brief, silent instruction: Be careful.

Then Boyd opened the airlock, the iris valve door dilating as its hydraulics hissed and groaned. On the other side of the door a unit of Long Knife engineers were setting up cutting equipment, their black armour flashed with red and bedecked with cumbersome tools. Surprised, they were gunned down immediately, afforded no chance of survival by Boyd’s heavy SMG, Vast’s two pistols and Doll Three’s shoulder mounted masers. The report from these weapons boomed about the airlock, battering Katarina’s ears and making Tatiana, hands going to her ears, cry out in surprise as the Long Knives died in utter silence. Whatever grimaces the dead engineers allowed themselves in death were concealed behind their blank and stoic armoured masks, and they fell to the floor—some of the svelte bodies still twitching—whilst Boyd, Vast and Doll Three pushed on, weapons still blazing.

The engineers may have been despatched easily, but Katarina could see a squad of marines lurking behind them. Bulkier in their augmented armour, but still as silent, their weapons were at the ready. These would be—Katarina knew—much deadlier opponents.

The airlock slammed shut, cutting off the sound of the escalating gun-battle, and Katarina found herself begrudgingly admitting that Boyd was actually pretty brave.

No sooner had the airlock hissed shut than Matinee stepped up to the door and used the aerosol to spray a symbol on the metal: the same symbol Boyd had carved into Ivan’s chest.

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Tatiana and Katarina ran after Matinee as the punk sprinted through the *Troika*.

“What was that you sprayed on the airlock?” Tatiana asked. Her voice was even and measured, a life-time of horse-riding, fencing and gymnastics having kept her pretty fit. In contrast Katarina wheezed and sweated as she tried to keep up.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Matinee answered. She didn’t seem to be struggling with the sprint across the length of the *Troika* despite the cigarette dangling from her bottom lip. “It’s some kinda magic shit. Your Dad and your Uncle used it to ward off the Witch back in the day. Don’t know why it works, but it does.”

“When did they meet her?” Katarina asked, panting.

Tatiana, despite the dire straits they found themselves in, shared her sister’s curiosity. Father and Ivan always refused to talk about their past, and both she and Katarina were greatly intrigued by these little glimpses into the days before they settled on Oridia and Father married into the royal family.

“They met her on Oridia,” Matinee said. “Back then she was known as the Witch of Bleakwinter. The Royal Family—your grandparents—hired Ivan and your Dad, who were mercenaries—”

“Mercenaries!” Tatiana had always known Daddy and Ivan knew how to look after themselves, but *mercenaries*?

“Yeah. The Royal Family hired ‘em to protect your mum from the Witch, who was terrorising them.”

“Why” asked Katarina.

“Dunno. No one knows. But they dealt with her. Your Dad always swore he’d killed her, though...”

“Is she dangerous?” Tatiana asked. Suddenly, despite her self-assurances that Boyd would be okay, she feared for his life. Acutely.

Matinee laughed, but didn’t answer.

By now they’d finally reached the corridor leading to the flight-deck. Before them lay the flight-deck door. It was covered in frost.

“What the...?” Tatiana whispered.

“Why’s it suddenly so cold in here?” Katarina gasped, her breath steaming as she spoke.

Matinee looked about them, and Tatiana looked too. Just like the flight-deck door, the corridor walls were frosty. Tatiana touched one. The cold bit her fingertips.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Matinee muttered as she turned to the twins. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“What? Why?” Tatiana looked around once again, trying desperately to see something she might have missed, but it was too late.

Shards of ice splintering from its surface, the door to the flight-deck hissed open and revealed a woman stood in their path. Skin sky-blue and glittering in the corridor’s artificial light, her exposed curves spilled out of a brass two piece outfit. Beneath the thin film of frost on her skin, two tattooed dragons gambolled about her azure body, moving over naked thighs, belly, and arms. The dragons stared at Matinee and the twins, laughing silently.

This, Tatiana realised, had to be the Witch.

“So,” the Witch said, “you must be Gregor’s other kids. It’s nice to meet you. Finally.” Her expression shifted immediately, going from one of feigned geniality to utmost contempt.

“Go,” she whispered.

Instantly the two dragons shot down her legs to swim over her bare feet and onto the deck, moving across the metal just as they had moved about her skin. Tatiana thought, absently, that maybe she should run. But she couldn’t. She was mesmerised.

Matinee, however, was not.

“Run!” the bodyguard shouted as she pushed at the twins, putting all her weight into it as she shoved them forward.

They fled, racing headlong up the corridor. Behind her, Tatiana was vaguely aware of Matinee stopping and bringing down a blast-door. Tatiana looked back in time to see the door close just as the dragons reached the threshold. Seconds later, Matinee had sealed the door by spray-painting that familiar heart-shaped symbol on the metal.

“What’s she doing on the *Troika*?” Katarina’s voice wavered, betraying her fear. “I thought that symbol was meant to ward her off?”

“It *does*,” Matinee said. “She must already have been aboard when we sealed the airlock.”

“So now we’re trapped on the ship *with* her?” Tatiana could barely believe it.

“Looks that way,” Matinee said.

Tatiana grabbed Matinee by the arm. “Then what are we going to do? This is just going from bad to worse!”

“I’m gonna do what I’m paid to do,” Matinee said evenly. “I’m gonna get you two to safety.”

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Corridor by corridor, Matinee shepherded the twins through the *Troika*.

“Do you have to seal *every* blast-door?” Katarina asked, exasperated as she watched Matinee spray the heart shaped symbol on yet another door.

“Yup,” Matinee said. “The more doors I seal, the longer it takes the Witch to reach us. The longer it takes her to reach us, the more time I have to get you two to safety.”

“Us two?” Tatiana said. “What about Uncle Ivan? And Boyd—”

“I’ll worry about them later,” Matinee said, “My first priority is *you*, okay?”

Katarina’s eyes narrowed. There was something shifty about Matinee’s reply, about her expression, that Katarina couldn’t put her finger on. It was the kind of expression she wore when the two of them shared furtive cigarettes and whisky together. Just what was she up to, she wondered...

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They pressed on. But it didn’t matter. It was obvious the *Troika* belonged to the Witch.

The lights were failing, and it had become very, very cold—so cold, in fact, that the all-pervading frost that now hugged every wall and bulkhead was beginning to thicken into crisp ice. Katarina’s gaze flicked about. The scant light played tricks on her. She was sure she could see the dragons gliding across the ice, or the Witch crouching in the shadows.

Katarina stood and shivered, hugging herself as she watched Matinee seal another door. She switched attention to her sister. Tatiana looked into the middle-distance as she played with her hair, no doubt fretting about Boyd.

As for Katarina, she too found her mind wandering, despite the cold and the danger.

The Witch. Katarina couldn’t get over the sight of her. So bold. So confident. Katarina just knew the azure sorceress had never been forced to flee for her life, or been chased from her home. She’d never been over-shadowed by her damned sist—

“Damn,” Matinee muttered, looking away from the door and shielding her face as a shower of sparks erupted from its controls. “All this frost must have started to get into the systems.”

“Is it me, or is the air getting stale as well?” Tatiana asked

“Great, the life support’s gone too,” Matinee said. “We’re gonna have to get a move on before we run out of oxygen.”

“Should we go via the med-bay? Collect Ivan?” Tatiana asked.

“No,” Matinee said, flatly.

“But—”

“No buts, Tatiana,” Matinee said. “We haven’t time to keep arguing about this.”

“There must be another option!”

Tatiana continued to protest, and Katarina wondered just who her sister was the most concerned about: Ivan or Boyd.

“What about the Witch?” Tatiana said. “Can’t we just...well, kill her?”

Matinee laughed. “Not unless you’ve got a house to drop on her, no.”

“A house?”

“Y’know, a house? Dorothy? Ruby slippers? ‘Ding dong the Witch is dead?’”

The twins looked at her blankly.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

The twins shook their heads.

“Jesus,” Matinee muttered shaking her head, “what do they teach kids these days?”

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Behind them the last blast-door slid drunkenly into a half-shut position, then ground to a halt.

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” Matinee said. “We’re here.”

The *Troika*’s shuttle bay was every bit as cold and dark as the rest of the ship. Sitting in the bay were three shuttles, quiet and forlorn. They reminded Tatiana of apprehensive cats, crouching and listening to the dull booms of the space-battle as it reverberated through the *Troika*.

Matinee gestured toward the nearest—and newest—shuttle. “Right, get aboard.”

“But...what about Boyd and Ivan?” Tatiana said. “What are you doing, Matinee?” she continued, clenching her fists. “Tell me you’re not going to just leave the others, because I won’t allow—”

“Get aboard!”

“No, Matinee!” Tatiana yelled. “Why are you being like this? Uncle Ivan. Boyd. They’re your friends! I...” She paused a moment and looked into Matinee’s eyes. This woman had been her friend for so long, Tatiana just hoped she could touch something inside her. “I don’t understand, Matinee, How can you be so—”

“Because I’m paid to be ‘so’, Princess,” Matinee said, her voice low. “I’m paid to keep you two alive, okay? Not Ivan. Not Boyd. Not even myself. Just you two, understand? Now, please, get aboard one of those bloody shuttles whilst we still have the t...”

“Matinee?” Tatiana asked as the punk’s voice tailed off, her gaze going up and over Tatiana’s head. Tatiana turned around.

The dragons. The dragons had found them.

Defying the term ‘hermetically sealed’, the two tattoos slipped into the bay through the shuttle-bay doors, grinning and winking.

“Oh, that’s priceless.” Matinee laughed, humourlessly. “All the time we were sealing the inner doors, they just went ‘round the *outside* of the ship.”

The dragons moved into the hangar and began to circle their prey. All the while they leered at the three women, mocking them.

Tatiana’s stomach knotted, her eyes stung by tears. It was all so unfair, she thought. They’d tried so hard! *Matinee* tried so hard!

And Matinee, it seemed, wasn't about to give up. "Run!" she shouted as she drew two pistols—wooden-handled, Terran antiques strapped low to her sturdy thighs—and began to fire at the dragons as they swept toward her and the twins.

Tatiana tried. She turned and grabbed Katarina, trying to urge her sister into motion. But Katarina, hypnotised by the unfolding scenario, didn't move.

The dragons reached Matinee's boots and rose swiftly up each leg on her fatigues as if printed on the fabric. Reaching the waistband in a flash, they vanished under the bodyguard's body-armor.

Matinee screamed long, and she screamed hard.

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They ran in blind panic. It was only when Tatiana stopped running that she realised that somehow she and Katarina had become separated, and her moody sister was nowhere to be seen.

Now even Tatiana was breathing hard, pressed into the corner of bulkhead. She pressed her hands over her ears.

Matinee. Her screams were stabbing at her, echoing throughout the *Troika*. Screams as guttural and hellish as her torture must have been protracted and painful.

Tatiana squeezed her eyes shut, only to open them again, paranoid that the Witch would loom out of the darkness at her. She looked about her though a blur of tears. She didn't even know where she was. The *Troika* looked so different.

The main lights were gone now, and the frost that clutched at every surface twinkled red as the alarm lights blinked. The resulting red sheen on every door, every wall, every panel was shot through with thick white veins of frost, and to Tatiana it looked like everything were made of meat. Meat in cold storage.

Of the Witch there was no sign, but Matinee's screams continued. Tatiana's head sank into her hands. Matinee was being tortured to death, and Tatiana didn't know what to do.

#

Their escape from the corridor had been frenetic and desperate, but now Katarina hid in Matinee's quarters, squeezed into a corner of the jumbled room.

Matinee's quarters. Katarina had always liked it here, just like she liked the bodyguard's quarters back at the palace. It was jammed full of old movie posters, clothes, guns, cigs and booze. She'd spent so many nights with Matinee, drinking and smoking as they watched some old film or listened to old Earther music, that she felt safe here, despite it all.

Presently she drew heavily upon a bottle of the punk's whisky before—teeth clenched—she resumed cutting herself with an old hunting knife she'd found in among Matinee's junk. Head tilted backward, she expelled air through gritted teeth as each stroke of knife brought its own unique type of release. The blood soaked into her vest top and wound its way down the blade like the smallest of rivers.

Her head flopped forward, and she stared about her through thick eyelashes choked with mascara. She had to get ready. It was only a matter of time until the Witch found her here—and Katarina knew she had to be prepared.

But it wasn't that easy, was it? Katarina thought. Sure, Matinee, or Ivan, or Boyd might have known what to do—but Katarina? She was just a kid. How was she supposed to know?

She gulped another mouthful of whisky. What would Matinee do? Or Boyd? Or Ivan? Run? Shoot the bitch? She looked at the whisky bottle. Get blind drunk?

The bodyguards'd shoot the bitch, Katarina concluded. But what about Ivan? He didn't shoot anyone anymore. He didn't even touch guns. So what would Ivan do? Bluff?

Her focus slipped, however as the whisky and the sight of the Witch—so glorious in her magic and majesty—conspired against her. The young woman suddenly found herself fantasising just what it must be like to be so powerful that you could face somebody as tough as Matinee and swat her like a fly.

She found herself, as she dropped the knife to the floor and lit a cigarette, wondering what it must be to be a witch.

#

Having made it back to her cabin, Tatiana clutched her scented pillow as she sank to her knees. She began to cry.

The screams had shuddered to a halt. Matinee was dead.

Tatiana had liked Matinee nearly as much as Katarina did. She was cool, with her guts and her antique guns. But now she was dead and Tatiana had just left her to die.

“Oh, God!” she moaned into her hands. “Oh, Matty, I'm so sorry. I was just...I was just so scared...”

She raised her head a little and stared into the middle-distance as a myriad of thoughts crashed through her grief. Matinee. Ivan. Boyd. The Witch. Long Knives. She didn't know what to do. She had to help them. She had to help *herself*. But how?

Suddenly her vision cleared as she focused on something on the deck of her quarters. A pencil, thrown onto the floor by the bucking of the ship and almost lost amidst a sea of teddy-bears make-up and clothes.

“Jesus.” Matinee's words sprang to life in Tatiana's mind. “What do they teach kids these days...?”

“Painting,” Tatiana muttered, almost delirious, as she brought herself to her feet. “I should have been painting today.”

She stumbled to the tidy desk in the corner of her cabin. Reaching it, she sat down and tore the pillow from its case, casting the pillow aside as she laid its delicate cover on the desk.

Ivan always liked to have the *Troika* ready to take his nieces on trips, and always insisted the ship's quarters were ready for the girls to leave at a moment's notice. As such, the desk's drawers—like the wardrobe, bathroom and linen chest—were fully stocked, stuffed with pencils, drawing books, tubes of paint and brushes. Now Tatiana grabbed handfuls of tubes in a daze, dumping them on them on the desk.

“Painting,” she said with determination.

#

The drop in temperature had been the first indication, and now Katarina stared at the door. Sure enough, the door rapidly became covered in frost—a frost that soon crystallized into thick ice.

“Katarina?” she heard a voice inquire. “Katarina Valentine? Are you there?”

A gentle knocking.

“It’s time to die, Katarina Valentine.”

A heavier knock and the door—along with Katarina’s drunken fugue—shattered.

Katarina didn’t cry out, she didn’t panic. She just watched the Witch enter the quarters, pausing at the threshold of the room. The dragon tattoos moved over her body like serpents in the sea.

This, Katarina realised, was it. Do or die. “Wait!” She raised her hand in a halting gesture. “Just, wait, okay?”

“Wait for what?” the Witch asked with a demure smile. “Do you want time to beg? To plead? That’s what usually happens.”

“No,” Katarina answered immediately, her mind racing as she scrambled around for something—anything—to say. Her train of thought was quickly derailed, however, as she studied the Witch.

She was magnificent. So confident. So secure. She wasn’t worried about her weight, about her hair, about which boys fancied her, or if her hips were too big, or her tits too small, or if she was going to die a virgin. She was just...awesome.

“No, I don’t want to beg,” Katarina finally whispered. “I want to be like you.”

#

Tatiana had stopped painting the pillow-case, and was now painting her face. Her frenzied, attacking application of lipstick froze, however, in mid-stroke. She looked up, swollen, red eyes losing their focus.

Katarina. The Witch had found her Katarina.

It was a pain in her stomach and a wave of nausea. It always came to her whenever Katarina was in trouble. Like the time Katarina had fallen off her horse in the woods. Or the time she’d poisoned herself by drinking too much at Gemma’s house. Tatiana knew. She always knew.

Instinctively, without thinking, Tatiana rose to her feet, and headed for the door. I’m coming, Kat, she thought. I’m not leaving you to die the way I left Matinee.

#

The Witch laughed long, and she laughed hard. “You? Be like *me*? And how would we achieve this? How would we achieve such a glorious transformation? How would we turn the sullen little Princess into an evil little witch?”

Katarina swallowed, shaking. Tatiana. Tatiana was coming, Katarina knew it—she could feel it. Tatiana was coming and she’d know what to do. All Katarina had to do was stall the Witch long enough.

“Teach me,” Katarina said.

“Teach you? Why would I want to ‘teach’ you anything? I came here to kill you, not take you under my wing.”

“Because it’d be the greatest form of revenge you could get over my Father.”

For the first time, Katarina thought she detected the slightest stir in the Witch’s composure. Katarina tried to maintain what Matinee called her ‘poker face’.

It wasn't all that hard. In fact, Katarina found herself surprised by how easy it was. It was just like a stream of consciousness, flowing from her unchecked and burbling. It was so instantaneous, so easy, that she began to wonder exactly how much of it *was* a bluff...

"Revenge?" the Witch finally asked.

"Revenge," Katarina nodded. "Think about it. Ask anybody what my father—and Uncle Ivan—loves the most, out of anything, and they'll tell you it's us. Me and Tatiana." Her mind raced as she grasped at abstract assumptions and trying to make them into a convincing argument. She took a deep breath before continuing. "By you—the one woman my father has ever been afraid of—taking me under your wing, by making me your apprentice, by turning me into what he fears and hates the most—you—well, wouldn't that be so much better than just *killing* me?"

"And what do you get out of it?" the Witch asked. Her hands were on her broad hips, her head lowered as her gaze bore into Katarina, who, once again, found her gaze wandering the Witch's generous body.

"Look in a mirror," Katarina said, her mouth dry.

The Witch didn't answer. She continued to stare at Katarina. As she did, she idly stroked gloved fingers across the top of one ample, semi-concealed breast. Katarina stared at the hand, at the fingers, at the breast and she felt something...strange, stir inside her. It was that same kind of breathless and tight-chested strange that she'd felt whenever she was near Gemma or her brother. That kind of strange that made her want to reach out and touch...

Finally, Katarina tore her gaze from the Witch's chest and looked instead into her eyes. "Please?" Katarina whispered.

The Witch smiled. It was a cold smile. "Kill her," she said with a sneer.

The dragons shot from the Witch's body and across the deck, reaching Katarina's heavy, untied boots...

...And stopped dead, recoiling from the young woman, momentarily static and confused.

The Witch's face darkened. "What's wrong?" she whispered. "Kill her! Kill her now!"

Katarina smiled, pulling her vest-top down just enough to reveal the heart-shaped symbol she'd cut into her own chest. With other hand she reached behind her, drawing the old pistol—one from Matinee's collection—from her waistband. She aimed at the Witch.

"Surprise," Katarina sneered, trying to look menacing. The bluff hadn't worked, so it was time for Plan B: shoot the bitch.

She fired—a clumsy, inaccurate shot that jerked her arm back as she yelped in surprise. By more luck than judgement, the bullet bore down on the Witch's face, but Katarina watched with a mixture of fascination and deflation as the bullet—seemingly robbed of all its energy—slowed to a halt before falling at the Witch's feet.

In two strides the Witch reached Katarina, slapping the pistol from her hand before grasping the young woman by the throat with a grip like steel. "Surprise, indeed." she growled as she squeezed hard. "You've warded off my babies, but what about *me*? You think a gun and a silly little shape cut into your skin is going to keep me from throttling the life from you?"

The gasping Katarina's windpipe closed as the Witch's fingers bit into her neck. Her knees buckled as she grabbed the Witch's arms. As their bare flesh made contact, Katarina's skin augmented by the arcane symbol scratched into her chest, the Witch's flesh began to burn.

But the woman did not release her hold. Her face contorted in anger and pain. “Do you think I’ve waited all this time for my revenge to be stopped by some stupid *rune*?!” she screeched. “I think somebody’s over-estimated its power over me!”

Katarina’s mind raced as she her eyesight began to fail. She couldn’t just die like this—Father had taught her to be a fighter. She couldn’t just let this woman squeeze all that out of her. Think! she demanded of herself. It was no use going for the neck, covered as it was with a brass collar. But what about the face? Or the eyes?

But those eyes—deep blue and cold—made contact with Katarina’s, and Katarina was lost.

“Just die,” was all the woman said, and Katarina suddenly knew. She understood. The Witch’s power wasn’t just about tattooed dragons and the cold and shattering metal. It was about mind over matter. Her will against yours—and right now Katarina’s will was totally enslaved.

Yes, she thought. Just let me die. I don’t need to fight you. Take me.

“Just die, Katarina Valentine,” the Witch whispered again, and Katarina’s body went limp as her vision dimmed before the cruel beauty of this woman. Soon she could see nothing but the Witch’s cold visage, and she felt glad. To die looking into the ice behind those eyes, to be ushered into whatever damnation the Witch had waiting for her, was heavenly.

Everything went black.

Black...with just a hint of blue.

Katarina’s eyes snapped open, focusing over the Witch’s shoulder to see Tatiana creep into the cabin and bear down on the Witch. Reaching her, she threw something over the Witch’s head—and the woman screamed every bit as long as hard as Matinee had done.

Coughing, Katarina fell back and onto the bed as the Witch let her go. The Princess looked on to see Tatiana—teeth bared as she drew the pillow-case tight about the Witch’s head—snarling as she forced the bitch to her knees. Smoke curled from beneath the material, and Katarina saw it had been painted with the heart-shaped symbol. The Witch was clawing at it as her dragons snapped and danced about Tatiana’s feet—but to no avail, the same symbol scrawled across her face in bright red lipstick.

“You!” Katarina heard Tatiana hiss. “You come here—you and your Long Knife friends—and you take all this from us? From *me*? You take my *friends*? You take my *home*? You take my *parents*?”

There was no answer, only more screams and an increasingly weak struggle.

“Kill her!” Katarina heard herself shout—scream, even—the Witch’s hypnotic hold over her broken. “Kill her, Tatiana! Do it! Do it *now*!” Katarina went on, her relief spewing out of her in a torrent of malice and desire for retribution.

Tatiana looked up. Tatiana looked up and into Katarina’s eyes...

...And Katarina knew. She saw it wasn’t there. That hard dullness in Boyd’s eyes, in Matinee’s, in Vast’s. For all Tatiana’s anger, Katarina could see she didn’t have it in her to kill the Witch. She was too afraid, and it was written all over her face in streaked mascara and smudged lip-stick. No matter what the Witch had done, no matter who she’d killed, Tatiana just didn’t have the backbone to pay her back in kind. She was too weak.

Katarina felt sick.

“You,” Katarina heard Tatiana breath into the Witch’s ear, making a visible effort to gather herself. “You can go. You can go, and you can tell your friends that we’re Valentines, and we don’t die. Ever. And if any more of your friends come looking for us, looking for trouble, they’ll need more than a few magic spells and parlour tricks to get out alive. Do you understand?”

There was no answer as Tatiana let go. The Witch, now limp and motionless, collapsed, her breath as shallow and directionless as the smoke that curled from her covered head. Of her dragons there was no sign.

“Do *you*?!” Tatiana bellowed.

There was still no answer. Tatiana looked at Katarina again, but not for long. She looked away, her shoulders sagging slightly, shame and confusion scrawled across her face every bit as clearly as the lipstick symbol.

Katarina turned away, only to hear Tatiana dragging the Witch from the room.

#

“Tatiana,” Boyd had said, “I need you to get back to the flight-deck and be ready, okay? When I give the signal we’ll need to get outta this holding bay quickly, understand?”

Tatiana sat and waited at the *Troika*’s controls. Gripping the idle yoke, she stared beyond the canopy at the holding bay beyond. She waited for Boyd and tried to ignore all she’d seen, all she’d heard, and all she’d done.

Matinee’s death. Katarina’s bargaining with the Witch. Her own inability to finish off the Witch. Was she that weak? Was Katarina that dark? She closed her eyes, squeezing them tight, trying to block it all out.

“Tatiana!” the voice—Boyd’s voice—finally shouted over the *Troika*’s ‘net, rescuing Tatiana from her inner turmoil. “We’re back. Go! Go! Go!”

Seconds later—the flagship’s magnetic clamps disabled by Boyd’s party—the *Troika* blasted out of the holding bay and scythed through the battle as the dwindling Oridian fleet fought the Long Knives to the bitter end.

#

The Long Knives’ flagship squatted in the thick of the waning battle as the Oridians’ resistance faded. In stark contrast to the motion and fury outside, the flagship’s bridge was hushed and almost serene. Orders were issued and executed without fuss or panic, and the humanoid crew—dressed to a man in their black naval uniforms and black, ornate masks enriched with red legends—were images of calm and confidence.

At the centre of this quiet machine sat the Blind Admiral. Thinner even than the rest of his slender crew, his uniform and mask were devoid of medals or decoration. Hands placed placidly on his knees, head bowed, he was listening intently to the hush of his ship and its laconic crew.

The *Troika*, it appeared, had escaped—and the Valentines along with it.

“Admiral,” one of his lieutenants murmured, bending to whisper in his ear, “Oridia has fallen, and the capital is ours. Vice Chancellor Mass orders you to report to her there immediately. In person.”

The Blind Admiral hesitated. He wanted to pursue the *Troika*. He wanted to make sure the royal line was extinguished with the deaths of Tatiana and Katarina. He wanted to know Ivan was finally dead. Orders were, however, orders. Especially when issued by Mass.

The Blind Admiral rose slowly as he took hold of a cane leant against his seat of command. “Bring us about, and place us in stationary orbit over the capital,” he said, words ringing with that confidence and authority that only military conquest brings.

He turned to leave the bridge, the tapping of his cane piercing the bridge’s gentle burble. Reaching the exit, he paused to listen for another moment.

The *Troika* had reached the periphery of the battle now, and had engaged its graviton drives, vanishing into space—but not before jettisoning an escape-pod bearing shallow life signs. An Oridian. The Witch, no doubt—kept alive and returned to the Blind Admiral as a warning.

How very Ivan Valentine, the Blind Admiral thought with a smile. Well, Ivan, if he couldn’t chase Ivan, he knew others who could. “Captain,” he said just before leaving the bridge, “have that escape-pod recovered and a medical team stabilise the Witch. Then bring her son to me. And Sachskurve.

“They have work to do.”

*The Valentine Chronicles* will continue with *After the Ordeal*

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