

## Frozen

by Paul L. Mathews

### Part One

#### The Silver Gun

On the fringes of the Pagentorns, nudging the border with D’Kothren space, lay the system known as 167-2—a sterile designation that revealed none of the system’s true nature. The Theocracy had an altogether more colourful name for it: *Hu Kwaren*: The Cadaver. Abandoned by the D’Kothren in the face of a Theocracy onslaught during their last war, they’d ensured it would serve no use to their approaching foes. Every planet had been ravaged, every city razed, and every sea boiled. Nothing was left alive.

Orbiting the system’s twin suns, JLY 751V—now labelled ‘Stanztrigger’ by Boyd in honour of a fallen ally—was the third planetoid in the system, and typical of the devastation wrought by the retreating aliens. Every inch of ground was suffocated by ash, and every ocean choked with chemical foam. Its cities—once congested complexes of temples, ziggurats, and halls—were now little more than ruinous heaps of weathered stone.

Three days after Ivan and Stanztrigger had killed Crepitus, night fell across the northern hemisphere. In the heart of one of its bigger oceans an island cowered before the elements. Vicious rain and brutal lightning attacked it, backed by thunderous battle-cries. A berserk gale swept about the island’s dead trees, their splintered shells whipping to-and-fro, and chemical waves crashed on its beach.

In the centre of the island, in a clearing containing Stanztrigger’s grave and the disintegrating ashes from Petrid and the Calci’s pyre, sat the *Troika*. Rain bounced off her battered hide. The wind swept over it. Lightning struck it, bathing its hull in sparking rivulets of electricity. But the cutter remained unbowed and undaunted as it sat in stoic protection of the crew onboard.

#

It was cold in the cabin, so much so Ivan shivered as he sat before his worn desk. Even the thick jumper worn over his bandaged torso offered little respite.

On the desk lay a battered tin kettle, a pot tea, a small dish and a bowl of sugar-cubes. The rest of the cabin was illuminated only by a monitor laid into the cabin wall. Footage of Tatiana—taken just after she’d returned from Parlour—was frozen on the screen. Sat on the edge of bed in sick-bay, she wore a medical smock that did little to cover her cuts and bruises. Playing with her hair, she stared at the floor, eyes lost in shadow.

Ivan winced and inhaled sharply as he moved, the pain in his old frame acute and cruel. His hand went to his bandaged shoulder involuntarily. He took another deep breath and picked up the tea-pot before pouring a mouthful of tea into the dish. A heady aroma of cinnamon, lemon, and orange rose from the hot liquid, the steam illuminated by the monitor. He sighed, steadying his nerves. It was three days since they’d defeated Crepitus. He’d put this off long enough.

He squinted with his left eye, his right covered by one of Doll Two's unflattering plastic eye-patches. Taking a sugar-cube from the bowl and dipping into the tea, he said, "Play." The footage of Tatiana began to move. Such was the age of the surveillance equipment on the *Troika* that the image and sound were flat and lifeless, making the proceedings detached and clinical. "—pider," Tatiana said, her voice hollow and strained.

"What do you mean 'she turned into a spider'?" He wasn't caught on screen, but even the *Troika's* old equipment had caught the anger in Ivan's voice as he'd cross-examined Tatiana. Watching, Ivan popped the sugar-cube into his mouth and sucked the tea from it. The zest of the tea mixed with the sweetness of the sugar as it melted on his tongue. Oblivious, he reflected that, maybe, he should have been a little less rough on the girl. Still, if she hadn't run off to Parlour in first place, yes?

"I mean she turned into a spider." Tatiana's voice rose in pitch, and she looked up for the first time. Ivan remembered her glaring at him for the briefest moment before the weight of his own stare had overcome her petulance. "She changed from being a little girl into a sort of spider thing."

"How big?"

Dolly moved into view, taking Tatiana's arm and dabbing at her inner elbow with cotton wool "As big as— Ouch! Be careful!"

"My apologies, Mistress Tatiana," Dolly said as she inserted a needle in the Princess's arm.

"Easily as big as me."

"Tell me again about the scent."

"Well, whenever she was near me, I could smell Father's cologne. Really strongly."

"How did that make you feel?"

"I'm... I'm not sure. Whenever I smelt it, it made me feel a little dazed." A pause as Dolly extracted the needle, now rich with Oridian blood. "It made me trust her, I guess. That and the fact I thought she looked so much like Shona."

"Shona? Your friend back on Oridia?"

"One of them, yes."

"Pause." Ivan crunched the sugar-cube and leant back in his chair. He'd heard enough.

"Lights," he said, standing.

The lights duly rose, and Ivan stepped away from his desk into the middle of his quarters. A life sentence punctuated with old furniture and older memories, the room looked more like a cell than a cabin. An aged bed with a thin mattress. Battered equipment cases. Another desk festooned with unlit candles and a crucifix. A metal rail laden with fatigues, jackets, and t-shirts that lurked over rows of polished boots. It was a sparse and functional room for a sparse and functional man, and he liked it that way.

He winced again as he flexed his thick arms. The scarred skin may have been slack and mottled, but the muscles beneath were still hard and powerful. Head lowered, staring into the middle distance, he cracked his knuckles before, with a grunt and a curl of his lip, he tapped at the comm in his ear, activating it.

"Stalin?" His tone was strident and brusque. "Where are you?"

“In sick-bay with Vast. We’re trying to put Dolly back together. We’re making the best progress we can considering I only have the schematics for a mark two on file, and Vast only has one arm.”

“Leave that and come here. I need you. And bring Vast.”

“Okay. We’ll be right there.”

The signal dropped out. Ivan began stroking his chin, the other arm folded across his chest. “Computer,” he said. “Access protected files. Password: Mother Russia. Subject: Spidrax.”

#

A thick tarpaulin sat across the *Troika*’s smashed canopy. The wind made it flex and buck like a rampant lover, and the sound of its flapping filled the darkened flight deck. Sat at the scanner station in a chunky white jumper and even chunkier jacket, Tatiana ignored both the cold and the noise as she concentrated on the display. The scanners had been one of the first systems Ivan and Boyd had repaired. Now they worked relatively well, with only brief bursts of static and a fuzzy screen disturbing the stream of information. Tatiana—squinting through her frozen breath—studied it as well as she could, fatigue and anxiety withstanding. Ivan had, after all, been explicit in his description of this system. It was, he maintained, a popular hide-out for the scum of the Pagentorns, and as such was full of “killers, rapists, and thieves, yes?”

Resting her chin in her hand, Tatiana leant forward, elbow on the console. She could see nothing worthy of alarm. A few slothful derelicts in slow orbit about the suns. Some meteors. Some ships skirting the periphery of the system before moving on.

She closed her eyes, shivered in the pervading cold and sighed. She was so tired. And her wound hurt. Her other hand went to her ribs, the wound from the Cook’s knife still sore, Tatiana’s breath still drawn and forced. Katarina—under direction from what was left of Dolly—had stitched and bandaged Tatiana’s torso and re-inflated her lung as best she could, but only time, and Tatiana’s constitution, could heal the rest.

Her eyelids were so heavy. She could feel herself beginning to drift. Since the *Balefire* had left, she’d only slept a handful of hours. Not only was there so much to do to make the *Troika* space-worthy, not only was she in tremendous pain, but she was worried sick about Boyd.

Her eyes opened. Boyd. In the three days they’d been trying to fix the *Troika*, Ivan had assigned the Scot and the twins tasks that kept them apart. As the girls had scrubbed away all trace of the Calci from the *Troika*’s corridors, so Boyd had been dispatched to bring in the APC the Eaters had abandoned when picked up by the *Troika*. When the girls had been sent to get sick-bay into shape, Boyd had been ordered to affect repairs to the hull. As Tatiana sat here in the flight-deck, the Scot slept. It was obvious Ivan was deliberately keeping his nieces separated from the man.

And Tatiana knew why. She shivered again. Something was wrong—*very* wrong—with Boyd. The smell of him. The paleness of his skin and its sticky, thick sweat. His wounds were healing so quickly. She’d seen him savaged by a Calci back on Stanztrigger’s ship, and yet he showed no sign of a wound, no sign of infection. She squeezed her eyes shut again.

He’d become just like Portia.

It all made sense. Portia was alone with him for hours back on Parlour. She could have done anything to him. A bite, maybe? Or a scratch? God only knew how, but it was clear she’d infected him somehow, and now he was turning in to something like her. Or worse, he was

going to turn into something more horrific, like those mutated arachnid fish they'd fought on Parlour.

She shuddered. Tears escaped from the corners of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. The thought of it, the concept, that he could be transformed from the man she loved, who filled her every thought and every waking dream, into something so hideous and twisted. A pressure built in her throat, and her chin began to tremble.

#

Boyd woke with a shout, shaking with fear. Naked on his bed, his body lay rigid on top of the sheets. He looked to all corners of his cabin with wide, fearful eyes.

She'd been in the room. He'd smelt her. The whisky. The cigarettes. She'd been hidden in the darkness of the room. She may have been little more than a gaunt shadow, but he'd seen the knife glint in her hand, his father's blood congealing on the blade

*Who was that, Boyd?*

"Not now, Portia." He reached under his pillow as he sat up. A bottle of whisky waited under the pillow, and he unscrewed the top as he turned and put his feet to the freezing deck. The harsh, grainy tang of the whisky slipped into his nostrils, and he put the bottle to his lips.

He was barely aware of the liquid as it burnt his throat. After some needy gulps, he lowered the bottle and inhaled deeply. "Cheers, Matty," he said in a low murmur. It was only right. The whisky had been Matinee's after all. 'Manner's maketh the man,' Da had always said, right? 'And ya Ma destroys 'em.'

He shuddered, banishing the memory and that evil cow from his mind, stood and walked across the cabin. A single light beside his bed offered a little light, but not enough to alleviate the darkness that lingered at the corners of the room. He reached his wardrobe and opened it. Taking a pair of combat-pants from within, he paused as he looked at his reflection in a mirror that lined the wardrobe door.

What had once been a stocky, fatted torso was now lean, the wide girth replaced with a solid and defined abdominal rack. His arms had bulked up, his shoulders had broadened, and his neck had thickened. What had once threatened to turn into a double chin had now been replaced with a sharp jaw-line, and the litany of scars once scrawled across his skin had vanished. Despite the nipping cold, his skin glistened with a thick and tacky sweat.

*Looking good, Boyd.*

"He knows, y'know" Boyd muttered. "Ivan. Or if he doesn't, he suspects." He looked away from the mirror. Christ on a bike. How could he *not* know? And what about Tatiana? How did she feel about all this...?

*Of course he suspects.* Portia's voice was gentle yet strong, and as it reached Boyd a gentle sense of calm and wellbeing seeped through him. Calm and wellbeing that smelt of satsumas and pine. *He's an intelligent man. A dangerous man.*

Boyd glanced from side to side. Satisfied nobody was near, he whispered, "What should we do?"

*Nothing. Not yet. For now, we just concentrate on the task in hand: repairing the Troika. I didn't escape Parlour just to be marooned on this backwater.*

"If Ivan decides to move against us you won't be going anywhere."

*Don't worry about it, Boyd. Just stay calm. Everything'll be okay. A small laugh. I promise.*

#

The aroma of the tea was beginning to recede now, and the more familiar smell unique to an unwashed old man began to reassert itself. Oblivious to it, Ivan stepped up to one of the cabin's walls, its bare metal disturbed by a single photo in a battered metal frame.

Ivan studied the photo as he continued to stroke his chin. It featured all the old unit, frozen in time as they sat upon a battered T-909 tank. The lumbering metal beast rolled through a benighted valley on Shadow, the planet's perpetually eclipsed sun dominating the horizon. Ivan could barely make out the frosty stubble and rosy cheeks of himself, Gregor, Thom, and Yevgeny, their faces lost beneath thick hoods and *ushankas*. Vassilissa, Crimea, and Stalin. They were all there. Even Kithaen, the witch so shrouded in heavy furs as to be indistinguishable. The silhouettes of wardroids—the *Oprinichki*—marched beside the T-909, and two *Stasi* hovered over them all, eagle-eyed and vigilant.

He reached into his jumper and pulled out the wedding ring that hung about his neck. Closing his eyes, he squeezed it and allowed himself an ironic laugh. The *Stasi* hadn't seen this coming, had they?

His boots squeaked as he turned on his heel and limped to his bed. It creaked as he sat on it and bent forward with a wince of pain. Feet planted wide apart, he reached beneath the bed-frame to grasp the handle on a battered old trunk before dragging it from under the bed. Brass corners and handles dull with age, the sigil of the Omega Hammers embossed upon its worn leather hide, it sat between his feet.

The stiff old lock offered obdurate resistance before opening with a sullen click. With a deep inhalation of breath, Ivan opened the trunk and rested the lid against his leg.

Inside lay his old revolver nestled in its holster and bound tightly in its belts. Silver and smelling of oil, it cooed at him like an old lover, reclined and salacious on a bed of ammunition. From beneath the gun and its ammo peeped one of Thom's old jackets, decorated with skulls. The smell of its leather assailed him, and he breathed in deeply once more, eyes closing as his mouth parted slightly.

By God, that smells good. He looked at the jacket again. Oh, to have Thom here now, he thought, and tears formed at the corners of his eye. Beneath the jacket, he knew, were Thom's love letters...

He gritted his teeth and rubbed at his eye with the back of his hand. Enough! No more! I want the gun, nothing else.

He grasped the holster and the pistol within and began to lift the weapon, then stopped, staring wide eyed at the gun.

The door to the cabin hissed open. He didn't even bother to look to see it was: the metallic click of Stalin's ceramic claws on the deck, and the clump of Vast's boots gave that away.

"Okay, Ivan, we're here. What's wrong?"

Ivan didn't answer immediately. He knew what he had to do. It was obvious. He'd experienced the same thing as Tatiana. He been so convinced that Boyd—or whatever his real name was—looked just like Thom. Just the smell of him, so much like Thom's, had threatened to unseat Ivan's concentration. He'd felt dazed and stupefied in his presence.

He cursed and he spat. Instead of being angry at Tatiana, he should have *listened* to her, yes? How could he have been so stupid? Was he so submerged in his own grief and self-hatred that he'd dismissed such an obvious warning?

He heard Stalin tell Vast to wait outside. A clump of her boots, a hiss of his cabin door, and Ivan knew she had left. “Ivan?” Stalin said, trotting to stand beside his master. Seeing the gun, the dog froze, wide eyed, with one foot raised from the deck. “My God, Ivan! A gun? What’s *wrong?*”

He didn’t respond. He just stared at the silver gun. Yes, there were questions to be asked. What was becoming of Boyd? What was his real name? What was he turning into? How did it happen? What threat did he pose to both the ship and the twins?

He continued to stare. A cold sweat broke out in his forehead, and his hand shook. Memories flooded back, but he repressed them quickly, reducing them into little more than blurred impressions of the battle on Ferroc Boon. Of the carnage. Of the slaughtered children.

Yes, there were questions to be asked, but he grimaced as he stared at the gun. But was this really the answer?

#

“Boyd? This is Ivan. You copy, yes?”

Boyd blinked, frozen in place. One foot off the deck, he was pulling on his pants as the comm had bleeped. He looked to it, the tiny device hooked into a pocket on a flak-jacket which hung on his cabin door.

“Boyd? You are there?”

*Answer him.*

He finished pulling on the pants and crossed to the jacket to grab at the comm, his expression darkening. He wasn’t due another shift for ten minutes. What did the old man want?

He fitted the comm in his ear and tapped at it. “Boyd here.”

“We are going out again. Meet me in hangar.”

Boyd’s brow furrowed. “You must be joking. Going out where?”

“We shall recover that Scythe the Eater’s left behind, and begin to salvage what we can from Hammer crashed by Tatiana.”

Boyd’s eyes narrowed and his looked left and right furtively. “Right now?”

“Yes. We go now. That is order. Ivan out.”

*This is it. He’s making his move.*

“What ‘move’?”

*You said it yourself. He’s an intelligent man. He must have worked out what’s going on, about me and you.*

“‘Me and you’?” Boyd laughed. “Don’t flatter yourself. You’re in my head. You’re a passenger. Not a love—”

*He must have worked out what’s going on, and now he’s going to kill us.*

Boyd laughed again. He laughed louder and harder than he could remember. “Aye, he could try.” He stopped laughing, face setting into a snarl. “But why would he even try? Why would he want to kill us? Listen to yourself, girl.”

*Because he hates you, and he always has.*

Again that smell of satsumas and pine, and the fleeting memory of opening Christmas presents with Da.

“He doesn’t *hate* me—”

*Yes he does. What did he say back on Potter’s Field? ‘I see way Tatiana looks at you, yes? You touch her, and next time I come here, I bury you.’?*

“Aye, and I haven’t touched her.”

*You were all over her back in the Elephant’s Graveyard. If Vast hadn’t walked in... And I’ve seen the way she looks at you, Boyd. She’s so in love with you it’s almost tragic. I’ve seen it, and so has Ivan.*

Boyd shook his head. This was nonsense... wasn’t it? His thoughts were beginning to slow, like they were wading through a sweet smelling treacle. Why would Ivan kill him, just because of the way Tatiana looked at him?

*You can’t trust him, Boyd. He’s not just intelligent, he’s a schemer and a user. He used you, Vast, and Matinee to protect him. Not the twins: just him. But now he doesn’t trust you anymore, and you’re going the same way all his other ‘friends’ have, the same way as Matinee, and Skullion, and Tusk.*

Boyd’s knees weakened. He reached out and supported himself against the door. His hand went to his sweating forehead. All he could see was Matinee’s body, ravaged by the Witch’s dragons. His hand clenched onto a fist, and he ground his teeth. She’d sacrificed herself too, hadn’t she? Sacrificed herself for Ivan, to save him from his past.

*He’s going to do it, Boyd. He’s going to take you out into the night, and he’s going to kill you. The only question is: are you going to let him?*

*Or are you going to kill him first?*

## Part Two

### Big Man with a Gun

Tarnished hull brooding under a film of ice, a derelict Theocracy cruiser tumbled along an elliptical orbit of 167-2’s twin suns. Once a gleaming cog in a mighty war-machine, now it was little more than a husk, its crew and payload long since spent.

A smaller ship clung to the derelict’s hull like a tick. A fighting ship, its armoured hide did little to hide torpedo tubes and maser-banks, and its scarred and pock-marked flank bore the ship’s apt *non-de-guerre*, the *Faded Lady*: a name that—if only he could have been warned—would have struck fear into the heart of Ivan Valentine...

#

“Confront Boyd?” Stalin’s jaw almost hit the deck. “What do you mean?”

Sat upon his bed and strapping a servo support about his bad leg, Ivan took time with his reply. He closed the modular sheath about his knee and thigh, and held it shut momentarily as it locked tight. “There is something wrong with Boyd, or whatever his name is. I think he is turning into something alien. Something evil.” He gritted his teeth and shut his eyes as the sheath’s needles pierced his skin. “I need answers. Even if I have to beat them out of him.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am serious. Do you think I would joke about such a thing?”

“It sounds like a joke to me. Boyd’s young and strong. You’re not.”

A hot wave of stimulants flooded Ivan’s leg as he stood. He strode across the room and passed Stalin. “I can take care of Boyd.” He reached his clothes rail and snatched at a camouflage jacket. “Whilst I am gone, you will be in charge, yes?”

“Me? Why?”

“Because you may be coward, but you are experienced coward.” Ivan paused as he put on the jacket. “Besides, I will need you here to stop Tatiana interfering if she realises what I am doing.”

“Thanks, Ivan. That’s just great.”

“You would rather trade places?”

“Fuck th—” The dog stopped with a hunted look at the glowering Ivan. “No. Absolutely not.”

“Then it is settled.” Head lowered, eyes and mouth narrowed, Ivan strode out of his cabin and into the darkened corridor beyond. It was just as cold as his cabin, but the smell of sweat and tea was replaced by that of bleach and cleaning agents. Even so the subtlest taste of Calci flesh tainted the air.

Waiting beside his door, Vast turned to him as he left his cabin.

“Vast.” Ivan stood and looked the Amazon up and down. Dressed in her customary tight pants and bikini top, her waist was concealed beneath a tool belt and its embarrassment of riches. Her web tattoos were almost lost beneath layers of grease and muck that paid testimony to how hard she’d been working to repair the *Troika*. What was left of her left arm—amputated from the elbow down during the clash with Petrid—was swathed in bandages. Before he continued, Ivan glanced at the dressings. Then he looked again, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

The wound should have healed by now. He hadn’t expected to see blood on the bandages. Dirt and grease, yes, but not blood. Yet there it was, seeping through the material in vivid red patches. Seeing his expression, Vast moved her hand to cover the stains. Ivan looked into her face, but she wouldn’t hold his gaze.

“Vast. Er...” Ivan had to gather himself. He took a deep breath, and refocused. “Vast. Go with Stalin to flight-deck. I want twins locked away until I am back. Understand?”

Vast nodded. Only now did she look into Ivan’s eyes. It was a haunted glance, and she didn’t hold it for long.

“Ivan?” Ivan looked down. Stalin had trotted to his side, tail hung limply between his legs. Skinthetic eyebrows arched, he looked up at his master.

“Yes?”

“Um. Be careful?”

Ivan stared down at Stalin with some amusement. “I am sorry?”

Stalin looked away, squirming. “You heard me. I may be a cyborg dog, but I’m still a dog never-the-less. And you’re still my master. Please be careful.”

Ivan’s expression softened, and a small smile creased his lips and made his moustache twitch. His servo-sheath whirred gently as he knelt down and patted Stalin on the head. “I will be

fine, my friend. I will be fine.” His expression darkened again as he stood. “It is Boyd you should fear for.” He stood and began to walk away. “I must go now.”

“But, Ivan,” Stalin’s brow furrowed as he nodded in the opposite direction. “The hangar’s this way.”

“Yes, it is.” Ivan said without bothering to look back. “But my vac-suit isn’t.”

With that he reached the end of the corridor. He gave Vast one last quizzical look over his shoulder, then a door closed behind him with a hiss.

#

The hangar was cold and dark. Only a handful of strip lights blinked and flickered, and a selection of lonely computer terminals resisted the darkness with glowing screens of blue and orange. The sound of the storm outside was muted by the hangar doors, and the smell of the burning Calci still lingered here. The *Troika*’s only remaining shuttle—the *Old Bitch*—lay under covers against the far wall. The Eater’s abandoned armoured personnel carrier dominated the centre of the bay.

Looking at this aged vehicle, Boyd—a rugged jacket worn over his body armour—walked into the hangar as he slung his maser-rifle over his shoulder. The *clump clump clump* of his combat boots echoed about him. As he neared the old vehicle, its darkened mass gained some clarity. Drab olive, its camouflage had faded, and its strong armoured silhouette was shaded blue and orange in the light from the monitors. It may have been new when the Eaters had first used it, but that was over fifty years ago. Harsh angles softened by dents, camouflage broken up with scars and scratches, it had plainly seen some action.

*Never mind that. Have you got everything?*

“Aye, lass.” Armour. Guns. Piss. Vinegar. He had everything he needed to kill Ivan.

Then he closed his eyes, squeezing them tight. Why? Why should he want to? It wasn’t right

—

*Why? Because if you don’t, he’ll kill you.*

“You are here. Good.”

Boyd turned to see Ivan stride into the hangar, and he blinked. He’d known the old man for the best part of two decades, and he’d never seen the bastard walk like that. With no trace of a limp, Ivan approached with purpose

Reaching Boyd, Ivan loomed over him and glared down his nose. “You are ready, yes?”

Boyd almost took a step back. Suddenly he remembered just why Ivan was such a legend. The thick white hair and bristling beard that framed his grizzled face like a corona. The bull neck. The massive shoulders and piston arms. The towering height. The sheer force of his presence and his glaring countenance had always been enough to strip most men of their will, and Boyd had seen Ivan intimidate hardened soldiers into surrender. Briefly, under the full weight of the Russian’s glare, Boyd was rendered speechless and impotent.

*Answer him.*

The voice was accompanied by a warm flush of calm through his body, and Boyd stood his ground. Taking a deep breath and smiling sardonically, he held Ivan’s gaze. “Aye, I’m ready, big man. You?”

“As I will ever be.” He walked past and began to ascend a small ladder into the APC’s cabin. He didn’t even look back, and Boyd couldn’t help but admire him for that. The old sod was

so confident he didn't think twice about offering Boyd a free shot. Boyd's hand moved to his holster.

*No. Not now. We wait.*

Ivan climbed into the cabin, and sat. He looked down at Boyd. "You are coming, or not?"

Boyd looked about him. "Is this it? Just me and thee? What about Stalin? Or Vast?"

"It is just me and you. Now hurry up. You are driving."

#

Katarina—a shapeless mountain of old purple jumpers balanced on stripy tights—had only just come to relieve Tatiana of her shift at the scanner when Stalin arrived. Tatiana watched her as she questioned the cyborg dog.

"Come with you? Come with you where? What's going on?" Her dark form was tinged red and green by the few functional monitors, and smoke curled from a forgotten cigarette which dangled from her bottom lip. "What do you mean 'they've gone out'?"

Stalin couldn't even look at the twins. With his back to the flight-deck door, he looked left and right, head low as he padded at the floor. "Um. Ivan said he wanted to grab that Scythe the Eaters left behind. He's taken the APC. And Boyd."

Tatiana and Katarina glanced at each other. The dubious raise of Katarina's eyebrow echoed Tatiana's doubts. "And he couldn't wait?" Katarina asked. She nodded toward the tarpaulin that continued to undulate in synch with the lupine wind. "Or hasn't he seen the weather?"

"He, um, didn't seem that bothered. You know what Ivan's like."

Tatiana hugged herself. "Yes. Cautious."

"The kind of cautious that wouldn't allow him to go out in weather like *this*, in a piece of shit APC like *that*, without good reason." Katarina stopped to pull on her cigarette. Its tip flared orange as she took a drag. "So what's going on, Stalin?"

The dog didn't answer. Nauseous, Tatiana put her hand over her mouth, tears in her eyes. This couldn't be good. If Ivan suspected there was something wrong with Boyd—just as Tatiana did—had the old man taken the Scot into the night to question him? To *kill* him?

Katarina took a step toward Stalin. She clenched her fists and bared her teeth, cigarette dangling from her lip. "Stalin?" What's. Going. *On?*

By way of a reply the door behind Stalin opened with a hiss, revealing Vast. With her good hand she trained a pistol upon the twins.

"I'm so sorry, girls. Really." Stalin's eyebrows arched as his eyes also filled with tears. "But Ivan was adamant. You're going to have to come with me."

#

The engine of the APC coughed and spluttered like a dying miner, and the old vehicle shook as it finally fired up. Sat at its wheel, Boyd wrinkled his nose. The vehicle smelt bad inside, like wet dogs and stale piss. It was dirty too. The kind of ground-in dirt that lingers like guilt and regret.

Gloved fingers gripping the big steering wheel, Boyd wrestled briefly with the stick shift before finding a gear. He wasn't sure it was the right gear, but it was a gear none-the-less. Not that it mattered, he realised, the gearboxes were every bit as bullet proof as the armour. Now he dipped the throttle, and the APC eased forward, throbbing. He steered it out of the

hangar, down the ramp, and into the raging storm that rocked the old troop carrier from side to side, shaking it like a child shakes a rattle.

As he applied the brakes, Boyd checked the wing mirror. Amidst the rain cascading over the dirty glass he saw Ivan's reflection. The old man walked down the ramp, which had already begun to close.

The volume of the storm rose as the APC's rear doors opened, and Boyd watched as the dripping wet Ivan climbed in. After a brief struggle against the pervading wind he managed to slam the doors shut.

"We go now," he shouted down the carrier, shaking excess water from his jacket.

Another check of his wing-mirror, and Boyd saw the hangar ramp shut, the thin sliver of dim light from inside extinguished. His boot went down on the accelerator, and the APC bucked slightly as it set off into the night.

#

With his head low and his tail hung even lower, Stalin's body language screamed dejection. He led the twins and Vast through the *Troika*, glancing over his shoulder at the girls occasionally only to look away just as quickly.

"I'm sorry, girls, really I am," he whined as they turned a corner and headed toward sick-bay, "but Ivan's orders are Ivan's orders. You know that."

"That's 'Your Highnesses' to you," Katarina said, acid in her tone. "Just remember who we are, you spineless mongrel."

Stalin seemed to shrink, legs bending and belly approaching the deck as though his entire body were buckling under the weight of his guilt. "I'm sorry, Your Highnesses."

"That's better." Katarina took a deep drag on her cigarette and looked over her shoulder to glare at Vast.

For her part, Tatiana remained silent. She looked about her as the four of them moved through the ship. There had to be a way to give Stalin and Vast the slip. All she needed was the one opportunity. And she had to do it. God only knew what would happen to Ivan if Portia really was somehow inside Boyd.

"Ivan wanted me to lock you up in the brig, but I think that's a bit harsh." The dog turned and looked up at the twins with big eyes and a lacklustre wag of his tail, as though the sop would somehow earn a reprieve. "So, I thought I might just lock you in sick-bay instead. At least there are comfortable beds there."

"No. The brig will be fine."

The three of them looked at Tatiana. Katarina's eyes narrowed slightly, and a delicate smile touched the corners of her mouth. Did she, Tatiana wondered, know what Tatiana was planning?

"But what about the comfortable beds in sick-bay? And the brig is notoriously cold, you know."

"Not to mention dark, I'll bet." Katarina shrunk as her shoulders stooped and she hugged herself. She gave the semi-darkness about them a troubled look.

Tatiana ignored Katarina and stepped up to Stalin. "Remember who you're talking to, Stalin. If I tell you we shall go to the brig, we shall go the brig. Is that understood?"

#

“I don’t understand why we have to do this now, Ivan.” Boyd had to raise his voice over the garrulous chunter of the aged engine.

“There is a lot here that requires answer, is there not?”

Boyd looked in his mirror again. Ivan had strapped himself into the APC’s scanning station, which sat directly behind the driver’s seat. The station’s flickering monitor painted Ivan’s face a Faustian red, and cloaked his eyes in shadows of deep, Calci green.

Boyd turned his attention back to the trail they were following. Ash and rain whirled about the carrier. Rain assaulted the windshield and broke over the plexi-glass like waves. The carrier’s headlights painted the dead trees outside ghoulish white as they whipped by, shuddering to-and-fro like restless spirits. Forks of lighting punctured the darkness, and peels of thunder tolled across the island. “How long until we reach the Scythe?” he shouted.

“Five minutes.”

He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Ivan in the mirror. The old sod sounded so laconic and relaxed anybody would think he did this sort of thing every day. Then again, Boyd thought with a sardonic smile, back in the Omega Hammers’ hay day, he probably did.

#

Tatiana and Katarina exchanged glances as they stood—along with Stalin and Vast—before the brig’s heavy door. Neither of them had even been to this part of the *Troika* before, but they’d both heard about it. Their father used to joke about it being haunted. As the door opened with a strained dirge of clunks and grinding metal, Tatiana recalled briefly the numerous ghost stories father would tell her and Katarina, the three of them sat in darkened rooms back home in the Oridian palace. He always seemed to find it funny, but their mother was less amused. Especially when her two Princesses couldn’t sleep.

The door came to a rest, and a palpable cold seeped from the pitch darkness beyond. Tatiana shuddered. “Darkness is good for only one thing, *Tzarina*,” Father always said. “Hiding monsters.”

She took a deep breath and her pulse slowed as she found her inner calm. Looking at Katarina, she saw her sister shiver. Still hugging herself, her wide eyes were glued to the darkened corridor. Tatiana’s brow furrowed. That didn’t make sense. Katarina—theatrical, gothic little Katarina—had never had been afraid of the dark. Tatiana looked at the bags under her twin’s eyes, her chewed lower lip, the bleeding skin around her thumbnail were she’d worried it with her fingernail.

“Kat?” She reached for her sister, offering her an open hand. “Are you okay?”

Katarina didn’t answer. She merely gave Tatiana a weak smile and took hold of her hand, squeezing tightly. She looked at Tatiana and her eyes shone, tears pooling amidst the thick mascara.

“You’re sure you wouldn’t rather go to sick-bay?” Stalin asked.

Tatiana looked into Katarina’s eyes and squeezed her hand. All Tatiana needed was for her sister to trust her, to stay with her, and everything would be okay. Tatiana smiled at Kat, and Kat smiled back.

“We’re sure, Stalin,” Katarina said, turning to glare at the dog. “Lead on.”

#

Boyd eased back on the throttle. The APC emerged from the remains of a blasted tree line and into a clearing. Its headlights fell upon the wreckage of the Hammer Tatiana had crashed during their escape from Stanztrigger's ship. Beside it sat the Scythe, the dirt on the thin, needle-nosed gun-ship made streaky and uneven by the lashing rain.

*This is it. This is where he'll make his move. Be ready.*

"Oh, I'm ready all right," Boyd muttered under his breath. "Okay, Ivan," he then said, louder, "we're here."

Boyd looked into the rear-view mirror. Ivan had gone. The scanning station's chair was empty and still spinning.

Boyd reached across the seats for his maser-rifle, but he found only empty, dirty canvass.

He swore under his breath. About to turn in his seat, about to draw his pistol, he felt something cold and metallic biting into the skin behind his ear.

"Okay, Boyd." A click of a hammer being pulled back on a revolver. "Now get up and put hands behind head. We must talk, yes?"

#

The torch clenched between Vast's teeth may have assuaged the darkness, but it did nothing for the cold. Even she shivered as the four of them reached the end of the corridor, her red skin covered in goose-bumps.

"Christ on a bike," Tatiana muttered. "It really *is* cold."

"I warned you." Stalin stood before a low, plain door. The words Cell 2 were stencilled across its surface. The metal of the door glittered with frost. "It's still not too late to change your mind."

Tatiana squeezed Katarina's hand. "This will do just fine Stalin, thank you."

"Well, okay."

Vast moved passed the three of them to stand beside a small terminal set into the doorframe. She activated a button which sprang into blue, glowing life. The door rose. The temperature dived still further, and the musty smell of dirty earth seeped from the cell.

"In you go, Your Highnesses," Stalin said.

#

Boyd eased himself through a gap between the driver's seat, and those for two passengers. He now stood in the body of the APC. Lined with benches, monitors, and lockers, it was semi-lit by flickering strip lights. He put his hands upon his head as he faced Ivan. The old man—pistol in one hand, Boyd's rifle in the other—took slow steps backward until he stood by the rear doors.

"Well, that's something you don't see everyday," Boyd said, nodding toward the silver revolver in Ivan's hand. "Had a change of heart have we, big man?"

"I will ask questions, and you will answer, yes?" He cast the rifle aside. It clattered to the floor.

Boyd shrugged. "You're the boss."

*That's it. Keep him talking.*

Boyd's mouth became dry. His skin tickled. His nostrils flared at the smell of satsumas and pine. A warmth flooded his body, and his breathing slowed. The sound of the storm became more acute. The darkness in the APC lifted as his eyes sharpened. Ivan's movements seemed to stagnate as though replayed in slow motion.

Boyd smiled a tiny smile. In such an enclosed space it was only a matter of seconds until Portia's perfume reached Ivan. Now all Boyd had to do was look for the signs. A trembling of the hands. A glazing of the eyes. A slurring of speech.

Then the old man would be finished.

### Part Three

#### I Die, You Die

As the derelict's orbit brought it close to Stanztrigger, the *Faded Lady*'s docking claws flexed and retracted, and the small ship fell away from its host. With the ice and debris in the derelict's wake bouncing off its hide, the *Faded Lady* engaged both its thrusters and its Griffin system. The flare from those thrusters became muted and winked into invisibility as the rest of the vessel also faded from sight.

Cloaked, the ship headed for Stanztrigger's ionosphere.

#

As the twins, Vast and Stalin stood before the open cell, Tatiana knelt beside the cyborg dog and wrapped her arms about his torso. Stalin lowered his head and closed his eyes. If ever the term hang-dog was appropriate, it occurred to Tatiana that it was now.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but Ivan's orders were very... Well, you know what Ivan's like," Stalin said with a whimper. His eyes opened, but he still didn't look at her. "You have to be locked up while he grills Boyd."

"Stalin, please," Tatiana said in a whisper, mouth close to the dog's ear. "You really shouldn't worry. Everything will be okay." She looked at her sister, and winked at her. "Isn't that right, Kat?" Tatiana made a subtle nod at Stalin and then another at the cell.

Kat blinked, and the blank look shifted into a smile. A wink back and Tatiana knew her sister had worked it out. "Erm. Yeah." Katarina also knelt by Stalin and wrapped her arms about him. "Everything's going to be fine."

"Really?" Stalin's voice rose an octave, and he looked at Tatiana over his armoured shoulder.

"Oh yes, Stalin." Her sly smile widened. "You won't be in there *too* long, I'm sure."

"I won't be—"

The girls heaved in perfect synchronisation, pitching Stalin forward. With a yelp, the dog fell on his nose and tipped through the cell door. He landed on his back and instantly scabbled to his feet, eyes wide in surprise.

Tatiana fell onto her backside and clutched the wound in her ribs with an agonised cry. Meanwhile Katarina sprang to her feet and punched at the small terminal beside the cell door.

"No! Don't! Don't do—"

The cell door slammed down with a reverberant clang, cutting off Stalin's protest.

“Argh! Christ!” Tatiana rolled onto her side. Tears welled in her eyes whilst she clamped both hands over her ribs. Her breath became short. A fire of pain swept through her torso.

“Tatty? Are you okay?” Katarina knelt beside her and put her hand under Tatiana’s head, supporting it.

Tatiana couldn’t answer straight away. She gritted her teeth and took deep inhalations through her mouth before exhaling through her nose. The deep breaths helped her find her calm place, and she ignored the pain.

The terminal in the doorframe buzzed. “Girls! Please! Don’t leave me in here! It’s meant to be haunted!”

Tatiana looked up, only to see Katarina’s expression darken and her lip curl. “Shit happens, you treacherous—”

She stopped as a torch beam shone in her eyes: Vast’s torch beam. The twins looked to her as she loomed over them. They looked from her to her pistol, and back again. It was still aimed at them.

“Vast,” Tatiana said with a gasp. “Please. Ivan doesn’t know what he’s dealing with. Boyd. He’s—” A pause as she took a deep breath. “He’s not himself. There’s something in him. Something nasty. If we don’t help Ivan—” Another gasp. “I don’t think even he can stop Boyd.”

Vast’s eyes narrowed.

“Vast? Are you there? Get me out of here! Please!”

“Don’t listen to him, Vast,” Katarina said. “Listen to Tatiana.”

“I could order you, Vast, but I won’t.” Tatiana propped herself up on her elbows. “I owe you too much to order you about.” She began to rise to her feet, hands resting on the cold metal of the wall. She cried out again, but with a little less passion. The pain had begun to subside. Now it was mere agony. “And you owe it to Ivan to let us go.”

“We all do,” added Katarina whilst helping Tatiana to stand.

#

“So, let’s start with your real name.”

Boyd sucked on his top lip and looked at Ivan, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Your real name. Stanztrigger let cat out of bag, didn’t he? Back on *Balefire*? Boyd is acronym, yes? B.O.Y.D. Derived from your battle-cry ‘Bring Out Your Dead’.”

*Nothing gets by him, does it?*

“I told you,” Boyd muttered. “You shouldn’t take this old bastard for granted.”

*Just keep him talking. He’s facing us in a confined space. He can’t be that clever. He’ll soon be under my control.*

The smell of satsumas and pine in Boyd’s nose became even stronger. His clothes began to stick to his skin as the thick, pungent sweat oozed from his every pore.

*Tell him to put the gun down.*

“C’mon, Ivan. You can put the gun down. You don’t need it, do you?”

Ivan laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant laugh, and Boyd wondered just how many people had heard that moments before they’d died.

“Oh, but I do. Do not tell me otherwise.”

Boyd’s mouth fell open slightly.

*Something’s wrong! He shouldn’t be able to resist!*

“If you will not answer, it is time for me to tell you something, yes?” He raised the gun and aimed it at Boyd’s head. “What are you changing into.”

#

Vast lowered the gun and nodded toward the exit.

“Thank you, Vast,” Tatiana said as she leant on her sister. “Thank you so much.”

#

*Stall him. I need time to think.*

Boyd hesitated, mouth open and still as he floundered. Why should he stall Ivan? What if the big man just wanted to help him? What *was* he turning into?

A wave of pain broke over him, searing, complete. His knees buckled. His hands went from his head to the seat behind as he steadied himself.

*I said stall him! Now!*

“Get those hands up!”

Boyd regained the strength in his legs and raised his hands in a halting gesture. “Ivan, man! What are you talking about? I’m nae turning into anything!”

“Do not insult my intelligence.” Ivan’s body began to shimmer and flicker like the picture on a faulty TV. The image of his parka, boots, and fatigues split into lines, shivered and vanished to reveal Ivan’s real apparel: his old vac-suit. The red and black of its armour was highlighted by the glow of a set of ‘Lectro-knux that girded his other fist. They sparked and hissed with as much deadly energy as the lightning outside. “Do not think that I am stupid, that I have not planned for this, that I am not prepared.”

Boyd shoulders sagged. A camograph projector fitted to a vac-suit. The clever bastard. Clever fucking bastard. And yet a smile touched his lips. He couldn’t help but admire the old git. He had everything worked out.

“You can throw all pheromones at me that you like. It will not work.”

“Pheromones?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.” A SHROUD projector fitted to the suit’s shoulder burst into life, painting a vivid blue image into the air. An animation of an arachnid form scuttled on the spot. As the projection progressed, the spider-like creature transformed into a series of bi-pedal males—including a human, a dog-headed Moreau, and one of Parlour’s amphibious natives—before resuming its true shape. Boyd shuddered.

“Matinee called them Ziggys,” Ivan said, the projection reflected on the visor of his vac-suit. “Jaroth Pha call them ‘The Pale Death’. The Wave know them as the Spidrax. Theocracy use them as spies and assassins. D’Kothren have entire branch of their secret service devoted to their extermination. But none of them—not *one*—really knows what they are, or were they came from.”

“Ivan man, c’mon, this is gibberish. I don’t—”

“But there is one inside you, Boyd. It is changing you on cellular level and transforming you into one of them. Soon you will be consumed by it. Soon you will die, and only Spidrax will be left. If we are lucky—if—we have caught you before it has laid eggs.”

Boyd’s brow furrowed and his blood chilled. Eggs? What the fu—?

*Ignore him. Don’t trust him. He wants to kill us.*

“You realise, don’t you, that I cannot let you back on *Troika*? With one of those things in you are threat to twins, to me, and to ship.”

“So what y’gonna do, big man? Kill me?”

“If you asked me back on Parlour, I’d have said ‘yes’. But now? After you have faced Calci, and Eaters, and Crepitus? No. Without you I doubt we would still be alive. We owe you our lives, yes?”

“So, what’s your plan?”

“Surrender now. We have Dante cabinets on *Troika*. Let me put you in suspended animation and take you to my friend Kithaen. She has faced these creatures before. She will know what to do.”

Boyd stood frozen in place. His fists were clenched so tight his knuckles hurt.

*Don’t listen, Boyd. He’s going to kill you. And then—next time his past catches up with, the next time a Crimea or a Witch or a Crepitus crawls out of the woodwork—he’ll let Vast die in his place. Vast. Then Stalin. Then Katarina. Then, when they’ve gone, it’ll be Tatiana.*

Boyd’s head sank into his hands, and he scratched at his scalp. Clumps of his hair came away between his fingers. He grimaced, teeth bare. Portia couldn’t be right, could she? Should he trust Ivan? He wanted to. He wanted to surrender to Ivan. He wanted this Kithaen to help him

*—*  
*Don’t be stupid, Boyd. How can you trust him? He won’t use guns, and yet he’ll use you and Vast to do his dirty work. And what about Matinee? She’s dead because of him, remember? Trust me. You know you can trust me, don’t you? Without me you would be undead by now, a Calci. The image of the Calci sinking tainted teeth into his shoulder flashed through Boyd’s mind. But I healed you. I healed you because we’re in this together, you and me. If you die, I die., and I don’t want that.*

*Now get up, Boyd. And kill Ivan.*

#

The twins ran into the hangar, Katarina propping up her sister. Vast followed.

Tatiana’s breathing was a little easier now, and the pain had receded slightly. She pushed it aside with deep breaths. She didn’t have time for pain. She had to get out of here. She had to find Ivan and Boyd. “I’ll take the *Old Bitch*. The scanner on board should pick up the APC easily.”

They crossed to the aged shuttle. With a tug Vast pulled at the cover that concealed the vessel, and it fell away to reveal the scarred hull. As ever its narrow and angled canopy gave the vessel a distrustful, glaring countenance.

“Wait a minute,” Katarina said, pulling away from Tatiana. “What do you mean ‘I’ll take the *Old Bitch*’?”

“I mean you’ve got to stay here and look after the *Troika*.”

“Look after the *Troika*? Fuck the *Troika*! What about you? You’ve got a collapsed fucking lung!”

Tatiana paused before answering. Behind them Vast activated the *Old Bitch*’s side door and stepped into the shuttle.

“Kat, please. Now isn’t the time. We can’t all go and find Ivan and Boyd. Somebody needs to stay here. Somebody needs to keep an eye on the scanners.”

“Then let Vast stay.”

“That’s not—” She had to stop, her voice drowned by a sudden whine from the old shuttle as Vast began the pre-flight cycles. Voice raised, Tatiana carried on. “That’s not such a good idea, Kat. It’s not as if she can call us for help if something goes wrong, is it?”

“Then I should go. You need rest.”

“No. Absolutely not.” Tatiana paused and sighed. “You know how feel about Boyd. I *need* to go out there.”

“And what about how *I* feel? I love Uncle just as much as you do!”

The two stared at each other, the silence punctuated by a stuttering as the shuttle’s Newton system struggled to activate. Tatiana studied her sister. There was something about her. She was holding something back. The way her eyes flicked about slightly, the way her eyelids twitched. The way she glanced about nervously and chewed her lip. She was hiding something, and she was desperately nervous. Tatiana’s brow furrowed. What could be bothering Kat so much? She hadn’t seen her this anxious since they’d been trapped on the *Troika* with the Witch.

“Kat.” She reached out and took her sister by the shoulders whilst staring into her eyes, head bowed. “I’m going. I need you to stay here. I can see you’re scared, but everything. Is going. To be. All right. Alright?”

She didn’t answer. She looked down and to the side. The tension seemed to bleed from her body, and her shoulders sagged.

“Vast,” Tatiana said, turning to the bodyguard as the *Veriddion* alighted the shuttle. “Stay here. Make sure the *Troika* is secure. Once I’m gone you can release Stalin, for all the good he’ll do.” Tatiana then turned back to her sister and took a step backward “Now, Kat. I have to go, before Ivan and Boyd kill each other.”

#

Boyd launched himself at Ivan. Springing forward, he barrelled into the old man—or tried to. Ivan lowered his pistol and Ivan drove the fizzing ‘Lectro-knux into Boyd’s chin with an expansive punch.

Boyd screamed as hundreds of volts poured through him. Thrown across the APC, he landed on his back and spasmed violently.

“So, it comes to his, yes?” Ivan threw his pistol to one side. He reached behind his back and replaced the gun with another set of ‘Lectro-knux. “A pity.”

*Get up! Kill him, before he kills you!*

Boyd squirmed onto all fours, and glared. His limbs trembled. His heart-rate increased. His nose was thick with the scent of satsumas and pine and the pain had receded, replaced with a feeling of calm and focus. He could take Ivan. Easy.

*He's going to kill you, Boyd. He's not interested in talking, in helping you. He just wants to kill you.*

"Are you sure this is what you want, Boyd?" Ivan asked, his new weapon sparking as he activated it.

Boyd rose, flexing his neck muscles as he rolled his shoulders. This was it, this was the decider. It had all been leading to this. The tension between them. Ivan's insults. Ivan's *threats*. It had always been leading to this final showdown. He sprang up and down on his toes like a boxer waiting in his corner. It had all been leading to this, and he'd be damned if he was going to lose. "Too right, y'old bastard," he growled. "Let's have ya."

#

With Vast knelt beside the hangar door, Katarina stood alone. Watching the storm swallow the *Old Bitch*—the shuttle buffeted by lashing rain and bullying winds as it ploughed through into the night—she hugged herself.

The cold was sharper now Tatiana had gone. The dark thicker. The silence heavier. Her eyes filled with tears as she watched the hangar door finally slam shut, cutting off her view of the receding *Old Bitch*.

Vast jogged passed her, Tatiana's last orders having been to make sure the *Troika* was sealed and secure.

As Vast left, the boom of the bay door continued to echo about the hangar, and Katarina tried to chart the sound's movements, frightened stare switching from one corner to the other in rapid succession. Each time she fancied something tinkled the periphery of her vision. Something colourful, flat, and painted on the walls. But every time she looked, it had gone, just as it had done all these sleepless nights.

With a shudder she turned on her chunky metal heel and scurried from the hangar.

#

The air in the APC was thick with the scent of Portia's perfume and burnt ozone. Successive punches from Ivan brought Boyd to his knees, and a further blow to the side of the head sent him to the floor.

Boyd shook his head. The pain vanished. Ivan loomed over him, preparing to strike again.

Boyd kicked, boot thundering into Ivan's groin. The crumple of his armoured box could barely be heard over the old man's cry, distorted by the suit's speaker. Ivan staggered back to the other side of the APC, hand going between his legs.

It may only have been a brief respite, but that was all Boyd needed. He drew his pistol and fired, the muzzle-flash painting the interior of the vehicle and its two combatants in chiaroscuro relief. The succession of rounds rained upon Ivan, his torso covered in sparks as his armoured suit resisted the bullets. The old man's body jerked, however, as the concussive force of the repelled slugs stabbed at his aging flesh.

With one pistol exhausted, Boyd rose to his feet and drew another. Continuing to fire, he closed the distance to Ivan. Once within arm's length, he cast the gun aside. Ivan gathered himself quickly and attempted a straight jab, 'Lectro-knux flaring. Boyd ducked under the arm, seized it, and threw Ivan over his shoulder.

With a crash and a curse, Ivan clattered against the far wall before falling headfirst to the deck. Boyd was upon him instantly, leaping the width of the APC to straddle his opponent. Ivan fought back, striking Boyd across the face with repeated lefts and rights.

It didn't matter to Boyd. He felt no pain. Only a euphoria, only the smell of satsumas, and of pine. Time had become slow and sedate—almost lascivious—and any fear or respect he'd harboured for Ivan had gone, seduced by a sense of utter infallibility, or complete dominance. He was Portia, and Portia was him. Together they were indestructible.

He held Ivan down with one hand, and pummelled that blank visor with the other. His knuckles didn't take long to break, and neither did the plexiglass. But whilst his hand healed, the visor didn't, its cracked edges framing Ivan's sneering face, his weathered skin cut and bled by tiny shards of broken visor.

The sneer soon vanished, the mouth going slack just as his eye became vague and his body went limp. With his nostrils clogged with scent, Boyd could see tiny droplets of Portia's thick perfume forming on Ivan's skin and collecting in his beard.

*That's it. He's ours. Now finish him.*

Mechanical and slavish, Boyd got to his feet and lifted Ivan from the floor with one hand, the beaten man limp and unresisting. Boyd looked about him, a smile playing across his face. His gaze fell upon Ivan's discarded revolver in the corner of the APC. He walked across to the gun, dragging Ivan behind him. Reaching down, he gathered up the gun pistol and pulled back on the hammer.

*Yes! That it! Shoot him, Boyd. Shoot him now!*

He put the barrel of the gun into the smashed visor. It was time. It was time to end Ivan and be free of him, to be with Tatiana, to command the *Troika*. Ivan'd had his time, and squandered it hiding behind people like Matinee and Vast. Well, he couldn't hide anymore.

Then his mouth ran dry and he paused, confronted with this most absolute of concepts. Killing Ivan? Sure, he wanted to show the old man who was boss, but to shoot him in cold blood? To put him down like a dog? It wasn't right. He'd have treated a Moreau with more respect than that. He began to withdraw the pistol as he muttered, "I won't do this, Portia."

*Yes you will. You will shoot him, and we'll go to the Troika. Then we will kill Vast, and Stalin, and Katarina. Then we will kill Tatiana, and we will take that ship and we will colonise the stars. Do you understand?*

The smell of satsumas and pine became so strong it stung his eyes. He blinked as tears streamed down his bloodied face. "No! I won't!"

*You will. Understand this, Boyd. There's nothing you can do to defy me. There's nowhere you can go. You are a closed room, and you are trapped in it with me. And I control you. Utterly. Now put that gun in Ivan's face...*

He did it. Barely aware of his own actions, the world about him had become distant and blurred as his senses were overrun and blunted by Portia. He barely heard the barrel of the pistol as it scraped against the smashed glass of the visor.

"Boyd?" Ivan's voice—weak and slow—leaked from the darkness inside the helmet.

"Don't."

*... And shoot him.*

He pulled the trigger.

## Part Four

### Body and Soul

With the roar of its thrusters muffled by the cacophony of the storm, the *Faded Lady* hovered over the island and disengaged its Griffin system. As rain squirmed over the ship's hide, retros in the vessel's belly glowed orange in the night. Ash and dead wood whirled about the scarred ship as it touched down.

Minutes passed. The ship sat in the rain, the hot metal of its hull ticking as it contracted. Finally a hiss escaped from its undercarriage as a crack of light sliced through an airlock in its belly. A ramp ventured forth. The light flourished and expanded, and the 'lock opened, five figures silhouetted in the glare. With the ramp biting into the ash on the ground, the five figures shuffled forward, hunched under rain capes that flapped in the gale.

#

The storm continued to batter the idle APC, the abandoned Scythe, and the crashed Hammer. Now, however, the howl of the gale was joined by a new sound: the *Old Bitch*. Forcing itself through the murderous weather, rain bouncing from its hull like stones, the aged shuttle settled over the clearing. The rain became white scratches on the darkness as the *Old Bitch's* spotlight sprang to life, its beam encompassing the two vehicles.

Inside, Tatiana locked the craft into a holding position and concentrated on the scanners. The monitor flicked and buzzed, its information distorted and fuzzy. "Come on, damn you!" Reaching up to prod buttons on a console above her head, she winced as she stretched the wounded muscles about her ribs.

The redirected power did little to improve the read-out. She bit her lip and stared through the rain that cascaded down the *Old Bitch's* canopy. She focused on the APC, so still and so lifeless.

Had Ivan, she wondered, already made his move? If so, were either he or Boyd still alive?

#

*Click.*

Boyd pulled the trigger again.

*Click.*

"What the fuck, Ivan?" Boyd extracted the revolver from amongst the sharp frame of Ivan's smashed visor. He flicked the chamber open with a deft flick of his wrist and inspected it. "You brought an *empty* gun?"

Ivan's eyes were blank slates of grey. His irises fluctuated slightly as his head stopped lolling. Blinking, lips twitching, his eyes narrowed before he said, "Only brought gun. To threaten you, to use language you would understand. Never intended to use it."

Boyd's teeth gritted and a bestial growl welled in his throat. Throwing the useless gun over his shoulder, he used both hands to shake Ivan.

"You coward! You old, dried up, bent, broken, vicious, twisted old *coward*! You won't use a gun? Christ, no! But you'll use axes and 'Lectro-knuks and me and Vast and Matinee to do your dirty work for you, won't you?"

*Boyd! What's wrong with you? —Focus!*

Again the smell of satsumas and pine washed over him, but it didn't matter. Something else had possession of Boyd now. Something far more feral than Portia, and twice as angry.

"You put the twins in jeopardy, you get Matinee and Doll Three killed—you get *Stanztrigger* killed—and you still won't use a fucking gun!" His voice rose to a roar, as he picked Ivan off the floor completely, leaning back to gain leverage. He shook the limp old man with an ever greater violence. "You use us all to mop up your mess, to kills freaks like Crepitus and Petrid, to protect you from bastards like Crimea and the Witch, but you won't. Use! A! *Gun!*"

*Boyd! You're becoming hysterical!*

"Now I have this thing inside me and Vast has no arm and Tatiana has a punctured lung and Dolly's in bits because *you're* a bloody *coward!* Because you won't face your past! Because you won't take up arms!" Ivan's limbs and head slew back and forth, blood and spittle flying through his smashed visor as Boyd shook him with even greater rage. "What's *wrong* with you?"

*Enough of this! Just finish him! Finish him now!*

Boyd's vision began to blur and fade toward the edges. Little lights flashed in front of his eyes. The smell of pine and oranges was now so overpowering he thought he might vomit. His movements became slurred and ill-coordinated as he lost contact with his limbs. Like an angry drunk, he threw Ivan to the floor and continued to rant.

He didn't know what he was saying. The words were a stream of slurred consciousness. He swayed above Ivan and rained vitriol on the bent old man. All those months of anger and fear, of frustration and anxiety poured from him like urine as he relieved the burdened bladder of his soul.

All the while Portia continued to bleat in his head, continued to use her perfumes, continued to douse him with both pleasure and pain. None of it worked. Just as Boyd had lost control of his temper, Portia had lost control of Boyd.

#

The *Old Bitch* touched down just inside the clearing. With a grunt of pain Tatiana began to rise from the pilot's seat, but paused as she took a deep breath and regarded the APC. If she was right, Portia was in there—and Portia was a killer. She flexed her long fingers, and chewed on her lip. She might need a weapon. She glanced about her, looking down at the pilot seat.

Then she remembered Katarina stabbing the alien in the shoulder with the emergency knife stored in the seat's frame. Reaching down, her searching fingers found the blade and pulled it out. She knelt and slipped the weapon into the lip of her boot. With only its hilt protruding she patted it, then moved to the shuttle's side-door, hand on her wounded ribs as she did so.

She punched at the door controls, and the doors opened slovenly. Rain burst in. With her hand raised over her eyes, she stepped out of the *Old Bitch*. Instantly the gale seized her, and she staggered sideways, her heels digging into the wet ash as she braced against the wind and grabbed at the edge of the door. Squinting through the torrential rain, she focused on the APC. It was only metres away, but these could well be the hardest metres she'd ever face. The wind hammered at her with bestial fury. Metal debris from the destroyed Hammer, Scythes, and Calci gunships was strewn amongst the ash and jagged rocks. A fork of lightning tore into a dead tree only metres away, destroying it utterly.

It didn't matter. Lives were at stake. The lives of two men she loved.

It would take more than bad weather to stop her from saving them.

#

*What are you doing? He's still alive!*

He didn't care. He wouldn't listen to her anymore. Eyes squeezed shut, hand on his forehead, he turned from the prone Ivan—the old man still and staring at him in alarm—and staggered to the APC's back doors. With a kick the doors buckled and sprang open.

*Where are you going, you idiot?*

He didn't know. He didn't care. All he knew was just how close he'd come to killing Ivan. Who was next? Tatiana? He couldn't risk it. He had to get away, he had to take this monster inside far away from Tatiana and the *Troika*. That was all that mattered.

#

Tatiana had almost reached the APC when the rear door sprang open and Boyd leapt out. He landed on all fours and looked about. Tatiana stopped and put her hand to her mouth as she gasped. Her eyes widened. Christ, he looked so feral. His teeth were bared, his skin shone with rain. He was covered in blood, mixed to an almost pink paste by that too familiar thick sweat she remembered from Portia's body. His hair was coming away in thick clumps.

"Boyd?" Her voice was small and weak.

He looked at her. Panting, teeth gritted, eyes like saucers, he scowled at her. She saw no recognition there, no warmth. Just distrust and a savage anger.

He couldn't hear her, she realised. Not in this storm. "Boyd?" she said again, raising her voice. She reached out for him. "Boyd. It's me. It's Tatiana."

#

Deep inside Boyd, locked into his cells and mutating her host, the complex nucleotides that collectively formed Portia realised she had lost control of Boyd.

This couldn't be happening to her! Not again! She wouldn't let it. She wouldn't be trapped here, on this backwater, the way she'd been trapped on Parlour. She had to regain control. She just had to. She had to find something, *someone*, locked deep in his memory or in his childhood or in his nightmares, and use them. The fear of Ivan had failed. Who else could she use? Who else might be more useful? Somebody in his past, perhaps? Somebody hidden deep away under all that denial and alcohol? Somebody like...

Then Portia found her, hidden back in Boyd's teens and locked away in a box made of booze and self-destruction. She found her, and deep inside Boyd, Portia laughed.

#

Boyd had never expected to see her here. He didn't even know she was still alive. Yet here she was, stood in the rain and reaching out toward him. Her mottled hand trembled, and the thin nails jittered as her skinny fingers shook. The last time he'd seen that hand it was clutching bread knife. A bread knife with his Da's blood on it.

"Boyd," she said. Her voice was different somehow. Younger. "It's me. It's yer ma."

He couldn't believe it. How could she be here? She should be dead by now, or still locked away back home. He backed away slightly. She shouldn't be here. Please, Christ, don't let her be here.

Yet there she stood, covered in his father's blood. Tall, thin, and weathered, her lined face was a map of substance abuse that showed all routes from Marlboro to Bells. The smell of her breath—whisky with a nicotine chaser—assailed him. He gagged.

“What’s wrong, Boyd?” She smiled. Her teeth were the same cheap plastic things that sat on top of black and rotting stumps. “Why are you running away?”

He couldn't answer. He hunkered down in the wet ash and put his hands to his head again. He shook it from side to side and tore at his hair. She couldn't be here! She couldn't!

*She is, Boyd. She's here, and she wants to kill you. I can't let that happen, Boyd. So you've got to kill her. Now.*

Suddenly the smell of her of tainted breath was all about him. It was in the air. It was on his clothes. It was in his mouth.

It was too much. He had to get away. He had to escape. Even if it meant going through her. He launched himself forward, and clawed at her scrawny throat.

#

“Boyd! No! What are you doing?”

Hands closed about Tatiana's throat, and squeezed hard. Gagging, she grabbed at his wrists. Her mouth fell open as she gasped for breath and tried to talk. Nothing came out.

She looked into his face. Wild and white, a viscous goo bubbled on his lips, and that sticky white sweat coated his skin. The smell of her father's cologne filled her nostrils, and now Boyd's features shifted, taking on her father's jaw and chin. The lips creased into that same crooked smile. The eyes deepened. The hair thickened and turned white. This was Portia's work. She knew it, even as she fought for breath, her eyesight failing and the roar of her heartbeat drowning out the sound of thunder.

Panicked and desperate, she reached for his head.

#

With his hands about his mother's throat, Boyd squeezed with all his strength. He ignored the whisky slurs of her pleading, and the stale ciggies on her breath. Now he would make her pay. Now he'd put his ghosts to re—

His mother let go of his wrists and grabbed at the side of his head before jamming her sharp thumbnails into his eyes. Pain exploded through his head. An agonised cry burst from him with a primal fury, and he staggered backward, hands going over his face.

“Bitch!” he screamed. He took his hands from his face and clenched them into fists. “You shouldn't have come here! I will kill you! You are dead! Do you hear, bitch? *Dead!*”

#

He recovered so quickly Tatiana had no time to plan her next move. One second his eyes were a bloody mess, the next they reformed to fill his bloody sockets.

One hand on her throat and one over her ribs, she gagged and stepped backward, boots struggling for traction. Even Vast didn't heal that quickly. What the hell was she suppose—

He came at her again, or so she assumed. All she knew was the blur of him moving forward, a flash of pain in her face, and her being on her back amongst the rocks and debris, dazed. She put her hand to her nose. Blood, thick and blue. It covered her hand and coated her lips. She blinked as the world refocused. Suddenly he stood over her, a rock held over his head

with both hands. His eyes shone, reflecting the meagre light that leaked from within the *Old Bitch*. They were alien eyes. They were Portia's.

At she thought of Portia she raised her knee to her chest, and her hand closed about the knife in her boot. She thought of Portia killing Ivan, her sister, and Vast. She thought of Portia taking the *Troika* and becoming some arachnid cancer amongst the stars.

Well, she'd beaten that arachnid bitch once, and she could do it again. She was a Valentine. "I'm sorry, Boyd," she managed to gasp.

#

Boyd brought the rock down, but Ma rolled sideways and the rock smashed as he drove into the vacant earth. He looked to his mother just as she rolled back at him. A searing pain burst through his thigh.

*Look. Look at what she's holding!*

Now her trembling hand clutched the bloody bread-knife he'd seen her use on his father. Suddenly he was fourteen again, cowering in the corner of the kitchen whilst she stood over murdered his father. Suddenly he was shitting himself again as she turned to look at him, face splattered in Da's blood.

He staggered back, hands clutching at his wound and blood pumping from between his fingers. An instinctive shudder seized him. A wound like that, in the artery, should kill him in seconds, but the wound healed. He should have been amazed, but it didn't matter. He just had to kill his mother. Now.

She was up already up and on her feet, breath coming in gasps and wheezes. She rushed at him and stabbed at him again. The knife sliced into his cheek and sliced through his face as she extracted the blade. She slashed into his neck, into his shoulders, into his chest, and with every laceration she sobbed. "I'm sorry, boy. I'm so sorry."

He didn't defend himself. With his hands by his side he stood his ground and let her exhaust herself. As he did, he gloried in the feeling of his wounds healing, of the skin knitting together. He gloried in the sight of her becoming weaker and weaker, her assault faltering and slowing until, with an agonised cry, she fell to her knees before him, hands falling into her lap and her pained breath coming in ragged gasps. He gloried in this final victory over his mother, over the ghost who had haunted him for so long.

*That's it, Boyd, Portia cooed in his head. She's done. You've won. Now kill her, and let's get out of here.*

#

Tatiana looked up into his face. It was blank and white.

"Boyd, please," she said with a sob, "it's me, it's Tatiana. Don't you recognise me?"

He reached down and grabbed a handful of her jacket.

"For God's sake, Boyd! Fight her! Can't you feel her? She's controlling you!"

He pulled on the jacket. A seam ripped in its shoulder as he hauled her to her feet and stared into her eyes. They were alien and alive with hate and mischief.

"Fight her, Boyd! Fight! Her!"

"He can't hear you, *Tsarina*."

They both turned. Ivan stood by at the rear of the APC, Boyd's maser-rifle held across his chest. An LED display in its power-pack crept upward with a succession of beeps. Feet wide apart, vac-suit cracked and bent, he glared at Boyd with a hatred that astonished Tatiana. Never had she seen him look so angry, and—despite the swelling purple bruises about his face, despite his swaying and staggering in the storm—never had she seen him so determined and alive.

“This,” he said, nodding down at the maser-rifle, “is yours, yes?”

He threw it in the same instant Boyd cast Tatiana aside. She fell, crying out as a fire of pain burnt her torso. She ignored the agony to twist in the ash and watch Boyd snatch the rifle from the air as it sailed toward him. Spinning it, taking hold of its handle and barrel with practised ease, he raised it to his shoulder and aimed at Ivan even as the old man jumped to the ground and covered his head.

The ascending scale of flashes reached the final LED, and the rifle detonated.

The concussion robbed Tatiana of what little air she had in her lungs. Unable to breath, she lay there flailing as she tried to turn onto her side and reach for her back. Her back was broken, she could feel it. Her back was broken, and she couldn't breath! She was going to suffocate!

No! Ignore it! You're just winded! she told herself. Concentrate! Where's Boyd? And Ivan?

She squirmed, and tried to look about her, tried to listen. But even in the howl of the storm, the explosion had bludgeoned Tatiana's hearing and rendered it into a sharp, protracted whistle. The explosion lingered over her eyes, reducing her sight to a sheet of milk white tainted with patches of muted purple and red.

“—iana? Can you hear me?” Hands grabbed at her, taking hold of her under her arms. “Can you hear me, yes?” The voice percolated through the whistling. “We must go.”

She was hauled to her feet. She shook her head vigorously and squeezed her eyes tight. Blinking, she could make out dark shapes as they began to materialise before her. “Ivan?” she gasped.

“Up, Tatiana, quickly.”

She threw her arms about him. “Ivan! Thank God! I thought—”

“No time. He is still alive. We must get away.”

He began to walk and drag her alongside. Head clearing, she could make out the sound of rain and thunder. Her limbs began to regain their strength, and she pushed away from Ivan.

“We can't just leave him, Ivan.” She shook her head and rubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand in an attempt to dispel the bright lights.

Even the howl of the storm couldn't mask the fear in his voice—a fear that made Tatiana shudder. Ivan shouldn't sound like that. “We have to. I thought I could beat him, contain him, take him to Kithaen. But—”

“We can't leave him.” She blinked her sight clear. She could see him now, his battered face lurking inside his ruined helmet. The arch of his eyebrows, the thin line of his lips. He was torn, she could see. He wanted to help Boyd, but...

A new sound reached Tatiana. A sound wet with the pained wheezing of damaged lungs, with the grating of fractured bone, with pained grunts forced from a demolished body. With a void in her belly and a vacuum in her throat, she turned toward the sound.

She choked on a swell of bile and vomit as she watched Boyd rise on unsteady legs. One hand on her mouth, the other on her belly, she forced herself to keep watching. Limbs twisted, flesh flayed away to reveal ripped muscles and splintered bone, Boyd rose to his full height. His head tipped back, and he stared at her, eyes framing the dark butterfly on his exposed nasal cavity. The smashed rictus of his teeth ground together, and the pale irises of his milk white eyes shifted as they focused on her. With faltering steps he began to lurch toward her, his every step screaming pain and ruination, but she could already see his bones straighten and seal, the muscles swell and knit together, and the small islands of burnt skin expand and rally. But, most of all, she could see the hate in those eyes. Hate, and no sign of Boyd.

“*Tsarina*. We go. Now.” Ivan grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her after him as he moved toward the *Old Bitch*. Over the gale she could hear a whine of servos accompanying his every stride. Still she looked back. Boyd’s pace picked up, and his faltering steps segued into powerful strides. The broken arms left his side and flexed as he reached for Ivan and Tatiana. His wounds were swallowed by a tide of milky, hairless skin. As she watched he became whole again. More slender, more feminine, but whole.

She and Ivan reached the *Old Bitch*, but it was no use. Boyd accelerated with a dreadful speed, and fell upon them. His eyes burnt into Tatiana as, with a sweep of his arm, he swatted Ivan aside. The old man howled in pain as he was thrown into the air and clattered to the ground. Her peripheral vision picked up his attempts to get up, but it would be far, far too late.

Boyd glared at her, and she shrank back against the hull of the *Old Bitch*. The streaming water on its flank soaked through her clothes, and a keypad bit into her shoulder. His arm a blur, he seized her by the throat and lifted her from the ground before slamming her back against the hull panel. The edge of the keypad cut into her hip. He drew back his other arm, ready to strike. His eyes told her this would be the killing blow.

“Don’t do it, Boyd! It’s me! It’s Tatiana!”

“Boyd isn’t here anymore, Tatiana.” The lips moved into a caricature of a smile. “I’ve put him away for a while.”

“No!” She punched Boyd in the face. He barely blinked. “He’s in there, Portia. I know he’s in there. He’s stronger than that. Stronger than *you*.”

“No, he isn’t. I own him. Body and soul. And I’m going to use him to get your ship and go home, just as I planned on Parlour. You understand, don’t you? You know what it’s like to want to go home.”

She hit him again. “Boyd! *Fight* her, Boyd! Don’t let her *win*!”

He faltered, the fist frozen in place. His eyes widened a little. A little colour seeped into those blank eyes, and the irises dilated.

“Boyd, I love you.” She wept now, her tears mingling with the rain. She reached out, cupping his face. It lacked the scratch of stubble she knew so well, and what should have sun-kissed skin was now so pale as to betray the blue veins beneath, but the flex of his jaw muscles under that skin was oh so familiar. “I love you, I love you, I love you. Please, I can’t bear to see this *thing* beat you like this. Fight her. For me. For *us*.”

He lowered her a little. His eyes were a steely grey now, and his fist was trembling. His lips moved as he muttered to himself, saying, “Kill her, you idiot. She’s lying. She doesn’t love you. She wants to kill you.”

“No! I could never kill you! Please, come back to me, Boyd. We’ll go away from here. We’ll settle somewhere and hide from all this madness. Hide from all the Calci, hide from all spiders. We can marry, have kids. We can have a boy and a girl. Call them Gregor and Matinee—”

He roared a bestial roar, squeezed shut his eyes and beat his fist against his skull. Finally his eyes snapped open. Boyd’s eyes.

Throwing her aside, he drove his fist into the shuttle’s hide. It buckled and split, his fist spearing into the circuitry behind. Lying in the dirt, Tatiana twisted to watch as Boyd’s body lit up instantly, the idling shuttle’s power pouring through him. Incandescent, his body shook violently. Its form shifted shifted and changed with a rapidity that both bewildered and sickened Tatiana. The newly formed skin bubbled and popped like boiling milk. Malformed mandibles speared through the sides of his bulging face. The muscles on his flank twisted and contorted as spider legs—stillborn and twisted—sprang forth. Two tiny colonies of eyes arose through skin that heaved about his eyes like churning seas. All the while his body shuddered and bucked as smoke poured from it and blood—brown and steaming—spat from gaping wounds.

Tatiana had to look away, hands over her ears. If the sight of him dying wasn’t bad enough, the scream was even worse. Almost porcine in its quality, it was a squeal she’d heard before. Back on Parlour. The first time she’d killed Portia. But this? This was a thousand times worse. This was Boyd screaming.

This was Boyd’s death.

The scream ebbed and faded into a sob, then there was silence. Tatiana opened her eyes. The *Old Bitch* seemed to give up the last of her power, the light inside fading, the idling of the engine dying and the landing lights going out. And as the shuttle died, Boyd’s smoking form fell away from the side of the vessel to collapse into the ash.

“Boyd?” Tatiana’s voice was weak. She tried again, louder. “Boyd?”

With no response, she crawled forward. As she closed in on what was left of Boyd, her limbs shook and her eyes stung. Hysterical sobs rocked her.

He wasn’t moving. The body—screwed up and burnt like a stubbed out cigarette—lay smoking in a sea of ash. Huge holes gaped in his body. Splintered bones poked out of scorched muscle. His face was a horror of arachnid mutation, lost in a sea of popped spider-eyes and mandibles. His stomach and chest had split open, and burning organs still shrank and squirmed in the heat. Amongst that ruination she could see a coagulated mess of burst eggs and tiny, barely formed spiders. Some still twitched.

She turned away and threw up with such violence she thought her throat might rip. Hands folded across her chest, she pitched forwards into her own vomit as she wept with all the passion and power of a newborn. Gone. He was gone. Taken from her. Ruined. Mutated. Turned into a horrific mass of alien flesh and smouldering bone. And it was all her fault. If only she hadn’t gone to Parlour, if only she hadn’t persuaded him to go with her...

She kicked and screamed, thrashed and pummelled at the ground, her fists clenched so tightly her nails shredded her palms. Her fault. All her fault. She made him go. She’d left him behind when the mutants had attacked. She’d left him behind for Portia to do what she want—

A slap bit into her hysteria. She froze and looked up. Ivan knelt over her and grabbed her wrists, pinning her.

“Stop this.” His face was lost in the darkness of his helmet. “Now is not the time.”

She couldn't move. She could barely breath. Her damaged lung and the tightness of her throat conspired against it.

"We are both injured and storm is getting worse. We must get back to *Troika*."

She tried to reply, but could make no sound. A grunt from Ivan barely penetrated the clamour of the storm as it surged about them, whipping ash and dead bark into a funnel. Lightning scored across the sky, smashing into the ground scant metres away. The rain stabbed at them. The abandoned Scythe and the spent carcass of the *Old Bitch* rocked to and fro in the gale, and the APC's aging springs bawled and cried out as the vehicle bucked and squirmed. Even the mighty Ivan struggled to hold the two of them upright

She looked to Boyd's body. It was already falling apart and being cast to the four winds, as though the elements themselves colluded against Portia. Ivan wrapped his arms about Tatiana and hauled her from the ground, staggering. She collapsed into him, as empty and lifeless as the *Old Bitch*. She wanted to stay. She *should* stay. She wanted to gather up all that was left of Boyd and bury him with the love and reverence he deserved. But she knew it was too late. Already his bones jittered across the clearing, his viscera springing into the air and almost dancing in the calamitous storm.

She closed her eyes and looked away, body shuddering with sobs. Boyd was gone.

#

Four of the five figures huddled together. Before them sat the *Troika*, undaunted and unmoved by the storm. Slightly apart from the rest of the group, one the five withdrew a thin and liver-spotted hand from its rain-cape. Thin black fingernails glinted in the flash of lightning and betrayed her sex. She held a small projector in her flaccid palm. It sprang into life, offering a wavering blue image of The Witch of Bleakwinter.

Even in her white furs and brass two-piece, The Witch's voluptuous body looked naked without her famous dragon tattoos. Also absent was her cold and celebrated beauty, her face hidden beneath a mask of thick and twinkling ice. She stood looking toward the camera that relayed her image. "Coven," she said as she folded her arms under her breasts. Despite the mask, her voice was clear and strong. "Did you find the Valentines?"

"Yes, ma'am," the figure said, her voice a thick Confederate drawl. The light from the projector barely illuminating her lined and haggard face as it brooded inside the cape's hood. "Looks like yer son was on the money. The *Troika*'s here—right where he said."

The Witch placed her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. "Then you shall capture the ship and the Valentines. You will hold them there until Crimea and I arrive."

The woman nodded. "Yes ma'am."

"And Coven? The Valentines are not to be hurt. You can have your way with the rest of the crew, but the Valentines are left for me, understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

The projection peered at the woman, as if trying to ascertain its true response. The woman's expression—or what could be seen of it—barely shifted. Thwarted, The Witch waved her hand dismissively. "Get to it."

The projection vanished, and the woman drew her hand back into the relative warmth of her rain cape.

"S'at true, momma?" One of the other figures shouted over the baying of the storm. "We ain't gonna have no fun?"

The leader's shoulders shook as though she were laughing. "Like hell, Scarlett. We got here first, we's gonna take the spoils and to hell with the damn Witch." She looked over her shoulder, black eyes glinting as lightning tore across the heavens. "Now pucker up, girls. We's gonna take the ship, and then we's gonna skin us some Valentines."

*The Valentine Chronicles* will continue with *Under the Gun*

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