

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?

To be continued...

Discuss this story—and more—on the [Valentine Chronicles forum](#)