

Frozen

by Paul L. Mathews

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 shrank 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 lightning 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 satumas 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.

To be continued...

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