

Frozen

by Paul L. Mathews

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 scrambled 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, shimmered 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's 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 where 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.

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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 I 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.”

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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.

To be continued...

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