

Frozen

by Paul L. Mathews

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 breathe, 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 breathe! 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, mamma?" 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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