

Under the Gun

by Paul L. Mathews

Prologue

Sandstorm

Twenty four hours after Crimea and Yevgeny had saved Ivan's life during the fall of Ferroc Boon, the fort burned. In the valley below, the city of Ferroc Tar cowered, its domed minarets and spiked towers kissed orange and red by the flames, as a tide of Theocracy forces swirled toward it. The brass *Stak Ta* armour of strident Theocracy nobles gleamed, and their guns smoked as hunched masses of myriad levies swarmed past them. The arrhythmia of their battle cries washed over the city just as their rockets and bullets tore into it. Brass gunships hovered over the valley and poured streams of fire into Tar, and the ground rumbled as gleaming tanks crawled forward and pounded their objective with shell after howling shell. All fought for dominance over the screams of those dying in the hellfire; and such was the combined cacophony, that the ears of the myriad alien levies bled.

Smoke poured from the burning metropolis and cast a pall over the valley which the moonlight couldn't penetrate. The acrid stench of burning masonry and the sickening stench of roasting flesh swelled about the onrushing army. Some—those younger and less hardened than their compatriots—faltered or even vomited, half-digested food coating their chins and armour, but they pushed on, rattling their sabres and brandishing their guns.

Such was the destiny of Ferroc Tar, a city that had dared to defy the Theocracy war-machine. Its fate sealed, all that remained to be seen was who would escape this conflagration alive.

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The square at the centre of Ferroc Tar had once boasted a magnificence of alien sculpture, fountains, and a clock tower said to be heartbeat of the Ferroc system. When this clocked stopped, wise men said, the surrounding planets would fall soon after.

Now, however, all was rubble and bent metal. What few sculptures had survived the shelling were smashed under the bellies of the *Troika*, *Siberian Winter*, and the *Kronstadt* as these famous Three Sisters of the Omega Hammers touched down. The smoke, sand and dust that choked the square swirled about the ships. The roar of their engines drowned out the pounding of shells.

From the ruination of a fallen tower, with the ground quaking, Ivan bolted for the *Troika*. In his arms he held an indistinct shape smothered in a bloody blanket. As he ran, his kit chattering about his waste and his breath ragged and forced, his comm buzzed in his ear as Gregor hailed him.

“We don't have much time, Ivan.” An unusual tension framed Gregor's voice. “I have multiple contacts on screen. Their infantry's going to be on top of us any minute—”

A boom and the sound of stone on stone. Moments later tracer fire spat by and smashed into the *Troika*. Ivan twisted as he dived, and fell on his side to as not to crush the cargo held to his chest. His breath was driven from him, and a muted cry—small and smothered—emerged from the blankets in his arms.

He looked back across the rubble. The first wave of ground forces had reached the square. At their spearhead were swift *Domina Ki* tanks, and one now nosed into view, its chain guns firing as its turret traversed. It would have the *Troika* in its sights in seconds.

Then it was gone, smashed into scrap by the *Troika*'s guns. Glowing shrapnel spiralled into the air and scrawled brief red scratches on night sky.

“Now, would be a good time, Ivan.”

“I see that, Gregor—”

“And why can't I raise Yevgeny?”

Ivan rose and ran toward the *Troika*. “Because I shot him in knees and left him behind.”

“Oh? Wh—”

Another boom, and another building fell. Two more *Domina Ki* emerged into the square as the rubble bounced off their brass hides and shattered beneath their tracks. Crowds of levies covered in their wake.

“—Why so?”

He glanced at the bundle in his arms. It stirred, and a red arm emerged to fight against the tightness of the blanket. “Because he was slaughtering children.”

“Well, that makes sense. I hope he doesn't come to us for a reference.”

The Three Sisters fired simultaneously, obliterating the tanks and shredding the infantry behind.

“Faster, Ivan! Faster!”

“Nearly. There.”

The ramp to the *Troika*'s hangar lowered before him, and he ran with renewed vigour. Ignore the vagueness in legs, he told himself. Ignore burning in chest. Ignore memory of dead children. Ignore bullets spitting by.

Behind, rank upon rank of Theocracy levies and their armoured masters poured into the square. They howled and chanted and swore, and their weapons wailed and spat. A torrent of bullets and rockets squirted across the square and rained against the armour of the Three Sisters.

“That's it. Dust off in five. Ready or not, we're going, Ivan.”

“I love. You too. Gregor”

He reached the ramp, and fell upon it as he gulped air. The metal beneath him vibrated as the *Troika* lifted off. A whine bored into his ears as the ramp began to close. Bullets still pinged off the metal about him.

Oblivious, he placed the bundle on the ramp. It bucked, and he pulled back the blankets. A flurry of bright red as a child—no more than nine years old—sprang from it and glared at Ivan. Trapped inside dirty armour, and with the unit number V457 scrawled across her

forehead, she bared her teeth at Ivan and went for a gun she didn't have anymore: a gun Ivan had thrown into Tar's river.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and held her in place. He looked in her eyes, and shouted over the roar of engines, guns, and hydraulics all around them. "Do not worry. You are safe now. You do not need to fight anymore. My name is Ivan Valentine..."

The ramp finally slammed shut sealing off the Vermiddion—her unit's only survivor—from her former life.

"...And I will take care of you."

Part One

A Rock and a Hard Place

The *Troika*'s flight-deck smelled of cigarettes and coffee, and the whistles and beeps of the faulty stations struggled to be heard over the flapping of the tarpaulin secured over the smashed canopy. Vast sat at the security station and studied the displays intently as thick smoke curled from her *jaffy* stick, its tip bright in the flight-deck's half-light. Behind her, Katarina sat at the scanner stations, azure skin highlighted green by monitors.

She shivered as she hugged herself. A forgotten cigarette burned away between her fingers. She chewed at her bottom lip and tried to concentrate on the scanner, the intermittent crackle from the faulty screen making phantoms of the coffee steam that rose from her mug.

Katarina's gaze twitched from side to side, up and down, but still she couldn't get a clear look at them. Oh, they were there alright, just out of view, just tickling her peripheral vision, but they continued to evade her, to tease her. Flat. Colourful. Swift.

She rocked gently in her chair and swore under her breath as she forced herself to pay attention to the scanner. Tatiana had been gone for almost an hour now, and Ivan even longer. Chewing her lip some more, her hand strayed to her belly. The pain had gone—that awful stabbing pain she suffered whenever Tatiana was in danger—only to be replaced with a dull ache. But what did that mean? The temperature out there had dived so sharply the rain was turning into sleet. Pretty soon the island would be consumed by a blizzard. Had Tatiana been trapped in the storm? Was she with Ivan? Did they have the gear to survive the conditions? Or, worse, what if they didn't *need* it? What if Boyd had—?

An alarm beeped on the scanner. She sat forward and peered at the monitor's wavering display. Five contacts approached the *Troika*.

"Who the fuck are *you*?" she muttered as she stabbed at the scanner console. A string of results cascaded down her screen. Humans. Three female, one male, and one, well, both, apparently. She shuddered. She didn't even want to know how that was possible. All five were armed.

She didn't like the look of that. Gaze still on the monitor, she took a heavy drag on her cigarette and a gulp of coffee before saying over her shoulder, "Vast? I think we've got visitors."

Still huddled in the depths of their rain capes, four figures reached the *Troika*'s main airlock. They glanced about them. The sleet had become thicker, and now heavy flakes of snow whirled about them.

“Scarlett?” the lead figure asked as she looked over her shoulder at the smallest of the group. “What d’you see, girl?”

Scarlett threw back the hood of her cape to reveal a haggard face and vacant glass eyes. Thin hair—coloured a vivid red—stuck to her withered forehead in the rain, and cheap red dye bled into the deep furrows and wrinkles. She paused before answering as she turned her blank eyes to some imagined horizon. “There’s three on board, momma,” she said in a thick Confederate drawl. “Two on the flight-deck, an’ one in the brig.”

‘Momma’ nodded and asked, “Is Johnny ready?”

“Surely,” Scarlett replied, but now she spoke with another woman’s voice. Although still possessed of a Southern accent, it became ethereal and multi-layered, and echoed as though transmitted through some psychic pipe. “I’m in poh-sition, momma.” This new voice featured a slight whistle, as though spoken through ill-fitting dentures. “Jus’ say the word.”

“Jus’ hol’ station, Johnny,” Momma said before she turned to nod at the tallest of the group. “Right, Woodrow...jam their gear.”

“Sure, momma,” Woodrow said as he produced a small spherical device from the depths of his cape. A moment later he depressed a button on its surface. “Tha’s it. Whoever’s on the *Troika* can’t see shit, an’ their comms are jammed.”

Momma clicked her bony fingers. “Right,” she said as she gestured at the airlock, “le’s get this open.”

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The scanners had gone down moments before an alarm sounded on Katarina’s console.

“Damn it.” Katarina turned in her chair. “Vast? You’d better get— Vast?”

But the bodyguard had already gone.

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Smoke curled from the glowing red hole blown in the airlock door. Now inside, the intruders removed their rain capes.

Woodrow ditched his first, and revealed filthy petticoats that ballooned from beneath flak-armour and equipment pouches. His hair, thin and greasy, hung to his dirty neck and his balding pate shone with sweat. He produced a kerchief and dabbed at his brow, his lined face choked with layers of foundation caked over grime and liver-spots. He then produced another explosive and approached the airlock’s inner door.

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Hydraulics hissed as the flight-deck door shut behind Vast. She stopped, and her shoulders sagged. Her head lowered, eyes lost in shadows, and her shaven eyebrows arched upwards. Her hand went to the stump of her amputated arm and cradled the wound, which still oozed through a fresh dressing.

She sagged a little more, leant against a bulkhead, and put her head into her hand. As she kneaded her temples with thumb and forefinger, she gritted her teeth.

She raised her head to peer into her hand. It was discoloured by what little blood hadn't left a palm-print on her face. With that bloody hand she drew a cumbersome revolver from its shoulder holster. As she pulled the hammer back, she head-butted the bulkhead, the metal splitting her forehead open. More blood poured down her face as, muscles bulging, she arched her back and let rip with a silent roar, her eyes wide and wild, and her neck a mass of stretched sinew.

She sprinted toward the airlock.

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“Trick, you're on point.”

Trick nodded. Its body a patchwork travesty pieced together from bits of men and women, it was stitched together with copper wire. Clothes were stretched over one sagging breast, broad shoulders, and a slender waist, and soiled half-mast trousers showed one male ankle and one female. The female leg was a few inches shorter, the difference made up with a shabby stiletto. One hand clutched a meat hook, the other a revolver.

The smell of burnt metal and rubber that wafted from the devastated door fought with the smell of petrol as smoke belched from rusty exhausts that erupted from sore wounds in Trick's back. Muffled pops and bangs accompanied its measured, mechanical steps as it stepped through the inner door and into the corridor beyond. It stopped and peered into the darkness. Iris valve eyes widened to reveal the faint glow of fire.

Trick turned and gave Momma the thumbs up. Its mouth little more than a scabby wound sliced across its face, it spoke through two small speakers nestled below its cheekbones. They buzzed as a male and female voice synchronised to declare a succinct “Clear”, then it moved toward the end of the corridor with Woodrow close behind.

Momma still lurked in the airlock, lost in the shadows, Scarlett stood before her. Every bit as thin as Woodrow, the slenderness of her frame was accentuated by a tight fitting suit. Her withered hands clutched two tiny pistols, and her head tipped to one side as her blank eyes starred someplace beyond the airlock wall.

“Okay, Johnny,” Momma said, “you hear me?”

“I'm here, momma.” Scarlett's lips were out of synch with the distant voice once again.

“Le's go, Johnny,” Momma said. “Le's make our play.”

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A tearing sound sliced through Katarina's fear, and she tore her petrified gaze away from the monitor. She squinted through cigarette smoke. A knife blade, serrated and dirty, forged a trail down the centre of tarpaulin, and the snow outside bled through the open wound.

Katarina rose from her chair and backed away. She pressed herself against the bulkhead beside the flight-deck door, her eyes wide and mouth open as she stared.

A head and shoulders pushed through cut in the tarpaulin. An old woman, her face was lost under a morass of wrinkles and scars, and her grey hair was plastered to her blotchy forehead. “Howdy. My name's Johnny,” she said, her smile dominated by brilliant white dentures. “Min' if I cut in?”

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“Scarlett?”

Scarlett's brow furrowed slightly, and her hair-dye leaked into the corner of her glass eyes before running down her cheeks in red tears. "One's close, momma. Real close."

"Which?"

"I think it's the Vermiddion, Vast."

Momma paused. "Don' matter." A glint in the half-light as Momma drew a revolver and cocked it.

Scarlett nodded and left the airlock door. With Momma behind, she walked after Trick and Woodrow with almost dainty steps.

They were waiting at the end of the corridor, flanking the door with pistols raised to their shoulders. The growl of Trick's engines vexed the air. A gesture from Momma and the patchwork creature prodded the door's pressure pad with its elbow. The door opened, and the jigsaw moved through in a crouch.

Its eyes pointed in different directions as it surveyed the vac-suit prep-station before it. Although dark, the sterile white surfaces offered some residual light. The walls were lined with lockers, benches and cabinets.

Woodrow's whisper pierced the silence. "You see anythin'?"

Trick shook its head.

Momma glanced at Scarlett. "How close is 'real close', Scarlett?"

"Metres, at the most."

Woodrow looked back at Momma, asking, "You sure about this? I mean, Vast, she's a Vermiddion, right?"

"Shut the hell up an' get through that door," Momma said, voice edged with steel.

"Sure, momma." Woodrow crossed himself and stepped through. He moved forward to stand beside Trick before shouting, "S'clear, Momma!"

Momma moved toward the door, but not quickly enough. A clang of boot against metal, a blur as a buckled grill fell to the prep-station deck, and a red figure covered in spider-web tattoos dropped from the ceiling. Its elbow jabbed backward and struck the door's pressure pad.

"Watch out!" Momma shouted, but it was too late. The door slammed shut, sealing her off from Trick, Woodrow, and this red menace.

Then the gunfire started.

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The hag stepped through the tarpaulin and stood on the pilot's controls. Two bandoliers—one loaded with bullets, the other with macro-grenades—crossed over an old Confederate uniform that hung from her frail frame. Her sleeves were rolled up, and track marks peppered her inner elbows. A false smile dominated her face.

"Oooo, look at you," Johnny said as she stared at Katarina, voice whistling slightly through her false teeth. "You real purdy. An' so young. An' I ain't. That jus' ain't fair." The smile vanished as her expression hardened. "Le's see what I can do about that." She jumped down from the console.

Katarina stared so hard without blinking that her eyes stung. Think! she told herself. Do something! “What—?” She stumbled over the words before taking a deep breath. C’mon, Kat, she thought. Look at her. She’s even older than Ivan! How hard’s it gonna be to take her out?

She clenched her fists, closed her eyes and took a deep breath before flinging herself at the crone. The next thing she knew she’d been punched in the face. She reeled, raised her arm in instinctive fear, but it was too late to block a further blow to the temple. Katarina’s knees buckled as her vision blurred. She fell to the deck and lay there, dazed. What the fuck? The flight-deck span and a wave of nausea crashed over her. How could she be that *quick*?

“I know what you’re thinkin’,” Johnny said with a dark smile. “I’m old, right? Ain’t no way a youngster like you got nothin’ to fear. You could take me.” A harsh laugh. “We’ll guess again, darlin’”

Katarina forced herself onto her hands and knees, head hung low as she shook it. She had to get up. She had to fight!

She gritted her teeth and shook her head. Her limbs trembled as adrenalin pumped through her, and her fingers flexed against the cold metal deck. Nostrils flared, taking in the smell of her assailant—a heady mixture of gun oil, BO, and cheap perfume—so strong that it soon overcame the smell of coffee and cigarettes. Now her ears roared with the sound of the storm outside, and the tiny pings and whistles of the consoles around became screams. Her skin turned to gooseflesh as the nip in the air was even more cruel. Even in this light, colours were more vivid—

Her heart skipped a beat as something tickled her peripheral vision. She blinked and turned her head to focus on the shadows beneath the security console.

There! She could see them again. Flat colours moving across the deck like...

Her jaw dropped and her blood ran cold.

...like tattoos.

Then Johnny stepped between her and the console, and Katarina looked up to glare at her.

“Look at you,” the aging killer said. “Such purdy skin. All flawless and Yankee blue.” A pause as she spat on Katarina’s back. “I fuckin’ hate blue.” She stepped forward, brandishing her knife over Katarina’s neck. “But tha’s enough talk. Le’s dance.”

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The sound of the escalating gunfight and the screams of the dying bled from the *Troika*. All the while the gathering storm howled a lamentation for those about to die.

Part Two

No Time to Cry

Two hours after Ivan Valentine and Boyd had left the *Troika*, the sleet turned to snow.

White with it, Ivan emerged from the teeth of the blizzard with Tatiana in his arms. She was wrapped in a thick, dirty blanket salvaged from the APC, her eyes wide and dull as they focused on nothing, and her cheeks glittering where her tears had turned into ice.

Ivan sucked frigid air through his gritted, bloody teeth, and ignored the acid burn in his muscles. He'd crashed the APC into an unsighted ditch on the way back to the cutter and so had to carry his niece the rest of the way, the girl catatonic with grief following Boyd's death. With Dolly's plastic patch still worn over one eye, he squinted through the driving snow with the other. Before him—finally—sat the *Troika*, its hull and markings emasculated with snow. The cutter remained defiant in the face of the blizzard, however, steadfast. Shifting his grip on Tatiana, Ivan tapped at the comm in his ear.

"Katarina?" he shouted over the snowstorm. "This is Ivan. I am back, and I have Tatiana with me. Have sick-bay ready." He waited for a reply. "Katarina? Do you copy? This is Ivan."

Still no reply. He craned his neck and squinted some more. Now he could see light spilling from a twitching wound in the tarpaulin across the flight-deck canopy. A further hole could be seen in the main airlock—a hole punched in the metal.

Even in this temperature the hairs on his neck rose a little more. Something was wrong. Somebody was on the *Troika*.

He sneered. It didn't matter who it was, it didn't matter what they wanted. He was tired and in no mood for nonsense. Head down, eyes squeezed shut against the bitter blizzard, he pushed on, ploughing through the mounting drifts of snow.

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The airlock door was damaged and, despite the horrid cold, the hole blown in the metal still glowed orange, impudent in the storm. Ivan lowered Tatiana to the ground and knelt beside her. "Tatiana? Do you hear me?" he asked as he cupped her frigid face. Even through his thick gloves the ice on her cheeks pricked his skin.

She didn't respond. Shivering, she stared somewhere far away.

He shook her gently. "*Tsarina?*"

Now her eyelids twitched, and her head turned a little. Her irises dilated slightly as she looked at him.

He smiled, put his arms around her and pulled her close. With slow, deliberate movements, her hands crawled over his back until she held him.

A lump welled in his throat, but he ignored it. "We're back at the *Troika*, *Tsarina*," he said, voice raised over the din of the blizzard. "But something is wrong. I cannot raise Katarina or Stalin." He leant back and cupped her face again. He looked into her eyes. "I need you to come back to me, *Tsarina*. I need you to..."

He faltered. Her chin trembled, and tears filled her eyes. Her mouth moved, but the cacophony about them swallowed her words. Not that he needed to hear them. He could read her lips.

Boyd, she said. Boyd's gone, Uncle. And we killed him.

With gritted teeth and an almost violent strength he held her again and kissed her hair. It was wet and cold. "I am so sorry," he said. He wanted to shout, so that she would hear him, but he couldn't. He could barely manage to croak the words. "I am so, so sorry..."

The pain in her eyes—the pain *he* had caused—was more than he could bear. He wanted to cry. He wanted to sob and kick and beat his fists like a child. But he couldn't. There was much to do. He had no time to cry. Katarina could be in danger right now. He had to defend her. He had to ignore his guilt and pain and push on.

He had to protect them.

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With Tatiana at his side, Ivan stepped through the breached door and into the airlock. They paused as Ivan assessed the chamber. Another hole had been blown in the interior door, and a thin pall of smoke hung in the air. He sniffed. Gun powder. Gun powder and something else...

He sniffed again. That smell. Like mould, stale tobacco, and body odour.

The hairs on his neck rose even more, and his heart raced. He knew that scent...

“Tatiana, wait here.”

She didn't reply immediately. An abstract distance still lingered in her eyes, and a moment passed before she nodded.

With a quick glance at her, he crept forward. The servo sheath on his knee made a gentle whine, and his boots a metallic clump on the deck. More smoke crept out of the door ahead of him, and he leant to one side to see through the hole. His vision struggled to adjust to the dim light beyond, but it got there, and—despite his sweating in his vac-suit—his blood ran cold as his fears were confirmed.

Bullet holes riddled the corridor beyond, and blood was liberally splattered across the floor, walls and ceiling. Spent cartridges were scattered about the deck. Foremost, however, was a body slumped against the wall. Ivan approached it with long and slow steps, fists clenched, squinting to see the corpse.

“Woodrow Coven,” he said under his breath as his shoulders slumped.

Still in his petticoats, stripped of body-armour, ammo, and guns, the old transvestite had gaping holes blown in his torso. One of his eyes was open, the other half shut, and he stared into whatever damnation awaited him with his head slumped to one side.

Ivan crouched and shook his head. He put his forehead in his hand. The Covens. The Fastest Girls in the Pagentorns. The Sisters of Mercy. The Devil's Gunslingers. It was almost a quarter of a century since he and Gregor had last fought them, since the bloodbath on Graven. Not nearly long enough. He wasn't ready for this. The *twins* weren't ready for this. To face these killers was bad enough, but to face them without Boyd and Matinee was even worse.

He looked to the deck and focused on the cartridges. He could see a mixture of calibres, but the biggest ones could only have been fired by Vast. The Covens would be too old and slight these days to handle guns that size.

He looked to and fro. No sign of Vast. So where was she? Had she dealt with the Covens? Common sense dictated the Amazon would have been able to dispatch a motley bunch of aging cross-dressers with ease.

But these weren't just any aging cross-dressers...

“Uncle?”

He turned to see Tatiana in the doorway. She'd cast off the blanket and stood in her white parka, combat pants, and sturdy boots. If she was disturbed by the blood she didn't show it. He stood and walked to her. Taking her by the shoulders, he looked into her eyes, saying, "Tatiana, we are in terrible danger. There are women on *Troika*—very, very *bad* women—who want to kill me, and will happily kill you too. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"We must find Katarina, Vast, and Stalin," he said, "and get away from *Troika* before they kill us."

Her body stiffened and her eyebrows arched. The ice on her face had begun to melt, and the thin coating that remained cracked as her face twitched. "They can try," she said through gritted teeth.

"*Tsarina*, you do not underst—"

"Oh, I understand, Ivan." Her voice was flat and devoid of fear or aggression. "I understand just fine."

She shrugged her shoulders, forcing his hands from them, and walked past him. He watched her walk to the end of the corridor before turning to look at him.

"I understand, finally. I understand what it takes to survive this life. Portia's taught me that," she opened the door, and the scant light from the prep-station silhouetted her, "and I'm not afraid anymore."

#

Ivan and Tatiana emerged from the prep-station and into one of the *Troika*'s main arterial corridors. The shadows were deep and the strip-lights weak.

Ivan looked both ways, peering into the gloom. He put his hand to the patch over his wounded eye and cursed. It wasn't making his life any easier. He sniffed the air. A faint trace of the Covens, but already the lingering smell of cleansing agents used to scrub away all trace of the Calci was reasserting itself.

Ivan looked to Tatiana and asked, "Where did you say Stalin was?"

"I didn't. But he's in the brig." She didn't look at him. Body stiff and fists clenched she too scanned the corridor.

He rolled his eyes. He was sure he could remember a time when that dog had been useful. Or perhaps he had dreamt it, yes? "Which cell?"

"Two" She still didn't look at him. The muscles in her jaw flexed and her nostrils flared rhythmically to reflect an anger that had crept into her voice.

He frowned. Cell 2? That had been Judd's cell.

He grimaced. It didn't matter. There were already enough spectres on this ship without worrying about Judd as well.

"Then we split up, yes? You will find Katarina and meet Stalin and I in brig. I will find Vast."

She shrugged. "Whatever you say. But you'd better be careful. You'll need to head that way—" She pointed down the corridor to a darkened door. "—Along with that."

He looked as she pointed to a swathe of blood that formed a trail on the deck. It had already begun to form a crust as it coagulated, and the diamond pattern on the metal beneath lurked in dark smudges.

“And, Ivan—”

She turned to him, and the anger in her eyes made him catch his breath for a moment. He had never seen that depth of passion in her. By God, he thought, she looks so much like her father.

“—If you get into trouble, they’ll be nobody to save you. This time, you’ll be on your own.”

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She had gone now, and Ivan crept on. Crouched and poised, he trailed the *Troika*’s corridors with long, slow strides. The servo-sheath about his knee whined as it supported his weak knee, and he cursed inwardly. By God, if he ever met Black Gladys again...

He entered another corridor at the end of which lay the hangar. Dark and open, it would be a perfect spot for an ambush...

Leant against the congestion of conduits, panels, and junction boxes that formed the wall, he approached the end of the corridor before stopping at the threshold of the hangar beyond.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head to listen.

The muted sound of the storm beyond the hangar doors. Whistles and beeps from various idling systems. The chink of metal on metal. A steady patter of dripping liquid.

He sniffed. The smell of the Covens was strong, their singular odour making his stomach turn. He sneered and put his hand under his nose. They must be here.

He looked to the deck. The trail of blood was at its freshest, and it lead past him before leading toward the centre of the hangar.

He peered again, neck straining as his good eye focused on something in the darkness. What was that? Glints of light in the air? Muted, yes, but light none-the-less. They swayed in time to the chink of metal on metal, and he decoded the small patches of light into a set of chains dangling from the ceiling—

He held his breath. A body hung from them.

Now he realised the patter of liquid on metal synchronised perfectly with the faintest of shimmers that cascaded from this body to the deck. Blood. And lots of it.

His throat contracted. The body hung there, lifeless and head bowed. Stooped broad shoulders. Muscles. Long legs and one thick arm—

With a groan of pain and anger he ran back up the corridor. He reached a tool locker and threw its door open, not caring as the metal door clanged against the wall. It didn’t matter now. Let them hear. He snatched at the fire-axe inside and yanked it out.

He turned and ran into the hangar. The time for stealth had passed. That was Vast up there, and it was up to him to get her down. Then he would deal with the bastard Covens.

He swung the axe with one hand. The head thundered into a terminal beside the door, and a flurry of sparks assaulted the darkness as the delicate machinery detonated. Instantly winches in the ceiling deactivated, and the metallic cackle of unravelling chains broke the silence.

Vast’s body fell to the deck, the wet squelch of impact married with the clatter of chains on the metal floor.

He ran to her. Sweat broke out on his brow despite his breath freezing in the cold. With an angry cry he knelt and lay the axe aside before turning Vast onto her back with a gasp and a heave. She flopped onto her back with no trace of resistance.

Even in this light he could see the horrid truth. Her tattoos were lost under the sticky morass of crimson, her body a butcher's shop of bullet wounds and deep lacerations. Blood bubbled from each one. The bandages on her amputated arm had slipped away, and her clothes had been stripped from her. His lips curled back and his breath shortened. They'd even ripped out her piercings. Every one. From her ears, eyebrow and nose, down to her nipples, belly and beyond.

He buried his head in bloody hands as a primal sound welled in throat. He threw back his head—face smothered in bloody handprints—and roared into the darkness, eyes wide and teeth exposed. He grabbed the axe and stood, bellowing into the hangar, “Baba Yagas! Croncs! Witches! Show yourself! Show yourself now! We end this, yes? We end this here!”

“Ain't no need to shout, Ivan.”

The lights burst into life, and Mother Coven emerged from his past in chiaroscuro relief.

Stood on the other side of the hangar, a discarded rain cape lay at her feet. With her head bowed he couldn't see her face beneath the brim of her grimy Stetson, but he knew it was her by the way she stood—feet apart, shoulders back. Skeletal fingers pushed bullets into the chamber of an antiquated revolver with a languid boredom.

She was older, the soiled leather duster that hung from her shoulders unable to hide just how frail she'd become. But, even after all this time, the sight of her made him pause and catch his breath. A spasm seized him as a cold shiver shot down his spine. He tightened his grip on the wooden axe handle and raised it over his head as ran forward, a protracted cry bursting from him.

With a deft flick of her wrist she snapped the chamber of her gun back into place and fired. The bullet smashed into the sheath about his knee, and he fell headlong as the support failed in a shroud of smoke and sparks. The axe span from his fingers and clattered across the deck.

“Tha's far enough,” Mother Coven said. She hadn't even looked up yet.

He looked to his axe, only to see it was pinned to the deck beneath Trick's shoddy boot, the aberration glaring down its nose at him. He cursed under his breath. Stupid old man. He was so focused on Mother—so unnerved—that he hadn't even seen the others.

He craned his neck to look over his shoulder, and saw Scarlett sat against the wall by the bay doors. Or what was left of her, at least. Her clothes were drenched with darkening blood, her skin was sheer white, and her blank eyes stared at Ivan from across the hangar.

Ivan turned back to Mother Coven, and now, finally, she looked up. Every bit as hateful as he remembered, her face was now even more jaundiced and sneering. Her hair had become bright white and straggly, and it framed her square jaw. Those cheekbones were still as sharp as angry words, and the black pits of her eyes sparkled as she glared at Ivan as if to kill him with looks alone.

“Howdy, Ivan,” she said with a feigned civility. “You ready to die?”

Part Three

Floorshow

Mother Coven didn't take her eyes off Ivan; she asked, "Scarlett? How's Johnny, and are those purdy nieces of Ivan's dead yet?" with an affected nonchalance.

#

Tatiana's breath came in ragged gasps, but she pushed on. Fists clenched and by her side, she marched toward the flight-deck door with her jaw set and lips in a thin, determined line. She had to ignore the pain and the fire in her lung. It wasn't important. Getting to Katarina, that was all that mattered now Boyd was dead.

She reached the flight-deck door and leant against it, braced her hands against the metal. She put her ear to the door and listened. Nothing.

With a step back, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Then she opened them, and activated the door.

#

Scarlett wheezed a little before answering, "N—No, momma, I can't—" She spasmed, face creased in agony. "I can't reach Johnny."

#

Something no longer human lay distorted in the centre of the flight-deck. Lazy curls of smoke rose from bubbled, blackened skin beneath a burnt uniform. The blistered flesh popped, and puss soaked through the body's clothes onto the deck. The features on the face were lost amongst a choke of swelling boils, and a pair of perfect white dentures hung from one side of its mouth.

#

"Johnny—" Another agonised cry. "Johnny's *dead*, momma!"

#

Despite the foul smell, Tatiana didn't put her hand to her mouth. This was nothing compared to the ruination of Boyd's body. The question of how this corpse had come to be here—and in this state—was harder to ignore. Was something else on board? Some new menace, some other creature? And where was Katarina?

"T—Tatty?"

The small, querulous voice emerged from beneath the scanning station. Tatiana looked to it, and only now could she make out the vaguest glint from the metal on Katarina's heavy boots.

"Kat?" she moved to the scanning station and knelt to peer beneath it. "What are you doing under there?"

Katarina burst from under the station and wrapped her arms about her. Burying her face in Tatiana's neck she began to sob. "Oh God, Tatty. I'm so pleased to see you. I thought I was — I thought she—" She stopped, body shuddering as she wept.

Tatiana held her a little, and stroked her hair. But all the time she stared into the distance. None of this mattered right now. There were more of these bitches on board—Ivan had said so—and all of them were out for blood.

#

Ivan detected only the slightest shift in Mother Coven's veneer.

"What do you mean 'dead'?" she asked. "How? How could one of those stupid girls take out Johnny?"

She glared at Ivan as if expecting some explanation. He had none to offer. He knew the girls were resourceful, but to kill Johnny Coven really was something else. His stomach tightened. It could not be true. It just couldn't. His nieces were *not* killers.

"Trick," Mother Coven said as she turned to her makeshift child, "why doncha leave me and ol' Ivan alone for a while, huh? Why doncha go see if you can't sniff out some sweet Oridian roy-al-tee to skin." She cooed and clicked like an indulgent mother. "Why doncha do that?"

Trick looked from Ivan to Mother Coven, eyebrows arching. It fidgeted, hands wiping themselves on its thighs as one leg trembled.

"Scarlett," Mother Coven said, "where will Trick find those lil pieces of Oridian trash, anyways?"

Scarlett's response was immediate, lips moving as Ivan's voice spilt from her lips. "Then we split up, yes? You will find Katarina and meet Stalin and I in brig."

Ivan's blood turned to ice, and his breathing became shallow. His lip twitched into the briefest sneer. God damn you, Scarlett, he thought as he climbed to his feet. Should have killed you years ago, yes?

"There y'go, Trick," Mother Coven said as her smile broadened. "Now git. You go and have some fun, 'kay? An' don' you worry about me. I'll be jus' fine." The false smile vanished as she looked at Ivan once more "Me and Ivan got a lot to catch up on. Don' we, Ivan?"

Trick kicked Ivan's axe across the deck and out of Ivan's reach. After a further glare at Ivan, it nodded at Mother. Its wound of a mouth split to reveal a smile of gears and razor blades, and its speakers buzzed with a "Kay" before it walked from the hangar, a cloud of fumes in its wake.

Ivan turned to Mother Coven. This was it. They were approaching the final act. Whatever endgame Mother had in mind, it would be played now.

But what of Tatiana and Katarina? He had to get to them. He closed his eyes and his head sank. He had to do something. Quickly. But he looked up at Coven, and at the gun she held so casually, and he knew he had to wait for some chance, some brief opening. As much as he wanted to snap Coven's scrawny neck, or rip her head from her shoulders, he could not. Not yet...

#

After a minute or so, Tatiana held Katarina by the arms and extricated herself from her sister's embrace. "Enough," she said. "Now's not the time. You have to pull yourself together." She nodded toward the dead hag. "The rest of this harridan's family are on board, and they probably want to kill us. We don't have time for this."

Katarina took deep breaths and wiped her runny nose with the back of one hand, and rubbed at her eyes with the heel of the other. "Yeah... Sure... I'm sorry. It's just—"

"What happened here?" Tatiana turned Katarina to face the dead Coven. "What *did* that to her?"

Katarina blanched, and Tatiana could have sworn her knees buckled slightly. She became paler as she reached for the edge of the console.

“Katarina? What *happened*?”

“I can’t, Tatty. Not yet. I just can’t talk about it.” She looked down and away.

Tatiana studied her. She’d never seen her sister this shaken. Not even in the aftermath of their flight from Oridia. Something penetrated the numbness inside Tatiana, something old and warmer than the fear and aggression their life had become. A tiny fissure of empathy cracked her grief, and she stroked Katarina’s head gently.

“Okay, Kat. Don’t worry. You can tell me later, okay? But we need to get out of here, right? I meant what I said. There are others like her on the *Troika*, and we need to get away before they kill us.”

With one last rub of her eyes, Katarina drew herself up to her full height. She breathed deeply. “Okay, sis. Let’s go.” She smiled a forced, joyless smile. “Let’s kick ass.”

#

“So, where’s that brother of yours?” Mother asked as she holstered her revolver. “Only, I heard stories. I heard he’d finally been killed.” Her voice descended into a whisper as she looked at Ivan through her eyebrows. “I heard the Long Knives got him. I heard they captured him an’ his Oridian slut. I heard they cut her into pieces while he watched, an’ then fed her to him—raw an’ drippin’.”

Ivan breathed deeply and stared back. He had to ignore this—her words were nothing more than goads designed to make him react, to make him do something stupid. He had to refuse them, to keep his head. He had to ignore her vicious lies. Because they were lies... weren’t they?

She continued in a whisper, her words coating Ivan’s anxieties like hot tar. “I heard he cried like a bitch and begged them for his life. I heard he died licking their boots like the mangy dog he was.”

He twitched, and his arms flexed. His fists balled. He looked away. No, he told himself as his teeth ground, show no weakness. Keep cool. Make *her* lose her head and make the first mistake.

#

Tatiana led Katarina through the *Troika*, her strides as swift as her breath was laboured. Periodically she would stop and glare at her more circumspect sister with a palpable impatience.

“Shouldn’t we be a bit more, well, careful?” Kat’s nervous stare continued to oscillate about the darkened corridor.

Tatiana dismissed her sister’s fears with a curt gesture. “We don’t have time. We need to get to Stalin, meet Ivan and Vast, and then get off the *Troika*.”

Katarina blinked. “But... what about Boyd? Where is he?”

Now Tatiana paused, and her hand went to her chest. The pain. Like the red-hot knife he’d used to cauterise her wound. Except this wound would never heal.

She strode away, blinking away the tears. She couldn’t answer, couldn’t bring herself to say it: Boyd was dead, and they’d killed him. Her and Ivan.

#

Silence. Then the gentle *clop clop clop* of Coven's boots and the rattle of stirrups as she circled him. Still her glare bored into him. She moved around him in a wide circle until finally she reached Vast. Only now did she look away as she turned her attention to the Vermiddion.

Ivan's moustache bristled as he licked his dry lips. He didn't like the way she looked at Vast. She was planning something nasty. He tried to distract her and nodded toward Scarlett. "She will die if you do not help her, Coven."

"Nothin' I can do," she said with a shrug. "Don' have the skills or the drugs to patch her up. Guess all I can do is make sure I get revenge." With that she stepped over Vast's prone form, straddling her. "An' this is jus' the bitch I needs to take it out on."

She reached behind and produced a wicked knife from the depths of her duster. She regarded the light glinting on the blade before looking at Ivan with an affected smile. He groaned inwardly, blood pulsed in his temples.

"Ever won'ered just what it takes to kill a Vermiddion?" she said. "I know I have. Do you won'er how long it'll take me to peel her open, Ivan? Won'er how long it'll take me to work my way down to her spine?" She paused. "Course...you could try an' stop me."

She reached into her duster again and drew another gun—one Ivan knew only too well. Matt black and with the golden insignia of the Omega Hammers embossed on its red pearl handgrip, it had been his so many years ago, until he'd thrown it away in disgust.

"Took me near forever to find this baby, Ivan. You wouldn't believe how much Omega Hammers mem'rabilia goes for in the Pag'ntorns. Cost the guy I took it from an *an'* a leg." She threw it toward him. It scittered across the deck and came to a stop some six feet away. "There you go, boy. Pick it up and stop me."

Ivan looked at the gun, and then back at the old virago. Now he knew exactly where this was going.

"Go ahead, Ivan. Pick it up and show me. Show me the Ivan the Terrible I knew all them years ago. The Ivan that slaughtered all those poor bast'ards in the Pag'ntorns. The Ivan that killed all Yevgeny's men on Sauber's Bazaar." She paused, her voice dropping to a spiteful whisper. "The Ivan that killed half my family on Graven."

Now, finally, the old woman's veneer had gone. It had slipped and all Ivan could see was sheer, unadulterated hatred, black and thick, as it filled the old woman's eyes like sullied oil. "Show me." Her whisper was barely audible now. "Show me, or I'll show you how to skin a bitch."

#

One minute Tatiana had strode into the brig, the next she lay on the deck, her eyesight blurred and distorted, and the roar of her heartbeat drowning out all other noise. A throbbing pain stabbed at her, and a sharp pulse radiated from the back of her head. She tried to stand, but could only manage to climb to her knees before shaking limbs betrayed her and she fell back to the deck.

She turned onto her back and raised her head, the muscles in her neck quivering with the effort. She gritted her teeth as she fought to gain some focus. A jigsaw figure in the dark. Monstrous, with pipes coming from its back and exhaust fumes in its wake. It loomed over her, and a patchwork fist thundered toward her head.

Part Four

Walk Away

The patchwork creature loomed, its titanium fist slamming toward Tatiana's head. She rolled, and the fist dented the deck where she had lain. Sparks flew from its knuckles and the clang of metal echoed about the brig.

A further blow, a further roll from Tatiana, and the deck ruptured as the creature's fist drove into the metal. It tried to extract its hand immediately, its efforts rewarded only with the grinding of gears and the pop and bang of an over-revved engine. Another jerk of its shoulder, and the screech of more slipped gears, confirmed the fist was stuck fast.

This, Tatiana knew, could be the only chance she'd get. She rolled onto her hands and knees again and staggered, at last, to her feet. Falling back against the corridor wall, she blinked and shook her head. The ringing in her ears faded and other sounds fought through: Katarina's hysterical screaming. The muffled grumble of an old engine. Stalin scratching at the other side of Cell 2's door, his muffled voice begging, "Let me out! Please! Get me out!"

She blinked and focused on the creature. It grabbed at its wrist and pulled its hand free. It turned to face her.

She had to get past this...thing, and find something to fight with. Bare fists wouldn't be enough. She looked about the corridor, breathless. There had to be something here. Anything.

#

Ivan grimaced as Mother's knife cut into Vast's chest. She cut sure, and she cut deep, the incision going down to the bone. The tip of her knife scratched along Vast's sternum, and Ivan's stomach turned. But he forced himself to watch. He couldn't show weakness.

"Nobody's coming, Ivan," the old hag said with a jeer. "You know that, don' you? Trick's gonna kill your nieces, an' there ain't gonna be nobody left. There ain't gonna be nobody left to save you or this bitch..."

"...Except you."

She paused, nodding toward the gun at Ivan's feet. "An' the only way you're going to do that is to shoot me dead."

Ivan's head slumped and his shoulders sagged under the sudden weight of his years.

Years. It had been twenty of them since the Torch, since he'd sworn he'd never touch another gun, his conscience unable to take the burden any longer. It had been a different life back then, a different Ivan. An Ivan whose joints didn't ache, whose breath didn't wheeze, and whose leg didn't agonise.

He looked down at the gun. It was an Ivan that still lurked inside him, whose mouth ran dry and whose pulse raced when he saw a gun, one who still dreamt of glory and war and violence. Now all he had to do was turn back the clock, let the old Ivan out, and all this would be over.

He squeezed his eyes shut. No! He wouldn't let that Ivan out. He *couldn't*...

...Because if he did, if he set him free, he knew it would be damn near impossible to ever get that Ivan back in his box again.

#

“Out of the way, Tatiana!” Katarina’s shout echoed about the brig, and Tatiana looked to her sister. Stood by the door to Cell 2, Katarina punched the controls, and the door opened. A dagger of cold air burst from the darkness within, and Stalin followed. Tongue hanging from his open mouth, he ran hell for leather out of the cell, his wide eyes staring over his metal shoulder and back at the freezing cell. An instant later he’d barrelled past Tatiana and into the makeshift monster, and the two cyborgs fell into a heap at the entrance to the brig.

Another time and Tatiana might have laughed. The creature lay on its back, asymmetrical brow furrowed in angered confusion as the fire behind its eyes burnt bright in the half-light. It glared at Stalin as the dog sat on its chest, his skinthetic features a study of confusion and fear.

“Um. Woof?” Stalin managed to say, eyebrows arching and teeth bared in a canine approximation of an embarrassed smile.

#

A cold sweat broke out on Ivan’s brow. He closed his eyes as the knife opened up Vast’s belly.

He was running out of time. *Vast* was running out of—

His eye narrowed. *Vast*. She’d moved.

Nothing more than a twitch of her trigger finger, and the slightest crease of pain on her bloodied face, but she’d moved. Was she recovering? Was this the chance he needed? Did he just need to buy her time?

He had to stall Mother. Now.

“Is this really worth it, Coven?” Ivan said, words blurring from him. “Is it really worth letting children die just to get revenge on me? Children who have nothing to do with this? My nieces were not even *born* when Gregor and I...”

His voice tailed off as she looked at him. There was nothing in that expression except hate and a bloody thirst. He realised this approach was not going to work. He may have made her pause, may have given *Vast* a moment or two, but it would not be enough. He had to change tactics.

“For God’s sake, Coven,” he said through gritted teeth whilst he held clenched fists to his chest. “Johnny is dead. Woodrow is dead. Scarlett is dying. These are your *daughters*, for God’s sake. Why do *children* have to die? Is it *really* worth that? Am I?”

They stared at each other, and Ivan thought he saw a shift in Coven’s gaze, as if she were looking somewhere far, far away. Was she reliving the past? Was she reliving the night Ivan and Gregor had gunned down her sisters, beating the self-proclaimed ‘Fastest women in the Pagentorns’ to the draw whilst Graven burnt down around their ears?

The faintest arch of eyebrows, the smallest flex of her jaw, and the smallest flare of nostrils as she looked down her nose at Ivan. “It’s worth it,” she whispered. “It’s worth it because I’ve waited more than twen’y years for this, an’ all that time you’ve been hidin’ behin’ that purdy lil Oridian navy, an’ in their palaces. Hidin’ from me, and hidin’ from yourself. But now I’m gonna to turn you back into the goddam bast’rd you’re so afraid of. I’m gonna make you go for that gun. Then, Ivan, I’m gonna shoot you down.”

#

Something like the sound of a revving engine bubbled in the creature's throat, and it swung at Stalin. The dog ducked under the arm and scrambled off its chest, shouting, "Follow me! Quickly!"

As the creature rose to its feet amidst a grinding of gears and the chunter of internal combustion, Tatiana staggered after Stalin. The dog's ceramic claws struggled for grip on the metal deck, but it managed to scramble across the brig to the other door. Tatiana reached her sister and grabbed her by the wrist before pulling her in her wake as she staggered after the dog.

Stalin, on his hind legs, nudged at the door controls with his nose. The door began to open slowly and he slipped through without waiting.

Tatiana glanced over her shoulder as she neared the door. The creature followed, loping after them with increasing speed. Lacerations from the metal panel marred its wrist, and turgid oil spat from the cuts.

Without checking their pace, the twins squeezed through the narrow gap between door and frame. Once the girls were through, Stalin nudged at the controls once more. Tatiana looked back. The door barely slid shut before the creature reached it, and the metal buckled and groaned as the angered monstrosity thundered into it.

Tatiana took a step back in reflex. Christ on a bike, she thought, if ever I needed a weapon...

"I don't believe it! That's Trick Coven!" Stalin began to run in a circle, tail between his legs. "If she's here, the other Covens must be too! We have to find the others and get out of here before we're all dead!"

"We don't—" Katarina stopped and stared at the door in fear as it buckled further, the sound of Trick hammering at the metal echoing around them. "We don't know where they are."

Stalin's nose twitched as he stopped circling and sniffed the air, head raised. "I do. Or Ivan and Vast at least." He ran down the corridor as he shouted, "Let's go!"

#

"Very well," Ivan said in a low and tired voice. His head sank and his shoulders slumped, limp arms by his side and scared hands slack against his thighs. He squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced before he turned away from Mother. "Kill her."

"What did you say?" she asked.

He looked back over his shoulder. She stopped dead, knife hovering over Vast's chest. Her glare had shifted into a study, as if trying to read Ivan. "Kill her," he said. "You know me, Coven. I am not sentimental man. One bodyguard is just like another. She is nothing to me. So kill her. I can replace her, yes?"

He turned and began to walk away.

#

They ran from the brig as the corridor echoed with the sound of Trick bludgeoning the door. Stalin raced ahead without looking back, and Katarina would have been close behind were she not helping her sister. She put her arms about Tatiana and helped her run behind the cyborg dog.

"I don't need...your help...Kat," Tatiana wheezed between gulps of painful breath.

"The fuck you don't," Katarina said with a crooked smile.

Tatiana had to admit she had a point. Her lungs burnt, and to breathe was a succession of painful battles. She held her ribs at the point she'd been stabbed by Cook back on the Eater's ship—back when Boyd had still been alive.

Together they reached the end of the corridor, Stalin running back and forth as he waited. He'd already opened the door, and the *Troika's* Lukin bay lay before them. The dog's tongue hung from his mouth and he looked past them with eyes like saucers.

"Hurry up!" he shouted. "Trick's about to—"

Behind them the brig door burst from its frame. It skimmed across the deck before coming to a stop and rocking like an upturned beetle. Trick erupted from the brig and sprinted after its quarry. As it ran whatever infernal engine powered it popped and banged in earnest.

Tatiana and Kat staggered through the door into the Lukin bay to join Stalin. Once again their pursuer was cut off in mid-stride as the door slammed shut. Once again the door began to buckle and distort as Trick assaulted it.

"Christ. On a bike," Tatiana gasped. "What *is* that thing?"

"That door's not gonna hold it any longer than the other," Katarina said. "Do we have another plan?"

"You call this a plan?" Tatiana said with a withering glare at Stalin. She leant against the bay wall and gulped air. "Sooner or later we're going to run out of luck—"

"And doors."

"—We've got to stand and fight." Tatiana ignored Katarina's interruption. "We can't just keep running,"

"I can," Stalin said. "My battery's good for—"

"Nothing." Katarina almost spat the words. "Your battery's good for nothing."

"Stop it, you two," Tatiana said. She forced herself to breathe in through her nose and out of her mouth. Her breathing improved, but it did nothing for her pain. She ignored it and looked about her as she scoured the Lukin bay for some sort of weapon. "We need to fight this Trick, not each other. We need *weapons*."

"Why do *we* need to fight him?" asked Stalin. "Where's Boyd?"

"Yeah, where *is* Boyd?" asked Katarina.

"He's dead!" Tatiana couldn't help it. The answer just spilt from her as she stamped her foot and beat her fists against her thighs. "He's *dead*, okay? Now don't ask me again."

She turned, tears in her eyes. She didn't need this right now. She had enough to deal with without having to think about Boyd as well. She rubbed the tears away with the back of her hand, cheeks burning under the slack-jawed stares of Katarina and Stalin.

Blinking through the tears, she focused on the Lukin bay as she tried to spot some kind of weapon. The bay, however, held nothing but a row of open escape pod hatches on one wall, and lockers filled with survival gear and vac-suits on the other.

Katarina said something that Tatiana barely heard over the sound of Trick battering the door. She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture and said "Not now, Kat. I need to thi—" She stopped, and turned on her sister as her words percolated through her pain. "Wait. What did you just say?"

Katarina looked down at her boots and shuffled a little. "I said that *I* have some weapons..."

#

The sound of Coven's blade slicing into flesh made Ivan wince.

"You can stop right there. You ain't goin' nowhere."

He stopped, and glanced at his gun as it brooded on the deck. Two strides and he'd have it. Just two strides and he could end this.

His face contorted as he snarled. No! He would not! He would not let her turn back the clock. He was never going to become that man again. Never. Yevgeny had brought him close on Sauber's Bazaar, and it had petrified him.

He walked on.

#

"What weapons?" Stalin asked.

Tatiana's eyes narrowed. Was *this* what had destroyed that hag on the flight-deck? "Show me," she said. "Quickly"

Katarina reached under her shapeless stripy jumper. Still she looked at the floor, and Tatiana could swear she was blushing. Moments later Katarina—hands shaking—drew two objects from her belt, and showed them to Tatiana and Stalin.

"Are you *crazy*?" Stalin said, jaw almost on the deck. "That's a macro-grenade! And a *gun*! If Ivan found out—"

"To hell with Ivan," Tatiana said with a sneer. "It's Ivan's fault we're in this mess." She stared at the gun. An old revolver and a grenade she guessed Katarina had stolen from that crone on the flight-deck. It was her turn to smile a crooked smile. Clever girl, Kat, she thought. Clever—

The door sprang from its mount with such force it rammed into Katarina. The impact expelled the air from her lungs as it threw her across the bay. The revolver and the grenade span through the air, clattering across the deck to nestle beneath two kit lockers. Katarina landed by an escape pod hatch.

"Katarina!" Tatiana shouted as she watched her sister lay motionless on the deck.

"Tatiana! Look out!"

Stalin's cry came too late. She turned to see Trick looming over her, meat hook raised over its head, and fire burning in its eyes.

Part Five

Damage Done

"Look at me, Ivan! *Look at me!*"

He turned to face Mother Coven. The hysterical edge to her voice told him he was winning. She was starting to lose control. And what she lost, he gained.

She stood and stepped away from Vast before walking after him. Spittle coated her lips and bubbled between her dirty teeth as she snarled, her withered hand hovered over the gun in her holster. Her fingers twitched.

“Don’ you walk away from me! I done tol’ you once, you sunnovabitch. You are gonna go for that damn gun, an’ I’m gonna put a hole in your goddam head, y’hear?”

He glanced at Vast. Mother Coven’s knife festered up to the hilt in the Vermiddion’s shoulder. Her face creased with pain once more, but he saw no movement in her body to suggest she had begun to heal. And even if she did, he couldn’t gauge how long he’d have to stall, how long it would be until she recovered. He had, after all, never seen her so badly wounded.

Then Vast’s eyes opened. Dull at first, unfocused. Her gaze locked onto Coven, and the irises dilated whilst her mouth twitched into a sneer.

“D’ya hear me, Ivan?”

He looked at Mother. And laughed.

“Yes, I hear you, Coven, and I am bored. I have heard this many times from you, and from Clarence, and Jed, and all other idiot Covens who have come after Gregor and I looking for trouble. And you always find it, don’t you? You and your kind always get what you deserve.” He turned his back on her again and walked on. “Which is why you’re the only Coven left, is it not?”

“You shut your mealy mouth, you piece of shit.”

He stopped. Now it was his turn to turn and glare. His voice dropped to a hard whisper. “I will not. You are only one left because none of you—not *one*—have been good enough to kill us. Is way of things, yes? You are Covens, and you are insects. We are Valentines, and we are Gods. Now leave while you can and crawl into hole. Or I will crush you.”

#

Trick’s meat-hook whistled by Tatiana’s head as she jiggled to one side. Undaunted, the monster swung the other arm in a wide arc and struck Tatiana square on her ribs. She howled as the blow lifted her off her feet and propelled her across the Lukin bay. Pain filled her world as she landed. She rolled from side to side and clutched at her ribs, hammering her heels against the deck as she fought the agony, tried to refocus her world.

Gritting her teeth, she shook her head. Her limbs trembled as adrenalin pumped through her, and her fingers flexed against the cold metal deck. Nostrils flared, taking in her assailant’s heady smell of burning oil and exhaust fumes. Now her ears roared with the rumble of Trick’s engine, and the sound of it stomping across the deck became ever louder.

Her eyes snapped open. What’s that? Katarina?

“St—stay back! I mean it! Stay—” The warning ended, truncated by a scream.

Tatiana rolled onto her side and focused across the bay. There Trick held Katarina by the hair with one hand, the meat-hook in the other. It drew back the weapon in preparation as Katarina kicked and swore and screamed, eyes wide as she clawed at the creature’s hand.

Tatiana shook her head and her vision cleared. She craned her neck to look further up the Lukin bay. There, underneath one of the lockers, sat the pistol. Tatiana scrambled to her feet, and dove for it.

#

Mother Coven broke as visibly as shattered glass, body doubling over as she hurled every shred of her vitriol at Ivan. “Do it!” she bellowed, “Pick up that gun and shoot me, you bastard! Do it! Do it now, or I’ll kill her!”

With a mechanical jerk, Vast reached across her chest to extract the knife in her shoulder. A further sweep of her arm sliced across the back of Mother's heel, the serrated blade severing the hag's Achilles tendon. With a cry of surprise and pain Coven collapsed to the deck, blood spurting from the neat gap in her boots. As the old woman hit the floor, the Vermiddion began to get up as quickly as her shaking limbs would allow.

"You damn bitch!" Coven shouted. With one fluid motion she drew her gun, aimed, and fired.

#

Tatiana fired, and the bullet careened off the bulkhead behind Trick.

"That was a warning shot," Tatiana said. "Next one kills you."

She held her breath and narrowed her eyes as she focused on Kat and Trick. They both looked at her, and Katarina's jaw dropped.

"Tatty? What are you—?"

"I'm saving you." Tatiana inhaled deeply, and the rush of oxygen steadied slowed her heartbeat and steadied her arm. Knees bent inward as she propped her self up against a locker, she aimed with one hand whilst the other still held her ribs. "Now be quiet."

Trick began to laugh. At least Tatiana assumed it was laugh, a series of revs welling from the engine inside the beast and vibrating from that mouth of metal and blades. It cast Katarina and its meat-hook aside and turned to stare down at Tatiana. Still it laughed as it beckoned with one hand whilst the other hovered over the antique pistol shoved in its waistband.

"Come on, shoot," it said, the buzz of its speakers unable to mask its mirth. "'Cos I'm callin' you out."

#

Mother's first bullet smashing into Vast's shoulder. The impact forced Vast onto her back once again, and the knife clattered to the deck as she lost her grip.

Seizing this advantage, Coven continued to fire, each successive shot ripping into the jerking Vermiddion.

#

This is it, Tatiana told herself, you can't run away this time.

Her first shot blew a bloody chunk out of Trick's hand, and the creature staggered back as its pistol was blown clear. It steadied itself and looked at the wound before looking back at Tatiana, eyebrows raised in surprise.

Tatiana inhaled and held her breath, and her fingers flexed on the grip of the pistol. The recoil had been harsh—this was a powerful gun—but she licked her lips, pulled back the hammer, and aimed again.

"I mean it, Trick," she said. "I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid to shoot you dead."

#

As the sound of Mother's fire echoed about the hangar, Ivan stooped to seize his gun. Eyes wide, body shaking, he grasped it with sweaty fingers. Cool and unyielding, it nestled in his palm like an old lover's hand. The weight told him it was fully loaded, and the familiar smell of oil and polish filled his nostrils.

Coven stopped firing, and now she tossed her spent pistol aside before reaching into her duster for a fresh weapon. Vast's riven body twitched on the deck, the metal beneath her lost under the combination of her blood and Mother's.

Damn you, Coven, Ivan thought as he tightened his grip on his old pistol. Damn you for reducing me to this. You *will* rot in Hell.

#

"Tatiana! No!"

Tatiana ignored Kat's scream and fired. And again. Each shot vibrated up through the wrist she'd sprained on Parlour, up her arm, and rattled her teeth. She winced and bit down on cries of pain, each shot hurting more than the last. Each shot forced Trick back, its body butchered by the squash-head bullets.

Tatiana blinked, tears spilling down her cheeks just as her innocence slid away from her. Damn you, Ivan, she thought as she fired again, this third shot pulverising Trick's bicep. Damn you for leading me here. Damn you for not having the balls to do this yourself. She winced and cried out in pain as she fired once more. Damn you for wasting Boyd, and Matinee.

Tatiana paused. One shot left. She focused on Trick. The creature had staggered back to the threshold of the escape pod, and wavered. It swayed as blood poured from its wounds and dripped on the deck. It sneered at Tatiana.

The last shot blew a hole in the monster's chest and Trick sagged as its hands went to the gaping hole. Its knees buckled. It looked down at the wound before looking back at Tatiana and coughing up a tide of oil. "Crap," it said before it collapsed backward into the escape pod.

#

Mother drew another gun as Ivan's shadow fell upon her. She looked up and tried to turn it on him, but he kicked it from her grasp. He ignored a small flash of dark satisfaction at the sharp snap of her brittle wrist. This wasn't about pleasure. This was about survival...

...And maybe just a little revenge.

He stood over her, his breathing rapid. Glaring, he held the pistol and snarled, "End of road, yes?"

"So what?" Coven said with a harsh laugh. "The damage is done anyways. They'll all dead. Vast. Your nieces. Stali—"

"No, Mother. They're not dead."

The voice took Ivan by surprise. Scarlett. He'd forgotten about her. Both he and Mother looked to her. She still leant against the wall, her glass eyes ever distant and vague.

Mother's voice was acid as she asked, "What do you mean? they ain't dead?"

#

"What have you done? I don't believe it! Where the hell did you learn to shoot like that?"

Tatiana ignored Stalin and stooped to pick up the grenade. She sucked in air as she fought the pain and straightened to her full height. Blood pounded in her ears. Her heartbeat thundered in her chest. Her skin was clammy and damp. She shook. Nausea strangled her. But it wasn't over yet.

She walked past Katarina, her sister prone on the floor and staring at her with astonished eyes. When she reached the escape pod she looked inside to see Trick. The monster still stirred. Its engine still growled, and it was beginning to prise itself off the pod floor.

No, she told herself. No more survivors. No more of Ivan's mistakes left alive to come and haunt us. From now on, if they cross us, they die.

She looked at the grenade. It sat in her hand, coated in her blood.

First she threw the empty revolver into the pod, then she tapped at the button on the grenade and tossed it in. As it landed in Trick's lap Tatiana punched at the pad beside the hatch. The last she saw of Trick was its expression fall as the hatch slammed shut with a clang. An immediate and violent vibration seized the bay as the pod ejected.

Moments later they heard a muffled explosion and the pitter patter of wreckage against the hull of the *Troika*.

Tatiana turned and walked past Stalin and Katarina without looking at them. As she reached the exit she said, "When you've stopped staring, we should find Ivan."

#

"They are still alive, and Tatiana has killed Trick."

Mother and Ivan fell into a stunned silence. Ivan's stomach lurched. Killed Trick? His mind raced. How?

"She shot it," Scarlett said. "With Johnny's gun."

His blood ran cold, and his knees weakened. Shot it? Impossible! His fingers flexed about the grip of his pistol. Tatiana would never do such a thing! This was little more than another Coven ploy to bait him. His knuckles became ashen white with the force of his grip about the pistol. But he refused. He would not stoop to their level.

He looked at Mother Coven. Blood poured from her heel and she sat in its growing pool. The crone put her face in her hands, and her body trembled. Ivan heard what sounded like muffled sobs oozing from behind those hands.

Something cold and sharp grasped his heart. Mother Coven. Weeping. Then it was true, Trick *was* dead after all...

...And Tatiana *must* have shot her.

Mother looked up, bloody handprints on her face, and Ivan understood. Yes, she wept, but with laughter. "Y'see, Ivan? I win. Woodrow. Johnny. Trick. They might be dead—me and Scarlett soon, I guess—but it don' matter. It don' matter 'cos I've done worse than kill your niece. I made her jus' like you an' me. A killer." She spat on his boot. "An' I've broke you." She nodded at Ivan's gun. "Now shoot me."

He wavered on his feet, light headed and confused. Perhaps it wasn't a lie. Perhaps Tatiana really had killed Trick, gunned her down like he and Gregor has gunned down so many others.

Maybe she really was her father's daughter.

He looked at Mother, at that twisted and bloodied face as it smirked and laughed. He knew what she wanted to make her victory complete. But he refused. He would at least have one small victory.

“Shoot you?” he said with a false smile. He span the pistol in his palm with a deft motion so he held it by the barrel and the grip lurked above his fist like a club. “No, Coven. I do not think so.”

She looked at the pistol as he raised it over his head. She had the briefest moment to muster a shriek of anger and fear before Ivan clubbed her in the forehead with the pistol butt, and her head split like an egg.

#

When Tatiana, Katarina, and Stalin reached the hangar, they found Ivan cradling the ruined Vast in his lap. Utterly limp and motionless, she betrayed no sign of life.

The body of an old woman with staring glass eyes sat against the wall, and another body lay prostrate on the deck. Tatiana couldn't tell if it were a man or a woman. The head having been reduced to a pulverized lumpy paste of brain, bone, and blood.

Ivan looked up as the three entered. Tears forged trails down his bloody cheeks and into his beard, its white hair dyed pink by blood.

Katarina gasped and ran to drop to her knees and throw her arms about him. “Are you okay?” she asked. She began to wipe the blood and tears from his face as she studied it intently. “Did they hurt you?”

“Never mind that!” Stalin said as he circled to hide behind Ivan and stare at Tatiana with wide eyes. “She killed Trick Coven! She shot him full of holes and then blew him up! You should have seen it! Gregor woulda been proud!”

Tatiana and Ivan's gazes locked. Ivan's eyebrows rose, as if imploring a denial from his niece, but Tatiana refused. She stood her ground and stared right back. She wasn't ashamed. Why should she be?

But what about you, sister dear? she wondered as she looked at Katarina. Just how did you kill that Coven on the flight-deck? What secret are *you* hiding?

Katarina met her gaze, but only for the briefest moment. Squirming, she gestured at Vast. “Is she okay?”

Ivan's shoulders sagged and his head dropped. “No,” he said. “She is dying.”

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Weapon of Choice*

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