

Under the Gun

by Paul L. Mathews

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.

#

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.

#

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.”

#

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! Cronos! 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?”

To be continued...

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