

Under the Gun

by Paul L. Mathews

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.

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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.

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

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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.

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

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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.

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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...

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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."

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"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.

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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.

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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 arm *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’rds 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.”

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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.

To be continued...

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