

Under the Gun

by Paul L. Mathews

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 blurting 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.

To be continued...

Discuss this story—and more—on the [Valentine Chronicles forum](#)

© 2009 Mathew David Spaul. All rights reserved.