

Under the Gun

by Paul L. Mathews

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.”

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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 adrenaline 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.

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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.

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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."

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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.

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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."

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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.

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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 it's 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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