

Weapon of Choice

by Paul L. Mathews

The morning after the Covens had met their match, more of Ivan's enemies closed in on the *Troika*.

The storm over the island still raged, and its shrieking rose to a new level of hysteria as this new threat pushed on through the snow. Twenty Long Knife marines, their black armour almost lost under snow and ice, stood around their leaders.

With his head lifted to avoid being lost in the drifts, Crimea's snarling face twisted further at the sight of Ivan's ship. Also smothered in snow, the *Troika* stood just as unbowed, scarred and solid, as that old bastard Ivan. Crimea's muzzle and skinthetic eyebrows twitched. To think he had come all this way—that he had pursued Ivan and his damned nieces across the Pagentorns, fought pirates, raiders, and phantoms in pursuit of his most hated enemy—to think he had Ivan trapped here in his battered old tin can on a dead backwater, only to defer to *her*...

"That's far enough," she said. "Crimea, signal the *Siberian Winter*. Tell Kirill we've found the *Troika*, and we're going in."

Crimea looked over his shoulder at her. He may have promised the Long Knives results in return for another chance to capture Ivan and a new crew for the *Siberian Winter*, but he hadn't expected to be taking orders from the Blind Admiral's tattooed wench.

Of the entire squad, only she seemed untouched by the storm. With her heavy fur cloak open to reveal blue skin, brass two-piece, and bare feet; she did not shiver, nor did her breath steam from behind her mask of sculpted ice. She remained untouched by the snow, and the storm seemed to shy away from her in deference.

Truly a witch of bleak winters, Crimea reflected with a snort.

#

Five minutes later the Long Knife marines advanced up the cutter's main ramp and into the hangar; Crimea at their head, the Witch in their midst, and the storm at their heels. Their strides were slow, and their rifles were braced against their shoulders. Their gloss armour shone with the reflected light of polish and melting snow.

The marines stopped as one and raised their weapons. A pile of corpses dominated the centre of the bay, four in total, with mouths and eyes agape—mouths that seemed to howl silent warnings. One had been completely decapitated, its spine poking from a torn and bruised neck.

One of the marines tried to speak, but all that emerged from behind the blank façade of his facemask was a distorted gurgle. "Are those...are those the Covens?"

Crimea allowed himself a cruel smile. This little floorshow was typical Ivan Valentine. Such a drama queen. "I told you Ivan was dangerous."

"I know, sir," another of the Marine's said as he slowly approached the stack of bodies. "But the *Covens*?"

“That’s enough,” said Crimea. “Stay focused.” His nose twitched. Ivan’s unique scent filled the hangar. More than the smell of perfume, cigarettes, decay, and gun-powder, his stench assailed Crimea’s olfactory sensors. It taunted him. It laughed at him.

Keep laughing, Crimea thought with a snarl, because when I find you, Ivan, I will tear that smile from your face.

“They were here,” he said. “Thirty minutes ago.”

#

Half an hour earlier Katarina, Tatiana, and Stalin had stood about Ivan as he had sat in the hangar deck and cradled Vast. Katarina gestured at the broken Vermiddion. “Is she okay?”

Ivan’s shoulders sagged and his head dropped. “No. She dies.”

The rest of them took a sharp intake of breath. Even the numb and weary Tatiana.

“But that’s impossible!” Katarina said as she covered her mouth with her hand.

“She’s...well, she’s *Vast!*”

“And she has been fighting since she was child, yes? There is only so much even a Vermiddion can take.”

A silence fell upon the hangar as Katarina moved to sit beside Ivan. She embraced the old soldier as he hugged Vast with his eyes closed. Tatiana studied him. This was a new side to the old man. An almost paternal side. Perhaps she and Katarina had taken Vast for granted all these years without realising the depth of feeling Ivan had for the Vermiddion. Perhaps there was more to their past than the twins knew...

A beeping sound intruded her thoughts and Tatiana cocked her head to determine its source. Muffled but insistent, it led her to the headless body of Mother Coven and she limped over to investigate. She reached into the corpse’s inner pocket. As her fingers searched amidst the lint and Christ only knew what else, she ignored the stench of sweat, shit, and old perfume—she’d smelt a lot worse recently.

Her fingers closed about a metal object which vibrated in time with the beeping. She withdrew it; a communicator crafted in the semblance of an antique pocket watch. She pressed a button on its side and its lid popped open to cast a projection into the air. Blue and wavering, the image shivered before taking form.

“Well well,” Tatiana said with a mirthless and crooked smile. “The Witch.”

Hands on broad hips, the projection of the Witch of Bleakwinter glared at Tatiana. A mask of ice covered the face Tatiana had wrecked, but it couldn’t conceal the anger in her voice. “Valentine?” The tone was so frigid it made even Tatiana shiver.

“*Valentine?*”

“Put that down, Tatian—”

“Do you actually have anything to say,” Tatiana asked the Witch as she silenced Ivan with a curt gesture, “or shall I go first?”

“How do you have this comm?” the Witch asked. She jabbed an accusatory finger toward Tatiana. “What have you done with the Covens?”

“They’re dead,” Tatiana’s tone remained flat and measured as she stared at the projection. “Just like I warned you. You remember, don’t you? You remember what I said when you were half dead in my sister’s cabin?”

The Witch didn't respond. Stock still, she continued to glare.

"I told you that you could go, and you could tell all your friends that we're Valentines, and we don't die. Ever." Tatiana's voice dropped and she glared through her eyebrows. "And if you or any of your friends came looking for us, looking for trouble, they'd need more than a few magic spells and dirty tricks to get out alive. Do you remember that?"

"Enjoy your moment of glory, Valentine," the Witch said in a whisper, "because I'm coming for you. And when I catch you, I'm going to kill you."

"Then hurry up, bitch." Tatiana's smile widened. "I'm waiting."

She clicked the comm shut, and the projection vanished.

"Oh, nice work!" Stalin began turn in a tight circle and whine. "Making the Witch even *madder*! That's really going to help!"

"Stalin! Be quiet!"

He ignored Katarina and continued. "Why doesn't anybody in your damned family ever think of *apologising*? Or trying to be *friends*?"

"Stalin!" Ivan shouted. "Enough!"

"We'd better get ready," Tatiana said without bothering to look at her family. "We're about to have company."

And Christ help me if I'm not looking forward to it, she thought.

#

"I can't detect any of the crew onboard," the Witch said thirty minutes later as she looked about the *Troika*'s hangar.

Crimea looked at the marines' sergeant. "Do you have any contacts?"

The sergeant consulted a palm scanner. "That's a negative, sir."

Crimea raised a skinthetic eyebrow. Scans and sorcery meant nothing when dealing with Ivan Valentine. The old bastard was too sneaky for that. He turned to the Witch. "Orders?" he asked, hoping his scorn wasn't too obvious.

"We split up and search the ship. They may still be hidden aboard. Sergeant, you have the deck-plans downloaded?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you check Tatiana Valentine's quarters."

"Aye, ma'am. If she's still here, we'll find her."

"Very good, sergeant." She nodded toward the Covens. "But be careful."

"Ma'am, yes ma'am!" The marines saluted simultaneously before moving out in unison, the sergeant at point.

"I shall look in other niece's quarters," the Witch said as she ignored the marines and their salutes. "I left something there I want back."

"And me?" asked Crimea with a growl.

"Check Ivan's cabin."

#

Twenty minutes earlier, Ivan had dumped his vac-suit on the floor of his dirty cabin. He sat on his bunk, a knotted mass of wounds and hewn muscle that bore six decades of scars and burns. Naked but for bandages, he rested forearms across thighs and hung his head low. His body steamed. Moisture gathered in his moustache.

With gnarled fingers he slipped the plastic patch from his wounded eye, and worried the bruised flesh about the socket with tentative finger tips. He winced. His muscles burned. A malformed curse barely escaped the cage of his bloody teeth. First Crepitus. Then Boyd. Now Mother Coven. Yes, he may have beaten them all, but he was in his sixties. He could not carry on like this. A man *half* his age would struggle.

He looked down at his automatic as it nestled in his slack fist, its gleam muted by the glut of Mother Coven's blood and brains. He and twins had been lucky this time. But at what cost? Boyd gone. Vast at death's door. And what of Tatiana? What had she become? To see her, to see that look in her eyes, that black slab of indifference to her killing of Trick, to see the pain of losing Boyd and Matinee strip away her conscience: that would be a price he could not bear—

“But Ivan, honestly, how long did you think you could keep running before this finally happened? Did you *really* think you could reach Kithaen before at least one of the twins turned into their father?”

Ivan didn't look up straight away, but grunted and smiled. So that explains the cold, he thought. He looked to his side. Sure enough the spectral image of a dead friend sat beside him on the bunk. He didn't look a day older. The skin was still clean and shaven, the uniform still crisp and smooth, the badges of the Omega Hammers still proud on his shoulders. Even the bullet hole between the eyes still looked fresh, and the mass of matted and bloody hair on the back of his skull still shone damp and sticky about the exit wound.

“Hello, Judd,” Ivan said with a sardonic smile. “You are well, yes?”

“As well as can be expected.”

They both laughed. Gentle laughs, slow and easy, they spoke as old friends who had perhaps missed one another more than they would admit. But there was something else. A subtle inflection, a hint of wariness and a guilt in both their glances.

“I did not expect to you see again, Judd, after what I did.”

“Ivan, Ivan, Ivan.” Judd sighed and looked away. “That was twenty years ago.”

“Yes, but I—”

“Yes, you did.” Judd looked back at him with bayonets in his glare. “But I stabbed you in the back, remember?”

Now Ivan had to look away. Remember? How could he forget?

“Twenty years is a long time, Ivan. Certainly long enough for me to gain a whole new perspective on things.” Judd looked across the cabin at the photo of the Hammers on their T-909 tank as it rolled across Shadow. Ivan fancied he saw a slight glimmer in those ethereal eyes. “It's certainly long enough to forgive, if not to forget.” He looked at Ivan again. “Well, for most people, anyway.”

Ivan smarted as if chastised. “What do you mean?”

Judd stood and took a few paces into the room. Back straight and hands held behind his back, he looked every inch the career soldier. “I mean, Ivan, that it’s about time you moved on.”

Ivan’s breath shortened a little as he raised an eyebrow at Judd.

Judd looked over his shoulder at gestured at the gun in Ivan’s hand. “It’s time you let go, and it’s time to let me and Tusk and the *Oprinichki* rest.”

“Rest? I don’t...” Ivan’s eyebrows arched and tears swam into his eyes. “What do you mean ‘rest’? I am not holding you, or Tusk, or the *Oprinichki*.” His throat contracted. He didn’t need this. He’d didn’t need the guilt and blame. He’d wrestled with it all every night for twenty years. Now he needed answers. He needed advice! “Why is it *my* fault? Why do you blame *me*?”

“Because you blame yourself.”

Ivan started as though slapped in the face. His blood froze and his body trembled. He blinked and tried to speak, he failed. Blamed himself? Was that it? Was that right? Had he been hiding from guns—from his past—for so long because he was *ashamed*? Was it that simple? That *obvious*?

“Let go, Ivan. You’ve carried your guilt too long. It’s twenty years since the Torch. Let go and lay your ghosts to rest and fight back.” He began to fade. “And do it soon, because you’re running out of time *and* options. Let go while you still have the twins to protect.” He pointed at the gun. “If you don’t there’ll be nothing left except the gun in your hand and the knots in your stomach.”

“Wait!” Ivan held out his hands toward Judd as if it would arrest his departure.

“Where will you go now?”

Judd smiled a laconic smile as his hand strayed to his chest. “You know where.” A crucifix hung about his neck under that khaki jacket. “It’s time to test *my* faith...”

Judd disappeared, leaving Ivan to stare at the empty space he once filled.

#

Twenty minutes later, and, with his ceramic claws clicking on the deck, Crimea circled Ivan’s cabin.

The scent of old man and polish was so vivid here he could almost see Ivan sat on that dirty bunk as he shined his boots, or wearing those aged pants hung on the makeshift railing. The smell of cinnamon, lemon, and orange was so fresh he could almost see him sat at that chipped desk drinking his tea from *Matushka-Rus*’s crockery. He crossed to a selection of half-empty trunks abandoned beside the bunk. There were different smells here. Old leather. Aftershave. His nose twitched and a smile touched his skinthetic lips. Of course. Skullion.

He stuck his nose in the foremost trunk and inhaled deeply. Oh yes, that was Skullion, alright. And something else. Gunpowder. Paper. Ink. His forehead furrowed. And yet this trunk was empty...

He lifted his head from and looked about the cabin. Look! he told himself. Never mind what you can smell. What about what you *can’t* see?

The battered table at the back of the cabin. The crucifix was missing. And that clean patch on the dirty wall. Where was the old photo of the Hammers back on Shadow?

He turned back to the coat rail and studied it. Two of Ivan's favourite jackets were missing, as were his most trusted boots.

He turned a slow circle, tail between his legs and head hung low as he snarled and slavered. "Where are you Ivan? Where have you gone?"

#

"Download complete, Master Ivan," Doll 2 said, her flat voice echoing in the empty sick-bay.

"Very good, Dolly." Ivan withdrew the wafer from the slot in the android's neck and pocketed it. "You understand what to do, yes?"

"Perfectly."

Ivan took a moment to look at what little was left of the android serf. A battered head propped up on a silver trolley. The rest of its body—or what little Boyd had found following their battle with the Calci at the Elephant's Graveyard—had been abandoned on the trolley's bottom shelf. It was not, Ivan reflected, a very dignified end to such a long and unblemished term of service.

Without taking his eyes off the android he hoisted his kitbags onto his shoulders. Heavy and swollen, their weight betrayed the memories he had stuffed inside. He'd tried to leave it all behind, but Judd was right: he just couldn't let go.

"We could—" He cleared his throat. "We could always carry you, yes?"

"That would make no sense, Master. I should think you will be carrying quite enough. There is nothing on this trolley that cannot be replaced."

"But you're such an old model. You have been in family for decades."

"And if I slow you down there will be no family for future models to serve."

Ivan blinked and his shoulders sagged. The serf was, of course, correct. And selfless as ever.

"Thank you, Dolly. For everything."

"You are quite welcome. Now I really must insist you go."

Ivan allowed himself a sardonic laugh and turned to leave. Upon reaching the door from sick-bay, he stepped through. Stalin waited outside, panting as he paced back and forth beside a floating Dante cabinet. Ivan looked back at Doll 2 for the last time. Alone and defenceless, it sat in the blank and sterile room and looked back at him without remorse or reproach.

The door hissed shut behind him.

#

Crimea sniffed the air in Ivan's cabin once more. There was another smell here, something almost hidden by the aroma of old boots and fusty combat gear. Something he couldn't identify. Something acrid and harsh. There'd been the same faint trace of it throughout the whole ship. What *was* that?

He looked about the Ivan's cabin for a clue. Then his gaze fell upon the door. With head cocked to one side he stepped toward it. In the centre sat a big patch of spray paint, loud and fresh. His nose twitched. There. That was it. Paint. That's what he could smell.

His brow knitted. Paint? What the hell was that for?

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“Is that it? Can we go now, please? Before Tatiana’s new best friend gets here?”

Still stood outside sick-bay, Ivan sighed and his shoulders slumped. Stalin had a point. The Witch would be here soon.

He stepped up to the Dante cabinet and unzipped one of the kitbags that lay upon it. Inside nestled a small number of aerosol sprays. He reached into the bag to grab one. As he did so, he looked back at the door through tired eyes. There on the dull metal brooded one of the many heart motifs—one of the type which warded off the Witch—he’d had the crew spray all over the *Troika* in the wake of their flight from Oridia.

“Ivan? *Please?*”

“Not yet, Stalin.” He took one of the aerosols from the bag and began to shake it vigorously. “There is one more job to do, yes?”

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Crimea’s internal comm buzzed and tore his attention away from the patch of spray-paint. “We’re in Tatiana Valentine’s quarters now, sir.”

“Let me guess, Sergeant. Is it empty?”

“Yes sir.”

“Can you see any signs of packing? Personal effects abandoned on the floor? Lockers or storage units left open?”

“That’s a negative, sir. If she has left, she hasn’t left in a hurry. Not without tidying up after herself, anyway.”

#

Tatiana closed her eyes and breathed in. The pillow she held against her face smelt so much of Boyd she could cry.

She placed it back on his bed and wiped her eyes before turning to his locker. She moved across the darkened room to stand in front of it, and her nostrils flared. His cabin smelt so much like him, all sweat and... She shrugged and smiled sardonically. Yes, whisky. Not that it mattered now. He could drink all he wanted if he’d just come bac—

“Stop it!” She punched herself in the thigh and stamped her foot. This was stupid. She had to concentrate! Ivan’s orders, as much as she disagreed with them, were very clear: they had to get ready, and they had to get ready *quickly*.

She gripped the edge of the locker door. The cold metal bit her skin as she opened it. She looked inside. Whisky. Boxer shorts. Socks. Med-kit. Some old books. A modern pistol. Ammo clips. None of which she was looking for.

Her nostrils flared again. The smell of oil seeped from the locker, and metal glinted at the back of the topmost shelf. She bit her lip, and glanced furtively over her shoulder.

She stamped her foot again, cursing. “Hurry!” she muttered. “No one can see you!”

She reached into the locker, hand shaking. She gulped. Her fingers touched something cool and metallic. She closed her hand about the object, and paused. The surface had

an oily feel to it, salacious almost, like a forbidden fruit or a sordid act. Suddenly she felt the same way she did when she masturbated.

She closed her eyes, and took another deep breath as she lowered her head. Then she lifted her head, jaw set and mouth stretching into a thin line. She pulled the heavy object from the locker before staring at it.

This was it. This was what she had come for. A gun. One of Matinee's that Boyd had confessed to taking as a keep-sake. An antique from way back in Earth's history. Tatiana turned it over in her hands, wide eyed and mesmerised. It had a bulbous wooden handle, a chunky body and a thin barrel. A thick clip of ammunition brooded in front of the trigger guard, and the hammer sat dormant at the back of the weapon.

She lifted it to her nose, breathing deeply. The thick scent of oil, mixed with cordite. She remembered Father smelling like that back when she was a little girl, back when he'd been fighting the revolutionaries on Oridia. She smiled a crooked smile, eyes glittering with a suggestion of tears. It was a good smell.

She shifted her grip on the gun, taking hold of the cold wooden handle and slipping her finger over the thin metal trigger. Her breath shortened, and her pulse increased. The pain from her ribs receded, and she stared so hard at the gun her peripheral vision darkened.

This is it, she realised. I have a gun.

She closed her eyes again, and a vision of Boyd filled her mind's eye. She tightened her grip on the weapon and slipped it into the waist band of her pants, the metal biting into the small of her back and the cleft of her backside.

Suddenly she felt a little safer—and she liked it.

She snatched at a small pile of clips and rammed them in the pockets of her cargo pants. Her boots squeaked as she turned on her heel and strode across the room before plucking up a small backpack she'd left by the door. What few possessions she'd seen fit to keep were stuffed inside. Photos of Mother and Father. Some toiletries. A change of clothes and different boots. Nothing else. None of the soft toys or drawing books, make-up or dresses. Those days were gone now.

The door hissed open, but she paused on the threshold before looking back over her shoulder at the bed. Sighing, she walked back to the bed and grabbed the pillow. She stuffed it into her pack as she left the room.

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Crimea hurried through the *Troika*, nose to the deck. Ivan's trail still baited him, and he wouldn't be defeated now. His breath steamed, the temperature dropped. As he followed Ivan's scent, he regarded the ice forming on the walls. Soon the cutter would be little more than an icebox and another of the Witch's trophies.

"Have you found anything yet?" Her voice came from nowhere, prodding at his inner-ear from across the ethereal divide. A spasm shot through his synthetic nervous system. Even after all these decades in combat, after all he'd seen and done, magic still made him nervous.

"No. Have you?"

"Not yet. Where are you?"

"Following Ivan's trail. I'm approaching the main 'lock."

“I’m about to enter Katarina’s cabin.”

Crimea swallowed a retort. Katarina! Yes, you go looking for the weakest of the Valentine trinity and leave the dangerous Ivan and Tatiana to us, he thought. He snorted. To him, whatever the damn Witch had supposedly ‘left’ in Katarina’s cabin just sounded more like a convenient excuse...

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Katarina shook as she stuffed piles of clothes into three kitbags sat on her bed. She had to hurry. Ivan’s orders were explicit. And she still had so much to pack. She snatched at one of Matinee’s last bottles of whisky and tried to wrap it in a thick jumper, but the bottle slipped from her sweaty fingers. It fell to the deck, bounced and rolled under the bed.

“Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck!” She dropped to her hands and knees. Yes, she could just leave it, but she couldn’t be sure they’d be much of that stuff where they were going. And she’d be damned if she didn’t need it right now.

She looked about her in an attempt to strip away the cabin’s dense shadows with her narrowed eyes. She swallowed a thick swell of spit. No sign of them, thank Christ.

Satisfied, she ducked under the bed and reached for the bottle.

“Hello, Katarina.”

She recoiled. With a hand to her mouth she barely managed to stifle a scream. Wide eyed, she kicked back across the floor until she’d backed herself into a gap between her wardrobe and door to the head.

That voice! Like broken, bloody fingernails clawing at the inside of a coffin lid. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes as she stared at the bed. Sure enough, the Witch’s dragon tattoos emerged from beneath it, flowing across the deck like spilt ink. Two dimensional and flat, their colours had faded a little since she’d watched them destroy Johnny Coven on the flight-deck, yet the greens, yellows and reds of their scales still seemed possessed of a supernatural glow.

She pulled at her sweaty vest to reveal the scarred remains of the heart motif she’d cut into her breast during their last confrontation with the Witch. “Stay back! You can’t come near me! I’m still protected!”

They advanced across the deck until they almost reached her chunky boots, but stopped shy of her metal heels. “Don’t be like that, Katarina,” they said in unison, and one winked at her. “We just want to be friends.”

She swallowed again, the grip on her vest relaxing. “What?”

“We don’t want to hurt you. If we wanted to do that we’d have taken you weeks ago. You’ve seen what *we* can do.”

“But...but this.” She tapped at her scar with her index finger. “This keeps you away... doesn’t it?”

They laughed, and the sound bore into Katarina’s skull like a trepan. “So people think. But they’re wrong. It may work on the Witch, but not us.”

“So, why haven’t you killed me already?”

They winked at her. “Because we want to be your friends.”

#

The Witch's shriek tore across the ether. "They're gone! They're not here!"

Crimea staggered to one side, disorientated by the banshee wail of the Witch. He fell against the freezing wall, blinking rapidly as he shook his head. "Bleakwinter!" he said with a snarl. "Calm down!" He could hear the Marines crying in pain and surprise across the comms network; no doubt her anguish tore at them too. "What's *wrong*?"

"They've gone! She's stolen them!"

He bared his teeth and regained his footing. "What's 'gone'? Who's 'taken' them?"

She shrieked again, and the cutter shook. They'd all heard the rumours about her temper. He imagined her clawing at the air like some mad thing. "I left them here, and now they're gone!" Another howl, and the swathes of ice on the wall beside Crimea thickened. "That sullen cow Katarina! She must have taken them. Don't you understand, you idiot? She's stolen my *dragons*!"

#

Tatiana leant against the wall of one of the *Troika*'s secondary airlocks. The gun in her waistband bit into the small of her back. Resting her head against the cold wall, she regarded airlock's outer door. One of Ivan's stylised hearts still adorned the metal, chained to the bottom of the door by trails of excess paint. Tatiana shivered at the thought of the Witch and drew the faux-fur collar of her white coat up about her neck.

"Hey, sis."

Tatiana turned to see a shapeless mass of stripy jumpers, one of Matinee's old parkas, three bulging kitbags, and a woollen bobble hat step through the inner door. "Kat," Tatiana said with a nod. "So you've packed lightly, then?"

Katarina shrugged as she dropped the bags to the deck. Tatiana swore she heard glass bottles clicking together. "So what?"

They looked at one another, and Tatiana's eyes narrowed. Something had changed. Katarina had altered somehow. Her gaze didn't waver any more. Her voice was stronger, her jaw firmer. The lips weren't as sore, and the crooked smile seemed a little darker.

"Are you...okay?"

"Me?" Katarina laughed. "I'm fuckin' awesome. How about you?"

The question struck Tatiana like a slap in the face, and she ground her teeth. Boyd had just died. How the hell did Katarina expect her to feel? She opened her mouth to answer, but stopped. No. Now wasn't the time. There was something weird going on with Kat, and she bet it was connected to whatever had snuffed out Johnny Coven. Now she smiled her crooked smile back at Katarina as her hand strayed behind her to grip the handle of new gun. "I'm just fine, *sis*. Fine and dandy."

#

The Witch's rant had finally subsided when Crimea entered the airlock. He sniffed the air. The smell was strong here, the strongest it'd been. But now he couldn't just smell paint, but other scents too. Perfume. Guns. Laundered clothes. Cigarettes. The nieces, no doubt.

He continued to sniff. Lubricant. Synaptic fluid. Rubber. Stalin? He grunted and shook his head. To think that little shit was still alive.

Nose to the deck, Crimea snuffled about the airlock. He raised his head and dwelt on the other traces in the air. Ivan's boots.

They'd been here. All of them. Had they left? Was this their last port of call before they abandoned the *Troika* and fled?

#

Ivan entered the airlock, Stalin at his heel. He pushed the Dante cabinet, the top of the machine lost beneath his gear.

The door hissed shut behind him, and the twins looked toward him. Katarina's face lit up with a breezy, almost delirious smile, and Ivan wondered if she might be drunk. This notion quickly passed as he looked at Tatiana.

How she has changed, he thought as he studied her eyes, dead and staring; her head reclined, her relaxed stance. One hand was behind her and one foot against the wall as she leaned back. No longer was this the frightened little *Tsarina* who had fled Oridia. This was a grown woman, bloodied and sharpened by the life he had dragged them all into...

"What's in there, Uncle?" Katarina pointed at the Dante cabinet.

"It's Vast!" Stalin jiggled from foot to foot and wagged his tail. "Ivan thinks he knows someone who can—"

"Enough!" Ivan kicked at Stalin's flank, and the cyborg dog yelped before giving Ivan a hunted glance. "Are you all ready?"

"For what's it's worth." Tatiana shrugged. "But you know this is a bad idea, don't you?"

Ivan's nostrils flared and he drew a deep breath. His chest swelled beneath his faded combat jacket. "We have had this convers—"

"Yes, we have, but that doesn't change the way I feel." Tatiana moved away from the wall to stand before Ivan. Drawing herself up to her full height, she looked up into his face with her chin jutting out. "We're just running away again, aren't we?"

"The Witch is comi—"

"Yes, she is, but we should wait for her—ambush her. We can take her. We've beaten everybody else."

"Now is not the time."

"Then when is the time, Ivan? The next time she finds us? The time after that, perhaps? Or do we keep going until we run out of luck?"

"No." he put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed before taking a deep breath. With a lowered head and his chin against his chest he looked through his eyebrows into her glittering eyes. "We are Valentines, and we decide when we fight, when we die. I do not choose to fight here. We are tired. Wounded. We grieve." He paused as he noted the slight dilation in her pupils, the slight tremor in her lips. "If we make stand here, we will die. And I do not want to die here, *Tsarina*. We run until we choose battleground."

Chin still protruding, she stared back at him. If anything, he realised, it was his own gaze that wavered. Those eyes, he thought with a shudder. So sheer. So hard. So... Gregor.

He squeezed her shoulders a little harder. "Yes?"

Now she looked away, but only as far as his hands. "Get your hands off me. They're covered in paint."

He twitched a little. He didn't like that tone one bit. Once they were away from here—far, far way—he would have talks with her. Grief or no grief, he would not be spoken to that way. But now was not the time.

"Very well. We go." He let her go and turned back to the Dante cabinet to reach into one of the kitbags. He produced another aerosol. "But first I have minor chore..."

#

Crimea cut the signal as he looked up and at the airlock door. There it was again. Another patch of paint. He walked across the airlock to take a closer look.

Thin and wet, the paint glistened in the half-light. The sheen betrayed a further texture beneath. Older paint. His stare traced the shape. A heart. With tribal flourishes branching from each side.

He looked away and down at the deck, eyes vague and unfocused as the enhanced brain behind them considered this new conundrum. He knew that shape. The moment he'd discovered the Witch would be his new CO he'd researched her strengths and weaknesses, and he'd found out about that shape in the copies of Ivan's old logs. The ward the Witch was so afraid of, created by Kithaen decades ago when the Valentines had first fought Bleakwinter on Oridia.

Ho looked at the shape again. But why obliterate it like that? Ivan knew she was coming, so why ease her passage onto the *Troika* by *removing* the hearts?

"What are you up to, Ivan?" He hunkered close to the deck and looked over one shoulder and then the other as he surveyed the entire airlock. His teeth bared as he growled, and the irises of his eyes opened wide as his nose trembled. "And where the hell are you?"

#

Two minutes before boarding the *Faded Lady*, and the Valentines stood outside the rickety ship. With Stalin by his side Ivan leant against the hovering Dante cabinet. The twins huddled inside thick parkas as the storm buffeted them.

"Okay," Ivan shouted over the howl of the blizzard. "We get aboard *Faded Lady*...search it, then steal it."

"Are you joking?" Stalin's voice wavered and his eyes became saucers. "That thing's held together with good luck and bad welding! We'd have a better chance if we flapped our arms and prayed!"

"We have no choice, yes?"

Stalin lowered his head, and his chin disappeared into the snow. Whatever he mumbled was lost to the storm as Tatiana walked past and approached the *Lady*'s airlock. "Stop whining, Stalin," she said, "and help me get this 'lock open."

#

Crimea's comm buzzed. "Yes?" he said.

"Sir, we've detected a power-source in sick-bay. We're on our way to investigate."

"Roger that. And remember, sergeant: be careful."

"Affirmative."

#

Ten minutes after boarding the *Faded Lady*, Tatiana sat on the ship's pilot seat with Katarina beside her.

"I'm getting green...ish lights across the board," Katarina said as she studied the diagnostic display before her. Even from her position Tatiana could see it didn't make pleasant reading. "Christ. I thought the *Old Bitch* was past it."

Tatiana didn't answer, she was lost to the remembrance of Boyd's charred body lying beside the *Old Bitch*. There he lay, screwed up and burnt like a stubbed out cigarette, smoking in a sea of ash. And there he would lay for the rest of her days. Those huge holes would forever gape in his body. Those splintered bones would always poke out of his scorched muscle. She would never cease to see the ruination of his torso tainted with a coagulated mess of burst eggs and tiny, barely formed spider—

"Tatty? Sis? You hear me?"

Tears swam in her eyes as she cleared her throat and squirmed in her seat. She hunched over the console and turned away from Katarina, hoping her sister hadn't seen. She pushed the mental image aside and forced herself to concentrate. "Sure, Kat, I—" She cleared her throat again. "I hear you."

It came as no surprise to her the *Lady's* systems were in such a state. With its grim and dirty corridors, low lights, dank walls, and pervading smell of waste and sweat, everything about the *Faded Lady* spelled dilapidation. Even the controls here on the flight-deck were choked with grime, and the stale air tainted with cigarettes and cheap perfume. Sickly monitors cast wavering green highlights over the twins as the flight-deck's air filters coughed and struggled with the fetid conditions.

Tatiana tapped at her comm to raise Ivan. As she did she shuddered. The old man had gone on to search the vessel for any surprises the Covens may have left behind. Christ only knew what he might find. "We're almost ready for take-off, Ivan."

A short stab of static, and then he was online. "Good, *Tsarina*. Get us out of here, yes?"

She prodded at buttons on the console before her, and their feeble orange lights flickered in protest. The whole ship throbbed and vibrated fitfully, and a strange grinding vibration rattled up Tatiana's seat and into her backside. That, she concluded, did not sound good.

"Well, here goes nothing," she muttered as she seized the yoke. Her fingers flexed about the dirty grip.

#

Another buzz from his communicator. "Crimea here."

"Sir, we've reached sick-bay."

"And? Did you found the power-source?"

“Affirmative. It’s a robot, sir. An old model.”

Crimea grunted. One of the Valentines’ serf units no doubt. Probably Doll Two. But why would Ivan leave it behind?

“And sir? It’s talking.”

Crimea’s head lowered. His toes spread, their claws slowly piercing the deck. Talking? He didn’t like the sound of that... “Let me hear.”

A brief pause as the sergeant moved his comm, and Doll Two’s voice manifested itself across the ‘net.

“—*Shest. Pyat. Chetyre.*”

#

The morning after the Covens had met their match, their ship rose through the storm. Its thrusters sputtered and whinged as they struggled against Stanztrigger’s gravitational pull. Behind it the island receded, blurred and indistinct in the backwash from the *Lady*’s thrusters. The *Troika*, however, sat still in the centre of the island, besieged by the storm.

#

“*Tri.*”

With a howl of anger and hatred, with the serf’s voice hounding him, Crimea turned and sprinted for the airlock door.

“*Dva.*”

It was, he knew, too late for the Bleakwinter and the Long Knives, but at least he could save his own ar—

“*Adeen.*”

#

Briefly, the *Lady*’s intermittent thrusters cut out, and the island assumed a clarity as the heat haze dissipated. A fraction of a second later the *Troika* exploded, consumed by flame and wreckage, its death a brazen orange ball amidst the storm. As fleeting as it was fierce, the explosion vanished. Now only a smoking crater concluded the storied history of the *Troika*.

The *Faded Lady*’s engines cut in again, and the ship pushed into the ionosphere.

#

Legend maintained that those who died aboard the *Faded Lady* were condemned to haunt its corridors for eternity, and the echoes of dripping water were drowned out by the ethereal cries of the tortured and cackling laughter of the Covens as they reverberated about the vessel.

Ivan hardly heard them. At the rear of the vessel he stood at an observation port, hands braced against the dirty plexiglass. He stared at the receding ruination his beloved *Troika* had become. He squeezed his eyes shut and looked away, chin trembling. The Witch and her allies had fallen for it. He’d won again, but at such cost. Matinee, Boyd, and the *Old Bitch*...these losses were bad enough, but to lose Dolly and the *Troika* as well?

He covered his face with one grubby hand. “*Pakah, moë podruga,*” he croaked, the words dry and cracked. “*Spasiba.*”

He shook his head and cleared his throat before turning back to face the corridor behind him. Dark, and lit by flickering green lights, it stank of decay and shit. The corroded walls harboured deep shadows.

Ivan’s shoulders slumped and his head tipped back against the plexiglass. Just as the screams and pleas of the Covens’ past victims still haunted the *Faded Lady*, so too did Mother Coven’s words haunt Ivan: “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...”

Ivan grimaced. It couldn’t be true. He would never believe that. Never! Gregor could not be *dead*... Could he?

He looked up and into the blighted grime of the *Lady*, but he did not see. Eyes vacant, he was very, very far away. It was time. He had to face his past, put his ghosts to rest, and make a stand against the Long Knives, Crimea, Black Gladys and all the rest...

But to do that, he needed first to find Gregor.

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Dark Forces*

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