

Under the Gun

by Paul L. Mathews

Prologue

Sandstorm

Twenty four hours after Crimea and Yevgeny had saved Ivan's life during the fall of Ferroc Boon, the fort burned. In the valley below, the city of Ferroc Tar cowered, its domed minarets and spiked towers kissed orange and red by the flames, as a tide of Theocracy forces swirled toward it. The brass *Stak Ta* armour of strident Theocracy nobles gleamed, and their guns smoked as hunched masses of myriad levies swarmed past them. The arrhythmia of their battle cries washed over the city just as their rockets and bullets tore into it. Brass gunships hovered over the valley and poured streams of fire into Tar, and the ground rumbled as gleaming tanks crawled forward and pounded their objective with shell after howling shell. All fought for dominance over the screams of those dying in the hellfire; and such was the combined cacophony, that the ears of the myriad alien levies bled.

Smoke poured from the burning metropolis and cast a pall over the valley which the moonlight couldn't penetrate. The acrid stench of burning masonry and the sickening stench of roasting flesh swelled about the onrushing army. Some—those younger and less hardened than their compatriots—faltered or even vomited, half-digested food coating their chins and armour, but they pushed on, rattling their sabres and brandishing their guns.

Such was the destiny of Ferroc Tar, a city that had dared to defy the Theocracy war-machine. Its fate sealed, all that remained to be seen was who would escape this conflagration alive.

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The square at the centre of Ferroc Tar had once boasted a magnificence of alien sculpture, fountains, and a clock tower said to be heartbeat of the Ferroc system. When this clocked stopped, wise men said, the surrounding planets would fall soon after.

Now, however, all was rubble and bent metal. What few sculptures had survived the shelling were smashed under the bellies of the *Troika*, *Siberian Winter*, and the *Kronstadt* as these famous Three Sisters of the Omega Hammers touched down. The smoke, sand and dust that choked the square swirled about the ships. The roar of their engines drowned out the pounding of shells.

From the ruination of a fallen tower, with the ground quaking, Ivan bolted for the *Troika*. In his arms he held an indistinct shape smothered in a bloody blanket. As he ran, his kit chattering about his waste and his breath ragged and forced, his comm buzzed in his ear as Gregor hailed him.

“We don’t have much time, Ivan.” An unusual tension framed Gregor’s voice. “I have multiple contacts on screen. Their infantry’s going to be on top of us any minute—”

A boom and the sound of stone on stone. Moments later tracer fire spat by and smashed into the *Troika*. Ivan twisted as he dived, and fell on his side to as not to crush the cargo held to his chest. His breath was driven from him, and a muted cry—small and smothered—emerged from the blankets in his arms.

He looked back across the rubble. The first wave of ground forces had reached the square. At their spearhead were swift *Domina Ki* tanks, and one now nosed into view, its chain guns firing as its turret traversed. It would have the *Troika* in its sights in seconds.

Then it was gone, smashed into scrap by the *Troika*’s guns. Glowing shrapnel spiralled into the air and scrawled brief red scratches on night sky.

“Now, would be a good time, Ivan.”

“I see that, Gregor—”

“And why can’t I raise Yevgeny?”

Ivan rose and ran toward the *Troika*. “Because I shot him in knees and left him behind.”

“Oh? Wh—”

Another boom, and another building fell. Two more *Domina Ki* emerged into the square as the rubble bounced off their brass hides and shattered beneath their tracks. Crowds of levies cowered in their wake.

“—Why so?”

He glanced at the bundle in his arms. It stirred, and a red arm emerged to fight against the tightness of the blanket. “Because he was slaughtering children.”

“Well, that makes sense. I hope he doesn’t come to us for a reference.”

The Three Sisters fired simultaneously, obliterating the tanks and shredding the infantry behind.

“Faster, Ivan! Faster!”

“Nearly. There.”

The ramp to the *Troika*’s hangar lowered before him, and he ran with renewed vigour. Ignore the vagueness in legs, he told himself. Ignore burning in chest. Ignore memory of dead children. Ignore bullets spitting by.

Behind, rank upon rank of Theocracy levies and their armoured masters poured into the square. They howled and chanted and swore, and their weapons wailed and spat. A torrent of bullets and rockets squirted across the square and rained against the armour of the Three Sisters.

“That’s it. Dust off in five. Ready or not, we’re going, Ivan.”

“I love. You too. Gregor”

He reached the ramp, and fell upon it as he gulped air. The metal beneath him vibrated as the *Troika* lifted off. A whine bored into his ears as the ramp began to close. Bullets still pinged off the metal about him.

Oblivious, he placed the bundle on the ramp. It bucked, and he pulled back the blankets. A flurry of bright red as a child—no more than nine years old—sprang from it and glared at Ivan. Trapped inside dirty armour, and with the unit number V457 scrawled across her forehead, she bared her teeth at Ivan and went for a gun she didn't have anymore: a gun Ivan had thrown into Tar's river.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and held her in place. He looked in her eyes, and shouted over the roar of engines, guns, and hydraulics all around them. "Do not worry. You are safe now. You do not need to fight anymore. My name is Ivan Valentine..."

The ramp finally slammed shut sealing off the Vermiddion—her unit's only survivor—from her former life.

"...And I will take care of you."

Part One

A Rock and a Hard Place

The *Troika*'s flight-deck smelled of cigarettes and coffee, and the whistles and beeps of the faulty stations struggled to be heard over the flapping of the tarpaulin secured over the smashed canopy. Vast sat at the security station and studied the displays intently as thick smoke curled from her *jaffy* stick, its tip bright in the flight-deck's half-light. Behind her, Katarina sat at the scanner stations, azure skin highlighted green by monitors.

She shivered as she hugged herself. A forgotten cigarette burned away between her fingers. She chewed at her bottom lip and tried to concentrate on the scanner, the intermittent crackle from the faulty screen making phantoms of the coffee steam that rose from her mug.

Katarina's gaze twitched from side to side, up and down, but still she couldn't get a clear look at them. Oh, they were there alright, just out of view, just tickling her peripheral vision, but they continued to evade her, to tease her. Flat. Colourful. Swift.

She rocked gently in her chair and swore under her breath as she forced herself to pay attention to the scanner. Tatiana had been gone for almost an hour now, and Ivan even longer. Chewing her lip some more, her hand strayed to her belly. The pain had gone—that awful stabbing pain she suffered whenever Tatiana was in danger—only to be replaced with a dull ache. But what did that mean? The temperature out there had dived so sharply the rain was turning into sleet. Pretty soon the island would be consumed by a blizzard. Had Tatiana been trapped in the storm? Was she with Ivan? Did they have the gear to survive the conditions? Or, worse, what if they didn't *need* it? What if Boyd had—?

An alarm beeped on the scanner. She sat forward and peered at the monitor's wavering display. Five contacts approached the *Troika*.

"Who the fuck are *you*?" she muttered as she stabbed at the scanner console. A string of results cascaded down her screen. Humans. Three female, one male, and one, well,

both, apparently. She shuddered. She didn't even want to know how that was possible. All five were armed.

She didn't like the look of that. Gaze still on the monitor, she took a heavy drag on her cigarette and a gulp of coffee before saying over her shoulder, "Vast? I think we've got visitors."

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Still huddled in the depths of their rain capes, four figures reached the *Troika*'s main airlock. They glanced about them. The sleet had become thicker, and now heavy flakes of snow whirled about them.

"Scarlett?" the lead figure asked as she looked over her shoulder at the smallest of the group. "What d'you see, girl?"

Scarlett threw back the hood of her cape to reveal a haggard face and vacant glass eyes. Thin hair—coloured a vivid red—stuck to her withered forehead in the rain, and cheap red dye bled into the deep furrows and wrinkles. She paused before answering as she turned her blank eyes to some imagined horizon. "There's three on board, momma," she said in a thick Confederate drawl. "Two on the flight-deck, an' one in the brig."

'Momma' nodded and asked, "Is Johnny ready?"

"Surely," Scarlett replied, but now she spoke with another woman's voice. Although still possessed of a Southern accent, it became ethereal and multi-layered, and echoed as though transmitted through some psychic pipe. "I'm in poh-sition, momma." This new voice featured a slight whistle, as though spoken through ill-fitting dentures. "Jus' say the word."

"Jus' hol' station, Johnny," Momma said before she turned to nod at the tallest of the group. "Right, Woodrow...jam their gear."

"Sure, momma," Woodrow said as he produced a small spherical device from the depths of his cape. A moment later he depressed a button on its surface. "Tha's it. Whoever's on the *Troika* can't see shit, an' their comms are jammed."

Momma clicked her bony fingers. "Right," she said as she gestured at the airlock, "le's get this open."

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The scanners had gone down moments before an alarm sounded on Katarina's console.

"Damn it." Katarina turned in her chair. "Vast? You'd better get— Vast?"

But the bodyguard had already gone.

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Smoke curled from the glowing red hole blown in the airlock door. Now inside, the intruders removed their rain capes.

Woodrow ditched his first, and revealed filthy petticoats that ballooned from beneath flak-armor and equipment pouches. His hair, thin and greasy, hung to his dirty neck and his balding pate shone with sweat. He produced a kerchief and dabbed at his brow, his lined face choked with layers of foundation caked over grime and liver-spots. He then produced another explosive and approached the airlock's inner door.

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Hydraulics hissed as the flight-deck door shut behind Vast. She stopped, and her shoulders sagged. Her head lowered, eyes lost in shadows, and her shaven eyebrows arched upwards. Her hand went to the stump of her amputated arm and cradled the wound, which still oozed through a fresh dressing.

She sagged a little more, leant against a bulkhead, and put her head into her hand. As she kneaded her temples with thumb and forefinger, she gritted her teeth.

She raised her head to peer into her hand. It was discoloured by what little blood hadn't left a palm-print on her face. With that bloody hand she drew a cumbersome revolver from its shoulder holster. As she pulled the hammer back, she head-butted the bulkhead, the metal splitting her forehead open. More blood poured down her face as, muscles bulging, she arched her back and let rip with a silent roar, her eyes wide and wild, and her neck a mass of stretched sinew.

She sprinted toward the airlock.

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“Trick, you're on point.”

Trick nodded. Its body a patchwork travesty pieced together from bits of men and women, it was stitched together with copper wire. Clothes were stretched over one sagging breast, broad shoulders, and a slender waist, and soiled half-mast trousers showed one male ankle and one female. The female leg was a few inches shorter, the difference made up with a shabby stiletto. One hand clutched a meat hook, the other a revolver.

The smell of burnt metal and rubber that wafted from the devastated door fought with the smell of petrol as smoke belched from rusty exhausts that erupted from sore wounds in Trick's back. Muffled pops and bangs accompanied its measured, mechanical steps as it stepped through the inner door and into the corridor beyond. It stopped and peered into the darkness. Iris valve eyes widened to reveal the faint glow of fire.

Trick turned and gave Momma the thumbs up. Its mouth little more than a scabby wound sliced across its face, it spoke through two small speakers nestled below its cheekbones. They buzzed as a male and female voice synchronised to declare a succinct “Clear”, then it moved toward the end of the corridor with Woodrow close behind.

Momma still lurked in the airlock, lost in the shadows, Scarlett stood before her. Every bit as thin as Woodrow, the slenderness of her frame was accentuated by a tight fitting suit. Her withered hands clutched two tiny pistols, and her head tipped to one side as her blank eyes starred someplace beyond the airlock wall.

“Okay, Johnny,” Momma said, “you hear me?”

“I'm here, momma.” Scarlett's lips were out of synch with the distant voice once again.

“Le's go, Johnny,” Momma said. “Le's make our play.”

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A tearing sound sliced through Katarina's fear, and she tore her petrified gaze away from the monitor. She squinted through cigarette smoke. A knife blade, serrated and

dirty, forged a trail down the centre of tarpaulin, and the snow outside bled through the open wound.

Katarina rose from her chair and backed away. She pressed herself against the bulkhead beside the flight-deck door, her eyes wide and mouth open as she stared.

A head and shoulders pushed through cut in the tarpaulin. An old woman, her face was lost under a morass of wrinkles and scars, and her grey hair was plastered to her blotchy forehead. "Howdy. My name's Johnny," she said, her smile dominated by brilliant white dentures. "Min' if I cut in?"

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"Scarlett?"

Scarlett's brow furrowed slightly, and her hair-dye leaked into the corner of her glass eyes before running down her cheeks in red tears. "One's close, momma. Real close."

"Which?"

"I think it's the Vermiddion, Vast."

Momma paused. "Don' matter." A glint in the half-light as Momma drew a revolver and cocked it.

Scarlett nodded and left the airlock door. With Momma behind, she walked after Trick and Woodrow with almost dainty steps.

They were waiting at the end of the corridor, flanking the door with pistols raised to their shoulders. The growl of Trick's engines vexed the air. A gesture from Momma and the patchwork creature prodded the door's pressure pad with its elbow. The door opened, and the jigsaw moved through in a crouch.

Its eyes pointed in different directions as it surveyed the vac-suit prep-station before it. Although dark, the sterile white surfaces offered some residual light. The walls were lined with lockers, benches and cabinets.

Woodrow's whisper pierced the silence. "You see anythin'?"

Trick shook its head.

Momma glanced at Scarlett. "How close is 'real close', Scarlett?"

"Metres, at the most."

Woodrow looked back at Momma, asking, "You sure about this? I mean, Vast, she's a Vermiddion, right?"

"Shut the hell up an' get through that door," Momma said, voice edged with steel.

"Sure, momma." Woodrow crossed himself and stepped through. He moved forward to stand beside Trick before shouting, "S'clear, Momma!"

Momma moved toward the door, but not quickly enough. A clang of boot against metal, a blur as a buckled grill fell to the prep-station deck, and a red figure covered in spider-web tattoos dropped from the ceiling. Its elbow jabbed backward and struck the door's pressure pad.

"Watch out!" Momma shouted, but it was too late. The door slammed shut, sealing her off from Trick, Woodrow, and this red menace.

Then the gunfire started.

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The hag stepped through the tarpaulin and stood on the pilot's controls. Two bandoliers—one loaded with bullets, the other with macro-grenades—crossed over an old Confederate uniform that hung from her frail frame. Her sleeves were rolled up, and track marks peppered her inner elbows. A false smile dominated her face.

“Oooo, look at you,” Johnny said as she stared at Katarina, voice whistling slightly through her false teeth. “You real purdy. An’ so young. An’ I ain’t. That jus’ ain’t fair.” The smile vanished as her expression hardened. “Le’s see what I can do about that.” She jumped down from the console.

Katarina stared so hard without blinking that her eyes stung. Think! she told herself. Do something! “What—?” She stumbled over the words before taking a deep breath. C’mon, Kat, she thought. Look at her. She’s even older than Ivan! How hard’s it gonna be to take her out?

She clenched her fists, closed her eyes and took a deep breath before flinging herself at the crone. The next thing she knew she’d been punched in the face. She reeled, raised her arm in instinctive fear, but it was too late to block a further blow to the temple. Katarina’s knees buckled as her vision blurred. She fell to the deck and lay there, dazed. What the fuck? The flight-deck span and a wave of nausea crashed over her. How could she be that *quick*?

“I know what you’re thinkin’,” Johnny said with a dark smile. “I’m old, right? Ain’t no way a youngster like you got nothin’ to fear. You could take me.” A harsh laugh. “We’ll guess again, darlin’”

Katarina forced herself onto her hands and knees, head hung low as she shook it. She had to get up. She had to fight!

She gritted her teeth and shook her head. Her limbs trembled as adrenalin pumped through her, and her fingers flexed against the cold metal deck. Nostrils flared, taking in the smell of her assailant—a heady mixture of gun oil, BO, and cheap perfume—so strong that it soon overcame the smell of coffee and cigarettes. Now her ears roared with the sound of the storm outside, and the tiny pings and whistles of the consoles around became screams. Her skin turned to gooseflesh as the nip in the air was even more cruel. Even in this light, colours were more vivid—

Her heart skipped a beat as something tickled her peripheral vision. She blinked and turned her head to focus on the shadows beneath the security console.

There! She could see them again. Flat colours moving across the deck like...

Her jaw dropped and her blood ran cold.

...like tattoos.

Then Johnny stepped between her and the console, and Katarina looked up to glare at her.

“Look at you,” the aging killer said. “Such purdy skin. All flawless and Yankee blue.” A pause as she spat on Katarina’s back. “I fuckin’ hate blue.” She stepped forward, brandishing her knife over Katarina’s neck. “But tha’s enough talk. Le’s dance.”

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The sound of the escalating gunfight and the screams of the dying bled from the *Troika*. All the while the gathering storm howled a lamentation for those about to die.

To be continued...

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