

Dark Forces

by Paul L. Mathews

Formerly a vital strategic base for the Theocracy, the *Hu Kwaren* system once pulsed with transports and tankers conveying troops and ordinance between massive brass orbital forts. Now only rock and detritus remained, the Theocracy having destroyed everything they left behind as they abandoned the system to invading D’Kothren forces.

The light from the system’s twin suns daubed a brilliant halo of red and orange about the Stanztrigger planetoid as, in geosynchronous orbit over that planetoid, the *Siberian Winter* reflected the sunlight on the pale blue and white of its scarred hull; a light that possessed the *Winter*’s plexiglass canopy with the radiance of weeping eyes.

On the other side of the canopy Kirill sat on the flight-deck and bit his lip. He wrung his hands. His eyes twitched from side to side as he assessed the many read-outs and reports offered by the *Winter*’s instrumentation. But, no matter how many times he looked, they all said the same thing: the *Troika* had gone, and it had taken Crimea and the Witch with it.

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Below the *Siberian Winter*, through the lugubrious clouds that hung over the planetoid, the island lay in a nascent calm disturbed only by a timid breeze and the brittle rustle of dead trees. The blizzard had stopped almost as soon as the *Troika*’s explosive demise rocked the island, and now patches of wet earth peeped out from beneath the receding snow. The trees wept as the ice thawed away.

What snow remained crunched under the boots of Moreaus as they crept through the wreckage of the *Troika*. Bent, blackened panels from the corvette still radiated heat and a little steam, and the *tick tick tick* of the metal’s contraction vied for attention over the snuffling of the creatures. Grubby and with the heads of pigs, they wore threadbare fatigues at least half a century old, the faded grey material contrasting with the glisten of white snow. Each Moreau wore the badge of Stanztrigger’s Eaters. They scanned for survivors, guns at the ready. They saw none, despite the abundance of shredded Long Knife flesh and rent armour that littered the scene. The Moreaus salivated at the sight.

Their leader—a bulky female boar named Sow, wearing rings through her ears and nose—licked her lips and gestured at the lumps of dirty flesh that lay amongst the snow and earth. “You!” she shouted at a small knot of pigs. “Get this meat into bags and take it back to the ruins.” Her stomach tightened and a wave of nausea swept over her. By God, it was so long since they’d had a square meal...

Distracted, her eyes narrowed as she peered at something on the fringe of the wreckage. It was the remains of an escape pod, its hide punctured outwardly by an internal explosion. With a curt signal she sent a further group to secure the pod. The pigs advanced at a trot, their kit chattering and their SMGs thrust forward.

They reached the pod, and the sow watched as they edged up to the breached shell, SMGs at the ready. A young boar risked his snout and peered inside. A squeal of alarm and his gun was thrust into the gap, his comrades following suit with shouts of “Don’t move!” and

“Identify yourself!” Whatever they’d found didn’t reply, however, and the pigs ventured inside. They emerged shortly afterwards, carrying...carrying *something*.

“What the hell *is* that?” Sow murmured.

An unnatural marriage between flesh and engineering, its torso and head wore gaping wounds, burns, and protruded shrapnel. Exhaust fumes seeped from ports in a lacerated back that leaked oil and blood. Ripped flesh surrounded metal bearings where Sow imagined the shoulders should have been. Both arms and one leg were missing, and its lifeless head sagged back, mouth gaping to give a glimpse of razors and gears. Despite being an experienced part of the Eaters, even Sow shuddered at this sight of this oily horror.

“Sow!” shouted a pig behind her. “Over here! I’ve found a dog...I think.”

She turned from the pod. Her brow creased. A dog? The Cook hadn’t mentioned anything about a dog. His instructions had been explicit: get to the *Troika* and find the Oridian called Tatiana Valentine.

Sow strode toward the pig. Assuming this wreckage *had* once been the *Troika*, the Cook wasn’t going to be very happy at all.

She reached the pig and looked down. Sure enough a cyborg dog lay in the snow—or what remained of one; its armoured body was ravaged by the same explosive fate that had befallen the *Troika*. Now only the bubbled and burnt head, neck and shoulders remained. A stencilled name—Crimea—could still be seen on its shoulder.

“Sow! Over here! I’ve found an Oridian!”

She turned. A further pig stood in the centre of the *Troika*’s wreckage. He pointed at a humanoid shape on the ground. Sow’s pulse quickened. An Oridian? Now that *was* interesting. She ran toward them. As soon as she reached the prone form she knelt beside it and inspected it carefully. Curled in a foetal position, a frosted shell of thick ice blurred its body. Sow could make out the azure skin and midnight blue of its hair. The face seemed to be obscured by yet more ice—was that a mask? she wondered—and the shoulders hidden by a fur cloak. The rest of the body looked to be naked but for some metal two-piece over her chest and groin.

“Crimea? This is Kirill. Do you copy, over?”

Sow’s ears twitched. A communicator close by, hidden amongst the wreckage. She looked about her, and the pig did the same.

“Do you *copy*? *Over*?”

She stood and, hunched a little, began to pace about the wreckage with her head tipped to one side in an attempt to pin down the comm’s location. She clicked her fingers at the pig and gestured about the devastation. “Help me!”

The pig obeyed and began to make its way through the wreckage, cupping one ear with a grubby hand.

“Crimea? *Please*, sir. Are you *there*?”

Sow’s eyes narrowed. There! She jumped forward and knelt over a clutch of twisted metal before gripping it and throwing it aside. The heat burned her palms, but it didn’t matter. There, amongst the melted snow, sat one of the Long Knives’ communicators.

“Crimea? This is the *Siberian Winter*. Can you hear me?”

Sow flicked her tongue across the tips of her cracked tusks. The *Siberian Winter*? That had to be the name of this Crimea's ship. A smile touched her lips as she produced her own comm from her pouches and lifted it to her lips.

"Cook? Sir?" she said. "I think we may be able to get hold of a ship after all..."

#

What should have been a short journey from *Hu Kwaren* to the planet of Heartland had taken the Valentines weeks as they followed a tortuous route through the Sospiri, Foitek, and Ghinzani systems in an effort to avoid being followed or detected.

But now, finally, they stood on the fringes of Heartland's capital. Tatiana couldn't have been more grateful. Ivan had insisted they didn't leave the *Faded Lady*'s flight-deck, and Katarina's snoring—along with Stalin's incessant chatter—had wreaked havoc on her sleep. Even now the noise from the labyrinthine spaceport behind them grated on her nerves. She tried to ignore it, tried to forget the congestion and heat of the complex behind her, and focused on both the cool metal of Matinee's gun as it nestled in the small of her back, and the metropolis before her.

The city was built in a river valley, its spires and walls reflected in the water. Blue and shimmering, the river eventually widened into a vast estuary dominated by tankers and small boats sitting at berth. Captivating in a hectic way. The urban land mass, however, crept from the riverbank like some primeval amphibious creature. It began along the riverbank as a festering morass of recycled masonry and renovated ship parts such as bits of hull, ram scoops and cargo pods with myriad alien families living within. Smoke from camp fires and ad-hoc ovens spiralled into the blue skies and clothes hung from lines. Countless species of baby played amongst the dirt whilst aged elders looked on and admonished them occasionally while parents bent to wash linen and underwear in the frothing shore of the river. The Babel of their languages floated up to the Valentines, and Tatiana's gaze lingered on these children. She'd wanted kids once, back when she lived in some silly fairy tale and hadn't seen the realities of the life—the legacy—she'd been born into. But now? A sardonic smile haunted her lips. Well, maybe if Ivan hadn't killed Boyd...

A familiar anger swelled in the pit of her stomach—the same choking anger she'd been holding back ever since they'd left the *Troika* behind. She'd hardly said two words to the old man since Boyd's death, since Ivan had driven into the night to kill him, and now she couldn't bring herself to even look at him. Instead she focused on the city, its life and energy, and her attention was pulled through bustling streets and markets to drink in the sights and sounds of the docks. They sprawled the estuary shore, and the hammer and rhythm of their industry welled from their cranes and grav-lifters as they strained to swap a kaleidoscopic profusion of containers from ship to shore and back again. Foremen shouted instructions, and lean dockers made discreet, gestured insults in return behind their backs. Transports laboured from the docks, weighed down by stacks of containers. They slid away from the harbour, crawling through the flotsam and jetsam of the shanty town like metal beasts. Their progress, slow and laboured, took them through the squalor, and past gates in the first of nine concentric walls that radiated from the centre of the city. Tatiana squinted at the guards that lurked on those walls. Wait a minute, she thought, aren't they...?

"Stalin?" She bent her head toward the dog as he cowered behind her leg with eyes like saucers. "Aren't they Theocracy soldiers?"

"Yes, they are."

“Just who are these ‘Theocracy’ anyway?” Katarina asked. Tatiana looked at her. Leant against their Dante cabinet with the relaxed air she’d possessed of late, she too appraised the city, her eyes black masses of mascara beneath the low fringe of her woollen bobble hat. “And hasn’t Ivan mentioned ‘em in the past?”

“They’re imperialist nutcases bent on controlling as much of the Pagentorns as possible.” Stalin shuddered. “Your Father and your Uncle fought them to a standstill twenty years ago, in the bad old days...”

They looked at Ivan. Stood apart from them, the old man either couldn’t hide his ire, or wasn’t bothering to try. Fists clenched, jaw set and eyes narrowed, he glared across the city as a convict might glare at his old prison.

The twins followed his stare to take in the increasingly grand buildings. Built in the gothic style Tatiana hadn’t seen since Father took her to Pugin, they were jammed amongst the walls beyond the slum. Gravs, pack animals, and old cars fought through narrow, twisting streets, their torturous progress documented by the blare of horns, insults, and bestial cries. A dizzying spectrum of life—from beggars to merchants, from soldiers to priests, and all colours between—crawled over it all like ticks on a cracked and dry hide.

“What did you say this place was called again?” Katarina asked Stalin.

“Well, its real name is Promise,” the dog said. “And that—” he nodded at a tower in the city’s centre, “—is the Torch.”

Flanked and bolstered by buttresses, arches, and spires, the Torch stabbed skyward. The top of its central tower lay open as a roaring fire danced, orange and vivid against the blue of the boundless horizon. From those walls hung the banners of the Theocracy, fluttering in the sea breeze. Purple etched with brass, the maxim *Kore Levin*—‘Our Duty’—sat proud at their centre.

Tatiana massaged her temple with stiff, tired fingers and groaned through her teeth in frustration. Theocracy. Heartland. Promise. She’d grown tired of it all—of being dragged all over the Pagentorns by Ivan—now she wanted answers. “So why bring us here?”

Stalin nodded toward the city, toward its Theocracy soldiers and fortified walls. “Because we need to get through that lot.” He focused on The Torch. “We need to get in there.”

“Why?”

“To help Vast...and to find your Father.”

#

From the fringes of the spaceport, over a toll-bridge and into the thick of the city, they’d ventured into Promise, their pace slowed a little by Ivan’s limp and Tatiana’s periodic need for rest, her lung still damaged following her confrontation with the Cook.

Ivan had settled on their using camograph projectors to disguise their identities because he had, in his own words, ‘...left a lot of enemies here, yes?’ Tatiana had avoided eye contact with the old man as she’d taken the small device from him without thanks. Now they shed their disguises as they crowded into a sparse hotel room with one tiny window through which they could see the claustrophobic precinct in which the hotel cowered. Identified by Ivan as Shit Town, it sat on the edge of Promise’s industrial quarter like an open sore.

With both heat and a hint of precipitation on her face, Tatiana leant on the window sill and looked out over the street as it palpitated beneath the sunset’s vivid red sky. Lined by dilapidated hotels, bars, and brothels, this main thoroughfare ran the length of the precinct

like a choked artery. Its cracked curbs were crammed with grav-cars so beaten and make-shift Tatiana found it hard to determine if they were parked or merely abandoned. Many had smashed windows and alarms that wailed for attention, whilst the rest had no windows left at all. Children and teenagers sat on their roofs and bonnets as they watched the passers-by and assailed them with abuse, rubbish, or spit. Some of these passers-by retaliated, and Tatiana saw at least two Karscalian teenagers being kicked and punched to the curb by a clutch of deceptively thin Xentries. Most just scurried on.

Hookers and pimps lingered in the few gaps between the cars. From famished human boys and Morls with sore patches in their thin fur, to pneumatic Karscalians and a hulking Gol Jaquan with acres of flesh spilling out of inches of cloth—all tastes were catered for. Their pimps looked on as their girls and boys lead a steady procession of clients into the street's alleys, cars, or hotels, only to be back minutes later, their trick walking away with a lighter wallet and heavier shoulders.

Music from all corners of the Pagentorns swept out of the bars, as did the punters, brawls, and lovers' tiffs. Tatiana watched one couple argue with such a passion that they were at blows one minute and screwing under a parked grav the next. Bouncers carried a body out of one bar and dumped it in the street before going back inside. Minutes later rats scurried from the shadows and set about this fresh meal. It twitched a little as vicious teeth went to work.

She saw no signs of the Theocracy or any police.

“Tatiana.”

She turned to look at Ivan and raised an eyebrow as she spoke to him for the first time in hours. “Yes?”

“I must take Vast to see someone,” he said as, yet again, he entered in a staring contest with her. “You will stay here until I come back, yes?”

“Can I stay too?”

“No, Stalin. You come with me.”

The dog—lying on the floor—whined and banged his tail on the threadbare carpet and put his paws over his face.

“Can I come with you?” asked Katarina. She sat on the room's only bed—a double with clean but faded blankets—and swung her legs back and forth as she rested her hands on the edge of the mattress. She'd already kicked off her heavy boots with now customary insouciance, and her stripy tights undulated as she wriggled her toes.

Ivan pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut, avoiding the tender flesh about his eye were Crepitus had almost half-blinded him. When he opened his eyes again they were still just as bloodshot. “No, Katarina. I will go alone.”

“You're sure? I mean, you look really tired, and it looks kinda dangerous out there—”

Ivan laughed for the first time that Tatiana could remember. It may have been a harsh laugh, but it was still a laugh. She and Katarina looked at him in stupefied surprise.

“Yes, Kat, it is dangerous. But so is staying here. You will be okay?”

“We'll be fine, Ivan,” Tatiana said. She leant back against the window sill with her hands behind her back. She rested her hand in the wooden handle of Matinee's gun. “We're big girls now.”

Another staring contest between Ivan and Tatiana only ended when Katarina stood and padded across the room to stand with Ivan. She gave Tatiana a dirty look before standing on her toes to give Ivan a kiss on the cheek. “*You* be careful, alright?”

He looked at her, and his expression softened. “I will be fine. Now lock door behind me and open it for *no*-one.”

#

The lift may have been clean but it took an eternity to reach the ground floor, and when it did finally grind to a halt the doors took just as long to open. By the time he and Stalin managed to escape it, Ivan had begun to wonder if he’d finally met his match in this rickety tin box.

Now he stood in the hotel’s cramped lobby, if lobby were not too grand a word for it. A tiny cubicle overlooked both the bare reception and a flight of stairs down to the street. A grizzled human male, approximately Ivan’s age, sat behind the cubicle’s bullet-proof plexiglass. He didn’t even bother to look up from his tatty old paperback book as Ivan pushed the Dante cabinet forward and stood in front of the cubicle.

“You are to be leaving already, Eh-van?” the receptionist said, his Russian accent every bit as thick as Ivan’s. “Are you not to be knowing it is late?”

“I have work to do, yes? You will keep eye on twins?”

“Oh sure, sure.” He nodded a slow, absent minded nod that didn’t convince Ivan he’d paid any attention at all. “I have all eyes for pretty girls, Eh-van.” He looked up and winked. “But you are already to know this, are you not.”

Ivan laughed, and for the first time in many weeks the laugh had genuine humour in it. Maxim may have aged—God only knew they all had—but the mischief in those steely eyes hadn’t changed, and the crows-feet and frown lines couldn’t hide scars that promised Maxim would fight to the death to keep the twins safe.

“Do not to worry, Eh-van,” he said as he reached under the counter to produce a heavy automatic pistol which he placed on that counter with a thud, “Auntie Glock and her nineteen dum-dum children are to be taking good care of pretty twins.” He gave Ivan a salacious grin. “Who knows, maybe Uncle Maxim is even tucking in twins later.”

Ivan shrugged and feigned an expression of indifference. “And maybe I tear Uncle Maxim’s Glock off if he tries it, yes?”

A riotous peel of laughter shook the cubicle’s plexiglass, and Maxim smiled a wide and genuine smile that warmed even Ivan’s frosted, weary heart. He could not deny it was very, *very* good to see this old friend again. “You are to be careful, Eh-van, eh? Promise is not improved since you are last here.”

“And neither has your accent,” said Stalin. He stood on his hind legs to rest his paws on the counter and peer at Maxim. “Talk properly!”

Maxim took an exaggerated look over both shoulders, and over Ivan’s shoulder into the street, and then leant forward to whisper to Stalin through perforations in the plexiglass. “Is part of act. Don’t be telling anyone.”

“Enough. We go now.” Ivan clicked his fingers and Stalin duly returned to all fours and trotted to his side. Ivan pushed the Dante cabinet toward the hotel door—or rather the space where the doors should have been. Ivan’s brow furrowed. Why the hell hadn’t Maxim replaced them?

“Is not worth fitting new ones,” Maxim called to them just as Ivan looked back at him with a quizzical raise of his eyebrow. “They are only to be blown off again. Like I am saying, Promise is not to be getting any safer.” He gave Ivan and Stalin a cheery wave, a bright smile, and a theatrical wink. “You make sure to enjoy your walk, eh?”

#

In fairness, Tatiana reflected, the hotel room may have been cheap (or it would have been cheap if the owner hadn’t given Ivan the room for free), but it did have its advantages. It was at least clean (which she guessed was a rarity in this neighbourhood), it contained a real bed, and it had a working shower.

Now steam shrouded Tatiana as she left the tiny bathroom. A voluminous towel enveloped her body and a smaller one crowned her head. Even so the cool breeze from the open window made goose-flesh of her upper chest and shoulders. She shuddered, taken by surprise. The air had been warm—humid even—before she’d taken her shower.

She looked to the window. Katarina leant out of it as she smoked a cigarette and watched the street-life make a gruesome spectacle of itself. With one leg straight and the other bent, her left stockinged foot rested on top of the right. Her chin sat in one hand and a cigarette glowed in the other, smoke curling about her face and straight midnight hair. She looked the very picture of calm. The image of Johnny Coven’s mutilated remains on the *Troika*’s flight-deck sprang to Tatiana’s mind, the nature of his death still a mystery on which Katarina had refused to shed any light. Tatiana shivered.

Katarina, she realised, looked like a killer...

Katarina looked over her shoulder to see Tatiana’s goose-flesh and the shiver in her shoulders. “Sun’s gone down, getting cooler,” she said as she took a final drag on her cigarette then flicked the glowing butt out of the window. She exhaled a stream of smoke before wrestling the recalcitrant window shut.

“How long was I in the shower?”

“Bout an hour.”

“An hour? Christ on a bike...” Tatiana knew she’d been a while, but still. It just showed how quickly time can pass when you’re crying over a lost love...

“How you feelin’, sis?”

Tatiana blinked. “What?”

“How are you feeling?” Katarina walked to the side of the double bed and carried on talking as she removed her baggy jumper, her voice muffled inside its shapeless confines. “You’ve been pretty quiet ever since we left Stanztrigger.”

Tatiana’s shoulders sank and she looked away. “How do you expect me to feel? Boyd dead. Dolly destroyed. The *Troika* blown up.” Tears filled her eyes and she had to stop.

Katarina threw her jumper on top of her kitbags and turned her back on Tatiana before unzipping her baggy black cargo-pants. Tatiana watched her. With the jumper off Katarina wore a thick long-sleeved tee which clung to her body. Tatiana’s eyes narrowed. Katarina had lost some serious weight. The puppy fat. The muffin top. All gone. A slender young woman remained. That just didn’t make sense, Tatiana thought. She found it hard to believe a combination of the occasional cigarette whenever Ivan wasn’t looking, stress, and a bad diet could leave her with such a great figure...

As she stepped out of her pants to reveal stripy tights Katarina said, “Well, I know you must be in pain, but I don’t think it’s fair for you to blame Uncle.”

Katarina turned to face her again, and their gazes locked. They didn’t speak, and the muted noise from the street momentarily owned the room.

“Well I didn’t see anybody else drag Boyd out into the night to kill him.”

“And I didn’t see anybody else drag Boyd down onto Parlour and get him bitten by that Portia thing.”

Tatiana’s fists clenched and her body tensed. Her nostrils flared as she took deep breaths and fought to bite down on her anger. How *dare* she say that? Didn’t she know Tatiana already blamed herself for Portia getting anywhere *near* Boyd?

She opened her mouth to speak, but the tumult of her emotions froze her tongue. How could her sister say such a thing? Wasn’t it obvious how much pain—how much *guilt*—Tatiana endured? What had happened to Katarina to turn her from the sister she known and loved to this...this heartless *witch*?

“Please, Tatty, leave Ivan alone before we really fall out.” She pulled a huge towel from the depths of one of her kitbags and a rattle of bottles spilled from the bag. “Oh, and speaking of falling out,” she said as she walked by Tatiana and patted her on the cheek, “I’d hide that if I were you. Before Ivan sees it and really loses his temper.” Tatiana followed Katarina’s nod to see Matinee’s pistol lying neatly in the middle of Tatiana’s pillow. The same pistol Tatiana had diligently hidden in her backpack before taking a shower.

She span on her heel with bared teeth and wide eyes, only to see Katarina close the bathroom door and bolt it. “Now ‘scuse me, sis,” Katarina said, voice muffled, “but I need a scrub.”

#

“What’s in the cabinet, mate?”

With the noise and bustle of the main street behind him, Ivan looked at the three men who blocked the shadowed ally. Human males, they had faces that weren’t so much been lived in as condemned and then demolished. Bloodshot eyes glared from amongst scars, stitches, and fresh cuts, and the sneering lips didn’t frame many teeth.

The scratch of claws on concrete told Ivan that Stalin had scurried behind him for cover. Ivan sighed. His head bowed and his shoulders slumped. His was too tired for this nonsense. The short-cut was meant to save time—time he could ill-afford to waste on these sorry cases.

“Never mind, just give us it anyways.”

There was the glint of light on blades and the *kla-chik* of a gun being cocked. Ivan looked at the weapons. They didn’t shake, and he surmised the robbers had either been doing this so long they felt no fear, or they just didn’t care. Well, *he* did. He had to be on his way.

“You do not want to do this,” he said. Better to give them one last chance to surrender than have his hand forced.

“Fuck that. Give us the cabinet or we kill you, bitch.”

He sighed and moved his hand from the cabinet to the camograph projector on his belt.

“Hey! What y’doin’, asshole?”

He flicked the camograph off, and his disguise vanished. Focusing tired eyes upon them, he raised an eyebrow and waited for them to realise just how much trouble they'd blundered into. Realisation crept over their faces like dawn across a bloodied battlefield.

"Fuck me. Is that...?"

"Oh, Jesus."

"Ivan fucking Valentine—I don't believe this shit!"

One by one they dropped their weapons and fled down the ally. Ivan watched them go before he turned to look down on Stalin.

"You can open your eyes now."

"Sorry, Ivan."

Ivan sighed and pushed the cabinet forward whilst Stalin slunk beside him with his chin to the floor and his tail between his legs. The pain in Ivan's knee swelled as he limped. The pain that never went away. The pain bequeathed him by that traitorous vixen Black Gladys. He gritted his teeth. One day, he vowed as he shut out the agony, he would find Gladys, and make her pay.

#

Tap-tap cursed as he tightened the cord of his plush gown over his expansive gut and scurried down the stairs. A mutated Raistrick—giant bipedal rats more colloquially known as Herbies—he had two heads, both which now muttered and cursed as he reached the front door and slide back the first of its many bolts.

"Who is this at such a now time?" he said, his two mouths occasionally falling out of synch. "Who would come here and make such bang racket?" The clicks of further bolts being slid back were lost by renewed hammering on the door. "Yes yes! We hear you! Be silent!"

He bent to undo the last few bolts and, with a groan, straightened, furry hand going to the small of his back. When, he wondered, did we become so old?

The chain tightened with a *ker-chuk* as he opened the door a fraction. Shouts, loud music, and drunken cheers seeped into his hallway from the streets, dulled almost into an ill-coordinated melody by the distance. His ears and the whiskers on his grey muzzles shivered as his noses twitched. Keen eyes focused on the mammoth shape that loomed in his doorway.

"All our stars!" He staggered back a step. Old he might have been, but his senses were still keen—as was his memory. Even now, after all these years, he'd know that smell of old sweat and other men's blood anywhere. The hair had certainly changed—gone were the thick black hair and goatee beard—but that scowl and those fierce eyes were still the same. The girth had thickened, the arms had lost some tone, but the scars on that mighty frame hadn't moved, and they still told a million tales.

"Open door, Tap-tap," Ivan said, "before I kick it in, yes?"

#

Tap-tap's flat lay on the fringe of Shit Town, where the precinct merged into the industrial sector. Beneath his flat lay his workshop, and Ivan now stood in the corner with Stalin. He stroked his chin as he watched the mutant rat. Tap-tap—his fur and gown cast in stark black and white by a spotlight over his workbench—peered into Vast's Dante cabinet. His eyes were narrow and steady, and one split into four segments to peel open and allow a telescope to slide forth.

Cool and crisp, the air temperature suddenly rose, and a stench of tarmac assailed Ivan. He turned to see Tap-tap's bodyguard, Mortlock, facing him. An ethereal bastardisation of intangible concrete and metal, steam rose from its body and its head slumped forward from a hunched back. Metal cables swung from its tarred pate like dreadlocks to cover its face, and a pair of glowing amber eyes glared at Ivan from within.

"Fuck off," Ivan said with a sneer.

The Draugr shrank back and looked toward Tap-tap, perhaps confused. It should have been invisible to the naked eye, after all. No ordinary man had ever seen Mortlock before.

With a wave of his hand, Tap-tap dismissed the Draugr. It gave Ivan a long, withering glare as it faded away and back into its supernatural world.

Tap-tap continued to inspect the frozen Vast, and Ivan surveyed the workshop. It may well have been close to two decades since he was last here, but it hadn't changed much. It still smelt antiseptically sterile. Doctorpus units were still dotted about the ceiling, black and multi-limbed. The mesh floor still sat over mutilated bodies preserved in plaxiglass tubes until such a time Tap-tap found the parts to heal their horrific wounds. The spotlight still provided the main source of light, and it still couldn't hide the racks of preserved body parts that crammed the walls. From races loyal to the Theocracy and species supposedly exterminated by the D'Kothren, to aliens allied with the Accord and subjects of the Gol Jaquan, Ivan saw limbs and organs from them all—and he knew full well they were the real thing. Tap-tap just didn't do bio-engineered substitutes. Every one the real thing, or your money back...

The tubes were still punctuated by cabinets stuffed with an equally diverse range of cybernetics, each carefully labelled with a small white tag. Each tag still had Tap-tap's careful writing on it, each word written twice in two sets of distinctive handwriting. This, Ivan concluded, was like stepping back in time. And it wasn't a pleasant trip.

Tap-tap closed the lid on the Dante cabinet, and it sealed with a hiss of expelled air, a series of thick clunks, and a beep from its diagnostics console.

"You give us five day nights and we give you new big Vast," the rat said.

Ivan peered at him. "How new?"

Tap-tap slipped his thumbs into the cord of his gown and squinted down his noses at Ivan.

"As new as you can expect, Ivan. You have run her long hard and there are not many miles left in her tank. But we will extract them from her—and a few more besides."

Ivan looked away for a moment. His heart sunk a little. While that had been the answer he'd expected, it wasn't the one he wanted. "Very well," he said with a curled lip. "How much?"

"Twelve."

"Twelve? That's ridiculous!"

Tap-tap shrugged. "Times are dark hard, Ivan. Take it or leave us be."

Ivan ground his teeth and looked to the shelves of limbs. So the rat-bastard wanted twelve limbs? He glared at the mutant with its two heads. Both sneered at him with an air of gloating superiority. They saw Ivan's desperation, and clearly enjoyed it. I ought to grab both those throats and throttle them here and now, Ivan thought. I should let Vast pass away, at peace in her sleep. But I can't. I *need* her.

"Fine. Deal," he muttered. "What species?"

“Any. There is a war battle coming.” He rocked back and forth on the balls of his slippers and one head poked a tongue into its cheek as it gloated. “Demand will be big huge. We will be able to use whatever you bring.”

Ivan turned his head slightly to look sideways at the mutant. “What ‘war’?”

It tapped the side of one nose and winked. “That is for us to see know.” He turned away and gestured toward the door. “Five day nights, twelve limbs. Now leave.”

#

By the time he reached Maxim’s hotel, Ivan began to feel the pace. Like the twins, he hadn’t slept well in weeks. His limbs were heavy, his eyes burnt, and his head throbbed with a constant and dull pain. He needed sleep. Badly.

He didn’t pause to talk to Maxim, a cheery wave from his old friend being all he needed to know. All was right and no-one had attempted to harm the twins. With Stalin trotting beside, Ivan proceeded to the faulty lift, thought better of it, and dragged his weary old carcass up six flights of stairs to their room.

The key clicked in the lock and Ivan slunk into the room with his head bowed, shoulders stooped, and his eyes almost shut. A cursory look toward the girls—both sound asleep in the double bed, albeit with their backs to one another—was all he needed to know they were okay. He ran his hands through his hair and sighed. He should shower, he knew. His hair was greasy, and he stank, but he was just too tir—

He turned back to the bed, eyes wide in alarm as it finally percolated through his fugue. There, on the bed. A small black paper heart placed between the twins. Two painful limps bridged the gap to the bed and Ivan snatched at the heart to look closer. No, please, he thought. Not here. Not yet. I am not ready...

The little paper heart fluttered in his trembling hand as he read the neat white words written across it:

Glad you’re back, Ivan. I’ve missed you. See you soon! xxx

He screwed it up and cast it aside as he looked about the room with wide eyes. Of course she’d left no trace of entry. She never did. Not Black Gladys.

He limped to the kitbags he’d stacked in the corner and threw the topmost aside until he found the one he needed. A fire-axe he’d salvaged from the *Troika* lurked in the bag, and he withdrew it before—with the axe clutched in both hands—he turned to the door.

“What is it, Ivan? What’s wrong?”

He ignored Stalin and stepped to his side until he reached a chair sat by the window. It creaked as he sat down, gaze focused on the door.

Ashen white and red eyed, he still sat there the following morning when the twins awoke, and still he stared at the door.

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Keys to the Kingdom*

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