

Detonation Boulevard

by Paul L Mathews

The morning after they had brought the remains of Crimea and Trick Coven to Tap-tap, the Cook witnessed something he had never seen in Promise: snow.

He stood at Tap-tap's living room window, and his steaming breath clouded the glass as he looked out into the street. Blurred snow fell from a dull grey sky to smudge the neighbouring buildings and workshops into abstraction. In all the occasions he and the Eaters had visited Promise in the service of the Beggar Barons, before being marooned on the forsaken planetoid 751V, there had never been conditions like this. The planet should have been warm, and as the inadequate jackets, cloaks and shawls of the huddled shapes outside testified as people hurried by. Still, he thought as he glanced over his shoulder, it isn't difficult to identify the source of these freak conditions...

The Witch of Bleakwinter sat in Tap-tap's armchair, at odds with the quaint chintz, antique furniture and tarnished brass around her. With her head bowed and her face concealed behind a Kabuki-esque mask of sculpted ice, she remained utterly still and silent as though engaged in some form of meditation or repose. His breath quickened a little at the sight of her curvaceous body and heavy breasts, and the way a thin, almost decorative layer of ice glittered on her skin in the half-light of the room's antique lamps. It wasn't a carnal desire he felt when he looked at her, but something darker. If his ruined face would have allowed he might have smiled. How like some of my victims she looks, he thought, with her brazen semi-nakedness. His hand moved into the pocket of his chequered trousers to find the bolt gun that nestled there. He fingered it as his memory flirted with abstract images of butchered girls and their mothers. Even now, nearly sixty years since the Theocracy had convicted him and sold him to the Stanztrigger's Eaters as punishment, it seemed the old compulsions still remained.

"You're staring."

He started. She was awake. That damned mask, with its implacable ice, made it so hard to tell. "I do apologise," he said. He looked away and changed the subject. "Is there any further word on the location of Tatiana Valentine?"

She didn't move. She didn't even look at him, but merely said, "Yes. My son tells me she has left her little den and is making her way across Promise as we speak."

#

Tatiana blinked against the driving snow. The last time she'd seen weather like this had been back home on Oridia. Sure, a blizzard had enveloped them back on planetoid 751V, just before the Witch had found them, but that had battered nothing but the *Troika* and dead trees; this snow smothered the city of Promise as an army would besiege a fortress.

She allowed herself a crooked and sardonic smile for the first time since ... since she couldn't remember when. The way the snow crunched under her boots. Snow melting on her lips. The aggressive nip of cold on her cheeks and nose. The contrast of wet, dark buildings and virginal snow. Vortexes of snow in the wake of Gravs and sliding

cars. Steaming breath blown on cold hands as careless feet slipped in the slush. The bitter, invasive wind that sapped the strength from her muscles and stripped the heat from her limbs.

All of it so much like home.

Yet for all its picture-book purity, the weather could only mean one thing, just as the snow on 751V had proven one thing: the Witch was in Promise.

The Witch of Bleakwinter. Tatiana took a deep, freezing breath and looked to the sky as strange black clouds swirled above the city. She couldn't even think of the Witch now without thinking of Katarina and of how she wore Bleakwinter's dragons like twisted badges of honour—of how she'd used them to destroy Johnny Coven, Fix and Jed. And not only had Katarina used them, Tatiana thought, but she'd enjoyed it.

With a groan she lowered her head and squeezed her eyes shut. The glee in Kat's eyes, the confidence of her posture. Day by day the dragons were changing her into something like the Witch, but so much worse because she'd been Tatiana's sister once. But now she didn't know exactly what would become of Kat once the dragons were done with her. Would she still *be* her sister? Would she still love—and fight—for Tatiana, for Ivan? Or would she become an enemy, like her idol the Witch?

Could Tatiana ever fight her?

"I know how you can defeat your sister." Maxim had said to her as he'd slipped a business card into her hand. "You will need this..." She took the crumpled card from her pocket and looked at the address:

Pagan Hearts Piercing and Tattoos

Detonation Boulevard.

Blinking against the snow, Tatiana looked up from the card and at the street.

The city's denizens drifted by her like confused ghosts under blankets of snow. Each painted a tiny portrait of life in Promise. A thin woman with unkempt hair and two black eyes scurried from a gun shop with a paper package under her arm. A young Morl looked over his shoulder as he exchanged an infant child for a bundle of cash. The jeers and warnings of an angered bar-steward pursued a youth seconds before the teenager slipped in the slush, fell face down in the snow and, insensible, remained there. Threadbare clothes hung from a grubby old man who, transfixed, stood before a quick-eat as it bombarded him with footage of a voluptuous Karscalian woman eating slabs of meat and fried potatoes. Semi-naked creatures from across the galaxy danced in red-lit windows, the glass crowded with gathering ice. Hookers shivered in doorways and flashed their bodies at passers-by whilst their pimps lurked in alleyways and warm coats. A humanoid figure lay snoring in the gutter as snow gathered over him. One vagrant leant against a wall, marooned in the winter conditions with no legs and only a blanket to protect him. Something shambling and skeletal lurched from a pawn-brokers before shuddering down the street and into a bookmakers. Above it all, like an angel of conquest, a Theocracy grav made glacial progress down the street, its brass armour muted in the winter light. The throb of its Newton system fought against the amorphous mess of drumbeats and melodies that leaked from the bars, brothels and quick-eats.

Such was life in the Theocracy's broken Promise, and such was life here on Detonation Boulevard.

She turned away from the grav and looked across the street. There stood Pagan Hearts.

It looked plain enough; a tattoo and bodypiercing studio heralded by a bold design painted on its window and armoured door. Tatiana knew the design only too well: the same tribal heart Ivan had used to keep the Witch at bay, and the same design on the business card Maxim had given her. She dwelt a moment on Maxim. Powerful like her uncle, but charming and charismatic like her father. The perfect man, perh— Her pulse quickened and her breath shortened a little as she flushed, even in these conditions. Now isn't the time, she told herself, and she pushed the thought of Maxim aside. Instead she narrowed her eyes and tried to ignore the snow which melted on her eyelashes, framing her vision. Through the window she could see a reception area with a counter, couches and walls covered with framed pictures of tattoo designs and photos of inked aliens showing off colourful body art and piercings.

So this is Pagan Hearts, Tatiana thought. But why did Maxim send me here? What can it offer me? How can it help Katarina and I?

She put her hand to her forehead. It burned even in this cold. So many questions. Does this place hold any answers? She took a deep breath that raked at her throat with bitter cold. Well, she thought, there's only one way to find out.

Her boots struggled for traction as she darted across the street and through the thin lines of traffic that drifted by with the continual wet hiss of tyres in slush. Her wounded lung, as ever, burnt as she reached the other side of the road, and she put a hand to her ribs. Damn that cook, she thought, the sight of him coming at her with a kitchen knife still fresh and vivid. Even now she could feel the heat from his galley on her exposed flesh, smell the burning oil, hear the bubbling and boiling.

But you won't be coming back, will you? she thought with a smile as she recalled him screaming in agony on the galley floor, head and shoulders doused in hot oil. At least my enemies *stay* dead, Ivan...

#

"Very good, Sow," Cook said, his comm held to sore and stinging lips. "You will continue to watch Tap-tap and keep me informed."

"Yes, sir." The comm crackled briefly before his lieutenant cut the signal.

"Well?" the Witch asked.

Cook studied her before replying. The venom in her voice could not be hidden, and such was her disdain she didn't even bother to look at him. She didn't trust him and he didn't trust her. Theirs could only be described as an alliance of convenience. With him finding her amongst the wreckage of the *Troika* back on 751V and then taking the *Siberian Winter* as his own, they'd both realised their mutual needs. She needed him to get off the planetoid; and he needed her to track down the Valentines. It did not, of course, mean they had to like one another. "Sow reports it could be hours until Tap-tap has finished with the remains of Crimea and Trick Coven," he said at last.

"We'll make our move as soon as he's done," the Witch said, still immobile and demure in the Tap-tap's armchair.

"And you're sure you'll be able to find Tatiana Valentine?"

"I'm sure I'll be able to find *all* the Valentines. My son is tracking them."

What remained of Cook's burnt lip curled. Ah yes, he thought, this elusive 'son' of yours, that we never see and with which you communicate by whatever hokus pokus

you possess. “He’d better be reliable. I would hate to think we had followed the Valentines here in error...”

Her tone assumed a chill that rivalled the icy countenance of her mask. “I trust him, Cook; he’s my son. I’d stake my life on him.”

“Would you indeed?” Cook said. Oh, how he hated her, with her perfect blue skin and her perfect blue body. So aloof. So distant. So much like all the others. So much like Tatiana Valentine. “Indeed, I think you do.”

#

As Tatiana hurried across the street, her boots sliding a little in the slush, she noticed a woman emerge from behind the counter of Pagan Hearts. She reached the door to the studio at the same moment as Tatiana and, about to reverse the colourful ‘Open’ sign that hung in the door, the woman froze at the sight of Tatiana.

Tatiana studied her just as she studied Tatiana. If Promise had become some harsh winter expanse then this woman was like a warm summer glade. Tight olive clothes hugged a long and slender frame whilst her bare arms exhibited tattooed bands of vermilion Celtic knots and swirls. A corona of long red tresses framed a tanned face with green eyes and scarlet lips. Yet there were serpents in that glade, judging by the poison in her eyes as she looked at her.

She must be a soldier, Tatiana thought. Her physique and her tone is so much like Matinee’s. And she’s the right age to have been in the Omega Hammers. But how can she help me against Katarina and the Witch if all she has are more guns and knives? What use had they been to Matinee or Boyd? Why did Maxim send me here?

The woman’s expression shifted, her eyes darkened and her brow knitted, whilst her nostrils flared in time with the rapid rise and fall of her flat chest. She clenched and unclenched the hand that hovered near the ‘Open’ sign ... and the other moved behind her back, presumably to a hidden weapon. Tatiana mirrored her and reached around to the broom-handled machine-pistol shoved in her waistband and against her spine. They narrowed their eyes at one another, and Tatiana inhaled deeply through her nose to steady her breathing, to focus. Please, don’t, she implored silently. Don’t make me fight. I don’t want a fight; I just want some answers.

Finally the woman lowered her hand and shook her head. Her lips moved before, with a snarl Tatiana couldn’t hear, she opened the door and stepped out into the snow.

“You’re one of Gregor’s brats, no doubt,” she said with an English accent. “I’d recognise those features anywhere. But which one are you?”

Tatiana frowned. Which one? she wondered. How many of us are there? Surely there’s just me and Kat?

And at that moment, something awoke in her mind and her the pit of her stomach: a doubt, dark and nagging...

...Where there more then just the two of them?

#

“Why do you want to kill Tatiana Valentine, Bleakwinter?” Cook asked.

She rose from the chair to stand by the window and look out into the street. Cook’s breath caught in his throat as he saw she’d left her fur cloak on the chair and exposed her strong back, broad shoulders and fulsome backside. By our good Lord Almighty, he

thought as he stared once again, it's been so *long*...

Her head bowed and she clenched her fists. "Do you know what it's like to look at your only son, and in his face see the man you hate the most?"

What a ridiculous question, he thought. What would I know of love and children? Women have never been anything to me than cattle for slaughter and food for the table. He tried to sneer, but the stab of pain from his ravaged lips deterred him. Instead he let his tone convey his contempt as he replied, "Of course not."

"Then why waste my breath? You wouldn't understand."

#

"I don't know who you are, or what you want," the woman said in an icy voice, "but I've no time for Gregor these days, or any of his litters. So you'd better leave—and quickly."

Tatiana blinked, startled. She hadn't expected this kind of hostility. Again, she questioned Maxim. Why send me here? she thought. Is this woman friend or foe?

"Well? What are you waiting for? Get lost."

This time the barbs in the woman's tongue stirred Tatiana. Her lip curled and she bared her teeth. "Don't you talk to me like that," she said. "I don't know who you are, but I've come too far and gone through too much to be spoken to like a child anymore."

"Now wait a minute—"

"No, *you* wait." Tatiana clenched her fists. "My name is Tatiana Valentine, and I'm here to find a way to save my sister. And you—" She jabbed a finger at the woman. "—are going to help me do it."

Tatiana held the woman's hostile gaze as the snow drifted through her vision and the chill sliced through her bones. I haven't stared down death, and the likes of Portia, the Cook and Trick Coven, just to flinch now, she thought.

Finally the woman's shoulders slumped and she cast a rueful look toward the heavens. "Damn it all, Gregor," she murmured, "you're still laughing at me, aren't you?" She looked back at Tatiana. "Well, we'd better get you inside. You look dead on your feet."

She stepped back and held the door open. Only now did Tatiana exhale. Thank Christ, she thought. I don't want to fight. I'm too tired. No more fighting, please. Just answers.

#

"And why do you want to kill Tatiana, Cook?"

They circled the room in silence, like two moons might orbit a planet. He noticed she never looked at him, the same way she'd hardly looked at him during their journey here from 751V. Not that he blamed her, considering the horrendous damage Tatiana Valentine had wrought on his face with her pot of boiling oil.

"She almost killed me. Ruined my face—"

"I can relate to that," the Witch said in a wry tone as her fingers moved across her ice mask. "But there must be more to it than that. You are a professional soldier. To chase a girl halfway across the Pagentorns just because she wounded you seems churlish for a man in your line of work. I would have thought that you'd just consider that an occupational hazard."

She was right, as much as he hated to admit it. Here he was with a spaceship and a crew, finally able to escape 751V and go anywhere he wanted, and yet he still pursued the Valentine girl? Of course there was more to it than that.

He cleared his throat and looked at one of the many framed photographs on the wall. It showed a faded picture of Forestral, a verdant and heavily wooded planet near the Theocracy's border. He knew it well. He and Stanztrigger had secured many victories there in the war against its rebellious natives.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, taking in the smell of the room and breaking it down the way Stanztrigger has taught him. Wood polish. Rubber. Mold. Unwashed fur. The scents gave him solace and distraction from his pain and his loss.

"I said—"

"I know what you said!" he snapped, "and there's no point in telling you."

"Why?"

He took another deep breath and dwelt on his memories of Stanztrigger. His only friend, and the only creature to shown him mercy, faith and the Lord. But now Stanztrigger was dead, destroyed by the unholy monsters Tatiana Valentine had brought to his ship. "Have you ever lost a friend you would gladly die for, Bleakwinter?"

"No."

He closed his eyes and lowered his head. "Then why waste my breath? You wouldn't understand."

#

"Sit down," the woman had said. "I'll get you a cup of tea."

She'd taken Tatiana inside and into the studio's reception. There she ushered Tatiana to some comfortable couches and left her, momentarily, to stare with disinterest at a table full of zine-pads and digital brochures of tattoos. Then she returned with a tray loaded mugs...

...The next thing Tatiana knew the woman threw a cup of ice cold water in her face.

Tatiana gasped, mouth open and eyes shut. She gripped the edge of the sofa and shook her head before opening her eyes. She glared at the woman, and saw she clutched a steaming mug.

"Now I want the truth from you, 'Tatiana Valentine'," said the woman, "because this mug is full of *boiling* tea, and it's going over your face if I don't like what I hear."

"Christ on a bike," Tatiana said through gritted teeth. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"What's 'wrong' with me is I've been alive too long and seen too much to take any old story at face value," said the woman. "So I want you to prove you're who you say you are."

"How can I prove I'm me?" she asked. A weariness possessed her voice, and suddenly her shoulders and arms were very heavy. The walk across Promise had helped her forget her fatigue, but now, sitting down, her wounds and lack of sleep were taking their toll again. She could barely believe she was being threatened yet again. When, she wondered, will these people *learn*?

"Who's your mother?"

Tatiana laughed at such a ridiculous question. “Queen Alston of the royal court of Oridia, who else? Now get that mug out of my face. I haven’t come all this way to be treated like a criminal. I’m not here to rob you.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed and her lips twisted into a sneer. Tatiana wondered if this harridan were used to being spoken to in such a manner. Whatever the case, the pause gave Tatiana the chance to assess the situation. Could she take this woman? The distance between them wasn’t that great, after all. But could she tackle her before having a mug of boiling liquid thrown in her face?

#

“The rat says he’s finished his work.” Sow’s voice buzzed and distorted over the aging comm. “Now he wants to discuss his fee.”

“Very good, Sow,” the Cook said, comm held to his lips. “We’ll be right down.”

He placed the comm in his pocket. “Tap-tap has—”

“I’m not deaf.” The Witch dismissed him with a curt gesture. “So let’s get this over with and get after the Valentines. This house is far too warm and it smells like a mortuary.”

He watched her as she strode from the room, a trail of frost in her wake. When this is over, he promised himself, his other hand tightening on the bolt gun in his pocket. When this is over...

#

“Now it’s your turn to answer questions,” Tatiana said with a crooked smile. Delay her, she thought, maybe even convince her I’m not a threat. Gain her trust. “What’s your name?”

“My *turn*?” The woman blinked. “A little presumptuous, aren’t you?”

“You’ll have to excuse me. I *am* a Princess, after all.”

The woman frowned, and took a sip at the steaming mug. Then she pursed her lips before saying, “I used to be known as Cartimandua. But now people call me ‘Mandy’.”

Cartimandua? Why did that name ring a—? Wait a minute, Tatiana thought. Hadn’t Rish mentioned a ‘Cartimandua’ as being in the army that fought here against the Theocracy? So she *is* an ex-Hammer.

“Now, assuming I believe you, and you are Tatiana Valentine, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Maxim sent me. He said you could help.”

Unexpectedly, Mandy blushed. “Maxim?” she asked, eyes wide. “Is—” She cleared her throat. Her eyes, earnest and bright, pierced the steam from her drink as she focused on Tatiana. “Is he okay?”

“No. He’s dead.”

Mandy lowered the cup and turned away, eyes closed. Now! Tatiana thought. Get her now! But she paused and raised an eyebrow. Maybe I don’t have to disarm her, she thought. Maybe I just took the fight from her without even having to move.

“Stupid idiot,” Mandy said in a whisper. “How?”

Tatiana hesitated. The news clearly upset this ‘Cartimandua’. Maybe she wasn’t the ogre she appeared to be. Closer study told that she was also lot older than Tatiana had first thought. Crows’ feet and the subtle sag of jowls hinted at her real age, there was even a little white amongst all that flaming hair. Looking again at the mug of tea in her hand, Tatiana noticed a ring on Mandy’s finger. A wedding ring. Maxim had said something about being married, hadn’t he? “Shot,” Tatiana said quietly. “Jed Coven shot him.”

“Jed Coven?” Another sneer from Mandy. She opened her eyes and glared into the middle distance. Her knuckles whitened as she tightened her grip on the mug. “That piece of shit. And where is Jed now?” she asked through gritted teeth. Tatiana had seen that look—all knitted brow and twitching eyes—on the faces of her enemies; a look of purpose that spelt a thirst for revenge.

“Dead. My sister killed him.”

Mandy raised an eyebrow, incredulous. “Your *sister* killed him?” Her voice rose an octave. “How? Jed Coven’s... Well, the man’s supposed to be unstoppable.”

“Well, that’s a long story,” Tatiana said as she recalled the dragon tattoos as they swam across Katarina’s skin. “And the whole reason I’m here.”

The eyes narrowed again, and Mandy looked at her sideways. “Why? What do I have to with it?”

“Because my sister’s stolen some tattooed dragons from a deranged witch, and now I’m scared she’ll become just like her.”

Mandy laughed. “So,” she said, “somehow your sister’s managed to steal Bleakwinter’s dragon tattoos, and now you want to know how you can either save her from herself, or save yourself from her. Is that right?”

Tatiana’s mouth fell open a little. “You know Bleakwinter?”

Mandy snorted with incredulity. “You really have no idea about your dad’s past, do you?”

Tatiana stiffened and clenched her fists. “No,” she said, “but that’s another reason why I’m here. I want some answers.”

“Answers?” Mandy sipped at her drink. She didn’t take her eyes of Tatiana. “Really?”

Tatiana nodded, mouth dry. Now it’s time for the truth, she thought, no matter how ugly. “What you said about me being ‘one of Gregor’s brats’, and asking ‘which one are you?’ Well, I want to know how many more of us are there?”

Mandy seemed to squirm a little. Do I make her nervous? Tatiana wondered. Do I remind her of Father a little *too* much? There had been something in her tone when she spoke about Father, something bitter, and yet touched with that same inflection she used when speaking of Maxim. Was she one of Father’s old flames? And a discarded one at that? “Look, Tatiana,” Mandy finally said in a low and earnest voice. “I *do* have answers.” She took a deep breath, as though to steady her own nerves. “But you need to know ... you need to *understand* ... this is a long story, and you aren’t going to like it. Any of it.”

#

The rat’s workshop in the basement may as well have been a sauna. Such was the heat inside that, upon entering, wraiths of steam poured from the Witch’s body. She

staggered a little, body glistening with water, but collected herself. Stood by her side, the Cook felt eddies of dire heat and abject cold clawing at him as they fought. His nostrils twitched. Here the smell of burnt rubber fought with that of cleaning fluids, and the pungent aroma of sullied oil mixed with the stench of cauterized flesh.

“I can’t see a damn thing.”

The Witch had a point, the Cook admitted. The steam may as well have been fog, such was its density. Feeling his heart rate pick up, he seized the butcher's knife secured to his belt. He hadn't survived this long without learning that you can't evade what you can't see.

A monstrous black shape loomed out of the thick vapour. It clutched the unconscious Sow in one of its metal hands, and proceeded to swat the Witch aside before it seized the Cook by the neck with the other. The smell of oil and burnt flesh threatened to overwhelm the Cook as he found himself lifted from the floor. He kicked his feet and clutched as the creature's arm as it squeezed his neck with an astonishing strength. Eyes watering, the Cook focused on the behemoth as it spoke.

“I already know Bleakwinter,” the thing said, its voice distorted by faulty speakers that hissed and crackled. “But who are you?”

The Cook choked and tried to speak, but the monster's grip proved too strong. A hideous bastardization of metal and flesh, it may have been nothing more than bits of Trick Coven and Crimea before Tap-tap had done his work, but now it more than surpassed the sum of its parts. The torn and sewn flesh of Trick's torso still betrayed dented and rusty panels beneath the skin. Now, however, the scrap metal orchard of exhausts either side of the hunched spine belched smoke as they popped and growled, and a sticky, unnatural heat radiated from whatever infernal combustion engine raged within this aberration's chest. Tap-tap had replaced its limbs with new powerhouses of gears and pistons—thick with dirty oil and grease—sheathed inside thick plates of burnt metal and bound in rivets. The exposed pistons hissed as they flexed. Well over seven feet in height and two thirds as wide, it appeared to be even larger thanks to the distortion of Cook's tears. Never had he seen such a beast. Truly, he thought, Tap-tap is a creator of nightmares.

Crimea's head, still burnt and its paint still bubbled and scarred, sat atop this monster, but now, like Cerebus made skin and steel, it stood flanked by two others. Tap-tap had split Trick Coven's head in two and completed the halves with skulls of exposed metal, each featuring Trick's mouth of gears and razor blades and speakers under the cheeks. They buzzed and squawked in unison with Crimea's synthesised voice as it spoke again. “I said, ‘who are you?’”

“I— Am— *gak*. The Cook.”

“The Cook?” Crimea asked. His lip curled to expose fangs of cracked ceramic. “I've heard of you. Cannibal and serial killer caught on Graven by the Theocracy.” He shoved his canine face close to the Cook's as he studied him. “Classic case of killing for company. Convicted and sold to the Eaters as punishment, but instead of serving your sentence on a plate you rose through the ranks to become Stanztrigger's lieutenant.”

“The— Same.”

“But how are you here? And how—” He looked down at his new body. The three voices fell slightly out of synchronisation as they asked, “Did I become this *thing*?”

“I take the credit for that,” Tap-tap said as he emerged from the steam that still poured from the dazed Witch. He thrust his hands into the pockets of what had once been a white lab coat, now smeared in dirt and blood. “Tap-tap, at your service. Hello again, Crimea.”

Crimea threw the Cook and Sow to the floor, and the Cook gasped as the impact robbed his lungs of breath. Eyes streaming, he seized his shoulder and grimaced in pain as he watched Crimea turn on Tap-tap.

“Tap-tap? So, you’re still alive after all this time,” Crimea said. Even the distortion of his speakers couldn’t hide the distain in his voice. “Isn’t it time you died?”

“Oh no, I’m going to be here for a long time, Crimea.” The rat’s heads smiled, and the Cook squinted as he watched. He could have sworn a shape—humanoid, yet ethereal—seemed to materialize by Tap-tap’s shoulder. Little more than a suggestion in the steam, it hovered there, and the temperature in the room rose and threatened to finally overwhelm the Cook.

“Get. Back, Crimea,” the Witch gasped. “He’s protected. Bodyguard.”

“I see no bodyguard.” Crimea’s whole body hissed and whined with hydraulic menace as he took another thundering step toward the smiling Tap-tap.

“He’s invisible, you moron.”

“She’s quite right,” Tap-tap said. He took his hands from his pockets and held his lapels. “Now, if you’re quite finished with your little show of bravado, perhaps we can discuss terms.”

“Terms?” Crimea twisted and glared at the Cook. “What does he mean ‘terms’?”

The Cook groaned in pain and rose from the floor. He wavered, yet rallied himself. It would be, he thought, a cold day in Hell before he’d allow these three to see him in need. “We had to pay to have you repaired,” he said as he clutched his shoulder. “Did you expect him to do this for free?”

“What price?” Crimea said, the triple voice low and thick with suspicion. His three heads glared at he rat, the Witch and the Cook simultaneously.

“It’s reasonable enough,” Tap-tap said. “All you have to do is kill the Valentines, and then bring me their bodies.” His smiles vanished. “Now...

...do we have a deal?”

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *The Future*

If you have enjoyed this story, please consider making a donation to our charity of choice, the [Myasthenia Gravis Association](#). Thank you.