

Keys to the Kingdom

by Paul L. Mathews

Part One

War Stories

Beyond the Torch and Promise's nucleus of Gothic towers and concentric circles of fortified walls, beyond the city's terraced houses, industrial sectors, and the melting pot of satellite precincts like Shit Town, festered the Commune. It squatted on the edge of Promise's river like a dirty toad, a congestion of shanty dwellings cobbled together with every conceivable type of salvage ranging from fridge doors, grav-cars roofs, blastcrete blocks, panels from spaceships, and far beyond.

What the tight streets of the Commune lacked in planning or cohesion, they gained in riotous colour with makeshift buildings of red, oranges and yellows jammed together alongside greens, blues, and purples. Aliens mingled and traded meagre possessions, food, and opinion in doorways and alcoves as the layered burble of their myriad tongues saturated the streets. Heat and aromas seeped from every door as unseen stoves prepared frugal meals of spiced meats, breads, and thin broths, and the sweet tang of seasoning contrasted with the commune's subtle scent of dirt and decay.

The bangs and crashes from the docks beyond the commune's makeshift walls were softened almost into melody by the distance, but the roar from shuttles and spaceships as they flew overhead made the ad hoc town shake so violently it seemed as though the whole place would collapse.

Against this backdrop of noise, no-one heard the bell of the Commune's makeshift church sound midday.

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Rish glanced through the school room window at Promise's weak, autumnal sun. Five hours into the day's lessons and the watery disc had already passed its zenith. It'd be time to send the kids home soon, he realised. "And so," he said as he turned his attention back to the pair of tiny, shoddy shoes he stitched, "when the Theocracy decided Promise couldn't defend itself from Crepitus anymore and threatened to take over the whole planet—make it a 'Protectorate' as they called it—what do you think Promise did?"

The resulting clamour as the children fought for his attention drowned out the noise from the Commune outside. Rish smiled as he looked up. Most of the children crowded about him thrust their hands in the air. Some waved them and some strained so hard their faces went a funny colour, and he could have sworn they were about to touch the roof of the shabby room. He stroked his white beard as he made his decision. Young Fara, he decided, spotting the small Karscalian girl. She'd been well behaved today. "Yes, Fara?"

"They got help from the Valentines and Omigo Rammers!"

More answers swept over him, as diverse and colourful as the alien children.

“And the Caged Rats!”

“And those snake women!”

“What about Black Gladys?”

“One at a time, please!” Rish said with a broad smile. “Fara is right. They asked for help from an army lead by the Omega Hammers. Now, tell me, does any...body...know...”

His voice tailed off as he watched the door to the class room open. Moments later Ivan Valentine stood there, filling the doorway. Heavier, perhaps. Older, certainly. But Rish couldn't mistake that face and its sans chin beard, or the physique and its sheer power. Upon seeing Rish, a tiny scowl stole across Ivan's face as he crossed his arms across his chest. The children turned to look at Ivan, and their blank, wide-eyed indifference told Rish that—despite the Valentines and their allies passing into local folklore as the last to fight and die for the city's liberty—they didn't have the faintest idea who Ivan actually was.

Rish cleared his throat and marshalled himself. He may have been expecting Ivan, but still, to see him after all these years... “Does anybody know who lead the Omega Hammers, and what he looked like?”

“It was Ivan Valentyn!”

“And his brother Gregory!”

Ivan stepped to one side of the door. He ignored the children and continued to stare at Rish. The tiniest, most imperceptible of nods toward the door told Rish exactly what Ivan wanted: Get those kids out of here, yes?

“Okay, that's enough, children,” Rish said, satisfied the children didn't realise who Ivan was, or what a danger he represented to the commune. “I'm finishing your class early today—”

Uproar swept over him. “But I want to hear about the Valentines and the Theocaracy!”

“And the pretty snake women!”

Rish laughed despite the scornful look in Ivan's face. “Tomorrow, tomorrow,” he said as he stood with a groan and a cacophony of complaints from his aged bones. Even at his full height, however, he only stood a shade over four feet tall, and most of the youngsters were taller. He began to shoo them out regardless. “I'll still be here tomorrow, and I'll tell you all about it then.”

Some ran from the room, glad of their freedom, others dragged their feet a little. Fara, one of the last, paused as she reached Ivan, and looked up at him, her sheer black eyes expanded into tiny saucers as she strained her neck and bent her back just to see the massive Russian's face.

“Who are you?” she asked.

Rish stepped up to the girl and placed his hands on her shoulders. He glanced at Ivan. The big Russian's face creased into a mixture of fear and confusion. In all his considerable days Rish had never seen anybody as frightened of children as Ivan—even his nieces, if Rish remembered correctly—and that, he thought, was a crying shame.

“This is...a general who needs his boots repairing,” said a new voice, and Rish looked to see an Oridian girl enter. No, he thought as he appraised her. Not a girl. A woman in a young lady's body. Tall, sleek, and toned, she had hard eyes which softened as she saw Fara. And that chin? He'd recognised that chin anywhere. This had to be one of Alston's daughters. Tatiana, perhaps? Or maybe Katarina?

“Hello, young lady,” the Oridian said as she allowed Rish a quick glance before taking Fara by the hands with apparent care, “what’s your name?”

“Fara.”

“And my name is Tatiana. Now why don’t you run along and leave the general to have his boots repaired.”

The child shrugged. “Okay.”

“Good girl,” Tatiana said as she ushered Fara through the door. “And go straight home.”

Rish gave his head a quick shake and blinked. He’d been staring. The last time he’d seen Tatiana she’d been no older than Fara. To see her now, so mature and...well, fulsome, startled him. Still, he shouldn’t have been surprised. God alone knew how many others he’d seen grow up, grow old...and die.

With Fara gone, Tatiana stood and looked down on Rish. That hard quality returned to her eyes, and Rish peered into them. Hard, yes, but only recently fired. Those were eyes cast with fresh anger and grief.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” Tatiana said.

“This is Rish,” Ivan said as he began to pace and clench his fists. “You won’t remember him.”

“The cobbler,” she said with a withering glare at Ivan. “You visited the palace when I was small. You repaired some of Father’s boots. And told us some really good stories.”

Rish smiled and bowed. “The very same.”

“How do you remember that?” Ivan stopped pacing, his face a mixture of incredulity and surprise.

She nodded at a motif on Ivan’s jacket: one of the Omega Hammers’ old mottos. “Oh, I Remember, Ivan. A lot.”

Rish watched them. Ivan bristled, lip curled and moustache twitching. Tatiana raised an eyebrow. Rish whistled under his breath. The anger between them was palpable.

Uncomfortable, Rish shivered a little as someone waked over his grave. He cleared his throat. “So, Ivan, I’ve been expecting you.”

“You have?”

“Of course I have.” Rish began to walk around the Russian. He looked up into that weathered face and scrutinised it. A hint of redness about puffy eyes. Hair unwashed. Chin unshaven. “I knew you’d come back here as soon as I heard the Long Knives had attacked Oridia. Now you’re on the run you need to get to Gift, and the only way you can do that is through the portal in the Torch. And the only way you can do *that* is if *I* take you there.”

Ivan’s shoulders slumped and his head bowed a little. These dark days clearly weighed heavy, even on him. “So bad news travels fast, yes?”

“Always, Ivan, always.” Rish stopped pacing and looked at Tatiana instead. With her hands on her hips, she watched his every move. He blushed a little. She really was very, *very* beautiful... “So,” he said, clearing his throat and looking back at Ivan. “Where’s everybody else?”

With that Ivan signalled at someone outside, and moments later Princess Katarina, dressed in a stripy jumper that didn’t match her leggings, entered. Stalin crouched at her heels. The

Princess looked relaxed as she leant against the wall, but the twitch in Stalin's eyes and ears betrayed the dog's apprehension. As soon as they were inside, Tatiana closed the door behind them and Ivan crossed to the window. He peered outside.

Only now with the children out of the room did Rish realise that the usual clamour of the community outside had quietened. He jogged to stand beside Ivan and stood on his toes, hands holding the window sill. Barking animals were silenced as their owners dragged them inside, and children were being ushered indoors. From the school window Rish saw a Theocracy noble, brass armour gleaming amongst the squalor, moving slowly along the street, six militia of various races by his side. They scrutinised the hovels about them with scanners and keen eyes.

"I suppose they're looking for you," Rish said as he looked up at the scowling Ivan.

"A bit of coincidence if they are not, yes?" the Russian muttered.

Rish walked away from the window. "Then we need to get you out of here," Rish said as he slowed his breathing and suppressed the knot of fear in his belly. "Now."

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What should have been a short journey out of the Commune and to Rish's home was elongated by a tortuous route encompassing alleys, shelter, and no open spaces. What few streets they'd been forced to cut across had to be inspected carefully to ensure no Theocracy were present, or those they did encounter were looking the wrong way. Now, some two hours later, Ivan and his family were squeezed into the living room of Rish's tiny terraced house.

With one last check out of the window Rish closed the shutters and locked them. He'd already secured the front and back doors. "We should be safe here," he said. "For now..."

He turned back to his living-room. Ivan stood by the front door as he checked the locks yet again. Stalin lay with his chin on his paws and watched his Russian master. The twins moved about the dim coolness of the room. Whilst both inspected the antiquated books on his cluttered bookshelves, the faded photographs on the walls, and the mementos shoved into untidy cabinets, Tatiana took the most interest, Katarina's curiosity being little more than idle.

"Why are we running from these 'Theocracy' guys anyway?" Katarina asked as she sat, perhaps bored, in Rish's threadbare armchair.

"I take it you've pissed them off at some point in your dark and oh-so-mysterious past." Tatiana asked. She didn't even bother to look at Ivan as she spoke. Instead she busied herself scrutinizing the many trinkets on Rish's mantle-piece. She examined his collection of framed sketches with particular interest. Drawings Rish had made of his friends across the ages, they crowded the mantle-piece. She picked up the drawing of Ivan sketched some two decades or so ago. The Russian's hair had been black shot through with grey back then, and he had the goatee beard he'd since abandoned in favour of his current *sans chin* affair. She raised an eyebrow and nodded in appreciation. Rish wondered which impressed her the most: Rish's sketch, or just how handsome her uncle had been. She turned back to Ivan and glared at him. "And why are we even in this city? I know you said we'd come here to find Father, but why *here*? Why *this* city?"

Rish sucked air between his teeth. That tone. Vitriolic. Barbed. Accusatory. No-one spoke to Ivan like that. He looked to the Russian. With his mouth stretched into a thin line, his eyes dark and glaring and his fists clenched, Ivan's struggle for self-control couldn't have been more obvious. Time to change the subject, Rish determined.

“So, where’s everybody else?” he asked. “Matinee? Doll Two? Boyd?”

“They’re dead—aren’t they Ivan?” Tatiana said, and the fury in her eyes made Rish shiver. He’d seen that look before, in her Father’s eyes.

Ivan looked away before saying, “She is right. They are all dead.”

Rish slumped. The Doll could be replaced, of course, but Matinee and Boyd? What a waste. “What about Vast?”

Ivan’s head bowed. “What is left of Vast is with Tap-tap. She is badly hurt.”

“And it’s all your fault, isn’t it?” Tatiana jabbed a finger at Ivan. The Russian looked at her, and the shaking in his body told Rish he wouldn’t be able to control that temper for much longer. “It’s all your fault.” Words every bit as sharp as a Roman gladius, she tossed her head back and glared down her nose. “Boyd dead. Matinee dead. Doll Two gone. The *Troika* destroyed—”

“Um, Tatty? I think you’ve made your—”

“No I haven’t Kat.” Tatiana strode across the room to stand toe-to-toe with Ivan before looking up into his face. Ivan’s lip curled and his fists trembled. Rish put his head into his hands. This wasn’t going to end well. “They’re all dead, and for what?” She jabbed him in the chest with her gloved finger. “So you can keep running?”

Ivan moved so quickly his hand blurred. He grabbed Tatiana by the wrist and squeezed so hard his knuckles turned white and she couldn’t suppress a startled yelp. Rish winced.

As Ivan spoke, he spoke through clenched teeth. “Who do you think you are talking to?”

“That’s the whole point, Ivan!” She wrenched her hand clear and held her clenched fists against her chest as she continued to shout. “I don’t know! *We* don’t know! You’ve dragged us all the way across the Pagentorns to this place, with freaks like Crepitus and the Covens hounding us all the way, and we *still* don’t know *why*!” She stamped her foot, and tears welled in her eyes. “And we don’t know why because we don’t know who you really are, do we?” She took him by the collar and shook him. “We don’t know why these people want to kill you. We don’t know who these Theocracy are, or why we’re hiding in this midget’s front room, or where Father fits into all this, do we?”

Ivan didn’t answer. Instead he seized Tatiana by the throat and bared his teeth. A feral growl escaped his mouth as he and Tatiana stared into each others eyes.

“Uncle! No!” Katarina shouted. She seemed to be frozen, seized with a fear of what Ivan might do next. “Don’t do it!”

Ivan’s eyes filled with tears and he slumped. He released Tatiana and his arms fell to his side as he swayed on the spot, pale and silent. Rish took a step toward him for fear the big man might collapse.

Tatiana cupped her uncle’s face in her hands, and now she began to cry, the fire and anger in her eyes drowned by grief. “And we don’t know because you don’t tell us, because you’ve never—*never*—been able to confide in us. You’ve always been afraid of us, and that...” She gagged a little, voice thin and hoarse. “And that hurts most of all, the thought that we can’t talk to you.”

He bowed his head, and rested his forehead against hers. As her body began to wrack with sobs he wrapped his thick arms about her and looked across the room at Katarina. She too sat in tears.

“She’s right, Uncle,” she said. “I know you love us, but we need more” She stood and crossed the room to stand with Ivan and Tatiana. “We need you to trust us, to tell us what the fuck is going on...and let us help you.”

The three of them held each other and cried together. Rish had to look away, uncomfortable with what should have been such a private moment. He looked down and saw Stalin still lay with his chin on his paws. Stalin looked across the room at Rish with an acuteness and composure rare for the cyborg dog.

Many wouldn’t have been able to read that look, but Rish knew the dog better than most. They both knew Ivan—despite his nieces’ emotive pleas—still wouldn’t tell the twins what they needed to know. He just wasn’t capable.

Stalin nodded an almost imperceptible nod. It was time for Rish to do what he did best: tell tall tales.

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Rish began the story in a tone rich with gravitas. “As ever with the Theocracy, it mattered little whether you felt your liberties were being taken from you. Once they had determined that you were incapable of protecting yourself, they would impose their protection upon you and claimed it as ‘Their Duty’. Such was the case when they came to here to ‘protect’ Promise. They had watched ever since the Beggar Barons came here to flee the oppression of the Blood Laureats of Charon; watched the Laureats send Patina, the Shadow Stealers, Crepitus, and his Calci to bring the Barons back, only for the Barons to pay the likes of Stanztrigger and his Eaters to thwart them. Then, twenty years ago, the Theocracy decided they had seen enough. They decided the Barons couldn’t resist the Laureats forever, and invaded the system.

“Thus the Theocracy swept from their system in their monolithic ships, gargantuan towers of brass and arrogance that carried battleships, drop-fortresses, and orbital stations like swollen, laboured mothers. Fleets of smaller towers came with them bearing mechanised armies, elite units of nobles, regiments of veteran soldiers, and hordes of conscripts and levies.

“The Beggar Barons were not to be intimidated. They had not fled the Laureats’ yoke to trade it for the Theocracy’s. Hasty alliances were forged with surrounding systems, and an allied front presented. Fired by liberty, strengthened by passion, they would not sell their lives cheaply.

“Schiatorella fell in three hours, Delatraz in forty minutes. Protos Alpha held out for two days, and The Wish confounded the Theocracy by fighting on for a whole week, but all for nought. The brass host marched on and left nothing but blood and orphans in its wake.

“Thus the Theocracy moved into position, and the stars over Promise were blotted out as they amassed on the fringes of the system. But the Beggar Barons did not cower. They had their own fleet made from mercenaries like the Plague Rats, the Cartimundi—”

“And the Omega Hammers, right?”

Rish looked at Katarina. Sat in his armchair now, her wide eyes shone in the half-light. Stock still with her arms wrapped about her knees, she couldn’t take her eyes off him. He smiled to himself; he loved a captive audience. “Indeed, yes. The Hammers were the first company the Barons contacted once the Theocracy declared their intentions.”

Tatiana drew the heavy curtains against the dusk, the metal hoops scraping the wooden curtain pole as the thick material blocked out a foreboding horizon of dark purple shot through with veins of vivid red. “Now things are starting to make some sense, at least.”

“Don’t bet on it,” said Stalin in a sullen voice. “I was there, and it still doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I cannot do this.”

Everyone turned to Ivan. Arms crossed, head lowered, he stood in the corner of the room, eyes lost in shadow.

“I cannot listen to this story. It is too painful.” He stopped, and Rish heard a tremor in the Russian’s tone. “I am sorry.”

He walked across the room to his kitbags and bed roll, head still lowered. He paused to wipe his hand across his eyes before he stooped and collected his belongings. When he turned to Rish his eyes were red and sore. They glinted in the half-light. “Where am I to sleep?”

“My room. First floor.” Rish said. A vacuum filled his belly. For all his differences with Ivan it still pained Rish to see him like this. Even after all these years, he thought, the wounds are still fresh, aren’t they, old friend?

Without a word, Ivan walked to the stairs and left the room. A silence lingered over Rish, Stalin and the twins as they watched the Russian leave.

Katarina rose from Rish’s armchair. “I’m going after him.”

“Sit down.”

“Fuck you, Tatiana.”

“There is no need for that kind of language in my house, young lady.” Rish’s tone sharpened. He’d been teaching for too many years to allow such behaviour. “And there is no need to follow your uncle.”

She blinked, and her mouth fell open. “But he’s—”

“Sixty years old, and he knows his own mind.”

Rish and Katarina stared at one another. The Oridian’s face went from angry to bewildered, and finally to chastised as her head slumped and she averted her eyes before mumbling, “Sorry.”

She sat down in the armchair and drew her legs up to chest to hug them.

Tatiana spared Katarina a withering glance before she asked, “So, who was in the ‘Omega Hammers’ anyway? Ivan mentioned something about a sister?”

“That’s right. Vassilissa. Your father’s twin, and just as distinguished a soldier. Ahh... Vassilissa...” His eyes lost focus as he recalled all six plus foot of her. “Now *she* was a handsome woman. Never have I seen such lovely—”

“Er, hello, Rish?” Katarina said as she put her hands over her ears. “That’s a little creepy. Family members here!”

He blushed, and cleared his throat. “I do apologise. What was I thinking?”

“Perhaps you were thinking of telling us what happened once the Theocracy invaded Promise.” Tatiana said as, head bowed, she looked at Rish through her eyebrows.

“Of course, of course...” He took a deep breath. “The battle encompassed every aspect of galactic warfare, with actions as diverse as fighting in the hills of Shadow and urban warfare in the city of Ferroc Tar, to battles between mammoth fleets at Los Endos and The Knife. From the butchery of animals like Yevgeny and Crimea to the mercy of the Lamia, and from

the cowardice of the Fractal Legion to the heroism of Tusk, it captured every facet of the soldiers' psyche. Victories were gained by inches and lost in seconds. Friends were lost...lost in the blink of an eye..."

Now Rish's eyes stung and he had to look away for a moment. These were not just stories; they were painful memories. Still, he thought with a sardonic smile, the show must go on.

"In the end it all came to nothing. In the end the Theocracy lay in orbit of Promise and on the verge of victory. Bloodied, yes, but on the verge of victory none-the-less. The Barons sued for peace. The Theocracy refused. Then the Barons begged for mercy. Again the Theocracy refused: the Barons had sought to set an example, to show that the Theocracy could be defeated, that their Duty was little more than an Imperialist agenda they'd soon abandon when faced with a resolute and well equipped opposition. Instead, the Barons would serve as an example of what would happen to those who resisted the Theocracy.

"So they ignored the Baron's pleas, and launched their final assault..."

Part Two

Invasion

With walls crammed, haphazard, with monitors and terminals; floor lost beneath a blanket of cables and wiring and air stale with sweat and whisky, Ivan's operations centre reflected the chaos and desperation into which the campaign had slid. The heat from so many computer processors made that same air thick and oppressive, and the room pulsed with the muted rhythm of artillery fire that—even this deep inside the Torch—could be heard as the battle for Promise raged outside.

Ivan stood at the heart of the room flanked by his lieutenant, Judd, and one of the Beggar Barons who had hired the Valentines and the rest of the mercenary army. In silence they watched as report after report issued from a holograph projector. Ethereal and green, the myriad of projections were backed by a chorus of gunfire, explosions and panicked shouting as they told their stories. Ivan stroked his chin, harangued by the worsening news.

"This is Elferink. We have Ildred landing on the waterfront. We'll try and hold them off, but we need more men here!"

"We can't take any more wounded. We're out of beds and space on the floor, never mind drugs."

"We're under fire! We're under fi—"

"Long range scans are back online. I...shit...I think the 'Cracys have more ships on the way..."

"We've lost Pavlo and the dogs!"

His shoulders slumped and his head bowed. The dogs? That meant Stalin, Laika and the rest were gone. Ivan snarled and spat on the floor. What had that idiot 'droid Pavlo been thinking?

He turned to Judd. Even in this heat, even after sixty hours without sleep, the man looked pristine and clean. Ivan grimaced at him. "This is not going well, yes?"

Judd ceased smoothing his immaculate pencil moustache with forefinger and thumb, and he drew a gleaming bowie knife from a sheath at his belt. Holding the blade before his face, he raised an eyebrow at his reflection in approval. "Still," he said with a sardonic smile, "at least it can't get any worse, old man."

A further projection shimmered into life—a tall, raven-haired and flat-chested woman with milk white skin that contrasted with the polished gleam of her long black cyborg legs, black hot-pants and body armour. Black Gladys, Ivan thought. Thank God. Someone I can rely on. "Gladys," he said. "How are—"

"The Theocracy have offered me more money, Ivan," she said. "I'll give you an hour to get away, then you're fair game." She pushed the fringe of her bobbed black hair back from her forehead and fastened it in place with a black butterfly clip. "I'm sorry, Ivan, but money talks, and I've got to think of my men."

Ivan's lip curled, and he ground his teeth. Damn it, he thought. Gladys and her Plague Rats' preternatural powers of teleportation made them one of the best companies left. They could strike anywhere, and at anytime. No wonder the Theocracy had made them a good offer—an offer Ivan had no chance of bearing. To lose them was bad enough, but to have to *fight* them...?

"An hour? We'll be lucky to last that long," said the Baron, voice shrill and querulous.

Ivan eyed the man. One of the youngest of the Barons, he could barely have been eighteen. Typically effete and pretty, his dark eyes glittered with the same reflected green light that also made his pale skin look ghoulish and sick. He smelt of liberally applied colognes and bath salts. His hands fidgeted across the lap of his dark red robes as he asked, "How long until your Kithaen creates that portal?"

"An hour," Judd said.

The Baron almost choked. "That's outrageous! How can it take an hour?"

Ivan jabbed the petite man in the chest with his forefinger. The startled youngster staggered back. "She is navigating the Echo. Do you have any idea of energies involved? One mistake and there will be no city left to defend, yes?"

The Baron blanched and looked away as he trembled beneath Ivan's glare. Ivan snorted and turned away. To think his men were dying for these shits...

"Ivan!" Judd shouted. "Look!"

An image of Vassilissa had stuttered into life and continued to stammer even as Vassilissa spoke. Bloodied and bent, the muscles in her jaw spasmed. Her blonde hair had become red and spiked with blood that leaked from beneath her hairline and down her face. Ivan's own blood ran cold at the sight of her. "Ivan? Judd?" Her voice was taut and thin. She swallowed, wincing, before continuing. "We've crashed and Gregor's hurt." She stopped, gasping for breath.

Crashed. Vassilissa and Gregor were on the *Siberian Winter* providing air-cover for the Cartimundi. For the *Winter* to be shot down jarred Ivan: if there had been any doubt as to how hard it would be to defend Promise...

"We need help here. I've stabilised Gregor, but he's bad. We need Skullion."

"It's okay, 'Lissa, just hold on." Typical, Ivan thought. Always saving little brother's hide. "I'm on my way."

He turned, ready to sprint from the room, only to be arrested by a hand on his shoulder. Judd. Even through Ivan's body armour, the strength of the man's grip surprised him. He looked into the Englishman's face—mouth in a thin line, oscillating eyes wide and wet, he looked nervous and... Ivan's brow furrowed. Did he look... dejected? Ivan knew the loss of so many of their men was torture for both of them, and he also had his suspicions about the precise nature of Englishman's relationship with Vassilissa, but he'd never seen Judd look so forlorn. "What?" Ivan asked. "What is wrong?"

"Just..." Judd looked away and let go of Ivan's shoulder. "Just be careful."

"I will. And Judd?" He squeezed the Englishman's arm as they looked at one another. "Lissa will be fine, I will see to that."

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The *Troika* bucked as it forged its way through the night sky over Promise. Scant minutes since it burst from one of The Torch's courtyards, and already the corvette shrugged off Theocracy fire. Small arms, rockets, and tracer fire streamed from the streets below. Maser beams from pursuing Scythes lanced across the sky, and missiles from warships off the coast tore through the night. But the *Troika* sped on, resolute. The masers were swallowed by the corvette's ECG field which flexed and swam with kaleidoscopic colour. The missiles exploded in vivid red roses, targeted and shot down by the chain-guns of robotic *Voyska* flight-pods that escorted the little ship. The bullets and rockets bounced off the *Troika*'s armoured hull without effect, doing little more than decorating its hide with sparks and pretty flourishes of transient flame.

Undaunted by this relentless assault, the *Troika*'s own turrets and pods responded with a calamitous symphony of cannon fire and missiles. This chorus of destruction swatted Scythes from the sky, raked Theocracy infantry below and battered the warships out to sea. The sky pulsed with explosion and fire, and the city bathed in wreckage and blood.

Below, the docks and the shanty town shorelines were swallowed by waves of Theocracy marines as they spilled from the maws of landing craft, and as hunched, amphibious Ildred waded out of the water and into battle. Elite shock-troops from deep with the Theocracy, they were armoured, hump-backed and hammer-headed aliens that would not stop until they'd reached the Tower or were destroyed. Bunkers and pillar boxes spat fire at them, mowing them down in their droves. Still they came.

Further inland, Theocracy levies swarmed through the streets, the brass hulks of bipedal *Gor Lak* walkers amongst them. These ape-like monsters lumbered forward on their knuckles, the pods of their shoulders blazing stream upon stream of precision fire. Led by nobles in gleaming armour, they pushed for the Torch, only to be held by the machine gun nests, snipers, mines, and barricades of Ivan's mercenary coalition.

At the centre of Promise the Torch stood proud, the fire beacon built into its tower still blazing against the midnight blue of the night. Duelling fighters spun a loose weave of rockets, missiles, and tracer fire about it, and Scythes spat at one another with ballistic vitriol that glowed in the darkness.

And yet, for all this chaos, for all this hellfire and wrath, Promise itself had suffered little damage, the invading force seeming to treat it with an almost palpable respect. They had come, after all, to protect the city, not ravage it. This was not a brutal, wholesale demolition with no thought for life or collateral damage: this was a surgical operation designed to remove a cancer and aid the patient.

Low to the roofs of tenements and terraces below, the *Troika* zeroed in on the vanquished *Siberian Winter*. The blue and white craft lay in a crater of decimated houses, obliterated by its crash landing. Ivan's ship moved into position to the side of the stricken vessel and, hovering, lowered its landing gear. More fire raked her armour. Hunched Theocracy levies, lead by strident brass nobles and backed by the towering fire-power of more *Gor Lak*, surged from the surrounding streets. They fired without pause and charged without hesitation, the *Troika* swamped by a tidal wave of deflected bullets and red-hot shrapnel.

#

"Damn it all!" Ivan said as he wrestled with the *Troika* flexing yoke. "They knew where we would be... *again!*"

"Worry about that later, Ivan," said Thom Skullion. Sat at the corvette's scanning station, his faded black t-shirt sported a thick patch of sweat down its spine and under the arms. His brow glistened, his lustrous dark hair plastered to his head. "Looks like there's half the goddam Theocracy out there!"

Ivan grunted. "Dolly?"

"Deploying anti-personnel measures now, Master Ivan," said the android serf as it sat at weapons control. Flashing readouts and data from the screens were reflected in its blank façade as it tapped at the controls beneath slim metal fingers.

A subtle vibration in his seat told Ivan the turrets had spoken, and he looked to a screen above him. Sure enough tiny contacts on the scanner were blinking out at an astonishing rate. Even the bigger ones—the *Gor Lak* suits no doubt—winked out with impunity. He smiled a dark smile. There would be no easy pickings here.

The *Troika* shook as it touched down. Ivan took a moment to offer a silent prayer to God, and then he rose from the pilot station and strode toward the door. He drew his silver revolver and popped the chamber to check it was full. "You come with me, Thom," he said whilst he holstered the revolver. He drew his automatic and clicked the safety off.

"Fantastic," Skullion muttered as he stood and grabbed his distinctive skull-decorated jacket from the back of his chair. "Grade fuckin' A."

Ivan ignored him. He wouldn't need be here at all if he had a dollar for every time Skullion griped and belly-ached. "Keep her hot, Dolly. We will need to leave quickly, yes?"

#

The ramp barely touched the rubble before Ivan sprinted from it, a unit of Omega Hammers beside him. With the relentless fire of the *Troika*'s chain-guns slicing over their heads, they engaged the faltering Theocracy, their SMGs, rifles, man-portable masers, and grenades dissecting the levies with an exacting precision. Scythes—the mark of Ivan's ally Mottersmead proud on their noses—moved into position above the *Troika* and fired on the Theocracy.

"To the *Winter!*" Ivan bellowed over the thunder of gunfire and the screams of the wounded. Crouched, he, Thom and a third of the unit scurried toward the broken *Siberian Winter*. Barely a quarter of the way, however, they suffered a withering hail of return fire as the Theocracy rallied. With men falling about him, Ivan could do little but dive for cover amongst the smashed walls and masonry of the decimated houses. His men followed suit, and they crawled toward the downed ship on their bellies, the rubble and brick beneath biting at them.

"Once," said Skullion, his voice breathless, "just once, I'd like to go on a normal date, Ivan."

“If we get out of this,” Ivan said, his mouth full of dust, “we retire and live boring life on beach somewhere.”

“Careful, lover.” Skullion’s tone bore needles and knives. “That’d mean telling Gregor ‘bout us...”

Ivan had no chance to reply. An ill-coordinated howling and the rapid crunch of rubble under boots warned Ivan of approaching danger. He pushed Skullion aside as a small knot of levies charged at them. Some brandished machetes and knives, others began to fire small arms. With bullets stabbing into the smashed wall behind him and the broken bricks beneath, Ivan fired both handguns simultaneously, and his assailants fell in a cloud of spilled blood and splintered bone.

Ivan looked about him. Mottersmead’s Scythes were being shot out of the sky to crash about them in showers of burning wreckage. Ivan’s men were already overwhelmed and engaged in hand-to-hand fighting. The indistinct shapes of yet more Theocracy were moving into view through the smoke. He grimaced. He’d recognise those silhouettes anywhere: Ildred.

“We need to get out of here, Ivan.” Skullion grabbed him by the arm and hauled him toward the *Winter*. “If the Ildred are here, they must have gone through Elfefrink.”

“I know, Thom,” Ivan said as he turned and sprinted for his brother’s ship. “I know.”

Damn it! he thought. Elfefrink had been a good man. Too good to waste on a lost cause like this. Ivan looked about him. More and more of his men fell beneath the sheer weight of numbers, smothered by levies, slashed by nobles and crushed by walkers. From tiny, rat-like Herbies to lumbering, Graven golems, and from the precision and grace of Venleigion skirmishers to the panicked blur of Jeshan slaves, the Theocracy war-machine crashed about Ivan’s men. Well-drilled and experienced, the Hammers held their own, but their dwindling numbers were being divided into desperate knots and forced back toward the *Troika*. Amongst them Ivan caught a glimpse of the Vermiddion child—Vast—in the thick of it all, punching and kicking without fear or pause.

He tapped at his comm. If the Theocracy had forged on this far already, they’d reach The Torch before Kithaen could hope to finish her portal. They needed to get the civilians out another way. “Judd?” he shouted into his mic, struggling to be heard against the furore around him. “Judd? Do you copy, over?”

#

Judd knelt over the twitching Baron. Face down, the effete youngster’s neck spat blood in lines across the floor of the operations centre.

“I’m here, old man.” He wiped his bowie knife clean on the Baron’s robe as he spoke. “Go ahead.”

“We cannot hold back Theocracy much longer.” Ivan’s voice sounded strained and thin. “Get down to crypt and get civilians out of Torch. Meet what is left of Aurochs at rendezvous point, and they’ll get civilians off-world.”

Judd sheathed his knife as he stood. “Wilco, Ivan.”

“And Judd? Make sure Barons are kept safe. They may be shits but they are still paying, yes.”

Judd looked down at the Baron on the floor. He’d stopped twitching and what little colour he’d possessed had already drained from his cheeks. “Don’t worry, Ivan,” Judd said with a sigh, his head bowed, “the Barons will be well taken care of...”

#

Back at the *Winter*, Ivan reloaded his revolver. A group of levies attempted to rush him and Skullion, only to be cut down in a torrent of bullets from the *Voyska* hovering over the *Troika*.

“We need access *now*, Dolly!” Ivan shouted over his comm.

“Copy that, Master Ivan.” As Doll Two’s voice crackled over his earpiece, the airlock hissed and its iris valve door began to dilate.

“Bless you, Dolly!” Skullion said as moved toward the door, only for Ivan to stop him with a hand on his chest.

“Wait!”

“There’s no time, Ivan!” Another ribbon of sparks and ricocheted bullets across the hull to their left underlined Skullion’s point. “We need to get—”

Ivan shook his head. “We need to wait. Something is wrong here.” He looked at the buildings about the crash-site. Something didn’t look right... He tapped at his comm. “Have you performed scan, Dolly?” he asked as he turned to fire at a gaggle of charging Jeshans, their green skin bright with sweat and tiny eyes wide with adrenalin.

“Indeed, Master Ivan, and I see no sign of external damage sufficient to cause the *Siberian Winter*’s crash.”

Ivan grunted. Just as he suspected. There was something about this whole thing that stank. “Go on.”

“Diagnostics suggest that the *Siberian Winter*’s Newton system has been sabotaged, causing the vessel to fall to the ground.”

Ivan snarled. That’s what was wrong. None of the surrounding buildings had been knocked down in a way consistent with a ship of the *Winter*’s size coming down at an oblique angle. It had clearly plummeted from the sky.

“Wh—” Skullion ducked as more bullets flashed over their heads and into the *Winter*’s bow. Ivan sank to one knee and killed the attacking Theocracy soldier with two shots. “What do you mean? Someone on *board* brought the *Winter* down?”

Ivan’s shoulders sank a little. He wanted to reply, but the words tore his throat. A void opened in his belly. To think someone in the Hammers would betray them to the Theocracy. “Just...” He looked into Skullion’s eyes and took a moment to stroke his face. The greasy prickle of his stubble scratched at his palm. “Just be careful.”

#

Judd’s stride slackened a little as he walked toward one of The Torch’s many banqueting halls, and a bilious taste welled from his throat and into his mouth. With his hand over his chest, he could feel the crucifix under his khaki shirt and tie, but it offered little solace. He gritted his teeth. Just remember why you are here, he kept telling himself. Remember why the *Theocracy* are here.

With a deep breath he pushed open a heavy wooden door and entered the darkened hall. Ornate, with a high and vaulted ceiling, tapestries lined the walls and torches burned in tall and golden stands. The windows were sealed and the thick air stank of sweat and flatulence. Stuffed with civilians, the hall bubbled with fearful chatter and murmured prayers.

Judd looked at the menagerie of aliens and refugees around him. Families sat together in tight knots. Couples, young and old, clung to one another. Soldiers from the Baron’s poorly

equipped militia gathered in pairs. Lone Barons, thin and pale, moved through the throng offering shallow reassurances. Judd's conscience pricked him, and he had to look away. No, he told himself. Don't be a fool. There's no need to feel guilt or shame, You're doing this for them. Just remember that...

He looked up, only to see a smattering of Omega Hammers and their sergeant, Maxim, stood at regular intervals about the walls nursing their SMGs just as he nursed his guilt. Frightened children cried and petrified parents tried to calm them. Frail grandparents and elders maintained a stoic silence whilst their sons railed at the dulled noise of the battle beyond the shutters, shaking their fists and vowing a terrible and unlikely vengeance.

The door slammed shut behind Judd with a boom and the throng of aliens and soldiers turned to him. Their voices trailed off one by one until only silence remained. Judd cleared his throat and flinched as the small sound echoed about the vast space. It's all right, old boy, he told himself. Everything's going to be just fine. You'll see.

"If I may have your attention." He stretched his neck and straightened his tie. "The battle is over."

The continued rumble of warfare beyond the shuttered windows belied Judd's statement. Then a tumult of questions and angry shouts filled the air whilst the Barons and their people demanded answers. His gaze travelled over them, and their eyes bore into him. At their centre that weird midget cobbler—Rish, was it?—sat surrounded by orphans. A friend of Ivan's, he'd apparently turned up on Promise years ago to 'mend shoes', and had never left. He glared at Judd, his brow knitting before shaking his head in disapproval as though reading Judd's mind.

Judd raised his voice to shout. "The battle is over, and the Theocracy have won. They offer mercy and zero civilian casualties in exchange for the Barons' lives—"

An even greater roar, and the Barons rushed forward, some angry, some scared, and some confused. Amongst them the Omega Hammers demanded to know what was happening, and who had ratified this surrender. They surrounded Judd, pushing and jostling him.

Gunfire bludgeoned the air, and screams rang out as the Barons and civilians dove to the ground. The Plague Rats stood amongst them, appearing from out of nowhere in their own impossible way. Like the Barons, they were thin and pale, faces sallow and cheek bones high, but they wore the skins of giant rats over their heads and black body armour. Smoke spiralled from the barrels of their guns as they trained them on the civilians, the Barons, their militia, and the Omega Hammers.

"Drop the guns." Black Gladys now stood by Judd's shoulder. Startled, he jumped. He'd fought beside Gladys and her Rats for years, and knew all about their weird teleporting powers but still couldn't get used to it.

A clatter as the militia dropped their weapons immediately. If any fight still lived in the Barons' people, it didn't live in their militia.

"*And you,*" Black Gladys told the Hammers with a thick vein of impatience.

The Hammers, weapons aimed at the Rats, glanced at each other.

"What's going on, Judd?" asked Maxim. A lean man decorated with the scars of continued service, he looked like he fed on nothing but gunpowder and pack-drill.

“Black Gladys and I have accepted the Theocracy’s terms of surrender to ensure no further bloodshed. They don’t want to see any more soldiers or civilians killed because of the Beggar Barons, and neither do we.”

Maxim laughed a sardonic laugh. “Okay, but has anybody told the *Oprinichki*?”

Judd paused. Ivan’s elite cadre of wardroids, the *Oprinichki* were currently in the bowels of The Torch and charged with defending Kithaen until she had completed her portal. They’d only stand down when ordered to by Ivan himself. He swallowed. “They’ve already been destroyed.”

The lie deflated Maxim and his men visibly, and they lowered their shoulders and guns. Then those guns fell to the floor as the soldiers placed their hands on their head.

The last to drop his SMG, Maxim looked at Judd with a sneer of disapproval. “What about Ivan? Has anybody told him the war’s over?”

Now Judd and Black Gladys looked at one another. Judd tried to answer. “We...um...”

“Don’t worry about Ivan,” Black Gladys said, a delicate smile on her ruby lips. “He’s all taken care of...”

#

“Transponders indicate Master Gregor and Mistress Vassilissa are indeed still on the flight deck, Master Ivan.”

“Copy that, Dolly. Ivan out.” He turned to Skullion. “You are ready?”

The American looked at him from the other side of the door to the Winter’s flight-deck. “The hell I am, Ivan. But I guess we’re goin’ in anyways, right?”

Ivan smiled a thin smile and thumbed the hammer back on his revolver.

“I thought so,” Skullion said.

They’d entered the *Winter* unopposed and their swift search had met with a similar lack of resistance. All they found were the unconscious crew of the corvette lining its corridors and battle-stations. None of them bore a single sign of struggle, but a cursory inspection from Skullion lead the American to declare they’d been drugged and left here—along with Gregor and Vassilissa—as bait. Now Ivan prepared for the final *denouement*.

He nodded to Skullion, who punched at the door’s controls. It opened with a hiss, and Ivan sprang through, revolver raised.

The flight-deck sat in darkness, its canopy sealed by its armoured shutter. The lights of its instrumentation were dim and slow, and Ivan caught a glimpse of the Newton system’s diagnostic. It beeped and flashed ‘*ERROR ERROR ERROR*’ over and over. Smoke slithered about the room, picked out by what little light the idle systems offered.

“Gregor? Vassilissa?”

There was no reply, and, with revolver still raised, Ivan crept forward with slow, deliberate paces. After only a few steps he finally made out his brother. Slumped in the pilot’s chair, motionless, his chin rested on his chest and darkness smothered his features. But it was him alright, from the Omega Hammers’ motif on his jacket, driving gloves, the excessive Gol Jaquan pistol strapped to his hip, and the tacky cowboy boots, it was him.

Ivan scanned left and right before he saw Vassilissa prone on the floor. Face down and unconscious, her breath made a patch of steam on the cold deck against her cheek. The hairs

on Ivan's neck rose, and he pushed his revolver into his belt and cracked his knuckles, happier to overcome any prospective ambush with his bare hands.

His nostrils twitched. A sickly sweet smell possessed the air: a smell almost unique to Back Gladys's Plague Rats... A groan and the thud of a body hitting the deck made Ivan spin to see unconscious Skullion on the deck with his limbs at odd angles. A blur of movement on the periphery of Ivan's vision made him turn again, and he had the briefest moment to see a black shape lurching for him—a black shape topped with the distinctive skinned head and pelt of a monstrous rodent. It came at Ivan as it wielded an inverted SMG like a club.

With a roar of anger, Ivan felled the Plague Rat with a left hook. More movement in the corner of his eye made him turn in time to see a further two Rats springing toward him. Eyes wide, teeth bared, he seized them by their throats and lifted them from their feet before smashing their heads together.

“Gladys!” A shower of bone, blood, and brain matter covered his face and chest whilst he ranted. “You promised me an hour! Traitorous witch! I will destroy you!” She wasn't here, but it didn't matter. He knew her comm link would be open. He knew that she could hear him. “Do you hear me? *Do you?*”

A tide of Rats appeared from thin air and fell upon him. He punched. He kicked. He bit, but they clung on. Behind them more appeared out of the darkness.

“Come! Come for me!” He butted the nearest Rat, and it squealed as its face collapsed. “See what I have for you! See—” Then came the scratch of a needle in his neck. His vision deserted him and he lost the feeling in his limbs. He tried to rally but darkness seized his vision. More blows rained upon his head and shoulders, and he fell to the deck under the sheer weight of assailants. “I will hunt you! I will find you all! I swear—”

A boot to his face and the crack of his skull against the deck sealed his fate. Time slowed and he slid into a black void as his senses left him.

“Gladys?” The thin and nasal voice of one of the Rats slid into Ivan's ears from far away “We have them. I repeat: we have Ivan and Skullion. You can tell the Theocracy that's it. Tell them it's over.” A pause. “Tell them they've won.”

Part Three

Blade in the Back

The morning after Promise surrendered, rain fell and smoke rose from the city. The sun ascended over the waves beyond the harbour, and its light glinted on the brass hulls of the Theocracy landing craft that glided from the clouds and into position over the city. A threat of violence, they hovered over Promise, their bellies parting to disgorge wave upon wave of flying soldiers. The denizens of the city looked to the heavens for some sign—*any* sign—that their gods had not deserted them.

“Citizens of Promise, do not be alarmed,” bellowed mighty speakers in the landing craft. “Your leaders have accepted our magnanimous terms of surrender, and are to be executed for their obstinate and foolish resistance in the face of our philanthropy. Their mercenary allies will either devote their lives freely in our Locust Fleets, or die.

“Henceforth you—on the behest of His Dutiful Majesty the Imperial Theocrat—are under the protection of his most beloved envoy The Now. You will return to your homes and await processing.

“That is all. You may now rejoice.”

#

The walls of The Torch shook when the speakers boomed. Judd wiped dust from his shoulders.

“Well,” he said as he removed his beret to brush it, “that’s fairly unambiguous. A lifetime of unremitting, back and soul breaking warfare subjugating planets for their resources; or a lifetime of unremitting, back and soul breaking servitude raping them once the soldiers have left. Wizard.” He replaced his beret. “Perhaps there’s a good pension plan?”

“Don’t be such a drama queen, Judd,” said Black Gladys. She pursed her lips and watched the monitors.

Ivan’s operations centre was all but deserted now the mercenary coalition had surrendered and the Theocracy had begun running the operation from orbit. Now only Judd, Black Gladys and handful of her Plague Rats studied monitors which betrayed the rampant spread of Theocracy forces as they moved into position across the entire city. Street by street, district by district, this army of soldiers and administrators moved into position and stood ready to absorb—and lose—Promise’s civilians in the wheels of bureaucracy. Presently those civilians who had sheltered in The Torch—including Ivan’s friend Rish—were shown in the myriad of monitors as leaving the tower in long, slow lines. Gradually they were directed to their homes by the Theocracy vanguard lining the streets. Meanwhile, the mercenaries who had laid down their arms were shown as being marshalled into the Torch. Those who refused to surrender were exterminated by Theocracy soldiers.

Dust, the chatter of Theocracy communications, and a sickly sweet smell of the Plague Rats choked the air in the operations centre. Judd, his stomach turning with nerves and that strange odour, dabbed at his pencil moustache with a kerchief. His nostrils flared. As ever he’d sprinkled a few drops of Vassilissa’s perfume on the material before the battle had begun, and now the scent lingered on his top lip.

‘Lissa. His eyes lost their focus for a moment. He needed to see her. He needed to know she was okay. His hand slipped beneath his tie to feel the shape of his clone brother’s crucifix under his shirt. Please, God, he thought, let her be okay...

“Will you concentrate?” As ever both Black Gladys’s eyes and tone pierced him as she gestured at a large contact on her monitor: a ship descended from orbit and hovered over the city. “Whatever’s on your mind, we’ve better things to worry about. Here comes the boss.”

On cue, the hologram projector in the centre of the room activated, and the image of The Now burst into lurid green life. A human male no taller than a child, he stood with hands on armoured hips. Medals and braids festooned his armour, and tiny ribbons fluttered on the tips of his forked beard. A Mohican reared from a head lost to brass plates bolted to his skull, and sheer white eyes peered out from a face dominated by scars.

“How now,” the projection said, hand raised in salutation.

“Good morn—”

“Is everything ready for my landing?” The Now said without waiting for Judd to finish.

“Well...erm...” Judd didn’t quite know how to break the news without getting killed. In all the worlds The Now had conquered he’d shown little in the way of mercy for his foes or patience with his subordinates. Even a seasoned soldier like Judd shivered when he recalled the images of slaughter and mass execution from The Now’s victory at Los Endos.

“Everything’s ready,” Black Gladys said. She spared Judd a withering glare. “The Barons are ready for execution, and the Omega Hammers and their mercenary allies have surrendered and await your judgment.”

Judd looked at Gladys, and his mouth fell open. To lie to The Now was a dangerous game.

Perhaps he read some deception in her face or tone, but The Now studied Gladys a moment before continuing. “*All* the Omega Hammers have surrendered? Even the *Oprinichki*?”

She glanced at Judd before she answered. This was the question they’d been afraid of. “No. The *Oprinichki* are still holding out in the bowels of The Torch. They’re protecting Gregor’s pet witch, Kithaen.”

His face darkened. “That is not good news, Black Gladys. The witch is dangerous.”

“We’re doing all we can.” Her tone had shortened, and Judd looked at her with some alarm. Gladys may have been known for her guts, but speaking to The Now like that was just stupid. “We’ve already sent in three squads of your soldiers, two squads of my Plague Rats, *and* a unit of paid Cartimundi. They were decimated.”

“You have Ivan Valentine?”

“Yes.”

“Then make him order the *Oprinichki* to stand down, and then execute the Omega Hammers.”

“What?” Judd stepped forward. “All of them?”

“All of them, including Gregor, Ivan, and Vassilissa. They have showed the most vociferous resistance, and must be seen to pay the price.”

“That’s not what we agreed! You said—”

“That is all.” The projection vanished.

Judd’s body trembled, his mouth ran dry. That was not what they’d agreed! The Now had said the Hammers would be spared!

“Snap out of it, you cretin,” Gladys said as she walked by and toward the exit. “If you believed the Theocracy were going to let your friends live then you’re even dumber than I thought.” She clicked her fingers and patted the metal of her gloss black cyborg thigh as though bidding a dog. “Now hurry up. We’ve got work to do.”

#

With the air over Promise filled by The Now’s mothership, static cruisers, hurried personnel carriers, and lumbering gunboats, the *Troika* was forced to fly low over the rooftops as she neared the Torch. Sometimes her belly smashed the taller chimneys below, and sometimes stones pinged off her as children and their fathers flung their impotent anger at the vessel.

The little craft approached the Torch. The tower’s fire still blazed in defiance, but it looked tiny and forlorn against a sky filled with the brass and purple of its new masters. At the foot of the building lay a series of expansive courtyards nestled against it like cobbled petals of a gothic flower.

These courtyards were filled with Theocracy levies and their noble masters surrounding captured mercenaries. From Omega Hammers and the feline Felidae, the man-mountain Mottersmead and his giant Aurochs, to the elegant grace of Cartimandua and her slender *femme fatales*, the whole of the Barons' mercenary host knelt here with their hands on their heads, awaiting their fate.

The *Troika* settled over one of the courtyards and descended into the walled space. Theocracy soldiers waited below, weapons at the ready. Judd and Black Gladys stood at their head, flanked by a clutch of Plague Rats in their rat skins. Gladys remained still and impassive, whilst Judd—sheltered under an umbrella—couldn't bring himself to watch the *Troika* land. A hiss from the ship's hydraulics and he jumped, his wide eyes shining as he looked up into the corvette's main hangar once its ramp deployed and lowered into place on the cobbled floor.

A sorry procession emerged from the hangar, down the ramp, and into the rain: the crew, hands on their heads and bodies stripped of weapons and armour. Doll Two and Skullion led the way, the American pushing a suspensor stretcher on which lay Gregor Valentine. Covered in a blanket and with his face hidden in the crook of his arm, the mercenary leader lay still. As Skullion pushed him past Judd and into the waiting throng of Theocracy soldiers Judd swallowed a swell of bile. Oh Lord, he thought as he looked at the comrades he'd betrayed, what have I done...?

"What the fuck is this about, Judd?" Skullion asked as he passed by. "Have you switched sides? You been selling secrets? Is that why the Theocracy have been one step ahead of us since Shadow?"

Judd tried to speak but his voice deserted him as he opened his mouth. He'd prepared for this moment, mentally scripted eloquent and moving passages to explain his actions and their motives, but they deserted him in an instant.

"Move along, human." An orange skinned Theocracy soldier shoved Skullion in the back and almost knocked him off his feet.

A roar sprang from the Hammers as they turned on their alien captors, fists clenched and teeth bared as they hurled goads and abuse. A squad of Theocracy surged toward them, hands and weapons outstretched. Within it all, Skullion tensed and stood his ground, his fists clenched.

"That's enough." Vassilissa's voice, thin and strained, cut through the tumult. "Anybody gets unruly and I'll crack their skulls."

All heads turned to look up at Vassilissa, and Judd's heart leapt at the sight of her. She stood at the top of the *Troika*'s ramp, held at gunpoint by Theocracy soldiers. Imperious and erect in her greatcoat and *ushanka*, blood plastered her face and hair. With square jaw set straight and unwavering steel-grey eyes, however, she appeared the picture of calm and authority. Only the bags under her eyes and the slightest twitch in the corners of her mouth betrayed her pain and fatigue. "Hammers, show some decorum," she said, gaze fixed on her men. "Move along and wait to be processed. Everything will be fine." She managed a weak smile. "I promise."

With grumbles, insults, and dragged feet, the Hammers complied as Vassilissa walked down the ramp; and with his stomach cramped, his throat contracted, Judd watched her. One part of him rejoiced at the fact she looked okay, yet the other dreaded what she would say and the first sight of the betrayal in her eyes.

The two guards shadowed her, weapons trained on her and trigger fingers twitching. She joined the rest of the Hammers as they shuffled past Judd and Black Gladys. Almost all spared the wretched looking Englishman a glare, a profanity, or a mouth full of spittle except Vassilissa. She only looked away and ignored his imploring eyes as she was led past by her guards.

As the Hammers were led to the periphery of the courtyard by more Theocracy soldiers, Judd's head and shoulders slumped. This, he told himself, had gone far enough. To see Gregor and Skullion taken away was one thing, but Vassilissa? That was too much. Eyes closed, fingers tight about his umbrella, he ground his teeth before looking up and shouting, "Stop!"

All attention turned to Judd. He gestured at Vassilissa and Doll Two. "Not the General, nor the serf. They come with me."

A noble stepped toward him. "But The Now ordered—"

"That all the Hammers were to be processed?" Judd said with a glare at the Theocracy noble. "I don't care what The Now says. The General is my woman, and the android makes a good martini. I want them." He spared the noble a patronising smile. "For my trouble."

The noble paused. A Karscalian, his ashen skin covered with his race's distinctive black nodules, he looked down his nose at Judd and his lips twitched. "Very well." He signalled to his men. "They stay."

The soldiers shrugged and allowed Vassilissa and Doll Two to walk free. The pair approached Judd across the courtyard, the Russian woman sparing him little more than a dismissive glance.

"Sir, I really don't—"

"—Need to say anything, Dolly," Judd said. "So shut up."

"Very good, Major Judd."

The android stood beside him. Vassilissa, however, remained out of reach, and turned away as she folded her arms across her chest.

The trio watched the Hammers being led away. Skullion gave Judd one last glance loaded with accusation and knives, whilst the Hammers jibed and insulted the Theocracy before leaving via the courtyard's arched doors. Gregor was the last to go, and Judd bit his lip and closed his eyes to the sight of the Russian's stretcher being pushed away by a Theocracy medic.

Once the Hammers were gone, Judd took Vassilissa by the arm. "'Lissa...I'm sorry."

She seized his hand and squeezed hard as she removed it from her arm. He winced. By God, she was strong. "Don't talk to me, Judd." Her voice was husky, the words contorted by gritted teeth. Finally she looked at him and tears cleared a path through the blood on her cheeks. "Just...don't."

"We don't have time for this, Judd." Black Gladys said. "Where's Ivan?"

Vassilissa regained her composure with a barely suppressed sneer and a crack of her knuckles. She breathed deeply and pulled back her shoulders before turning to the woman. Every bit as tall as her brothers, she towered over Gladys. "In the *Troika's* sick-bay," she said, tone sharp and laced with acid. "We had to sedate him again on the way here."

“Again?” Gladys raised her eyebrows and she glanced at her unit. They shifted their grip on their weapons and looked at one another. Some gulped.

“He’s pretty angry, as I’m sure you can imagine. He’s just been... what’s the phrase? Fucked over?”

Judd’s blood froze. Previously Ivan’s reaction to this betrayal had been an abstract concept, a price to be paid to save the Hammers. Now, however, the reality of the situation—and how the Russian must feel—knotted Judd’s stomach. He looked at the *Troika*. Ivan lurked in there, and if he ever got his hands on Judd and Gladys...

“Well... so what?” Gladys said, flicking her head back to clear a strand of hair from her forehead. “He’s just one man. We can take care of him.” Vassilissa laughed, and Judd stared at Gladys, mouth slack and eyes wide. ‘Take *care*’ of Ivan? How could she say such a thing? No-one had ever managed to ‘take care’ of Ivan, and everybody knew how the likes of Crepitus, the Covens, and Devlin Gweneverere had tried... “And you—” Gladys jabbed Judd in the chest with a gloved finger then gestured at Vassilissa and Doll Two, “—had better take these two and get out of here. If The Now finds out you’ve defied his orders to have all the Hammers put down, your life isn’t going to be worth shit.”

Vassilissa growled as she asked, “What does she mean, ‘have all the Hammers put down’?”

“Things have changed, ‘Lissa.” Judd avoided her gaze as she looked at him in alarm. “Gladys is right, we need to go. I’ll explain on the way.” He started to turn, only to pause, straighten his tie and look back at Gladys. “Well, good luck, old girl.” He managed half a smile. “You’ll need it.”

He left the courtyard, Vassilissa and Doll Two in his wake. Behind them Black Gladys and her Plague Rats had already vanished. The assembled Theocracy soon bled away too as they either scurried from the courtyard with nervous glances at the *Troika*, or ascended the ramp into the corvette, their officers at the rear.

#

Judd’s quarters were small and functional with bare stone walls, a bench with his bedroll on, and a single shuttered window. It was just how Judd liked it: neat, clean, and uncluttered. Now the battle for Promise, with its explosions, roaring Scythes and battle-cries had ended, only the sound of a key in the door disturbed the pitter patter of rain against the wooden shutter.

Judd opened the door and stood by it as Vassilissa and Doll Two walked past and into the sparse room. He averted his gaze as Vassilissa walked by. Mouth dry and skin damp, he shut his eyes. A million words raced through his mind, yet he still struggled to find the right ones to say. Where do you begin? he wondered. ‘I know your brothers are going to die, but I didn’t realise The Now was such a bad egg’?

With her back turned, Vassilissa still refused to even look him, and Judd smiled, despite himself. He looked at her, at the muscles flexing in her jaw. A weak smile touched his lips. That is so typical of you, ‘Lissa, he thought. So bloody stubborn...

“Vassilissa, please—”

She turned and Judd’s senses scattered as her upper-cut slammed into his chin. By the time he’d regained his faculties she’d seized him by the collar and held him pushed against the wall.

“You have seconds to explain, Judd.” Her eyes blazed, and her gritted teeth did nothing to confine the abject fury in her strained, hoarse voice. “So talk. Talk, and explain to me how you could do this. How you could betray me and the rest of the Hammers to the Theocracy.” She drew the knife on his belt and held it against his cheek. He winced as it bit the skin, “and you’d better summon all your charm. Because if I don’t like what you say, I *will* kill you.”

He took a deep breath as an inner turmoil seized him. Grown in a vat and engineered to fight, his instinct roared at him. *Disarm her! Take her down! She wants to harm you!* But a deeper part of him prevailed: the side of him she’d touched in all those stolen, tender, naked moments away from the torture and bloodshed of their violent existence. Don’t fight her, he told himself. Just do as she says. Explain. She’ll understand.

“I had to,” he whispered. He touched her cheek and took hold of her hand to ease the knife from his face. She didn’t resist. “It was the only way to make sure the rest of the Hammers weren’t killed!”

She leaned closer, eyes narrow as she studied him. They sparkled a little, her expression softening, and Judd knew he’d reached her for all her anger and confusion.

“And The Now said he’d spare them if you betrayed the Beggar Barons?”

“Why else do you think I’d do it? Ivan, Gregor...even that ignoramus Skullion: they’re my *friends*.”

“And what now, Judd?” The words may have been spiked with anger, but now they were blunted a little. “He’s betrayed you, and all the Omega Hammers are going to die.” She shook him. “What *now*?”

“I don’t...” Confusion pawed at him once again. What could they do? There was an army between them and her brothers. What did she expect him to do? Fight them *all*? “I don’t know!”

Still holding him by the collar, she took a step away. He eyebrows rose and her eyes widened. “You idiot, Judd,” she said. “You stupid, naïve idiot. How could you believe The Now would do anything but lie to you? He’s from the *Theocracy*, you moron!”

Her words stung, but their tone—the kind used to admonish a wayward child—heartened him. Had the anger gone? Had she remembered what they had together? “But I thought—”

“We didn’t buy you to think, did we?” She handed him the knife. He took it, and they looked at one another.

Finally, she pulled him to her and kissed him. A fierce kiss, it spelled relief to be alive, and a determination to stay that way. Judd relished it, and took her in his arms as he returned the kiss with just as much passion. His eyes watered, and tears crept onto his cheeks, such was his relief.

“We have to get them out.” She pushed him away. Her tone hardened and she frowned as she concentrated on the job in hand. He smiled to himself. This was the Vassilissa he loved most of all: the hard, focused soldier. “And we *can*...” she turned to Doll Two, the serf standing in the corner as it awaited instructions, “...can’t we, Dolly?”

#

A humanoid with knobby purple skin and bright yellow eyes, the Theocracy soldier stood on guard outside one of the Torch’s cells. Nervous hands flitted from holstered pistol to hair, from his knife and then to his ammo pouches. His gaze jumped about the corridor, nerves

frayed further by the inmates—mostly mercenaries and a handful of Beggar Barons—as they rattled tin cups against the bars and jeered.

“You’re going to die, boy!” one shouted. He could barely be heard over the sound of the Theocracy forces attempting to overcome the *Oprinichki* a few floors below. The echoes of this latest pitch battle bounced about the cells’ damp stone walls.

“The *Oprinichki*’ll come for you, and then you’re gonna get yours!”

“Say your prayers, sonny.”

“Look. Here’s one now!”

The guard span on his heel and went for his gun. Sure enough the door at the end of the corridor had opened, and the hard silhouette of a droid filled the bright space. The guard drew his gun. His hands trembled as he aimed at the black shape.

“Who’s there?” he shouted. “Who are you?”

“My name is Doll Two,” the android said as it stepped into the dim corridor, “and I have refreshments for Thomas Skullion.”

The guard squinted. Only now could the blank façade of the Doll robot be seen. “What refreshments?”

“By order of Major Judd.” Doll Two’s tone remained even and measured as it advanced down the corridor. It carried a tray of sandwiches, some fruit, and a cup of steaming coffee. The rest of the prisoners fell silent, jaws slack with envy, as the food passed their cell.

The guard relaxed and holstered his pistol, yet his narrow eyes spelled suspicion. “Nobody told me anything about any refreshments.”

“By the sound of the battle, I would surmise your superiors and comrades are rather busy at present.”

The corridor shook as a heavy explosion rocked the Torch. Dust fell from the ceiling, and the guard stumbled. By the time he’d recovered his balance, Doll Two stood outside Skullion’s cell. The American—slouched on a bench inside with his head against the stone wall and his hands in his lap—could barely be seen in the poor light.

“Well...okay...” The guard produced a hefty ring of keys from a hook on his belt and fumbled with them. His attention, however, had shifted to the tray of food. With a lick of his cracked lips, he inserted a rusty key in the metal door and turned it with a thick *click*. “But it’ll cost you some of that food.”

“Be my guest.”

The next moment the guard lay unconscious in the cell surrounded by fruit, sandwiches, and spilled coffee. Doll Two stood in the open door with the bent tray in its hands.

“Dolly!” Skullion’s word were barely able to penetrate the cheer from the other inmates. He sprang from his bench and ran to the android. “Thank God! Am I glad to see you!”

“Yes, well, the sandwiches *are* rather good.”

“Fuck the sandwiches, Dolly, what are you doin’ here?”

“Major Judd would like me to escort you to the operations centre. He is waiting for you there.”

“Well, assuming I even wanted to see that treacherous asshole, how am I meant to get to ops without being noticed? I’m a talented boy, but I ain’t invisible.”

Dolly raised a hand, palm upward. “Major Judd has anticipated your reservation...” a small aperture opened in the android’s palm to reveal a camograph projector. “...and sent you this.”

#

Judd took a deep breath to try and calm the butterflies in his stomach, and viewed the monitors in front of him. Behind, he could hear Vassilissa pacing about Ivan’s abandoned operations centre. From here Judd had a complete appraisal of the both the Theocracy’s occupation of the city, and their ongoing battle with the *Oprinichki* in the basement.

He stroked his moustache and shook his head. This was nothing more than insanity. Did Vassilissa *really* believe they could do this...?

“Okay, Judd, give me one good reason why I don’t kill you now.”

Judd turned to see a Theocracy noble as it strode into the operations centre, Doll Two in his wake. A Venleigion, he stood tall and slender, and the delicate lilac skin on his pretty face was typically unblemished. For a merest fraction, Judd panicked, afraid he’d been discovered, but his reason prevailed as the noble’s American accent belied the projection.

“Well,” Judd said, “you’d have a right to, but perhaps you might want to help Ivan and the rest of the Hammers first, old boy?”

The noble stood beside Judd, and the image of brass armour, purple cloak and lilac alien flickered and vanished. In its place stood Skullion, glaring, fists clenched whilst the muscles in his jaw flexed. Vassilissa watched the pair of them from across the room, hand on the hilt of her sabre.

Judd held his breath. This could, he reasoned, go either way. The raw betrayal and anger in Skullion’s eyes told him that much. The American continued to glare, and Judd had to look away. He just didn’t have it in him to hold—and return—that stare. Maybe if Skullion wasn’t right...

“Why’d ya do it, Judd? Why’d you sell us out like that?”

“We don’t have time for this, Skullion,” Vassilissa said as she approached them. “What’s done is done. Now, you either want to help us undo it, or not, but you need to make up your mind quickly.” She nodded toward a monitor showing an ostentatious Theocracy barge—all banners, guards in ornate armour, and a gleaming hull decorated with sculptures of Gellion Angels—as it approached the Torch. “Because The Now is on his way, and if we don’t get Ivan, Gregor, and the rest of the Hammers out of here soon, he’ll kill us all.”

#

“Ivan?”

“Wake up, Ivan.”

Nausea swamped him and his head pounded. A gaseous feeling swelled in his gullet. The last thing he remembered was a tooth and claw fight with Black Gladys’s Plague Rats before they’d injected him with something filthy that had dropped him like a stone.

“You’re going to die, Ivan.”

His eyes opened slowly and allowed him only the most blurred of vision. Indistinct faces hovered over him and leered. He blinked and tried to move but the numbness in his naked and cold body precluded it. He had no idea where he was, the ceiling above him lost to his

faded vision. An jumble of thoughts swept through his mind: was Skullion safe? What of Gregor and Lissa? Please God, please, if you can hear me, please let them be alive...

"You're going to die, Ivan." The voice—German and spiteful—chased the ravens away. "And we're going to watch."

He blinked again, and some clarity seeped into the smudged faces: Clarabelle Coven and her inbred brethren; the poisonous beauty of Devlin Genovese; the Teutonic gravitas of Winklehock the Eiffellender; a school of amphibious Myrmex from Quirinal. A murder of old enemies he'd killed or left for dead, now back to crow over him. He tried to retort, but little more than an incoherent gabble spilled from his slack mouth.

"The Now'll be here soon, Van," Clarabelle said with a smile of black teeth and chewed tobacco, "an you're gonna git what y'all deserve."

The Myrmex laughed—a sound akin to boiling oil—and Gwenevere leant so close her lavender breath washed from her cherry lips and over Ivan's face. "And when you die, we're going to be waiting for you."

Finally some strength seeped into Ivan's limbs, and he lashed out. "A. Way!" he blurted in a shower of spit and blood. "I. All ready. Kill. D. You!"

"I'm not dead yet, Ivan."

The apparitions vanished, and cool fingers touched his cheek and bare chest. Still he tried to sit up, to get off a metal bench he lay upon, but he could only struggle and collapse again.

"Just relax, Ivan, please. You know I hate to see you upset."

The fingers on his cheek stroked his face. His vision gained yet more clarity, and both the dark claustrophobia of one of the *Troika*'s cells and Black Gladys came into focus. She leant over him whilst her bobbed hair fell forward and over her cheekbones. Her dark eyes shone and her eyebrows arched. Those eyes made even Ivan shudder. "Darkness is good for only one thing, Ivan," Gregor always said, "—hiding monsters." And Ivan could think of no greater darkness than that in Black Gladys's eyes.

"Glad. Ys." The syllables stumbled from him like drunken idiots, and his hands were just as ill-coordinated as he took hold of her wrists. "What are you. Doing? Sold me. Out."

"Shhh." She pulled a wrist free and placed a finger on his lips. "Not now. You need to listen. The Now will be here soon, and he's going to tell you to order the *Oprinichki* to stand down. Do you understand?"

He lay back and absorbed the words. So the *Oprinichki* fought on. That meant Kithaen must still be safe. All was not lost... Or was it? Perhaps this was all a ruse, and the battle was already over. After all, why should he believe a word Black Gladys said?

"Please, Ivan. Please listen to me," she said as though reading his mind. She cupped his face in her hands and leaned so close their lips were scant inches apart. "You know how I feel about you." Her stare flitted from his eyes to his mouth. "Oh, Ivan," she added with a whisper, "you *know*..."

"Why should I listen?" He snarled as he ignored the passion in her voice. "You betrayed us all. You betrayed Gregor. You betrayed Vassilissa. You betrayed Judd—"

She laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. "*Judd*? Oh, Ivan, you sweet, sweet man." She stroked his face again and smiled like a mother might smile when she patronises her child. "How do you think all this was orchestrated? Judd sold you out months ago, back on Shadow
—"

“No! You lie!” Now he sat upright with a pained bellow and grabbed her upper arms. He shook her as he ranted. “He would never!”

She tried to shrug his hands off, but she couldn't. Pain crept into her features as he squeezed. “Don't be naïve. Think about it. *Think* about the kind of information The Now must have been fed. The kind of information *I* didn't have access to but Judd *did*. How do you think you've been second guessed by the Theocracy all this time. Every time you and Gregor made a decision, Judd fed it to The Now.”

“Liar! Harridan! Traitor!” he roared as he rose from the metal bench and shook her. “First you betray me, and now you lie about my friend!” He threw her across the cell, and she bounced off the opposing wall to collapse on the deck with a gasp of expelled air. “But you will lie no more, Black Gladys.” He sprang forward to loom over her. His body trembled with abject fury. “You—”

In the blink of an eye she vanished. Instinct made him turn on the spot, fists clenched and muscles taut, but too late. Black Gladys, already stood behind him, struck his jaw with a blow Ivan himself would have been proud of. Already weakened by drugs, Ivan's legs buckled, and the following blow—a roundhouse kick from her blurred cyborg leg—sent him crashing back against the wall. What strength he'd possessed deserted him, and he slid down the wall and onto his backside, vision once more little more than a smudged mess.

“I'm sorry, Ivan” she said, voice shallow and stretched. “I tried to help you. But if I can't convince you to make the *Oprinichki* to stand down, then The Now will have to.”

And then she vanished, and Ivan groaned in pain and despair.

#

The Now's barge landed in one of The Torch's courtyards with a bump. As the assembled mass of Theocracy forces knelt, heads bowed in reverence, a door opened in the barge's belly. A ramp—carpeted in red velvet—rolled forth like an impertinent tongue. Choral peels flooded from speakers set about the door, and a phalanx of armoured guards—the finest, most diverse specimens the Theocracy had to offer—marched down the ramp in time to the music. They reached the foot of the ramp and formed a corridor of purple and brass between the ramp and a cluster of battered and weary Theocracy officer. Amongst these kneeling officers stood Black Gladys. She looked about her with an expression painted in puzzlement and incredulity.

The Now strode from within the barge to stand at the top of the ramp, arms wide and eyes closed as the forces in the courtyard hammered their hilts against the floor in waves of adulatory applause. Some even whistled, and others cheered. The Now drank it in, head tipped back as he gestured for more.

As this orchestrated show of sycophancy roared about him, he strode down the ramp and through his guards to stand before the officers. With a click of his fingers he brought the music and thunderous applause to a halt.

“You may stand,” he said.

The officers rose. The eldest—a Gol Jaquan so old what should have been black skin had become the grey of lugubrious clouds—even groaned a little and had to helped up by his comrades.

“No. Not you.” He pointed at Gladys. “Just her.”

The others knelt again to leave Gladys to look down on The Now. The gathered forces held their breaths and watched the unfolding confrontation. The weight of these alien eyes didn't phase Gladys in the least. In a tartan mini-skirt, newly polished legs, chunky boots and a white blouse with ruffled collar, she'd taken the trouble to change into something a little more attractive than her combat gear, and she soaked up the attention with a diva's demeanour.

She raised an eyebrow at The Now. "Yes?"

He looked to her left, and then to her right. "Where is Major Judd?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "He's not answering his comms. My guess is he's made a break for freedom once he realised you were going to have them put down like a dog. Humans are funny like that."

"No matter. They are of little consequence now, but I understand the *Oprinichki* haven't surrendered yet, and the witch Kithaen is still at liberty in the cellars." Despite his lack of stature, such was the authority and displeasure in his voice that some of the kneeling officers winced. "Why?"

She held his stare. "Ivan refuses to cooperate."

"Indeed?"

"I've tried my best." She put one hand on her hip whilst inspecting the black nail varnish on the other. "If you think you can do better, be my guest."

"Very well." He smiled, and took Gladys's hand before holding it to his lips. "You have served me well, despite this last failure. But it is still a failure." He turned to his guards, clicked his fingers, and pointed back toward Black Gladys. "Kill her."

They turned as one and drew their weapons. Black Gladys, however, had already gone.

"No matter," The Now said after a stunned pause. "I have a bigger scalp to claim."

#

Ivan sat upon the deck, backside numb and sore. Chin on his chest, his slumped head twitched as he slipped in and out of unconsciousness and the ghosts of old nemeses taunted him.

"We're still here, Ivan, waiting."

"Won't be long now!"

"The things we's gonna do to you, boy. Ain't gonna be purdy."

"Hack him *glarble*. Splat him *gurkle*. *Glub* twat him!"

Ivan's eyelids fluttered open, and his brow creased. The clunk clunk clunk of metal on metal penetrated his fugue, and he looked up through bloodied eyebrows. There in his cell stood The Now whilst five attendants—their svelte, androgynous bodies mere silhouettes within hooded white chiffon robes—stripped him of his armour. Ivan's head bobbed up and down and he sneered at the megalomaniac before his chin sank to his chest again.

So, he thought, this is it. I finally face The Now. His fingers flexed, and he prised himself from the floor before falling back against the cell wall. His limbs trembled and his eyelids twitched as he spat malformed incoherencies at his enemy. His bare feet slipped in something sticky on the deck. My own blood, he realised with a lazy, sardonic chuckle.

“So,” he managed to say, “vaunted warlord...comes to finish off half-dead enemy once... lackeys and lick-spittles have done hard work, yes?”

The Now smiled. “Indeed, Ivan. A man doesn’t get to where I am in life without capitalising on the efforts of others. You know that.”

“No, I don’t. Have...always led from front.” Ivan pushed against the wall and stood. His arms trembled as he raised his fists and stood like a drunken caricature of a Queensbury boxer. “These hands have killed...more than you will...ever know.”

“Oh, I can imagine.” The Now smiled as his attendants stripped the last of his armour from his heavily muscled body. Older than Ivan, he sported scars, burns, and leathery skin.

“My word, Ivan Valentine,” he said, “you really are an impressive specimen, are you not?” He clicked his fingers, and one of his attendants stepped forward with a plain wooden box. Shallow, and no longer than a foot, the wood of the box bore its own catalogue of nicks and cuts. The attendant opened the box, and The Now reached inside even as he continued to admire Ivan, seemingly transfixed. “Ordinarily I wouldn’t bring a blade to a gun show,” he said as he withdrew a knife from the velvet interior, “but in your case I can see I must make an exception.”

The attendants, their slender arms laden with armour, left the cell in silence, and its door slammed shut behind them. Ivan wavered and blinked as he focused on the knife. It glinted and flashed even in the cell’s half-light.

The smile vanished, and he lunged at Ivan.

Part Four

Price You Pay

The Beggar Barons of Charon had built the Torch as a beacon for the oppressed and disposed, as a signal they were not alone, and that any who made it across the cruel and disparate Pagetorns to the city of Promise were welcome. Now, however, those same Barons died on their knees in the rain, the Theocracy firing squad ignoring their wails and pleas.

Riddled bodies slumped to the floor, arms and feet bound by wire. As they twitched, their blood fled between the cobbles of one of the Torch’s courtyards. Some still moaned, and a handful screamed in agony, but not for long. The Theocracy sergeant silenced each of them with a bullet in the head.

#

Ivan roared defiance as The Now’s blade slashed across his chest. He would not die here! He was a Valentine, and the Valentines chose when they died.

The Now struck Ivan in the jaw with his free hand, and Ivan reeled. He tried to stay on his feet, tried to strike back, but the cell deck was too slick, and his legs too weak. The blood on the floor splashed about him as he collapsed

With a gasp he rolled onto his side. He blinked again and again in a vain attempt to clear his senses. Eyes unfocused and arms weak, he managed to push himself off the deck and rose onto all fours, yet he quivered like a sacrificial ox. He had to get up and fight. He was Ivan Valentine! Who was The Now to best him like this? No-one could do this to—

A kick from The Now sent Ivan back to the deck before the Theocracy count loomed over him.

“It is over for you, Ivan. Your violent and bloody days are done.”

Ivan lurched into a sitting position and reached for The Now’s throat, but a further swipe from the Count’s blade sent fire through Ivan’s forearm, and he clutched at the wound.

“And when I have finished with you I will kill your brother, the Lothario.” Another kick thundered into Ivan’s solar plexus, and the air vanished from his lungs. “That is the price he pays for defiling my wife, and that you pay for defying me.”

#

“Sergeant Maxim. Where is he?”

The two Theocracy guards—weary levies, their skin encrusted with dirt and blood—glanced at one another. The detritus on their foreheads cracked as they frowned. They glanced over their shoulders and at the captive Omega Hammers in another of the Torch’s courtyards. Sat on their hands in the rain, the captives’ heads were bowed. More Theocracy guards moved amongst them.

The tallest guard turned to Skullion. “Um...why?”

Keep it together, Skullion told himself. They can’t see through the camograph projection. Just say your lines nice an’ cool an’ it’ll be fine. He gestured over his shoulder at Doll Two who stood in silence behind him. “This serf is programmed for ecclesiastical duties. I have brought it here to administer the Last Rites to these humans ahead of their execution.”

The smallest guard possessed a face like screwed up sandpaper. “Why ain’t I seen ya before?”

“Tell him you’re a noble.” Judd’s voice wavered over the comm in Skullion’s ear. It did little to settle his nerves. “Tell him you don’t have to answer to them.”

The other guard’s distorted lips curled and exposed rotten wooden teeth. “Which unit are you from?”

“The Third Benevolence of His Dutiful Majesty the Imperial Theocrat’s Clerical Administrators,” Doll Two said. The calm of its voice contrasted with the worry in Judd’s and settled Skullion’s nerves. It gestured at Skullion. “His Grace landed with the latest wave of staff assigned to the lengthy process of executing prisoners.”

“S’right,” Skullion said with a weak smile, even though he knew the projection would hide it. He offered his hand. “Pleased to meetcha.”

The two guards made a dismissive exhalation of air through their teeth and rolled their eyes. One looked down its dirty nose at Skullion. “Administrator? That’s why we didn’t know ya.”

The other sneered. “Yeah, seein’ as as we’ve been fighting on the front line an’ all.”

“Well, er...” Keep it together! Skullion told himself. Don’t let ‘em phase you! “I, er, think you’ve done a swell job. All them women an’ kids?” He slapped the shortest guard on the shoulder. “Grade fuckin’ A.”

“For God’s sake, Skullion,” Judd hissed in his ear, “shut up!”

Skullion fell silent. Judd was right. Dolly had played his hand for him, now he just had to shut the hell up and bluff it out.

“He’s over there.” The tallest guard made a lazy gesture. Skullion looked to see Maxim, the Russian’s face bloodied and one eye hidden by a brutal bruise of red and blue. He spat on the boot of a passing guard and received a further blow to his face for his trouble. Skullion’s eyes narrowed and he clenched his fists. He liked Maxim, maybe even a little more than he’d admit to Ivan. To see him abused like this...

“Get a bloody move on, Skullion. We don’t have all day!”

“Don’t get ya panties in a bunch, Judd,” Skullion muttered. “I know what I’m doin’.”

With Doll Two in his wake, he walked across to Maxim. The levies moved out of his way to allow him easy passage through the neat ranks of kneeling mercenary prisoners. As he walked, Skullion assessed the captive soldiers. There were more than just Omega Hammers here. Feline Felidae, their fur matted with dried blood, knelt beside Blax’s dog-headed Moreaus. The knotted muscle of Mottersmead’s bull-necked Aurochs were packed in amongst the svelte Cartimundi whose heads were bowed and their semi-naked bodies hidden beneath mud and gore. Fish-faced Cral of Spyker Minor gawped at him whilst Corvid Talon-priests closed their eyes as their beaks moved in silent prayer, and the tails of chaste Lamia rattled in barely-checked annoyance as they were forced to rub shoulders with drunken soldier tramps of the Khobos caravan-fleet. Together, this ram-shackle collection of the beaten and bloodied gave testimony not only to the weight of The Now’s victory, but the abject nature of Judd’s betrayal.

God help you Judd, Skullion thought, when Ivan gets hold of you...

He looked to the far side of the courtyard and his gaze locked onto that of another guard. Whilst the other levies and soldiers couldn’t be bothered to spare Skullion and android serf a second glance, this one peered at them with suspicion. Whilst not a noble, the guard was an officer none-the-less. As he looked at Skullion, he lifted the comm strapped to his wrist and whispered into it.

“Looks like someone isn’t buying it, Judd,” Skullion whispered. “I think he’s trying to get hold of command and verify if we’re meant to be here.”

“He won’t get through,” Judd said. “We’re jamming the signal.”

Skullion rolled his eyes. “Of yeah, and that won’t look suspicious.”

“If I may be so bold,” Doll Two said. “Would now be an opportune time?”

“Good a time as any, baby doll,” Skullion said as he too knelt and covered his head with hands. “Let’s do this thing.”

No sooner had Skullion gone down on his knee than an aperture appeared in Doll Two’s back. A moment later a small sphere appeared from the aperture and hovered in the air as the 'droid knelt beside Skullion. With a beep, the sphere unleashed an invisible maser-wave across the courtyard. It swept over the heads of Skullion, Doll Two, and the kneeling prisoners to slice the Theocracy guards in two. The few diminutive captors who survived—Herbies, Jeshan slaves, and a Komerex dwarf—had no time to gather their wits and draw their weapons before the assembled mercenaries seized this unexpected opportunity, rose, and rushed the guards with noisy, riotous ardour.

Skullion—still disguised as the Theocracy administrator—also fell foul of the prisoners’ anger. No sooner had the emancipated mass dealt with the remaining guards, than they fell upon him, kicking and punching him to the ground. He tried to reach and deactivate his camograph projector, but instead he had to curl into a ball to protect his head and chest from the flurry of blows.

“Fuck off!” he shouted. “Fuck! *Off!* It’s me! Thom Skullion!”

“That’s enough! Out of the way! Leave him!”

Sure enough, the barrage stopped, and a grateful Skullion peeked from behind his arms. Maxim stood over him. With a broad smile, he reached down and offered his hand.

“Thom, my only American friend.” He laughed and helped Skullion to his feet. All about them the Hammers and other soldiers of fortune were helping themselves to the equipment dropped by the dead Theocracy. Isolated tussles broke out over the best weapons. “So, tell me, what is the plan?”

“Fuck knows. Judd’s in charge.”

“Judd?” Maxim sneered as he made a throttling motion with his hands. “That turncoat! It’s his fault we’re here in the first place.”

“Well, you can tell him yourself,” Skullion said, “because he wants to speak to you.”

#

“Right, chaps,” Judd said as he addressed the holographic image of Skullion and Maxim relayed to the command centre by Doll Two, “I need you two to get that rabble organised and break Gregor out from a Theocracy medical barge parked in courtyard twelve. He’s being held there pending process—”

“Free Gregor?” Skullion raised an eyebrow. “Fuck that, Judd. Why would I wanna free that bigot? Let Maxim worry about Gregor—I’m goin’ after Ivan.”

Judd signed. Such insubordination may well of have been typical of Skullion, but that didn’t make it any less tiresome. “Thom, old boy, I need you to put your animosity toward Gregor to one side and do as you’re told. You’re near Gregor, and I’m near Ivan. That’s the end of it.”

“The hell it—”

“Judd is right,” Maxim said. He laid a hand on Skullion’s arm in an effort to calm the American. “He may be a devious liar and a back-stabbing traitor, but he is right.”

Judd smarted. Yes, he deserved that, but it still hurt. Didn’t they understand he’d been trying to *save* them?

“Say that again,” said Vassilissa, eyes ablaze and teeth barred as she moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with Judd, “and I’ll come down there and beat some manners into you.”

An uncomfortable silence enveloped the control room as Judd took Vassilissa’s hand and squeezed it. To be next to her, to feel the implicit support in her voice and he grip, meant more to him than he could say. He tried to draw on the strength she gave him and say something to Skullion and Maxim, tried to think of some way to to apologise. But he couldn’t. Not with words, anyway. Only by delivering them from this nightmare could he hope to assuage his guilt.

“Then it’s decided,” Judd finally managed to say.

“Once you’ve got Gregor, get down to the cellars and meet up with Kithaen.” Vassilissa said. “She’ll get you through the portal to safety. We’ll meet her once we’ve rescued Ivan. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Good luck, and God’s speed.” The holograph dropped out, and Judd breathed a sigh of relief. He’d expected that to be hard, and he’d been right. Forget that now, he told himself, there’s no time to waste. He tapped at his comm. “Dolly?”

“Yes, Major Judd?”

“Leave Skullion’s group and meet me at the *Troika*. We’ll need you to get aboard.”

“Very good, Major Judd. Doll Two out.”

Judd turned to Vassilissa. He took hold of both her hands. The semi-darkness hid the tiny scars and nicks on her face, nose and lips that made that face all her own. Even so, she looked both beautiful and wilful with her mouth set and lines gathered at the corners of her narrowed eyes. They shone in the green light from the monitors and tactical displays.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“I...” He had to stop and clear his throat, which contracted as he tried to speak. He looked at her, scrutinised her, searched for a sign as to how she felt. Were they not about to tackle the gathered might of The Now’s forces? Were they not trying to coordinate a complex and audacious operation? And, even if they succeeded in getting past The Now, his honour guard, levies, and maybe even the Ildred, would they not have to face Ivan?

Ivan. The subject they were both avoiding. And they were avoiding it because they knew where this was heading... “You know he’ll kill me, don’t you?” he said, voice low and husky.

“Judd, you idiot,” she said as she touched his cheek with a delicacy and feeling that belied the tone of her voice and steel in her eyes, “you should have thought of that before you stabbed him in the back.”

“But I—”

“I know, I know,” she whispered. She put a finger against his lips to silence him. “And if—if we can convince Ivan, we might get you out of this in one piece.”

“Oh God,” he said as he reached into his shirt to take hold of his clone-brother’s crucifix again, “please, help me...”

She frowned. “God? Judd...?” she stepped way from him and shook her head. “How can you and Ivan still believe in God? After all we’ve seen? All we’ve *done*?”

“Never mind,” he said. This wasn’t the time for a theological debate. “Look, I got these for you.” He reached for the small of his back and drew two pistols from his waistband: Ivan’s automatic, and his revolver. He handed them to Vassilissa. “Black Gladys gave them to me after she captured Ivan. She thought I might want to keep them.”

Vassilissa took them, and her eyes were lost to shadow as she looked down at the two weapons.

“I can’t bring myself to keep them, so I wondered if you...”

She nodded, but she didn’t reply. Judd knew her well enough to read the signs. This lack of response, this stoic silence told him she hurt more than she wanted to show. To hold these two guns—symbols of Ivan’s might and legendary status—and to know that they may be all that remained of the man should they fail in their mission... Tears crept into Judd’s eyes.

Without a sound, she thrust the guns into her belt, turned on her heel and strode from the room. Judd followed.

#

Rain fell upon the *Troika* and bounced off its armoured hull. The Now's honour guard stood about the corvette, and other Theocracy soldiers prowled the courtyard. Even here, on the outskirts of the Torch, the sound of escalating battles betrayed both Maxim's inexorable push for the medical barge, and the *Oprinichki's* indefatigable resistance of the Theocracy in the cellars below. The walls vibrated in sympathy with the rumble of guns, and small lumps of stone and concrete pattered onto the courtyard's wet cobbles.

Sheltered under a raincape, a forlorn Theocracy guard watched the *Troika* from one of the Torch's balconies. A young Venleigion, barely an adult, she shivered a little, and reached into her cape to produce a lighter and a packet of *jaffy* sticks.

"You there!"

The guard turned to see Judd stood in a doorway behind her. "Major Judd?" she said, slack jawed and with a *jaffy* hanging from her bottom lip. "I heard—"

"Never mind what you've heard. General Vassilissa has fainted. Come help me."

The guard complied without hesitation. She followed Judd through the arched doorway and into a spiral of stone stairs. Vassilissa lay there, motionless, with her eyes closed. The guard knelt beside her and put her hand to the Russian's neck in search of a pulse. A moment later, and Judd had produced his knife and cut the startled guard's throat. She collapsed sideways to tumble down the stairs in a cartwheel of spurting blood.

Now Vassilissa stood, dusted her backside off, and wiped the girl's blood from her face. Judd vanished into a camograph projection of the guard, and stepped back out onto the wet balcony.

#

The Now pressed home his advantage. Slash after slash, kick after kick, punch after punch overwhelmed even Ivan, who could do little more than curl up and bleed. Hundreds of slashes crossed his arms, legs, and torso, and his skin had become lost under a slick, glistening coat of his own blood.

Like an upturned beetle he rolled from side to side, but always the knife found its mark. Too light headed to feel the pain, too drained of blood to fight back, Ivan could do little more than remain conscious.

Abstract thoughts flashed through his mind. How had it come to this? What of Skullion and Gregor, Vassilissa and Stalin? How could Judd do this to them all? How much had his loyalty cost?

Just how long would it take to die?

#

"Twenty of The Now's honour guard, plus a unit of Dorvak commandoes." Judd said as he counted the soldiers below. Not good odds, he concluded. "Spiffing."

"They must know something's wrong by now," Vassilissa said. Still inside the doorway, she remained hidden from the guards in the courtyard whilst the disguised Judd assessed the opposition. "We won't be able to bluff our way by."

Judd's brow furrowed and he squeezed his eyes shut. They had to get on board the *Troika*, they just had to. It was the only way to make all this right. And they had to get onboard soon, before The Now killed Ivan.

Part Five

Guns Blazing

From the balcony overlooking the *Troika*, Judd appraised the guards that surrounded the Corvette. There were far, far too many to either fight their way through, or bluff their way past. He squeezed his eyes shut and cursed. They had to get aboard the *Troika* before The Now killed Ivan, and the mother ship sent reinforcements.

He looked up to the grieving skies as they wept over the city of Promise—a broken Promise now forced to face a bitter reality of Theocracy rule and oppression. And in those grey skies floated the Theocracy mother ship: an overblown and ostentatious symbol of the Theocracy's self-importance and relentless interplanetary persecution. Swarms of fighters, Scythes and cruisers buzzed about it like sycophantic courtiers would bow and scrape about a bloated king.

Judd reached under his tie and between the buttons on his pressed khaki shirt to produce his crucifix. In silent prayer, he held it to his lips and kissed it.

Please God, please, he prayed, I need a miracle. Failing that, please let Dolly get here soon. *Please.*

“I am here, Major Judd.”

Judd turned to see Doll Two and Skullion standing by Vassilissa.

“What in God's name?” Judd said with a hiss. He glared at Skullion. “I *told* you to stay with Gregor!”

“And I told *you* to fuck off.” The American glared at Judd from beside Doll Two and raised his index finger. “Ivan's in trouble, so I'm here to help him. Maxim'll do just fine without me.”

Judd had to look away, unable to bear the hatred in Skullion's eyes. “Okay, well, we need to move fast if we're to save Ivan and get out of here in once piece. Dolly?”

“Yes, Major Judd?”

“Can you still access the *Troika*'s weapons systems...?”

#

A guttural resonance punched through Ivan's fugue, and his eyes opened. That noise, that sensation deep in his gut. The *Troika*'s guns roared, just as they'd roared so many times before.

But this was different. Before this, he'd been the *Troika*'s master and commander, at her helm and with her triggers beneath his fingers. This time he lay on the floor of her brig covered in his own blood, resigned to die at the hand and blade of a runt with an unfaithful wife and a bruised ego. This time he lay on the verge of Death by a Thousand Cuts.

Another peal of distant thunder as the corvette's guns called to Ivan once more, willing him—begging, maybe—to remember who he was and to fight back. Another slash from The Now's knife, and the dwarf continued to rant, his voice nothing more than a drone of amorphous indignation drowned out by the angered rumble of the *Troika*'s weapons.

Knives. Guns. Weapons. Ivan needed a weapon. Any weapon. He groped across the deck and up the cell wall until his fingers crept to the coolness of the metal bench. His fingers gripped its edge, and he snarled. No more. As the *Troika* fought, so he would fight.

The Now stabbed at him again, only for Ivan to grab his wrist. He and Ivan's gazes locked, and the noble's eyes widened in realisation and fear as he saw the sudden fury and resolve in Ivan's eyes.

Using the bench to steady himself, Ivan rose and loomed over The Now. The noble shrank back, suddenly very small and impotent in the face of this towering and bloody force of destruction. A cruel smile burned amongst the crusted blood and mucus on Ivan's face, and as the rhythm of the *Troika* guns continued to call, he answered, and he reached for The Now with murderous intent.

#

Palls of smoke stalked the courtyard as Judd, Vassilissa, Skullion and Doll Two ran from a doorway and toward the *Troika*. All about them lay the shredded remains of the Theocracy, torn apart by the corvette's anti-personnel turrets. The guns still brooded under the belly of the corvette, and their sensors swept the yard. Theocracy survivors writhed, struggled, howled, or wept as they were picked off by further volleys of fire.

"Nice work, Dolly!" Judd said over the chatter of his kit. So far so good, but the rest of the rescue wouldn't be half as easy. Guards still lurked inside the *Troika*, and then they'd have to face Ivan himself...

Even as they reached the foot of the ramp the first of those guards appeared. Three of The Now's svelte attendants, they moved in a crouch across the top of the ramp to form an ad hoc cordon, firing handguns as they went. Judd and Vassilissa returned fire—the latter with Ivan's automatic—and the battle began in earnest.

#

With his fist full of The Now's Mohican, Ivan beat the noble's face against the metal bench. Time after time, blow after blow, Ivan didn't stop.

"Dwarf! Runt! Goblin! You dare do this to me? To *us*? You dare take my friends and family, turn them against me?" The Now didn't answer. He'd stopped struggling minutes ago, and only the bubble and pop of breath forced through choking blood escaped his smashed mouth. His tongue flopped from his lips, teeth and blood spilling onto the bench. "Well now you die! Like all die who cross the Valentines. Do you hear me? Death! That's what you get!" With renewed vigour, with the purest of adrenalin and hate coursing through him, numbing his pain, Ivan beat that face against the metal in concert with his roars. "That's! What! You! *Get!*"

A final crack, and The Now's skull imploded in a halo of blood, mucus, and brain. His body twitched, and a stench assaulted Ivan as the noble's bowels emptied with a protracted rasp of expelled gas. Something like a screech and a lament fled his exposed and distorted pharynx as his lungs evacuated too.

Breath laboured, limbs shaking, Ivan let go. He wanted to carry on, wanted to smash the whole skull into the tiniest of fragments, tear the spine out through the chest, break arms, pulverise legs and pelvis, nail The Now to the *Troika*... But it would have to wait. He wiped blood from his eyes and steadied himself against the wall with one hand. With the other he held his penis, and contented himself by pissing onto the The Now's decimated face.

“That’s what you get,” he said in a thin whisper as steam rose from the stream of urine to caress the pulp of chest and face. “That’s what you get. That’s what you get...”

#

The usual silence of the *Troika*’s cool brig had been drowned by the echoes of gunfire and the shouts of the alarmed and dying. Now it resumed for the briefest moment, disturbed only by the gentle hum of the corvette’s air-con and beeps from various consoles. Then a sharp hiss sliced across the room as the door slide open and Judd, Vassilissa, Skullion, and Dolly stepped through.

“Nearly there,” Judd said with a grimace of pain. Hand on his shoulder, a swell blood of blood creeping through the material of his shirt, he felt a little light-headed.

Skullion stepped forward and reached for Judd’s shoulder. “You should let me look at that.”

“No Skullion, we don’t have time,” Judd said as he waved the American away. The battle had cost them too much time to delay any further.

“Major Judd?”

“Yes, Dolly?”

“Ildred troops have spilt into two units and entered the Torch. One would appear to be heading for the *Oprinichki* and Kithaen’s position, and the other is heading for us.”

Judd and Vassilissa exchanged dark looks. Ildred? Not good. Not good at all. If there were any units in The Now’s force even the *Oprinichki* couldn’t resist...

“Maxim?” Vassilissa said as she tapped at her comm. “Status?”

Maxim’s voice buzzed over their ear-pieces. “We’ve taken the medical barge and have Gregor. We’re fighting our way through to Kithaen now. Resistance is heavy, and we’re losing men rapidly.”

Judd gripped his mic between thumb and forefinger and raised the *Oprinicki* leaders.

“Nobby? Zhukov? Status.”

“We’re holding this position, but Kithaen advises she is unable to maintain the stability of her portal through the Echo much longer. If we are to leave, we need to leave soon.” Nobby’s sharp android voice sounded even harsher over the comm. “Orders?”

Judd hesitated. The Echo: a primeval reality beneath their own where time and distance were malleable. A skilled artisan like Kithaen could use the Echo to transport matter huge distances in a short time. But if she were to lose control of the portal the energies unleashed would be catastrophic. And yet their only chance of getting out of the Torch alive rested in getting back to Kithaen and that portal before the Ildred cut them off. But could they reach her in time?

“You wait for Maxim and then get him, Gregor, and everybody through the Echo,” Vassilissa said without waiting for Judd to gather his wits. “Tell her to close it soon as you’re all through.”

Judd and Skullion looked at in alarm. What is she doing? Judd thought. If we’re left stranded here...

“And you, General?” Nobby asked.

“We’ll be fine.” Vassilissa glared at Judd and Skullion as though daring them to challenge her. “We’ve got the *Troika* on our side.”

“Wise. I concur. Nobby out.”

The signal dropped out to leave the three humans in the brig look at one another.

“Looks like we’re on our own,” Skullion said with a shake of his head. “Grade fuckin’ A.”

“Then might I suggest we make haste?” asked Doll Two. “I have locked down the *Troika* to delay the Ildred’s forthcoming ingress, but we really do have no further time to waste.”

#

Ivan’s hands shook and his vision swam, but it didn’t matter. There wasn’t time to let that stop him. He had to get out. Someone was outside the brig. He could hear their muffled voices.

The Now’s knife slipped in Ivan’s bloodied fingers as he turned it, the tip nestled in the last of the panel’s screws. Nearly there, he told himself. Get this panel off, jig the wiring, and door opens. He smiled a grim smile and muttered, “Then someone gets big surprise, yes?”

He heard more of their muffled voices. Who could it be? The Now’s attendants? His honour guard? An execution administrator? It didn’t matter. He wiped blood from his eyes again and squinted as he concentrated on the tiny screw. They’d be dead soon.

#

Stood on the threshold of cell two, hand hovering over a small terminal set into the doorframe, Judd looked over his shoulder and at Skullion.

“What?” the American said, eyes narrow with suspicion.

“I’m sorry.”

“Judd, darling, there isn’t time—”

He carried on regardless of Vassilissa. It needed to be said, and this would be his last chance. “I’m sorry I got you, Gregor, Ivan, the Hammers, and everybody else into this position. Truly I am. But you must—*must*—believe me—”

“You did it for us. To save lives.” The poison in Skullion’s tone had vanished, and the black look lightened a little. “I know that, I guess.” He shrugged and even managed a smile. “I mean, I know you’re an asshole, but even *you’re* not that big an asshole.”

Judd laughed a small, heartless laugh, and looked at Vassilissa. As she slipped a fresh clip into Ivan’s automatic, a mask fell across her face. But she knew. They both knew. This was it. Time to face the music. She looked at Ivan’s gun, for many campaigns the symbol of his fury and brutality.

Throat contracted, voice little more than a choked whisper, and eyes brimming with tears, Judd managed to croak, “Lissa?” She looked up and into his eyes. Tears ran down her cheeks and her the muscles in her masculine jaw flexed as she fought with her emotions. “I love—”

Judd never managed to finish the sentence. The door opened, and two massive and bloody hands reached from within to seize him by the head. The next second he’d been hauled inside and thrown across the cell. His senses left him as he hit the wall and fell to the bloody deck.

#

The courtyard beyond the *Troika* resounded to the drum of marching feet before a phalanx of Ildred strode from the arched doorways. Hunched and with shark-like hammerheads, these elite troops bore scared armour, bared teeth, and glittering black eyes fixed on the *Troika*.

Their pace slackened, and they moved in silence toward the corvette. Then a harsh chorus stabbed the air as they cocked their weapons in unison.

#

“Traitor! Bastard! Judas!” Ivan roared as he stood over the motionless Judd. He held the Englishman by the neck with one hand and pummelled his face with the other. If Judd was still alive, he didn’t show it. He simply lay on the deck, eyes closed and body limp. Ivan didn’t care. Let him lay there and take it. He deserved it. “You! You cost us everything since Shadow! You fed all our plans to The Now! You!” He lifted Judd from the floor and shook him like a dishcloth. “*You!*”

“Ivan! Please stop!” Vassilissa came at him from the cell door to grab him by the arms. “You’re killing him!”

Ivan tried to speak, but now the rage had taken him beyond cohesion. Only a furious roar left his lips as he swung his free arm and struck Vassilissa across the face to send her crashing to the floor. How could she defend him! How? His own flesh and blood! Didn’t that make her just as bad?

He threw Judd across the brig and turned on Vassilissa. Dazed, she tried to get up, but her gloves found no purchase on the bloody deck. She’d fallen back onto her chest before Ivan reached her, grabbed her by the hair and hauled her onto her knees.

“Are you are no better?” His words were so ill-formed as to be almost still born, spat into her face with spittle and venom. “My own sister!” He shook her, and she cried out. “How could you defend him?”

“Jesus Christ , Ivan. Stop this.”

Skullion’s voice, and his black jacket on the edges of her vision. Ivan didn’t care. He wouldn’t be stopped. He would have his say, he would exact his retribution. He would make them pay. With a sideways motion of his head, he butted Skullion on the chin. Remorseless, he almost didn’t notice the American stagger back and fall against the doorframe.

“Idiot,” Vassilissa said, lips and teeth bloody. “He had to do it! He had to do it because *you’re* insane. Because you just don’t know when to stop.” She drew a gun—Ivan’s gun—and thumbed back the hammer. “Because we love you, and you need protecting from yourself.”

She raised the gun to push it under his chin, but he grabbed at her hand and smothered it in his huge palm.

“Lying bitch!” he shouted as he squeezed so hard she screamed before biting her lip and drawing blood. “He did it for money! He did it to save his own live!” He snatched the gun and turned to train it on the startled Judd. “Well, it hasn’t worked, because now he dies!”

“Ivan, no! Don’t!” Judd lurched to his feet and reached for Ivan. “I—”

Ivan fired, and the bullet smashed into Judd’s forehead to tumble and tear its way through and out of his skull in a vortex of blood and brain. A startled look froze on Judd’s face before he fell to the deck.

“*Nnnnoaaaaargh!!!*” Vassilissa’s shriek echoed about the cell as she staggered to her feet. She pushed Ivan aside and ran to Judd, fell to her knees, and gathered him in her arms. “No no no no no,” she sobbed as she rocked him and wiped at his forehead as if to wipe the wound away. “No, Judd, please. Please don’t go. Please.”

Ivan stepped toward her and aimed the gun. She seemed far away, and her voice faint and thin. His vision was black at the edges, and the dull rhythm of his blood in his ears threatened to drown her voice out.

“You bastard!” Bent almost double, clenched fists held to her chest, she screamed at him, her words barely maintaining their cohesion in the face of his grief. “Look at what you’ve done! He was a good man! A *Christian* man! You fucking *bastard*.” She spat at him, and the spittle struck his chin. “I wish you were dead.”

Detached from his actions, numb to this bloody reality, he took aim at his sister. He didn’t care. She’d sided with that Judas, and now she would pay. “That’s what you get, ‘Lissa. That what you get.”

He pulled the trigger.

#

The Ildred had barely crept halfway to the *Troika* before the corvette’s turrets spoke again. The bright fury of their muzzle flashes blazed in the gloom, and they spat volley after volley at the advancing aliens. A handful of Ildred were hit and thrown back across the courtyard to hit the walls with squelches and alien shrieks, but the others fired back. The turrets were silenced, torn to shreds by this return fire, and hung from the *Troika*’s belly in shrouds of sparks and with the whimpered whine of straining, ruined servos.

Silent, focused, the Ildred moved in.

#

Ivan pulled the trigger again and again, but the gun still didn’t fire.

He swallowed, and his senses began to clear. The gun felt light, its clip exhausted. Ivan lowered the gun, and put a hand to his forehead. A crushing pain swamped his temples. He staggered back, eyes still focused on Vassilissa. She stared at him, mouth slack and eyes streaming with tears.

“Oh, God,” Ivan stared at the gun. To shoot Judd had been bad enough, but to try and shoot his own *sister*? “Oh, God. Oh, God.” He looked at her again, and spread his hands in an imploring gesture. “Oh, ‘Lissa, I’m so sorry, I...” He choked on the words, and swayed. He felt cold, separated from his limbs. “So sorry.”

She stood and ran past him, weeping into her hands. He turned to watch her flee the brig. Then he looked at the gun, a hideous lump of spite and oil that had separated him from his humanity, his friends, his family.

Doll Two stepped forward and took the gun from him. “I think that’s quite enough, Master Ivan.”

Stupefied, swaying like a drunk, Ivan looked at the serf before turning to Skullion. Thom, he thought. My own beloved Thom. He’ll understand...

“You...you do, don’t you? You understand, yes?” Ivan said. He held his hands together in an attitude of prayer. “You under—”

“All I understand right now, Ivan,” Skullion said as he pushed himself away from the doorframe, “is that you’re a cunt.”

Skullion staggered across the cell and struck Ivan on the chin. Already weakened, already dazed, Ivan fell and darkness seized him.

#

Bent beneath the weight of her grief, Vassilissa ran through the *Troika*, unaware of her surroundings as she wept into her hands. She had to get off the ship, away from Ivan. That was all she knew. How could he do such a thing? Was he really such a monster? She'd never wanted to believe he could truly be the cold and terrible killer his enemies claimed. But there, back in the brig, lay the cold and bloody evidence. Judd. Dead. Slaughtered by her own brother.

This cannot be happening, she told herself. I should have found a way—any way—to keep him alive. She squeezed her eyes shut and staggered on blindly as she tried to stem the tears. But this time her self-control failed her. There could be no denying these tears, or her pain.

She opened her eyes to find she had blundered into the hangar. With her face glistening with tears, she roared in anguish. Her cries echoed about the cold space and continued to assail her as she reached the hangar doors. With a blow from her closed fist she opened the doors and deployed the ramp before sinking to her knees. The sound of her sobbing fought with that of the ramp's hydraulic hiss—and it won.

Then a new sound impinged on her grief: the whine of macro-servos on Theocracy armour. With a sharp intake of breath she looked up to see Ildred advancing on the *Troika*. She shrank back, but they'd seen her already, and the foremost—a hunched hulk of scars and teeth—spoke, his guttural tones translated through a speaker on his collar, “Surrender now, by order of His Dutiful Majesty the Imperial Theocrat, and you will be accorded due mercy.”

She looked at the school of shark-like Ildred through the ocean of her tears. There must have been twenty that she could see, never mind the others surrounding the corvette. One of these beasts—just one—would have been enough to kill most men. But she was not most men. She was a Valentine, and she would choose when to die.

She stood and drew her sabre. She sneered and drew her pistol.

#

The pilot seat felt uncomfortable to Skullion as he sat at the *Troika*'s controls. He gripped the yoke with one hand and stabbed at the console over his head with the other. Immediately a welcome vibration carried up the seat and into his kidneys.

“Batteries, muon generators and graviton arrays now online,” Doll Two said as it took position at the engineering station. “Scanners green-lining n—oh.”

“‘Oh’?” Skullion turned to the android serf. “‘Oh’ isn't a good word, Dolly. What's the fuck's up?”

“It appears Mistress Vassilissa has disembarked to engage the Ildred.”

“What?” He turned back to look at his displays. Sure enough, external cameras showed an infra-red image of Vassilissa as she fought tooth and claw with the armoured Ildred. She swung for their exposed heads with her cavalry sabre whilst shooting others in the eyes with her revolver. He ground his teeth. What the fuck did she think she was doing? Now they'd have to try and save her—

A volley of fire tore into Vassilissa, and she fell. A crush of Ildred swamped her the moment she hit the cobbles.

“Dammit,” he whispered, momentarily frozen, “not you as well, ‘Lissa.”

Jesus, he thought, there ain't gonna be anybody left at this rate. The notion jolted him out of his frigid state. He had to get out of here, and now.

He flicked a row of switches on the console before him and grabbed a headset from its cradle by his side. “Dolly, seal that ramp, then put me through to Maxim.”

“Certainly.”

“Maxim here.”

“Max, what’s your sitrep?” Skullion said as he donned the headset and spoke into his mic.

“We’ve reached the portal, and are almost through the Echo.”

“Grade A, Max.” He fired up the *Troika*’s Newton systems and eased the yoke back. As ever, his stomach lurched as that weird sensation of neutral G seized him before the system equalised and the corvette lifted off. “What about the *Oprinichki*?”

“They refuse to go through.”

“What the fuck?” He adjusted the controls to point the *Troika* at the sky. The pitter patter of the Ildred’s weapons pelting the corvette rattled over the whistles and beeps of the flight-deck and the throb of the Newton system. “Why?”

“They insist on staying here until the portal has collapsed to ensure no-one follows us.”

He shook his head. What was it about heroes? Why couldn’t people just look after their own skin these days? “Well, let ‘em.”

“But—”

“No, Max, fuck ‘em. If you wanted the bleeding heart club, you got the wrong number. We don’t have the time or the men to waste arguing with androids. Get the hell outta there and let ‘em die, clear?”

“Well, you’re the boss...”

“Damn right, Max. Now go. We’ll hook up with you on Gift, clear?”

“Clear. Good luck. Maxim out.”

Skullion grunted as he looked at the scanners. All he could see was a sky full of Theocracy ships, and he was sat in a ship with a super-sized bull's-eye painted on it. Luck? He laughed. He needed a goddamn miracle.

“Mister Skullion?” asked Doll Two

“Yeah?”

“How do you intend to get past the Theocracy fleet. It is awfully big, after all.”

“I dunno. I’m making this up as I go along.”

#

The *Troika* picked up speed as Skullion gunned the engine. His gaze swept from scanner to scanner. Theocracy ships now surrounded the *Troika*, with the mother ship dead ahead, scythes to the aft, and gunships to port and starboard. Why aren’t they doing anything, he wondered. He’d have expected something by now, even if it were only a barrage of missiles and masers, but for them to just do *nothing*?

“Incoming signal from The Now’s mother ship, Mister Skullion.”

Well, there y’go, he thought. This’ll be the first round of that famous Theocracy negotiation technique: comply or die. “Put it through,” he said with a sigh.

“Hey Skullion. How’s it going?”

“Gladys?” He almost bit his tongue. “What the fuck are you doing on there?”

“I’m convincing The Now’s grieving widow—and the new head of the fleet now her husband’s dead, I might add—that she *really* doesn’t want to fire on the *Troika*.”

Skullion frowned. “Why? You stabbed us in the back. Why help us escape?”

“Because The Now crossed me and tried to have me killed. That, and I’m hot for Ivan.”

“And you’re welcome to him,” Skullion said as he brought up a sub-menu on his monitor to access navigation. “Me and Ivan are through.”

“I’m...sorry to hear that, Thom.”

“The fuck you are.” He scrolled through a selection of friendly ports within range. It was, after all, a long way to Kithaen’s farm on Gift, and he’d need to fuel up first.

“Yeah, you’re right. Now, as soon as you’re clear of the fleet you engage the Graviton drives and don’t show your face on Promise again, right? That’s the deal.”

“Suits me.” His finger hovered his final selection: the Gestalt colonies, he thought. They’d do for now. “How long do we have until the Theocracy come after us?”

“Well me and Mrs Now have struck a deal. Long as she wants to live, she leaves you and Ivan alone.”

“Sweet deal. Thanks.”

“Just do me one favour, Skullion.”

“Shoot.”

“You tell Ivan what I did for you, and that I’m sorry for switching sides.”

He checked a different monitor. The *Troika* had almost reached the fringe of the Theocracy blockade... “After today I doubt I’m telling Ivan anything ever again.”

He jabbed at his console to activate the Graviton drives. They kicked in, and the *Troika* jumped to faster-than-light speed to leave Promise, the Theocracy, and Black Gladys far, far behind.

#

“The *Troika* took eighteen months to reach Gregor and Kithaen on Gift,” Rish said as he concluded his tale, “and in that time Skullion left, and Ivan hunted and exterminated every single Plague Rat by hand—except Gladys, of course.”

Thus Rish finished his tale, but the twins’ questions were numerous: Ivan had said they needed to get inside the Torch to reach the portal? Could they still use it to reach this farm of Kithaen’s? Would Gregor be there? What had become of Black Gladys? But Rish waved all these queries away. It had passed three in the morning, and he wasn’t as young as he used to be: he needed some sleep. Sullen, reflective, and perhaps even unsettled by what they’d heard, the twins agreed to leave their questions until morning. By then, Rish hoped, they would have had time to think both about what they’d learnt, and how they could use it to understand their Uncle and his continued fight against not only his past, but his self.

Now the girls slept in their temporary billets. Rish had put Tatiana up on a fold-out bed amongst the clutter of packing boxes and trunks in the attic, whilst Katarina slept on a tiny bed in the back bedroom. Fussing and clucking like a mother hen, Rish ensured they had all they needed in the way of water, towels, blankets, and bed clothes, and left them to sleep.

He sat in his armchair with a glass of whisky and his sketch of his old friend Laiverius in his hand. “Well,” he said as he toasted the picture, “here’s to chickens roosting and all that, eh?”

Draining the last of the liquor, he rose. Light crept through the crack in his curtains, and he groaned as he looked at the clock. Another night’s sleep lost to reflection and regret. He put his head in his hands. When will I ever learn?

“Where’s Ivan?”

Rish looked down. Stalin had fallen asleep as soon as the twins had gone to bed, and slept soundly since. Now however, he peeked out from under the paws over his nose, one eye open and both ears cocked.

“In my room. I told him to sleep in there.”

“He isn’t there.”

“Of course he is. Where else would he be?”

Stalin jumped to his feet, and that familiar querulous aspect entered his voice. “Rish, I’m scanning that room right now, and he isn’t there...”

As one they ran for the stairs. Stalin bounded ahead, and Rish huffed and puffed in his wake. The door to Rish’s room bedroom splintered and fell apart under Stalin’s weight as the cyborg dog threw himself against it, and the pair burst into the room. Ivan’s sleeping bag lay empty and cold on the floor.

Rish’s heart sank and his blood chilled. There, on the pillow where Ivan’s head should have lay, sat a small black paper heart. He snatched at it, and his hands shook as he read the short message written across the heart:

All things come to she who waits. Love and kisses, Gladys x

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Night Time*

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