

## 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 naught. 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..."

*To be continued...*

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