

Keys to the Kingdom

by Paul L. Mathews

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.”

#

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 a 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 bleeped 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 Black 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.”

To be continued...

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