

## The Keys to the Kingdom

by Paul L. Mathews

### 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 spittal 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 words 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. A 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 be 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 then 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 then 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.

*To be continued...*

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