

The Keys to the Kingdom

by Paul L. Mathews

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 Pagentorns 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.

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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—wearing levis, 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 Skulion!"

"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.”

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“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.

To be continued...

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