

The Keys to the Kingdom

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Five

Guns Blazing

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

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

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

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

“I am here, Major Judd.”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Major Judd?”

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

#

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

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

unfaithful wife and a bruised ego. This time he lay on the verge of Death by a Thousand Cuts.

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

Skullion stepped forward and reached for Judd's shoulder. "You should let me look at that."

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

"Major Judd?"

"Yes, Dolly?"

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

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

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

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

Judd gripped his mic between thumb and forefinger and raised the *Oprinicki* leaders. "Nobby? Zhukov? Status."

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

"Orders?"

Judd hesitated. The Echo: a primeval reality beneath their own where time and distance were malleable. A skilled artisan like Kithaen could use the Echo to transport

matter huge distances in a short time. But if she were to lose control of the portal the energies unleashed would be catastrophic. And yet their only chance of getting out of the Torch alive rested in getting back to Kithaen and that portal before the Ildred cut them off. But could they reach her in time?

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

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

“And you, General?” Nobby asked.

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

“Wise. I concur. Nobby out.”

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

#

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

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

“I’m sorry.”

“Judd, darling, there isn’t time—”

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

"Jesus Christ , Ivan. Stop this."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He pulled the trigger.

#

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

Silent, focused, the Ildred moved in.

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

"It appears Mistress Vassilissa has disembarked to engage the Ildred."

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

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

"Dammit," he whispered, momentarily frozen, "not you as well, 'Lissa."

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

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

"Certainly."

"Maxim here."

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

"We've reached the portal, and are almost through the Echo."

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

"They refuse to go through."

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

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

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

"But—"

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

“Well, you’re the boss...”

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

“Clear. Good luck. Maxim out.”

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

“Mister Skullion?” asked Doll Two

“Yeah?”

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

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

#

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

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

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

“Hey Skullion. How’s it going?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m...sorry to hear that, Thom.”

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

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

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

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

“Sweet deal. Thanks.”

“Just do me one favour, Skullion.”

“Shoot.”

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

“Where’s Ivan?”

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

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

“He isn’t there.”

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

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

As one they ran for the stairs. Stalin bounded ahead, and Rish huffed and puffed in his wake. The door to Rish’s room bedroom splintered and fell apart under Stalin’s

weight as the cyborg dog threw himself against it, and the pair burst into the room. Ivan's sleeping bag lay empty and cold on the floor.

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

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

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Night Time*

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