

Russians

by Paul L. Mathews

Twenty years before the revolution, before being forced to flee Oridia, and Ivan had lost his bearings. Caught in the blast from a mortar round, he lay amongst rubble, coughing and bleeding. All about him, the fortress Ferroc Boon blazed, a curtain of flame and smoke from behind which came a crunching, grinding noise—stone being crushed under metal.

Craning his neck, vision dimmed by blood running from a gash in his forehead, Ivan saw a Theocracy noble stood at the breach in the fortress wall, its brass *Stak Ta* suit incandescent in the reflected light of the surrounding fire.

Ivan groaned and made a feeble attempt to reach his pistol, fallen in the rubble before him. But it was no use. He was too weak and the noble too quick. It reached Ivan in two long strides to thrust sword through his outstretched hand. What little remained of Ivan's strength was summoned for one last, agonised howl of pain, and then he lay there, resigned to his fate.

Then, gunfire boomed across the fortress's courtyard, and the noble's *Stak Ta* suit was enshrouded in sparks as the heavy calibre rounds drove him back.

Yevgeny, Ivan thought. Thank God.

Moments later, the noble finally fell, holed and riven, collapsing at the breach like discarded scrap. Undaunted, his troops tried to force their way around their leader, desperate to fulfil his orders and take the fort, only to be cut down by Yevgeny's systematic fire.

Then Crimea, Yevgeny's cyborg dog, was at Ivan's side. A cross between a rottweiler and a tank, the dog sank his teeth into the loose material of Ivan's jacket before, jaws locked, he began to drag Ivan to safety under Yevgeny's covering fire.

"Crimea," Ivan slurred, losing consciousness, "get me to Skullion."

"Skullion," the dog mumbled through a mouth full of material. "Aye, sir."

"I remember," Crimea then declared.

"I remember," Ivan gasped.

#

"Parlour," announced Kirill. "Long range scans suggest the *Troika* is about to enter orbit of the planet Parlour."

Two decades since the battle of Ferroc Boon, and Crimea paced the darkened flight deck of the *Siberian Winter*, his ceramic claws clicking on the smooth floor. His dark, canine eyes narrowed in suspicion as he looked at Kirill. "Parlour? That doesn't make sense. It's deep into the Pagentorns, and why would Ivan go deeper? He should be making a break for the Accord, or the Dee Kays, surely?"

"Sauber's Bazaar." The voice was cold and biting, like a winter's wind. Crimea looked to its owner: his commanding officer, Yevgeny. Fingers sharp as knives, the thin old man stroked his chin thoughtfully as he perched on the edge of the captain's chair. His face was lost in shadow in the half-light. "It's in orbit around Parlour right now."

“Sauber’s Bazaar?” asked Crimea, his head lowering as his voice took on a deferential timbre. “Why would Ivan go there?”

Yevgeny paused before answering. “I’m... not sure.”

“What are your orders, sir?” Kirill oozed, his crooked, malformed hands wringing as he bowed his crooked, malformed head.

Yevgeny glanced at the cyborg dog. Company commander or not, the old man still depended on Crimea—his most trusted lieutenant—for advice.

“Kirill,” the canine ordered, “set a course for Parlour. It’s time to catch up with our old friend Ivan. And kill him.”

#

“Say that again,” slurred Boyd as he squinted at Doll Two across the *Troika*’s stark, sterile med-bay. “In layman’s terms.”

“If we do not get Master Ivan to a specialist soon,” Doll Two said, its voice factual and devoid of hyperbole, “he will die.”

“Die?” Boyd muttered, staring into space as though trying to grasp the meaning of the word. Ivan turned to study him. Dishevelled and blurry eyed, the Scotsman had obviously been drinking heavily.

Doll Two turned her smooth, featureless face in Boyd’s direction. “It seems Master Ivan’s encounter with the Witch’s dragons has left certain side effects. Not only is there significant—and continued—agitation of the skin, but also internal damage. Master Ivan’s internal organs are showing the first signs of tissue degeneration. If it is allowed to continue, unabated —”

Ivan’s cyborg dog, Stalin, asked, “Can’t you do anything?”

“I have tried everything I am programmed to know, Stalin,” Doll Two said. “But, as much as the concept confounds me, I would surmise the answer is less conventional.”

Stalin looked at Ivan.

“Skullion,” Ivan said heavily, as he realised there was no alternative. “I need Thom Skullion.”

Stalin’s voice rose in pitch. “Skullion?” Disbelief moulded the cyborg’s skinthetic features. “Why?”

Ivan couldn’t answer straight away. Creasing in agony, his hands went to his chest. The pain was still intense, and the welts left by the Witch’s dragons sore and open. They wept a black, viscous puss that smelled of hatred and vengeance. Finally, as the pain abated a little, he took hold of the wedding ring tied around his neck with a leather cord. “He is healer,” he said, his broken English strained and contorted, “and I am dying. I have no choice, yes?”

“That’d be a great plan if Skullion didn’t want to kill us,” Stalin said. A nervous scratch had entered his tone, and Ivan knew just whose hide the dog was worried about.

“Kill you?” slurred Boyd, obviously struggling to keep abreast of the conversation.

“It was not me Skullion wanted to kill, it was Gregor. But that was long time ago. I am sure Skullion has forgotten all about it,” Ivan said, lying through his teeth.

“I doubt that, Ivan,” Stalin said. “All our enemies seem to have long memories...”

Boyd lifted a finger. “Wait! I remember now! I’ve heard of Skullion!” He pointed at Ivan. “He was your company medic, right? The queer?”

“Enough!” Ivan snapped, as—pain or no pain—his patience reached its end. He turned to glare at Boyd. “Get to bed and out of my sight, yes?”

“But—”

“No ‘buts’,” Ivan roared. “You are very drunk, and I am very angry at you. Now leave before I lose temper.”

Ivan saw it in Boyd’s eyes. Suddenly the Scotsman was clear-headed, the all-too apparent fear of Ivan’s wrath sobering him quickly. Even now, Ivan smiled to himself, his reputation could scare the wits out of the hardest men.

It took a moment or two for Boyd to lever himself to his feet and wobble out of the room, throwing a mumbled apology in Ivan’s direction as he left. Ivan made no sign of acknowledgement. Right now, he didn’t care.

“So, do you know where Skullion is?” Stalin asked.

“Of course. The Bazaar. We should be arriving within hour, yes?”

#

True to his word, the *Troika* orbited Parlour inside of fifty minutes, and thirty minutes later, Ivan, Stalin and the towering mute bodyguard, Vast—clad in her transparent armour and sporting a belt full of guns—stood in the doorway of one of the Bazaar’s smaller hangars. Their shuttle, locked down and idle, lay dormant behind them. Beyond the hangar lay the Bazaar.

Once described by Matinee as “*Babylon 5 meets Dungeons and Dragons*”, Sauber’s Bazaar was contained within the belly of a converted planetoid. A labyrinthine congestion of market streets hewn from the rock, it was rammed with a miasma of stalls, and the noise, smell and simmer of life and danger slipped about them like a cut purse.

Ivan, for all the pain he was in, for all his apprehension at meeting Skullion again, couldn’t help but smile as his senses brought memories back. The sour scent of Karscalion coffee stung his nose, and just the smell of it took him back to stolen moments between missions, sipping the stuff with Skullion and laughing as the buzz made them carefree and confident. As Ivan, Stalin and Vast moved through the chaos of stalls, there was the same gentle throb in Ivan’s kidneys as the Bazaar’s subterranean generators laboured to power bright spotlights. A kaleidoscope of stall-holders, beggars and hookers assailed them with a dizzying array of bargains, pleas and come-ons. Alien robbers and ne’er-do-wells lurked in the shadows as their narrow, multitudinous eyes looked out for the overworked and undermanned militia. The air tasted of spice and sweat tinged with cordite and perfume, and the heat made Ivan sweat.

Making the best progress they could manage in this strangle-hold of commerce and survival, the trio suddenly found themselves accosted by a female Morling. Diseased and weak, she thrust her baby toward Ivan.

“*Ekta ti! Elapse!*” the mother begged, alien eyes clogged and almost blinded by sticky fluid and some sort of fungal infection with its own tiny, snapping mouths. “*I Noncat efed ti! Elapse!*”

Vast stepped forward and shoved the mother aside before—as she was paid to do—dragging Ivan away in search of safety. Ivan looked back, mesmerised by the alien baby. It was barely

alive. It was obvious the mother just wanted somebody—anybody—to take it from her and feed it.

He forced himself to look away. He had no room for kids.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Stalin said, voice sullen and laden with an apparent thirst for self-preservation.

Ivan looked at him. In all the time he’d owned Stalin, it never ceased to amaze him just how nervous a cyborg dog could actually look. Everything about Stalin—from his body language, to his jittering eyes, to the oscillation in his voice—screamed fear. Ivan wished he could blame it on some faulty chip or other, but no. Stalin was just a coward.

As though she concurred with Stalin’s reservations—if not his abject fear—Vast pulled one of her smaller pistols from a holster on her utility belt and offered it to Ivan.

He shook his head, as he suspected Vast knew he would. It had been nearly twenty years since he’d sworn he’d never use a gun again—and he’d meant it. “No. No guns,” he said, smiling grimly. “I mean, what could possibly happen to us here?”

#

From the flight deck of Yevgeny’s ship—the *Siberian Winter*—Crimea could see her sister ship, the *Troika*. Orbiting Parlour, it looked placid and defenceless.

“Long range scans detected a shuttle leaving the *Troika* fifteen minutes ago,” Kirill said. “It was manned by a human, a Vermiddion Devil and a cyborg canine.”

Crimea smiled. A cyborg dog and a Vermiddion Devil. Surely they had to be Stalin and Vast. Ivan was sure to be with them.

“They must be in there,” Yevgeny declared, “Sauber’s Bazaar.”

Beyond the *Troika*, Sauber’s Bazaar sat demure and innocuous, the randomness of the planetoid’s rocky surface broken only by the occasional ram-scoop, thruster, graviton array, torpedo tube, or docking bay.

“We ignore the *Troika* for now. Come back for it when Ivan’s dead.” Yevgeny said.

“Oh, a masterful plan. So succinct and incisive.” Kirill said.

“Crimea?” Yevgeny continued, ignoring Kirill. Still his face was lost in the flight deck’s half-light.

Crimea stepped forward. “Aye, sir?”

“Prepare the company. We’ll be landing shortly.”

“I remember,” Crimea said, citing the company motto.

Yevgeny replied with a nod. “I remember.”

#

Sat in a tiny café, Ivan drank a strong Karscalion coffee whilst Vast stood at his shoulder and maintained a vigilant watch. Stalin lay at Ivan’s feet beneath the table, fretting and nervous.

Ivan winced. The pills Dolly had given him were having less and less effect, the pain becoming worse. It felt like his skin was being scratched away by sandpaper, and his senses besieged by an increasingly acute pain in his skull. His breath was becoming laboured, and he felt clammy and cold. Even the coffee wasn’t helping. “We go,” he said.

Vast and Stalin followed as he limped from the café, and briefly Ivan wondered if Skullion could heal that old wound too, take the limp away. Maybe even a few deeper scars? He smiled a humourless, resigned smile and glanced at Vast. Somehow he doubted it. There were some scars even Skullion would never be able to reach.

“Have you any idea were Skullion actually is?” Stalin asked.

“Of course,” Ivan said. “The Bazaar.”

Stalin looked at Ivan quizzically. Even the normally implacable Vast’s face creased a little in bemusement.

“But the Bazaar’s a big place, Ivan,” The cyborg dog said “It’s gonna take a long time to find him if you can’t narrow that down.”

“I don’t need to,” Ivan said, looking about him. “Skullion will find me.”

“But how will he know you’re here?”

Ivan smiled. He’d already seen them—the urchins and snitches—sneaking off into the depths of the market after he passed their shady hiding places. Yes, even after all these years his reputation was still such that these guttersnipes could easily find somebody—some old enemy—willing to pay for a tip-off as to his presence.

#

Not yet an hour since the *Siberian Winter* had landed in one of the Bazaar’s bigger hangars, and Yevgeny’s company—the melee of the market pausing and parting before it like the Red Sea—already had a lead on Ivan. Down a discreet alley, Crimea questioned a young urchin. She looked longingly at the rations Yevgeny was about to hand over, the old soldier little more than a slender silhouette in the darkened alley.

“And you say you’ve seen Ivan where?” Crimea watched her attentively, looking for any sign of untruth.

“Over at the Karscalion sector,” the girl said. Painfully thin and malnourished, she was all dirt, cuts and tears.

“And where was he heading?”

“I don’t know. My guess is he’s looking for Skullion.”

Crimea blinked.

“Skullion?” The surprise in Yevgeny’s voice echoed that which Crimea felt. “Thom Skullion is here, in the Bazaar?”

“Yes,” the girl said, licking cracked lips.

Crimea and Yevgeny exchanged glances. Skullion? That was unexpected, yet it made perfect sense. Crimea had always known Ivan would go running back to Skullion one day.

The dog growled, “Where is he? Where does Skullion live?”

“Will that get me extra?” the girl asked, not taking her gaze from the rations.

A click of Yevgeny’s fingers and his company complied, seizing the girl and forcing her to her knees. Crimea detected a ripple of perverse excitement sweep through the men. Crimea knew they’d soon have their sport with the girl, and one was already starting to finger the buttons on his fly.

Baring his fangs, he stepped up to the petrified child. “Don’t overplay your hand, child. Now, tell me: where is Thom Skullion?”

#

“I hate this place, Ivan.”

“Be quiet, Stalin.”

“Ivan, it’s dangerous. What’s there to like?”

Ivan made an expansive sweep of his arms that encompassed the surrounding market. “The colour. The sound. The smell,” he said.

“It’s garish, it’s noisy and it stinks—”

Ivan stopped and turned to face the dog. “And you would prefer what? An ice planet, like Oridia, with all that cold and all that snow?”

“At least it was safe,” Stalin said. “Well... until the revolution.”

“It was boring.”

“I’d settle for boredom over certain death any day.”

“That is because you are coward.”

“This coming from Mister ‘Afraid of Commitment’,” a strange voice cut in.

The three of them turned just in time to see a young woman lunge for Ivan. Vast quickly enveloped the youngster in massive, tattooed arms before she reached Ivan, however, and the bodyguard held her off the floor. Out of reach of Ivan, she kicked and struggled instead, spitting words at him.

“You!” she shrieked. “You broke his heart! You said you’d come back! You said you *loved* him!” Her head was shaven yet stubbly and, despite her lack of height, the intensity of her struggle suggested strength and resilience. Clad in dark clothes, they were topped off with a black leather jacket decorated with painted, stylised skulls. It was a jacket Ivan knew all too well.

Stalin paced a half-circle in front of the girl. “Who the hell are you?”

She narrowed her eyes and glared at Ivan. “My name is Skinn. I’m Skullion’s daughter.”

Ivan felt his chest tighten. “And where is Thom?” he asked, almost afraid. “Where is Skullion?”

She stopped struggling. “You don’t know?” she asked, with a hint of suspicion. “You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

Skinn didn’t answer straight away. “I think you’d better come with me,” she finally said.

#

Following the urchin’s directions, Yevgeny’s company had left the commercial sector. The confusion and colour of the market had evaporated into a steady stream of alien life making its way to and from homes, rented apartments and slums. All of these aliens, even the militia, wisely avoided getting in the company’s way.

Now, in the bowels of Sauber’s Bazaar, flanked by houses and apartment blocks, Yevgeny and his men had found a massive tree marooned in the sea of rock and shadow. Thick and

old, its roots dug into the street's granite floor, and its trunk rose until buried in the thoroughfare's high ceiling. It had a single wooden door in its base, and the branches were bare.

"Okay, maybe the girl wasn't lying," Crimea said.

"Oh well," Yevgeny said, his voice suddenly muffled as he ducked his face down into a combat mask. "She'll recover. Probably enjoyed it anyway. The slut." He raised his head, the blank, metal façade of his combat mask hiding his contempt just as effectively as the mask's electronic distortion of his voice.

Crimea ignored the squad as the unit laughed sadistically. He sniffed at the air, skinthetic nostrils flaring as his olfactory sensors locked onto familiar scents. Ivan, Stalin (How was that shit still alive?) and a Vermiddion Devil. They were here all right. But there was something else—another smell. "Yevgeny, sir," he began, still sniffing the air, "I smell... something."

"What?"

"I'm... not sure. It's that bitter smell Kithaen used to reek of."

"Kithaen." Yevgeny said, and Crimea's fangs bared in a smile. Even the mask can't hide the disgust in that tone, he thought. "That bitch. Magic?"

"I wouldn't bet against it."

Kithaen. The enchantress. Crimea had never trusted her or her witchcraft, even when they'd served in the Omega Hammers together. Just the smell of her—the memory of her—made him nervous, and he knew Yevgeny felt the same. The sooner this was over, the better.

#

The interior of the tree was surprisingly big. Ivan stood in the living room, fiddling with his wedding ring. The room was homely, with low beams and a rustic feel. Semi-circular, it was cluttered with old wooden furniture and illuminated purely by candles dotted about the place in old metal candelabras. Masses of old photos festooned the walls, and Ivan was inspecting each and every photo in turn.

They were all there, frozen in time, all the old crew. Crimea. Kithaen. Yevgeny and Gretchen. Stalin. Even Vassilissa before she'd gone totally mad. Most prominent was a picture of Skullion, back in his pomp. Wearing the same skull jacket his daughter now wore, he looked dark, vital and handsome—just the way Ivan remembered him. He was stood in front of a section of the *Siberian Winter's* hull. The motto Я вспоминаю—"I Remember"—written large and proud behind him. It was almost like he was taunting Ivan.

"Ivan, I'm really confused now," Stalin said. "First, I didn't know Skullion had a kid. Second, what does she mean by 'You said you loved him' and 'You broke his heart'?"

"You must a combat model," Skinn said as she walked into the room, "'cos you're plainly stupid."

She handed Ivan a glass of water. Ivan took it, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her, such was his discomfort. To look at her, to look at that jacket, just made him feel guilty and spineless. How could he have walked away from Skullion like that? Maybe Stalin is not only coward, he thought with a sardonic smile.

"Ivan?" Stalin pressed.

"Are you gonna tell him, or do I have to?" Skinn said.

Ivan paused. Maybe it was time. Maybe it would help to talk about it, to get it out in the open. God only knew he couldn't when Gregor was alive. He didn't dare think of what would have happened if Gregor—the galaxies greatest bigot—had found out about him and Thom.

Ivan drew in a long, deep breath. Then he began. "Thom was not just company medic, Stalin," he said. "He was my husband."

There was a sound of half-swallowed water being sprayed across the room. Ivan, Stalin, and Skinn turned to look at Vast. Water dribbled down her chin as she gawped, frozen in place with the glass of water held to her mouth.

Stalin looked at Skinn. "But if Skullion was...y'know...how does that explain you?"

"I'm adopted, stupid."

"Adopted?" Ivan said, subdued. "Thom and I always talked about the possibility. He peered at Skinn, studied her a little. Could this, in another life, have been his daughter? The question—the same *fear*—crossed his mind, the same way it had done with Skullion: what kind of parent would he have been? As always, he shoved it aside. All he could think of then was that starving Morling baby.

No. No kids, he'd thought, then as now. I have no room for kids. Or the guts. "I never realised he had actually done it," he said.

Skinn smiled insincerely. "Well, maybe if you'd kept in touch?"

Something finally hardened inside Ivan, and a fire ignited. "That is enough," he snapped. "You will stop trying to crucify me, yes?"

"The hell I wi—"

"Don't you think I feel guilty? Don't you think I miss your father? Skinn, I loved your father more than I thought was possible. Leaving broke my heart, too."

"Then why didn't you come back?" She clenched her fists, stamped her foot, and suddenly the hard veneer was stripped away. Ivan saw Skinn for what she was: a child.

"I could not! I had commitments. I had people to protect. Your father chose to stay here..."

He had to look away then. It was too much. He'd known it would be hard—but this? God, he wished the Witch had killed him after all. His head hanging, he fought to compose himself. He closed his eyes and ignored the gawping Vast and Stalin. Finally he felt Skinn's hands on his shoulder. She shook him gently.

"Hey," she whispered, "I'm sorry, okay? It's just... All these years, y'know? Seeing Dad miss you so much... You can't blame me for being angry at you, can you?"

Ivan turned to her and smiled a sardonic smile. "No. Or expect you to be as angry as I am."

They looked at each other and, for the first time, exchanged understanding smiles.

"So," Ivan said, "Thom. Where is he?"

Then the gunfire started.

#

"Pour it!" Yevgeny shouted to his squad over the report of their guns. "Pour it on! Don't let them get out alive!"

Crouched low and growling, Crimea watched as volley after volley lanced into the weird tree, ripping chunks from it. Crimea knew it was overkill, but he also knew Yevgeny wasn't taking any chances. Supposed 'pacifist' or not, Ivan was still a dangerous man.

The squad continued to fire for several minutes as the Bazaar's denizens panicked and fled, some screaming.

"Enough!" Yevgeny raised a hand. "Get in there. Sweep the place out!"

The squad responded immediately, crouching low as they ran toward the smoking tree, Crimea at point. Leading from the rear wasn't for him. He was one of Gregor Valentine's Omega Hammers, one of the most feared fighting units in the Pagetorns. Besides, he wanted the pleasure of ripping out Ivan's treacherous throat.

Two shots rang out, and then another two, and suddenly the squad was four men down, their bodies twitching in the street.

Crimea snarled, crouching low in reflex. "What the...?"

The answer was big and red, and it burst from the tree's door with both guns blazing. This rapid-fire setback was as accurate and it was unexpected, and Crimea felt his pace, and his jaw, slacken. That couldn't be the Vast child! She must only have been three feet tall when he'd last seen her.

Whoever it was, she was cutting the squad down. Her volleys were rapid and accurate, and what return fire hit her didn't seem to be slowing her down. Crimea could make out the subtle reflection of transparent armour, and what little fire penetrated it just didn't seem to be hurting her. Then Crimea remembered. Vast: the little Vermiddion child with prodigious self-healing. Bruises vanished in seconds. Wounds closed in minutes.

Then Vast shot him.

He was knocked off his feet by the concussion, and his front right leg separated from his torso, torn off at the shoulder by the blast. Rolling back, he tumbled to a stop, and tried to get up. It was to no avail.

"Grenades!" Yevgeny commanded. "Concussion and smoke!"

The squad complied. First a concussion macro-grenade exploded at Vast's feet, propelling her back across the street and into the hide of the tree, then the second laid down thick, impenetrable smoke.

"Retreat and regroup!" Crimea barked, and within the fog of the smoke grenade, he felt himself lifted and carried away.

#

Ivan had lost his bearings. Crimea's fire had ripped through the tree, and bark and smashed furniture lay strewn about the living room. He lay among the glass of so many ruined picture frames, coughing and bleeding. Beside him, Skinn and Stalin were picking themselves up from amongst the ruination of Skullion's home.

"I told you!" Stalin cried as he began to run in a tight circle, yapping like a scared puppy. "I told you we shouldn't have come here! That's Yevgeny and Crimea out there! *Crimea!* We're going to die, Ivan!"

"Shut up, Stalin!" Ivan's mind raced. Crimea? What were Yevgeny and Crimea doing here, and why were they trying to kill him? His hand went to his shoulder, trying to stem a tide of blood that soaked through his punctured coat.

“Oh, Jesus—that looks bad!” Skinn said, her face becoming even paler. Behind her Vast—wounded but healing rapidly—stumbled back into the room.

“Skullion,” Ivan managed to say through clenched teeth, spittle flying from his lips. “Now would be good time, yes?”

#

The squad broke into a vacant shop a block or so away. It would be only a few minutes until the Bazaar’s militia arrived, and Yevgeny plainly begrudged having to fight them too. They weren’t worth the ammunition.

Yevgeny had Crimea lowered onto the ground, the squad handling him with care. Once on the ground, Crimea raised his head to address Yevgeny, who knelt beside him to inspect the damage.

“It’s bad,” the dog said. “I can’t even get a diagnostic report from that shoulder. The wetware must be totally shot.”

“I can’t repair it here,” Yevgeny replied, his voice even and unflustered through the mask. “You’re going to have to return to the *Winter* whilst we finish off Ivan and the others.”

Crimea almost recoiled with horror. He hadn’t come all this way just to let somebody else kill Ivan. “Sir, please—”

“No, Crimea. I need you in one piece. We can handle those three.” Yevgeny reloaded his pistol. “They were lucky last time: we weren’t expecting to be facing somebody like Vast. We won’t make that mistake again.”

The squad murmured agreement.

“Very well, sir,” Crimea said, “but, if I *do* have to go back to the *Winter*, I have another plan of attack.”

#

Leaving Vast in what was left of the living room, Ivan—leaning heavily on Skinn—limped into the kitchen. The panicked Stalin was at his side.

“They’re gonna come back! They’re gonna come back and they’re gonna kill us!”

“Shut! *Up!*” Ivan shouted, tired of Stalin’s whining. He was in pain, and his vision was fading fast. He didn’t have time for theatrics, even if the damned hound was right.

The tiny kitchen was dominated by a fridge. Easily seven foot tall, its clean white door contrasted with the earthy colours of the kitchen’s wooden cupboards surfaces. Helping Ivan over to the fridge, Skinn opened it. It was big inside—easily big enough for the three of them to fit in.

“In we go,” Skinn said, pushing Ivan forward.

“In the fridge?” Stalin said. “Is this your plan? Hide in the fridge? Why don’t we just climb in the oven and admit we’re toast?”

“Just get in the damned fridge,” Skinn said.

“I thought we were going to see your father?”

“We are.”

Moments later, they were inside, surrounded by cheeses, milk, cold meats and vegetables.

“Is anybody gonna eat that ham?” Stalin’s fear was second only to his hunger.

Skinn didn't reply, she just closed the fridge door and plunged them into darkness.

Moments later, there was the *ka-chink* of a Zippo lighter being flipped open, and then the darkness was banished as Skinn lit a cigarette.

Stalin stared around, wide-eyed. "Guck me!" he said through a mouthful of stolen meat.

The fridge had gone, replaced with walls constructed from skulls. Before them was a staircase that spiralled downwards.

"One word, Stalin," Ivan said—he'd recognise this kind of magic anywhere—"Kithaen."

"This way." Skinn helped Ivan down the stairs as, cigarette dangling from her mouth, she held the Zippo aloft.

Stalin followed, ham hanging from his slack mouth as he looked about him, aghast. In the dancing half-light, the skulls seemed to laugh at his unease, and he quickened his step.

#

Three soldiers ran up the *Siberian Winter's* gangway and into the ship, heading straight for engineering. There waited Kirill.

"Oh, sir. Oh, my word." Kirill set to work sealing off capillary tubes and stripping out fragmented metal. "You're so brave, sir, you really are. Such bravery in the face of such damage—"

"Leave that," Crimea snarled through bared teeth.

"But sir! The damage! You won't be able to walk—"

"It doesn't matter. I have another plan."

"Another—?"

"Yes. And I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner. Tell me, Kirill, you sack of shit: do you still have those access codes for Stalin..?"

#

They reached the foot of the stairs... and Ivan could have sobbed. On a tangled mass of the tree's thick roots, and beneath a thin blanket—black, naturally—the man lay. He was nothing but skin and bone. The walls of the circular room were rammed with gawping skulls, silenced by candle upon lighted candle brooding nervously in their mouths.

"There he is," Skinn muttered. "My Dad. Hanging on just for you. Waiting."

Stalin stayed at the foot of the staircase while Skinn helped Ivan across to the tangleroot bed. She helped Ivan sit on the edge of the bed before backing away. "Let's go," she said to Stalin.

"Where?"

"The kitchen. Let's give these two some privacy. Besides, I bet this Crimea is about ready for a second assault."

Then they were gone, and Ivan Valentine was, for the first time in nearly twenty years, alone with Thom Skullion.

#

"Are you ready, sir?" Crimea asked.

“Aye,” Yevgeny replied over Crimea’s internal comm. “We’re ready. We’re across the street from the tree, in an alley. There’re some of those shitty militia men between us and the tree, but they seem to be in some sort of daze—as if they don’t register the tree’s existence.”

More of Kithaen’s magic, no doubt, Crimea thought. Still, it didn’t matter, not now his plan was about to be played out. “We should act now, Yevgeny,” he said. “I remember.”

“I remember,” the company replied.

Over his comms system Crimea could hear them break cover and rush their target, deigning to cut down the unfortunate militia *en route*.

Moments later they were in, smashing down the already-weakened door and walls, and engaging Vast. Crimea could hear the Amazon’s guns as they roared.

“Now, Kirill,” Crimea shouted.

“Aye, sir,” Kirill said, tripping the switch.

There was a moment’s disorientation, and then Crimea gained his bearings. He was in a kitchen, and he could hear Vast killing his men in the room next door. In front of him, a young woman he assumed was the Skinn girl was snarling as she emptied a boiled kettle in the face of one of the squad.

It had worked, Crimea realised. The access codes had worked. He’d taken over Stalin.

Leaving his men to deal with Vast and the girl, he turned and sniffed the air.

Magic. Kithaen’s magic. This place stank of it—and the smell was at it strongest there, in the fridge. Get ready, Ivan, Crimea thought as pawed open the door. I’m coming for you.

I remember.

#

Ivan touched the weathered hand gently, and Thom’s eyes opened, becoming little more than slits.

“Ivan?”

“Yes, Thom, it is me.” Ivan found it hard to keep emotion from his voice. Thom looked so old. He was every bit as twisted and gnarled as the roots he slept on. Indeed, Ivan could see some of the roots penetrated the skin, no doubt feeding Thom and keeping him alive.

“What... What happened to you?” This couldn’t be Thom. It just couldn’t. Thom was so strong, with dark hair and darker smile—not this bleak shadow. Ivan felt his throat tighten, and he fought to keep his tears in check. “You were so...”

Thom’s laugh was a dry and brittle, like leaves in an autumn wind. “Kithaen warned me, didn’t she? Didn’t she always say that every time I laid on hands, healed a wound, saved a life, that the energy had to come from somewhere? Well, I didn’t listen, did I? And this is the result, Ivan. I’m spent. Dried up. Dying.”

“There must be something I can do? I could take you to Kithaen—”

That dry laugh rustled about the room again, and the candles flickered.

“No. Kithaen’s done all she can. She left me this house, this bed, just to keep me alive.” He reached for Ivan’s hand and grasped it. His skin was cold, and his grip weak. “I don’t want anymore of her charity, Ivan, I’m still a proud man.” His hand trembled as he squeezed as

best he could. “All I wanted was just enough strength to hang on, just enough time to see you again—”

“And now you’ve lived long enough to see him die.”

Ivan turned to see Stalin at the foot of the stairs. Or at least it looked like Stalin. But Ivan knew. The way he crouched low, chin barely above the floor, hind raised, toes spread as claws sank deeper into the ground. He’d seen that pose before, that snarl, that subtle arch of skinthetic eyebrow. “Crimea,” he said, lip curling into a snarl of his own.

Crimea gave a near imperceptible nod. “Ivan.” The dog began to pace, circling, head still low.

“Crimea, why are you here? And why are you trying to kill me?” Ivan could see it in the dog’s eyes: he wouldn’t leave until Ivan was dead.

Crimea sneered as he circled. “The Long Knives are paying us to come after you, Ivan. Isn’t that ironic? Paying us when we’d have done it for free!” With that, Crimea leapt, knocking Ivan to the floor.

The pain Ivan felt as his head hit the ground was nothing compared to that flair of agony as Crimea sank his teeth into his shoulder, biting hard. As tough as Ivan was, as driven and brave and stubborn, he couldn’t suppress his howl of agony. As Crimea, straddling the Russian’s chest, ragged the big man to and fro like a piece of steak, Ivan made an attempt to fend him off, punching the cyborg in the side of the head. It was no use. These things weren’t just built to kill, they were built to be bullet proof. He achieved nothing but a broken knuckle.

But Ivan wouldn’t give in. He *couldn’t* give in. Was Crimea going to stop once he’d finished off Ivan? No. Ivan was all that stood between Crimea and Skullion, and Ivan would break the dog’s body in half to protect Thom.

His hand grasped a tangled root, and tore it from the ground, clubbing Crimea across the head with the thick piece of wood. He didn’t stop there. For all the agony he was in, for all the blood he was losing, for all the muffled growling and feral anger of Crimea’s attack, Ivan kept on trying, kept on hitting the cyborg in the head.

Finally, clearly annoyed more than hurt, Crimea let Ivan’s shoulder go, and seized the incoming root in his bloodied, frothing teeth, ripping it from Ivan’s grasp with a jerk of his cybercised neck. Then he swung his head, the root clubbing Ivan in the temple.

Crimea dropped the root as he stood over the dazed Ivan. “You’re a traitor, Ivan. You know that, don’t you?” Crimea growled. “All those years you and I fought side by side as brothers? All those years we saved each others lives—and for what? For you to just turn your back on us like that?”

Ivan’s voice was slurred, and his vision was dimming. “You... You were killing children—”

“They were *soldiers*, Ivan!”

“No, they were children. Soldiers or not, they were still children...”

Ivan fell silent, head flopping back on the roots. Suddenly his eyes snapped open. The roots! He could feel them squirming beneath his head and back. Were they moving?

“So you just gave away or position to the Theocracy and left us to be slaughtered?” Crimea lowered his head, teeth inches from Ivan’s face. “You just set us up and slipped away?” His voice lowered an octave as he leant forward again to whisper in Ivan’s ear. “Did you think we’d really be killed, Ivan? Did you think we’d forget?”

Ivan strained his trembling neck to look about him. Yes! The roots *were* moving! From out of the ground, from beneath Thom's bed, Ivan could see young saplings venturing forward into the open. They twisted and swayed blindly, as if listening. Then, hearing Crimea's diatribe, they homed in on the dog.

Crimea continued. "Well, we weren't killed, Ivan, and we didn't forget. We remember, Ivan, you bastard. *We remember!*"

With that, Crimea lunged for Ivan's throat, and Ivan couldn't help but cry out.

The killing blow never came.

The metal teeth were touching Ivan's skin. He could feel them in his flesh. But Crimea was held in place, seized by the roots as the clung onto his cyborg frame, grasping at his legs, his torso, his neck, his jaw.

Then they pulled him back and away from Ivan.

"Oh, well played, Ivan, you shit," Crimea said. "Well played. But it doesn't matter. Look at you. You're spent. I give you, what? Two minutes before you die anyway? I'm just sorry I couldn't see you go.

"Goodbye, Ivan."

#

Another moment's disorientation, and Crimea was back on the *Siberian Winter*.

"Crimea?" said Kirill, still hunched over the dog's shoulder as he continued to repair the damage. "Did you get him? Did you get Ivan?"

Crimea's tongue swept about his chops. He could still taste the blood he'd left behind on Stalin's lips. After two decades, his tasted salty, not sweet. "Oh yes, Kirill," he said. "He's dead alright."

#

Ivan didn't know where he was, but he knew he was nearly dead. He couldn't see. He couldn't hear. He felt sticky, covered in something congealed and tacky. He tried moving, but he couldn't.

"Ivan! Ivan!" The voice was coming from somewhere far away. He thought he could make out a shape above him—a face looking into his. A canine face.

Was that Stalin or Crimea? he wondered. Was he back at Ferroc Boon? Had Crimea dragged him out of the fire? Was that gunfire? Gunfire and fighting? Was that Yevgeny?

Skullion. Thom. He needed Thom.

"It's okay, Ivan. I'm here."

Ivan felt tender hands cup his face. They were strong hands, and their touch made Ivan's skin tingle. Instantly he felt his vision clearing, the darkness receding.

"Crimea!" Ivan said, almost delirious. "Crimea! He wants to kill us!"

Leaning over him, cupping his face in his hands, Thom looked young, handsome and virile. His roguish, stubbled face softened into a warm smile as he looked down at Ivan. "It's okay, Ivan," he said. "I've taken care of Crimea. Just relax."

Then Thom kissed him—a long, gentle kiss that rose above sex and spit and spelled love and sacrifice. For every moment Thom’s lips moved against his, Ivan felt the pain diminish, felt wounds heal and bones mend.

Finally he was strong enough to take hold of Thom, get his fingers into the healer’s lustrous, thick hair and feel that strong back move beneath his touch.

“I’m sorry,” Ivan murmured. “I wanted to come back, I really did. But, Gregor... I couldn’t tell him... About us. About me...”

“It’s okay,” Thom said with a sad smile. “I know. I understand.”

Then they kissed one last time, their mouths open. As their tongues caressed, he felt Thom Skullion breath one last, selfless breath, the remaining vestiges of his energy passing between them.

Then Ivan was healed and alive, and Skullion lay dead on his bed.

“Ivan!” Stalin yelled. “What just happened? I thought you were dead!” He watched Ivan get up. “You were torn to bits, and then you just... got better! But... But I think Skullion’s dead.”

Ivan didn’t answer, he just stood and looked at Skullion’s desiccated body. It looked drained and flat, like an empty vessel. Ivan went to him, leaning across the bed and kissing Thom on the forehead.

“Thank you, Thom,” he whispered, crying. “Thank you, so much.”

Then he turned away, intending to head back to the kitchen. His way was blocked, however, as three of Yevgeny’s soldiers appeared at the foot of the steps. He looked at them. He felt numb. He struggled to comprehend the concept of Skullion’s death.

“It’s over, Ivan,” one of the soldiers said as the others raised their guns. “We’ve got you.”

Then it burst out of Ivan, a roar that resounded about the weird chamber. Suddenly he felt thirty years younger. Suddenly the pain and the aches and the limp were gone. Suddenly he was the bloody, terrible bastard that had torn through the Pagentorns like a scythe, taking lives, planets and chances. Suddenly the vow to forsake violence and warfare was gone, and he was himself again. He tore into the three men with a violent grief and self-loathing that sustained him as he ignored their blows and took their lives in bloodied, hardened hands.

Stalin had to look away.

#

Crimea’s ears twitched, and a low growl started to build in his throat. He tried to raise his battered body off the bench even as Kirill worked on him, but—too badly damaged—his shoulder just pissed fluids as servos ruptured and failed. “What?” he asked over his comms suite, “you can’t kill *one* man?”

It was, he knew, a redundant question. The three men were dead already, and Ivan—no doubt healed by that shirt-lifter Skullion—was back. Not that pale, frightened shadow of Ivan that had been hiding on Oridia, but the Ivan he’d fought beside all those years ago.

The real Ivan. The one Crimea remembered all too well.

#

Twisting serpents of gun-smoke and dust slithered about the living-room, illuminated by the light that speared through the holes blown in the tree. Amongst the debris six of Yevgeny’s

company were sat on Vast—the Vermiddion bludgeoned into submission and barely conscious—as Yevgeny prepared to shoot her in the head.

Then Ivan burst into the room, breathless and covered in blood.

Yevgeny and his company froze, turning to stare at Ivan, and the two old comrades glared at each other.

“You!” Ivan said, breathing ragged and uneven. “You took him from me.”

“And ‘Hallo’ to you too, Ivan,” Yevgeny said as he bent his head to remove his combat mask. “It’s been a long time.” Mask removed, he raised his head. His face was covered in hundreds of tiny scars, scored into the skin in tallies of five. “I should know,” he said as he unbuckled his armoured vest, letting it fall to the ground. “I’ve been keeping count...”

He opened his tunic. His body was also covered in tallied scars, numbering in their thousands. “One for every day my company and I were prisoners, Ivan. One for every day we were locked up in that Theocracy hellhole. And this one,” he pointed to a particularly big scar rent into the skin over his heart, “marks the day my wife died.

“It’s been along time, Ivan—but now I’m going to make you pay.”

The words were lost on Ivan. Not for one second did he feel any remorse, not for one second did he pause to reflect on the news of Gretchen’s death. Instead he barrelled head-long into the seven men, taking them down in one lunge. They fell about Vast into a tangled heap, and Ivan was up first, smiling as if in some sort of daze.

What followed was both brutal and one-sided.

#

Crimea could hear them over the comms. He could hear them dying. It was no use, he realised. The mission was over. “Kirill,” he said, “get the *Winter* airborne. We’re leaving.”

Kirill blinked, clearly surprised. “Leaving? But, what about Yevgeny?”

“Yevgeny’s a dead man, Kirill,” Crimea said, pragmatism and self-preservation superseding any loyalty to his master, “and we’ll be next if we don’t get out of here, understand? Now let’s go.”

#

The fight had been fierce but brief, and it ended with Ivan pinning Yevgeny against the wall. Yevgeny was dead already, he just wouldn’t admit it, and he stared hard into Ivan’s eyes whilst Ivan—Yevgeny’s own knife in hand—felt the man’s ribs crack and part.

“I remember, Yevgeny,” Ivan declared, wild-eyed and savage, wrist deep in his enemy’s viscera. “*I remember.*”

Then Yevgeny admitted defeat, and Ivan stepped away, letting the body fall to the floor with a wet *klotch*.

Having hidden in the fridge for the duration of the fight, Stalin slunk into the living room, clearly embarrassed. The sorry remains of Yevgeny’s soldiers were strewn about the place, broken and torn by Ivan.

Trying not to dwell on this, Ivan—stitching up a nasty flesh-wound in his thigh—sat in the corner by Yevgeny’s body. He hadn’t come through this struggle unscathed.

He could use a medic, he thought. The bitter irony made him smile.

Ka-chink.

Teeth clenched as he fed the needle through his skin, Ivan looked up. Skinn had entered the living room too with vast. She offered a light to Vast—the Amazon’s wounds already healing—as they both indulged in a *jaffy* stick.

Ivan and Skinn made eye-contact, and he could see she knew that Thom was gone.

She showed no remorse, only a resignation. Resignation, and something else. Covered in cuts and bruises—the legacy of her own fight against Yevgeny’s men—there was something gritty and dark in Skinn’s eyes that made Ivan shiver. Homeless and orphaned, wounded and bloodied, Skinn didn’t care. In fact, Ivan guessed she quite liked it, and then he finally understood.

She really *wasn’t* her father’s daughter.

#

“You are sure you won’t come with us?” Ivan asked again.

They stood by Ivan’s shuttle now. Beyond the door into the docking bay the market bubbled and spat like boiling water in vivid contrast to the cool stillness of the bay.

“I’m sure.” Skinn nodded. “Skullion might have been happy to tear around the Pagentorns fighting for his life, but I’m not.”

She was lying and he could see it. She wanted nothing more than to be ‘tearing around the Pagentorns’—she just didn’t realise it yet. “What about you? D’ya think the Long Knives are gonna send anybody else after you?”

“Oh, I am certain of it.”

There it was again, the temptation. It was scrawled across her face, leering out from amid the cuts and bruises. “No. No, I’m not coming.” She clenched her fists, set her jaw in defiance.

“You have friends here, maybe?” Ivan asked. He loathed the thought of leaving her behind, wounded and alone. “Somebody you can stay with?”

“No.”

“What will you do?”

She shrugged. “I’ll think of something.”

That was an end to the conversation, he could tell. He suddenly felt ever more awkward. What was he supposed to do now? What was he supposed to say? Ivan looked at her. This girl—this ‘Skinn’—could so easily have been his daughter.

Finally, he did the only thing he could think of. He moved toward her, extending a hand of friendship.

She stepped away.

“No, Ivan. Don’t. It’s gonna take me a long time to forgive you for leaving Dad alone all these years. You know that, don’t you?”

He nodded.

“An’ Ivan?” she said, dark eyes boiling as she glared at him, “even if I do forgive you, I’ll never, *ever* forget.”

#

Skinn's words were still haunting Ivan as he steered the shuttle back toward the *Troika*. Behind him Sauber's Bazaar continued to orbit Parlour. He kept trying to concentrate on what he was doing, on where he was going, but all he could think of was what he'd left behind.

"Even if I do forgive you, I'll never, ever forget." Skinn had said. That is okay, he thought. Neither will I.

"Dolly, this is Ivan," he said over his headset. "Am beginning final approach. Prepare to receive and secure shuttle, yes?"

"Aye, sir," Doll Two replied, her voice echoing in his ear. "Preparing to receive and secure shuttle, Master Ivan."

"How are twins?" He hated to admit it, but Boyd's recent re-acquaintance with the bottle had introduced nagging doubts into Ivan's mind. Could he still trust the Scot to take care of the girls?

There was no response from Doll Two.

"Dolly?" Ivan said, puzzled. That wasn't like the android. "Dolly? What is wrong?"

"It is the twins, Master Ivan. They went down to the surface..."

"... And now I think they're dead."

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Safe and Sound*.

Discuss this story—and more—on the [Valentine Chronicles forum](#)