

# NIKOLAI DANTE

## SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

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# INTRODUCTION

**SIMON FRASER ONCE** told me that whenever he read a *Nikolai Dante* script, he heard my voice as Dante's. So, regardless of the fact that he's the son of a Russian aristocrat and an Italian Pirate-Queen, Dante - thief, adventurer and incorrigible ladies' man - speaks with a Glasgow accent, which, to be honest, is fine by me.

And, although Dante's immeasurably better-looking, I often see Simon in the artwork, especially the facial expressions. It makes me smile to think of Simon gurning furiously into a mirror in an attempt to capture panel descriptions I deliberately designed to infuriate him - 'Close, Dante, tough, sexy and devil-may-care, but also thoughtful, philosophical, even.'

The creation of *Nikolai Dante* has been covered in numerous interviews and is more a topic for the first book in the series, not the last. As this is the final book, I also don't want to comment on the story for fear of spoiling the climax for readers who didn't follow its initial serialization. You'll have to read the book to find out if Nikolai Dante really is 'too cool to kill'.

So, how do you encapsulate 15 years of swashbuckling SF adventures, cutthroat sword-fights, Machiavellian intrigue, global rebellion, inter-dimensional warfare, shenanigans and star-crossed romance, not to mention the odd bearded woman?

The answer, as Dante himself would say, is to not do with it, don't even bother trying. Just pour yourself a nice drink, put your feet up and read the books themselves; they're a lot more fun than listening to me blabbing on about them.

I'm not a great fan of examining your work too much anyway, elaborating grandly on the themes or subtext. I'd rather let people judge for themselves. The series did grow in scale and ambition, but in truth, I set out with no greater purpose than to try to write the sort of story I'd like to read myself, while also hoping that other people would enjoy it too.

Comic-book storytelling is nothing if not a collaborative process, and a number of people deserve thanks, beginning with the various editors.

Steve MacManus and John Tomlinson spotted the potential in the character, and started the buckle swashing with their commission of an 8-part storyline. John, crucially, was also responsible for suggesting Simon as artist.

David Bishop believed in Dante from the start, doubling the length of that first series and making the character a regular in *2000 AD*. After the initial commission, Dave was for me the series' most important editor - even if I've never quite forgiven him for cutting 'The Adventures of' out of the title!

Cheers to Andy Diggie for keeping the series thundering along during the transition from Fleetway to then new owners Rebellion. Matt Smith, Editor now for over a decade (an achievement in itself), has been hugely supportive and has extended us an enviable amount of creative freedom. Thanks for commissioning so much of the damn stuff!

Gary Caldwell (and before him Alison Kirkpatrick) is an artist in his own right and has been a mainstay of the series over the years, enhancing the visuals and the storytelling with his atmospheric colouring.

Letterer Annie Parkhouse made my dialogue look much sharper than it probably was and is the only other person to have worked on every episode of the series. She deserves a huge round of applause and a big kiss from Captain Dante himself.

A number of artists have illustrated Dante's adventures in various styles, including Charlie Adlard, Chris Weston, Andy Clarke, Steve Yeowell and Paul Marshall, but two in particular will be forever associated with the character.

John Burns is the last of a certain breed of classic British comics artist and was a perfect fit for Dante's adventures. As a child, the first comics my Grandad bought me featured John's artwork and I've been a fan ever since. It's been a pleasure and an honour to work with him all these years later; a true gentleman, personally and professionally.

Co-creator Simon Fraser and I have come a long way from discussing Dante in a basement bar in Glasgow nearly 16 years ago. Simon's risen to every visual and storytelling challenge I set him, from spectacular action sequences epic Imperial Russian metropolises to the touching portrayal of Dante and Jena's star-crossed romance.

He's possibly the best 'character acting' artists in the business and always found new ways of drawing Dante jumping out of windows in various states of undress. He's a great collaborator and a great friend. If we didn't live in different continents, we'd have celebrated the ending of the series in hell-raising Dantesque style. Or tried to, at least.

Finally, thanks to Deborah, the love of my own life, for her wit, wisdom and support, and for countless instances of insight and inspiration. Without her, Nikolai and I would be far shallower characters.

**Robbie Morrison,  
North London, July 2012.**



Sample file

## THE MEMOIRS OF NIKOLAI DANTE

Script: Robbie Morrison  
Art: Simon Fraser  
Colour: Gary Caldwell  
Letters: Annie Parkhouse

Originally published in *2000 AD* Prog 1731

YEAR OF THE  
TSAR 2676.

FORMER HEADQUARTERS OF  
GENERAL STERNIK (DECEASED),  
HEAD OF THE 4TH IMPERIAL  
TANK DIVISION.

DRINK?

THE PREVIOUS  
OCCUPANT MIGHT  
HAVE BEEN A STONE-  
COLD KILLER, BUT  
HE KEPT THE BEST  
DRINKS CABINETS  
I'VE EVER  
SEEN.

YOU ARE  
OLD ENOUGH  
NOW, AREN'T  
YOU?

I  
AM, BUT  
NO THANKS,  
NOT JUST  
NOW.

WISE  
MOVE.

THE  
DEMON DRINK  
AND ALL  
THAT.

THANKS  
FOR LETTING  
ME SEE YOU,  
NIKOLAI.

I KNOW  
YOU'RE BUSY,  
TO SAY THE  
LEAST.

HEY,  
I'M JUST  
GLAD YOU  
CAN SEE  
ME.

HOW ARE  
THEY?

Sample file

BETTER  
THAN THE ORIGINALS.  
I CAN SEE CLEARER,  
FURTHER.

I CAN  
EVEN CHANGE  
THE COLOUR TO  
SUIT MY  
MOOD.

LOOK...





USED TO BE NO ONE COULD SEE AS FAR AS YOU, ODESSA.

KONSTANTIN, THE TSAR, I'LL MAKE THEM PAY FOR WHAT THEY DID.

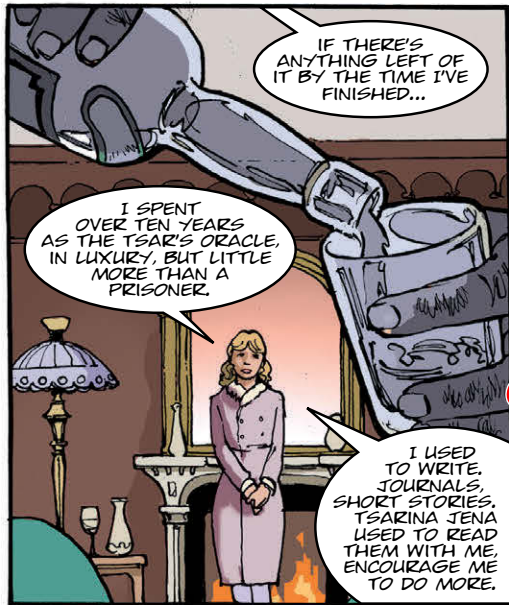
NO, NO VENGEANCE, PLEASE, NOT FOR ME.

MY PRECOGNITIVE ABILITIES WERE A CURSE. I'VE LOST NOTHING I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT.



I'VE SPENT MOST OF MY LIFE PEERING INTO OTHER PEOPLE'S FUTURES.

NOW I'VE GOT THE FREEDOM TO LIVE IN THE PRESENT, TO EXPLORE THE WORLD AROUND ME.



IF THERE'S ANYTHING LEFT OF IT BY THE TIME I'VE FINISHED...

I SPENT OVER TEN YEARS AS THE TSAR'S ORACLE, IN LUXURY, BUT LITTLE MORE THAN A PRISONER.

I USED TO WRITE, JOURNALS, SHORT STORIES. TSARINA JENA USED TO READ THEM WITH ME, ENCOURAGE ME TO DO MORE.



I THINK THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO DO.

WRITE.

I WANT TO WRITE ABOUT YOU, NIKOLAI DANTE.



ME? DIAVOLO! PEOPLE ARE SICK TO DEATH OF READING ABOUT ME.

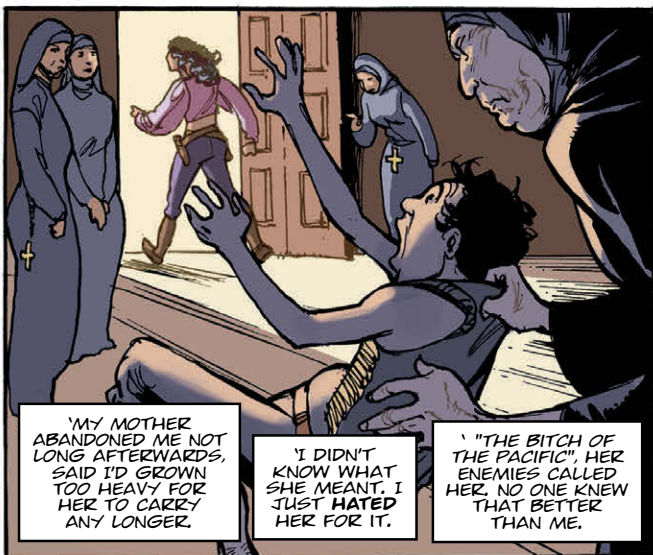
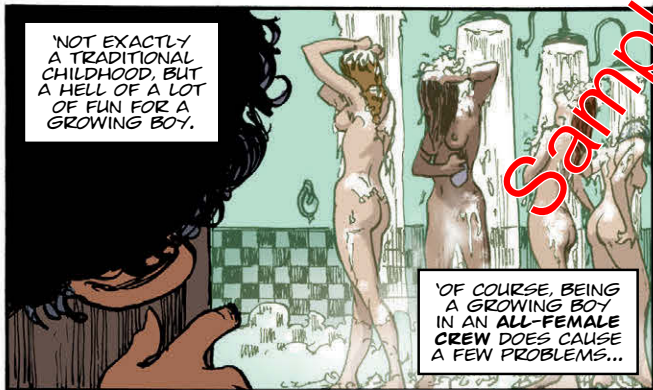
THERE'S A MILLION BOOKS ABOUT ME OUT THERE ALREADY AND I HAVEN'T READ A SINGLE ONE OF THEM.

LIFE'S TOO SHORT.



I'VE READ THEM. LIES, PROPAGANDA, LURID FANTASIES...

AFTER EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED, NIKOLAI, DON'T YOU THINK THE WORLD DESERVES TO KNOW THE TRUTH?





BANDIT,  
BRAWLER,  
CONMAN,  
DUELLIST,  
GIGOLO,  
THIEF

'I MUST'VE BEEN DOING  
SOMETHING RIGHT - OR  
WRONG, IF IT WAS YOU I  
WAS ROBBING - BECAUSE  
EVENTUALLY TSAR VLADIMIR  
THE CONQUEROR ISSUED A  
WARRANT FOR MY ARREST.'



HE EVEN SENT  
HIS OWN DAUGHTER  
TO BRING ME  
IN.

TSARINA  
JENA!

IS THAT  
HOW YOU BOTH  
MET? WAS IT  
LOVE AT FIRST  
SIGHT?



OF COURSE!

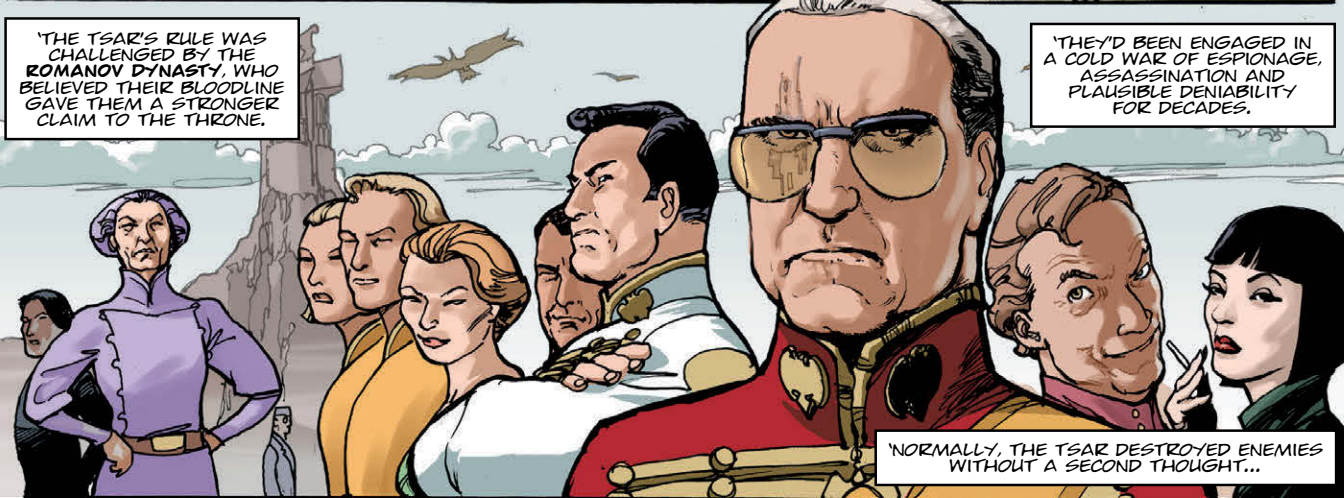
THOUGH  
IT'S TRUE THAT  
THERE'S A THIN LINE  
BETWEEN LOVE AND  
HATE, IT MAYBE TOOK  
HER A FEW YEARS TO  
WORK OUT EXACTLY  
WHICH ONE WAS  
WHICH.



'SHE FOUND MY CHARMS  
SO IRRESISTIBLE THAT  
SHE THREW ME INTO  
THE IMPERIAL DUNGEON  
AND TOLD ME TO AWAIT  
EXECUTION.

'HER IDEA  
OF FLIRTING,  
OBVIOUSLY...

'LUCKILY, A GENE-SCAN  
REVEALED THAT THERE'S  
MORE TO ME THAN  
MEETS THE EYE...



'THE TSAR'S RULE WAS  
CHALLENGED BY THE  
ROMANOV DYNASTY, WHO  
BELIEVED THEIR BLOODLINE  
GAVE THEM A STRONGER  
CLAIM TO THE THRONE.

'THEY'D BEEN ENGAGED IN  
A COLD WAR OF ESPIONAGE,  
ASSASSINATION AND  
PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY  
FOR DECADES.

NORMALLY, THE TSAR DESTROYED ENEMIES  
WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT...

'BUT THE ROMANOV'S POSSESSED THE MOST POWERFUL BIO-WEAPON IN THE EMPIRE, FASHIONED INTO THE FORM OF THEIR ANCIENT COAT OF ARMS.

'THE "WEAPONS CRESTS" BONDED ONLY WITH MEMBERS OF THE ROMANOV BLOODLINE, GIVING THEM SUPERHUMAN ABILITIES ATTUNED TO THEIR INDIVIDUAL PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILES.

'TURNED OUT MY DNA MATCHED THAT OF THE FAMILY ROMANOV.



'MAMA CLAIMED MY FATHER WAS ANY ONE OF A SUCCESSION OF FAMOUS LOVERS.

'SHE LIED. IT WAS DMITRI ROMANOV, HEAD OF THE FAMILY, THE CRUELLEST KILLER I'VE EVER KNOWN.

'THE TSAR INTERCEPTED THE LATEST CREST - CREATED FOR ARKADY ROMANOV - WITH ME, INTENDING TO ADAPT IT INTO A WEAPON FOR HIS OWN FORCES.

'AFTER BONDING WITH "MY" CREST, A SYMBIOTIC BATTLE COMPUTER WITH CYBORGANIC BIO-BLADES, I MADE A DARING ESCAPE AND DECIDED TO CLAIM MY BIRTHRIGHT.

'I JOINED THE ROMANOV DYNASTY, EXPECTING TO ENJOY THE LIFE OF AN ARISTOCRAT - FAME, FORTUNE, WALL-TO-WALL WOMEN...



'INSTEAD I GOT PSYCHOTIC HALF-BROTHERS HELLBENT ON WORLD DOMINATION, INTERDIMENSIONAL ASSASSINS IN THE GULAG APOCALYPTIC, BLOODSUCKING VENETIAN VAMPS, BERSERKER OUTLAW GANGS AND, WORST OF ALL, POLITICAL AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES.

TO BE FAIR, THERE WERE A FEW WOMEN, THOUGH A COUPLE OF THEM TRIED TO KILL ME TOO.'



IN FACT, BACK THEN, I USED TO THINK JUST ABOUT EVERYONE WAS TRYING TO KILL ME.



'IS THAT ANY DIFFERENT TO TODAY?'



'OH YEAH.

'NOW I KNOW JUST ABOUT EVERYONE IS TRYING TO KILL ME.'



DID YOU SEE MUCH OF JENA WHEN YOU WERE WITH THE ROMANOV'S?

WE BUMPED INTO EACH OTHER A FEW TIMES.

IN FACT, SHE WAS BEGINNING TO FALL FOR ME IN A BIG WAY...



...UNTIL THE TSAR ANNOUNCED HER ENGAGEMENT TO MIKHAIL DERIABIN, DIRECTOR OF THE HOUSE OF BOLSHOI, THE MEDIA DYNASTY.

'A POLITICAL UNION TO INCREASE THE SPHERE OF HIS INFLUENCE.

I SELFLESSLY VOLUNTEERED TO ACT AS HER BODYGUARD IN THE RUN-UP TO THE WEDDING, BUT BEFORE I COULD SABOTAGE IT...



Sample file

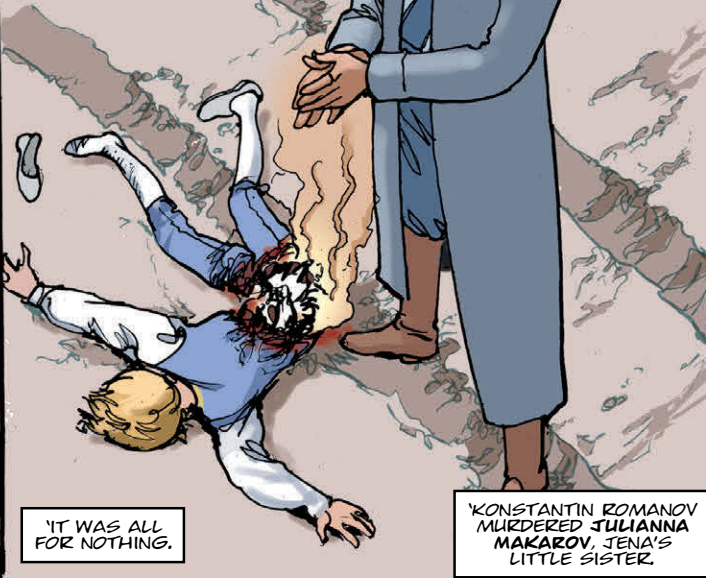
'DERIABIN AND HAWKSMOORE WERE CONSPIRING TO INCITE CIVIL WAR, EXPECTING THE TSAR AND THE ROMANOV'S TO DESTROY EACH OTHER, SO THEY COULD SEIZE POWER.



I FREED JENA AND FOUGHT A DUEL WITH HAWKSMOORE IN A CRASHING AIRSHIP ABOVE THE BALTIC SEA.



'AFTERWARDS, JENA AND I EMBARKED ON SOME INTIMATE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS, TRYING TO END HOSTILITIES BETWEEN OUR FAMILIES.



'IT WAS ALL FOR NOTHING.

KONSTANTIN ROMANOV MURDERED JULIANNA MAKAROV, JENA'S LITTLE SISTER.

'AND SO WE WENT TO WAR...

'I BECAME CAPTAIN NIKOLAI ROMANOV OF THE RUDINSHTEIN IRREGULARS AND WE TORE APART THE EMPIRE WITH BATTLES AND BETRAYALS FROM BRITANNIA TO ST PETERSBURG.

'THE ROMANOV EMPIRE WAS BROKEN, ANDREAS, THE ONLY REAL FRIEND I HAD IN THEY FAMILY, DIED IN MY ARMS DURING THE DEFENCE OF RUDINSHTEIN.

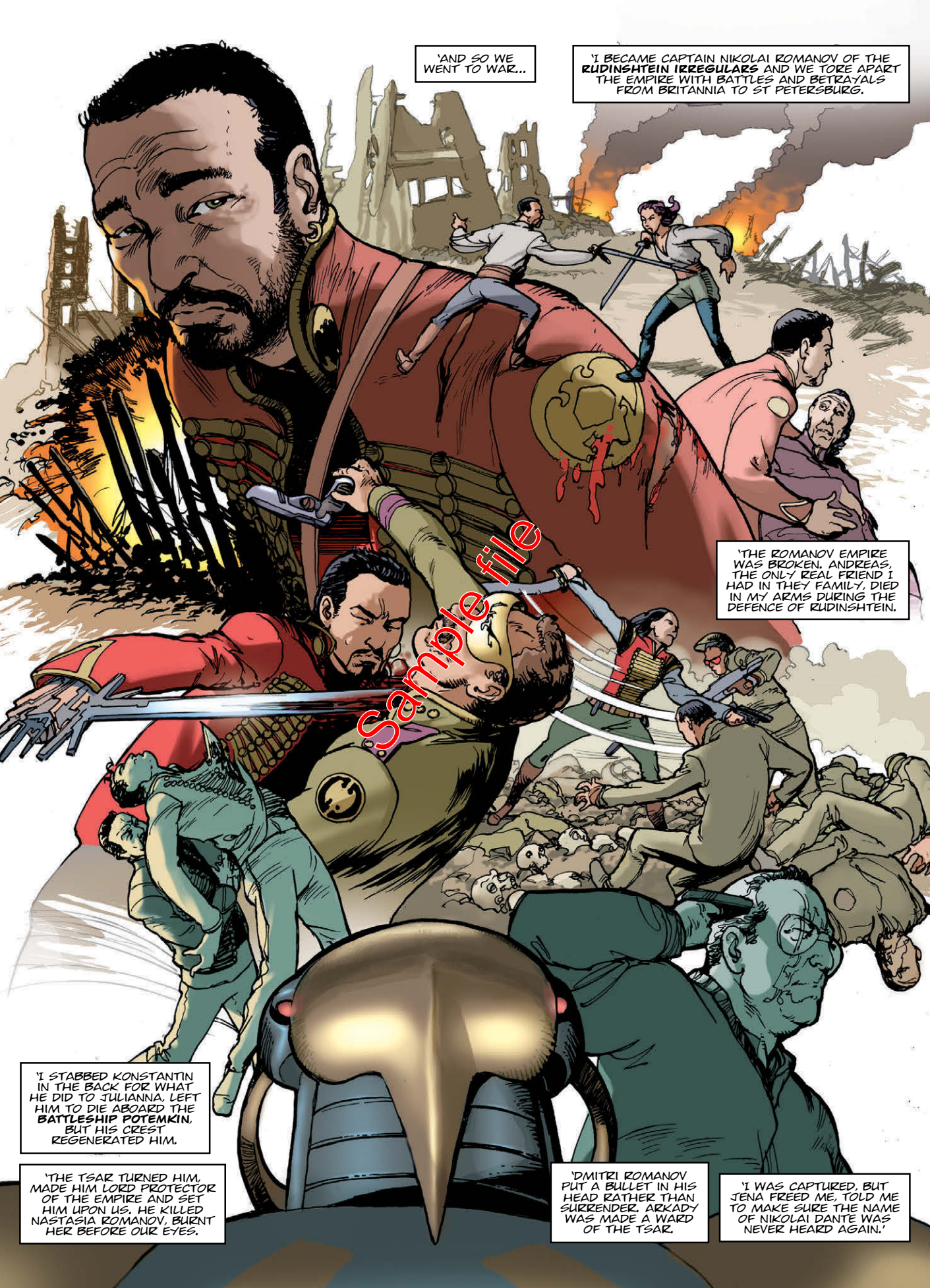
'I STABBED KONSTANTIN IN THE BACK FOR WHAT HE DID TO JULIANNA, LEFT HIM TO DIE ABOARD THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN, BUT HIS CREST REGENERATED HIM.

'THE TSAR TURNED HIM, MADE HIM LORD PROTECTOR OF THE EMPIRE AND SET HIM UPON US. HE KILLED NASTASIA ROMANOV, BURNT HER BEFORE OUR EYES.

'DMITRI ROMANOV PUT A BULLET IN HIS HEAD RATHER THAN SURRENDER, ARKADY WAS MADE A WARD OF THE TSAR.

'I WAS CAPTURED, BUT JENA FREED ME, TOLD ME TO MAKE SURE THE NAME OF NIKOLAI DANTE WAS NEVER HEARD AGAIN.'

Sample file





NEVER COULD TAKE ADVICE.

I WAS THE MOST WANTED MAN IN THE EMPIRE AND I WENT STRAIGHT BACK TO CRIME, THE BIGGER THE HEIST THE BETTER.

THINGS BACKFIRED WHEN I HOOKED UP WITH AN OLD FRIEND...



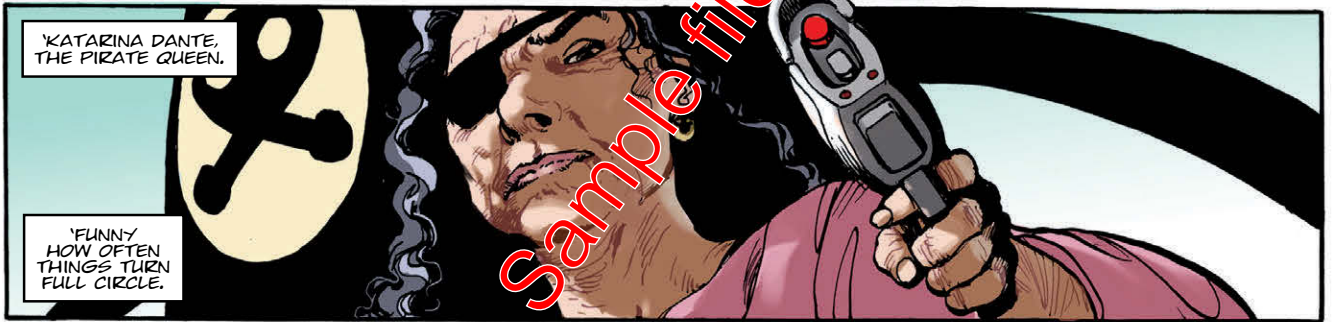
...A BEAUTIFUL MONSTER WHO CALLED HERSELF THE COUNTESSA DE WINTER.

'WE STOLE THE ROMANOV JEWELS BACK FROM THE TSAR, BUT SHE DID THE DIRTY ON ME AND I ENDED UP HIGH-DIVING INTO THE PACIFIC AGAINST MY WILL.



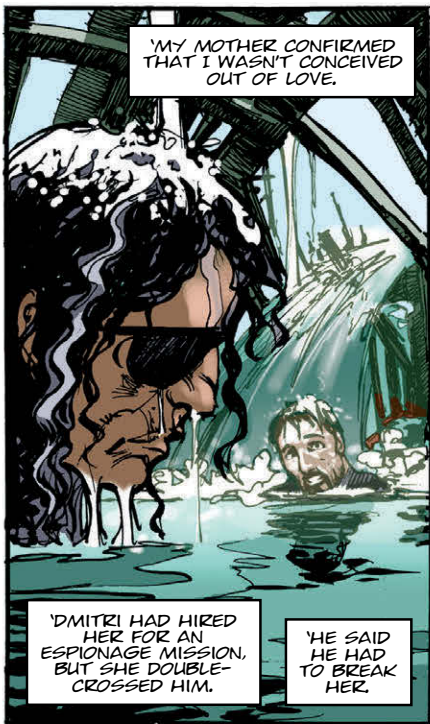
I WAS PICKED UP BY THE BLACK DRAGONS, THE YAKUZA ALLIANCE THAT GOVERNED THE PACIFIC RIM.

'AKITA SAGAWA, THEIR LEADER, PERSUADED ME TO HUNT DOWN A MARAUDER WHO'D BEEN PREYING ON THEIR SHIPPING LANES...



'KATARINA DANTE, THE PIRATE QUEEN.

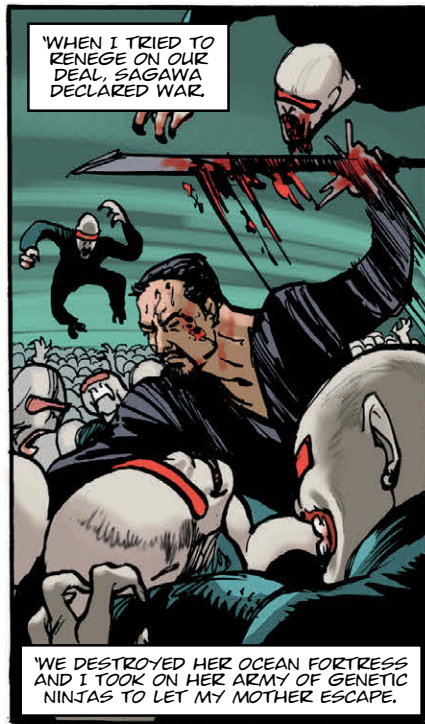
'FUNNY HOW OFTEN THINGS TURN FULL CIRCLE.



'MY MOTHER CONFIRMED THAT I WASN'T CONCEIVED OUT OF LOVE.

'DMITRI HAD HIRED HER FOR AN ESPIONAGE MISSION, BUT SHE DOUBLE-CROSSED HIM.

'HE SAID HE HAD TO BREAK HER.



'WHEN I TRIED TO RENEGE ON OUR DEAL, SAGAWA DECLARED WAR.

'WE DESTROYED HER OCEAN FORTRESS AND I TOOK ON HER ARMY OF GENETIC NINJAS TO LET MY MOTHER ESCAPE.



'I FIGURED, WHAT THE HELL, AT LEAST I'M GOING OUT IN STYLE.

'MAYBE IT WOULD'VE BEEN EASIER IF I HAD DIED THEN...'



YOU PRETTY MUCH KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE THEN. YOU WERE PART OF IT.

VLAD BLACKMAILED ME INTO BECOMING THE SWORD OF THE TSAR, HIS ENFORCER, AVENGER, WHATEVER THE HELL HE WANTED ME TO BE.

OR SO HE THOUGHT...



'I SECRETLY WORKED AGAINST HIM, BUILDING ALLIANCES, TRYING TO DESTROY THE EMPIRE FROM WITHIN...

'AND THEN I THREW IT ALL AWAY IN A MOMENT OF RECKLESSNESS.

'STORY OF MY LIFE...



'JENA RESCUED ME, TURNED AGAINST HER FATHER.

'I GATHERED TOGETHER AN ARMY OF THIEVES AND WHORES, AND WE LED A REBELLION AGAINST THE TSAR.

Sample file



'WE WON. PEOPLE KEPT TELLING ME WE'D BROUGHT PEACE TO THE EMPIRE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THEIR LIVES.

'I EVEN ASKED JENA TO MARRY ME, NO ONE ELSE KNOWS THAT.



'AND THEN IT ALL FELL APART.

'DMITRI ROMANOV HADN'T KILLED HIMSELF, BUT PASSED HIS CONSCIOUSNESS AND ALL THE POWERS OF HIS CREST INTO ARKADY.

'THE KILLING HASN'T STOPPED SINCE...'

THE MAN WHO PUT ME ON THIS EARTH BY RAPING MY MOTHER IS STILL ALIVE, AND NOW HE'S TAKEN THE WOMAN I LOVE.