

Night Time
by Paul L Mathews

Part One
Reptile House

Decades after Black Gladys had kidnapped Ivan, the storyteller Rish would sit and tell the tale of how, on the day following the kidnapping, Tatiana, Katarina and Maxim set about finding their uncle. From dawn until dusk they, Stalin and Rish made plans in the cramped office of Maxim's sparse hotel in Shit Town. Then, at nightfall, Rish and Stalin returned to the storyteller's tiny terraced house, whilst the twins set forth into the night to find their Uncle.

Maxim—leaving a trusted friend and former comrade in the Omega Hammers in charge of the hotel—accompanied them with a silent vow: he would protect these two precious jewels, and woe betide those who would harm them.

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The Reptile House hid amongst the bars, brothels and eat-quick shacks of Promise's docklands. With the smoke of guns and cigarettes swirling about them, the staff of this 'gentleman's' club—a twilight warren of *jaffy* rooms and boudoirs—trembled in the club's bar, their hands on their heads. Only minutes before this seedy club had been littered with a grubby rainbow of patrons from across the stars as they indulged themselves with the rich variety of soiled hookers and weary dancers on offer. The customers had, however, fled once the firing started, leaving the staff to their own devices. From bulky Krak'n bouncers to slender Karscalian and Morl dancers and all species in between, their faces were lost in shadow as they bowed their heads in the semi-lit bar, their skins highlighted by a kaleidoscope of neon and salacious holographs that lined the walls of the hexagonal room. Tatiana, Katarina and Maxim held them at gunpoint, the smoke from Maxim's two SMGs cajoled and twisted into strange and ethereal shapes by eddies of hot air which swept through the bar.

Tatiana gripped Matinee's old pistol, its wooden handle warm and moist against her clammy palm. Hand steady, she trained the weapon on the bar's owner who knelt at her feet with his hands on his head. A smartly dressed Krak'n, his green scales were touched with red from the neon bar lights, and he lay in a sea of broken glass and spilled liquor—sharp remains of an array of bottles destroyed by Maxim in an exuberant display of gunfire. His tongue flicked out of his mouth and a low, incessant hiss leaked from his reptilian snout. Gills on his neck betrayed his annoyance with their rapid oscillation. Yet more detritus, Tatiana thought as she appraised the alien. Forget the smart suit and trappings of respectability, this was just another peddler in misery and fornication. Her finger tightened a little on the trigger. No, she told herself, we need him...

“Ivan Valentine. Where is he?” she said.

“Why sshould I know?” said the Krak’n. “Thiss a gentleman’s club, not a butcher’s shop. If you want dead meat like Valentine, try the carrion market.”

A single gunshot reverberated from one of the two SMGs Maxim brandished, and the bullet sliced through the Krak’n’s shoulder. Tatiana looked across the room at the Russian. Once she might have jumped, perhaps startled by the gunshot—maybe even scared. Not anymore. A sardonic smile played her lips as she looked at the guns in Maxim’s hands, at the way the light glinted off the metal bodies, how the smoke curled from the barrels. No, not anymore. She relished in the feel of Matinee’s gun in her own hand now, thrilled and repulsed in equal measure. Weren’t guns supposed to be *evil*? If so, why did she get such a kick out of using one...?

“Now now, Fix,” Maxim said to the Krak’n in his thick, almost caricatured, Russian accent, “please don’t to be fucking around. Uncle Maxim is knowing you are knowing where Eh-van is, so please to talk.”

The dual membranes on Fix’s ochre eyes flicked across his irises as he clutched at the wound in his shoulder and glared at Maxim. The Krak’n took a moment to gather himself. Then his scaly face screwed up in pain as he said, “I already asked you, *Uncle Maxssim*...why sshould I know?”

“Because if Maxim says you know, then you know,” Katarina said in that perpetually bored tone that had begun to grate on Tatiana so much. She spared Katarina a glance. The only one of the raiders not carrying a gun, Katarina stood over the prisoners with her feet apart, hands on her hip and her chin touching her collar bone as she glared at the captive bouncers, dancers and prostitutes through her black eyelashes, gloss black lips fixed in a crooked smile. Tatiana shivered. Katarina didn’t need a gun: just a look like that could kill a man. “Because he says you’re a scumbag who knows all about this kinda stuff, so you’re going to talk, aren’t you?”

“How ssweet,” Fix snorted in derision, “the pretty prinsscess trying to scare me...”

“Please, don’t waste our time.” Tatiana took a step forward and glass crunched beneath her boots. Fix became cross-eyed as he tried to maintain his focus on Tatiana’s gun-barrel, which she now rested on his nose. “Just tell us what we want to know, and we’ll be gone.”

Fix laughed. A dry, rasping affair, the laugh seeped from between his fangs and jabbed at Tatiana like a clawed finger. “Kill me? Please, don’t make jokess. You won’t kill me because you need information from me...” He looked past the gun and into Tatiana’s eyes. “...And because you are not a killer.”

“Aren’t I?” Now Tatiana’s lips twitched into a crooked smile. Not a killer? The vision of Trick Coven staggering back as she filled it full of lead played across her mind. “Don’t bet on that. I’m a big girl now.”

“Are you really? I wonder.” Fix’s nostrils flexed as he snorted. “I wonder if you’ll be sso ‘grown up’ when every bounty-hunter thiss sside of the Accord comess looking for you, wanting to make names for themselves and to collect the price the resst of the Covenss have put on your head—not to mention the bounty the Long Knivess have already offered.”

“Let them come.” Katarina shrugged. She and Fix now glared at one another, and neither showed any signs of looking away.

“We’ll ssee—” Fix’s chuckle was almost lost as he ground his teeth in pain. “We’ll ssee...”

Music swirled about Jed Coven, and the smoke from his cigarette was cajoled and twisted into strange and ethereal shapes by eddies of stale air which sighed through the bars and brothels of Shit Town's main street. He took a drag on his cigarette and peered through the smoke at the grubby rainbow of patrons from across the stars spending their most primal currencies on a variety of spent and weary rent-boys and hookers. From emaciated, threadbare Morls to sturdy, fattened humans and all species in between, the hookers' faces were lost in shadow as they conducted hushed transactions with their customers and pimps, their skin highlighted by a kaleidoscope of neon and salacious holographs that filled the windows of the street's bars and watering holes. Not that Jed cared. His attention was fixed on Maxim's hotel across the road. Pa had told him to find and kill the Valentines, and Jed was pretty sure this'd be as good a place to find them.

Leaning against a lamp-post, he flicked his spent cigarette and watched it flare as it span away. He looked about, the exhaled smoke from his cigarette now replaced with his steaming breath. It was, he concluded, gettin' col'. He shivered a little, his young, lean body lacking any scrap of insulating fat, and his grubby shirt, soiled long johns and torn trousers were far too thin to offer any warmth. Far too dam col' for Promise at this time a'year, he thought. He looked up into the deep blue of the dusk, and his brow furrowed. Somethin' ain' right. He peered harder, eyes narrowed as he tipped back his billycock hat to stop it impeding his view.

"Well, damn me," he murmured under his breath, "if some o'the stars ain't missin'."

The close ones were all there. Ones like Los Endos and Domino. But some of the real distant ones, the really faint ones on the fringes of the Outer Darkness? They were just gone.

His train of thought—and his view of the sky—became blocked momentarily as a Theocracy grav flew overhead. Low, and with the door-gunners' cannons trained on the streets below, it flew on in continuance of its patrol. Jed watched it go, the brass of its armoured hide twinkling in reflection of the street lights below. Its flight-path led directly to the centre of the city, where the Torch—bedecked in the fluttering purple and gold banners of the Theocracy—dominated the horizon. The dark windows and arches nestled in its stone walls contrasted with the bright signal fire that still danced atop the tower.

Jed smiled to himself. Much as people hated the Theocracy—Pa amongst them—Jed'd always kinda admired their preenin' and their struttin'. 'Big ideas an' bigger guns,' Pa always said, 'tha's all the Th'rocracy got.' Well, Jed thought as he tipped his hat toward the Torch, Amen to you, brothers. Amen.

"You lookin' for business, mister?"

He turned away from the Torch to look to his right, where a stringy Earth girl now stood. Plastered in make-up and thin to the point of skeletal, she couldn't have been any older than fourteen. He stood straight and removed his hat. As he flattened down his hair he summoned his most charming smiles to treat her to a glimpse of his fine teeth. Of all the Covens, he'd always had the best teeth, although he'd have to confess he'd forgotten just who he'd stolen them from.

"Well, miss," he said, "Ah'd be real flattered to lay with you, but I have myself some more pressin' business to atten' to. Maybe when ah'm done..."

He let the question dwindle into a suggestion, but she didn't seem too pleased, face creasing into a scowl. She stepped toward him and gently laid her hand on his crotch whilst idly stroking her flat chest with the other. "Are you sure? I'm really good, Cheap too. I can't think of any type of business that'd be more pressing than laying with me."

“Well, miss, usually you’d be right.” He replaced his hat and laid his hand on the butt of the revolver shoved in his belt. “But tonight...why, tonight ah aim to kill the Valentines, miss.” He puffed out his chest and looked down his nose at her, bursting with pride. “So ah’ll be back jus’ as soon as they’re dead, miss.” He smiled at her again. “Ah give you this as my bond.”

He withdrew a playing card tucked into the band on his hat: a worn ace of hearts with a single bullet hole through the heart. With a parting wink he placed the card in her hand and turned on the heel of his cowboy boot. Sight fixed on the hotel lobby across the road, he strode toward it, stirrups chattering as he swaggered.

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“Last chance, Fix,” Maxim said as he advanced on the Krak’n and trained his SMGs on the alien. “Please to talk, or die.”

Fix picked himself up off the floor. He looked Maxim in the eyes as he did so. “Go away, ssilly Russian.” His reptilian eyes narrowed. “Your ridiculous accsent is getting on my nerves.”

“This coming from Missster Sssinisster—”

“Kat!” Tatiana said with a glare. “Be quiet!”

Katarina poked her tongue out at Tatiana, and Maxim pursed his lips and glared back at the Krak’n. Tatiana watched the old soldier and the dapper Krak’n eye-balling one another and tried to gauge who had the superior will. Maxim, she knew, was an old hand who served with Ivan years ago, so he must know what he was doing. But this Fix? She looked at the alien. He raised an eyebrow at Maxim, as if demanding the Russian either make a move or get out of his bar. The last person she’d seen with that kind of confidence, she realised as she renewed her grip on the pistol, was Matinee. She glanced at some of his staff, and two of the hulking Krak’n bouncers looked at each other and smirked. They clearly knew who’d be win.

Maxim lowered his guns, and his lips moved in a silent curse. His shoulders lowered even as his lip curled.

“Very wisse, Maxssim. Leave now and I will only bill you for my damages. I know where your sso called ‘hotel’ iss.”

“I’ll make him talk.”

Everybody turned to look at Katarina as she placed a cigarette in her mouth and held a lighter to it. Tatiana’s jaw slackened. What the hell? Where was the skittish, frightened sister that had fled Oridia? Where was the introverted little goth, so wrapped up in the theatre of her own anxiety and the loss of their parents? Look at her, she thought, eyes narrowed as she watched Katarina throw back her head to shake hair from her eyes. Look at that smile. Listen to that voice. She’s *enjoying* this.

Fix laughed again. “And how will you do that, exssactly?”

Katarina smiled, lips parting just enough to let cigarette smoke spill from her mouth. “Get the rest of these goons out, Maxim. Tatiana too. Me and Misster Ssnake-Sskin-Bootss here need some time alone.”

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The man in reception had been a grey old warhorse. He’d had a machine-pistol hidden under the counter of his tiny cubical. He’d tried to shoot Jed the instant he’d seen him. But now he was just dead.

With his revolver still smoking, Jed took a moment to appraise the shattered plexiglass shielding the cubical. Easily strong enough to withstand small arms fire, it should have protected the man from Jed's bullets. But, Jed thought with a smile as he appreciated the web in the punctured plexiglass, he didn't use normal bullets...

A further shot destroyed the lock on the cubical door, and Jed stepped inside. He straddled the body and admired his handy work: a bullet through the heart and a bullet through the brain. Hot damn, Ah'm good, he thought with a smirk.

He knelt over the body. This weren't no man named Maxim. Pa had described that old bastard. And Ivan. And the twins. He rubbed his chin. Ah needs to get me some information from this here corpse. See if he knows where Maxim and the Valentines are at.

He placed his revolver on the floor and reached into the unbuttoned neck of his long johns. A locket glinted in the light of the hotel's shabby lobby, and Jed reached behind his neck to undo the clasp. With the locket in his hands, he opened it with reverence. Inside a small picture of his favourite aunt, Scarlett, lay nestled behind some polished glass. Her haggard face and vacant glass eyes stared out of the photo, her face a lined portrait of vacuousness.

"Always a pleasure, Aunt Scarlett," Jed murmured as she crossed himself. "Ah'm sorry to disturb, but ah'm in need of your help."

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Tatiana had acquiesced to Katarina's plan with some reluctance, but had acquiesced all the same. She and Maxim ushered Fix's staff from the bar to leave Fix and Katarina alone. Maxim puffed up like a peacock as he smiled broadly and asked the dancers and whores if they would be so pleased as to be leaving. Tatiana—despite herself—smiled as she watched, amused by the comedic aspect to his voice and the way he winked and devoured the girls with his eyes.

Once outside the bar Maxim let his twin SMGs dangle by their shoulder straps and he closed the door behind, sealing Katarina inside with Fix, and he and Tatiana in the reception area beyond. A room decorated with velvet, brass rails and framed pictures of the girls available that evening, it was chilled by cold air seeping in through the open door into the street.

Now he and Tatiana turned to the staff. The girls had left immediately, evaporating into the bowels of the bar to find some solace in the staff rooms, but one or two of the bouncers lingered. They eyed Maxim, perhaps trying to judge how easily they could take him. Tatiana looked too. A big man, he stood a good half a foot shorter than Ivan, but the tight t-shirt he wore displayed a body hewn into a physique more toned and developed than her uncle. Cleanly shaven, grey hair smartly cut and scraped back and a single ear-ring. Here was a man who not only took care of his appearance, but could also take care of himself. Just like Matinee. Just like Boyd. She liked that, she realised as she blushed a little.

Maxim looked back at the two bouncers—a Krak'n whose eight foot frame almost filled the reception area, and a smaller, rat-like Verminion with nasty eyes and gold front teeth that glinted beneath his twitching muzzle and whiskers. "Can Uncle Maxim be helping you?"

The Krak'n and the Verminion glanced at each other, and then back at Maxim. The Krak'n smiled and cracked his knuckles.

"Don't be silly, boys," Tatiana said. Now she pushed out her chest and put back her shoulders. You can do this, she told herself. You can show Maxim you can take care of yourself. These two are just bums. She aimed her pistol at the Krak'n. "There's no need for you to get hurt."

Now the Krak'n and the Verminion focused their attention on her, and she inhaled deeply to calm herself. She could do this. No problem. They were just bums. She dwelt on the weight of the gun in her hand, on its inherent power. All she had to do was pull the trigger and these two stains would be gone forever. "Don't think I'm afraid to use th—"

A scream sliced through the door into the bar. Shrill, a vibrato created by a total and absolute expulsion of air, it pierced Tatiana like a spear. She spasmed, limbs momentarily weak as she turned to look at the door in alarm. She hadn't heard anything like that since...

Her eyes narrowed...

...since Matinee had died.

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Jed laid the locket on the man's forehead, and the corpse's eyes opened in an instant, their irises as milky, colourless and indistinct as Scarlett's. The mouth parted and a expelled a lung full of air before taking a shallow breath, his chest falling and rising with a morbid arrhythmia.

"What—" the corpse wheezed between protracted gasps, his accent a bastardised blend of coarse Russian and a thick Confederate drawl "Do you— Want?"

"Well, sir, ah'd be real oh-bliged if you could tell me where ah might find the Valentines."

"They— Went— To see— Fix. They— Wanted— To ask him— Where Ivan— Is."

Jed's brow furrowed. "You mean they don' know?"

"Ivan— Has been— Taken by— Black Gladys."

Jed paused. Pa never said nothin' 'bout no Black Gladys. That was real bad news. Gladys was a stone-col' bitch, an' no mistake. Still, he thought with a shrug, ah'll jus' have to kill her too.

"Well, sir, ah'm obliged to you. May the good Lord go with you."

The corpse opened its mouth to speak again, but Jed snatched away the locket before it had chance. No sooner had the corpse been parted from the piece of jewellery than its eyes closed again and its mouth became slack and lifeless.

Jed stood and reached behind his neck to refasten the locket, grateful the body had fallen silent. In his experience that was the point they began to cuss, and Jed'd be damned if he found anything as ungodly as profanity.

With the locket safely fastened and tucked back in his long johns, Jed knelt to take his revolver from the floor, doffed his hat at the dead man, and rifled through its pockets before taking his leave with a spring in his step and a whistle on his lips.

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The bouncers fled the instant the screaming started, leaving Tatiana and Maxim to look at each other in alarm. The screams seeped through the door and bubbled like hissing, spitting water.

"What the hell is that?" For the first time since they'd met, Tatiana saw Maxim a little unnerved and on the back foot. With his jaw slack and his eyes wide, his knuckles turned white as he gripped his SMGs and trained them on the door.

Perhaps he's never heard anything like that before, Tatiana thought as she reached for the door handle, but I have—the day the Witch killed Matinee.

She turned the handle with no fear of what lay beyond. If the Witch was in there, if somehow she'd survived the destruction of the *Troika* and trailed them all the way to Promise, so be it. Tatiana wouldn't run away again. Ivan wasn't here to drag her away. If the Witch was in there, then good. Then they could finally end this...

The door was locked.

She turned the handle again. "Someone's locked it from the other side!" She swore and kicked the thick metal with her booted foot. All she gained was an ache in her ankle.

"Stand back!" Maxim shouted over the continued assault of screams. He aimed both guns at the door.

"Maxim! No! It's—"

Maxim opened fire, only for his bullets to strike the door in a shower of sparks and ricochet off into the reception. He and Tatiana crouched, arms over their heads as the repelled bullets sliced by and thudded into the velvet walls and smashed the framed pictures.

"—bullet proof."

Maxim opened one eye and looked about him once the tempest had passed. His cheeks coloured a little as he stood. "Not being best plan," he murmured by way of apology. He looked down and to the right a little, perhaps too embarrassed to look her in the eye.

Tatiana smiled. Such a tough, capable man, and to blush with such vulnerability and embarrassment. That's really...well, sweet, she thought. "It's—"

The screaming stopped.

They turned to the door and stepped apart. Once again they trained their weapons on the door, Tatiana stood with her feet wide, and one hand steadying her shooting hand just the way Father had taught her during those secret lessons in her youth.

A series of clicks from the door, as though a lock was being tripped. Tatiana flexed her jaw. Come on, you bitch, she thought, lip curling, if it is you, if you're in there, let's finish this. I'm ready. I'm—

The door opened. Smoke spilled from it and momentarily obscured a figure on the threshold. Female, with broad hips and a generous bust. A silhouette so much like the Witch it made Tatiana pause for breath as a vacuum opened in her belly.

"Stop right—"

"It's me, Maxim," Katarina said as she stepped out of the smoke, one hand in the pocket of the baggy knee length cargo pants that hung low on her hips, and other holding a lollipop to her black lips.

Tatiana lowered her gun and asked, "What just happened in there?"

"I found some complimentary lollies on the bar."

"Never mind the sweets, Kat—"

She feigned an indignant pout. "But they're really nice sweets!"

"Enough!" Maxim stepped forward, seized Katarina by the wrist and forced the lolly from her mouth. "Enough of this act! You will grow up, start acting like a sensible adult!" He squeezed so hard Katarina's hand spasmed and contorted as she dropped the confectionary. Now Maxim's act and the exaggerated accent had gone. Here, instead, stood a man of force

and arms who would not suffer fools. Here, thought Tatiana, is a man just like Ivan. "...and tell us what just happened in there! *Now!*"

Katarina shrank away from the Russian, and for a split second Tatiana fancied her confidence fell away from her, stripped by the blunt force of Maxim's anger. Her eyes became saucers, and her mouth stretched into a thin, quivering line. Even Tatiana, for all they'd been through since the flight from Oridia, for all the undead, the Moreaus and the Covens, shivered, taken back to that that inner child which still blanched in the face of an adult's anger.

But Katarina did not blanch for long. She regained her composure as quickly as she had lost it. Snatching her hand away from Maxim, she glared at him and rubbed her wrist as she said, "What happened in there is the snake man told me where Ivan is. Black Gladys has been paid to take him to the Torch. *That's* what happened." She squared up to Maxim and jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "Now get out of my way before you find out *why* he told me."

They glared at one another for a moment before, with a sneer, Maxim stepped aside. Katarina did not hesitate to lift her nose up at him and stomp past. As she walked by Tatiana, she paused only to say, "I wouldn't go looking in there, Tatty. It's not a pretty sight."

Tatiana turned to watch her sister leave, and Maxim moved to stand by her side.

"She," Maxim said, "is going over Uncle Maxim's knee very, *very* soon..."

Tatiana looked over her shoulder and into the bar. The neon lights still shone and the holographs still regaled her with wanton imagery, but something had changed. A scent now leaked from the room, a subtle suggestion of crisped flesh and burnt marrow. Bile rose in her throat, and she suppressed the need to gag. She'd smelt that before. On the *Troika*. That smell had pervaded the hangar even after Matinee's body had been removed, and also clung to the flight-deck once Johnny Coven's corpse had been taken away.

She turned to look at Katarina, her sister now stood outside the bar's entrance. She cupped a cigarette, her face illuminated as she lit it. Tatiana's shoulders sagged and tears crept into her eyes. Matinee. Johnny Coven. The Witch. What was the connection? And what did it have to Katarina? What was it Katarina had said to the Witch once? How she'd wanted to be like that cold-blooded harridan, how she wanted to be taught by her, shaped by her?

Now look at you, Kat, she thought as she watched Katarina exhale smoke into the night and lean against the doorframe, thoughts lost behind her crooked smirk. Look at you with your secrets and smiles...

"Oh, Kat," she murmured under her breath, "what have you *done?*"

"We have bigger problems right now, Tatiana Valentine," Maxim said to her, voice low as he leant to murmur in her ear. "If Katarina is right, if Black Gladys *has* taken Ivan to the Torch, that can mean only one thing: the Theocracy have him."

She looked up at him. The Theocracy? she wondered. They'd wasted Christ knew how much time and men trying to kill Ivan back in their war against the Beggar Barons. If they had him now, finally, after all this time—

"And if they have him," Maxim said, as though anticipating her train of thought, "they will surely kill him."

To be continued...

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