

Night Time

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Two

The Certainty of Chance

As Ivan had done upon their arrival in Promise, so too did Maxim insist the twins move across the city under the cover of camograph units. Disguised as bowing monks in tatty red robes, they trudged through Promise's red light district, besieged by an array of lewd suggestions, loud music and leaden stares.

They reached Maxim's hotel without incident, and Maxim's usual joviality returned once he'd seen his 'precious Princesses' home, but that jocularly proved to be brief. He spotted the damage to the bullet-proof glass on the reception desk as soon as he entered the hotel lobby.

Now he knelt over his dead comrade, eyes narrowed and jaw shifting as he ground his teeth. Tatiana and Katarina stood behind, watching as he spat on a kerchief and gently dabbed at the dried blood on the man's face like a father with a grubby child.

Transfixed, Tatiana looked on. Carefully the Russian cleaned the forehead, then the area around the eyes, cheeks, jowls, and finally the mouth. He then eased the eyes shut with index and forefinger before he closed his own eyes, bowed his head, and offered a murmured prayer.

Tatiana remained unmoved.

She should have felt something, she knew. The sight of the corpse; Maxim's apparent grief and care; the blood; the craters in the man's chest and cranium; the smell of blood and gunpowder. It should have disturbed her. It *would* have disturbed her before the flight from Oridia. But they'd stolen that, hadn't they? Portia. The Covens. Ivan. They'd taken that part of her away with a surgical precision rich in un-anaesthetised cruelty.

She swallowed, her mouth awash with bile and spit, and looked away as the weight of her loss grew. They'd taken her friends, her innocence. They'd taken her humanity. Eyes laden with tears, she looked away and caught sight of Katarina, only to see her stood with one hand on her hip as she inspected the painted nails of the other, bored.

Tatiana tipped her head back and her shoulders sagged. "What have they done to us, sister?" she murmured under her breath. "What have we become?"

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The corpse had been obliging enough—with a little help from Aunt Scarlett—to tell Jed that the Valentines had gone to lean on Fix for some information. Fix was a name Jed knew only too well, having had the pleasure of his girls time and time again. Now glass crunched under the Coven's boots as he walked into the Krak'n's bar.

The moment he stepped inside he saw two Krak'n bouncers and two Theocracy Constables in the centre of the room, the officers taking notes from the gesticulating reptiles. They turned to look at him, and the way their eyes widened told Jed they knew exactly who he was.

The youngest of the Constable's went for her gun, and that was all Jed needed. It's you or me, lady, he thought as he drew his own revolver, an' I ain' dyin' tonight.

Feet apart. Choose target. Go for the nearest Krak'n, give that lady half a chance. Tight grip. Steady hand. Palm back hammer. Steady squeeze. BLAM! Yessir, one through the chest. BLAM! An' one through his head. He's down. Constable ain' even unclipped her holster. BLAM! BLAM! Tha's the secon' Krak'n gone. The girl's got a hol' of her piece. She's skinnin' it! The other Constables runnin'. BLAM! Low down yella jack-rabbit. BLAM! Okay, lady, jus' you an' me. BLAM! Too slow. BLAM!

Too slow by half...

He breathed deeply, and the smell of cordite filled his nostrils. The echoes of his gunfire still bounced about the walls as he admired the four bodies, each with a shot through their heads, a shot through their chests. Jed smiled in satisfaction: the young constable hadn't even managed to draw her gun.

His revolver left a trail of gun smoke in its wake as he span it about his finger before sliding it back into his waistband. Just for the briefest moment, he wondered if maybe he shouldn't have shot them on sight, that maybe he should have given them a chance to surrender.

Better not let Pa catch you thinking like that, he concluded with a grim smile

He paused before stepping over the young Constable. A Karscalian in black fatigues and purple body armour, she stared into the here-after through the curtain of blood that seeped from the void in her forehead. Jed knelt, withdrew her gun from its holster, and inspected it. A snub nosed D'Kothren tank-stopper that weighed heavy in his palm. Enough power right there to have blown a hole clean through a man.

Jus' lucky I ain' that man, he thought as he tossed the gun aside.

Jed stood. Why were these Constables even here? Had the Valentines already come a callin'?

He looked over the bar, and saw Fix amidst the smashed glass on the floor—or what remained of him. Fix's features were lost amongst a crowd of swelling boils, the lips curled into a rictus of agony as one eye slid down his face. Smoke rose from the blistered and blackened scales beneath his smouldering suit. There were glimpses of burnt flesh through gaps in the suit's ravaged material, and this blistered flesh popped to ejaculate a dark green goo—foul smelling and viscous—which saturated the body's clothes before leaking onto the floor.

Jed raised a brow. Yessir, he thought. Looked like the Valentines had been here already, and they'd done a fine job on Fix. “Now, Mister Fix,” Jed murmured as he reached into the neck of his long johns and withdrew the locket, “I'd be mighty grateful if you could tell me wha's happened here...and where I might find the Valentines.”

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“A shot through the heart, a shot through the head,” Maxim said. With his back to Tatiana and her sister, he looked out of his office window. A telescreen across the street made a silhouette of the Russian as it repeated prurient footage of young girls and boys posing provocatively in skimpy outfits. “That's the trademark of Jed Coven.”

“*Jed Coven?*” Tatiana leant against one of the office's battered old filing cabinets. “I thought we'd killed all the Covens.”

“No such luck.” Maxim’s sneer was reflected in the window. “The Covens are worse than vermin. They’re more like a disease; the Pagentorn’s answer to the Black Death. Your killing Mother Coven and her brood barely scratched the surface...”

“And now more of them are here in Promise trying to kill us, I presume.” Tatiana shook her head and sighed. They didn’t have the time for this. First they had to rescue Ivan, and then they had to find Father. There wasn’t the time for trivial distractions like more of those rancid hicks.

“Not ‘more’. Just Jed.”

“So what?” Reclined in a chair, Katarina sat behind Maxim’s desk on which she’d found a capture-frame. She watched as it cycled through photo after digital photo. Fascinated, Tatiana watched too. The pictures revealed—along with a variety of guest stars ranging from Ivan and Gregor Valentine through to innumerable pretty girls and female mercenaries—the story of Maxim’s career from good-looking teenage rookie to dashing officer in the Omega Hammers. Eventually the Maxim in the pictures evolved into the rugged silver fox who now turned to look at Katarina as she said, “If this Jed Coven comes looking for trouble we’ll kill him as well.”

Maxim’s laughter filled the small, sparse office. It seeped about the shelves stuffed with box files, it bounced off the cabinets stuffed with invoices and it flowed about the random piles of dockets and delivery notes scattered about the floor. The Russian wiped a tear from one eye, and the laughter faded.

“So the two of you are going to kill Jed Coven with an old gun and some attitude?” He crossed the small office with one stride and snatched the capture-frame from Katarina. Now he leaned over the desk to glare into the Princess’s eyes. “Let me tell you about Jed Coven. Twenty years ago he was the runt of the litter so his daddy flushed him out of an airlock. Fifteen years later he walked back into his daddy’s life with a gun that never misses, bullets that penetrate any armour, and the Devil’s own luck. Five minutes later daddy and four other Covens were dead—”

“I’ll ask you again: so what?” Katarina leant back in Maxim’s chair and put her hands behind her head. “His luck’s just run out.”

Maxim scoffed, about to retort, but Tatiana stepped forward and placed her hand on his shoulder. The thin material of his tee-shirt couldn’t conceal the power in his frame. She gripped it hard and glared at Katarina. “It’s a moot point. We haven’t the time to waste on this Jed Coven. All that matters is finding Ivan. So we forget anything else, get into the Torch, and find our uncle.”

“And to be doing that,” Maxim said as he straightened and a wide smile spread across his face, “we are to be needing some serious firepower!”

Tatiana smiled. The contrasts in this man were incredible. Within a moment he had been ignited by the prospect of a fight, a return to old glories, and shed his darkened countenance.

“And serious firepower is meaning your Aunt Glock...” His hand fell to the pistol holstered against his hip. “...And Vast.”

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Jed frowned. Nothin’. Nothin’ at all. He took the locket from Fix’s devastated forehead. Whatever had ravaged the Krak’n’s body had also erased his spirit. But what in hell can do that? he wondered. I ain’t never seen that in all ma days—

A crunch of glass under a boot pierced Jed's confusion, his reflexes did the rest. Springing forward just as a gun roared and a bullet sliced by, he came up in a crouch, revolver at the ready.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said as he aimed his gun at the hulk of a Krak'n brandishing a smoking gun of its own, "if it ain' Mister Grinzz."

Tall even for a Krak'n, Grinzz strode through the bar doorway, his head low and eyes glittering with reflected neon as he continued aim at Jed. The gun wasn't a make Jed recognised, but judging by the gauge it could seriously fuck him up if the Krak'n got a lucky shot in.

Jed stood and stared into the Krak'n's eyes as the reptilian alien asked, "What are you do-ing here?"

"I came here to talk to Fix." Jed gestured at the devastation. "Foun' the place like this. You?" "Fixx's biz-ness part-ner called me. Said bar dam-aged by Val-en-tines and Max-im. Wan-ted them killed." Grinzz said. His mutilated face did nothing to conceal his teeth, the dirtied and cracked fangs constantly bared after his lips had been ripped off by Trick Coven years ago. When he spoke his voice rumbled, and his teeth clicked.

The pair circled, guns at the ready and the history between Grinzz and the Covens at the forefront of their minds. I could jus' shoot him right now, Jed thought, the good Lord knows I'm faster than him, but...well, he's Mister Grinzz, the best tracker this side of Uncle Clarence, an' he's tryin' to find the Valentines too...

...Now ain't that just a piece of real good fortune? he concluded with a sly smile.

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"But we don't know where Vast is," Katarina said with a snort. "Last time we saw Ivan was wheeling her away in a Dante cabinet."

Maxim dismissed Katarina's objection with a flick of his hand and said, "I know. Stalin told me Ivan had left her with Tap-tap to be...well, repaired, I suppose you could say."

Tatiana gave a Maxim a sharp look. Repaired? she thought. Vast wasn't some sort of machine. She was a person, and they all owed her their lives. Was this, she wondered, how soldiers like Maxim and Ivan viewed the world? Did they see allies and friends such as Matinee, Boyd, Vast—even the poor man in reception whose name she didn't even know—as mere machines and munitions...?

"So who's this Tap-tap?" Katarina asked as she put her feet on the faux wood surface of Maxim's desk and inspected her heavy, unlaced boots.

"He's a mechanic, I suppose." Maxim walked across the office to another filing cabinet and pulled open the top drawer. "But he repairs people with a combination of machinery and black magic."

"He's a technomancer?" Tatiana asked. "Like Crepitus?"

"Very much like Crepitus." Maxim began to extract and inspect a series of increasingly big handguns from the draw. "Except Tap-tap isn't as mad as a drunken monk."

"I don't care if he's as mad as Crepitus or not..." Tatiana's skin crawled at the thought of Crepitus and his army of dead doppelgangers, of the crushing tide of zombies wearing her *face*—her very own *features*—that had almost killed her back at the Elephant's Graveyard. "...I don't like him anyway."

“Me neither.” He pulled another gun from the drawer and grinned widely at it. Eyes gleaming, he turned the pistol—a black beast almost as long as his forearm—this way and that, and he watched its sleek body glint in the light. “So let’s be kicking his ass.”

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“Why should I help you? Your fam-i-ly killed my mate and our brood.” Mister Grinzz gestured at the ruination of his face. “Trick tor-tured me, did this to my face. I should shoot you now.”

Jed raised an eyebrow at the bounty hunter. “You should help me *because* you want to kill me,” he said, “and because you know you ain’t good ‘nough.”

The Krak’n snorted and hissed, his clawed foot scratching at the floor. “Not good e-nough?”

“Hell no. I could shoot you three times over ‘fore you even managed to get off one shot, an’ you know that.” Jed and the Krak’n stared into one another’s eyes. Neither blinked. Neither lowered their pistol. “So,” Jed said, “If you help me I’ll give you a free shot once we kill the Valentines. Deal?”

Mister Grinzz’s eyes narrowed, and a lengthy hiss leaked from between his teeth. After a few moments he lowered his gun and nodded. “Deal.”

Jed’s smile broadened, and he doffed his billycock hat at his new ally. “Then here’s to us, pardner...and here’s to killin’ the Valentines.”

To be continued...

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