

Night Time

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Three

Creatures of the Night

Folklore labelled him a ‘Draugr’—an ethereal and intangible spirit born of concrete, tar and street violence. Whatever he truly was, Mortlock now flowed through the streets of Promise leaving a swelter of heat in his wake that momentarily banished the unseasonal cold that had befallen the night. In the shadow of the Torch he cascaded about the Theocracy gentry that sat in their restaurants and carriages. They sweated and pulled on tight collars as he swept by. He passed startled alien merchants in their finery, washed over Theocracy nobles in their brass armour, and flowed past boutiques brimming with priceless object d’art, exquisite foods and exotic robots.

Ignorant of the sweet smells of off-world perfumes, indifferent to the alarm of perspiring Constables, he surged from the cobbled streets and into the labyrinthine congestion of neo-gothic towers, arches, and churches that radiated from the Torch. He poured over the gravs, pack animals and old cars that fought through the narrow, twisting streets, their torturous progress documented by the blare of horns, insults, and bestial cries. The dizzying spectrum of life—from beggars to merchants, from soldiers to priests, and all colours between—paused as he swirled by, and the stench of tarmac and burnt rubber seized them, gave them pause and made them nauseous.

With those gravs, pony-traps, and flat-beds behind he rushed on, and the streets dipped downhill as he crashed toward the estuary. Here terraces and tenements were tied together with myriad lines of washing which contorted and quivered, tortured in the heat of his passing. The sound of baying animals, wailing children, and quarrelling adults leaked from the thick, ugly walls and filled the night sky, but he cared not.

Another sharp turn, and he bore down toward the riverbank that fed into the estuary before he flooded Promise’s dense docks with his redolence and heat. Night workers gasped for breath and covered their mouths. Gone as quickly as he’d arrived, oblivious to the cranes that rose into the night, the blaring of horns from inbound freighters and the taste of brine on the breeze, he sped on.

Into the industrial sector now, he rushed by workshops that rang with the pounding of machines and the rhythm of industry, past cold and darkened warehouses, and over forges that danced with the light of furnaces and welding-lances, their heat made weak and timid by the swelter of his passing. The tired workers trudging home and their reluctant counterparts plodding to work staggered as he washed over them, their brows seized by sweat and their lungs stung by hot air.

Then Mortlock crashed against the walls of his master’s home and vaporised like a wave against a sea-break, only to materialise inside and shudder to a halt in the workshop therein. He hovered and watched in silence whilst the mutant rat continued to work on Vast.

The Vermiddion lay on an operating table, a Doctorpus unit poised over her inert form. Stood between his patient and Mortlock, Tap-tap blocked most of the view of the table, and all the spirit could see of the Amazon was the sheet draped over her legs, and the top of her head which now sported cropped, sheer white hair. With delicate fingers and absolute precision, Tap-tap completed his work before, with a pause and satisfied nods, turning his heads to look at Mortlock. The rat was one of the few living creatures that could see Mortlock, and the Draugr looked away in deference, his gaze fixed on the workshop floor.

“What news?” Tap-tap asked. The servant stole a glance at his master, and saw the halos of whiskers about his twin muzzles quiver when he spoke. The small black eyes bored into him, and the noses twitched incessantly.

“Things move faster than I thought possible.” The Draugr’s voice, a thin whisper of heat that shivered in the air, tore his throat and the words burnt his mouth. Duty bound, he forged another sentence, determined to serve his master. “The night darkens about Ivan Valentine. I doubt he will see another dawn.”

“He’d better. He owes us for this.” Tap-tap’s twin heads nodded towards the dormant Vast. “We don’t work for free.”

“He has been captured by Black Gladys and given to The Now’s son in the Torch.” Molten tears of pain steamed as they dripped from his blazing eyes, but Mortlock pushed on. “The *Siberian Winter* has just landed in the city’s spaceport. It bears a witch, a robot dog and a killing machine all intent on Valentine’s destruction. As we speak a Coven prowls the streets in league with Mister Grinzz. They seek him also.” Mortlock risked another look at Tap-tap, but the disapproval in the rat’s eyes made him look away once more before he summoned his strength for one last sentence.

“I fear,” he whispered, “you will never see Ivan Valentine again.”

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It had, Jed Coven reflected as he watched Mister Grinzz at work, been years since he’d seen the tracker go about his business.

On the garish street outside the Reptile House, the ebb and flow of barely dressed detritus and its consumers undulated about him, and Jed watched Grinzz as the Krak’n unlocked a hinged panel on the breastplate of his armour. This small aperture opened to reveal a tarnished brass knocker screwed onto a secondary layer of Grinzz’s armour. Metal scraped metal as the knocker opened its eyes, and its nose—now devoid of whatever brass ring had once blocked its flared and prodigious nostrils—wrinkled. It blinked and yawned, its gargoyle face making a metallic noise as it stretched.

“I say! What time is it?” It sounded sullen and sleepy. “I’ve barely slept.”

“You have slept long e-nough,” Grinzz said. “Now it is time to earn your keep.”

Jed popped a cigarette into his mouth as the knocker grumbled. A smile touched his lips as he extracted his zippo from the pocket of his worn pants.

“What on earth is a *Coven* doing here!” the knocker asked, voice shrill and querulous. It watched Jed shield his cigarette with one hand, and fire up the zippo with the other. “You *hate* the bloody Covens!”

“Can’t say I like your friend that much neither,” Jed said. He took the briefest moment to admire the zippo. An old silver affair with “Fuck Communism” engraved in its hide, it had been a gift from Pa when he and Jed had been reunited after all those years. He put it back in his pocket and said, “But we’ve reached ourselves an agreement, have we not?”

Grinzz nodded and glared at Jed. “And the soo-ner we find our prey, the soo-ner the ag-ree-ment ends.” He gave the knocker a sharp tap on its bulbous nose with his thumb. “So get to work.”

“I should cocoa!” the knocker said. “You can’t keep me under this armour for hours on end and then just expect me to— Oh! Hullo!” The knocker’s eyes widened as Grinzz produced a small metal box from one of the many pouches on his belt. With thick, green fingers showing a dexterity that surprised Jed, the Krak’n opened the box to reveal a pinkish powder. “Oh! I say! Oh, yes!” The knocker’s nostrils twitched, and its lips parted as a tongue of flexible metal tracked back and forth across them. “Yes indeed, that’s it...oooo! My word!”

Grinzz took a pinch of the powder between his forefinger and thumb, and held it under the knocker’s nose. The metal nostrils flared, and the powder vanished.

A smile crept across Jed's lips, his cigarette momentarily forgotten. This were'n' somethin' you saw ev'ryday.

"And whom," the knocker asked, face now dominated by a stupefied smile, "am I sniffing out, exactly?"

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Once more Tatiana, Katarina and Maxim assumed their red holographic robes as they walked through the precinct known as Shit Town, heads bowed and hands folded. Presently they emerged into a well maintained, verdant park. Despite the cold that gripped the city, the park's deep green lawns were congested with a galaxy of alien orators and other rhetoricians spouting theory and opinion in a dizzying array of languages. Monitored by Constables and officers as they drifted through the crowds, the speakers' words washed over the attentive mob, some of whom heckled and jibed, but most of which fed on those words like sacrament. Some of the worshippers held prayer books or small children, and others held candles whose lambent flames cast flickering highlights on their attentive faces. Street lamps lined the park and cast pools of weak light and thin, artificial heat over the faithful. As ever, Theocracy gravs passed overhead, watchful and gleaming.

Tatiana's nose wrinkled a little as a heady combination of smells seeped from the throng. She looked about her, and her eyes narrowed as she tried to count just how many evangelists and clerics addressed the crowds. They dwarfed the amount of storytellers and activists, as did their audiences. She'd never seen so many holy men in one place before. Most rulers in the Pagentorns—her parents included—didn't trust religion, or its hold over people. She leant to murmur in Maxim's ear, "Why are they so many preachers here?"

Inside his holographic hood, Maxim smiled sardonically. "It's all part of the caring and sharing Theocracy. They'll conscript your healthy relatives for their wars, but they'll give you all the religious freedom you want to pray for their safety."

"That's magnanimous of them," Tatiana said with a sideways glance at a nearby Constable. It watched the crowd with hawkish attention.

"Magnanimous?" Maxim allowed himself something between a grunt and a chuckle.

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"They're in that lot," said the knocker. "Somewhere."

Jed and Grinzz looked out over the masses in the park, and the Coven sneered, the cigarette dangling from his bottom lip.

"Can you be a lil' more precise," Jed said.

"You'll have to give me a moment, old boy." The knocker's nose twitched. "There's quite a lot of different smells about." It closed its eyes and smacked its lips, as if it could taste the aromas. "Let me see... Sweat. Incense. Jaffy." A small pause. "There's a Jennite couple making love. Karscalian coffee. Cooked meats—human, Verminion and Jaroth Pha, I believe. What could be either rotting fish or a school of Cral, I'm not sure wh— Wait." The nostrils flared even wider. "That's it. I have them. Maxim and two Oridians. Teenagers, if I'm not mistaken."

Jed frowned. It wasn't that he doubted the knocker. Hell, the damn thing had already followed whatever scent it had picked up all the way from the Reptile House, but that was a real big crowd. "An' you're sure it's them?"

"Oh, it's them, young man." The knocker's eyes opened with a screech. "I'd recognise the smell of Oridians anywhere."

With that Grinzz chuckled a laugh of staccato grunts.

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“So, if you hate the Theocracy,” Tatiana asked Maxim, “why have you stayed in Promise?”

Their pace had slowed now they were in this morass, and Tatiana was only too grateful as the lung the Cook had damaged back on Stanztrigger’s ship was still healing. Maxim shrugged as they continued to sidestep hawkers, beggars, preachers and outcasts. “When we lost the war against the Theocracy, and Ivan and Skullion escaped in the *Troika*, the rest of us mounted a ‘tactical retreat’ in the Torch’s basements: which really meant fighting for our lives until most of us managed to escape through Kithaen’s portal.”

He stopped to have a quick look around and assure himself they were in no danger. Tatiana followed suit, then felt a little foolish when she realised she didn’t actually know what she was looking for. *Everybody* and *everything* in this damned city looked dangerous to her. She blushed a little, and her discomfort grew when she glimpsed Katarina smirk at her.

“This ‘Kithaen’,” Katarina asked of Maxim with an interest that Tatiana hadn’t seen in her for some time. “Rish said she was a witch. Is that true?”

“As much a witch as Bleakwinter, and maybe even more powerful.”

“So why didn’t you all go through the portal?” Tatiana asked as she glared at her sister. She didn’t like all this talk of Bleakwinter, or Katarina’s fascination with witchcraft. Katarina smiled back and winked.

“Kithaen was weak, wounded. She got most of through before the portal closed, but those of who were left behind had to escape through a secret tunnel only Rish knew about.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question,” Tatiana said. “Why did you stay here? Why not leave the planet and start again somewhere else? Maybe find Ivan or my father?”

“Because I met a woman and got...married...”

The sentence tailed off, but not before it had slapped Tatiana across the face. Married? She blushed, and her throat tightened. He’d never mentioned a wife! Where was she? What—?

Stop this! she told herself. Why would he tell you? Why should he? It’s not like he’s Boyd—

“Maxim? What’s wrong?”

If Maxim heard Katarina, he didn’t answer. Instead he looked back behind them, his eyes narrow and attentive. His hand moved to one of the several pistols holstered on his belt.

“Maxim?” Tatiana looked in the same direction, and even stood on her toes to get a better view. “What’s wrong?”

It wasn’t that she couldn’t see anything. She could see too much. A crowd of aliens that would kill her just as soon as look at her. Now she reached for her pistol as it lurked against the small of her back. Its wooden handle felt good in her hand.

“Fuck me,” Katarina murmured. “He’s big.”

Tatiana frowned, and she followed her sister’s gaze until she too saw the massive Krak’n. With its darkened eyes fixed on them, it moved through the park in their direction. The glacial crowd parted before it as though under an ice-breaker’s prow. Its fangs gleamed even in this light.

“Shit. That’s Mister Grinzz.” Maxim grabbed the both by the arm so roughly Katarina gasped in pain.

“Get off!” she said with a hiss. “You’re hurting—”

“We need to be leaving, girls.” He grabbed Tatiana with his free arm, and now she yelped. Christ on a bike, she thought as she instinctively tried to pull free. And I thought Boyd was strong!

Without so much as a glance over his shoulder, he shouldered his way through a pliant crowd focused on its opiates and orators. The twins were pulled in his wake, grimacing.

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“Wait.”

Grinzz hissed and turned to glare at Jed. “What for? They have seen us. They are es-cape-ing.”

Jed glared back and his lip twitched into a snarl. “An’ what are you gonna do if you catch ‘em here, uh? Kill ‘em, I suppose. In public.” He gestured at a nearby Constable. “With all these Poh-lease watchin’. Is that what you’re gonna do?”

A hiss slid from Grinzz’s teeth like a knife would slide through skin. It told Jed the Krak’n was struggling to regulate his breathing and with it, his anger.

“Might I suggest the...*ahem*...gentleman has a point, old boy?” said the knocker.

Grinzz growled. He did not answer, but merely pounded his fist into his palm.

Jed raised an eyebrow at the Krak’n. “So we wait, let ‘em get away from the park, an’ catch up with someplace a lil’ less conspicuous, right?”

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“What’s a taxi?”

Maxim spared Tatiana a laugh and a smile. “It is what the rest of us who are not travelling in armoured cars and royal cavalcades are using, little Princess.”

They stood between the edge of the park and a wide arterial road. A steady parade of cars, pack animals, bicycles and trucks and streamed by. The rainbow of colours, shapes and sizes dwarfed even the diversity of the crowd behind them. Red and green. Yellow and Purple. Blue and Orange. They were all there, some peppered with rust, some gleaming under the artificial lights suspended over the road. Angry shouts and tooting horns pierced the babble of engines, and the isolated braying of a horse or Karscalian pony brought animal stabs to the mechanical orchestra.

One further wave from Maxim, and a battered yellow car emerged from the melee of vehicles to park before them. With a smirk, a theatrical bow and an “After you, Your Highnesses!” Maxim opened the backdoor of the vehicle and ushered the twins inside.

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They couldn’t see the driver through the grubby glass, but they’d smelt him as soon as they clambered aboard his dilapidated taxi. A thick, organic alliance of damp soil and mouldy bark, the fusty odour clung to the vehicle’s muddied upholstery.

“Where going are you, hmm?” The driver’s voice was thin and frail, and Tatiana couldn’t place the species. All she could see of him—if, indeed, it was a ‘him’—was a tiny pair of wizened green hands that reached up to clutch the steering wheel. Christ alone knew how he could see the road, she reflected with a shudder.

“Corner of Kershner and Kasdan,” Maxim shouted over the uneven chunter of the engine as the taxi idled on the roadside.

“Be there soon we will.”

The engine noise rose and the car pulled away and into the stream of traffic. A blare of horns told Tatiana the driver wasn’t exactly careful. She glanced at Maxim, whose concern seemed directed entirely at whoever followed them. Sat between the twins and with his arm on the back of the seat, he turned to look out of the grubby rear window. Tatiana looked too, but she couldn’t see any potential threats as the crowd in the park receded. Satisfied, she looked at her sister who, for the first time in weeks, actually looked apprehensive. Eyes wide and knuckles white, she clutched at a handle over her door and stared at the road ahead as the driver jinked the car into a gap in the next lane.

“Did you say people *pay* for this?” she asked over the sound of more car horns and the angry snort of a Rahwan mule glaring through the back window at Tatiana, its breath steaming on the glass.

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Jed and Grinzz stood before the scrolling vista of animals and cars and watched the Valentines’ taxi consumed by the traffic.

Jed looked at the knocker and pointed at the decrepit vehicle. “You can follow ‘em, right?”

“I already have the vehicle’s scent. The engine runs on a fuel high in toluene and benzene...” The knocker gave the air a further series of quick sniffs. “...Mixed with a low ratio of potassium additive. The driver also smells a little...swampy. I could follow that across the whole city if I had to.”

“You have to...thanks to Co-ven.”

“Then hail us a taxi, old boy.”

Jed laughed and looked at the hulk of a Krak’n. Grinzz in a taxi? This he had to see...

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Their skins a pale cyan, the twins stood on a curb as the taxi pulled away. Tatiana’s heart raced, and she savoured each breath whether it be tainted with exhaust fumes or not. The cab ride out of Shit Town had been a sickening series of swerves, sudden stops, impossible gaps and blaring horns. She’d gripped the handrail so tight her hand ached, and she’d barely been aware of the bars and brothels giving way to pre-fabricated industrial units and concrete facades.

“And I thought your flying was bad,” Tatiana said to Katarina in a low hush.

Her sister looked back with a blank expression, and her hand trembled as she placed a cigarette on lips that muttered what Tatiana imaged to be indistinct thanks to whatever God of taxi-passengers had seen them here safely.

The driver had dropped them at the intersection between two streets packed tight with locked-up workshops sitting beneath residential flats. All bar one were festooned with hoardings and posters offering services ranging from automobile refurbishments to android repairs. Some were still open, the light from their windows splashed across the street like spilt paint. Save for a handful of industrious souls still working in those lit workshops, the two streets lay deserted and cosseted within the irregular sound of hammers, grinders and saws.

“We are not having much time,” Maxim said. The return of his exaggerated accent told Tatiana he was enjoying himself again. He closed his wallet and stuffed it back into his back pocket. “Grinzz will be soon be catching us up.”

Tatiana unfastened her jacket before she replied.. The chill that had previously fallen over Promise had vanished, and now perspiration tickled her brow and her armpits were sticky. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and exhaled. “Why the hell is it so hot?”

“It is being the heat created by Tap-tap’s bodyguard, Mortlock.”

“Tap-tap?” Katarina paused, hand and its incumbent lighter hovering close to her cigarette. “So we’re close?”

“Very.” Maxim gestured at the plain workshop. Bare and somewhat anonymous, and with its windows covered with armoured shutters, it looked more like a prison to Tatiana. Or a fortress.

“Tap-tap lives there.”

“Awesome.” Katarina lit her cigarette and inhaled on it. “So let’s get Vast.”

To be continued...

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