

Night Time

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Four

Dead Man Walking

More hammering on his door, and Tap-tap muttered as he ran to it.

“Who? Who now is *this*?” He reached the door and slid back the cornucopia of bolts and chains with a tut. A crossfire of thoughts spat across the conjoined cortices of his two brains. Could it be Ivan? No, the Theocracy have him. Could it be them perhaps, here to arrest Vast as an accessory to Ivan’s war crimes? Don’t be ridiculous! They won’t even know Vast is here—

The hammering intensified. “Honestly!” he muttered “People folk these days! First Ivan, and now...” He left the last chain in place, and it strained against the edge of the door as he opened it a little to peer outside. “What? What do you want? Who is here there?”

Three silhouettes stood at his door, trimmed in yellow by the street lights behind. “Hello, Tap-tap,” said the nearest. “It is being thoroughly unpleasant to see you. But needs must.” The chain sheared as this black shape kicked the door aside, forcing Tap-tap to stagger backward. “Now please to be letting us in, before Maxim is getting physical.”

Maxim stepped into the hallway. Tap-taps lips curled into sneers. What a fool! he seethed. To come here to our home when we have Mortlock to protect us!

The heat and smell of Mortlock heralded the Draugr’s appearance. Tap-tap glanced to see the ethereal bodyguard by his side, poised. Maxim, he knew, was unable see the spirit. No ordinary being could.

“You can be calling off Mortlock,” Maxim said as he wiped at his sweating brow. “Maxim is not needing to see him to know he is here. Maxim is not being here for a fight.”

“Then why are you here now?” Tap-tap asked, twin mouths speaking in unison.

“We are coming here to collect Vast.”

Tap-tap gestured at the young females behind Maxim. They had, by now, entered the hallway. “And who is ‘we’?”

“My name is Tatiana Valentine,” said the first; a tall and athletic creature dressed in black, practical clothing. She gestured at the young woman beside her. Identical in face and build, she wore, however, more flamboyant and gothic dress. Whilst this ‘Tatiana’ looked focused and sombre, her twin looked relaxed as she sucked on a lollipop. “And this is my sister, Katarina.”

“Ooo, chintz,” Katarina said as she looked at the hallway’s flocked wall-paper. “Nasty.”

Tap-tap raised an eyebrow at the Valentine twins. So the stories were true. Here stood the exiled princesses. He appraised their flawless Oridian beauty, their azure skin and midnight blue hair, but he did so as a pawn-broker might regard rare jewellery. These two were worth a

fortune. Everybody from the Long Knives, the Covens and all in-between would pay immeasurable amounts to own these two royal hides. He crossed his arms and stroked at a chin. If only he could cash in on this unexpected opportunity...

Maxim clicked his fingers to regain Tap-tap's attention, and said, "Now, let us please to be hurrying. We are not having too much time"

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"Twelve limbs. That is the price deal Ivan agreed to for us we to fix Vast, and this is the price deal you must pay to have Vast released to you."

Not quite sure if she'd heard the mutated rat-creature correctly, Tatiana looked across the plush living room at Katarina. Her sister lounged amongst the many cushions in one of the Tap-tap's richly upholstered armchairs, still sucking her lollipop as she tucked her legs under her. As if reading Tatiana's mind, or at least her puzzled expression, she met her sister's glance and echoed her confusion by asking, "Did you just say 'twelve *limbs*'?"

"We did." Tap-tap nodded with one head whilst the other puffed on an antiquated wooden pipe. He held the bowl with one hand whilst lighting the tobacco inside with the other. "Those are our terms."

Tatiana, leant against Tap-tap's marble fireplace, glanced toward Maxim. The Russian, one hand resting on one of the many pistols on his belt, pulled back one of the heavy floral curtains that covered the living room window to look through the slats of the shutter beyond. His face became thrown into shadow by the miserly light offered by sullen faeries trapped in the room's crystal chandelier.

Silence reigned as Tatiana pulled on the collar of her tee. Christ on a bike, she thought as she grimaced, it's so hot! She looked at the spirit that hovered by Tap-tap's shoulder. A steaming parody of a man, its body a chaos of cracked concrete and bent-metal, cables hung from the perimeter of its slumped, bald head. They threw a darkness over its face from which two glowing amber eyes stared at her dolefully. Tatiana guessed the stench of tar and hot metal that oozed about the room's quaint lamps, delicate porcelains and decadent furniture emanated from this...thing.

"Does he *have* to be here?" Katarina said, gesturing at the apparition. "We're not gonna hurt you."

Tap-tap paused, the cheeks of one head shallow as they drew on his pipe. One hand fidgeted inside the pockets of his quilted smoking jacket, and he squinted at Katarina through his pipe smoke. "You can see Mortlock?"

"Yeah. Smell him too." Katarina fanned the air from beneath her nose. "He stinks."

"But only the gifted and the damned can see creatures such as Morlock..." Tap-tap said.

Katarina laughed with customary insouciance and pointed toward Tatiana with her lollipop. "Well, she's the gifted one, so what does that make me—?"

"We don't have time for this." They all looked toward Maxim. He turned from the curtains and gestured over her shoulder with his thumb. A shadow still haunted his face and mirrored the gravitas in his voice "Jed Coven and Mister Grinzz are outside."

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"An' you, ma'am, can keep the change."

The taxi-driver—a homely Karscalian with mischief in her eyes—took the money from Jed, and her gaze lingered on him. His smile broadened and he tipped his billycock hat at her before he straightened and stepped back from the cab. A moment later the engine of the scratched and dented cab grumbled as vehicle moved away from the curb and left Jed and Mister Grinzz stood on the side of the street. He looked at the workshops about them. Slowly the activity in those workshops, the ringing of hammers and the hissing of welding lances, ground to a halt, and the street become lined with gawping artisans and fascinated labourers. A stillness enveloped the street, and a hushed, expectant silence.

“This is it, chaps,” said the knocker screwed into Grinzz’s armour. “Maxim and the Valentines are in there.”

Jed and Grinzz looked toward the plain, shuttered workshop. Don’ look much to me, he thought as he removed his hat and wiped sweat from his brow, but what the hell is this *heat*?

“So,” Grinzz said, “they come to see Tap-tap. Why should they do that...?”

“Beats me, pardner. Ain’t never heard o’ no ‘Tap-tap’.”

“We must proceed with care.” Previously crammed into the taxi’s inadequate interior, the Krak’n bounty-hunter flexed his head from side to side and a sharp crack sounded from his neck. “And we must not anger Tap-tap. He is not only clever and able, but his body-guard is both invisible and deadly.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Jed said as he studied Grinzz. The cold-blooded reptile’s ponderous speech pattern had vanished. Prob’l summin’ to do with how damn’ hot it is ‘round here, Jed thought. Speeded up his mo-tab-olism or some such. That’ll make him quicker an’ more dangerous. Jed drew his pistol and spun it about his trigger-finger several times before slipping it back in to his waistband. Well, quicker or not, he still ain’ no match for me on the draw... “Now le’s get this done.”

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“Okay, let’s get ‘em,” Katarina said. She unfurled her long legs from beneath her and prized herself from the depths of the armchair.

“No,” Maxim said. “You stay and keep an eye on Tap-tap. I’ll take care of these two.”

“But you can’t take both—”

“Of course I can. There’s only two of them—” He pointed at the array of pistols holstered about his waist. “—And ten of my favourite guns. Those amateurs don’t stand a chance”

Tatiana stepped toward Maxim, and drew the antique, broom-handled pistol shoved in her waistband. There was no way she’d let him go alone. She wasn’t the same frightened Tatiana who’d hid behind Boyd, Matinee and Vast. This Tatiana fought her own battles now. “No, Maxim, I won’t let you do this—”

“Tap-tap, make sure these two don’t follow me. And you two—” He looked at Tatiana and Katarina. “—Keep an eye on *him*.” He nodded at Tap-tap. “Make sure he doesn’t pull anything funny when he revives Vast.”

“But you haven’t paid us twelve limbs yet!”

“You’ll get your twelve limbs, rat-boy,” Maxim said with a sneer. “So wake Vast up. *Now*.”

“Very well.”

“Good little rat.” Maxim looked at Tatiana and grinned. “Now it is being time for Uncle Maxim to rock out with his Glock out.”

“No, Maxim, no way.” Tatiana shook her head. “I’m not hiding behind you or anybody else. Not anymore.” She raised her gun parallel to her cheek, the metal trigger warm and reassuring against the crook of her finger. “So you’re not going out there alone. I won’t let you.”

“Oh but I am. I promised your Uncle Ivan I would protect you, and I will.” He took hold of her shoulder with one hand and slipped the other into one of his pockets. “It will be okay, I promise,” he whispered as he bent his head to kiss her on the cheek. His lips were coarse, but the touch tender and delicate. “I know how to defeat them. Trust me.” He took her hand and squeezed it before whispering in her ear. “And I know how you can defeat your sister. You will need this...”

He let go of her hand, and she saw he’d surreptitiously placed a crumpled business card into her palm. Amongst the card’s torn corners and surface scratches lay a stylised blue heart with tribal flourishes: the same design Matinee and Ivan had used to ward off the Witch. An address sat above the design:-

*Pagan Hearts Piercing and Tattoos
Detonation Boulevard
Shit Town
Promise*

She frowned and looked up. “I don’t underst—”

But it was already too late. Maxim had strode away, and stood on the threshold of the living room. He demeanour switched once more to that of the brash, exaggerated man of action as his face split into an expansive grin and he declared, “Uncle Maxim will be back soon, girls. Mortlock?”

And with that he was gone. Tatiana moved to pursue him, but she staggered back as a blistering heat assaulted her damp cheeks. She blinked, the fierce swelter stinging her eyes, to see the glowering Mortlock now blocking the door.

“Very well, girls,” Tap-tap said. “Would you like to see Vast? We have done a good job, even if we say so ourselves...”

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“Well, I’ll be damned...”

Jed’s jaw fell. He’d seen a lotta things in life, but he never expected to see *this*.

“Please to be going for your guns, boys,” Maxim shouted as he strode from Tap-tap’s front door, hands resting on two holstered pistols, “because Maxim is calling you out.”

A hiss burst from between Grinzz’s naked fangs. “Are you mad, Maxim? You must know we will kill you.”

“I am knowing nothing,” the Russian said as he stopped, puffed up his chest and threw his shoulders back, “except you two are being dead.”

“Aw, c’mon, Maxim, this ain’ even a fair fight—”

“Then I will only be using one gun.” Maxim’s grin widened. “I may even use my left hand.”

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With Katarina behind her, Tatiana followed Tap-tap down a flight of narrow stairs. Mortlock hovered behind them, amber eyes burning in the half-light. Walls cluttered with framed sepia photos of alien landscapes, wondrous cities and majestic starships, the stairs led to an open

door from which spilled a white, pristine radiance. This, Tatiana thought, must be where the rat technomancer has Vast. Her attention, however, drifted to Maxim. Something about this didn't add up. If Ivan had promised Tap-tap twelve limbs in return for 'fixing' Vast, how did Maxim hope to meet this price if he were only confronting Grinzz and Jed Coven? Surely, she thought, that only added up to eight limbs. Unless...

"Maxim! No!" she shouted, even though she knew he couldn't hear her. Then she turned and pushed Katarina aside before dodging around the sluggish Mortlock and sprinting back up the stairs.

"Tatty! What the fuck are you doing?"

But Tatiana didn't answer her sister. She didn't have time. She had to stop Maxim. Before it was too late...

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Jed faltered. What the hell was the lunatic doing? He frowned and spat on the curb. This had to be some kinda trick, didn't it?

"This is madness, Coven," Grinzz hissed. The knocker screwed to his armour gawped at the unfolding drama. "Let's just kill him and get the Valentine girls—"

"I am having no quarrel with you, Mister Grinzz," Maxim shouted, nodding at Jed, "but this scum shot my friend in my own hotel. You can go now and I will not be killing you."

A roar burst from the Krak'n as, jaws parted and forked tongue slashing at the air, he went for the big gun strapped to his hip.

Grinzz was quick, Jed had to admit—a lot quicker than he'd anticipated—but Maxim was quicker. In a blur of practised movement, the big Russian skinned a hefty black pistol the length of his forearm and fired. The roar of the gun hammered at Jed's ears, and he grimaced. A corona of green blood spouted from a blackened hole in Grinzz's armour as the bullet thundered into his chest, and the Krak'n staggered back.

"Ooo! You bugger!" the knocker shouted, lips pursed and brow furrowed. "Get him, Grinzz!"

Blood running from his mouth, Grinzz grabbed at his wound with one hand, and aimed with the other. But Maxim fired again. This second shot reduced Grinzz's shoulder into a green miasma of flesh, armour and bone, and his orphaned arm fell to the curb, taloned fingers still clutching his pistol. With a gargling hiss married to a despairing groan, the Krak'n crashed to the pavement.

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Mortlock looked up the staircase after Tatiana. "Shall I pursue her?"

Tap-tap shook his heads. "No, Mortlock, leave her. There's nothing she can do now."

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The sound of gunfire—muted by Tap-tap's front door—mocked Tatiana as she reached the top of the stairs and ran down the hallway. She reached the door, only to grind her teeth and swear under her breath. The bloody locks and chains! The rat-bastard had insisted on putting them all back in place before he'd led them to his living room!

She began to undo the myriad chains and bolts, her damp fingers slipping on the metal. She wouldn't let this happen, she determined. Maxim wasn't going to die.

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The street about Jed and Maxim had descended into chaos. The onlookers had panicked and ran, and some now cowered behind what cars, bins or lampposts they could find for cover. Most, however, simply ran inside, slamming their doors behind them, whilst others fled the street.

Jed blocked it out, and now he and Maxim squared off, their gazes fixed. Poised, they circled one another, hands hovering over their holstered guns. Maxim had already sheathed the big pistol, and now he prepared to draw a smaller, more compact weapon—an old Glock, he was sure, unless he'd missed his guess. And Jed *never* missed.

“Well, what you waitin’ for old man?”

Maxim shrugged. “Maxim is not being in a rush, Coven. He can wait all day if he has to.” He winked. “You, on the other hand, are not having such a luxury.”

Jed’s lip curled slightly, and his blood chilled a little. This weren’ right. This crazy ol’ coyote all a winkin’ an’ and a smilin’. All the others, they’d cried or begged, swore or snarled. He ain’t never met nobody like this.

“How long do you think it is until the Theocracy are being here now shooting has started with street full of witnesses?” the Russian said. “Maxim is having license for guns and friends in constabulary. You are not. You are also being responsible for deaths of at least one man in Promise that Maxim is knowing of, and he would not bet against you having killed more.” The image of the dead constables in Fix’s nightclub flashed across Jed’s mind. “So I,” Maxim concluded, “am quite happy to wait for them to arrive.”

Jed’s fingers flexed and moved closer to his pistol. The damn Russian was right: Jed couldn’t wait none. But Pa had always said no man should draw first. To draw first was a deliberate, mechanical action. To draw second was pure reaction, pure instinct. ‘He who draws last shoots first, boy,’ Pa had warned.

But time ain’ on my side, Pa, Jed thought, the tips of his fingers just touching his pistol’s grip. I gotta do this now.

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The last of the bolts resisted, but Tatiana gave it one more tug and it slid back. She gripped the door handle and wrenched at it, only to discover it was locked. But Tatiana would not be thwarted. Jaw set and chin jutting forward in determination, she stepped back, drew her pistol, and opened fire. The wood about the recalcitrant lock splintered and buckled as her burst of bullets raked at it, and sparks flew from the metal of the lock itself.

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The chatter of a semi-automatic weapon spurred them both, and they went for their guns simultaneously.

Maxim proved to be the faster. Jed had barely extracted his pistol before the Russian had his Glock drawn, levelled and aimed. Frozen with disbelief, all Jed could do was look on, stunned. This jus’ ain’ possible, he thought. Ain’ nobody faster than me. Not Pa. Not Johnny. An’ sure as hell no leathery ol’ Ruskie.

But the evidence could not be denied. From the dark smile on Maxim’s lips to the stone-cold steadiness of his hand, no-one could doubt just who would be remembered as the fastest.

Gun-metal grey, Maxim’s eyes bore into Jed. His lips moved as, barely audible, he said, “Go to hell, mother-fucker.”

He pulled the trigger. A click, hollow and desperate filled the street.

The two men looked at the Glock in disbelief before looking up at one another. Now Jed's face split into a grin as Maxim's jaw dropped. Well, ain' that jus' the Devil's own luck, Jed thought. A misfire.

Perhaps more in desperation than hope, Maxim went for another gun. But Jed knew it was all over. Maxim was a dead man.

To be continued...

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