

Night Time

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Five

Darkness Before Dawn

The sound of Tatiana shooting the lock of his front door stabbed at Tap-tap. Immediately Mortlock appeared by his side.

“Go outside,” Tap-tap said to the Draugr. “Maxim, Coven and the Krak’n may be dead shortly, and we want their limbs.”

The light of Mortlock’s doleful eyes pulsed and the spirit looked toward Katarina. “Will you be safe?” he asked.

Tap-tap eyed the Oridian. With the ever-present lollipop in her mouth, Katarina bent forward slightly to peer through the glass door of one of Tap-tap’s cupboards and at the cybernetic limbs inside. She’d been glancing over his lab as a child might look over a museum, and did nothing to disguise her disinterest in the preserved body parts, mutilated bodies and other such materials Tap-tap kept in stock for his trade. He chuckled to himself. She looked very much like an over-confident little girl ignorant to the dangerous worlds she now occupied. That Mortlock would think this child posed any threat... “We will be safe fine, Mortlock. Now go.”

#

Smoke curled from the barrel of her gun as Tatiana flung open the door. Barely cognisant of the smell of cordite in her nostrils, or the thud of the door’s blasted lock falling to the floor, she burst into the street. Maybe she could still save Maxim. Maybe it wasn’t too late after all

Once outside, however, her pace slackened as soon as she saw it was far too late.

With her blood running cold and her skin clammy, with her breath short and blood pounding in her ears, Tatiana assimilated all she could see in disbelief. It didn’t look real. It *couldn’t* be real. Maxim lay in the street, the small hole in his forehead at odds with the bigger, bloodier void that distorted the back of his skull. Eyes wide open he stared into the night sky, lips parted and his face marred with blood. His beloved Auntie Glock nestled in his slack fingers. A dark pool of thick blood oozed from his body. It spread across the road’s pitted surface and reflected stars twinkled in the surface of the viscous liquid.

Now moving at little more than a shuffle, Tatiana looked toward his killer. He stood over Maxim’s body and smiled at her. Thin and grimy, yet handsome, he doffed his hat at her before saying, “Jed Coven at your service, ma’am. Ah’m mighty pleased to meet such a purdy lady.”

Her breathing quickened and her throat contracted as bile filled her mouth. First Matinee. Then Boyd. And now Maxim. How many more...?

“I’m mighty hopeful you ain’ one of them Valentine girls,” the Coven said as his smile broadened and he ravaged her with his eyes, “‘cos ah sure would be sad to have to kill y’all.” She bared her teeth at the smirking Coven. None. No more. No more would die for her. She raised her gun and took aim, just the way father had taught her.

#

“And this, young lady, is the new Vast.”

With that Tap-tap drew back a thin white sheet draped over one of the tables that populated the lab. Immediately Katarina’s jaw dropped and the lollipop hung from her bottom lip like a parasite. Tap-tap’s two heads smiled, and they glanced at one another. Even now, after all these years, the two brains concurred, it still felt good to see the astonishment in their clients’ eyes...

They looked at Vast as the naked Amazon lay on the table. The previously dull and dry red skin—once marred by those ugly tattoos—now gleamed with a robust vigour, flawless and fierce in its scarlet splendour. A cybernetic surrogate now replaced her severed arm; a particularly rare example of much sought-after Retro-Nax technology. The arm’s internal pistons, hydraulics and synthi-stem were visible through the crystal clear surface. Her hideous and badly applied make-up had been scrubbed away from the eyes and mouth to expose her hard and handsome features. Short, cropped hair of brilliant white—combed forward and to a point—now crowned her once bald head. The same white hair curled in the pits of her arms and about her genitals. Even at rest her muscled form looked toned and ready, and it was easy to see, Tap-tap reflected, just why Ivan would be so keen to retain the services of such an impressive weapon.

He smirked and turned back to Katarina and smiled widely. “She is magnificent, is she not? Easily worth twelve limbs.” His smile darkened. “No matter whose limbs they may be...”

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Tatiana hadn’t even seen the wounded Krak’n, but now it reared up behind the Coven. Blood spat from both a stump that had once been its arm, and a hole in its chest. She had the briefest moment to note the brass knocker screwed into the reptile’s armour seemed to be complaining vociferously as blood flowed from the Krak’n’s wounded chest and into the knocker’s face and eyes.

The Krak’n, which loomed over the oblivious Jed Coven and wavered on unsteady feet, attacked the grinning cowboy from behind. One blow was enough to lift the assassin from his feet and propel him several feet across the street. The killer landed at Tatiana’s feet with a protracted groan, and she looked down at him. He flopped onto his back, and, still dazed, he slurred half-formed obscurities. Blood ran down his face from a gash in his forehead, and his hand moved across his eyes as he wiped at the thick red tide from his vague, heavy-lidded eyes. His legs kicked and flexed like those of a baby in a cot as he tried—perhaps by instinct alone—to gain some purchase and crawl to safety. All he achieved, however, were a drunken tally of scratches in the tarmac as his spurs scored the surface.

She pointed her gun at this helpless man. It would be so, so easy, she thought. Just one squeeze, and he’ll be dead. A sweet shiver of excitement thrilled and repulsed her in equal measure. She shouldn’t think that way. Ivan, her mother, and even her father—in their quiet hours alone when he’d shown her how to use a gun—had always taught her that guns were evil. But how can they be? she thought, if they allow me to fight monsters like this, like Trick Coven, like the Witch...?

...And monsters like Mister Grinzz.

Focused as she was, she didn't hear the pounding of feet until it was too late. She looked up, but with barely enough time to register the fact Grinzz was upon her. Her attempt to aim at him proved to be too little, too late, and the back of his armoured fist struck her in the chest. The next moment she found herself in the road, face down in the gutter.

#

"So what are you waiting for?" Katarina said through gritted teeth. Tap-tap peered at her. Why did she suddenly hold her stomach like that? Was she in pain? "Wake her up. That's what we're here for."

Tap-tap couldn't help but laugh at Katarina. To look at her, so soft and small, giving him orders, even in her obvious distress. "Perhaps we choose not to."

She didn't respond immediately. Instead she staggered a little and both hands now went to her belly. A further grimace before her lip curled into a faint sneer, and she raised an eyebrow at him. "What the fuck do you mean 'choose not to'?"

"Perhaps we don't want to revive Vast." He slipped his hands into the pockets of his smoking jacket. "Perhaps we choose to keep steal her...and perhaps we choose to keep steal you also."

#

Tatiana cried out as she rolled onto her back and grabbed at her shoulder. Christ, that hurt! Her jacket had torn where she'd landed, and she could see her exposed azure skin discolouring as it bruised. With a further cry she clutched at her stomach and drew her knees up before falling sideways in a foetal lump. Tsunamis of pain now swamped her belly and she gasped as he held it. All this pain crowded out her senses until she were barely aware of the sound of stiffened leather thudding into flesh, and of the distorted and abstract words that percolated through her fugue. She took deep breath and ignored the fire in her lungs, the agony in her stomach, ribs and shoulder. Focus! she told herself. Get up! Remember who you are, who your father is! Who your *uncle* is!

She pushed herself up and into all fours. Head hung, the tickle of running blood spread across her forehead. Vision blurred then cleared, and she looked toward the Krak'n. He knelt above the Coven and pummelled the young man's face with blow after crushing blow. Her senses began to clear, and the reptile's words now gained some form.

"This is for my face!" Crunch! "This is for my mate!" Crunch! "And this is for my brood!" He stopped, and peered at the Coven who now lay motionless, his face a morass of blood, bruises and shards of fractured bone. The Krak'n stood and straddled the body. Just as blood still poured from his ruinous shoulder and chest, so too did his vitriol still spill from his reptilian lips. "I warned you," he said, "once we found the Valentines our partnership would end. Now I am avenged."

He turned and focused his beady eyes on Tatiana. His exposed fangs clicked against one another as his tongue slashed back and forth like an angered serpent. "And now," he said, "for you, Valentine."

#

Whatever pain she may have been in, Katarina laughed; a genuine laugh born not of nerves, but of mirth. The little Princess lost she may be, Tap-tap conceded, but she wasn't without some bravery.

"Oh, so you're going to keep me here? And why would you wanna try that?"

Tap-tap chuckled. Why indeed. The possibilities flashed back and forth between Tap-tap's two brains:-

Sell her; the Long Knives are offering a fortune for her and Tatiana!

No, look at her. Why would she hold her belly thus? We have seen this before, have we not, in psykers and latents? If she should have some empathic link with her sister that responds to her danger, the opportunity to dissect them both is priceless...

Nonsense! She may just have stomach ache. We shall sell her. The flesh-vendors in Shit Town will kill for a body-graft like that.

"The whys wherefores are no concern of yours, young lady." He walked across the lab to a shelf laden with syringes. "You are ours now..." He picked one up: a Karscalian tranquilliser. More than enough to sedate the brave little Princess. "...And there is nothing you can do about it."

#

Instinct told her the reptile shouldn't have been that quick, but his movements were a blur. His scaled fist sliced through the air, but she managed to duck below the arc of his would-be blow. He swung again, but again she managed to dodge beneath the hefty arm. Legs weak and trembling, belly knotted with agony, she staggered away from the Krak'n, but the wheeze of his laboured and wounded breath warned her he was not far behind.

Frantic thoughts bounced about her befuddled brain. How could he be this quick? One arm missing, chest riven, eyes glazed and blood oozing from his mouth; he should be dead by now. But still he pounded after her.

The heat, she reasoned, it must be this heat. Whatever the reason, she couldn't fight Grinzz with her bare hands. She needed a weapon, hers having been knocked from grasp by the Krak'n's initial blow. Vision streaked and distorted, lungs aflame and legs wobbling, she looked across the road to Maxim's body. A hardened part of her psyche, wrought in the deaths of Matinee and Boyd, told her one simple fact: the Russian now had guns to spare...

Her legs near-buckled as she changed direction, but she managed to keep her balance. The pursuing Grinzz overshot, wrong footed by her new course, and she knew this could be her only chance. Run, she told herself. Run, damn it! Ignore the pain! Get a gun and *fight*!

She lurched toward Maxim, only for the air to become possessed of a fierce heat and the stench of burnt rubber. Mortlock materialised over the dead Russian, crouched and hunched over the body like a bird of prey with its victim. It roared at Tatiana in warning, and fire leapt in its parted mouth.

Tatiana ground her teeth against the pain, against the blistering intensity of Mortlock's presence, and ran at him, Grinzz at her heels. She jinked to the side at the last moment, and this time her legs couldn't take the strain. With a cry she fell, her knee striking the road with a crunch. Grinzz—wrong footed once more—thundered by her...

'...Only the gifted and the damned can see creatures such as Morlock,' Tap-tap had said, and Grinzz it appeared, was neither. Seemingly oblivious to the spirit's presence, he stopped inches from the Draugr and began to turn again toward the fallen Tatiana. But Mortlock struck. Its hand speared Grinzz, and the ethereal talons entered the Krak'n's back like a desert wind through an open door. Instantly the Krak'n howled, his body convulsed, and the protracted torture of his scream soon gave way to a hideous bubble as a tide of boiling tar spouted from his mouth. Still he tried to scream, and still the tar rose from his throat to spew from his gaping maw, his nostrils, his wounds, and then his eyes. His remaining hand clawed

at his throat in a desperate bid to alleviate the pressure, and his claws sliced his armoured skin to allow fresh geezers of black and steaming pitch to erupt into the night air. Tatiana screamed and turned away as the thick substance rained over her, and splashes of it sizzled and burnt as it fell upon her clothes, hair and bare skin.

She heard Grinzz crash to the ground, and looked back over her shoulder. Steam rose from his corpse, and the skin blistered and puckered before her eyes. The knocker screwed into his armour looked at her with wide, imploring eyes for the briefest of moments before its eyes rolled back into its head and tar also gushed from its nostrils and mouth.

“Go away!” Mortlock’s voice tortured her eardrums just as the black tide of Grinzz’s death tortured her skin. “These bodies are Tap-tap’s now. Go now before I am forced to kill you.”

#

Tap-tap laughed. “‘Make’ us revive Vast? ‘Make’ us let you go?” Syringe in hand, he paused for a moment to scoff at Katarina. “And how could you ever ‘make’ us do anything?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised, rat-boy.” Her voice had suddenly gained a little composure. Suddenly she didn’t hold her belly with such ardour, and her irises were not so dilated. He peered at her. What had changed? Was her sister now in less danger? Would this allow Katarina to regain her strength and focus? His mouths twitched into twin smiles. Fascinating.

She smiled a smile ten times darker than Tap-tap’s could ever be. “Here,” she said, “let me show you...”

#

Tatiana scrambled to her feet and wobbled across the street toward Tap-tap’s house. She grimaced. Her lungs and her skin, her wrist and her knee; all clawed at her with pain. It didn’t matter. Katarina. Vast. Only they mattered now.

She stooped as she lurched on and picked up her gun. Its wooden handle scorched her palm, such was the heat in the air. Spittle escaped from her gritted teeth. Ignore the pain, she ordered herself. Get inside. Get to Katarina—

She paused, swaying as she focused on the spot where the Coven should have been. Gone. No sign of him but blood and shards of bone on the tarmac. She scanned the street through the heat haze. The shifting Mortlock mantled over the bodies of Maxim and Grinzz. Smudged faces gawped from behind windows, cars and doorways. Abstract pimples of light flashed in the sky as the shriek of sirens stabbed at the night. The stink of tar and her own sweat squatted in her nose and the back of her throat. But she saw no sign of Jed Coven.

#

Keep goin’, boy, he told himself as he touched his pulverized face. Tha’s what Pa would say. Ain’ nothin’ but pain, and pain ain’ never hurt no-one.

He leant on the banister of the stairs into Tap-tap’s basement lab. He’d fled soon as he saw Grinzz hot-steppin’ after Tat-yana. Weren’t nothin’ to be gained from waitin’ to see her die, Grinzz’d take care o’ that...

He spat. Grinzz. He’d take good care o’ that back-slidin’ coyote when he was done here.

He winced again, face agonised and tender. The stab of pain made him smile. Felt good. Made him focus, brought him back to the present, back to findin’ the other Valentine girl before she could get away.

He reached the foot of the stairs, and he shielded his eyes against the bright light from beyond the open door. The smell of antiseptic and other such cleanin' stuff washed over him. But that didn't interest him none. Not when he could hear a voice inside...well, two voices, talking in stereo. No, not talkin'. Pleadin'...

"Please! Let us live and we will release Vast to you at no cost charge." The voices were kinda reedy and thin, and they quivered and shook.

"Fuck you! I could just kill you and take Vast anyway—"

"No! *No!* You need us to revive her!"

Jed tried to frown, but all he could manage was a brief and tortured grimace. To hell with this. He didn't come here for no talkin'. Sooner he took care o' this, sooner he could find a damn doctor.

He stepped through the doorway into some sort of lab crammed with stiffs, bits of stiffs, and more stiffs. There were even stiffs stored under the damn mesh floor. He ignored 'em and focused on a two-headed rat on his knees and pleadin' in the middle of the room, and the real purdy blue girl stood over him. Damn him if she weren't the double of that Tat-yana. That jus' had t'be Kat-a-rina. Pity they had to die. He could have real fun with those two; same kinda fun he'd had with cousins Rosasharn and Daisy.

"O. Kay—argh!" His voice sounded alien to him, distorted by his dislocated jaw, broken palette and smashed teeth. No more talkin', he thought, jus' shoot the bitch.

He raised his gun and aimed at Katarina, hand as steady as ever. She didn't respond, she just laughed.

Why the hell was she all a smilin' an' a laughin'? Didn' she realise—

Something caught the periphery of his vision. Something flat and colourful that sped across the wall like splashed paint. He squinted. What the hell was that?

And then it flowed over him.

#

Grinzz's dying screams had been horrific, but the screams erupting from Tap-tap's lab were a million times worse to Tatiana. Grinzz's had possessed a despairing quality, as though, even amongst all that pain, he were still aware of his existence and the horror that had befallen it. But these screams had none of that awareness, none of the realisation of impending death, no fractured regrets or the desire for release. These screams held nothing but the most abject pain, the kind of pain that eclipsed all else, that overwhelmed the victim and snuffed it out. They were the same screams that had been ripped from Matinee.

Abruptly, they ceased.

She turned her ankle and pitched down the last few steps to land face down in the lab. The light hurt her eyes as she looked up.

"Oh, my God," she gasped.

She choked on a tide of vomit as she saw Coven—or what remained of him. He lay on his side in the middle of the lab, and smoke rose from the blistered and blackened skin beneath his smouldering clothes. There were glimpses of burnt flesh through gaps in the ravaged material, and this blistered flesh popped to ejaculate a dark green goo—foul smelling and viscous—which saturated it's clothes before leaking through the mesh floor. His features

were lost within a crowd of swelling boils, the lips curled into a rictus of agony as one eye slid down his face. The slack fingers of his hand curled about his revolver.

The revolver pointed across the lab, and Tatiana's horrified gaze followed to rest on Katarina, who stood over Tap-tap, the rat's twin heads bobbing over her boots as he licked at them.

Katarina's face blazed with the reflected light of a match as she lit a cigarette. Her cheeks hollowed as she inhaled deeply before casting her match aside. It landed beside an operating table upon which lay Vast.

"Please! We will revive her if only you—" he paused as his twin tongues travelled across both boots simultaneously, "—will let us live! You take her, and let us be. Please!"

Wracked by pain, Tatiana's mind struggled to put everything in order. What had happened to Coven? Why did his body look so much like Matinee's, or Johnny Coven's, or Fix's? And what did it have to with her sister?

Katarina turned to look at Tatiana, cigarette on her lips. Those lips twisted into a crooked smile, and her eyes glittered with a malevolence she'd seen before. With a gasp and grunt of pain she forced her self up and off the floor and staggered toward her sister. Yes, Tatiana had seen that look before, that smile. On the Witch...

Her hand shook as she pushed her gun into her belt. Then she stood face to face with Katarina, barely aware of Tap-tap as the mutant rat crawled away and cowered by the wall.

"Hi, Tatty, how's it goin'? You look like shi—"

She didn't reply. She gripped Katarina's black blouse in both hands and—knuckles white—tore the flimsy garment aside to expose her sister's chest and belly. And then she staggered away, gasping in short gulps as her worst fears were confirmed.

They gambolled across Katarina's chest and belly, dashing back and forth across her blue skin, over her breasts and about the lacy, bottle green bra: the Witch's dragons, the yellows, oranges and red of their inked scales vivid and black of their hand drawn lines crisp. They looked at Tatiana and grinned toothsome, evil grins.

"Well, Sis," Katarina said as she exhaled smoke and shrugged, "guess the cat's outta the bag now, right?"

Tatiana slumped. Her legs wobbled and her shoulders dropped as she asked Katarina, "How?" This was impossible! The Witch was dead! Ivan had blown her up on the *Troika*. They couldn't be here! They couldn't be on Kat! "She's dead...?"

"Oh, Tatty, don't be so stupid. They came to me just before we left the *Troika*. They'd been aboard ever since you beat the Witch the first time, hiding, waiting for the right time to find a new host..."

She didn't bother to finish the sentence, and she didn't need to. Tatiana could fill in the rest. What had she said to the Witch back when this nightmare had just begun? 'I want to be like you'. And that's what they'd offered her, wasn't they? They'd take away her insecurities and puppy fat, her fears and her self-harming scars, and they'd turn her into a facsimile of the Witch. The same attitude. The same stance. The same killer instinct.

"Oh, Kat—"

Heat overwhelmed her before she could finish, and her knees buckled. Mortlock's black mass roared out of the ether to materialise behind them, mouth agape and fire blazing in its eyes. Weakened and adrift in pain and confusion, Tatiana nearly fell, but found herself in

Katarina's arms. She tried to push away and shouted, "No! Get way from me! You're just like her!"

"Stop being stupid, Tatty," Katarina said with a hiss. "You can barely stand."

The strength in her legs deserted her, and her full weight sank against Katarina, whose arms—stronger now than they'd ever been before—held her tight. Together they looked toward Mortlock as it burnt and hovered over Coven's remains. The corpses of Maxim and Grinzz hung in its fingers. It cast the bodies down beside the dead Coven before looming over the twin sisters.

"Mortlock! Back!" Tap-tap's voice regained some of its authority. "We don't need them now. We have our twelve limbs." He scuttled across the floor and stood beside the twins. He looked at Katarina and nodded with vigour. "That is correct, is it not? Mortlock doesn't need to hurt you, and you don't need to hurt us. Is that not right?"

"Sure thing, rat-boy." Katarina blew smoke in his face as she replied, and he coughed. A pulse of heat and a growl akin to that of pneumatic drill washed over them, perhaps signifying Mortlock's anger at seeing his master treated in such a fashion. Tatiana turned a weary head to look at the Draugr. It clawed at the air and oscillated before them as a ravening hound might strain at a leash. Katarina ignored it and said, "So why don't you just wake up our friend and we'll be on our way."

#

Ten minutes later the revived Vast stood proud and brazen in the middle of the lab, flexing her new cybernetic arm in silent appreciation. She then donned the clothes the bent, obsequious Tap-tap had brought for her. The mutant rat then took his leave to stall—or pay-off, Tatiana wasn't sure which—the Theocracy Police which gathered at his door, afraid to enter for fear of the rat's notorious bodyguard.

Mortlock continued to glare at the twins as they waited for Vast to dress, and the oppressive heat of his presence made Tatiana feel faint as she leant against an operating table beside Katarina. Mouth parched and rough, tongue swollen, her skin dry, she stared through dancing static of visual snow at the bodies of Maxim, Coven and Grinzz. They hung from meat-hooks now and swayed gently. The crushing finality and the desperate indignity of this, Maxim's fate, bore into Tatiana's dwindling consciousness.

She couldn't carry on like this. She'd lost so much. Her parents. Her home. The *Troika*. Doll Two. Matinee. Boyd.

Boyd. Her eyes narrowed and her chin quivered, but no tears came, her dehydrated body devoid of fluids and her pain dulled by an increasing darkness that crowded her awareness. Where are you now, Boyd? she thought. I need you. I need you so badly. Everything's gone— She swayed and gripped the table as best she could, barely aware of its cool surface. She marshalled her senses. Everything's gone to shit.

"You should go now," Mortlock said as he appeared beside the twins. Tatiana winced and had to turn away as the intense heat burnt her dry eyes.

"Okay, we're going." Katarina put her arm around Tatiana's shoulders. "C'mon, sis—"

"Get your hands off of me!" Tatiana summoned what strength she had to shrug off her sister's embrace and stand on her own. "I don't need your help."

Katarina didn't respond, but Tatiana caught a glimpse of her dark, withering glare. To hell with you, Tatiana thought. I can't trust you anymore. I can't trust *anyone* anymore...

Then, with one last glance at poor Maxim, she staggered toward the stairs, hugging herself as pain bombarded her hunched body. Katarina and the silent Vast followed.

Epilogue

Trouble

Tap-tap closed his eyes and savoured Mortlock's comforting heat. After a day with the constabulary explaining away the morning's disturbance, and another few hours waiting for the carpenter and locksmith to replace and secure his front door, he could, at last, relax.

Here, in his lab, he felt safest of all. A further draw on his pipe and he resumed his inspections. There before him lay the bodies of Maxim, Grinzz and Coven, recently taken down from their meat-hooks and laid carefully on operating tables, ready for Tap-tap's artistic attentions. He leant forward and squinted. Yes, they were all a little worse for wear, but it mattered little. If the ethereal whispers brought to him by Mortlock were true, it wouldn't matter soon. Soon setbacks like today, like the monies he'd had to part with in bribes and sweeteners at the Police station, would be forgotten as premium limbs and body parts such as these became invaluable commodities...

He chuckled. She's coming for you, Ivan Valentine, he thought, and war follows with her. If the Theocracy don't kill you, then she'll do the job properly. You killed her husband, and you killed her daughter. And now she's out for revenge, a graveyard of stars in her wake.

He blinked. He'd drifted for a moment, lost to his avaricious distractions. But now something caught his eye: a gold locket and chain about Coven's neck, almost lost amongst the dreadful ruination Katarina's dragons had wrought upon his body. At some point it must have opened, Tap-tap assumed, and now a small sepia photo stared out at him. He leant forward and peered at the faded picture. Was that Jed? And was it...moving?

Yes...yes, it was! Eyes wide, mouth parted in a silent scream, the head oscillated back and forth as the trapped Coven screamed for freedom. Tap-tap's mouths twitched into smiles. My, my, Mister Coven, your soul, saved by—and trapped within—your locket. What an interesting development—

His ears pricked and he turned toward the door. What was that? Hammering on the front-door. What kind of time was this to call, he thought. We will ignore it, his brains concurred.

The hammering resumed, more persistent now.

His whiskers twitched as he chewed his lips. What if it were the Valentines? What if they had discovered a flaw in Vast's new body? Would Katarina choose to make good on her threat to destroy him...?

Mortlock's stench filled his nostrils, and he turned to see the spirit by his side. He smiled. Faithful Mortlock, he thought. You will never let anybody hurt harm us, will you?

"Is it the Valentines?" Tap-tap asked, a tremor in his voices.

"No." Mortlock's strained tone seared the quiet of the lab. "Three people. One of them is—"

Again the pounding on the new door bayed for Tap-tap to respond.

"If it isn't the Valentines then we don't care worry who it is," Tap-tap muttered as he stood and shuffled out of the lab, "they will get short shrift tonight."

With that he stomped up the stairs and into the hall, Mortlock by his side. Whoever this is, Tap-tap thought, they had better not be looking for trouble. We have had quite enough of that, thank you!

A voice leaked through his front door. A male voice he didn't know recognise, with a tortured texture, like it were forced through a damaged or burnt throat. "Open up in there!"

"Be patient quiet!" Tap-tap slid back the first of multitudinous bolts on his new door. "We are here now!"

Only the lengthy series of clicks and clacks marred the silence as Tap-tap slid back bolts and turned keys. Eventually he groaned as he bent to undo the lowest locks before straightening, hand pressed into the small of his back. He opened the door, keeping its chains in place.

Three figures stood at his doorstep, trimmed red by the scarlet dusk. The first—a bulky Moreau bitch with the head of a female bore—had a sack over her shoulder. A hood hid the identity of the second figure as, stooped, it stood in a parka and a pair of dirty chequered trousers.

The third... Tap-tap's jaws fell. Even in this half-light, even as she stood in silhouette, there could be no mistaking her. Even with her shoulders draped in a heavy fur cloak and her feet—usually bare, from what he remembered—covered in thick furry boots; even with her face hidden beneath a thick mask of glittering ice and her azure skin so bare without her tattooed dragons, there could be no mistaking the brass two-piece outfit held in place by slender chains, the sweeping curves of her wide hips, the weight of her bosom and the way she stood with her hands on her hips. "My stars," he said in the faintest of voices, "the Witch". For the briefest moment he speculated how much the flesh-vendors in Shit Town would pay for *that* body...

He quickly pushed the thought aside. Be careful now, he told himself. She has weird strange powers, this one. If she should read our thoughts...

"Hello, Tap-tap." The Witch said, her voice clear and strong despite her mask. "We've travelled a long way to see you. Now open the door."

He cleared his throats and drew himself up to his full height, emboldened by Mortlock's heat on his necks. "We choose not to. You are bad news dangerous. And besides..." He looked over her two companions. "...It is late and time for my bed."

She didn't respond, merely stared at him through the network of chains that secured his door. Tap-tap breathed deeply. She can do us no harm, he thought. We have Mortlock, *and* all these new chains—

The briefest of gestures from the Witch and the chains on the door iced over, splintered, then shattered.

Tap-tap staggered back as a snap of frigid air scratched at his skin, neutralising even Mortlock's aura. This blast of bitter cold heralded the Witch as she stepped into his hallway, her two cohorts behind her.

"G...Get out!" Tap-tap shrieked over the rumble of Mortlock's growl. "I'm warning y—"

"Be quiet, Tap-tap," the Witch said as she raised a hand. An even more vicious cold seized him and robbed him of breath. His legs became weak and one hand went to his chest—suddenly possessed of the most awful and frigid pain—and he steadied himself against the wall. "We're not here to harm you. We need your help."

“Help?” Tap-tap’s voice steamed in the cold. His eyes narrowed and the warm prospect of profit offered at least some respite from the Witch’s presence. “It will cost you.”

“We anticipated as much,” said the stooped man as he stepped forward, “and we’re happy to pay for a premium service such as yours” He threw back his hood to reveal nacreous strands of burnt flesh stretched across naked bone, and exposed, red muscle. His beady eyes glittered in the half-light. He continued in the agonised voice that had first stabbed through the door, saying, “I am The Cook, ex of Stanztrigger’s Eaters,” He gestured at the Moreau. “This is my lieutenant, Sow. We’re here to kill the Valentines.”

A pause before he continued. “But first...” He clicked his fingers, and Sow tipped the contents of her sack upon Tap-tap’s floor. They clattered and clanked as they fell. The rat—shivering—looked down. What appeared to be an unholy mass of smashed cybernetics and charred flesh lay at his feet and leaked blood and oil into the thick carpet. Amongst the carnage lay the battered head of a cybernetic dog. Tap-tap’s eyes narrowed. Is that, he thought as he hugged himself, the remains of both Trick Coven *and* Crimea? “... We have a little job for you.”

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *The Future*

If you have enjoyed this story, please consider making a donation to our charity of choice, the [Myasthenia Gravis Association](#). Thank you.