

Bad Blood

by Paul L. Mathews

Prologue

In the Garden

Once, she'd been a beautiful and healthy young woman, but now Petrid was an animated mannequin of stained wood and bent wire. Externally, all that separated her from any other wooden puppet was an absence of strings and one organic eye that stared out from her carved face. Unable to blink, her eye wept constantly, tears staining the dark material of her high collared Victorian dress.

She stood deep within Crepitus's flagship—the *Balefire*—on the threshold of the ship's garden, the door to which was composed of bone and exposed muscle. Like the rest of the vessel about her, the door bled. The ship had taken an awful lot of damage escaping that black hole, she reflected, and now the red muscle and pink flesh that made up the walls, deck and ceiling wept blood whilst leaking tacky lymph fluids. The arching ribs that made the walls had splintered, and the light provided by pearlescent globes that nestled amongst the flesh was fitful and weak. The bones beneath her feet were sticky with blood, and the air was tainted with the smell of burnt flesh. She could feel her father's ship struggling for breath as the usual steady rhythm of its heartbeat slurred and skipped.

The Valentines, she concluded, would pay for this.

Finally, with a protracted squelch, the door opened, and Petrid stepped into the garden beyond. It was like stepping into another world, and she often wondered how her father managed to install such an oasis into his ship. But then, Crepitus was capable of many incredible things.

She now stood in a delicate wooden arbour, the vivid green of its vines contrasting with the red of the muscle door that flexed shut behind her. All she could see were high, solid oaks which rose from amongst thick bushes and wild flowers. Yellows, purples, pinks and blue stippled the vista about her, and the aroma of flora and fresh rain wafted over her. The air was humid and damp, and condensation trickled from the high ceiling—lost beyond the garden's canopy of leaves—in a gentle summer rain.

Petrid, however, hated this place, and had done ever since she had been reborn here. The picturesque veneer was soon dispelled if one knew where to look, subtle reminders lay hidden amongst the greenery. Amongst the branches and plants, spiders nestled in thick, glistening webs, their thorax's dominated by eyes bloodshot and glaring, and flies with eyeballs for heads swarmed about the bodies of small children almost lost amongst the fauna. Her own eye flicked from side to side, and she could see her father's bodyguards stood amongst the trees, regarding her silently. Known as the Bone Valentines, they were three skeletal representations of the hated Ivan, Gregor and Vassilissa. Their precise nature escaped Petrid, as did many of father's machinations. Were they simulacrums? The Valentines from a parallel reality? Glimpses of the future? Whatever they were, they studied her, stock still and silent. Closest was Bone Ivan, his skeletal hand resting on a pistol that hung by his side. That,

and the symbol of the Omega Hammers on his camouflaged parka told her this was an Ivan from an older time, when he had been a man to fear and loathe.

Before her lay a path paved with the skulls of kittens and puppies. Her father's voice drifted down it asking, "What news?" Brittle and strained, his voice scratched at the air like wire-wool.

She moved forward as the Bone Valentines watched her. With her feet an inch from the path she glided into a clearing at the centre of the garden. There she found her father stood amongst a glut of potting benches, head bent as he focused on the tiny pots of soil and seedlings before him. He didn't bother to look up.

She clasped her hands together behind her back and lowered her head. "We've *tk* We've *tk* We've found the *Troika*, father." Her voice materialised before her wooden face, crackling and scratched like an old gramophone.

He didn't look up, but he did pause. With his uniform jacket removed, his shirt sleeves were rolled up, revealing wooden arms and hands. The rolled collar of his shirt betrayed the point his frail head was stitched to his wooden neck. "Where?" He began to work again, pushing a seedling into a hole with his wooden fingers before kneading the soil to secure the fledgling plant.

"A *tk* A backwater planet near the D'Kothren border. It doesn't have name, just a designation: JL *tk* JL *tk* JLY 751V. We are in position over the *Troika* and I have dispatched Calci to capture *tk* capture the Valentines."

He worked on a further pot, dibbling a hole with his little finger. "How many units?"

"Ten skeletal."

"Not enough. Send more."

She hesitated. "Father... We've lost a lot *tk* a lot *tk* a lot of units in both the fight with the Jaroth Pha and the escape from the black hole. To send more *tk* more units would leave us expose—"

"I don't care. I won't allow Ivan and his pretty little nieces to escape me again. They are to be brought before me so that I may kill them slowly. Do you understand?"

She nodded dutifully. "Yes, father."

They fell into silence, her father concentrating on his plants. She waited as long as she dared. Perhaps he would ask how she was, if she had been hurt in the battle against the Jaroth Pha's ship, or the escape from the Black Hole? Perhaps he would congratulate her on finding the *Troika*?

But the silence remained. Head still bowed, she stepped back. She cited the family motto, "We are the dead," as—with one last glance at her father—she turned and left, a tear rolling down her wooden cheek.

Part One

Red Rain

The Hammer's engines were at full throttle as Tatiana tried to outrun the *Tower's* explosive death, but the tiny gunship was subsumed by the brief, infernal wave of fire that flashed across the lagoon as the *Tower* erupted. As the explosion receded, the damaged gunship continued in a spin, the rear of the craft ravaged and torn and the engines ruined. Smoke poured from it as it ploughed on, losing altitude, before spearing through the trees that lined the lagoon and hitting the ground. Momentum bore it forward, gouging a trench in the ash and dead soil, until, still sheathed in smoke, it came to a halt, the Hammer-headed nose battered and bent, and the canopy smashed.

“Please, Boyd? Are you there? Tatiana? Are you there? Do you copy?”

Katarina's voice sounded small and weak over the Hammer's radio. Tatiana's eyes fluttered open. Thrown clear of the Hammer and lying in ash, she was numb, the agony of her knife wound vanished. She couldn't feel the bits of plexiglass she saw poking out her body. The earth beneath her head vibrated and pulsed, rattling her teeth. She managed to lift her head and focus on the Hammer. It was still smoking, and a fire had broken out in the rear of the craft, the black and Halloween orange muted by a disturbed ash hanging in the air. Of Boyd and Stanztrigger there was no sign.

Her head fell back to the ground, and she looked into the sky. The haze hung over the whole island, muffling the sound of the howling wind and thunder, and of the deep throb of colossal engines that reverberated through the island beneath. Focusing above that pall of ash, she could see the black clouds that hid the sky parting as a mass of stained ivory began to emerge.

Finally the clouds dissipated, consumed by intakes, vents and docking bays that punctuated a vast expanse of bone—the underbelly of Crepitus's flagship—which blotted out the sky. It was scarred and cracked, fires burning within its dreadful mass as it rained blood upon the island. Spotlights lanced from the ship, sweeping the island beneath, and those all too familiar troopships—built to look like sheep skulls—began to descend from its hangars.

“Is anybody there?” Still Katarina's voice bleated over the Hammer's radio. “Please. Is there anybody there? Anybody at all?”

The answer was metronomic and uniform. At first they were a vague outline in the curtain of ash that hung about Tatiana, the impression of their bodies solidifying as they emerged from the haze. Skeletal warriors moved with perfect synchronisation and purpose, their bodies boosted by grafts of metal and cybernetic joints, their weapons trained on Tatiana as they formed a circle about her and the Hammer.

Tatiana laughed a shallow, sardonic laugh. It was all over. Crepitus was here.

She forced herself onto her hands and knees, then rose unsteadily on weak legs. Her side began to pain her as she moved, penetrating the fugue that crowded her senses. On her feet, hand going to her wound, she drew herself up to her full height. As Crepitus's skeletal warriors aimed their guns at her, she appraised each in turn, turning in a slow circle as she brought the full weight of her disdainful glare them.

Done, she stood whilst the red rain fell upon her, coating her hair and her blue skin. There was no quip, remonstrance, or clever sound-bite as she set her jaw in defiance and awaited the inevitable. She merely faced her death with dignity and poise.

Then the firing started.

#

Ivan and Vast forged through the water as they bore down on the *Troika's* flight-deck, ignorant of the bulky vac-suits that would have burdened those less driven. With the bodies of zombie Calci pricking its surface, water—thigh high and dirty—choked the corridors. Ivan ignored them. Katarina. She was all that mattered. He had to reach her before the Calci did.

Ivan and Vast reached the flight-deck door, and Ivan punched at the door's pressure-pad. The door slurred open, and they pushed through. There stood Katarina, mesmerised as she watched a tide of Calci advance across the beach. Through the rain they marched, rhythmic and inexorable, illuminated by spotlights from Crepitus's flagship.

“Katarina! Get down!” Ivan seized her shoulders and pulled her backward, forcing her into a crouch with her back against the flight-deck's security console.

Ivan heard a metallic *sha-chik* beside him and crouched, interposing himself between Vast and Katarina as he grasped the leading edge of the console to smother her shaking body. With a heavy machine gun braced against her expansive shoulder as its bullet belt trailed after her, the tattooed Vermiddion scowled and bared her teeth at the Calci, glaring through narrow eyes. With a mighty *boom boom boom*, she began to fire, the report of her gun magnified by the confines of the flight deck.

Katarina cried out, hands going over her ears as she fell forward in to Ivan

#

Tatiana dove to the ground as soon as the fighting started. Falling heavily, she ignored the pain and looking up. From behind the ring of Calci, from amongst the dead trees and the smoke from the crashed Hammer, Moreaus emerged, guns blazing. Ramshackle they may have been, but they'd come to fight, fangs bared and snarling as they settled into two rows, one knelt and one standing. The muzzle-flash from their guns daubed the night orange and red, and the lattice work of bullets threaded the clearing.

The Calci fought back, turning to face their new assailants and firing, their masers spitting invisible death at the marauding Moreaus—but the Calci were outnumbered two to one. Taking out only a fraction of the Moreaus, the Calci fell, their bones shattering and their cybernetics failing as they hit the ground. One staggered by Tatiana, collapsing to the ground beside her as its skull vanished in a corona of bone. Its maser-rifle—hot and steaming in the drizzle—fell by her hand.

The heat pricked her skin, and instinct told her to take it, to use it. Her little finger twitched, moving to touch the gun, but the thought of Ivan and his disapproval flashed though her mind. She moved her hand away.

She looked up again. With a howl, three Scythes—thin and dirty gunships with an array of weapons packed into their noses—settled above the clearing, running lights blinking in syncopation with the resonance of their Newton systems. Their spotlights highlighted the rain, sweeping the clearing as their chain-guns scrawled tracer fire through the night, shredding the remaining Calci.

Behind her a camouflaged armoured troop carrier smashed through the trees, headlights blazing as it stopped beside the downed Hammer. More Moreaus spilt from a door in its side, and a dog-headed gunner trained its turret-mounted machine gun upon Tatiana. As the Moreaus left the APC they brought up SMGs and side-arms, aiming them at Tatiana as they shouted, their voices lost under the uneven rumbling of the vehicle's engine.

Wide-eyed, she watched them move toward her, trying to gage their intentions. What were they going to do? Would they kill her? Eat her? Her hand moved back to the fallen maser-rifle.

#

Still shielding Katarina, Ivan looked over his shoulder and out of the flight-deck's smashed canopy. Vast's bullets spewed forth, sweeping across the beach and the Calci. Through the rain and ash he saw the forward most Calci convulse as their bodies splintered and snapped under the withering fire, falling to the floor in shrouds of fragmented bone and sparks. The rows behind returned fire, the pitter patter of their maser rifles almost childish and petulant compared with Vast's monstrous gun.

Their invisible maser beams splashed across the hull of the flight-deck, jabbing ineffectually at its armoured hide. Little blossoms of sparks flowered around the canopy, and about Ivan panels and consoles buckled and melted as beams of invisible energy tore into the flight-deck's interior.

He turned back to Katarina, and kissed her hair, shouting over the sound of Vast's gun. "It is okay, Katarina. I am here, yes? I will protect you."

And that, he reflected, means finishing off Crepitus. Once and for all.

#

The Moreaus closed in on Tatiana, forming a circle about her and the Hammer. Her hand closed about the maser-rifle. Gripping it, she took a deep breath, trying to find her calm place. Calci were one thing, but these flea-ridden scum-bags? If they wanted her, then they'd have to fight for her.

She hesitated. What would Ivan think? What he say if he knew she'd resorted to using a gu— A boot came down on her hand, trapping it against the rifle. She yelped in pain, looking up. A mangy lion-headed Moreau—young and malnourished—glared down at her, teeth bare. She had the briefest moment to realise she'd seen this one before—back on the *Tower* as he'd been dragged her off the Dogfish—before he crouched, shifting his weight onto her hand as he forced the barrel of his pistol against her neck.

"You!" he said. "You brought the Calci here. Why?" She couldn't answer, agonised as her hand was slowly crushed beneath his boot. "Answer me!"

Pawing ineffectually at his ankle, kicking feebly, she looked onto his glaring face. "Get..." She winced. Her voice was stretched and hoarse, her throat scarred by her screaming in the Cook's galley. "Get your damned foot off my hand, you animal," she said through clenched teeth.

"Do as she says."

Tatiana froze. Boyd! She shifted again, looking over her shoulder toward the smashed Hammer. Sure enough, he stood by its nose, leaning heavily against its blackened hull. With one hand he clutched his shoulder, blood seeping from between his fingers, with the other he aimed a SMG at the lion.

"Do as she says, or I blow your bloody head off!"

With a uniformity of movement worthy of the Calci, the Moreaus raised their weapons and trained them on the Scot. Above them, the Scythes shifted, weapons and spotlights zeroing on him. Unfazed, his aim didn't waver. "I'm not in the mood, boy. Let the girl go, and no-one dies."

“That’s enough.” Emerging from the smoke as the rear of the crashed Hammer, Stanztrigger moved toward them, his goat-legs unsteady and wavering. He too nursed a wound on his arm, and his long nose, torn ears and horns were lost beneath a choking of blood. “Leave the girl be.” Head lowered, jaw clenched, his stare and the baring of his bloody teeth told everybody he wouldn’t ask again.

“Stanztrigger? You’re alive?” The lion’s voice rose an octave.

Tatiana looked back to the lion, who, in turn, looked at Stanztrigger, forehead creasing as his eyes narrowed. Then his ears twitched as he looked at Boyd and Tatiana in turn. He shifted his head to one side to spit, then stood, lifting his foot from Tatiana’s hand as he lowered his pistol.

Stanztrigger limped forward. As Tatiana curled up and hugged her hand, she watched the goat-headed Moreau. His movements were pained and slow, and he winced with every step as he said, “How many?”

“Twenty five of us, with three Scythes and the APC.”

Tatiana almost didn’t hear the answer. Boyd had reached her now, and he knelt to take her up in his strong arms. She melted into him, and a painful pressure gripped her chest and throat as she began to sob, bravado stripped away as she was momentarily overtaken by her fear and relief. “It’s okay, Princess,” he whispered, kissing her hair as he stroked it. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

“You’re bleeding!” Her damaged voice rose in pitch, and she made a futile attempt to grip the rent flesh on his shoulder together. Her fingers merely slithered amongst the blood.

“I’m... Stop it.” He took hold of her wrists, pulling her hands away as he looked at her.

“Never mind me. Look at you. You’ve half the Hammer’s bloody windshield sticking in you!”

Walking past the lion, Stanztrigger knelt beside Tatiana and Boyd, arms resting in his thighs.

“You are both okay?”

“We’ll live, but the Princess needs help—”

“I’m fine—”

“My arse!” He turned toward the Moreaus, calling out, “Medic? *Medic!*”

Tatiana watched his mouth as he talked. Oh, to taste those lips again. She gathered herself, forcing herself to concentrate. Reaching into his flak-vest to produce his pince-nez, Stanztrigger tried to fix their tiny golden frames across the bridge of his nose, only to discover they were bent, the lenses shattered. With a baleful look, he put them away, squinting hard to see Boyd. They looked into each other’s faces, and a silent communication seemed to pass between them. The Moreau’s eyes flicked to Boyd’s wounded shoulder, and the Scot gave a weak smile and a subtle nod. Meanwhile a scrawny looking Moreau with an otter’s head and a first-aid kit crouched beside Tatiana and began to examine her wounds.

Standing with a grunt of pain, Stanztrigger patted Boyd on the other shoulder as he turned to converse with the lion.

“How are you, young lady?” The otter was unpacking dressings from his kit.

“She’ll be okay,” Boyd said, “but she needs these shards removing. The wounds will need to be sterilised and dressed.”

Their voices faded into the background as Tatiana turned to Boyd and just stared at him, almost unaware of the otter beginning to gently extract the plexiglass from her numb body. His breathing was strained and raspy, his arms were shaking, and he smelt of... cologne? She stiffened, eyes narrowing. Why would he smell of cologne?

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Vast ceased firing, smoke coiling from the red-hot barrel of her machine gun. Satisfied the Calci must be destroyed, Ivan stood, muscles shifting like an antiquated steam train. He squinted through the smoke, surveying the beach. It was a scrapheap of decimated Calci. Their ruined cybernetics spat sparks into the night, and the blood from Crepitus's ship ran down the bone and metal like rain on a windshield. The smell of burnt copper and gunpowder overpowered the night air.

Even Ivan, with his history of violence and martial experience, felt his stomach lurch at the sight of this crimson downpour. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath to calm himself. "Good work, Vast. Now get to hangar, yes?"

Vast nodded, and left the flight-deck, the dirty water that rose to her thighs doing little to arrest her swift, powerful strides. As the Vermiddion left, Ivan turned back to Katarina, reaching down to take her under the arms and help her stand.

"You're alive! Thank God!" Katarina said, voice choked. She threw her arms about him. "I thought you'd been killed!"

"I am fine." He pushed her away, looking at her. She was sodden and shivering, wet hair plastered to her face. Her thin stripy jumper clung to her body, and her make-up had run, leaving black trails of mascara down her face. She needed to get into some dry clothes—but not yet. There was still much to do.

He smiled at her and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. With his other hand he tapped at the comm set in his hear. "Dolly? Do you copy? Are you there, Dolly, yes?"

A brief burst of static in his earpiece heralded the serf's response. "I am here, Master Ivan."

"Where is 'here'?"

"Engineering. I'm currently jacked into the *Troika*'s systems."

"Can you get her airborne?"

"Affirmative. The Newton systems still appear to be functional, if operating at reduced capacity. Thrusters two, three and five are also down, but we should still be able to achieve considerable speed."

"Do it, yes?"

"Very good, Master Ivan. Doll Two out."

#

Stanztrigger knelt beside Tatiana and Boyd once more. "Princess Tatiana, your vessel, the *Troika*, will it still fly?"

"Um"

"It was bugged when I left," Boyd said. Tatiana still stared at him. He was almost ashen, and she could have sworn he'd lost some of the weight about his face. And what was that strange sheen on his skin? Sweat? "But it may still be able to go sub-orbital. Why?"

Stanztrigger turned to look at the Scot. “Because we need to get up there.” He jerked his thumb toward Crepitus’s ship as it brooded over them. “The island’s crawling with Calci. To have any chance of killing Crepitus, we need to get off the ground and take the fight to him.”

“Agreed,” Boyd said, nodding. “I’ll need to contact the *Troika*.”

“Comm set,” Stanztrigger said, turning and snapping his long fingers at a further Moreau. “Now.” The Moreau—a feline female—moved quickly to stand beside him. Tatiana fancied her gaze lingered on the lion, a shy smile touching her lips. She removed a comm set nestling in her ear, and began handing it to Boyd.

The cat paused. “You?” the Moreau said to Boyd. “You’re the one who killed Stat.”

“Not now, Lorelei,” Stanztrigger said. “Just give him the set.”

#

“Ivan? D’ya read me? Are you there, over?”

“We’re here, Boyd.” Sitting at the *Troika*’s engineering station, up to his chest in dirty water, Ivan stabbed at the consoles intransigent instruments. They were loathe to surrender anything more than garbled fragments of diagnostic reports. “Where are you?”

“I’m not sure. Somewhere on the island.”

“Is Tatiana with you?” Afraid of the answer, the question almost caught in his throat. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Katarina—sitting at the *Troika*’s flight controls and strapping herself in—pause, her hand going to her comm set as she too awaited the answer.

“Yes, and she’s alive.”

Tatiana was alive! Thank God! Ivan weakened slightly, and he squeezed his eyes shut. He took a deep breath and exhaled through purse lips. Tears welled in his eyes. “Is she okay? Is she hurt?”

“Not now, Ivan. We need the *Troika*. Can it fly?”

“We’re working on it now, yes?” Even as he spoke, the water about him shivered, and he could feel the throb of the Newton system.

“Get the *Troika* airborne, and home in on this signal. Boyd out. ”

#

“Calci!” Tatiana shouted as one of the Scythes hovering over the clearing shuddered and yawed whilst festooned in small wreaths of flame.

In typically uniform lines they emerged firing from the trees. Surprised, a handful of Moreaus fell instantly, eviscerated by the molecular agitation of the Calci’s masers.

“Return fire!” Stanztrigger shouted. Knelt on the ground, a fresh tourniquet about his bicep, he sprang to his feet, shrugging the startled medic aside. “Single rounds! Selective fire!”

An explosion rocked the ground as the damaged Scythe—spinning out of control—thundered into the midst of the Calci and vanished in a ball of flame. Bits of Calci and hot metal whistled through clearing, bouncing off the hull of the downed Hammer and tearing holes in a handful of Moreaus, the APC, and the dog handling its heavy machine gun.

“Stanztrigger! Here!” Tatiana rolled away from the medic attending her wounds and snatched up the fallen maser rifle. As the Moreau turned to her, she tossed him the weapon. With a fluid motion he caught it and turned back, opening fire.

“Perimeter down!” the lion shouted. “Grenades and support fire!”

On cue, the outer Moreaus dove to the ground, firing. Those at the centre of the formation let loose with grenade launchers and SMGs, as a fresh Moreau manned the APC’s heavy machine-gun. Above them the two undamaged Scythes spat streams of bullets at the besieging Calci.

A Moreau fell beside Tatiana, and its blood splashed her. She couldn’t contain a startled shriek, and she kicked against the ground in an attempt to crawl away from its rent body. Boyd stopped her, however, wrapping a thick arm about her.

“Tatiana! Take this!” Boyd shouted over the furore, thrusting a pistol in her hand. “No arguments!”

“N...” She faltered, Suddenly the smell of cologne was so much stronger. She felt a little light-headed. She looked at the pistol in her hand with a dim mixture of curiosity and revulsion.

“Take it!” He paused as he began to fire again. Three rapid shots decimated three Calci skulls.

“No, Boyd,” she said. Shoving the pistol into his belt she gritting her teeth and—by instinct alone—put her wrist under her nose to block the smell of after-shave. “But I will take this.”

She snatched the comm set from his ear and put it on. Ignoring Boyd’s exasperated look, she crouched low as bullets, shrapnel and maser beams stabbed by her. “Kat? Can you hear me? Is the *Troika* ready?”

If there was a response, she didn’t hear it. One of the Scythes was torn in half by a fierce flurry of explosions, the flaming wreckage spiralling through the raining blood to fall on the battle beneath.

A pair of Calci gunships burst out of the curtain of rain and hanging ash. Skull shaped and with an exhaustive array of weapons, one circled the remaining Scythe, the other settled over the Moreaus. Bullets pinged off its hide as it lowered its nose, training its weapons on Tatiana and Boyd. Frozen in place, Tatiana stared at the vehicle—at its blank, soulless eyes—and waited to die.

Part Two

Wooden Heart

With a roar of displaced air the *Troika* lunged out of the night. Throttle opened up full, Newton system throbbing, its armoured flank thundered into the first gunship’s skeletal face, smashing the bone-machine’s grinning visage. It fell from the sky, spinning and broken, vanishing behind the tree-line and creating a mushroom of ash and smashed wood as it exploded.

Throttling back, turgid seawater pissing from the holes in its hull, the *Troika* overshot the clearing, exposing its aft to the remaining Calci gunship—its aft, and its hangar. Vast—knelt on the brink of the hangar’s open doors—fired a compact anti-aircraft rocket she held to her shoulder. The fiery wake of the rocket tore toward the gunship, thundering into its skeletal face just as it managed to bring its weapons to bear. The resulting explosion ripped the front

from the ship, the broken skeletal crew spat into the air, and the remaining Scythe finished the job with a barrage from its chain-guns. This last Calci gunship slurred out of the sky and exploded somewhere beyond the trees. Moments later the last of the Calci infantry fell to the Moreaus.

Crouching amongst the debris and smoke on the ground, Tatiana grinned. “Nice work, Kat! Now, get down here—we’ve got work to do.”

#

Ash, bone, and dead bark swirled about the *Troika* as it landed, hangar doors still open. Vast, Stalin, and Ivan stood in the hangar, waiting for Tatiana and the others. Ivan flexed his arms nervously. Would Tatiana be in one piece? She may still be alive, but what if she were hurt? Ivan doubted he could control his anger if Boyd had allowed her to be hurt.

With a whirl of weary hydraulics, the cutter’s ramp came down, and Tatiana and Boyd boarded. Ignoring the fifteen or so bedraggled Moreaus that accompanied them, Ivan lurched forward as soon as he saw his niece being helped aboard by Boyd.

“Oh, Ivan! Thank God!” Tatiana pushed away from Boyd, and almost collapsed into her Uncle’s embrace. Tears rolled down the pale blue of her cheeks, clearing a channel in the blood and dirt. “I thought we were all going to die!”

Ivan didn’t answer. He just squeezed Tatiana tight, and closed his eyes even tighter. He didn’t know who these animal headed creatures were, but he’d be damned if he was going to cry in front of them.

After a moment, he held Tatiana at arm’s length. “You look awful, yes?”

“You should see the other guy.”

They laughed, and Ivan grinned, looking at her. She was becoming more like her father everyday.

“C’mon, Princess,” Boyd said as—avoiding eye-contact with Ivan—he stepped up to Tatiana, wrapping an arm about her shoulders, “you need sickbay.”

“Just a minute, Boyd.” Ivan hadn’t seen any Moreaus in action for years. He wanted to ask who these were, but he stopped, distracted. Something had changed in Tatiana. There was a subtle tension when Boyd touched her. A delicate yearning? And why did she look that way at the Scot? What had passed between them? Had Boyd ignored Ivan’s dire warning about touching his niece?

Derailing Ivan’s train of thought, a Moreau with a goat’s head came to stand with them, saying, “This is Ivan, your leader?”

“Leader?” Ivan looked at the Moreau. He was covered in blood and smelt like wet dogs. He stood tall and straight, but the trembling in his limbs and the agony in his eyes told Ivan this creature was in a lot of pain. “No, I am not their ‘leader’. I am their Uncle, yes?” He turned to Tatiana and Boyd, gesturing at Stanztrigger. “Who is this?”

“Ivan,” Boyd said, “this is the leader of the Eaters, Stanztrigger.”

Ivan’s mouth fell open. “Stanztrigger? The Eaters? As in, *the* Eaters?”

“The same.” The pain in his eyes momentarily displaced with pride, he seemed to gain an inch in height, his chest swelling.

“He and his company,” Boyd said, “they saved mine and Tatiana’s lives. Stanztrigger, this is Ivan Valentine, ex of the Omega Hammers.”

“My God. It is a pleasure... an *honour* to meet you, yes?” Ivan extended his hand. “You’re a legend in the Pagentorns.”

Stanztrigger gripped Ivan’s hand and, after a swift shake, lifted it to his nose. He sniffed at the wrist delicately. The flaring of the nostrils, and the gentle inhalation of scent and air made Ivan squirm, and he looked at his niece.

Tatiana merely smiled a wan smile, saying, “He does that.”

“You are a man of principle, courage, and determination.” Stanztrigger lowered Ivan’s hand and slapped him on the shoulder. “It will be my pleasure to finally kill Crepitus with you beside me.”

“Kill Crepitus...? Of course! The Beggar Barons paid you to kill him. You engaged him at Danica’s Tears.”

“And lost. Badly. My wife and son were killed along with two thirds of my men. Now I shall have my revenge.”

“About that,” Tatiana said. “Shouldn’t we be going?”

“Indeed. Tatiana, you will go to sickbay, and Katarina will fly *Troika*, yes?”

“No.”

Ivan blinked, looking at Tatiana with surprise. “What?”

“No, Uncle.” She looked back at him, jaw set and her chin protruding. “I’m not going to sickbay until we’re all safe. I won’t sit this one out. Besides,” she sniffed, lifting her head to look down her nose, “Kat can’t fly the ship as well as me.”

“Princess, you’re hurt—”

“I said ‘No’, Boyd—”

“Tatiana—*Tzarina*—Boyd is right—”

“No! And that’s final!” She stamped her foot. “Now, get me to the flight-deck so we can get this over with.”

A brief pause, and Ivan nodded. “Very well.” He looked at Tatiana, at the surrender in her body as Boyd propped her up, and he balked. He didn’t want to leave her with the Scot. Not until he found out what was going on. If that man had touched her, if he’d forced himself upon her... “Vast, you will take Tatiana to the flight-deck and stay with her whilst we find Crepitus, yes?”

“What? Wait a minute—”

Ivan held up his hand. “No, Boyd. You will be coming with me, and Vast will stay aboard *Troika*.”

“But Vast’s worth ten of me! You’ll stand a lot better chance against the Calci if she’s with you.”

“Vast is worth ten of you, correct...” His voice trailed off briefly, nostrils flaring. What could he smell? That indefinable—yet unmistakably—scent that was uniquely Thom’s. He felt a little light-headed. Why could he smell Thom? Marshalling his senses, he focused on Boyd.

“And that is why she stays with the girls, yes?”

“But, Uncle—”

“No, Tatiana. I have made up my mind. Boyd comes with me.”

Boyd and Ivan glared at one another, and—out of the corner of his eyes—Ivan could see Tatiana looking at them in turn, like a spectator at a tennis match. Ivan’s lip curled and he inhaled deeply, his chest expanding as he drew himself to his full height, looming over Boyd.

“Okay, you’re the boss.” That trace of Thom, that delicate taste in the air, vanished, but Boyd’s glare did not. As Vast took Tatiana by the arm and led her away, the Scot stepped forward, shoulder blocking Ivan. “You’d better be right about this, Ivan,” he murmured as he pushed past.

Ivan stared after him, and saw Stanztrigger as he also watched the Scot walk away. A dark look fell upon the Moreau’s face. Dark, and a little sorrowful.

#

The *Balefire*’s darkened bridge smelt of rotting meat, and its walls of bone and muscle glistened with blood. Skeletal Calci stood rigid around the periphery, hard-wired into the ship by umbilical cords that pierced the back of their skulls. A massive, blood-shot eye sat in the ceiling, blinking occasionally as it looked down on Petrid.

Stood at the centre of the bridge, she regarded a bank of monitors burnt into the bridge’s main walls, their frames smudged and lost beneath scar tissue and pearly buttons that peeped from clitoral hoods. The monitors betrayed the *Troika* lifting off from the planet and heading for the *Balefire*.

Behind her, the vulva that marked the bridge’s main door parted, and Crepitus entered, flanked by the Bone Valentines. Hands concealed in leather gloves, Crepitus buttoned up his uniform jacket. Soon the jacket’s high collar covered the wood of his neck, and he at least resembled the man he used to be. “What news, daughter?” The words slithered from his lips, rearing and spitting at her like a serpent.

“The Valentine have evaded *tk* evaded *tk* evaded our ground forces. As we speak they are approaching the *Balefire* *tk* the *Balefire* *tk* the *Balefire* aboard the *Troika*.”

“They’re approaching us?” Something approaching a laugh convulsed on his lips. “How typically stupid.”

“I have fighters *tk* fighters at the ready, and batteries *tk* batteries three through twelve have the *Troika* in their sights.”

“No. The *Troika* will be allowed to dock. Then you will intercept its crew and kill them—”

“But, father, our *tk* our *tk* our forces. We haven’t many resources to call o—”

“Recall the ground forces if you have to. I don’t care. Just make sure the *Troika*’s crew are killed, and the Valentines are brought to me. You will oversee the operation personally.” Stepping up to her, he gripped her slender wooden shoulders. “And Petrid? Should they beg? Should you falter? The Valentines took Scullion from us. Never forget that.” He stepped aside and gestured toward the door. “Now go.”

She lowered her head dutifully, a tear rolling down her painted cheek. “Yes, father.”

#

The hangar door remained open as the cutter forged its way toward Crepitus’s ship. Ivan—with Boyd and Stalin beside him—stood on the verge of the door whilst holding a safety cordon. The wind whipped his white hair about his brow, and he had to squint against the dust and ash that assailed him. He watched the island recede. It looked small and diseased. Lonely. He glanced over his shoulder at the Moreaus, and wondered how they’d survived in such a desolate place.

They were now in two rows, knelt with heads down as Stanztrigger, eyes closed, stood before them, reciting the Lord's Prayer. One of the Moreaus, who wasn't listening, noticed Ivan. The one with the lion's head. Although knelt, he was looking about the hangar and tilting his head to one side as though listening to the whine of the Newton system. Bare hands on the deck, he ran them gently over the metal to feel the vibration from the thrusters. It looked to Ivan as though he were gauging the ship's condition. Looking about, his feline gaze met the Ivan's, and held it. Ivan returned the stare, and the lion finally looked away with a last, dark glance.

"They're going to do it! They are! They're going to shoot us down!"

Ivan looked at Stalin as the cyborg dog paced back and forth by his feet, magnetic paws securing him to the deck as his ceramic claws tapped against the metal. Tongue out, panting, skinthetic eyebrows raised, his tail was between his legs and he looked like he was about to die of fright.

"I doubt it, Stalin. I know this man, yes? He wants me and the girls in one piece to torture us." He allowed himself a small, dark smile before teasing, "He'll probably just shoot you on sight, however."

The cutter reached Crepitus's ship, and Ivan watched as the wounded underbelly of the *Balefire* swallowed the sky above. Cracked, blood leaking from the fissures, the bone hull was burnt and tortured. Clearly the *Troika* wasn't the only damaged ship.

The cutter slowed before climbing up and into one of the *Balefire*'s open hangars. Only the *Troika*'s running lights assuaged the darkness therein. As its Newton system whined—the high, nasal pitch a clear indication of just how badly damaged the ship was—the cutter slurred to one side and touched down in the hangar. The landing was awkward, the vessel hopping slightly.

"We're here." Tatiana's voice sounded tired over the comm, and Ivan was sure the bad landing was a reflection on her condition.

The Moreaus sprang to their feet, moving toward the hangar door. Simultaneously the *Troika*'s spotlights burst into life, illuminating the darkness beyond. Ivan allowed himself a small, sardonic smile. It was just as he remembered. Like a scene from the *Inferno*. Red, dripping shreds of lacerated muscle hung from the ribs that formed the arched ceiling, and sheered bone speared into the open air. The smell of rotten meat choked the atmosphere. The broken bodies of skeletal Calci were cast about the bony deck, their remains almost lost amongst the smashed wreckage of fighters. Once these dog-skull vessels would have hung from the rib-cage ceiling, but now they were smashed and strewn about the hangar. Flies with staring and bloodshot eyes for heads flew to and fro, the insidious buzz of their wings multi-layered and constant.

"Secure the area," Stanztrigger said to his Moreaus, and Ivan turned with some interest to observe this creature in action.

The Moreaus' response was immediate. Jumping from the *Troika*, they spread through the *Balefire*'s hangar with their SMGs raised before kneeling in a circle around the cutter.

Only the lion remained with Stanztrigger, listening intently to his comm set. "Perimeter secure, sir," he said as he turned to his commander.

"Excellent," Stanztrigger said. "Now we move out." He turned to Ivan. "I trust you are coming with us?"

"Of course. Me and the dog, yes?"

“What? No way!”

“Yes, Stalin. Now shut up.”

“Very well.” Stanztrigger turned to his lion lieutenant, placing a hand on his shoulder and squeezing it. “Joseph, you stay here with Lorelei and the others. Protect this ship—and the Princesses—at all costs. We will need them if we are to escape. Do you understand?”

Joseph nodded, the matted hair in his lions mane quivering. He cast a furtive glance at Ivan before answering, “Yes, sir.”

“And, Joseph, I know you must be hungry, but on *no account* must you—or any of your team—eat any part of the Calci bodies left on the *Troika*. Do you understand?”

Joseph nodded once more. “Yes, sir.”

“Right,” Boyd said, raising his Calci maser to his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“No.” Stanztrigger raised his hands, halting them. “Not yet.”

Ivan raised an eyebrow. “Not yet?”

“As much as I respect your principles and your moral fibre, Ivan Valentine, I will not let my Moreaus die as they fight beside an unarmed man. I must insist you carry a weapon.”

The Moreau’s gaze locked onto Ivan’s, who smiled before saying, “As you like.” Crossing over to the bulkhead beside the hangar door, he wrenched a fire-axe from an open tool locker, and brandished it with both hands. “Now we go, yes?”

#

Petrid stood in the fleshy elevator, *en route* to the *Troika*. Unable to close her eye, she bowed her head and covered her face with her wooden hands. She imagined, just for moment, that she was a brave fairytale warrior-woman making her way through the wicked wizard’s castle as she sought to slay the evil witches. Like Joan of Arc, or Maria Morevna, or Nordwina the Eiffellender, her armour glistened, her crown glittered, and her sword gleamed. Then, when she had slain the witches, her winged horse would carry her home to her Princess, and their castle in the sky.

Lost to the fantasy, she didn’t feel her tears slip between her wooden fingers, running down her hand and soaking the cuff of her mouldy old dress.

#

The unit of ten Moreaus—with Ivan, Stanztrigger, and Boyd taking point—advanced across the hangar, their boots struggling for grip on the bloody bones. As they approached one of the hangar doors, it slopped open with a wet squelch. Immediately skeletal Calci poured forth, firing as they came.

To either side of Ivan two Moreaus went down, their chests vanishing as they were converted into photons by the Calci’s masers. As Boyd and Stanztrigger’s masers flashed, the bestial company returned fire, their SMGs loud and bright in the gloom and oppressive silence. The first wave of Calci fell, but the ranks behind pressed on, striding over their dead comrades and closing the gap to the invaders. Then—with blades springing from cybernetic sheaths above their wrists—they engaged the Moreaus hand-to-hand.

One lunged for Ivan, who heaved with his axe, splitting the skull in half and destroying the cybernetic brain within. As the Calci collapsed, Ivan stepped over the body, gritting his teeth in pain and determination. Beside him Boyd continued to fire, cutting the Calci down before they could reach him, and Stanztrigger used his rifle as a club, crushing skulls and breaking

bones with a savage passion. Of Stalin there was no sign. With a further swing of his axe, Ivan beheaded another Calci.

Then the battle was over, ending as quickly as it had begun. The Calci were beaten down and smashed to pieces. Their limbs twitched and sparked as small spirals of smoke writhed about them. A cheer went up from the Moreaus.

“No time to celebrate, Stanztrigger,” Ivan said. The strength of Crepitus’s forces had always been sheer weight of numbers. Small units like this would be easy to overcome, but they couldn’t afford to let the Calci regroup. “We must move on.”

The Moreau nodded. “Agreed.” He turned to his unit, gesturing toward the open door. “Forward. I will take point.”

As the unit moved passed him, Ivan paused to look over his shoulder. The *Troika* sat in the half-light, and—even from there—he could see Tatiana and Katarina through the cutter’s smashed canopy. They waved to him. As he waved back, he tapped at his comm set, saying, “Tatiana. Katarina. Be careful. Crepitus will send more Calci here. Maybe even his daughter.” He stopped, looking toward the small knot of Moreaus they’d left to guard the ship, focusing on the lion Joseph. Aware they were on an open channel, he switched to the Oridian equivalent of Latin, saying, “*Lola hule llionen. Stealu by ellastat ledom trafe Joseph. I-jainkir nodt lohoush ellehan,*”

There was a small pause before Tatiana said, “*I-jainkir aadosjalkis, Uncle.*”

“*Aaja hule,*” said Katarina.

“Ivan Valentine. We must go. Now!”

Ivan turned to see Stanztrigger and his unit waiting at the door. “I’m coming.” Ivan said, limping toward them.

As he approached, Stanztrigger went through the door, Boyd and the Moreaus piling in after him. Tagging onto the end of the line, Ivan reached the door and looked back for the last time. His gaze fell upon Joseph; the lion's green eyes shone with reflected half-light as he watched them leave.

Part Three

Joe the Lion

Stalin tapped into communications between Crepitus and his forces. The speaker on his back crackled and buzzed as he relayed the information to Ivan. “Skeletal units Alpha Eight through Twelve docking at hangar thirteen,” a flat and metronomic voice said, doubtless one of Crepitus’s skeletal commanders. “Units Delta Seven, Hydra Nine, and Epsilon Six now alighting at hangars one, three, and five. Unit Theta Five now approaching hangar nineteen. Security details Ceti One through Six now moving into position.”

Ivan’s head sank, a wave of fatigue pricking him even through the adrenalin. “That’s enough, Stalin.”

The cyborg dog cut the signal and the speaker fell silent. A hush fell over the unit. Ivan looked up, appraising them. They’d left the *Balefire*’s main corridors after a further clash with a unit of Calci skeletons and moved into a series of low, narrow arterial conduits that

criss-crossed the ship. Crouched down or resting in their haunches, the group looked tired and bedraggled.

At point Stanztrigger fitted a new cell to his maser rifle with shaking hands covered in clotting blood. His soldiers—thin and dirty—trembled with a combination of fear and fatigue. They stared about them, eyes wide and fitful, as they slipped fresh clips into their SMGs. Dogs, wolves, a bull and a cat, they panted, slavered and mewed.

Behind Ivan, Boyd leant against the conduit wall, ignoring the mucus that coated it. Eyes closed and lips moving gently as he whispered to himself, the Scot's skin gleamed, coated in a thick sweat. Ivan's gaze lingered on him. It had never occurred to Ivan before, but there something about Boyd seemed gently reminiscent of Scullion. Something about his mouth. About his lips.

Thom Scullion. Ivan turned away, the image of his beloved Thom—bound and battered deep in the *Balefire*'s brig all those years ago—stung him like an acid kiss. There was no time for this. They had to get moving. The longer they lingered, the better Crepitus's chance of revenge.

“Stalin, heel.” With the wide eyed and leaden-tailed dog at his side, Ivan moved along the conduit, squeezing past the Moreaus to reach Boyd. The Scot nodded wearily at Ivan's approach.

“We need to move. Now.” Ivan squatted down beside Boyd. “There may already be more Calci on ship than we can handle.” He turned to his dog. “Stalin? What is quickest route to Crepitus?”

“If we move along this conduit,” Stalin said, a tiny green hologram of the *Balefire*'s schematics springing out of a projector in his left eye, “we can cut across to the spine and move directly to the bridge.”

“Then we move out, yes?”

“Ivan, wait a minute.” Boyd pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

He then leant toward Ivan, breathing in his ear. The feel of his hot and urgent breath, his subtle scent—so similar to the smell of Scullion's leathers—threatened to derail Ivan's concentration until he marshalled himself.

Boyd continued. “These Moreaus? They're just kids. They may have spent all their lives fighting for survival on a barren planet, but they've no combat experience. They've never faced anything like the Calci. I'm surprised they've even got this far.”

“He's right, Ivan,” Stalin said. “The Moreaus we left to protect the *Troika*? They looked petrified when we left. I should know.”

“And they haven't even faced the Dopple-Calci yet.” There was a shiver in Boyd's voice. “Facing the undead is bad enough, but when it's like looking in a mirror? How d'ya think they'll cope? How long 'til they lose their bottle and run?”

#

The door parted with a wet and sloppy noise, revealing the semi-darkness of the hangar. Stood on the threshold, Petrid peered through the door. She could see the *Troika*, its hull choked with the *Balefire*'s drying blood, thick and crusty. The cutter looked old and tired, with damaged panels hanging from its frame. Ruptured conduits and wiring spilt from holes in the hull like exposed intestine, and the fitful arrhythmia of its landing lights suggested the unsteady beat of a dying heart.

A small group of Moreaus—no more than half a dozen of the flea-ridden creatures—formed some sort of perimeter around the vessel. Not that it mattered, she reflected as she gathered herself for what had to come. Her father’s words pricked at her sense of duty: “The Valentines took Scullion from us. Never forget that.”

She raised her head to glare across the hangar, and her voice scratched the silence. “Yes, father.”

A haze of smoke—coloured rust red by the flashing of damaged consoles and monitors—hung thick in the *Troika*’s flight-deck, courted by the taste of burning. This haze was stirred by the air that breezed through the flight-deck’s *Troika*’s smashed canopy, and the smell of rotten flesh from the hangar outside fought with the aroma of burnt out wiring. The incessant *beep beep beep* of failing computer systems chattered in the stillness.

Vast stood guard at the door, the red bulk of her Vermiddion body filling the aperture, whilst Tatiana and Katarina studied the flight-deck instrumentation. The twins’ reunion had been tearful, but the gravity of their situation had meant it was also brief. Katarina stood at the cutter’s engineering console, hunching over the displays as she ran diagnostics and re-routed power supplies, whilst Tatiana sat at the security station.

“*Stealu by ellastat ledom trafe* Joseph.” Ivan had said over the comm before he’d left. “I don’t trust Joseph.” Tatiana played with her hair as she studied the security displays. As soon as Ivan and the others had gone, she’d erred on the side of caution and deployed the *Stasi*. Even now the tiny airborne surveillance drones hovered about the *Troika*, cloaked in the darkness by their onboard camograph systems.

Tatiana leant forward, fingers moving across blinking buttons as she switched the main monitor to a particular *Stasi*. Zooming in with the drone’s lens, the screen filled with an image of Joseph and his companion—the cat Moreau Lorelei—standing guard under the nose of the *Troika*. The equipment tinted them a putrid green as it compensated for the low light, giving them a sickly, almost Calci-esque appearance. Tatiana turned up the volume on the machine’s mic, and the speaker buzzed as it betrayed the Moreaus.

“... should get out of here as soon as we can,” Lorelei said, glancing over her shoulder. She fidgeted with her gun whilst, her eyes wide as she looked back and forth fitfully. “If Stanztrigger wants to fight this ‘Crepitus’,” she said, racing through the words with a nervous, fearful energy, “let him, but we’ve no quarrel with him. And that Boyd? He killed Stat. And Lev! He’s even wearing his kit! Have you seen Stanztrigger, anyway? He’s hurt bad, dead on his feet.”

The lion put a finger to her lips, silencing her. “Lorelei, it’s okay. I know.” He looked about him before gripping her shoulder and leaning forward to whisper in her ear. Tatiana adjusted the pick-up on the mic to compensate. “I say we hijack the *Troika* and get out of here, take our chances.”

“I agree.” Lorelei rubbed her nose gently against the lion’s before gazing into his eyes. “Then can we eat the Oridian girls?”

Tatiana had heard enough, killing the volume. She turned in her chair to see Katarina staring at her, wide eyed and pale, whilst Vast sneered, pulling back the hammer on her pistol. “You two had better get ready,” Tatiana said, voice strained and thin. “We’re not out of this yet.”

Stood at the foot of the *Troika*'s ramp with Lorelei beside him, Joseph looked about him at the darkened hangar. He didn't like it there, it stank of dead meat and poisoned blood. Tapping at the com in his ear, he whispered, "Okay, guys, what we got?"

Hushed, furtive reports began to slide into his ear. "Two clips for my SMG, one for my sidearm." "Same here, but with a frag grenade." "One clip only, SMG."

Joseph waited, then exchanged a confused look with Lorelei as she listened in. Only three reports? That wasn't right. Joseph growled, dirty teeth bared as his lip curled. "Cas? What you got?"

There was no reply, just a gentle hiss of radio interference. The hairs rose on Joseph's neck. Instinctively he turned to Lorelei and took her hand, pulling her closer to him. "Daniel. Go check on Cas, see what's wrong with her."

The reply was curt and sheathed in static. "Wilco."

"The rest of you get back here." Joseph turned to Lorelei. "What about you? What you got left?"

She shrugged. "Not much. One clip for my SMG, and a phosphorous grenade. That's it."

"It'll do. I mean, c'mon ... two Oridians? They aren't going to be much trouble."

"Two Oridians and a *Vermiddion Devil*, Joseph." The hushed nature of her reply and the subtle tremble in her tone betrayed her fear.

"So what? We'll ta—"

"Joseph!" The voice over his radio was shaking and abrupt. "Joseph? You there? Oh, fucking Hell, Joseph! You need to see this!"

Joseph turned away from Lorelei, hunched as he put his hands over his ears and said, "What, Dan? What's wrong?"

A slow, protracted gargle slid out of the comm set before dying on the vine.

"Dan? Answer me, Dan!"

Silence.

Joseph turned to Lorelei. She was trembling, her knuckles bright white as she gripped her SMG. "Stay here."

"But Joseph!"

"Just stay here. The other two'll be here soon." He turned and ran down the ramp. Reaching the deck, he turned and headed under the *Troika*. His heart rate accelerated and his hands trembled as he brought up his SMG, flicking on the torch taped to its barrel. Raising the SMG to his shoulder, he illuminated the spot where Cas had been stationed and advanced with long strides.

Then he stopped, heart in his mouth. He could see them. Two bodies lying crumpled and foetal. He took a deep breath and moved forward until he could see them. Finally the torch revealed their fate, and he could do nothing but stare.

Eyes open and crossed, teeth bared and gritted, the bodies were contorted and sculpted into studies of a painful death. The veins looked thick and swollen below their skin. Stepping forward, Joseph looked closer. What were they? Those things breaking the skin?

Out of the burgeoning veins sprouted black and twisting stems. Sheathed in thorns and tiny black leaves, they were already flowering as Joseph looked on, dark, bitter smelling roses rearing and swelling like engorged penises. Joseph's hand went to his mouth and he turned away, going down on one knee as he retched, his empty stomach producing nothing but water and acid.

Eyes watering, he looked up into the darkness. Nothing. He tapped at his comm set. "Lorelei? Lorelei, do you hear me?"

Lorelei didn't answer. All he heard was a rhythmical scratch, like an old record. Finally, out of the fuzz, a voice emerged. "I spy with my little eye..."

Eyes like saucers he looked to and fro, the beam of his torch scything through the darkness as he twisted back and forth, sweeping the hangar with his SMG. Nothing. Still the voice whispered over his comm set. "Something beginning with *tk*. Something beginning with *tk*. Something beginning with *tk*..."

Panting, he sprang to his feet, and began to run toward the *Troika's* ramp. His torch fell upon a figure in his way, and he stopped in his tracks. A mannequin in a black dress, it stared at him with one real eye sunk into a painted wooden face. Her voice materialised in front of her face. "Something beginning with *you*."

His mouth parted and his teeth bared as he spat at her, hissing and feral. He brought up the SMG and fired a protracted burst at the wooden girl. His vision was obscured as the flash of his gun painted the scarred hull of the *Troika* above and the dead flesh of the deck below bright white and deep black. His spent cartridges pattered at his feet, and the grumble of his SMG echoed about the hangar, drowning out his long, feline wail.

He stopped, gulping breath, squinting as his eyesight adjusted to the dark once more. She was gone. Not even a body. "Oh, God, oh fuck. Oh, please, help me, someone." He ran for the ramp.

#

With Katarina leaning over her shoulder, Tatiana's shoulders sagged. They'd all seen the death of the Moreaus. They'd seen the wooden mannequin girl. "Oh, Christ on a bike," she said, biting down on a wave of pain and nausea.

"Tatiana? What are we gonna do?"

"I don't know, Kat. I just don't know." She massaged her clammy temples with stiff fingers. The wooden mannequin, could that be Crepitus's daughter? The one Ivan had warned them about. A few mangy Moreaus she could handle, but this?

She took a deep breath, calming herself, finding that secret place inside and tapping it for strength of mind. "Dolly? Do you copy?"

Doll Two replied over the comm, "Affirmative, Mistress Tatiana."

"Can you close the *Troika's* ramp from there? It's not responding to my controls."

"Negative, Mistress. It would appear the relays have been damaged."

"What about the inner doors? Can you close them off, seal the hangar?"

"Most of them, Mistress. There are five I am unable to seal, however."

"Why?"

"Their servos have shorted. They will need to be sealed manually."

So much for that plan, Tatiana reflected with a trace of resignation. She should have guessed it wouldn't be as easy as sealing off the rear of the *Troika* and letting the lion and Crepitus's daughter take each other out. "Which doors, Dolly?"

"Doors seven and twenty on deck three. Door nine on deck one. Doors one and three in the hangar itself."

"Okay, Dolly, seal off what you can, we'll take care of the rest."

"Affirmative, Mistress."

A series of pings sounded from the security console as a sequence of flashes showed the doors shutting on a plan of the ship. Tatiana pursed her lips as she put her pressed hands together in an attitude of prayer, resting her forehead against them. "Kat?"

"Yeah?"

"Door nine, deck one. That's near the flight-deck. Get to it, seal it off."

"Gotcha."

"Vast? Get to deck three and seal door twenty. I'll take door seven."

"Whoa!" Katarina grabbed Tatiana by the shoulder. "Are you fucking crazy? Look at you! You're white as a fucking sheet and you can't stand up. How the fuck do you think you can get to the damn door, never mind seal it off?"

"Because," Tatiana said as she stood, shaking, "this mannequin may be Crepitus's daughter, but I'm Gregor Valentine's. Now stop arguing. We don't have much time."

#

Joseph's agonised howl rent the air and echoed about the *Troika*'s hangar. He collapsed onto his knees beside Lorelei's body. Twisted and blackened by the dark lattice of black veins that swelled beneath her skin, her back was arched off the deck, frozen as she had clawed at the air in agony. Bitter black roses blossomed about her body.

He didn't even dare to touch her. God alone knew what poison coated those thorns. "I'll get her, Lori, I swear." Tears streaked the dirt on his face. "I'll get her."

With jerky, fearful snatches, he stole the phosphorous grenade and SMG clip from her kit before standing and stumbling away from her body. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he turned and staggered toward the *Troika*'s interior, leaving his beloved Lorelei at the top of the ramp. At the bottom of that ramp were the twisting, blossoming bodies of the other Moreaus. Now only he remained. Now it was him versus the mannequin. And when he was done with her, the Valentines were next.

#

"Tatiana?"

"I'm here, Kat." She leant against a bulkhead, catching her breath. Light-headed, she swayed. Her vision was blurring, and she was struggling to hear over her heartbeat as it boomed in her ears.

"I've sealed off door nine, and Vast's sealed off door twenty. What about you?"

"I'm..." Her voice tailed off and she gasped for breath, hand going to the wound in her ribs. The pain! Oh, Christ, the pain! "I'm on my way. I'm going to cut through the mess hall."

"You should wait. Let me and Vast get to you."

“There’s no time Kat.” She wanted to wait, Christ only knew. She wanted somebody to help. She wanted Boyd.

She stopped herself. No. Not Boyd. Something had started to nag at her like a toothache. It had done ever since they’d boarded the *Troika*. There was something about him. Something had changed. His skin, the way he smelt. She’d seen that sheen before, smelt that cologne. She didn’t know how he’d changed, she didn’t know why, but she knew she needed answers. Until then, until she had them, they’d be no more knights in shining armour. She was on her own.

She forced herself to stand, and pushed against the wall before staggering down the corridor.

#

Joseph crept through the *Troika*, his gentle tread lost as the cutter’s stuttering alarms tried to grab somebody’s attention. The darkened corridors were choked with rotting Calci, their putrid smell smothering the air. His nose twitched as she growled low and deep. He could smell her, even through the stench of rotten flesh. He could smell varnish, mouldy cloth, and the bitter smell of sap and dying roses. The mannequin.

He bared his teeth, slaving. He’d kill her. Chop her to pieces and burn her. He didn’t care what she was. He didn’t care what black magic kept her body in motion. He was an Eater. He was an Eater, and soon he’d have his own ship, able to fly away from this forsaken backwater and start a new life. Maybe he’d rechristen the ship. Maybe he’d call it Lorelei.

He turned a corner. The corridor ahead vanished into darkness. He sniffed the air.

She was close.

#

Tatiana emerged into the *Troika*’s mess hall. The light here was as bad as the rest of the cutter, but it was enough to silhouette the plastic tables and chairs that dissected the room. Clutching her ribs and staggering forward, she made her way across the mess as she headed toward the door on the other side. It was quiet here, the petulant shrieks of the alarms in the corridor muted as the mess door closed behind her. There were no Calci here either, the air was untainted by their stench. A delicate trace of Dolly’s cooking lingered, from the serving counter at the far side of the room.

Suddenly another smell assailed her. She stopped, leaning against a table as she looked about her. Her nostrils twitched. That smell. It smelt like... varnish?

“I spy, with my little eye,” a voice said, emerging from the shadows on the fringe of the mess, “something beginning with ‘T’.”

Part Four

In Bloom

Accompanied by a warm and putrescent breeze, a squad of skeletal Calci marched down the *Balefire*’s so-called spine. A corridor high and wide, its off-white bone walls were choked with a purple and red tangle of nerves and arteries, and the omnipresent glut of eye-flies. A series of puckered sphincters punctuated this organic morass.

One such sphincter opened, the noise it made wet and sloppy as trails of mucus stretched across the widening aperture. Brushing these sticky trails aside, Ivan, Boyd, Stalin, and the Moreaus stepped out and into the *Balefire*'s spine. Immediately they were engaged by the Calci. Boyd and Stanztrigger returned fire, standing proud as they decapitated Calci after Calci with a series of well-placed shots. Stanztrigger's Moreaus fanned out across the spine, shaking with adrenalin and eyes wide with fright as they plastered the tunnel with long bursts from their SMGs.

As the battle raged, Ivan knelt at the rear of the party beside Stalin. The cyborg dog was flat to the ground and quaking with fear as he projected the hologram of the *Balefire* from his left eye. It painted an ugly picture. Red flashing contacts moved through the green schematic, closing in on both Ivan's party and the *Troika*.

Ivan appraised the hologram. This was going to be harder than he'd imagined. Much harder. He had to get the *Troika* out of there, get the girls to safety. He tapped at his comm set. "Tatiana? Come in, yes? Do you read me, over?" There was no response and he snarled in frustration. "Stalin? Why can't I raise her?"

"I think it's Crepitus—he's jamming the signal. The twins are on their own, Ivan."

#

The comm in Tatiana's ear spat as she stood in the *Troika*'s mess hall. The words were distorted and fractured beyond recognition. Not that she cared. Her arms hung limply by her side whilst she stood motionless, staring at the apparition emerging from shadows. Its old fashioned black dress blended in with the shadows, but a delicate corona framed the mannequin's varnished wooden head as it reflected the mess hall's meagre light. The carved face lacked expression, but the single, bloodshot eye marooned amongst its flaking paint glinted with tears.

Tatiana slumped, sitting on the edge of a table. Her shoulders sagged and a long sigh—thin and wounded—slipped from her throat. She knew she should run, or struggle, or call for help, but she couldn't. She was so cold. Weak. And she hurt so much. Maybe it was time. Maybe it was time to just let go. She couldn't keep fighting creatures like this.

"Don't *tk* struggle," the mannequin said, the voice grainy and scratched, "this will be over *tk* over *tk* over soon." It moved toward Tatiana, skirt gliding across the floor. As it neared her it raised its wooden hands and reached for Tatiana's face. Small, thorny shoots writhed on its fingertips.

Gunfire roared across the room, and Tatiana—jolted from her resignation—turned toward the fringes of the mess to see the lion Moreau highlighted in oranges and reds as his SMG blazed. Dust and splinters of wood surrounded the mannequin as bullets thundered into it. It pitched backward, falling against a table before crashing to the floor with a clatter.

"You bitch!" Joseph roared as he stepped forward. "You killed her! You killed my Lorelei!"

Energized, Tatiana ducked down below the level of the tables. With a grimace of pain, she put her hand to the wound in her ribs. The lion she could deal with. The mannequin will have to wait, she thought as she shivered.

The comm buzzed again. "Tatiana? Do you hear me?"

She put her hand over her mouth as she whispered into the mic. "Katarina? Where are you?"

"Matinee's quarters. Where are you?"

“Matinee’s quarters? What?” She shook her head. Whatever Katarina was doing there wasn’t relevant right now. “I’m in the mess.”

“Yeah, well, we’re *all* in a mess, Tat—”

“No, not *a* mess—the mess. I’m in here with Joseph and some killer mannequin.”

“Killer mannequin...?” Katarina’s voice tailed off in exasperation. “For fuck’s sake. I’d give good money to meet somebody *normal* who wanted to kill us. Right, stay there, Tatiana. We’re coming. I won’t be long”

“No! Not you! Just send Vas—” Too late. The signal had already been cut. With a frown and mutter of “Stubborn cow,” Tatiana removed the comm set and closed her eyes. Listening carefully, she took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Over the roar of her heartbeat filling her ears, she could just make out the squeak of Joseph’s boots as he crept passed the table behind her. She listened intently, cocking her head.

The squeaking of leather stopped, and Tatiana heard a muttered “Fuck” from the lion.

She knew she needed to get him, to strike whilst he was off-guard. But Sweat ran down her face, and her limbs shook. Waves of nausea consumed her. Her head fell back and she opened her eyes before gasping and falling onto her backside, eyes wide and a gasp catching in her damaged throat.

“No sign of the mannequin,” Joseph said, standing over Tatiana and training his SMG on her. His tongue flapped about his dirty chops, and he eyed her with a salacious gluttony. “But you’ll do for a starter.”

#

“Bring out your dead!” Boyd roared over the multi-layered echoes of the Moreaus’ SMGs. Moving forward at a pace, he fired single shots from his maser, switching rapidly from target to target with a metronomic accuracy. All the while in the maelstrom of the Moreaus’ bullets that flew past him, the Calci fell like pins.

Ivan grunted and raised an eyebrow as he watched Boyd in action. Every shot counted, every movement was measured. Boyd didn’t flinch, he didn’t falter, and his face was a studying concentrated aggression. Even Ivan had to admit the Scot was impressive. Forget the booze, forget the unsavoury attraction to Tatiana, *this* was why Gregor had poached him from the Plague Rats all those years ago.

But for all the ferocity of the assault, the Calci weren’t done yet. Programmed to wither opposing forces by concentrating fire on the centre of mass, they ignored Boyd and unleashed their masers at Stanztrigger’s Moreaus. Three were cut down immediately, their chests vanishing in a flash of light, and one of the dead—tongue flopping from his dog mouth and eyes wide—fell beside Ivan.

“Shit! Ivan! Grenade!”

Ivan turned, chest contracting as his breath caught in his throat. Looking down, he saw the grenade—primed and about to blow—roll from the dead Moreau’s hand. Red light blinking rapidly, it settled at Ivan’s feet.

#

“On your feet, bitch.” Joseph stepped forward and grabbed Tatiana by the hair. He pulled hard, and Tatiana cried out as she rose, hands going to her head and clutching at his wrist. “You’re coming with me.”

She glared at him. “I don’t damn well think so! Get your dirty paws off me! Now!

A smile of dirty incisors blossomed on his filthy face. “That’ll be the d—”

Teeth bared, she drove her knee into his crotch with all the strength she could muster. It wasn’t the most ferocious of blows, but it did the trick. With an “Ooof!”, he staggered back, dropping his SMG as his hands cupped his aching bollocks. His weapon clattered to the floor and Tatiana wasted no time in scooping it up, crying out in pain as she flexed her torso to bend down. Biting down on the agony, she used the gun, clubbing Joseph across the jaw with its stock, his retreat arrested by a table. His head rocked back and snapped forward, eyes glazed and mouth slack. She drove the stock into his forehead, and he collapsed to the floor, eyes rolling up into his head.

She staggered, dropping the gun as she grabbed at the table edge. She ground her teeth as she squeezed her eyes shut and gasped for breath. Christ! The pain! She couldn’t go on.

She could just wait here, right? Wait for Vast and Katarina? Her eyes opened, tears rolling down her cheeks. No. She couldn’t rest. Taking out Joseph had been the easy bit. The mannequin was still here.

Legs weak, gait unsteady, she began to walk toward the mess door. Her head tipped back as she glared at the exit and sucked air through her flaring nostrils, spittle flying from her lips as she exhaled. With step after faltering step, she walked toward the door. The door began to open, the dim light beyond barely silhouetting Vast’s bulky frame as the Vermiddion stepped through.

Tatiana smiled. She was going to make it. She never doubted it. She was a Valentine. Gregor’s little girl.

She stopped in her tracks. Behind her. That smell. Varnish and mold. She turned sharply to see the shadowed mannequin stood so close Tatiana could feel the cold radiating from its body.

It reached for her. “I *tk* spy, Tatiana Valentine...”

#

Ivan winced and rose, his fingers flexing about his axe handle. He reached the grenade in two truncated strides despite his limp. He shifted his grip, taking hold of the bottom of the axe with both hands before he swung at the grenade. The clang on metal on metal, and Ivan propelled the grenade over the head of the Moreaus. It whistled through the air before landing in the thick of the Calci and exploded in a flash of fire, splintering bone and spilt blood.

As this debris whistled by, Ivan flinched and went down on one knee, covering his face with his arms. Ears ringing, stupefied by the force of the blast, it took him a moment to realise what was going on. Two more Moreaus lay dead, bodies eviscerated by the Calci’s maser fire. The arteries on the spine’s wall were damaged, and blood spat across the corridor, coating the raiding party and the remaining Calci. These last skeletal soldiers fought on, compromised by damaged limbs, but to no avail. With a roar of “I! Am! *Stanztrigger!*” the Moreau leader surged forward, firing, with the last of his unit in tow. Charging into the thick of their skeletal foes, they set about delivering the *coup de grace* with their SMGs.

Ivan blinked. He turned to his side to see Stalin lay beside him, cowering in his shadow with his paws over his eyes. Still blinking, Ivan looked for Boyd through the miasma of spraying blood. He saw him, flat in his back, his face and fatigues a chaotic mess of lacerations and tears.

He wasn't moving.

#

With no battle cry, with no fanfare, Vast sprinted by the petrified Tatiana and thundered into the mannequin, shoulder down. Struck squarely in the chest, the mannequin was propelled backward, tumbling between a row of plastic chairs. Vast turned back to Tatiana and shoved her in the back, propelling her toward the open door.

“Vast!” Tatiana shouted. “Look out!”

On its back and then vertical in the blink of an eye, the mannequin closed in on Vast, gliding across the floor as though on casters. The Amazonian bodyguard's lip curled, and she drew back her fist before driving it toward the mannequin's face—only for this marauding nemesis to catch the fist in its wooden hand.

Instantly Vast's body convulsed, the mute's mouth gaping open in a silent scream. She collapsed to her knees, shaking violently as she pawed at her trapped hand. Her head shook to and fro, and tears and saliva flew from her face.

“Vast!” Tatiana took a step toward her. “Christ! No!”

The veins about the Vermiddion's hand blackened and swelled, and as Tatiana stared in horrid fascination, the red skin on Vast's hand split as delicate shoots—black and thorny—sprang forth. With as sickening rapidity, the veins on her forearm began to swell, and they too flowered even as the infection spread to her bicep.

Dumbfounded, Tatiana's gaze switched to the mannequin. What was this creature, that it could do such a thing? That it could bring Vast—so immutable, so indestructible—to her knees? Letting go of the bodyguard, the wooden nightmare looked at Tatiana and glided toward her, that one eye glistening in the half-light.

#

The battle was over by the time Ivan staggered to Boyd, Stanztrigger and the last few Moreaus as they finished off the Calci. Reaching the Scot, wincing in pain as his bad leg agonised him, Ivan knelt beside him.

“Boyd! Wake up, yes?” Ivan slapped the bodyguard's face. Ashen and sweaty, it was still and untroubled, like a sleeping child. Ivan slapped him again. Still no response.

Stalin trotted to Ivan's side and peered down at Boyd. “Ooo. That doesn't look good.”

Ivan didn't respond; he stared at the wounded man. He looks so much like Thom, he thought. So peaceful, so calm, yes?

How many times had Ivan stroked the lush dark hair away from Thom's face, just to stare at him whilst he slept? How many times had he stroked that cheek? Felt the prickly texture of stubble against his palm? Run his finger tips over those lips?

“Ivan? Ivan, are you listening? He needs—”

“More Calci!”

Stanztrigger's words sliced through Ivan's trance. Turning, he looked toward the Moreau. He and the last three of his men had been pilfering ammo and weapons from their fallen opponents, but now they were raising their weapons and firing. Ivan looked to this new threat, and his heart sank.

These were not more skeletal cyborgs, these were the zombified doppelgangers of a type Ivan had faced many times before. Loping out of the curtain of blood, tongues lolling from open mouths they came: wave after wave of undead Stanztriggers. Snarling with broken teeth, they charged at the raiding party.

#

Petrid paused within touching distance of the Tatiana, taking her time to look at the beautiful Oridian. The girl stood before her, wheezing and blinking rapidly, irises dilated. Shaking, legs quivering, she raised her fists and adopted a defensive posture. Her eyebrows knitted, she bared bloodied teeth. “Come on, den,” she said, the words slightly slurred and malformed, “letz see what you’ve got.”

Petrid remained still. She had killed so many in her time she couldn’t remember what it was to have unsullied, bloodless hands. Even before her body had finally withered away, even before father had trapped her in this wooden vessel, she had killed in his name. But none of her victims—not Theocracy, D’Kothren, or even the Long Knives—had faced their deaths quite like this. Most tried to run, some begged or even cried, but not one had looked he squarely in the eye and determined to sell their life dearly. This Tatiana Valentine—despised so by Crepitus purely for her parentage—was true royalty. She was clearly a true warrior princess. She was everything Petrid dreamed of being.

So what, then, does that make me, Petrid wondered? If Tatiana is the hero in this dark fable, what am I?

Petrid’s shoulders sank and her head lowered as she folded her hands into her lap. She knew. She’d always known. She was the villain here, the wicked witch, the evil dragon. She was Crepitus’s daughter.

She looked up again, the perennial tears streaming down her face. Tatiana continued to quake, arms shaking with increasing violence. But still she held Petrid’s gaze, still she held her ground. “I *tk* I *tk* I am sorry.” She raised her hands and reached for Tatiana’s pretty neck. “Please forgive me.”

#

One look at the zombies and Stanztrigger’s Moreau dropped their weapons, then—as Boyd had predicted—they fled, howling. Ivan sneered as they ran by him, their eyes wide with terror and limbs pumping. He watched them as they bolted, but their retreat was cut short by a further unit of skeletal Calci emerging into the spine. A burst of maser fire and the Moreaus were cut down.

Ivan turned from this new threat to the undead Stanztriggers—all teeth and broken horns—as they poured forth, grasping with rotten fingers and cracked claws. It was all over. They were trapped.

The sound of hoof on bone told him the real Stanztrigger had moved to stand beside him. And as Ivan turned to the Moreau legend, he placed a hand on Ivan’s shoulder saying, “To the death, Ivan Valentine?”

#

Tatiana would never understand what went through the mannequin’s mind as it paused. Whatever it was, whatever had caused that slight delay, probably saved the Princess’s life.

With the mannequin's flowering hands almost at her throat, Tatiana saw the lion over the row of tables behind, his face dominated by a ghastly split in its forehead. He snarled through a mask of saliva and blood. "Fucking bitches!" he shouted. "Burn in Hell!"

He swung his arm, throwing something toward them. In the darkness Tatiana couldn't see what it was—but she knew soon enough. The object struck Petrid between the shoulder blades, instantly siring a flower of fire and heat that blossomed and engulfed the mannequin.

Tatiana fell, the wave of heat making her eyes and skin smart. She hit the floor, her instincts took over, and she rolled under a table behind her as a sticky, flaming substance splashed onto the deck. It stuck to the metal and burned fiercely.

Phosphorous, Tatiana guessed as she continued to roll out from under one table and under another, her hand clutched to her wound. She emerged into the open again and forced herself up to her knees, the effort drawing a gasp from her dry mouth.

Across the tables she could see the mannequin—shrouded in flames of rose red and calendula orange—turning to face Joseph. The Moreau drew a pistol and began to empty it into the flaming figure. Shadows quivered across the walls, and the smell of burning wood and varnish pummelled Tatiana with just as much ferocity as the heat.

Out! She had to get out! Already the mess's sprinkler system had engaged, and water rained over Tatiana. She looked over her shoulder. The door behind her was closing. Grabbing the edge of the table, she struggled to her feet. She then took a step toward the door, and her legs gave way. She fell to the deck, the skin above her eye splitting as she smacked her head against the metal. Looking up, blood running into her eyes, she saw the door was almost closed. Once it was shut the *Troika's* safety system would expel all the oxygen in the mess, choking the flames—and the occupants. She reached for it, bloody fingers splayed, but she knew it was no use.

She was going to die.

Part Five

Under Pressure

The air about Ivan and Stanztrigger shimmered and flexed as the Calci's maser fire hit an invisible bubble that absorbed their energies, dissipating them.

"ECF engaged, Ivan," Stalin said. His legs quivered and his eyes were like saucers as he stared at the Calci hammering against the force field. The ECF generator bolted to his back hummed low and steady.

"To the death?" Ivan winked at Stanztrigger and smiled a grim smile. "Not just yet, sir."

The Moreau leader raised an eyebrow and bowed toward Ivan. "Touche, Ivan Valentine."

Ivan looked to the undead Stanztriggers outside the ECF bubble. The foremost were pressed flat against the force field as—skin splitting to reveal dirty bone and putrid viscera—their bodies distorted under the weight of the Calci pushing from behind.

To the rear of the ECF, wave upon wave of skeletal Calci advanced, firing maser beams rendered into harmless photons by the shield.

“We haven’t much time, Ivan!” The cyborg dog turned a tight circle as the diagnostic display on the ECF unit glowed red. “This thing’s going to blow, Ivan!”

Ivan frowned and his fingers flexed upon the shaft of his axe. Stalin had bought them time, but little else. Now they needed to get away. “Okay,” he said as he knelt to grab the prone and bleeding Boyd by the collar. “Let it.”

#

Tatiana lay on the deck, the metal beneath her cheek cold and wet. Her sopping body-stocking stuck to her, and the smell of burning wood and varnish filled her nostrils. The pitter-patter of the sprinkler’s rain synchronised with the crackle of the flaming mannequin. Then the sound of heavy boots on the deck intruded on her semi-conscious state. She stirred, eyes flickering. Was that Joseph? Was he coming to finish her off?

“C’mon, sis, get up!”

Tatiana blinked. Katarina! Vision black and hearing dull, Tatiana was barely cognisant of her sister—little more than a black mass topped with an azure smudge—emerging from the darkness, grabbing her under the arms and hauling her across the mess floor. Limp, Tatiana’s legs and hands dragged across the wet metal, grazing her knees and knuckles.

“Kat,” Tatiana managed to gasp. “Door. Closing.”

Tatiana could see the door—now little more than a diminishing slice of light—was almost shut. Then something blocked out that light: something tall and broad that stood between her and the door. Could it be...? Was that *Vast*?

A red blur, the Amazonian bodyguard reached the door. The whine of servos and a bleating alarm told Tatiana *Vast* was holding the door open even as the mannequin’s flowers bloomed along her arm.

“You two! Stop!” Joseph’s voice—and the sound of gunshots—pierced Tatiana’s fugue and the hiss of the sprinkler as bullets ricocheted off the deck, flowers of sparks stabbed at her with petals hot and yellow.

“Sis, I need you to get up!” Katarina’s steps were faltering.

Tatiana shook her head, clearing the cobwebs. She managed to get onto her knees before Katarina hauled her to her feet. With her sister’s arms about her, Tatiana lurched forward, tottering in the edge of collapse. More bullets sped by her.

They were nearly at the door. Now she could see *Vast*—with her back against the door frame and arms locked straight—holding its leading edge. Her right arm was a jumbled mess of roots and flowering buds as the black and poisonous infection continued to spread up and over her bicep. Her white teeth were gritted and her eyes wide and wild as her nostrils flared rhythmically. Water from the sprinkler cascaded across her skin, mingling with sweat and blood.

Nearly there—oh, so nearly—the twins staggered toward *Vast*. Another gunshot, and Katarina flexed, back arching as she cried out, arms going into the air. Momentum carried her forward and—legs bent and uncoordinated—she fell at *Vast*’s feet, face creased with pain.

#

“Let it blow! Are you crazy?”

“Shut up, yes?” Ivan stood over Stalin. With his axe held between his knees and his other hand still grasping Boyd’s collar, he tapped at the ECF’s tiny keypad. A tiny *ping* and the

device detached from the dog's back. It rolled down his armoured ribs and fell to the wet, bloody floor.

"Let's go!" Ivan grabbed his axe and hauled on Boyd, Stanztrigger helping to pull the unconscious Scot across the deck. A shrill beep—increasing in pitch—told them they had seconds to get clear before the ECF—unable to cope with the weight of Calci pressing against it—finally detonated. To their left lay one of the spine's sphincter-like portals. Reaching this exit, Ivan stabbed at a clitoral pearl nestled in the flesh beside it with his axe handle, and the aperture opened. The four of them had barely stepped into the arterial corridor beyond before the ECF finally blew.

The force of the blast shredded the Calci, the bone of the corridor, its arteries and nerves, and the sphincter. Fire and debris burst through the door, lashing at Ivan and his party. Caught up in the force of the explosion, lacerated by its shrapnel and burnt by its fire, they were flung down the corridor and fell motionless to the sticky deck.

#

Tatiana reached Katarina. Now it was her turn to grab her sister under the arms, the dampness of her clothes cool against her fingers. Pitching herself toward the door, she didn't so much pull Katarina over the threshold as simply cling on to her as she fell through it, the pair landing in a wet and undignified heap.

"Vast!" Tatiana shouted. "Door!"

Teeth still gritted, eyes still wide and feral, Vast stepped to one side, letting the door go. It slammed shut, amputating Vast's infected arm, slicing through her tattooed bicep. The mute's face distorted in pain, and she collapsed to the deck, bucking and kicking as blood cascading from her wound.

Tatiana's blood ran cold as she stared at the Vermiddion. Vast grabbed at her arm, trying to stem the flow of blood, only for the torrent to pour from between her fingers. Behind Tatiana, Katarina lay motionless.

She turned to the door, a series of rapid thuds pricking her attention. Through the window she could see Joseph—snarling—beating against the glass with the butt of his pistol. His mane was silhouetted by the orange of the flaming mannequin, the colour twitching.

"Bitch!" The speaker to the side of the door hissed and popped as it struggled to convey the Moreau's vitriol. "Let me out! You bitch! I'll gut you! I'll—" He turned, and Tatiana had the briefest glimpse of his eyes shining bright with fear before fire swept across the window, the black and blistering mannequin within embracing the screaming lion.

Lurching to her feet, Tatiana pitched herself against the door. And as she pressed her forehead to the window, she watched a frenetic Joseph's skin blister and darken before splitting and peeling away from the bone. His dirty clothes and ammunition went up like tinder, and small explosions in his belt tore his hips and spine to shreds, legs dangling as the mannequin squeezed him tight.

With Katarina motionless and Vast bleeding to death behind her, something black and ugly seized Tatiana. "Good riddance," she said before spitting against the glass. "Burn in Hell."

Tatiana looked to her companions. The Vermiddion had managed to stand and, with faltering steps, stumbled to a clutch of pipes and conduits that lined all the *Troika's* walls. Grasping one of the pipes, she ripped it in two and bent the metal outward. A jet of gas poured forth, and—with a practised flourish—Vast seized and lit a lighter in her pouches, using it to ignite

the gas. As the fire twisted and lunged, she shoved her mutilated limb into the flame, cauterizing and cleansing the wound whilst her face distorted with another silent scream.

Tatiana put her hand over her mouth and nose, turning away as the smell of burning flesh assailed her. Her sight fell upon Katarina. As Tatiana watched, her sister's eyelids flickered open. Her face was vague and soft, but her eyes quickly focused and her visage hardened, brow furrowing. Only now could Tatiana clearly see the flak-vest she wore, the name Matinee stencilled across its chest. "Joseph?" Katarina mumbled, pushing herself up. "The mannequin?"

Looking back through the window, Tatiana saw that the sprinklers had stopped and the fire had ceased, all air in the mess expelled by the *Troika's* emergency systems. At the centre of the mess lay Joseph's twisted, burnt body and, knelt beside it, the black and blistered mannequin, Motionless, dress destroyed, its hands lay in its lap and its single melted eye streaked down its face like birdshit.

"They're dead, Kat." Tatiana leant her head against the window and closed her eyes. Jesus, that felt good. So cool and smooth. "It's over."

"Like fuck, sis." There was a bite to Katarina's tone that—on a different day—might have rankled Tatiana. "Crepitus is still out there. And Ivan."

#

Ivan lay on his back, the stretcher beneath him barely masking the sharpness of the rubble beneath. His sopping fatigues stuck to him, and the smell of burning wood and petrol filled his nostrils. The pitter-patter of rain synchronised with the crackle of the fire consuming Ferroc Boon. Then the sound of heavy boots on the rubble intruded on his semi-conscious state. He stirred, eyes flickering. Was that Thom? Was he coming to help him?

"Ivan? C'mon, Ivan. Get up."

Ivan blinked. Thom! Vision black and hearing dull, Ivan could barely make out the shape that leant over him. But he could smell him. The leather. The sweat. He reached up, groping at the pale smudge that looked down on him. His fingers tingled as he touched soft, tender skin and greasy stubble. "Thom? Is that you?"

A sting as the shape slapped him across the cheek. "Don't be stupid, Ivan, It's me. Boyd. Now c'mon. We've need to get moving."

Ivan blinked again, craning his head to try and look about him. His vision started to clear as a zesty smell of citrus revived him. Brow furrowed, he turned toward Boyd. He could see the Scot now, all cuts and bruises. "Do you...? Do you smell that?"

"I dinnae smell nothing." Boyd grasped him under the arm and heaved. "Now get up, old man."

Ivan looked about him as Boyd dragged him to his feet. They'd been thrown clear of the mutilated door. The ground was littered with bits of Calci bone and rotten flesh, and smoke combined with the smell of burnt flesh as it circled and slithered about them. The deck was awash with more blood, the thick red tide pissing from the corridor's arteries severed in the blast. Eye-flies crawled about the walls and over the four interlopers.

Ivan looked at Boyd, the lacerations about the Scot's face already knitting together. He looked into Boyd's eyes, the Scot staring straight back, his head lowered. On the way to healing already, yes? There was no ignoring it now. It just wasn't right. It just wasn't human.

"Okay, Boyd, what is goin o—"

“Ivan! Look!”

Ivan turned, the urgency and sharpness in Stalin’s voice telling him something was wrong. Sure enough, the dog stood beside Stanztrigger, the Moreau collapsed against the wall. Ivan limped to them, Boyd by his side.

Ivan knelt beside the Moreau. “Stanztrigger? You are okay, yes?”

The Moreau blinked, his breathing short and laboured, his body peppered with shrapnel. The flesh beneath his fur was tinged a ghoulish green. Ivan pointed at the diseased flesh, asking, “What is that?”

“He was bitten by a Calci back on his ship.” Boyd’s tone was heavy, and he didn’t look Ivan in the face. “He’s infected, turning into one of them. He’s fighting it, but he doesn’t have much time.”

Boyd took Stanztrigger by the shoulders as Ivan looked on. “Stan? C’mon, man. Can you hear me?”

Ivan looked at the Scot. He hasn’t heard that inflection in the Scot’s voice since they’d buried Matinee at Potter’s Field.

“I can hear you, Boyd.” Stanztrigger smiled as he opened his eyes. He looked vague and stupefied. “Boyd. An acronym, I presume. Bring Out Your Dead. Is that what they called you?”

“Not now, Stan. Are you okay?”

“And what is your real name, I wonder? What secrets do you hide?”

“Stanztrigger. Not *now*.”

Stanztrigger focused in the Scot, nostrils flaring. “What ails thee? I smelt it, you know? Your disease, your mutation.”

Ivan’s blood ran cold His eyes narrowed, and his hand tightened about his axe. An acronym, indeed? Mutation? Curiouser and curiouser, yes?

Boyd slapped Stanztrigger across his chops. “Pull yourself together! We need you! Crepitus is out there, and he’s laughing at you. He’s laughing at you right now. You need to get *up*. You need to get up and *fight*, damn it!”

Ivan’s nostrils twitched. That smell again. That smell of citrus. It had revived him, but would it work on Stanztrigger?

Sure enough, the Moreau’s senses appeared to clear. He shook his head and put a hand to his forehead. He groaned, eyes squeezed shut. “We need to hurry. I can’t fight this much longer.”

“This is stupid, Ivan.” Stalin’s head sank as he banged his tail on the sticky deck. “We should get out of here. There’s no way we can beat Crepitus like this.”

“Be quiet, Stalin.”

“No! Shan’t!” Look at us! You’re a cripple, Boyd’s wounded, and *he*’s going to one of *them* soon! What makes you think we can overrun the Balefire and kill Crepitus? Moreover, why should we?”

“Enough—”

“No, Ivan! It’s your fight, not ours! If you don’t get on with Crepitus, fine, you go see him. Me? I want to go home.”

Ivan bared his teeth and glared at the dog. He didn't know what enraged him more: the fact Stalin was defying him, or the fact that—after all they'd been through since being chased out of Oridia, after all Stalin had done to duck trouble and avoid confrontation—this was the time he chose to show some balls.

“He's right, Ivan.”

“What?”

“He's right.” Boyd's eyes bored into Ivan. How like Thom's they were. So dark and alive. “This is a fight we can't win.”

Ivan shook his head, just to clear it. That smell again, that delicious trace of Thom. He had to ignore it. He must. He couldn't be sidetracked now. “No, you're wrong, both of you. If we leave now, if we let Crepitus survive, he will come again, yes? And he will keep coming, until we are dead—us and the twins.” He pointed at Boyd with his axe. “And don't think their deaths will be quick, either, Boyd—or whatever your name is. They will die long, excruciating deaths followed by eternity of undead servitude.” Ivan's nostrils flared at he grasped the axe with both hands. “I will not allow this. I will fight to my death to stop it. And if you will not fight, I fight alone, yes?”

““And if one prevails against him'” Stanztrigger said as he forced his diseased body off the deck and stood on wavering legs, clutching at his wounded arm, ““two shall withstand him; and a three-fold cord is not quickly broken.””

They turned to the Moreau, and Ivan raised an eyebrow. He knew that quote. “Ecclesiastes?”

Stanztrigger nodded. “Chapter four, verse twelve.”

“But there're four of us!”

“You don't count, dog. You are a coward.” Stanztrigger turned to Ivan and Boyd. “Now, we must cease this bickering, and we must act. The longer we pause, the more momentum we lose.”

Boyd glanced at Ivan and then back to Stanztrigger before shaking his head, saying, “Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you.”

#

On the *Balefire*'s bridge, Crepitus lowered his head and closed his eyes. He could feel it. Gone. His only daughter. And the Valentines were to blame. Again.

One of his skeletal crew continued a flat, emotionless report. “Units Hydra Nine and Epsilon Six destroyed, as well as Zed waves one and two. Spine badly damaged. Loss of power to life support across decks one through five. Batteries nine—”

“Enough!” Crepitus opened his eyes and clenched his fists before taking his antiquated revolver from its holster. “You three!” He turned to the Bone Valentines, the three of them lurking on the periphery of the bridge. “With me. This ends now. We find Ivan and his little friends before they do any further damage. Then we skin his nieces.” He strode toward the bridge's main exit, the vulva opening at his approach.

The Bone Valentines bowed their heads. “We are the dead,” they said in unison, before moving into line behind their master.

Part Six

Keep Talking

Ivan, Boyd, Stanztrigger and Stalin moved cautiously down the corridor. Whilst the three soldiers looked about with calm observation, Stalin's eyes were wide with fear, and he panted and trembled. The walls of this corridor were little more than thin flesh stretched over arching ribs. Eye-flies fed off the rotten walls and their rank skin. A hot wind bore stench of decay, and viscous goo hung from the roof in thick, trembling strands.

An eerie silence had dominated the corridor, but now that silence was savaged as Crepitus's voice hissed out of the speaker in Stalin's back, saying, "Ivan? Can you hear me Ivan? I know you can. I know that dog is monitoring my communications." A pause. The four of them glanced at one another. "You've done it. You've finally killed my daughter. Not content with stealing my son from me, my Skullion, you've taken Petrid too. Well, I hope you're proud. I hope you enjoy your little pyrrhic victory, because you haven't long to live. You and those teenage sluts. Get ready, Ivan. Get ready to d—"

The rant ended as Stalin cut the transmission.

"He's really mad now, Ivan." The dog put a paw across his eyes as he lowered his head and shook it.

"Wait..." Boyd's brow creased, "...Did he say *Skullion* was his *son*? *Thom* Skullion? The Omega Hammers' old medic?"

Ivan nodded, turning away as tears pricked his eyes. "Yes. Gregor and I captured him years ago, back when we fought Crepitus in DeAngelis campaign, yes? He was just called Skullion then." He turned back to Boyd. "He swapped sides and adopted name Thom shortly afterwards."

"So who's this 'Petrid'?"

"Thom's sister." Ivan's smile was sardonic and thin. "As much as he hated Crepitus, he never forgave himself for leaving Petrid behind. She was very sick, very frail. Only Thom's healing powers kept her alive—her and her mother. Crepitus turned Petrid into some wooden monster soon afterward, just to keep her alive and strike at Thom."

"So, where's the mother?"

Ivan shuddered. Patina? He had no idea. And he prayed to God he never found out ...

#

Striding down one of the *Balefire*'s fleshy corridors, Crepitus stopped, his rant over. He turned to the Bone Valentines. The skeletal facsimile of Ivan stood at the front of the trio. His ushanka and parka were worn and scarred. Head lowered, he stared at Crepitus, his one robotic eye twinkling in the semi-darkness.

"Can you see them?" Crepitus asked.

The response was delayed as tiny scanner readings—conveyed by the flies about the ship—scrolled over Bone Ivan's eye. The green image stopped, and a red contact flashed bright and angry in the centre of the iris. "I have them, yes?" His voice was synthesised and harsh, forced into the world by an eroded speaker in his spine.

"Where?"

“They are approaching the Womb.”

#

“This,” Stalin said, voice a nasal whine, “is such a bad idea.”

“We have to destroy Womb to have chance of success.”

“The Womb? Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

Ivan turned to Boyd, about to answer the Scot’s question, when Stalin cut in, saying, “Because you know what’s good for you?”

“What is this ‘Womb’?” Stanztrigger’s voice was thin and drawn, and he leant against the fetid wall to draw breath.

“*Balefire*’s power-source, yes?”

“Power-source?” Boyd looked about them, a sweep of his hand taking in biomechanical decay of the corridor and the ship beyond. “What kind of power drives a monstrosity like this?”

#

A cavernous chamber that rose from the bottom of the *Balefire* to the top, the Womb’s floor was lit red by pockets of glowing pearls nestling in the walls, Thick pillars of bone rose from the deck to the ceiling, calcified spears of bone sprouted from their surface. Clusters of computer banks choked the base of the columns, fleshy umbilical cords running from these terminals only to be lost under an uneven blanket of shit that coated the deck. This vast chamber’s circular walls of tibia and fibula formed millions of tiny cocoons lined with dank flesh and flexing muscle. Each wept the ethereal wail of a lost and frightened soul.

Boyd leant forward, hand over his nose to block out the stench. He peered into one of the chambers. “Ivan? Are they...?”

“Ghosts? Yes.”

Ivan looked at the Womb. It was every bit as horrific as he remembered. A hideous nest of spectral children, torn from their wombs and trapped here, the dreadful vessel powered by the lost potential of those countless lives. The lost love. The lost hope. The lost dreams. All stolen from them, all harvested by Crepitus's foul and shitty magic. Ivan gripped his axe so hard his fingers ached.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” The vitriol in the voice was palpable. “My greatest achievement, wouldn’t you say?”

Ivan, Boyd, Stanztrigger and Stalin fell into a circle, the Scot and the Moreau sweeping the vista before them with their guns. Ivan’s lip curled as his eyes narrowed. He was here, finally. The man who’d taken his self-respect from him, who’d forced him to go begging on his knees to the ghost of a dead friend, and who’d reduced him to a wailing and pitiful old man. Now it was time for revenge.

“And you, Ivan? You like it so much you’ve come back?”

Ivan couldn’t see him. He looked to and fro, but all he could see were the calcified pillars.

“Why? What are you hoping to find? Vassilissa’s children? Or more of Gregor’s little bastards?” A brittle laugh rattled through the Womb. “Or maybe yours? On, no, wait. I forgot. You’re one of *them*, aren’t you? A dirty little queer.”

Ivan's breath caught in his chest, and his cheeks burnt. He trembled. The bastard! How dare he? He would pay for that. "Come out, Crepitus!" Such was his anger he could barely form the words. "Let's see you!"

"You'd never have your own children, would you? You were always content to steal other peoples'." Crepitus stepped out from behind a pillar, pistol raised and trained on Ivan. He looked every bit as threadbare and spiteful as Ivan remembered: his liver-spotted face a mask of bitter contempt, and his sneering, black teeth. "Like my boy, my Skullion."

"Ivan!" The panic in Stalin's voice betrayed their perilous position, and three further figures stepped into the open to surround them. Ivan looked over his shoulder, and he couldn't suppress a tiny, ironic smile. The Bone Valentines. This went from bad to worse.

He turned back to Crepitus, looking the aged technomancer in his evil little eyes before nodding at the pistol in his withered fingers. "Better make that shot count, yes? Because if you mi—"

With a cry somewhere between vitriol and anguish, Crepitus fired, the old gun bucking in his hand. Ivan flinched, ducking down as the bullet whistled over his head. With two painful strides Ivan moved behind a pillar, crying out as he put a hand to his bad leg. Another shot, and chips of bone stabbed at Ivan's shoulder as a bullet ricocheted off the bone colonnade at his back.

That first move made, the fight began in earnest. The Bone Valentines raised their pistols and fired, the chatter of their gunfire echoing about the Womb. As the bullets stabbed by, Stalin bolted, head low and eyes like saucers as he sprinted for cover. Boyd ducked and ran sideways, firing his maser as he went. Stanztrigger fired as he advanced on Bone Gregor.

"Stanztrigger! Down!"

Ivan's call came too late. Even as Stanztrigger's barrage blew holes in its skeletal frame, even as its black fatigues and cyber-enhanced limbs were shredded, Bone Gregor fired back. Bullets thudded into Stanztrigger's body, and the Moreau fell back into the shit, face creased in pain. His maser fell from bent and crooked fingers, hands shaking in a violent agony.

As the remains of Bone Gregor plopped into the mire, Boyd reached cover. Cramming himself under a bank of terminals, on his knees in the faeces, he kept firing at Bone Vassilissa. The automaton ducked back behind a column as Boyd's maserbeams tore into the pillar. It attempted to emerge again and fire, but a further burst from Boyd drove it back.

"Is this the best you could muster, Ivan? Are these all the allies you have left?" More mocking laughter. "Where are Yevgeny and Crimea now? Or the *Oprinichki*?"

More gunfire, and Bone Ivan stepped toward Boyd, firing as it bore down on him. Its bullets rained on and about the Scot, but he didn't falter. Bringing his maser to bear, he fired back, and the skeleton jerked and span before falling under the barrage.

"Ivan the Terrible, with his fearsome Omega Hammers, reduced to what? That coward Stalin, a sick Moreau—did you say that was *Stanztrigger*?—and some Scottish ruffian? Pitiful."

Bone Vassilissa now sprang into view and fired again. Even as its bullets pelted Boyd, the besieged man managed one last volley, decimating Vassilissa's skull. It collapsed into the excreta just as, blood bubbling from his wounds and his mouth a rictus of pain, Boyd's hands collapsed to the filthy deck, fingers loose about his gun.

"All alone now, Ivan. Just you and me."

That is it, yes? Keep talking, Ivan thought as he ducked and edged his way toward another column. Keep taunting.

Ivan moved again, reached another column and pressed against it. He paused, taking a deep breath as his fingers flexed on the axe. With eyes closed he drew a mental image of the Womb. If Crepitus hadn't moved, he should be just...

...about...

...*here!*

He stepped out from behind the pillar, axe raised.

Crepitus wasn't there.

Ivan's eyes flicked from left to right. His blood ran cold, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose. Where was he? Where had the dark sorcerer gone? His muscles tensed, and he shrank by inches as his body coiled and compressed, his nostrils flared and his eyes widened, senses primed and alert.

There! It was little more than a squelch, the sound of a boot in shit, but it was enough. Ducking, he moved forward as a bullet whistled by him and staggered to the cover of a bone pillar. The brief impression of Crepitus's black uniform and a muzzle flash pricked his peripheral vision as he looked over his shoulder, a further round scything by.

"Don't be sad, Ivan. You should celebrate. After all, it isn't every day one witnesses the end of not one great mercenary legacy, but two. Who would have thought it? After all these years I will finally bring a close to both Stanztrigger and his Eaters, and the Valentines and their Omega Hammers. Glorious."

He was so close Ivan could almost smell his rank breath and dirty clothes. Ivan squeezed his eyes shut, gulped for breath, held it, and sprang into the open. Crepitus stood no more than three feet away from him, and the pair both paused as they each looked into the other's face. A ghost of a smile drifted across Crepitus's lips before he aimed his gun at Ivan.

Exhaling, Ivan swung the axe, knocking the pistol from his enemy's grasp as it fired, the bullet careening by. Crepitus took a step back, brows raised in alarm, eyes wide. Ivan pressed forward. A further swing of the axe, and it bit into the technomancer's shoulder.

"Stop! Stop, now!" He tried to grab at the axe, but to no avail. Ivan tugged, releasing the blade from the wood of Crepitus's torso, and swung again. Crepitus raised his hands to protect himself, but the axe cleaved his right hand in two. "No! You mustn't! Stop! I *order* you!"

Another swing, and the other hand shattered and fell away from the wrist, leaving a stake of splintered wood. Crepitus staggered back against a bone pillar, ruined hands falling by his side. "Stop this instant!"

"Stop?" Ivan swung again, this time ruining the old sorcerer's other shoulder, which splintered and bent outward from the torso, the arm now hanging at an odd angle across his belly. "*Stop?* You try to kill us, pursue us across Pagentorns, threaten my nieces, and you ask me to *stop?*" Another blow, and the maladjusted arm was cleaved from the body. "Never! This ends, and this ends today...yes?" Ivan heaved one last time, only for Crepitus to dodge sideways. The axe rammed into the pillar and stuck fast.

"Ends? Today?" Crepitus sneered as he sprang forward, slashing Ivan across the eye with the splintered stake of his wrist. Ivan cried out, hand going to his face as an agonising pain erupted from his eyeball. "You ignorant lack-wit!" Another slash, and he gouged a bloody

line across Ivan's hand. "Even if you managed to kill me today, don't you realise *she's* still out there?" A further lunge, and Ivan staggered as the stake gored a hole in his chest. "You've killed her daughter. Even if you escape me, you know she'll come for you, don't you?"

Ivan's feet went from under him, and he fell, hitting the bone column behind him hard. A tearing of flesh and a sear of pain subsumed his world as one of the pillar's calcified spurs speared his shoulder, the bloody tip bursting out of his body stocking. The axe fell from his grasp. He couldn't see. All was blood and pain. He rubbed desperately at his face with the palm of his eyes to try and shift the blood. It couldn't end like this! He had to stop Crepitus! He had to end him, end his evil, his reign of darkness, his black wizardry.

He cleared the blood from his eyes, fought the pain with quick and shallow breaths. The battered and bent Crepitus stalked toward him, wrist drawn back to deliver that last dolorious blow. "Goodbye, Ivan Valentine. Of all the souls I have crushed, you have been the most resilient. But all things die." A black smile. "Except me, of cour—What on Earth?"

Blinking rapidly, Ivan made out a black and hunched shape rising from the deck. Crooked and bent, its movements were slow and pained.

"For all our days are passed away in thy wrath," the shape said. Now Ivan smiled a black smile. That voice! Stanztrigger! "We spend our years as a tale that is told."

Stanztrigger burst forward, falling upon Crepitus even as the wizard stabbed him in the belly. The pair fell into the filth, locked together in a desperate and bitter struggle. Focusing, Ivan saw Crepitus using what remained of his arm to hold Stanztrigger at bay. By now, however, the Eaters' leader was more Calci than Moreau. Thick, green saliva oozed from his green chops as his teeth snapped and lunged. Broken claws bit into the skin of Crepitus's head, gouging at the flesh and stabbing at the eyes.

"No!" Crepitus's shrieks reverberated about the Womb. "Not like this! Please! Ivan! Help me, Ivan! Help me!"

Ivan gritted his teeth and forced himself forward, crying out in sheer agony as the bone spear left his shoulder with a dreadful wet slurp. Once free, he fell to his hands and knees, head hung low.

"Ivan! Please! *Please!*"

Ivan turned his head slowly, the pain across his trapezius searing and savage. Stanztrigger ripped Crepitus's arm from the socket before casting it aside. He fell upon the technomancer's head, mauling. The Moreau's teeth ripped through the flesh, his claws pierced the exposed muscle, and his tongue lapped at the gushing blood. Stanztrigger ripped the head from its wooden shoulders and dashed it against the deck. Split in half, the brains within oozed into the open, and the Calci Moreau began to devour them with a guttural relish.

The dying scream of the black sorcerer echoed about the Womb and Ivan could have sworn the ghostly wails of the unborn stopped, just for a moment, as if to enjoy the moment.

"Ivan? We need to go. Now."

Ivan laughed to himself, sardonically. Stalin. Back now the fighting is all but over. Typical, yes? Ivan rose to his knees and looked at the cyborg dog. He was staring at Stanztrigger and trembling.

"We need to get out of here before he finishes eating Crepitus. We'll be next."

Ivan didn't reply, he just reached out and picked up the axe. He leant on it as he used it for leverage and rose to his feet. Move, old man. Ignore the pain. Ignore the blood. They can wait. Stanztrigger needs you. He needs you now. You owe him this, yes?

With faltering steps, Ivan moved to stand beside the Moreau. Mouth full of brain-matter, smashed skull held to his lips, what was once Stanztrigger turned sharply to glare at Ivan. It shrank away, coveting the skull as it snarled.

"It has been..." Ivan had to stop and gather his breath, "...an honour, yes?"

It looked at him, and something shifted in its face. A trembling of the eyebrows, a spark of recognition, and a subtle nodding of the head. It knew what was coming, and what little of Stanztrigger remained in there was grateful.

One last heave of the axe, and Ivan decapitated the legend.

"That's great, Ivan. Now can we g—Oh, shit."

Eyes closed, Ivan's shoulders sagged as his head fell back. Now what?

The answer was metronomic and uniform. Skeletal Calci moving with perfect synchronisation and purpose, they were marching into the Womb *en masse*. Lining the walls of the chamber, they trained their weapons on Ivan and Stalin.

Ivan's laugh was shallow and resigned. It was all over. Crepitus had won after all.

A *sha-chick* of a gun being reloaded beside him, and Ivan turned to see the bloody and torn Boyd by his side. They smiled at one another and, for the first time since they had left Oridia, the smiles were genuine.

"To the death?" Boyd asked.

Ivan nodded. "To the death."

They turned to face the Calci, Ivan with his axe, Boyd with his maser. Jaws set in defiance as they awaited the inevitable, they made no quips, remonstrations or clever sound-bites. They merely faced their deaths with dignity and poise. Even Stalin bared his teeth to growl and snarl, perhaps choosing to die with a little self-respect.

#

"Oh fuck."

"I see it, Kat. I see it." Back on the flight-deck and slumped in the pilot's seat, skin clammy and cold, light-headed and short of breath, Tatiana looked at the TAC monitor above her station. Multiple red contacts moved through the green schematic of the *Balefire*, all zeroing in on the *Troika*.

Tatiana's throat contracted, her eyes filled with tears. This wasn't fair. They couldn't beat the Calci. Not like this.

"Vast? Are you in position?" Kat's voice was thin and weary. Tatiana turned to see her slumped over the security station, a cigarette dangling from her chewed lips. Head in her hands, she stared at the monitors before her. One of them showed Vast—seemingly oblivious to the fact she'd recently become an amputee—waiting at the *Troika*'s ramp, pistol at the ready. She turned to the security camera and nodded, thumbing the hammer back on her pistol.

Tatiana looked away, but not before lingering on the dark shape on the periphery of the screen. The Moreau Lorelei, body twisted and punctured, lay at the top of the ramp, the black flowers that had signalled her demise droopy and dying.

“What we gonna do, Tatiana?”

She took a deep breath, trying to find her calm place, trying to focus. It didn't work. A thousand thoughts besieged her. Should they run? Should they abandon Ivan, Stalin, and Boyd? What if they were already dead? What good would fighting do then? And, even if they did run, wouldn't Crepitus just track them down?

“Tatiana?” Kat's voice rose an octave as panic began to set in.

Tatiana closed her eyes, chin falling onto her chest as tears began to roll down her cheeks. “I don't know,” she whispered.

“What about Ivan? Have you—”

“Yes!” Tatiana slammed her palms upon the arms of her chair as she glared at her sister. “I tried again and again! He's not there! Either Crepitus is jamming the signal or he's... he's...” She couldn't finish the sentence. She couldn't bear to think about that. She turned away and put her head in her hands, sobbing.

Above them, the speaker in the flight-deck's ceiling suddenly buzzed and squawked.

“*grizzatiana?* Katarina? Do you copy, over?”

The twins turned to the speaker. Heart in her mouth and tears staining her cheeks, Tatiana dared not hope. Could it be...? Was that...?

“This is Ivan. We are on our way...yes?”

#

The Calci marched in the hangar, spreading out to surround the *Troika* ...

... and Ivan, Boyd and Stalin lead them.

Supporting one another, Ivan and Boyd walked toward the *Troika*'s ramp, Stalin trotting along beside them with his head in the air and his tail wagging. Ivan looked to the top of the ramp to see an incredulous Vast, mouth hanging open, staring at him and the Calci beyond.

Ivan smiled a tired smile. He had expected to die in the Womb, only for the Calci—now free of Crepitus and his diabolical will—to lower their weapons and salute him with a thunderous chorus of “We are the dead.”

The trio reached the ramp, two Calci walking beside them. One carried Stanztrigger's body, the other held the Moreau's head in its hands. Reaching the top of the ramp, Ivan patted Vast on the shoulder and smiled. Beside him Boyd activated his comm, saying, “It's okay, Princess, we're back, and we're safe. It's over. We won.”

The two Calci placed Stanztrigger's remains on the *Troika*'s deck with a mechanical grace, and marched down the ramp to join their comrades. Ivan turned to face them. As Boyd moved to the ramp's controls and activated the hydraulics, as the ramp began to close with a protracted whine, Ivan turned to face the Calci that lined the *Balefire*'s hangar. At the forefront stood Bone Ivan—bent but unbowed. They made eye-contact as the ramp began to close.

“Я вспоминаю,” the Calci said, saluting.

Ivan nodded. “Я вспоминаю,” he said, returning the salute. “I remember.”

Epilogue

Ashes to Ashes

The clearing was big and open, the ground littered with dead bark and the *Balefire*'s clotted blood. In its centre sat the *Troika*, its scared hide courted and teased by vortexes of ash caught in a stiff breeze. The cutter's landing lights blinked, and occasional jets of steam burst from its riven hull with a gentle hiss. Beside it a pyre of the Moreaus and Calci left aboard the ship burned and crackled, painting the clearing a fiery orange. On top of the pyre lay the wooden remains of Petrid.

A little way from the *Troika* stood her crew. The Princesses supported the bloody Ivan whilst Stalin sat at his feet, head lowered and eyes closed. Vast stood smoking, the thick smoke and pungent scent of her *jaffy* stick snatched away by the wind. With their back to the fire they observed a solemn silence whilst they watched Boyd—still strong and healthy despite all he had faced—pile the last of the rocks on a grave. Stripped to the waste, his muscular body gleamed with thick and tacky sweat, and even from here, even over the horrid stench of burning corpses, Tatiana could smell her Father's cologne.

Beyond the clearing, beyond the dead trees that lined it, the planet's weak suns set, turning the clouds of dust that crowded the horizon a delicate flesh pink shot through with veins of bloody red.

Katarina nodded toward the sky. "Where do you think they'll go?"

"The Calci? Now they are free of Crepitus?" Ivan paused before continuing, and Tatiana looked at her Uncle whilst he considered his answer. Despite a face crossed with scars, and despite a torso buried beneath a swathe of bandages, she'd never seen him like this. There was also something different about him, something she hadn't seen since they'd fled Oridia. He seemed taller somehow. Unbowed. "I honestly don't know. I don't know where they come from—no-one knows how Crepitus created them—and I don't know how far *Balefire* can continue in that condition. It is badly damaged."

"Will we see them again?"

"I fucking hope not," Katarina said before, eyes wide and horrified, she seemed to remember where she was, and who she was with. She looked at Ivan and gulped.

The old man laughed, and Tatiana—arm about his ribs—found a subtle reassurance in the power in his frame as it flexed. "I fucking hope not too, yes?" Ivan said.

They watched Boyd, the Scot standing beside the completed grave of rock and stone. Head bowed and eyes closed, his lips moved gently as he said a few last words.

"For all our days are passed away in thy wrath," Ivan said in a tiny voice. "We spend our years as a tale that is told." Tatiana and Katarina looked at him, confused, as the old man continued, "For all the Eaters' victories, for all the stories told about them, that they should die here, their leader should be buried here, on a back-water planet, crushed by a mad man's revenge."

Tatiana turned back to watch Boyd picking up an ad-hoc wooden cross he'd already prepared. As the Scot drove the cross into the pile of stones, Katarina asked her uncle, "Does this planet even have a name?"

Boyd turned away from the make-shift grave and trudged toward them, hands in the pockets of his dirty fatigues. He dragged his feet and stared into the ash on the ground. Behind him brooded the name STANZTRIGGER, burnt into the wood.

Ivan smiled. "It does now."

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Frozen*

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