

## 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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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."

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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. ”

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“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.

*To be continued...*