

www.thevalentinechronicles.com presents:

## Bad Blood

by Paul L. Mathews

### 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 Valentines 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.

*To be continued...*

© 2008 Mathew David Spaul. All rights reserved.