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Bad Blood

by Paul L. Mathews

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 Dopppe-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, slavering. 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'."

To be continued...