

Bad Blood

by Paul L. Mathews

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.”

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“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 whither 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.

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“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...”

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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.

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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.

To be continued...

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