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Bad Blood

by Paul L. Mathews

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."

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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.

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"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.

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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.”

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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 ghoulis 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 as 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.

To be continued...