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## Bad Blood

by Paul L. Mathews

### Part Six

#### Keep Talking

Ivan, Boyd, Stanztrigger and Stalin moved cautiously down the corridor. Whilst the three soldiers looked about with calm observation, Stalin's eyes were wide with fear, and he panted and trembled. The walls of this corridor were little more than thin flesh stretched over arching ribs. Eye-flies fed off the rotten walls and their rank skin. A hot wind bore stench of decay, and viscous goo hung from the roof in thick, trembling strands.

An eerie silence had dominated the corridor, but now that silence was savaged as Crepitus's voice hissed out of the speaker in Stalin's back, saying, "Ivan? Can you hear me Ivan? I know you can. I know that dog is monitoring my communications." A pause. The four of them glanced at one another. "You've done it. You've finally killed my daughter. Not content with stealing my son from me, my Skullion, you've taken Petrid too. Well, I hope you're proud. I hope you enjoy your little pyrrhic victory, because you haven't long to live. You and those teenage sluts. Get ready, Ivan. Get ready to d—"

The rant ended as Stalin cut the transmission.

"He's really mad now, Ivan." The dog put a paw across his eyes as he lowered his head and shook it.

"Wait..." Boyd's brow creased, "...Did he say *Skullion* was his *son*? *Thom* Skullion? The Omega Hammers' old medic?"

Ivan nodded, turning away as tears pricked his eyes. "Yes. Gregor and I captured him years ago, back when we fought Crepitus in DeAngelis campaign, yes? He was just called Skullion then." He turned back to Boyd. "He swapped sides and adopted name Thom shortly afterwards."

"So who's this 'Petrid'?"

"Thom's sister." Ivan's smile was sardonic and thin. "As much as he hated Crepitus, he never forgave himself for leaving Petrid behind. She was very sick, very frail. Only Thom's healing powers kept her alive—her and her mother. Crepitus turned Petrid into some wooden monster soon afterward, just to keep her alive and strike at Thom."

"So, where's the mother?"

Ivan shuddered. Patina? He had no idea. And he prayed to God he never found out ...

#

Striding down one of the *Balefire*'s fleshy corridors, Crepitus stopped, his rant over. He turned to the Bone Valentines. The skeletal facsimile of Ivan stood at the front of the trio. His ushanka and parka were worn and scarred. Head lowered, he stared at Crepitus, his one robotic eye twinkling in the semi-darkness.

“Can you see them?” Crepitus asked.

The response was delayed as tiny scanner readings—conveyed by the flies about the ship—scrolled over Bone Ivan’s eye. The green image stopped, and a red contact flashed bright and angry in the centre of the iris. “I have them, yes?” His voice was synthesised and harsh, forced into the world by an eroded speaker in his spine.

“Where?”

“They are approaching the Womb.”

#

“This,” Stalin said, voice a nasal whine, “is such a bad idea.”

“We have to destroy Womb to have chance of success.”

“The Womb? Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

Ivan turned to Boyd, about to answer the Scot’s question, when Stalin cut in, saying, “Because you know what’s good for you?”

“What is this ‘Womb’?” Stanztrigger’s voice was thin and drawn, and he leant against the fetid wall to draw breath.

“*Balefire*’s power-source, yes?”

“Power-source?” Boyd looked about them, a sweep of his hand taking in biomechanical decay of the corridor and the ship beyond. “What kind of power drives a monstrosity like this?”

#

A cavernous chamber that rose from the bottom of the *Balefire* to the top, the Womb’s floor was lit red by pockets of glowing pearls nestling in the walls, Thick pillars of bone rose from the deck to the ceiling, calcified spears of bone sprouted from their surface. Clusters of computer banks choked the base of the columns, fleshy umbilical cords running from these terminals only to be lost under an uneven blanket of shit that coated the deck. This vast chamber’s circular walls of tibia and fibula formed millions of tiny cocoons lined with dank flesh and flexing muscle. Each wept the ethereal wail of a lost and frightened soul.

Boyd leant forward, hand over his nose to block out the stench. He peered into one of the chambers. “Ivan? Are they...?”

“Ghosts? Yes.”

Ivan looked at the Womb. It was every bit as horrific as he remembered. A hideous nest of spectral children, torn from their wombs and trapped here, the dreadful vessel powered by the lost potential of those countless lives. The lost love. The lost hope. The lost dreams. All stolen from them, all harvested by Crepitus’s foul and shitty magic. Ivan gripped his axe so hard his fingers ached.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” The vitriol in the voice was palpable. “My greatest achievement, wouldn’t you say?”

Ivan, Boyd, Stanztrigger and Stalin fell into a circle, the Scot and the Moreau sweeping the vista before them with their guns. Ivan’s lip curled as his eyes narrowed. He was here, finally. The man who’d taken his self-respect from him, who’d forced

him to go begging on his knees to the ghost of a dead friend, and who'd reduced him to a wailing and pitiful old man. Now it was time for revenge.

"And you, Ivan? You like it so much you've come back?"

Ivan couldn't see him. He looked to and fro, but all he could see were the calcified pillars.

"Why? What are you hoping to find? Vassilissa's children? Or more of Gregor's little bastards?" A brittle laugh rattled through the Womb. "Or maybe yours? On, no, wait. I forgot. You're one of *them*, aren't you? A dirty little queer."

Ivan's breath caught in his chest, and his cheeks burnt. He trembled. The bastard! How dare he? He would pay for that. "Come out, Crepitus!" Such was his anger he could barely form the words. "Let's see you!"

"You'd never have your own children, would you? You were always content to steal other peoples'." Crepitus stepped out from behind a pillar, pistol raised and trained on Ivan. He looked every bit as threadbare and spiteful as Ivan remembered: his liver-spotted face a mask of bitter contempt, and his sneering, black teeth. "Like my boy, my Skullion."

"Ivan!" The panic in Stalin's voice betrayed their perilous position, and three further figures stepped into the open to surround them. Ivan looked over his shoulder, and he couldn't suppress a tiny, ironic smile. The Bone Valentines. This went from bad to worse.

He turned back to Crepitus, looking the aged technomancer in his evil little eyes before nodding at the pistol in his withered fingers. "Better make that shot count, yes? Because if you mi—"

With a cry somewhere between vitriol and anguish, Crepitus fired, the old gun bucking in his hand. Ivan flinched, ducking down as the bullet whistled over his head. With two painful strides Ivan moved behind a pillar, crying out as he put a hand to his bad leg. Another shot, and chips of bone stabbed at Ivan's shoulder as a bullet ricocheted off the bone colonnade at his back.

That first move made, the fight began in earnest. The Bone Valentines raised their pistols and fired, the chatter of their gunfire echoing about the Womb. As the bullets stabbed by, Stalin bolted, head low and eyes like saucers as he sprinted for cover. Boyd ducked and ran sideways, firing his maser as he went. Stanztrigger fired as he advanced on Bone Gregor.

"Stanztrigger! Down!"

Ivan's call came too late. Even as Stanztrigger's barrage blew holes in its skeletal frame, even as its black fatigues and cyber-enhanced limbs were shredded, Bone Gregor fired back. Bullets thudded into Stanztrigger's body, and the Moreau fell back into the shit, face creased in pain. His maser fell from bent and crooked fingers, hands shaking in a violent agony.

As the remains of Bone Gregor plopped into the mire, Boyd reached cover. Cramming himself under a bank of terminals, on his knees in the faeces, he kept firing at Bone Vassilissa. The automaton ducked back behind a column as Boyd's maserbeams tore into the pillar. It attempted to emerge again and fire, but a further burst from Boyd drove it back.

“Is this the best you could muster, Ivan? Are these all the allies you have left?” More mocking laughter. “Where are Yevgeny and Crimea now? Or the *Oprinichki*?”

More gunfire, and Bone Ivan stepped toward Boyd, firing as it bore down on him. Its bullets rained on and about the Scot, but he didn’t falter. Bringing his maser to bear, he fired back, and the skeleton jerked and span before falling under the barrage.

“Ivan the Terrible, with his fearsome Omega Hammers, reduced to what? That coward Stalin, a sick Moreau—did you say that was *Stanztrigger*?—and some Scottish ruffian? Pitiful.”

Bone Vassilissa now sprang into view and fired again. Even as its bullets pelted Boyd, the besieged man managed one last volley, decimating Vassilissa’s skull. It collapsed into the excreta just as, blood bubbling from his wounds and his mouth a rictus of pain, Boyd’s hands collapsed to the filthy deck, fingers loose about his gun.

“All alone now, Ivan. Just you and me.”

That is it, yes? Keep talking, Ivan thought as he ducked and edged his way toward another column. Keep taunting.

Ivan moved again, reached another column and pressed against it. He paused, taking a deep breath as his fingers flexed on the axe. With eyes closed he drew a mental image of the Womb. If Crepitus hadn’t moved, he should be just...

...about...

...*here!*

He stepped out from behind the pillar, axe raised.

Crepitus wasn’t there.

Ivan’s eyes flicked from left to right. His blood ran cold, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose. Where was he? Where had the dark sorcerer gone? His muscles tensed, and he shrank by inches as his body coiled and compressed, his nostrils flared and his eyes widened, senses primed and alert.

There! It was little more than a squelch, the sound of a boot in shit, but it was enough. Ducking, he moved forward as a bullet whistled by him and staggered to the cover of a bone pillar. The brief impression of Crepitus’s black uniform and a muzzle flash pricked his peripheral vision as he looked over his shoulder, a further round scything by.

“Don’t be sad, Ivan. You should celebrate. After all, it isn’t every day one witnesses the end of not one great mercenary legacy, but two. Who would have thought it? After all these years I will finally bring a close to both *Stanztrigger* and his Eaters, and the Valentines and their Omega Hammers. Glorious.”

He was so close Ivan could almost smell his rank breath and dirty clothes. Ivan squeezed his eyes shut, gulped for breath, held it, and sprang into the open. Crepitus stood no more than three feet away from him, and the pair both paused as they each looked into the other’s face. A ghost of a smile drifted across Crepitus’s lips before he aimed his gun at Ivan.

Exhaling, Ivan swung the axe, knocking the pistol from his enemy’s grasp as it fired, the bullet careening by. Crepitus took a step back, brows raised in alarm, eyes wide. Ivan pressed forward. A further swing of the axe, and it bit into the technomancer’s shoulder.

“Stop! Stop, now!” He tried to grab at the axe, but to no avail. Ivan tugged, releasing the blade from the wood of Crepitus’s torso, and swung again. Crepitus raised his hands to protect himself, but the axe cleaved his right hand in two. “No! You mustn’t! Stop! I *order* you!”

Another swing, and the other hand shattered and fell away from the wrist, leaving a stake of splintered wood. Crepitus staggered back against a bone pillar, ruined hands falling by his side. “Stop this instant!”

“Stop?” Ivan swung again, this time ruining the old sorcerer’s other shoulder, which splintered and bent outward from the torso, the arm now hanging at an odd angle across his belly. “*Stop?* You try to kill us, pursue us across Pagentorns, threaten my nieces, and you ask me to *stop?*” Another blow, and the maladjusted arm was cleaved from the body. “Never! This ends, and this ends today...yes?” Ivan heaved one last time, only for Crepitus to dodge sideways. The axe rammed into the pillar and stuck fast.

“Ends? Today?” Crepitus sneered as he sprang forward, slashing Ivan across the eye with the splintered stake of his wrist. Ivan cried out, hand going to his face as an agonising pain erupted from his eyeball. “You ignorant lack-wit!” Another slash, and he gouged a bloody line across Ivan’s hand. “Even if you managed to kill me today, don’t you realise *she*’s still out there?” A further lunge, and Ivan staggered as the stake gored a hole in his chest. “You’ve killed her daughter. Even if you escape me, you know she’ll come for you, don’t you?”

Ivan’s feet went from under him, and he fell, hitting the bone column behind him hard. A tearing of flesh and a sear of pain subsumed his world as one of the pillar’s calcified spurs speared his shoulder, the bloody tip bursting out of his body stocking. The axe fell from his grasp. He couldn’t see. All was blood and pain. He rubbed desperately at his face with the palm of his eyes to try and shift the blood. It couldn’t end like this! He had to stop Crepitus! He had to end him, end his evil, his reign of darkness, his black wizardry.

He cleared the blood from his eyes, fought the pain with quick and shallow breaths. The battered and bent Crepitus stalked toward him, wrist drawn back to deliver that last dolorious blow. “Goodbye, Ivan Valentine. Of all the souls I have crushed, you have been the most resilient. But all things die.” A black smile. “Except me, of cour— What on Earth?”

Blinking rapidly, Ivan made out a black and hunched shape rising from the deck. Crooked and bent, its movements were slow and pained.

“For all our days are passed away in thy wrath,” the shape said. Now Ivan smiled a black smile. That voice! Stanztrigger! “We spend our years as a tale that is told.”

Stanztrigger burst forward, falling upon Crepitus even as the wizard stabbed him in the belly. The pair fell into the filth, locked together in a desperate and bitter struggle. Focusing, Ivan saw Crepitus using what remained of his arm to hold Stanztrigger at bay. By now, however, the Eaters’ leader was more Calci than Moreau. Thick, green saliva oozed from his green chops as his teeth snapped and lunged. Broken claws bit into the skin of Crepitus’s head, gouging at the flesh and stabbing at the eyes.

“No!” Crepitus’s shrieks reverberated about the Womb. “Not like this! Please! Ivan! Help me, Ivan! Help me!”

Ivan gritted his teeth and forced himself forward, crying out in sheer agony as the bone spear left his shoulder with a dreadful wet slurp. Once free, he fell to his hands and knees, head hung low.

“Ivan! Please! *Please!*”

Ivan turned his head slowly, the pain across his trapezius searing and savage. Stanztrigger ripped Crepitus’s arm from the socket before casting it aside. He fell upon the technomancer’s head, mauling. The Moreau’s teeth ripped through the flesh, his claws pierced the exposed muscle, and his tongue lapped at the gushing blood. Stanztrigger ripped the head from its wooden shoulders and dashed it against the deck. Split in half, the brains within oozed into the open, and the Calci Moreau began to devour them with a guttural relish.

The dying scream of the black sorcerer echoed about the Womb and Ivan could have sworn the ghostly wails of the unborn stopped, just for a moment, as if to enjoy the moment.

“Ivan? We need to go. Now.”

Ivan laughed to himself, sardonically. Stalin. Back now the fighting is all but over. Typical, yes? Ivan rose to his knees and looked at the cyborg dog. He was staring at Stanztrigger and trembling.

“We need to get out of here before he finishes eating Crepitus. We’ll be next.”

Ivan didn’t reply, he just reached out and picked up the axe. He leant on it as he used it for leverage and rose to his feet. Move, old man. Ignore the pain. Ignore the blood. They can wait. Stanztrigger needs you. He needs you now. You owe him this, yes?

With faltering steps, Ivan moved to stand beside the Moreau. Mouth full of brain-matter, smashed skull held to his lips, what was once Stanztrigger turned sharply to glare at Ivan. It shrank away, coveting the skull as it snarled.

“It has been...” Ivan had to stop and gather his breath, “...an honour, yes?”

It looked at him, and something shifted in its face. A trembling of the eyebrows, a spark of recognition, and a subtle nodding of the head. It knew what was coming, and what little of Stanztrigger remained in there was grateful.

One last heave of the axe, and Ivan decapitated the legend.

“That’s great, Ivan. Now can we g—Oh, shit.”

Eyes closed, Ivan’s shoulders sagged as his head fell back. Now what?

The answer was metronomic and uniform. Skeletal Calci moving with perfect synchronisation and purpose, they were marching into the Womb *en masse*. Lining the walls of the chamber, they trained their weapons on Ivan and Stalin.

Ivan’s laugh was shallow and resigned. It was all over. Crepitus had won after all.

A *sha-chick* of a gun being reloaded beside him, and Ivan turned to see the bloody and torn Boyd by his side. They smiled at one another and, for the first time since they had left Oridia, the smiles were genuine.

“To the death?” Boyd asked.

Ivan nodded. “To the death.”

They turned to face the Calci, Ivan with his axe, Boyd with his maser. Jaws set in defiance as they awaited the inevitable, they made no quips, remonstrations or clever sound-bites. They merely faced their deaths with dignity and poise. Even Stalin bared his teeth to growl and snarl, perhaps choosing to die with a little self-respect.

#

“Oh fuck.”

“I see it, Kat. I see it.” Back on the flight-deck and slumped in the pilot’s seat, skin clammy and cold, light-headed and short of breath, Tatiana looked at the TAC monitor above her station. Multiple red contacts moved through the green schematic of the *Balefire*, all zeroing in on the *Troika*.

Tatiana’s throat contracted, her eyes filled with tears. This wasn’t fair. They couldn’t beat the Calci. Not like this.

“Vast? Are you in position?” Kat’s voice was thin and weary. Tatiana turned to see her slumped over the security station, a cigarette dangling from her chewed lips. Head in her hands, she stared at the monitors before her. One of them showed Vast—seemingly oblivious to the fact she’d recently become an amputee—waiting at the *Troika*’s ramp, pistol at the ready. She turned to the security camera and nodded, thumbing the hammer back on her pistol.

Tatiana looked away, but not before lingering on the dark shape on the periphery of the screen. The Moreau Lorelei, body twisted and punctured, lay at the top of the ramp, the black flowers that had signalled her demise droopy and dying.

“What we gonna do, Tatiana?”

She took a deep breath, trying to find her calm place, trying to focus. It didn’t work. A thousand thoughts besieged her. Should they run? Should they abandon Ivan, Stalin, and Boyd? What if they were already dead? What good would fighting do then? And, even if they did run, wouldn’t Crepitus just track them down?

“Tatiana?” Kat’s voice rose an octave as panic began to set in.

Tatiana closed her eyes, chin falling onto her chest as tears began to roll down her cheeks. “I don’t know,” she whispered.

“What about Ivan? Have you—”

“Yes!” Tatiana slammed her palms upon the arms of her chair as she glared at her sister. “I tried again and again! He’s not there! Either Crepitus is jamming the signal or he’s... he’s...” She couldn’t finish the sentence. She couldn’t bear to think about that. She turned away and put her head in her hands, sobbing.

Above them, the speaker in the flight-deck’s ceiling suddenly buzzed and squawked. “*grizzatiana?* Katarina? Do you copy, over?”

The twins turned to the speaker. Heart in her mouth and tears staining her cheeks, Tatiana dared not hope. Could it be...? Was that...?

“This is Ivan. We are on our way...yes?”

#

The Calci marched in the hangar, spreading out to surround the *Troika* ...

... and Ivan, Boyd and Stalin lead them.

Supporting one another, Ivan and Boyd walked toward the *Troika*'s ramp, Stalin trotting along beside them with his head in the air and his tail wagging. Ivan looked to the top of the ramp to see an incredulous Vast, mouth hanging open, staring at him and the Calci beyond.

Ivan smiled a tired smile. He had expected to die in the Womb, only for the Calci—now free of Crepitus and his diabolical will—to lower their weapons and salute him with a thunderous chorus of “We are the dead.”

The trio reached the ramp, two Calci walking beside them. One carried Stanztrigger's body, the other held the Moreau's head in its hands. Reaching the top of the ramp, Ivan patted Vast on the shoulder and smiled. Beside him Boyd activated his comm, saying, “It's okay, Princess, we're back, and we're safe. It's over. We won.”

The two Calci placed Stanztrigger's remains on the *Troika*'s deck with a mechanical grace, and marched down the ramp to join their comrades. Ivan turned to face them. As Boyd moved to the ramp's controls and activated the hydraulics, as the ramp began to close with a protracted whine, Ivan turned to face the Calci that lined the *Balefire*'s hangar. At the forefront stood Bone Ivan—bent but unbowed. They made eye-contact as the ramp began to close.

“Я вспоминаю,” the Calci said, saluting.

Ivan nodded. “Я вспоминаю,” he said, returning the salute. “I remember.”

## Epilogue

### Ashes to Ashes

The clearing was big and open, the ground littered with dead bark and the *Balefire*'s clotted blood. In its centre sat the *Troika*, its scared hide courted and teased by vortexes of ash caught in a stiff breeze. The cutter's landing lights blinked, and occasional jets of steam burst from its riven hull with a gentle hiss. Beside it a pyre of the Moreaus and Calci left aboard the ship burned and crackled, painting the clearing a fiery orange. On top of the pyre lay the wooden remains of Petrid.

A little way from the *Troika* stood her crew. The Princesses supported the bloody Ivan whilst Stalin sat at his feet, head lowered and eyes closed. Vast stood smoking, the thick smoke and pungent scent of her *jaffy* stick snatched away by the wind. With their back to the fire they observed a solemn silence whilst they watched Boyd—still strong and healthy despite all he had faced—pile the last of the rocks on a grave. Stripped to the waste, his muscular body gleamed with thick and tacky sweat, and even from here, even over the horrid stench of burning corpses, Tatiana could smell her Father's cologne.

Beyond the clearing, beyond the dead trees that lined it, the planet's weak suns set, turning the clouds of dust that crowded the horizon a delicate flesh pink shot through with veins of bloody red.

Katarina nodded toward the sky. “Where do you think they'll go?”

“The Calci? Now they are free of Crepitus?” Ivan paused before continuing, and Tatiana looked at her Uncle whilst he considered his answer. Despite a face crossed with scars, and despite a torso buried beneath a swathe of bandages, she'd never seen

him like this. There was also something different about him, something she hadn't seen since they'd fled Oridia. He seemed taller somehow. Unbowed. "I honestly don't know. I don't know where they come from—no-one knows how Crepitus created them—and I don't know how far *Balefire* can continue in that condition. It is badly damaged."

"Will we see them again?"

"I fucking hope not," Katarina said before, eyes wide and horrified, she seemed to remember where she was, and who she was with. She looked at Ivan and gulped.

The old man laughed, and Tatiana—arm about his ribs—found a subtle reassurance in the power in his frame as it flexed. "I fucking hope not too, yes?" Ivan said.

They watched Boyd, the Scot standing beside the completed grave of rock and stone. Head bowed and eyes closed, his lips moved gently as he said a few last words.

"For all our days are passed away in thy wrath," Ivan said in a tiny voice. "We spend our years as a tale that is told." Tatiana and Katarina looked at him, confused, as the old man continued, "For all the Eaters' victories, for all the stories told about them, that they should die here, their leader should be buried here, on a back-water planet, crushed by a mad man's revenge."

Tatiana turned back to watch Boyd picking up an ad-hoc wooden cross he'd already prepared. As the Scot drove the cross into the pile of stones, Katarina asked her uncle, "Does this planet even have a name?"

Boyd turned away from the make-shift grave and trudged toward them, hands in the pockets of his dirty fatigues. He dragged his feet and stared into the ash on the ground. Behind him brooded the name STANZTRIGGER, burnt into the wood.

Ivan smiled. "It does now."

*The Valentine Chronicles* will continue with *Frozen*