

Flesh

by Paul L. Mathews

Part Six

Bite Me

Stanztrigger and Boyd left the bridge, running down the corridor to the stairwell. Boyd still had Tatiana over his shoulder, but the girl was regaining consciousness. Her eyes flitted open, only to close again, and she groaned periodically whilst her limbs twitched.

“We have to reach the hangar,” Stanztrigger said. “There will be Hammers prepared by my men ready to attack and seize the *Troika*. We will use them to get off the *Tower*.”

Boyd grunted. He hadn't seen a Hammer in years. In fact, they hadn't been *made* in years. Still, he didn't care how old they were if they got the three of them out in one piece.

They emerged from the corridor into the stairwell before traversing the narrow mesh bridge. There they reached the stairs that spiralled down the chamber's spinal conduit. Stanztrigger's pace didn't abate, seemingly undaunted by the possibility of falling off the stairs. Boyd was more circumspect. He didn't know exactly how high they were, but it must be at least two hundred decks.

With the chamber echoing to the sound of Boyd's boots and Stanztrigger's hooves on the stairs, they pressed on. They'd descended a further two decks before Boyd pulled up, pointing. “Calci!”

Stanztrigger stopped, and squinted.

Five decks below, on a narrow bridge that led from the stairs to a darkened doorway, four Calci—once Stanztrigger's dog headed guards—were moving toward the staircase. In bloodied fatigues, clutching old submachine guns, they were looking up at Boyd and Stanztrigger. Even from here, Boyd could see their slack mouths, pallid skin and dead eyes.

“No matter.” Stanztrigger began to run again. “We'll deal with them soon enough.”

“Um, Stanztrigger? They're pointing guns at us.”

“Residual instinct. The Calci don't use gu—”

The Calci fired, and bullets stabbed through the air about Boyd and Stanztrigger, ricocheting off the metal of the stairs and the central conduit. As sparks showered them, Boyd crouched and hid under his arm in reflex.

“I stand corrected.” Stanztrigger hadn't bothered to crouch, hadn't bothered to seek some sort of shelter. He merely raised his pistol and fired, the boom of his gun bludgeoning the air.

Below, one of the Calci flexed as Stanztrigger's bullet thudded into its torso, bursting out of its back in a bloody haze. Still the Moreaus fired. Boyd, propping Tatiana against the conduit and shielding her with his body, fired back. At this range, however, and with such a poor pistol, he hadn't a prayer of hitting his target in the head. Instead the round punched a hole in the target's groin. Such a wound would have stopped a normal Moreau, but not a Calci. Undeterred, the Calci continued to fire. Bullets hissed passed Boyd, and still the sparks fell upon him, piercing his skin and clothes like hot needles.

Boyd and Stanztrigger continued to fire. By chance Stanztrigger blew a hole in one of the Calci's head, the body convulsing as it toppled off the bridge and into the darkness below. In return, Stanztrigger was hit, roaring in anger and pain as a volley of bullets traced an arc of sparks across the conduit before writing a concussive line across his chest. He staggered back, hit the conduit, and slumped onto his haunches.

"Stanztrigger!"

"I am fine." He was still firing, but one hand was on his chest, blood escaping from beneath it and venturing down his flak-vest.

"We need to get off this bloody bridge! We're sitting ducks here!"

"I will not run! I will not falter!" He was stood now, holstering his pistol. "I! Am! *Stanztrigger!*" With that, he leapt from the staircase, arms and legs stiff and outstretched.

Boyd reached for him, shouting, "No!"

The Calci continued to fire at the Moreau even as his gaunt frame bore down on them. Boyd didn't have time to gauge if they hit or not, Stanztrigger hit the bridge, hard, buckling the mesh and flexing the narrow structure. Two of the Calci, flailing, lost their balance and pitched into the darkness, vanishing into the depths below. The last fell onto its back, its SMG clattering down beside it. Stanztrigger, too, was pitched to the side and hung from one hand from the weakened bridge.

Boyd—convinced the Moreaus had outplayed his hand—looked on as—still dangling—Stanztrigger put his other hand to his wounded chest. From his vantage point, Boyd could see a glazed look had taken possession of the Moreau, and the steaming of his breath was erratic and shallow. He could also see the Calci looking down and—seeing Stanztrigger—it rolled onto its hands and knees and began to move toward him. Its canine mouth was open, and thick saliva coated its teeth and oozed from its gums.

"Fucking idiot," Boyd put his forehead into his palm as he shook his head in exasperation.

Leave him. We don't need him.

"Do you know the way to the hangar? To the Hammers?"

No, but—

"Neither do I. We need hi—"

With a rapid series of metallic *pings*, more bullets struck the metal of the conduit just above Tatiana's head and the ricocheting bullets whistled past Boyd. Looking up, his eyes narrowed and his teeth ground at the sight of more Calci. Lurching on to a bridge above there were six in all. Two—once Moreaus—fired haphazardly at Boyd, the rest were once human. He guessed they'd been prisoners in Stanztrigger's pantry, but now

they were jaded, leering ghouls covered in blood and bite marks. With a loping gait, they crossed the bridge and reached the staircase.

“Bugger.” Boyd fired back as the Calci continued to shoot at him, but his inaccurate weapon could inflict little more than ineffectual flesh-wounds. Yet more bullets stabbed at the metal about him, and he knew it was only a matter of time until they scored a hit—lucky or otherwise.

He turned to grab Tatiana, but paused as he looked over his shoulder. Stanztrigger still hung from the bridge, and the Calci was closing in fast as it licked needy lips. Shaking, bloody, the beleaguered Moreau attempted to draw his pistol, managing only to take the weapon from its holster before it slipped from his weak fingers and spiralled into the abyss below. Boyd blinked, frozen. He knew he should just run and take Tatiana. He should find the hangar himself, or maybe get to the dock and steal that Dogfish. But he couldn't. There was something about this Moreau. Something so epic, that—even as the weakened legend fought to retain a grip on the bridge, even as his life leaked away through the holes in his chest—he left Boyd mesmerised. With his determination, with his faith, with his anger, there was something about him, something of Nemo, or Ahab, that Boyd could not abandon.

“Wait here,” he said, whispering in Tatiana's ear. Again she stirred, eyelids flickering. Her hands twitched. “I'll be right back.” He kissed her forehead. “I promise.”

Right back? What are you...? Oh, you've got to be joking!

With a last look at Tatiana and a quick glance at the creatures above, Boyd turned, sprang forward and—with a thrust of his boot against the edge of the stairs—launched himself into the air just as Stanztrigger had done. Arms and legs pumping, he fell with a clang to land in a crouch. He wavered, but grabbed at the bridge to steady himself. The Calci snarled as it turned to face him and tried to rise to its feet, but Boyd sprang forward and struck the creature across the chin, knocking it off the bridge.

The gunfire continued to rain from above. A bullet hit Boyd in the thigh—but he ignored the pain. Now it was his turn to snarl, diving forward and seizing the abandoned SMG. Whipping round, he trained the gun on his attackers.

“Bring out your dead!” he shouted above the chatter of the SMG as he fired a prolonged burst. The gun twisted and bucked in his hands, but even though he only held it in the one hand, he was strong enough to make the shots count. His bullets tore through the Calci and they lost their footing, slipping off the bridge and plummeting out of sight with their limbs threshing the air.

“Boyd!” Stanztrigger shouted. “The girl!”

Twisting, Boyd saw the last four Calci were almost upon Tatiana, closing within feet as they slavered and groped, their bent, twisting bodies throwing theatrical shadows on the side of the spinal conduit. Boyd fired again, this time in shorter bursts for fear of hitting Tatiana. The four Calci were chewed up by the volleys, dancing in a shower of sparks as they were riddled with bullets. As Boyd exhausted the SMG's magazine, three of the creatures—bodies smoking—pitched forward and fell off the stairs. One, however, fell sideways, landing on the stairs mere feet from Tatiana. Instantly, it began to stir, pushing itself up on its punctured arms and glaring at the Oridian.

“Tatiana! No!” Boyd froze. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't fire. He couldn't reach her. He—

The Calci lunged, mouth bearing down on Tatiana. At the last instant the girl's eyes fluttered open and she lurched to one side, the Calci's face smashing into the conduit. Blood erupted from its nose and forehead, and, as the Calci rose to its feet, it blinked and rubbed at the gore in its eyes. With an uncoordinated shove, Tatiana pushed at its belly, and the creature lost its balance, crying out as it fell off the stairs and plunged to its death.

Tears stung Boyd's eyes. She looked toward him, flopping back against the conduit as she smiled a weak smile and gave him an even weaker thumbs up.

Heart racing, blood pounding in his ears, Boyd looked about him. There were no more Calci. He looked down at Stanztrigger. It was the Moreau's turn to look impressed.

#

Having hauled Stanztrigger off the bridge and into the corridor beyond, Boyd returned to Tatiana. Reaching the girl, he took her in his arms and held onto her. "Thank Christ you're okay."

"Of course I'm okay." She grimaced as she spoke, and her hand went to her throat, stroking it gently. "I'm a Valentine."

"How do you feel?"

"This wound really hurts." Her voice was strained and coloured by the effort required to ignore the pain. "And my throat hurts when I talk."

For a moment, Boyd knelt on the stairs and breathed in the smell of her hair and revelled in the feel of her skin on his cheek. "I'm getting you out of here, Princess," he said in a gentle whisper as he drew back and kissed her forehead, "and I'm taking you home."

#

When they returned to Stanztrigger, the Moreau had stripped off his flask-vest and opened his shirt. He was peering at his chest through his pince-nez as he used a tiny device to staple the wounds closed, wincing as he went. He looked up as Boyd—supporting the weak Tatiana as she staggered beside him—entered the corridor.

"Hello, young lady," Stanztrigger said with a smile.

"Um. Hi." Tatiana looked faintly embarrassed, and she glanced sideways at Boyd.

"Princess, this is Stanztrigger. Stanztrigger, this is Her Highness Tatiana Cyzarine Valentine of the Enlightened Court of Oridia."

"Ah, Oridia. A beautiful planet. Seductive in its purity. You suit it well."

"That's enough small talk," Boyd said as he saw Tatiana blushing deeply. "C'mon, we need to get outta here." He reached down and helped Stanztrigger up. Around them the klaxons continued to howl. "We're running out of time."

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"We are twenty decks above the hangar," Stanztrigger said. "This is the quickest way."

They stood at a set of rusty doors. With a *ping* they opened, revealing an elevator within. Although dimly lit by a single bulb that hung from its ceiling, wiring exposed, there was nowhere to hide for the Calci crouched inside. Once it had been a human

from the Pantry, now it was a monster gorging itself on a luckless Moreau whose mouse features were frozen in an agonised rictus.

The creature barely had time to look over its shoulder, a look of surprise intruding on the blood and gore on its face. Boyd fired immediately, and the Calci's head was smashed open.

Boyd, Tatiana, and Stanztrigger stepped into the elevator, boots barely gripping the floor through the spilt viscera. Stanztrigger pressed at the worn buttons, selecting the appropriate deck. The doors shut, cutting off the sound of the klaxons, the sudden silence as intrusive as any muzak.

Stanztrigger smiled, but his shoulders were sagging, and he looked down, closing his eyes. He suddenly looked very weary, and his hand went to his stomach as it grumbled loudly.

Boyd took Stanztrigger gently by the arm. The sleeve was wet with blood, and the Moreau recoiled immediately, wincing as a hiss of air escaped his gritted teeth. "You okay?" Boyd asked.

"We'll be there very soon," the Moreau said, changing the subject. "You need to be ready. The lift is located on the periphery of the hangar." He looked away, as if embarrassed. "The Calci may be converging on my men in the hangar waiting to attack the *Troika*. They may be upon us before we draw breath."

"We'll cope." Boyd said "We'll be off this ship in five minutes flat. Trust me."

"You, young lady, will need this." Stanztrigger turned back and offered Tatiana a small pistol from a holster nestled in the small of his back.

Tatiana shook her head. "No. I can't. Uncle doesn't approve."

Stanztrigger's look was quizzical. "'Doesn't approve'?"

"Her uncle had some sort of epiphany years ago, fighting against the Theocracy," Boyd said. "He forsook guns, and now he insists Tatiana and her sister don't use them either."

"Epiphany? Fighting the Theocracy?" Stanztrigger put the gun away. "He sounds like a man of principle. I like him already."

"He has his moments." Boyd's tone was dry, and it earned him a reproachful glance from Tatiana.

"Can either of you fly a Hammer?" Stanztrigger asked.

"I may be able to," Boyd said. "Been a while, but..."

"And you?"

"Sure. How hard can it be," Tatiana said with a shrug and a wan smile.

"Won't you be flying it?" Boyd asked Stanztrigger.

"I'm not coming."

"What the Hell? Why? Are you crazy?"

Stanztrigger gripped the cuff on his sleeve, rolling it back to expose a vicious wound on his forearm. The skin was green and festering, the blood a deep, clotted purple. Boyd looked at the wound, and then into the Moreau's face.

“Oh, Christ...”

“I was bitten when we were ambushed in sick-bay. I’m fighting it, but even now I can feel the poison inside me. I don’t know how long I can hang on.”

“Isn’t there something we can do?” Tatiana said. “Back on the *Troika*? Maybe Dolly can—”

“No. There is nothing to be done.” He looked at them, and smiled. “And I am glad.”

Boyd blinked, stunned. “What?”

“Boyd, I am tired.” Stanztrigger closed his eyes and let his head roll back. “Very tired. It is fifty years since I have slept. I can’t do it anymore. Even my will and my faith can’t defeat this. Crepitus has beaten me. Finally.” He looked at them again, and that familiar fire crept back into his voice, his eyes blazing beneath arched eyebrows. “He has taken my crew from me. He has taken my ship. With them gone, I have nothing to strive for.” He reached for Boyd, grasping him by the shoulder. “But you, you do. You have Tatiana. You have the *Troika*. Promise me you’ll get back to them, and get this girl to safety.”

Boyd nodded, lost for words. Stanztrigger stepped up to him, bending to whisper in his ear, “and promise me you’ll kill that fucking twat Crepitus.”

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The elevator door opened, and the sound of klaxons, gunfire, screaming, shouting, thunder, and the throb of engines combined to batter Boyd, Stanztrigger and Tatiana.

Then Boyd’s pistol joined the cacophony. A gaggle of Calci Moreaus were stood in a loose pack with their backs to the lift, firing SMGs. They fell like skittles as Boyd fired successive shots into their skulls, their brains bursting out of exit wounds in their foreheads.

Boyd assessed the situation. Before him lay the hangar. Three stories high, its octagonal walls were grimy and wet. Driving rain speared through the open bay door, the water on the deck shining from the glare of spotlights in the metal ceiling, the bodies of gnawed Moreaus and decapitated Calci breaking the surface of the water. In the centre of the hangar sat a Hammer: a small, armoured gunship with a hammer-headed, dropped nose cockpit, a narrow fuselage sporting wings for canons and rocket pods, and an open ramp to the rear. All around, clutches of Moreaus fired panicked bursts at gaggles of Calci that swamped the hangar, lurching from doorways or holding their ground as they returned fire or dragged their ravaged bodies through the water.

Stanztrigger pointed toward the Hammer as he bent to take two SMGs from the Calci Boyd had dispatched. He threw one to Boyd before snatching up another. “There! Get ab—” His voice was drowned out, a deafening crack of thunder bursting through the hangar as the darkness beyond the hangar doors was eclipsed by pure, brilliant lightning. “Get aboard! You have four minutes before the *Tower* goes up. I will draw their fire.”

Boyd looked at Stanztrigger. The Moreau showed no sign of fear as he looked back at him. “It’s been an honour,” Boyd said, extending an open hand.

“Likewise.” Stanztrigger’s grip was firm. Even after they had shaken hands, however, he retained his grip on Boyd’s hand, pulling him close to whisper in his ear, “And, Boyd? Get to a doctor. You’re very sick.”

“What do you me—” It was too late, with a bellow of “I! Am! *Stanztrigger!*”, the Moreau was away, sprinting toward the Hammer as he fired his two SMGs simultaneously, targeting two groups of Calci.

“Tatiana!” Boyd shouted over the sound of gunfire. “Let’s go!” He beckoned her to him, and she obeyed, leaning heavily on his chest. Wrapping her arms about his back, she hauled her legs up, tucking them against his belly. Untroubled by this extra load, Boyd sprinted after Stanztrigger.

A crackle of gunfire scratched at the air, and Stanztrigger went down, twisting and arching his back as bullets thudded into him. He fell headlong into the dirty water, dropping his SMGs and groping at his back as smoke spiralled from his shredded flak-vest.

“Shit!” Boyd sprang forward, sighting the Calci who had shot Stanztrigger and gunning them down. Reaching the fallen Moreau, Boyd knelt beside him.

“Leave me,” Stanztrigger managed to say, gasping. He was already drawing another pistol.

Yeah, leave him! We need to get out of here!

“We’re not leaving you, sir.” Tatiana had to raise her voice over the sound of the battle. She paid for it, gasping in pain and messaging her throat once more.

“But—”

“No ‘buts’. She’s right. Wound or no wound, we’re not leaving you. Now get the fuck up and move your arse.”

Stanztrigger’s eyes flashed and his nostrils flared.

“What he said,” Tatiana said.

Boyd? Will you pay attention? The Hammer! It’s lifting off!

He looked toward the gunship. Sure enough, the craft was lifting from the deck, Newton system whining. Its rear ramp was still down, and a starved tiger Moreau tried to clamber onto it, only to be cut down by Calci fire. Falling to the deck, the Moreau lay there, bleeding as it looked to the Hammer. His eyes were wide as he reached for the craft, for salvation, but seconds later Calci descended upon him.

Boyd? Come on! Move!

“Time to go,” Boyd said, springing forward. For all his injuries, Stanztrigger fell in behind him, keeping pace as a trail of blood flourished in his wake.

They circled the Hammer and bore down on its rear ramp. It was only at shoulder height. Boyd cast aside his SMG and, with a heave, lifted Tatiana onto the ramp before hoisting himself up. Reaching back, he grasped Stanztrigger’s wrist and hauled him aboard. Bullets ricocheted off the ramp and the metal about them, and Boyd saw a unit of Calci approaching the Hammer, firing as they went.

“Get to the cockpit,” Stanztrigger shouted as he turned to return fire, ignoring the bullets that scythed passed them, “and get us out of here.”

Boyd looked over his shoulder. The interior of the Hammer was lined with benches with empty lockers above them, doors flapping open. It was lit by weak, orange lights, and it stank of oil and urine. From his vantage point, he could see a Calci in bloodied Theocracy fatigues leaning over the pilot, feasting on his neck. Blood was spraying onto the canopy, and the pilot's boots beat against the bloodied plexiglass as he thrashed and howled. There was something about that Calci kit that Boyd had seen before.

"Princess? You're flying."

"What about that Calci?"

Upon hearing them, the Calci turned to glare at Boyd and Tatiana.

"I'll take care of him, Princess." Now Boyd knew where he'd seen this one before. The wolf Moreau who'd taken Tatiana from the *Troika*. The one driving the Dogfish who'd tried to cut him down with a machine gun. Now, however, he was empty handed, but his wolfen face was twisted and snarling, the fur about his mouth lost beneath a sea of foaming blood. His eyes were bloodshot and wide, and his clawed hands dripped with gore. Panting, his green tongue flopped from behind his teeth, licking about his chops in a wide arc. Only this lupine Calci stood between them and control of the Hammer. "Right, y'bastard," Boyd said, fists clenched as he moved forwards, "bring out your dead."

A sound somewhere between a snarl and a howl bubbled out of the Calci as it leapt. Flying through the air, its gaping maw bore down on Boyd's neck only for him to swat the creature from the air with a thunderous left hook to the chin.

The Calci hit the deck, rolled, and sprang back up. It butted Boyd in his solar plexus with the hard bone of its forehead, driving the breath from him. He staggered back against the bulkhead, falling onto his arse. Clutching the bench there, he began to rise to his feet, only to see the Calci bearing down in him once more.

Twisting, Boyd took hold of a metal door from the lockers above the bench, ripping it from its hinges. As the Calci leapt for him once again, Boyd clubbed it across the face with the metal door, blood and teeth flying from its head. The Calci fell onto its back, mouth hung open whilst its tongue flopped from its mouth and its limbs went limp.

That's it! Finish him! Finish him!

Boyd moved in for the kill, casting the door aside. He reached the Calci. Time for this fucker to die, he concluded.

The creature had other ideas, foot lashing out to strike Boyd in the knee. He shouted in pain and fell forward. The Calci rolled out of the way, and Boyd struck the deck, face down, clutching his knee. He rolled onto his back, only for his opponent to straddle his chest. With a glint of its bloodied teeth, its jaw snapped shut on his shoulder, teeth tearing through cloth, skin and muscle with savage ease. He howled as blood spouted from the wound, filling the ghoul's mouth.

No! Boyd! No! Please! You can't die here! We can't die here!

Breathing shallow, losing feeling in his extremities, Boyd lay there, the Calci teeth in his shoulder. He could hear Stanztrigger firing. He could hear the pitch of the Hammer's engines change as Tatiana took control. He could hear the *Tower's* klaxons. The space between their shrieks was almost a continual wail. They were almost out of time.

Then, out of the darkness, a new sensation. A sweet, zesty smell that spelt the tingle of citrus on the tongue and the sting of juice in bitten fingertips. Satsumas. Satsumas ... and something else. Pine.

The Calci's jaws slackened, then the teeth left Boyd's shoulder. With the last, fading ebb of his consciousness, Boyd lifted his head as the rent muscles in his neck flared in pain. With a slack mouth, limp limbs and a glazed eye, the Calci sat up, falling onto its haunches with its hands in its lap.

The gun! Go for its gun!

Half blind and guided by instinct, Boyd reached for the Calci's belt, and the pistol stuffed inside. Fingers weak and hands trembling, he took it and, with his sight failing, he emptied the weapon into the Calci's head. Its body flopped backward, slumping to the deck with only the name on its parka—Chaff—to identify it.

Don't say I never do anything for you.

Satsumas and pine. Already Boyd's strength was coming back and his senses clearing. With jerky movements, he touched his face. It was tacky, with a thick, sticky film on his skin. Looking at his finger tips he saw a clear, thick solution that glistened in the artificial light. He'd seen that sheen before.

Back on Parlour. Back in the library. Back in *her* library.

"Portia?" he said, his voice an incredulous whisper.

The gentle laugh oozed about his head.

#

The *Tower's* death-throws began below the water-line. Engineering went up first, the hydrogen powered reactors achieving critical mass and taking out the bottom of the ship in an explosive furore. As the explosion decimated the bottom of the tower, as the water in the lagoon flared orange and white below the murky water, as chunks of the ship's hide erupted from the surface and lanced into the air, the *Tower* began to topple.

A second explosion was barely contained beneath the water, its report muffled by the lagoon. As the remains of the *Tower* then plummeted into the water, it cracked and vanished in a sphere of fire and shattered metal that lit the island in a brief, fierce flash, only for the flaming debris to be swallowed by leaping, hissing water as the wreckage plummeted to the bottom of the lagoon. The boom and concussion of the explosion tore across the island, shredding the quaking trees and throwing the ash on the ground into a choking wave.

This wave of ash swept out over the beach, consuming the *Troika*. In the cutter's flight-deck, Katarina turned away from the ash that burst through the smashed canopy, enveloping her as she squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in the nape of her arms, coughing.

The wave of debris began to settle almost as quickly as it had devoured the island, and the coughing Katarina grasped the mic of her comm set once more. "Come in Boyd. Do you copy, over? Come in, Boyd. Do you read me, over?"

Her voice was trembling, and so was she. Up to her waist in water, she was so cold she had begun to lose the feeling in her legs. Her hands shook violently, and her lower lip bled as she chewed it.

She paused, looking out over the beach. A haze of ash hung over the beach, bleaching out colour and muffling the sound of the howling wind, of the thunder, and of the deep throb of colossal engines that made her teeth vibrate. Looking up, looking over the pall of ash, she could see the black clouds that hid the sky parting as a white, jaded mass began to emerge. “Boyd, please. Are you there?” Her tiny voice was almost lost in the dim. “Boyd? Tatiana?”

Finally the clouds dissipated, consumed by intakes, vents and docking bays that punctuated a vast expanse of bone—crafted into the underbelly of a starship—which blotted out the sky. It was scarred and cracked, and fires burnt within its dreadful mass. Spotlights lanced from the ship’s underbelly, sweeping the cowering island beneath, and troopships—those all too familiar troopships built to look like sheep skulls—began to pour from its hangars and docking bays.

“Is anybody there?” Katarina asked in despair as she stared as the apparition in the sky. Where was Ivan? Vast? Stalin? They’d been here when she’d regained consciousness. They’d promised her they’d be back, and then they’d vanished into the *Troika*, muttering about ‘repairing it’ and instructing her to ‘raise Boyd’. So where were they now? “Please. Is there anybody there? Anybody at all?”

The answer was metronomic and uniform. At first they were a vague outline in the curtain of ash, the impression of the bodies solidifying as they emerged from the haze. Skeletal warriors, row upon row of them, moving with perfect synchronisation and purpose, their bodies boosted by grafts of metal and cybernetic joints, their weapons trained on the *Troika*. Katarina’s shoulders sagged at the sight of them, hands falling into the chill water as her head sank.

It was all over. Crepitus was here, and he had them.

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Bad Blood*