

Hearts and Bones

by Paul L. Mathews

Part One

Five Seconds to Live

Three days since leaving Potter's Field, and only hours after stopping on the planet Ensign for further supplies, the *Troika* was attacked again.

"Where did they come from?" Tatiana asked, her voice raised over the klaxon's tantrum.

"They were hiding in asteroid belt." Ivan vacated the pilot's seat for her and limped to the navigation station. His forehead flushed and damp, he began to strap himself in.

Tatiana strapped herself in also, struggling with the belts as she tried to fly the *Troika* with one hand. She'd been about to bunk down when the gunboats had attacked, and was still in her night clothes—a light, ankle length and amorphous night-shirt. Even so, she began to sweat. She appraised the myriad displays, the only source of illumination in the benighted flight-deck. The TAC read-outs alleviated the darkness, but they had no good news. She looked to her main TAC display. Three contacts, closing fast. Built in the semblance of sheeps' skulls, they were of a design she'd never seen before. As she looked, they each fired a pair of torpedoes.

Great, Tatiana thought. Three bogies and nothing to fight them off with. "Any ideas, Uncle?" She stopped fiddling with the intransigent belts and instead stabbed at her console, deploying a bank of counter-measures.

"We go to light speed," Ivan said as his stiff old fingers moved as quickly as they could over the navigation computer, "and hope they can't follow."

"Co-ordinates?"

"Laid in now, yes?"

"Engaging!" Tatiana reached above her head and stabbed at the bank of switches. She felt the pull at her internal organs as the *Troika*'s graviton drive engaged, and she lost focus briefly as her eyes struggled with the brief, sharp acceleration. Pushed back into her seat, the sweat Ivan had left behind soaked through her night-shirt.

"No good," Ivan said as the compensators finally kicked in. "They have jumped to light speed too."

"Aren't they too small to have graviton drives?"

"There are more things in Heaven and Hell, Tatiana."

Oh, yeah, because quoting damn Shakespeare's really going to help, isn't it? she thought, pulse quickening further as her mind raced. "Any more ideas, Uncle?"

"Just get *Troika* to those co-ordinates." He was trying to sound unruffled and focused, but Tatiana—perhaps for the first time in her life—detected a tremor in his tone, the slightest quiver. "We will take it from there."

#

Ten minutes later, and with the three gun-boats still on its tail, the *Troika* decelerated rapidly, dropping out of light-speed as it arrived on the edge of a gargantuan expanse of ruination and decay. The legacy of an apocalyptic space battle, this lamentation of wrecked capital ships stretched hundreds of kilometres before the *Troika*. Beyond it all lay a small system of five planets and a red, shifting nebula.

“Is this it, Uncle?” Tatiana said, perplexed. Was this his plan? Had he brought them here to be buried with all the other dead ships?

“This is it, Tatiana, the Elephant’s Graveyard,” Ivan said. He cracked the knuckles on his massive hands as he surveyed his display, and Tatiana thought a seam of strength had returned to his voice. “Now, take us in.”

“You’re the boss,” she muttered, head lowering as her eyes narrowed and her fingers flexed on the *Troika*’s yoke.

#

Thrusters propelling it at an insane speed, the *Troika* dove into the mass of mutilated ships. Theocracy vessels, the bigger ones were built along vertical axis, like monoliths, and had once been majestic, imposing towers of brass and genocidal potential—but now they were little more than blackened, bent derelicts. Swooping port and starboard, the *Troika* danced between these warped corpses. It swept passed burnt out destroyers, it blasted by the icy wrecks of fighters, dove between the smashed remains of battleships, and thundered through the disembowelled carcasses of frigates. Behind it, every bit as fast and every bit as agile, the gun-boats still hounded it, firing torpedo after torpedo. Most were confused by the *Troika*’s counter-measures, detonating as they neared them, but some pressed on, refusing to take the bait and bearing down on the *Troika*. One had already detonated so close as to punch a hole in the *Troika*’s armoured skin and damage the graviton drives. Now four more torpedoes were closing fast.

#

“Five seconds, Tatiana!” Uncle Ivan shouted. She could barely hear him over the shrieking alarms and wailing klaxons. “Five seconds to impact!”

Tatiana looked at the monitor as it betrayed the four pursuing torpedoes “I see them!” She winced, wrist still hurting from her crash on Parlour. Her palms were sweating, and perspiration ran down her face and from her armpits. She took a deep, calming breath and gripped the yoke hard, the knuckles of her hand white as she forced the *Troika* into a downward trajectory, accelerating.

Torpedoes closing fast, the *Troika* hurtled toward the darkness brooding within a dead battleship’s open hangar. Reaching the threshold of the hangar, the *Troika*’s retros flared into life, and the corvette began a violent deceleration as it entered. Moments later the torpedoes pursued it, swallowed by the darkness within.

The resulting explosion tore the top off the battleship and split what was left of the vessel in two. The fireball was fierce, but it was brief, subsumed by the vacuum. Out of its dying bosom burst the *Troika*, reversing at a dizzying speed. Just as the torpedoes had overshot their target, now did the *Troika* shoot past the gun-boats before sweeping into a turn and firing up its thrusters again. Behind, the pursuing vessels decelerated and jiggled to avoid the spinning debris from the dead battleship before adjusting course and heading after their target once again.

“My God, Tatiana!” Ivan’s voice was strained, and Tatiana was fairly sure his face would be every bit as pale.

“Sorry, Uncle,” she said, meekly. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” She surveyed the TAC display, taking in the mess and confusion of the dead ships. She had to do something. She couldn’t keep this up. They’d been lucky so far, but... “Did you say you had a plan, Uncle?” No response. “*Uncle?*”

She glanced over her shoulder at him. He was ashen, and the thought that even her brave, implacable Uncle Ivan was worried made Tatiana feel even worse. “There!” he said, his statement coinciding with a *ping!* as a new display burst into life on her TAC screen. It was a three dimensional representation of the chaotic graveyard laid out in green, and what looked like a small planetoid glowed red in the centre. “Take us there!” Ivan said. “Take us to centre.”

“Then what?!”

“We shake them off and then go to light-speed again.”

“Go? Go where?”

“Am working on it.”

“Can you work faster?”

“No, I cannot.”

Tearing her attention away from the TAC display, she risked another quick glance over her shoulder. He was hunched over the navigation console, carefully plotting a series of co-ordinates.

“Well-plotted course is essential,” he said. “To activate graviton drives and pass too close to a sun, or hit a planet, m-fray, or gravitational distortion could destroy ship.”

“I know that—”

Ivan ignored her and grasped the mic on his headset “Boyd? Katarina? Can you hear me?”

#

Katarina and Boyd were in the cramped, low confines of the graviton bay, klaxons bludgeoning the air and making Katarina’s ears hurt. All about them was the flashing red of alarms, the orange and yellow of sparks, and the oily blue of smoke and Boyd’s vociferous cursing. The air smelt of burning rubber and melting plastic—and it tasted just as bad.

The heat made Katarina sweat profusely whilst she crouched and tried to jury-rig a new conduit between the bay’s muon catalyst generator—a hulking, cylindrical affair that dominated the bay—and the hydrogen banks. A whole bank of these conduits had ruptured. She didn’t know a great deal about engineering, but she knew the muon converter wouldn’t work without hydrogen—and that meant no graviton drives.

She’d been about to bunk down when the gunboats had attacked, and even now she was still in her night clothes—a baggy, stripped sweater and men’s boxer-shorts. Bare feet and hands cut from the shards of metal that littered the bay, her teeth were bared and eyes wide in a combination of pain and anger.

For God’s sake! she thought as she tried to batter a bent conduit back into shape with a hammer with all the finesse of a charging elephant. Why can’t we go somewhere without someone trying to *kill* us?

“Boyd? Are you there?” Ivan’s distorted voice stabbed at her through her headset.

“I’m here, Ivan.” Boyd answered, tack-welding a new conduit in place, face shielded behind a safety mask.

“We need those drives!”

Katarina suddenly thought how much his distorted voice matched her perception of Ivan—warped, angry and threatening. Or at least the Ivan he *used* to be.

“I’m doing my best, man.” Boyd’s voice sounded muffled and angry behind the mask. She looked at him. His hands were shaking. “If you hadn’t dragged us even further into the bloody Pagentorns it wouldn’t be a fu—”

“You will keep mouth shut and do your job, Boyd,” Ivan snapped, voice raised and serrated with an electronic distortion. “Get those drives repaired. Ivan out.”

#

The *Troika* sped on, hurtling toward the centre of the graveyard.

“Christ on a bloody bike,” Tatiana yelled, mimicking Boyd. “Look at the size of that thing!”

She’d been wrong. It wasn’t a planetoid on the TAC screen—it was the corpse of a vessel so massive it boggled Tatiana’s mind. It lay rotting at the epicentre of the conflagration, besieged by the ghosts of the smashed vessels around it. The semi-spherical front of the ship was smooth, polished and white like a gigantic pebble, but this seemingly delicate façade dove-tailed into the vessels rear: an ugly confusion of metal, maser banks, torpedo bays, mass-drivers, empty javelin pods, and spent pulse spheres.

“It is Jaroth Pha dreadnought,” Ivan shouted over the klaxons. “It was attacked here years ago.”

“A Jaroth Pha dreadnought?” she paused. “Wait a minute. Did you say this was the Elephants Graveyard, Uncle?” She’d heard stories about this place—the legacy of a Jaroth Pha flagship’s last stand against a Theocracy fleet “I remember father mentioning this place. That, and a name... Tusk?”

“Never mind that, Tatiana—just get inside the dreadnought. We can lose these ships inside it and then get away once the graviton drive is back—”

He was cut off as yet another alarm bleated. The gun-boats were gaining—and quickly.

Tatiana looked at her display, and cursed gently under her breath. They were going to be all over them any second now...

#

Katarina paused before answering. “Vast?” she said. “I think she’s reloading the counter-measures on deck three. Why?”

“Get to the hanger, Kat,” Tatiana said over the ‘net, voice edged and sharp. “Meet her there.”

“Vast? The hangar?” Katarina said. “That doesn’t make sense. An’ who made you boss, anyway!?”

“Not now, Kat—just go!”

#

The *Troika* convulsed as Tatiana tortured it, putting it through a spiralling barrel roll as she hurled it along the cylindrical body of a decayed troopship. Behind the vessel, vortices of ice left a trail that circled the dead ship like ribbon on a may-pole.

#

“It’s no use! I can’t shake them!” Tatiana manhandled the ship in to a tight bank, but still the three contacts shadowed them on her TAC. “Damn it, Uncle—who *are* these people?”

“They are Calci,” Ivan said, voice heavy and strained, “and I had hoped you would never meet them.”

She pulled back hard on the yoke, steering the *Troika* up and into a yawning hole in a gutted destroyer before emerging from a similar hole on the other side of the eviscerated cadaver. She looked to her monitors, and allowed herself a brief, rare smile. These “Calci”, in their gun-boats, had overshot the wound through which the *Troika* had threaded, and were having to slow and double-back.

Buy us a minute, she thought as she altered course and slammed the throttle forward, driving headlong for the dreadnought.

#

“I’m in the hangar, Tat,” Katarina said.

She’d only just reached the hangar, bleeding feet rendered numb from the *Troika*’s cold deck. The lights were on and Vast was already there, punching the combination into the *Old Bitch*’s door-lock. The *Troika*’s three shuttles were secured to the deck. Even now the *Old Bitch* seemed to glare at Katarina, as if it still resented her for putting her through hell on Parlour. As she crossed the hangar Katarina tried to ignore the memory of the Witch’s dragons moving across that deck toward her and Matinee.

“Three shuttles, Kat,” Tatiana said over the ‘net. “That’s one more than we need.”

What is she talking about? Katarina thought as she leant back against a bulkhead and raised one foot to massage it with cut, bloodied fingers. Her brow furrowed. “What? I don’t understand?”

“You will. Vast knows what to do. Be ready.”

#

“Tatiana! No!” Tatiana had never heard such obvious fear and alarm in Ivan’s voice before, but she pushed on regardless.

The *Troika* dove into an aperture on the side of the Jaroth Pha dreadnought so small the Russian corvette barely fit into it. Beyond this aperture lurked some sort of tunnel—an exhaust, Tatiana guessed—so narrow that the sides of the *Troika* vomited sparks and slivers of armoured hide as its hull glanced against the blackened, claustrophobic walls. Her TAC told her it ran for a hundred kilometres, at least, with other such tunnels branching off. Her TAC also told her the Calci gun-boats had followed, rushing headlong after their prey. Now their torpedoes were exhausted, and instead they were stabbing at their quarry with maser beams.

“We’ve taken damage!”

“I know, Uncle! I know!” She made a rushed appraisal of a secondary TAC screen, and leant hard on the yoke as she throttled back. The *Troika* pitched up and to the side as it left this tunnel and darted into another.

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The yaw was so violent that even the Newton compensators struggled to hold Katarina and Vast in place as they sat at the shuttle's controls

"Tat! For God's sake!" Katarina yelled as she felt her stomach vault into her throat and her whole body vibrate. Helping the silent, inscrutable Vast prep the shuttle, she had to stop, hands grabbing at the control console.

"Sorry!" Tatiana said over the 'net. "Better hold on, Kat. We're in for a rough ride!"

#

"What kind of idiot designs an exhaust system like this?" Tatiana muttered under her breath as she wrestled with the controls. Her TAC display revealed a twisting convolution of intersecting exhausts. She pushed the *Troika* to a speed her instinct described as 'stupid'.

The undulations of the exhaust, and the Calci's reticence to match the *Troika*'s speed, meant the pursuing vessels were presented few opportunities to target their masers on the Valentines' ship. Their wild, continual fire chewed white hot chunks out of the exhaust walls that showered the *Troika* in tiny, molten meteorites.

Tatiana looked sideways at the engineering read-out. "Ivan! Thrusters two and five are down! We've got breaches on decks C, D and E." She punched at her controls to bring up a further read-out. "Counter-measures down. Life support and scanning systems at critical." She pitched the *Troika* into a new tunnel, barely avoiding a volley of maser beams. "One more hit, Uncle, and it's all over."

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"We're ready, Tat! The engines are primed, the auto-pilot's active, and the proximity detector's in place." Despite the numbness in her extremities, Katarina allowed herself a grim smile as—jumping out of the shuttle—she looked toward the hangar doors.

They were open now, and beyond the hangar's AEGIS shield, she could see the tunnel walls as they hurtled by. A brazen trail of sparks and bits of the *Troika*—so hot as to be almost translucent—span away in the corvette's wake.

The pursuing gun-boats were still there, spitting at them.

"Do it, Kat!" Tatiana said, her voice urgent and strained. "Do it now!"

#

Ivan's discarded shuttle sped toward the Calci, automatic pilot zeroing in. One of the gun-boats veered to avoid collision, impacting against the exhaust wall and vanishing in a silent white rose of fire and rent metal. The remaining pair split up like a pair of foxes, going to either side, only to be consumed in an explosive fury as the shuttle's proximity detector triggered its self-destruct.

What was left of the two Calci gun-boats span out of this brief, explosive flourish, only to smash into the exhaust walls, breaking up instantaneously.

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"Ha! In your face!" Katarina shouted, raising her index finger as she looked back at the spinning, twisted remnants of the gun-boats ricocheting off the tunnel behind. She span on her feet and gave the grinning Vast a high-five.

“We did, it, Tatiana!” she shouted over her mike as she messaged her aching wrist. “We *did* it!”

#

“What is she doing, Tatiana! That was our best shuttle! She should have used *Old Bitch!*”

“Not now, Ivan.” Tatiana didn’t even have time to reflect on the boldness of her reply. She’d never spoken to him like that before. “What’s on the long-range scanner?” she said, focusing on more pressing matters. “Are there anymore of these ‘Calci’ out there?”

“Yes. Four more contacts. They look like troop-carriers.” He turned to her, eyes lost in shadow. “They are closing on graveyard.

“We’re not out of this yet.”

Part Two

Zombie

Twenty years before the ambush, Ivan had stood in the biggest hangar deck he had ever seen. All about him was chaos. Alarms sounded. Soldiers, pilots and mechanics shouted as they rushed to and fro. Service vehicles ranging from tiny buggies to cherry pickers and hefty wagons criss-crossed the bay, yellow lights flashing and horns beeping. Phalanx after phalanx of wardroids marched by, the whine of their servos almost nasal and plaintive. Flat-beds laden with torpedoes and ECMs were carefully escorted to their new homes. In what few areas of tranquillity they could find, men whispered prayers and crossed themselves as the word spread: The Theocracy was coming.

“Very good,” Ivan said to the tall, thin soldier beside him. Both were dressed in the red and black flight-suits marked with the insignia of the Omega Hammers. “Get back to *Siberian Winter* and get Pavlo’s unit aboard.”

“I remember,” the soldier said, citing the company motto. His sallow, emaciated face was implacable and cold.

“And Yevgeny,” Ivan said, voice heavy as he raised an eyebrow and wagged a finger at the soldier, “we leave when *I* say, not before.”

Yevgeny saluted and turned on his heel, walking away. Ivan watched him head toward the ships. The hangar was so big that the three sister ships *Troika*, *Siberian Winter* and *Kronstadt* fit in it with ease, along with a larger fleet of mercenary troopships, supply vessels and escorts. All sat on the deck, poised and alert as engineers scabbled about them, torpedoes loaded and crew boarded. From here Ivan could see the robot Pavlo V and his unit of cyborg dogs boarding the *Winter*, Crimea at the head of the pack, Stalin lagging behind. The *Old Bitch* was being wheeled into the *Troika*’s hangar and Doll Zero was loading the bodies of the men they’d lost on *Shadow* onto the *Kronstadt*. The deck about the ships was a hazardous mess of generators, runner droids and cables, and the air about it throbbed with idling engines and the strong, insistent sound of hydraulics.

Above this melee were the ships that had already been loaded and prepped, suspended above by magnetic clamps and metal cable. He could see the *Mercy Seat*—Skullion’s black, sleek medical frigate—and he pictured Thom drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair,

impatient and nervous. Above these ships, the hangar ceiling was lost behind a multitude of spotlights that illuminated this fleet of thirty-seven mercenary vessels.

“Ivan!”

He turned to see his sister striding toward him. Every bit as tall as her brothers, she was every inch the soldier in her fatigues, body armour, long coat and *ushanka*.

“Vassilissa,” he said, nodding toward her. “Shouldn’t you be aboard *Kronstadt*?”

“I was,” she said, her handsome, masculine face clouded and furrowed with displeasure. She stood, hands on her hips, the leather of her gloves creaking. “But Gregor sent me to get you. He’s been trying to reach you but you’ve turned off your comm. Why?”

“Because I will not let Gregor tell me when we leave,” Ivan said. By now they had made eye contact, and the same old staring match began. “We leave when *I* am ready, not before.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but paused as an alarm sounded, signifying the opening of the main hangar door. As it opened it exposed the green shimmer of the AEGIS shield, and, beyond that, deep space. Five planets hung in the vacuum, framed by the twisting red of the Theodore nebula, and a tiny, weak sun sulking in the centre of this small, back water system.

“Well, what is there to wait for?” Vassilissa said once the noise had abated and the bay-doors were fully open. “The fleet is nearly ready, and then we can leave. Why wait? The Theocracy will be here in an hour, at the most.”

“We go,” Ivan said, sight still locked onto hers, “when I have said goodbye to Tusk.”

“Said goodbye to Tusk?” she said, turning her hands to the heavens. “Why?”

“He is my friend.”

“It’s a good job you have turned off your comm,” she said, the tone and curl of her lip dismissive, “because Gregor would tear you a new arsehole if he knew the reason you’re stalling...”

Ivan blanched and looked away. Vassilissa did not, however, get the chance to crow about this small victory.

Footsteps booming, the sea of chaos parting before them, three Jaroth Pha naval officers marched toward them. Known across the galaxy as ‘Space Pachyderms’, the Jaroth Pha were hulking, grey skinned quadrupeds with big ears, prehensile trunks, fearsome tusks, and eyes like black-holes. Encased in their thick, chunky space-suits, they were often dismissed as a comical race—until they were engaged in combat.

The leader of the three reached Ivan, who saluted. Vassilissa, however, merely stared, over-awed.

“India,” Ivan said. No human could pronounce the creature’s real name, so this alias had to do, “I had hoped to see Tusk.”

“I am afraid the captain is very busy preparing to engage the Theocracy, Master Ivan.” A Jaroth Pha’s voice was so deep it would make a human’s ears bleed, thus India’s words were related by a speaker set in his suit’s chest. “He extends his best wishes to you, and hopes you have a pleasant journey.”

“But, Tusk—”

“Will always be your friend, Master Ivan, and, as such, he asks that you do not waste your time—and our sacrifice.” India’s two comrades moved to flank Ivan and Vassilissa, and they

found themselves in a staring contest they were never going to win. The pachyderms began to pointedly nudge the two humans with their trunks. “The Theocracy will be here soon, and you will need all the time we can buy to regroup at Ferroc Boon. You must go. Now.”

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Twenty years later, and Tatiana eased the *Troika* down a tunnel deep within the mammoth Jaroth Pha dreadnought. Her brow was furrowed as she peered at the TAC display.

This doesn’t make sense, she thought, turning her head slightly to address Ivan. “Uncle? I don’t understand. Shouldn’t these exhausts lead to some sort of engine? All my display shows is some sort of chamber. A big one.”

“They are not exhausts, Tatiana,” Ivan said. He was still sat at the navigation station, but now his head was in his hands, and his eyes were closed. His TAC showed the Calci vessels bearing down on the wreck of the dreadnought.

“Then what are they?”

“You will see, yes?”

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Finally the *Troika* reached the end of the supposed exhaust, which ended in an abrupt downward turn. Tatiana duly guided the corvette through the resulting aperture, the *Troika* descending, nose level and steady, into the cavernous chamber below.

It was pitch black. Hovering in the chamber, the *Troika*’s spotlights burst into life, and the darkness fled, leaving its secrets behind.

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Tatiana’s jaw dropped. Speechless, she could only sit and stare out of the flight-deck’s canopy. Her Uncle moved to stand behind her chair, ducking down to afford a better view of the panorama before them.

“Welcome, Tatiana,” he said as he placed a hand on her shoulder, “to *real* Elephants’ Graveyard.”

The chamber was immense, its metallic, ribbed walls honey-combed with tunnels. The deck was lost beneath the huge skeletons of countless Jaroth Pha. Tatiana had read about these creatures. She’d thought they were cute when she was a kid. To see the skeletal remains of so many of these graceful creatures was a shock.

“Did they...?” She stumbled over the words. “What happened here?”

“Some years ago, there was a war in these systems against Theocracy. This ship fought rearguard action against them, buying me and your father time to retreat and regroup.”

“You and father fought here alongside the Jaroth Pha?” Tatiana blurted in disbelief. Her father had never talked about the past.

“And your aunt.”

“We have an aunt?”

“We all fought in war,” Ivan said, ignoring the question, “but we had to leave Tusk and crew behind. They decimated Theocracy fleet—you can see evidence outside—but battle left their ship—*this* ship—crippled and most of crew dead.

“Those left came here to die, Tatiana,” he said, and she thought she saw a sheen on his eyes. “It is their custom, yes? When ship is dead, when there is no hope, they will come to these halls and make peace with God, and with each other.”

“But, those tunnels? They’re for what? Escape pods?”

“No, Tatiana. The Jaroth Pha call them *Pha Doram Lof*—‘The White Gates’. They are for their spirits, that they may begin journey into next life.”

“That’s so…” Tears sprang into her eyes, and her throat contracted. “That’s beautiful.”

“They are beautiful race—spiritual and giving. That they should die out here in cold, so far from home and loved ones…”

“And they’re not going to be the only ones, are they, Ivan?”

Tatiana and her uncle turned to see Boyd as he walked onto the flight-deck, Vast, Stalin and the smug looking Katarina behind him, now wearing baggy cargo pants, heavy boots and a slack, stripy sweater.

A pit opened in Tatiana’s stomach the moment she saw Boyd, and her heart-rate quickened still further.

“Boyd—”

“Are y’happy now, big man?” Boyd said before Ivan could finish the sentence. “Are y’happy now we’re in a corner and we can’t get the fuck out?” He strode up to Ivan and jammed a finger in Ivan’s chest. “Are you happy you stuck to your guns and refused to buy torpedoes? Eh?”

Tatiana looked at Ivan and held her breath. What did Boyd think he was doing? Nobody spoke to Ivan like that!

But there was no explosion from Ivan. No shouting. No violence. Instead he just looked away, shoulders sagging and head going down as he deflated visibly. Tatiana looked at Katarina, and she could see—from the arched eyebrows and the slight parting of her mouth—that her sister was just as shocked.

“So what are we gonna do?” Katarina said. “How are we gonna get out of here?”

Boyd turned away from Ivan as the big Russian sat down. “Well,” Boyd said to Katarina as he avoided making eye-contact with Tatiana, “first we need to get the graviton system online, so if we do manage to get passed the Calci—”

Stalin trotted to Ivan’s side. “But, Boyd, have you seen the TAC?” he said as—looking up at the station’s TAC display—he stood on his hinds legs and rested his front paws on the navigation console. “There are more of those things out there.” The quiver in his voice, the arching of his eyebrows and nervous twitching of his tail betrayed his fear.

“He’s right, Boyd,” Tatiana said. “How do we get past them?”

Tatiana’s heart was in her mouth as she turned to Boyd. He’d been avoiding her ever since they’d left Potter’s Field. This time he couldn’t ignore her—unless he really was the ignorant peasant Ivan thought he was.

He looked at her, and she was sure he blushed slightly. She smiled, but his expression remained dour and heavy. “I don’t know, Princess. I’m making this up as I go along.”

“Oh. Great,” Katarina said, looking to the heavens. “No weapons, no leadership—”

“Hey, back off Kat.” Tatiana scowled at her sister. “If you’re so damned clever—”

Boyd raised a hand. “Okay, that’s enough. Arguing won’t help.”

“Um...I think they’ve reached the dreadnought,” Stalin said.

Tatiana looked at him. He’d be running around in small circles soon, unless she missed her guess.

“I’m launching the *Stasi*,” Boyd said as he moved to the Troika’s tactical station, tapping at a series of buttons.

“*Stasi*?” Tatiana said. “What are they?”

“Flying cameras, remotely operated,” Boyd said quietly without looking at her. A series of pings for the console signified the departure of the cameras. “I’ve only ever heard of these ‘Calci’. I want to see exactly what they are...”

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Approaching the dreadnought from four different angles, the Calci troopships, also shaped like sheep skulls, backed onto the dreadnought’s hide. Muted by the utter silence of space, umbilical boarding-telescopes extended from the rear of the ships, docking collars locking onto the dreadnought’s *Doram Lof*.

Collars in place, their iris valve airlocks began to open, the darkness of *Pha Doram Lof* pierced by expanding shafts of red light from within.

Within moments, the valves were open, and from each of these infernal gates of hellish red emerged a solitary figure.

Moving in a metronomic uniformity, they were cybernetically boosted skeletons. Their limbs were reinforced with armoured plating and pins that stood proud from pitted bone, and their brains—kept alive by immoral technology and darker witchcraft.—were cosseted in basins within their armoured skulls.

Moving a small distance from their vessel, held to the deck by portable, anti-gravity Newton systems in their cybernetic spines, the four Calci stood, the black, empty sockets of their skulls staring into the darkness of *Pha Doram Lof*

Moments later, the tiny *Stasi* cameras arrived, hovering above the skeletons.

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“That’s it?” Stalin said as they all stared at the pictures relayed from the cameras. “Four piles of bones? I could eat them for break—”

“Shut up, Stalin,” Boyd said. “Look!”

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In perfect syncopation, the four Calci raised an arm, each pointing a bony finger into the darkness.

On cue, the truth spilt from the troopships like an exodus from Hell.

Partially concealed in *Pha Doram Lof*’s darkness, silhouetted red by the troop-ships’ internal lights, this black tide poured from their crafts. They lurched forth in waves, an undulating, haphazard sea of bent limbs and dragged feet.

#

“There must be hundreds of them!” Stalin said. Sure enough, he began to run in small circles, tongue flopping out of his mouth as his voice reached whole new levels of nasal whininess. “That’s it. They’re coming. We’re going to die!”

“Stalin, shut up!” Boyd leaned forward, focusing on one the *Stasi*’s footage. “I need a better look,” he said.

“No, Boyd, you do not,” Ivan said in a quiet voice. “Please, Boyd, do not do this.”

They all stopped to look at him. Sat at the navigation station, seat turned away from its instruments, his legs were parted and his elbows rested on his knees as his head slumped down and forward. He stared at the deck. His commands had no weight and no gravitas. He was, Tatiana reflected, like some sort of ghost.

“I’m taking a closer look,” Boyd said as he tapped at the console. Immediately the *Stasi* zoomed in, and the truth of the *Troika*’s situation became clear.

Tatiana had to stifle a scream, hand going over her mouth as her eyes loaded with tears.

“Oh...Oh my...” Boyd said as the colour drained from his face. “Oh fuck.”

“I warned you,” Ivan said, looking up at Boyd.

They all fell into silence, and Katarina—looking as though she were about to faint—had to lean against a bulkhead. They all fell into silence as they watched themselves on the TAC screens.

From Tatiana to Katarina, from Ivan to Boyd, countless variations of their reanimated corpses lurched across the flickering screen. All were different, but each horrifically familiar. Some were old, some were young, some were wounded or mutilated, others were outwardly unharmed, but all were dead, mouths open and listless, eyes dull and lifeless. Tatiana could make out a young Boyd with his neck snapped, the head flopping about across his shoulder. Beside him there was a frail, elderly Katarina, skin aged and breasts sagging from her withered frame. She saw another Boyd with his throat cut, and a youngster she thought looked like Ivan with a hole blown in the back of his skull. She could even make out a variety of Stalins amongst this host, and some unholy composites that featured bits of them all sown together to make sickening amalgamations.

One foot before the other, inexorable and inexplicable, they marched on, moving past their skeletal generals as they headed down *Pha Dorma Lof*. The *Stasi* relayed this ghoulish movement to the crew of the *Troika* just as, in turn, that crew betrayed their horror with mute, frozen fascination.

Part Three

Here They Come

“What *are* those things?” Tatiana whispered as she and the rest of the crew stared at the cadavers on the screen. She hugged herself, skin crawling.

“No one is really sure,” Ivan said, head going into his hands. “Some say they are versions of Crepitus’s victims plucked from across time and infinite paradoxes. Others say they are little more than dead soldiers, scavenged from battlefields and given new faces by Crepitus—”

“Crepitus?” Tatiana’s said, voice thin and tiny.

“He is a technomancer,” Ivan said. “An evil, evil man who toys with the dead through science and black wizardry. Your father and I have fought him before. It is said to be the same for everyone Crepitus fights. Always they must face themselves.”

“Are they... Is part of them, y’know... still alive?” Katarina asked, a shudder in her voice.

“That depends,” Ivan said. “Do you believe in the notion of a soul?”

Katarina didn’t answer, she just looked at the display. Black tears, tainted with mascara, slid down her cheeks as she bit her lip. It soon began to bleed.

“Why isn’t there a Vast in there?” Boyd asked.

“Have you tried to kill Vast?” Ivan said. “Is not easy.”

Silence resumed as they stared at the screens. Was this, Tatiana wondered as her eyes fixed on a cadaver with her face—albeit some thirty years hence—riven with multiple gunshots and covered in blood, their future? Was that what they were looking at? Disturbed, she turned away. “What are we going to do?”

“I,” Ivan said as he turned and hit a swift series of buttons on his console, “am going to do the only thing I can.”

He pushed one last button, and the air in the flight-deck was disturbed by a green holographic distortion. It twisted and pulsed briefly before it settled, and the green shimmering representation of a man stood amongst the startled crew. Old, hairless and bent, he was dressed in a shabby, frayed uniform Tatiana didn’t recognise. He was so thin he reminded the Princess of a skeleton shrink-wrapped in liver-spots.

“So, Ivan,” the hologram said, his voice so thin and jaundiced it cut through Tatiana like the sound of broken, grinding bone, “you’ve run back here, to Tusk, to the friend you left behind? And I thought only dogs returned to their own vomit.”

“Who is this?” Boyd said to Ivan, gesturing at the holograph.

“I am Crepitus, you lack-wit. And you, Ivan, want to beg for your life, I expect.”

“No. Not mine. You can have me, but I want you to spare the others. You don’t need my crew—”

“Yes I do, Ivan.” His cracked lips curled back to reveal blackened teeth festering in ruined gums. “I need to capture them, to mutilate them, whilst you watch, understand? My Calci are coming for you, Ivan, and they’re going to drag you out of that toy spaceship, and they’re going to bring you to me.”

“Aye, you’re the big man talking from the other side of a comms signal, are y’not?” Boyd said. It was his time to sneer. “Why don’t you come down here yourself and we’ll see who mutilates who, you skinny sack of—”

“Oh, you’ll see me soon enough,” Crepitus said, “and then I’ll cut you down to si—” The hologram vanished, the signal cut by Ivan.

“Well, that went well,” Stalin said.

“So, begging didn’t work,” Boyd said, voice dripping with scorn. “Got any other plans, Ivan?”

“If Calci are coming to take us alive they will try to overwhelm *Troika*,” Ivan said in a low, tired voice. “We must hold out as long as possible and try to repair graviton drives. Once they are repaired we may be able to get away.”

“Why is this ‘Crepitus’ even out there, Uncle?” Katarina said. Her eyes were narrowed, and her tone suspicious. “Is this another case of you and Father’s enemies taking it out on us?”

“It doesn’t matter, Katarina,” Boyd said, his interruption earning him a withering glare from Katarina. “Ivan’s right. We’ve got to concentrate on getting away.” He tapped his finger against the mic on his comms headset. “Dolly? You there?”

“Yes, Master Boyd,” Doll Two said, its voice crackling in Tatiana’s headset via the ‘net’s open channel.

“Get to the graviton bay and start work on those relays.”

“Yes, Master Boyd. Doll Two out.”

“What are you going to do?” Tatiana said, stepping up to Boyd. She placed her hand gently on his arm. He didn’t move away. Instead he looked at her, and she tried to read him. A subtle watering of his eyes and the slightest inflection in his eyebrows suggested there was a vulnerability there, a yearning, but then it was quickly smothered as his nostrils flared and his mouth drew thin as if some invisible barrier had fallen between them. But he didn’t draw away, he just looked at her.

What was he fighting, she wondered. What was wrong? “Boyd?”

“Yeah, what are you gonna do? They’re gonna kill us all!”

“Stalin! Shut. Up!” Ivan said, the slightest hint of steel creeping back in into his tone.

“Me and Vast’ll set up firing posts outside and hold the Calci off for as long as we can,” Boyd said as he put his hand over Tatiana’s and squeezed gently.

Tatiana felt flushed and a little light-headed, and fancied a ghost of a smile haunted his dour countenance. “I’ll come with you,” she said.

“You will not.” For all his resignation and fugue, the sudden strength in Ivan’s tone reminded them all of the man he used to be. “It will be dangerous. You must stay here and co-ordinate efforts, yes?”

“I can do that,” Katarina said as she put her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. She stared at them all in turn as they turned to look at her.

“Katarina, my darling,” Ivan said in the kind of tone one uses when one is trying to let a child down gently, “we will need someone alert and—”

“Ex-cuse *me*, Uncle, but it was me that saved these two on Parlour,” Katarina said as she gestured at Boyd and Tatiana, “not the other way ‘round. Not to mention I just killed three Calci gun-ships.”

Ivan looked up at Katarina, and Tatiana saw a flash of the old man there, the slightest fission of annoyance. He wasn’t used to the nieces answering back.

“She has a point, Uncle,” Tatiana said slowly.

“Me and Vast’ll have to use the Maxims, Ivan,” Boyd said. “We’ll need ammunition constantly. Tatiana really would help...”

“No.”

“Yes, Uncle,” Tatiana said. Now it was her turn to put her hands on her hip and stick out her chin.

“It is danger—”

“And waiting here isn’t?” Tatiana said. “What choice do we have? Die, or die fighting? Well, Father wouldn’t die without a fight, and I’m guessing the Uncle Ivan who fought alongside him and Tusk wouldn’t either.”

He looked at her, and she stared back. She saw the fire die in his eyes.

“Very well,” he muttered, his head slumping once more.

#

The *Troika*’s vac-suit prep-station was sterile and white. Brightly lit, the walls were lined with lockers, benches and cabinets containing bulky grey and orange vac-suits and equipment ranging from portable Newton units, beam polarisation distorters and suspensor sleds, to oxygen tanks, scanning arrays and utility packs. The air was cool, and Tatiana recognised the sharp, acrid smell of the cleansing agent Doll Two preferred.

Perhaps it was a betrayal of its military heritage, Tatiana reflected, perhaps it was just an oversight, but the *Troika* only had one such prep-station, and she was forced to get changed with Boyd.

Tatiana ditched her nightshirt and grabbed her vac-suit’s all-over Gagarin stocking as quickly as she could. For a brief moment, as the nightshirt hit the deck and she stepped into the figure-hugging stocking, she was completely naked, and she felt her cheeks burn even as the coolness of the air bit at her skin, raising tingling gooseflesh all over.

As she sat on a bench and pulled the body-stockings over her legs, she watched Boyd. Faced flushed, he was stood with his back to Tatiana as he stripped down to his boxer-shorts, and Tatiana caught herself hoping he was struggling not to avail himself of her nakedness. Part of her—the shy young girl who wanted to be at home playing with dolls—was glad, but the other part—the curious young woman who wanted to be in bed playing with her man—wanted him to look.

But he didn’t. He dutifully ignored her.

“Boyd?” she said in an effort to seize his attention. “Are we going to, y’know... Die?”

He didn’t answer straight away, nor did he turn to face her immediately. He remained stock still for a moment until, shoulders sagging, he exhaled and turned to look at her over his shoulder. His eyes were hooded, and his jaw was set. The same barrier she’d seen on the flight-deck was in place, the same barrier he’d been hiding behind every since they left Potter’s Field.

“Look, Princess, I can’t lie to you. The stories I’ve heard? About these Calci? They might be slow, they might be coming after us with their bare hands, but there’re a lot of them, and there’s probably more on the way...” He looked away again, head sinking still further as he made a pretence of adjusting the wristbands on his stockings. “If Dolly can’t get those engines going, the Calci’ll just wear us down ‘til we run out of ammo and they can rip us apart.”

With that, he fell silent. She looked at him, at his back. Vulnerable and naked in the face of this new enemy, she felt tiny and very, very alone. More than anything she wanted Boyd to take hold of her the way he had on Parlour, and to make her safe. But all he could do was turn his back on her, a slave to whatever fears, whatever reservations, haunted him.

Well, enough was enough. “Oh, Boyd. This,” she said as she stood, stamping her foot and clenching her fist, “is stupid. You’ve been ignoring me ever since we buried Matinee. You know that don’t you?”

He didn't answer, but his expression shifted with the greatest subtlety as she neared him. It became softer, a little less defensive.

"Why, Boyd? Is it something I've *done?* *Said?* Don't you like me anymore? I thought, when you kissed me on Parlour..." Tatiana said as she stepped toward him. "Is it *because* we buried Matinee? Is it because you blame me that she's dead?"

"Oh, Christ, Princess! No!" he said, turning toward her and taking her by the shoulders as he looked at her. She looked back. Suddenly the barrier had gone, and he was earnest and sincere with parted lips and wide, bright eyes. "It's not that at all, Princess. It's not your fault she's dead. I don't blame you. Nobody does..."

"Really?" Tears stung her eyes. God knew she'd waited for someone to say that to her, and for it to be Boyd tasted so sweet. "But I ran away. Left her..."

"And if you hadn't she'd have pushed you away." His head was lowered now as he looked into her eyes. "Because that's what she was paid to do. That's what Vast is paid to do. What I'm paid to do." He looked away. "Die for you."

The breath caught in her throat. "Would you... Would you die—"

"In a heart beat."

Then they were in each others arms as they kissed. With his tongue exploring her mouth and his stubble scratching her chin, she thrilled to the feel of his hands as they moved over her. In one he took hold of her head, hair spilling through his fingers, and with the other he took a firm hold of her buttock. For her part, her fingers moved across his shoulders and back, savouring the contours of his body and the synthetic texture of the Gagarin stocking.

"How... long?" she said with a gasp as his mouth moved to her neck. She could feel his erection against her thigh.

"What?" He paused, as if taken aback by such a forward question.

"Vast. How long until she gets here?"

"Oh. I..." He stopped as his lips moved to her earlobe. "I don't know. She went to the armoury first to grab the guns..."

"Oh, good." Her hands went between them, and she began to unseal his stocking with every intention of stripping him naked, there and then.

Where this was coming from, she didn't know. Maybe it was the fear of what lay outside. Maybe it was the realisation she could die very soon. Maybe it was the lingering image of her dead doppelganger and its reminder of her mortality. Maybe she was just horny. Whatever the case, she wasn't letting this opportunity pass her by.

"If Ivan finds out..." Boyd said, the words muffled and distorted as he ravished her neck.

"He won't."

His laugh was dirty and rough. "Won't find out? Ivan?"

"Who cares anyway?" She'd opened his stocking to his belly, and his chest and part of his shoulders were exposed. Scared and strong, they promised Tatiana stamina and power. "We could be dead soon." She began to open her own stocking, grasping it at the neck and pulling it open, revealing her cleavage and the mole on her breast. "Just hurry up before—"

The door hissed open, and Vast strode in, encumbered with two big Maxims—heavy calibre machine-guns with a bore big enough to puncture plate armour—resting on each shoulder and her torso lost beneath an array of ammunition belts, bandoliers and grenade satchels.

“—Vast gets here.” Tatiana concluded with a sigh.

If Vast was surprised to catch the pair of them in this tryst, she didn't show it. Giving them little more than a cursory glance, she dumped the weapons and other equipment on the deck and went to her locker, opening it to reveal an armoured vac-suit inside.

#

“We're ready, Kat.”

Sat at the tactical station on the flight-deck, Katarina's brow furrowed as she pressed the earphone deeper into the well of her ear. “What? Already? That was quick,” she said as she looked at the TAC screen. It was flooded with contacts marching down *Pha Doram Lof* toward them.

“Aye, because we've never done this before, have we,” Boyd said, and even the distortion of the open channel couldn't hide his sarcasm.

“My bad, Boydy. I forgot you're the experienced hard-man...”

“That's enough, Kat,” Tatiana said over the network. “We're leaving now, setting up these guns. What's the ETA on the Calci?”

“I reckon you've got five minutes, max. And that's not all,” she said as she looked at her display. “Long range scans show another four ships inbound. Too early to say what they are, but I think they might be more Calci ships.”

“How long?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“And what's the environment like out there, Katarina?” Boyd asked.

“Um, if I read these scans right, this dreadnought's so big it seems to have its own micro-climate. Air pressure is twenty kay. Gravity twice Oridian normal. Atmosphere a hydrogen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide mix.”

“And the temperature?”

“Fucking cold.”

“S'like I never left Glasgow, then.”

Katarina laughed, despite herself.

“Um, Kat?” Tatiana said. “Your, um, language..? Is Uncle Ivan still with you?”

Katarina smiled. They both know Ivan hated swearing. “No, he's not here,” she said as she took a packet of cigarettes from her sweater pocket. I bet he'd hate this even more, she thought, smiling as she popped a cigarette in her mouth and withdrew the packet's incumbent lighter.

“He's not there?” Boyd's tone was sharp and alarmed. “What do you mean ‘He's not there’?”

“He's gone.” She paused to light the cigarette, inhaling deeply. “I just turned 'round and he'd left. An' he's taken Stalin with him.”

#

It was a secret room known only to himself and a select few. As the door hissed shut behind him, he took a deep breath.

“Never thought we’d be in here again, Ivan,” Stalin said.

It was the *Troika*’s second prep-station. Smaller than the other, it was darker, lit only by red lights and green TAC displays. It smelt of stale sweat and burnt flesh. It had smelt just the same twenty years ago when Gregor had dragged Ivan’s sorry, bleeding carcass away from the Coven’s ambush on Aguri-Takagi.

Gregor, you bastard, he thought, looking away and closing his eyes. What I wouldn’t give to have you here now...

The walls were lined with vac-suits, only these suits were red, adorned with scared black armour, and flashed with the 14/02, Ω and Я вспоминаю badges of the Omega Hammers. There were also enough guns to fight a war.

“You’re not going to use those? Are you?” Stalin asked, eyeing the weapons.

Ivan looked at them, saying, “Of course not, Stalin.” He began to strip off. His voice was still weary and strained, and his movements lacked snap and purpose. “If God is with us, I won’t need to...”

#

“Right. Opening the ‘lock now. See you soon, Kat.”

Katarina saw a light activate on her console as the airlock opened. Her throat suddenly became tight, and her mouth dry. “Um, Tatiana?” she said.

“Yes?”

“Be careful.” It was hard for Katarina to say. The image of Tatiana letting the Witch live, and the memory of her going to Parlour and nearly getting killed still made Katarina angry, but the realisation they could all die... “Please?”

A pause.

“We will, Kat. We’ll be back, I promise.”

#

The instant the ‘lock opened the drop in temperature was so severe that—heated Gagarin stocking or no—it took Tatiana’s breath away, her hand going to her chest as her gasp reflex almost bent her double.

“Christ on a bike,” Boyd said over the ‘net, voice thin and shallow. He too was slumped, hand going to a handrail on the airlock’s bulkhead to keep himself upright.

“Is this... I’ve never... It’s so cold.”

“You’re right, Princess. This cold: It’s not natural.”

Tatiana didn’t respond, however. She just stared.

The *Troika*’s ramp had already come down, and the area beyond—and immediately around the ship—was illuminated by the lights in the corvette’s under-carriage. All she could see were the skeletal remains of the Jaroth Pha, stretching away into the darkness.

Only now did she fully realise the sheer scale of these creatures, and of the chamber in which they had died. Hulking skulls lay to rest on the deck, easily big enough to hide a man inside. The bones from their limbs formed a maze of intricate, waist-high walls. Massive rib-cages

soared into the air. All glittered white with frost, and the deck—what little she could see through the mass of bones—was ribbed and metallic, just like *Pha Doram Lof*. The chamber's high ceiling soared above them, and its walls seemed far, far away.

"I'm not liking this, Princess," Boyd said. "You should go back."

"No Boyd. You need me."

He turned to look at her, and she saw it in his eyes. Yes, he did.

Vast—seemingly unaffected by the horrible cold—had already pushed past them. Tatiana set off after her, pushing a suspensor sled laden down with ammo boxes and other gear. Even with its weight partially negated by its Newton system, the sled was heavy. She could feel her suit's own Newton unit vibrating against her back as it worked to alleviate the dreadnought's localised gravity.

Even though her pulse quickened as she struggled with the sled, the resulting rise in her body-temperature did nothing to alleviate the cold that seemed to slice through her suit's thick hide and dissect her. The HUD projected onto her visor told her the suit's life-support was trying its best to acclimatise, but it didn't seem to be working.

I was just like the ghost-stories Kat used to tell back on Oridia. They always had a 'supernatural cold'. She reached the foot of the ramp, fist-size fragments of bone on the deck making her lose her footing momentarily. She looked about her again, gaze passing over *Pha Doram Lof*. Were they alone? Had the spirits of the Jaroth Pha's spirits really fled through those tunnels?

Or were they still here...?

#

Five minutes later—having worked flat out in two suitable congestions of bone to create small two nests, one at each end of the *Troika*—they were nearly ready. Tatiana had watched Boyd the whole time, and she'd been surprised—and a little thrilled—by just how strong he was, matching the powerful Vast pound for pound as they'd lifted their gear from the suspensor sled and put it in place.

"Tatiana? Can you hear me?" Katarina's voice was tremulous and high pitched. "They're here. The Calci, they're *here!*"

"What? Already? That was quick," Boyd said. Knelt by his machine-gun's tripod, he was hooking up an ammo belt that ran from a huge horizontal drum by its side. He stood, and looked toward the chamber wall before turning to look toward the other three sides of the chamber. "They've got us surrounded, alright," he said.

Tatiana turned to look. Sure enough, all about the chamber, Crepitus's troops were emerging from *Pha Doram Lof*. Their slow, lurching movements, the abject lack of life in their faces made her turn away. She was going to be sick.

"Okay, this is it," Boyd said as he crossed to his Maxim, kneeling at its stock and bracing the butt against his shoulder. He squinted down the barrel of his gun. If he was unnerved, he didn't show it. "Here they come."

Tatiana caught a brief glimpse of Vast vault a wall of bone and sprint toward the machinegun nest they'd set up at the other end of the *Troika*. Then Boyd's gun roared, and Tatiana cried out, the sound battering her senses.

Part Four
Spirits in the Material World

The incessant roar of Boyd and Vast's machine guns dominated Tatiana's world as they fought to keep the Calci at bay.

Tatiana couldn't look. Even now, as she busied herself maintaining a constant stream of ammunition for the guns, what she'd seen made her sick. The sight of Ivan after Ivan, Boyd after Boyd, and Katarina after Katarina being torn into bloody shreds by the endless hail of bullets. The sight of these fallen Calci hitting the deck, shrouded in blood and splintered bone, only to be trodden under foot by the next rank of Calci made her nauseous.

But she pushed on, carrying ammunition from the suspensor sled as it sat beneath the *Troika*. She dashed back and forth to Vast and Boyd's positions at either end of the corvette. Her muscles burnt and her ill-fitting boots rubbed the skin from her heels. All the time her laboured breath steamed inside her vac-suit, the cold of the chamber dissecting her with a clinical cruelty. But she pushed on.

"Tatiana, Vast's gonna need more ammo soon." Katarina's was voice high and shrill over the 'net. "Boyd, there's a group breaking off. Hex-ref five, niner, seven—"

"I see 'em, Katarina." Boyd said, nearly drowned out by the roar of his Maxim. "What's the sit-rep with those other ships on the scanner?"

"They've docked. You've more Calci heading your way. And I see more incoming ships, too..."

"More?" Boyd muttered. Tatiana looked at him. Startled, she saw his face was wet with tears. Was he too suffering at the hands of the Calci's most potent psychological weapon?

"Princess?" he said "I'm gonna need more ammo!"

She took a deep breath. Calmed, she hurried to Boyd's position.

#

Katarina did the best she could to keep up with the torrent of information her TAC hurled at her. Unit movements and composition. Fields of fire. Diagnostics. Ammunition levels. Opposition numbers.

Hunched over the flight-deck's tactical station, her clothes were soaked in sweat, and her hair was plastered to her forehead. She looked at the TAC. Despite Boyd and Vast's intersecting arcs of fire, the Calci were slowly closing in. The Maxims just weren't firing fast enough—and they were running out of rounds fast. And there were another six vessels on their way now—one of which was a contact so big it could only be a mothership of some sort.

It wouldn't be long until the Calci overwhelm the *Troika*, Katarina realised, and there was no way Boyd and Vast could hold off that many Calci hand-to-hand. She grasped the mic on her comms headset. "Dolly! How long until the graviton drives are back online?"

Doll Two's voice was flat and even. "I don't have the time to repair all these hydrogen relays, Mistress Katarina, so I have elected force the hydrogen through fewer conduits at a higher pressure—"

"Less science, more answers, Dolly."

"Fifteen minutes."

“Fifteen!?” Katarina froze, hands hovering over the station. “We’ll be dead in five!”

An alarm sounded, and Katarina looked to see the ammunition read-out on Vast’s gun reach a flashing red zero.

Katarina’s head went into her hands. Her throat contracted as both tears and pressure threatened to overcome her. They couldn’t do it. They couldn’t hold the Calci back. They needed experience. Leadership.

They needed Ivan.

#

It wasn’t easy for Ivan to pick his way through the bones. They were big, and—even with his vac-suit’s Newton unit—his bad leg was struggling to cope with the gravity. He moved as quickly as he could, hunched and low as he used the cover afforded by the Jaroth Pha skeletons. At his side Stalin—eyes wide in fear and panting incessantly—hopped over and slid under bone despite his clumsy canine vac-suit. A generator was secured on his back. Idling, the diagnostic on its side glowed green.

Ivan stopped briefly, breathing heavily and hunkering down as he surveyed a TAC display on his suit’s HUD. His lip curled back. The Calci were closing fast.

“This is stupid, Ivan! If they see us, we’re done for!”

“Be quiet’ Stalin,” Ivan said.

“No! Shan’t! This is stupid. Why are we even out here?”

“Because,” Ivan said, bending low and thrusting his helmet against Stalin’s, eyeballing the ignorant animal, “I cannot think of other way to save us, yes? Now shut up and get moving, or I leave you behind.”

#

Tatiana—stood beneath the centre of the *Troika* and beside the suspensor—turned in her vac-suit, looking toward Vast. The red Amazon was stepping away from her machine gun, its ammunition exhausted. Tatiana looked down at the suspensor sled, hoping to see more of the Maxims’ slugs. There were none.

Oh, Christ. Now what? Tatiana thought as she looked back toward Vast. Already the Amazonian bodyguard had taken up two SMGs she’d stowed by her position. Gripping them, wedging their stocks under each arm, she opened fire once more. The guns syncopated reports would have struck Tatiana as being impressive mere days ago—but now, with the noise of the Maxim’s ringing in her ears—she thought they sounded tiny and weak.

Her blood suddenly froze. Boyd’s gun. It had stopped firing.

She turned toward Boyd now. His Maxim also spent, he unslung a stubby, ancient looking grenade-launcher with a wooden stock from his shoulder.

“Vast?” he said over the ‘net as he stood and braced the weapon against his shoulder, squinting down its barrel. “Get Tatiana inside. They’re gonna be on us in no time”

#

As soon as Vast’s machine gun had stooped firing, the Calci had surged forward. Ivan, head bowed as he knelt before a Jaroth Pha skull, looked up briefly.

Now the Calci were all about him, a crush of forlorn, familiar faces and decaying bodies. They moved to grab him, but were held back as they impacted against an invisible force, a shield that absorbed their kinetic energy and dissipated it.

“Okay, Ivan, the ECF’s holding—for now,” Stalin said, “But there’s only so much it can absorb before it blows—and takes me with it.”

Ivan spared Stalin a brief glimpse. Sure enough, the diagnostic on the ECF generator strapped to the dog’s back was already beginning to glow a deep amber. They didn’t have much time, he realised, as he turned to pachyderm skull before him.

Big, even for its kind, its chin rested on the deck and its empty eye-sockets bore down on them. An ancient sigil—meaning known only to the Jaroth Pha—was carved into its forehead. They’d found it only moments ago, and Ivan had gone down on his knees immediately.

“Ivan? *Ivan?* What are you doing? I need help here!”

Much to Stalin’s chagrin, Ivan didn’t answer. He merely bowed his head once more as a SHROUD projector on his shoulder burst into life, creating a holographic, interactive console before him that pulsed a warm, steady red. Fingers moving to press holographic buttons, he began to talk to himself.

#

“Bring out your dead!” Boyd was shouting “Bring out your bloody dead!”

Tatiana had never seen Boyd like this before. Eyes wide, teeth bared, he ranted as he stood on top of the pile of bones he’d previously used for cover, firing round after round from his grenade launcher. Beyond him, she could see the explosive results as sundered clouds of bone and Calci were thrown into the air. Shards of bony shrapnel whistled by her as she crouched by the suspensor.

Beside her, Vast was also firing. The Calci had now over-run the ad-hoc machine gun nest Vast had abandoned. Climbing over the bones, they lurched forward, stumbling on even as Vast poured twin streams of bullets into their knees. Those that fell at the forefront still clawed their way toward them, and those behind pushed on, reaching for their prey.

One of Vast’s guns ran out of bullets, and she cast it aside. Still firing the other SMG, she twisted and grabbed Tatiana by the arm, pulling the Princess to her feet.

“No, Vast,” Tatiana tried to pull her arm free. “I won’t leave him. I won’t leave Boyd”

Vast had no chance to respond, Katarina’s signal suddenly bleating in their ears, “Boyd? Boyd, do you hear me.?” she said, voice urgent, words compressed and rushed. “Your suit, Boyd—I think it’s punctured!”

Tatiana turned away from Vast, movement restricted by the bulky suit as she looked toward Boyd. She saw him stop firing, clumsy hand groping at his shoulder from which protruded a shard of bony shrapnel. His gait was drunken and precarious. He lost his footing, and fell from the top of the bony wall to the deck. He landed on his wounded shoulder, pushing the sharp deeper, and then he lay there, still.

“Boyd! No! Please no!” Tatiana’s shout was so loud it even rang in her deaf ears. “I’m coming! Just hang on!” Teeth bared and eyes wide in an almost feral anger, she shouted “Let me go, Vast. Now!”

Maybe it was Tatiana’s breeding, an innate authority, maybe it was a desire to see her colleague—friend, even—survive, but Vast complied immediately. Letting go of Tatiana’s

arm, she turned back to the Calci that were nearly upon them, and carried on firing as she drew yet another, smaller SMG from a sling beneath her armpit.

With Vast moving backward to shadow her, firing as she went, Tatiana ran to Boyd as quickly the vac-suit would allow, fumbling in one of utility pockets for a vac-seal patch. Reaching the stricken Scot, she fell to her knees amidst the broken bones and spent cartridges, and looked at Boyd, shaking him as she peered into his helmet. Flat on his back, his eyes were closed and his head slumped into the confines of his helmet. He was turning blue. His body was utterly limp. Finally managing to wrestle the stubborn patch from its pouch on her sleeve, Tatiana made a quick inspection of his wound. Boyd's falling onto the deck had pushed the shrapnel so deep into his shoulder it was practically plugging the wound. To remove it now would merely induce more bleeding. Leaving the bone where it was, she slapped the vac-seal patch over the hole in his suit. She tried to ignore the blood that soaked it.

#

"Tatiana! Get out of there! They're almost on top of you!"

Katarina couldn't believe how stupid Tatiana was. The damned Calci were feet away and she was still trying to save that stupid Boyd. A camera in the *Troika's* underbelly showed her trying to drag Boyd toward the *Troika's* ramp even as the undulating tide of Calci oozed toward her, clawing at the air.

Katarina activated her mic. "Tatiana! You've got to get out of there! You've got to get out of there *now!*"

#

The syncopated flashing from the two guns lit Boyd's nest like guttering torches.

Vast! Tatiana thought. Thank Christ!

The bodyguard was walking out from beneath the *Troika*. Composed and unruffled, her guns blazed as she cut down swathes of the nearest Calci. They fell thick and fast, their splintered, broken bodies piling up in piles of butchered Tatianas, Katarinas, and Ivans. Tatiana had to look away. They're not us, she kept telling herself.

She heaved at Boyd, dragging him toward the *Troika's* ramp and the supposed sanctuary of the airlock, only turning back when she heard Vast stop firing. The Amazon's guns were exhausted, and this brief respite was all the Calci needed, surging forward

"Vast! Look out!" Tatiana shouted as Vast stood her ground, eyes locked on the Calci as they lurched toward her. Showing no panic, she dropped one SMG, and reached for a fresh clip for the other.

"Boyd's guns!" Katarina's voice was high pitched and desperate in Tatiana's ear. "Use his guns!"

Tatiana dithered as her fingers rested on one of Boyd's pistols. Even then, even in the face of certain death, the fear of Ivan and his attitude toward guns took over and her hands moved from the guns to the last two grenades on his belt. "Vast! Down!" she shouted as, turning toward the Calci, she paused just long enough to flip up the covers on their primers, depress them, and throw the grenades.

It was her best throw, but such was the gravity in the Graveyard that the grenades fell to the ground by Vast without bouncing. Vast barely had time to turn and throw herself to the ground before the grenades went off. Kinetic grenades, they spat forth a wave of concussive

energy that barrelled into the approaching Calci, throwing them in all directions. Caught in the blast, Vast flew over Tatiana's head, impacted against the *Troika's* underbelly and thundering into the deck in a cloud of bone and dust.

"Christ, Vast, I'm sorry!" Tatiana said as she dashed to Vast and put an arm about her, helping the big woman to stagger toward the ramp. Vast's suit was punctured, she was holed and bloody, and still she fought. Pulling a pistol from a holster under her armpit, she began to fire at the next wave of Calci that advanced toward them.

What the hell keeps you up, Vast? Tatiana thought. And where can I get some?

#

The moment Tatiana and Vast dragged Boyd back inside the airlock, Katarina brought the door down. Almost as soon as the door locked, Vast collapsed, as if she'd been driven by duty alone.

"Get this 'lock re-pressurised, Kat—"

"Shut up, Tatiana. I know what I'm doing!"

"Boyd and Vast both need medical attention." Tatiana activated her mic. "Dolly? Meet us at med-bay—"

"Wait a minute, Tatiana," Katarina said, alarmed. "What about the graviton drives? Dolly needs to stay where she is and fix 'em."

"Why? What's the use in repairing them if there's no-one left alive?"

Katarina froze. She looked to the TAC. Tides of Calci now swamped the *Troika*. Beyond the chamber, more troop-ships were docking with *Pha Dorma Lof*, and still further, more ships were bearing down on the dreadnought, with the mothership now lurking at the fringes of the graveyard.

She held her breath and began to stamp her feet, beating her fists against her console. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuuuuuck!" Her bellow was as intense as her tantrum was childish.

Then she stopped dead, static and confused. "What the fuck is that?" she said to herself, eyes peering as she leant forward to inspect the TAC.

Stalin. That was his transponder. What the fuck was he doing in the graveyard?

#

"Stalin, this is Katarina—what are you doing?"

Stalin was barely cognisant of Katarina wittering over his comms suite. He was too busy watching the press of Calci as they piled onto his ECF field in a bid to overload it. It would blow soon. It wasn't designed to take that much pressure.

"Stalin!" Katarina said again.

"I'm with Ivan," he said.

"What's he doing out there?"

"Right now?" Stalin looked at Ivan. Still on his knees, he was jabbing rapidly at the SHROUD projection, working through a series of menus imposed on the air before him. Stalin hadn't seen the type of glyphs on Ivan's screen since he was last on this ship, twenty years ago. "He looks like he's praying to an elephant skull and trying to hack into what's left of this dreadnought's computer."

“Elephant...? Look, never mind. I need to talk to him, fast.”

“Then raise him on the comms net.”

“I’ve just tried that. He’s not answering. I need you to log into his suit’s CPU and open a channel for me.”

“Are you joking? If he’s not answering, it’s because he wants leaving alone. He’ll kill me if I —”

“Not if the Calci kill us all first. Do it, Stalin. Do it now.”

#

The TAC showed Katarina the channel to Ivan’s comm was open. She opened her mouth to speak to Ivan, but then she stopped as her face fell.

Ivan was crying.

Her hand went to her open mouth as her eyes widened in astonishment. She’d never heard him cry before.

Then he began to speak, and it took Katarina a moment to realise he was talking in Russian. The *Troika*’s computer, however, kicked, and began to translate the big man’s lamentations to an increasingly stunned Katarina.

“—lissa’s dead now, Tusk. Gregor too. I had to leave him behind. He and his wife told me to meet them at the farm, but I’m sure they’re dead...”

No! Katarina thought, hands going over her ears as she squeezed her eyes shut. Don’t say that.

“If they were still alive, they’d have found us by now,” the translation continued, its clinical, computerised diction clashing with the distress in Ivan’s voice. “God knows everybody else has. Crimea and Yevgeny found me. Crepitus is here with his Calci. A D’Kothren ship’s been tailing us every since we left Oridia. I’m pretty sure the Coven sisters and Black Gladys will be out there, somewhere. ...”

An alarm from the TAC pierced Ivan’s monologue, and Katarina looked to see the dire report: Hull breach, hangar deck. The Calci were in. Her shoulders sagged and her hands fell into her lap. How the fuck had they got in?

She activated an external camera, to see a small knot of Calci—consisting of a shaven-headed Boyd with bloody garrotte marks around his neck, a teenage Ivan with an arm missing and two mangled Tatianas, converging on a panel on the *Troika*’s hide—already bent and weakened by maser fire from the Calci gun-boats. Then an explosive device inside these Calci exploded in a burst of flame and rent fresh, taking the panel with them, and gouging a hole in the ship.

Another alarm, and another. Multiple breaches. Cameras zoomed in and focused, and Katarina could see them forcing themselves in through holes in the *Troika*’s hide, tearing themselves open on jagged, twisted metal.

Still Ivan continued: “They all want me dead, Tusk, all of them. They’re all coming out off my past to get their pound of flesh out of Ivan the Terrible. They can have me, I don’t care.

“Thom’s dead, Tusk. The man I love, gone, just like that. He’d waited twenty years for me, and then he died in my arms. All that time, Tusk, wasted. All that time I should have been with him, but I was too afraid to tell Gregor.”

Katarina's mouth fell open. What? she thought. Ivan's *Gay*?

"He was my brightest joy and my darkest Tsar, Tusk. My reason. And he loved me so much he gave the last of his life to save mine. And I failed him."

More alarms. More hull breaches. TAC awash with white contacts as even more Calci poured out of *Pha Jaroth Lof*. Katarina slouched in her seat.

"I'm pitiful. I don't care if the Calci kill me here and now. But... Gregor, he's had children. Two girls. Such beautiful, bright girls. And they don't deserve to be hunted like this. They don't deserve to die here.

"If you're there, Tusk, if you've stayed with your ship. I need you. I need you more than ever before. Please help them. Please help the girls..."

As Katarina watched, the small area on the TAC that marked Stalin's EFC contracted as the Calci swamped it. The diagnostic report on the field's generator showed it was red-lining, seconds from detonation.

But then a throb reverberated through the entire chamber. Everything from the bones of the Jaroth Pha and the Calci, to the *Troika*, and to its crew vibrated so violently, so deeply, that Katarina thought her kidneys would burst.

The temperature dived even further and with such sharpness it robbed Katarina of her breath. Her display showed the temperature outside plummet, and the *Troika*'s external cameras showed her something else...

The bones of the Jaroth Pha, from their skulls to their ribs and to their limbs, had suddenly become laced with glowing, pulsing glyphs, each bright white and fierce. Energy readings from the *Troika*'s scanners became confused and erratic, and Katarina could only stare, dumbfounded.

#

Another vibration shook the corridor. Tatiana's legs buckled, but she managed to stay upright. Struggling to help the staggering Vast prop up Boyd, they were making their way to med-bay. Already waking up—to Tatiana's surprise—Boyd was vaguely lucid, muttering as his head rolled about his shoulders.

Yet another vibration rocked the *Troika*. Even worse than the last, it was so bad fled Tatiana's nose bled as she cried out in pain.

"Katarina?" she managed to gasp as she steadied herself. "What's happening out there?" There was no reply. "Kat—?"

Beside her a door hissed open, and a shuffling of Calci lurched from it, falling upon Tatiana. With a scream, she fell to the floor, head banging against the bulkhead, disorientating her. Adrenalin helped her regain some composure—but it was already too late. She could see Vast fighting hard—as ever—but Boyd was defenceless, twitching on the floor as the Calci grabbed him.

Then she lost sight of him as more Calci crowded her. Tatiana after butchered Tatiana, the Calci held her in cold, strong hands. One had the side of its head blown off, one had a gaping void in the left side of its torso. One was old and so thin as to be a poisoned stiletto, another couldn't have been more than ten years old. With more behind, these four held her down, pinning her to the floor, mouths gaping as they leant toward her warm, soft flesh, ready to deliver the *coup-de-grace*.

Facing death at her own hands, she screamed.

#

Ivan pressed one last button on the SHROUD projection, and a sphere of blue light burst from the sigil in Tusk's skull, expanding and sweeping through the chamber. All about Stalin's ECF, the Calci collapsed, lifeless, the instant this wave of ethereal blue energy touched them. Like dominoes the Calci fell as this blue orb, shot through with twisting white veins of light, swelled, filling the chamber and beyond.

"Thank you, Tusk," Ivan said. Still on his knees, he looked up at Tusk's remains with a heavy smile, moustache wet with tears and intruding into the corners of his mouth. "I will never forget this."

#

The instant the wave of energy swept through the *Troika*—unconstrained by bulkheads, blast-doors or airlocks—the Calci dropped, lifeless and limp.

Visible for only the briefest moments, vague apparitions rose from the mangled cages of the Calci, only to hover over the bodies for a fraction of a second. Tatiana watched aghast and confused. They seemed to be looking down at her, perhaps lingering just long enough to say silent, earnest thanks, and then they were gone, sweeping away, passing the startled Tatiana with supernatural rapidity.

#

"Katarina, this is Ivan. Do you copy?"

Katarina couldn't reply. She was staring at the TAC. The white contacts of the Calci had vanished. All the way from the chamber to the perimeter of the dreadnought, they blinked out.

In their stead were the strangest readings she'd ever seen, as if some bizarre energy had been released from the Calci. Even these readings were transitory, however, as the contacts fled the chamber and swept into *Pha Joroth Lof*. Within seconds they were in open space, fading.

She stared. She didn't completely understand what she'd seen, but she could guess. Oh my God, she thought. All those souls—*our* souls—set free. She put her hands together in an attitude of prayer and put them to his pursed lips as tears ran down her cheeks. Bless you, Ivan.

"Katarina? Do you copy?"

"I'm here, Uncle," she said, clearing her throat.

#

Ivan was making his way back to the *Troika*, fighting to climb over the remains of Jaroth Pha and Calci alike. It was so cold now the air about him was freezing, and his visor was steaming up as his suit's environmental controls failed to cope with the temperature. Beside him, Stalin's movements were slovenly and torturous as his joints froze.

"Am struggling to reach ship, Katarina. You must take off."

"What about you and Stalin?"

"You will leave us, yes?"

"Hey! Wait—"

"You will leave us, and get out of here," Ivan said, ignoring the dog.

“But, we can wait, surely?” Katarina said. “The Calci, they’re all gone, right?”

“No,” Ivan said as he consulted the *Troika*’s TAC display on his suit’s HUD. It revealed the extent of the Calci fleet outside. “The rest of Calci are waiting, and Crepitus will be in that mothership. Katarina, is only matter of minutes until they will fire on dreadnought and destroy it. You must go now. That is order. You will go...

“...And you will leave us.”

Part Five

Deep Dark Hole

Ivan, for all his legendary stubbornness, could no longer resist his advancing years and the dire cold that haunted the chamber. He collapsed, his breath ragged and torn.

He felt a weight against his back as something collapsed against him. He lifted his head and managed to turn it enough to see Stalin lying across his back. Stalin. His oldest friend. He groaned. Oh, that he should have dragged him here to die.

The air around him had turned to snow, and the flakes shone in the light of the glyphs that pulsed on the Jaroth Pha’s bones. He couldn’t feel his limbs, and his eye-sight was failing. All he could hear was the dull thud of his slowing heartbeat.

“Please, Katarina,” he said into his mic, gasping. “You must know, and you must tell Tatiana. I was never warm to you, never *good* uncle. But I always...I always loved you both very much...”

The roaring in his ears changed, increasing in volume and possessing a flat, even tone. He could feel his body throb as the deck beneath him shook. He opened his eyes to see the snow whirling in a vortex of reflected light. This vale parted, and the *Troika* moved into position over him, hovering.

“...And I am very, very proud of you,” he said with a weak smile as he looked up at his ship.

The corvette touched down, crushed bone splintering under its landing gear. Yards away from Ivan, Tatiana stood at the foot of the lowered airlock ramp, a lifeline securing her to the interior of the *Troika*. She held two more lifelines. The instant the ship was still, she rushed to her Uncle.

“You are going over my knee for disobeying orders, yes?”

“I love you too, uncle,” she said as she bent, fixing the end of one of the lifelines to Ivan’s body-armour. Seconds later, the second lifeline was attached to Stalin’s back. “That’s it, Kat. Winch them in.”

Still skirting unconsciousness, he felt his body being dragged toward the *Troika*’s ramp, and Stalin being dragged along beside him. Bent, Tatiana walked with Ivan, hands resting on his body as she inspected the suit for tears.

Over her shoulder, he thought he saw something—a shiver in the air. He looked again, straining to focus. Sure enough, the snow parted once more, and he saw the spectral images of a Jaroth Pha standing proud and regal over Tusk’s skull. The wraith looked at Ivan, massive black eyes fixed and deep, and ears moving back and forth gently. Its trunk and body

—naked and exposed without its hulking spacesuits—were still, the thick, grey skin lined, weathered and scared.

Tusk, Ivan thought, I am so glad I saw you again. I never had the chance to say goodbye...

He nodded feebly toward the ghost and lifted a hand as he bade Tusk farewell for the final time. The spirit nodded, and raised its trunk in salute.

Seconds later, Ivan was onboard the *Troika*, and the airlock closed to shut out the ghosts and snow outside.

#

“How is he?” Katarina said. Sat in the pilot’s seat, she eased back the yoke as the *Troika* lifted off once again.

“Almost unconscious,” Tatiana said over the ‘net. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Um...” Katarina looked at the pilot’s TAC.

“What’s wrong?”

Katarina didn’t answer as she eyed the display. All those ships out there... And those tunnels were so *narrow*. Flying the *Old Bitch* back on Parlour had been one thing, but this?

“Do you want me to fly the *Troika* out of here, Kat?”

Katarina bit her lip, pride clashing with common sense.

“Okay,” Tatiana said, not waiting for an answer. “I’ll be right there.”

“Dolly? This is Tatiana.” Tatiana knelt beside Ivan in the airlock, removing her suit’s helmet as she spoke. “Belay my last order. Stay in the graviton bay and get those drives working. Vast’s with Boyd. She’ll stabilise him.”

“As you wish, Mistress.”

“Stalin?” Tatiana turned to the cyborg dog. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m re-routing back-ups now. Should be back on my feet in a few minutes.”

“Good. Soon as you can, drag Uncle to med-bay. I’ve set his suit’s Newton sys—”

“No, Tatiana,” Ivan said, taking a weak hold of her arm. “I will come with you, to flight-deck. I will help you get *Troika* out of here.”

“You can’t, Uncle,” she said, hand over his as she smiled down at him. “You’re hurt. The cold out there should have killed you—”

“And there is man out there who will finish job if I let him. I cannot allow that, Tatiana. Now take me to flight-deck.”

#

“Tatiana?” Katarina said as she heard the flight-deck door hiss open, unable to take her eyes off the TAC. “You should see the readings I’m getting here.” She began to vacate the pilot’s seat. “The Jaroth Pha dreadnought? I think its systems are coming online again... Oh!” She turned now, and saw Tatiana holding Ivan up as the pair moved to the navigation station. She snatched the cigarette from her mouth and hid it behind her back, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

“Uncle Ivan? Are you okay?”

“I am fine. Thanks to you and Tatiana.” He didn’t look at her—his pride probably wouldn’t let him, she realised—but there was the most subtle of inflections in his voice that revealed his gratitude.

As Tatiana helped him sit, Katarina moved to stand beside him, hand still behind her back as she flicked the cigarette away. The sound of him crying, of lamenting for them, for their father, and for Thom Skullion, echoed in her ears, and now she knew something, at least, of the pain and suffering that haunted this scarred, stubborn soldier.

“I love you, Uncle.” She whispered so quietly she wasn’t even sure he’d heard her, and she bent forward, kissing his cheek.

He turned, and she looked into his eyes. He still looked like that warped, angry and threatening Uncle she’d always feared, but the dampness in his eyes betrayed the complex, sensitive man beneath.

“Kat?” Tatiana said, buckling herself in to the pilot’s seat, “I’m going to need you on the engineering station, okay?” Still wearing her vac-suit, she removed the gloves and flung them across the flight-deck. “I’m going to need to know the *instant* Dolly gets those drives back online.”

“Sure, sis,” Katarina said, turning away from Ivan as she gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Whatever you say.”

“Good. Now, let’s kick some ass.”

#

The *Troika* tore out of *Pha Doram Lof*, and into the graveyard beyond. That instant, the alarms on the flight-deck began to throw loud, flashing tantrums.

This is going to be fun, Tatiana thought with a frown as she threw the corvette sideways to avoid colliding with a dead frigate. Still in her vac-suit, she was sweating profusely, and that sweat stung her eyes as she looked out of the canopy. She didn’t need her TAC to see Crepitus’s flagship. She could see it even from the centre of the graveyard. Sculpted in the shape of a massive dragon skull, it glared at her from the edge of this field of dead ships. Skull shaped fighters and gun-boats, torpedoes, and maser-drones poured out of hangars set in its belly, and all about the *Troika* she could see the dead vessels they’d have to rely upon for cover being lacerated and broken apart by barrage after barrage of maser-beams.

“Bogies incoming at eight seven niner and two three six—”

“I see them, Ivan.” Tatiana pushed hard against the *Troika*’s yoke, pushing the ship beneath a derelict carrier. As the *Troika* passed under it, the carrier was smashed to pieces by the incoming fire.

“How long until you have a course, Ivan?” she yelled over the sound of alarms as she steered the *Troika* around the remains of a destroyer.

“Minutes, yes?”

“We don’t have minutes, Unc—”

The destroyer exploded as a school of torpedoes hammered into it. Instantaneously the corvette shuddered with an uncommon violence, and Tatiana felt a muscle tear in her neck as she was thrown forward with a sickening ferocity. Even through her vac-suit the straps on her harness bit into her shoulders.

“We’re hit! We’re hit!” Katarina bellowed. “Debris from that destroyer. Breaches—”

“Never mind that,” Tatiana shouted. “How long until we can go to lightspeed?”

“Dolly?” Katarina said, tapping her mic to activate it.

“Two minutes and twenty three seconds, approximately, Mistress Tatiana.”

“That soon? Oh, that’s good…” Tatiana’s TAC flashed as five contacts dropped in behind the *Troika*.

“Fighters, Tatiana—”

“I *see* them, Uncle,” she said as she pitched the *Troika* sideways, its compensators shrieking in agony as it flashed through a gaping wound in a carrier. This carrier—a gutted sham of its former glory—lasted mere seconds before it too was ripped asunder by Crepitus’s incoming fire, the *Troika* blasting out of the spinning debris as it broke apart.

The fighters were still on the *Troika*’s tail, and Tatiana could see two more groups bearing down on them. The *Troika* rocked again as it was hit by a volley of maser-beams from the pursuing fighters, which now numbered twenty plus.

A small fire broke out in the corner of the flight-deck as the life-support and damage control station erupted. Ivan was upon the fire as quickly as could be expected, extinguisher ejaculating over the flames.

Oh, Christ. We’re done for. We need a miracle, Tatiana thought, pitching the *Troika* into a barrel roll and squeezing it through two dead ships, the gap so narrow three of the pursuing fighters collided with each other and perished in a cascade of fire and shrapnel.

“Has anybody else been tracking those readings from the dreadnought?” Katarina asked. “I’m getting green-lines across multiple systems—”

Maser-beams speared across the graveyard, and the Calci fighters were obliterated, their remains spinning into oblivion.

“What the..?” Tatiana’s jaw dropped as her eyes widened.

“I don’t believe it!” Katarina was shouting now, gripping the edge of her station and leaning forward as she grinned and stared at her display. “The dreadnought! It’s opening fire!”

#

Like mythical titans, the two flagships tore and gouged and spat at each other.

From across the graveyard they threw masers and torpedoes which exploded on their hides and left wounds that glowed and bled fire fed by the vessels’ escaping atmospheres. Calci fighters swarmed over the Jaroth Pha ship like flies around a bloated corpse as Calci gun-boats stabbed at their target from a distance. Maser-drones fanned out from Crepitus’s mothership and picked at Tusk’s stubborn vessel, and from the Calci ship huge, ad-hoc missiles—forged from compacted, recycled matter—burst out of mass-drivers, smashing their way across the graveyard and punching gaping holes in the Jaroth Pha dreadnought. All the while the Jaroth Pha ship soaked up this onslaught and returned fire, its masers and torpedoes shredding Crepitus’s fighters, gun-boats, and the hide of his mothership with a steady, determined rhythm.

Caught in this cross-fire, the graveyard torn to shreds and dying in a miasma of rent metal and brief, silent explosions, the *Troika* swooped and dived, driven on still faster by the determined Tatiana.

#

“Time’s up on those drives, Dolly.” Tatiana’s eyes were fixed and staring from beneath her brows as she focused on dodging the chaos beyond her canopy. “We need to get out of here *now!*”

“The graviton bay’s taken more fire, and Dolly’s in pieces, Princess. You’ll have to make do with me.”

“Boyd? But... You’re supposed to be in med-bay.”

“I got better.”

“Got better?” Something distant and subtle stirred in her belly. That doesn’t make sense, she thought. He was suffering from oxygen starvation. He couldn’t just ‘get better’.

“Course is laid in,” Ivan said, cutting into the conversation on the open ‘net. “How much longer until drives back online?”

“Just give me a few more minutes, Ivan. I won’t let you down.”

#

Still the battle raged, and the withering, relentless fire of the Calci began to take effect, the Jaroth Pha dreadnought faltering. Its rate of fire began to decrease, and its hull began to weaken and buckle...

#

“Uncle, I don’t understand these readings,” Katarina said, brow furrowed. “Can you—”

“Rerouting—” Ivan was cut off briefly, jolted sideways in his seat as Tatiana threw the *Troika* to one side, avoiding collision with the spinning remains of a decimated cruiser. “Rerouting data to my display.”

In an instant, streams of information cascaded down his TAC display, glowing green in the flight-decks half-light. He took only seconds to translate it before grasping his mic and shouting, “Boyd! *Boyd!* We need lightspeed *now!*”

“I’m almost there—”

“Then hurry up!”

“What’s wrong, Uncle?” Katarina asked. Her blood was turning to ice. The look on Ivan’s face, and the tone in his voice, didn’t bode well.

“Tusk’s ship is losing, and it is playing last card.”

“Last card?” Katarina said. “That doesn’t sound good.”

#

Faster now, and with increasing rapidity, the dreadnought seemed to be collapsing, shrinking in on itself. It ceased fire, and the Calci pressed on their assault, emboldened by apparent victory, oblivious to reality.

#

“It is called *Pha Hona Lof*—‘The Black Gate’—the Jaroth Pha’s last ditch weapon,” Ivan said as his fingers jabbed at his console. “The dreadnought is imploding, compressing its own mass. Soon it will reach point where its mass is in so small an area it will collapse under its own gravity...” He paused just long enough to allow Tatiana to glance toward him, alarmed by the gravitas in his voice. “And create black hole.”

#

Still besieged by the ignorant Calci, the dreadnought crumpled and shrunk.

Finally, with no noise to herald this last act of defiance, no explosion, it vanished. In its wake appeared a brooding, greedy and indiscriminate void. Outwardly it looked like a black sphere, and, as the hydrogen and other matter in the surrounding vacuum was sucked in and compacted by its gravitational pull, a beautiful rainbow field of captive energy flourished around the hole.

The graveyard's inexorable shift toward the black hole was slow, but it was sure. Soon the dead ships in the graveyard were racing toward the void, and the Calci fighters and gun-boats were caught too. Their thrusters flared and burnt, but to no avail. All they achieved was a delay of the inevitable, dragged to their destruction and compressed into red slivers of matter as they were sucked toward the hole's event horizon. Only Crepitus's ship could effect any real resistance, its massed thrusters defiant and infernal as they flared, but even then it began to slide toward the void.

In the middle of all this, engines redlining as Tatiana opened them up in desperation, the *Troika* was being dragged toward its doom as debris and bits of the graveyard bounced off its battered hide.

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The *Troika* was shaking so badly Tatiana nearly vomited. Every station, every alarm, on the flight-deck was screaming at them, and the diagnostics showed her the thrusters would hold out for mere minutes.

"We need more power, Tatiana," Ivan shouted. "We need to pull away!"

"This is all we have, Uncle!"

"We're being dragged in!" Katarina's voice quivered, and rose to a hysterical pitch. She was thumping her fists against her console and stamping her feet. "God damn it, Tatiana! *Do* something!"

"Like *what*?"

"Boyd?" Ivan was shouting over his comm now. "This is it, Boyd. You do, or we die."

"I just need a few more seconds, Ivan."

She looked to her TAC to see Crepitus's flagship. Sliding backward toward the black hole, it had still managed to manoeuvre into an intercepting trajectory with the *Troika* and, as Tatiana watched, a capture bay opened in the rear of the vessel.

"Incoming—"

"Ivan, I *know*!"

"—signal."

The holograph shimmered into life, and the green, oscillating image of Crepitus leered at them once again. "—van... *bzzk*... *Ivan*." The signal was disjointed and broken by the gravitational pull of the hole. "Don't think *thbrackkle*ing to save you. I've *bzzzt*ed too long to get my *revbzzzt* on you."

"Can somebody shut him up, please?" Tatiana said.

"I'm coming for *ywyzacklevan*. My ship's going to swallow your stupid little *byyrkknd* then I'm going to kill you."

Tatiana looked to the TAC. The *Troika* was siding backward now, but still Crepitus's ship stalked it. It would have them in minutes, and Tatiana could guess just what undead fate awaited them once they were aboard.

She could feel the *Troika* squirming, its pitiful struggle translated through her hands and up her arms as she gripped the convulsing yoke. Her TAC detailed the slow death of the corvette. Debris was pounding it to bits. Reactors were popping. Systems were failing. "Come on, Boyd," she murmured under her breath. "Please."

But then, from nowhere, Ivan's words came back to her: "To activate graviton drives and pass too close to a gravitational distortion could destroy ship." To pass too close? she thought. But what about activating the drives in a gravitational distortion? One like this? Then what?

"That's it, Ivan," Boyd said over the 'net. "Go."

"You heard him, Tatiana" Ivan said.

Tatiana hesitated. What would that distortion do to the *Troika* and its crew? "Uncle, I'm not sure about this—"

"You go, Tatiana, or we die."

"Do it!" Katarina's scream cut across the aural calamity on the flight-deck. "For fuck's sake, just do it!"

Static in her seat, immobile with indecision, Tatiana looked at Crepitus's ship as it closed in, the capture bay looking so large now as to fill her canopy. She looked at the damage reports. She looked at the black hole.

Damned if I do, she thought as she killed the portside thrusters. The *Troika* slurred sideways instantly, nose pointing away from the looming Calci flagship. Damned if I don't.

"What are you *ywyzackleing*, Ivan?" Crepitus's image said, taunting his old nemesis even as they wavered on the brink of death. "Trying to run? It doesn't matter. I'll *byyrkkind* you. You know that, don't *yskryyyyn*? Wherever you go, I'll track you dow—"

Ignoring the holograph, Tatiana took a deep breath, found her inner strength, swallowed her fears, and activated the graviton drives.

She had the briefest sensation of the drives kicking in, of the shrieking of metal and a flare of blinding agony. She had the briefest sensation of being stretched so thin as to be plastered across the galaxy. She had the briefest realisation Ivan and Katarina were howling in ungodly agony, and she was screaming too. She said the briefest prayer as she begged for something...*anything*...to release her from the searing pain...

...And then oblivion.

The Valentine Chronicles will continue with *Flesh*

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