

Hearts and Bones

by Paul L. Mathews

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; and, 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 heard the reason why you are 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 tusks. “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 engineering 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 cutter 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. She felt her Uncle move 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 said, stumbling 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? You 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 held her breath. She looked at Ivan. *Christ, Boyd—what are you doing?* she thought. *Nobody speaks 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 had 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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“What? 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.

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“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 view of these things,” 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's like some sort of ghost*, Tatiana thought.

"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.

To be continued...