

Hearts and Bones

by Paul L. Mathews

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 voice was tiny and thin.

“He is a techromancer,” 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 and she was biting at 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. *Is 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, *my future? Is that what I’m 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 like bombed-out houses. “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 are you fighting, Boyd? she wondered. *What’s 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 could really 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.

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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.

For her part, 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 before turning 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's 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 stocking. "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, Jesus, 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 was a taste 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.

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“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.

Fuck you, Boyd. “My bad, Boydie. 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 said.

“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.

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

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“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.”

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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...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 *Troika*—was illuminated by the lights in the cutter'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.

It's just like those ghost-stories Kat always used to tell me. They always had a 'supernatural cold', she thought as she reached the foot of the ramp, fist-size fragments of bone on the deck making her lose her footing momentarily. Are we alone? Are the Jaroth Pha's spirits here?

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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 sprinting toward the machinegun nest she’s set up at the other end of the *Troika*, vaulting a wall of bone. Then Boyd’s gun roared, and Tatiana cried out, the sound battering her senses.

To be continued...

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