

Hearts and Bones

by Paul L. Mathews

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.”

To be continued...

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