

Hearts and Bones

by Paul L. Mathews

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, spent, his breath ragged and torn.

He felt a weight against his back as something collapsed against him. *Stalin?* he thought. “*Oh, that I should drag you out here to die...*”

The air around him had turned to snow which shone brightly in the light of the glyphs that pulsed on the bones of the Jaroth Pha. He couldn't feel his limbs, and his eye-sight was failing. All he could hear was the dull thud of his heartbeat in his ears. It was getting slower.

“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 cutter touched down; bone crushed and splintered under its landing gear. Yards away from Ivan, the airlock ramp was still lowered, and Tatiana was at the foot of it, a lifeline securing her to the interior of the *Troika*. She held two more lifelines in her hands. 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 by his side. Tatiana was bent as she 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 sigil pulsing. 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.

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“How is he?” Katarina was in the pilot seat now, easing 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 are so narrow. Flying the Old Bitch back on Parlour was 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.” The Princess knelt beside her uncle 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.”

“Roger that, 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 of 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 cutter 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 the 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 cutter 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 light-speed?”

“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, God, 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. *We’re done for. We need a miracle...*

“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!”

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Like two 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 focused, determined Tatiana.

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“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!*”

“Dolly’s in pieces, Princess. The graviton bay’s taken more fire, and Dolly was damaged. 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.”

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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...

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“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. “Do I want to know?”

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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.

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“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 slivers of red 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 as they were sucked into the black hole.

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The *Troika* was shaking so badly Tatiana nearly vomited in her seat. Every station, every alarm, on the flight-deck, was screaming at them, and the diagnostics showed her the thrusters would only 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."

"A need a few more seconds, Ivan, and then we're good to go."

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 *thbrackkleing* to save you. I've *bzzzted* 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 hold of 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 cutter. Debris was pounding it to bits. Reactors were popping. Systems were failing. *Come on, Boyd... 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.

What will that distortion do to the Troika? To us? "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 *yskryyyn*? 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 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*