

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."

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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.

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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.

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“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?”

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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.”

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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...

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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!”

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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.

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“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.

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“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!"

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"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!"

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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 massaged her aching wrist. “We *did* it!”

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“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.”

To be continued...

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