

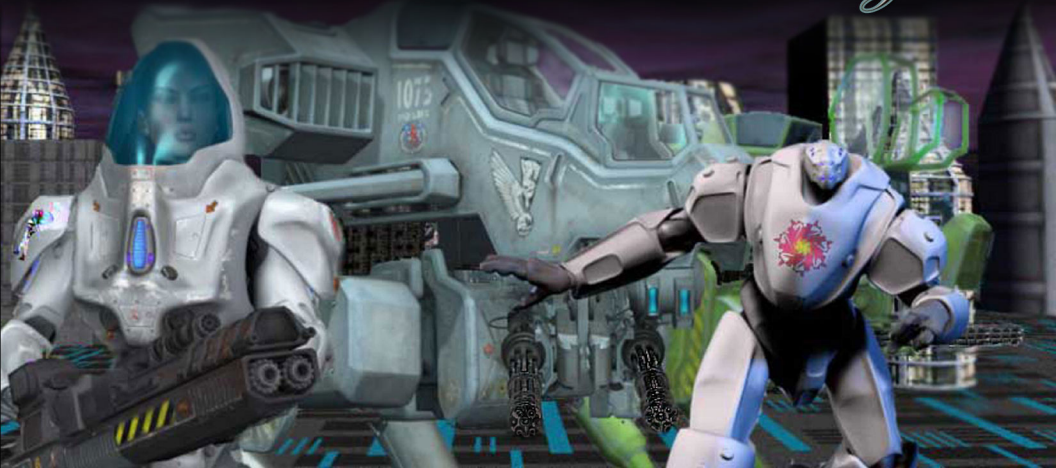


NIGHT SONG

BOOK ONE:

NIGHTFALL

Maximillian d'Erebourg



Nightfall Book One, Volume One of the Nightsong Saga

Serialized Part I of III

Maximillian dErembourg

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For Tim Salume: the original Morgan Blackskull

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Yes - A Free Sample

Yes – A Free Sample...

And NO, Not the FIRST three chapters.

I have chosen to include the Prologue, and two later chapters.

Do not despair, Those Who Must Read Everything Contiguously!

I really feel that these three chapters best deliver the feel of the experience that is Nightsong. Besides, they are all from Book One Part One; the story of the entire saga really begins with the Terran Invasion...Nightfall. No point holding it back 6 more chapters for you; in earlier versions, Chapter 7 was Chapter One.

Besides Part II: hardly any substantial story these days is told in completely linear order. The complete book Nightfall will have at least three chapters told in flashback anyhow...so there!

However, if you are one of those purists dedicated to the philosophy of reading each chapter only in story-order, then I warn you now, only read the Prologue.

Then buy the e-book “Nightsong Book One: Nightfall, Volume One” and read away!

Max])

☒# Prologue

It was good to be the king. King Duncan Valori laughed

sardonically at himself; one hand held a fusion-sword, the other kept his belly-wound closed lest his steaming intestines spill upon the frozen waste. *Any other day, perhaps.* The King tried to stay still and quiet, but he feared that his heavy breathing would give him away, either by its sound, or the plumes of white he was spewing forth against the crystal blue sky. A sudden flurry of wind-driven snowflakes removed at least that threat, but caused him to shiver even more.

The crunching of boots on frozen snow caused the king to crouch in the shadow of a chunk of fallen hull, more pirates were coming.

“I want that boy prince found, no matter the cost,” King Duncan clearly heard their leader order. “We will not waste an opportunity like this one. And remember, no blasters, I want to drag the prince before the Coil alive and smarting.”

So, they knew his son was on the transport. How could they? A spy, or an intercepted messenger? They’d been so careful.

“Yes Mal!”

King Duncan heard the boots crunch to a sudden halt. “What did you call me?”

“I... I’m sorry, milord... milord Malicious, milord!”

“Now you listen very closely to me, Dandre, you will personally lead the last two shurikens into that wreckage, and you will personally drag that simpering fool of a prince from the crater. The child of Alarian royalty is a renown

duelist, so if you find him holding a sword, you may blow his hand off, but otherwise I want him whole. Any other injury you do to Prince Morgan, I shall personally repeat upon your body.”

Two more shurikens, that would mean...ten more men coming! Duncan knew his son would never be able to fight that many off, even if his concussion had cleared up by now. The King had left his son in the care of the handful of royal retinue who had been in the passenger compartment with his son and him when the ship slammed down. It seemed the pilots, and guards were all dead.

“Y...yes milord!” Duncan heard the sound of one of them—Dandre, he presumed—turn in the snow and run back, away from the boss. However, the other pair of boots just stood there, silent.

Duncan imagined that he could feel the pirate lord searching the wreckage with his gaze, and listening for the sound of his breathing...and maybe even his heartbeat, against the din of wind and driving snow on the glacier.

“Do you hear me?” Malicious spoke calmly and normally, without trying to yell in any fashion, as if having a conversation over an elegant dinner.

Duncan wondered if the pirate had heard him, or simply felt his presence, somehow?

“Do you? This is the moment of reckoning, young prince. The son pays for the sins of the father, and your father’s sins are many, indeed. Perhaps it wont go so badly for you, if you come out nicely. Your father would trade himself for your life, being of such noble Valori stock,

how could he refuse, after all? You know what I'd do then, sweet prince? I'd lower the "king" into a medkit tank, and program a surgi-droid to remove his liver everyday, keeping him alive through it. That's right, I'd create my own little Prometheus." Duncan thought he sounded absolutely elated at the thought.

Obviously, this man was for some reason, obsessed with his royal personage. Maybe...maybe there was some way he could use that fact. It seemed the pirates knew his son was on that ship, but had no idea the real prize they had bagged.

Scattered debris, twisted bodies, shattered hull plating, and smoking power conduits created a maze of rubble atop the flowing ice-field upon which their ship had crashed, after being assaulted by two pirate frigates. Black Dragon Clan, the King assumed. Oily black smoke rose from a myriad of locations to pollute the pristine chill white clouded blue sky, so cold that it seemed to be trying to freeze him into part of the frigid landscape anytime he stood still, like now. Duncan had looked for help among the corpses. He'd found four of his six Royal Guard thus far, but none that could offer more than a dead man's gun. Two of the plas-pistols the king had recovered were damaged, but the third had sufficed for a few blasts before fusing into an aluminum chunk, useless as all but a cudgel.

Now he held a sword taken from the last pirate he'd killed. It, too, must have malfunctioned in some manner, the fusion-swords employed by the other nine pirates the king had killed had all disintegrated into a thousand metallic shards once their wielder had died.

Bitterly stark cold air numbed the majority of the Valori King's wounds, the bruises, burns, and lacerations he'd received from the crash. However, the newer wound, the slash from a pirate fusion-sword, was not so fortunate as to be dulled by the cold; in fact, the biting cold burned like fire in his wound. The slash across half his belly seemed to exhale steam into the frozen air, like hot breath.

The pirates had come into the wreckage in waves, teams of five, there had seemed no end to them. Now he knew; ten more were coming. These Black Dragon raiders are not going to leave empty-handed... He knew he had to convince them that they'd found something worth all their efforts, then perhaps they would cut their losses and leave for their cold black environs - a home which matched their hearts.

To accomplish even that much today, he'd have to keep the marauders' attention on himself.

A spike of fear, cold as the ice beneath his feet, impaled King Valori. Ruthlessly he fought it off.

_Royal decorum; isn't that what you've taught your sons, these five and twenty years? Act with decorum. Live with decorum. Die with decorum. A Valori must never dishonor his great name! _

_Well, you dolt, if it's to be done, let's get it done! _

King Duncan Valori stepped out from the shadow of the hull-wreckage, his wound stinging deeply, "Over here. You pirate bastard! Take me! If you can!" _Oh, Isabel, I'm sorry I was so distant. From you. From the boys. Remember me with some fondness... _

The King came face to face with the hunter. This 'Malicious' stood alone, holding a weapon that did not seem to be like his compatriots' fusion-swords; a thousand shards of steel held together in the shape of a weapon. Instead, Malicious' sword was an old Eastasian single-forged; a long, curved Japanese katana, shining in the frozen sun. One pale hand held an intricate ashen tsuka and tsuba, cross-hilt and handle, carved from white bone. The man who held it was hideous. Half his face had been torn open or off decades back, a third of his head was scar-tissue from a blow that had ripped from the scalp, to eye, to mouth, to neck. His long hair was as white as the driving snow, though his age could not have been more than fifty. A twisted smile, half scar tissue, made him look like a troll contemplating an easy meal.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Royal Murderer himself! Come, come, my good king; certainly, you'd feel better getting out of this cold, having that wound treated?"

"So I can experience the pleasures of your meditating tank? I think not, Dragon scum!"

Malicious' wide white smile turned into a vicious scowl, "How many of my clan did you have killed, all those years ago? You didn't expect—when you called that double-March, and exiled our clans—that you'd ever see us again...did you?"

"I cleaned up Alaria, getting you scum off of the Planet of Light. You were the ones who started it all."

"You killed...ten thousand of our people..." Malicious' voice trailed off, and he stopped talking, seemingly not knowing what to say next.

“However—like cockroaches—I couldn’t stomp you all out, or we would not be here today. How was it? You and your brethren managed to find a way off-world, who helped you escape Alaria?”

Malicious smiled again, his scarred face twisting unnaturally with the effort, “Howsoever it began, my good king; for you, it ends here!”

The pirate struck high, rapid-fire blows to the King’s right and left sides, blindingly fast.

The King, one hand gripping the sword, the other holding his stomach, still managed to intercept every blow. Smoothly, Malicious switched to a low snap to the King’s left.

Pain erupted as, having no shield, the King took the sword to his left arm. Fortunately, there was not much power behind the snap, so the sword only cut half-way through. Ulna likely shattered, thought the King, still he kept his left hand tight on his belly wound. For a moment he considered finding an opening for a deadly, desperate thrust...

But malicious had quickly switched grips, bringing down a two-handed overhead strike. Instinctively, the King’s training kicked in, knowing that such a powerful blow would require both hands to intercept, his left hand tried to join his right on the fusion-sword hilt. Broken as it was, his left arm never made it, but it did move away from his wound. The pirate changed his blow’s angle of attack on the fly.

Malicious’ sword dug into the King’s wound as Valori’s hand moved away, and pain was all that remained of

Duncan's world. He tried to keep his eyes level with the pirate scum's, but found his suddenly warm feet entangled in something wet and slippery, and he fell, losing the sword as his hands tried to stop his fall.

"Dammit!" The King heard the pirate curse. "Dammed Black Dragon Mushin form training... Well, my king, it seems fighting without a mind is great for reaction-time, but sucks if you want to take someone alive!" Malicious ended his tirade with two vicious kicks to the downed king's left ribs, certainly shattering more than one.

Duncan spat blood. "No medkit handy, Mal?" he sneered. He found it virtually impossible to draw breath after speaking, however.

It was good to be the king, Duncan said to himself again, some days.

Today...today it was enough to be a father for once, and die in his son's place.

The bitter cold soon faded. Then his wounds stopped their pounding. Duncan thought that a flurry of snow must be clouding his vision, as his sight faded to white.

☒# Chapter 7 - Night Falls

Kyrie "Blaize" Saturai wallowed in self-hating disappointment as she helmed her damaged five seat racing corvette back toward her isolated homeworld. She was seated forward of the other four bridge stations, the only seat on the lowest tier of the Flaire's bridge, half-surrounded by her huge integrated concave view-screen. The bottom quarter of that view-screen was graphically complaining about the Flaire's damaged systems, calling them out in angry red

icons.

Depressed, Blaize had gruesome images flash through her head of all her crew and friends dying before her eyes, exposed to the vicious vacuum of space as the ship was torn asunder. The race had almost ended all their lives. She had to get over this melancholia, she decided at once.

“Prince Morgan,” an announcer’s voice rang from one of the monitors behind Kyrie’s seat with the slightly unrealistic cast that a voice over any electronic devise created.

“Please, Ken,” a voice that Kyrie knew to be that of the Prince answered, “We use our gladiatorial names here. Call me Blackskull.”

“Of course, Prince...er, Blackskull. There was some controversy over whether you had used micro-jumps on several parts of the course.”

“Ridiculous! My corvette is even now being examined by the racing officials, who will confirm that there was no wrong-doing. This victory was simply superior House Valori engine design by my Uncle Dyssan Valori, and -of course- superior piloting.”

“PLEASE turn that off, Sammie!” Kyrie felt bile rise to her throat and -she really hated to admit this- a tear forming in her eye, she refused to turn her seat around as she normally would to address her friends and crew. “The very last thing I need right now is to hear Morgan Valori talking about how great he is.”

“But Kyrie,” Sammie -her communications officer- pleaded,

“Just because we were eliminated, doesn’t mean we don’t want to see the end of the races.”

“We know how it ends.” Kyrie responded, “With us out of the running, Prince Morgan ‘Blackskull’ sweeps the field, winning the thirty-sixth Alarian Star Gladiator Races. Cheater.”

“Kyr?” The sympathetic voice of Kyrie’s best friend, Jean Hays, seemed concerned. “The loss was tough, but something else is eating at you.”

“Jean, you know me too well. Never put friends on your crew, he said, I should have listened...”

“Who, Kyrie?”

“The same man who’s going to disintegrate me when we get back, and disavow my base DNA.”

“Gordon Xycor?”

“Yes, Jean.”

“Kyrie, he’s not just your sponsor, he’s also your uncle. Gordon will understand.”

“Understand?” Kyrie vented, finally spinning her seat to face her friends, “The most powerful and aggressive of all Alaria’s corporate magnates does not accept failure in his investments, or his family. Imagine being both!”

“Kyr,” Jean replied, “Gordon will be glad that you’re okay, and grateful even to Prince Morgan Valori for his part in that.”

“You really don’t know my Uncle X, Jean. He’ll be furious at me for causing him to hold a debt to the Prince. He especially hates the Valoris.”

“Why would he?” Sammie asked with the innocence of a much younger woman than she actually was.

“Uncle X believes that the Valori family has been responsible for holding Phoenix Corp back from being elevated to Lordship, full Household status, and a seat on the Parliament of Lords.”

“How could he expect to be made a Household?” Sammie let her mouth run off, as usual, Kyrie thought, “Phoenix is less than fifty years old! I mean, there are corporations that have been around for centuries...”

“Well,” Kyrie answered defensively, “You have to admit that Gordon Xycor -through Phoenix Corp- has done a hell of a lot more for Alaria than the Valori family has over the past five decades. Two out of every ten Alarians have some kind of Phoenix Implant, bio-grown or nano-built. All the Valoris make are starship engines and playboy princes!” Kyrie vented.

Moniquea at the Nav console chimed in, “Though... King Duncan Valori did pretty much create the Alarian Trade Alliance...”

“Which makes about thirty-percent of its profits from exporting Phoenix bio-tech!” Kyrie replied. “And he’s dead now, anyhow.” She became reflective for a moment, “He’s gonna be so mad! It was bad enough, on Cantus Day, Uncle

X took me to the ball at the Temple...”

“The Valori Royal Temple, that Temple?” Moniquea asked, excited by this tidbit.

“Yes, that Temple.” Kyrie responded.

“With the Queen?” Little blond Sammie bounced in her seat

“Yeah, our Kyrie even busted out in a sword fight right in front of said Queen... with one Prince Morgan Valori!” Jean was practically giddy with the gossip.

“Oooh, I heard a rumor about that, but I dismissed it when it didn’t make the Newsnet,” Said dark-haired Rajua, the Flare’s engineer.

“They suppressed that bit,” Jean answered.

“So that really happened? How mortifying!” Sammie declared.

“Actually,” Kyrie slowly admitted, “It was strange... after the fight, Uncle X treated me as if he’d never been prouder.”

An uncomfortable silence was broken when Sammie asked, “If you and Morgan fought a duel, how come one of you didn’t end up spitted?”

Jean answered again, “Morgan’s uncle stepped in.”

“You mean the Steel Duke?” Rajua looked up from her control panel.

Kyrie tried to take control of the conversation again, “You know, he’s mostly titanium, not steel.”

“Still...”

“Yeah, I can see how he’d be able to tear you two apart.” Jean was not yielding her conversational spotlight, “Why don’t you and Morgan just sleep together and get it over with?”

“JEANNIE!” Sammie was scandalized.

“What! He’s a prince, not a priest. Beside, our precious little Blaize is a total slut.”

After the rest of the crew gasped, Kyrie calmly replied, “Yes. Yes, I am.”

The small ship erupted in the laughter of women turned girls again.

“But Jeannie,” Sammie laughed, “What about Trevor?”

“What about that Terran gorilla?” Jeannie replied playfully.

“You wouldn’t have Kyrie cheat on him, he’s nice!”

“You two realize I’m still here on the bridge, right?” Kyrie interjected.

“Trevor’s a Terran,” Jeannie explained, “Kyrie’s swept up in the idea of having a lover from Mother Earth’s Terran Fleet. Just ‘cause we re-established contact with Earth a while back, Kyr’s got to be on top of fashion... but Terrans are Cro-Magnons, it won’t last.”

“Trevor’s a toy. Nothing more.” Kyrie advised her friends.

Sammie pursued, “Six months, though, Kyrie, that’s the longest you’ve...”

“He happens to be a very nice toy, is all...” Kyrie explained.

When the laughter died, the announcer could be heard once more. “In the second heat, Prince...er, Blackskull... there was the incident with Phoenix Corporation’s ship, the Flaire.”

Blaize tensed, and the whole crew remained silent.

“When you damaged the Flaire’s engine, knocking them out of the competition...”

“Now now, Ken,” Morgan ‘Blackskull’ interrupted the announcer, “We all know that interaction between ships in the first three heats is strictly forbidden. However, there is no sanction against interacting with the local astrogeology...”

“You mean the asteroid.” Ken commented.

“I mean the asteroid. All I did was move a local rock into a strategic position.”

“Which the Flaire hit, smashing their primary engine and knocking them out of control. Were you concerned that such tactics could lead to deaths... Blackskull?”

“This is a dangerous sport, Ken, deaths are by no means uncommon. But, as I’m sure you recall, I then used that same tractor beam to save the lives of Blaize and her Phoenix crew. Then I still went on to win that heat.”

“Oh, I am so going to kill him the next time I am within swords’ reach!” Kyrie released.

“You mean if the Steel Duke isn’t around to stop you.” Jeannie teased.

“He did save our lives...” Sammie half whispered as if it were blaspheme. No one seemed to hear her.

A warbling beep got Rajua’s attention, “We’re approaching the nebulae, Kyrie.”

“Rajua, how’s that keed engine holding up?” Kyrie asked as she spun back to her forward-facing piloting position. Kyrie had been fretting over the engine which formed the mass of the Flaire’s top aft section... and normally supplied the vast majority of the ship’s main power. Keed was the word for “primary” in the brand of Irish Gaelic language which had survived the centuries off-planet.

Rajua was a consummate professional again, “I’ve got keed completely down to warm-up level, Captain, one-percent. She started vibrating at twelve. Dara is taking up the slack perfectly, we should have no problems landing safely at Phoenix Compound.” Dara was the engine which composed the bottom rear of the corvette, the word meant ‘secondary’ in ancient Gaelic.

“Captain, we’re entering the Alarian system in four, three, two...”

“Come out of Pinhole, bring up main screen.” The main view-screen brought up the horizon of a beautiful blue-green globe, covered in energized glowing streaks of magenta, violet, and tealish Borealis effects as the planet’s magnetic field pushed through the planetary nebula’s en-

energized particles. Blaize turned her command chair to face Moniquea and Jean, behind her and to her left. Now facing away from the main screen, with her crew and friends before her, Blaize finally felt some sense of relief and completion, at least now she was home and surrounded by friends; whatever may happen with her uncle was karma now, no use worrying. “Welcome home, folks.”

But the eyes of Blaize’s crew were not upon their captain-friend. Each of her four crew-members were fixated on the screen behind their captain’s back. Several had their mouths agape, staring, almost as if screaming in a vacuum without sound. An unexplainable chill ran up Kyrie’s back, urgent yet denying. Something was terribly wrong, yet something else pleaded for her not to turn around and find out what it was. Then the short silence was broken by Sammy’s screaming, just as Blaize managed to burst out the word, “What...?”

Jean responded, “The view-screen, Kyrie!” Just as the Flair’s automated targeting systems began adding the ship’s screams to those of Sammy.

It had been a second at most that seemed phantasmagoric, then Kyrie forced herself to spin her command chair back to facing fore.

What she saw there defied the human mind. Literally. A gigantic void now sat in orbit above her home planet Alaria. A hole in space, as it were. A sphere of pulsating and undulating silvery nothingness which the human eye could register, but the human mind could not quite

comprehend. The closest thing Kyrie could compare it to was a chromed soap bubble... the size of a small continent, shimmering in Alaria's Auroralis Effect.

Then the next instant the sphere of emptiness vanished, but in its place was a sight even more terrifying: a cloud of huge steel warships of crude yet brutal design. Dozens, scores, visible but in an armada so dense that hundreds must have been lurking within what a moment ago had been the shimmering silver sphere.

"What in the realm of Hell's freezer...?" Blaize could no longer hear either her ship's alarms, nor the words or screams of her crew, her mind fixated on trying to comprehend the input from her eyes alone. Then she managed to clarify one detail at least, "Those... those are Terran cruisers!" The Terran fleet began to spread formation into a more disk-like shape, as those ships on the bottom edge began dropping huge iron rods down into the atmosphere of the beautiful world below them. Mere seconds had passed since the ships had appeared over her world, and the brutal attack had already begun. "Terrans... where did they come from?"

Dark iron rods -each two meters across- plummeted through Alaria's atmosphere, heating to red and white metal, streaking downward, leaving wakes like flares — then slamming to ground. Mass and velocity did as much damage to the areas struck as nuclear warheads could have, without contaminating the air and land for those that followed the attack with invasion.

With sudden decision, Blaize took command. “Combat Alert! Raj, get those engines to max power! Sammie, contact Phoenix Command, let them know we are about to engage. Jean, how many are there?”

Jean flung herself across the bridge to her seat, as she sat at the engagement-intel station, she nonetheless voiced her doubts. “Kyrie, need I remind you that we’re flying in a racing corvette designed to do no damage in combat; not to mention our own engine damage?”

“JEAN! THEY ARE BOMBARDING OUR HOME!” Blaize shouted, “Raj!”

Rajua came out of her stunned funk, “Keed Engine coming back on line now, Captain. I don’t know how much use she’ll be.”

“Jean... how many...?”

Jean worked her targeting computer controls in disbelief, “The computer’s still counting, Kyrie! It’s just not designed to handle more than five hundred targets...”

“Sammie, where’s my link to Phoenix Command?”

“Captain, Phoenix is not responding.”

”Try the other Houses... anyone down there!” Then a thought struck her, “Why aren’t we being barraged by distress calls?”

“Captain, all channels seem to be actively jammed... _every one, _except...”

The face of a Phoenix Corp rep came up in a com window within the main view-screen, “Captain Kyrie Saturai, this is Phoenix Command, do not engage. Repeat: you are not to engage Terran ships.”

“Like bloody Hell! Turn that thing off! Mon, I don’t need nav right now, get to work bringing the lasers back to combat strength.” Instantly, the communications window sputtered off into a disappearing white line, the Phoenix Rep. was gone.

Moniquea threw up new set of interfaces on her screen, showing power relays and transits, “I’ll have to re-route power around sanctioned systems — either that or burn out the racing inhibitors..”

“Just do it!”

The young navigator started clicking furiously, “Captain... even if I can do it, it will take time..”

“I’m taking us in there, *NOW!*” Kyrie turned to her best friend, “Jean, Historical Warfare class: do you remember how Admiral Baen turned his destroyer’s Tesla communication rod into a plasma weapon?”

“Baen’s Plasma Lance? That would require configuring the rod to create a targeted magnetic vortex — what would we use for plasma medium?”

“How much mass would it need?” Kyrie asked.

“A couple dozen kilograms at least.” Rajua answered, still working on the engines.

“We have the dummy missiles from the competition.” Jean suggested.

“Make it happen, folks. Sammie, help Jeanie, there’s no-one to talk to at the moment anyhow, turn the Tesla antenna into a Plasma Lance.”

“A Tesla-rod vortex will have practically no range with the Keed Engine at ten-percent. She’ll have virtually zero range, Kyrie...”

“That’s fine; we’ll fly right down their throats!” The fire of Blaize’s hair was now perfectly matched by her attitude. “Mon, plot for the closest cruiser, I’m piloting for ramming.”

Sammie was almost hysterical, “Holy Goddess... they’re... they’re leveling Alaria’s population centers! Adelaide, Taliesin, Avalon... *they’re all gone...!*”

“Jean, lock the main cannon and fire!”

“Damnit! Tesla -rod not responding, Captain!”

“Captain should I plot us a course out?”

“NO! Jean: fire that gun!”

”*Almost.....*“

“Jean... *JEAN!*”

”*NOW!*” Jean fired the missiles directly ahead of the ship, into the forming vortex.

Flaire’s top-mounted “tuning fork” shaped gun sparkled and a plasma beam erupted from it... just long enough to reach ahead of the FLARE no more than the distance of

half the ship's length. The missiles were turned to plasma in that energy vortex, and then the plasma was held in place by it, as the ship sped forward.

Like a harpoon being thrust into a whale, the Flaire followed the plasma sphere it was actively projecting, right into and all the way clean through the much larger Terran cruiser, easily twenty times the mass of the corvette.

"Yes!" Captain Blaize exulted. The plasma sphere died as the power to keep it in place diminished.

"Captain," Sammie reported, hands on controls, "Dozens of Alarian ships are lifting off from the surface. Sentinels, house destroyers, corporate flagships... they're coming to fight the Terrans!"

The Flaire banked and turned into combat with other cruisers, dodging return fire, opening fire with the side mounted lasers, which sliced apart another large Terran cruiser.

In the Flaire's veivscreen, the ship they first flew through exploded into wreckage that began the slow fall into the planet's atmosphere.

The Flaire continued to dodge, loop, and twist, come about and attack again, slicing open a third Terran cruiser with her side-mounted lasers. The Tesla cannon was starting to sparkle again when the small corvette was suddenly caught in a hazy energy beam, and stopped cold.

"Tractor beam!" Kyrie shouted, "The Terrans aren't even supposed to *have* tractor technology!" Kyrie tried desper-

ately to break free, “I have no helm control. Rajua, I need a power spike, now.”

“There’s nothing more, and if I spike Keed she’ll likely explode.”

“Captain!” Sammie gasped, “The Alaria ships, they’re all being torn to pieces!”

Kyrie could see that they were being pulled through a cloud of ships, ever deeper into the school of steel space whales. Again she had one of those moments of intuition bordering on precognition, telling her that they were about to reach the end of their forced march; this time they were the whale, having been speared, being pulled to their doom. “We’re dead if you don’t.”

Rajua sighed, “Aye, aye.” She began spiking controls, half her interface began glowing red.

The ship lurched forward a moment, then shuddered from a small explosion.

“That’s it, Keed’s dead and venting plasma, probably melted her fusion chamber. We only have Dara now.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Kyrie whispered.

“What?”

“We’re there.” They were indeed, they’d come to a stop, the tractor beam now holding them still in a space without cruisers nearby, they’d reached an empty central hub, like the eye of a storm. Kyrie rotated the main screen’s angle to the aft view.

“Oh goddess, no... anything but that...” Escaped Kyrie’s mouth with utter resignation. She heard the others gasp or curse in three languages. The screen was filled with a vision from Alarian prophecy: A ship that dwarfed all the hundreds of cruisers surrounding it, because it had brought them all with it casually, like a child might bring a bag of toys to a sleepover, Kyrie thought. It resembled not a ship at all, but more a massive space station; a construct orbiting a black hole not unlike the one that they’d seen the ships emerge from — a sphere of empty blackness which served as its power-supply and engine; an endless source of power.

“Jean, get the Tesla rod reconfigured to send a message again, and prep the pin-drive.” The Flaire’s sensor alarms began warning about a new threat nearby, a knife-like blade of plasma not unlike the one the Flaire had created but much more powerful, was closing in. “You’d better hurry.”

“Captain,” Rajua interrupted, “attempting to go to pin would surely rip us to shreds while we’re locked in a tracor...”

“We’re not going to pin-space, Raj, our broadcast message is. Can Dara open up a pin-hole?”

“For a moment only, half a minute at best.” Rajua reported.

Kyrie Saturai gazed at each of her friends, sadly. “I’m sorry I didn’t get you home.”

“Tesla rod relay ready, Kyrie...” Jean said, resignedly. The

blade of plasma seemed to circle the Flaire menacingly.

“Incoming message from...” Sammie couldn’t say the name.

“Incoming.”

“Don’t bother with their surrender demand. Bring up the pin-hole, Raj. Jean, target the rod into the singularity’s E.H., get ready to transmit.”

“Who are we sending to?”

“Address the Q-gate station at Miranda... they always monitor pin-space for emergency signals of lost ships. Once the signal is in Pin, it will be receivable all over the system, and shortly all over half the galaxy, anyone with ears or ships in pin-space will hear it.”

Both women nodded ready. Kyrie noticed that Moniquea had began to sob quietly. She keyed her command chair’s mic, “Attention, this is Kyrie Saturai of Pheon... of the Alarian Trade Alliance. Alaria is under attack by... a massive Terran fleet, their flagship is the Old Earth dreadnought Cantus Nocti...”

Kyrie saw the moment that followed as if in slow motion, as she would see it in nightmares for the rest of her life. A beam of light cut through the Flaire’s hull, slicing into the bridge behind the command chair, passing through and evaporating Jean and Sammie. Air pressure was lost in the Flaire, atmosphere vented. A bubble came down over the command chair and Blaize as she screamed. The command chair was ejected out of the bottom of the craft as she watched Moniquea and Rajua die from being “spaced”, and

her ship being torn asunder. Then a blinding flash.

Her little escape pod plummeted toward the planet's gravity well, having been accelerated by the Flaire's final explosion. Quickly Kyrie's mind flashed over to the little-studied specs on the escape pod. It was technically capable of re-entry -technically, if all conditions were perfect- and you were really very lucky. There couldn't be a single flaw in... then the Terran cruiser rammed her pod. The crysteel domed top was clearly cracked, and the bottom smashed in. Kyrie heard what little atmo she had in the tiny thing noisily venting. What had been her breath formed crystals outside the crack that sealed it for the moment.

When I hit atmo, that's gonna melt off in a flash... shortly thereafter so will I. She thought of her friends. *Guess it wont be long, now.* "See you all... soon." Kyrie sobbed.

Chapter 9 - Prince Valiant Valori

What was that? I blacked out again? How is it those Terran bastards keep missing us whensoever I so swoon?

I suppose it was only momentary, maybe I jiggle the FCS when I black-out? The crew's cheering again, they must think I'm doing it intentionally... bugger me if I'm going to tell them I didn't... that I'm actually loosing my...

Just fight, don't think, Morgan. Rather, think about the fight, not the other... things. Like the victims. Time for grief, later... maybe. If not, then I'll be with my bothers anyway. If. If the Powers allow me into the same hallowed halls as... STOP!

You are the last prince of Alaria! Concentrate on decorum – if these are to be your last moments, be royal!

Three days of constant flying and fighting with no sleep was making Prince Morgan loopy. Your emotions mayn't be trusted right now, and mustn't be allowed to... what was that? Is that the primary buffer panel? Stop! You've checked that at least sixteen times in half an hour... oh great Celtic gods... it's actually been half a day since that warning was thrown... Concentrate! They're firing again!

Morgan came back to himself once again, to the sounds of a cheering crew. They were exultant, but exhausted, as exhausted as he.

Morgan contemplated the expression that said we only truly come to terms with who we are when we are “shot out of an airlock.” Of course it was a metaphor, they meant when we are exposed to the fires of Hell, isolated under extreme duress. The prince found himself an emotional wreck and exhausted to boot, but thank the Heavens he had a vital and immediate mission to distract his every moment for those first three days after... Well, after what had come to be called Nightfall.

Oh there was rage, there - a great, seething rage that would outshine even Morgan’s sorrow once he completed his mission of hope. But at that moment the prince was tasked with protecting the stragglers of Admiral Orionis’ nascent Resistance Fleet. That more or less meant anyone who managed to make it into space over Alaria in any kind of ship, and had thereafter refused to surrender to the marauding Terran Legio Primani Fleet.

There were about a hundred Alarian souls -scattered amongst nine damaged ships- relying on their last remaining prince to see them through the Terran blockade, to some kind of relative safety.

The prince took the job -which he had volunteered for- very seriously. Not only were these his people —literally, now that he was the last remaining royal who hadn’t surrendered—but the fact that the job had afforded him the opportunity to kill a few hundred Terran spacemen certainly sweetened the pot.

Once more Prince Morgan Valori, plunged his sole small

ship into a group of much larger, more heavily armed invaders, like a mad mother sparrow driving a group of larger crows from her nest. So far the impossible was happening; I still lived to fight, pass after pass.

The Terrans were wasting allot of rail gun ammo, and loosing ships that outweighed our corvette -the Ballista- up to a hundred to one. But the edge of the Swamp was fast approaching; a part of the Solara Nebula where the Terrans would be fool-hardy to follow. Soon the damaged ships they were screening from Terran attack would make the denser parts of the gaseous cloud, enough free-floating iron and other heavy elements that Terran targeting would go from difficult to impossible. In the Swamp, the invaders' ships would be at odds against even returning to their fleet over Alaria.

Morgan's mind was racing, but he would occasionally blank out -fatigue he figured- and at any moment he expected to find himself as dead as the rest of his family. Would they welcome his with open arms, Morgan wondered? _Me: the prince who may have doomed his entire world? _

But, time and again, as Morgan 'awoke' he found that the Terrans had lost ground in his 'fugue.' Time and again his little crew -as addled from sleeplessness as he himself- would be uttering phrases at their stations behind him such as 'did you see that?,' '...unbelievable!' or 'how did that shot miss us?'

Morgan, however, when he could spare a moment to think

about something other than dodging, attacking, strike-and-withdraw, was finding depths to his mind that the prince had never before experienced in his twenty-one years.

Morgan can see his losses, his planet, his brothers dead, his mother hostage or worse, but why could he not mourn them yet? He decided that his current responsibility was to my living subjects, and that mourning would come soon. Then the Terrans had better watch their gray steel bellies!

The Ballista, forty tons of state of the art technology—sleek, beautiful and fast—was designed by his Uncle Dyssan Valori for racing in the Sport of Royalty; but this flight was no game. The weapons fired at Morgan's ship that day were Terran rail gun rounds moving at a 'significant percentage of the speed of light'—as Morgan's other Uncle Crispin might have said—instead of the usual low powered lasers he was used to being targeted by, tuned for audience enjoyment more than for combat. And this run was the longest his crew and he had ever endured; he had been flying my little crew ragged since the Terrans had attacked Alaria, over three standard days ago.

The lead ships of the Terran task force which pursued the damaged Sentinel ships tried a final push to catch and eat their elusive prey; they knew they were slower than this sparrow fluttering in their midst, but they had more speed than some of the flock it was protecting. The lead Terran ship made for the Ballista, but this time when Morgan's smaller ship turned into them to distract them, only the lead ship followed, the next two Terran cruisers made for

the fleet of broken Sentinel ships, and pressed full burn.

The final two followed their leader, attempting to flank the Ballista. The single corvette could not distract two groups of ships at once, and three Terran Cruisers now stood between them and their charges. The two other cruisers moved out from their leader's path, Morgan figured to be better able to intercept them if they ran back toward their broken fleet.

"Talon!" Morgan cried out loud enough for those behind him to hear clearly.

"Yessir!" Nathan 'Talon' Balthazar—Morgan's best friend and co-pilot in the Racing season—responded. *Completely unlike him to call me 'sir,'* thought Morgan, "They still mine asteroids around these parts, too, don't they?"

"Some, Morgan, but we're not yet in the Swamp where the mining mostly—"

"That's okay, Talon, just try and find me a rock. Remember what we did to Blaize's Flare last week in the semi-finals?"

"You're gonna hope they weren't watching, then?"

"We just re-established contact with Terra...I don't think they are up to speed with our sports shows, yet. Axe! Forget the guns for now, convert the Tesla rod to gravomag configuration."

The huge man's name was Michael Rosen, the prince handed him the name Axe when he chose his own and Talon's. He never spoke much, so when he asked, "Trac-

tor?” Morgan knew he had doubts about trying the maneuver.

“Yeah, get ready for a rock-fight!” Fatigue gave way to yet another second-wind for the prince. He still experienced that tiredness that seemed to burn behind his eyes, but at least he wasn’t about to pass out from exhaustion now. Reality of their odds started to strangle his optimism again. Somewhere behind his burning eyes Morgan wondered if the pain would end with his life. Or would the burning just have started?

“I got one!” Talon reported, then he became grave as the stats of the rock he’d found became apparent. “No, we can’t use that one; its mass almost matches ours!”

“Perfect,” Morgan replied, “I’m heading for her — slightly a-starboard.”

“But, sir, its mass... the simple physics...”

“You think I don’t know simple physics, my friend? I don’t have time to explain... trust me!” Morgan glanced over his shoulder as Talon and Axe looked at each other and shrugged.

“Yessir!” Talon yelled.

Morgan was already doing the math in his head, but there was an unknown quantity... he didn’t have time to establish the rock’s exact trajectory. They’d need luck. Morgan felt that surge of unreasoning glee come on again, and he yelped.

Morgan sped the Ballista toward the asteroid, setting up as much energy-as-velocity as he could.

“Passing in five...” Talon kept track

“Axe... as we pass!” I yelled back.

Morgan tipped her starboard just as they passed, and waited for the lurch that indicated lock-on.

“Now passing!” Talon yelled.

As the pilot Morgan felt the tell-tale lurch in his FCS, despite Alarian technology creating a magnetic bubble that shrouded them from the great mass of the acceleration change.

“Got it!” Axe yelled. The Tesla rod on the forefront of the Ballista caught the asteroid in a magnetic-gravitic net of energy which it usually used to create and contain a pin-hole sized singularity out ahead of the corvette’s bow.

He yanked the controls hard to port. The Ballista and the asteroid exchanged momentums as they passed, throwing the Ballista around to a trajectory almost opposite to its previous one, and actually speeding her up in the process. As a result, the asteroid also changed position, practically exchanging places with the Ballista. At the apex of the arc, Morgan slammed the override releasing the magnetic net... an act that would amount to suicide if it had been sporting its usual cargo: a small black hole.

On the screen’s split that showed the aft arc, all eyes in the Ballista were locked on the lead Terran cruiser. She saw

the trap, but the Terran space pig had no time to avoid it, just barely attempting an oblique burn, she started turning as the asteroid slammed into the starboard side of her bow, and ripped its way down her flank, opening her to space as it spun her carcass around... slamming her into the second Terran cruiser. They looked like toys thrown around by a giant.

The third Terran cruiser started the long process of stopping, likely to render aid.

The crew of the Ballista cheered, all except for Morgan, his mind had moved on to the next challenge. "Heading for the flock, brace for micro-jump!" The singularity that formed the core of Alarian pin-drive formed for only a split-second at the pilot's command, forcing them in and out of the pocket dimension so quickly that Morgan wouldn't have known it had happened at all, except that the view from the main-screen abruptly changed. Now the Ballista was off the sterns of the two remaining Terran cruisers. Those cruisers were quickly closing on the prince's charges.

"Axe, light up one of their engine rooms."

"Aye-aye!"

The Ballista's lasers -which would have been useless against that heavy steel armor, focused on the relatively small egress port of one of their engines. Technically, this wouldn't really 'light up their engine room' -Morgan knew-as that was somewhat deeper within the hull, but it would add a lot of heat to the inner walls of the cruiser's fusion generation

plant, when the ship was already pushing things to full-burn.

In less than a minute, the first Terran ship's engine shut down. The added friction of passing through the iron-rich nebulae started to slow her down right away. The last undamaged enemy cruiser turned and ran for the main Terran fleet over Alaria.

Now Morgan cheered. He yelled after the fleeing craft, "Avaunt, thou hateful villain, get thee gone!" And then he promptly passed out.