

The Rings of Alyria

by

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The cockpit was quiet save for the steady humming and soft clicking of the recently upgraded machinery. Quiet, that is, until the loud static of the intercom burst alive with reveling and commotion. “*Tjuk eep dau veranao Alyria,*” the automatic translation module popped on not long after. “...welcome you again, and for the final time to the Yesan-Five system’s favorite intergalactic piloting event; *The Rings of Alyria*, for this final time now dubbed marvelously as *Race Around the Heart of a Dying Star*. Now I don’t need to tell all of you fine folks about the absolute wonders of...”

Dax shut the intercom down with the click of a switch and sighed. “It’s not a star, it’s a dwarf-planet, you idiot,” he rubbed his temples. “Besides, I don’t need anyone commenting on my flying today. If I did, I’d engage *your Obsyyrian* to Earth-English speech probe, right Tenebrae?” Dax stood up from the comfortable captain’s chair and gently put his hand against the sides of the small cockpit walls, they buzzed and jittered in anticipation. “How are you doing, mate? Are you ready for the big one today? I tell you this could be our ticket out of here. No more races, how’d you like that?”

A sharp melancholic melody echoed throughout the chambers and hallways of the living ship. Tenebrae agreed, Dax knew this, there was no greater importance than making the finish of this edition of *The Rings of Alyria* first. The remaining pilots and their living bio-mechanical partner ships would surely be reduced to atoms the moment the implosion at the heart of the dying planetoid triggered.

Dax wandered back into his chair and started the navigation protocols. The series of tiny, harmless electronic pulses were linked directly with the Tenebrae’s brain, allowing the ship computer to input calculations, actions and reactions faster than any living organism could come up with itself. From the thick Thura-glass windows Dax could see the massive void of deep space stretch out into infinite before him. Some distant systems blinked in- and out of existence every several seconds while slightly to the right of his vantage point the dark flashes of antimatter eating up the reality around it marked the grim future of the Yesan-Five Quasar. Once a system brimming with life, now it was a mere galactic graveyard on the brink

of non-existence. It's last remaining world was Alyria, and it would be devoured in precisely three-minutes and forty-one seconds local time. The fastest possible lap around the rings at top speed for a pro-pilot with an exceedingly powerful partnership was estimated at around fifty-six seconds. The race was set to start one minute before total system collapse.

You get in, make the lap and jump into hyperspace the moment you break that finish-line. Too slow and you'll get eaten by the Yesan black hole. You chicken out and jump out before hitting the finish, they'll hunt you down and feed you to the Grues for breach of contract. Either way it's getting swallowed by something nasty or eternal glory and riches, Dax reminded himself.

Dax checked the chronometer; it estimated around twenty-eight seconds local Alyrian time until the start of the race. "Better get going, Tenebrae buddy," he hollered and pulled the hyper drive clutch. The giant anthropoid entity floating in dead silent space wavered for a second before blinking away.

Tenebrae flashed back into real-space and the spectacle of Alyria appeared in front of the clicking-and clacking ship in full view. The soundless pulsing of the brown-and purple planet vibrated through the thin atmosphere; while the countless asteroids lining the silver and gold belt of the rings of Alyria reflected brightly the system's twin-galaxy's sun, Yesan-Four, equally doomed for inevitable destruction.

Tenebrae floated down towards the starting line and nestled itself between the rest of the countless glory-seeking pilots and their bio-mechanical wonders. Many of the ships were Obsyrian in origin, like Tenebrae. Others were Nautilian, easily recognized by their huge spiral-like exoskeletal armor. One or two of the ships appeared Arichidean and looking as nightmarish creatures fitting the terrifying stories about the planet cluster they originated from. Dax tried not to look at the horrific ships too much. He checked his chronometer, ten seconds before start.

Around him, Dax could now see a lot of familiar-looking starships gather. Many of the pilots were well-known, or even notorious racers, around the entirety of the known- and explored universe. Amongst others, Dax had recognized the ships of the Jupiterian Lovar Ajeesnogh, the Molamar-descendant Muuhr Majick and, to Dax's dismay, he also saw the Darkheart appear just above him to the left. The Darkheart was the ship of Dax's rival Halimar Thorop, a human born on the fringes of the first Mars-Colonies.

As expected, the intercom-link blinked red indicating a transmission. Dax reluctantly accepted, knowing fully well who it was.

“Surprised to see you here Novacloud,” the coarse and mocking voice of Halimar Thorop rang through the cockpit. “I’d expected you to run off like a baby after hearing the stakes of the final *Rings of Alyria* match, you know you don’t stand a chance of beating the Darkheart, right?”

Dax continued prepping Tenebrae for launch while listening to Halimar rant on. “Well, either way the cookie crumbles, Thorop,” he laughed. “Whether I win or lose I can take pleasure in the fact that I never have to speak to you again. Now I’d wish you good luck but we both know you only fight dirty, so screw you and see you never.” Dax ended the comlink and disabled the communications module.

Five seconds to launch.

Dax flicked on the Shield generator and clamped the mask that would provide him with oxygen and a special stimulant heightening his senses to his face. Tenebrae’s singing softly murmured through the metal-encased insides of his enormous mass hovering in-between the shimmering rocks of Alyria’s rings.

“Last one, big guy.” Dax shouted over the roar of the ship’s engines. He could barely hear Tenebrae whistling in agreement.

Zero seconds. Dax pulled the accelerator nearly down to the floor and the Tenebrae sped off together with the countless other brave pilots giving their all for a final shot at glory. One minute to total planetary destruction.

Two things ran through Dax’s head the first seven of seconds after the green neon lights signaled the start of the race. One; the pulling of the Yesan-Five Quasar had seemingly slightly altered the electromagnetic field of the asteroid belt. This changed the trajectory of each individual space rock and made the swoops through and around the belt a whole new challenge by itself. And two; After having witnessed Muuhr Majick’s poor ship unceremoniously slam against the side of an asteroid in the first two seconds due to a pulse wave from the Darkheart indicated that the scoundrel Thorop was indeed playing dirty, as expected.

The Tenebrae made a gallant pass swerving a click left then immediately two clicks right and emerged unscathed from the first danger-cluster. Dax eyed the nav-comp for a split second. Around half the pilots did not make it through the cluster. The radar screen indicated about a dozen ships now closing in on the Tenebrae’s location. About five pilots sped ahead of the Tenebrae, Dax calculated they were about two-point-eight-six seconds behind the fastest possible time for the lap.

“We’re not going to make it like this, Tenebrae old buddy, time for the big guns.” The ship hummed in anticipation, Dax pulled the clutch of the booster-module and the Tenebrae exploded forwards. Within a few seconds Dax had circumnavigated the second danger cluster entirely and managed to bypass the Nautilian ship Hera, piloted by Paruk Olympia from the Hope-beacon nebulae and the filth-covered and tendriled Arichidean ship the Slaughterhouse, which was piloted by a being only known as The Butcher.

The Slaughterhouse lived up to its name, for one of the security cameras revealed the Arichidean ship literally *biting* into the Hera sending the burning- and bleeding Nautilian crashing into the Alyrian atmosphere. The ship’s desperate cries made Dax shiver and he could hear a frightened bellow from Tenebrae.

Thirty-five seconds until total planetary annihilation.

Dax swallowed hard. He had been in some brutal races before, but he’d seen nothing like this. The absolute fight for survival, giant living starships engaged in heated battle to the death while in less than a minute time the last planetoid of the Yesan-Five system would be swallowed up by the most destructive force the known universe had ever seen. The worst part was that it was all for the amusement of the rich and powerful. But Dax couldn’t have passed this opportunity up. Winning meant retirement, away from the fast and dangerous world of galactic races and off towards whatever his clean slate would come up with.

The Tenebrae bolted past two more ships heading into the third danger-cluster of the asteroid belt. In a few seconds, the hardest part of the Alyria run would come up. From this side of the planet just up until the a few clicks from the finish line the pilots would have to go in blind. Yesan-Five’s twin galaxy Yesan-Four’s blinding sun would be in view straight ahead, this made the last part of the run especially dangerous, leading the pilots to put their trust in their ships and their respective navigation prowess and reactionary abilities.

Sure enough, as soon as the remaining ships made the swoop into the third cluster the Obsyrian vessel just behind Dax immediately crashed and went up into flames.

Twenty-four seconds until total planetary annihilation.

Dax watched the nav-computer eagerly, the radar revealed Thorop’s ship just a few clicks ahead. Dax couldn’t do anything except for trusting Tenebrae to get him through. He was only zero-point-six seconds behind the best possible time. He knew he could make it, this was his final shot, it was now or never.

Dax jolted up as the swift tickle of a knife poked the side of his throat. Behind him a woman with purple hair and sharp ears emerged and threw off her Shimmer-steel cloaking device.

“Never a boring job,” Dax whispered. “Go on, what do you want?” Despite the danger he kept a close eye on the nav computer, he was just a click behind Thorop.

Thirteen seconds until total planetary annihilation.

“Halimar Thorop sends his regards,” the woman hissed, she pressed the knife in deep. “Slow your ship down.”

“You know,” Dax started. “Halimar never was the curious type, was he? He never did ask me what upgrades I installed before the big race. So how could he know I had a stealth detector tracking you the moment you set foot on Tenebrae, right?”

The woman gasped as Tenebrae’s living power tendrils wrapped around her feet and slammed her body hard against the steel plating of the ship’s floor.

Nine seconds until total planetary annihilation, five seconds until the finish line.

The Tenebrae was now neck and neck with the Darkheart. Every other ship was either gone or so far behind it didn’t matter.

The woman screamed as Tenebrae’s paralyzing grip threw her into the ship’s escape pod. Dax went for the comlink and patched it through to the pod. “Tell Halimar I don’t do regards, but once in a while *I* can play dirty too.” He then punched the release and sent the escape pod flying into the side of the Darkheart, which stammered a tick before slamming sideways into an oncoming asteroid.

The Tenebrae blasted over the finish line and just before jumping to hyperspace Dax could see the white-hot flash of the Yesan-Five system implode out of existence behind him.

As the ship re-emerged back into real-space a couple of moments later it hovered alone for a while and Dax turned on the Obsyrian to Earth-English communication probe. He listened to the ship gentle and relieved bellowing and nodded. “That’s right, old buddy. We’re going... we’re going home.”