

Gravity Poisoning

by Loren L. Coleman

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Gravity lurched in a sickening twist as the *Excalibur*-class DropShip *Blue Corona* powered through a tight turn. Subaltern Eric Domingo breathed sharp and shallow. Warning klaxons rang inside the launch tube. Lights dimmed to emergency, washing his F-92 *Stingray* in a bath of bloody red. Navigation blinkers on the leading edge of the aerospace fighter's forward-sweeping Canard wings flashed amber on the left, crimson on the right.



Eric counted the flashes. Tightened his grip on the joystick. He felt the blast panel lever up behind him, shaking the launch tube as it slammed into place. Eric pinched his throat mic and locked it open.

"Afterburners," he said, goosing his throttles wide open. The launch tube filled with a bright, torch-light burn as his drive flare splashed against the thick ferrosteel blast plate and shattered into yellow-orange flames.

The *Blue Corona* had barely completed its roll when the order came. "Ready-five, Ready-six, launch."

He braced for it, which he knew did no good whatsoever. Then his spine slammed deep into the cushioned crash seat as the DropShip's catapult system grabbed his *Stingray* and yanked the sixty ton fightercraft down the short launch tube in one quick, violent thrust. He noticed a second drive flare emerging parallel to his as his wingman was also ejected into space.

Darkness, pierced by distant stars. His cockpit's polarized glass glowed with a gray haze and he glanced up. The local sun blazed regally at his twelve o'clock, just peaking over a planetary horizon New Avalon, wearing a fiery crown. He "fell" up towards its atmosphere, still pushing the momentum left by the *Blue Corona*. Once oriented, Eric pulled his "Slantback" craft over and around, turning away from the capital world of the Federated Suns.

Shoving his throttle full forward, he quickly ate up that momentum and then raced back to the fight he had hoped so desperately to avoid.

Prince Victor Steiner-Davion had come to New Avalon.

And Katrina's loyalists were in retreat.

No one in the Twenty-second Avalon Hussars, Eric's unit, had doubted that Victor would come. Not even Marshal Donna Iona, as staunch a loyalist as one could hope to find, dismissed it. The Hussars saw too much heavy fighting, lost too many good men and women while battling their way across the Federated Suns to come to Katrina's defense, to believe that Victor's camp would suddenly lose heart. When Tikonov fell during the sixth wave, the Hussars had been mopping up remnants of the Seventh FedCom RCT on Talon. Victor's video address arrived and was quickly broadcast by subversive news channels all over the planet. In it, the rogue prince once more laid out his reasons for the civil war. Why he continued to fight.

Why it was worth the cost, no matter how painful, "to tear away the veils and expose tyranny where it has dressed itself in self-righteous garments. We began this journey knowing the costs would run high. We continue it now," he promised. "Whatever can be done must be done, and *will* be done, to see this through.

"And to Katherine," he'd said directly into the camera, "my sister. Murderess. Usurper. Tyrant." He nodded. Once. A curt promise. "Your end is near."

The following riots in most major cities on Talon had kept the Hussars busy for weeks.

Everyone heard Victor's conviction. They talked about it openly in the mess halls and at strategic planning sessions. But though he did not talk about it, Eric Domingo worried that he heard the faint stirrings of something else in the prince's words.

Truth.

But truth wasn't going to armor him against the hostile lasers and missiles of Victor's aerospace corps. Eric's wingman pulled his own *Stingray* alongside, feathering his engine to keep just off Eric's wing. The two of them joined a host of loosely-spread two-fighter elements, scissoring back and forth through vacuum.

Eric's heads up display was a jumble of icons and information tags. Gold for forces loyal to the Archon-Princess. Red for Prince

Victor and his allies. Fightercraft of both persuasions swarmed in a large tangle ahead, creating a wall that divided the retreating loyalist DropShips from the recently-ended WarShip battle. Through the middle of that knot plowed an *Avalon*-class cruiser, the *FCS Melissa Davion*. Prince Victor's flagship. The prince led his invasion fleet forward, pushing the massive dogfight ahead of him. Toward New Avalon's atmosphere.

"*Lucifers*," Subaltern Patyr Orullian warned. "Breaking away from the pack at eleven o'clock high."

"Keep them off us," their flight commander back aboard the *Blue Corona* ordered. The DropShip was one among several dozen running for the safety of New Avalon, their massive drive flares cutting across the blackness of space.

Hundreds of potential targets clouded his HUD. He was supposed to find...there! Two red comets with stubby tails, angling down at him. 16K *Lucifer II*'s according to the data tag. Too far away for their standard lasers, the fighters spread out in front of them an umbrella of long-ranged missiles. A warbling tone rang through Eric's cockpit as missile-lock grabbed his *Stingray*.

Pitching down sharply, saving his countermeasures, Eric then rolled back up into a steep line of attack that slid him and his wingman under the missile barrage. From long range, he probed out with the extended-range PPC built into the nose of his craft. An ionized stream of particles flashed out in a burst of ball-lightning, reaching for the lead *Lucifer*.

Patyr relied on wing-mounted lasers instead, slashing angry red knives at the exposed underbelly of his target.

"First blood," Patyr called out as his lasers splashed armor away from the undercarriage. Eric's particle cannon missed.

The allied craft adjusted their attitude, pitching down to slash at the rising *Stingrays*. Head to head, the sixty-five ton *Lucifers* owned a slight advantage with their assault-class missile systems and a better array of close-in weaponry. Eric's edge was in range, so he tied his lasers and particle cannon together for a second distance shot, then toggled for a full spread as the fightercraft flashed toward each other like bullet trains on the same track.

His lasers cored into the lead *Lucifer*'s starboard wing, right behind those of Patyr who had rightly judged that combining firepower might help bring down one of the fighters quickly. Patyr's PPC scat-

tered arcs of energy along the underbody. Eric smashed his ball of manmade lightning right into the *Lucifer's* nosecone. The erupting energy tore long rents down the *Lucifer's* smooth lines.

Globules of molten composite splattered back over the cockpit's ferroglass.

More by instinct than plan, Eric dampened his engines and channeled extra plasma through his forward attitude jets. Yanking back on the joystick, he pulled the nose up in a zero-gravity reverse pitch just as the *Lucifer's* weapons hammered into him. Missiles cratered the armor beneath his portside wing and stabilizers, shaking the *Stingray* with short, sharp jabs. A fury of large and small laserfire sliced deep into the nose and underbody, burning away armor but unable to penetrate with such a widespread damage pattern.

And then Eric was standing vertically in relation to the *Lucifer*, flashing beneath it, still reaching to flip the Slantback fightercraft onto its back as he triggered his full weapons spread.

Lasers ripped open the *Lucifer's* underbody, and ionized energy poured into the rents as his PPC hammered in the deathblow. White-hot lightning carved into the fusion reactor, shattering containment. Golden fire erupted along seams and burst out of popped rivets. It filled the cockpit with an unearthly light, and then was quickly extinguished as the vacuum of space doused the reaction.

A blackened, dead husk rode momentum forward in the lead *Lucifer's* place. Its wingmate banked away, running for the safety of the allied fleet.

"Burned armor and some aileron damage," Patyr reported as Eric pulled his *Stingray* through the reverse pitch. The *Lucifers* had divided their fire, and their effectiveness.

Pushing his throttle half open, trimming his craft, Eric swallowed dryly and did a quick three-point check. Gauges: good. Armor: burned but adequate. HUD: "Roll out!" he yelled.

Patyr peeled away left, Eric right. Between them a crippled *Stuka* tumbled past, end over end, bleeding sparks from its savaged underbody.

Separated on divergent paths, both *Stingrays* dove into the body of the advancing dogfight. Lasers flashed by with sharp, violent edges. Particle cannon jettisoned one ionized ball of energy after another. Missiles launched in haste were just as likely to throw a

deadly screen over one of your own fighters, as Eric learned when a loyalist *Chippewa* dumped a flight of LRMs into his path.

He smashed through the wall of warheads and shrapnel, juking left and right to spread the damage evenly over his front profile. On the far side he attempted to slide back around onto his wingman's trail, but a sheaf of short-ranged missiles stuttered into his tail as a V20 *Corsair* latched onto his six.

Rolling through the firefight, trying to shake the allied pilot, Eric felt a cold weight settle into his gut. This was it. His dues for staying with the Hussars after Talon, even when he was no longer sure he believed in the cause for which they fought. How close had he come to making a decision against Katrina? Not forty-eight hours ago he had stood in formation with his mates of the Thirty-second Tactical Air Wing, assembled in a large aerodrome hangar while Commander Saule Rosenberg pepped the team.

Against a backdrop of last-minute welds and aerospace fighters being ranked in row after row of flight-ready birds, she relayed news of other loyalist victories on Dalkeith and Hesperus II and Acamar.

"No word from Tharkad, yet," the White Witch said, "but the Royal Guard aren't about to let the Lyran capital fall, and the Twenty-second Hussars will help keep New Avalon under its rightful rule as well. We're here for the Archon-Princess. We're here to hold Victor Steiner-Davion *off...this...world.*"

Applause thundered through the hangar, echoing back from the open rafters. Eric clapped along with the rest, but glanced around cautiously wondering if he was the only one not caught up in the fervor. He saw two others also taking a surreptitious look around, but he couldn't know how many were searching for kindred souls, and how many were taking names. Word had it that Marshal of the Armies Jackson Davion now sat under house arrest in the palace compound. And there were rumors, credible ones, of officers and enlisted personnel disappearing from the ranks.

Eric applauded harder.

He had also thanked his stars when he drew position as one of the *Blue Corona's* back-up ready pilots, ready to drop out at a key tactical point or—fates defend the Archon-Princess!—to cover a retreat. Eric had silently wished for Victor to give up, pull back from the New Avalon system, even though he knew the prince would never do it.

Now he'd pay for that cowardly thought with his life. Eric tasted a metallic dryness at the back of his throat. Dead man flying. That was him.

But instead the *Corsair* wavered, tried to break away, and then exploded into a small, tight ball of burning metals and incandescent gasses.

"Coming down in your six," Patyr said, spiraling his *Stingray* through the *Corsair's* devastated remains. "Where away?"

A flush of relief tingled on his skin, though it did not penetrate far enough to remove the lead weight from his guts. Eric wrenched his stick over, yawed for a tighter turn, and quickly powered forward to bleed away momentum while searching to point his nosecone at the nearby planet. His flightsuit pressured up around his legs, restricting blood flow.

"New Avalon," Eric said. The two Slantback pilots raced forward under full thrust, edging out onto the dogfight's leading front. New Avalon was a dark body floating out in space with a blue-green crescent thickening up on the equator as the sun fully rose above the horizon. The retreating DropShips had already made their deceleration turns, and were falling into atmosphere.

"We've given the *Corona* enough of a head start." And staying far out in front of the advancing WarShip might actually prolong both their lives another day. They could slingshot around the horizon, and work on their decel maneuvers once out from under the big guns.

A plan which nearly survived to planetary orbit.

In space-born combat, speed was everything. Too little, and you were laser-bait. Too much poured on for too long, and maneuvers stretched out on such grand, arcing paths that you'd get one fly-by and then be out of the fight for several long minutes. But if your only goal was to harass a retreat started far in advance of your position, a pilot simply juiced his engines and poured a long acceleration burn into the velocity bank.

Which was how four *Corsairs* raced up from behind the *FCS Melissa Davion*, speared through the still-roiling dogfight, and slammed onto the tail of the two *Stingray* fightercraft before they could react. "Lock. I'm locked," Patyr had time to yell.

Four pair of large lasers chewed into the aft section of his Slantback, slagging armor and exhaust ports, probing deep into

the propulsion system with angry, red knives. A ball of red-gold fire engulfed the back of Patyr's *Stingray*, chewing its way forward as the fusion reaction ate up anything that even remotely resembled fuel. The burning was no less terrifying to Eric for its silence. A shockwave. A roar of flames. Anything that might have warned him of how lucky he'd been. Except for the flip of a coin, that could have been his fate.

Still could be. Two of the *Corsairs* pulled into a high orbit of New Avalon while two others yawed around to face their burners toward the planet, decelerating to match speeds with Eric's fighter. Their lasers sliced through the empty heavens, crisscrossing in front of his nose, his cockpit, missing on the high-speed deflection shot.

Eric clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw muscles pained him. He nosed his *Stingray* up, pulling his crosshairs over one of the *Corsairs*. His PPC blast caught it in the forward fuselage. His lasers sliced deep into the starboard wing, boiling armor into a gray mist.

The *Corsairs* drifted too far forward, out of Eric's weapon range. His hand hovered over his throttle. No. They continued to decelerate, trusting their two-on-one tactics. Eric should have been turning for an atmospheric insertion burn as well. New Avalon grew very large in the window. He waited, crosshairs burning a steady red imprint, then flashing between red and gold as he acquired partial lock. He gave it three heartbeats.

It wasn't supposed to be Patyr! His wingman had saved his life even after Eric had all but given it up. The Hussars had been running for home. Had it truly been necessary?

Yes. In a civil war, every life cost both sides deeply. But a life spared hurt double on the day after, or the next, when there is one more laser or missile system pointed back at your side.

Eric squeezed into his shot just as the targeting reticle burned a deep golden tone. His nose-mounted particle cannon tagged the *Corsair* again, this time blasting a large jagged scar down the nosecone, while the lasers on each wing worked the main fuselage without mercy. Something slipped through the *Corsair's* armor. Its drive flare sputtered, then died. It raced ahead of its partner, which continued to decelerate.

In the clutches of New Avalon's gravity, the wounded *Corsair* sped toward its inevitable, fiery death. There was nothing the allied pilot could do except fall into the planet's embrace.

Pilots called it “gravity poisoning.”

Eric stood on his port thrusters, spinning his *Stingray* on its horizontal axis to start a belated decel burn. He hit his afterburners, poured it on, and nine gravities of weight pinned him into his seat. His shoulder blades and neck ached with high-G stress. The air bladders in his flight suit maxed out to keep all the blood from flowing south, but still his vision tunneled down to a blur of instrumentation lights and stars.

The allied pilot, with maneuvering velocity, bracketed him with lasers and then missiles. The *Stingray* bucked and shook, but its armor held up.

Then it slammed ass-first into the upper atmosphere, and it felt as if a giant hand had swatted the backside of Eric’s brain.

A board short-circuited inside an instrumentation panel, shooting white-hot sparks into his lap. Several burned through the legs of his flight suit, stinging him like angry wasps. The ozone stench of carbon and melted insulation filled the cockpit, doused a moment later by acrid flame retardant sprayed by his automated systems. Several status indicators went dark as Eric lost navigation lights, his IFF transponder, and landing gear.

Wrenching over, standing on his thrusters, Eric pulled his craft around to get the belly pointed downward before the thickening atmosphere tore his fighter apart. He was still coming in hot. A reddish-orange nimbus glowed at the edge of his wings, up along the fuselage, danced at the fore of his cockpit hatch. He wrestled with both hands on the stick, fighting the turbulence of transition between space and atmosphere. Reverse thrusters helped him bleed off more momentum.

His airspeed dropped, and the shaking lessened.

Eric switched over to atmospheric flight, using tail, elevators and ailerons now instead of thrusters and attitude jets.

Far, far below, New Avalon’s northern continent rolled over into morning. Eric took an eyeball reckoning, and turned onto a new glide path which he knew would eventually bring him in over ocean and then Rostock’s Drilands. He’d have to crank open his landing gear manually, or at worst suffer through the humiliation of a bellyflop touchdown, but such efforts paled after a shaky re-entry. Eric began to breathe a bit easier.

And then a hammer fell out of the sky, slamming hard into the fuselage just behind Eric's cockpit.

The remaining *Corsair*, dropping down from above Eric, latched onto his tail with the tenacity of a Lyran-trained pit bull. Lasers struck out again, splashing armor into a fiery rain that trailed back from his wounded *Stingray*. A six-pack of short-ranged missiles corkscrewed in on twisted contrails of gray smoke. Eric dumped over, rolling out of their immediate path and then pointed his nose at the pastel-blue beneath him and *dived*.

Bloody-minded Davionist!

It wasn't enough that Katrina's loyalists were in retreat or that the four-*Corsair* team had claimed another life just short of atmosphere. It didn't matter that Eric regretted launching from the *Corona*, and even setting foot on New Avalon when something deep inside him had argued against any further involvement with the civil war. This pilot wanted another kill. He was willing to chase Eric down into atmosphere to get it.

Eric didn't plan on making it so easy, though. Not after Patyr paid blood price for coming to his rescue.

Fighting against new tremors as turbulence and another brace of lasers shook the Slantback fighter, Eric gave himself a slow count of three and then dug into the thin atmosphere with his elevators. Metal spoilers flared, grabbing for purchase, and the *Stingray* wrestled its nose up. He twisted over, banking away from the *Corsair's* path.

The other pilot glided out into a nearly parallel course, drawing away for distance and then snapping back to cut at the *Stingray* on an oblique angle. His shots went wide off the mark, but Eric did not give his counterpart the chance to correct. He dived, snapped over to the left this time, leveled off, and then dived again. Working his way down through the atmosphere, shedding kilometers and buying time.

Again and again the *Corsair* re-latched, far more maneuverable than an old Slantback. It was the PPC built into Eric's nosecone. The heavy weapon pulled the nose down toward the ground, forcing Eric to fight gravity as much as he fought against the other pilot. The forward-swept Canard wings helped even out the balance somewhat, putting more weight toward the rear of the craft, but did not completely do the job. Aerospace pilots called dogfights in the lower atmosphere of any planet "fighting in the soup." Being

pulled down into the soup was another form of gravity poisoning, especially for a heavy fighter being ridden by a lighter, more maneuverable craft like the *Corsair*.

Like Eric felt, mired in the politics of civil war, being chased down by a growing feeling of uncertainty. A lead weight sitting heavy in his gut, poisoning his thoughts, dulling his reflexes.

No matter what he tried, there did not seem to be a way out. Not from the dogfight, not from the situation he'd cornered himself into by throwing support behind Katrina's claim to the throne of the Federated Suns. The one was currently more pressing than the other just now, but both weighed on him heavily.

Eric snap-rolled right, then pulled back into an Immelman. The *Corsair* scissored away and latched again before Eric turned out of his inverted roll. Lasers probed at his exposed underside, scarring new damage into the fighter's armor.

He dodged out again, and again. The thicker air slowed him down, but allowed for tighter turns. For the *Corsair* as well, which darted past him on one run, then another.

"Got something to prove," Eric said, nodding. "Got to keep pushing, or—fates help us—we might all start thinking."

Below, the coast of Rostock flashed by a welcoming wave of amber beaches and rugged, green coastline. Eric held a few seconds lead on the *Corsair* at ten kilometers, then seven, then four. Always lower, always fighting for ever-extended maneuver in hopes of shaking this persistent devil.

A missile slammed into the seam where his hatch sealed to the fuselage, and ferroglass shrapnel erupted into the cockpit. Several shards ticked and scratched off his helmet. He felt a sting and then a flush of warmth to the side of his neck, his shoulder, and knew he'd been hurt. A bitter wind whistled sharply through the cockpit, stinging his eyes. His mask provided enough breathable airflow to prevent blacking out.

Then he dropped below three kilometers, and thin air was no longer a problem.

Just the *Corsair*.

Laserfire probed and splashed away armor from his wings, runneling molten composite into the damaged gaps of his starboard aileron. Airflow cooled the composite, and jammed the control

vaned against lifting. An amber indication light flashed its warning on the control panel. Eric tested his ability to roll out to the left. The wing vibrated violently, and the entire craft turned sluggish.

Snapping back to the left, Eric pitched into a series of barrel rolls, avoiding the *Corsair's* weapons for another few seconds. Sweat beaded and ran from his brow, stinging at the corners of each eye and staining his lips with a salty taste. Trapped. Caught in the grip of his choices, like desperate hands clutching at his ankles, trying to pull him under. He didn't want to die, not out over the Drilands during Prince Victor's return. The *Corsair* pilot was giving him little to say in the matter, though. No doubts on that score. If Eric wanted a second chance, he might have to buy it with the allied pilot's life.

Eric had altitude and time for only another trick or two. He had to make the call soon, or it would be too late. Still worried about the choice, he pushed his stick forward and hammered his nose down toward the Drilands.

A hundred meters disappeared with each heartbeat, and the painted desert rushed up fast, fast. The *Corsair* followed.

Slowly, painfully, the Slantback's nose tucked itself past vertical, began pushing up to complete an inverted loop. Eric's vision narrowed as blood rushed to his head, causing his sense of timing to waver, slip. By instinct more than decision, he rolled out right and pulled into a tight bank that looked like the start of a reverse Immelman, but actually pulled him around in a tight, spiraling turn. The *Corsair* slashed by off his right shoulder, and Eric dug into his elevators hard enough that the *Stingray* felt as if it might fly apart at any second. But it yanked him around in a tighter corner, and when he leveled off only a thousand meters over New Avalon's Drilands, he had the *Corsair* by its six. Perfectly framed. His thumb on the main triggers.

Maybe the allied pilot had the right of it. Maybe Prince Victor's cause was the more just.

Maybe Eric should have paid the price for Patyr, and not the other way around.

But in a civil war, momentum was all you had to go on if you wanted to survive. And Eric's choices, right or wrong, had brought him here. As certain as gravity's pull, he knew that he had no choice now but to live, and learn.

Pulling into a full salvo of weapons, Eric dug into the *Corsair's* starboard wing with the coruscating lightning of his nose-mounted PPC. A long, jagged rent scarred the armor from turn to tip. Lasers sliced in after, finding the weakened joint where wing met fuselage. The other pilot tried to pull up, jumping above the line of fire, adding more stress to the damaged wing, which tore free like shredded paper-machè.

The *Corsair* dumped over into a death-spiral, trailing smoke and burning hard into the desert below. A fireball roiled up on a pillar of soot-stained flames.

Eric's *Stingray* flashed overhead, churning the smoke into a dispersed haze. He searched the skies to either side of him...hoping. The lead weight in his stomach grew heavier, until he saw a sky-blue parafoil cross against the red rock of the Drilands. The *Corsair* pilot had bailed out safely.

Eric pulled around in a slow arc, scanning the desert floor. No signs of life, or roads to promise any nearby habitation. A dry lake bed stained the painted dunes three kilometers to the north, stretching out in an oblong expanse of dark clay. Coming at it from northeast to southwest he could land there. He would. And if he could prevent the downed pilot from taking a shot at him with whatever sidearm might be stored under his ejection seat, the two could talk, and might be able to work their way out of the desert together.

He'd leave the *Stingray* on the ground.

One final offering to gravity.