

**EDEN SKIES**

**COLIN HALL**



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— Colin Halt —

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*For Arthur*

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

– Revelation 21:4

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# Chapter One

The light was flashing again.

The world disappeared below Avery faster than she could comprehend, the horizon a bright curve outside her window, and that troublesome life support light in the corner of her annunciator panel was flashing again. She grimaced and reached above her head to flick the twin-engine Dragonfly's pressurization reset switch for the second time in fifteen minutes. Thirty seconds later, the red light in the corner of her main display resumed its blinking.

*Kusir.*

She nearly spoke the Voirian curse, but her childhood indoctrination kept her silent—as did the voice recorder installed under her seat. The stars came into view, a million glowing embers against velvet black, and she was tempted to ignore the warning and continue. The pressure suit she wore made the problem academic, but the technicians would check each system readout when she returned and the safety regulations were clear. With two weeks left until graduation and her commissioning as an ensign in the Commonwealth's space command, she couldn't afford to violate such a critical policy. Not if she wanted to raise her class rank from second. At twenty-eight, six years older than most of her classmates, there would be a certain amount of pride if she came in first. No, this flight was over before it had really begun.

Avery initialized the suborbital engines, cursing the engineer who designed the switch to be behind her head, then hesitated once more before she made the final call. Would anyone ever know if she changed her mind and continued on? She pressed the transmit button before she could talk herself out of the right decision. Pressure suit or not, her breath was shallow and measured.

—Control, Spark 6. ||

—Spark 6, Control. Go ahead. ||

Even after ten years of flying, five of those years in space, the ability to hear a voice from a hundred kilometers away amazed her. —I've got primary and secondary life support failures. Negative reset. || A pause, then an answer. —Failure confirmed. Cleared for return. ||

The ship spiraled downward over the mountains that edged the eastern coast of the largest continent of Ventana IV. The glowing exhaust cloud was a barely visible flare outside her aft view screen. As disappointed as she was over the short flight, Avery had to admit the view from this high up was stunning—but most of the wilds of Ventana were stunning from any vantage point, on land or in space. The mountains lay in a straight line along the coast, and from her altitude it was easy to tell why the original colonists had chosen this place for their first settlement. They had been protection for those early settlers from Torai, but now those same mountains were her playground.

Wistfulness flowed into the small cockpit as she watched them grow larger. She would miss Ventana IV more than she ever missed Asria. If she was lucky, she would have enough leave after graduation for one last solitary trek through the mountains before sharing a shipboard barracks with dozens of other pilots for the next three years.

Both thoughts made her grin. She wouldn't be wandering across the remaining Ventanan wilderness or serving on a Commonwealth cruiser if she'd stayed on Asria. Nothing had been waiting for her there but isolation and routine. Her family's obsession with guarding her every step and a six-week trip at tach speed to the Commonwealth's headquarters on Ventana guaranteed that. Asria wasn't as isolated as it could be, but the sheer distance between it and the rest of the Commonwealth worlds, combined with their ancient monotheistic faith, kept them to themselves. Thank goodness she had escaped Asria and her father's disappointment over her growing doubts. It had become too difficult to pretend to be someone she was not, to pretend to believe something she wasn't sure she believed anymore.

Avery's thoughts drifted back to the ship as she banked low toward the landing site at the academy. Relieved the ship would hold together for another five minutes, she breathed a silent prayer that her luck would continue, then laughed out loud. Maybe that faith wasn't as distant as she'd prefer. The landing was uneventful—one of her best—but she scrambled out onto the landing pad as fast as she could.

She would miss the Commonwealth's main space base on Ventana as much as she would miss the mountains. Rows of hangars, some filled with training Dragonflies, some locked and surrounded by armed security personnel, ran in concentric lines on each side of the five-sided landing site— a side for each of the Commonwealth's founding planets. It still amazed her a designer had that idea when planning the base. Avery was lucky enough to spend much of her time here and not stuck at the academy most days like the non-flying cadets. Sortie cut short or not, it was a beautiful day for flying: the normally hostile Ventanan humidity gone, the breeze light enough to keep the heat at bay.

Lost in that bit of luck, Avery almost dropped her helmet when her gaze fell on the instructor standing just outside the clear zone, his arms crossed and a heated expression on his face. There was no way he could've read her mind and her deliberation to ignore the failure, but it looked like he might have. She crinkled her nose and tried to remember if she'd said something out loud— words the recorder might have heard. There was nothing.

—Kohren wants to see you. Now. ||


There was so much accusation in his order, she forgot about the system failure. Cadets were never called to the commandant's office unless there had been an egregious disciplinary issue, and those disciplinary issues usually meant dismissal. Avery wiped away a sweat-soaked strand of dark hair that clung to her forehead while she tried to recall something she might have done to grab his attention.

—Sir, I— || She broke off before she apologized for something she didn't know she had done. —Did he say why? ||

—No idea, Rendon, but you've got ten minutes. Let's go. || He walked away, and the heat from his anger rolled toward her.

Avery fumed at his hostility and the haste he had put her in. She was able to smell years of sweat and filth from the Dragonfly sticking to her, but she wouldn't have time to change or shower. Untidiness wasn't the impression she wanted to give the commandant, but there was no other option now. She shimmied out of the pressure suit, lobbed it and her helmet to a waiting crewman, and followed the furious officer across the landing site.

\* \* \*

Avery's heart pounded as the ~~secretary~~  showed her into the commandant's inner office. She stood at attention and looked around the room. The warm wood décor reassured her some. It was a welcome contrast to the steel and glass of most of the modern academy buildings. The furnishings reminded her of Asria, and despite her nervousness they reminded her that Admiral Elber Kohren was from Zaetis, another small world. The forest planet was known across the Commonwealth for their furniture making, and the peikwood desk with the hand-carved designs had to be centuries old. She made the immediate decision to look into some Zaetian pieces for her home if she ever made the choice to settle down. Of course, that would be somewhere other than Asria, if she had any say in the matter. She might even do as her elder brother had done and disappear in the middle of the night. Avery missed Quen more than she ever thought possible, but most of the time she was sure he had made the right decision. Not that it mattered. If the need arose, the Asrian Senate would hunt Quen down and bring him home.

—Have a seat, Cadet Rendon. || Kohren gestured at the chair in front of his desk.

Avery perched on the edge. It was becoming easier to ignore Kohren's broken nose, a gift from an overzealous cadet during unarmed combat training five years before. Rumor had it the commandant had refused to have the injury corrected, believing it lent him a certain aura of... well, something. It certainly made the otherwise competent admiral legendary at the academy and probably throughout the fleet.

Avoiding an obvious stare, Avery tucked another damp piece of hair behind her ear and cursed her inability to have showered beforehand. What would the commandant think of her? Well, it wouldn't matter what she looked like if this was a disciplinary matter.

Kohren glanced at his desktop screen and Avery's mind went wild. Was this about her breaking curfew the week before, even though it had been to study in the library across campus? That was a minor issue for the commandant to involve himself in. Mistaken identity? There had been that incident two days ago with the fire extinguisher . . . and although she hadn't been tangled in that practical joke, Cadet Tayge had, and everyone said they looked alike . . .

Instead of rebuking her, he said, —I just finished reading your first

classman thesis. It's impressive. ||

It was not the observation of someone who was angry with her, and it was difficult to keep herself from scratching her head in confusion. Avery found it even more difficult to keep herself from beaming.

—I'm sorry, sir. You called me here to talk about my thesis? ||

—No, || he replied, leaning on his desk. —There's no good way to say this, so I'll be blunt. We just received word your uncle has abdicated. ||

Abdicated? She must have misheard him. Of all the things Kohren could have told her, that was the last thing she had expected to hear. More than that, it wasn't possible. Relief flooded her. He called her here for no reason at all.

—Sir, there must be a mistake. He can't do that. || —Because Asrian law prohibits it. ||

It wasn't a question; everyone knew the history. Kohren knew it too, which meant this was a mistake. —Of course. It hasn't happened in five hundred years. ||

And five hundred years ago, it had touched off a bloody civil war that resulted in the both the prohibition and the abolishment of most of the Asrian nobility. No one, not the Senate, not the royal family, and not the citizens, wanted the result of another power vacuum. The law always had strong support, and although Avery understood the wish for a normal life more than most, the idea of breaking it was horrifying. If ever she ended up ruling Asria, as distasteful as the prospect was . . . she would follow the law.

But they would find Quen before she had a chance at becoming queen. No matter what Quen had told her, they would bring him home. Kohren's entire face tightened. —That's probably why reports show he fled to Haedera. ||

—Haedera? || If the first news about her uncle was unexpected, this part of it had to be a joke. Did the academy play practical jokes on graduating cadets? Haedera was the biggest threat to this part of the galaxy and the reason for the Commonwealth's formation. And Uncle Victor wasn't capable of treason. Of course not. This was a mistake. Bad intelligence of some sort. Her uncle wouldn't have gone to Haedera.

Kohren searched her face, and Avery suddenly knew what a pikan bound for slaughter felt like.

—I'm sorry to ask you this, but has he contacted you? || he asked. —Asked for help? Told you anything? ||

*Epecially anything about this Haedera business,* he was clearly

suggesting. Avery's jaw tightened at the implied accusation.

—Sir, I haven't seen or heard from him in over a year. We're not close. || They had been close years ago, but things changed once she left Asria. Distance did that to relationships. An alarming thought arose. —I don't know how I can prove this, sir, but my loyalty is to Asria. And the Commonwealth, || she hastened to add. —Please don't dismiss me over this. || The request came out more beseechingly than she intended.

—Your loyalty isn't in question, || he replied, and Avery relaxed in relief. —But we have another problem. || He scratched his head, as though he was afraid to continue. —Because of your change in status, the Asrian Senate has revoked your waiver. ||

*The waiver.*

Her chest tightened. The Commonwealth required any member of a planetary royal family to obtain permission from their local government before attending the academy or enlisting in the Commonwealth military. Planetary forces naturally had no such requirement, but Avery had long desired to leave Asria behind, so the Royal Asrian Defense Forces had never been an option for her. She fought for years for a waiver from the Senate. They hadn't let her go without a fight, and now they had gotten what they always wanted. They had revoked her waiver. Her life. But something else Kohren had said . . .

—I'm sorry, sir, || she said. —Change in status? || *Was that sympathy on his face?*

—Your father's coronation was five weeks ago. The courier ship stopped on Metis II this morning to make the report, and we'll know more once they arrive. ||

*Oath*, she wanted to correct him. A common misinterpretation of how Asrian law functioned. An Asrian coronation was religious in nature—and celebratory—so while her father might have made his solemn oath in front of the Senate as soon as they approved his kingship, he wouldn't have been coronated. Not yet. Not if her uncle had truly . . . defected? It was an insignificant word for such a strong betrayal.

Kohren pushed a tablet across his desk toward her, interrupting her thoughts. She struggled to focus on the suddenly blurred words before her. —Your discharge authorization. I'm sorry, Your Highness, but we have no control over internal planetary matters. ||

Your Highness. Not Cadet Rendon. Not Lady Avery. Never Ensign

Rendon now.

Avery sat frozen. Asria would be back in her future sooner than she liked.



# Chapter Two

Avery paused on the shuttle's disembarkment ramp and took a deep breath of fresh air.

*Asria.*

Even in mid-summer, the coolness surprised her. But then, almost every habitable planet was cool compared to Ventana. The port outside Cadena, Asria's capital, wasn't busy this early in the morning, and it only took a brief glance around to assess her situation.

The king was nowhere to be seen. She was glad, if not at all surprised, that her father was not waiting for her on the landing pad. She'd had plenty of time over the six-week journey to stew over her situation, and the new king was the last person she wanted to see—even if her forced return wasn't his fault.

Instead, a grin spread across her face when she spotted Drexel Langley, her father's head of security and her friend for the past fifteen years. Still lean, even though he was pushing sixty-five, and tall like most Asrians, he looked more like an athlete half his age than a reluctant bureaucrat. For three years, Avery had missed him more than she had ever thought possible. Drex, forced into retirement from the Defense Forces after a glider accident, would understand how disappointed she was at being called home, never to fly fighters again.

—Drex, you don't know how good it is to see you. || Avery sprang down the steps two at a time, ignoring the disapproving look on his face. A broken ankle would be her own problem and not the worst thing about today.

Not mentioning the white facial hair that graced his sharp chin—a fashion she never would have predicted on the professional-to-a-fault Drex—Avery hugged him in full view of the workers unloading the shuttle. Who cared what her father would think? He hadn't bothered to welcome her back, after



all.

Neither had Merritt Parker, and that rejection hurt more than her father's snub. After ten years, though their relationship had always been marked by conflict, she had thought she would find him waiting here. They'd had an unspoken *agreement*. But she couldn't get upset about his absence just yet. Merritt could be busy with his new job.

Avery looked about the dock. —Where's Mother? ||

—She's not feeling so well this afternoon. || Drex's tone barely hinted of the turmoil Carina Rendon had been through in the past year, with the deaths of Avery's grandparents just weeks apart. She'd heard her mother rarely left her rooms anymore, but hoped the rumor was just palace gossip. Perhaps it wasn't.

—Oh. || Disappointed, she changed the subject. —Please, don't call me Your Highness. || Best to get that request taken care of right up front. She hoped the new title didn't come with new social expectations.

—Request noted, Avery. || Drex hesitated, as if he wasn't sure what else to say. He looked as if he expected her to blow up at any moment. Six weeks of travel had tempered her feelings though, at least enough to not be angry with Drex. She would save that for her father, whenever he deemed her important enough for a chat. That might take him awhile.

—You can smile at me, you know. I'm not angry with you. ||

—Don't be angry with your father, either. || Drex's dark eyes were serious. —This wasn't his call, and it's not his fault. ||

That Avery believed. She could blame the Senate for this one. —Fine. I won't blame him, but I'm not happy with him, either. He didn't fight this at all, did he? What do they intend on me doing at home, anyway? Sit in on committee meetings and look pretty? ||

Drex laughed and pointed her at the aeroflyer parked nearby. Avery looked forward to the foreign luxury, but there was something strange about the ship with the pearlized-gold finish. That was it . . . It wasn't marked with the twin astra seal of the king. She squinted in uncertainty at the omission. A sign of the new King Lucas's egalitarianism, extreme even by Asrian standards? No, that would be too much of a break from tradition, even for her father. More likely the unmarked ship was a new security measure. Animosity toward the Rendon family had to be running high in the wake of her uncle's treachery. She could add that to the list of things she would never forgive him for. Who was he to tarnish the Rendon name like that?

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