



Across Astral Realms
Volume 1 in the Astral Alliance series

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Contact - author@daviscrossing.com

Author website - www.daviscrossing.com

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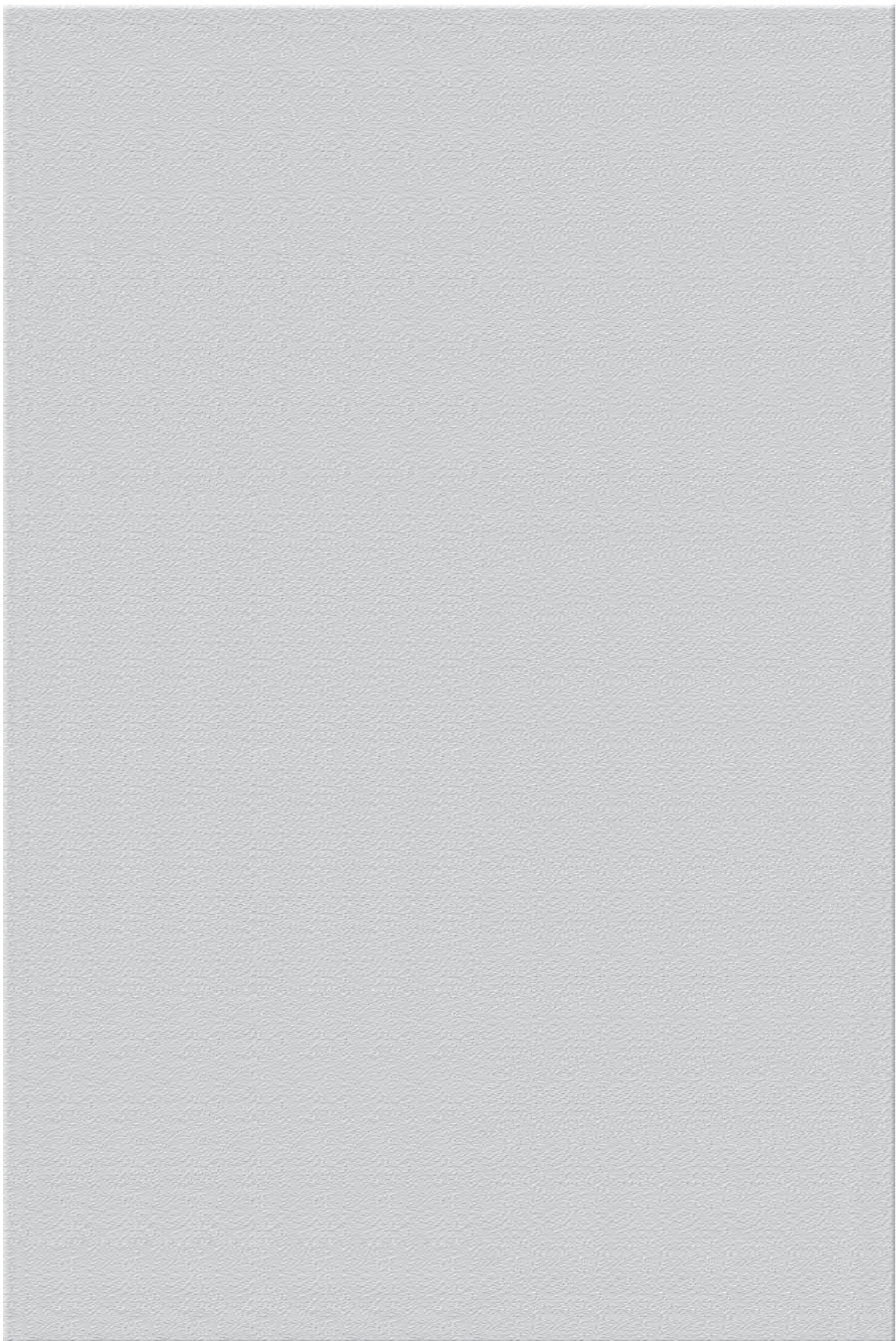
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**Part
01**

Escape





The spaceship shuddered with a telltale rattle. We were nearing the end of the wormhole, and time was running out—probably less than an hour left until we landed. I pulled the chain attached to my shackled ankle, holding the hefty links with both hands and pushing with my legs against the wall with all my might.

As I strained, something creaked. I stopped tugging and crawled close to the wall next to my flimsy cot. Barely visible in the dimness, the chain's wall bracket was slightly bent, maybe a couple of millimeters more than yesterday. I was getting closer. But how much longer would it take? This morning might hold my last chance to escape execution.

At the ceiling, the tiny spy camera's flashing blue light rotated toward me, silent compared to the ship's gravity-engine hum. I released the chain and reclined on my cot, stretching my arms as I pretended to be waking up.

A half-dozen lights blinked on the opposite wall, some red, some green. Apparently my wakefulness had been noticed by the ship's computer. "Emerson," I said as I sat up on the cot and blinked, feigning bleary eyes, "what time is it?"

Emerson replied from speakers embedded in the ceiling, his voice realistic in cadence, though still somewhat mechanical. "It is five twenty-eight, Megan. You are not scheduled to awaken for thirty-two minutes."

I shook the chain's links. "Tell the captain *he* should try sleeping chained to a wall."

"Captain Tillman's habits are not relevant. According to my database, a girl your age needs at least eight point two hours of sleep. You should—"

"To blazes with your database!" I touched the two-inch-wide metal collar that encircled my neck and slid it off the burn inflicted by the court's interrogator, still sensitive even after five months. "Does your blasted database say to put a dog collar on a girl my age and zap her with electric shocks? Does it say to work her fourteen hours a day like a whipped mule and then chain her to a wall at night? Does it say to feed her barely enough pig slop and dishwater to keep her alive for another day of slave labor?"

"Negative. But my database does indicate that your vocabulary level and oratory skills are greatly advanced for a teenager who was reared by pirates."

I scowled. "Freedom fighters, you mean."

"I am merely using the terms provided by—"

"Oh, go reboot yourself." I let out a loud huff and sat on the cot with my sock-covered feet on the metal floor, the shackle chafing my ankle. Some freedom fighter I was. I couldn't even free myself. Instead, death stalked ever closer. In a few hours, the captain would leave the *Nebula Nine* to search for his kidnapped son, following up on a report that Oliver might be on Delta Ninety-eight as a prisoner of slavers there, members of a race called Jaradians. Landing on that planet would offer my first opportunity to escape since I'd been captured. But if the captain decided to follow the judge's orders to the letter, he might execute me before setting out to find Oliver, probably using his remote to deliver a lethal shock to my collar. To save my life, I had to get off the ship as soon as we landed.

Thinking about that awful shock made me cringe. The pain would be horrible, ghastly. Yet, the shock would finally end my torture, and I could join my father in the heavens, living in eternal comfort with the Astral Dragon, the deity he believed in with all his heart, the one he had

even named his ship after. At least I hoped I would go to such a wonderful place. If my parents' beliefs were true, and an afterlife really existed, maybe there we could find justice. This galaxy was surely void of it.

Tears crept to my eyes. A sob threatened. Fighting it off, I took a deep breath and steeled myself. I couldn't give up. I had to be the fighter my parents taught me to be. I had to escape and find my mother. Yet, to do that, I needed to know the captain's plans to the minute—and I needed to get my hands on that remote. Maybe I could trick Emerson into giving me a clue.

I looked at the flashing lights on the wall. "Emerson, what's on my chore list today?"

"Nothing. The list is empty."

"Empty?" Hot prickles ran down my back. Trying to shake them off, I laughed under my breath. "Um . . . Emerson, that's impossible. After a planet landing, there are tons of maintenance checks to do. Lots of stuff can shake loose during atmosphere entry."

"Dionne and Dirk are scheduled to perform routine maintenance duties."

I furrowed my brow. "Dirk? Why him? He's just a scullery boy."

"He is also listed as a computer technician. He will be helpful to Dionne."

"But I'm her assistant. Does the duty list say anything about me at all?"

"I am authorized to give you public postings. Nothing more."

"What? You can't even tell me my own assignments?"

"Negative. Your security access has been terminated."

"Terminated?" Like a cold wind, the interrogator's threats returned to mind. *If you don't tell us where it is, you will be terminated. Captain Tillman is under strict orders to execute you if you refuse to reveal your secrets.*

I swallowed hard, feeling the collar's pressure against my throat. "Why was it terminated?"

"A reason was not entered in the termination record."

"So I just sit here in the dark all day?"

“Negative.” Shielded bulbs in the ceiling flashed on, giving light to my little corner in the bowels of the ship. The cot with a tied-down pillow against one wall served as my bed, and a shower and vacuum toilet against another wall gave me a place to do my personal business. Removable panels filled most of the remaining wall space, providing access to storage or to shafts that led to nearly every part of the ship.

A slight stinging sensation ran along my arms and calf muscles. I looked at the network of conductive ink on the inner portions of my forearms and legs, surgically imprinted parallel to the nerves underneath. Electrical fields from the lights had activated the ink, causing the sting. Not bad. No more than a tingle that I barely noticed anymore, as long as the captain wasn’t wielding his remote.

My full bladder gave me a hard pinch. I glanced again at the still-blinking, still-rotating camera. “Emerson, I need some privacy.”

“Acknowledged.” The camera’s light turned off.

“Thanks, but I can’t get dressed yet. Is someone going to unlock me at six like usual, even though I’m grounded?”

“I cannot answer that question. Your security access has been—”

“Terminated. Yeah. You said that. I’m not deaf.”

“Then simple logic should have instructed you not to ask the question.”

I heaved a loud sigh. “Listen, genius. The chain’s long enough for me to do my business in the pot, but I can’t put my pants on. Do you get that? It’s simple human anatomy.”

“Acknowledged. You have fifteen minutes of privacy.”

“Great, but I still can’t put my pants on.” Grumbling to myself, I focused on a wall panel that led into the ship’s hull space. The shaft the panel concealed might be my best chance to get away and hide, but it was useless until I could get the ankle shackle off.

After using the toilet, I sat on the floor with my feet braced once more against the wall and both hands again clutching the chain. I pulled and pulled while glancing at the ladder leading up to bridge level, hoping not to see the captain’s shiny black boots tromping down the rungs and my collar’s remote-control unit in his hand.

As I pulled, the bracket bent a millimeter farther, though still not enough. I kept pulling. What choice did I have? It was either break free or die.

Footsteps sounded from the level above. I let go of the chain and sat on my cot, trying to settle my racing heart as I stared at the ladder. Yet, no one descended.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I stood and looked at the dormant camera. Wasting my privacy time on a stubborn bracket probably wasn't the best idea. I stripped off my knee-length night jersey, exposing a pair of loose shorts, a white singlet undershirt, my locket at the end of a leather cord, and the brand on my upper arm—a fierce dragon, the Alliance's symbol for piracy, infused with purple ink to make it show clearly. The ugly scar always drew my eyes toward it. Even after five months of healing, I could still hear my skin sizzling as the red-hot iron burned into soft flesh to make its court-ordered mark.

Wincing, I tore my gaze away from the brand. Those monsters would pay for their cruelty . . . someday.

I set the locket on my palm and opened the clasp for the thousandth time. My mother and father, Anne and Julian Willis, gazed at me from a browning, wrinkled photo taken four years ago. They were happy then. So was I. But now? How could I be happy? My father was probably dead, and as far as I knew, my mother was imprisoned or awaiting execution somewhere. It was always risky to check on her. Yet, today I really needed to know.

After glancing at the dormant camera once more, I snapped the locket closed and set my thumb against the locket's back. Its embedded thumbprint reader activated, and the secret lead-lined cover popped open, revealing a tiny ruby—a dragon's eye. The gem glowed red.

Fresh tears blurred my vision. My mother was still alive. But for how much longer? Prisoners found guilty of piracy rarely survived long enough to complete their sentences.

I closed the locket and whispered, "Mama, somehow I'm going to get you out. I just have to find where they're holding you."

"What's that?"

I spun toward the voice. First Mate Gavin Foster stood at the bottom of the ladder, a computer tablet in hand.

I gasped, stuttering, "Just . . . just my locket. My parents gave it to me. The captain knows about it." Feeling naked with just a singlet covering my torso, I hugged myself. "I was getting dressed."

Gavin stared at me with his ratlike eyes. Even the long-sleeved blue shirt with the *Nebula Nine* eagle logo on the breast pocket couldn't make him look like anything but a weasel. "Sorry about that. I would've knocked, but you don't have a door."

"You could've called." I scowled at him. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Why? Got some secrets you're hiding?" He huffed a laugh. "Don't worry. I didn't see anything. And I'll just be a minute."

"Doing what?"

He opened a panel next to my cot. "Checking your suit. Routine inspection."

"Why you? Kind of below your pay grade, isn't it?"

"Landing day is always busy. We all have to wear multiple hats." He withdrew my pressure suit along with its attached air tank from behind the panel, hung them on a wall hook, and squinted at the tank's meter. "Ninety-four percent. That's plenty."

"If everyone's so busy, why is my duty list empty?"

"What?" He looked at me, his thin eyebrows bending low. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Emerson said my security clearance has been terminated."

"Terminated? That's rather ominous." He glanced at the inactive camera before whispering, "If I were you, I'd make myself scarce for a while."

I tensed. "The captain's going to kill me today, isn't he?"

"Most likely. You've been living on borrowed time. According to the court order, he could have executed you on your thirteenth birthday, and he won't want any contraband inspectors seeing you. Either you spill your secrets, or you'll be dead before we land."

"I already told him I don't know where my parents' cache is. They got someone to move everything, and they didn't tell me where. And I have no clue where that dragon eye thing is. I never even heard of it till the captain mentioned it."

"And those lies didn't convince him, did they?"

"They're not lies."

"Cut the crap, Megan." He gestured toward the collar around my neck. "I'll bet the remote's light is blinking red right now."

I tugged at the collar. "Lie detectors aren't always right."

"Maybe not, but, like I said, I'd make myself scarce."

I glared at him. He knew as well as I did that escaping was pointless unless I had the collar's remote. I would get fried to a crisp before I could run out of sight of the ship. "You know why I have to stay on the *Nine*."

"Yeah, I know." Gavin crossed his arms and looked me over, but not in a creepy way this time. "Listen, Megan, I'm as anti-pirate as any Alliance officer, but I draw the line at killing a kid. That's worse than being a pirate."

"So you'll help me?"

"If I can." Gavin stroked his chin. "Tell you what. Emerson's showing a possible hull-integrity anomaly. No air loss, so it's probably nothing. I was going to check on it in a minute, but I'll assign it to you. That'll give you an excuse to hide in the hull space while I look for the remote. From that point on, we'll play it by ear."

I pursed my lips. What was Gavin's game? That line about not killing a kid sounded hokey, maybe a scam, but his offer might be my best chance to survive. I put on a thankful smile. It fooled most adults into thinking I believed them. "Great. Thank you. But you'll have to find the remote in a hurry. Hiding in the hull space won't work for long."

"Don't push me, Megan." He wagged a finger. "Listen. I'm really sticking my neck out for you. If you get caught, I'll deny I had anything to do with this, and the captain will believe me long before he'll believe a pirate."

I nodded firmly. "Right. I get that. No problem."

After tapping a few times on the computer tablet, he attached it to his belt and withdrew an electronic key cylinder from his pocket. "I'll unlock you."

Crouching, he set one end of the cylinder against the shackle. A moment later, the lock clicked, and the shackle popped open. I pried it off and dropped it to the floor. "Thanks again, Gavin."

He straightened and pointed at my suit, still hanging on the hook. "Don't forget to attach your harness. The wormhole exit will shake this ship like a rag doll."

"Yeah. Sure. I've been through it before. It's almost like an earthquake."

When Gavin climbed the ladder out of sight, I pulled my storage box from under the cot and withdrew my maintenance-duty clothes—khaki cargo pants and a long-sleeved, button-down work shirt, an outfit similar to what I'd worn while working on my parents' ship, the *Astral Dragon*. Fortunately, the court official didn't give me a hard time when I refused to wear a prisoner's dress to board the ship. I told him I'd never worn a dress in my life. No one bothered me about that again.

After putting the clothes on, I grabbed the suit and helmet, slid them on, and added my magnetic shoes to complete the safety requirements. I then clipped my flashlight to the suit's harness, a series of straps that wrapped around my shoulders, chest, and waist. The harness also fastened the air tank to my back.

Looking at the wall panel leading to the hull, I took a deep breath. Trusting Gavin felt like a fly trusting a spider inviting it into a web, but I didn't have any other way to get the remote. He had to come through. I whispered, "Let this work," not really sure if the *Astral Dragon* was listening, but a quick prayer couldn't hurt.

I tugged on the wall panel. Dirk toppled out of the dark shaft and tumbled to the floor. He blinked at the light and spoke in a hushed tone. "I think we're in trouble."