



A Companion to Ascension written by Chris Leclair
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Countdown to Starfall

5: A Change of Fate

“We have one of the latest warships, and we are performing nothing but scouting missions!” Lieutenant Abatjour complained, a hint of French accent and a hint of personal arrogance present in his voice.

A man of slight build, he kept his black hair and mustache just barely within regulation. He was the Ascension's navigator, and third in command. His station was nominally the nav console to the right of and directly behind the piloting stations, near the front of the CIC.

He turned in his swivel chair to face the woman standing beside the (currently inactive) tactical display. “What do you think, mademoiselle?”

Lieutenant Hunt ignored him. She was the ship's XO, and she didn't have to put up with that kind of comment. The navigator was one of the few who would try. Though personable enough, Allison Hunt was physically imposing, taller and more powerfully built than most of the crew. The fact that she was ex-special forces was an open secret among the crew, and that also added to the intimidation factor. Still, she wasn't about to pound an officer of equal rank to bits in the CIC. Abatjour was a misogynist, a racist, and an asshole, she reflected, but he was actually quite good at his job.

Realizing that he would not get a response from the original query, Abatjour repeated, “What do you think, Lieutenant?”

This time she shrugged and replied, “It's the Navy. You've been in longer than I have; you should be used to it by now.”

“It does not mean I like it. Or even understand-”

“Captain on the bridge!” a crewmember called.

“Carry on,” Commander Parker ordered dismissively, stepping through the doorway. She took a sip of black coffee from her thoroughly stained mug. Letting off the dispense button, she placed it on top of a weapons console. “Lieutenant Hunt?”

“Yes, sir?”

Although about average in height, Jennifer Parker looked short beside her, her red hair topping out in line with her XO's chin. She asked, “You flew an R-19 back in the day, right?”

“That's right.” Allison Hunt had a complex service history. It was still mostly classified, and there wasn't a lot she could comfortably say. In this case, *back in the day* was a euphemism for her black ops days.

“Are you still qualified to fly them?”

“I haven't flown a real one in years, but yes, sir.” Technically, that part of her record wasn't classified. She was trained on the R-19 and other spacecraft many years ago. Why and how... *that* was classified.

Even though her duties were much different, she still stayed qualified on most of the vehicles she had

trained on, and still trained with weapons on a regular basis. It annoyed the navigator, initially surprised the captain, and endeared her to the ship's Marines. Some things never changed.

“Good.” Parker handed her a datapad. “You're flying scout today.”

“Wasn't Kim supposed to be flying today?” Abatjour asked, standing up and walking beside them.

The captain nodded. “He was. Tripped on a ladder and fell two decks. Landed on his head, serious concussion.”

“What a clumsy fool.”

Parker ignored the jibe, and continued, “These things happen. I hate to force this on you, Hunt, but Reyes and Wang are already out and Markov is getting his mandatory rest.”

“Bad luck,” Abatjour commented. “We could abandon or delay, no?”

The captain nodded, turning to Hunt. “If you don't feel up to it-”

“And what if we miss the magic planet? There's a few out here that could be habitable, right?” Hunt objected. “I'm good to go. It's not a problem, skipper.”

“Good. It's just a routine scouting mission, shouldn't be any problems.” More quietly, she added, “Be careful out there, Allison. Good luck.”

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4: Great Discoveries

“Dropping out in three... two... one... dropout!” Lieutenant Allison Hunt felt a slight lurch as the scout ship transitioned from subspace to realspace. Technically, there was very little deceleration, even though they had went from several times lightspeed to a tiny fraction of it. Something about subspace physics.

The R-19 scout ship was larger than most fighters but smaller than most shuttles, similar in size and configuration to an attack striker or passenger starplane. Like those, it was a transat, capable of operating in space, entering an atmosphere, and flying on aerodynamic lift.

The long lifting-body fuselage was blended with the stubby, curved wings. A small two-person cockpit, a source of many complaints, was located back from a long nose full of sensors. Behind them was fuel tankage, more sensors, the fusion reactor and FTL resonator. The sublight engines were placed on the wingroots, and more fuel and sensors were contained in the wings. This time, they were unarmed, though it could carry defensive missiles on external hardpoints.

“Automated orbit adjustment burn, firing on computer control,” she reported, for the benefit of both her ESO and the voice recorders. The ship pivoted on RCS thrusters and gimbal gyros, and about fifteen seconds later the fusion engines on the spacecraft fired, pushing them back into their seats.

Once the acceleration stopped, Allison took her eyes off the computerized cockpit displays and looked out the bubble canopy. The planet below was just as the long-range scanners had reported. Blue and green, covered in wispy white. A habitable planet, much like Earth. Probably alive, maybe even with intelligent life.

She had done a lot in her life, most of which she wasn't proud of. But being the first to see (okay, maybe her ESO was technically first) an Earthlike world was something new. Something amazing. She already knew that Exploration was a hell of a lot better than Special Forces, but knowing and feeling were completely different.

No wonder why they were always idealistic and cheerful, in addition to being intensely arrogant.

She turned to Lieutenant Andreia Lindstrom, her electronic systems officer (ESO), sitting to her left and slightly below and voiced her thoughts. “No fucking wonder you guys love your jobs.”

“It never gets old,” she replied, smiling behind her transparent faceplate. “Even a death world... being the first human to set eyes on it is something. A world like this... well, this is my first time, too. Wow.”

“Alright, we should get to work.” The moment had passed- too quickly. This was something she had to do again. Even after all she had seen and done... well, this wasn't the time to think about it. “Check ECM intercepts.”

“ECM is clear,” Lindstrom reported after a moment. “If there's life- intelligent life- down there, it's preindustrial.”

“Let's find out, then. Bring sensors online.”

“Active and passive?”

“Affirmative, active and passive online.”

“Bringing sensors online, active and passive,” Lindstrom replied, already flipping the necessary switches on her control panel. Several of the screens that had been off or displaying idle messages lit up with data. “Sensors online, all systems functioning- wait, minor fluctuations in port subspace receiver.”

“Is that a problem.”

Lindstrom shrugged. “Probably just a loose cable. Shouldn't even affect our measurements.”

Hunt nodded. “Alright, what can you tell me about this planet?”

“Well, it's definitely habitable,” she replied excitedly. “Oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. Composition, temperature, and pressure is within Earth norms... well, pre-industrial Earth norms.”

“Does that mean it's-”

Lindstrom's voice grew more excited. “Yes, it's alive, very alive! Carbon dioxide, oxygen, ozone, traces of nitrous oxide. Composition- it looks like there's intelligent life deliberately burning, I mean, it could just be a planet with an unusual amount of fires and volcanic activity- but, no, probably intelligent life!”

“Can you-”

“Definitely, definitely!” If her multi-point harness would let her, Lindstrom would be bouncing off the cockpit walls now. “Scanning with radar, IR and visible spectrum for artificial structures!”

“Calm down, Lindstrom,” Hunt cautioned. “I'm as excited as you are, but we need to be careful, cautious, and thorough.”

“Sorry!” the ESO replied.

“No need to apologize. Just figure out if there's intelligent life down there.”

“Running the analysis now...” Lindstrom paused. “Yes! Yes! Artificial structures, and lots of them. Definitely in line with late pre-industrial civilization, actually very similar to Earth. Huh, the computer is trying to identify architectural styles as classical, medieval, and early modern Earth... and its succeeding.”

“I didn't realize it had a sense of style,” Hunt quipped.

“It doesn't, it's just recognizing patterns and doing it wrong. The software is far from perfect. It tries hard, but there's only so much you can pull out of a limited data set. It kind of “runs home to momma”, so to speak.”

“Alright, send a message off to the Ascension. We've found a pre-industrial civilization, and are going in-atmo for a closer look.”

“All right... done.” The scout ship was equipped with a powerful subspace transmitter, which shipped off a detailed faster-than-light message in seconds. “You are aware of protocols regarding contamination, right?”

“Yeah, I know them. Keep your altitude high, enter and exit over the ocean so nobody sees you, bypass open and thrust minimal so nobody hears,” Hunt replied. She added lightly, “Don't trust me?”

“Just making sure.”

Hunt nodded. “Lining up for atmospheric entry. Let's see what's down there.”

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3: Falling Down

“Hey, Lindstrom, wouldn't they have seen us drop out and decelerate?” Lieutenant Hunt asked over the airflow noise. The R-19 was cruising at twenty thousand meters above sea level, moving at several times the speed of sound. The instruments had automatically calibrated themselves for atmospheric flight, and the values were very similar to Earth, perhaps even more so than Eridanus.

“Probably, but there's a big difference between an unexplainable astronomical event and being buzzed by a transat,” the ESO replied, looking up from her sensor readouts. “Besides, we can't know if there is intelligent life until we check first.”

“Ah, I see.” Again, Hunt's trained eyes scanned the autopilot readouts. It was a long time since she had flown the R-19 in atmo, even in a simulator, but the systems were fairly standardized. Right now they were straight and level. The control surfaces were active, but barely moving. The engines were throttled back, with the forward doors open to draw in atmospheric air and mix it with the hot, fast fusion exhaust.

“I know, it's not a perfect system, but we try,” Lindstrom said.

“So, what's the verdict?” Hunt asked.

“The verdict?” Lindstrom paused. “Oh, of course, what we're flying over. We're definitely looking at a pre-industrial, but metal using, group of civilizations.”

“Group of civilizations? Not one civilization?”

“Was Earth ever one civilization?”

“Right, right, of course.” That made sense to Hunt.

“Well, we'll find out more when we bring it back to the Ascension for analysis, but my guess is that most of this planet is about Renaissance level.”

“Renaissance level? That's pretty specific.”

“It's just a guess. Look at the pictures.”

Hunt scrolled through a few of the photographs on her own monitor, then laughed. “No, no, definitely medieval. Too many castles to be Renaissance.”

“Planets don't always develop the same way, Lieutenant, and our castles didn't go away once the middle ages ended.”

That also made sense, reminding Hunt again that she was not exploratory corps material. “Yeah, well, I'm still putting my money on middle ages. Knights and swords and all that shit.”

“Is that a bet?”

“It is if you want it to be.”

“Fine. Two hundred creds on Renaissance era, or close to it.”

“Done,” Hunt replied lightly. “What can you tell me about the people living down there?”

“The people?”

“Yeah, they look bipedal for sure, humanoid, what else can you tell me?”

“Not much about their biology, I'm afraid. You can only figure out so much from pictures.” Lindstrom shook her head. “I can tell you that there's a lot of variation. It could be multiple species, or just one with a lot of variation, or something else that we haven't thought of yet.”

She flagged several pictures, and Hunt looked through them- pausing occasionally to check her flight instruments. “Huh. Some of these look really human.”

Lindstrom shrugged. “That's what we figured when we met the Salvel.”

“Well, some of these guys look like Salvel, too.” Hunt flagged a few of the pictures.

Lindstrom shrugged again. “Like I said, sometimes it happens. Certain traits tend to be advantageous in similar environments.”

“True.” That made sense, also. It was fairly logical, but she was sure the field was much more complex than simple statements. She was also fairly sure that Lindstrom was getting a few kicks out of her ignorance.

“Oh, I can also tell you that they mostly live on the northern continent,” Lindstrom added. “Almost all of them sophisticated enough to build large structures, anyway. I'm not sure yet, but it looks like the variation is smooth across geographical lines. So it looks like a naturally diverse species or group of closely related species.”

“No little green guys messing with DNA?”

“You're not one of those people, are you, Lieutenant?” Lindstrom asked, concern in her voice. Some believed that extraterrestrials had a hand in human evolution, or had even created the human race from scratch. Though there was some support, most dismissed the theory as fiction.

Hunt chuckled. “Nah, I'm just kidding. Honestly, it's not something I think about much. I'm just a dumb Marine.”

“You're an ex-Marine, a Navy officer now,” Lindstrom reminded her.

She shook her head. “No such thing as an ex-Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

“Yeah, I've heard...” Lindstrom paused, focusing intently on her instruments for several seconds. “Huh, that's weird- I'm picking up an energy signature!”

That almost sent Hunt into combat mode, but she forced herself to relax. Lindstrom sounded more excited than panicked. Not everything was a threat. “What kind of energy signature?”

As soon as she said that, Lindstrom's ECM board lit up. She shouted, “Holy shit, we're being-”

They were interrupted by a bright flash, followed by a loud noise and the angry beeping of a dozen alarms. Almost instantly, the spacecraft began to break apart. She would never remember almost-institutively pulling the eject lever, being shot out of the cockpit on an ejection seat, and blacking out from the whirlwind of forces.

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2: Fire in the Sky

At first, it looked like nothing. A trick of the light, an optical illusion. The stars were unchanging, but sometimes ones' eyes could play tricks on them.

But the blue speck in the sky didn't disappear. It only grew brighter, turning from an illusion to a definite occurrence in seconds. It took only a few more seconds for the bright blue spot to turn into a bright blue trail. A shooting star... but the wrong color. And the motion wasn't quite right, either. This was different, something else. It traced an arc in the sky, moving yet not moving.

Kerl was the first to see it. He was lying back, nearly asleep in a chair outside his home in Wyndhalten. The flash shocked him fully awake in an instant. An old man, his tired grey eyes struggled to make out the shapes. He knew, even though he was tired, there would be no sleep for him. It was a sign of something in the heavens, and he would keep watching, for skyfire could be next. Something was happening, and he was both excited and afraid of what it could be.

Anja saw most of it as well. She was outside, still gathering firewood in the late hour. When she put down the bundle of split logs, she noticed something odd in the sky. Before it even registered with her conscious mind, the speck had bloomed into a streak, lighting up the sky before fading away. She watched the whole thing, then resumed her work. She figured it was some kind of divine sign, but had no idea how to interpret it.

Markus barely noticed the speck, but saw the streak for almost its entire duration. He was standing watch when he noticed the odd blue star that appeared in the sky. Immediately, he realized it was some kind of divine sign, something he could not interpret. He sent a guard to wake his king, then set his mind upon witnessing the event the best he could. He knew that this was important, to himself, the Sturmkonin, and everyone else.

Agata witnessed almost the entire event. She was watching the town guard, as she did every night. The change in the sky caught her eye, and she saw a blue streak in the sky. She wondered what it was, if it was one of the signs of legend. She watched the entire event, then resumed watching the guards. If it was something of significance, they would know soon.

Oraka saw most of the shooting star- he thought it was a shooting star. He was on his way to conduct a late-night inspection of the fortress's defenses when he noticed the odd light in the sky. He did not believe in the superstitions of the locals and paid the event little heed. He had his own set of beliefs, of course, but the meaning of a shooting star was much different, and much more mundane. He did not feel it was even worth reporting in his official log.

Eduard was too far late to see the speck appear, but saw the shooting star for a few seconds before it disappeared. Habitually, he walked outside and observed the skies for a few minutes each night- it helped him sleep. He, too, knew that there would be no sleep tonight. The timing was too good to be coincidence. This was a sign from the gods, and more might be coming. Something was happening.

Valamir missed it completely. He was about to retire to bed when one of his guards burst into his bedchamber, shouting that the sky was on fire. He immediately dashed outside in his sleeping clothes in a manner completely unbecoming a king. By the time he had made it to the roof, though, there was nothing. When he questioned the guards, he found that it was not skyfire, but something lesser. Still,

Valamir waited outside. It could happen again, and this time he would not miss it.

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1: The Prophecy

Seam Uorvassun knew that the world was about to change.

A pure Skad, free of elven blood, he was related to the current Sturmkonin and could trace his lineage back for a thousand years. It was a sign of status, but for him it was also practical. Sacred artifacts that would do nothing for mixed-bloods would come alive for him.

He was High Priest of Wyndhalten, holding a position that could be considered head of the Nordsaenir religion. The amount of direct power he had was fairly limited, as the temples and priests were very loosely organized. Still, his word held a lot of sway, and he was considered the authority on the realm of the gods.

Wyndhalten itself was the nominal capital of the Kingdom of Skarval, although right now it was hardly a kingdom at all. Skarval was a crescent shaped peninsula, with a mountain range down the center. The Sturmkonin and his loyal army controlled the northern and western portions on the other side of the mountains, the Remarian empire had footholds on the southern tip and inner peninsula, and the rest was mostly neutral.

There was also word going around that the Kingdom of Egaloch and the Grand Duchy of Stotzka were both considering taking part of the southern tip of Skarval. It was not the first time they had fought over this land. Skarval had been invaded time and time again, and had always pushed the invaders out and reestablished itself as an independent, if disorganized, kingdom.

Most regarded the war as an epic struggle, but to him, it was only one omen among many. The year was 3E521 by the Imperial calendar, which meant nothing, but to them it was the Year of Myerr, which meant there would be significant events. Ipel had transited the moon. The crops had done unusually well. The winter was warmer than usual. Only hours ago, a tiny trail of blue fire had traced across the sky. It was not skyfire, but it could herald its arrival.

*Not a child of Skarval, but of far away, will Starfall be.
In a time of great strife will they appear.
No remembrance shall they possess, save for clouded visions.
Arrive on a night of fire, the being will.
A knowledge and speech unfamiliar shall they possess.
With a staff of thunder, they dominate all enemies.
With their voice, they will bring down the sky.
Peace to the land will they usher in.
With a final revelation, they will change the world forever.
But with one false step, the End of Days shall begin.*

The Prophecy of the Starfall. A testament to the strange ways of the gods, it was both central to the legends and outside of it. It did not appear in many of their legends, but was woven intensely into the ones it did. Even still, close examination of the other legends would reveal subtle connections. Legend had it that Thurin himself passed on the legend to the Skads.

Since they had first been brought down to the plane of Rynn, Skad priests had debated on the meaning of the Prophecy of the Starfall. The earliest scholars had believed that the Starfall was a great warrior,

descendant of the gods, that would appear very soon. Later, beliefs diversified, with some continuing to preach the old interpretation, some postulating that the Starfall would come from a foreign land, that their arrival was far away or both, and a minority believing that the legend was nothing but a metaphor for the great leader that became the first Sturmkonin.

His belief, and the current doctrine, was conservative. The Starfall would be a great warrior, probably descended from the gods, maybe even Thurin himself. He would be a powerful warrior able to wield both sword and magic like none had ever seen, and would lead the Skads to glory. Previously the line had been that the Starfall would not arrive within their lifetime, but now it seemed that he had to revise his estimate.

There was one part that always bothered him, and in fact had bothered many scholars before. The last line of the Prophecy was unclear. Most believed that the End of Days would only begin if a mistake was made. But how could the Starfall fail? Only another god would be able to defeat him. That meant that Skati and Nyhoggir would arrive and raze Drassil. The epic battle. Norok. The End Times.

All would be revealed soon. He watched the sky as the skyfire began.