

ABYSS

AURORA RENEGADES: BOOK THREE

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PART I:

MIRIAM'S WAR

"What is a rebel? A man who says no."

— Albert Camus

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MESSIS I

*EARTH ALLIANCE ORBITAL STATION
MESSIUM STELLAR SYSTEM*

“This is not a mutiny.

“This is not a military coup d’état.

“This is not an insurrection.

“This *is* a counterinsurgency. We are not the traitors—we are the defenders. We are the resistance.

“The Earth Alliance military exists to defend the people against threats from without and within. I swore an oath to defend you forty-seven years ago. It has been my greatest honor to do so ever since, and I do not intend to stop today.”

Miriam Solovy’s tone grew more measured; no need to be a firebrand, right? “The Biological and Neurological Integrity Assurance Act, or BANIA, is unconstitutional. More than this, it is inhumane. It violates our most fundamental precepts of justice, fairness and liberty. It demands the imprisonment of people not for what they’ve done, but for what they are.

“Yes, I said ‘people.’ Whatever the propaganda being pushed upon you may claim, Prevos are first and foremost people. Humans. Individuals. Enhancing ourselves with cybernetics and eVis over the last two centuries did not mean we ceased to be human, and neither does increasing one’s mental acuity with the quantum processing of an Artificial.”

She paused to smile to herself, hoping the act reached her voice. “Let me tell you a story. A story about the Metigen War.

“When all seemed lost and we were on the verge of being overrun, four individuals risked their lives to defeat the enemy and save us from annihilation. They risked their lives to become the first Prevos, fully aware the untested, unproven augmentation could kill them in any number of ways. Then they risked their lives to go out on the battlefield and fight alongside our military personnel. We won the war because of every infantryman, pilot and Marine, but we also won it because of these individuals.

“This information was classified until now, but perhaps it should not have been. Perhaps we should have awarded them medals in public ceremonies for all to see. They certainly deserved it. And you deserve to know they are not devils, but heroes.”

Miriam’s gaze darted to the left, triggered by a burst of activity near the entrance of the command center.

Three MPs blocked her view...until Alex stepped through the doorway. Behind her Caleb talked quietly with one of the officers.

Alive, yet again. Re-emerged from of the void, yet again.

Relief surged through her, strengthening her resolve as she resumed the broadcast. Her daughter was not only the greatest reason she fought to protect the Prevos but the greatest reason she believed it was right to do so.

“We gave these individuals full control and command of our militaries and our defenses. Do you know what happened? They used these tools in ways your leaders could never have accomplished to protect Earth. To protect Seneca. To protect Romane. They used them to crush the Metigen fleet into surrender.

“Then they relinquished control and went back to their lives, asking for nothing in return. Not power. Not medals, leadership roles or any other reward.

“Yet now we want to imprison those Prevos and others like them. We want to reward heroism and sacrifice with a cage. All because we are afraid.”

More movement on her left demanded her attention. Richard went up to Alex and embraced her in an enthusiastic bear hug. A delightful jealousy flared in Miriam’s chest. She wanted to do that—and she would, very soon. She breathed in.

“But the better instincts of us as humans tell us to react to fear with courage, openness and a willingness to learn and adapt. The history of human progress is one of growth, of discovery and advancement and of never standing idle. This is merely the latest chapter. So I ask you to listen to your better instincts and reject fear in favor of tolerance.”

She steeled herself. What she’d conveyed thus far was all very nice—and true—but now came the real purpose of the speech. Now words must transform into deeds.

“Now I speak directly to the military personnel under my command, to every Earth Alliance officer and enlisted across the galaxy. Our counterinsurgency is a legal one, and it is also a moral one. We are defending our Constitution and our citizens. We will be an aegis shielding those who now find themselves under siege from their own government.

“Prime Minister Winslow’s attempts to order you to enforce BANIA are illegal. You are not required to obey illegal orders—you know this—whether they come from a prime minister, an admiral or your squadron commander. Instead, I will give you orders you can obey with pride and a clear conscience:

“Protect the people. Protect those who are innocent of actual wrongdoing. Refuse to assist in the enforcement of BANIA, but do it in a peaceful, non-violent manner. Simply stand your ground. No one, not a solitary soul, needs to die in this dispute, but if arms are taken up against you, defend yourself and the civilians in your care as you must.

“I do not want to fire a single shot at my fellow servicemen. But I will not allow the Earth Alliance military to fall to illegitimate, unlawful forces, and per our Constitutional duty, the Earth Alliance military will not allow the government to fall to those same forces.

“Godspeed to you all.”

She ended the broadcast without fanfare, not betraying in her expression or her bearing any of the residual anxiety which still churned her stomach, and immediately turned to Admiral Rychen.

“Winslow won’t hesitate to act. Watch the local traffic closely—Admiral Fullerton is in her pocket and will likely try to wrest authority over Northeast Command from you amid the confusion. I’ll leave it to you to make certain he doesn’t succeed. Richard has an eye on the rest of the network.

We ought to learn who among the other admirals and generals are siding with us soon enough.”

She didn’t wait for a response before pivoting to where Alex now lounged against the wall beside the wide viewport, arms and ankles crossed like she was attending the most casual of gatherings.

Miriam strode toward her, but stopped a meter away and adopted a scowl. “You’re alive, I see.”

Alex shrugged. “Kind of self-evident, yep.”

“You should have told me what you were planning to do before you left.”

“You would’ve tried to talk me out of it.”

“Yet I doubt I would’ve succeeded. Since you’re here now, you’ve been back on this side of the portal for at least a day. Why didn’t you message me? It’s been four months.”

“Heard you were busy. Didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Yes, well....” Miriam pursed her lips, and Alex’s began curling up in response. With a sigh she reached out and drew her daughter into her arms, grateful beyond words to feel the gesture returned in full. Heart beating, skin warm, ten fingers and all the necessary limbs intact. All was well in the world.

Except it really wasn’t.

She backed up to regard Alex, keeping her hands on her daughter’s shoulders. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Alex flinched and pulled away. “Why not?”

It probably had been the wrong thing to say, or said in the wrong manner. Miriam worked to soften her tone—to lessen her daughter’s ire and to lessen the blow to herself from saying the words aloud. “Because you shouldn’t have to hear your mother called a traitor. I didn’t want you to see any of this.

“I hate that you’ve been gone for four months, but now, honestly, I wish you’d stayed away another one.”

“You think I care what some *svoloch* politician says about you? What you’re doing is incredible. And it was a great speech. Hell, I was moved.”

The last part was delivered in a teasing tone, and she relaxed; part of her had worried Alex would be disappointed in her somehow. It seemed foolish in retrospect. “I did try.”

“Do you think it will work?”

Caleb joined them then, and Miriam accepted a quick hug from him before responding. “It won’t prevent bloodshed, if that’s what you mean. Will it bring me the support of the people I need to pull this off? Will it win over the hearts and minds of the rank and file, of the masses? Maybe. I’m not a politician or a public speaker. I’m not...” her chin dropped “...I’m not exactly a charismatic figure. This isn’t what I do.”

Alex smiled. “Sure it is. You do what is required in the circumstances, right? You always have.”

The cryptic insinuation reminded Miriam where Alex had been these last months. “I suppose I do. What did you find?”

“Through the portal?” Alex’s gaze drifted to Caleb, and they exchanged a weighty look. “We can talk about it later. You have a counterinsurgency to lead right now.”

That was true enough. Off to her left an officer hurried up to Rychen, and they conferred in hushed tones. She fought the urge to rush over and hear the news this instant. Was the officer corps falling her way or abandoning her in droves?

Futzing to and fro like a schoolgirl wasn't going to change the answer, so she imposed calm on herself and refocused her attention on Alex. "Very well. But answer one question for me: can anything you've learned help me here and now? Is there anything I'll later wish I had known today?"

Alex's expression grew uncommonly solemn, and Miriam realized her daughter looked tired. Strained. Concern flared, but discovering the reason for the strain would take longer than she had at present.

"Just know it's vitally important for you to get this one right. I mean, of course it is, clearly. But if we—people, all of us—head down the wrong path now, it will have grave consequences beyond the obvious. You need to win this fight. We need to be the good guys."