

RELATIVITY

AURORA RESONANT: BOOK ONE

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PART I:

SUPERPOSITION

"Listen: there's a hell of a good universe next door; let's go."

— *E. E. Cummings*

The Dzhvar descended upon them like the shadow of an eclipse.

The Anadens were not ready. How could they be?

As one of the more mature species currently evolving in their corner of the universe, the Anadens enjoyed rapid interstellar travel and danced on the cusp of developing practical wormhole traversal technology, a feat which promised to open galaxies outside their own to them. But they had never encountered an alien species as advanced as they, much less one so vastly more advanced that its nature resided beyond their ability to comprehend. For the Dzhvar existed across all dimensions, and among other peculiarities this trait enabled them to easily hide out of sight until they moved to strike.

The Anadens' weapons could not harm this fearsome enemy; their shields could not stop them and their tools could not track them. World after world crumbled under the onslaught, but the adversary offered no leader with whom to negotiate a surrender.

We had no special care as to their fate, for we did not concern ourselves with the affairs of mortal creatures carved of blood and bone. The Anadens were one among billions of life forms and millions of sentient species. If their existence began and ended as a blip on the cosmic timeline, so be it. They would not be the first to rise to the cusp of greatness, only to fall into the silence of history. They would not be the last.

The universe was eternal, and we had seen it all before.

But while the Anadens' fate lacked consequence, this was not true of their enemy. The Dzhvar could not be fought and could not be vanquished by ordinary mortals, because they were pandimensional beings born of the void.

In many ways, they were the void. Our opposite, for where we created they devoured. Where we seeded, they destroyed. Unrestricted by limitations of distance or dimensionality, they surged across the manifold of space, in their hunger not distinguishing between stars, planets and living beings.

We came to recognize a horrifying truth. The Dzhvar did not merely devour organics and their habitats. They had begun to devour the universe itself.

With every star system consumed their power grew. If their insatiable appetite continued unabated, a thousand thousand ages from now they would consume the entirety of the cosmos. They would consume us and, like all the others who fell beneath the Dzhvar's assault, we would be unable to stop them.

We were life. We were stardust. We were not warriors.

But the Anadens were.

A decision was made.

AMARANTHE

YEAR 6143

12TH EPOCH PROPER

PRÓTOS AGORA

MILKY WAY GALACTIC CORE

One by one the Primors teleported into the Prótos Agora.

The sphere's translucent walls absorbed and filtered the prodigious spectrum radiation bombarding it. Even so, the room was bathed in the light of the galactic core.

Myriad celestial objects were created and destroyed, endlessly smashed together and wrenched apart by the tremendous forces generated here at the heart of the Milky Way. The Prótos Agora harnessed that energy to propel itself on an orbital trajectory that circumnavigated the core, forever skirting the periphery of the accretion disk and the pull of the supermassive black hole at its center. The sphere's motion, and the shield that protected and shrouded it, were driven by the captured chaos of the core itself.

Praesidis was the last to arrive and the only one who did not require an aperture at the destination in order to do so. His *diati* dissipated—it never vanished entirely—as he greeted the others with a subtle dip of his chin. There might be no official leader here among them, but if there were one it would be him.

Upon his arrival and without fanfare their business commenced. They had been doing this for twelve epochs and formalities, if they had ever existed, were abandoned long ago.

“The permanent gateway to the Maffei I galaxy is nearly complete and will be ready for traversal in fifteen days.” Diaplas pivoted to face Machim. “We have picked up four disparate energy signatures consistent with Tier II or early Tier III civilizations, so standard Advanced Contact Protocols are to be in place during our exploration and evaluation.”

Machim gave his assent. “Done. Three DS brigades will be at your disposal in twelve days. Their Navarchos is authorized to summon additional forces as needed. Erevna, what is your status?”

“The prospect of a populated galaxy has volunteers lining up to be of service. You're guaranteed to have a full complement of personnel equipped and ready to move when you discover worthwhile targets.”

“Good.” Machim shifted to him. “Do you have any updates on the Phoenix Gateway investigation? My troops are ready to Eradicate the anarchs, should you ever succeed in finding them.”

The destruction of the Phoenix Gateway—the first permanent wormhole to another galaxy ever constructed, six hundred millennia ago—by a set of antimatter bombs the month before had stirred up troublesome murmurs of dismay within the populace. It represented an audacious, too-public assault on the Directorate's control. Long an annoyance, these ‘anarchs’ were now becoming actively problematic.

Praesidis nonetheless maintained a steady, unperturbed expression. “You know as well as I do they are not to be ‘found,’ for they represent a fragmented, loosely connected collection of terrorists and malcontents.”

“Be that as it may, I don't need to be an Inquisitor to deduce that they are also either suicidal or they have Anadens in their ranks and a regenesiis lab at some physical location. Physical locations can be found and destroyed.”

“This is not a new or noteworthy observation, Machim. We have destroyed their largest base before and doing so did not eliminate the threat but instead emboldened it. The better and more permanent solution is to deprive the anarchs of Anaden members, as without them the resistance will atrophy and

die. Erevna, tell me you have made tangible progress on a method to preclude the emergence of these aberrations in future generations.”

She glared at Praesidis with imperious disdain, as if he were a child rather than an immortal. “We covered this at the last assembly, in addition to at least three before it. Unless we exclude a sense of individuality and the perception of free will altogether, we can expect to continue to see deviations at a rate of approximately one per two hundred million individuals.

“If we do erase these traits, studies indicate the affected Dynasty members will become unproductive. With no reason to act, they will eventually cease doing so. In my opinion, this minimal anomaly rate is an acceptable price to maintain proper balance.”

Anomalies. A cold, science-swathed word for Anaden progeny who, whether randomly or upon being provoked by some impactful experience, rejected their Dynasty integral and vanished from their Primor’s sight. More often than not, they also dropped out of the Accepted social and physical infrastructure to live on the fringes, a move which rendered them untraceable.

Machim gestured in a theatrical display of open frustration, thrusting an arm toward the Agora’s wall and the core beyond it. “And this was acceptable, until the anarchs started blowing up important and very visible public utilities. This escalation in hostilities is *not* acceptable. Praesidis, I request you station three Inquisitors at each gateway and all Class IV facilities. Such a reprehensible event must not occur a second time.”

“I do not have enough Inquisitors to meet the request. Besides, they are all currently pursuing important assignments.”

“Then grow more.”

Machim’s passive-aggressive challenging of him had waxed and waned for the entirety of their existence. Driven by a surfeit of avarice, the man had never conceded to the irrefutable reality that, despite the millions of warships Machim fielded, Praesidis and his Inquisitors held the true power.

Praesidis’ eyes flashed violent crimson; tendrils of *diati* roiled out to caress his temples. “Inquisitors are not guards and they are certainly not interchangeable drones, and they will not be demeaned by being treated as such.”

Machim took a half-step forward...and retreated. “Watchmen then, but make it five per facility.”

Despite the recent destruction of a gateway, the notion these ‘anarchs’ posed anything approaching a legitimate threat remained an absurd one. But the Directorate had ruled Amaranthe for a million years in part by never letting any unorthodoxy, no matter how incidental, slither through the cracks to a place where it might fester and grow.

He nodded with a confidence that suggested he had planned to do so all along. “Security checkpoint staffing and restrictions will be doubled as well. There will not be a repeat of the Phoenix Gateway incident, and the anarchs will soon be erased from our history.”

MILKY WAY SECTOR 23*EXO BIOLOGY RESEARCH LAB #4*

“It doesn’t always come down to explosives, Cosime.”

“No, but they’re the most fun.”

“Oh, sure. Right up until the excruciating pain followed by agonizing death part.”

The memory of his last such experience continued to linger in the recesses of Eren asi-Idoni’s mind. The Phoenix Gateway obliteration was a sensational feat to pull off, and witnessing the antimatter work its magic up close and personal had absolutely been worth the pain followed by death which resulted. Still, he didn’t feel inclined to repeat the stunt—or not until the more negative aspects had faded from memory, anyway.

“You just need to learn how to get out of the way better.”

Bloodlust wasn’t a trait most people expected to find in a Naraida. Reedy and slight of frame, with long, hyper-flexible limbs, delicate features and luminescent hair as soft as feathers, the Communis name for the species was derived from the word for ‘fairy’ for several reasons. If naiveté counted as one of them, however, it had been a mistake.

He scowled at Cosime Rhomyhn in an embellished display of exasperation. “You’re welcome to take my place on the next mission and show me how it’s done.”

She cackled, enormous emerald eyes dancing with mirth above the frills of her breather lines. In typical fashion for her, the spiraire more closely resembled wearable art than a functional nitrogen supplement.

“Don’t be silly, Eren. Weak, helpless little me can’t possibly do something scary and dangerous like perform one of your missions.”

“And you better hope the Directorate keeps on believing that nonsense.”

He turned to the viewport. The banter was a fun diversion, but they were here to scope out a target, and they were lingering for too long too close to its security perimeter. The tiny scout ship on loan from Anarch Post Epsilon disguised itself by broadcasting false readings, and if they didn’t take drastic action, they should be able to remain hidden.

But floating around on the outskirts of a secure Erevna facility made him twitchy. And as Cosime often pointed out, twitchy soon became ornery.

The lumbering hulk of metal that was Exobiology Research Lab #4—it obviously had been designed by scientists rather than architects—orbited a bright blue B7 V star. No planets or other artificial structures existed in the system, and the quarantine procedures required to enter the facility were strict in the extreme. Inside, samples of plant and animal life collected across multiple galaxies were studied for useful insights into evolutionary tendencies, in the hope they could aid in the cultivation of new xenobiological, -viral and -genetic strains.

It might be proper and even admirable scientific work if the research was limited to plants and non-sentient animals. The ‘samples,’ however, included members of intelligent alien species who for one reason or another had failed to pass muster and gain Accepted Species status. They were experimented on as ruthlessly as the rest of the specimens.

Whatever the results of those experiments, none ever left the facility again.

He watched a cargo vessel dock in the bay suspended below the structure after multiple scans. The procedure was the same as the last three dockings. “I’ll blow it if I have to, but I’d prefer to get more creative this time.” *Make the scientists endure some fraction of the agony they’ve inflicted on their test subjects* went unsaid.

In contrast to the Phoenix Gateway’s destruction, this mission’s primary purpose was not to undermine the Directorate, though it stood to accomplish that as a bonus. No, this mission was an act of mercy.

Cosime hopped up on the dash to face him. Her arms and legs continued moving, if aimlessly. She never stopped moving, swaying, leaping, tumbling. For the moment it was only swaying, but the incessant motion was energetic enough to send her pure white hair bouncing about. The starlight beyond the viewport increased its natural glow to radiant levels.

As a side effect of the luminosity, the inky scar beneath her left eye blackened in stark relief. It had been earned at the end of a whip wielded by a displeased Kyvern superior; instead of getting it healed when she’d joined the anarchs, she’d altered it into the silhouette of a soaring broad-winged bird. Once, when in an unusually introspective mood, she’d told him there were other, deeper scars elsewhere, and he couldn’t help but wonder if she’d reshaped them into art as well.

“You know, you could let the inmates out of the asylum.”

He scoffed. “Sneak inside and disable the security protocols? The prisoners would never make it off the station. If they somehow made it off the station, they’d never make it past the security perimeter.”

“True.” She leapt up and twirled around to press her hands against the viewport and stare outside. He realized she felt confined by the narrow walls of the cabin—another reason not to stay here too long, as he didn’t care to watch her suffer. “But at least they could take their revenge on their captors. And by doing so, your end goal would still be achieved. I mean, your intent is to punish the Erevna here, isn’t it?”

Being circumspect earlier hadn’t made a damn bit of difference. She knew him too well, which was...weird, since nobody knew him well. He shrugged in agreement.

“Then this is a better plan, no? Guaranteed vengeful, righteous violence.”

The possibility of the imprisoned aliens slaughtering—or worse—the Erevna researchers held morbid appeal, and he enjoyed picturing the imagined carnage for a minute before leaning into the dash and sighing.

“You’re assuming they’ll fight back. Rise up. But no one does that, Cosime. No one but us.”

She sank down onto her heels wearing a pout. “All the anarchs do.”

“A few thousand among two and a half trillion. Most people, most creatures of any kind, aren’t like us. It never occurs to them to fight...I don’t think it even occurs to them that they ought to be free.”

“But—”

“Everyone inside this lab already chose not to fight. If they’d done otherwise, they wouldn’t be inside—they’d be dead back on their home planets. We open the doors to their cages, and the prisoners will simply cower in the corners waiting to be disciplined.”

She watched him studiously for several seconds, then adjusted one of the spiraire lines with the tip of a finger. “So, explosives, then?”