

RUBICON

AURORA RESONANT: BOOK TWO

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PART I:

FOR EVERY ACTION

*“The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is.
Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can,
and keep moving on.”*

— Ulysses S. Grant

AMARANTHE

YEAR 6143

12TH EPOCH PROPER

1

MACHIM FLEET FABRICATION CENTER

MILKY WAY SECTOR 46

Captain Brooklyn Harper landed in the Machim Fleet Fabrication Center server room face-to-face with a hulking orb of mechanical death. A weaponized appendage extended out from its shiny black casing to lock the sights of a plasma cannon on her forehead.

“Halt, intruder.”

Of all the bloody timing. She snapped her left arm out to knock the cannon off-kilter. At the same time, she pressed the trigger on her far smaller weapon, held close in at waist height in her other hand.

The laser from her Daemon tore through the metal casing with relentless efficiency, and after a jerking shudder the drone promptly exploded.

“Dammit!” Brooklyn threw her arms over her face in a protective cross and dropped to a crouch as metal fragments shot in every direction and the few heavier, larger pieces that remained intact thudded to the floor.

The ensuing racket echoed once through the cavernous room before being absorbed by thick, insulated walls.

Sotiras: Are you injured, Human?

“I’m fine.” She shot a quick glare at the shapeless lights trembling in the corner as she stood and lowered her arms.

Sotiras: But there is—

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): “Shit. Sorry, Harper. It showed up the same second you did.”

HarperRF: “Noted. Tell the Kat to watch the door and tell me where to go.”

Sotiras: I am right here, Human. You may tell me yourself. Also, I should note—

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): “Sotiras, please watch the door for additional incoming security. Harper, take the third aisle down to the large vertical enclosure.”

The Kat spun off toward the entrance, and Brooklyn took a step back to see which aisle might be the third one. She jogged down it until she met what was either a wall or a very tall block of hardware. It was unmarked and seamless.

HarperRF: “Is this what I’m looking for?”

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): “Yep. At 1.8 meters height, cut out a rectangle up to 2.1 meters height, all the way across.”

She gripped her blade hilt, brought it up to eye level and activated it. The plasma sliced cleanly into the material, and a few cuts later a section of the covering fell away. She propped it against the equipment to her left while her eVi filtered the bright white glow coming from inside the opening she’d created.

The interior contained a circuit of some kind. Hyperfine traces of darkness divided the light in a rigid, ordered pattern. Deeper inside, beyond the circuit, lay stacked slabs of a translucent onyx mineral.

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): “Okay, see the junction? The thicker cluster near the bottom right? Stick the bypass module to it.”

Everything looked like a ‘cluster’ to her. She palmed the small bypass module and started moving her hand from the center downward and to the right.

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): “Down farther. Over a little more—there.”

Suspicious of what could result from her ignorant tampering, she exercised proper caution as she positioned the module in front of the thickest grouping of traces and applied pressure to it, then drew her fingers away. To her surprise, it stayed where she’d put it. The traces appeared virtual to her eyes, but apparently they had some physicality.

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): “And we’re set. Wedge the section you removed back in place as best as you can. Hopefully they won’t find our handiwork until it’s too late. Sotiras, as soon as she’s done, get her out of there and back to the Saratoga.”

Her blade had done precise work, and the rectangular piece of metal fit perfectly in place. Once she nudged the last corner a touch to seat it, no glow escaped to betray the seams.

Sotiras: Security reinforcements are approaching.

HarperRF: “Ready.”

Pinpricks of ethereal light encased her to blot out the surrounding walls, and she arrived on the bridge of the *AFS Saratoga* two seconds later. The purposeful sounds of a full bridge mid-mission were briefly jarring after the tomb-like silence of the server room, but not unwelcome.

Brigadier Malcolm Jenner greeted her with a nod from the command overlook, then turned toward a grouping of tactical screens...then back, wearing a frown. “Um, Harper...”

“What?”

He pointed to her left shoulder. She craned her neck around to see a four-centimeter shard of drone jutting out of the back of her upper left arm. The material of her tactical suit had sealed around the metal to staunch the bleeding, so the extent of the damage wasn’t immediately apparent.

Residual adrenaline and automated eVi injury mitigation routines masked any pain, but she grimaced anyway. “Hell.”

I did try to inform you that you were bleeding. The Kat hovered closer and more confidently now, here in the safety of the bridge.

“Whatever.” She returned her attention to Malcolm. “What’s our status?”

“Waiting on the go-ahead. Your job’s done, though, so get to Medical.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but then it occurred to her she might have additional, less obvious shrapnel embedded god knew where. “Fine. But for the record, this does not count as a ground incursion. You still owe me a real mission. Sir.”

He gestured to the lift, staring pointedly at her until she pivoted and headed in its direction.

She was halfway there when the pain kicked in.



AFS SARATOGA

The Machim Sector 46 Fleet Fabrication Center sprawled across nearly three megameters of space in a lengthy orbit around a distant blue giant star.

A central structure sat at the center of an immense labyrinth of latticed assembly lines, not dissimilar to the Presidio’s design. Machim battlecruisers in various stages of completion hung in four rows down the primary production lines. Smaller semi-enclosed adjunct structures assembled a host of smaller components, which were ferried by ring channels to the production lines. Mechs buzzed through the facility like ants scurrying over an anthill.

Was there a single living creature at the facility, Malcolm wondered?

The Anadens were reported to be wary about synthetic intelligence, so presumably someone was on site to ensure the mechs and the lines' operational ware didn't get unruly. But it didn't seem as if there were many. He started to reflect on how it would keep the body count low, but if they were Anaden even that wouldn't matter. The notion of an enemy who perpetually came back to life was taking some getting used to.

The mission kicked into gear then, saving him from twisting his brain into knots over the matter.

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): *"I'm patched into the security system. Referencing the mission Tactical Grid, trip sensors are located at:*

Q1 S 21° E z -12°

Q1 N 67° W z 41°

Q2 S 35° W z -80°

Q2 N 26° E z 54°

Q3 N 19° W z 61°

Q3 S 11° W z -3°

Q4 S 84° E z -59°

Q4 N 25° E z 22°

"Each trip sensor is linked to four proximity mines. They're outfitted with failsafe triggers, so EMPing them won't do any good. You'll have to shoot them from a distance or something.

"The force field barrier is powered by three generators located inside the barrier at Q3 NW 6° z -9°. I've got a couple of authorization codes a disguised ship or two can use to get inside."

Commandant Solovy (AFS Stalwart II): *"Our first priority is to take out the force field. AFS EW-08, when I give the order, project the false cargo ship hull and proceed through security using one of the authorization codes Alexis provides. Once inside, target the generators using negative energy missiles, then stealth and keep clear of the blasts."*

Commander Lekkas (AFS MA-Primary): *"ESC Flights Two and Four, stage yourselves in range of the trip sensors and be prepared to neutralize them the instant the generators blow."*

Acknowledgments scrolled up the screen to his left alongside auxiliary chatter.

Commandant Solovy (Stalwart II): *"EW-08, proceed. All ships, combat alert status."*

The fleet was situated too far away from the target for Malcolm to be able to see the electronic warfare craft's progress. However, a stealthed companion provided a visual feed, and Malcolm monitored the disguised ship on a second screen as it approached the heavily guarded entrance gate.

An electronic warfare craft was an unlikely choice for an infiltrate-and-destroy mission, but in this case it was the correct size to pull off the disguise, being close in size to a standard Anaden cargo ship. It also wielded the best holographic projection capabilities, making the disguise believable. Nevertheless, the small, precision negative energy missiles it now carried constituted its entire payload and stretched its loadout capabilities to the maximum.

The vessel proceeded through the gate without incident and adopted a trajectory that would ostensibly take it to the hangar at the central structure—then it vanished behind a cloaking shield. Three long seconds later, multiple explosions erupted near the center of the facility.

The visible force field flickered and died in sync with a spike in activity as the Fabrication Center went on alert. Outside the perimeter, a series of smaller detonations cascaded in a bubble surrounding the facility.

Commander Lekkas (MA-Primary): *"Trip sensors neutralized."*

Commandant Solovy (Stalwart II): "All ships, proceed according to your assignments."

Rampant, comprehensive destruction was the objective of the mission today. Fighters swarmed in to engage the automated defenses, which included drones as well as far more robust turrets spaced throughout the facility. Sabres followed the fighters in, accompanied by a complement of frigates for protection, and began firing on the unfinished battlecruisers.

Lacking active shielding, the hulls crumbled under the onslaught from the Sabres' powerful railguns.

But it wasn't going to be enough to destroy the ships under assembly. They needed to destroy the Fabrication Center's production capabilities, or else the Machim would just start building new ships here tomorrow.

Malcolm eyed the long row of adjunct structures stretching beneath the length of the facility. "Proceed on a N 13° E z -2° vector. As soon as we're in range, target the individual units sequentially from west to east."

Brigadier Jenner (AFS Saratoga): AFS Tripoli and AFS Caracas, with me."

Lt. Colonel Londe (AFS Tripoli): "On your left flank, Saratoga."

Colonel Torres (AFS Caracas): "On your right."

Admiral Rychen (EAS Virginia): "EA 12th (NW) Regiment will take care of the central structure. Advise active Rifters to handle the prodigious debris soon to result."

Defense turret fire plinked off the *Virginia's* shields in harmless pinpricks as it unloaded its arsenal on the boxy edifice at the heart of the facility. It began to come apart in large, jagged chunks.

"Major Ettore, make our heading an additional S 12°."

Ettore chuckled. "Copy that."

Captain Casales: "First unit is in range. Firing."

Brigadier Jenner (Saratoga): "Tripoli, Caracas, commence firing at any and all component assembly units in range, west to east progression."

Confirmations followed, and the viewport lit up in the glow of lasers meeting, ripping into and melting metal. The distant sun reflected off the projectiles created for added effect—at least until the projectiles vanished into the rifts surrounding the attacking vessels.

Twenty minutes later, a facility that had manufactured four hundred battlecruisers a week lay in ruins. Nothing larger than thirty meters populated the debris field.

The automated defenses were no match for twelve thousand ships from the AEGIS fleet, and they met no active resistance. In executing the ambush they had followed the Machim model by bringing far greater firepower than was required to complete the mission. It was the latest strike in a campaign to swiftly nullify the Machim's biggest advantage: numbers.

No doubt they'd meet greater resistance in future missions, but for today it appeared they would chalk up a decisive victory.

℞

SIYANE

Alex watched the fireworks from a bird's eye vantage above and to the left of one of the primary assembly lines, for the moment. She could move freely among the cacophony of explosions and shattering metal, however, without fear of injury.

For she wasn't really there.

The *Siyane*, and her with it, were safely tucked away thirteen kiloparsecs from the Machim Fleet Fabrication Center under attack, but only a few dozen meters from a solitary teleportation gate situated on a rocky, barren world bearing the uninspiring moniker of MW-2189c.

She drifted among the lasers and mounting debris enjoying the show, as her role in the mission was essentially complete. She *could* pitch in to provide target advice or location pointers, but in truth this mission was mostly about blowing shit up, and the military didn't need her help with that.

So she watched the impressive destruction-in-progress with half her attention as her mind began to wander to other matters. "Remind me to talk to Mesme about Sotiras. The Kat could use a round of coaching on how to interact with people."

Valkyrie's voice resonated in her mind—also in the cabin of the *Siyane*, but she didn't try to split her attention yet further to hear it. *'It wasn't that bad.'*

"Yes, it was. But I guess we shouldn't expect too much when the B-team fills in."

'Still, the mission would have been all but impossible without Sotiras' assistance in infiltrating the facility.'

"Not Sotiras specifically, since any random Kat would have sufficed. But, yes, the infiltration assist was definitely helpful. We need...."

Alex absently fiddled with the tiny Reor slab she'd removed from her pocket at some point. She understood Anaden security protocols and information storage and retrieval methodologies fairly well now, having studied the details both Mesme and Eren had provided, but more so having hacked and deep-dived Machim Central Command servers. This latest foray into the inner workings of one of their systems only reinforced her belief that she now had a solid grasp of the tech and processes involved.

'Yes? What do we need?'

"We need to figure out a way to tap into their systems remotely—or permanently. We need to get inside their overall network. This single location, physical infiltration routine is nonsense. It's unreliable and puts our people, and sometimes *me*, in unnecessary danger."

'The Directorate's rampant paranoia makes doing as you suggest a difficult proposition. Information they treat as valuable is not designed to be widely shared and is walled off from remote interconnections.'

"Well, we need to find a way."

'I will make a note.'

Alex's focus gradually returned to the ongoing sacking of the Fabrication Center, and she realized she'd been staring at a semi-hidden piece of equipment while she and Valkyrie talked. She'd been waiting for it to crack apart or vaporize entirely, yet it remained intact.

Alexis Solovy (Siyane): *"Somebody target the blocky module suspended below the central structure in Q3, near the rear—S 21° W \pm 8°—and your pesky defense turret problem will be no more."*

A message arrived in an off-channel pulse.

'Somebody'? Please try to maintain at least a small amount of decorum on the open channels.

Sorry, Mom. I just don't speak military.

'Technically, you do. I have available for instant recall the designations of all formations in the AEGIS-led fleet down to the squad level, as well as every named ship. I also keep databases of modern military nomenclature.'

Alex grumbled under her breath. "Shhh. She doesn't need to be reminded of that."

A staccato of explosions rippled through the module in question.

"See, though? 'Somebody' took care of it."

'SF Northern Fleet Fighter Squadron #143, to be precise.'

“Yes, Valkyrie. Thank you.”

A completed component storage unit she'd mentally wandered near during the exchange abruptly disintegrated, sending metal shards to envelop the space her consciousness occupied.

Like shattered glass. But none pierced her, instead falling through her untouched like the ghost she had become.

No. She allowed the déjà vu to flare, rooted in a memory from Portal Prime, but she wasn't a ghost. Not this time. Moments such as this, she wasn't certain exactly what she *was*—human, Prevo, and maybe something still unfathomable as well—but she was making peace with the ambiguity.

Okay, Mom. You seem to have things well in hand, so I'll leave you and your esteemed fleet to mop up things here. I'm supposed to pick Caleb up in a few minutes.

Understood. Rendezvous at Staging Point C1 in three hours for an AEGIS Council meeting. And lunch after, if you'd like.

Sounds good.

She laughed to herself. They were making lunch date plans while she projected her consciousness across over a dozen kiloparsecs into the middle of a space battle, if a rather one-sided one, her mother actively commanded. All of this was taking place in a universe other than their own, and it was all somehow *normal*.

Her life had always been unconventional, but occasionally it caught her by surprise just how damn improbable it could be.