

# SIDESPACE

AURORA RENEGADES: BOOK ONE

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## AURORA THESI (PORTAL PRIME)

### ENISLE SEVENTEEN

I considered the inert form lying in the stasis chamber.

It appeared a stranger to me. I felt no kinship, no attachment to the body providing my life force. Memory my aspect, I no longer recalled having resided within it. To find oneself bound inside the confines of a small, frail body, rendered hapless by its myriad limitations, was anathema to me.

I moved the stasis chamber into the deepest corner of the structure. The life support system was designed to function for perpetuity without my intervention. Unseen, it would trouble me no further. Then I left the structure and its refuge behind to hover at the shore of my lake, finding myself uncertain of what to do next.

*Exile.*

Such had been the verdict of the Idryma Conclave. Exiled from their ranks in name, title and consciousness. Exiled from Amaranthe. My body retrieved from the *krypti* and relinquished to the dirt of Aurora Thesi.

*A watcher with no subjects.*

*An Analystae with no dominion.*

It would be far simpler if it were such a simple matter as this. But my task extended far beyond the rigid strictures of the Idryma. Aurora had been entrusted to me because I understood our purpose more deeply than anyone, save possibly Praetor Lakhes.

Histories. Futures. What was inevitable, and all that was not.

The Conclave called Aurora a failure. We would refocus

our efforts on the other Enisles, Lakhes proclaimed, in the search for new and innovative prospects. We would try again, Hyperion declared, but ensure firmer restraints were in place from the beginning this time.

I believed the answers still resided in Aurora. For what the Conclave was too insular to see—or too fearful to admit if they did see—was this: the uprising by the Humans had in fact proven the validity of the principal hypothesis underlying Aurora's existence. Now was not the time to recoil as mettle failed.

This was the *kairos*. This was what we had *wanted*. The others might flinch and turn away, but I would not.

Before departing Aurora for the last time, representatives of the Conclave had placed spatial triggers at the Metis Portal, designed to pitch the apparatus into a dimensional singularity upon its opening from the other side. It had been a near thing, our—their—decision to refrain from destroying the portal immediately. Only my most elegant arguments had convinced the Conclave they need not permanently foreclose this avenue.

But the Conclave, eager to be rid of the troublesome Aurora Enisle and its equally troublesome Analystae Mnemosyne, had perhaps not paid sufficient attention to the details.

I was and had always been the First Analystae of Aurora. This meant I controlled all the apparatuses of the Enisle, observational and otherwise.

The triggers had been deactivated. I could rearm them at any time, and should it become necessary—should the Humans or their scions attempt to launch an armada through the Metis Portal, one bent on wanton destruction of whatever they

found—I would do so, regrettably but without hesitation.

But I was the First Analystae of Aurora, and this experiment was not over. Once a proud member of an underground resistance, I was now a rebel from the rebellion.

As the sea spread out beneath me, an alert transmitted the opening of the Metis Portal. I halted far above the waters and waited.

What emerged from the portal was not the feared armada. Instead, it was a single ship. A familiar ship. I felt a quickening in my atoms.

*Clever, dangerous girl. I have been expecting you.*

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# SIDESPACE

# PART I:

## WILD THINGS

*“Life is the fire that burns and the sun that gives light. Life is the wind and the rain and the thunder in the sky. Life is matter and is earth, what is and what is not, and what beyond is in Eternity.”*

— *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*

PORTAL: B-3

SYSTEM DESIGNATION:  
EKOS

**EKOS-1**

A thundering bellow undulated across the grove as the forest roused itself to life, murderous intent in its heart.

“Get us out of here!”

Caleb’s retort came in the form of the bike leaping forward out of the small clearing and into the tangle of woods.

Alex gazed at the underbrush whizzing beneath her feet in fascination. Formerly placid, it now roiled like ocean waves advancing ahead of a hurricane. Before the bike’s speed became too great for her to perceive such details, she swore each individual blade of the broad, sage-hued grass reached up in an attempt to ensnare the wheels or frame of the bike, or even her feet.

“Holy hell.”

Her attention jerked forward at Caleb’s exclamation, at which point she could only concur. “*Svyatoy chyertu....*”

The foliage that wound parasitically around the trunks of the trees populating the lush woodland? It was unfurling to dart out through the air—toward them. She instinctively tucked her head against his back and drew her body in close.

In the corner of her vision the pliant, soft-wood limbs of those trees began to enlist in the campaign, lurching and clawing at their fleeing presence. Like the foliage, they seemed to be driven by a single, overriding purpose: to stop them, then to kill them.

Caleb expertly picked a path between narrow gaps in the trees at reckless speed, but the forest was increasing in



thickness. She honestly didn't know how he was going to get through such a dense chaparral, but she needed to help.

"I'm going to try shooting at the trees—maybe it will spook them long enough for us to squeak by." Shooting at the apparently sentient trees, that was to say. She intensified her hold on his waist as her right hand went to her belt and unlatched her Daemon. She withdrew it from its holster and pointed it outward—

—a vine darted out, wrapped around the barrel and yanked it from her hand. She blinked, startled, then quickly pulled her arm in before some vine decided to do the same to it.

Wide, tall trees closed in ominously in front of them, blotting out the sun. "Um...can I borrow your gun?"

The jungle-like forest was also increasingly loud, the rumbling noise growing as every element of it sprang into action, and she wasn't sure he heard her. In the absence of a response and not wanting to distract him, she reached down and jostled his Daemon out from the holster on his belt. This time she kept both it and her arm tucked in as she pointed it forward over his shoulder at a notably behemoth tree blocking their path. She pressed the trigger.

The laser tore into the timber in an explosion of splintered bark and vascular tissue. The topmost segment of the tree swayed to the left and fell away. As it did, the dull roar exploded into a furious cacophony. The surviving trees—all the trees except the one she'd shot apart—bowed in toward the bike, lashing out with greater vehemence.

"I think you made them angry."

She snorted in the confines of her helmet. "Well, they've made me angry...."

Her voice trailed off as the air filled with a plethora of orange spores, seemingly released by the groundcover ferns. Individual plants began linking together, closing off what open space remained. The last of the faint light from the prairie in the distance vanished as the trees, vines and foliage snarled into a web in which to ensnare them.

“Shit!” She stretched up, farther over his shoulder, and opened up an unrelenting stream of laser fire directly ahead.

“Valkyrie, we’re going to need a little air support here—and a pickup, posthaste.”

*‘I anticipated as much when every active sensor spiked. ETA 42 seconds.’*

The laser succeeded in creating a jagged hole in the web, albeit one barely wider than the bike. Caleb raced headlong through it as vines sporting razor-sharp edges tore at them from all sides. The helmet kept the vines from ripping into Alex’s face and the protective clothing she wore mostly protected the rest, but a zing of pain at her wrist alerted her that a vine had found skin between sleeve and glove.

“We’re almost out. Just hang on.” Caleb’s voice was low and strained. Still, she took comfort from hearing it.

Hanging on, she could do. She could also keep firing ahead and help to clear the way. She sent a new stream into the living web.

A streak of *different* moved off to their right. She squinted several times, unable to accept what her eyes relayed to her brain. “Caleb....”

“I see it.” His voice had gained a rather forceful edge now.

A large...creature...loped across the woodland on an intercept trajectory toward them. Except it wasn’t a creature—it wasn’t an animal. Multiple bramble plants had combined to

take the shape of a leopard-type beast, complete with two rows of thorns for teeth. But plants couldn't travel—not of their own volition and not like this.

As it closed on them, it became astonishingly evident what was happening. The grass was propelling the construct. Each successive region of blades worked in concert to send it careening forward.

When it was within ten meters, she swung the Daemon around and fired. The construct was porous, more empty air than organic material, and it was arms-length away before the laser finally hobbled it.

She wasted no time in redirecting her fire to the front. They were, in fact, almost out—but the trees had begun to lay themselves down across their path. The blockade grew higher each passing second.

“Faster? Please tell me there’s a faster.”

His response was a grunt.

“Valkyrie?”

*‘ETA 9 seconds.’*

The front of the bike pitched upward as Caleb fired the thrusters. The back wheel followed suit, and in a burst of speed they flew centimeters above the trunks. She sensed the trees shifting up as the bike passed over them, but the bike cleared the barrier before any limbs succeeded in swatting them out of the air.

The next instant a tree was imitating a javelin by hurtling through the air toward them. The wheels had barely hit the ground when Caleb swerved. The rear of the bike fishtailed in the grasping, clawing underbrush, and sheer velocity was the only thing that kept them from being skewered by the projectile.

Prairie land—escape—was now a few meters ahead. The border foliage surged in from both sides, tearing at them as they slipped out.

She exhaled in relief as the surroundings opened up and the spores dissipated, and more so as the *Siyane* came into sight. The ship descended to hover above the flatland, then pivoted to face them.

“We’re coming in hot, Valkyrie, so get the ramp extended.”

*‘Understood. I will provide covering fire to give you time to get on board.’*

“Is that necessary?”

*‘Look.’*

She closed her eyes, and Valkyrie showed her the scene from the ship’s visual scanners.

The forest was chasing them.

The plant life had not gained true motive power, and the grass here on the prairie wasn’t tall enough to pull off any loping constructs. But the forest was nonetheless chasing them.

Every variation of flora was joining together, ripping itself up by the root to attach itself to the trees, pushing up and out ever farther. Behind the border region the hinterland thinned out as she watched—via the ship’s sensors—to feed itself into the growing structure. They and the bike were a tiny black dot racing away from a living, angry woodland in hot pursuit, and gaining on them.

She forced out a whisper. “You’re going to want to not slow down. Just take my word for it.”

“It’ll be a hard landing, then.”

She watched their impossible pursuer surge closer. “I’m okay with that.”

When they were ninety meters from the *Siyane*, Valkyrie opened fire. The ytterbium crystal laser burned bright silver over their heads as it cut a swath through the menacing column of organic material. Exponentially more powerful than their sidearms, it ripped the leading edge of the column to shreds—but beyond the destruction the mass continued to build. *Damn.*

Caleb barked a warning. “Get ready.”

She tightened her grip on him and the bike as they hit the ramp at full speed. Caleb slammed on the brakes the instant they cleared the hull, but the engineering well simply wasn’t that long.

They were thrown over the handlebars as the bike skidded into the side wall. Her head slammed against the ladder. The helmet prevented her skull from cracking open but did little to soften the blow.

“We’re on board—go!”

His voice came from...she blinked away the worst of the pain...her left? She couldn’t be sure, as everything including her brain was moving. The ship gained altitude at a sharp angle as the ramp retracted and locked into the hull. The bike slid down the well to settle upside-down against the rear wall.

Caleb crawled over to her. “Are you okay?”

She groaned and struggled to find the control to collapse the helmet. Once it was gone she shoved the breather mask off and peered up at him. “Ow.”

His eyes were dark with concern as they inspected her. “How ‘ow’? I have a headache ‘ow,’ or I’ve been impaled by a metal spike ‘ow?’ ”

She felt along her chest and abdomen to make certain. “The first one. You?”

He chuckled raggedly. “I’m exceptional.”

‘Do you want to depart the planet, or should I adopt a high-altitude survey course?’

Caleb collapsed on his back beside her. “I don’t know, Valkyrie—did the forest form a towering beanstalk to climb into the atmosphere and wrangle us to the ground?”

‘Yes.’

They stared at each other in alarm. “Yes?”

‘Yes. However, it was only able to reach an altitude of 1.4 kilometers before falling to the surface.’

“Right.” Caleb’s expression was one of incredulity and mild amusement. “Take us to five kilometers altitude. And keep an eye out for new beanstalks.” He rolled over to prop up on his elbows beside her.

She flashed him a lopsided grin. “That was close.”

“Indeed. Did you really have to take a souvenir?”

“It was one fucking leaf! I thought we could analyze it on the ship....” She fumbled in her pants’ pocket and triumphantly produced the leaf. “And we still can.”

“Hang on, put that in something. It’s alive, remember?”

She frowned at the leaf. It hung limp and inert from her fingers; the color was already fading to a dull brown. “I think we can take it if it gets rowdy.”

“Well...” he twisted around and opened one of the storage compartments, grabbed the leaf and threw it in “...better safe than sorry.”

She tugged her gloves off and coaxed him back to her. She was sore in half a dozen places, doubtless bruised in more, and winded. But the adrenaline continued to flow through her veins, leaving in its wake an intoxicating high built on terror and exhilaration.

His lips met hers with a sudden, electrifying fierceness. He tasted of salty sweat and earth.

Her arms wrapped around him and drew him the rest of the way atop her, then her hands were tangled in his hair. His were lower, tugging her overshirt from the waist of her pants and sliding underneath it.

She bit his lower lip in mounting passion—

‘You should come upstairs as soon as you’re able. I believe both of you will want to see this.’

Caleb growled in protest against her mouth. She stifled her own grumble and kissed him fully once more, then reluctantly relinquished him from her grasp. “We’re on the way, Valkyrie.”

He rolled off her and onto his knees. “I’ll secure the bike and be up.”

She offered him a pout by way of apology and climbed to her feet, discovering a few additional aches in the process, then hauled herself up the ladder. As she reached the main deck Caleb’s voice echoed in the engineering well below.

“Valkyrie, do I need to explain the meaning of the term ‘cockblocker’ to you?”

‘No. I did consider feigning ignorance, however, in order to hear what would surely be a most colorful description.’

Alex burst out laughing, which also ached, and made her way to the cockpit.



She didn’t need to see through Valkyrie’s vision or the *Siyane*’s scanners to learn what had attracted the Artificial’s attention; she didn’t even need a HUD display screen. All she needed to do was look out the viewport.

The surface of the planet was in motion. It roiled in violent swells like an enraged beast caught in a giant cage. The agitation had spread far beyond the woodlands where they had ventured and now stretched as far as she or the visual scanners were able to detect.

She increased their flight speed but allowed Valkyrie to continue to navigate. “Let’s find out how prevalent this is, and how fast it’s spreading. Could it be the entire planet?”

‘I will adopt a course designed to encompass the most area in the shortest time possible.’

“I brought up your contraband.”

She gazed over her shoulder to see Caleb warily carrying her pilfered leaf between two gloved fingers over to the workbench. He placed it on the bench, pulled the gloves off and dropped them on the desk, then joined her in the cockpit.

“Damn. We really did piss it off.”

“Seems so.” She began opening several HUD screens while scratching absently at her wrist. “Valkyrie, are we picking up any readings to explain what’s going on down there, scientifically speaking?”

Caleb’s hand landed on her right arm; he tugged it upward and flipped her hand over. “You’re hurt.”

Of course she was hurt—her body was probably covered head-to-toe in bruises—but that wasn’t what he meant. A cut eight centimeters long ran diagonally from her wrist up her inner arm. It wasn’t actively gushing blood, but the wound was ugly and the skin surrounding it had swollen into red welts. “One of the vines managed to land a swipe in between my glove and jacket. I didn’t realize it took a chunk out of me, though.”



“Hang on—and don’t scratch it.” He glanced out the viewport again then headed back into the cabin.

‘There is an increase in near-surface seismic waves across the scanners’ range. I am also detecting a strong ambient wavefield, though the microtremors are erratic and not holding to a regular pattern.’

Alex kept one eye on the scene outside while she studied the accelerometer readings. “Earthquakes, huh? Quite the temper tantrum.”

‘You are assigning sentient attributes to a planet.’

“And she’s right to do so.” Caleb reappeared at her side, lifted her arm and wiped the wound clean. The antiseptic stung, and she was grateful when he moved on to securing a medwrap around her arm. “The forest tried to kill us. It was acting with malice aforethought and did everything in its power to prevent us from escaping.”

She winced as he pressed the medwrap firmly onto the wound. “So the planet is alive? Is that what we’re saying?”

“More likely it’s only the organic material. If it was the planet, the ground would have opened up beneath us when we reached the prairie, if not before.”

The image sent a shudder down her spine. “That would’ve been...bad.”

Caleb double-checked the secureness of the wrap then squeezed her hand. “Yeah. Not sure how we’d have gotten out of that one.”

She gave him a quick, relieved smile. “But if it’s not the planet itself, why are other regions reacting? We’ve flown over six hundred kilometers of flatlands containing hardly a blade of grass, but look.”

They had reached a wooded mountain range. The trees blanketing the slopes whipped about with such agitation the mountains themselves almost appeared to be moving. “How do *those* trees know what happened all the way across the prairie?” It sounded more absurd when uttered aloud than it had in her head.

‘I can hypothesize that the organic material uses the soil or underground cavities to communicate between disparate regions. The details of how such a mechanism might work, however, are unclear.’

“When we come upon the next barren region, send a probe into the ground. Maybe it can relay back useful readings before the planet devours it.”

‘I will do so.’

She considered the irate mountains for another second. “While we wait, shall we see what our stolen treasure can tell us?”

“You mean the leaf.”

“Hey, we fought damn hard for that leaf.” She wandered over to one of the cabinets, grabbed a scope and carried it to the workbench.

The leaf did appear rather puny lying there all alone. A sliver short of fifteen centimeters long and nine wide, the edges had curled inward and turned a muddy umber color. Narrow brown bands extended in from the tips toward the center. As she watched, the bands visibly grew, creating an expanding darkened area along their path. She blinked and activated the scope.

On initial inspection it looked like an ordinary leaf even at the cellular level. An epidermis protected layers of cells thick with chloroplasts and a network of veins. When she zoomed in

closer, however, one interesting difference manifested. In addition to the cells which transported fluids and nutrients, spread through the vascular tissue in fine webs was an unfamiliar type of cell, each one so slender they could be mistaken for filaments.

*They resemble axonal nerve fibers.*

*Lots of things 'resemble' axons, Valkyrie.*

*True, but Abigail studied numerous brain images. They resemble axons.*

*Point taken.* She increased the magnification level but couldn't discern any other noteworthy features inside the cells.

Caleb leaned against the table next to her and considered the screen above the worktable displaying the feed from the scope. "What does Valkyrie think?"

"Hmm?"

He tapped a fingertip to the edge of his left eye, by which he meant, *her* eyes.

"Oh. Right." Her nose wrinkled up in slight consternation. The truth was the act of toggling the connection to the Artificial on and off had become so seamless and natural, half the time if asked she wouldn't be able to say if it was open or closed without reaching for Valkyrie's thoughts. In fact, she wasn't certain exactly when she had toggled it on this time.

"She thinks they might be axonal nerve fibers. Valkyrie, do you think the central nervous system they would feed into was in the plant's stem?"

'Perhaps, but I'm analyzing a different idea.'

"Which is?"

'I'd prefer to wait to discuss the matter until I'm more confident in my conclusions.'

"Except you can't keep me out of your mind."

Caleb chuckled. “Maybe you should respect her privacy.”

She was surprised to find him wearing a somewhat cryptic expression. “You’re serious.”

Both of their voices had lowered, though Valkyrie could presumably still hear them if she wished. “It just seems if we genuinely believe she’s not merely a sentient being but a sapient one, we should treat her as such. I know, she’s all up in your head and you in hers, which means it’s an impractical notion in practice.” He raised his voice pointedly. “And it’s not like she’s respecting our privacy by not eavesdropping right now, is it, Valkyrie?”

‘I’m sorry, Caleb, did you need something?’

“Nah.”

Alex pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head with a weak laugh. The last of the adrenaline had dissipated, leaving her achy and tired. “What about the probe? Have we found a prairie region yet?”

‘Launching in six seconds.’

He grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the cockpit. “Let’s see how it reacts to another intruder.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and guess ‘not well.’”

But it didn’t do anything at all. The probe plowed ten meters deep into the barren dirt and began sending readings back unimpeded. They showed a series of extremely low frequency infrasound microseisms and little else.

“I guess this confirms our suspicion the flora’s alive but not the planet, and supports the theory the flora are communicating through the soil.” She chewed on the side of her lower lip. “So they’re a hive mind, then, with an intelligence shared by all the flora. That’s the theory you were working on, isn’t it, Valkyrie?”

‘You know it was.’

“Actually, no—I didn’t peek. But I was fairly smart on my own before you came along, and it makes sense. In fact, it’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

‘As you say. Scans of the crust and upper mantle show no indication as yet of a central nervous system, making it plausible that sensory functions and responses are shared amongst the flora across the planet rather than concentrated in a single cortex.’

“A distributed neural network? I suppose the trees and plants could be separate nodes of a primary consciousness—”

“Stop that.” Caleb’s hand rested gently over hers.

She looked down...she’d been scratching at the medwrap on her inner forearm without realizing it. She rested her head on his shoulder. “It itches.” It also ached even more than the rest of her body, but no need to worry him.

“I’m sure it does. So I think the emergency has passed for the moment. We should get clean and get some rest.”

“Hmmm.” She nodded languidly against him. “Valkyrie, pull up another kilometer to be safe. Adopt a pattern overnight to capture good representative scans of the surface. You know what to search for. Wake us if there’s a problem or a life-altering—and I mean literally *life-altering*—discovery, but otherwise we’ll decide how to proceed in the morning.”

‘I’ll do so. Might I suggest a biocide shot to ward off infection in your wound? In addition, both of you should have your eVis initiate anti-inflammation measures before you go to sleep.’

“Yes, Mom....” They drawled in unison.