

TRANSCENDENCE

AURORA RISING: BOOK THREE

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PART I: RICOCHET

“What matters most is how well you walk through the fire.”

— Charles Bukowski

SENECA

CAVARE, INTELLIGENCE DIVISION HEADQUARTERS

They were losing. Field Marshal Gianno said they were winning, thus the Defense Director said they were winning, thus Chairman Vranas said they were winning. But if they were truly winning, why did the air drifting through the hallways of power hum with an undercurrent of dread, with the whispered chant of metaphorical Last Rites?

No, Director of Intelligence Graham Delavasi decided as he reviewed the dwindling list of Oberti's contacts not yet arrested or cleared of involvement in the Aguirre Conspiracy, they surely must be losing. There had never been much hope of winning, he mused, but they had to try. Humans were stubborn that way.

His focus continued to ricochet between the two trains of thought—war in all its bloody tragedy and betrayal in all its icy malevolence—when the alert leapt into his vision to jolt the focus in a new direction.

Treadstone Protocol requested. Passphrase: The first and greatest punishment of the sinner is the conscience of sin. ID: D41571

"I'll be damned."

Caleb Marano was alive.

He didn't question the reason for the protocol's invocation. Questions would be for later, and the rules triggered by the invocation were both clear and strict in any case. He accessed the Intelligence Division's Level V security layer and initiated a new Treadstone Protocol Event.

A number of things happened next. The Senecan Planetary Defense Grid received an instruction to approve passage of the ship bearing the serial number designation EACV-7A492X, as indicated in the file attached to Marano's message. A bunker so secret it didn't have a name was activated, its on-call staff ordered to report and its security system similarly authorized to permit entry to the same ship. Four high-level security officers were requisitioned and directed to prepare for departure. Graham canceled his appointments for the next twelve hours.

Only after setting all the above in motion did he respond to the message.

Authorized. Your word is 'tendenza.' The response is 'corrente.'

Then he grabbed his trench coat from the windowsill and his Daemon from the desk drawer and headed for the rooftop landing pad.



Wind buffeted the blue-black water to a froth five meters below the shuttle. They flew low and without lights to minimize the chances of detection. Clouds from a gathering rainstorm blocked most of the reflected light from Seneca's moon—a fortuitous boon to their efforts at stealth. It was a night made for clandestine encounters.

The bunker hovering twelve meters above Lake Fiore opposite the Cavare waterfront was supported by twelve hefty deep-driven posts. Disguised as the residence of a wealthy recluse, the heavily fortified structure supplemented the natural defenses the water provided with a military-grade force field extending fifty meters in every direction and four rooftop SAL turrets masquerading as ornate bronze sculptures. Any vessel not possessing currently active authorization would be denied entry by the force field—and the turrets if necessary.

Division, the Military Council and the Cabinet shared use of the facility. Even so, it had been utilized on average less than once a year. The criteria for its use were quite narrow.

The protocol Marano invoked was one Division agents possessing Level IV clearance and above retained access to but few ever used. It signaled the highest level of threat to the interests of the Federation and demanded absolute secrecy—a total blackout of information. Above all, it requested protection.

The shuttle banked into the large hangar that stretched beneath the length of the elevated building. It was empty; his guests had not yet arrived. But the Planetary Defense Grid had tagged their entrance five minutes earlier and his message to Marano included the coordinates of the bunker, so he expected them to arrive before long.

Graham turned to one of the security officers who accompanied him as they exited the shuttle. Thus far none of them knew who they were to be protecting. At the bunker they were under a communica-

tions block bypassable solely via a unique code, so they would not be sharing the information he was about to divulge. He trusted the officers, but the Treadstone rules *were* both clear and strict.

"I'm providing you the files of our expected guests. Get started constructing new identities for each of them." The man accepted the files and orders without question and headed upstairs.

"The rest of you, stay below. They'll be here soon."



The ship sliding into the hangar cut a sleek profile, featuring sweeping curves leading to acute edges.

On seeing it Graham scowled in surprise, and surprises were not welcome in this setting. The hull gleamed a rich tungsten hue with a subtle pearly quality, yet the file said it should be muted ebony. Odd. But it possessed the correct authorization and matching serial number designation and otherwise fit the description...so another question for later.

The three officers with him trained their Daemons on the hatch as it opened and a ramp extended. Though none were likely to occur, the circumstances which could lead them to use those weapons were legion.

A man and a woman descended the ramp, hands in full view and displaying no surprise at the weapons trained on them. They matched the images from their files—but appearances could be masked.

When they reached the hangar floor the man came to a stop a respectful distance from Graham. "Division Level IV Field Agent Caleb Andreas Marano, ID number D41571, requesting Treadstone Protocol protection for myself and my companion, Alexis Mallory Solovy, Earth Alliance citizen. The word is *tendenza*."

"The response is *corrente*. Protection granted."

He signaled to the officers to lower their weapons, then relaxed his posture and offered a hand. "Graham Delavasi, Director of Division. Welcome home, Agent Marano."

Caleb brandished an easy smile as he shook Graham's hand. Though he favored his father only at the margins, the smile was pure Stefan—enough so it jarred Graham briefly. "It's an honor to finally meet you, sir."

“Something tells me the honor is more mine.” He shifted his attention to the woman as she stepped up, and repeated the action. “Ma’am.”

Her expression was guarded, her palm cool to the touch. “Alex Solovy.”

“Indeed.” One of his men appeared carrying two small devices and handed them over. “Military-issue personal shields for you both. Put them on now and don’t take them off. When you’re ready we can go upstairs.”

“One second.” Solovy adjusted her shirt over the shield generator as she went back to the hull of the ship. She input a series of commands in the small panel to the right of the hatch before returning to Marano’s side. The ramp retracted and the outer hatch closed.

Then the ship vanished.

“Bloody hell!” He sensed the officers’ weapons come out again behind him, and his hand instinctively went to his own.

Marano laughed. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

“How in the..is it still there?”

“Step closer.”

Graham joined the man and they walked toward where the ship had been. Abruptly it materialized mid-step, three meters in front of him. Frowning, he took a step back. It vanished once more.

He gave the all-clear to his men. “Care to explain?”

Marano shrugged. “Just a new toy we borrowed from the aliens.”

“Is that all?” Graham shook his head as he motioned them toward the lift. “You can tell me about it—after we discuss a few other matters.”

The lift took them to the main level. On the outside the structure might be a fortified bunker, but on the inside it rivaled a five-star luxury suite. A well-appointed sitting room with a couch, two chaise lounges and a formal dinner table stretched across the left side of the level. A large ornamental fireplace divided it from the command center occupying the right side. The far wall contained a bank of screens and individual control panels for each. A conference table with elegant but comfortable chairs ran down the center of the work area.

Graham poured himself a coffee at the kitchen station tucked into the back of the dividing wall, then pulled out one of the conference table chairs and sat. “You’ll be happy to know we uncovered the con-

spiracy responsible for framing you for the EASC Headquarters bombing and believe we have largely run it to ground—with considerable help from your friend Richard Navick, Ms. Solovy. So it might be Treadstone wasn't really necessary after all, though under the circumstances I can understand why you would feel the need to invoke it."

His guests exchanged an interesting look as they took seats opposite him. Marano clasped his hands on the table. "I know, and you have my deep and sincere thanks for doing so. But that's not why I invoked it. It's not the conspirators who are hunting us now. It's the aliens."

"Because you stole their invisibility cloak?"

"We didn't steal it, actually. No, the aliens want to kill us because we've seen them, we've talked to one of them and we've studied how their technology works. Mostly, though, they want to kill us because we know how to defeat them."