

VERTIGO

AURORA RISING: BOOK TWO

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PART I:

DESCENT

"For each one of us stands alone in the midst of a universe."

— John Buchanan Robinson

SIYANE*BEYOND THE PORTAL*

They were falling into a black hole.

People referred to regions of space where the distance between stars stretched to kiloparsecs as ‘the void.’ But even the void retained a murmur of light in the pale glint of distant stars and infinite galaxies.

This darkness was boundless and unbroken.

Dizziness clawed at the corners of Alex Solovy’s vision, brought on by the absence of a fixed point, of any spatial reference whatsoever to lock onto as a lodestar.

In a fit of what could be mistaken for panic she cut propulsion and sought the rearcam visual—and found golden plasma rippling placidly inside the ring sustaining it. She let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, and the dizziness receded upon the knowledge they were not after all *in* a black hole.

The hand wrapped over hers squeezed with reassuring strength. She looked over to find Caleb wearing an air of easy confidence.

“Not dead.”

She knew the calm aura he projected was for her benefit, to give her comfort. And it worked. Her pulse slowed and the pounding receded from her ears. A laugh bubbled forth, only to morph into a mild protest halfway through. “Not dead. Excellent point. But what *is* this place?”

She returned the squeeze, then let go of his hand and directed her attention to the HUD as readings began coming in. Sensor sweeps were picking up no transmissions save the tremendously low frequency wave from the portal, which continued unabated for as far as her instruments reached. Analysis of the surroundings reported...nothing out of the ordinary.

“The immediate area has the same fundamental characteristics as our galaxy. According to these readings, the laws of physics are alive and well and functioning correctly. The impulse engine is able to operate within parameters. If the portal is a Brane intersection...” she

glanced over with a frown "...the dimensions of this place are identical to ours. So *why* is it a portal?"

She checked the visual overlay. "We are definitely not anywhere in the Milky Way, though. It'll take the system time to analyze all the possibilities, assuming it *can* with no locus...but I don't believe we're anywhere in mapped space."

"Maybe the portal merely sent us a long way." He shrugged. "Like 'the other side of the universe' long way?"

"Well the other side of the universe is a damn boring place. There's nothing here."

"But there *was* something here. There were ships here, a lot of them, and they had an origin point."

She pinched the bridge of her nose in a futile attempt to ease the dull throbbing behind her forehead then rested her elbows on her knees.

This wasn't what she had expected.

She hadn't known what to expect. Perhaps a fresh armada of alien superdreadnoughts eager to return humanity to the stardust whence they came? Or more preferably, a dazzling civilization of exotic space stations, Dyson rings and planets subsumed beneath cities? She had idly entertained the notion of a mind-exploding dimensional shift to a gestalt of reality she hadn't the acumen to comprehend.

But she hadn't expected *this*.

She stared at the varied screens intended to display a plethora of information. One by one they updated. *Nothing*. Nothing save the portal and the *Siyane*. Yet somewhere beyond this barren expanse lived the aliens who dispatched an armada of warships through the Metis Nebula.

"I think...I think we follow the TLF wave for now. It's still being generated by something farther in. We can use the portal as a heading reference so we don't go in circles. I'll keep scanning on wideband, and eventually that 'something' will show up. It has to."

Hearing no agreement or any response at all, she toed the chair around to face Caleb. He was peering out the viewport, shoulders taut in a suggestion of unease. "What's wrong?"

He blinked and straightened up in his chair. "Sorry. That sounds fine." A corner of his mouth tweaked up in a hint of a smile. "I wouldn't dream of arguing with you on the best way to navigate uncharted

space. This is your show. But I was wondering...the portal had vanished until we reactivated it, which means they never expected anyone to come through it. So why are they hiding?"

"Maybe they're not hiding. Maybe they're simply...farther. Let's find out." She reengaged propulsion and accelerated until they attained a steady eighty-five percent cruising speed. No reason to overtax the impulse engine on the off chance the laws of physics weren't *exactly* the same here.

In the pervasive darkness there was no visual perception of movement, and only the subtle *purr* of the engine argued otherwise. It was rather disconcerting, so she sought solace in monitoring the portal in the rearcam. For the time being the sight of it shrinking in the distance did at least convey a sense of motion.

Then it vanished, and the void truly was absolute.

"Dammit!" She killed the thrusters entirely before confirming the gamma wave was still transmitting. It took considerable effort to resist the powerful urge to whirl the ship around and bolt for where the portal had been. To flee this suffocating *emptiness*.

Instead she slumped in her chair, arms flopping weakly to drape over the armrests. Her instruments would have been able to keep a lock on the portal long after it had passed from visual sight. But now...

"Must be a distance limit on the signal to keep it open. *Dammit.*"

Caleb had stood to pace behind the cockpit. In the wake of their discovery of the alien armada she had quickly deduced he did his best thinking while roving. Had it been only weeks ago? It felt like a lifetime had transpired since they had uncovered the terrifying secret at the heart of Metis.

"Can we use the TLF as a guidance mechanism? A sort of beacon?"

"So long as we don't lose track of which way is forward and which is back. The key is going to be..." she swiveled to the dash, magnified one of the HUD screens and began inputting commands "...I'm setting the navigation system to record our relative movements. It will create a mapping of our path, in essence. If all else fails we can retrace our steps."

"Will it work?"

"It'll work." Instructions completed, she sank back to stare out into the yawning abyss once more.

It was a bleak panorama. Forbidding. Oppressive. She yearned for stars to light the way, to shepherd and inspire her. But there were none.

In lieu of stars she reached behind her, somehow knowing his hand would soon be in hers, warm and comforting. Solid. *Real*.

On finding what she sought, she sucked in a deep breath and continued on.



They had been flying for what felt like hours when the first blips emerged on the long-range scanner.

Bored to tears and craving reassurance life remained possible in this desolate wasteland, she was curled up in Caleb's lap when the alert sounded. In *her* chair in his lap, on account of it being larger and more comfy and all.

She leapt up and magnified the USAR data while motioning him out of the chair impatiently.

"What do we have?"

"Looks like—" More blips materialized on the scanner. Then more...and it occurred to her she didn't technically have a plan for this particular scenario. "We found them."

She yanked the ship sixty degrees starboard and pushed the impulse engine to its limit. The inertial dampeners prevented them from being thrown to the floor, but she engaged the safety harness in her chair, as did he.

"Let's see if..." what was now a veritable sea of increasingly larger red dots shifted on the screen "...hell. They can track us. Worse, they *are* tracking us."

"Their dimension, their rules. Can you outrun them?"

She checked the numbers beneath the display tracking the vessels to see how rapidly they were approaching. "No."

"Can you beat them back to the portal?"

She swerved one more time to confirm and watched in dismay as they tracked her course yet again. "Not a chance. They'll be on us in minutes."

"What can I do to help?"

She magnified the longest-range scans of the region. She wanted to FTL. At superluminal speeds she'd outrun them, or at a minimum they wouldn't—surely couldn't—be able to track her. But she had no sense of how large or small this space may be or what might even happen if she initiated a warp bubble.

"Alex?"

"You can *shut up* and let me think."

"Right."

The tightness in his voice jarred her. She softened her own tone. "Sorry. Just...hang on."

In the corner of her eye she noted the muscles in his jaw twitching. "Okay."

The last time she had been in a firefight she had been shooting at *him*. The irony would have been amusing if not—

—the first of the blips came in range of the visual scanner. It was one of the insectile tentacled vessels from the alien armada.

"We're being chased by an army of squid. And goddamn are they fast squid."

Her gaze raced across every display, every sensor, every reading...but perceiving no answers, it fell to the oblivion outside the viewport. They couldn't run; the ships were almost upon them. They certainly couldn't fend off what now constituted a solid one hundred pursuers.

She thought Caleb might have said her name, but it was background radiation accompanying the hum in her ears and the symphony in her head—a song of quantum mechanics and trajectory calculations and astrosience physics and *where to go, where to go, where to...*

With a long sweep of her hand the entire HUD vanished. At the end of the gesture her wrist flicked and the lights in the cabin shut off. The inside of the ship was now as featureless as the landscape outside it.

She engaged the autopilot, unfastened her harness, stood and stepped up to the viewport. Her eyes closed.

Moya milaya, do not be afraid of the dark, for there is always light within it struggling to shine through. Be fearless, and you will see it.

She reopened her eyes, and the world outside was no longer cast in charred ebony. More of a dull charcoal now really, except...there. An *absence* within the emptiness. Hollow. An echo of the space around it.

She fell back in the chair, re-latching the harness with one hand while disengaging the autopilot with the other and pulling the ship up in a long arc before veering another twelve degrees starboard. Once the harness was engaged she reactivated the HUD and the lights.

“What do you see?”

Anyone other than him would have quizzed her when she shut everything off, or questioned her sanity. But he had recognized she needed the silence and held his inquiry until now.

“Somewhere darker than black.”

A few adjustments and she coaxed another two percent out of the impulse engine, but their pursuers were still gaining on them. It was going to be *close*.

What was going to be close? She was flying headlong into another black hole, and she couldn’t fathom what waited inside it.

It hardly mattered now. She had no other option.

The lead row of vessels fired, scarlet-hued lasers bursting out from flaming crimson cores. The writhing arms of the attacking ships ignited, lengthening to amplify the beams and direct them to their target.

In the instant before the beams impacted she flung the *Siyane* into a full spin, praying the rapid revolutions might cause the beams to lose tracking or simply cause them to miss.

Her stomach joined the *Siyane* in its spins as the inertial dampeners failed miserably to compensate for the speed of the revolutions. In the cabin ‘up’ and ‘down’ lost meaning.

“Jesus, Alex...”

A growl escaped through gritted teeth. “Just...hang...on...”

It took every iota of her concentration to keep the nose of the ship pointed toward what was a perfect eclipse of infinite blackness. The walls blurred away, along with everything else in her peripheral vision. She kept her focus directly ahead on the void within the void, for if her attention drifted a millimeter off-center she would be lost.

The ship shuddered in her grasp as a laser beam grazed off the lower hull. She ignored it to stay locked on the chasm racing toward her; yet as it consumed the viewport terror bubbled up into her throat.
Dad, I don’t think—

—they breached the edge and plunged in—

—and were inexplicably careening through an atmosphere. Shadow became brilliant sulfur as light flared to life around them.

Utterly unprepared for light, of all things, she was temporarily blinded. She fought to pull out of the roll she had created while blinking furiously and begging her ocular implant to give her *something* before the atmospheric forces tore her beloved ship to pieces and them with it. “I can’t *see*.”

“I can, in infrared. Let me help you.”

Then he was beside her. One of his arms wound tightly around the armrest; the other curled over hers on the controls. She willed her grip relaxed and let her hand respond to his guiding touch.

It took a few seconds, but the spinning diminished to wild gyrations, then to mere turbulence. Down and up returned to their proper positions, and the bright halos overwhelming her vision began to fade.

“I...I’m okay. Mostly. Enough.”

He collapsed to the floor next to her chair. “Good job, baby.”

His voice sounded terribly weak, trembling from the effort of speaking. She didn’t understand how he had managed to get to her side, much less remain there without a harness, *much less* stay focused ahead and be her eyes. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and cradle him against her, but she still needed both hands.

The atmosphere did show signs of thinning, though. With a deep, steadying breath she transitioned to the pulse detonation engine for planetary flight and allowed her fingers to sink into his hair.

A moment later the haze coating the sky evaporated away.

“When you can, you’re going to want to look up...”

He steadied himself by resting one palm on her thigh and the other on the armrest, and rose to his knees. “I’ll be damned.”

“Possibly. But not today, I think.”

They flew high above savanna grassland. The sky was the deep cornflower blue of a sunny late afternoon on Earth...*exactly* the color of a sunny late afternoon on Earth.

Only there was no sun. Whatever was lighting this planet, it wasn’t a star.