

THIRD BOOK IN THE AURORA SERIES

EMBRACING LIGHT AURORA



ISAAC HUNTER

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF KNOWING THE TRUTH MEANT THE END OF EVERYTHING?

Isaac Hunter's

EMBRACING LIGHT AURORA

Book 3

The Aurora Series

Chapters 1-5

An Excerpt

EMBRACING LIGHT AURORA

BOOK 3 OF THE AURORA SERIES

2ND EDITION

ISAAC HUNTER

ISAAC HUNTER BOOKS

EMBRACING LIGHT AURORA

Aurora Series - Book Three

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Jennifer—my constant support and the reason these stories exist.

And to our children:

Elly

Jeremiah

Skye

Angelynna

Willow

Andelynn

Dawson

Dalton

Kiannah

Audrey

And to the three we have not yet met:

Isaac Christopher

Isaiah Hunter

Gracelynn

And to all the children God will one day bless us with.

*Creation does not occur when energy is applied,
but when authority is acknowledged.*

CHAPTER 1

THE COMMANDER STEPPED out of the elevator as soon as the double doors opened.

“What’s the status of Sector 21?” he asked, immediately turning to the right and heading down the corridor. Captain Farrell followed a step behind, instinctively coming to the man’s right.

“We thought it was clean,” he said.

“Hmm...”

The commander moved with a slight urgency in his step as a few other soldiers passed by, but said nothing as they headed in the opposite direction. They stepped slightly to the left to make way for the commander.

“So, what’s this about grid 8, then?”

“I’m not sure, Sir.”

The commander reached the door on the left, three letters stenciled in white above it:

TOC

“Not sure?” the commander asked, stopping short of the security display on the wall. There was a soldier standing guard on the other side, his carbine at his side, his gaze forward, standing statue-like. The commander ignored him as he quickly entered the security code on the key-code panel, then stood at the retinal scanner long enough for the ocular scan to finish. It took only a few seconds before the display flashed:

ALL CLEAR.
ACCESS GRANTED.

The loudspeaker dinged as the door slid open, recessing into the wall.

“The incident—it just occurred—” Farrell said, following the commander through the doorway. It was dark inside, the overhead lights shaded, casting a red hue over everything.

“Report!” the commander said.

Several people at their individual stations sat up straight, taking immediate notice.

“Commander—!”

A warrant officer got up from his terminal at the corner of the room and followed along as the commander and captain made their way to the central monitoring station.

“Contact was made five minutes ago, Sir,” the officer said. “We’re still ascertaining what type of incursion we have. Reports so far are somewhat...confusing...”

“Then who the hell is out there and why are they in my footprint?” the commander said.

He came up behind another soldier who was sitting at the station, three large monitors side by side, two displaying yellow coordinate grids on a black background, the other listing a digital record of information: names, call signs, coordinate locations, and check-in times.

“Son—”

The commander’s voice was calm and steady.

“I need you to get out of my way.”

The soldier glanced back at him for a second, then immediately abandoned his chair and headset, allowing the commander to commandeer his seat. The commander took a rapid survey of all three screens and the larger display projected on the wall in front of him. Captain Farrell stood quietly, the warrant officer at his side—both tense, but motionless.

“When was the last contact?”

The commander glanced over his shoulder at them all, waiting impatiently for the immediate response he was not receiving.

“Seven minutes, Sir,” the admin said.

“Who?”

“Call-Sign Cable23, Sir,” the warrant officer said, gesturing toward the list on the third screen. “In Section 21, Grid 8.”

The Commander took a deep breath and held it for a moment, then let it out, slowly and evenly. He picked up the headset and flipped the intercom switch to open mic so they could all hear.

“Cable-two-three, Cable-two-three, this is Mountain-Main. Over.”

The room waited in silence.

“Cable-two-three. Do you copy? Over?” the commander repeated.

Silence.

The soldier standing behind him fidgeted uncomfortably in the shadows, instinctively ensuring it was not noticed. No one dared speak or interrupt.

“Mountain-Main. Mountain-Main...”

The caller came back suddenly.

“This is Cable-two-three. We are currently in Sector 21, Grid 8. I repeat—Sector 21, Grid 8. Contact confirmed. I say again—contact is confirmed. We need immediate security support...”

The person on the other end of the radio transmission spoke rapidly, a slight panic betrayed in his voice.

“Cable-two-three, please advise on the nature of the contact.”

The commander waited.

“Mountain-Main. This is Cable-two-three. Are you kidding me? I already advised. I said we need some freaking security support out here right now!”

“Cable-two-three—”

The commander straightened up in his chair, his tone now stern.

“This is Commander Andrist.”

There was a pause.

“Uh, Mountain-Main. This is Cable-two-three. Uh, yes, Sir. Please be advised. We have contact in Sector 21, Grid 8—unknown individuals. There appear to be sixteen in number. Mostly adults. Four or five are children. Over.”

“Cable-two-three. Repeat that.”

The commander glanced back over his shoulder again at Captain Farrell, who met his look, then stared at the overhead screen in front of them.

“Did you say children? Over?”

“Mountain-Main. Correction. Three children. I say again: three children. They do not appear to be armed and are on foot, Sir.”

The commander looked around the room, the red glow making it difficult to read expressions.

“Why are there children inside my perimeter?”

The Warrant Officer leaned over and whispered in Captain Farrell's ear.

"There's nothing in Grid 8, is there?"

Farrell shook his head.

"It's empty," he said. "No infrastructure—nothing. It's impossible. There can't be anyone out there."

The Commander swiveled in his chair and looked back at the admin.

"Dispatch Security Team Bravo immediately."

"Yes, Sir," he said.

"Send additional transportation support as well."

The soldier went to work in the shadows behind him as the Commander turned back to the monitors.

"Cable-two-three. Your security support is on the way. Have you engaged with the intruders?"

"Mountain-Main. That is a negative. No engagement at this time, but the contact is aware of our position. I repeat, they know our position."

"Cable-two-three. Hold your position. Do not engage. I repeat, do not engage. Defer to the Security Support Team Bravo upon their arrival. Provide support only upon request."

"Mountain-Main. Roger. Out."

There was a hum of voices in the background as the open line was severed. Several soldiers were now on their feet, moving in earnest—transmitting information to other parts of the facility, ensuring orders were clear and being followed to the letter, and documenting everything in real time. Captain Farrell shifted his weight back and forth, from leg to leg, waiting patiently for engagement with the Security Team.

"What's going on here, Sir?" the warrant officer asked.

The commander turned around in his chair.

"Well, I think we're about to find out."

CHAPTER 2

SCOTT KNELT in the snow as the soldiers worked, clad in military fatigues and flak jackets, their assault rifles pointed at them from all directions. Their leader was a short, stocky man who yelled out orders as the others scrambled to follow. They first separated them—the women and the children lined up with three soldiers guarding—while the others worked methodically through the men.

First, Thomas.

Then Terrance.

Lupe.

Alex.

Alex's father.

Each one had their hands cinched behind their backs with plastic zip ties, and a burlap bag was placed over their heads. They were then pulled up onto their feet and escorted by two soldiers over to one of the large troop trucks that had arrived shortly after “contact” was made.

That's the way they kept saying it over their radios.

Made contact—

He could see Martha and the kids, huddled up a few yards away. The boys were crying softly, and Martha was doing her best to reassure them both. Kelly was sitting quietly next to them, her face ashen and a little sickly in the glow of the white headlights. Scott spotted Derrick at the end of the line of women and children. He stood out from the others. But not for any ordinary reason.

Sullen, yes.

But, unlike everyone else, he didn't appear to be distressed about the soldiers or being held at gunpoint. In fact, he seemed almost entirely oblivious to their current predicament. Impervious to the situation they were suddenly thrust into.

Scott couldn't quite put his finger on it.

It was as if the boy had...

Why did he keep looking around?

The boy kept turning back again and again, glancing over his shoulder, beyond the reach of the truck headlights—out there in the distance, in the cold. It was as if he were...

Was he?

It popped into Scott's head and immediately made sense. He was longing for the place they'd come from—the pocket—universe. Scott still had trouble even thinking it in his head, let alone saying it out loud, or even believing it to begin with. Parallel universes, multiverses, wormholes, and black holes were the gritty stuff of theoretical physics, the kind of stuff that made for good science fiction, but not real.

Not *really* real.

How could it?

There was no proof, no evidence they existed at all. Well, until now. Now there was proof. And he was sitting right in the middle of it—a part of the strangest experience he'd ever had in his life.

He'd lived through it. It hurt his head just thinking about it.

But, the reality was they'd actually been living in an alternate—more precisely, a parallel or pocket—universe for months, some of them for years. And now they were back, having survived their inevitable demise as the fundamental fabric of that alternate universe collapsed in on itself, having escaped through the wormhole at the front of it.

The odds of it were simply astounding.

And...

Then there was Derrick.

Unfathomable was the best way to describe him. He was an unknown variable—a question mark. And now Scott was sure the military knew about where they had been. How else would they know they'd crossed back over?

They hauled Mike to his feet and helped him over to one of the trucks. But what about Derrick's behavior on the other side? More importantly, how he'd been changed after disappearing the way he had, there was no telling how that place had affected him.

Altered him...

Scott mulled it over in his mind. The possibilities were simply unquantifiable. So fascinating, though. The things the kid suddenly knew. Before, he'd been a little slow, stunted, though Scott never really thought about it enough to ask Carol what the boy's disability had been. But there were many questions he wanted answered now. More importantly, experiments needed to be conducted.

He sighed.

For as horrible as everything had been, he couldn't shake the feeling that this had been the most intellectually stimulating few months of his life, and now it was getting even better. It's not every day you find a subject who has been cured of a developmental impairment, especially like this. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. There was something else going on

with that boy. Something extraordinary and peculiar, but oh so intriguing, too.

Scott hadn't noticed the soldiers coming until they were nearly on top of him. They bound his hands behind his back, and then everything went black as a burlap bag went over his head. He could feel his hot breath on his cheek as he tried to breathe through his mouth. They hoisted him up onto his feet and gave him a shove forward, a silent directive to walk.

Scott made his way toward the trucks. He could hear Martha sobbing.

"It's going to be okay, honey," Scott said, turning to look at her, even though he could see nothing. He could feel another shove from behind, along with verbal instructions to keep his mouth shut.

The truck's steel was freezing to the touch as he was forced up into the back, grabbed by another soldier already up inside, and quickly shoved to the left, next to someone else. He panted inside the burlap bag.

There was no telling what was going to happen now. Scott took another deep breath. He'd been so preoccupied in thought over Derrick that he hadn't given any thought to the fact that they were being taken into custody by some unknown military force. Knowing where they were—or better yet, where they had just come from—there was no telling what this group planned to do with them. Not that any of them really had any choice in the matter, regardless of the aggressor's intentions.

Several minutes later, Scott heard the truck engines roar to life, and the driver shifted into gear and began the slow trek back toward wherever the soldiers had come from.

CHAPTER 3

RAYMOND LEWIS PUT his ID into the back pocket of his pants as the soldier waved him through the double doors, the overhead buzzer ringing in his ears. He carried nothing else with him. No laptop. No briefcase. No brown bag for lunch. The white metal doors were heavy when he pushed his way through.

Inside the corridor, he waited for a moment as the soldier filled out something on his clipboard.

“Dr. Lewis,” the soldier said, not bothering to look up.

“Specialist Palif,” Dr. Lewis said, not bothering to look at him either. He glanced down at his pants and brushed something off them with his hand, waiting to be given the okay.

“You’re clear,” Specialist Palif said.

“Thanks.”

Dr. Lewis started down the corridor. He made it two doors down, then turned the corner. The corridor ran a hundred feet or more in front of him, with a security desk on the right side about halfway down the hall, and another glass door and alcove

on the left opposite. Dr. Lewis walked the short distance to the security desk and nodded at the soldier sitting behind it.

“Good morning, Dr. Lewis,” the soldier said, looking over from the bank of monitors that were attached to the wall.

“Good morning.”

The soldier found the corresponding keys under the built-in counter, and then handed them over. Lewis took the keys and folded them into his hand; a thin smile was all he could muster.

“Nothing on you?” the soldier said.

Dr. Lewis shook his head.

“Just my ID.”

“Okay,” the soldier said. “You can go in.”

“Thanks,” Dr. Lewis said, shaking the keys to the main door of his lab, his desk, the filing cabinet, and several other locked cupboards. He turned and went through the glass entryway just before another large metal door.

Dr. Lewis stopped and fumbled through his keys without looking at them, found the right one by feel alone, inserted it into the door, disengaged the high-security lock, pulled it out, and pushed the door open.

Another day at the lab.

It was exciting—sometimes.

Most of the time, though, it was monotonous and disappointing. The work he was doing, while on the cutting edge, was still a slog. Lots of dead ends. Lots of trial and error.

Endless failures.

The vacuum seal on the door hissed as he stepped through, the door closing quickly behind him as he made his way across the lab toward his desk. Chicago had been better, overall. Well, all things being considered. What did they always say about it? Hindsight is always twenty-twenty.

It was true.

It had all been better back then—well, until...until it wasn't. Dr. Lewis got to his desk, pushed his chair back, and sat down. He pulled out a Daily Report Log from his organizer, grabbed a pen from the center drawer, and began filling in the data for each day.

Another day.

Another form.

Another set of failures to work through, record, and catalog, adding to his already growing list of failures. But even after only two years, the University of Chicago felt like forever ago. An entirely other lifetime away. He'd been a postdoc then, a simple researcher without the independence that came with full-time employment, which meant long days and little compensation for him and his family. He snorted to himself at the irony, shaking his head.

It all had been for nothing anyway...

Dr. Lewis slumped in his chair as he let out a demoralizing sigh, realizing that he had at some point stopped writing on the form. He glanced down at the paper and could see he had still filled in everything by rote. Why were they using paper in a top-secret, government facility anyway?

Another day...

He had to stop thinking about these kinds of things. He shook his head, pushed the form to the top of his desk, and forced himself to get up onto his feet. He turned and took the white lab coat off the coat hanger behind him. He slipped his arms into the sleeves one at a time, then adjusted the collar, grabbed his ID out of his back pocket, and then clipped it to his left breast pocket.

Okay...

Get it together...

This had been a good move overall. He had to do it. It was the only option at the time, and staying in Chicago had become

anything but a good one. Not after...everything that had happened. And while what they were working on was fascinating, there was no way they could make it work.

It couldn't work.

And the reality was, Chicago would not have been any better. It probably would have been much, much worse. Employment-wise. Relationship-wise. If only he had made different choices, it could have been different with...

Julie—

Dr. Lewis fought back the tears welling up in his eyes. Despite just the thought of her name bringing him to the edge of overwhelm, tears were not going to be appropriate in a place like this, and it certainly wasn't going to help him in any tangible way.

And, he wasn't about to cry...

In front of Cali.

He shook his head, trying to get focused. It was going to be a long day, and he needed to get on track. He could cry in his beer during his off time.

But now he had to work.

Dr. Lewis walked across the lab to the double doors on the far wall to the right of his desk. His assistant was already here; he could hear her unboxing materials and moving things around, preparing for their first experiment.

He paused, one hand on the right door, and took a deep breath, filling his lungs with as much air as they would hold. He closed his eyes and started counting down from ten.

9...8...7...

This was available to him, and the best he could do.

6...5...4...

He was doing cutting-edge research for the US Government.

It was a dream job for any scientist...

3...2...1...

Alaska was almost 4,000 miles away from Chicago and... away from Julie.

Zero reverberated in his head like a gong. It broke him, having to fold up his old life once again and tuck it back away in the recesses of his soul.

He had to work, though.

Dr. Lewis pushed the door open and walked through into the lab. It was time to get going.

CHAPTER 4

SCOTT COULD STILL TASTE the burlap on his tongue. The bag they had placed over his head out in the cold had rubbed against his mouth the entire trip back. One after another, he'd watched his friends get zip-tied, bagged, and hoisted up into the truck like cattle. The bag came off just as quickly as it had gone on, the blackness now replaced by the glaring fluorescent lights above him. Scott frowned, shook his head, and let out a haggard gasp.

"What the...where am I?"

Scott tried to open his eyes, but all he could see were blotchy and blurry shapes in front of him, large stretches of solid colors, and he could hear a steady humming in his ears—maybe the sound of a ventilation system or a generator or...

He repeatedly blinked, the pain subsiding a little.

"What is this?"

He stammered through a cough. Scott forcefully cleared his throat, sat up in the chair, and pulled reflexively against the handcuffs as soon as he noticed them on both wrists.

"Why the—?"

He tried once more, glancing around the room. The only things he could see were drab, olive green walls with peeling paint in the far corner. He sat at a table with a bolted eye in the center of the tabletop, where his handcuffs were firmly attached. The lights were recessed into the ceiling, a single door was behind him, and a half-wall mirror was on his left. Sitting across from him was a man who seemed unaffected by anything Scott said.

“Hello?”

The man seemed engrossed in writing in a notebook he had in front of him on the table. Scott looked down for a moment as the man wrote longhand, scrawling looping words, his hand shifting along as he progressed across the page.

“Why am I here?” Scott asked, but the man just kept writing.

“Where are the others?” he insisted. “You can’t hold us like this. We have a right to due process, you know. We have rights. You can’t just take us captive like this, and where is my family?”

The man breathed in long and slow, then let it out at the same pace and cadence as his inhalation. He clicked the button on his pen, then deliberately set it down on the table next to the tablet he was writing on. Scott blinked repeatedly, still trying to shake the burning in his eyes.

“Well—?”

The man folded his hands in front of him and finally made eye contact.

“You can call me Malachi,” he said.

Scott knew he certainly wasn’t military. At least he didn’t look military, unlike the people who took them from the snow. He was not dressed in fatigues, but wore a collared shirt, with close-cut hair and a clean-shaven face. Scott thought he had a peculiar look about him, though.

Kind of shifty.

Almost like a used car salesman look.

“And my name is Scott, but you already know that. So, are you going to answer any of my questions?” Scott asked, holding up both his hands. “And are these really necessary?”

The man almost smiled, but at the last minute didn’t.

“Depends,” he said, and that was it. No explanation. No justification. The answers to all of Scott’s questions, including those about the handcuffs, were poisoned by the man’s brevity.

“Where am I?” Scott asked again.

The man just pursed his lips.

“Are you going to tell me at least why you kidnapped us? Are we in violation of some law? Are you military? What’s going on? Where’s my family and my friends?”

“Why don’t you tell me about your friends?” the man said, picking up his pen again, clicking the button, ready to take more notes.

“Not until I get some damn answers,” Scott said, sneering.

“How did you arrive at your location?” the man asked. “Do you have any affiliations you would like to declare? What is the purpose of the children, exactly?”

“Look,” Scott said, putting up a hand to stop him. The handcuffs clinked together, making a distinctly metallic sound as he did. “You need to answer some of my questions here. Like, where the hell are we? What is this place, and how the hell did you find us out in the middle of nowhere?”

“You do not have clearance for any of that, I’m afraid,” the man said, looking up from his notes.

“Clearance?”

Scott was dumbfounded.

“Do you have any idea what we’ve just gone through? I don’t give a *damn* about having clearance.”

The man didn’t respond.

“At least tell me you know about what’s out there. Can you at least tell me that? I mean, why in the hell would you have a place like this way out here at the top of the world and not know what’s happening?”

Scott shook his head as he looked down at the handcuffs.

“What do you mean, what’s out there?”

The man shifted noticeably in his seat, and Scott thought he saw him glance over at the mirror for a split second.

“What exactly do you mean by something out there?”

Scott sighed.

“You know exactly what I mean. It can’t be a coincidence now, can it?”

“How else would you describe what is out there?” the man asked again.

“God, come on!”

Scott buried his head in his hands.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about. Don’t be stupid. You know where we came from. Did you do this? Why didn’t you people help us? Did you do something to make it unstable?”

The man cleared his throat, and this time Scott was sure he’d looked over at the mirrored wall.

“What do you mean, unstable?”

Scott laughed out loud.

“Because the damn thing collapsed in on itself and nearly killed my entire family and me, that’s what I mean by unstable!”

“So, could you please elaborate on how you arrived at your previous location? How did you get to the location where our initial contact was made?”

“Look,” Scott said, suddenly feeling exhausted. “It’s pretty obvious I’m getting nowhere with you. So why don’t you send in the guy behind the glass there? Maybe I can talk with him?”

Scott sat back in his seat, wanting so much to have a free hand to massage his temples. The man wrote a few more notes in his pad and, after a moment, Scott shook his head in disbelief and spoke once more.

“Just let me talk to the man behind the mirror, okay?”

CHAPTER 5

THE SCREEN GLOWED BRIGHT green as Cali used the Postgres software to enter data from the afternoon's sessions. One of her jobs was to aggregate the datasets and dump them into the EDB mainframe in the basement, where computations ran overnight to verify the variables. She typed a string of code into the first entry box on the form, then skipped to the bottom of the screen and entered the final bit of telemetry settings.

Postgres was an interface to the facility's basement mainframe—what the lab staff called the Supermicro Machine, because it was manufactured by a company in San Jose, California, called Super Micro Computers, Inc. That was what they were told, anyway. Really, she only knew what the software did and its limitations. Cali was not sure how much of what they were told about the facility was accurate, or whether it was intentional disinformation to keep any one individual from knowing too much about what happened underground here.

After all, there was no grid up here at the top of the world. No computational network to upload their data to, so all the

difficult work could be done off-site and spread across several network hubs. Instead, everything had to be done in-house.

In the basement.

Isolated.

Alone in the wild and barren cold, a hundred feet up to the surface.

Cali sighed.

It had been so long since she had been to the surface.

Six months?

Nine?

Was she getting close to a year now? What did Raymond—Dr. Lewis—always say while working in the lab? They lived their lives beneath thousands of tons of concrete and steel. Down here, though, they were treated to all the comforts of home, well, except for freedom of movement, the trappings of the outside world, the conveniences of the internet, sunshine, and contact with their families. And that was one of many things she was surprised to find herself longing for.

Cali thought about her father, who lived in Killeen, Texas, and had just turned eighty-one, and whose birthday she had missed, and about a brother she had not seen or spoken to in twelve years who lived in San Diego. She could still remember what they looked like, their faces burned into her memory like haunted images, but oddly, she could no longer remember how their voices sounded. She found it strange how easily memory eroded when unused. It was strange, though, that she was thinking about the two of them in the first place.

And now?

She shifted in her chair as she added another data set to the Postgres on a new screen, the results from the second round of their testing. As she did, the phone next to her rang, and Cali nearly jumped out of her seat. Still struggling to breathe, she picked up the receiver and put it to her ear.

"Hello?" she said, her voice strained and tight, her heart still beating out of her chest.

"Yes, Ms. Penter?"

She recognized the security officer's voice outside the lab. He was probably sitting at the security desk watching the door.

"Yes," she said, still typing data into the computer.

"I just wanted to double-check with you that you are working late tonight?"

"Yes," Cali said, hitting the enter key on the keyboard and moving to an empty screen within the software interface. "If I work late every night, does that mean I'm not working late tonight?"

Cali waited for a response from the soldier on the other end of the line; maybe a little banter would help. She didn't get much of that down in this rabbit hole.

"Do you have an estimated time you will be leaving?" the soldier asked, ignoring her attempt at small talk.

"Probably another hour," Cali said, starting another string of data.

There was a pause. The soldier was probably writing the time and details on his clipboard. They wrote everything down here.

Everything.

"Is that all?" she finally asked, deflated by his matter-of-fact demeanor.

"Yes," the soldier said. "Thank you."

The line abruptly disconnected without a goodbye or any kind of pleasantries at all, leaving the receiver to beep rhythmically in Cali's ear until she put it back on the base. She glanced up at the clock, and her left leg started to bounce up and down on the ball of her foot again.

Would they show up tonight?

Cali wondered.

She sighed and went back to entering data, surprised that she still wanted to talk to them.

Why should she?

It was against the rules, and she should have turned in their contact immediately. She should have said something two days ago!

Cali shook her head.

She could rationalize what she should do, but there was something about whoever it was talking to her—something about their words—which she *knew* sounded crazy. She was not usually prone to being taken in by scammers or manipulative people—not anyone really. But this individual, whoever they were, was somehow compelling, and she had no idea why. And they had known...things... about her family.

About her private life.

About her and Raymond—

And how in the world could they get into a facility like this anyway?

She finished the last string of data and hit Enter again. But, instead of flashing to another empty input screen, the entire display went blank. At the top left, a cursor flashed in succession, then, as if they had been reading her mind, a message appeared as someone started typing to her from somewhere else.

Cali sat up straight in her chair. Every muscle in her body tensed as if a gun were pointed at her head. She watched as the letters appeared one after the other on the screen:

GUEST: Are you there, Cali?

CP8392: Yes, I'm here.

GUEST: Did you tell Dr. Lewis what I told you?

CP8392: No. Not yet.

GUEST: Why not? I have information he needs.

CP8392: About what?

GUEST: He must know the truth.

CP8392: But I'm scared. What if they find out I'm talking with you? I could lose my job. I could lose everything!

GUEST: That will not happen. They are not aware of our transmissions.

CP8392: Why not?

GUEST: I'm using a secure VPN tunnel and a terminal that I installed myself. They cannot trace it.

CP8392: That is impossible. Our facility is walled off. No one can connect to us from the outside. Who are you again? Why are you trying to talk to me?

GUEST: I've accessed the facility's GOTS system on the first floor. I can use AES, SHA, and Elliptic Curve to encrypt our communications. The facility has no idea that I'm speaking to you, so you are safe.

CP8392: Are you sure?

GUEST: Yes, but you need to tell Dr. Lewis immediately what I told you.

CP8392: Why don't you talk to him directly?

GUEST: Unfortunately, I can't. You're the closest contact I could find for him. I saw an opportunity and reached out to you because the situation is urgent.

CP8392: Okay, but I don't really understand. And who are you? Please tell me who you are.

GUEST: It's not important who I am. What's essential is that you explain to Dr. Lewis everything that is happening up here. Can you do that?

CP8392: Yes. I can do that. Up where? Where are you?

Cali waited for a response, ten seconds, then twenty. Nothing. She started to wonder, as the cursor blinked in a repetitive rhythm, if the enigmatic stranger on the other end of

ISAAC HUNTER

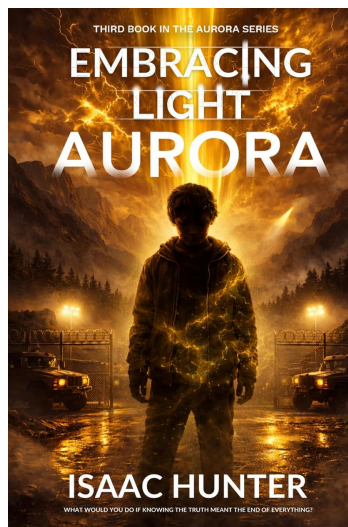
the chat had disconnected, but then another message appeared.

GUEST: We're on Level 3. Please help us, Cali. It's a matter of life and death.

The screen flickered once. Then the Postgres display returned as if it had been there all along.

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