



CHRONICLES OF ALSEA



CATALYST



Fletcher DeLancey



CHAPTER 1

Bonding break

EKATYA SERRADO STOOD AT THE floor-to-ceiling window of their suite, looking north over the domed roofs of Whitemoon to the sparkling bay beyond. The luxurious inn commanded a spectacular view from its hilltop perch, second only to the view from Whitemoon Temple.

At the bottom of the hill lay a large park, its central open space a colorful contrast of grassy meadows and immaculately landscaped gardens. A narrow but dense belt of tropical forest surrounded the park on three sides, separating it from the city. The fourth side backed up to the hill, where a stone path meandered up to the front arch of the inn.

Though normally full of Whitemoon residents, for the past three days the park had been closed to the public due to its current occupant. Crouched in the largest meadow, looking wildly out of place, was Lancer Tal's state transport. Ekatya and Lhyn would be boarding soon, and even now she could see the tiny figures of Guards and guests milling around.

She glanced to the left, where the temple shone on its hill in the morning light. It looked so different now, an imposing edifice of black stone that absorbed the sun. Last night that same stonework had glowed, giving back the day's light and reflecting the moons as all Alsean temples did. Impressive though that light had been, it still came in a distant second to the brilliance of a tree catching fire from the mere touch of two women's hands.

That little display was still making her head hurt. She had questions, Lhyn had questions, the Protectorate government would have questions...and she suspected that they would all be unsatisfied. The Alseans simply accepted it as a sign from Fahla. Even Andira, with all her pragmatism, showed no desire to look beyond the surface. "Fahla has legitimized our bond and Salomen's position in a way I could not have done with a hundred speeches," she had said. "And you think I should ask why she chose to bless us?"

Sometimes she envied Andira her beliefs.

She turned away from the view and crossed the tiled floor to the bed, which sat beneath a skylight and could have slept four. Currently, it held two travel bags and several piles of clothing, most of which were hers. Lhyn had nearly finished packing her bag while Ekatyia lingered at the window with her morning shannel. Shippers, but she had missed that brew.

"It still feels odd," she said as she rolled up a shirt at the foot of the bed.

"What, taking a real vacation for the first time in over two years? You're right, it does." Lhyn held up a scrap of fabric, wrinkled her nose, and squished it into a corner of her bag. "I don't think I'll need this. Andira said most Alseans don't wear swimsuits in the ocean."

"She also said it was optional."

"Sure, if we want to look like Protectorate prudes. I'd rather blend in."

As if that were possible. "The less clothing you wear, the less likely you are to blend in. You're missing a few ridges on that lovely body of yours."

Lhyn smiled from where she was bent over her bag. "What makes you think anyone will be looking at my body?"

"Because they have eyes, tyrina."

"Yes, and those eyes will all be directed at the Lancer and Bondlancer on their bonding break. As long as those two are around, nobody will be looking at us."

"I think you're underestimating the amount of attention a Fleet captain and the famous Doctor Lhyn Rivers will attract." Ekatyia added another rolled-up shirt to her bag. "That's what feels odd. I can't get used to the idea of us going along on someone else's honeymoon. They're supposed to be off by themselves, having sex twenty hanticks a day. Not entertaining us."

"Oh, I think they'll manage plenty of time for joining and Sharing." Lhyn sat on the side of the bed next to her bag. "And you have it backward. They're not entertaining us; it's our job to entertain them when they want it. Weren't you listening when Lanaril explained?"

"Ah...not really. I was talking to Salomen." Ekatyia folded a pair of pants and avoided eye contact. She was not comfortable around Blacksun's Lead Templar, a woman who lived and breathed religion. But Lhyn adored her, so at some point she would have to work past this.

"An Alsean bonding break isn't about the couple being alone," Lhyn said, and Ekatyia could hear *that* tone of voice. A mini-lecture on Alsean culture was about to begin.

“I mean, yes, it’s partly about that, but it’s also about the two families getting to know each other. Family is such a foundational part of their culture.” Lhyn’s eyes were wide with interest as she added, “It permeates the rituals of bonding. The words of an Alsean bond proposal are really a request to be taken into the family, and the bonding break is the time when that request is put into action. Everyone tells stories, so the new members can learn family history and the families can learn more about their new members. We’re going to learn so much on this trip!”

“It’s not a field study, Lhyn.”

“I know, but don’t you realize what it means that Andira invited us? She’s made us her family. She wants the Opahs to get to know us. She invited Lanaril for the same reason. Lanaril can hardly keep her head on her shoulders, she’s so honored.”

“I do know what it means. And I’m just as honored.” But she wasn’t at ease. Her friendship with Andira Tal, hard-earned in the middle of a global crisis, was an anomaly in her life. She didn’t make friends easily or quickly, and she certainly didn’t make friends whose absence never stopped aching. She had known Andira for all of two months before leaving Alsea, yet she had spent nearly two years since then being constantly aware of their separation. Hugging her the day before yesterday had felt like coming home.

But now she was expected to fit into a family dynamic, with Shippers only knew what kind of ramifications involved. She would rather have negotiated a treaty with the Voloth. At least then she would know how to act and what to say.

“Lanaril said that Andira and Salomen will spend a lot of time alone with each other,” Lhyn said, blissfully unaffected by such concerns. “But part of our responsibility is to be there whenever they want us. Essentially, we’re on call. Oh, and we’re supposed to make sure they eat properly. I guess newly bonded couples don’t always plan ahead for meals.”

Ekatya had to laugh at that. “I should hope not. If those two are meal-planning, then I might have to take Andira aside and give her a few pointers.”

“I see you missed that part of the conversation, too.” Lhyn shot her a smirk.

“What? What part? Andira did not talk about—” Too late, Ekatya saw the look in her eyes. “You little spark. You had me going.”

“And it was like netting trayfish in spawning season. No challenge at all.”

Ekatya strode around the corner of the bed and shoved her onto her back. "I'll show you a challenge," she growled, her fingers finding the sensitive places along Lhyn's ribs.

Lhyn gasped and squirmed, laughing as she tried to catch Ekatya's hands. Then her laughter stopped and she went much too still. "No," she said in a panicked voice. "Get off. Get off me."

As her heart dropped into her stomach, Ekatya took two hurried steps back and turned slightly to the side, making herself as nonthreatening as possible. "I'm sorry."

Lhyn sat up and wrapped her arms around her torso. "It's all right. I'm all right. It's not you." Her breathing was fast and shallow, and Ekatya stood helpless as she watched her fight a battle all alone. If she saw a panic attack coming, she could often help to head it off, but sometimes Lhyn simply fell in the hole before either of them knew it was there.

At last Lhyn looked up, her face appearing ten years older. "Come here?"

Moving slowly, giving her every chance to say no, Ekatya stepped into the space between Lhyn's legs, slid her arms around her upper back, and dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

With a sigh, Lhyn rested her cheek against Ekatya's chest. "Much better. I can breathe."

"Sometimes I wish I'd taken that third strike," Ekatya said darkly. "He would never have breathed again."

"But then Sholokhov would have owned you. It was too high a price to pay."

"Sholokhov can never own me. Remember..."

"It's not about owning. It's about who you give yourself to."

"And I've only ever given myself to one person." Ekatya kissed the top of her head again.

"Ask me," Lhyn whispered.

It was their ritual, and Ekatya did not hesitate. "What is the first rule of capture?"

"Survive. Do what I have to, but survive."

"What is the second rule?"

"Delay. Say anything, do anything to delay any act that might debilitate me or make me unable to assist my own rescue."

“What is the third rule?”

Lhyn looked up. “Find the piece of you inside me.”

“It’s always there.” Ekatyia held her gaze. “Always.”

“And thank Fahla for that.” Lhyn tucked her head against Ekatyia’s chest again, a position she had never cared for before but found great comfort in now.

It was an odd physical reversal, given the height difference between them. Ekatyia always looked up to her taller partner, but in these moments she looked down, providing shelter, and she would do it until her legs fell asleep beneath her.

After several silent minutes, Lhyn gave her a final squeeze and pulled back to rest her hands behind her on the bed. “You know that I’m never leaving Alsea again.”

“I know.”

She inhaled deeply, a smile returning to her face. “I can breathe here. It’s so safe.”

“It is. And we could hardly be safer than where we’re going. Between Andira’s and Salomen’s units, we’ll have forty Guards patrolling the place.”

“Not to mention Andira. She would have made short work of him, just like you did. I still wish I could have seen it.”

Ekatyia ran gentle fingers through Lhyn’s long hair, the silver strands shining against the mass of dark brown. “Are you going to tell them?”

“I already promised Lanaril that I would. That’s what a bonding break is about, telling stories and getting to know the family. I want this family, Ekatyia. This is my home now. They have to know.” Lhyn’s eyes closed, as they always did when Ekatyia touched her this way. “Will you tell them your story?”

“Yes. Though I might have to hide the shuttle, or Andira will want to jump in and fly back to the Protectorate to teach a few lessons. She’s not going to be happy.”

Lhyn’s chuckle was music to her ears. “Wouldn’t you love to see her in Sholokhov’s office?”

“Are you kidding? It’s one of my daytime fantasies.”

Now Lhyn laughed outright. “And here I thought those revolved around me.”

“No, those are my nighttime fantasies.” Ekatyia hid her relief at seeing Lhyn return to normal. These moments happened less and less often, but it still tore a hole in her heart every time.

To this day, she had no idea how she had held herself in check. It would have been so easy to kill him.



CHAPTER 2

Well met

“WELL MET, LEAD TEMPLAR SATRAN.” The little boy held up both hands solemnly.

“Well met, Jaros.” Lanaril touched his palms and smiled at the unguarded innocence of his emotions. Jaros Opah was thrilled to be here and quite proud of his maturity in introducing himself.

“I’ve heard so much about you from your sister and bondsister,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to see you outside of the ceremony. But you mustn’t concern yourself with titles now; we’re all family here. Call me Lanaril.”

He shook his head, his freshly cut brown hair showing red highlights in the sun. “I like titles. They mean something.”

Andira stepped up next to him and rested a hand on his thin shoulder. “I still can’t get him to call me by my first name.”

“I think I understand,” Lanaril said. “I’m not certain I can call Colonel Micah by his first name, either. He doesn’t look like a Corozen, does he?”

“Oh, no. He’s the *colonel*.” Jaros turned toward the enormous state transport, which took up most of the park’s central meadow. In the crowd of Guards gathered near the ramp, Colonel Micah stood out for his lack of uniform and the fact that he was the only Guard with a full head of silver hair. He kept it in a short, bristly cut, a style common for younger warriors but not often seen on warriors his age.

“Do you know the other Guards, Lead Templar?” Jaros asked. When Lanaril said she did not—which was mostly true; she knew only a few of them by sight—he proceeded to point to each and give their rank, name, and a short description of their accomplishments.

After spouting more names than Lanaril would ever remember, Jaros indicated one of the few Guards taller than Colonel Micah. “That’s Head Guardian Gehrain. Lancer Tal promoted him two moons ago, right after her challenge moon on our holding. And the warrior next to him is Lead Guard

Vellmar, but I don't know her very well. She took Gehrain's place as Lancer Tal's Lead Guard."

"You might get to know her this moon," Andira said. "She's been working very hard since taking over my unit, so I've promised her some leave time. That's why she's not in uniform today." She leaned closer, her bright blonde hair looking even lighter next to his dark head, and spoke more quietly. "She's better than me with a sword."

"Really? Speedy! Will you spar with her?"

"Oh, most definitely. If Salomen leaves me with any energy."

His brow furrowed, bunching the skin along his forehead ridges in an endearing manner. "I thought this was a bonding break."

"It is."

"Then why is Salomen making you work?"

Lanaril pressed her lips together as tightly as she could.

"Because your sister cannot bear seeing me idle," Andira said, smiling at someone coming down the stone path behind Lanaril.

"Don't believe her, Jaros. I wish she would be idle more often." Salomen joined them with her father and older brother in tow. "I thought you two were out for a stroll around the inn property?"

"We were, but Jaros saw the Guards here and was afraid the transport might leave without us." Andira ruffled his hair as he rolled his eyes.

"I was not. I just wanted to see it."

"And he has already introduced himself to Lanaril."

"Very nicely, I should add. I'm most impressed with Jaros's manners." Lanaril watched the boy light up and thought she could happily spend a day absorbing such uncomplicated emotions.

"That's my influence," Salomen said, nudging her brother. "Now that Nikin is taking over some of the daily upbringing, I expect a steep decline."

"You mean a decline in temperamental outbursts? Yes, I expect the same." Nikin's white teeth flashed against his tanned face as he grinned.

The family resemblance between all three of the siblings was quite pronounced, with their dark brown hair and eyes, strong chins, and transformative smiles. Salomen and Nikin were both taller than their father, Shikal, and judging by the length of his legs, Jaros was well on his way to matching them. His facial ridges were still small on his forehead

and nonexistent on his cheekbones, but the thick, masculine ridges on both Shikal and Nikin were an indication of what he would grow into.

Salomen's ridges were attractively narrow, the fan-shaped trio on her forehead curving gracefully from the bridge of her nose to either temple and straight up to her hairline, while her cheekbone ridges cast faint shadows as she leaned over to tug Jaros's collar straight. He bore the attention stoically, lifting his head to make room for her hands. The action made his chin dimple more obvious, a twin to Salomen's own, and not for the first time Lanaril thought they could easily be mistaken for mother and child.

Shikal looked over Andira's casual clothing, his eyes crinkling in amusement. "You seem more approachable today. I could hardly believe that shining warrior in the full cape and breastplate last night was the same person who spent a moon working in our fields."

"What about that shining producer in the full cape and breastplate? I thought she looked like Fahla walking among us." Though Andira's front was perfect as always, the smile she directed at Salomen would have advertised her thoughts to a sonsales. Salomen's answering smile was just as easily read.

"Our Lancer seems to have been mentally compromised, don't you think, Father? It must have been all the spirits she drank. Oof!" Nikin huffed when Salomen elbowed him in the ribs.

Shikal shook his head. "You deserved that. And I believe our Lancer sees very clearly." He stepped forward and slid a finger beneath the fabric at Andira's throat, flipping out the upright collar that had been rolled under on one side. "But not when she dressed this morning. You must have been distracted, eh?"

Lanaril had never seen Andira blush before, nor stand so obviously speechless. She wondered how long it had been since anyone but a lover or Colonel Micah had touched her in such a casual, familial manner.

Shikal turned to his daughter. "I thought your mother taught you better than that. It's your job to make certain your bondmate is fit to be seen in public. Fahla knows Nashta was always stopping me before I walked out the door."

"And how many times did you stop her?" Salomen had not taken her eyes off Andira, who still looked as if she had been hit over the head with something large. "Father, Andira might need a little more time to adapt to her new family before you start trying to parent her."

“As if I could,” Shikal said. “I would never presume to usurp Corozen’s role.”

Jaros frowned. “Colonel Micah is Lancer Tal’s father?”

At last Andira found her voice. “Not biologically. But in every other way that matters, yes, he is. Just as you’re not biologically part of my family, yet here you are.”

The frown had not left his face. “We won’t stop being friends just because we’re family, will we?”

“No, of course not. Why would you think so?”

He stepped closer and spoke in a low voice that everyone else could still hear. “Herot is my family. But we’re not friends.”

A pained expression crossed Andira’s face before she crouched down with her hands on his shoulders. “I believe your brother is thinking very hard right now about his family and his choices in friends. You may find that when he comes back home, things will be better between you. But you’re right, family is no guarantee of friendship. I forgot that because I’ve spent so many cycles without either one, but you know what?”

“What?”

“I get to choose both now. I’m choosing friends to be my family. And I choose...you.” She tapped a finger to the tip of his nose.

He launched himself into her arms, and she held him tightly, resting their heads together. Then she opened her eyes, looked up the pathway, and smiled. “Here come two more people I’ve chosen. Didn’t you tell me you missed meeting Captain Serrado last night?”

“She’s here?” He pulled away and looked around before spotting the two Gaians walking toward them, bags over their shoulders. “Oh...”

To Lanaril’s surprise, the previously confident boy took a half-step behind Andira. “What do I say to her?” he asked.

“You say well met,” Salomen answered. “They may be Gaian, but they know our ways.”

He nodded silently, radiating both awe and trepidation as he watched the women approach.

They made a striking pair. Lhyn was tall and slender to the point of seeming fragile, and her startling green eyes were almost too large for her face. After all this time and many quantum com calls, Lanaril was used to

the lack of cheekbone and forehead ridges. She had certainly seen the same alien smoothness on the faces of the Voloth colonists, who were physically indistinguishable from the Gaians. But seeing it so closely was...different.

Lhyn wore her long brown hair in a complicated braid that brought out its silver streaks, giving her a look of dignity that was usually dispelled the moment she opened her mouth. She was one of the most open and enthusiastic people Lanaril had ever met, and her words rarely strayed from the truth of her emotions.

Ekatyá Serrado was much shorter, with shoulder-length hair as solidly black as Lanaril's own and dark blue eyes that sparked with intelligence. Though her height and slim build made her look small, she had the confident stride and aura of restrained power that inspired others to get out of her way. Lanaril could easily imagine her commanding more than a thousand people on her ship.

But where Lhyn was open and true to her emotions, Ekatyá was closed and cautious. She maintained an outwardly friendly facade, behaving with impeccable politeness, but she held people at her fingertips. Especially Lanaril, it seemed. She hoped this bonding break would provide the opportunity for both of them to move past that, for Lhyn's sake if not her own.

"Good morning, everyone." Lhyn dropped her bag on the grass and shaded her eyes with one hand as she looked toward the transport. "This is a crowd. Are we late? Blame Ekatyá; she had to have a third cup of shannel."

"Making up for lost time, Captain?" Andira asked in a teasing tone.

"Absolutely and without shame. I hope you've packed at least a case of it somewhere on that transport." Ekatyá smiled at the group, and when her gaze reached Jaros, he slid a bit farther into Andira's shadow. "I don't believe we've met. You must be Jaros."

"Ah..." He looked at his sister for help, but Salomen tilted her head toward Ekatyá. Reluctantly, he moved away from his protector and held up a hand. "Yes, I am."

Ekatyá met his palm touch. "Well met, Jaros Opah. I'm Ekatyá Serrado."

Lanaril was fascinated by the way she could physically project so much assurance when her emotions told a different story. Like all Gaians, Ekatyá and Lhyn were sonsales, unable to sense emotions and equally unable to front their own. Everything they felt was free for the sensing—all the unguarded

emotional power of children, but with the complexity and contradictions of adults. And this battle-hardened, accomplished warrior was nervous about meeting a small boy.

“Two hands, Jaros,” Salomen said. “Andira has invited Ekatyra and Lhyn because she has chosen them for her family. Which means they are your family as well.”

Jaros obediently lifted his other hand. “Well met, Captain Serrado.”

“There’s no need to call me Captain. I’m not on duty right now, and I’m not your captain. Call me Ekatyra.”

“But you’re the Savior of Blacksun,” Jaros said in an awed voice. He let go and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I read a book about you. We learned about your ship and battle tactics in my history class this cycle.”

Lhyn laughed. “Look at that, you’re already history. I guess you can retire now.”

“Which battle?” Ekatyra asked.

“The Battle of Alsea,” Jaros said as if that were blindingly obvious. “There was only one battle. Not counting the first ground pounder, I mean.”

“After the *Caphenon* crashed, yes. But what about the battle we fought before we crashed? When we destroyed the first Voloth invasion group?”

His mouth formed an O. “We didn’t learn about that! Not any details. Just that you blew up three ships before crashing.”

“You didn’t learn about a battle that took place right over your heads? It seems we need to update the Alsean records.” Ekatyra drummed her fingers on her thigh as she raised her eyebrows. “Should I start with you?”

“Yes! How did you know they were here? Is it true you fought them all alone? What was it like? Were their ships even bigger than the *Caphenon*?”

Jaros had forgotten the meaning of the word shy, and Ekatyra had forgotten her nervousness at the same time. She smiled at Andira, who gave her a quick wink.

Lanaril watched, her curiosity rising. There was an oddly intimate nuance to Ekatyra’s emotions, a private thread between her and Andira. An intimacy like that would make sense had they been lovers, but...

She glanced at Salomen, wondering if she had felt the same thing, and found her staring at Andira with a speculative expression.

Well. This trip might be more exciting than she had imagined.



CHAPTER 3

Confession

TAL HAD ARRANGED FOR SEVERAL platters of refreshments to be brought to the conference table in her private cabin, intending to use it as a place where both guests and Guards could stretch their legs and enjoy a nibble. But the transport had barely lifted off when Salomen grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her out of the main cabin. Quiet laughter followed them down the short corridor, the others assuming that they couldn't even wait to land before joining again.

Unfortunately, joining was the last thing on Salomen's mind. As soon as the door shut behind them, she dropped Tal's hand and said, "I think you have something to tell me."

"Shek." Tal ran her hands through her hair. "Please don't be angry with me."

"Oh, how I love conversations that begin with those words. Tell me, on a scale of being half a hantick late for our third date, to letting me find out in front of three hundred people that you might die in ritual combat, how angry am I likely to be?"

"Being half a hantick late for our third date is the *bottom* of your scale?"

Her attempt at stalling failed. When Salomen silently crossed her arms over her chest and assumed a waiting stance, Tal sighed.

"Remember when you told your family about your empathic gift?" she asked. "And you said that the longer a secret is kept, the more entrenched it grows?"

"Vividly. And now you're worrying me. What is going on between you and Ekatya?"

"More than I realized," Tal muttered, half hoping she wouldn't be heard.

Salomen took her wrist again, led her to the four large, comfortable seats by the windows, and pushed her down. Taking the opposite seat, she said, "You told me the two of you never joined."

"We didn't. But...we Shared."

Salomen sat up straight, reeling from the impact of that news, and Tal scrambled to mitigate the damage.

“I wanted to tell you earlier, but there was never a good time. I’d hoped to bring it up after my challenge moon, but then there was the whole disaster with Herot and Parser and Shantu, and after that we were cleaning up the mess, and then it was all the politics of electing two new Primes and getting ready for the matter printers and the bonding ceremony...” She dropped her head into her hands. “I know I should have said something. I just didn’t know how to start the conversation. And the longer I left it, the harder it became.”

“You *Shared* with her? A woman you loved? And not only that, but a sonsales alien who was probably overwhelmed by it? No wonder she’s connected to you!”

“I didn’t know she was!” Tal lifted her head and faced Salomen’s ire. “Not until the same time you did. I thought it was just me.”

Salomen’s eyes narrowed. “How could I not know you still felt that way?”

“Because I don’t! Or I didn’t. Agh!” Tal threw up her hands. “I felt that way before, yes. And you know all about that, but that’s not what’s happening now. This is something different, something I’m...” She rubbed her forehead ridges. “Rather nervous about.”

“No, I don’t know all about that, because you somehow left the Sharing bit out of your explanation. You said she never knew how you felt until the very end. How is that possible when you gave her everything you are? I would have preferred it had you joined with her.” Salomen slumped back into her seat. “And I cannot believe I just said that.”

“It wasn’t that kind of Sharing.”

Salomen gave her a sideways glance that dripped with skepticism.

Stung, Tal said, “And you wonder why I didn’t want to start this conversation.”

“Don’t even *think* of shoveling this back on me. I am not the one bringing my past love and your greatest competition on our bonding break!”

Tal snapped her mouth shut and stared out the window, where the coastline of Pallea was passing beneath them as they flew southeast. It was difficult to think clearly with the weight of Salomen’s emotions rolling through her, a tangled ball of jealousy, anger, and fear. But underneath the knots, pulsing steadily, was the power and solidity of their tyree bond.

A memory rose to the front of her mind, something Salomen had said on her first day in their State House quarters.

“Nothing has changed.” She met Salomen’s eyes, willing her to believe. “She still has her tyree, and I still have mine. Ekatya did not light up a molwyn tree with me.”

Salomen blinked, inhaled deeply—and relaxed. The sudden shift as the knots slithered apart left Tal light-headed.

“You’re right,” Salomen said. “Whatever is between you, it’s not what we have. Maybe I overreacted, but I’m just not used to...” She made a helpless motion with her hands.

“Sharing your toys?” Tal asked with a small smile. “Your father did mention that about you.”

“It’s much too soon for jokes. You know she’s the only person I would ever worry about.”

She sobered. “I do know, but there’s no need.”

“And I understand that, mostly, but she’s not a ghost any longer.” Salomen pointed at the bulkhead behind her. “She’s right there, and she has a deep connection with you. Which is a little unsettling to discover the day after our bonding ceremony.”

“I’m sorry, but I really had no idea. I didn’t feel it until now.” Tal hesitated. “There was...something, when she gave me that warmron the night they arrived. But I hadn’t touched her in seventeen moons. We were both so happy to see each other—I thought it was just her unfronted strength.”

“I did, too,” Salomen admitted. “Their emotional nakedness does take some getting used to.”

“It does. Ambassador Solvassen has learned to keep his emotions a little more ordered, and Chief Kameha has always been more muted. His mind tends to be focused on engineering details and projects. I’ve grown accustomed to working with them, but I forgot what it was like to be with Ekatya and Lhyn.”

Salomen nodded, her posture slightly more open though she was still guarded. “Perhaps you could just tell me the whole story this time.”

Tal winced at the reminder. “There isn’t that much to tell. It started with the honor challenge Ekatya told you about. That was when I Shared with her the first time.”

“The first ti— Oh, for the love of Fahla.” Salomen rested her head against the seat back. “How many times?” she asked the transparent ceiling.

“Only once with Ekatyra alone.”

That brought her head back up. “You Shared with *both* of them?”

“I didn’t plan it. I didn’t even know what I was doing. And it really wasn’t safe, which became abundantly clear when they left and I...well. Let’s just say it wasn’t a good time in my life.” Tal pushed down the unpleasant memory. “I didn’t Share myself with Ekatyra that first time. I used the Sharing to push my memories of Lhyn’s emotions to her. They were tyrees and didn’t know it, and Ekatyra refused to believe me when I told her. She didn’t think it was possible. So I showed her.”

Salomen stared at her in silence until a tiny smile lifted one side of her mouth. “You Shared with her to prove she was tyree.”

“I told you it wasn’t what you were thinking.”

“I know.” The smile spread. “Trust you to have protective instincts even toward an alien. One you had just beaten after she insulted your honor.”

“Well, there was some guilt involved. I owed her. And it seemed like a crime against Fahla that there could be such a thing as sonsales tyrees. They couldn’t feel the gift they held.”

“I can understand that.” Salomen drummed her fingers on the armrest. “What about the other times?”

As often as Tal had imagined this conversation, she had yet to come up with the right way to explain.

“This is where it gets complicated,” she said slowly. “I’ve never told you exactly what I did to make sure that Ekatyra stayed with us to help in that battle, and I promise you that I will, but not right now. Suffice to say that because of my strategy, their bond was strained. Deeply strained. I kept waiting for them to resolve it, but...” She shrugged. “They’re sonsales. Neither of them knew how the other felt, and they weren’t talking about it. At least not with each other. It was driving me insane. I dreamed my whole life of having what they had, and they were letting it slip like water through their fingers because they were too afraid to trust each other.”

“And we wouldn’t know a thing about that.” Salomen was softening, her hand reaching out for Tal’s as if she wasn’t aware of it.

Tal gladly laced their fingers together. “But we had our bond driving us. We couldn’t turn it off even when we wanted to. They couldn’t turn it on.”

“I think I see where this is leading.”

“I connected them, yes. But I didn’t know what I was subjecting myself to. They had so much power and no control; it was like completing an electrical circuit. I became part of their bond without realizing it. And we did that for fourteen days in a row. Only on the last day did I drop my own blocks and make it a true triad Sharing.”

“Fourteen days.” Salomen gazed out at the towering columns of clouds they were now flying through. “With both of them. That is...not what I expected.”

Tal could almost hear her thoughts as she followed the shifting emotions. She braced herself when Salomen met her eyes.

“I’m not your first tyree.”

“No. But you are the tyree I was meant to have. What I did with Ekatya and Lhyn...it wasn’t my bond to join, but they had no barriers and I had no idea what I was doing. And none of us wanted to stop.”

“But then they went home, and you were left behind with a broken tyree bond. Goddess above, now it makes sense—the way you were still so affected a full cycle later.”

“It wasn’t a full bond,” Tal said. “But yes, it was enough to be debilitating. I didn’t even realize it until I had already made a mess of my life.” She smiled, tightening her grip on Salomen’s hand. “Then I met an obstinate, disrespectful producer who pushed me past every border of propriety, and despite my acting like a dokker’s backside to her, she gave me a shining gift. She understood how I felt, even without knowing the whole story, and she told me that Ekatya was the dream I could only touch.”

Without releasing their grip, she shifted into the seat beside Salomen and slid her free hand around the curve of her jaw. It was an intimate gesture, half of the hand positioning for a Sharing, and it said more than her words could.

“But you are the dream I can hold,” she said softly. “And the one who holds me.”

With an inarticulate sound, Salomen wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss that left no doubt as to which dream was real. Drawing back, she said, “Now I really wish you had told me earlier. Perhaps then I wouldn’t have made a fool of myself jumping to conclusions.”

The sun pouring in through the ceiling lit up her eyes and brought out their many different shades, darker at the edges and lighter toward the center. The golden ring encircling each pupil was the sort of intimate detail that Tal delighted in, knowing that very few people were privileged to see it.

“You were never the fool,” she said. “I should have told you.”

“Yes, you should have. But I know now, and I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I’m not, if it’s what led me to you.”

That was exactly the right thing to say. As Salomen leaned in, Tal tilted her head back, offering her throat in full trust. The sudden suction made her breath hitch.

Salomen let go and blew across the now-warm skin. “I wish I had known you then.”

“I wish you had, too. Imagine if I had met you instead of Darzen, back when I was first starting to heal.”

“Well, for one thing, I wouldn’t have stopped you from ordering horten soup.”

Tal’s laughter was cut short by a gentle bite, followed immediately by the suction that sent her skyward. While she was losing herself in the sensations, the back of her seat began to recline.

“You do have a golden tongue.” Salomen left the seats in a half-reclined position and straddled Tal’s lap. “You can talk yourself out of any situation, even when I’m angry with you.”

“Does this mean I’ve talked you out of your clothes?” Tal asked hopefully. “You know that’s what they all think we’re doing in here.”

“No, but you may have talked yourself out of *your* clothes.” Salomen’s hands were busy at the buttons on the side of Tal’s wrap shirt, and in another piptick she pulled the top layer away, exposing one breast. “You looked ravishing last night in that bonding suit and breastplate, but I have to say, I prefer this for easier access.” She bent down and took the nipple into her mouth.

“Oh, Fahla.” Tal’s head slammed against the seat. “And to think I put off this conversation.” Her fingers wound into Salomen’s hair, holding her in place.

Salomen smiled against her breast, then pulled Tal’s hands away and sat upright. “Let this be a lesson to you, then. Had you told me earlier, we could have done this much sooner.”

"I'm a grainbird," Tal said, trying to get her hands loose. She needed them on Salomen's body.

"Yes, you are. Which is why you're not touching me now." Salomen pushed her hands back. "Hold on to the back of your seat, tyrina."

"What?" Her resistance was purely instinctive, a warrior's reluctance to be at any physical disadvantage. But Salomen's grip was very strong, and she was using her body weight.

"I'm not about to reward you for keeping the truth from me." Salomen's efforts won out as she pressed Tal's wrists against the top of the seat. "Hold on to this if you want me to go any further."

"You're joking."

"I'm not, and you know it." She leaned in for a deep, possessive kiss, then slowly pulled away. "It's your choice. Either you let me take control, or I fasten your shirt again and we bring everyone in here to attack those platters." Releasing Tal's wrists, she sat back and waited.

Tal was caught in an agony of indecision. She loved it when Salomen was assertive, but this was a step beyond. She had never completely given up control before, and it was not an easy role to accept.

But that was the point, she realized. Salomen had something to prove. If it were easy, it would have little value.

Silently, she turned her wrists and rested her fingers on the top of the seat.

Salomen's smile was somehow predatory and loving at the same time. "Good choice, my Lancer."

She unfastened Tal's trousers, then slid to the floor and began pulling off her boots. It was an act of humility that Tal had hated for most of her life, having been forced in her early training to remove the boots of any older trainee who demanded it. Salomen had memorably redefined its significance the night of their first joining, when she made it an act between equals.

Now she was redefining it again. Tal discovered that having her boots pulled off while she was in this position, with her hands above her shoulders and her body presented as a gift to be opened, put all of the humility squarely back on her. The feeling intensified when Salomen told her in a no-nonsense tone to lift her hips, and her trousers and underwear joined the boots and socks on the floor.

“Open your legs,” Salomen said. It was all the warning she gave before she gracefully dropped to her knees and leaned forward.

“Oh,” Tal whispered, jolted by the touch of her tongue. “I thought you would—”

A bite just this side of painful interrupted her, and when she felt long fingers slide inside, she forgot most of her vocabulary.

Keeping her hands still was far more difficult than she expected. But the enforced passivity enhanced her other perceptions, adding a layer that felt raw and dangerous—and all the more pleasurable because of it.

Salomen’s presence in their link took on a fierce edge. Despite being fully dressed and untouched, her arousal was not far behind Tal’s as she took her to the brink and then withdrew, not allowing her to finish. With sure hands and a devastating touch, she eased Tal back into a rhythm, pushed her to the edge again...and again withdrew.

The third time Tal was denied, she thought her fingers might punch through the seat fabric. She bit her lip rather than ask.

“I know this is killing you, but you are so competitive,” Salomen murmured as she rose from the floor. “And so damned beautiful looking like this.”

She straddled Tal, who by now had been driven high enough that the mere brush of Salomen’s trousers against her molwine made her gasp and arch her back. Then she gasped again at the bite on her throat ridge.

“I’ve been neglecting these terribly,” Salomen said into her ear. “And you refuse to ask me to finish you, so we’ll do this the hard way.” She began a slow rocking with her hips, applying delicious pressure while simultaneously working her way along the length of first one throat ridge and then the other.

Gradually she ramped up the intensity of her bites, but kept the same damnably slow pace with her hips until Tal was trembling beneath her, desperate for her release and silently praying that Salomen would not stop a fourth time.

“Ask,” Salomen said, and bit down so hard that Tal nearly lost her grip on the seat.

“Ask,” she said again, and began to suck where she had just bitten.

“Goddess,” Tal choked out.

“No. Ask me.” She bit down once more and this time did not let go.

“Salomen—” Tal strained her hips upward, trying to increase the pressure. Her fingers were going numb.

Salomen surged against her without relenting from the power of her bite. It was almost more than Tal could bear...and then it abruptly became too much.

“Please!”

The sudden absence of pressure on her throat ridge nearly pushed her over the brink. A shudder ran through her body.

“Let go,” Salomen said. “Hold on to me.”

With a groan of utter gratitude, she wrapped her arms around Salomen and held her close. “Fahla, I need you.”

“I know. Hold on.” Salomen slid her hands beneath Tal’s shoulders and shifted into a higher gear, her hips moving twice as fast as before. She lowered her head and returned to the throat ridges, this time sucking just firmly enough to keep the sensitivity high without distracting from the deeper pleasure of her thrusts.

Tal could not keep her hands still, her previous inability to touch making her starved for it now. She pressed and rubbed and squeezed, worshipping the curves and planes that made up this precious body. When the release finally roared through her, she pushed Salomen’s head up and kissed her, crying out into her mouth. Shaken by the aftershocks, she buried her face in the warm fragrance of Salomen’s throat and thought she might never leave this place.

Salomen remained still, stroking her hair and the back of her neck and murmuring words that Tal could not process. Gradually, sense returned, and she heard “my beautiful tyree” and “even more stubborn than me, but I love you anyway.”

The last made her laugh. “I am not more stubborn than you.”

Salomen kissed the top of her head. “You put yourself through torment just to avoid asking me to finish you.”

“But it was a very pleasant sort of torment.”

“I know. I felt it.” Salomen’s amusement shook her body. “And Great Goddess, but you were glorious like that.”

Tal finally pulled back enough to look in her eyes, which were full of love and an only partially slaked lust. “You didn’t have anything to prove to me.”

A knowing smile brought out the lines at the sides of Salomen’s mouth. “Perhaps I had something to prove to myself.”

“Did you succeed?”

“Oh, yes. Fabulously.”

“Good.” Tal snuggled in again. “You’re overdressed.”

“I’m fine. We do eventually have to let our guests in, you know. I didn’t plan to spend half the flight joining with you.”

“Let’s shove the platters out into the corridor and lock the door.”

“Yes, because that would be the height of courtesy, and who would explain it to Jaros?”

“Oh, Fahla.” Tal suddenly remembered who was on the other side of the bulkhead behind her. “I’ve never been so glad that this cabin is soundproofed.”

Salomen laughed, kissed her one more time, and pushed herself onto her feet. “Much as I love making you sound like that, I’m very happy not to have to answer any questions. That job I’m leaving to Nikin when the time comes.” She leaned down and refastened the top layer of Tal’s shirt. “I feel as if I should apologize to your other breast. Poor thing never even got free.”

Tal rubbed the side of her throat, where the hot skin was evidence of numerous marks. “I think you made up for it with my throat ridges.”

Salomen scooped up the underwear and held it out. “I’d apologize for that, but I’m not one bit sorry.”

“No, you’re proud as a moonbird in full feather.” Tal rose and began dressing. “I’ll be going out there covered in bite marks while your throat is pristine.”

Salomen offered the trousers with an unrepentant smile. “It’s a bonding break, Andira. They expect it.”

“I’m going to get teased,” Tal grumbled as she settled the trousers in place. “Micah will be positively gleeful.” She pressed the control to bring the seats back into their normal position, then sat down to pull on her socks and boots. “And if you wanted to avoid Jaros asking any questions, you made a tactical error.”

The realization washed over Salomen’s face, and now it was Tal’s turn to laugh. “Didn’t think about that, did you?”

“Shek,” Salomen muttered. Then she brightened. “No matter. It’s Nikin’s job anyway. He’ll just have to do it a little sooner than he might have planned.”

Now fully dressed, Tal stood and drew Salomen into a warmron. “Thank you, tyrina,” she said quietly. “Both for that lovely joining and for understanding.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for giving me what I asked for. I know it wasn’t easy for you—either part of it.”

Tal nodded, suddenly serious. It had to be said. “It’s still there. That piece of a tyre bond between Ekatyra and me.”

“I know.”

“I swear I had no idea—”

“I know that, too. It’s all right.”

“It doesn’t change anything.”

“Yes, it does.” Salomen ran soothing fingers through Tal’s hair as she spoke. “I don’t know how, and don’t worry, I’m not afraid of it. It’s only a piece, and what you and I have is beautiful and whole. But the truth is that you and Ekatyra are not just friends, and if this little piece of a bond has survived seventeen moons of separation, then you will never be just friends. You created something permanent.”

“I know,” Tal said. “I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“And this is where you keep making the same mistake. It’s not for you to do anything, not by yourself. This isn’t about you. It’s not even about you and Ekatyra. It involves all four of us, and we will all decide if anything needs to be done.”

Tal stared at her, and Salomen shook her head with a smile.

“Come, my Lancer. Time to stop being rude and give our guests a chance to enjoy that food.” She laced their fingers together and tugged her toward the door.

“Wait!” Tal let go and diverted to the cabinets to the left of the door, where she pressed a hidden control.

“What is that?”

“Air circulation. No need for Nikin to answer any more questions than necessary.”

This time, Salomen actually blushed.

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CATALYST

BY FLETCHER DELANCEY

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