



CHRONICLES OF ALSEA

EVERY LEGEND BEGINS WITH THE TRUTH.

VELLMAR THE BLADE



Fletcher DeLancey



CHAPTER 1

Bedtime story

JANDAHAR STOOD JUST OUTSIDE THE bedroom door and cleared his throat loudly. “Anyone wanting a bedtime story had better be *in* their bed by the time I come in this room, or—”

A stampede of small feet thudding across the wooden floor interrupted him, followed by creaking bed frames and the whoosh of blankets as his two children raced to beat the deadline. By the particularly loud creak of Milena’s bed, he guessed she had leaped into it from a good four paces away. If that bed lasted through her tenth cycle, he would be amazed.

“Look at that, already in bed,” he said as he walked through the door. “What a nice surprise! You didn’t wait until the last possible tick this time.”

Milena and her younger brother, Harren, blinked up at him from their beds on opposite sides of the room. Their covers were pulled up to their chins, hands still clutching the top edge in a position they clearly thought would fool him.

“No, Bai,” Milena said without a trace of guilt. “We were just waiting for you.”

“So I see. Your teeth are brushed?”

She nodded.

“Face washed?”

Another nod.

“Toes washed?”

A giggle escaped. “Bai!”

“You didn’t wash your toes?”

“We don’t wash our toes before bedtime!”

He turned around. “Harren? Are your toes washed?”

Harren smiled widely. “No, but my toes don’t stink like Milena’s. She didn’t put on clean socks this morning.”

“I did too!”

“Did not.”

“Did too!”

“Enough!” Jandahar cut them off before they could wind themselves too tightly. “Milena, let me see your feet.” He pretended not to notice the tongue she stuck out at her brother even as she pushed her feet out from under the covers. Making a show of approaching carefully, he gave an exaggerated sniff. “Well, they don’t seem too bad.”

“They’re clean!”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far.” He pointed at a suspicious spot.

She pulled up her foot to inspect it. “That’s just from my socks.”

“Your dirty socks,” muttered Harren.

“Hm.” He leaned a little closer. “Well, I’m sure you’ll put on clean socks tomorrow. Yes?”

Milena sighed as he tucked her feet back in. “Yes.”

“Good.” He resettled the covers over her. “Harren? Teeth and face?”

“Clean, Bai.”

“Which is more than I can say for your bed.” He crossed the room and tidied Harren’s blanket, which as usual was a twisted mess except for the small section he had pulled up while diving under it. Standing erect, Jandahar put his hands on his hips and surveyed the two children in their beds. “Since things are *mostly* clean and you’re in bed and ready, I suppose it’s time for a story. Which one shall I tell tonight?”

“I want to hear about Trevan the Treecat and how she fooled Moonbird into leaving her nest so that she could eat all the eggs!” It was Harren’s favorite.

“Bai, no! We had to hear about Trevan last time.” At nine cycles, Milena fancied herself much too old for Trevan the Treecat stories.

“That’s true,” Jandahar told his son. “Last time we did Trevan and the winden.”

Harren’s face fell. “But I like Trevan.”

“So do I. In fact, I like Trevan the best of all the animals. But your sister is right, it’s her turn to choose.” He pulled the chair out from the wall between their beds and sat down. “What would you like to hear, Milena?”

She flipped onto her side and propped her head on her hand, eyes sparkling. “The Fall of Blacksun!”

“That’s a war epic, not a bedtime story.”

“But it’s exciting.”

“Yes, and it would take a nineday to tell it. Choose something shorter.”

“The Last Charge of the Defenders!”

Jandahar could never understand where his daughter got her bloodthirstiness. “I think bedtime is not the best time for stories of war and death.”

“But they didn’t *all* die.”

“Why don’t you choose a story in which no one dies?”

She pouted for a moment, then brightened. “Tell the story of Vellmar the Blade and how she lost the championship at the Global Games.”

“Ah, that’s a good one,” he said in relief. “Vellmar the Blade, hm? Well, that was a long, long time ago, before we had our own space fleet. It was back in the Golden Age of Tal the Wise and Salomen the Strong, when Alsea prospered at the very beginning of the Discoveries.”

Milena settled onto her back and closed her eyes, the better to listen.

“It all began when Vellmar, who had just become Lead Guard for Lancer Tal, decided to enter the Games...”



CHAPTER 2

The beginning

Vellmar stood straight and tall, fronting her nervousness while the aide announced her. Her boot heels thudded on the highly polished hardwood floor as she entered the office, then sank into the plush rug that padded the area around Lancer Tal's enormous wooden desk, carved and inlaid by a master of the craft. The wall of glass behind the desk offered a glorious view of the State Park, with Blacksun Temple's majestic dome rising over the trees.

Lancer Tal was in the far corner of the room, where an equally beautiful wooden sideboard held a collection of snacks, cups and saucers, and a shannel dispenser. Vellmar stiffened and smacked her fists together against her sternum. "Lancer Tal."

"Vellmar, right on time. Can I interest you in a cup of shannel?"

It took a moment to get over the shock of her oath holder and the most powerful person on Alsea offering to serve her. "Ah...yes, please."

"Good answer." A quiet whoosh sounded as Lancer Tal filled two cups, followed by soft clinks as she set them in saucers. Holding one in each hand, she carried them across the room and set the first in front of Vellmar. "Sit down."

That was not an order Vellmar could obey. She remained standing until Lancer Tal had walked around the desk and sat in her own chair, and only then did she gingerly lower herself to a chair that was probably hundreds of cycles old. Councilors and caste Primes had sat in this very seat. It was heady indeed for a warrior from Pollonius who had never dreamed of reaching such heights.

Lancer Tal sipped her shannel and regarded her over the rim of the cup. Replacing it in its saucer, she said, "Is any part of your back actually touching that seat?"

Vellmar awkwardly let her spine rest against the chair. "Yes."

"Is it me causing this intimidation, or the office?"

“I’m not—” She stopped before telling an outright lie. “Ah...both, I suppose. But more the office. I’ve never been in here before.”

“I just realized that. Perhaps you should try the shannel and see if it helps.”

She picked up the cup and saucer, both emblazoned with the Seal of the Lancer, and took a sip. A small hum of fervent appreciation escaped before she could stop it.

The Lancer chuckled. “Good, isn’t it?”

“More than good.” She sipped again, savoring the excellent flavor. “Probably the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“It’s how they keep me in here sometimes. There have to be some rewards for the title.” Lancer Tal leaned forward. “Now that you’ve marginally relaxed, let’s talk about your Guards.”

Vellmar had sweated over her personnel reports for a nineday in an effort to make them as detailed, exact, and forward-thinking as she could. It was the first real test of her administrative capability since coming to Blacksun, and she was determined to impress. She was the Lead Guard of the most elite unit of Guards on the planet—those who protected Lancer Tal herself—and that meant she had to be the best in every way.

But she had expected to give those reports to Head Guardian Gehrain or, at the highest level, to Colonel Micah, the Chief Guardian. It had never occurred to her that Lancer Tal herself would ask to hear them. Nor had her nerves been soothed when Gehrain informed her that in fact the reports did go to him, but Lancer Tal wanted to test her new Lead Guard.

For the next hantick, she answered questions and offered assessments of the warriors under her direct supervision. It was nerve-racking, because the Lancer knew her Guards better than she did. Most of them had served with her for several cycles, while she had been here less than four moons.

But when the last question was answered, Lancer Tal gave her an approving nod. “Well done. You’ve demonstrated an excellent understanding of your Guards’ strengths and weaknesses, especially given the short amount of time you’ve been here.”

“Thank you, Lancer.” She kept the pride behind her front and hopefully off her face as she rose. “And thank you for the shannel.”

“You’re welcome. So,” Lancer Tal said in an entirely different tone of voice, “now that we have that out of the way, I understand that the deadline for entering the Global Games is the end of this nineday. Are you registered yet?”

There went her sense of accomplishment. “No.”

“Why not?”

The Lancer’s more familiar manner gave her permission to answer honestly. This was the woman she ran and sparred with, the woman who did not intimidate her. “Because my birthmother already entered. I had planned to ask her if we could divide the competitions between us, but when I called, it was too late—she had already filled out her card. She’s in every short-blade event. How am I supposed to compete against my own mother?” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “It took me three moons to decide to enter at all, and when I finally mustered my courage, I was one day too late. One day! I cannot believe it.”

“Perhaps you should sit down again. You’re vibrating.”

She had been so close to getting out of this office without making a fool of herself. “I apologize,” she said as she retook her chair. “I’ve let my personal... agitation show where it’s not appropriate. This is not your concern—”

“What do you mean, not my concern?” The Lancer leaned forward, hands clasped on her desk. “My Lead Guard is passing up the chance to bring the glory of the Games to this unit, and it’s not my concern? It most certainly *is* my concern. And do please stop drumming your fingers.”

Belatedly, Vellmar realized she had been beating out a tattoo on her leg. She flattened her hand and rested it on her knee, then moved it to her thigh, then propped her elbow on the arm of the chair.

“Good Fahla, I’ve never seen you so jumpy. If I hadn’t already seen you perform on a mission, I’d wonder about your capability.”

She looked up in alarm, but the Lancer was smiling at her. “I’m not jumpy,” she said, straightening and crossing her hands over her stomach. “I’m just...dismayed. All this time I’ve been working myself up to it, and now I have to wait until next cycle. I feel like a grainbird. I really don’t like feeling that way.”

Now the Lancer chuckled. “Who does? And what exactly is the problem of entering the same competitions as your birthmother? Are you worried

she'll best you? There would be no shame in that. She's the reigning champion, after all. And I would be proud to have you bring a blue medal back to our unit. Not getting a red medal isn't the end of the world."

"No, that isn't—" Vellmar paused, knowing that she was about to make herself sound like an arrogant pup. "With respect, Lancer, I'm not worried about her besting me. I'm worried about me besting her."

"Ah, I see." Lancer Tal sat back. "Go on."

"She taught me blade handling from the moment I could understand which end of a knife was which. I've been her student all my life. But last cycle in Koneza—we had so much time on our hands, and so much of what we did was busywork. I petitioned the colonel to allow me to use duty time for throwing practice, and he approved. In effect, I trained nonstop for over a cycle. She never had that kind of time available to her."

"And you believe you've surpassed her in skill."

"I know it sounds overconfident, but yes, I do."

Lancer Tal glanced down at her desk for a moment. When she looked up again, she had somehow transformed her entire bearing. Vellmar sat even more erect, pinned by the intense look in those light blue eyes and the stern set of her features. She never thought of Lancer Tal as attractive, because one did not think of the Lancer that way—ever—but in this moment she felt as if she were looking at a messenger of Fahla, her blonde hair aglow with something more than simple sunlight.

"Point number one. If you are truly at the top of your field in a skill, it is not overconfidence to state as much. Have pride in your accomplishments, don't hide them. Unless it's for strategic reasons, of course."

Her wink put Vellmar more at ease, making it clear that she was referring to the first time they had sparred together. Vellmar had downplayed her sword-fighting skill, and Lancer Tal had not believed her for a moment.

"Take care in how you speak, yes," the Lancer continued, "but false modesty is not a virtue. Not in my unit. I *need* to know the skills of my Guards, just as you need to know the skills of every Guard you're leading."

Chastened, Vellmar nodded and cursed the embarrassment that was heating her face. She could front the emotion, but she could not hide the flush.

“Point number two. If your birthmother is a good instructor, and I’ve no reason to believe she is anything else, she will not be hurt or upset if you win any of those competitions. Your triumph would not diminish her.”

How could it not?

She kept the thought to herself, but somehow the Lancer seemed to hear it anyway.

“You disagree?” she asked.

“Ah...well, I don’t disagree with the general...I mean...”

Lancer Tal raised an eyebrow. “Vellmar. You’ve been with me for almost four moons. Surely you know by now that you can speak the truth to me? I’m not going to send you back to Koneza if you disagree with my opinion.”

That was easy for her to say. But Vellmar had never been good at dissembling anyway, so she took a deep breath and dove in.

“My mother is one of the best warriors I know. She takes pride in that. She always taught me that the difference between good and better is usually a matter of work, and she works hard. But...she’s aging. I don’t want to be the one who takes her title away from her.”

“At some point, somebody will. Do you think she would prefer that title go to someone else rather than you?”

She had not considered that.

“You’re training Senshalon in knife fighting. That started almost the day you arrived, didn’t it?”

Puzzled at the change of subject, Vellmar nodded.

“Is he a good student?”

“He’s excellent.”

“And you’re enjoying teaching him.”

“Yes, of course.”

“How do you think you’ll feel the day he surprises you and disarms you with a move you taught him?”

It only took a piptick to see the logic trap. With her face warming even more, she admitted, “I’d be proud of him.”

“Just of him?”

“Well...”

“No false modesty. Wouldn’t you be proud of yourself as well?”

She was distinctly uncomfortable with the turn this conversation had taken, but she had gotten herself into it. Lifting her chin, she said, “Yes, I would. Because that would mean I did a good job training him.”

Lancer Tal nodded in approval. “And his success would reflect positively on your skill as an instructor.”

“Yes, it—” She stopped, finally making the real connection. “Oh.”

A wide smile brightened Lancer Tal’s face, transforming her back into a mere Alean. “I do believe I just saw a light go on behind your eyes.”

“So blinding that I’m having difficulty seeing.” Vellmar felt an answering smile pushing its way out. “I never thought of it that way. I could bring her honor in this.”

“A great deal of it,” Lancer Tal agreed. “You’re not just any competitor. You’re her daughter *and* her student. If you win, she does as well.”

Vellmar relaxed into the chair, all of her agitation and worry draining out in the space of two heartbeats. She had needed a Fahla-damned map to find the truth, but there it was in front of her at last. “I wish I’d spoken with you earlier. You could have saved me a lot of wasted time and second-guessing myself.”

“Keep that in mind for the next time, then.”

“I suppose I’ll also have to keep in mind that Senshalon can occasionally be right. He’s the one who first got me thinking seriously about entering the Games. He said she would be proud of me.”

“Senshalon only looks like a musclehead. But I’ve never chosen my Guards based solely on their strength, and neither has Colonel Micah.”

The knowing expression directed her way made her face warm again, but this time it wasn’t embarrassment.

“Thank you, Lancer Tal. I appreciate this more than you know. And I’ll try not to act like a muscleheaded warrior in the future.”

“You haven’t yet. Don’t worry, if you do I’ll have Micah straighten you out immediately. He’s very good at that.”

“I have no doubt.” She slapped her hands on her thighs and rose from the chair. “Then if you’ll excuse me, I have a few calls to make.”

“Excellent. I’ve a few calls to make as well. We’ll need a proper celebration for all of those red medals you’ll be bringing back.”

Vellmar opened her mouth to protest but then saw the twinkle in Lancer Tal's eyes. She raised a finger in a warning gesture. "False modesty may not be a virtue, but neither is tempting Fahla. Don't put a cloud of bad luck on me."

"I wouldn't dream of it. But you might keep one thing in mind."

"What's that?"

"Don't underestimate older warriors. I still haven't forgotten the lesson I learned the last time I made that mistake."

"How long will I need to serve with you before I can hear that story?"

"More cycles than you have left in your lifespan," said the Lancer dryly.



CHAPTER 3

Milena disagrees

“AND SO, AFTER MUCH PERSUASION, Lancer Tal finally agreed to allow Vellmar to enter the Games.” Jandahar paused to steal a drink of water from Harren’s glass. One of these nights, he would remember to bring his own.

“Why didn’t she just say yes to begin with?” Milena asked.

“Well, probably because Vellmar was her Lead Guard. That’s an extremely important and serious position. There was prestige associated with a Games medal, to be sure, but Vellmar already held one of the most prestigious ranks a warrior could hope to attain. And she had to spend a great deal of time training for the Games, which could take away from her duties.”

“Vellmar would never have shirked her duties,” she said stoutly. “She would have trained on her own time.”

“Perhaps. But the truth remains that we don’t hear stories of many Lancer’s Guards taking part in the Games, do we?”

“It still doesn’t make sense. *I* don’t think Lancer Tal would have kept Vellmar from the Games. I think the story’s wrong.”

“And who is telling this story tonight, you or me?”

When no answer was forthcoming, Jandahar reached out, ruffled her hair, and continued.

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VELLMAR THE BLADE

BY FLETCHER DELANCEY

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