

THE CAPHENON

BOOK ONE IN THE CHRONICLES OF ALSEA

FLETCHER DELANCEY

HEARTSOME PUBLISHING

For the ones who look up.



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GRAY MODE

“Captain, I’m detecting pikamet radiation.”
Ekarya Serrado briefly considered ordering the scan onto the bridge display, then ruled it out. At the moment, both upper and lower displays were active, creating the illusion that the bridge was floating in space. Beneath their feet and rising halfway up the port side, Alsea’s second moon loomed, a ghostly orange as it traversed the planet’s shadow. The remainder of the hemispherical upper display showed an endless carpet of stars, vastly thicker on the starboard side where a galactic arm flung itself across their view.

She preferred this beauty to the graphic interpretation of an event their visual scanners could not detect—an event they had not expected for another day.

“How many?” she asked.

“Three exit points. No ships through yet.”

Fucking Hades, a full invasion group.

Fleet intelligence had expected a single scout ship, at most a destroyer. They thought the Voloth strategy would be to menace the *Arkadia*, the little long-range science ship that had been studying this planet for ten months, and squat in Alsean space until an invasion group arrived. She could have intimidated a destroyer captain, using the sheer size of the

Capphenon to send a message: *The Protectorate's largest warship is guarding this planet. Get out and don't come back.*

As her grandfather said, the best way to win a battle was not to fight it.

But even the *Capphenon* could not intimidate a Voloth Empire invasion group.

"Confirmed," said the data systems officer. "Two destroyers, one orbital invader. No other exit points forming." She tapped her board and added, "Estimated time of arrival, eighty-six minutes."

Time for Gramp's corollary, then.

"Notify Command Dome and ask for authorization to engage," she told her com officer. He nodded and set to work, but every other head in the second and third rings of the central dais turned to look up at her. The rest of the bridge crew turned their backs to their stations along the walls and faced her as well. She slowly rotated her chair, as always appreciating the design choice that put her alone on the third level and gave her an unobstructed view.

"It's not what we hoped for," she said. "But I didn't rule it out. That's why we've been running in gray mode since our arrival. They don't know we're here, and they won't until we power up. One of the smartest people I know once told me that if I have to fight, then hit first and hit hard. That's what we're going to do."

Ekatyia outlined her strategy and thanked the stars that she had drilled this team so relentlessly. They were calm and ready. The moment she finished, the bridge hummed with low voices as orders were given and systems checked. She opened the all-call and informed her crew of the impending battle, then made a far more private call.

"Lhyn," she said quietly. "I can't break gray mode now. You can't go back."

DOUBLE TAP

The hardest part was the waiting. It gave Ekatyia too much time to second-guess herself.

Her strategy could backfire badly, but running out to meet the Voloth halfway would be throwing away their best advantage. Whatever they gained in distance and fighting time before reaching the planet, they would lose by having all three enemy ships on full alert before they got there. Better to let them get closer and take them by surprise.

The immersive displays were now overlaid by a combat grid, showing optimum targeting solutions for each of the weapons rooms that ringed the *Caphenon*. Every room held three separate weapon systems: a rail gun, used both offensively and defensively; two main launch tubes, able to fire either shield breakers or missiles; and a massive Delfin launch tube.

The four-person teams in her weapons rooms were standing by with their launch tubes loaded—shield breakers in the port and bow rooms, missiles in the starboard. The *Caphenon* was quiet and dark, but she would come out spitting fire.

Ekatyia watched the three red dots high up on the port side, currently superimposed over the moon but progressing toward its edge. Abruptly, their position changed. Lieutenant Candini had initiated another short thruster burst, pushing the *Caphenon* back and keeping the moon between them and the invasion group.

“That’s the last one,” Ekatyia said. “Engineering, ready for full power.”

“Ready, Captain.”

“Weapons, prepare for first salvo. Steady . . . steady . . .” She watched the red dots and felt time slow to a trickle. It happened in every battle, whether she conducted it with her body or a ship’s weapons. She had once described the feeling to her grandfather, who smiled broadly and told her that was the hallmark of a true fighter: the ability to disassociate from the fight and see it as a player would a game of strategy.

The first red dot crossed the grid line nearest the moon’s edge.

“Lieutenant Candini, push us out.”

Just below her, Candini tapped her console and gripped the control stick to its right, engaging thrusters one more time. The moon slipped aft and the three red dots winked out, replaced by the ships themselves: an orbital invader, big enough to hold five hundred ground pounders and two hundred fighters, and two destroyers, massive in their own right but small compared to the behemoth they protected.

One was a threat to the planet. The other two were threats to her ship and crew. She would rather have taken out the invader first, but that would leave her in a two-to-one fight against more maneuverable and heavily armed enemies. Absent orders to the contrary, her first duty was to her crew.

“Port weapons, ready.” Ekatyia paused. “Fire! Engines, full power! Rotate!”

Fifty shield breakers exploded from their launch tubes, their positions marked on the displays with small white dots that sizzled toward their target. Ekatyia barely had time to focus on them before the world spun around her as Candini flipped the ship in space. The moon rushed under the feet of the aft bridge crew, while the dense stars of the galactic arm flashed from starboard to the ceiling to port. The *Caphenon* was now upside down relative to its prior position.

“Starboard weapons, fire!”

Twenty-five new dots chased after the fifty already launched. The missiles carried all the firepower necessary to blow a ship to atoms if the shield breakers did their job. Ekatyia had shaved critical seconds off their launch time by rotating the ship rather than waiting for the port tubes to reload.

“Candini, get us there.”

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Again the world spun around her as Candini turned their bow toward the Voloth ships and accelerated. The moon slid all the way to the stern and began to shrink behind them, and the display dimmed as they burst out of the planet's shadow and into the brilliance of its sun.

“Bow weapons, fire!”

Twenty-two dots launched off their bow and streaked toward the second destroyer. Twelve seconds later, another twenty-two flew. Then a third set.

The first destroyer, caught unawares, failed to get its rail gun defenses online in time. Every one of the shield breakers hit their target, outlining the ship's shield in fifty flashes of blue. The twenty-five missiles roared in behind them, sailing through the now nonexistent shield and slamming into the unprotected flank of the ship. Its smooth acceleration shuddered as blossoms of fire opened all along its flank, bow to stern. Snuffed almost instantly by lack of oxygen, the blossoms were replaced with silent geysers of hull plating, deck sections, and occasional smaller flares fed by the ship's decompression. A new explosion ripped through the destroyer from the inside out, and the display automatically darkened that grid as a small sun was born, briefly outshone anything else in the system, and just as swiftly died.

“One down, one to go,” Ekatyia murmured, then shook her head as the second destroyer began shooting down the shield breakers they had launched at it. She had known the element of surprise would only work for one, but they had made it count. “Candini, port up. Port weapons, target the second destroyer. All weapons, fire at will. We don't have much time.”

The moon, smaller now, swung to the starboard side as Candini flew the ship in an arc, exposing the port side to the remaining destroyer. Fifty more shield breakers sped toward their target, even as the destroyer launched its own.

“Incoming,” her tactical officer said calmly. “Defensive batteries locking on. Automated systems green across the board.”

They had time to launch another broadside before the Voloth shield breakers arrived, lighting up the displays with brilliant white flares as the *Capphenon's* rail guns came to life and blew them apart. None impacted, but this was just the first wave.

Now the battle began in earnest. The destroyer had only one job: to

delay the *Caphenon* long enough for the orbital invader to drop its ground pounders on Alsea. Once those monstrous weapons platforms were launched, it was all over. The unsuspecting inhabitants of this small planet would find out the hard way that they were not alone in the universe, and Ekatyia would only be able to bear witness to their destruction.

Her strategic options were limited, and time was on the enemy's side. The destroyer captain knew it, launching wave after wave of shield breakers that gradually began to slip past her defensive batteries. Retreating and fighting from a safer distance—one that gave her batteries more time to react—was not an option. But the destroyer's shields were taking the same pummeling as hers, and as the two ships flew a dance of death, Ekatyia was grimly certain of her victory. The only question was how long it would take.

The orbital invader lumbered toward Alsea, untouched by the battle raging behind it. Ekatyia pressed hard, pushing the destroyer to retreat, but it did so grudgingly. The closer they came to Alsea, the more it threw at them, until she began to wonder how much it could possibly have left in its armory.

The *Caphenon's* shields were full of holes by the time her tactical officer made the announcement she had been waiting for.

"Enemy shields red-lined."

"Weapons, switch to missiles," Ekatyia said immediately. Red-lined shields meant her missiles could now get through, and she could get this damned destroyer out of her way. And none too soon—the orbital invader was closing in on drop altitude.

"Candini, this dance is over," she added. "Punch us through."

"Acknowledged."

Ekatyia spun her chair to face the bow as Lieutenant Candini brought the ship around and accelerated straight toward the orbital invader. The destroyer seized its chance, launching a blizzard of weaponry. Most ended up as flares of light as her rail guns found their targets, but too many got through, chewing up her shields and slamming into her external hull. The Pulsar double-hull design did its job, absorbing the shock. Damage reports began to stream across her left console.

She ignored them, watching intently as more and more of her own missiles hit their mark. "Tactical, give me a Delfin solution. It's looking soft by the engine cradle."

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Her tactical officer was focused on the virtual display hovering above his console. “Yes, it is. Marking.” He tapped the image of the destroyer on his display, marking a green circle near its stern. Up on the bridge displays, his mark was mirrored and overlaid with targeting data.

“Weapons, load Delfins,” Ekatyia said. “We’ve painted you a juicy target.”

Delfins were to standard missiles what a warship was to a fighter: massive, difficult to manufacture, and staggeringly expensive. Even a warship like the *Capphenon* carried a limited number, and never used them except to finish off a target. Once the far cheaper missiles had softened up the hull structure, a Delfin’s explosive yield could penetrate and end the fight.

She had the fastest weapons teams in Fleet. The Delfins were on their way as the *Capphenon* flashed past the destroyer and closed in on the orbital invader it was trying to protect. Ekatyia turned her chair to watch and was treated to the glorious sight of the destroyer crumpling, then erupting as another small sun was born.

But they were too close. The shockwave swept outward, hammering the *Capphenon* with the strength of a hundred missiles. Their shredded shields offered little resistance and the ship slewed sideways, then flipped. The blue planet and its largest moon spun crazily around the displays until Candini wrestled back control. Ekatyia was very glad for her battle harness and brace bars.

“Get us to that invader,” she barked.

Candini’s acknowledgment was drowned out by an unwelcome voice coming through Ekatyia’s internal com.

“Kameha to Serrado. That shockwave fried our pressure chamber. If we don’t want to turn into another star, we have to take the fusion core offline.”

“Can you give me five more minutes?”

“I can give you two.”

She bit back a curse. “Understood. Candini, the core’s going offline. We’ve got two minutes of power left, punch it! Weapons, fire shield breakers at will.”

This time her pilot didn’t bother to acknowledge the order, focusing instead on calculating how much speed she could get while still controlling the ship once the power was gone. Ekatyia stared at the rapidly growing orbital invader on the display and made her own calculations.

They would be deep inside Alsea's gravity well when their power ran out. Thrusters would not be enough to pull them back. Candini could slingshot them around if she had freedom of movement, but they still had an orbital invader to take care of.

She had no choice.

Opening the all-call, she gave the command that haunted every captain's nightmares.

"Abandon ship immediately. Abandon ship. Fighter pilots to the shuttles. Number one weapons team, stay."

With the exception of Lieutenant Candini and Commander Beldessar, her executive officer, every officer on the central dais rose from their stations and strode down the ramps to the floor of the bridge. They seemed to be running through the stars as they joined the crew members leaving their wall stations and streaming out the exits. In less than ten seconds, the bridge was empty.

She put her crew through this drill every week, always working to improve their time. They could do it, but killing that orbital invader was even more critical now. If she didn't succeed, her crew would be sitting targets in their shuttles and escape pods. That ship wasn't nearly as well-armed as the destroyers, but escape pods had no defenses.

"Commander, take tactical and keep firing the shield breakers. I don't care if we use up our entire armory, we have to get through. When we get close enough, target the shields over their armory and drop bays."

"Understood." Beldessar stepped down to the third ring.

Without her weapons teams, the offensive platforms joined the defensive grid in automated operation by the ship's computer. It made full control from the bridge possible, but was never as accurate as precision manual targeting from trained teams. Fortunately, the orbital invader was too busy trying to shoot down shield breakers and get to drop altitude to go on the offensive.

Protocol dictated who remained aboard unless ordered otherwise by the captain. Commander Kameha and a hand-picked crew of engineers were needed to keep the fusion core contained; abandoning ship did little good if the core went critical. The shockwave would wipe out the escape pods, which had insufficient engines to outrun it.

Her four best weapons teams would normally stay on in a battle evac-

uation, each covering one quadrant. But without engines, they would only get one shot. It made no sense to keep any but her top-scoring team, who would be rewarded for their skill by staying behind while everyone else lived to fight another day.

A tap of her left console brought up an outline of the *Capphenon* with its escape pods marked in red. Already many of the indicators had turned green, showing pods that were safely away.

“Serrado to Roris,” she said.

“*Yes, Captain.*”

“We’re going to be down to inertia and thrusters in sixty seconds. We’ll get one chance. When the moment comes, I need you to target both drop bays and the armory. But we don’t have time to soften them up with missiles. Give me a double-tap, Warrant Officer. Three of them if you can, but one absolutely needs to be the armory.”

There was a brief pause as the leader of her best weapons team considered her response.

“*It would be our pleasure to set a Fleet record, Captain.*”

Despite the situation, Ekatyia smiled. “It’ll go down in history.”

By the time the ever-present hum of engines died and the lights dimmed to emergency backup levels, the first shuttles and most of the pods were out. The ship silently sliced through space, leaving more and more pods behind. Commander Beldessar kept up an unrelenting barrage of shield breakers, and the orbital invader was suffering.

“Candini, when we get there, take us under and show them our starboard side. We need to give Roris and her team their best shot.”

“We’ll get them, Captain.” It wasn’t a standard response, but Candini wasn’t a standard pilot. Ekatyia could imagine no one else in that chair.

They were close enough now for the orbital invader to start sending its own shield breakers, and the automated defense grid was lighting up the displays with interceptions. As long as the Voloth believed the *Capphenon*’s shields were holding, they wouldn’t waste their missiles. Ekatyia needed them to hold those back, both to spare her own ship and to keep as many sitting in the armory as possible.

Every light on her evacuation map was now green. She fidgeted, impatient with her own lack of action. Candini was piloting, Beldessar was keeping up the pressure with the shield breakers, and Roris held the final

outcome in her capable hands. Right now, Ekatyia was just warming her seat.

She called up a list of the remaining personnel aboard, double-checking that no one had been left behind. All on-duty crew wore internal coms that enabled them to be tracked by the ship's computer, and even off-duty crew were required to wear them outside their personal quarters. Inside their quarters, door sensor data would confirm their location.

There were several names on the list that did not belong, but a quick tap to each one pulled up sensory data indicating that these internal coms had been left behind in the rush. Their low temperature readings meant they were not sitting in the warmth of an ear canal.

She continued through the list and landed on a name that set her heart pounding: Dr. Lhyn Rivers.

Her finger trembled as she called up the sensor data.

The temperature was too high.

She closed her eyes and fought back a wave of fury and fear. Her first thought was to call Lhyn and ask what the fucking Hades she was thinking, but she quickly squelched it. She could not afford such a loaded conversation in the middle of a battle. With ruthless and long-trained efficiency, she shut down every semblance of emotion and focused on what had to be done.

The rest of the list was what she expected. She had just closed it when Beldessar said, "Switching to missiles. I think we can soften them up."

Ekatyia studied the orbital invader now looming on the display. "No. Keep at them with the shield breakers. I don't want spotty shields, I want them gone. At least over our targets. We've only got one shot at this."

"Captain, even one double-tap is—"

"Trust our weapons team, Commander. They just need us to clear the path. If they miss, *then* we'll clean up."

"They'll hit it," Candini added. "I'll bet a hundred on it."

"I will, too." Ekatyia wondered if the fact that she could smile now meant she was due for a psych review. "Any takers?"

"I'm not betting against you two."

"Good choice." Candini made a slight thruster adjustment to their heading. "Thirty seconds to target."

"The Voloth are firing missiles," Beldessar announced.

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“Let them. They can’t hurt us now.” *This ship is probably done for already*, she did not add.

The defense batteries worked valiantly to save a ship that was locked into a course of destruction. Ekatyia saw the damage reports but paid even less mind to these than she had the earlier ones. The only thing that mattered would happen in twenty seconds.

Ten seconds.

“Commander, cease fire,” she said as Candini smoothly dove and rolled the ship. The orbital invader slid from the bow to the ceiling to the starboard side, while the bow and half of the side displays were filled with the blue and white of Alsea.

“Roris, time for that Fleet record.”

Warrant Officer Roris’s response was not verbal. In perfect synchrony, three rail guns spat out projectiles, followed instantly by three Delfin missiles. If they succeeded with the double-taps, the projectiles would punch three holes in the hull for the Delfins to slip right through.

The *Capphenon* sailed past, and Ekatyia turned her chair to watch what she fervently hoped would be the death throes of that ship.

Its stern buckled, paused, and blew outward in a great gout of flame. The Delfin had penetrated the drop bay and detonated inside.

Locked inside that bay and ready for orbital insertion were two hundred and fifty ground pounders, each holding a small armory of missiles and mortars. They were going off like fireworks, a beautiful chain reaction set off by the Delfin and now tearing apart the entire rear half of the ship.

Another gout of flame erupted amidships, this one bigger than the first. Roris and her team had hit the armory.

At the bow, a too-perfect ball of fire bloomed: the sign of a missed shot expending its energy on the hull. Ekatyia opened her mouth to order missiles—they still had time to fire everything from their aft launchers—then shut it again when another precision pair of shots rocketed away from her ship.

Roris’s quiet voice sounded in her ear. *“Saved one for myself, just in case.”*

They would never know if Roris had managed an impossible third double-tap. Before her shots arrived, the continuing explosions from the armory were ripping through the hull, making the penetrative force of the

rail gun projectile unnecessary. The Delfin flew through the fracturing hull and blew apart the second drop bay, setting off another chain reaction as the remaining ground pounders added their weapons to the detonation.

“Done!” Ekatyia slammed her fist against the arm rest and spun her chair to face the bow. “Roris, well done, full congratulations to your team.” Without waiting for a response, she called her chief of engineering. “Kameha, reinforce our aft shields any way you can. We got the invader and their fusion core will go any second.”

“*Acknowledged,*” he grunted, sounding as if he were running.

“Candini, any chance we can pull out?”

Directly below, Candini glanced up from her console to the planet that now filled their display from top to bottom and side to side. “We lost that chance before we caught up with them.”

“Then it’s time to get in that last shuttle. Set an autopilot course and we’ll send the *Capphenon* into their ocean.” She cringed at the thought of setting her beautiful ship to self-destruct, but it had to be done.

“Working on it. We’ll have to—”

A blinding light flared through the bridge before the computer darkened the display grids at the stern. The orbital invader’s fusion core had blown, and they were still too close.

“Hang on,” Candini warned.

Ekatyia clung to her brace bars as the ship bucked and surged, helpless without its engines in the fury of the largest shockwave yet. The planet spun around in dizzying circles before vanishing in a uniform gray. They were in the atmosphere, making an uncontrolled descent with ravaged shields, and now running blind. The sensors had shut themselves off to prevent heat damage.

Candini spat out several expletives as she frantically worked her controls. Feeling oddly calm, Ekatyia decided that if Candini pulled them out of this one, she would earn the distinction of being the only crew member ever authorized to swear whenever and wherever she damn well pleased.

Perhaps Candini heard the thought and was particularly motivated. The tumble stopped and the displays lit up again, but the brilliant blue of sunlit ocean was gone. They had crossed back into the night side.

“Crap. We’re too late,” Candini said. “The shockwave drove us in. We

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don't have time to ditch in the ocean." She peered at her console. "Oh, shit."

Now was not the moment to regret her mental promise. "What is it?"

Candini turned, the jaunty look of her short, spiky red hair at odds with her expression. "Our trajectory is taking us straight into their largest population center. And all I have are thrusters."