

WITHOUT A FRONT

THE PRODUCER'S CHALLENGE

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HEARTSOME PUBLISHING

For my tyree.



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RUNNING

“They won’t take any more,” said Erik Solvassen, second Protectorate Ambassador to Alsea. “I’m sorry. I did suggest sending the sane ones first.”

Lancer Andira Tal leaned back in her chair and sighed. “Yes, you did. And we wanted to, but that kite flew into a tree. They’ve just asked for political asylum.”

Ambassador Solvassen’s eyes widened. “That is . . . unusual.”

“And that is not what you were about to say. Why does this shock you? Have no Voloth asked for asylum before?”

“Yes, but never on a pre-FTL world.” He shook his head. “From the beginning of my political career, I’ve learned to keep my reactions behind my face rather than on it. I have to keep reminding myself that won’t work here.”

She had to smile at his honesty. “I’ve heard that empathy takes some getting used to.”

“It really does.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, you’re already two lengths ahead of your predecessor.”

“Thank you. Though I must point out that Ambassador Frank was not the best example of what the Diplomacy Corps has to offer.”

When Ambassador Frank had arrived in Blacksun, one moon after the

departure of Captain Serrado and the remaining crew of the *Caphenon*, Tal had greeted him with the expectation that he would be as shining an example of Gaian ethics as Ekatyá Serrado and Lhyn Rivers had been. That expectation had been disabused within the first five ticks. By the end of the first hantick, she wanted to expel him from her office and preferably off the planet. The man was unqualified, arrogant, and under the impression that he could ingratiate himself into the highest levels of Alsean government simply by virtue of his job title and patrons in the Protectorate. It was abundantly clear that his “expertise” was a synonym for wealth—he had bought his way into the job and the prestige that came with it.

Mindful of the newness of Alsea’s relationship with the far more powerful Protectorate, Tal gave Ambassador Frank a moon to change her first impression. Not only did he fail, he also insulted and alienated the entire High Council in that time, along with a good number of the lower Councilors. It was Prime Merchant Parser who saw Frank’s true intent. “Trust a merchant to know a merchant,” he told the rest of the High Council. Frank was not a diplomat—not even a bad one. He was a businessman who had maneuvered himself into position to open up the new markets that Alsea represented. When he went one step too far and Prime Warrior Shantu threatened to kill him, Tal figured she had ample reason to do what she had wanted to that very first day.

Ambassador Solvassen was Frank’s polar opposite. He was shy, unskilled at prevarication, and quite surprised to find himself in such a prestigious position. Apparently, he had been pulled from a dead-end assignment at the other end of Protectorate territory, where he expected to spend the remainder of his career. When Tal asked him why, he admitted that he wasn’t good at keeping his mouth shut when he saw things that seemed wrong. Tal understood immediately: he was a scholar, not a political player.

But he certainly understood Gaian politics. As he explained, former Ambassador Frank hadn’t given up on his plan to open Alsean markets. Though he was forced to retreat and regroup, he made sure no competition got in ahead of him. Solvassen was Frank’s personal choice: a man with zero business prospects, a poor record of advancement, and little chance of success in the position.

Tal would dispute that last characterization. Within one hantick of

meeting the portly man with his bald spot and honest smile, she had known they would work well together. Solvassen's emotions matched his words.

"I wish I could tell you that Mr. Frank is an exception to the rule," Solvassen continued, "but the truth is that the Diplomacy Corps is really two separate entities. One is made up of professional diplomats with training and experience. The other is made up of political appointees—"

"With neither," Tal finished for him. "And in one nineday you managed what Mr. Frank could not. You persuaded the Voloth to agree to Protectorate help with the prisoner lift."

The Council would not allow any Voloth shuttles on Alsea, so it had to be the Protectorate carrying the prisoners of war into orbit. But the Voloth did not want their people on Protectorate shuttles, nor Protectorate shuttles on their ships. It had been a two-moon standoff until Solvassen arrived and brokered an agreement.

"Not much of a success, though, was it?" Solvassen said. "Only two trips and they've cut us off."

"It wasn't entirely unexpected. As soon as the sedative wore off, they must have realized what they were getting."

"No, but I still hoped. These are their own people."

"Their own insane people. Those prisoners are a burden to us, and they'll be a burden to the Voloth. And now we have two hundred and forty-four to take care of instead of two hundred and seventy-four. It's an improvement." She leaned forward again and crossed her hands on her desk. "What about the sane ones? Are they asking for them?"

"Not yet. I was just about to propose that when Commander Qualon cut me off."

"Good. Then he thinks all of the prisoners are insane, and he doesn't want them. That gives us some time to decide what to do about this petition for asylum."

"You really are a planet of firsts," Solvassen said. "First to break out of the Non-Interference Act, first pre-FTL civilization to repel a Voloth invasion, and now the first that any Voloth ever asked to stay with. How many are asking for asylum?"

Tal picked up Colonel Razine's report, which she had been reading when Solvassen had knocked on her door. "All those that were turned by untrained empaths, and . . ." She scrolled down, scanning for the second

number. “Good Fahla. All but nineteen of those that were turned and left fully intact. Why would they want to stay?”

“Well, they did kill their own people. Hard to go back after that.”

She felt his revulsion. “There was only one way to win that battle, Ambassador.”

“Of course. I studied it even before I got this assignment—that report blew up the Diplomacy Corps com lines. I agree with your tactics. You had every right to defend your world in whatever way possible.” He shrugged. “But I still can’t think about it without imagining the horror of having your free will taken away.”

“And if the Voloth had won, they’d have killed most of us and enslaved the rest. How is the horror of having your free will removed via slavery any more palatable than having it removed via empathic force?”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way. I suppose we’re less horrified by the thought of slavery because we’re used to it. The Voloth have been doing it for four generations.”

“So if something unthinkable is repeated often enough, it becomes less unthinkable?”

“Seeders, when you put it like that . . . it doesn’t reflect well on us, does it?”

“Or it’s simply a way to cope.” She spoke absently, having just seen her own name in Razine’s report. She read the full sentence and caught her breath, then read it again. A shiver ran down her spine. “Ambassador, I’m afraid I’ll have to cut this short. I’ll contact you when I know more about this petition.”

Somehow she got him out of her office while maintaining a calm expression, but the moment he was out she locked the door behind him, told her aide not to bother her, and picked up the report again.

The words hadn’t changed. The sane Voloth prisoners had elected a spokesperson—one of the weapons officers she herself had turned.

Razine’s report made it clear that the Voloth knew what they were doing. While Tal hadn’t identified herself to any of the crew she turned, they had figured it out from watching Alsean broadcasts in their cells. They were leveraging their only advantage by forcing her to speak directly with one of the people she had violated.

She was still feeling sick to her stomach when an urgent report came in from Miltorin, her communications advisor. Grateful for anything to

take her mind off the vision of facing that Voloth, she pulled it up on her reader card to see what new crisis he was fretting over.

The first thing that greeted her was an image of an Alsean hanging from the lowest branch of a tree, her head tilted to one side and her face slack in death.

“Oh, no,” she breathed, suddenly certain why Miltorin was sending her this. His report confirmed it. The dead woman had left a note asking forgiveness from Fahla for breaking her covenant. It was the first suicide of a Battle of Alsea veteran.

Miltorin was on his way to her office. He would want to discuss how to handle this publicly, and right now Tal couldn't handle it at all. She didn't want to talk about containing the political damage. She didn't want to think about facing the Voloth she had turned.

She didn't want any of this.

A sense of urgency pushed at her as she stripped off her wristcom and tossed it in her desk drawer. Her earcuff followed. She slammed the drawer shut and exited her office at such a fast clip that the Guards in the antechamber were startled.

“Lancer Tal—”

“Leave it.” She strode into the corridor, where State House staff took one look at her and edged to the sides. Without pausing, she pushed open the door to a little-used stairwell and began running down fourteen flights. At the bottom she opened the emergency door, having deactivated its alarm a moon ago, and checked outside.

No Guards in sight.

Quickly, she slipped out and walked toward the landing pad, her heart pounding at the thought of being stopped. It was ridiculous; nobody would stop her from going wherever she wanted. Nobody except Micah, that is.

She arrived at her personal transport without any interference and wasted no time lifting off. Only when she left the State House behind and had the Snowmount Range in sight did she relax.

Fifteen ticks into her flight, the com panel beeped with an incoming message. The ID displayed a familiar code and the name Colonel Corozen Micah, and without hesitation she pressed the key to reject the call.

Ten ticks and two more rejected calls later, she landed at the entrance to a trail she knew well. It wasn't one of the scenic ones and so had few

visitors, which served her purpose. She stepped between the front seats into the back, where a bag held her running gear. The space was a little cramped, but she was used to it by now. It didn't take long to change her clothes and strap on her shoes, and then she was outside, gratefully breathing in the crisp autumn air.

Dry leaves crunched beneath her feet as she walked up the trail, releasing their scent to join those of rich loam, decaying logs, and the minty smell of winterbloom. It was still too early for the winterbloom flowers to be open, but their leaves bore a fragrant oil that was used in many an Alsean recipe.

Tal didn't walk long enough for a good warmup. She simply couldn't wait, and began jogging along the trail at an ever-increasing rate until she was running at her normal speed. The trees flashed by, the scents filled her nostrils, and she heard nothing but the pounding of her feet on the trail and her own harsh breaths.

Slowly, her mind cleared until she was aware only of the rhythm of her breathing. It had evened out as her body caught up with her pace, and she ran for lengths in a perfect balance of muscle exertion and breath, effortless and unthinking.

Then she tripped over a root and stumbled, and all of her rhythm dropped away. The vision of a slack face and a rope around a neck floated into her mind, and she set off down the trail at a dead sprint. She ran as hard as she could and then she ran harder, the breath sobbing in her throat.

As if Fahla herself were in pursuit, demanding justice, Andira Tal ran.

POLITICAL ASYLUM

Lanaril Satran had never been part of a High Council meeting before. She had occasionally been invited to speak at one when her input as Blacksun's Lead Templar was required, but the High Council meetings had always been closed-door affairs, limited to the six caste Primes, the Lancer, and occasionally the Chief Counselor.

But then the *Caphenon* had landed and the changes kept coming, with no end in sight. And here she was on the fourteenth floor of the State House, sitting with the leaders of Alsea and waiting for the arrival of a Voloth soldier. A soldier who was asking to stay on the very world he had tried to take by force.

Fahla certainly did have some interesting plans.

She glanced up at the head of the table, where Andira sat with an inscrutable expression and an impenetrable front. She looked every bit the Lancer today, with her dark blue uniform and her blonde hair wound back in a formal twist. If the thought of facing one of the Voloth she had turned was bothering her, Lanaril couldn't tell.

"So the technology is identical?" Prime Merchant Parser asked.

"No, but it's close enough." Prime Scholar Yaserka tossed his thin gray hairtail over his shoulder and leaned forward. "Our healers harvested several lingual implants from dead Voloth, and Chief Kameha reverse-engineered them."

“The man is brilliant,” Prime Builder Eroles added. She was resplendent today in a turquoise suit that set off her dark skin and hair to perfection. “It took him just three days to come up with a prototype. They’re very similar to Protectorate implants, so he had no problem altering one of the *Caphenon’s* chip burners to produce the right chip.”

“‘Harvested,’ what a horrible use of that word.” Prime Producer Arabisar shuddered. “Could we refrain from using that for anything other than what Fahla intended? We harvest crops, not technology from the heads of dead aliens.”

“My apologies,” Yaserka said. “We dissected them.”

Arabisar glared at him. “You did that on purpose.”

“Did what? You asked—”

“Enough,” Andira said in a clipped tone. “Yes, we have full communication with these Voloth. The healers said it was critical for their mental health to be able to speak with us and understand our broadcasts. And since mental health is on all of our minds these days, I authorized both the study of the technology and the production of new language chips.”

“And look where that got you.” Prime Warrior Shantu crossed his arms over his expensive tunic, his fashionably cut hair brushing his shoulders. “Watching those broadcasts is how they knew to target you.”

“Excuse me,” Lanaril said. Every head turned to her, and she sat a little straighter. “I understand that you’re thinking like a warrior and looking for the strategic angle. But I think we should remember they’re not our enemies anymore. Right now they’re supplicants.”

“With all due respect, Lead Templar, I killed as many Voloth as I could. I don’t see them as anything but an enemy.”

“And of course that’s what you had to do. I stood outside my temple and rejoiced at every explosion of light I saw, because that was one less ground pounder that could attack us. But that was then. You beat them. We won. They have no power anymore. These are people who are asking us not to send them home. So I have to ask in my turn: Why? Why don’t they want to go?”

“Perhaps they will be prosecuted at home for what we forced them to do here,” Prime Crafter Bylwyтин said in her quiet voice. “Or persecuted.”

“Oh, now, you’re not feeling sorry for them, are you?” Shantu snorted and shook his head. “They’re invaders. They should feel exceedingly fortu-

nate that we haven't executed the lot. Instead they've made demands and we're actually going to listen to them."

"Exactly," Andira said. "We're going to listen. We haven't agreed to anything, and we won't without a majority approval of the Council. But it costs us nothing to listen."

"Well, it's costing me a valuable hantick of my time, not to mention the strain of being in the same room with one and refraining from killing it."

"If they were *its*, I hardly think a high empath would have killed herself from the guilt of empathically forcing one." Lanaril hadn't meant to let her own feelings show, but Shantu's attitude could only come from one who had no inkling of the suffering she had seen in her temple. "I've been counseling Blacksun high empaths for two moons, and I can assure you, their guilt comes from forcing people, not animals."

His front was as good as Andira's, but the hate burned in his eyes. "The first ground pounder bombed Duin Bridge to charred bricks and killed every adult and child in it. They would have done the same to every one of our cities if we hadn't stopped them. And those they didn't kill, they would have enslaved. Those are not the actions of *people*."

A tap on the door interrupted and Colonel Razine entered, her stern face set even harder than usual. Behind her came a Guard holding one end of a chain, then a tall Voloth with his hands shackled in front of him and attached to the chain. A second Guard brought up the rear, and the small conference room suddenly felt very crowded.

Lanaril stared at the Voloth. With his smooth, ridgeless face, he resembled the Gaians she had met and liked. How could an enemy look so similar to a friend?

The three warriors thumped their fists to their chests, a salute that was marred by the jangling of the chain still held by one.

Colonel Razine stepped forward. "Lancer Tal, members of the High Council, Lead Templar Satran, this is Rax Sestak, weapons specialist in the Voloth Third Pacification Fleet."

"Pacification?" Shantu said. "Really?"

The Voloth looked at him, then around the table. When his gaze settled on Andira, all motion in the room stopped. His unfronted emotions poured off him, buffeting Lanaril with a shock of recognition and panic, followed by the determination that wrestled his fear under

control. It had never occurred to her that he might be afraid, but in hindsight it made sense. He was facing down his own personal nightmare.

Was she?

They stared at each other for what felt like five ticks before Andira finally said, "Rax Sestak. I never knew your name."

"I never knew yours, either." His voice was gravelly, as if he hadn't used it in a while. "Well met, Lancer Tal."

Great Fahla, Lanaril thought. He knew the standard greeting. Somehow she hadn't expected courtesy from an invader.

"Well met," Andira answered. The tension in the air eased, only to rise again at her next words. "Colonel Razine, this room has a long history, and I don't believe that history includes the presence of bound prisoners. Take off that chain and unbind his hands."

"Are you insane?" Shantu shoved back his chair and stood. "I know you like to prove your points, but this is going too far."

"Are you afraid of him, Prime Warrior?"

Shantu stopped with his mouth open, then snapped it shut. "I killed too many of them to be afraid of one."

"Well, I for one am not comfortable sharing the room with a bound Voloth, much less an unbound one," Eroles said. "Lancer Tal, *is* there a point to this?"

"We're here to listen to a request for political asylum. If we cannot do that without keeping the petitioner in chains, then I see no reason for this meeting to continue. We'll have already decided on our answer."

"I agree." Prime Merchant Parser cast a sidelong glance at the still-bristling Shantu. "If the five warriors in the room can't handle one unarmed Voloth, then we have indeed come to our decision."

"Unbind him for all I care. I'd welcome the chance to kill one more. But there are others in this room whose concerns should be taken into account."

Andira turned to the Prime Builder. "I promise you, on my honor as a warrior, that this Voloth will not harm you."

"How can you make a promise like that?" Eroles asked.

Andira rose and walked over to stand in front of the Voloth. She looked slim and small next to his bulk, but he watched her with a resurgent fear. Without taking her eyes off his, she said, "Colonel Razine."

The colonel took out a key, unlocked the wristcuffs, and handed them to the Guard holding the chain.

"Thank you," said the Voloth as he rubbed his wrists.

"Tell me, Rax Sestak, do you intend harm to anyone in this room?"

"No, Lancer."

"And we're supposed to—"

Andira held up a hand, stopping Shantu in mid-sentence. "Would you like a chance to prove that?"

Rax looked at her in confusion. "I don't see how."

His eyes widened and his fear spiked into panic when she reached into her boot and pulled out a dagger. The entire room collectively held its breath.

Andira held the dagger for a moment, then flipped it over, caught it by the blade, and offered it to him hilt first.

He took it from her hesitantly, his panic morphing into shock and bafflement.

"I'm the one who made you do it," she said in a low voice. "I stripped you of your will and forced you to kill your fellow soldiers. I know you hate me for that."

"A little," he whispered.

"Then this is your chance. Take your revenge if you can. No one will stop you; it's a matter of honor."

He looked from her to the dagger and back again. "If I do, none of the others will get to stay."

"This is between you and me. It won't have any effect on the others."

Lanaril felt as if she were watching an entertainment vid. This couldn't be real.

Rax tightened his grip on the hilt. "Did you know that some of them were my friends?"

"No, I didn't. Did you know that I lost friends, too?"

"But you didn't kill them yourself." His voice was almost a groan. "I killed my own friends."

"Then kill me and you'll feel better about it."

"No, I shekking won't!" He threw the dagger to the ground. "It won't help! And that's not what I came here for."

One of the Guards scooped up the dagger and handed it back to

Andira, who took it with a nod of thanks and slipped it into her boot. Turning to the others, she said, "Is that proof enough?"

"Great Mother!" Yaserka blurted into the shocked silence. "That was the most reckless thing I have ever seen."

"No, it wasn't. He can't harm me nor any other Alsean. He *cannot*. Do you understand?"

Lanaril finally remembered to exhale, just as Shantu let out a startled laugh.

"Oh, well done, Lancer Tal. You didn't bind him to yourself. You bound him to Alsea." Shantu sat down, still chuckling. "I must say I'm impressed."

"And I'm confused," said Arabisar. "What in Fahla's name just happened?"

"A demonstration." Andira took her seat. "Rax Sestak has free will, with one exception. He cannot harm Alsea nor any Alsean. I left that instruction when I forced him. Unless I cancel it, he'll be bound by it for the rest of his life. If we send him back to the Voloth, he'll never again be able to engage in any hostilities against Alsea. And if he stays here, he'll never be able to raise a hand against any Alsean. So as you can see, he's not a threat to you."

"Some demonstration," Eroles said. Her dark skin was a shade lighter than usual, and Lanaril suspected her own face was still showing the shock.

"Rax Sestak, how shall we call you?" Andira asked.

"Just Rax." His desperate need to know burst its confines. "Please, tell me. Is that the only thing you did? Is that all you left inside me?"

"That's all," she assured him. "I swear."

He dropped his face into his hands, his shoulders shaking with the release, then looked up with reddened eyes. "Thank you. I know I was one of the lucky ones. If you could see the others . . . Seeders, they've forgotten everyone they ever loved. My friend Danek—he has a baby daughter and he doesn't even care anymore. He carried her picture everywhere and we used to tease him about how gone he was over her, and now—he doesn't care. At least you left my heart in one piece."

Lanaril didn't think anyone in the room could be unaffected by that. She glanced over. Well, anyone but Shantu.

"None of us ever wanted to do that," Andira said. "But you left us no choice."

"We had no choice!" he cried. "We were shekked if we did and shekked if we didn't."

"What do you mean?" Lanaril asked. "Why didn't you have a choice?"

"Because we're hangers. And the officers are all citizens."

The six caste Primes and Andira seemed to understand this, but Lanaril had no idea what he was talking about. "Hangers and citizens?"

"The Voloth Imperium has its own caste system with three castes," Andira explained. "Though they don't call them that, and there's no equality. Their people are either citizens, hangers, or slaves."

Rax rubbed his wrists again. "And being a hanger isn't much better than being a slave. You can't own property, you don't have the same legal rights as citizens, and Seeders help you if you ever get into trouble with a citizen. The police will never believe you. A citizen can do everything but murder a hanger, and nobody would turn a hair. I don't think murder is out of the question either, so long as you bribe the right person. And in the military—" He shook his head. "You don't disobey orders."

"You know what your military does," Yaserka said. "You made a choice when you joined it. Seems to me it's a little late now to say you wish you hadn't."

"But I don't—" He stopped and calmed himself with an effort. "Yes, I made a choice to join. We all did. But that's only because none of us were rich enough to buy our citizenship."

"You have to buy your way into your top caste?" Prime Merchant Parser asked.

"There are only two ways to become a citizen. You can buy it, or you can earn it through military service. I was halfway through my military service requirement. When I finished, I'd have been a citizen. And then I could have protected my parents."

"Are they also hangers?" Lanaril asked.

Rax nodded. "They couldn't afford to buy their way out. But they couldn't earn it either, because the military won't take you if you have any medical problems they can't easily fix. My father lost his leg in a farming accident and my mother—well, she didn't have a medical problem. She just couldn't serve. She washed out of basic training because she wouldn't follow orders."

“If her orders were something like ‘bomb that village and kill every innocent person in it,’ then I salute her moral code,” Shantu said. “But you were ready to follow any order you were given.”

“You don’t understand. They don’t give you those orders in basic. They give you stupid orders that don’t make any sense and then they beat the dokshin out of you if you dare to ask why. So you learn not to ask.”

“And unlike your mother, you learned your lesson,” Yaserka said.

Rax looked haunted. “I made it through. The washout rate is over seventy percent, and I made it through, and I was so proud. My father was, too. I served for almost three of your cycles before they sent me on my first invasion. They told us that the locals were primitives, that our government had made peaceful overtures but the primitives had attacked and killed most of the landing party, including the entire squadron that had been sent to protect the diplomats. We were outraged. And we were trained not to ask questions. So when they told us to destroy the villages, we did. And it was easy and they rewarded us. And I was going to be a citizen.”

The picture was coming together, and Lanaril was aghast at what she saw.

“All we had to do was follow orders,” Rax continued. “They give them and we follow them and every order is a little bigger than the one before. And you keep following. And you never, ever ask why. Sometimes, somebody asks why or refuses to obey, and then you don’t see them anymore. They get transferred. We always knew that really meant something else, but nobody said it out loud. We called it ‘transferred to the Eighth Fleet,’ because there is no Eighth Fleet.”

“Are you telling us that your superiors will kill you if you don’t obey orders?” Bylwytin looked faint at the thought.

“Nobody knows that for sure. Look, Colonel Razine said I had to be completely honest with you, because you’ll know if I’m lying. I’m telling you the truth. I think—we all think it’s either obey or die, or if it’s not death, then it’s something even worse, like medical experimentation. There are rumors. But I don’t know. All I know is, none of us ever wanted to find out firsthand.”

“And that’s why you were willing to kill innocents?” Shantu crossed his arms, a look of disbelief on his patrician features. “Because it was

either kill or die? You're not lying, but you're not telling us everything, either."

"I'm trying to." Rax wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Then try harder. Tell us the rest. Tell us how proud you were to be on your way to becoming a citizen, no matter what you had to do to get there. Your superiors dropped four thousand soldiers in your *pacifiers*. Don't tell me they were all controlled by fear."

Rax shook his head. "That's the part I've only started to understand since we came here. You're all primitives—I mean, that's what they told us," he added hastily. "You don't worship the Seeders. All primitives are good for is slavery, but sometimes slaves convert. Sometimes they learn the truth, and then they're saved. If we have to kill primitives, it's not like killing real people, people who worship the Seeders. It's like . . ." He struggled to find the words. "Primitives get reborn when they die. They get another chance to accept the truth. We're doing them a favor."

Shantu's chair flew back with such velocity that it crashed onto the floor. "You're doing us a *favor*?" he roared. "By killing people who never lifted a finger against you? By killing *children*?"

"Great Fahla, that is disgusting," Arabisar said. Heads nodded all around the table.

Lanaril felt ill. "What a twisted theology you have. And twisted for one purpose only, so far as I can see. To justify murder, slavery, and the worst kind of theft. To justify stealing people's worlds."

Rax wiped his forehead again, his fear climbing a notch. "Please, that's not—"

"Everyone settle, please," Andira said. "I don't think Rax finished what he meant to say. Do you believe this?"

"I did," he whispered. "I did until we came here. They said you were violent primitives who had just enough technology to be dangerous, and that you'd attacked a diplomacy unit that had landed to invite you to be part of the Imperium. We offered you technological advancement and the chance to be saved by the Seeders, and you answered by killing off half the diplomats and their soldiers."

"A strangely familiar story." Shantu's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Heard that one a few times, did you?"

"Primitives are always attacking Voloth diplomats. We were taught that the diplomats are among the most courageous people in the entire

Imperium because their jobs are so dangerous. Primitives have their own gods, and they get violent when you try to teach them the truth. But an attack on a diplomatic unit is an attack on the Imperium itself. It has to be answered with ruthless efficiency. So they sent us here, and we were supposed to take your cities. They said we could be live heroes or dead failures. But . . . the thing is, we failed but we're not dead. You took prisoners, but you didn't kill us. That cell you have me in—it's bigger than the cabin I shared with three other soldiers. You keep us fed and you don't beat us and you don't use us for labor. We killed your people and you're treating us better than we treat our slaves. And your Fahla . . . everyone's saying she's a Seeder. None of your temples were hit, and I don't see how that's possible when they were one of our primary hard targets."

"You were *trying* to destroy our temples?" Lanaril's spine hit the back of her chair with a thump.

"It's one of the fastest ways to pacify primitives. That's what they taught us. Take out their false gods and they'll hear the truth more easily." He looked around the table. "If your Fahla is a Seeder, then that explains everything. It explains how you could do what you did to us, and why nobody landed a hit on those temples and why you're . . . you're not primitives at all. And that's got us thinking about the other worlds we invaded. What if they weren't really primitives either? That would mean—" He stopped, unable to say it.

"That your government lied to you," Andira said. "And systematically trained you to murder without question."

He nodded miserably.

"I never saw a Voloth diplomat until we began negotiating to return you. Your attack—both of your attacks—were entirely unprovoked. The first Voloth to die on this planet died after they had already killed *two hundred and fifty-four* innocent Aseans who didn't even know you existed!"

Rax cringed back at her sudden rise in volume, and she did not let up. "So let me assure you that yes, your government lied to you. And you lied to yourself, because I don't believe you never asked any questions. Maybe you didn't ask them out loud, but you asked them in your head."

His guilt said she was right. "I'm a hanger, we don't—we can't—"

"Tell me something. In all your time in the military, did you ever once hear about a planet where the natives *didn't* attack the diplomats?"

He shook his head.

“What a coincidence,” Yaserka said. “I guess they don’t teach hangers about the laws of probability. How extraordinary that the Voloth appear to be the only peaceful race in the galaxy, and yet—how many ‘pacification’ fleets do you have?”

“Seven,” he mumbled. Then he lifted his head and said in a stronger voice, “Five and a half now. The Protectorate destroyed half of the Fifth and you destroyed the entire Third Fleet. The ships are still there, but it will be a long time before they can restock them.”

Lanaril concentrated on what she was sensing from him. He seemed strangely satisfied at the idea of the Voloth fleets being whittled down.

“Once you start asking questions, it’s hard to stop, isn’t it?” she asked.

He turned to her, visibly relieved by her calmer tone. “Yes, it is.”

“And then you begin to feel angry at the ones who lied to you.”

Andira glanced at her, one eyebrow hitching up. “Is that why you don’t want to go back? The whole truth,” she added when Rax hesitated.

“That’s . . . part of it. Some of us would still go back if we could. But we committed treason. We killed our own.”

“But that wasn’t your fault,” Bylwytin said. “You were empathically forced.”

He laughed, a shocking sound given the charged emotions in the room. “You don’t know our commanders. Telling them ‘the primitives made us do it’ won’t get us very far.”

“What will the penalty be? Death?” Shantu had retrieved his chair and seemed much calmer.

Rax shook his head. “No, worse. Lifetime slavery at hard labor. No chance of buying or working your way out. The only out is when they work you to death. And they will.”

The room was silent as everyone digested this information.

“Then I have to wonder why nineteen of you do want to go back,” Andira said.

“Some of them are officers. They’re citizens; they won’t get put into the grinder like we would. The others are true believers. They follow the orders because they enjoy it. They’re the ones who tell the higher-ups when somebody asks a question and make people disappear. They want to go back because they have connections, and now they have inside infor-

mation. They'll find a way to get rewarded for it, just like the officers will. I know some of the ones you're talking about. You don't want them here."

"Why would we want the rest of you here?" Andira asked, though her tone was not unkind. "You're asking a lot of us. What do you have to offer in return?"

His hope blossomed on Lanaril's senses. "Anything we can. We've already offered to teach you how to maintain and operate the pacifiers—"

"But for a price," Yaserka said. "You asked for access to the Alseans who turned you. That price was too high for us to pay."

"I know. We've talked about it, and it's hard for the ones whose hearts got taken. But they've agreed to offer their service without conditions."

Andira and Shantu exchanged looks.

"And we'll tell you anything we can about our military structure, invasion strategies, weaponry . . . whatever any of us know. You've got some good engineers in that group, too. And a few scientists. I'm not much use that way; I'm just a producer's son—but I'd gladly serve you as a soldier. So would many of us. There are some that don't ever want to see the inside of a pacifier again, but they're anxious to offer anything that might be of use." He looked around, his hope rising as the High Council members remained silent. "Can we work out a deal?"

"We cannot answer that now," Andira said. "We'll have to discuss it and then bring it before the full Council. I can only promise to give you an answer as soon as we have one."

Lanaril actually felt sorry for him as his anticipation crashed. She didn't know why he would have expected an answer right away, but perhaps that was his experience in the Voloth military.

"Well . . . thank you for hearing me out. I appreciate that you even listened to me."

Andira nodded. "Thank you for your honesty. But there's one thing you need to take back to your people."

"What's that?"

"*If* we decide to grant political asylum, it will come with a non-negotiable condition. What I did to you—binding you to Alsea—will have to be done to all the others. They will all have to undergo another forced Sharing."

His jaw dropped as he stared at her. "I don't . . . I, um . . ."

"Non-negotiable," she repeated. "Talk to your people. But you can tell

them that it won't hurt, and it won't cause any additional damage. All it will do is ensure their loyalty. You're already carrying that instruction; you know what it feels like. You're the best person to tell them. Colonel Razine, please escort Rax back to his cell."

The chain rattled as the Guard lifted it up and stepped toward Rax.

"Wait," Andira said. "He's to be considered a member of parley. Leave him unchained. And give him a reader card so he can record exactly who can offer what in terms of expertise or willingness to work. Rax, we may have more questions for you later."

To everyone's surprise, he snapped erect, thumped both fists to his chest, and bowed his head. "Lancer Tal."

Andira's eyes widened before she could control her expression. "Settle," she said.

He raised his head and nodded at her. "Thank you." Turning smartly on his heel, he faced Colonel Razine. "I'm ready."

When the door closed behind them, everyone at the table let out a breath.

"I'll admit that was not what I was expecting," Arabisar said.

"Nor I," said Eroles. "Was he telling the truth?"

Andira, Shantu, Yaserka, and Lanaril nodded. "That man was terrified," Lanaril said. "Though whether it was because he was facing us or because he doesn't want to face his superiors, I'm not sure."

"Both, I think." Yaserka pushed back his chair a handspan and relaxed his posture. "Imagine controlling an entire military organization through fear and lies. At some point you'd think it would have to fall apart."

"Fear, lies, and rewards," Andira said. "Don't forget the incentive to serve. It sounds like a powerful one."

"I wonder what percentage of Voloth are citizens." Parser refilled his cup of shannel. "If the hangers can't own property, can they run a business? How exactly do they fit into the Voloth economy?"

Yaserka held out a hand for the shannel pot. "I must confess I'd like to learn more about that. And that is something I never dreamed I'd say."

"I never dreamed I'd be in the same room with a Voloth and not want him chained to the wall," Eroles said. "But I can see some value in his offer."

"So can I," Yaserka agreed.

Shantu made a sound of disbelief. "A few snuffles from a prisoner of

war and you're already soft? Have you forgotten what he was in the process of doing when Lancer Tal turned him? If he'd had his way, he would have blown up every building in this city." He turned to Lanaril. "And your temple would have been the first thing he'd have targeted. You heard him."

"I did hear him. I also felt him. He's a young man who has been taught to never ask any questions, and now he's asking. He's taking his first step on a spiritual journey. And that is more than I ever thought I'd see in a Voloth."

"Spiritual journey." Shantu rolled his eyes. "He's only willing to concede we might not be naked savages because he thinks Fahla is one of their Seeders."

"Maybe she is," Lanaril said quietly.

That left him flat-footed, and Andira spoke into the silence. "Lead Templar, I appreciate the time you took to be here today. There's no need for you to stay for what I'm guessing will be a protracted discussion. But I asked you to attend because you have an input that the rest of us lack."

Lanaril folded her hands in front of her. "I'll aid in any way I can."

"You've been counseling high empaths for war trauma. You know more about their fears and concerns than any of us. If we were to accept this offer, how do you think it would impact them?"

The first thing that came to mind was yesterday's suicide. Though she hadn't known the woman personally—she had lived in Whitesun—Lanaril feared it was only a matter of time before someone she did know was found hanging from a tree. In her counsels, she encouraged veterans to take advantage of the mental healing clinics set up for them, but many told her that wasn't enough. They needed more than help, they said; they needed assurance. An assurance that only a representative of Fahla could give. Every time she heard that, she remembered the first time Andira had come into her study, asking for the same thing.

But it wasn't really about assurance, was it? It was about forgiveness.

She thought of the dead silence when Andira and Rax first laid eyes on each other. He had been terrified of her, and she had needed time to control her speech. Yet by the end, they seemed to have come to a tentative understanding. Perhaps it was simply the relief of replacing the unknown with the known.

And perhaps understanding was the beginning of forgiveness.

Without A Front: The Producer's Challenge

“I think,” Lanaril said slowly, “that if the mental healers made very careful choices and set up very controlled meetings, having these Voloth here could actually help our veterans heal.”