

WITHOUT A FRONT

THE WARRIOR'S CHALLENGE

FLETCHER DELANCEY

HEARTSOME PUBLISHING

For all the tyrees.



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BURNED

“**A**ndira, wake up.”
“I can feel you. You’re almost there.”
“Please, tyrina. Come the rest of the way.”
“No change?”

Not until Micah’s deeper tones registered did Tal realize she had been hearing Salomen. She wanted to reassure them, but everything seemed so slow.

“No.” Salomen’s voice again. “I can feel her; she’s just under the surface. Thank the Goddess I at least have that. If we hadn’t Shared, they’d have sedated me by now.”

“She’ll be all right. Healer Tornell is the best in her field. If she says the damage can be repaired, then it can.”

“I know. It’s just so hard to see her like this.”

“Like what?” Tal mumbled.

A gasp sounded above her as someone touched the back of her neck.

“There you are!” Salomen said breathlessly. “You frightened me most of the way to my Return!” The hand vanished and was replaced by soft lips.

Tal managed to open her eyes, only to slam them shut again. The room was far too bright.

“Sorry.” It hurt to speak, but she felt an urgent need to tell Salomen that she hadn’t meant to frighten her.

Salomen’s laugh was halfway to a sob. “Don’t you dare apologize to me.” She pressed another kiss to the same place, lingering before pulling away with a reluctance that Tal could barely sense.

Her mind seemed to be wrapped in feathers, and her throat felt as if she had been chewing on cinders. “Thirsty . . .”

Footsteps hurried on a hard floor, away and back, and Salomen’s voice came from a different direction. Below her, somehow. “I have some water here, if you’ll open your mouth.”

She did, expecting that water would be poured in, but instead felt something touch her lower lip. Instinctively, she closed her lips on it and sucked. Cool water filled her mouth, and she held it for a moment, marshaling the courage to swallow when she knew it was going to hurt.

Oh, but it was worth it. The hot coals in her throat were quenched, and she imagined wisps of smoke coming out of her nostrils. She sucked up a lake’s worth of water, then cleared her throat and tried her voice again.

“How bad is it? What do I look like?”

Much better. Rough, but she could speak normally.

“Like something the fanten stomped over and refused to eat,” Micah said.

“Thanks, Micah. I can always depend on you.” With great care, she opened her eyes a bare slit, testing the brightness and finding it more tolerable. She relaxed and blinked several times, confused by the fact that she saw nothing but the blue of the ocean on a summer afternoon.

Oh. It was a floor.

“No blue floors in Hol-Opah. Are we in Blacksun?”

Salomen’s face appeared at the edge of her vision. “Yes, in the healing center. How are you feeling?”

“Like something the fanten stomped over and refused to eat. Though a good deal better than before.”

Micah’s face appeared next to Salomen’s. “I was joking. You don’t look bad, considering what might have been.”

“Healer Tornell says you’ll be on your feet in half a nineday,” Salomen said. “Your back is badly burned, and you have a few burns on your legs as well. But she says the damage can be repaired. The hard part will be

staying on this restriction bed for five days while the gel packs are working.”

Tal shifted her head in the padded ring supporting it, wanting to look at them more directly. She frowned when she found them crouched down in order to see her. “Do they not have chairs?”

Salomen sat cross-legged on the floor, and Micah soon followed, though with far less grace. “None low enough for this,” Salomen said. “It’s so good to see you awake.”

“It’s good to see you, too. But I can’t feel you. I can’t feel anything.”

With a trembling smile, Salomen caressed the part of her face that she could reach. “That’s the medication. It blocks your empathic senses as well as your pain receptors.”

Tal stared at her, trying with all her might to break through, but could only pick up whispers of emotions. When Salomen dropped her hand, even those vanished.

“I would almost prefer the pain. To go from a Sharing to this . . .”

“I know. I’ve been trying to tell myself that this is more of Fahla’s sense of humor.” She was pale and drawn, her eyes still shadowed with worry.

“Are you all right?” Tal asked.

“Thanks to you, yes.”

“That’s not what I meant. You were Sharing my pain.”

“It’s gone, Andira. It was gone as soon as I let you go. I’m tired, but all right.”

“Thank the Goddess.” There was so much more to say, but not with Micah there. “What time is it?” she asked instead.

“Night-two,” Micah said. “You’ve been out for a few hanticks.”

“Did you get him?”

“He’s in custody on the base. Colonel Razine already questioned him. I asked her to take care of it personally.”

“And the weapon?”

“A plasma gun. He claims it’s been in his family for three generations, and Gordense and Iversina confirm it.”

That made no sense. “Nobody uses a plasma gun for a long-range sniper shot. They’re not accurate enough.”

“Razine said it was an isolated action. Cullom is on the very low range of mid-empathy; she had no difficulty with him. It wasn’t a professional

strike. He was just an idiot with a grudge and a family weapon." He watched her too steadily, and Salomen's gaze was on the floor.

"What else? My senses may be blocked, but I know there's something you're not telling me."

"Perhaps we should wait until you're feeling better," he suggested.

"I'm feeling well enough."

He looked at Salomen, who nodded.

"I don't recall abdicating my authority to Salomen," Tal snapped. "My brain is still functioning quite well, thank you. What are you two hiding?"

Without a word, Salomen stood up and left the room.

"Salomen, wait. I didn't mean—"

The door snicked shut. Salomen had not even looked back.

Ashamed, Tal dropped her head back to the padded ring.

"She's not angry at you," Micah said. "This hasn't been easy for her."

"I—I know that. Micah, I'm blind as a sonsales and I don't know what's happening, but something obviously is. Just tell me the truth. I can handle it."

He ran a hand down his face, looking suddenly weary. "Cullom had help. Plasma guns may be inaccurate, but they're good enough if all you need to do is hit a large window."

She frowned, trying to see what he was leading to. "So he knew that was my room? But—" A shock ran down her spine. "He knew I sat in that seat, didn't he? At a regular time each night. He had inside information." There was only one person it could have been.

Micah nodded. "We're still looking for Herot."

"Oh, no," she groaned. "Salomen . . ."

"She has the bearing of a warrior. You'd never guess to look at her that she nearly died because of her own brother."

"I'll kill him with my bare hands. That fantenshekken! He'd best run long and far, because when I find him I will *tear him apart*." She already knew which of his bones she would break first.

"And you will lose Salomen," Micah said sharply. "This isn't you talking. You have some powerful drugs in your system, and one of them is interfering with your emotional control. Healer Tornell told us to expect it."

Tal closed her eyes. Perfect. Maybe she really should abdicate temporarily. No empathic senses, no emotional control, and no ability to

do anything except lie in this damned bed and let everyone else deal with the crisis. "At least knowing that allows me to recognize it. Just tell me everything. I promise to be reasonable."

"Don't make promises you cannot keep." He settled himself more comfortably. "There isn't much to tell. We intercepted Cullom right where you said he'd be. He was carrying the plasma gun, and it was still hot. His adjudication hearing won't take more than five ticks." Scowling, he added, "We can thank Herot for the fact that he was outside our empathic net. If he hadn't known exactly where and when to take the shot, he would have needed a much closer approach. We'd have caught him in time."

She could envision it all too easily. "But all he had to do was wait until he could see a shape in the window."

"He didn't wait at all. He'd been drinking at the tavern with Herot, who told him that you thought you were untouchable with your Guards, but anybody could kill you without half trying. One shot through the second-floor window west of the back door, he said. He even said there were only three Guards patrolling the outer ranges of the property. Cullom went home for the plasma gun and then straight to Hol-Opah. It was entirely unplanned."

Tal could hardly believe it. "Herot may as well have taken the shot himself. How could he hate me that much and hide it?"

"I don't know. Neither does Salomen. She doesn't believe he did, but right now we're all questioning our assumptions about him."

Tal hoped that wherever Herot was, he was terrified out of his mind. He deserved that and so much more. "What an irony. We thought the risk would be a warrior or scholar wanting to create an opening for themselves. Or someone who wants me dead because I broke Fahla's covenant. And when it finally happens, it's a spoiled young producer who gets drunk and decides to go out and kill the Lancer before bedtime."

"With considerable help from his drinking partner, Herot Opah," Micah said in disgust.

"Does the rest of the family know?"

He shook his head. "They're shaken up enough as it is, what with half the room being destroyed by the plasma blast. Salomen spoke with Nikin a hantick ago. They were still cleaning up the mess. I told them to send any bills to me."

"Good. Do we have any leads on Herot?"

“Not yet. The tavern owner says he left half a hantick after Cullom did, but none of the Opahs ever saw him. I’m still trying to guess his state of mind. Did he have no idea what Cullom had planned, and that’s why he stayed at the tavern? Or did he stay because he *did* know and wanted the alibi?”

“And Cullom can’t tell us that.”

“No. We need to find Herot.”

“He won’t last long. He’s a strutting yardbird who just jumped the fence. What about the media?”

“Miltorin is making an announcement in five hanticks. He’ll say there was an attempted assassination, and that you sustained minor injuries from which you will fully recover. We didn’t think it wise to advertise just how badly you were hurt.”

“Agreed.”

“He’ll also release Cullom’s name and confirm that he’s been detained.” For the first time in his report, Micah hesitated. “In the absence of instructions to the contrary, I told him to keep Herot’s name out of it. He doesn’t deserve the consideration, but his family does.”

Tal winced at the thought of the media storm that was about to break over Hol-Opah. “You did the right thing. Have you warned them?”

“They’ve had other concerns. I wanted to give them as much breathing room as we could.”

Which wasn’t much. Herot’s absence wouldn’t go unnoticed for long. “What a mess,” she muttered.

“Words for Fahla. But it could have been worse. Far, far worse.”

She closed her eyes at the image his words brought up, so horrifying in its intensity that she could hear the screams.

“Is that all of it?” she managed.

He nodded. “At this point it’s mostly a matter of waiting.”

“Then would you ask Salomen to come back in?”

“Certainly. Salomen!” Micah called.

Tal glared. “I could have done that myself.”

“You could have, but you asked me to.”

The door opened and Salomen walked in, her head down as she settled next to Micah. Tal watched avidly, drinking in the sight of her alive and in one piece, but her relief vanished when Salomen looked up.

She had been crying.

“Now you know,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry, Andira. I have no defense for my brother. He’s brought dishonor to our name even if this wasn’t intentional, and I can only pray that it wasn’t.”

Tears were rising in Tal’s eyes as well, just from seeing her misery. Damned medication!

“Micah, I need to see Salomen alone.”

To her confusion, Micah turned to Salomen and said, “Will you aid an old warrior?”

“You’re not old. Just slightly dented.” She wrapped her hands around Micah’s upper arm and helped him to his feet.

Tal gasped. “Micah! Your hands!”

He examined them as if he hadn’t noticed they were encased in gel gloves. “As she said, I’m slightly dented.”

“He burned them trying to get the molten glass off you,” Salomen said.

The realization sent shivers all the way to her toes. “That was Fahla’s sign. In Whitemoon Temple.”

They looked at each other, then at her. “We hadn’t thought of that,” Micah said.

Salomen nodded. “Too much else to think of.”

“It was never about me. It was about you.”

“Perhaps it was about both of you,” Salomen said.

“Perhaps.” Micah looked at his hands again. “Or perhaps it was about more than that. I believe I’ll have a cup of shannel and give this some consideration. Call me if you need me.”

As he walked toward the door, Tal said, “Micah, thank you. You’re one of the reasons it wasn’t worse.” He would say it was merely his duty, but it required a special kind of courage to put one’s hands in fire.

He stopped with his back to her. “You owe me no thanks.”

The door shut behind him, and Salomen returned to her spot on the floor. “He’s very upset. He feels responsible.”

“He’s not responsible for the fact that Cullom Bilsner was given privileged and very specific information.” Tal barely stopped herself from adding *by your own shekking excuse for a brother*. “Nobody can guard against that.”

“Maybe not, but that’s what I’m sensing.” Salomen scooted closer.

"I've been waiting and waiting for you to wake up, and now that you have, I don't know what to say. You have every right to your anger."

Tal closed her eyes. The bond. Salomen could feel everything now, but thanks to the drugs, it only went one way. "I'm sorry you felt that. I don't know how much is me and how much is the medication. Mostly, I'm worried about you."

"I'm not the one in the restriction bed."

Tal carefully moved her arm, found it functional, and slipped it off the support. As soon as Salomen felt the hand on her cheek, she reached up to hold it there, her face crumpling.

"I'm so sorry," she choked. "So sorry. You were hurt so badly! I tried to help you, but even that little bit that I could Share was unbearable, and I couldn't hold it—"

"Shhh, Salomen, please. None of this was your fault. And it wasn't a little bit that you took from me; it was a great deal. I saw what it did to you. It broke my heart."

"How do you think I felt when I let go? You were in agony because I wasn't strong enough."

"Oh, tyrina. If you were any stronger, you would not be Alsean. I've never seen anything like what you did. It humbled me."

Salomen's laugh was bitter. "*I* humbled *you*? If you could feel me, you'd know how ridiculous that is."

"And if you're feeling me right now, then you know this is the truth. I love you." She would not let one more piptick go by without saying it, not after such a brutal reminder that time was finite. "I'm sorry I didn't have the courage to say it earlier. I felt it; I just couldn't . . . speak it aloud. And now I don't even remember why."

A fresh surge of tears streamed from Salomen's eyes as she turned her head and kissed Tal's palm before lacing their fingers together. "I told you not to say it until it came from your heart."

"It does," Tal whispered. "You know that."

Salomen nodded. "I've known it for a while. That's partly why I put off our Sharing. Most people need it to see into a heart, but those flashes—I saw yours. For me, the benefit was far outweighed by the consequences."

"Is it still?"

"Oh, Fahla, no. If I hadn't had this connection, I would have gone

insane the moment you passed out on top of me. I thought you were dead at first. You were so heavy and limp, and Colonel Micah—I've never seen him like that. I was starting to lose my mind, but then I felt a tiny little thread that had never been there before. It's held us together all this time." Her mouth twisted. "I could hate Herot for taking this from us. Our first Sharing was torture because of him. He's the reason I'm alone in this bond. All that time I put it off, and now that I want our full connection—Great Mother, I want it now—but it's not there. You're sonsales."

Tal would have given anything for that connection as well. She wondered if this was a punishment for the way they had delayed their Sharing and denied the divine spark.

"I'm only sonsales for a few days," she said, trying to convince them both. "After that, you won't be able to get me back out of your mind again. And you don't hate Herot. He's your brother."

"If we find out that he did this intentionally, he is not my brother," Salomen said fiercely. "I won't share our mother's name with him, and I doubt Father would share his, either."

She could hardly have said anything more shocking. Retraction of a family name was one of the greatest punishments that could be incurred outside the justice system, and Tal would not have thought her capable of it.

"Then for all our sakes, I hope he was just a drunken fool."

"So do I." Salomen used her free hand to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "I'm also feeling cheated. We're finally at the point of being able to touch each other without fear and I still can't have you. You're so—" Her breath shuddered in her throat. "Hurt," she finished in a whisper.

"But you said the damage can be repaired, yes?"

She nodded.

"Then in a few days I won't be hurt anymore. And I can tell you right now that thinking about our joining is going to make me heal twice as fast."

Salomen gave her a watery smile. "At least we're both still here. I'd have been very upset if one of us went to our Return before we ever got a chance to join or Share properly."

"Fahla would never let it happen. Not even she would incur your wrath lightly."

"You wouldn't let it happen, either. I know you're going to tell me this

isn't necessary, but I believe it is. Thank you, Andira. First for saving my life, and then for saving my body."

Tal opened her mouth before realizing that she was about to say exactly what Salomen had predicted. "Well, I had to get you out of that window seat one way or another. I told you it was mine."

Salomen kissed the back of her hand. "Next time, you can have it."

INCOMPETENCE

Spinner stabbed his finger on the encrypted message, deleting it forever, and threw the reader card on the desk.

“Fahla-damned *idiot!*” he shouted. Furiously, he grabbed the first thing that came to hand—a statuette that had stood on his desk for fifteen cycles—and threw it as hard as he could. It shattered against the wall with a satisfying crash, destroying four thousand cintecks of value in an instant.

It didn’t make him feel better.

How could Withernet have been so stupid? A shekking assassination attempt on the Lancer? It was the last thing he wanted! Ten moons he had spent on this plan; ten moons of applying either influence, cintecks, or both as he carefully put all the pieces in place. Tomorrow was supposed to be his day of triumph. It was supposed to be the day he put the final tile in place and it all fell apart for Lancer Tal. Instead, she was in the healing center in Fahla only knew what shape. The plasma blast had taken out half the wall of her room. Even if she survived, there was little hope she would be intact enough to keep her title. Either way, she would be of no use to him.

And now he had lost his leverage with Challenger as well. He had just gone from triumph to disaster, all because of the flaming incompetence of a grainbird who had the bright idea of exceeding his instructions. In his

message, Withernet had the horns to suggest Spinner would be pleased at the news.

At the moment, Spinner thought darkly, the only thing that would please him would be news of Withernet's demise. That man was too stupid to live.

He spent the next two hanticks pacing his study, trying to find a way to salvage the situation while waiting for the inevitable announcement. When Communications Advisor Miltorin finally appeared onscreen, his face grave as he addressed the people, Spinner's heart rate doubled.

Two ticks later, a broad smile creased his face. Minor injuries? She had escaped that with minor injuries? Either Fahla herself was looking out for that woman, or Miltorin was lying through his teeth. One of those was far more likely than the other. But Miltorin wouldn't have promised her full recovery if that much weren't true. Somehow, Lancer Tal had managed to survive in good enough shape for the healers to put her back together.

The game was still on.

By the end of the announcement, Spinner's mood had rebounded to near euphoria. Cullom Bilsner was in custody, but no mention had been made of Herot Opah. If they had Cullom, they knew about Herot. And if they weren't mentioning Herot, there could only be two reasons. One, they were covering up his involvement. Two, he had run and they would not admit they had lost him. Either of those options gave him excellent leverage.

Humming an old ballad, he retrieved his reader card and began sending out orders.

NON-INTERFERENCE

The sun had just cleared the horizon when Gehrain arrived with Tal's gear bag. "I picked up everything that seemed important," he whispered as he set the bag on a chair. "Or salvageable. How is she?"

Micah looked at the unmoving figure in the restriction bed. "She's . . ." *Torn apart*, his conscience helpfully informed him. *Alive only because of her own instincts, and no thanks to you.* "On the mend. But the drugs have knocked her out. You don't have to whisper."

Gehrain studied her. "I can hardly believe she's still breathing. That room—the whole window seat is gone. And the bookcases, and half the wall. But Raiz Opah is walking around with hardly a scratch. Fahla must have been in the room with them."

"And a good thing, too," Micah said bitterly. "We certainly weren't any help." He held up a hand as Gehrain turned toward him. "No. I don't want to hear it. But you were right, and I was wrong. We should have moved the net farther out."

"He had inside information, Colonel."

"And I should have accounted for that possibility. Take a lesson from this. Always, always plan for the worst scenario."

Gehrain nodded, though he clearly wanted to say more. "I've set up the Guard rotation for the next five days," he said instead. "And pulled in

more warriors from the base. Blacksun Healing Center is officially a fortress.”

“Good. If I had my way, she wouldn’t put a boot anywhere on Alsea without fifty warriors around her.”

“She would never allow that.”

“I know.” Micah glanced back at Tal. “Fahla save us from brick-headed warriors.”

It was exactly what Aldirk would have said. They looked at each other and then snorted with laughter. It felt disloyal and wrong, with Tal so grievously injured, but he couldn’t stop and neither could Gehrain.

An odd chime broke into their stress release, and they gazed around the room for the source.

“Is that . . . ?” Gehrain pointed toward the status displays on the far wall.

“I don’t think so.” Another chime brought Micah’s head around to the gear bag. He reached for the tabs, then cursed at his useless gel-gloved hands. “It’s coming from there.”

Gehrain opened the bag and rustled around. “Ah. It must be—” The chime sounded again just as he held up a familiar pad. “There’s Gaian script showing, but I can’t read it.”

“It’s Captain Serrado.” Micah couldn’t read it either, but there wasn’t a doubt in his mind. “They talk about once a moon, and it’s been a moon since the last one.”

The pad chimed again, and Micah weighed his options. “I can’t activate it with these damned gloves.” He gestured toward the counter at the side of the room. “Set it up there so I can stand in front of it, and then tap the screen.”

Gehrain did as requested. The moment his finger touched the screen, the alien script vanished and Captain Serrado appeared. Her smile faded when she saw the two men looking at her. “Colonel Micah, Lead Guard Gehrain. I would say well met, but you don’t seem—” Her gaze moved over their shoulders. “Those are status displays. Are you in a healing center? Is Lancer Tal all right?”

“Thank you, Gehrain,” Micah said. “That’s all I need for now.”

“Yes, Colonel.” Gehrain nodded at the captain. “It’s good to see you again, Captain Serrado.”

"And you." She waited silently while Gehrain exited the room, but her expression spoke volumes.

As soon as the door shut, Micah said, "She's not all right. But she will be."

The horror showed clearly on her face as he explained, but by the end she had put on a professional mask. "Are you certain this was an isolated action? I know she's still facing censure for her decision at the Battle of Alsea."

"I'm as certain as we can be, given our current knowledge. That's not to say that an attack might not materialize from a different quarter, but this one had nothing to do with Fahla's covenant."

"This one," she repeated, her eyes narrowing. "I am not reassured. If you need any assistance at all, tell me. I can have the *Phoenix* there in sixteen of your days."

"Didn't you just get that ship?" Tal would never want Captain Serrado to risk her career again, and the last thing she needed was for her lost love to show up now.

"I did, and we just finished our shakedown cruise." She leaned forward. "The Protectorate is very invested in keeping Lancer Tal in power. We know there are voices on Alsea calling for an end to this treaty, and we know who those voices belong to. One of them is on the High Council. It wouldn't take but a word from me to have orders in hand, directing me to burn my engines all the way to Alsea. I can help."

Micah swallowed his surprise. It had never occurred to him that the Protectorate would be tracking Alsean politics that closely. But it made sense. Why else have an ambassador living in Blacksun?

Tal probably knew all about it. He wished she were awake to handle this delicate moment.

"We're never without a Protectorate ship close by," he said. "If we had to call in help, it would be here sooner than you could be. And I really don't think we'll need the assistance, though I'm grateful for the offer." There, that sounded like something Tal would say.

"You do have a closer ship," she agreed. "But not one with the resources of the *Phoenix*. And not one with a captain who understands Alsean culture and knows when to help and when to let you take the lead."

"Captain Serrado—"

“Why don’t you want me there? She’s my friend. I can see how worried you are about her.”

He sighed and reached up to scratch the back of his neck, then swore when the gel glove touched his skin. He was never going to get used to these damned things. “I didn’t tell you everything. It’s really her story to tell.”

“Well, she doesn’t seem capable of it right now. And I only have this call. Personal quantum com time is a limited resource, especially when it’s being routed through this many base space relays.”

Serrado could stare a hole through a person when she wanted to. No wonder she and Tal had become friends so quickly.

Micah gave up. “The woman she saved last night—Salomen Opah—she and Tal are tyrees.”

“Andira found her tyree?” A warm smile transformed her face. “In the producer who challenged her?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think Salomen will ever stop challenging her.”

“That’s wonderful news, Colonel. I’m thrilled for her. But it doesn’t explain why you don’t want me there.”

“They’ve been bonded for less than one day,” he said, hoping desperately that she would understand.

She tilted her head with a slight frown. “What terrible timing. But I’m not a threat, if that’s what you’re worried about. A tyree bond can’t be broken from the outside.”

Now that was strange, hearing an alien lecture him on Fahla’s gift.

“No, it cannot. But Tal is a special case. This isn’t her first tyree bond.” He hoped Tal would forgive him. “Her first one was with you.”

Serrado stared at him, speechless. At last she cleared her throat and said, “You need to explain that.”

“I know about her Sharings with you and Lhyn.” As the mask fell over her face, he added, “She had no intention of telling me. I forced her into it, because she was . . . not doing well. Captain, what she did with you was unprecedented. And very dangerous, because neither you nor Lhyn had any way to control the power of your bond. Every time Tal linked you, some of it spilled over into her brain. When you left, it was . . . well, you severed a partial tyree bond. In truth, she should have been under the care of a healer. But she was stubborn and never told a soul until I gave her no other option.”

Serrado closed her eyes. "Damn her. Why didn't she—?" She stopped and exhaled softly. "Never mind, I already know why. Is she all right now? I mean, regarding that?"

"Yes. It took several moons, but she recovered."

"Colonel Micah, I know this comes too late, but if I'd had any idea—"

"I know. So does she. Though I think she would have done it even if she had known the risk."

"She probably would have. So . . . you're saying I'm a threat after all."

"Salomen only consented to their bond last night. Two ticks after they Shared, Tal passed out on top of her from the pain and shock. Since then, Tal has either been unconscious, or awake but sonsales because of the drugs in her system. Their bond is so new it hardly even qualifies as a bond yet. And it's Salomen's brother we're looking for. This is a very delicate situation."

Serrado's shoulders went back. "I see. Then I'll stay out of it for now. But I meant it when I said the Protectorate wants Andira in the State Chair. If you can't resolve this threat internally, you're going to see me whether I ask for it or not. I'll run interference as long as I can, but my influence only goes so far. And I'll be Shipper-damned if anyone gets sent there other than me." Her posture softened. "But more importantly, if something happens to her and I could have prevented it, then neither you nor I are going to be able to live with ourselves."

He nodded in perfect understanding. "From one warrior to another, Captain, I swear I'll keep her safe."

"I hope you're bringing in reinforcements to bolster that oath."

"I am." In more ways than she realized.

"Good. Tell her to call me as soon as she can. I'll arrange for a priority call status."

"It will probably be several days."

"As soon as she can," she repeated.

They ended the call a few ticks later, leaving Micah with a pad that he had no way of deactivating. He turned to the bed, where Tal lay immobile and nearly invisible beneath her pile of gel packs.

"Between your friend and your tyree, you'll never again hold the upper hand," he told her. "But I'll enjoy watching you try."