



CHRONICLES
OF ALSEA

CATALYST



Fletcher DeLancey

For anyone who has ever taken a leap of faith.

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CHAPTER 1

Bonding break

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes she envied Andira her beliefs.

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

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

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

"She also said it was optional."

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

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

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

"Because they have eyes, tyrina."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not a field study, Lhyn.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ask me," Lhyn whispered.

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

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

"What is the second rule?"

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

“What is the third rule?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



CHAPTER 2

Well met

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It is."

"Then why is Salomen making you work?"

Lanaril pressed her lips together as tightly as she could.

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

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

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

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

"And he has already introduced himself to Lanaril."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Which battle?” Ekatyra asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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