

VELLMAR THE BLADE

BOOK FIVE IN THE CHRONICLES OF ALSEA

FLETCHER DELANCEY

HEARTSOME PUBLISHING

For those who strive.



CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Map</i>	ix
1. Bedtime story	1
2. The beginning	4
3. Milena disagrees	11
4. Practicing I	12
5. The greater hero	19
6. Practicing II	21
7. Salomen the Strong	26
8. The Games I	28
9. Family	34
10. Swimming	36
11. Adult things	45
12. The Games II	47
13. Vallcat	63
14. Laughingstock	64
15. A vallcat of your own	67
16. A passel of kittens	68
17. Injustice	76
18. Growing up	77
19. Nickname	85
20. A few new things	87
21. Just like you	102
22. Second chance	104
Untitled	111
NEXT: OUTCASTE	
1. Dreams	115
2. Fourteen, almost	123
3. Fifteen	128

<i>Glossary</i>	133
<i>About the Author</i>	139
<i>Also by Fletcher Delancey</i>	141

BEDTIME STORY

Jandahar stood just outside the bedroom door and cleared his throat loudly. “Anyone wanting a bedtime story had better be *in* their bed by the time I come in this room, or—”

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

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

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

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

“So I see. Your teeth are brushed?”

She nodded.

“Face washed?”

Another nod.

“Toes washed?”

A giggle escaped. “Bai!”

“You didn’t wash your toes?”

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

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

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

“I did too!”

“Did not.”

“Did too!”

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

“They’re clean!”

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

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

“Your dirty socks,” muttered Harren.

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

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

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

“Clean, Bai.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But it’s exciting.”

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

“The Last Charge of the Defenders!”

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

“But they didn’t *all* die.”

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

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

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

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

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

THE BEGINNING

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

Lancer Tal was in the far corner of the room, where an equally beautiful antique sideboard held a gleaming shannel dispenser and a collection of snacks. Upon seeing her, Vellmar stiffened, bowed her head, and brought her fists to her sternum. "Lancer Tal."

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

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

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

That was not an order Vellmar could obey. She remained standing until Lancer Tal had walked around the desk and sat in her own chair.

Only then did she gingerly lower herself to a chair that was probably hundreds of cycles old. Councilors and caste Primes had sat in this very seat. It was heady indeed for a warrior from Pollonius who had never dreamed of reaching such heights.

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

Vellmar awkwardly let her spine rest against the curved wood. "Yes."

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

"I'm not—" She stopped before telling an outright lie. "Both, I suppose. But more the office. I've never been in here before."

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

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

The Lancer chuckled. "Good, isn't it?"

"More than good." She sipped again, savoring the excellent flavor. "Probably the best I've ever tasted."

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

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

But she had expected to give those reports to her immediate supervisor, Head Guardian Gehrain, or possibly Colonel Micah, the Chief Guardian. Not in her wildest dreams did she think Lancer Tal would ask to hear them. Nor had her nerves been soothed when Gehrain said the reports normally did go to him, but Lancer Tal wanted to test her new Lead Guard.

For the next hantick, she answered questions and offered assess-

ments of the warriors under her supervision. It was nerve-racking, because the Lancer knew her Guards better than she did. Most of them had served with her for several cycles, while she had been here less than four moons.

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

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

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

There went her sense of accomplishment. “No.”

“Why not?”

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

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

She had been so close to getting out of this office without making a fool of herself. Dropping back into the chair, she spoke more deliberately. “I apologize, Lancer. This isn’t your concern—”

“What do you mean, not my concern? My Lead Guard is passing up the chance to bring the glory of the Games to this unit. That most certainly *is* my concern. And do please stop drumming your fingers.”

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

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

She looked up in alarm, but the Lancer was smiling at her.

“I’m not jumpy.” She straightened and crossed her hands over her stomach. “I’m just . . . dismayed. All this time I’ve been working myself up to it, and now I have to wait until next cycle. I feel like a grainbird. I really don’t like feeling that way.”

Now the Lancer chuckled. “Who does? And what exactly is the problem of entering the same competitions as your birthmother? Are you worried she’ll best you? There would be no shame in that. She’s the reigning champion, after all. And I would be proud to have you bring a blue medal back to our unit. Not getting a red medal isn’t the end of the world.”

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

“Ah, I see.” Lancer Tal sat back. “Go on.”

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

“And you believe you’ve surpassed her in skill.”

“I know it sounds overconfident, but yes, I do.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

How could it not?

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

“You disagree?” she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

She had not considered that.

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

Puzzled at the change of subject, Vellmar nodded.

“Is he a good student?”

“He’s excellent.”

“And you’re enjoying teaching him.”

“Yes, of course.”

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

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

“Just of him?”

“Well . . .”

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

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

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

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

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

“A blinding one.” Vellmar felt an answering smile push its way out. “I never thought of it that way. I could bring her honor in this.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You haven't yet. Don't worry. If you do, I'll have Micah straighten you out immediately. He's very good at that."

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

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

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

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

"What's that?"

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

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

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

MILENA DISAGREES

“**A**nd so, after much persuasion, Lancer Tal finally agreed to allow Vellmar to enter the Games.” Jandahar paused to steal a drink of water from Harren’s glass. One of these nights, he would remember to bring his own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PRACTICING I

Vellmar was in her focused zone. She had been in the State House training room since the end of her duty shift, practicing her throws. It was just her, the knives, and a target, with nothing and no one around to interrupt, and she had long since lost track of time. Her vision had tunneled down so far that all she could see was the target. Her body felt as if it were an extension of her thoughts. She was no longer making any physical effort at all; she simply envisioned the throw and let the knife leave her hand. These were the moments she treasured, when her skill took over her body and made it nearly impossible to miss.

Nearly.

She had set a goal of twenty-five perfect throws at the thirty-pace short-blade competition distance and was not allowing herself even a hair's width of error. Each time her blade landed anywhere other than dead center in the target, she restarted the count. It did not matter if the throw was still in the red zone; in fact, she never threw a knife anywhere but in the red zone. What mattered was that it was in the exact center, because she would need to be more than excellent to win this event. She would need to be perfect.

Thunk.

Dead center. That was twenty-one. She waited for the target to eject her knife, then picked up another from the case at her feet. Take position, envision the throw . . .

Thunk.

Twenty-two. This was where she had lost the count last time.

Come on, just three more, she thought.

Take position, envision the throw . . .

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

“Yes! Finally!” With a whoop, she picked up a knife from her case and tossed it high into the air. As it came down, she snatched it by the handle and fired it at the target.

Thunk. It wasn’t perfect, but it was still in the red.

“If I hadn’t seen what you can do, I’d have thought that last move was a bit dangerous,” said a voice behind her.

Vellmar whirled, her heart beating triple-time. “Great Goddess above! You just scared me halfway to my Return!”

Salomen Opah, Bondlancer of Alsea, stood on the wooden observation deck that overlooked the training room. Her arms were folded on the waist-high railing, the position making her dark hair drape over her shoulders. She looked as if she had been there for quite some time.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pushing off the railing and turning toward the stairs. The snort of laughter belied her words. “I’m glad you weren’t holding a knife just now.”

“You would never have been in danger.” Vellmar was offended at the thought and more than a little disgruntled to see the Bondlancer laughing at her.

Salomen stepped onto the training room floor and came toward her, a broad smile accentuating the dimple in her chin and making her deep brown eyes dance. “I do apologize, Fianna. I honestly thought you knew I was there. I wasn’t trying to be quiet when I came in, but you have a focus like nothing I’ve seen. I really didn’t mean to startle you.”

She held up a palm in an invitation that would have been rude to refuse. Vellmar met it with her own, relaxing as Salomen’s emotions

flowed through the physical connection. An apology via palm touch could never be insincere.

“Am I forgiven?”

“Yes, of course.” Vellmar was already past her momentary umbrage. “I didn’t realize you took such pleasure in throwing events.” Salomen’s vast enjoyment could hardly be missed, even by an empath of half Vellmar’s strength.

“I never did until now. It really was a beautiful sight, and that’s not a word I ever thought I’d associate with a weapon. But what you do with them . . . there’s no other word for it.”

Vellmar leaned down to pull another knife from her case. “They *are* beautiful to me. The way the grip fits perfectly in my palm, the weight of it, the craftwork, even the shine of the blade.” She held it out, handle first, and Salomen grasped it carefully. “It’s very sharp,” she added.

“So I see.” Salomen folded her fingers around the grip and hefted it. “You’re right, it does fit nicely into the palm. And this is certainly more finely crafted than any blade I’ve ever used on the holding.”

“You use work blades. These are throwing blades. They’re two different animals.”

“The difference between a fanten and a winden, hm?”

“That’s a good analogy, in truth. Fantens are sturdy stock. They thrive in every environment, eat almost anything, but they’re never going to outrun you. And they’re not very beautiful.”

“But the winden is wild, fleet, and free,” Salomen said. “Creatures of the mountains, outrunning anything on legs.” She tilted the blade, watching the play of light along its length. “It really is a marvelous piece. May I be rude and ask how much a blade like this would cost?”

“I’ve never heard you speak rudely before and still have not today.” In fact, Vellmar thought the Bondlancer had quite a bit in common with a winden, given her natural elegance and quiet strength. She had an innate ability to make everyone around her stand a little taller, and Vellmar couldn’t help thinking that she looked good with a blade in her hand.

“Thank you, but that was not an answer to my question.”

“Right. Let me think . . . The case cost a little over three thousand cintecks, so the blade you’re holding would be about two hundred.”

Salomen’s eyes widened. “Two hundred! For *one*?” She hastily offered the knife back, but Vellmar held up her hands.

“Please, keep it. If it brings you pleasure.”

“Oh, Fianna, I cannot. This is yours.”

“Which means it is mine to give away. It seems to belong in your hand, Bondlancer.”

“Salomen,” she corrected. “You are not on duty, and we’re not in public.”

“And I’m still not accustomed to it,” Vellmar admitted.

“You’re not accustomed to me using your first name either, are you? Every time I call you Fianna, you look startled.”

Vellmar rubbed the back of her neck. “It’s not a name I hear often.”

“Yes, the warrior tradition of using family names. I’ve never quite understood it. Andira has known Colonel Micah for her entire life and still won’t call him Corozen.”

“Good Fahla! Of course she can’t call him that!”

Laughing at her horrified reaction, Salomen held out the knife again. “Really, this is much too precious for you to give away.”

Vellmar crossed her arms over her chest. “You will insult me if you do not accept.”

Salomen met her eyes, then nodded. “I would never wish that. Very well, I accept your gift. Thank you, I’m honored by it.” She lifted the knife once more, examining it closely, and Vellmar’s practiced eye could see the difference. Already she was handling the blade more confidently.

Ownership changed everything.

“I would ask a gift in return,” Vellmar said.

“Of course. What can I do for you?”

“Let me teach you to use it.” She watched Salomen’s grip tighten around the hilt.

“Oh, no. I don’t think so. Fianna, no. Ask me something else.”

“Bondlancer . . . Salomen,” Vellmar corrected herself, “please hear me out. You are the second most targeted Alean on the planet. Your

Guards are some of the best to be found, but they can't be everywhere all the time, and they are not infallible. If the worst occurred, you should be able to defend yourself. At the very least, you should know how to use a weapon."

"I'm not a warrior."

Oh, but you are, Vellmar thought. She had seen this woman show more strength than an entire unit of warriors put together. But she chose a different tactic.

"What would it do to Lancer Tal if anything happened to you? Would she even survive the loss of a divine tyree bond?"

Salomen frowned. "You don't fight fairly."

"I fight to win. And what I'm offering is the gentlest method of defense possible. Think about it. A cellular disruptor causes horrific damage, even when the shot isn't fatal. You've seen that. But a knife cut is clean and minimally damaging if the wielder knows what she's doing. That's one of the reasons I prefer blades. I'm not a good shot with a disruptor, but even if I were, I'd still use blades. If I need to, I can kill quickly and painlessly, and that's almost impossible with a disruptor. And if I seek only to neutralize, I can do so without permanently disabling my target. Now, the easiest weapon for you to learn to use would be a disruptor. But you would never carry one."

"No, I would not." She looked faintly nauseated at the thought.

"But you could carry a knife without it weighing you down or constantly reminding you of its presence. And if you were properly taught, you could use it—for self-defense only. The one weapon less damaging than a knife is your hand, but I don't think hand-to-hand is a skill you would want to learn. Even if you did, the learning curve is steep and long." Though Salomen could be a fantastic fighter if she wanted. She was nearly as tall as Vellmar herself, and a lifetime of physical labor had honed her to a fine edge.

Salomen stared at the knife in her hand, then into Vellmar's eyes. "You've put quite a lot of consideration into this. I think I just walked into a trap that was waiting to be sprung."

There was no use denying it. "I've considered this since I met you and offered you my sword."

"Then I suppose I should be grateful that it took you this long to

spring your trap.” She sighed. “Andira has been saying much the same thing, and I’ve been putting her off as long as I could. I just didn’t want to accept this part of my title.”

“I’m sorry,” Vellmar said sincerely. Despite her warrior heart, Salomen was a gentle being whose soul would suffer if she were forced to inflict harm. But better that than the loss of such a soul altogether.

Salomen turned toward the target. “What would you teach me? To throw like you do?”

“Yes, though not at such a distance. If you needed to defend yourself, chances are that by the time you realized it, your target would be only a few paces away. Perhaps even within arm’s reach. I would teach you close-in throwing and, for the arm’s reach targets, the dartfly style.”

“Dartfly style? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a specialized style of knife fighting, relying on speed and small, targeted cuts. You could take down an opponent twice your size without causing debilitating injury, and with less risk to yourself. It’s very difficult for an opponent to disarm a skilled dartfly fighter.”

Salomen was silent, staring at the target.

Vellmar left her to think about it. While crouched at the base of the target, replacing the ejected blades back in her case, she went over her argument and concluded that she had done the best she could. To her mind, Salomen was like a newborn winden, a tender target for anyone violently opposed to the Lancer’s leadership. She had no idea how Lancer Tal lived with the fear, but she knew it was there.

Salomen’s gaze was on her as she snapped her case shut and made her way back.

“Dartfly, hm? It sounds so . . . harmless.”

Not yet acceptance, but she was considering it. Vellmar chose her words carefully.

“There’s nothing harmless in preventing your own death or injury. I don’t concern myself for a pipstick with the well-being of anyone who would attempt to harm you. But I’m very concerned about your well-being. And I know that you would mourn forever if you were forced to truly hurt another Alean.” She did not add *or to kill*. She didn’t need to.

Salomen tapped the flat of the blade against her leg. “Very well. I agree. I don’t like it, but I see the necessity. And I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have teaching me. Thank you, Fianna.”

“Don’t thank me. This is your gift to me; it’s I who should be thanking you.”

“I meant, thank you for caring so much that you spent more than three moons planning your argument.”

Vellmar ducked her head. “It’s my duty.”

“If that’s all it is, then I’ve misjudged our relationship. Are we not friends?”

There was a sad note in Salomen’s voice, and Vellmar felt an immediate need to smooth it away. “I would count your friendship among my greatest honors.”

“Good. Because I would rather have a friend teaching me than Andira’s Lead Guard.”

“Then that is who will teach you.”

They smiled at each other, the tension of the moment broken. Salomen’s expression turned playful as she reached out and squeezed Vellmar’s upper arm. “I thought so. You’ll soon be lopsided, growing such muscles on your throwing arm. You’ll find it difficult to walk a straight line.”

“That’s why I only use this arm half the time. Then I switch.”

“You do not!”

Vellmar laughed. “I really do. But I’m terrible with my left arm. I can only hit the red zone seven out of ten throws.”

“Great Mother. No wonder Andira likes you. You’re the only warrior in this building even more obsessed with perfection than she is.”

They went back up the stairs and across the observation deck in companionable silence. As Vellmar held the door open for her, she smiled. More obsessed with perfection than the Lancer? She could live with that.