

RESILIENCE

BOOK SEVEN IN THE CHRONICLES OF ALSEA

FLETCHER DELANCEY

HEARTSOME PUBLISHING

*For the ones who don't fit in.
What makes you different may make you extraordinary.*



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PROLOGUE

I *will represent Alsea to the best of my ability.*”

First Guard Rahel Sayana had said those words just eight days ago, before making her first trip into orbit. Looking at the groaning crew members strewn about the floor at her feet, she had the uncomfortable feeling that she’d already broken her promise.

And the day had started so well.

RAIN

The chime at her door came precisely on time, as always. One thing Rahel had learned about Dr. Lhyn Rivers was that she took her job seriously. Though not formally attached to the crew, she had been contracted to teach Rahel about Protectorate culture and the ship she was serving on. Every day, she appeared at the same time to begin a new tour.

“Good morning!” she said brightly when Rahel opened the door. Her hair was contained in its usual complicated braid, dark brown and silver blended together, and her vivid green eyes—too large for her face and one of the most alien things about her, even with the lack of facial ridges—were alert despite the early hour. “Ready for deck twenty-one?”

“Barely.” Rahel stepped out, the door sliding closed behind her, and walked down the curving corridor beside her taller friend. “Dr. Wells kept me late last night with at least fifteen different scans. I’m glad to be done with it. Every time she put me in that omniphasic diagnostic bed, I was afraid she’d press the wrong button and send me shooting off the ship.”

“Oh, that’s right. Yesterday was your last compulsory day of testing. Congratulations on surviving a full week in the gentle hands of our chief surgeon.”

Rahel let out a huff of laughter. “Her hands are the only gentle thing about her.”

Dr. Wells had been a fixture during this first week aboard the *Phoenix*.

She was competent and intimidating in equal measure, and her temper was the stuff of legend. Rahel hadn't seen it yet, but she had heard stories.

"That's not true, you know." Lhyn angled over to a small alcove built into the bulkhead, its recessed lights shining on the yellow-flowered plant that filled it. "Dr. Wells is a kinder person than most people realize. It's a cultural constant that people present different public and private faces. Yet we still assume that what we see in public tells us all we need to know." She touched one of the flowers, which turned a deep blue beneath her finger, and added, "I love Filessian orchids."

"I like them because I can remember their name. The rest of these . . ." Rahel gestured at the corridor with its profusion of plants. Graceful arches marched along its length, bracketed by pillars housing broad-leaved vines that swept to the floor. More plants clung to the tops of the arches, some small and bushy, others with long, leathery leaves that reached for the ceiling. Along the sides of the corridor, each door was topped by a lintel crowded with greenery, and if that weren't enough, every few steps was an alcove featuring either a Filessian orchid or some equally spectacular flower. Between these were large mosaics of colored tiles, spotlighted as if they were installations in an art gallery.

Rahel had never expected a warship to look like a place of worship. She felt immediately at home here, enjoying even the air she breathed. She had been prepared for sterile air, but the *Phoenix* had a subtle, woody scent, spiced with the fragrance of its many blooming plants.

"I can't imagine why you're having trouble remembering the names of a few hundred plant species along with the schematics of a Pulsar-class ship," Lhyn quipped.

"Ha. I was looking over the schematics for deck twenty last night and realized I'd already forgotten at least a quarter of what you showed me. How is it that you Gaians can install a lingual implant in my head so I can speak your language, but you can't program me with a map of this ship?"

She was teasing, of course, but Lhyn took her seriously.

"It's a different kind of learning. Language is a result of neural impulses that are translated to specific muscular movements of the tongue, cheeks, lips—"

"Lhyn."

". . . and jaw, but—hm?"

“That wasn’t an actual question.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.”

The burn of embarrassment hit Rahel’s senses, and she shook her head at herself.

As a scholar, Lhyn was supremely confident. She was one of the Protectorate’s most famous anthropologists, spoke thirty-eight languages fluently and fifteen more quite well, and could put details together with a speed and intuition that left Rahel breathless. But Lhyn had explained that studying cultures and moving through them were two different things. She might be a genius at one—and the fact that she would use that word to describe herself was a perfect example of her confidence—but that didn’t translate to any facility at the other. It was one of the reasons she had chosen Alsea as her home: in a culture of empaths, her inability to blend in was an asset. Alseans valued a person whose words always matched her emotions.

“No need for apologies,” Rahel said. “Besides, I’m only now getting used to my mouth saying words I don’t know. I can’t imagine how odd it would be to have my brain coming up with facts I don’t know.”

Lhyn smiled, all embarrassment gone. “Wouldn’t it be *amazing*? To have limitless information at your fingertips? It’s been tried, of course.” She led Rahel down the corridor. “But the Protectorate outlawed the research.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Every attempt to go from theoretical to experimental failed. The voluntary subjects couldn’t cope with the information density.”

It was a clean-sounding phrase, but Lhyn’s sympathetic horror said otherwise.

“What does that mean?” Rahel asked.

“They burned out their brains. Overloaded the neural connections and—” Lhyn held her hands apart, then flipped them upward. “Fried them.”

“Like the Voloth?” It was the only comparison she could think of, the invaders who had tried to conquer her home and were instead driven mad by Alsean high empaths.

“Not exactly. They didn’t go insane, just catatonic.” Lhyn stopped by the mosaic across the corridor from the lift, a brilliant rendering of a red waterfall cascading down a sheer cliff. “But as long as you’re aboard a ship

like the *Phoenix*, you have something close to limitless data. Go ahead, find out what this is.”

It was one of the first and most valuable things Lhyn had showed her. Rahel was used to tapping an earcuff to activate it and make a call, but communication equipment on the *Phoenix* was more advanced. Now when she prepared to leave her quarters, she inserted a small, comfortable ear plug that not only allowed sound to pass through from the outside, but also enhanced it. The internal com linked to the ship’s computer, which constantly tracked her location and listened for any requests.

Best of all, she and the computer could converse in High Alsean, a welcome bit of familiarity in this alien place. She could even choose among several different voices for their conversations, though after trying them all, she had settled on the same one that the computer used for its external communication.

“Phoenix,” she said, “what is the mosaic at my location supposed to be?”

The feminine voice spoke flawless High Alsean inside her head. *“The Firefall of Allendohan, a waterfall four hundred and twelve meters in height. It flows over a cliff face composed of quartzite and iron oxide, giving the rock a red tint. At sunset, the angle of illumination increases the reflection of red wavelengths. During these times, lasting from five to thirty-five minutes, the waterfall appears to be in flames.”*

“Have you seen it?” Rahel asked. Allendohan was Lhyn’s home planet.

“Yes, it’s spectacular. It’s on the opposite side of the planet from where I grew up, though. I only saw it twice. The irony is that this artist isn’t from Allendohan. I had no idea the Firefall was so famous until I left home.”

“There’s a philosophical truth in there somewhere.”

Lhyn chuckled as they crossed to the lift, which chirped in recognition of their arrival and opened its doors. “Probably, but I’m a linguist, not a philosopher,” she said. “Deck twenty-one, hydroponics.”

The lift’s lighting took on a slightly blue cast, the only indication that they were now hurtling through the ship.

“You’re also an anthropologist,” Rahel said. “I don’t see how you can do that without being at least something of a philosopher.”

“Don’t tell. I keep that out of my articles.”

The lighting returned to normal and the doors opened, revealing a vast bay four decks high.

Rahel stepped out, marveling at the size of this place. It was filled with tall, tiered racks of plants in orderly rows stretching from one side to the other, beneath a forest of trees that brushed the ceiling. From the trees hung even more plants, fantastical shapes that twisted and curled and adorned themselves with blooms and fruits unlike anything on Alsea. Fleet personnel wearing the uniform of the botanics section busied themselves among the racks and wove through a bewildering maze of pipes with varying diameters and orientations. The air was heavy and moist, full of the scent of growing things, and she could hear pressurized water hissing as it was released somewhere out of sight.

“Great Mother,” she blurted. “Has Salomen seen this?”

“It’s one of the first things I showed her.” Lhyn’s enjoyment was on her face as well as her emotions as she gazed around the cavernous bay. “She didn’t want to leave.”

“Are you speaking of Bondlancer Opah? Aye, she was a treasure. It’s not often we get a world leader in our little corner of the ship.” A slender, black-haired man rose from a crouch at the end of the nearest rack, tossed a few dead leaves into the bin beside him, and dusted off his hands. Holding one out to Rahel, he said, “And now I get a new celebrity. Masaru Shigeo, chief of botanics. You must be Rahel Sayana.”

Rahel would never get used to the Fleet custom of grasping hands, much less the odd up-and-down motion that seemed to vary every time she met someone new. Some people did the motion once, others twice, a few three times, and two had done it repetitively as they spoke to her, as if they’d forgotten what their hands were doing. Sometimes her hand was held gingerly, as if she had a contagious disease; other times she found herself in some sort of unspoken contest to prove who had the superior strength. She found no pattern to the ritual, nor any way to predict how the next one would be conducted. Lhyn said a wealth of information could be learned about the other person from the way they shook hands, but Rahel much preferred the Alsean way: a simple meeting of the palms, held vertically at shoulder level, allowing a transfer of emotions through skin contact.

But the Gaians were sonsales, unable to sense emotions even through physical touch, so she accepted Shigeo’s hand.

He moved her arm up and down twice, using a crisp, economical motion, then released her with a slight smile. “Not used to shaking hands, eh?”

“It’s . . . different,” Rahel allowed. She turned to Lhyn. “Why do you call it shaking? Shaking is this.” She held up a hand and shook it vigorously, then stopped when both Lhyn and Shigeo burst out laughing. “What? I know that’s the right word.” Her language chip didn’t make mistakes in terminology.

“It’s the right word.” Lhyn was still chuckling. “Just the wrong application. And you’re right, that doesn’t describe it. I’ll have to look up the etymology.”

“In some instances, we should call it jerking,” Shigeo said.

“Shippers, yes. I try to avoid those. Then there’s pulling.”

“Or sublimated fighting,” he offered.

“Oh, good one. Or sublimated seduction.”

“I don’t get those very often, more’s the pity.”

“How do you sublimate seduction in a handshake?” Rahel asked.

With his dark brown eyes twinkling, Shigeo held out his hand and waited patiently until she accepted it. Gently, he enclosed her hand and held it still.

“Rahel Sayana, it is a great pleasure,” he murmured in a deeper voice than she had yet heard from him. She watched in confusion as he executed a graceful bow. “I’ve waited a long time to meet the first Alsean space explorer,” he said to her hand, then looked up through his long lashes. “It was worth the wait.”

He straightened, letting his fingers slowly slide along hers until they slipped away.

“I don’t understand,” Rahel said. “That wasn’t seductive at all.”

As Lhyn laughed, Shigeo thumped a hand over his heart and staggered back a step. “I’m wounded.”

“That’s what you get for trying physical seduction on an empath.” Lhyn’s amusement rolled off her skin, wrapping around Rahel with bubbly warmth. “She can sense that you’re not attracted.”

He straightened and flashed white, even teeth in an easy grin. “It’s true, I usually prefer less intimidating women. You look like you could toss me over that rack.”

“She probably could,” Lhyn said before Rahel could respond. “Alseans have denser musculature than we do. She’s even stronger than she looks.”

Shigeo raised his eyebrows—a motion that always seemed strange on these Gaian with their lack of forehead ridges—and looked Rahel up and down. “That will appeal to some for sure. Be careful,” he added, his emotions growing abruptly heavier. “There are people aboard this ship who will want to bed you for the challenge and bragging rights.”

“They won’t have much luck,” Rahel said. “I’m asexual.” The word sounded harsh to her ear, an inadequate translation of the Alsean *sansara*.

His emotions lightened once more. “In that case, I look forward to hearing about all the failed score-counters. Shall we start your tour?” He swept a hand out, indicating the open space behind him. “I don’t know why Lhyn waited this long to bring you to the most critical part of the ship, but the important thing is that you’re finally here. Let me show you the lungs of the *Phoenix*.”

The tour lasted two hours, and Rahel enjoyed every bit of it. She had met so many aliens over the last eight days that only a few of the names and faces stood out, but Shigeo easily rose to the top level. Like Lhyn, he showed no discomfort at her ability to sense his emotions, probably because he had so little to hide.

He was small, his head barely rising past her shoulder, but he commanded quiet authority in his domain. His occasional orders to the botanists were often phrased as suggestions or requests, yet were obeyed without question. Most of his subordinates felt an ease in his presence that was almost visible to Rahel’s empathic senses.

But there were a few exceptions.

“She doesn’t like me, does she?” Shigeo asked as they moved past one such exception.

“Shigeo,” Lhyn said in a warning tone.

“No. She’s envious of you.” Rahel glanced at Lhyn, who was shaking her head. “Or of something about you. But she respects you.”

Shigeo stopped walking and looked at her with a slight smile. “What a temptation you are.”

“A temptation you already flunked,” Lhyn retorted. “I know I’m not imagining our conversation yesterday.”

Rahel looked between them. “I’m not supposed to tell you what I sense?”

“You’re not supposed to be put in that position.” Lhyn folded her arms across her chest, glaring down at Shigeo though Rahel could feel no heat in it. “He can spout the scientific names of three thousand plant species, but he can’t remember what I told him twenty-four hours ago.”

“And you think Captain Serrado won’t put her in exactly that position?” Shigeo’s calm was undisturbed, though Lhyn was now exuding true irritation. “What else is an empath here for?”

“I thought I was here to be the first Alsean space explorer.”

“You are,” Lhyn said firmly.

“And to serve Fleet in whatever capacity it needs and that you’re capable of providing.” Shigeo motioned them toward a panel on the wall. “We’ve reached the end of our tour.”

“You’re an asshead, Shigeo.” Lhyn’s irritation had subsided into grudging acceptance.

“I’m practical. Now then, Rahel, would you like to do the honors? It’s time for the rain cycle.” He opened the panel, exposing a colorful array of controls, and pointed toward a large green square adorned with an image of a water drop. “Press that and watch the magic.”

Nothing in his or Lhyn’s emotions suggested a need for caution, so Rahel pressed the button.

A loud horn sounded through the bay, inspiring an instant reaction in the throng of botanists. Within moments, most had moved to stand beneath the overhang that ran around all four bulkheads. The few who remained amongst the plants were shrugging on clothing similar to an Alsean rain cloak.

The horn blew again, two notes this time. A quieter sound accompanied movement overhead, and Rahel looked up to see the pipes now bristling with silver disks lining each side. With a hiss, the disks began to spin, spraying water that drifted down in a fine mist. The hiss grew in volume, the mist thickened, and soon it really was raining, a deluge of water that reminded her of spring rainstorms in her home city of Whitesun.

She stared around, caught up in the magic, for that was indeed the right descriptor. Never had she imagined seeing rain on a starship.

“Some of our plants derive nutrients through their leaves.” Shigeo spoke loudly to be heard over the falling water. “All of them benefit from having their leaves washed occasionally. I swear that after a rain cycle, I

can feel them sighing in happiness.” He glanced over with a smile. “I wish I had your empathy to feel it for real.”

“I can’t sense plants,” Rahel said. “But you’re probably right.” She took a deep breath of air, weighted with the clean scent of wet leaves and the heady perfume of bruised blossoms, then held out her hand to feel the raindrops spattering against her skin.

Now she understood the grated flooring. The water fell right through, gurgling into a collection system that filtered and recycled it. She was going to study the schematics on this bay the moment she got back to her quarters.

For fifteen minutes, they watched the rain and discussed the systems. Rahel learned that the bay was divided into zones, each with different types and lengths of rain cycles for the needs of different plant species. Only occasionally did the entire bay get doused, and Shigeo had delayed it by one day so she could see it.

It was with great reluctance that she followed his instructions to shut off the cycle. She had seen technology that qualified as miraculous on her tours of this ship, but nothing had felt as magical as a simple rain—or as close to home.

Lhyn thanked Shigeo for his time and escorted Rahel through another section of the deck, but her descriptions and explanations fell on largely deaf ears. Rahel’s mind was still in the hydroponics bay, leaving her too distracted to take in the details.

“Time for a break,” Lhyn announced, tapping the control of a door that featured a thicket of hairy-leaved plants atop its lintel.

Though Rahel had never seen the room beyond, its cushioned mats and the sharp scent of hard-working Gaian bodies was familiar. She had already used a similar training room near her quarters several times.

“Why don’t you wear yourself out going through your forms and I’ll pick you up in an hour for lunch? The showers are through there.” Lhyn pointed.

“Was I that obvious?”

“Oh, sister,” Lhyn said in High Alsean, using the affectionate address she had picked up in Whitesun. “I don’t need empathy when I have eyes. See you in an hour.”

RESPECT

Rahel would have preferred her own workout clothes, but like the training room on her deck, this one had a stock of close-fitting, stretchy clothing in standard sizes. She changed swiftly and hung her uniform on the rod that ran the length of the dressing room. At least twenty other uniforms hung there as well, representing every section on the *Phoenix*. Hers stood out starkly with its Alsean style and the dark green color blocks of the Bondlancer's Guard. In her opinion, it was much more attractive.

Stave grip in hand, she walked barefoot to the center of an empty mat. Thirteen crew members were using the room's equipment or practicing their own disciplines on other mats, and she wondered about the discrepancy in numbers. A quick glance around revealed another door across from the changing room—a secondary training area, she guessed.

Her empathic senses were awash with the curiosity emanating from so many sonsales aliens, along with the usual spikes of nervousness. No matter how much she smiled or tried to appear unthreatening, the mere fact of her empathy was enough to engender fear in some Gaians.

"They're not used to the possibility of their emotions being read," Lhyn had explained on her first day. "That's going to scare some of them."

"I don't *want* to read their emotions." Rahel had only been aboard for

six hours, but she was already tired of fending off the unwanted broadcasts of everyone around her.

“They’ll figure that out at some point. Then they’ll calm down.”

But Lhyn hadn’t said how long that would take. It had been eight days and Rahel still sensed the fear every time she walked through the corridors or met a new group of Gaians.

Only one crew member in this room looked at her directly. Stocky and well muscled, with short brown hair and a square jaw, she emanated calm competence. Though her workout clothing gave no hint of her specialty, she was obviously a warrior. That competence had a deadly shadow behind it.

The other woman nodded once, a greeting of like to like, and went back to what appeared to be resistance training on the complicated machine she was using.

Rahel closed her eyes and raised her blocks, pushing away the emotions in the room until a blessed silence descended on her senses. After several long, slow breaths, she opened her eyes again and pressed the golden stave grip in her hand.

The metal segments shot out of each end, telescoping instantly into a solid weapon. She swung it through two sets of slow-paced initial forms, warming up her muscles, then launched into the far more strenuous combat forms. The exertion settled her body and began to clear her head, draining some of the tension that had built up since she came aboard.

She was physically safe here, free of concerns about hiding or being detained and punished for past crimes. Her honor was restored, and she was living out her dreams.

Yet every night, she fell into bed exhausted by the unending assault of emotions against her senses. Before coming here, she had worked with a tutor to improve her blocks, but she had not learned to hold them up all day long. It was more tiring than the dance of combat, because a fight eventually ended. This never would. She shared a ship with a crew of one thousand two hundred and sixty-five—a floating city in space, Lhyn called it—and not one of them could front their emotions.

Never again would she envy high empaths for their greater ability to sense emotion. These days she almost wished she were a low empath, needing physical touch to know what others felt. Not even in sleep could she escape the onslaught. Her nearest neighbors in the crew quarters were

within range, and there was regular traffic in the corridor outside. Her dreams were troubled and her sleep restless, and every day she woke feeling edgier, slower, and less controlled than the day before.

Fortunately, none of that had shown up on Dr. Wells's tests, and Rahel was not about to volunteer the information. Better to keep working on her stamina.

Body and mind are connected, she thought as she began another set of combat forms. *To train one is to train the other*. As a young warrior just learning how to use her body, she had never paid much attention to the second half of that quote. Now she thought it might be a great deal more important.

The door opposite the changing room slid open and seven laughing crew members jostled through. Rahel ignored them as she whirled and brought her stave up in a block against an imaginary opponent.

"Hey, look at that! It's the Alsean!"

She pulled back and whipped the stave down, letting one end hit the mat before using the rebound to flip it upward. Spinning again, she ducked under the likely return blow before straightening up and twisting her torso to drive the stave through a sharp backward thrust.

"Fancy," another voice snickered. "But useless."

"No kidding. What was Captain Serrado thinking when she brought that on board?"

"Hey. Alsean. Don't be rude."

Rahel planted the end of her stave in the mat and looked at the hecklers. "I don't think I'm the one being rude."

"She speaks!" A tall male, apparently the leader of the group, grinned widely. "Then you can tell us why Serrado took you on. What are you supposed to do with that little stick?"

A shorter woman waved an energy weapon. "You're still fighting with sticks and swords," she sneered. "Out here in the galaxy, we use real weapons."

"Yeah," said the leader. "Let's see you stop this with your stick." He raised his own weapon and fired.

Rahel was so shocked by the aggressive act in this supposedly safe environment that she stood there dumbly as a green laser hit her in the torso.

Nothing happened. There was no pain, nor even any heat. She stared

down at herself, her empathic shields shattered by the surprise, as the others roared with laughter. Dislike, condescension, and fear battered against her senses.

“Some warrior!” one of them called, and the others laughed louder.

“What’s the matter, you need more advance warning?” the first woman asked. “Here, try it again.” She raised her weapon, gleeful aggression pouring off her in a toxic cloud.

Rahel had no way of knowing whether this weapon was as harmless as the first. From her first days of training with a molecular disruptor, she had been taught to never point it at another person unless she meant to maim or kill.

Her reaction was built on a lifetime of warrior training, the stave whipping out to crack against the woman’s wrist. With a shriek of pain, the woman dropped her weapon.

“Aah!” she cried. “You broke my fucking wrist!”

“Sucking Seeders, you really are a barbarian,” the leader snarled. He flung down his weapon and charged.

Had he given her time, Rahel would have explained her reasoning. If it had been a mistake, she would have apologized.

But he gave her no time, and his five uninjured friends were right behind him, their violent intent obvious even to a sonsales.

Rahel took out the leader with a blow to the side of his knee, dropping him like a sack to the mat. She flipped the stave back and half over her shoulder, then drove it forward, breaking the nose of the next closest attacker. That slowed the others long enough for her to whirl around and slam her stave into the jaw of the big woman trying to flank her, then spin back and let the force of her turn fuel a strike against the ankle of another.

The remaining two stopped their approach, watching her warily as they tried to work together to bring her down. She should have stepped back and given them a chance to end the fight, but the blood sang in her ears and eight days of emotional exhaustion broke through her restraint. She ceased fighting defensively and went after them with fire in her heart.

The first tried to block her strike with his forearms, a good strategy in hand-to-hand combat but painful in a stave fight. He howled as the metal cracked against his elbows, then bent double with a whine. Still in motion, Rahel didn’t look at the final opponent while swinging her stave upward. At the last moment, she realized the woman was holding up her

hands in surrender, but by then it was too late to pull the blow. It crashed against her ribs and sent her sprawling.

Rahel settled back into the ready position, stave held diagonally across her torso, and scanned the room for further dangers.

“Well,” said the warrior woman with the short brown hair, “*that* was impressive. And well deserved, I’d say.” She was standing close by, having left her machine behind.

Rahel sank more deeply into her position, leg muscles tensed to spring, until her mind cleared enough to sense the lack of aggression. In fact, this woman seemed oddly pleased.

“Pearson has bricks for brains,” she continued. “His buddies might think twice about following him after this.” She held out a hand. “Warrant Officer Roris, weapons specialist. Glad to meet you.”

Rahel looked around the silent room. Every other crew member was staring at her with wide eyes, exuding astonishment and a surprising level of respect, but no danger. Six of her attackers lay groaning on the mat, while the first woman had collapsed onto a bench, holding her wrist in stupefied shock.

She had promised to represent Alsea.

She was reasonably certain that damaging seven crew members was not considered adequate representation. Captain Serrado was going to be furious.

Accepting Roris’s hand, she said, “First Guard Rahel Sayana. Though you probably don’t need to remember my name. I don’t think I’ll be here long enough for that.”