

# UPRISING

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BOOK EIGHT IN THE CHRONICLES OF ALSEA

FLETCHER DELANCEY

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When head and heart are in conflict,  
the body cannot move forward.

~ Lanaril Satran, *The Book of Verity*



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## EVEN MONSTERS HAVE MOTHERS

**R**ax Sestak, formerly Weapons Specialist First Class, Third Pacification Fleet of the Voloth Empire, crouched by the small plant covered in delicate blue flowers and set his satchel beside it. From the satchel he produced a wide-mouthed pot and a hand spade.

With the precision he had once applied to firing mortars and missiles, he dug a line around the plant. His hand spade sank easily into the soil; there was only minor resistance from roots. Good. He had chosen the distance well and avoided unnecessary damage.

Once a complete circle was cut, he wedged in the hand spade and began levering up the soil plug. A bit of pressure here, a bit there, and the column of soil rose.

He stopped to wipe his brow. The unknown plant grew in full sun, and he was baking at the foot of this hillock. It was first spring, the annual burst of warmth unique to Blacksun Basin before the weather settled back to cooler temperatures and a more gradual shift toward summer. All over the Basin, the farmers—or producers, as the Alseans called them—had timed their plantings for this period to give their seedlings a boost of early growth. He had hoped to do the same but could find no one to sell him the seeds and starts.

Another careful application of leverage raised the soil plug enough for

him to capture. He dropped the spade and cradled his prize in both hands, examining it to be sure he had not cut any important roots.

“There you are,” he said softly. “I promised I wouldn’t hurt you, didn’t I? Let’s make sure you’re protected.”

The root ball fit the pot but needed more soil to fill in the narrow space around the edges. He gathered and poured soil from his cupped hand, then used his thumbs to tamp it down.

Working more swiftly now, he scraped the surrounding soil into the hole he had dug to even it out, his father’s lessons echoing in his memory. *We are stewards of the land. It provides, but only as long as we give it our care.*

That was a long time ago, before Rax turned his back on the land and entered a military life, for all the good it had done him.

He brushed the hand spade clean, dropped it into his satchel, and dug out a water flask. Two deep draughts slaked his thirst. Though he wanted more, a third draught would empty the flask. He had too much military training to drink it all, even when a refill was a short skimmer ride away.

The bare patch of scraped soil was the only sign of his presence here. Satisfied, he picked up the pot with its precious inhabitant and made his way back to the skimmer.

To the south, verdant grasslands sloped down to the mighty Fahlinor River, its distant waters a shining silver ribbon in the late afternoon light. Round houses with domed roofs dotted the landscape, each far from its neighbors and centered in fields already bursting with new growth.

Across the river, the land rolled away in broad, smooth undulations, a gentle terrain suited to the peaceful race that farmed it. There were more shades of green than he had names for, punctuated by broad strips of ancient forest that guarded waterways and defined borders. Far away, at the edge of his vision, the sea of green washed up at the feet of snow-capped mountains.

Behind him were the first of the foothills that led to the Snowmount Range, the Basin’s equally mountainous northern border. East and west were still more mountains, all encircling this glorious bowl of fertile land that fed more than half the population of Alsea.

His parents would love this valley. But they would never see it, nor would they see him again.

The hum of insects lent the landscape a sleepy feel, their buzz accentu-

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ating a deep silence beneath. Though it held the largest city on Alsea, Blacksun Basin was still a place of open land and quiet sanctuaries, its palpable immensity soothing Rax's soul. In his imagination, the Termegon Fields looked like this. Surely the mythical home of the Seeders could be no more beautiful than what lay before him now.

He was nearly to the skimmer when a low rumble disturbed the air. Louder and louder it grew, thrumming through his chest, until it spiked in a heart-stopping roar as three Alsean military transports streaked overhead. Instinct dropped him to a crouch, protecting the plant as he stared after the transports trailing thunder across the valley.

His vision wavered. Dread weighed his limbs, fear froze him in place, and he closed his eyes as the fading roar merged into a deeper, harsher sound: the motors and gyros of a pacifier, the most advanced heavy weapons platform in the Voloth Empire.

The flashback took him effortlessly.

Two curved display screens filled his vision, constantly updating with targeting data for the weapons at his fingertips. Behind him, the second weapons specialist watched the other two screens. Together they commanded complete coverage around their pacifier, raining death and destruction on their enemies. Their pilot operated the pacifier's four jointed legs, walking the immense machine toward the city, while the engineer kept everything running smoothly. But it was Rax and his fellow weapons specialist who did the real work.

A new target appeared on his screen, and Rax spoke to the slender, blonde woman standing beside him. "Enemy or not?"

The woman could not understand his speech, nor did she need to. She consulted a portable scanner, then nodded and made a hand motion that simulated an explosion.

Rax swiftly prepped a tube and fired. With a muted *thump*, the missile streaked away. It took six seconds to reach its target.

In the seventh, a fireball lit up his screen.

He recognized the ID of that pacifier. His friends were in it. One was his bunkmate, the other three played with him on the zero-G netball team. He had laughed with them, drunk cheap alcohol with them, occasionally fought with them.

He had just murdered them in cold blood.

Trapped in the back of his mind, the still-free part of him howled in

horror and disbelief. But the rest of him craved approval from the woman. He was desperate for it, needing it for his very survival, and when she smiled at him, his blood burned with joy. He grinned back and turned to his screens, searching for another target.

For her, he would kill them all.

A new sound gradually broke through the motors and thumping missile launches: the harsh breathing of a terrified man.

As another gasp was torn from his throat, Rax opened his eyes. He was not sitting in front of his targeting screens. He was crouched by the skimmer, still clutching the plant to his chest. Wildly he looked around, chest heaving, trying to reassure himself that what he had experienced was no longer real. There were no pacifiers here, no fireballs, no signs of war. Just the silence of a paradise, broken only by humming insects.

A paradise he had done his best to destroy.

He was a different man then, fully inculcated with the beliefs of the Voloth Empire. Obedience and service led to citizenship. Citizenship led to elevation. Elevated citizens went to the Termegon Fields when they died. It was the ultimate goal of all Voloth who hadn't been born into citizenship: the slaves, who had no rights at all, and the hangers, whose handful of rights largely amounted to the ability to use and abuse slaves.

He had been a hanger, working toward citizenship through military service. It was the only option for a son of poor farmers unable to buy their way in, and despite the brutal training and harsh conditions, he had done well. Citizenship was in reach—until the Third Fleet was ordered to pacify a primitive planet named Alsea.

The so-called primitives had mental abilities no one could have predicted. With only their minds as weapons, they broke the back of the invasion, turned captured Voloth soldiers against their own comrades, and obliterated the assets of the Third Fleet. The two orbital invaders and four destroyers remained unharmed only because they were in space, well removed from the terrifying power of Alsean empathths. But one thousand pacifiers were either destroyed or captured, along with their four-person crews.

All four hundred aerial fighters were wiped out in the second wave of the invasion, their hullskins disintegrating in the Alsean atmosphere. They hadn't known about the nanoscrubbers, microscopic machines teeming invisibly in the air and breaking down harmful radiation. They broke

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down hullskin, too, turning the Empire's most advanced fighters into rocks that fell from the sky. Not a single pilot or gunner survived.

Never had the Voloth suffered such a total loss. Even the Protectorate, their technological equals, could not inflict that much damage. The closest thing to it had ironically occurred in the same place, when the famed and hated Captain Ekatyra Serrado blew half of the Fifth Fleet to atoms while defending Alsea from the first invasion attempt.

Of the nearly five thousand soldiers who tried to pacify Alsea, only four hundred and forty-six survived. More than half of those couldn't even be called survivors. The horrifying mind-rape had shattered them, leaving behind trembling husks with no coherent thought, just an unending loop of terror. The Voloth Empire evacuated thirty before realizing how useless they were as soldiers. It promptly turned its back on the rest.

Excluding the broken, insane shells, one hundred and seventy-two Voloth soldiers lived through that battle. Nineteen opted to return to the Empire. The others, like Rax, knew that nothing good awaited them back home. Soldiers who killed their own would not escape punishment. They had whispered amongst themselves of medical experimentation, because the Empire would want to see how their brains had been affected by the mind-rape the Alseans called empathic force.

In desperation, they begged for sanctuary from the people they had tried to annihilate and thought it a great victory when their request was granted.

After twenty moons of living under a constant cloud of hatred, Rax sometimes wondered if going home might have been easier.

With a shaking hand, he set the plant on the ground, then pulled out his water flask and tipped it back. There was no use in conserving now, not when he could barely breathe without coughing. Flashbacks always left him sweaty and weak, but the dry throat was the worst. Soothing it, he had learned, was the fastest way to evaporate the last wisps of horror.

He was reaching for the plant when a flicker of motion caught his eye. A fairy fly floated toward him, its broad, transparent wings reflecting the sun as it homed in on its next meal.

Fairy flies were common in Blacksun Basin, but their mastery of camouflage made them a rare sight. Their wings could only be seen when

the light hit them at the perfect angle, and their bodies were the same color as the dirt that stained his fingers.

The fairy fly fluttered around his plant, between the outstretched hands he did not dare to move. Gracefully, it settled on one of the blue flowers and folded its wings.

Its nondescript brown body rippled into color. Blue, green, and charcoal gray perfectly matched the flowers, foliage, and shadows of the plant. Four feathery dippers slid out of its body and began sampling the nectar of several flowers at once. These too rippled with colors, mimicking whatever they passed over with eerie precision. The effect was to render the fairy fly invisible. Had he not watched it land, he would never have noticed it.

Until now, he had only seen images of this notoriously skittish creature. Surely its presence here, between his hands, was a sign that his soul could be salvaged.

His arms grew tired, but he remained motionless as the fairy fly walked over and touched every flower on the plant. At last it retracted its dippers, shook out its wings, and let out a shockingly loud buzz that nearly sent Rax over backward. A second call vibrated his ears, and the fairy fly rose into the air on its delicate wings.

Watching it float away, Rax lowered his aching arms and chuckled. “How do you make a sound like that with such a tiny body?”

The fairy fly vanished. From one blink to the next, he had lost sight of it.

“Be well, my friend,” he said. “And thank you.”



Forty ticks later, Rax pulled his skimmer into the grassy lot in front of a plant and seed store. There were no other customers this time of day, exactly as he had hoped.

An Alsean man stood behind the front counter, eyes narrowed as he watched Rax approach with the plant. Though his age, work-hardened body, and silver hair were reminiscent of Rax’s father, his expression was not.

“We don’t serve your kind here,” he said.

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Rax set the pot in front of him. "I've heard that from every plant and seed store in the Basin."

"For good reason. Invader!"

He had a right to his hatred. That did not make it easier to bear, particularly so soon after a flashback.

"My name is Rax Sestak. I'm the son of two producers. I love growing things, just like you, but I can't ever go home again. We have—"

"That's your own fault. I'm supposed to feel sorry for you? My niece died in that battle. She was thirty-four cycles old and left three children at home. Her bondmate is the only parent they have now."

Rax bowed his head. "I'm sorry for your loss. I mean it. If you want skin contact, you can feel for yourself."

The man's hands slid off the counter as he drew back. "I will never touch the likes of you."

He always hoped he could reach them. Once in a great while, someone would listen long enough for him to apologize and express his regret. With their sensitivity to emotion, easily amplified through skin contact, even low empath Alseans could feel for themselves that he was sincere.

But to get that far, they had to listen. Very few did.

With a sigh, he picked up his plant and turned. "Thank you for your time."

"Wait," said another voice.

A well-muscled woman was stripping off a pair of stained work gloves as she strode into the shop from a side entrance. The closing door behind her revealed a brief view of the attached glasshouse.

"Not that I've any better opinion of your barbarian kind than my bondmate," she said, "but I'm curious. Why are you carrying a silver everlasting?"

Rax looked at the plant in his hands. "Is that what it's called?"

"You didn't know?" She stopped in front of him.

"No, that's why I brought it. I was hoping someone here could identify it and tell me how to take care of it. I found it in a field and—" He swallowed. "It reminds me of my mother's favorite flower."

She studied him from beneath dark eyebrows, which accentuated the ridges that drew a graceful fan shape across her forehead. One went from the bridge of her nose straight up into her hairline; the other two arched

across to either temple. A pair of cheekbone ridges completed the facial set. It was one of the most jarring physical differences between Alseans and Voloth—and everyone else in the galaxy, for that matter. Voloth and Protectorate peoples were all from the same genetic stock, but the Alseans had something else mixed in.

“Hard to imagine you having a mother,” said the man behind the counter.

“Galor.” The woman spoke in a remonstrating tone. “You can feel it, surely.”

“Didn’t say I couldn’t feel it. Said it was hard to imagine.”

Rax turned to him. “I pray to Fahla every day to forgive me.”

He scoffed. “And does she? I heard you targeted our temples especially. She’s more forgiving than I thought if she can overlook that.”

“I don’t know. She’s never given me a sign. But I thought . . .” Rax lifted the little plant. “I thought maybe, when I saw this yesterday, that it was a sign of sorts. Mother’s flower was called meadow march, because it marches through the meadows in early spring. She used to go out and gather handfuls, and put them in little vases, and she’d keep one in the kitchen and put one in—” He took a shuddering breath. “In my room, on top of my bureau. Because producers should appreciate even the things we don’t grow, she said. But I didn’t learn, because I joined the military instead, and now I found this . . .”

Overcome by the memories and a deep longing for his mother’s voice, he stopped speaking. The flashback had left him too shaken. He shouldn’t have come here.

“Great Goddess above,” Galor said. “You miss your mother?”

His incredulity cut Rax to the bone.

“Even monsters have mothers,” he whispered.

“You don’t feel like a monster,” the woman said, still studying him. “You feel like a lost traveler.”

Rax tried not to hope too hard. “I’ll never see meadow march again. But this looks like it. I only want to know how to take care of it. Please, can’t you tell me? How much water does it need, how long will it bloom, when should I prune it? Will it even grow in a pot? Or should I put it back where I found it?”

She dropped her gaze to the plant, then pursed her lips and nodded. “It’ll grow. And it’ll bloom all spring. When the blooms fade, they turn

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silver, but they don't fall off. They'll stay on the stems through summer and autumn and only come off in winter. That's why it's called silver everlasting."

The tiny gesture of kindness nearly undid him. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, I don't want it. But anyone can feel what that plant means to you, so don't let it die. They don't like too much water. Let it dry out between waterings, and for the love of Fahla, don't put it in the shade. It needs sun."

"I know that from where I found it." Rax cradled the pot. "And I don't know what to say if you don't want my thanks."

"Is that really why you came here?" Galor asked. "Just to ask about that?"

"There's another reason," he admitted. "But you already said you won't serve me."

"What did you need?" the woman asked brusquely.

"Uh . . . seeds and starts for a kitchen garden. We're trying to feed ourselves instead of relying on the government. Some of us are producers, and we're working on a garden big enough for the settlement. But we can't get a supplier."

"Why don't you ask the government?"

He didn't know how to explain the realization they were all experiencing: that keeping to themselves was no longer enough.

"We're trying to reach out. Be part of the community."

Galor snorted in disgust. "You'll have better luck teaching a dokker to sing."

"Why now?" the woman asked. "It's been a cycle and a half."

"We were building New Haven, but it's done. And there are only a hundred and fifty of us."

"Got tired of your own company," Galor observed.

"If we can't go anywhere else, talk to anyone else, we're just in prison."

"Which is where you should be!"

He wondered if casual hatred would ever not hurt. "Do you know how many of us survived? Three and a half percent. Fahla saved her temples and she saved Alsea; she could have disposed of us all. But she didn't. I don't think she let us survive so we could spend the rest of our lives in a prison we built with our own hands. There has to be more."

In the silence, he heard a hum followed by the sound of spraying

water. It sounded like an automated irrigation system out in the glasshouse.

“That’s a lot of fine theology for someone who just wants seeds and starts,” the woman said. “But I’ll tell you what. You have the cinteks, we’ll sell you what you need.”

“Belsara!”

“You don’t have to,” Belsara told her bondmate. “You can check that sticky dripline in the glasshouse. I’ll take care of this.”

With a potent glare at Rax, Galor steamed out to the glasshouse and slid the door shut with more force than necessary.

“Don’t ever think you can apologize enough for what you did,” Belsara said firmly. “But you might be right about Fahla. So let’s get you what you need to start a garden.”

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## INSULT AND INJURY

Prime Builder Anjuli Eroles was a perfectly average mid empath. Her empathic strength lay at the precise midpoint of the scale, putting her with the majority of Alseans who needed close proximity to sense emotions. But when Chief Kameha approached her office, she could sense him before he reached her door. Like all Gaians, he was sonsales, unable to sense or front emotions, and broadcast his feelings like a broken water main that could never be repaired.

The water main was gushing down the corridor outside her office right now. She walked to the door and waited for her favorite part: opening it before he knocked. It was a trick that only high empaths could normally play, and she never tired of it.

Sure enough, Kameha's hand was hovering in the air when she swung the door open. "Well met, Chief," she said with a wide smile.

He shook his head, amused tolerance wafting off his skin. "Someday the fun of that will wear off."

"We'll both be retired by then." She touched his palm in greeting, then stepped aside and gestured for him to enter.

He walked by on stubby legs, the top of his head barely coming to the level of her chest. Kameha came from a high-gravity planet and was typical of his people, but his height had brought him unwanted attention in the Protectorate Fleet. He once told Anjuli that the best thing about

working on Alsea was that people stared at him because he was an alien, not because he was short. When she pointed out that they would stare at him less if he removed his eye-popping facial hair, which no Alseans possessed, he had laughed and grown that monstrosity even longer.

Kameha was her treasure, the Gaian engineer who, with the rest of a skeleton crew, had crash-landed his giant ship on Alsea before the Voloth invasion. When the rest of his crew returned home, he remained, working as her Chief of Advanced Technology. With his wealth of knowledge from the more technologically advanced Protectorate, he had moved them from a planet-bound culture to one that was stepping into the stars. The first component of their space elevator—the cable that was the basis for everything else—would launch next nineday.

They settled in at her drafting table, rolled out the blueprints and checklists, and spent a happy half hantick discussing the work that had been completed since their last meeting.

“The final batch was delivered yesterday,” he said, leaning back in the combination stepladder-chair she had designed for him. “We’re officially ready.”

“That’s it, then?” she asked. “We’re truly on time for the launch? No last-tick disasters or unexpected supply delays? The port platform hasn’t sprung a leak?”

“Shocking, isn’t it? I built in a shipload of extra time to account for all the delays I expected. They never materialized.”

“Yes, they did.”

“Fine, a few did,” he conceded. “But you have no idea what I’m used to. The Protectorate Fleet is an entire government on its own. That bureaucracy could fill this galaxy, and the number of ways things can go wrong or get lost? Infinite. You Alseans are paragons of efficiency by comparison.”

“Bureaucracy is a gas,” Anjuli said. “Release it, and it will expand to occupy any volume, no matter how large.”

He laughed. “True words. Which is why it should never be released.”

She rested an elbow on the table and leaned her head against her fist, the motion making several of her bracelets chime together. “It is such a pleasure to work with you, Chief. I don’t know if I say it often enough.”

“You do.” The skin above his beard turned pink, though she would hardly have needed the visual cue to sense his bright embarrassment and

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warm pleasure. “I never feel like I’m laboring in obscurity. I’d do this work anyway, but it sure is nice to get the recognition for it.”

“The first alien to work on Alsea was never going to labor in obscurity. You were a celebrity before you even accepted the job.”

“Nah, that was Captain Serrado,” he said easily. “And Lhyn Rivers. They have the star power. They can keep it. I don’t have time for speeches and interviews and all that.”

“Then you don’t mind that Dr. Rivers jumped in front of you and took the first Alsean citizenship?”

The light tone of voice belied her fury. Anjuli had worked night and day to convince the other five caste Primes and then the full Council that Alsean citizenship should be offered to aliens who performed special services for them. She had done it for this man, only to see her prize snatched away at the finish line by none other than Lancer Tal, leader of the Alsean government and pain in her backside.

It hadn’t always been that way. Lancer Tal had once been her best ally. She not only convinced Kameha to stay on Alsea, but also nudged him toward the builder caste despite the scholars wanting him as well. She gave the builders priority access to the alien ship’s advanced matter printers for the reconstruction effort. She even attended the grand reopening of the Whitesun builder caste house as Anjuli’s guest.

Then Prime Warrior Shantu inexplicably attempted to seize power by challenging Lancer Tal to an ancient ritual combat. Anjuli had watched that combat with her heart in her mouth, knowing that she would lose no matter who won. On one side was an irreplaceable ally, on the other her secret lover—and it was a fight to the death.

She never learned why Shantu chose such a terrible plan. She never had the chance to ask, because Lancer Tal rammed a sword through his chest in front of the full Council, an overflowing guest gallery, and every Alsean watching the live broadcast.

Anjuli’s special relationship with her died by that same sword thrust. She could not swallow her loss or her rage, but if Lancer Tal noticed, she didn’t care.

Taking away her citizenship prize had added bitter poison to a festering injury.

“I don’t mind.” Chief Kameha’s voice brought her back to the present.

“I know Lhyn. She deserved that award. She paid the highest price imaginable for it.”

“I don’t deny her courage in withstanding torture for the sake of Alsea,” Anjuli said. “But I created that citizenship path for you. You should have taken the first one. I would have been delighted to give her the second.”

He stroked his startling facial hair, discomfort crinkling the air around him. “I’m glad she had the first,” he said carefully. “I know you wanted that for me, but it meant more to her.”

It was easy to sense that he was telling the truth, so she changed tactics and lied through her teeth. “Then I’m pleased it went to Dr. Rivers first. It worked out the way it was meant to.”

“It did.” Relief poured off his skin. “I’m glad you’re not upset about it. Lhyn would be hurt if she thought there was any rancor about her award.”

“Then we shall speak of it no more.” Anjuli smoothly directed their conversation to a review of the pre-launch checklist, and Kameha dove in with enthusiasm. At the end of their meeting, she waved him out with a smile on her face.

It dropped the moment the door shut.

Kameha was a good man, but he was an engineer, not a politician. He didn’t understand that Lancer Tal had insulted both of them. If Anjuli wanted to preserve the power of her title, she could not let this stand.