

# ALSEA RISING

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GATHERING STORM

FLETCHER DELANCEY

HEARTSOME PUBLISHING

*To the readers, those honorary citizens of Alsea.*



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## FLIGHT PLAN

*“ Shuttle Ops to Captain Serrado. Dr. Wells just filed her flight plan.”*

**S** “Thank you.” Ekatyra Serrado closed the report she had been reading, blanked her transparent terminal, and gratefully rose from the chair she had occupied for too long. The hanger behind her was supposed to hold her jacket when she wasn’t using it, but she had never gotten in the habit, preferring to drape it over the back of her chair. Now she tugged it free and pulled it on as she crossed the room. Just outside the door’s sensor range, she paused to be sure that a regulation length of cuff showed below the sleeves.

These days, she couldn’t afford the tiniest crack in her image of the perfect Fleet captain.

Satisfied, she stepped out of her office and onto the bridge.

With the floor display inactive, the expansive bridge seemed smaller. Only the hemispherical upper display manifested their movement as they kept station above the small blue-and-green planet of Alsea.

Atop the three-tiered command dais at the center of the circular room, Commander Lokomorra occupied her chair. Now fully settled into the role of executive officer, he was comfortable enough to set the displays the way he liked, rather than leaving both top and bottom active as she preferred.

She glanced at the opaque deck beneath her feet and missed the sensa-

tion of standing among the stars. But Lokomorra held the bridge; it was his call.

“Commander Lokomorra,” she murmured, letting her internal com route the call as she walked across the inactive display. “I’m headed for the shuttle bay.”

*“Acknowledged. Tell Dr. Wells I said good luck. And tell her that if she yells at an Alsean healer by thirteen hundred tomorrow, I win the betting pool.”*

Her smile drew the attention of a young ensign at the science station nearest the lift doors. “If I tell her that, she might wait until thirteen thirty just to spite you.”

*“I know. That’s why I didn’t give you the real time I bet on.”*



Some crew found the shuttle bay to be intimidating. Reaching six decks in height and housing eight shuttles of various sizes, it did have a cavernous feel. Ekatyā liked it all the more for that sense of space and possibility.

Six of the shuttles bore the silver hullskin characteristic of all Protectorate ships. The other two, gleaming black beneath the bright lights, were the only Alsea-capable shuttles in Fleet. Lacking the semiorganic hullskin that made travel through base space possible, they were limited to the slower speeds of normal space. But they could fly through Alsea’s nanoscrubber-infested atmosphere, safe from the microscopic machines that attacked hullskin due to the foreign radiation it produced. Another ship attempting that flight might land safely, but it would never get into orbit again—a fact Ekatyā had learned in a memorable fashion.

She ducked under the nose of her favorite shuttle, trailing her fingertips across its smooth, black hull. Fleet called it “nanoscrubber-proof hull plating” and had refused to equip any of her fighters with it, despite the requirements of her mission.

If weaponized, Alsean nanoscrubber technology could change the balance of power in the galaxy. It had to be protected at all costs. A tiny, backwater planet at the edge of Protectorate space would not normally be assigned a warship to protect it, much less an entire battle group, but Alsea was different.

*In every way*, Ekatyā thought as she neared the smallest shuttle.

Her chief surgeon had just lowered the ramp. Glancing over at the sound of footsteps, she smiled in recognition.

“Ekatyā. Come to see me off?”

“Did you know there’s a betting pool on how long you’ll last before yelling at an Alsean healer?”

The smile grew sharp. “No, but I’m not surprised. Are you in?”

“I would never take part in betting for or against my own crew members,” Ekatyā said primly. “But I think you can make it three days.”

Alejandra Wells laughed, drawing startled looks from around the bay. Though slight in bone structure and average in height, she exuded an impatient energy that made others nervous, especially when combined with her legendary temper. That she also had a sense of humor was not widely known.

“Such faith you have in me, thanks. I don’t plan on yelling at any of them. Not this time, at least.” Tilting her head toward the ramp, she added, “I need to do the preflight. I appreciate your coming, though. It’s nice to see a friendly face before I go.”

“You’ll be fine down there.”

“I know. It’s just intimidating. Rahel is one thing; I’ve adapted to her knowing what I feel. A whole group of high empath healers is something else. And I’ll be in close proximity for a week.”

“Just remember, they have their own rules of courtesy. It’s rude to say what they feel from you unless it’s relevant to the work. Or you bring it up first.”

“And they’re brutally honest,” Alejandra said with a sigh. “All the times I’ve wished my patients couldn’t lie to me . . . I have a feeling I’m about to see the other side of that.”

“It’ll be good for you.” Having been through this adaptation herself, Ekatyā was enjoying watching someone else take the first steps. “Besides, one of the things they’ll be honest about is how much they respect you. You solved a thousand-cycle-old mystery.”

“Sure, no pressure there. Nothing like having to live up to your own advertising.”

She flapped her hands in the direction of the ramp. “Get out of here. And fly safely.”

“I thought you’d say ‘may Fahla fly with you.’”

“No, I need to get out of the Alsean frame of mind. It’s almost time for my check-in.”

Alejandra stiffened. “It’s criminal, what they’re doing to you.”

“Don’t start—”

“Don’t start? I never finished. How can you do this, day after day?”

“This is not the place to discuss it,” Ekatya said shortly. They were as public as they could be; she had already seen two nearby crew members turn their heads.

“Fine.” Alejandra seized her wrist and pulled.

Startled, Ekatya let herself be drawn up the ramp into the shuttle. In the quiet interior, Alejandra released her grip and turned, all spikes and ire. “You’re the best captain in Fleet and they’re treating you like a criminal on parole. And Admiral Greve of all people! Pompous asshole. I’m just waiting for him to get sick and end up in my medbay. I’ve got an enema with his name on it.”

Ekatya couldn’t help the snort of laughter. “Ordinarily, I’d say ‘let me watch,’ but in this case . . .”

“It’s not funny. They’re trying to break you!”

“Do you think I don’t know that?”

“Then why are you letting them?”

“Because I don’t have a choice!” Ekatya snapped.

They stopped, staring at each other in surprise.

Alejandra drew back first. “Shit, I’m sorry. You came to see me off and I—dammit. I didn’t mean to bring that up. It’s just so *infuriating*.”

Ekatya sat in the nearest seat. “Tell me about it. You think I’m not angry? It’s all I can do not to plant my fist in his smug, superior mouth. But I have to play the game.”

“Why?” Alejandra sat in the opposite seat. “I don’t want you to resign. I’m not sure I’d last another week after you, given what I’ve seen these last few years. But if your only other option is to let them humiliate you, why not go?”

“Game it out. What happens if I resign? They assign another captain to this duty. Someone as far from me as they can get. Someone who’s in no danger of ending up with a tyree bond. Someone who thinks the Defenders of the Protectorate have a good point.”

Alejandra looked horrified. “The DOP is smashed. Completely discredited. You can’t think—”

“I do think. I think Andira embarrassed both Fleet and the Protectorate. The leader of a backward planet blackmailing a galactic power into doing what she wanted? They hate her because she beat them at their own game. But they need her. And she needs me, so here I am. If I leave, they can bring in anyone they want, and they sure as Hades won’t want another Alsea sympathizer. Do you know what my primary mission objective is?”

“To protect Alsea.” She frowned when Ekatyia shook her head.

“No. To prevent the nanoscrubbers from falling into Voloth hands. Protecting Alsea is secondary to that. The Voloth could destroy Alsea and I’d still fulfill my primary mission objective as long as I made sure they never got out of orbit with the nanoscrubber technology.”

Alejandra melted into her seat, her normally upright posture dissolving. “Sainted Shippers. I had no idea.”

“Alsea needs me right where I am,” Ekatyia said heavily. “Andira needs me here. So I’m doing what I have to.”

Alejandra studied her, then straightened as some of her earlier spark returned. “And here I thought the Fleet brass were incompetent. Turns out they’ve got one thing right. You really are loyal to Alsea first.”

Ekatyia opened her mouth, ready to deny it. She had lied to an investigative panel packed with admirals and government ministers, perjuring herself repeatedly without the slightest remorse.

Those words, so easy then, would not come now. She couldn’t lie to her friend.

“It’s all right,” Alejandra said in an uncharacteristically soft tone. “You’re prioritizing a unique civilization over political maneuvering. You think I’d report you for that? I think they should give you a damned medal.”

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**CHECK-IN**

“Admiral Greve will see you now.”

Ekatyia didn't bother to thank the adjutant, a lieutenant commander whose rank had not come from what she considered real service. Until now, he had managed never to be posted aboard a ship. He made no secret of his distaste for the compromises of space travel: smaller offices and quarters, amateur cultural events, limited access to fresh foods. But the worst, she suspected, was the lack of backs he could trample to advance his career. Command Dome was a target-rich area for a ruthless climber like him. The *Phoenix* was not. It was hers, despite the admiral waiting behind that purposely closed door, and she had built a crew that worked together.

Greve and his adjutant were interlopers, treated with the required respect and not one iota more. It galled them to see the crew respond so differently to her. They would never understand that institutional respect bore no resemblance to respect that was earned.

She entered the office and stopped in front of Greve's desk. “Admiral.”  
“Captain.” He leaned back in his chair and offered an insincere smile. “I thought you might actually be late this time. Heard you were in the shuttle bay, giving last-minute instructions to Dr. Wells.”

“I was wishing her good fortune. She doesn't need my help to do her job.”

“Her job.” The smile twisted, marring his handsome features. “Fleet sure has changed since I was a captain. Back then, a chief surgeon’s job was to care for her crew, not aliens.”

“I believe a chief surgeon’s duties have always included learning about new and useful procedures. Alsean medtech has already changed how we heal bones and treat burns. Who knows what else Dr. Wells might find?”

She could play this game all day long. Greve was forever trying to get a rise out of her, hoping to lead her into a statement he could use.

He was an amateur. Sholokhov would eat him for breakfast and use those admiral bars to pick his teeth. Though she rarely had occasion to be grateful for her tour of duty serving under the Director of Protectorate Security, it did have benefits. She had learned to defend against the best.

*You aren’t even close*, she thought, keeping her expression bland.

He glowered. “Captain Serrado, have you received instructions from Lancer Tal or any member of the Alsean government?”

“I have not.”

“Has your command been mentally or emotionally influenced through your tyree bond?” He pronounced *tyree* with extra emphasis on the first syllable, making it sound like a profanity.

“It has not.”

“If you receive an order in conflict with anything you’ve promised Lancer Tal or your wife—”

“Dr. Rivers is my bondmate, not my wife. It was an Alsean ceremony. We prefer the Alsean term.”

“Your *wife*,” he repeated, “how will you respond?”

“I will uphold my oath to the Protectorate.”

He opened a file on his pad, tapped it several times, then threw the pad on his desk with a clatter. “And we’re done for another day. What a load of useless crap. I ask, you deny, and you’re probably lying through your teeth. But I’m supposed to take you at your word.”

She refused to show the anger that coiled through her stomach. “The value of my word has been established through a lifetime of service to Fleet.”

Disdain dripped from his voice. “Right up until you disobeyed orders, sided with a foreign government, and then got yourself some jacked-up alien brain bug. You’re a liability, Captain. But somehow you keep climbing to the top of a shit mountain without getting a speck of it on

your boots. You may have fooled half the brass at Command Dome, but you don't fool me." He leaned forward. "Don't get complacent. Sholokhov won't always protect you."

She stared at him, shocked, and a genuine smile lit his face.

"You didn't know. Interesting." Resting against the chair back, he steepled his fingers and studied her. "I was being literal when I said you fooled half the brass. The panel was divided until Director Sholokhov came in and tilted the scale in your favor. You're here because he wants you here. I thought you were a favorite, but if he didn't tell you . . ." He chuckled. "Then you're nothing more than a game piece he's moving around. He's not protecting you, he's using you. When he's done, he'll move you right off the board."

In all the times she had stood here for this farce of a check-in, Greve had never been able to rattle her. Now she stood speechless.

Sholokhov had interceded on her behalf and kept it quiet. Not only was it a favor unasked, but he had passed up the chance to hold it over her head.

He wanted something from her. Worse, he was bidding his time, waiting to demand it.

Greve was speaking, exuding satisfaction at this perceived win. She paid no attention. Let him think he'd struck terror into her heart; it would get him off her back for a few days. She could use the time to think.

What did Sholokhov want?

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## COLONEL GRAND SHIT

**T**he fourteenth floor of the State House was always quiet. Beneath it were the gears of government, churning and whirring, powered by a thousand dedicated Alseans from all six castes. Those corridors were never empty, even at night.

Few State House staff ever set foot above the thirteenth floor, having no authority to pass the bioblocks on the lifts and stairwell doors. But for those with the security clearance, the fourteenth was a world of hushed corridors and rich tapestries, inhabited by the most powerful people on Alsea. The Lancer's office was here, as well as those of her closest advisors and support staff. Here also was the famous Unification Chamber, where the original High Council had come together to work out a power sharing system that brought a millennium of peace. The caste Primes had met there ever since.

On the other side of the great dome were the equally famous guest suites, each a museum in its own right, yet seen by very few. Staying in a State House guest suite was the pinnacle of achievement for Alsean political society.

Colonel Corozen Micah would never sleep in one of those rooms—his quarters were several floors down—but as the Lancer's Chief Guardian, he had an office on the fourteenth. For the son of low-ranking

warriors with more love than prestige to offer, such an achievement felt unreal even after eight cycles.

Duty had kept him in his office well past evenmeal this night, and he emerged into a corridor so quiet that he might have been the only one here. An illusion, of course, but one he embraced. These glorious artworks, this ancient bench pieced together and carved by a crafter when Blacksun Temple's molwyn tree was still young—in this moment, they were his to enjoy.

He strolled down the hall, hands behind his back, footsteps muffled by a handwoven rug still resistant to traffic after three hundred cycles. Lhyn Rivers had once told him that in most Protectorate cultures, this rug would be behind protective glass in a museum.

"What a waste," he muttered, his gaze on the intricate patterns beneath his feet. How strange, to lock away things that were meant to be used.

The rug curved gracefully around a corner, and he saw a small boot and bare calf just before a body collided with his. Instinctively he reached out, his hands settling on the slim shoulders of a woman.

A Gaian woman, in a formal dress and jacket that smelled of hyacot. She had been to an expensive restaurant, then. Hyacot twigs were generally used in ceremonies or as atmospheric enhancers in the type of restaurant he tried to avoid.

He steadied her while she found her feet. "Dr. Wells. Are you all right?"

"Hm? Yes, yes, I'm fine." She straightened her jacket with the deliberate movements of one who has overindulged. "Can't find my room, though. This place is a damned ant nest. Passages going every which way, and half of them dead ends."

He kept his amusement off his face. "You're on the other side of the dome from your suite."

"What? No, that—" She lifted her head and looked around in confusion. "Oh. Are these the offices? How did I end up here?"

"With the help of several bottles of spirits, I suspect."

Her gaze snapped back to him, remarkably sharp despite her inebriation. "I can hold my spirits, Colonel."

"Since you're still walking upright, I agree."

She frowned. "Why does that feel like a disagreement?"

“I have no idea. May I escort you back to your suite?” He held out a hand, indicating the direction from which she had come.

“I suppose you’ll have to,” she grumbled, turning in place. “Ant nest.” After a tick of silent walking, she spoke more quietly. “But Shippers, what a beautiful ant nest.”

“It is, isn’t it? Sometimes I wish the State House tours could come to this floor, so more people could see it.” He put a hand on her elbow, gently nudging her through a doorway.

“No wonder Ekaty and Lhyn love living here. I don’t know how Ekaty goes back to the *Phoenix* after a few nights in this place. I have one of the biggest suites on the ship, and it’ll feel like a shannel cup after this.”

In his few interactions with Dr. Wells, she had been edgy and sharp-tongued, forcefully sharing her professional opinions while keeping anything personal behind stone walls. This was a different view of her.

“I can imagine,” he said.

She glanced over. “Imagine? You don’t have a suite here? Aren’t you the grand shit of security?”

“The grand what?” It was an effort to hold back his laugh, especially when she put a hand to her mouth with an expression of genuine surprise.

“It’s possible,” she said, enunciating carefully, “that I’ve had a bit too much to drink.”

“A bit, yes. Does ‘grand shit’ mean anything more than what it sounds like?”

She chuckled, then let out an open laugh that melted her reserve. “It does, and I’m just drunk enough to tell you. It’s Fleet slang, dating back to the days when our ships were a lot smaller and the, hm, facilities were much less reliable. And by facilities, I mean sewage plumbing.”

“I assumed.” She looked so elegant, standing there in her fine clothes and the formal hairstyle that bared her neck. Gemstones flashed at her throat and sparkled from her ears, she smelled divine, and she was talking about sewage.

“In those days, if someone produced . . .” Her hands lifted, slender fingers curving to indicate a sizable object. “. . . a fecal output that was larger than normal, or more solid, it would block the plumbing. When you block a ship’s plumbing, everything else is secondary. Unless you’re in the middle of a battle, of course.”

“Of course,” he agreed, losing control of his smile.

She grinned at him, a flash of teeth and satisfaction that warmed his skin. “So a grand shit is important enough to bring everything to a stop. You are, aren’t you?”

“I can’t say I ever thought of myself in those terms. But yes, I’m the Lancer’s Chief Guardian, which does indeed make me the grand shit of security.” He offered a short bow. “And therefore the most important escort you could have back to your suite.”

“I’m honored.” She matched his bow, looking up briefly with an impish gleam in her green eyes. When she straightened, the gleam was lost behind a familiar wall of reserve. “You’re different from the healers. I’d think it was because of your caste, but you’re different from Rahel, too. Is it your job, or just you?”

“I’m not sure I can answer that without knowing what you see as different.” He resumed their journey, noting that she walked closer now, her movements less guarded.

This was dangerous territory, and he should put a stop to it.

He wouldn’t. That look in her eyes, the flash of teeth—they had done something to his insides that he hadn’t felt in too long. He wanted to see them again.

“On my home planet, we say we have three faces. One we present to the world, one we show our friends and family, and one we keep for ourselves. I’ve just finished seven days in the company of a whole herd of healers. They don’t have three faces. I’m not sure they have two.” She paused when he touched her elbow, guiding her around a corner. “Rahel *should* have three faces, and sometimes she does. Other times, it’s all there for anyone to see if they know how to look. But you, Colonel. You have at least two faces.”

They walked the length of a corridor while Micah considered how to answer.

“Have I offended you?”

“No. Intrigued me, perhaps. Not offended.” He opened a door and motioned her through.

She stopped, gazing around with a furrow in her smooth brow. “All right, I know where I am now. But I don’t know how we got here.”

“The main corridor follows the dome.” He drew a circle in the air. “In theory, you could have kept walking and returned to this point eventually. But that would take you past the Lancer’s office; you wouldn’t have gotten

much farther before my Guards stopped you.” Making a straight line through his imaginary circle, he added, “We took a route that crossed the dome. And here you are.”

“Here I am.” She looked down the hall to her suite, three doors away, then back at him. “And you’ve managed not to answer either of my questions. Would you like to come in, Colonel? I won’t offer you a drink, but if you’re in the mood for a cup of shannel . . .”

He ignored the practical voice informing him that this was an extremely bad idea. “It would be my pleasure.”

Her suite was half the size of the one given to Lhyn and Ekatyra, but every bit as splendid with its tapestries, historically significant furniture, and priceless art. On a table near the tall windows, a vase the size of his thigh held an enormous bouquet of flowers. Such bouquets were a standard courtesy for guests, assembled from park plantings by State House producers. They were also a subtle indication of the guest’s importance or favor with whomever had issued the invitation.

“Make yourself comfortable.” Dr. Wells slipped off her jacket, exposing bare shoulders and the insubstantial straps of her dress, and vanished into the small kitchen space.

In that brief glimpse, he had seen only smooth skin where an Alsean’s chest ridges would be. His fingers itched to touch it, to feel that difference, and he hurriedly crossed to the bouquet to give himself something else to focus on. Inhaling the delicate scent of tintinatalus blossoms helped only a little, a small distraction of one sense while his entire body seemed attuned to clinking cups and the whoosh of a shannel dispenser. When her footsteps returned, he moved to wait by the sofa.

She appeared with a cup in each hand, walking with less care and more grace than he expected.

“You’re not drunk any longer,” he said, accepting his cup.

“Good eye, Colonel. I brought a few doses of kastrophanol with me. It neutralizes most of the negative effects of spirits.”

“Yet I’m still here.”

“Yes, you are.” She took a seat facing the window and smiled when he chose a chair opposite. “Definitely a warrior. Every soldier I know sits facing the door.”

He lifted the cup in a salute. “You see more than you allow others to know.”

“Three faces.” She matched his gesture and sipped her drink, the motion drawing his eyes to that smooth expanse of skin and the shadowed valley between her breasts.

Dragging his gaze away, he pointed across the room. “Do you know the significance of this bouquet?”

“I didn’t know there was any.”

“All guests receive them. The bigger they are, the more status they convey. Yours is as big as they come, and it’s not made with flowers that put out new blooms every nineday. Those branches are tintinatalus. A tree, not a shrub. It’ll take a cycle for the tree to regrow them.”

She studied the bouquet with new appreciation. “They came from Prime Scholar Yaserka. He’s the one who authorized this collaboration.”

“He holds you in high esteem. The producers who made that bouquet know it, the staff who prepared this suite know it. It’s surely common knowledge in the State House by now.”

“Did you know?”

“Yes, but I get my gossip through a different route.”

“Top down instead of bottom up, hm? Fleet works like that, too.” She kicked off her boots and pulled up her legs, sitting sideways with knees bent and one arm resting on the back of the sofa. “I believe you owe me a few answers, Colonel. Is it your job or you?”

He hadn’t forgotten. “If we’re in your suite talking about faces, call me Micah.”

“Your family name?”

“It’s what I’m most comfortable with. A warrior tradition for those of us in the protective forces. The eldest uses the family name as long as they’re serving.”

“Rahel doesn’t go by Sayana.”

“Rahel is unique. She never served in a normal Guard unit, and her oath holder styled himself a parental figure. He always used her first name.”

“I don’t think Shantu styled himself a parental figure. I think he *was* her father. If he hadn’t been, she wouldn’t have obeyed those orders.”

“You’re protective of her,” he observed.

“Yes, I am.” Simple and firm. “I’ve read her file. I know what she did to you. I don’t know how you handle being her commanding officer after that, but I’ll tell you right now: don’t say a word against her to me.”

A tendril of tension rose between them, poised for explosive growth.

“What an advantage she has, with someone like you as her shield.” He watched the slight drop of her shoulders, a result of her relaxing spine, and added, “Rahel has paid her debts. I made my peace with her some time ago.”

“That’s a story I’d like to hear someday.”

There were quite a few stories he suddenly wanted to hear.

“I don’t think I can answer your question,” he said. “I can’t remember a time when there was a me separate from my job. Can you separate from yours?”

This laugh was not the uninhibited one from earlier. “Do you know what I was doing tonight?”

“I know you were in a very nice restaurant.” At her visible surprise, he tapped his nose. “Your clothes. They’re infused with the scent of hyacot twigs.”

“Oh. Those are wonderful, aren’t they? I’d like to bring some back with me.” She sipped her shannel, then slid cup and saucer onto the side table. “I was celebrating the success of our first medical collaboration. Ten of us went out to do what healers do best, regardless of species. We self-medicated.”

“Is that how you separate from your job?”

“That’s how I forget enough of my job to remember who I am without it.”

“But you’re sober now.”

“I’m not bringing a man into my quarters if I’m too drunk to handle him.”

“Has that been a problem before?” He forced himself to stay still, but his blood thrummed at the mere thought of it.

“I learned that lesson the hard way, yes.” She pinned him with a glare that said pity was not welcome. “But I’m told that’s very unusual on Alsea. Only one of the healers I worked with had ever treated a victim. I still can’t quite believe it.”

“Unusual and swiftly punished,” he said tightly.

“Oh, he was punished. Just not by the Fleet judicial system.” She retrieved her cup and took a sip.

He shouldn’t ask, but . . .

“What did you do?”

She cradled the cup between her hands, her gaze on the bouquet. “He was an officer, which meant he had a personal matter printer. About a moon after my experience, I treated an ensign from data systems with familiar symptoms and a very familiar story. She wrote a self-deleting program that delivered a toxin to his next food order, and I found a medical code to authorize the installation. He’s not in Fleet anymore,” she added offhandedly. “Medical discharge. Not fit for active duty.”

“Great Mother,” he blurted. “You’re not like any healer I know.”

He caught a glimpse of wide, startled eyes before she dropped her head and rubbed the back of her neck.

“I don’t think the kastrophenol neutralized everything,” she muttered. “Dammit. Must be the difference in Alsean spirits.”

She had not meant to tell him that much. He had taken advantage of the vulnerability she had tried to eliminate.

“It won’t leave this room.” When she looked up, distrust written across her face, he added, “I swear on my honor as a warrior. I hope Rahel has taught you what that means.”

Her expression cleared. “She has.”

But she was still skittish, and the only way forward was through.

He rested his forearms on his knees, hands clasped together. “May I ask why you didn’t appeal to your judicial system?”

She assessed him and made her decision with a defiant lift of her chin.

“It doesn’t work like yours. There’s no empathic scanning to determine guilt and innocence. The only physical evidence wouldn’t have proved coercion. He would have said it was consensual. I had no proof to the contrary, and he had witnesses to my behavior in the bar before I took him to my quarters.”

While he tried to wrap his mind around that, she added, “Not to mention that he was two ranks above me.”

“What difference does that make?”

She stared at him, then made a soft sound of amazement. “Shippers, I love Alsea.”

“Do you mean—” He stopped. If they had no empathic scans to determine the truth, then rank probably did matter.

“It wouldn’t have impacted his career,” she said, confirming his guess. “But it would have ruined mine. It was my first posting; I was still an apprentice.”

Which meant she had been very young. “And you stayed in Fleet after that.”

“I wasn’t going to let him keep me from my goals.”

“I doubt you let anything keep you from your goals.”

“We might have that in common, Colonel Grand Shit.”

The sheer surprise of it after such a dark story left him unable to stop the bark of laughter. She watched with a spark of humor in her eyes, and no, pity was not necessary.

“Not only did he lack both honor and decency, he was a grainbird on top of it. I only needed two ticks to know I didn’t want you angry with me. You threatened to stick me with something sharp.”

It was her turn to laugh, the real, open one that made him want to do whatever it took to hear it again.

“I’d forgotten. You *were* being an overbearing ass.”

“I was not.”

“We may have to agree to disagree.” But she was smiling, and her posture had softened. “You still have a question to answer. Why don’t you have one of these suites?”

“I didn’t want one. Tal offered it when she won the election, but it was difficult enough to spend my days surrounded by politicians and people with agendas. I didn’t want to spend my nights with them, too. I’d rather be with my warriors.” He pointed at the floor. “I’m a few floors down.”

She needed a moment to find her voice. “You’re not what I expected.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“It’s a very good thing.” She set her cup on the table and took a more defensive position: shoulders forward, feet on the floor. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done this. And I was never good at it to begin with.”

“I don’t quite know what it is we’re doing,” he said truthfully. “But I’m happy to stay and talk, if that’s all you want. I’m enjoying getting to know you, Dr. Wells.”

There: shoulders back, spine loose once more, small tilt of the lips. “Alejandra. Whatever happens tonight, it’s not going to happen with you calling me Dr. Wells.”

“Agreed, as long as you don’t call me Colonel Grand Shit.”

He could get addicted to that laugh.

“Sorry, I can’t guarantee that. But I promise to do it sparingly.” Her

eyes were dancing, and she pulled her legs back up in the pose he now recognized as being one of mental ease. “Nothing much will happen tonight. At the very least, I’d have to study some anatomical charts first. And ask Rahel for advice.” She chuckled at his silent reaction. “Well, who else do I have up there? Besides, I hear she knows her way around Alsean sexual responses.”

“You make it sound like a clinical study.” But her matter-of-fact attitude allowed him to admit, “I’d need a few charts, too. Goddess above, I’d have to ask Lhyn.” He buried his face in his hands, then dragged them down to his jaw. “Do you have *any* idea how long she would lecture me?”

This time she laughed so hard that her body curled with it, arms around her torso as if her ribs were in danger of flying apart. “Oh, stars. Yes, I can imagine it.” She laughed again, then wiped her eyes. “Micah, thank you. You’re making this easy, and that—I can’t tell you how much that’s worth.”

There was an unspoken history beneath those words. He suspected that not much in her life had been easy.

This, he vowed, would be a different story.