

# ALSEA RISING

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THE SEVENTH STAR

FLETCHER DELANCEY

HEARTSOME PUBLISHING

*For all those who love.  
You bear within you a spark of the divine.*



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## LAUNCH

Commander Cox didn't speak a word as he led Rahel into the lift. She stepped in and turned, keeping her eyes forward.

"Sedated, eh? Not what I thought you'd do."

She relaxed her rigid stance. From the moment he entered the bridge, she had sensed his admiration, colored with concern and a thread of envy.

"What did you think I'd do?"

"One quick swing with that stave would have put the captain in charge."

"It would have been more satisfying," she admitted. "But worse in the long term."

"That's for damned sure. Shuttle bay."

Her head snapped around. "I thought we were going to the brig."

"Captain Serrado didn't order me to put you in the brig. She ordered me to take you off her bridge, which I have done. She also wanted you deported at the first opportunity. I'm doing that now."

Candini's fighter was in the shuttle bay.

Her first, joyous thought was that she would still fight this battle. Her second was a staggering realization.

Despite being taken by surprise, despite having less than a minute to come up with a plan, Captain Serrado had gotten her off the ship. Legally, safely, and without repercussions for anyone on her staff. No one could

fault Cox for his interpretation of the orders. After all, they were on the cusp of battle. Candini's alternate gunner was on Alsea; there was no time to go back for him. Without a gunner, her effectiveness would be significantly reduced.

When the battle was over, Candini would return to base and Rahel would step onto Alsean soil a free woman. The politics would no doubt rage over her head as the Protectorate officially protested the lack of internal justice, but Lancer Tal would defend her—especially once she learned what Admiral Greve had tried to do.

She could still feel the oily weight of his anticipation. He had relished the moment as he set the trap, knowing Serrado would disobey an order that endangered two ships and their crews. He had used her honor against her.

The lift doors opened, revealing a hive of activity.

"Finally!" Candini shouted. She was already in her flight suit, jogging across the bay and pointing toward the locker room. "Get your ass in there and get suited up!"

"May your goddess fly with you," Cox said.

She wished she had more time. "And with all of you. Thank you, Commander."

In the locker room, she stripped down and yanked her suit off the hanger, thinking wistfully of the friends she was leaving behind. They deserved a better farewell than her sudden disappearance. Quantum com calls could not hold a candle to the warmrons that Gaians gave so freely.

Her change surely set a new speed record, yet when she raced up the ladder and landed in her seat, Candini gave an impatient huff.

"It's about time," she grumbled, tapping the controls to stow the ladder and seal the cockpit.

"Unavoidable delay." Rahel opened the storage beneath her seat and squeezed in her rolled-up Bondlancer's Guard uniform.

"Doing what, picking your ass? This is the real thing, Red." She pulled back on the control stick, guiding the fighter off the deck and toward the exit tunnel. "And since when do you bring that uniform with you? Is it some sort of good luck charm?"

Rahel snapped her harness in place and settled back to watch the green guidance lights. "You won't believe it when I tell you."

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## CALM BEFORE THE STORM

“Slow down, tyrina. They won’t be here in the next five ticks.”  
Salomen tripped trying to shove a leg into her trousers and needed two hops to regain her balance. “They’re a day early! I’m not ready! How are you so shekking calm about it?”

Even if they didn’t share emotions, the use of profanity was a waving flag. Salomen rarely swore.

Tal crossed the room and held her by the shoulders. “Tyrina. Stop.”

“There’s no time—”

“There *is* time. You’re allowing fear to override your logic.” She pushed Salomen backward.

“What are you—stop this, I need to get my shirt on.”

“You’re lovely without it.” Two more steps.

“There are no words to express how *not* in the mood I am for that.”

She reached her goal and turned them in place. “Look.”

Frowning, Salomen looked past Tal’s shoulder. “At what?”

“The base. The trees. The Blacksun skyline. Look at the sunlight reflecting off the buildings. It’s all still there.”

“It might not be if we don’t—”

“Salomen. Look at it. Breathe.” She fumbled behind her back and threw open the window. Crisp morning air flowed in, carrying birdsong, warriors’ voices, and the sound of rustling leaves. In another hantick, the

morning breeze would die down and the still air of summer would begin heating up the day.

She looked into Salomen's eyes and inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

After a charged moment of resistance, Salomen followed suit. Her eyes slipped shut. "I'm afraid," she whispered.

"I know. It's all right."

"Everything depends on me." Her voice caught. "How can it be all right? The entire plan rests on my shoulders and I'm shekking terrified. It should have been you!"

"No." Tal brought their foreheads together. "It has always been you. Fahla chose you for a reason. I trust her wisdom, and I trust you."

Salomen collapsed against her, wrapping her in a desperate warmron. "What if I fail?"

"Then I will help you pick yourself up and we'll try again. You're not the missile, Salomen. You're the launcher. If you miss, we launch again. And again, until we succeed. It rests on *our* shoulders, not just yours."

She willed determination into the trembling body in her arms. Salomen had faced every aspect of this plan with unflinching courage, but until this morning, it had all been theoretical. Ekaty's quantum com call made it real. Her news that the Voloth had upended their battle plan made it terrifying.

"We're already at a disadvantage." Salomen straightened, wiping her eyes. "All those ninedays of preparation—"

"Ekaty will handle it. Trust her to be the warship captain she is. Everyone has their roles. Our fighters will work harder to defend the space elevator, Ekaty will take down as many ships as she can—none of that changes what *we* do. Our plan is exactly the same."

"Goddess above, I envy your battle experience."

"No, you don't." Tal could not imagine her peaceful bondmate drawing blood. This was the woman who cupped hairy watchers in her hands and carried them off the trail to safety. Tal wouldn't touch the things, but Salomen saw value in even the lowest forms of life.

"Perhaps not the experience," Salomen conceded, pulling the shirt over her head. "But the calm that comes with it."

Tal walked to the closet and retrieved their combat vests. Back at the windows, she dropped hers to the floor, then opened the other and held it up. "Fear is strongest when it has no competition. Once you make that

jump, once you begin what you've trained for, you'll have a focus other than your fear. You'll still feel it, but it won't control you."

Salomen slipped her arms through and settled the vest in place. "So I can look forward to gibbering panic for another hantick or so?"

"Look at that." Smiling, she sealed the front and gave it a pat. "You're already halfway there. Making jokes is an excellent sign."

"It's not much of a joke," Salomen grumbled, but she moved with more of her usual fluidity as she picked up Tal's vest to return the favor. "Did we formally thank the Protectorate for sharing their flexible light armor technology?"

"Not exactly, since it wasn't the Protectorate that did the sharing. I did thank Lhyn."

"So did I." A quick smile crossed her face as she closed the seal. It was small but significant, and her emotions reflected the change. "These are certainly more comfortable than a cuirass."

"More practical, too. A little lacking in style." Tal caught her hands. "If you remember nothing else when things get tricky, remember this. A battle never goes exactly the way we expect. Plans are guaranteed to fall apart. What separates the victors from the rest is their ability to adapt."

"I've been practicing the same plan for a moon and a half and *now* you tell me to adapt?"

"I'm telling you that I'll be right there with you, helping you do it."

Salomen took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right. Let's go meet the divine tyrees. You know you'll be repeating this speech to them."

"Without the hand holding, I hope."

They activated their earcuffs, officially ending their bubble of calm.

"Colonel Razine, Salomen and I are prepped and moving to the quad. Any updates from the *Phoenix*?"

"*Captain Serrado has engaged the enemy,*" Razine said. "*There are five destroyers and two heavy cruisers.*"

"More than two-to-one odds!" Salomen's fear rose once more.

"*I wouldn't worry, Bondlancer. It started at three-to-one. Captain Serrado has already vaporized a heavy cruiser, and the Victory and Thea worked together to take down a destroyer.*" Satisfaction rang through Razine's voice.

"*We have the Savior on our side, and she's not fighting alone.*"

"Neither are we," Tal said.

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## RACING THE STARS

The *Phoenix's* fighters launched with them, just as they had in the last several war games, but the familiarity ended there. In their games, they had all flown to Alsea together. Sixty-one fighters traversing the distance meant that any missiles slipping past the *Phoenix* were easy pickings. Rahel had complained about having too few opportunities to take a shot.

Now she had none.

With the *Phoenix* moving up to support the *Victory* and *Thea*, Captain Serrado had ordered her fighters to take the ship's place. All sixty were arrayed in a defensive net, prepared to neutralize any missiles that came their way. Alone, Rahel and Candini sped toward Alsea.

"Not a single missile yet," Rahel observed. "The Voloth are picking their asses, as you would say. Why aren't they targeting the elevator?"

"They haven't done a damned thing we expected." Candini glanced at the battle grid display. "I don't like it. At all."

"Captain Serrado said they would study her tactics. That they'd be developing strategies to neutralize her. This has to be part of that, but I don't understand how."

"Or it's not part of their strategy and they don't have time to fire missiles our way because they're busy trying not to get blown to atoms. I

bet they were expecting her to be closer to Alsea. They didn't think she'd be waiting for them."

"She wouldn't if Greve had his way." Rahel had known it was the right thing to do when she did it, but she hadn't expected such swift confirmation. Watching nine ships come out of base space—including three heavy cruisers that rivaled the *Phoenix* for size—had eradicated any tendrils of concern.

"Best thing you ever did," Candini growled. "I'd have shot him."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Fine, then I'd have introduced my fist to his face. Several times. And none of this dokshin about laying him gently on the deck. You should have dropped him to see how far his head bounced."

"I was advised against that."

"By the same person who got you that sedative? It was Lancer Tal, wasn't it?"

Rahel passed a finger over her lips, miming the movement of sealing an Alsean shirt.

"Asshead."

"It's cute that you still swear in Common. If it were just me, I'd tell you. I can't risk my, um, advisor."

"Yeah, I know. At least I can get a copy of the security logs. That footage will be on the black market by the end of the day." Her glee faded as soon as it had appeared. "Shek, are you seeing this? They're practically ignoring the *Victory* and *Thea* and going after the *Phoenix*. Maybe that's why they haven't targeted the elevator. Maybe their orders were to take out Serrado first, then focus on Alsea. It would explain the huge number of ships."

"Three-to-one odds." Rahel shook her head. "What a testament to her reputation. She must be greatly feared in the Voloth Empire."

"Hated, feared, same thing. She's the best and they know it."

Their quantum com activated in a voice-only call from the Fleet wing commander. "*New orders, Nightwing. We're joining you at the space elevator, both squadrons. Serrado's worried about the Voloth overleaping us if the battle breaks at the minefield.*"

"Well, they haven't been doing anything else we expected," Candini said. "Come on over, the weather's fine."

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## LEFT BEHIND

Lanaril had lit six rows of oil bowls when someone walked to the rack nearest hers and began lighting their own.

She kept her head down, hiding her scowl. The temple was quiet at this hantick. With so few worshipers using the space, it was rude beyond belief to crowd her as this unknown person was doing.

They had probably recognized her, though she was not wearing her templar's tunic. If they were hoping for aid or wisdom from the Lead Templar, they would be sadly disappointed. She had none to spare.

She lit the seventh and eighth rows with increasing anger. The one time she needed her own respite in this holy place, and this dokker's backside couldn't respect it?

The ninth row went by in a silent litany of curses. By the time she finished the tenth, she was irate enough to show it. She slammed her wand of eternal flame back in its holder and turned, hands on her hips as she prepared to give a lesson in courtesy.

Lhyn Rivers looked up, startled. "Are you all right?"

"Great Mother." She had a chest full of anger and nowhere to direct it. "I didn't realize it was you. I was about to tell a rude blindworm where she could put her eternal flame."

"How could—oh. You have your blocks up." Lhyn replaced her wand

with far more grace. “I’m sorry. I assumed you’d know it was me. I should have realized you’d be blocking everyone out.”

“Why are you here?” Not until she saw Lhyn’s flinch did she realize how that had sounded. “No, you have every right to find comfort in the temple. I only—” She stopped, trying to center herself. “Please ignore me. I’m not at my best this morning.”

“Of course you’re not. I’m not either. That’s why I came, to ask if you’d like to wait with me.” Lhyn stepped closer and held up her hands. “I know how it feels to be the one left behind.”

Yes, Lanaril thought as their palms met. She knew exactly how it felt.

“We said our goodbyes when she flew down to Whitemoon Base.” The words came unbidden, four days of stoic strength undone by a touch. “I thought I was doing well. No tears and no fear that she wouldn’t come back. We had a Shared joining that morning, and I was . . .” She swallowed, a sudden tightness in her throat making her voice hoarse. “I was proud of myself for sending her away with a smile. I cannot smile now.”

Lhyn interlaced their fingers and brought their hands down, turning a palm touch into a more intimate gesture of friendship. “She doesn’t need you to smile now. She needs you to be there when she gets back. So we wait.”

“I had no idea it would be so difficult. The waiting.”

“It’s the hardest thing in the universe. Ekatyra is fighting right now, and she can’t spare a piptick to reassure me or give me an update. I don’t know what’s happening. I can only imagine, and I have a vivid imagination.”

“So do I, it seems.”

“Come with me to Blacksun Base. It’s where I waited during the Battle of Alsea. I thought it would be apropos.”

Her shrug was unconvincing, but Lanaril appreciated the effort. “Ah, then it’s only coincidence that Andira and Salomen are there.”

“If I have to wait, I’d rather do it where I can see some of the action. And where I can be with the people I love.” She saw Lanaril’s hesitation and added, “If you’re worried about Alsea Ascendant, Micah says he prefers to have you on the base anyway. He’ll cancel your escort to the *Caphenon*.”

Micah had made it clear that he considered her a high-priority contrib-

utor to Alsea Ascendant and should be housed with the Primes. She had insisted she could do more good with the greater numbers of evacuees being sent to the ship. Now, with the battle upon them, she was reconsidering.

“Please,” Lhyn said quietly. “You should be in the safest place. And I need my friend.”

She glanced at her oil rack, one hundred flames dancing in the air currents that drifted through the open temple doors, and realized that Lhyn’s presence was no coincidence.

“I asked Fahla to guide those defending us today,” she said. “And to guide me in knowing how I can best serve. Perhaps the key is not how many need me, but who needs me the most.” She squeezed Lhyn’s hands. “Shall we? Then I can be with the people I love, too.”

Relief flowed through their touch. “All but one,” Lhyn said.

“There are a few more scattered around Alsea. But in terms of those doing the fighting? All but one.”

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## TAKING ODDS

**E**katya swiveled her command chair to the left, then to the right, then flipped it straight back in an effort to keep the battle in view. Lieutenant Scarp was putting her ship through its paces, spinning them away from the astonishing number of shield breakers that filled her display. She had given up trying to direct him. The battle was changing too rapidly; the delay between her order and his response could easily leave them vulnerable.

When this was over, she vowed, she would promote him to lieutenant commander. He had come a long way from the blushing pilot who took her brand-new ship out of space dock for its maiden voyage. His calm competence under a level of fire most pilots would never see was already a good enough reason. The fact that he had so far saved their asses twice was another.

As it turned out, she was not the only captain who had been drilling her crew in the Serrado Spin. The Voloth had copied the tactic and were performing it extremely well. She had never before been on the receiving end of it and was not enjoying the experience.

Fighting defensively was neither her preference nor her best skill, but there had been little choice once the Voloth recovered from their exit transition. Killing two ships in those precious few seconds had improved the odds, but not enough. Still, it could have been much worse. Had she

left the *Thea* and *Victory* on their own, they would already be space dust. There was no doubt that the battle record would vindicate her decision and prove Greve's incompetence.

That didn't help, she thought grimly as the *Phoenix's* automated defenses took out a swarm of shield breakers on their tail. Assuming she survived this battle, she would be sent back to Command Dome for yet another set of drawn-out proceedings in which personal and political agendas carried the same weight as the truth.

Merely imagining it made her furious. But fury kept her mind sharp, and she needed that now.

The *Victory* and *Thea* had diverted the attention of a heavy cruiser, swooping around it like small birds attacking a raptor and forcing it to defend itself. Two months of war games had molded Captains Kabbai and Teriyong into a formidable team, well used to working together against a larger opponent. Their tactics were successful enough that the cruiser's supporting destroyers had abandoned their harassment of the *Phoenix* and were now attempting to corner their Fleet counterparts.

Ekatya could not breathe easy, given the heavy cruiser and three destroyers she still faced. They desperately needed to reduce these odds.

"Incoming Delfin torpedoes, gamma-one-eight through ten!"

She spun her chair forward. On the battle grid overlaying her displays, four glaring yellow markers were curving in toward her bow, the size and vivid color representing their high threat.

The Voloth ships were working in concert, destroyers harassing her flanks while the heavy cruiser tried to break her bow shields. Yet Delfins at this point made little sense. Her shields were still intact; most of the explosive yield would be wasted.

But not all. With a start, she realized that the cruiser's captain was using Delfins in place of shield breakers.

Great galaxies, had the Voloth Empire discovered an asteroid made of teracite? She commanded one of the largest warships in Fleet, and even she had a limited number of Delfins in her armory. The necessary mineral for their construction was rare and difficult to refine, making each torpedo as expensive as a small shuttle. No one launched Delfins except as a ship-killing final assault. For the Voloth to fire them this early in the battle meant they carried unprecedented firepower designed for one thing: to get the *Phoenix* out of their way.

“Helm, hard to port,” she ordered. “Team One, both tubes on incoming Delfin torpedoes. Starboard weapons, one tube on the Delfins and keep that destroyer occupied.”

Her best weapons team was on the starboard side. If anyone could neutralize this threat, it would be Warrant Officer Roris and her team, but even they couldn’t take out four at once. Each weapons room was equipped with two missile launch tubes; Roris’s team didn’t have enough time to reload and fire a second set. By diverting half her starboard weapons, Ekatyia was giving an opening to the destroyer on that side.

She saw no other option.

Her automated defenses were already firing the rail guns, attempting to shoot down the torpedoes. It was pointless. Rail gun projectiles were ineffective against the heavily shielded Delfins. Only a missile could neutralize them.

A broadside of shield breakers and missiles appeared on the battle grid, the former targeting the destroyer and the latter tracking toward the Delfins. Two missiles were well in front of the rest.

Roris may as well have put her signature on them. Only her team would fire that quickly—and that accurately, Ekatyia thought as two Delfins winked out of existence.

A second and a half later, the other two were hit.

Vibrations through her seat told of the impact on her own shields: the destroyer had taken its opening. A quick glance at her console showed the negligible result, thanks to her rail guns and the fact that the window of opportunity had been so limited.

“Show them our port side,” she ordered. “Keep them busy.”

She needed a little breathing room to flesh out an idea. If the Voloth wanted her that badly, she would oblige.

Two minutes later, she issued instructions to her weapons teams, navigation, and helm. It was another ten minutes before she saw the necessary configuration. A few taps to her console marked the bridge display with her intent.

“Helm, drop us in.”

Lieutenant Scarp obeyed without question, despite her order putting them in a narrow space between the heavy cruiser and a destroyer. Where before her ship had been in constant motion, making itself a difficult target, it now appeared that she was gambling on a close bombardment.

Both the heavy cruiser and destroyer were at risk unless they moved away, but they had little incentive to do so when her ship was taking a far greater risk. As long as the *Phoenix* held position, it was easily targeted by the two nearest ships and the other two destroyers, which were swooping in to take advantage.

She would never have considered this had the *Victory* and *Thea* not kept the second heavy cruiser and its support ships occupied. Even so, the *Phoenix* was under assault on all sides. And they were ridiculously close to the destroyer, making it impossible to defend against its broadside. Her port shields were taking a beating.

But so were the shields of the destroyer.

She watched the display as a blizzard of weaponry flew between all five ships, though with a difference the Voloth captains should notice: her starboard weapons were not firing at the same rate as port.

“Come on, you asshole,” she murmured. “I’m taking hits and something’s wrong. Finish me off.”

As if the heavy cruiser captain had heard, four more Delfins appeared on her display.

“There you are. Helm, prepare to jump. All hands, brace, brace, brace!”

“Ready,” Scarp said.

The subtle hum of surf engines vibrated through her feet. Scarp was ramping up the engine power while keeping it disengaged from the drive.

“On my mark.”

The Delfins screamed across space, certain death packed into metal cylinders and waiting only for release.

“Steady.” Ekaty’a’s eyes were locked to the battle grid as four yellow trails lengthened, growing ever nearer. “Steady . . . steady . . . mark!”

The battle grid blurred as the *Phoenix* accelerated abruptly, overwhelming the inertial dampeners. Ekaty’a was slammed into the back of her seat, then hurled forward against her battle harness when Scarp threw the engines into reverse. As he used their stopping power to slew the ship around, she sucked air into sluggish lungs and hoped her crew had taken the brace warning seriously.

Though warships were built for rapid jumps, this went well beyond normal operations. Command Dome would probably put a warning in her file for such a reckless move.

But it worked. One second after their jump, the Delfins passed through the space the *Phoenix* had previously occupied. Three seconds after that, they impacted the destroyer through its weakened shields.

Ekatya did not have the opportunity to see its destruction. Scarp had come about and executed the second jump, putting them back where they started but on the other side of the heavy cruiser. Had the calculations of her navigation officer been anything less than perfect, both ships would now be battle trash.

The heavy cruiser's automated defenses remained silent, confused by the massive target so near rather than the smaller and more distant targets it was programmed for. The other two destroyers also seemed baffled by the sudden disappearance of their target and its reappearance in the wrong place, as well as the ongoing disintegration of their sister ship. They had no clear shots until they could swing around.

With fierce pride in her crew, Ekatya called out the order.

"Fire!"

A broadside of shield breakers exploded against the cruiser's shields almost as soon as they were launched, so close were the two ships.

"Rotate!"

Lieutenant Scarp smoothly flipped the *Phoenix*, bringing their port weapons to bear.

"Shields soft," her weapons officer called.

Had that been a destroyer, the shields would already be gone. The much larger cruiser was harder to break.

"Port weapons, fire!"

A few lonely laser cannon bolts sizzled across the space. On the bridge of the heavy cruiser, the weapons officer must have turned to the one defense immediately at hand. Scattered shield breakers spat from individual weapons rooms, the efforts of desperate crew operating without orders.

Only four of her shield breakers were neutralized. The other forty-six slammed into their target.

"Rotate!"

"Shields redlined. Nose to tail," came the triumphant announcement.

The heavy cruiser's rail guns lit up, switched to manual control at last. A broadside of shield breakers—and two Delfin torpedoes—flew toward them at the same time.

That captain had made a fatal mistake.

With no shields remaining and the bridge officers rattled after blowing up their own destroyer, the only sane choice was to flee. But the *Voloth* wanted the *Phoenix*, and here she was, a target that couldn't be missed. Not only that, she had completed a Serrado Spin. The captain had made a reasonable assumption that her tubes were empty and she was momentarily open to attack.

They didn't know she had drilled her crew in a double spin.

"Starboard weapons, fire!"

Forty-two missiles streaked toward the heavy cruiser. Eight more converged on the more imminent threat, fired by the best teams on her starboard side. She had told them to expect the Delfins on this rotation, and they did her proud: both torpedoes exploded uselessly in the vacuum between their ships. The missiles not expended in that effort kept going, attracted by the massive target just beyond.

Thirty-eight missiles made it through the cruiser's defensive screen, sailed through its nonexistent shields, and slammed into the hull. Her own shields were impacted in the exchange, though with minimal damage. Her rail guns were already on manual, and their operators wiped out three-fourths of the cruiser's broadside.

"Rotate!"

The heavy cruiser was spouting great plumes of hull plating, internal structures, and atmosphere as it slid off the starboard side of her display, flew beneath her feet, and rolled up the port side.

"Port weapons, fire! Ready helm."

Her final broadside included three Delfin torpedoes. They streaked through space with their smaller brethren and met no resistance from the wounded ship.

"Go!"

The *Phoenix* shot away, putting much-needed distance between it and the shockwave that would soon follow. Ekatyia spun her chair aft and had a beautiful view. The destroyer was now an expanding cloud of debris, and the heavy cruiser was dying. Three massive explosions at the bow, midship, and stern marked the impact of the Delfins, dwarfing the smaller strikes of the missiles.

The two destroyers that had previously targeted them fled the destruction, heading back to the one remaining heavy cruiser and its attendant

destroyers. Ekatyia gave the order to follow and sent a warning to the *Victory* and *Thea*.

Those destroyer captains had missed their chance. Unnerved by the sudden loss of two ships, they did not realize what a target she now presented. A double Serrado Spin was physically tiring for the weapons teams. Manual operation of the rail guns added stress and mental effort to the burden. In addition, every person on her ship was currently feeling the effects of two back-to-back jumps. Her chest hurt from the dual impacts into her battle harness, and her spine was grateful for the cushioning of her chair. She hoped that none of her crew had lost their bracing holds, or Alejandra would have her hands full with fractures and blunt force traumas. They desperately needed a few minutes to recover, and the frightened Voloth captains had given them exactly that.

She rubbed her chest and watched the glorious light show put on by the heavy cruiser. Had the yield of the Delfins been kept outside the hull, lack of oxygen would have snuffed the fireballs. That they continued to billow, with secondary explosions distorting their shape, testified to the destruction of the ship's integrity.

At last the flames faded, the oxygen supplying them having dissipated into vacuum.

Six seconds later, the fusion core blew.

The display automatically darkened, saving their retinas as a small sun burst into life. It grew exponentially, spreading into a brilliant, perfect sphere, then winked out.

Cheers rang throughout the bridge.

"And *that's* how you use Delfin torpedoes," Ekatyia declared, setting off another round of whoops. "Helm, navigation, well done. We couldn't have timed it better. Serrado to weapons teams, beautiful job! They'll be teaching this to cadets next year."

She pretended not to see Lieutenant Scarp wipe the sweat from his forehead. He was entitled to a little nervousness after the fact.

Her console lit up with an incoming private transmission from the *Thea*.

"Fuck me and take me for a ride," Captain Teriyong said with a grin. "That was one Hades of a tactic."

"Liked that, did you? Too bad we'll only be able to use it once. They'll never fall for it again."

“Once was enough. They’re down four ships now. I don’t think they counted on losing two of their heavy cruisers. If we’re lucky, one of them was their flagship.”

They weren’t that lucky.

The remaining heavy cruiser pulled out before the *Phoenix* could get there, followed so quickly by the last four destroyers that Ekatyia knew there had been no sudden change of command. Whoever was directing this battle was on that cruiser.

All five ships streaked away, heading for Alsea at top speed.