

## **THE CHRYSALIS BLOSSOMS**

*A TALE OF THE ALTERRAN LEGACY SERIES*

*OCCURRING BETWEEN VOLUMES 3 AND 4*

Microscopic tendrils pierced young Sud's sedated mind. Creeping along the shadowy synapses, they infused a chemical haze into her gray matter. Overstimulated neurons flashed, at times arcing with hyper energy. Her expanding mind strained to shape coherent thoughts from the torrent of a second lifeforce coming to take residence. Despite her diminishing consciousness, a primal fear took root, and she struggled against the drug-induced haze. It was overpowering. Something was being lost. Something vital: her unique essence. She hadn't expected the feelings of inconsolable loss. She was adrift in blackness, detached from not only the Alterran people but the universe itself.

The woman's overwhelmed essence bobbed helplessly within two raging rivers, each fighting for dominance. The horror of being untethered— her broken link with the Universal Consciousness —began to choke her, causing her to stir with approaching wakefulness. Each wave of terror was followed by euphoria that sank her consciousness, enabling her to tolerate the onslaught. When the images dimmed, she relaxed. But it began again. And again.

Now, her mind possessed faint early memories of tutoring at an island temple that resembled the temples of Baalbek. The memories were imbued with happiness, until they were interrupted by the terror of her island being torn apart with searing lava. Later images that tumbled through her mind were of hunting, dismembering speared animals, and primitive ritual. These frightened, even repulsed, her. The most vivid memories beheld a familiar, cherished face—Lil. Although he was Sud's betrothed, in memory he was her mate. Sud knew a young boy, Iskur, as intimately as if she had given birth with her present body.

Alana's life was now Sud's. Sud sensed a singular oneness had returned, and she no longer felt the pain of isolation. She and her bodymate shared the same ethereal link. It was the Alterran belief that within each person is a link enabling him or her to serve as the eyes and ears of the Universal Consciousness, through which the evolving universe comes to understand itself. In ancient legends, her ancestors referred to the connection with the divine as a soul. At human death, the entangled link retrieves this essence to rejoin the whole, and the whole is enriched by

the human experience. These philosophical precepts Sud understood. Despite the limitations placed on her social interactions, En.Ki had made Sud absorb the Teacher's complete training, as much as was permitted those with the highest Alterran ranking, so that Alana would be prepared for her new life.

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"Kosondra, she's stabilized." Ninhursag shrugged, feeling the tension in her shoulders. "I didn't expect so much resistance. We didn't force her." As a precaution, they had performed the delicate procedure in the rejuvenation chamber. A medical drone hovered over Sud's head, scanning the progress inside the brain and creating a holographic image. Whenever the creeping tendrils encountered a dam caused by a gap in Sud's inexperienced memory pathways, Ninhursag had to physically intervene. Clutching a pen to eject a microscopic thread, she completed the undeveloped connection, which permitted the free flow and mapping of new synapses.

"If ever I needed more proof of our genetic kinship with Earthlings, this is it," said Ninhursag. "This is something the infants don't exhibit." In the hologram, she poked the newly developing folds in her gray matter. "Memories are only part of the story. They work their magic on gene expression."

"It's the process that creates Alana's personality traits?"

"Precisely, it creates the entire, unique individual, even though she'll be a bodymate with Sud. It's magnificent to watch, isn't it?"

"Do you think Sud's personality will survive?"

"For a while. Their essence derives from the same master source, or so it's believed. Since a clone is a biological being, we don't think its connection is lost. Having no connection to the divine is why the Elders forbade synthetic beings."

Ninhursag had cloned the body as a mere vessel into which Ninhursag would inject Alana's memories. This was the only way to resurrect Lil's wife. When she'd drowned, her body had been carried out to sea and, when found, it had been far beyond the Alterrans' ability to rejuvenate. Cloning was an ancient, lost art and the memory installation was only applied to infants. However, for En.Ki's plan to work, Ninhursag had had to accelerate the clone's growth into puberty before installation. By keeping the clone isolated, they'd thought its personality

would remain a blank slate that wouldn't resist having Alana's rich memories overwrite its meager ones. But the plans had gone awry. Like Alana, Sud had been headstrong and resourceful. She had escaped and developed a distinct personality with a love attachment, not knowing that it was En.Lil in disguise as Semjaza. Sud didn't wish this mental suicide. She'd agreed only after obtaining Ninhursag's promise that a small part of her consciousness would survive. Alana, she'd been told, had a small son who needed his mother. The grieving Commander En.Lil, the named successor to the leadership of Alterra, would be her husband. They would be bodymates.

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Becoming wakeful, the patient lay flat, her mind unable to move her head, torso or limbs. She felt frigid despite the cloth warming her body. After a while, vibrations drew her attention. Through her drowsiness, she discerned a pattern in the soft tones. *Music*, came a thought in a language foreign to Alana. Yet she understood.

*An intruder*, thought Alana. *Only demons have such power.*

With as much dream force as she could muster, Alana demanded, *Who sent you?* A shamanic teacher had taught her to confront negative dream images. The haunts of dreams were as threatening to the sleeper as stalkers in daylight. Everything has meaning. But demons were no match for a determined Earthkeeper. And Alana was the strongest of the Earthkeepers.

*No one. It's me.*

No image accompanied the thought. The words were meek, uttered in a language that Lil had spoken to his guardsmen. At Khamlok, Alana hadn't understood his words, but now the meaning floated easily in her mind. *I will not be fooled. Where are you? Why do you stalk my dreams?* Being skilled in the art of wakeful dreaming, she forced a search through the murky, transitioning paths of Khamlok, but found that not even the faintest shadow betrayed the intruder's location. She felt something amiss, her mind crowded with fullness. *I feel another's spirit in my innermost space. That space is sacred. The dream snatcher must desire my bear totem.* Only the vilest of demons would steal life's essence by capturing a sacred totem. Alana's totem was the strongest, envied by many. Her totem had emboldened her to tackle her life's many adversities. Her secret totem song, learned through deep commune, vibrated in the same

harmonic tone of Mother Earth, empowering her to enter the spirit world. She alone could do so. Except, perhaps, for Drood. *I'm nothing if my totem is lost. I must defeat the demon.*

“Commander, she’s near to regaining consciousness.” A hand lovingly caressed her patient’s soft cheek. “She’s as lovely as before, but examine the change in her brow and jaw. She’s more confident.”

*Mother, thought Sud. Kosondra, thought Alana.*

*It's as if the thought comes from me. Yet it does not. Who are you?*

*I am Sud. You are Alana. This body was originally yours, and then it became mine. Now, you have returned. We share, although it's your life that they want this body to manifest.*

Alana, horrified, caused their pulse to quicken. *Those who passed to the ancestors have never returned. Only demons would be so evil.*

*I worry too, came the sincere reply. I'm no demon. I don't want your totem. You won't need it, you know. You're leaving that life behind. You're Alterran now. We share the same essence. In truth, it's the same as your totem.*

*I'll always need my totem! You said this body was originally mine.*

*Well, they tinkered with it when they made me. They never planned for me to survive.*

*Who is 'they'?*

*Ninhursag, Commander En.Ki, mother, I don't know who else. Commander En.Lil didn't know about me beforehand, which caused a lot of trouble. After he discovered the secret, he persuaded me to receive your memories. He wants YOU back.*

Sadness pervaded Alana’s senses. Sud hadn’t been permitted to live her own life, even though her fundamental traits were Alana’s. Sud’s essence swirled with courage. A stray memory of drowning stabbed their mind, its vividness shocking their system with adrenaline.

*I died. Sud's spirit rightfully controls this body. I am the intruder. But I live again for a purpose, or the spirits would not have permitted my totem to return to Earth. Sud, we'll find our way. I promise. I am the Earthkeeper.*

They felt a poke, followed by energy surging through their veins. Fingers and toes tingled with renewed life.

“Hey, there,” soothed Commander En.Ki. “I know you can hear me. Open your eyes.”

The patient lifted her heavy eyelids. The blur became the face of En.Ki, familiar to both. Sud remembered him as the attentive uncle who had read her stories. For Alana, the memory was

of his brotherly rivalry with her husband. Over his shoulder, they saw a woman. *Ninhursag*, thought Sud. *She did this to us.*

The Commander studied her eyes. “Sud, are you there?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Alana, let me know that you’re with us.”

Alana managed to project an air of authority. “Why am I here?”

Smiling at their success, En.Ki said, “Alana, when you’re able, I’ll explain.”

“Tell me now,” she ordered, trying to rise.

En.Ki exhaled and ran his fingers through his blond hair, weighing the risk of jolting her with a premature explanation. Alana was no ordinary Earthling, but finding your memories held by a new body with an existing occupant might tax even her.

“Lil loves you both. Alana, we brought you back for him and for Iskur. You should know that this body is pregnant with his child.”

“He raped me, thinking I was you,” said Sud, stifling tears.

Alana shrugged off the sorrow. She furrowed her brows while snippets of Sud’s memories flashed of the rape, the trial, and of Semjaza’s, or rather Lil’s, care for her.

“I know what you know. So, the child’s name is Nanna Sin, the moon child.” Raising her hand to scratch an itch at her hairline, she touched stitches. “What is this?”

Ninhursag answered, “We inserted a device. My brother wanted your mind to talk with his, just as you think thoughts with Sud.”

*Lil wants us to be connected always, thought Sud. He feels tremendous guilt about your death. He doesn’t want anything to separate us ever again. Alterrans aren’t used to permanent death. They can’t accept their inability to control everything.*

*Mindtalk? It must be what Lil had called mencomm.* In encountering the surprise of inhabiting a new body, Alana hadn’t noticed the distant whispers. When she focused on the En.Ki or Ninhursag, the whispers heightened into words.

*They are pleased with their handiwork. What else is there? So many strange things have happened since the hunt. If I’d hidden from Lil and his men, how different my life would have been. Chances are, I would have been offered to Drood’s son—that disgusting cannibal. I would have died from his beatings. Or I would have starved cold and alone after father went off to die. Without Lil’s help, all our women would have died in the Dane camp. I walked toward hope, no*

*matter how improbable, and there I found Lil. No matter how strange things seem, it's been for the best. But this is the strangest of all—living a second life, sharing a body with a different me. How can I accept this? But how can I not?*

Alana cleared her throat. “Can I hear the thoughts of everyone?”

“No,” said En.Ki, “only those with an implant. Only a select few have them.”

*Only a few, thought Alana. They have plans for me.*

“How is Iskur?” Alana asked. “Is he here? Can I see him?”

“He suffered,” said En.Ki, “as you’d expect of a child losing his mother. Lil abandoned him at first. Your friend, Maya, took care of him. Now that you’ll be a family again, the boy will recover. All will be well. You’ll see him soon.”

*I did this for the boy, thought Sud. He looked so very sad.*

Alana’s lips formed a determined line. “May I think alone?”

Ninhursag shook her head. “Over time. It will be give and take with Sud until then. Your personalities will eventually become as one.” At least she hoped this was true; she hadn’t downloaded memories into a grown clone before. “I’ll let you rest.”

“Wait,” said Alana. “I am Alterran now?”

“Yes. You’re able to marry Lil—”

Alana snapped, “—but I did.”

Ninhursag continued, “In an official Alterran ceremony. Now you may reign with him when he ascends. There will be no more opposition.”

*I feel your anger, but don't be mad. It's for the best. He must deal with his people as they are, not as he wishes they were. He's renaming you—I mean us—as Ninlil. Wait, don't get upset. I did at first, too. To him, it's not about control. It's a sign of our eternal love, more important than our marriage vows.*

*Well, maybe I'll get used to it.*

*No one knows you as Alana, anyway.*

*What? What happened to our people from Khamlok? She searched Sud's memories, and found that the girl didn't know. How odd that she'd spent so much time with him but she hadn't met them.*

*They isolated me, remember. I never saw anyone.*

*Right, sorry I mentioned that. I feel how much that upset you.*

*Yes, but that should be over now. Back to what I was saying, he said that he'd promised that you— we— would be his Queen of the Universe. I think he plans to turn us into a goddess—at least to the Earthlings where he's building his new civilization. Sumeria, he's named it.*

Alana retrieved Sud's memories for a deeper understanding. Intrigued, she accessed the learning that Sud had absorbed from the Teacher and felt an incredible exhilaration. So much knowledge. She learned about Baalbek, with hints from En.Ki's reports about En.Lil's plans for Sumeria. Earth civilization had been decimated by the floods, and destitute survivors were being gathered and taught to serve the Alterrans. *I have the power to help them.*

Alana inhaled deeply. *This new life is the rarest of gifts.*