

Besieged

by Sarah Ettritch

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Lesley moved away from the living room window and lifted her mug from an end table. Sleeping on yesterday's events hadn't helped at all, especially since she'd tossed and turned all night. What had Mo said? *It's not like we'll go to the notification meeting this afternoon and then it's over.* No, they were stuck with her—forever. Unless they decided to execute her.

She sipped her tziva and grimaced. Cold. She'd spent too much time gazing out the window, wondering if her life would ever make sense again.

Mo padded into the room, yawning into her hand. "It's almost 10:00. Why didn't you wake me?"

Lesley shrugged. "I figured you needed your sleep."

"How long have you been up?"

"About an hour and a half. What time did you finally drop off?"

"I don't know. Around 03:30, maybe? But then I woke up at 05:45, and 06:30, and 07:40."

Lesley could relate; she'd managed about three hours of broken sleep. "Did you have the same nightmare I had, about ending up in a triad with an Adams, or did that actually happen?" Not expecting an answer, she raised her mug. "Do you want some?"

"No, I think I'll get dressed and head home, see how Papa's feeling." Mo paused. "I'm not answering beeps today. I won't know what to say."

Yes, what would they say when their friends beeped to congratulate them? Everyone would assume that she and Mo were giddy with happiness and entering a new phase of their lives as Chosens. They were entering a new phase, all right, but not one to celebrate. At least their friends would be sympathetic and supportive. They'd know that she and Mo weren't weak in the Way, that they'd ended up in a horrible situation through no fault of their own. What would happen tomorrow, when the Chosen Council announced the weekly notifications and their military peers found out? What would Rymellans who didn't know them think?

Lesley slipped her arm around Mo and kissed the top of her head. "We'll get through this," she murmured, more to reassure herself than Mo.

Mo looked up at her. "How? And when will we be through it, exactly? I'm not seeing an end, here. Not one we can live with, anyway."

"Depending on how things go, that could change."

"Maybe," Mo said, frowning. "But we can't let anyone rush us into a decision. I know she's an Adams, and if I could, I'd make her disappear, but that doesn't mean I want us to present a sham case."

"I don't want that, either." Lesley steered Mo toward the hallway, wanting to get to the kitchen so she could dump the cold tziva and prepare a fresh jug. She could at least have hot tziva; she hadn't completely lost control of her life.

"Where are your parents?" Mo asked at the bottom of the stairs.

"Mama's in the study, working out the details of tonight's supper with the caterers." Mo snorted, making Lesley smile. Even though Mama had just

received the shock of her life and considered Jayne and her family to be beneath the Thompsons, she'd arrange a supper that would impress the Preeminent Ruler. "Papa had a case this morning. I doubt he would have scheduled it if he'd known what was going to happen."

"What about Jason?"

"He's out too, assisting on a case. Mama said he's staying with a friend tonight."

"Good. Tonight will be difficult enough without him coming home while they're still here."

She silently agreed.

"Anyway, I'll go get dressed." Mo patted Lesley's arm and thumped up the stairs, sounding like an elephant despite her size.

Lesley stared after her for a moment, then headed for the kitchen. Her comm unit beeped; her fingers tightened around the mug's handle when she read the name: Laura. She reluctantly pulled the unit from its holder and pressed the connect button.

"Good morning," Laura said cheerfully. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, I've been up for a while," Lesley said as she entered the kitchen, "though I did get up a little later than usual."

"I figured you'd be up late celebrating, that's why I waited until now to beep you."

She'd been up half the night, but not celebrating.

"Anyway, congratulations again. I know you and Mo—"

"Laura, I—"

"—will have a wonderful life together. I'm beeping to invite the two of you to supper. You'll be flooded with invitations, so I thought I'd ask before everyone else does."

Lesley poured the cold tziva into the recycling chute's liquid collector, set the mug on the counter, and desperately searched for the right words to tell Laura about the triad.

"I'd like to get to know Mo better," Laura continued, after waiting for Lesley to respond. "I only really know her through you. Now that I can treat you like a couple, I'm hoping that will change. So would you like to come for supper sometime next week?"

If not for the triad and its third member, Lesley would have immediately said yes. Mo's face tightened every time Laura's name came up in conversation. Lesley wanted her to get to know Laura, in the hope that Mo would eventually stop blaming her for their separation. They were to blame; they'd forced Laura to abruptly split them up.

"Lesley?" Laura prompted, puzzled by Lesley's silence.

"Um . . ." Laura knew about triads, but Lesley had no idea how she viewed them. Did she think they were unnatural and against the Way?

"Laura, what do you think about triads?"

"What?"

"Triads. Three Chosens Joining. What do you think about them?"

Silence. Then, "Why are you suddenly asking me about triads?"

Laura's voice was quiet, but hard. It set Lesley's heart pounding. She already regretted asking the question. If Laura ranted about how awful triads were, telling her would be even more awkward and embarrassing.

"What have you heard?" Laura barked.

"Nothing," Lesley said, confused by Laura's reaction. "Just forget the question." She hesitated, then forged ahead. "I have to tell you something. My notification meeting didn't go as I'd expected."

"What do you mean? Don't tell me Mo isn't your Chosen."

"No, she is. But . . . I have another Chosen. I'm in a triad. We're in a triad."

"What?"

"Mo and I, we're in a triad." Silence. "We're really shocked," Lesley said, compelled to fill the void. "The Chosen Council gave us a historical treatise to read. Triads have been volatile and Rymellans have treated them with suspicion, so we don't understand it. We're strong in the Way. I just hope everyone remembers that." Including Laura. "We're just—honestly, it doesn't feel real." Still no response. "Laura?"

"Will you be home later?"

"Yes. But we're hosting our, um, other Chosen for supper."

"What time?"

"She's arriving around 18:00."

"I'll drop by this afternoon. Finney out."

"Laura, wait!"

But she'd disconnected. Lesley lowered her comm unit in dismay. Laura hadn't ended a conversation with *Finney out* for ages. She was already distancing herself, and she hadn't heard about the Adams part yet.

Mo swallowed the last bit of oatmeal raisin cookie and grabbed another from the cookie jar. Okay, this really would be the last one, but she'd take the cookie jar with her in case she felt like another one later—or in five minutes. Cradling it in her arm as she nibbled on the cookie, she strode from the kitchen and stopped short, almost bumping into Mary. "I didn't hear the front door," she said, surprised to see her. "No appointments today?"

Mary ignored the question. "I want to talk to Papa. Where is he?"

"He's not here." She'd hoped to talk to him too, but according to Nathan, Papa had left that morning, saying only that he'd be back by four.

Mary frowned and eyed the cookie jar.

"You want one?"

"No." She wandered into the living room.

Mo followed her. "He won't be back until four," she said when Mary sank onto the sofa.

Mary groaned. "I have to leave before then. Tell him I'll beep him later."

Mo expected her to leave, but Mary stayed put. "Why don't you sit down for a minute?" Mary said with a tight smile.

Great. She didn't feel like talking, especially about the triad. Nevertheless, Mo lowered herself into a chair. She took the time to open the cookie jar and pull out three more cookies before setting it on the end table.

"So how are you feeling?" Mary asked.

She chewed a piece of cookie while pondering what to say. "Still in shock, I guess."

"Have you and Lesley talked any more about CT134?"

Oh, so Mary didn't care about her after all. She should have known. "Since yesterday? We told you, it's too early to make a decision."

Mary leaned forward. "You hadn't met her at that point. Now you have."

"And it's still too early to make a decision. We don't know enough yet."

"Lesley will be a commander. She'll have to make decisions like this quickly."

"Les will deal with criminals. We're not talking about a criminal here."

"Oh, don't be so naïve," Mary said with a snicker. "Adams is the daughter of two criminals, two criminals who committed Chosen Violations. It's only a matter of time."

"If it was only a matter of time, they would already have executed her!" Mo snapped, then shoved another cookie into her mouth. She shouldn't defend the woman who could take Les away from her, but Mary's lack of concern for anyone but herself irritated her. And no way would she tell Mary what Les had told her, that some Rymellans had wanted to execute Jayne after the Incident. She'd never hear the end of it. "She's still alive. That says something."

"We'll see what happens when she's Joined," Mary responded ominously. "Her parents took two other Rymellans down with them. How many will she take down? What if it's Lesley?"

"It won't be! Les is strong in the Way. And don't you dare say it could be me." Mo stood, already tired of the conversation. "I'm going to the Trading Centre." She wanted to stock up on a few things before the triad went public.

"I'm sorry," Mary called as Mo reached the hallway. "I know how much of a blow it must be to find out that Lesley doesn't belong only to you."

Mo froze. "Nothing will change between us."

"You say that now, but who knows what the future will hold?"

"Nothing will change, Mary," Mo said, whirling to face her. "We don't have to have a relationship with her."

"She's your Chosen. You'll fall for her whether you want to or not."

"No, I won't. The way I feel about Les . . . I could never feel that way

about someone else.”

Mary nodded. “I can see why. Lesley’s a beautiful woman.”

“Yes, she is.” Though that wasn’t why Mo loved her.

“It’s easy to see why women would be attracted to her. Your other Chosen, for example.”

Did Mary think she was stupid? “I know what you’re trying to do and you can stop it right now.”

Mary placed her hand on her chest. “I’m only speculating about what it’ll be like to have three Chosens Joined together. I’m sure Lesley will rebuff any advances your other Chosen makes.”

“Of course she will. If she wanted to be with someone else, she had plenty of opportunity during our separation.”

“You’re right, of course,” Mary said soothingly. “But this Adams woman, she’s not just anybody. She’s Lesley’s Chosen. The Chosen Council says they’re meant for each other.”

“She’s my Chosen too, and I wouldn’t be interested,” Mo said harshly. “I’m off to the Trading Centre.”

She stomped down the hallway, grabbed her cloak, and stormed out the front door, mad at herself for letting Mary get to her. It would be nice if Mary supported her instead of playing on her insecurities, but all she cared about was herself. When Les had said they wanted more time, she’d meant more than a few hours. Not even a day had passed since their notification meetings and Mary was already applying pressure. What next? Would Matthew show up later and lay a load of guilt on her? Would Papa duck out of supper?

And now Finney was getting in on the act, too. According to Les, Finney didn’t know about Jayne but was already upset enough to want to discuss the triad in person. When she heard the rest of the story, she’d probably urge Les to execute, not wanting an Adams in her sector. Mo didn’t want Jayne in their lives either, and if there was a way to get rid of her without executing her, she’d be all for it. If they were lucky, Jayne would say or do something that would make it easy for them; make it clear that she was a threat to the Way and that not exercising CT134 would be against the Way. If they were lucky . . .

She chewed her thumbnail. She hated thinking that way, but she hated being in a triad. She felt guilty for hoping that Jayne would give them a reason, but would be relieved if Jayne did. Les having another Chosen terrified her, but that other Chosen was also hers. So how in the flaming Argamon was she supposed to deal with this without losing her mind? No matter what she thought or felt, it was wrong. And right. Argh! She hopped on her bike and pedalled toward her aviacraft.

A cloud of dust up ahead caught her attention. Papa seemed to be doing some stomping of his own. She slammed on her brakes and skidded to a stop in front of him. “I thought you were only coming back at four.”

He squinted at her. "I can't focus. Usually I can shut everything out at the workshop, but not today. Two shirts, ruined! Andrew shooed me out before I could do any more damage. Where are you going?"

"The Trading Centre. I want to go before—"

"Before everyone's whispering about you? How are we supposed to make sense of this mess?" He shook his head and stared at his feet. "I've been thinking a lot about your mama today. Wondering how she'd feel, what she'd do."

"What do you think she'd want me to do?" Mo asked, not sure she wanted to know.

He blew out some air, then lifted his head. "She'd probably want to give her—Adams—a chance. She *was* an indoctrinator, she'd want the letter of the article followed. But she'd also want to protect her name. I wish she were here. She was always the stronger one."

"You're saying that Mama would want what Les and I have decided? To wait and see?"

"Yes, but not everyone in the family agrees, and I'm the one they'll complain to."

"Just tell them you're supporting me. I'm the one with the power to exercise the article." Others could call for Jayne's execution without considering the consequences, but not her and Les.

He skirted around the bike and gave her a clumsy hug. "Here I am worried about me when you're the one . . . well, you're the one whose life will never be the same." He stepped back and gripped her arms. "You seem so calm."

Numb, more like. "Only because I don't quite believe it. It's still not real." Right now, she couldn't think past tonight's supper. One day—no, one hour at a time was all she could handle. Maybe part of her hoped the triad would somehow disappear and she'd never have to believe it.

"It'll be real tonight," Papa warned.

"Yeah." Could he say awkward? She was determined to remain objective, to view supper as an opportunity to observe Jayne and learn more about her, but looking for what? A reason to exercise the article that she and Les could live with? "Tonight we're going to tell her about us. Our relationship."

"Maybe that will help you decide what to do."

"Les said that she'll probably say what she thinks we want her to say. She knows about the article." And unless she was an idiot, she had to know that she was the prime candidate for execution.

"That's true. The real test will be time."

But they only had two years to decide about CT134. Could Jayne keep up an act that long and only reveal her true self when it was too late?

"I should let you get on," Papa said gruffly. "I think I'll visit the crypt. Your mama can't hear me, but I feel like talking to her anyway."

If there was a chance Mama would answer, Mo would be there in a shot. "Mary's at the house, looking for you."

Papa grimaced. "I'll go around." He pressed his lips together.

"What?"

"I know I said your mama would want to give her a chance, but if we open the door to this woman, will we be letting in a wolf in sheep's clothing?"

If they were, Mo fervently hoped they'd recognize the wolf for what it was before it tore her, Les, and their families apart.

Lesley snapped off her station's monitor when Mama tapped at her half-open bedroom door. For the last hour, half of her mind had read background material on articles related to triads, while the other half had worried about Laura's reaction. She'd heard the knock at the front door; she knew why Mama was here. "Yes?"

Mama leaned around the door to peer into the room. "Commander Finney is here to see you."

"I'll be right down."

"She's waiting outside. She didn't want to come in."

"Why not?"

"She said she doesn't feel like sitting down, she feels like walking."

"Oh." Lesley didn't know what to make of that.

She followed Mama downstairs with a heavy heart. Losing Laura's friendship and respect would not only hurt, it would put her on the wrong side of her commanding officer and a soon-to-be commodore. And this would be the worst time to lose a valued advisor she desperately needed.

As she buttoned her cloak, she wandered into the living room and surreptitiously glanced out the window. Laura stood rocking on her heels, her back to the house and her hands clasped behind her. Her rigid posture wasn't a good sign. Despite telling herself that Laura's view of the triad could change with time, Lesley still felt apprehensive.

When she swung open the front door, Laura looked over her shoulder. Her expression gave Lesley pause. She looked almost fearful. Did she think Lesley was a threat to the Way?

"Let's walk," Laura said.

Lesley fell into step with her, and after considering and rejecting several conversation openers, decided to wait for Laura to speak.

"I'm sorry about my reaction earlier," Laura said. "The triad came as a bit of a shock."

"I should have prepared you, not just blurted it out like that," Lesley said, feeling herself relax. "I didn't know how to tell you."

"I'm not sure you could have prepared me."

"I could have led up to it better, but I just wanted to get it out. It was

difficult for me to say.”

Laura cleared her throat. “And now it’s my turn to tell you something . . . difficult. Difficult for me, anyway.”

Lesley kept her eyes focused on the path ahead. Perhaps she’d read too much into Laura’s apology.

“You said that you’ve read a historical treatise about triads?” Laura asked.

“Yes, the Chosen Council gave it to us. A condensed version, but enough to get across that triads have been volatile and that not everyone is comfortable with them. Some Rymellans say they’re against the Way, but the Chosen Council obviously doesn’t think they are.”

“Did it say much about the last triad?”

Lesley played along, suspecting that Laura had fallen back to a comfortable subject—history and the Chosen Tradition—until she was ready to say whatever was on her mind. “It was successful. Fourteen daughters.” The Thompson triad certainly wouldn’t have fourteen daughters. But she was getting ahead of herself. The Thompson triad might not Join.

“Did it say what their names were?”

“No, it wasn’t that detailed. We want to find out more about them, though. After all, they succeeded.” She and Mo had wondered how old the Chosens were when they Joined, among other things.

“I can tell you a bit about them.”

Lesley wasn’t surprised.

“Their names were Eleanor, Miranda, and Charlotte.” Laura paused. “Finney.”

“Finney?” Lesley blurted, stopping in her tracks. “You’re a descendant of the last triad?”

Two steps ahead, Laura turned to look at her. “One of many. They did have fourteen daughters over two hundred years ago, though I’m sure there have been a number of Solitary descendants.”

“Is this the difficult thing you wanted to tell me?” Lesley asked slowly, not understanding why Laura would find it difficult to tell *her*, of all people.

“It’s reared its ugly head twice in my life, so I’m a little sensitive about it,” Laura said sheepishly. “Once at the Learning Academy when a classmate found out, and then at the Military Academy.” She shook her head. “When I was having problems at the Learning Academy and wished I’d never heard the word triad, my mama suggested that I learn about them—Eleanor and company. The more I did, the more proud I was—am—to have them as ancestors.”

“That’s how you became interested in the history of the Chosen Tradition,” Lesley stated.

Laura nodded.

Lesley wondered if she would have reacted as matter-of-factly to Laura’s revelation if Laura had told her last week. She hoped so. A thought

struck her. "Did Morton have anything to do with it rearing its head at the Military Academy?"

"He found out when he dug into my background after my run-in with him, the one I told you about. Maybe I should have mentioned it, but . . . You asked why he has a bad attitude toward me." Laura bit her lip.

"And you told me. You didn't lie or hide anything. You weren't under any obligation to tell me about your family history." Perhaps she'd ask more about the consequences of Morton's discovery later. Right now, she had her own triad to worry about.

"When you told me you're in a triad, all that ran through my mind was how triads would be all over the monitors and on everyone's lips, and you know at least half of it will be negative and ignorant, maybe more."

"I'm expecting most of it to be negative, if not all of it," Lesley said.

"Why?" Laura asked. "Rymellans are familiar with you. You have a great reputation. Perhaps I'm being too pessimistic and this triad will be the one that finally puts all the nay-saying to rest."

Lesley doubted it. If anything, it would provide the naysayers with more ammunition. "You didn't give me a chance earlier to tell you about the third triad member."

Laura's brow furrowed. "Why would the third triad member make a difference?"

Now it was Lesley's turn to say something difficult. She swallowed. "Remember when we were at the early morning meeting on the day we captured Owen, and Hall told us about the Adams children?"

"Yes," Laura said, looking even more confused.

"Well, I met one of them yesterday. At the Chosen House."

Laura's face froze. She stared at Lesley and opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

"So now you see how bad this is. An Adams and a triad." And she and Mo, caught up in it.

"Bad?" Laura exclaimed, finally finding her voice. One hand went to her head. She stepped to the left, then to the right, then faced Lesley again and dropped her arm to her side. "Lesley, you will be under so much pressure."

"You mean about Article CT134?" Lesley asked.

"Yes."

So Laura had jumped right to that. Lesley wanted to share her suspicions about the triad, but held back. Telling Laura she thought the triad might not be authentic would be crossing over the line. Mo, yes. They were Chosens; communication between them was privileged. Not so with Laura. Lesley trusted her, but Laura's primary concern would be the Way. She wouldn't put Laura into a situation that could force her to make an agonizing choice; friends didn't do that to each other. Laura couldn't report what she didn't know. "We're already under pressure from our families," she said.

"Not everyone, but a few."

"You do understand the article?" Laura said. "She has to threaten the triad to the point that her continued existence pretty much guarantees that the triad will fail. You can't execute her on a whim."

"I know, and we don't intend to."

"Good, because I'm the one who'd have to do it, since you're the Principal," Laura said, patting her chest with both hands.

"You won't be C3's commander for much longer."

"I will be in charge of this sector until Hall finds a replacement, which could take a while. So you listen! I don't hesitate to stick criminals who violate the Way. I'd do anything to protect the Way, that's why I'm in the military. I didn't join Interior and rise to commander to stick Rymellans who haven't committed a violation. So I do not want to be called to an execution site because the three of you couldn't work something out." Her face was red and her breathing rapid.

"You won't be," Lesley said, lifting placating hands. "The article says the Chosen has to threaten the viability of the triad."

Laura grimaced. "That's too open to interpretation for my taste, especially in this case. What does 'threaten the triad' mean? If she disagrees with you, is that threatening the triad? How about if you have an argument or she gets along better with one of you and the other one doesn't like it? Will I be beeped then?"

"No!"

"It's a stupid article!" Laura said, surprising Lesley with her honesty. "I'm not saying I wouldn't uphold it," she quickly added, "but it doesn't belong in the Tradition. I know the history. I know that triads have been . . . problematic at times. That shouldn't mean we give Chosens permission to kill each other."

"In this case, I'm sure some Rymellans will be glad the article exists and will hope that Mo and I do exercise it," Lesley said carefully. "Including some in our own families."

"Sometimes the most courageous thing you can do is nothing." Laura met Lesley's eyes. "This could be one of those times. And it could get rough."

It already was.

"So, an Adams is your Chosen," Laura said, sounding as if she couldn't quite believe it. "I'll be honest, when Hall told us about the children, I—" Her comm unit beeped; she glanced at it. "Hall," she mumbled, pulling the unit from its holder. She walked out of Lesley's earshot. Lesley waited, relieved that Laura would still be a strong ally, especially given her ancestry.

Laura strolled back to her. "I have to go. Listen, can I tell Hall about this, give him some warning?"

"Go ahead." She'd rather Hall learn about the triad from Laura than from the Chosen Council's weekly announcement.

"I'll tell him to keep it to himself, though I guess it'll be public soon enough. I'll beep you tomorrow. I want to hear more about her—um, Adams. And I guess I'll have three supper guests. We'll have to arrange a time. And remember, I'm living proof that triads can work," she called over her shoulder as she walked away and waved.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Lesley called back. Concern now tempered her relief over Laura's reaction. Pressure to not exercise CT134 could be just as bad as pressure to exercise it. Everyone seemed to have a personal stake in what happened—or at least felt they did—but only she and Mo would suffer the consequences. And Jayne. As much as Lesley would like to, she couldn't forget about Jayne.

Carol inserted the top end of her comm unit into the trade station and punched in her intended destination. Seconds later the station beeped. She withdrew her unit and moved away. "I don't know why we're taking such an early train," she said as Ronald paid for his passage. "We're rushing there to sit in a waiting area for half an hour."

"I don't want them to have to wait for us," Jayne said. The less she aggravated them, the better.

"And we'll be sitting twiddling our thumbs after a three-hour train ride," Carol muttered. "A three-hour train ride with you and no sketchbook. How long do you think you can keep that up?"

Jayne stepped toward the trade station and inserted her comm unit.

"The longer you leave it, the harder it'll be to tell them," Ronald said.

"I don't feel comfortable telling them right now," she mumbled as she entered the code for Station C3-8.

"Look, I know you're sensitive about it, but they're your Chosens. You can't hide it from them forever," Carol said. "It'll be a strain you don't need."

Jayne was only half listening. Why hadn't the station beeped and the *Thank you. Please remove your comm unit* message appeared on the display? She sensed someone looking over her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Ronald asked.

"I don't know, it's not—" The station beeped, but her relief turned to dismay when she read the display: *Your request could not be completed. Please remove your comm unit and see the station attendant.* Why did this have to happen now? They'd be late!

"Are you sure you have enough credits?" Carol asked as they walked to the station's information counter.

"Positive." She'd checked earlier to make sure.

The station's attendant frowned when they approached. "Yes?"

Jayne swallowed. "I, uh, tried to trade for passage, and the trade station told me to see you."

"Give me your comm unit," he demanded, holding out his hand.

Carol shifted her weight. Jayne hoped she wouldn't choose today to get snotty, as Carol sometimes did when others treated Jayne rudely. She gave the attendant her comm unit.

He scowled and gingerly held it, as if he could catch something. "Where are you going?"

"C3-8."

"Just a moment." He whirled, pushed open the swinging door behind him, and disappeared, presumably into another room.

Great, there went her comm unit. "We'll be late."

"We'll have plenty of time, even if we miss the next train," Ronald said.

"You sure you have enough credits?" Carol asked again.

"Yes," Jayne hissed, then rubbed her temples. She watched others stride up to the trade stations, pay for their passage, and carry on their way. The station she'd used wasn't rejecting anybody else's request, so it couldn't be out of order. She tried to wait patiently, but grew more agitated with every passing minute. What if he never came back? He had her comm unit. "Where is he?" she said to nobody in particular.

"This is getting ridiculous." Ronald leaned over the counter. "Excuse me," he called. "We have a train to catch."

Jayne stared at the door, willing the attendant to reappear, but he didn't.

"Excuse me!" Ronald called again.

"Jayne," Carol said urgently.

Jayne spun toward her. "What?"

Carol jerked her chin at something over Jayne's shoulder. She turned to look. A lieutenant and sub-lieutenant were making a beeline for them.

"I told you!" the attendant said, suddenly back at the counter. He pointed to Jayne and looked at the lieutenant. "You said if she bought passage to C3 again, to let you know. Well, I went one better. I put a watch on it, so she'd have to come see me if she tried."

The lieutenant nodded to him. "You did well. Thank you." He shifted his attention to Jayne and motioned for her and her companions to move away from the counter with him, out of the attendant's earshot. "Why are you going to C3?" the lieutenant asked.

Jayne hesitated, not wanting to tell him about the triad. Carol jumped in. "Do you monitor everyone's travel this closely? Travelling to C3 isn't a violation."

"No, but we can't be too careful." The lieutenant looked down his nose at Carol. "Some Rymellans require more monitoring than others."

"Did you hear that, Jayne? You're a Rymellan today!" Carol exclaimed.

The lieutenant's face tightened.

"Carol, please!" Jayne placed a restraining hand on Carol's arm, then quickly answered the lieutenant, hoping to divert his attention away from

Carol. "We're going to visit someone."

"In C3?" the lieutenant said incredulously.

"Yes, we're going for supper."

"Is this mystery person Joined?" the sub-lieutenant asked, his eyes narrowing. "Four were executed during the Incident and there are three here," he murmured to his partner.

"I beg your pardon!" Ronald said. "I resent the implication."

"Then perhaps you should be more careful about the company you keep," the lieutenant said, his eyes still on Jayne. "Who are you visiting?"

Why did she have the feeling that her answer would only make things worse? She hesitated again.

"Lesley Thompson," Ronald said. "Lieutenant Commander Lesley Thompson. She invited us for supper."

The lieutenant stared at them. "And what about yesterday? You were alone," he said to Jayne. "Were you visiting her then, too?"

"I saw her, yes."

Disbelief was written all over his face. "And let me guess, tomorrow you'll be heading to D5 to have tziva with the Preeminent Ruler." He turned to the sub-lieutenant. "We'll have a good story to tell at the outpost tonight." The sub-lieutenant shook his head as the lieutenant stepped toward Jayne. "You're apparently determined to get yourselves into trouble, and I'm happy to oblige." He grabbed Jayne's arm. "Let's take them in."

"I'm telling the truth!" Jayne cried as the sub-lieutenant moved toward Ronald.

"Do you think we're that stupid, that we'd tell you something you can easily refute?" Carol said when the lieutenant reached for her arm.

"I think you're all having a laugh at the military's expense," the lieutenant replied.

"And what if we're not? Do you want to be the one to explain to the lieutenant commander why you hauled off her supper guests?"

"Don't you think you should at least beep her?" Ronald added. "I assume you'll end up doing that at some point. You can't strike us without verifying that we're lying."

Ronald was right, but Jayne wasn't sure which she'd prefer: being struck, or having Lesley dragged into this mess. Article CT134 loomed. Then again, if they didn't show up for supper . . . She inwardly sighed. They might as well just take her to an execution site and get it over with.

"Maybe we *should* beep her," the sub-lieutenant said uncertainly, letting go of Ronald's arm. "What if they're telling the truth?"

Jayne winced when the lieutenant tightened his grip on her arm. "Oh sure, that's exactly what they want us to do," he said, "bother her with this nonsense so they can laugh at us."

"This one's right, though." The sub-lieutenant jerked his thumb at Ronald. "She'll be beeped anyway."

"Not by us." The lieutenant's grip relaxed. "I know, I'll beep Ramsey, see what he thinks."

Oh great, now they were involving E6's commander. The lieutenant let go of Jayne and Carol. "Stay with them," he said to his subordinate, then pulled out his comm unit and walked away.

Jayne rubbed her arm and refused to look at the sub-lieutenant hovering in her peripheral vision. Carol sighed.

The lieutenant rejoined them. "He's beeping her." His eyes bored into Jayne. "And he said it will give him great pleasure to throw the three of you back into the Indoctrination Academy for a refresher stay."

Jayne exchanged a sidelong glance with Carol, but kept her mouth shut. Would Lesley tell Ramsey the truth? If she denied it, Ramsey would know that she'd lied the moment the triad became public knowledge. But since he didn't care when his people struck Jayne for breathing, why would he care if Lesley had her thrown into the Indoctrination Academy? And what would stop Lesley from turning around and using the situation to show that Jayne was weak in the Way? They could be plotting that very scenario right now.

She started to fidget. When the lieutenant leaned to his left to shoo away a couple of gawkers, she glimpsed the clock over the platform entrance behind him. If they didn't board the next train, they'd definitely be late. What was taking so long?

Jayne tensed when the lieutenant's comm unit beeped. He moved away again, gesturing with his free hand as he talked. A minute later, he returned. She searched his face.

"So?" the sub-lieutenant said.

The lieutenant's upper lip curled. "He said to let them board the train."

Surprise flickered across the sub-lieutenant's face. "So she's actually visiting Thompson?"

"I don't know. All he said was to let them go to C3."

"The attendant still has her comm unit," Carol said.

Jayne silently thanked her. Too focused on making the next train, she'd forgotten about her comm unit and would have boarded the train without it.

Without a word, the lieutenant led them back to the counter. The attendant straightened and eyed Jayne smugly. "Deduct passage to C3 and then give her comm unit back to her," the lieutenant said.

The attendant's eyes widened. He opened his mouth, then clamped it shut and did what he was told.

"And remove the watch on C3," the lieutenant said as Jayne accepted her comm unit. "If she wants to go to C3 again, let her."

"If that's what you want me to do," the attendant said stiffly.

"It is." The lieutenant whirled and walked away, motioning for the sub-lieutenant to follow.

"What, no sorry?" Carol said sarcastically.

Jayne was already heading toward their train's platform. "Come on," she said over her shoulder. As she bounded down the stairs, the absurdity hit her: she was rushing for the train so she wouldn't be late for supper with two military who were supposedly her Chosens.

The train was pulling into the station when they reached the platform. They found two pairs of seats facing each other. Jayne sat on her hands. "You should have brought your sketchbook," Carol said, frowning at her. "You can't keep it a secret forever."

"I might not have to," Jayne said. "Especially after what just happened."

"You really think they'll exercise CT134?"

"Carol," she sighed, "they're a couple."

"You don't know that for sure."

Yes, she did. Either that, or they'd really hit it off during their notification lunch. "Trust me, they are. Even if I wasn't . . . me, they wouldn't want me around. And remember what we talked about?" She'd told Carol and Ronald about her suspicion that the triad had been deliberately arranged, something she wouldn't dare repeat on the train, even though nobody was sitting near them.

"I don't know, if they—" Carol waved her hands around to suggest unknown schemers—"wanted to get rid of you, they'd just get rid of you. They wouldn't have to dream up some elaborate scheme to do it."

Ronald snorted. "In other words, no need to worry, Jayne. If they really wanted to, they could kill you anytime."

Carol burst into laughter and squeezed his arm. "Now you know why I'm not a counsellor," she gasped before turning her attention back to Jayne. "But seriously, you have to let your Chosens get to know you."

She'd rather take Counsellor Morris's advice—keep her head down and go along with whatever Lesley and Mo wanted. The fewer excuses she gave them to kill her, the harder it would be for them. Maybe.

Jayne jumped when her comm unit beeped, then stared at it in surprise. The only person who ever beeped was sitting across from her. She pulled the unit from its holder, read *Lt. Cmdr. L. Thompson*. "It's her! Lesley!" she shrieked, resisting the urge to hurl the comm unit away as if it were a poisonous snake.

"Answer it!" Carol snapped.

She pressed the connect button, her heart pounding. "Um, hello?"

"It's Lesley. Did you make it to the train all right?"

"Yes, we did. We're on the train now." She paused. "I'm sorry they had to beep you."

"I told Commander Ramsey about the triad," Lesley said, her voice even. "I figured that would allay any concerns they have about you travelling to C3."

Jayne stifled a groan. What had Ramsey said?

"I guess Mo and I will see you at the train station in a few hours, then."

"Yes. Thank you," Jayne said, then wanted to kick herself for sounding dumb.

"Good-bye." Lesley terminated the connection.

"See? That's a good sign," Carol said as Jayne slid the comm unit into its holder. "Two good signs. She not only set Ramsey straight, she beeped to see if you were all right."

"She's just being polite," Jayne said, sitting on her hands again.

"That's better than being rude. Anyway, we've already had our run-in with the military, so the day can only improve," Carol said cheerfully, settling back into her seat.

Jayne stared out the window, watching the tunnel lights whip by. She'd like to believe Carol, but considering that one wrong word could lead to an execution site, she couldn't. With Article CT134 hanging over her head, the day could get worse. Much, much worse.

Jason tensed. Someone was coming, the hallway carpet muffling their footsteps as they approached Advocate Phillips's waiting room. He forced himself to look at the doorway. A man strode past and the footsteps faded away. Jason slowly exhaled.

Ever since he'd arrived, he'd had the irrational fear that Lesley would suddenly appear. He knew she wouldn't; she was nowhere near Phillips's office. He gripped the arms of the wooden chair. No, she was at home, preparing for supper. The thought of an Adams on the estate made him sick. Lesley must be in shock, or she'd be here, not planning to give Adams a flaming guided tour of the house. She'd better not show Adams his room. He'd shut the door, hoping to send a message, but Lesley might be too out of it to understand.

More footsteps. He tensed again, then felt dizzy with relief when Mary walked in. "Where have you been? Our appointment's in a couple of minutes."

Mary sat in the chair next to his and crossed her legs. "I'm on time," she said, unperturbed.

"Barely." He stared at Phillips's office door and almost jumped when it opened.

Phillips and another Rymellan strolled into the waiting room. "The amendment should be posted within two weeks," Phillips was saying.

The woman with him smiled. "Thank you."

"Always a pleasure to serve the Way." He nodded to her and turned to Jason. "Jason! Nice to see you again."

Jason stood and swept his arm toward Mary. "This is Mary Middleton."

Phillips nodded to her. "A pleasure. Please, come in." They filed into his office. "I have to admit, our conversation yesterday left me very curious." He gestured to the two chairs in front of his desk and sat in his own chair. "What can I do for you?"

After glancing at Mary to see if she wanted to start, Jason cleared his throat. "As I said yesterday, I'm here for my sister, Lesley. She received her Chosen Papers a few days ago and had her notification meeting yesterday. I couldn't tell you everything when we spoke because not all the Chosens had been notified."

"Not notified? But you contacted me in the afternoon."

"I know, but we have an unusual situation on our hands."

"Hold on." Phillips pulled a pad toward him and poised a pen over the paper. "Start from the beginning."

"Lesley and Mo—um, Ramona Middleton—"

"My sister," Mary said.

"—are Chosens, and both families are pleased with the match. Our sisters have been involved for a long time, though they split up when they turned twenty-five, of course."

"It sounds like congratulations are in order," Phillips said, confusion plain on his face as he scribbled on the pad.

"That would be true if they weren't in a triad."

Phillips stopped writing. "A triad?"

"Do you know what that is?" Mary asked.

"I do. I specialized in the Chosen Tradition in my final year and have advocated or consulted on the few cases related to it since I graduated."

Jason nodded. "That's why I contacted you."

"There hasn't been a triad in over two hundred years."

"Until yesterday," Mary said.

Phillips cocked his head. "The only reason I can think of for you being here is Article CT134. I can't think of any other reason why you'd want or need to involve an advocate."

"You're right." Jason paused, wanting to choose his words carefully. "Lesley and Mo don't know we're here. They're understandably in shock."

"We all are," Mary said.

"We want to prepare a case for the execution of the third Chosen, so they can move quickly once they've decided to execute."

"Don't you think it's a little soon for that?" Phillips asked. "Why are you so sure they'll want to execute?"

Jason gulped. "The third Chosen is an Adams."

The blood drained from Phillips's face. "Are you telling me that your sisters are in a triad with one of the Adams children?" he asked, his voice husky.

"I am."

"Unfortunately," Mary murmured.

Phillips dropped his pen and leaned back in his chair. "That's unbelievable! Not that I'm questioning the Chosen Council. It included Article CT134 in the Tradition for cases like this."

"That's what we said!" Mary exclaimed, pointing to herself and then to Jason.

"You can imagine how horrified the families are," Jason said. "Our sisters are devastated. They're just going through the motions right now."

"Understandable," Phillips said. "You know, we tried to execute the children after the Incident. I helped prepare one of the cases. The Adamses spat on everything we hold dear, and who knows what they taught their children. It seemed clear to me and to many others that we'd all be safer if we rid Rymel of their existence. But the overseers didn't see it that way. I wonder if any of them will regret turning down our petitions when they hear about the triad." He shook his head. "Your poor sisters."

"Now you understand why the first thing we did was book an appointment with you," Jason said.

"Yes. They must be going through a terrible time. I'm sure your support means a lot to them."

Jason shifted in his seat.

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Phillips continued. "We said the Adams line was horribly tainted, and it turns out we were right."

"Exactly!" Jason said, nodding vigorously. "I just said yesterday that whenever an Adams is involved in a Joining, something goes wrong."

"So can you make a case?" Mary asked.

Phillips snorted and picked up his pen. "In my sleep, and I'll be happy to do so. The Way has just handed me the opportunity to reverse a bad decision made by short-sighted overseers, and to eliminate a dire threat to the Way in the process. I won't squander it."

Jason shot Mary a smug look.

"Now, I can see why expediency is critical, but we'll be proposing that someone who hasn't violated any articles be executed, so we can't rush this case."

Mary slapped the arm of her chair. "Would you want your family spending time with an Adams?"

"The article's in the Tradition," Jason said. "And we're talking about an Adams. How much of a case will we need?"

"Their reputations are on the line and both family names will be sullied. We have to move quickly, to minimize the damage," Mary said, her voice rising.

"That woman will be in my home tonight," Jason added. "In my home!" he repeated hoarsely.

Mary opened her mouth, but closed it when Phillips held up his hand. "I understand your concerns. Believe me, if I were in your position, I'd share them. I *do* share them, and so will all Rymellans. But we'll only get the one

chance with the overseers, as you well know, Jason. And given that we've already been turned down once, we don't want to blow our chances this time because we're impatient." He bowed his head to write notes. "The children had their ages on their side last time. Her age won't protect her this time."

"Until yesterday, I didn't even know there were any Adams children," Jason said. "It came as a complete shock."

"I can imagine. Rymellans will share your shock when this goes public tomorrow."

"We were hoping the triad wouldn't be a triad by then," Mary said.

"Unfortunately I can't move that quickly," Phillips said with a small smile. "But I'll clear my calendar, make this my top priority."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"Who's the Principal?"

"Lesley."

Phillips made a note. "If my memory serves correctly, I met her once. I gave a talk to the Chosen Tradition group at the Military Academy. I believe she was there. Ironic that she'd end up in a triad with an Adams."

Jason chuckled. "I don't think she quite appreciates the irony right now. Perhaps when it's all over."

"Quite."

Mary leaned forward. "This case. I assume it will describe why Adams is a threat to the Way?"

"Of course," Phillips said. "In accordance with the article, the case has to show that the triad won't be viable if the Chosen in question remains a member. An unstable triad is a threat to the Way. So if I can show that a triad with Adams won't be viable, and I believe I can easily do that, then I've shown that Adams is a threat to the Way, a key point if we want her executed. It's not a difficult case. But as I said, we'll only get the one chance, so I want to be thorough, make sure I've covered everything. I'll also consult with several of my colleagues. I'm sure they'll all be eager to help."

He swivelled toward his comm station. "Give me a second," he murmured, tapping away at the station's keys. "Ah, yes, here's the case I worked on just after the Incident." He made a note on the pad, then pressed a button on his comm station. A familiar click indicated that a connection had been established. "Herbert? I want you to contact the archives. I want everything they've got on Article CT134. Every case, opinion, dramatization, amendment, and anything else you can think of. And send me everything they have on the Adams Incident, too."

"The Adams Incident!" Herbert sputtered.

"Yes. Most of the records are sealed, but get what you can. I also want all the information you can find on Jayne Adams. J-a-y-n-e. Find out her sector of residence and send Julie over there to see what she can dig up. I have a feeling that, as of tomorrow, many Rymellans will be anxious to talk

to us. Have her drop by a military outpost, see if anyone is willing to share any information about Adams' record."

"I will."

"And Herbert, this is your top priority. Drop everything else." Phillips terminated the connection and swung back to Jason and Mary. "It may take a day or so to retrieve the material related to CT134, but I'll start working on the case right away. I should have something for you within a few weeks' time. When will you tell your sisters about the case?"

Jason and Mary exchanged a glance. "As soon as it's ready," Mary said.

"Or as soon as they say they want to prepare a case," Jason said. "Whichever comes first."

"Do you want me to present it to them, or would you rather I provide it to you in writing first?" Phillips asked.

"In writing," Jason said. Lesley might ignore his pleas to see Phillips, but she couldn't ignore a case he placed in her hand. He was sure that once she read it and knew that Adams threatened the Way, she'd persuade Mo to execute. Then it would just be a matter of authorizing Phillips to present the case to the overseers. "Once the case is presented and accepted, how long would it be until she's executed?"

"Things would move very quickly," Phillips said. "Adams would be seized immediately and dead within the hour."

Jayne climbed the steps to Station C3-8's waiting area and immediately spotted Lesley and Mo, their orange cloaks drawing her eye in the almost empty room. They were supposedly her Chosens, but two military usually meant trouble, and these two could do more than strike her or harass her for a laugh; they had the power to decide whether she lived or died.

Her stomach fluttered when Mo's eyes locked with hers. Mo spoke to Lesley, then they both looked in Jayne's direction. "There they are," Jayne murmured absently to Carol and Ronald. She drew a deep breath and forced herself to walk over to them.

"Welcome to C3-8," Lesley said, her smile not reaching her eyes.

"This is my cousin, Carol White, and her Chosen, Ronald," Jayne said, noting as she did that Mo's cloak had a Defence insignia on it, a detail she hadn't noticed yesterday. She'd assumed that since Lesley was in Interior, Mo must be too.

"Jayne doesn't need to tell us who's who," Carol said with a smile. She gazed at Lesley. "I recognize you from the monitors."

"Yes, I'm Lesley." Lesley shook Carol's hand, then Ronald's. "And this is Mo," she said, turning toward Mo.

"Pleased to meet you," Mo said with a nod, though she also shook

their hands.

"It's about a twenty minute walk to the estate. This way." Lesley took a couple of tentative steps toward the exit, then glanced over her shoulder and lengthened her stride, apparently satisfied they were following. Several paths led in different directions; she chose the one that veered into a wooded area.

"How was the train ride?" Mo asked, falling into step with Lesley.

"It passed quickly," Jayne said when Carol nudged her. It would have flown by if she'd had her sketchbook.

"Good," Mo said absently.

They walked in silence, Lesley and Mo leading the way. Jayne preferred the silence to forced polite conversation; she suspected there would be plenty of that over supper. They eventually turned off at a sign that read *Thompson Estate*. When the house came into view, Carol turned to Jayne and raised her brows appraisingly. Jayne withered. Not only did the Thompson family apparently own a large block of land, but her entire apartment could probably fit into one of their closets. Did everyone in C3 live like this? Was there a Middleton estate too?

Lesley swung open the front door, stepped across the threshold, and moved aside. "Please, come in." Mo was already stepping into the hallway; Jayne and the Whites followed. "I'll take your cloaks," Lesley said. Her parents and Mo's papa entered the hallway from a room off to the left as Lesley wordlessly accepted Jayne's cloak and hung it over Carol's. When Lesley removed her own cloak, Jayne noticed that she wasn't in uniform. Neither was Mo.

"This is Carol White, Jayne's cousin," Mo said. "And her Chosen, Ronald."

"Welcome to our home," Alan said, shaking their hands. Adelaide and Michael nodded and also shook their hands, but remained silent. "Why don't we show you through to the sitting room," Alan said to Carol and Ronald, "and give the, um, triad a few minutes to themselves."

Jayne's heart sank as she watched Carol and Ronald disappear down the hallway. Apprehensive, she turned to Lesley and Mo, convinced that the Thompsons and Middletons had planned in advance to separate her from the others.

"Why don't we go into the living room? Mo and I want to talk to you for a minute," Lesley said, motioning to the doorway from which her parents and Michael had emerged.

"Sure," Jayne said, her mind racing. They wouldn't tell her they planned to execute and then expect her to have supper with them, would they? *We've concluded that the triad won't be viable with you in it, so we'll be exercising CT134. Tziva?* No, she was letting her imagination run away with her. If they decided to exercise the article, they wouldn't bother to tell her. They'd present their case and then forget about her, not giving her a

second's thought as she was dragged away.

Jayne was so preoccupied with what they wanted to discuss that she hardly registered the living room's furnishings and decor. At Lesley's invitation, she sank into a chair. They sat on the sofa across from her. As she stared at them, waiting for them to speak, the full gravity of her situation sank in. If the triad Joined, she'd live with these two women, be trapped with them behind closed doors and always at their mercy. Could she trust them? Dare she try?

Lesley looked at Mo, then crossed her legs. "Um, Mo and I have known each other for a while."

"The Middleton estate is next door," Mo said, "so we grew up together."

So there was a Middleton estate. And they were neighbours. And their families were close. But she'd hear them out before she deemed her situation completely hopeless.

"We've also been in a relationship for a long time," Lesley said slowly.

So Jayne had been right. She wouldn't tell them she'd already guessed, in case they reacted badly.

"Obviously we didn't know we were Chosens," Lesley said. She smiled at Mo, the first time she'd shown any emotion since Jayne had met her.

Since they seemed to genuinely believe they were Chosens, Jayne scratched "each other" off the list of what the Chosen Council may have promised them to temporarily be in a triad with her. She doubted credits would have enticed them, so that left career advancement—and the satisfaction of protecting the Way, of course.

"We were very happy when we figured out from our Chosen Papers that we are," Mo added.

Happiness that must have turned to crushing disappointment when they learned about the triad. Execution loomed again. Somehow she had to convey that she had absolutely no intention of elbowing her way into their relationship, and do so without insulting them. "How long have you been together?" she asked, to give herself time to think.

They looked at each other. "Well, we got together when we were fourteen," Mo said.

Fourteen. Argamon.

"But we put our relationship on hold when we turned twenty-five."

Jayne almost said, "That must have been difficult," but stopped herself, not wanting to suggest they were weak in the Way. No matter how strong they were in the Way, it must have been heart-wrenching—they obviously cared very much for each other and could actually be Chosens. But they might be eager to take her words the wrong way.

"We wanted to tell you before supper, in case our parents said something," Lesley said. "We didn't want you to find out that way."

"Oh. Thank you," Jayne said. When they continued to stare at her, she

realized they were hoping for more. Time to make it clear that she'd stay out of their way. "I'll respect your relationship. I'll never interfere with it in any way."

She couldn't blame them for the scepticism in their eyes, considering she'd just agreed to never have a romantic relationship for the rest of her life. If she were anyone else, she would have thanked them for telling her and left it at that, but then, anyone else's neck wouldn't have been on the line the moment Watkins said her name at Lesley's notification meeting. Anyone else would expect children, at the very least. Nobody else would agree to sit on the sidelines while the other two triad members carried on as if she didn't exist, only acknowledging her in public.

But she wasn't anyone else. She was an Adams. Lesley and Mo couldn't possibly appreciate how the Incident had warped everyone's perception of her, but surely the last twenty-four hours had given them an inkling. Somehow she had to build on it, help them understand why she'd accepted years ago that there would never be a special someone.

Unfortunately the coming days could do it for her. She hoped their reputations wouldn't come under fire when the Chosen Council announced the triad, but realistically, they'd probably get a small taste of what she'd experienced since the Incident—and would probably execute her, as a result. So rather than trying to come up with a sanitized way of explaining why she'd never expected a relationship with her Chosen, she might as well be candid with them. Trying to protect herself by softening the truth and avoiding uncomfortable conversations would only backfire. They'd see the truth for themselves soon enough, and she was starting to realize that how she came across to them would likely bear little on whether they decided to exercise CT134.

Jayne sat on her hands. "When I turned eighteen and didn't receive a Solitary Notification, I knew I wouldn't be a desirable match for anyone. I'm aware of what everyone thinks of me. So my only hope was that I'd end up with a Chosen who would eventually see past all that and become a friend. That's all I've ever hoped for. And that's still all I'm hoping for. So I mean it when I say that I'll respect your relationship, not only because I never expected a relationship with my Chosen, but because the triad depends on your relationship remaining strong." She said that last part at the same moment her brain worked it out, and fervently believed it. If their relationship ever wavered, the triad could fall apart. To be associated with another failed Joining was the last thing she wanted. For that reason alone, she'd never come between them. Of course, she probably wouldn't get the chance.

They both peered at her; Jayne could almost hear the wheels turning. "When we found out about the triad, we hoped that we could come to some arrangement with you that we can all live with," Lesley finally said.

"For us, our relationship is the most important thing," Mo said,

grabbing Lesley's hand. "I mean, if you're okay with being a friend, then that is an arrangement we can try to live with."

"I'm okay with it," Jayne said, trying not to let her mouth hang open, even though Mo's "try to" wasn't lost on her. Were they saying they'd let her live if she left them alone? Done! She'd intended to do that anyway. But did that mean they hadn't agreed to be in the triad? They seemed sincere. If they weren't, they should have joined the theatre, not the military. Jayne still couldn't accept that she'd just happened to end up in a triad with them, but maybe they weren't in on the scheme.

She suddenly saw them in a new light. They weren't just going through the motions until it was time to get rid of her; they honestly believed they had a decision to make. Maybe those behind the plan had chosen Lesley and Mo because of their blind dedication to the Way. She felt a pang of something she'd never expected to feel toward them: sympathy. Still, she wasn't safe yet. Those who wanted her dead had two years to wear them down. And if her mere presence in their lives started to grate, they could change their minds.

"Then we'll see how it goes," Lesley said, unknowingly reiterating Jayne's last thought. "Let's join the others."

When Jayne entered the sitting room, Carol raised her eyebrows at her. Jayne responded with a small smile, to let her know that nothing dire had passed. She'd tell her later about the polite conversation they'd just managed to have without anyone explicitly mentioning CT134.

"Would you like something to drink?" Alan asked.

She agreed to a glass of grape juice. After accepting it from him, she sat in the empty chair nearest to Carol and listened to the others engage in small talk. Nobody seemed interested in involving her in the conversation, though she caught all the parents eyeing her when they thought her attention was elsewhere. Let them get the gawking out of their systems; she didn't mind. She was most interested in Lesley and Mo, who were mainly conversing with each other— out of her earshot, unfortunately.

A woman hovered in the doorway. Adelaide exchanged a few words with her and then announced that supper was ready to be served. Jayne followed everyone to the dining room, where ten chairs were aligned at a long table.

"We've never seated a triad before," Adelaide said. "We've put Lesley in the middle, since she's the Principal. Mo, you're at her right."

Jayne gathered that she must be at Lesley's left and took that seat. Since they'd placed Lesley at one end of the table, Jayne found herself across from Mo. Carol and Ronald took the two seats next to her, and the parents occupied the three chairs closest to Mo.

"If all our siblings were here, we'd have to sit in the other dining room," Mo said as two caterers rolled in the first dish.

Other dining room? Jayne hoped she wouldn't have to go to the

bathroom. She'd probably get lost.

"You have five brothers and sisters, right?" Carol asked, picking up her fork and starting in on her salad.

Mo nodded. "Four brothers and a sister. Only one of my brothers is Joined, though. My sister and two of my brothers are Solitaries. My youngest brother is a Chosen, but he's only nineteen. "

"We thought we'd welcome three Chosens into the family, but we were wrong," Michael said.

Lesley's fork stopped on the way to her mouth. "Look at us. There will be more Chosens Joined into the family than there are children. How many families can say that?"

"How many would want to?" Adelaide muttered.

"You have a brother, don't you?" Lesley said to Jayne.

On paper, maybe. "Robert. He's a Solitary." And that was all she wanted to say about him.

"Do you live with your brother?" Alan asked.

They all looked at her. Uncomfortable in the spotlight, she lowered her fork. "No, I don't."

"What do you do?" Adelaide asked.

Jayne had dreaded this question. How would she explain to them why she'd never pursued a vocation? Nobody would hire her for positions that required contact with Rymellans, and nobody would want to work next to a reminder of the Incident in those that didn't. Truth be told, she hadn't tried to find a position. After graduating from the Learning Academy with a lousy final report that essentially said she was worthless, she hadn't felt up to facing one potential rejection after another. She'd lost herself in her sketching, and it had been easier to stay there. Art College had flitted across her mind, but that would have meant providing a portfolio of drawings that everyone except Carol mocked. When they'd rejected her application, she wouldn't have known if they'd refused her because she lacked talent, or because her last name was Adams.

Adelaide interpreted her silence as confusion. She gestured toward Lesley and Mo. "These two are in the military. We're advocates," she said, pointing to herself and Alan. "Michael's a tailor. What do you do?"

Two caterers chose that moment to bustle into the room and collect empty salad bowls. Unfortunately the interruption didn't deter Adelaide. "So what do you do?" she asked again after the caterers had left.

Jayne swallowed. "I'm not doing anything right now."

"Why not? What do you do with your time, then? And you said you live alone. How do you manage if you're not earning credits?"

Again, she felt everyone's attention on her. When Carol drew breath, Jayne placed a restraining hand on Carol's arm. She appreciated that Carol wanted to support her, but she had to be the one to answer Adelaide's questions. "I draw an allotment," she said, feeling smaller by the minute.

Adelaide's brow furrowed. "Usually Rymellans draw an allotment when they're ill. Do you have an illness we should know about?"

Was Adelaide asking a trick question? "No," she said quietly, then leaned back to allow a caterer to place the main dish in front of her. She picked up her knife and fork. The food no longer appealed and her mouth felt dry, but she wouldn't insult them. She'd clear her plate if she had to choke down every mouthful.

"You can't draw an allotment when you're Joined, you know," Adelaide said, ignoring her meal. "You can only draw an allotment if your Chosen doesn't have the means to support you. So are you planning to depend on these two?"

Blood rushed to her face. She hadn't thought that far ahead. Being dependent on them mortified her. If they Joined with her, they'd have to feed and clothe her as well. They'd rightly consider her a burden. Despite her earlier conversation with them, CT134 loomed again.

She wanted a sip of water, but her glass was empty and she didn't trust herself to reach for the water jug. Adelaide glared at her, waiting for an answer.

"I think Mo and I should discuss these sorts of details with Jayne," Lesley said. "Privately."

Jayne turned to her in surprise, then quickly turned away. Fortunately Lesley was focused on her mama.

Adelaide's eyes narrowed. "Do you?"

"Yes," Lesley said firmly.

Others murmured their agreement, their heads bent over their plates, but Adelaide wouldn't let it drop. "She'll become a Thompson. Thompsons don't sit around. Thompsons don't depend on—"

"I said we'll discuss it privately," Lesley repeated as Mo rolled her eyes.

"Oh, well, fine then." Adelaide picked up her fork. "Another thing Thompsons do is go to college. All Thompsons have gone to college. Well, almost all."

Lesley's face tightened. She looked as if she were about to speak, but then grabbed a piece of bread from the bread basket and buttered it.

A heavy silence settled over the table. Jayne focused on her plate. What was she doing here, in this house, on this estate, with these strangers? She should be at home curled up on the sofa, reading a book, planning her next drawing, or sewing a button on her cloak. But could she ever relax at home again, when the apartment door could burst open at any time?

Adelaide had crushed the seed of hope that her conversation with Lesley and Mo had planted. Maybe her two "Chosens" would give her a chance, but not those around them, who had two years to persuade them to execute. Well, when the door burst open, she wouldn't beg for her life. She wasn't a criminal and wouldn't act like one. As they led her to the execution

site, she'd hold her head high.

Jayne silently laughed. No, she wouldn't. She'd be a wreck. Her name would end up on the Wall of Offenders, with her parents'. The military would destroy all her artwork, as they had her papa's. And the name Adams would become even more synonymous with "criminal."

Lesley hung her cloak and then peered into the living room, surprised to see a light on; she hadn't noticed it as she'd approached the house. Mama and Papa looked up at her, mugs in their hands. "I didn't think you'd still be up," Lesley said.

"Well, we are." Mama sipped her tziva. "Mo not with you?"

"No." Given how much they'd tossed and turned the previous night, they'd decided to spend tonight apart. Perhaps one of them would manage to sleep through the night without waking.

"It's good to have her around again," Papa said. "We couldn't see her when, uh . . ."

"We were separated?"

He nodded. "We didn't want to make things more difficult for her. And we didn't want to keep anything from you."

If she'd ever found out that her parents had seen Mo, it would have taken all her willpower to not pester them for details.

"So what do you think now?" Mama asked.

"About what?" Lesley asked, confused.

"CT134. It's becoming clearer that she doesn't suit you and Mo, which means a triad with her will be difficult."

"How is it clearer?" Lesley said, irritated that Mama was raising the article again so soon.

Mama gave her a withering look. "The woman doesn't have a vocation and doesn't care!"

Lesley folded her arms. "I don't know, Mama, she didn't look as if she didn't care to me."

"And she hardly said a word during supper."

"After the way you jumped down her throat, I'm not surprised."

"I didn't jump down her throat!" Mama said indignantly. "I just asked her questions, questions that needed to be asked."

"There's a difference between questioning and badgering."

"While your mama's questions may have been a little strong, we do need to get to know her," Papa said.

"I agree. But perhaps a gentler approach would be more effective."

"You don't care that she doesn't have a vocation?" Mama asked.

"I'm curious to know how she spends her days." And perhaps they would have found out, if Mama hadn't intimidated the woman into silence.

"You didn't find out anything more when you took her home?" Papa

asked.

"No." She and Mo had expected a few minutes alone with Jayne on the way to her apartment, after taking Carol and Ronald home. But Carol had invited Jayne to stay the night, so they'd dropped the three of them off near the White home.

Mama drained her mug and rested it on her knee. "How did she react when you told her about you and Mo?"

More honestly than I expected. She would have predicted that Jayne would quickly agree to respect their relationship. Who wouldn't, with CT134 hanging over her head? But Jayne's explanation had convinced Lesley that she was telling them the truth, not just what they wanted to hear. Either that, or Jayne was a skilled manipulator. She didn't strike Lesley that way. "She said she'd respect our relationship. I believe her."

"You believe her, just like that?" Mama asked, shaking her head.

"At the moment, I have no reason to suspect she's lying. We have to see how things go, Mama. To be honest, I don't know how we're supposed to figure out whether the triad will be viable with her in it. Unless she does something blatant . . ." And if Jayne were anyone else, CT134 wouldn't be under discussion until there were clear signs that the triad was struggling, and this one was too young to struggle. Everyone was assuming it was bound to fail because of Jayne's family history. *"I'm aware of what everyone thinks of me."*

"Perhaps we should take a look at the cases that have been presented in relation to Article CT134," Mama said.

"You know, that's not a bad idea," Papa said. "I'm curious."

Lesley had to admit that she was, too. What reasons had those who'd exercised the article provided? How had they known that the triad wouldn't be viable with the executed member?

"I'll contact the archives tomorrow, see if they can dig them up." Papa pulled his comm unit from its holder, presumably to make a note of his intention.

"That commander beeping could be a sign that she's not as meek as she appears," Mama said.

"It sounded to me as if he just wanted to double-check that she was coming here," Lesley retorted, wishing she'd been alone when Ramsey had beeped.

"I can understand why they track her movements. It's good to know the military in E6 are so diligent." Mama paused. "I wonder how Commander Finney will handle having an Adams in this sector, if it comes to that. And how will everyone else? As of nine a.m. tomorrow, this isn't our secret anymore. Everyone will know."

They'd find out if Rymellans still regarded triads with suspicion, and Lesley's friends and peers would learn that not only was she in a triad, but in one with an Adams. Lesley nodded wearily. "I'm going to bed. Tomorrow

could be a long day.”

She climbed the stairs, glad that she’d spend the night alone. Not because Mo would have kept her up, but because she’d be lucky if she slept a wink.

Mo groaned and cracked open an eye when her comm unit beeped. What flaming time was it? She rubbed her eyes and blinked at the display—09:45—then read the name: *Cmdr. T. Baker*. “Middleton,” she croaked, sitting up.

“Good morning, Mo.”

“Morning, Commander,” she mumbled.

“Admiral Jensen has requested a meeting with you this afternoon at 13:00. She’s also asked me to attend.”

Okay, she hadn’t slept well, but she felt coherent. “Admiral Jensen wants to see me?” So far, her exposure to Jensen had consisted of seeing the admiral’s name at the bottom of Defence certificates and in the occasional article in Defence bulletins.

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “Maybe she’s read this morning’s announcements.”

Flaming Argamon! The Chosen Council’s announcements had gone out at 09:00. And Admiral Jensen was already asking to see her? Usually Rymellans didn’t read the announcements as soon as they were released; after all, they had an entire week before the next batch. But if just one person connected to the admiral had read them early . . . news of a triad would spread like wildfire. “Where’s the meeting?”

“B5 headquarters. Why don’t you meet me in the lobby at 12:45?”

“Okay.”

“It’s a rather interesting, uh, announcement,” Baker said.

“Which part, the triad part or the Adams part?” Mo asked, deciding on the spur of the moment that pretending she didn’t understand why the announcement was a shocker would be stupid. If she was honest about it, maybe others would be too. They could clear the air and move on.

Silence, then Baker chuckled. “All of it.”

“We were shocked too.” *Still are.*

“I can imagine. Congratulations are certainly in order in regards to Lesley. As for the rest . . .”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Whatever Jensen wants, we’ll deal with it together, okay?”

“Yep,” she said, trying not to worry.

“See you at 12:45. Baker out.”

As soon as he disconnected, Mo punched in Les’s code. “I’ve just been told I have to see a flaming admiral this afternoon,” she blurted before Les could say a word.

"The triad went public at 09:00."

"Yeah, I've already connected the dots," Mo snapped, then took a deep breath. "Sorry."

"Do you know what he wants?"

"She. Jensen. No, I don't. Baker beeped me and told me to meet him at 12:45. At least he'll be there too."

"Do you want me to go with you? I can read in the craft while you're in the meeting."

"Would you fly us there? It's at B5 headquarters." She hated flying over B5.

"Sure. Too bad it isn't at B2 headquarters. I could show you my office." Les paused. "And get a feel for how people are reacting without having to stay long. I haven't heard from anyone. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad sign."

Mo quickly checked her messages. "Neither have I, apart from Baker."

"Well, for me, Laura was the big one, and she'll definitely be there for us."

Yeah, Flaming Finney had turned out to be a descendant of a triad. And now she wanted to have supper with all of them. How wonderful! Though it couldn't be any tenser than last night's supper. And though it grated, Mo had to admit that Finney's support was important.

"Part of me is glad I'm on leave," Les said. "The other part wishes I wasn't. I'm in the dark."

"At least Hall hasn't asked to see you."

"True. Look, why don't you come over? We can have an early lunch and then go."

"I just got up," Mo protested.

"Did you sleep okay?"

"Not really. You?"

"Same."

"Let me shower, then I'll head over."

"See you in a bit, then."

They said good-bye and disconnected. Mo sat on the end of her bed with a sigh. She had no idea what Jensen wanted, but her gut told her that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

Jayne spread raspberry jam on a piece of bread and covered it with another piece, completing her sandwich. She took a bite as she walked to the kitchen table, then swallowed quickly and set the plate on the table when her comm unit beeped. "Hi," she said, sitting down.

"You still at our place?" Carol asked.

"Uh-huh. I'm just having lunch, then I'm heading home."

"Why don't you stay another few days? Let the initial shock blow

over.”

“Carol, I won’t face anything I haven’t faced before.”

“I don’t know, Jayne,” Carol said quietly. “The triad is *the* topic of conversation today. Everyone’s talking about it—about you. And I’m only getting the polite version. Who knows what they’re saying when I’m not around?”

“So everyone’s talking, what else is new?”

“This feels different. I’d feel better if you stayed with us a little longer.”

“They won’t be saying anything I haven’t heard before.”

“Will you at least stay until I get home? Please?” Carol sounded worried.

“Okay,” Jayne said, despite knowing that Carol would come home and try to persuade her to stay another night. She didn’t want Carol fretting all afternoon.

“Good,” Carol said with a sigh of relief. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

Jayne lifted her sandwich and took another bite. So everyone was talking. She could guess what they were saying—the triad was her fault; the triad was doomed to failure; poor Thompson and Middleton. Those who’d petitioned for her execution after the Incident would be crowing that the overseers had made a mistake, and those who knew about Article CT134 would be discussing the odds that Thompson and Middleton would prepare a case.

Let them talk; they couldn’t make her feel any worse than she had last night, when Adelaide had swiftly cut her down to size. Jayne knew who to watch out for in that family—in addition to Lesley. Rymellans could talk all they wanted; only what Lesley and Mo thought would count in the end.

So Carol needn’t be concerned about her. How the talk would affect Jayne was irrelevant. How it would affect Lesley and Mo was the important question, and Jayne’s life depended on the answer. What were they hearing today? Unlike Jayne, they’d be unprepared for the onslaught, unaccustomed to having whispers and suspicions swirl around them and their dedication to the Way questioned.

Once again, Jayne felt a pang of sympathy and wondered how she could support them. For a split second, she considered beeping one of them—probably Mo—to ask how they were, but then she decided against the idea. She doubted they’d want to hear from her today, and they might interpret her concern as an attempt to save her own skin. In time, if the triad survived, perhaps they’d trust her enough to accept that any support she offered was genuine, not a ploy. For now, they’d have to rely on their own strength, and she’d have to hope they were strong enough to resist the temptation to exercise CT134. Would they honour the spirit of the article when their reputations were under fire and everyone was urging them to

execute, or would they buckle under the pressure and throw a sham case together?

Jayne savoured the next bite of her sandwich. From this point forward, any meal could be her last.

Mo pushed open one of the double doors at the entrance to B5 headquarters, hoping she appeared calmer and more confident than she felt. Nobody stared and pointed at her, but she was just one of the many anonymous Defence members striding through the crowded lobby. She'd probably face gawkers if she were at the Military Academy, on 72, or anywhere else pilots hung out, but not here.

Baker stood chatting with one of the officers behind the reception counter. "Commander," Mo said with a nod when she reached him.

He nodded in return. "Let's go to Admiral Jensen's reception area. This way."

Mo walked next to him, fighting the urge to ask if he'd gleaned any information concerning the reason for the meeting. "Almost there," he said as they turned a corner and approached a glass door at the corridor's end. The gold lettering on the door read *Admiral S. Jensen, Reception*.

The woman behind the desk smiled warmly. "Yes?"

"Commander Baker and Lieutenant Commander Middleton. We have an appointment at 13:00," Baker said.

The woman, one Lieutenant Boyd, according to the nameplate sitting on the desk, peered at her comm station. "Oh, yes. The admiral will be with you shortly. Please, hang your cloaks and have a seat."

As they settled in two of the chairs waiting against one paneled wall, Mo glanced around and caught Boyd staring at her. Boyd coloured slightly and looked away. Apparently she'd read the Chosen Council's announcements too, or heard about one in particular.

"Let me do the talking," Baker murmured.

"Okay," Mo said, relieved.

"We'll miss you, this tour. I suppose it's too early to know when you'll be back on the *Falcon*, especially with . . . with what's happened."

The triad wasn't the only factor that could delay her next tour on a ship. Mo still didn't know how she and Les would resolve their diverging career paths. "Yeah, everything's sort of on hold right now."

"I can imagine."

No, he couldn't.

"When you do return, I hope we gain Lesley as well."

If she returned. Mo hoped she would, but she wasn't sure how she could without Les having to sacrifice her career goals. "She'd definitely be with me, so yeah, she'd be flying full-time again."

"If she comes with you as a pilot. She could come aboard as part of

Interior.”

Mo hadn't thought of that. Every ship had a handful of Interior officers on board, but commanders were rarely among them, if ever. If they promoted Les to commander, Mo couldn't see them assigning her to a Defence ship, though how many commanders had pilots as Chosens?

The mahogany door near Boyd's desk swung open. A commodore emerged from Jensen's office, nodded to Boyd, and left the reception area. Mo's heart pounded; she clenched her hands in her lap and thought about Les, who was probably lounging comfortably in the aviacraft with her nose in a book.

Boyd's station beeped. She glanced at its display, then looked in Baker's direction. "You and the lieutenant commander can go in now, Commander."

"Thank you," Baker said, rising. Mo followed him into Jensen's office. She and Baker stood at attention behind the two empty chairs in front of Jensen's desk.

Jensen leaned back in her chair and touched her fingertips together. "If you would close the door, Lieutenant Commander," she said.

Mo did so, then resumed her stance at Baker's side. She stared at a point on the wall behind Jensen's left shoulder as Jensen studied them in silence. "At ease," Jensen finally said. Mo expected an invitation to sit, but none came.

Jensen straightened and rolled her chair closer to the desk. She rested her elbows on the desktop and touched her fingertips together again. "Like many Rymellans, I started my day by reading the Chosen Council's weekly announcements. And like many Rymellans, I was shocked when I read about the triad, and not just a triad, a triad with an Adams." She grimaced. "Not something people want to read with their morning tziva."

Mo kept her eyes focused on that point on the wall.

"I already know who Thompson is," Jensen said, her gaze taking in both Mo and Baker. "When I read that another lieutenant commander is involved, I naturally requested that lieutenant commander's file. I was quite dismayed when I discovered that not only is a Defence member involved, but a Defence member under my purview."

She leaned forward. "We have a problem. Your Chosen—or in this case, Chosens—must accompany you on tours. I'm concerned about how a crew will react to having an Adams on board. Morale is important for any military operation, whether it be a routine patrol or a key operation that has the potential to turn a campaign. Everyone has to work together on tour. There can be no dissension, no whispers." She focused her attention on Mo. "Given that, I have no choice but to remove you from the *Falcon's* roster. Permanently."

Mo stifled a shocked retort. Beside her, Baker shifted his weight. "With respect, Admiral, Adams isn't military," he said.

"Of course she isn't," Jensen said with a snort. "We'd never let her in."

"No, we wouldn't. So while I understand your point, I'm not sure everyone has to like everyone else's Chosen in order for morale to be healthy and for our military members to work as a team."

Mo silently agreed. There were certainly a few non-military Chosens on the *Falcon* that she'd happily see sucked out of an airlock.

"Under other circumstances, I'd agree with you, but these are extraordinary circumstances." Jensen leaned back in her chair again. "This goes beyond not liking someone. Having an Adams on board a ship could be disruptive. Most see her as a threat to the Way. Does it make sense to have a Defence ship carrying a threat to the Way?"

"Of course not," Baker said, "but—"

"There are no buts, Commander."

Baker fell silent.

"And it's not only Adams, is it? I read your file, Lieutenant Commander." Jensen spun toward her station screen. "And what did I come across? You had problems on your very first tour of duty. What was it again?" She scanned whatever was on her screen. "Oh, yes. Not mentally fit for duty." Jensen swivelled to face Mo. "Not . . . mentally fit . . . for duty."

Mo's cheeks burned. She met Jensen's eyes and refused to look away.

"Admiral, did you read the entire file, especially the circumstances surrounding Lieutenant Commander Middleton's medical leave?" Baker asked. "She received the Medal of Service to the Way for saving the entire B5-1 Learning Academy."

"And had a breakdown!"

"She was willing to sacrifice herself to save others. As it was, she lost her mama in the crash."

"A terrible tragedy, but does everyone have a breakdown when they lose a parent? And what will happen if she sees real action and we experience casualties? Another breakdown?" Jensen shook her head. "I'll grant you that, viewed in isolation, the lieutenant commander's medical leave wouldn't raise any alarm bells. But now we have new information, information suggesting that the lieutenant commander's state of mind after the crash could have been indicative of a weakness in character and perhaps a weakness in the Way."

"Lieutenant Commander Middleton is one of our best pilots!" Baker said, clearly exasperated. "And her dedication to the Way has never been in question!"

Jensen glared at Baker. "Yet she has an Adams for a Chosen, and a second Chosen, too. So until further notice, she's grounded. No tours."

Mo resisted the urge to wave at them. Had they forgotten she was there? She was short, not invisible. "Admiral, does this mean I'll never fly again?" she asked, her voice sounding even because her legs were doing all the shaking.

"No, I said no tours," Jensen said, still looking at Baker. "I think the supply list is the right place for you at the moment. When the triad has some time behind it and Rymellans see that it's stable and that Adams is observing the Tradition, I might be willing to let you back onto one of my ships." Jensen's gaze settled on Mo. "Of course, if for some reason the triad ceases to exist, you'd be welcome on any tour immediately. In fact, I may have an open spot on the *Hawk* for a senior pilot, one that will lead to commander rank. If not for the triad, I'd have no problem recommending you for the position. But given your current circumstances, I can't put your name forward. You do understand."

Yes, she flaming-well understood! Maybe Les was right and the triad wasn't real. "Yes, Admiral." Despite the rage coursing through her, she sounded calm.

"Good. You're still a pilot in the Defence Division. I want you ready to fly a tour at any time, and I'll be monitoring your simulator scores and your performance while flying domestic. Commander Baker, consider yourself informed that the lieutenant commander will not be returning to the *Falcon* in six months. Dismissed."

As they collected their cloaks, Mo could tell from the set of Baker's shoulders that he wasn't pleased, nor in the mood to talk. He didn't turn to her until they'd almost reached the lobby. "I'm sorry, Mo, especially about her dragging up your medical leave." He scowled. "You're not the first pilot to require intensive counselling, and you certainly won't be the last, especially if we go to war. Experienced counsellors like Willis are on board for a reason, and she knows it."

"It's all right," Mo said. Actually, it wasn't, but Jensen should be the one to apologize, not Baker. "It's not your fault. You did the right thing back then."

Her assurances didn't mollify him. "We'll sort this out, I promise. I can't believe she's grounded you!"

"At least I'd already removed myself from the next tour," Mo said, trying not to get caught up in his indignation. If she gave in to her anger, she'd likely say a few things she'd later regret. "Maybe in six months, she'll have changed her mind." Yeah, and maybe Mo would be admiral by then, too. "And to be honest, given the triad and Les's career, I'm not sure when I'll be in a position to go on tour again."

"Mo, you're a born pilot. You'll be wasted on domestic. Maybe you will have to miss a few tours because of the triad, but once everything's settled, you'll want to be out there again."

Maybe, but wanting and having were two different things. The longer Les was tied to Rymel, the more she'd become entrenched in her Interior career. Mo had already considered the possibility that she'd never go back on tour, but she'd thought it would be by choice, not because an airhead admiral was trying to manipulate her. "I guess we'll see what happens."

Baker grunted.

"I was planning to pick up my things just before the *Falcon* undocked, so I could say good-bye to everyone. But if it's all right with you, I think I'll pick them up in a few days."

His forehead creased. "I haven't assigned anyone your quarters. I hoped you'd only be off for one tour."

"I think you better go ahead and assign them," Mo said quietly, then looked down at her feet to hide her face.

"I'm sorry," Baker said again. "I'll do whatever I can to change Jensen's mind."

"Thank you," Mo said. "I'll send you a dispatch if my status changes." Though he could find out before she did. "Permission to leave."

Baker pressed his lips together, then said, "Permission granted. It's been a privilege to serve with you, Lieutenant Commander." He nodded to her.

Mo saluted him. "And with you." Her vision blurred. She whirled and walked away. He already felt bad; he didn't need to see her cry.

She fought tears all the way to the aircraft and bit her lip as she slid open the door, determined not to sob her heart out when she was safely inside. She had to be stoic for Les, not add yet another burden to those Les already shouldered.

Les's nose wasn't in a book; she was reading something on her comm unit, and looked up when Mo entered the craft. The curiosity on her face quickly turned to concern. "What happened?" she asked, shoving the comm unit into its holder.

Mo plunked down in the passenger seat and shrugged. "You know how we were eventually going to have to figure out what to do about our careers, with you in Interior and me in Defence? Well, we don't have to worry about that anymore, because my career just went down the drain." She forced herself to meet Les's eyes, then reached for her and squeezed her eyes shut. Feeling Les's arms tighten around her only made it more difficult to maintain her composure, but somehow she managed not to snifle.

"What happened?" Les asked again, softly.

"I'm no longer welcome on tours. Not as long as I'm in a triad and would have a threat to the Way tagging along, anyway. Domestic only, unless the triad disappears."

"She said that? That if the triad goes away, you can go on tours?"

"Yeah, she did. Of course, she didn't elaborate on how the triad could suddenly go away. I'm starting to think you're right about the reason we're stuck in this triad."

Les drew back. "What did Baker have to say?"

"He didn't like it. He said he'll try to change her mind." She decided not to tell Les that Jensen had brought up her extended medical leave, not wanting Les to regret her decision back then to sound the alarm. "I doubt

she will, though. Not unless we exercise CT134. And we're not going to, not because of this."

"She won't be the only one with authority who'll want us to exercise it."

Mo was starting to appreciate that. "Have you heard from anyone yet?"

"A few dispatches, all carefully worded to basically acknowledge that they've seen the announcement." Les chuckled. "But what else can they say? Congratulations would be insincere and honesty would probably be rude." She grasped Mo's hand. "We have to stick together on this. Will you be all right flying domestic for now?"

"I was going to be doing it for the next six months anyway." And she'd always believed that as long as she was with Les and in a cockpit, she'd be content. Flying was flying, right? It wasn't as if she was seeing real action on tour. But domestic service didn't have the same air of excitement about it. Plus, pilots on tour always ribbed those left behind to watch over the planet. Most, like her, meant it good-naturedly, but some seriously believed they were better than their domestic peers. Well, she'd never cared for snobs. "It's a good thing it's not your wings being clipped. I can imagine what your mama would say." Mo adopted Adelaide's tone and diction. "If you'd listened to me, Lesley, you wouldn't be flying in circles around the planet, pretending to be a fighter pilot."

Les laughed, then grew serious. "I'm sure Jensen will change her mind—perhaps not for a year or two, but she will. So we'll have that conversation about our careers. I was hoping that once I had a few years of service as a commander under my belt, I could transfer back to Defence and we could think about going on a tour, perhaps with a daughter or two along."

"And our other Chosen," Mo added dryly.

"Yes. Her too," Les said, bemused.

"I wonder how she's doing today." Not that Mo cared. She should, but Jayne didn't appear to have much to lose, and nobody would pressure her about CT134, even if she did. Mo knew she was being surly, but right now, after just being told she'd probably still be flying domestic when she was fifty and all her friends outranked her, she didn't flaming care.

"Actually, I was thinking that perhaps we should go see her tonight," Les said hesitantly.

Mo looked at her. "Why?"

"Because I think we need to show everyone that we're a triad, not a couple and an odd one out. When I said we need to stick together, I meant with her, as well."

"She has nothing to lose!" Mo snapped. She'd just been relegated to domestic duty for the rest of her life and had her mental state after Mama's death thrown in her face, but Les was concerned about poor old Jayne. "She doesn't have a career or a reputation to protect. And CT134 isn't an issue for

her—I mean, not in the same way it is for us.”

“True, but what if everyone’s reacting the same way Jason and Mary did? They immediately pointed the finger at Jayne. What if those around her do the same? She’s more vulnerable than we are.”

“But she has nothing to lose,” Mo said again, her irritation with Les’s concern rising.

Les’s grip on Mo’s hand tightened. “Mo, I’m thinking about us. If we signal where we stand on the triad, at least right now, perhaps Rymellans won’t pressure us to exercise the article right away. They might take their cue from us and give us some time.” She paused. “I could be wrong, but I think we need to behave as if the triad’s legitimate and we genuinely want to give it a chance. We need to show what we think following the Way means right now.”

Mo didn’t believe for an instant that being seen with Jayne would delay any pressure concerning CT134, but she could see Les’s point about showing where they stood. With any luck, the triad’s togetherness would get back to Jensen. Ideally she’d read a dispatch about it while having her flaming morning tziva.

“We’ll have to see her again at some point anyway, and soon. We can’t ignore her,” Les said.

“Yeah, okay, let’s go see her,” Mo mumbled. The day couldn’t get any worse.

Les pulled out her comm unit. “What’s her comm code again?” she murmured, then punched in a code, apparently having memorized it after beeping Jayne the previous day.

“Yes, um, hello,” Jayne said, after her comm unit must have beeped for at least thirty seconds.

“Hello,” Les replied. “Mo and I were wondering if we could visit you tonight. Perhaps around 7:30?”

“Oh.” A pause. “My apartment isn’t very big.”

“If there isn’t enough room for us to sit down, we can stand,” Les said, her tone light.

Silence, then, “You’ll be able to sit.”

Les’s brow furrowed. Mo stifled a laugh. Jayne had sounded serious.

“Can we make it eight?” Jayne asked. “I’m still at Carol’s.”

“Sure, that’s fine. Can you dispatch your apartment identifier to me?”

“Yes. Sure. I’ll do that right away.”

“Thanks. We’ll see you later. Good-bye.”

“Bye.”

Les terminated the connection.

“Don’t tell her about my problem with Jensen,” Mo said.

“Why not?”

“Because she doesn’t need to know those sorts of details. All she needs to know is that I’m on the supply list right now because I dropped

from the next tour. Things could change in six months." Mo doubted they would, but she and Les would deal with the problem. They didn't need Jayne poking her nose into it.

"We haven't discussed what we do in any detail," Les said. "She doesn't even know you've been on tour and that you're a fighter pilot. Perhaps she thinks you fly aviacrafts."

Mo snorted.

"Then again, she probably has no idea what you do in Defence. All she knows is that we both have aviacraft licences. Without my mama around, perhaps we can actually have a civil conversation and not only tell her what we do, but find out how she spends her time."

"So you're going to tell her you belong to a group that investigates Chosen Violations?" Mo asked. Last night's supper had been awkward. Discussing Chosen Violations with Jayne would be awkward squared.

"She probably saw me in the procession."

"Even if she did, she still wouldn't know you're in a special group. And will you mention that you'll be undergoing the commander training course?"

"After what Jensen just did, I think I'll tell her about the commander course when I know for sure I'll be taking it. Anyway, let's go." Les turned to the navigation panel.

Mo fastened her seatbelt. As the aviacraft lifted off, she suddenly wanted to tell Les to change the coordinates to those for the Military Academy. The simulator always soothed her, and she hadn't flown a sim with Les since they'd separated. But that would mean facing her peers at the pilot training complex. She wasn't ready for that, not after Jensen. She'd naively assumed that her military record and family name would speak for themselves and trump any misgivings Rymellans had about Jayne and the triad. But it hadn't with Jensen, and now she had to face the possibility that those she considered friends could turn their backs on her.

Kevin Stewart surveyed the group gathered in his living room with satisfaction. Word had rapidly spread; around thirty people had managed to squeeze themselves into the room, many representing their families. Any newcomers would have to listen in from the hallway. Gwen and the children weren't among those assembled. They'd gone to her parents, so the children wouldn't inadvertently hear something they shouldn't.

He raised his hand. "Let's begin." Those chatting quieted; others settled back in their seats. "We were right," Kevin said when he was sure he had everyone's attention. The front door thumped shut; two new faces peered over the shoulders of those leaning against the living room doorway. "You've all seen the announcement," he continued. "What we said would happen has happened. But they ignored our warnings. They let her live."

Tom Morgan snorted. "I still remember that pompous fool sitting there

all smug, telling me I didn't understand the Way. That a dispensation to execute a twelve-year-old would set a dangerous precedent, especially since she hadn't violated any articles."

"But she was—is—the product of two criminals," Ellen Finch said. "Both committed Chosen Violations. Both lines are obviously flawed. And this girl is a combination of both lines."

"Which is why we have this!" Kevin thrust his finger toward the names of the three triad members displayed on the comm station screen he'd swivelled to face the group. "Not only is she involved in an unnatural formation, but with two military members, one on the rise. The Adams taint is spreading, growing stronger. If we don't stop it, we could be witnessing what history will show as the event that triggered the downfall of the Way."

Alarmed gasps filled the room.

"We have to do something!" someone cried.

"But what?" said another.

"Whatever we do can't violate the Way. We're not criminals," a third said nervously.

Kevin signaled for silence. "We have an opportunity to rid ourselves of this threat once and for all without violating any articles," he told them. "Article CT134. The Principal and one of the other members of that abomination can execute the third Chosen. In this case, they'll have to show that Adams will be a threat to the Joining and to the Way if she remains alive." Laughter rippled through the assembly. He smiled. "Exactly. So, my friends, Article CT134 gives Thompson and Middleton the power to execute Adams."

Everyone spoke at once. Kevin waited for the din to die naturally, pleased to be in the company of like-minded Rymellans. "I have no doubt that Thompson and Middleton will execute Adams. I'm sure they've already engaged an advocate. What worries me is the influence Adams has over them. We've seen how the Adamses work their charms, how they whisper into the ears of innocent Rymellans." Kevin's mouth twisted. "I'm sure Adams is already spreading her poison. We must help and support Thompson and Middleton, let them know that Rymellans are behind them and will applaud their decision to exercise CT134."

"But how, Kevin?" Cynthia Stewart asked.

"If we're not careful, we'll be the ones executed," Ellen said. "We don't want to be seen as criticizing the Chosen Council."

Kevin shook his head, ignoring the front door as it announced more arrivals. "The Chosen Council added the article to the Tradition, so suggesting that it be exercised and supporting those who exercise it can hardly be seen as criticizing the Council. Trust me, we won't be the only ones calling for her execution. She's fair game now."

"So what do we do?" Tom asked.

"I propose that we send a dispatch to Thompson, since she's the

Principal. This will serve two purposes. First of all, it'll let her know that they're not alone, that Rymellans will support her and Middleton's decision to execute Adams, as we would have supported the decision thirteen years ago. If," Kevin finished derisively, "those idiots had found the courage to do what should have been done, instead of hiding behind misguided concerns about offending the sensibilities of Rymellans who all wanted it done anyway." His chest felt tight. He paused to catch his breath. "Second, it will allow us to put forward our case for why we think they should execute Adams. I'm sure Thompson is well aware of the reasons, but we need to drive them home, counter whatever Adams is whispering in her ear."

"Each write a dispatch, you mean?" Tom asked, frowning.

Kevin nodded. "And we'll write them now. Together."

Several in the room coughed or whispered to their neighbours. "I'm not sending a dispatch to Thompson," Cynthia said.

"If we bombard her with dispatches, she'll see it as harassment," another said.

"I don't want the military on my doorstep," a third chipped in. Everyone murmured agreement.

"Let's write one well-crafted dispatch, instead," Ellen said. "We can tell her we've written it on behalf of a group of concerned Rymellans. Personally, I'd be more impressed that a group is behind the appeal. She'll have no idea how many of us there are. She might imagine hundreds, thousands."

"And who volunteers to send it?" someone asked indignantly. "I won't. You know who they'll come after first. It's not fair to expect one person to take that risk for everyone."

"It's not a violation to send someone a dispatch!" Kevin snapped. "And are you telling me that nobody here is willing to stand up for the Way? An Adams could Join with two Rymellans, one of whom is on her way to admiral."

"If Thompson survives long enough," someone murmured. "We don't know when Adams plans to involve her in a Chosen Violation."

"Yes, if she lives," Kevin said, meeting the eyes of those nearest him one by one. "And maybe that's what Adams wants. Imagine the power she'll have if she's Joined to an admiral. Think of the possibilities! We could be the only ones standing between her and the destruction of the Way. And nobody is willing to send a dispatch?"

"Adams has to be executed," someone said firmly.

"Exactly."

"Why don't you send the dispatch?" someone else asked.

Kevin shook his head. "If I do it, Thompson will likely dismiss it. The same applies to Cynthia and Tom. It has to be someone else, someone she'll consider impartial."

"What about the Adams son?" Ellen asked. "Even if the daughter is executed, he'll still be around."

"I wish we could do something about him, but we can't. Fortunately he's a Solitary, so at least he won't be reproducing."

Several looked at Kevin in horror. "If Adams has children . . ." one woman said, her voice strained.

"Yes. This is our final chance to end this."

The enormity of the crisis silenced everyone.

"Maybe there's another way to contact Thompson," a man said from the doorway. "I believe the military has an internal system for sending actual documents, just like most organizations do. If we write the dispatch on paper, somehow send it through that system . . ."

"We'd need a military member to send it for us," Kevin pointed out.

"Surely most, if not all, will be sympathetic," Tom said.

"Who wants to start asking military if they'll help us?" someone asked wryly. Nervous laughter met the comment.

Kevin looked at everyone in disgust. Cowards, all of them! He'd send a dispatch; he'd ask military, even if it meant his life. Shouldn't all Rymellans be willing to die for the Way? But he couldn't do it, because Thompson wouldn't take him seriously. She should! His knowledge of the Adams' depravity was based on firsthand experience.

"Why don't we start composing a letter? We can figure out how to get it to Thompson once we're done," someone said.

Grateful for the suggestion, Kevin smiled. "Yes, let's do that." Maybe discussing the danger and seeing in black and white the reasons Adams had to die would reacquaint some in the room with their backbones. "Let's split into groups. Tom, take those in the hallway. Ellen, grab everyone to your left. Everyone else gather around me."

Chattering, those assembled moved into groups.

The front door thumped shut again. "Grab whoever just came in," Kevin shouted to Tom.

"Um, Kevin," someone near the doorway called, his face pale. Those in the hallway suddenly grew quiet. A moment later, Kevin understood why. Two Interior officers squeezed themselves into the living room. Everyone stared at them, fear in their eyes.

"I assume you're in charge here, Kevin," Lieutenant Brock stated.

Several around Kevin nodded; one pointed at him. Kevin licked his lips. "This is a peaceful meeting," he said, finding his voice. "We're not doing anything wrong."

Brock approached Kevin while his partner hung back. "We heard a rumour that you're all here because of the triad."

"We're not doing anything wrong," he said again. "The Chosen Council added CT134 to the Tradition. We're allowed to offer an opinion to those in a position to exercise it."

"Oh, so your plan is to pressure Thompson and Middleton to exercise CT134?"

A bead of sweat tickled Kevin's brow. He swallowed. "Like I said, the Chosen Council added CT134 to the Tradition. We simply want to tell them why we think they should exercise it. We will, of course, accept whatever decision they make." He hid his trembling hands behind his back.

"Relax, Kevin," Brock said, unbuttoning his cloak. "We're not here to strike you, we're here to join you."

Jayne bounded up the steps to Station E6-4's waiting area and hurried outside. She'd intended to leave the Whites' the moment Carol arrived home, but Carol had persuaded her to stay for supper and then had spent ages trying to convince her to change her plans with Lesley and Mo. What was Carol so afraid of? So people were talking. So people were blaming an Adams for the triad. What else was new? What had Carol intended to do, have Jayne stay with her until the talk died down? The talk would never die down, and Carol couldn't be with her twenty-four hours a day. Jayne had to go home at some point, and she couldn't keep Lesley and Mo away from her apartment forever.

But she wasn't ready to show them her drawings, not yet. She'd left her sketchbook at Carol's and hoped to reach her apartment in time to remove the few drawings that hung on its walls. They didn't need to see her bedroom, so she'd throw her drawings, sketchbooks, pencils—anything that might give away her secret—into it and shut the door. Though, given the time, she might run into Lesley and Mo before she reached her apartment. If she did and they ridiculed her drawings, they could go ahead and execute her. She'd rather die than have them laugh at her art for the rest of her life.

Minutes later, almost at her apartment, she relaxed. There was no sign of Lesley and Mo. It should only take her five—

Two people were running toward her. She veered to the left, but still they came right at her. Suddenly she was sprawled on the path, her breath knocked from her. The world went white; pain exploded behind her left eye. She tried to struggle to a sitting position, but a weight held her down. Someone was on top of her, straddling her. "Thought you'd stay away and hide?" he shouted.

She glimpsed his face just as he drew back his arm. His fist slammed into her mouth. Something sharp scraped down the back of her throat. She lifted her hands to protect herself, but the next blow came from her left. Her ears rang; she closed her eyes in agony. Another explosion of pain; fluid trickled into her right eye, blinding her.

The weight on her chest lifted. She rolled to her right, started to push herself up, desperate to get away. "We should have killed you years ago," another man yelled. Pressure on her back; a searing pain; she collapsed onto the path. "For the Way!" Fire radiated through her back; she cried out.

"Hey!"

Something thudded next to her. Receding footsteps, approaching footsteps. *No, no more. I can't take anymore . . .* She tried to crawl away. The stones on the path dug into her arms, but she couldn't move. *Too much pain. Too . . . weak.*

"Les, she's been stabbed!" someone exclaimed—a woman. "Don't move, Jayne. Don't move." Jayne knew . . . the voice. But . . . who . . .

"This is Lieutenant Commander Thompson. Medical emergency at my coordinates. I repeat, medical emergency at my coordinates. Send immediate assistance. Reporting a Level 5 assault. Repeat, a Level 5 assault. Lock down the sector."

"Medical aviacraft dispatched. I'm connecting you to a physician."

"Physician Ackers, Lieutenant Commander. What's the nature of the injury?"

"She's been stabbed. She's bleeding."

"Where . . ." The voice faded.

". . . keep the pressure on."

"I'm pushing as hard as I can, Les. The bleeding . . ."

". . . with me, Jayne. Come on, Jayne, stay with me."

Jayne opened her eyes. She couldn't see Lesley. She couldn't see anything. Why couldn't she see anything?

"I see the medical aviacraft, Jayne. I see the craft! Come on, Jayne, stay with me. They're almost here. Just one more minute, Jayne. Hold on for one more minute."

No, no, she needed to sleep. So tired. So fed up. So cold. So tired. She let the darkness take her.

Lesley watched the medical personnel work on Jayne, still struggling to digest what had happened. A group of Interior officers rushed by, in the direction she'd told an earlier group the assailants had fled.

"It looks like they're getting ready to put her on the craft," Mo said, so softly that Lesley barely heard her.

"Why don't you go with her and I'll follow in my craft?"

"Yeah, okay." Mo frowned. "But they won't expect me to make decisions for her, will they? I mean, I don't even know her."

"I'll beep Carol, ask her to meet us there. We can defer to her." Lesley paused. "I dread telling her what—"

One of the emergency physicians approached them, the same one who'd told a dazed Mo to go into the medical aviacraft and wash her hands. Physician Shaw. "How is she?" Lesley asked.

"She's stable enough to transport, but we have to get her to the infirmary right away," Shaw replied.

"Will she survive?" Mo asked, her face pale and a slight tremor in her voice.

"It's touch and go. We really do need to get her to the infirmary. Are you both coming?"

"No, just me." Mo squeezed Lesley's hand. "I'll beep you, let you know where I'm waiting."

"I'll be following in my aviacraft," Lesley said, not wanting Shaw to think that she wasn't planning to show up at the infirmary at all.

"Then let's go," Shaw said to Mo. She turned away, then turned back. "Oh, Jayne did briefly regain consciousness. She wanted me to tell you something, both of you. It seemed pretty important to her. She struggled to form the words, even though I told her to stop."

"What did she say?" Lesley asked.

"She said to tell you she's sorry."