

Good-byes

by Sarah Ettritch

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Mo uncrossed her legs and drew them up to her chest. Her bum was starting to hurt. Maybe she should have booked a meeting room; then everyone could have sat around a table instead of on the floor in her quarters. But she hadn't planned on holding a gathering to mark her twenty-fifth birthday—she wasn't in a celebratory mood. She'd grudgingly agreed to an impromptu party to appease Les and David, who'd insisted that spending her birthday alone, or with only Les, could draw the wrong type of attention from her superiors. After all, it *was* her twenty-fifth. She was supposed to be beside herself with joy at the prospect that a Chosen Council courier could be waiting for her when the *Falcon* docked in two weeks' time. Just last week an airhead in the Dance Hall had blabbered on to anyone who'd listen that she couldn't wait to Join and start having babies. Ugh.

When Les had turned twenty-five a couple of weeks into the tour, she'd invited her close friends to a five-course supper. She'd booked the room and ordered the food weeks beforehand, at the tail end of their last tour.

Mo, on the other hand, had frantically beeped everyone last night to see if they'd drop in for a couple of hours, sit on the floor, and listen to music blaring from a comm station while they snacked on leftovers scrounged from the canteen. To her surprise, all those not flying a shift had agreed to come, including Ann. Mo hadn't wanted to be rude by leaving her out. She'd braced herself for a string of jokes about her age, her Chosen not being able to see her, or other such nonsense, but Ann had been quiet all evening. Come to think of it, Mo couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Ann with that new pilot she'd hooked up with. Maybe they'd broken up. Ann couldn't seem to hang onto a boyfriend for longer than five minutes.

"I'm getting bored of the *Falcon*," David said, dragging Mo back to the conversation. "The mock battles are fun and you guys are great, but I wouldn't mind a change. Most of the pilots we started with have already moved on. Steve's transferring to the *Osprey* after this tour, so that'll be one more gone."

"I hadn't heard that," Les murmured as she carefully dunked a piece of carrot into the vegetable dip that sat in the middle of the circle everyone had formed. Mo stifled a giggle. Les would probably prefer to eat with her right hand, but Mo was holding it and had no intention of letting it go.

"Most pilots only spend two or three tours here," Jackie Quinn, who'd come with David, said. They'd been seeing each other casually for almost two years. David didn't seem bothered that his Chosen Papers, or hers, could be ready when they returned to Rymel. *It's not as if we're in love*, he'd said when Mo had asked.

"I'm surprised you're still here," David said to her. "You even

transferred here. Don't you ever wish something would happen?"

She tipped her head from side to side as she considered his question. "Sometimes I think I want to see real action, but if it happened, I'd probably wish it hadn't, if you know what I mean."

Several heads bobbed in agreement.

"I'll definitely be on the *Falcon* for a while," Sheila said.

David's gaze shifted to her. "You've never thought about transferring?"

"Well, I have, but . . ." She reddened and glanced around.

"Well . . . I wasn't going to say anything, but . . . well, you know Ruth went into fighter maintenance when she didn't make it into the fighter pilot program. We've been trying to get assigned to the same ship, and we finally managed it. She'll be on the *Falcon* next tour."

"That's great!" David said. Mo echoed the sentiment along with everyone else, but she couldn't help feeling envious and understood why Sheila would have preferred to avoid the subject. Sheila and Ruth would reunite and could stay together as long as they liked. She and Les, on the other hand, could face the end of their relationship every time they stepped back onto Rymellan soil. Nobody was talking about that tonight, but it must be on everyone's mind. They all knew why she'd only wanted a quiet gathering for her birthday—they weren't stupid. She squeezed Les's hand, but didn't look at her.

"You must both be Solitaries," Jackie said.

"Oh, sorry—yes, we are," Sheila said. "I forgot you weren't in the program with us. I made it into the fighter pilot program, but she didn't. So she went into fighter maintenance, hoping we could serve together. That worked out okay until I was accepted to the *Falcon* but she wasn't. She kept applying, but there never seemed to be a position for her. Then all of a sudden, there was." She snorted. "All of a sudden. It only took four years."

"Four years," Jackie repeated, shaking her head.

"Yeah." Sheila paused. "I heard a rumour that if your relationship lasts longer than three years, they make more of an effort to place you together. But I don't know if Ruth finally got a position because of that. It could be a coincidence."

If Les had been a Solitary, Mo wouldn't have minded being one; she could take or leave children. But four Solitaries probably would have disappointed Papa. Mama too . . . if she were alive.

"Being separated from Ruth when you're on tour must be difficult," Les said.

Sheila nodded. "It was fine when we were both on 72.

Sometimes our off days didn't coincide, but for the most part, we were together. It's been rough since then. The last few weeks of the tour are always excruciating. Every day feels like a week."

Mo swallowed.

"Why didn't you keep flying domestic?" David asked. "Then you could have stayed together."

"We considered it, but she didn't want to hold me back." Sheila shrugged. "I wouldn't have minded, but it would have bothered her. So I started going on tour, and we just hoped that it would eventually sort itself out. And it finally has."

"I might apply for a three-year tour in a couple of years," Keith, a former 73 pilot, said. "My brother . . ."

Ann waved to Mo, catching her eye. "I'm going," she mouthed, pointing at the door.

Mo nodded to her and started to rise, but Ann motioned for her to remain where she was and crept away. Moments later, Mo's comm unit beeped twice. She glanced at its display, in case the dispatch was from one of her superiors, but it was from Ann. What witty joke had she sent this time? *Thanks for inviting me. Happy birthday.* Perplexed, Mo slid the comm unit back into its holder. Maybe the joke was that it wasn't a joke?

David was going around the circle, asking about everyone's future plans. Mo half listened, wondering what she'd say when he reached her. As long as she was in a cockpit and with Les, she didn't care what ship she served on. So she'd say something vague about wanting to go on a longer tour at some point. Nobody was taking notes.

Les pulled her hand away. "We're running low on drinks. I'll go to the canteen and get some." She pushed to her feet and headed for the door.

"Wait!" Mo called. "Tim said to beep him if we need anything and he'll bring it up."

But Les didn't hear her—and twenty minutes later still hadn't returned. Mo was about to beep her when the door slid open. "Drinks," Les announced, setting a bag on the table near the door.

"Did you get lost?" David asked.

Les smiled. "Uh, no, I ran into someone and we talked for a bit."

Her answer satisfied David, but not Mo. Les was lying; her smile was too broad and she hadn't met David's eyes. But it would be rude to rush everyone out so she could find out why Les had really taken so long.

An hour passed before she thanked the last guest for coming and turned with relief to Les. "I'm glad that's over."

"It wasn't so bad."

"No, I suppose not."

Les started to gather the dirty dishes. She pointed to the dip bowls. "Can you deal with those?"

"Sure." She'd wait until after they'd tidied up to ask why Les had lied to David. "Maybe we should think about transferring to another ship," she said as she stacked the bowls. "A change could be nice. Do you want to see if any other six-month tours have open pilot positions? We still have a few days before the deadline."

"They'd never transfer us to another ship, not together."

Mo scraped the remains of the vegetable dip into the recycling chute. "They haven't forced one of us to transfer to another ship, so maybe they would."

"We're both twenty-five now."

"I know. But they let us go on this tour and they haven't asked one of us to leave the *Falcon* for the next, so obviously they're not concerned, right?" She wiped a napkin around the bottom of the vegetable dip bowl, put it on the floor, and lifted the next bowl from the stack. "Right?"

"They're not concerned because I won't be on the *Falcon* next tour."

Funny, she could have sworn that Les had just said she wouldn't be on the *Falcon* next tour. "What?"

"I won't be on the *Falcon* next tour."

Mo didn't want to look at her. She wanted to continue scraping cheese dip into the recycling chute; she wanted this instant in time to go on forever so she could continue living under the delusion that Les hadn't said anything about not being on the *Falcon* next tour. But her hands were shaking and she felt sick.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean for it to come out like that."

In her mind, Mo whirled and threw the bowl at Les. In reality, she clung to it and turned around. Les, paler than usual, stood several feet away, her hands clasped in front of her. "How long have you known?" Mo asked.

"I wanted to tell you—"

"How long?"

"I was waiting for the right time, but I—"

"How long?" she roared.

Les grimaced. "The transfer went through last month."

Anger, disbelief, disappointment, fear, hopelessness, disillusionment—all clamoured for her attention. Her rational mind took over. It wasn't too late to fix this. "Which ship?" She instinctively held the bowl in front of her when Les stepped forward.

"Not another ship. I transferred to Interior."

The bowl slipped from her fingers and hit the carpet with a thud, even though Les's answer hadn't surprised her. She'd just never imagined that Les would actually do it, not without . . . "Why didn't you talk to me? I don't understand. I mean, this is us, Les. This is our

relationship. And you went ahead and transferred to Interior without even talking to me about it? What I might think didn't count for anything?" Her voice sounded strained. Swallowing didn't help; her mouth was too dry.

"Mo, I wanted to talk to you, honestly I did. But then the accident happened, and everything associated with that, and then—"

"Wait a second, wait a second." Mo narrowed her eyes. "You knew before the accident? That was almost two flaming years ago! Why didn't you tell me? Did you think I'd have a breakdown or something?"

"No, no," Les said, vigorously shaking her head. "I didn't want to spoil things. I didn't want it hanging over us."

Now Mo understood why Les had fled the room and taken her time returning when David had been quizzing everyone about their plans. Oh sure, she wouldn't lie to them, but she didn't mind lying to her girlfriend. Well, she hadn't exactly lied—she'd held back an important piece of information. For two flaming years! "So you went ahead and made a huge decision that affects both of us without talking to me. You know, frankly, I would have preferred it hanging over us. At least then I would have felt that you cared about how it would affect me, instead of just doing what you wanted."

Les gaped. "Doing what I wanted? This isn't what I want. If it was up to me, I wouldn't be transferring."

"Because you don't really want to be in Interior?"

"No, because I want to stay with you."

"Then why in the flaming Argamon are you doing this?" Mo shouted.

"Because it's not up to me."

"Finney put you up to this."

"Finney didn't force me to transfer into Interior, no. But she did make it clear that she expected us to end our relationship around this time. If she hadn't known that I planned to transfer, she probably would have forced one of us to another ship a couple of tours ago."

Now only one emotion ran through Mo, and that was hate. Pure, unapologetic hate.

Les drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "I'm not going to lie to you. Interior appeals to me. But that's not the only reason I chose it. Our . . . bond is so strong, that we have to make a clean break. Half measures won't work. I'm not just thinking about now, I'm thinking about the future. If we both remain in Defence, we could run into each other."

Panic surged through her. "You're not seriously suggesting that we completely cut each other off in five weeks?"

"The whole point is to prepare for our Chosen Papers. We can't

stay in touch. We can't see each other. We've left it too late already."

No writing? No seeing each other between tours? "I don't think I can do that. It's too sudden."

Les rubbed her forehead. "Mo, in two weeks' time we'll be in that conference room. If either of our Papers—"

"Then we'll break up," she said, not believing it would happen. Since the accident, her conviction that they were Chosens had only grown stronger. "But right now, we don't have to. We can't do anything about the next tour, since you went ahead and transferred without talking to me," she said with a glare, "but we can stay in touch, figure out what to do after that."

"We can't stay in touch. It'll look bad."

Mo put her hands on her hips. "Oh, so that's what it's about. What others think is more important to you than our relationship."

"That's not true! If it was up to me, we'd stay together, but it isn't. We're twenty-five. Our Chosen Papers can end our relationship at any time, just like that." Les snapped her fingers. "So we can't carry on as if we're Solitaries. They won't let us. Not anymore."

"David and Jackie will both be on the *Falcon* next tour."

"They're not like us. Everyone knows they could drop each other tomorrow and accept their Chosens. And everyone knows we'd struggle." Les sighed. "Our relationship is too serious. We have to split."

"If we're told to split, we'll split."

"We need to break up now, of our own accord. We don't want it on our records that Interior had to step in and force us apart."

"You won't even try. All you care about is your flaming record!"

"Yes, I care about my record!" Les shouted, her eyes blazing. "If I can't have you, can I at least try to have a career so I'll have a reason to get up in the morning? Can I try to salvage something from the wreck my life will be without you? And is it so bad that I want you to do the same, that I'll want to imagine you out there flying, on a tour you chose, because you didn't have any black marks on your record limiting your options? Is that so bad?" She bit her lip and looked at the floor.

"Do you really think that breaking up is the only way to satisfy people like Finney?"

"Yes," Les said, her eyes still on her feet.

Mo wanted to go to her, but to say what? That it was all right? It wasn't! "You should have told me sooner. You should have given me more time. You've had how long to get used to the idea? And I'm supposed to get my head around it by the end of leave?"

Les looked up. "I'm not used to the idea. I'll never be used to it. I don't want to do it."

"Then don't! What will Finney do? Monitor our dispatches? Have military stake out the estates when I'm on leave? Come on."

"This is Finney we're talking about," Les reminded her. "Do you honestly think we'd get away with staying in touch and seeing each other behind her back? She may be my mentor, but she wouldn't let that get in the way of doing her duty. She'd come down on us so hard our heads would spin."

And to think she'd liked Finney when she'd first met her. So much for first impressions.

Les took another step toward her. "But you're right. I should have told you sooner. And I shouldn't have just blurted it out, especially on your birthday."

Mo would have laughed, if she hadn't also wanted to cry. When she'd woken that morning, she'd expected to fly her shift, spend a few hours with friends, and then spend the night with Les. Happy flaming birthday! "I want you to talk to Finney and find out if she'd be upset if we stayed in touch."

"No." Les pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I know what she'll say."

"Les, do this for me. Please."

"I can't. We can't beg for more time. It's too late."

"Well, I guess you better go, then. It's over, right? No point you hanging around here." Mo pointed toward the door. "Go!"

They stared at each other in heavy silence. "If that's what you want," Les finally said.

"No, it's not, actually," she said, the hysteria she felt creeping into her voice, "but apparently we'll no longer do what we want to do. We'll do just the opposite." Needing to move, she bent over to pick up the bowl. Cheese dip had splattered onto the carpet. "Look at this mess." Suddenly life—everything—overwhelmed her. She sank to her knees.

"I'll take care of it," Les said.

"No. I'll do it . . . I have to get used to not having you around." The dam burst. "Why, Les?" she wailed as she hunched over and hugged herself. Why had they fallen in love? Why had they stayed together? Why?

Her shoulders shook—then her entire body. When Les's arms encircled her, she let herself go and grabbed Les, clung to her, pressed her cheek against Les's and felt Les's tears mingle with her own.

Mo zipped up her bag with a sigh. Two weeks had passed, just like that. Time always dragged when she was looking forward to

something; why couldn't it drag when she wasn't? If she could freeze time now, she would. No, she'd wait until she was with Les—then she would.

Les . . . Mo still couldn't believe she'd transferred. When she returned to the *Falcon*, reality would slap her around with the realization that she wouldn't see or contact Les for six months, perhaps ever again. But right now, she couldn't comprehend that Les would no longer be a part of her life. She had no point of reference for it. None whatsoever.

Since learning of Les's transfer, she'd struggled to not lash out, rage at her, ask her how she could have been so flaming stupid. She understood, on a rational level, why Les had transferred. But her heart wanted no part of it and engaged her mind in a constant tug-of-war. One minute she wanted to hug Les and tell her how much she'd miss her; the next she wanted to shout at her for ruining their lives. And in the background, time ticked away, infusing every word, every tender gesture, every moment with a crushing sense of futility. Les had done her a favour by telling her so late—she couldn't have stood years of this.

The door indicator chimed. She pressed the intercom button on her station. "Yes?"

"It's Ann."

What did she want? "Come in."

The door slid open. Ann stepped over the threshold and dropped two bags to the floor. "I'm on my way to 72. I'm on the first shuttle." She shoved her hands into her cloak's pockets. "I just came to say good-bye."

"Oh." This was new—Ann had never bothered before. "Well, yeah, enjoy your break. See you in a few weeks." She tensed. Ann would have a field day when she found out about Les. *So she finally dumped you, eh? Took her long enough. Wonder who's keeping her bed warm now.*

"No, I mean good-bye. I won't be back."

"What do you mean?" Mo blurted in shock.

"I'm going back to flying domestic."

"Why?" Defence wouldn't have removed her from the *Falcon's* roster. Despite what Mo thought of her, she couldn't deny that Ann was a decent pilot.

"It's my mama." She removed her hands from her pockets, then shoved them back in again. "She needs someone around right now. All my siblings are Joined, so I'm the winner." Her sombre expression contradicted her words. "Domestic is kind of a compromise. She wanted me home all the time."

"What about your papa?"

"He died years ago."

"Oh," Mo said, suddenly struck by how little she knew about Ann personally. "I'm sorry." And sorry for her mama, too. Ann acting as some kind of caregiver? Good luck.

Ann shrugged. "I'd better go. Uh . . . do you mind if I send you a dispatch every once in a while, to see how things are going?"

The question took her by surprise. "No, of course not," she said politely. The chance that she'd actually hear from Ann was slim. Better than the chance that she'd hear from Les, though. Sure, Ann could send her dispatches, but not Les.

"See you, then." Ann picked up her bags and turned toward the door.

"Ann," Mo called.

Ann looked over her shoulder.

"Take care of yourself."

"You too." She punched the *Close* button as she stepped over the threshold. The door swooshed shut.

Had someone asked Mo how she'd feel if Ann left the *Falcon*, she'd have said that she'd jump up and down on her bed with glee. Instead, the news saddened her. Not long ago, they'd all been at the Military Academy, then learning the ropes on 72. What happened? Where had the time gone?

She picked up the image of Mama and Papa from the nightstand and hugged it to her chest. Why did everything have to change? When she'd flown domestic, her life had been almost perfect, marred only by her and Les's uncertain future. Then Mama had died and now Les was leaving.

She hoped—no, believed—that Les's absence from her life would be temporary. But how much solace would that offer her in the lonely months, maybe years, ahead? How long would she have to fight the temptation to slip back into the darkness she'd experienced after Mama's death? Because the temptation to withdraw from life would be very strong indeed. Reminding herself that she was Les's Chosen and that it was only a matter of time before she took her rightful place at Les's side would be her only defence against it. She had to remain strong—for both of them. If she felt herself faltering, she'd see Willis.

Her station beeped. Mo set the image back on the nightstand. "I'm ready," she said to Les. "I'll meet you on Deck 3."

"Okay."

"Oh, I had a visitor. Ann. She won't be back next tour. She's flying domestic again."

"You didn't tell her about me, did you?"

"No." They'd agreed to keep it to themselves for the remainder of the tour. Over the break, they'd tell those they cared about the

most, like David. The rest would hear about it when she returned to the *Falcon* without Les; the news would quickly spread. "See you in a bit."

She terminated the connection and lifted the bag from the bed. Next time she entered her quarters, she'd be in a new phase of her life, one she'd never wanted to experience. With luck, their Papers would be there today, waiting for them, but she'd barely turned twenty-five. Receiving Papers this early was rare. Six months on was a real possibility, though, so maybe she'd only have to bear one tour without Les. Six months would be excruciating, but better than the rest of her life.

Mo sidled her way to an empty seat in conference room three, more a small auditorium than a meeting room. Les folded down the seat next to her and sat. They briefly touched hands, but didn't look at each other. A Chosen Council courier strode down the aisle and joined the end of the line of those already assembled at the front. The last shuttle would arrive in ten minutes. Once everyone on the *Over twenty-five and not yet Joined* list was present, they'd start announcing names.

David and Jackie took the two empty seats next to Les. "Doubt I'll get mine, but you could get yours," David was saying to her.

Jackie nodded. "I'm already a year over the average age."

Mo wished she could be as casual about the whole thing as they apparently were. Before she left this room, her dream could be realized, or she could be reduced to a weeping heap, barely able to function. Why did they have to gather everyone together to announce Papers? Learning in private that she and Les weren't Chosens would be devastating enough; she could do without an audience.

How would everyone expect her to react if one of them received Papers and the other didn't? Paste a smile on her face? Hug Les and wish her all the best? Forget it. If she could think—if she could move—she'd flee to the safety of her aviacraft, wait for Les . . . and then what? Her mind refused to visualize what would happen next.

She snuck a sidelong glance at Les. To anyone who didn't know her well, Les would appear relaxed and at ease, as if this meeting were about a trivial matter, not potentially about the rest of her life. But the set of her mouth and her rigid posture spoke volumes to Mo. Plus, Les hadn't protested when Mo suggested that they not sit in the front. Les was as terrified as she was, but had always been better at masking her feelings.

Fortunately David and Jackie were carrying on a silly

conversation about flying a speed sim blindfolded. Welcoming the distraction, Mo listened and mentally threw in a comment here and there while trying to control her breathing. If she looked down, would she really see her heart leaping out of her chest, or did it just feel that way?

Too soon, those on the last shuttle streamed into the room and settled into seats. Mo did a quick head count: around forty people and eighteen couriers. She didn't like the odds, especially since a single courier could have Papers for more than one person. No, she had to believe! They'd both receive Papers, or neither would.

A female officer stepped up to the microphone. "Welcome home, everyone. Please stand."

Mo grabbed Les's hand and that of the person in front of her. Les's hand felt clammy, another sign that her outer calm was a lie.

"Disobedience means death," she chanted along with everyone else. "Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way!" She joined in the clapping, though today the reality of the Words sobered her, and frightened her a little, too.

"If your name is announced, please come forward and accept your Chosen Papers," the officer said when everyone had sat down. "Then return to your seat and wait until all the Papers have been distributed before reading yours. I know the first thing you'll want to do is rip open the envelope, but please respect your peers and celebrate their moments with them. There will be plenty of time afterward to read your Papers and celebrate with your families and friends. Any questions?" When no hands went up, she smiled. "Then let's begin."

She moved away from the microphone to allow the courier at the front of the line to take her place. He removed an envelope from the satchel slung across his shoulder and read its front. "Lieutenant Kenneth Neilson."

Mo knew of him; he was in navigation. She watched as he rose from his seat in the second row and bounded to the front. The courier presented the envelope to him with a bow. "Congratulations."

Neilson turned to those assembled and waved the envelope above his head, a broad smile on his face. Mo half-heartedly clapped. She hoped they didn't expect her to wave the envelope around like an idiot.

The next courier stepped to the microphone. "Lieutenant Commander Sylvia Moore."

Mo winced at the shriek behind her. Had everyone in here suddenly turned stupid? A minute later, she winced again—another

envelope waver. The next courier stepped up. She swallowed and reminded herself to breathe, then relaxed slightly when the courier announced a lieutenant commander's name.

Four more names were called, none of them anyone she knew. She shifted, and grimaced when her shirt peeled slowly from her back, soaked with sweat. Good thing she'd left her cloak at the back of the room with her bag, rather than wearing it.

The courier at the microphone peered at the envelope in his hand. "Lieutenant David Bryson."

Mo felt as if she'd been struck by lightning. David was younger than Les! He was flaming younger than Les! If his Papers were here . . . While everyone else applauded, she gripped the arms of her seat and tried not to hyperventilate. She had to get out of this room. But she was trapped. They were trapped.

"I can't believe it," David said when he returned. Jackie didn't seem bothered; in fact, she smiled at him. How could she smile at him?

Mo could no longer focus. She applauded when everyone else did, but without registering the names and reactions. They hadn't called her or Les's name—that was all that mattered.

"Lieutenant Commander Jacqueline Quinn," a courier announced.

"Finally," Jackie said as she rose.

"What are the chances?" Les murmured.

If Mo read David's face correctly, he wasn't thrilled at the prospect. She shifted her gaze back to the front of the room as Jackie returned to her seat. Two couriers were left. Mo clapped when the courier at the microphone called a sub-lieutenant's name. Now only one courier remained.

Please, please, please! If they were Chosens, the same courier would have their Papers. The Chosen House in the Principal's sector always issued the Papers for both Chosens. So please, if this courier read one of their names, please let her read the other one afterward.

The courier stepped to the microphone. Mo shrank against her seat, closed her eyes, and dug her fingernails into her legs.

"Lieutenant Louise Murphy," the courier said.

Mo let out the breath she'd been holding and listened to the applause.

"Congratulations to those who received Papers," the officer who'd opened the meeting said. "Dismissed."

Tears stung Mo's eyes. Her hands trembled, then her body shook. Her throat felt tight; she wasn't getting enough air.

"Mo, are you okay?" Les sounded far away. "It's okay. We didn't get them. Neither of us got them."

No, it wasn't okay! She didn't know if she could go through this

again. And next time she'd be sitting here fighting to breathe by herself! "I'm fine," she said, though her paper-thin voice betrayed her. "Let's get out of here." But then she heard the sound of paper tearing—David and Jackie opening their envelopes. As much as she wanted to, it would be rude to rush off.

David slid out his Papers and skimmed the top page. "I'm the Principal."

"So am I," Jackie said.

Neither seemed upset. "What about our notification parties?" David asked. "Our guest lists will overlap quite a bit."

Jackie pursed her lips. "When's your meeting?"

Mo couldn't believe it. If she and Les had just learned they weren't Chosens, the last thing on her mind would have been to coordinate her notification party with Les's. She would have been incapable of holding a conversation. They would have been carrying her out right about now.

She tugged on Les's sleeve. "Let's go."

"Congratulations, both of you," Les said.

"Oh, yeah—congratulations," Mo mumbled.

David smiled. "Expect invites."

"From me, too," Jackie said.

Not wanting to be insincere, she nodded and moved toward the aisle, trusting Les to follow. She wasn't in the mood to celebrate new beginnings, not when she was facing the end of her own relationship. She could probably come up with an excuse to politely bow out of Jackie's party, but not David's. He'd consider it a slight, and rightly so. Close friends didn't miss notification parties.

So, they were safe for another six months. What a relief! Mo collected her cloak and bag and watched as Les slipped into her cloak, slung a knapsack over her shoulder, and picked up two bags. Then it hit her. Relief turned to anger.

By the time they reached her aviacraft, Mo felt as if she'd explode. She punched in the security code and slid open the door. Even though she'd bought the craft over a year ago, it was still new, having spent most of its time parked at the shuttle base while she was on tour.

"I'm glad that's over," Les said as she slid into the passenger seat.

Mo bit her tongue and fastened her seatbelt. She started to enter the coordinates for the Thompson estate, then stopped. If she didn't get it off her chest, it would only eat at her.

Les looked at her. "What's wrong?"

"I'm so angry with you right now," Mo told her.

Les's brow furrowed.

"Our Papers aren't here. We could have had another six months together. But no, you had to go and transfer."

"It doesn't matter that our Papers aren't here. They can come anytime now. That's what matters."

"You keep saying that, but it's not true! Nobody receives Papers on tour." She pointed above her head. "Up there, we're safe. What are the chances that our Papers will arrive in the next three weeks? If they wanted us to have them, we would have received them today, when there's time for meetings and notification parties. They wouldn't wait until we're about to go back on tour."

Les shook her head. "Not necessarily. Remember that sub-lieutenant who got his Papers during the last week of leave? Those couriers had Papers that would have been delivered over the past six months. They only hold Papers back, they don't move them forward."

"I don't care!" Mo shouted, making Les jump. "What are the flaming chances that we'll get Papers within the next three weeks? Possible? Yes. Probable? No. So we could have had another six months. If you hadn't gone and ruined everything." She unfastened her seatbelt and shot up from her seat.

Les's eyes widened. "Where are you going?"

"I'm too upset. You fly us home."

"Mo—"

"Fly!"

"Okay, okay." Les moved to the pilot's seat.

Mo slammed herself into the passenger seat, did up her seatbelt, and folded her arms. The craft lifted off. She closed her eyes to signal that she didn't want to talk.

Why did Les always have to do what was expected of her? Why wouldn't she try to stay in touch? They wouldn't be violating any articles. Finney could intervene, but at least Les would have tried, shown that she was willing to risk a mark on her record for their relationship.

She inwardly snorted. What a nice fantasy—Les defying Finney. It would never happen. Mo would accept a mark on her record and only realize the consequences later. But she let her emotions rule her more than she should. Les thought things through, anticipated consequences, and acted accordingly. Trying to argue with her, trying to persuade her to reconsider, would be futile. Les would have already considered all the options; she must honestly believe that ending their relationship and cutting each other off—in three weeks!—was the best thing to do, for both of them.

Again Mo's heart and mind waged a battle. The very traits she admired about Les—her loyalty, dependability, and determination to do the right thing—were forcing an end to their relationship. But that

was Les. It grated that Les seemed to be doing exactly what Finney wanted without so much as a peep, but truth be told, Mo would have been shocked, even horrified, if Les had told her they'd thumb their noses at Finney. That would have been someone she didn't recognize, not the woman whose loyalty to the Way guided her more than her emotions and desires.

She loved that woman, but at the same time, she wanted to flaming strangle her.

Sweat trickled down Lesley's left temple as she strode along the path to the Thompson house. A heavy cloak had been suitable when she'd left on tour, but now it was too warm. Next time she went out, she'd wear a light civilian cloak. She was technically between assignments, and tomorrow she'd hand in her military cloaks so they could be altered. When she picked them up next week, they'd have Interior insignia on their chests.

When she saw the house in the distance, she stopped walking and dropped her bags to the ground. This was home now, not just the place she hung her cloak six weeks of every year. No more going on tour. She'd drift through life here until her Chosen Papers arrived.

She fought a wave of melancholy; she couldn't allow herself to grieve, not yet. They couldn't both be in despair. One of them had to remain strong . . . until they parted. It had to be her. Mo was justifiably shocked and upset. Lesley would have found it a bitter pill to swallow if Mo had suddenly informed her of a transfer and dictated the terms of how they'd end their relationship. But Mo would never have done that. Lesley had always known the responsibility for ending it would rest on her shoulders.

Discussing her transfer with Mo beforehand would have been a mistake. Mo would have resisted her every step of the way and potentially damaged their reputations for nothing. They couldn't win this one. They didn't have a choice. Mo didn't see that now, but perhaps in time she'd come to understand, even forgive. Lesley hung her head. How could she expect Mo's forgiveness when she was struggling to forgive herself? She'd transferred into Interior to protect Mo, to ensure that Mo wouldn't harm her reputation and career by trying to follow her. Telling Mo sooner wouldn't have lessened the shock. But still . . .

Her comm unit beeped. She pulled a handkerchief from her cloak pocket and wiped her sweaty hands, then slid the unit from its holder. "Thompson."

"Welcome back," Finney said.

"Thank you."

"I thought I'd beep you to see how things are going. Did you receive your Papers?"

"No."

Finney grunted. "You mentioned in your last dispatch that you'd told Mo about your transfer. How did she take it?"

Was Finney genuinely concerned, or checking up on them? Lesley suspected a little of both. "She's upset. It was a huge shock, not just my transfer, but . . . everything. She knew we'd break up at some point." If they weren't Chosens. Mo was still clinging to the faint hope that they were. "But she didn't expect it to be so abrupt. She thought it would be more gradual, that we'd start by physically parting, but still stay in touch."

"Why would she expect that? You couldn't have done it gradually when one of you received Papers."

Lesley started to pace. "I know. But that's not the situation right now."

"But it could be at any moment." Finney's voice hardened. "If she wanted gradual, she should have taken the initiative and transferred to another ship a year ago. Then she could have had gradual until you turned twenty-five. But not now. It's too late for gradual."

Finney's reaction didn't surprise her; she'd known it would be a waste of time. But for Mo's sake, she wouldn't let it go just yet. She had to be careful, though, not to make it sound as if Mo were weak in the Way. "You have to understand that, for her, it's come out of the blue. I've known for a while. She only found out two weeks ago and needs time to come to terms with it."

"It did not come out of the blue!" Finney snapped, sounding angry now. "She's known from the moment she turned eighteen. She's had seven years to come to terms with it. If she chose not to, that's her fault. That goes for you, too."

Lesley couldn't argue with that.

Finney blew out some air. "I know this is difficult, but tough. If you can't do it now, what makes you think you'll be able to do it when one of you receives Papers? You have to make a clean break now, start building lives without each other."

"I've gone through with the transfer on my own initiative," Lesley said, irritated that Finney was overlooking that point. "And I know we have to cut each other off." She didn't want to do it, but she would. "I was just telling you how Mo reacted."

"And I'm telling you why she'll have to accept that, once she leaves on the *Falcon*, that's it. No contact. She wouldn't have had any warning, any time to come to terms with it, if one of you had received

Papers today. As it happens, she's had the last two weeks and has the next three. That'll have to do. I know it'll be rough, but that's too bad."

She'd expected Finney to resist any suggestion that they remain in touch, but not to be so callous about it. Had Finney not grasped what a traumatic and life-changing event this would be for her and Mo? Perhaps she had and knew that if she wavered and gave even the slightest hint that she was sympathetic, Lesley would try to persuade her to let them write to each other. She wished she could see Finney's face.

"I have to go," Finney said. "I'll see you next week."

All right, then. Discussion over. "I'm taking my cloaks and uniforms in tomorrow. Do you expect me to be in an Interior uniform when we meet?"

"No. I'll give you your uniforms and cloaks when I see you."

"I thought I'd have to pick them up from Supply."

"Not this time. Finney out." The connection went dead.

Lesley slid her comm unit into its holder. Well, she'd tried, not that it mattered. They were still breaking up. Mo would still be angry with her. And she'd still make a great show of enjoying her new career in Interior while she withered away inside.

She picked up her bags and resumed her walk to the house. She'd been wrong before. This wasn't her home. Nowhere would ever be home again, without Mo.

Mo tried to follow Les's lead on the impromptu dance floor without bumping into anyone. The Brysons had moved the larger pieces of living room furniture into the dining room and had pushed the rest against the walls, but the dance area was still cramped. Everyone was making the best of it—nothing would dampen the enthusiasm of those who'd gathered to offer David congratulations and wish him well during what would probably be the most important meeting of his life.

Usually Mo would be as boisterous and excited as those around her, but not tonight. She'd worked hard to hide her dour mood, smiling so wide that her cheeks hurt. And she'd nodded in agreement whenever someone waxed optimistic about David's future with his Chosen, even though she wasn't feeling all that optimistic about hers. But she found it a strain to keep up the charade as the evening wore on.

When Les had asked her to dance, she'd quickly accepted. If she let the mask slip while in Les's arms, nobody would notice. But

glimpses of other dancers—a tender gesture here, a head resting on a shoulder there—made her dance with Les feel like a farce. What were they doing, trying to pretend that everything was wonderful and they were happy, happy, happy? They'd spent the entire evening lying to others through their polite words and smiles. Mo didn't have the energy or the desire to do the same with each other. She drew back. "I can't do this, Les. I'm going to step outside, get some air. Give me a few minutes on my own, okay?"

Les let her go without protesting.

She fled to the back garden, not wanting to weep in front of everyone. The weariness and pain on Les's face had finally broken through her defences. But then, everything hurt these days. Talking to Les, touching her, seeing her, dancing with her—it all hurt. And that flaming clock ticked loudly away in the background, counting down the days, hours, and minutes until Les would disappear from her life. Sometimes she managed to tune it out, but never for long. Did Les hear it too?

The back door squeaked open; someone stepped onto the patio. "Hey, what's up?" David said. "I saw you rush out."

Mo quickly wiped away her tears, but not fast enough. David peered at her. "You're crying! What's wrong?"

If she lied to him, he'd catch her in that lie later, when he found out that Les wouldn't be returning to the *Falcon* and realized what had really been bothering her. Her lips trembled. This would be the first time she'd be telling someone outside her family. "Les isn't going back to the *Falcon*." She swallowed and wiped away another tear.

David's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"She's not going back. We're splitting up."

"I can't believe it! What ship is she going to?"

Mo shook her head. "Not another ship. She transferred to Interior."

David whistled. "Are you serious? When did you decide all this?"

As much as she'd have liked to tell him how Les had decided all of it and dumped it on her, she wouldn't. Despite her anger and disappointment at the way Les had handled it, she wanted to protect her. Everyone siding against Les would be terrible. "A few months ago. But it's really hitting home now."

"I bet."

"I was hoping we could still write to each other, but our sector commander is breathing down our necks. She wants a clean break."

"Not even a dispatch every once in a while to ask how you're doing?"

"Nope."

Sympathy softened his voice. "That's rough. I know you're

twenty-five and your Papers can come now, but you would have broken up the moment they came.”

As he and Jackie had? If he’d said that, she would have been furious with him.

“I guess it’s smarter to do it now, but no contact?” He shook his head. “I can’t believe it. It’ll be weird, not seeing you together.”

“When I rushed out, what did Les do?” she asked, hating herself for caring.

“She looked a little lost, then sat down.” He paused. “I’ve known something’s wrong all night. You might be fooling everyone else with those dazzling smiles, but not me. I’ve known you too long. I could have asked her what’s up, but I figured I’d have a better chance of getting it out of you.”

He did know them well. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Telling you this tonight, at your party.”

“Don’t worry about that. It means a lot to me that you came. You must feel awful.”

Awful didn’t quite cover it. “So you won’t take it the wrong way if we leave soon?”

“No. And I’m sorry this is happening, Mo. Seems to be one thing after another for you.”

It certainly felt that way. She drew a deep breath. Okay, now David knew, but she still had to tell everyone else. Did Les realize that she’d left it up to her to let everyone know, that she’d be the one who’d have to face all the questions when she returned to the *Falcon* and everyone realized that Les hadn’t? Had Les thought of that when she’d come up with her plan? The first few days back on board would be a nightmare, answering the same questions over and over and spinning her answers so Les wouldn’t look bad, while trying to make it through her days without breaking down. Maybe David could help.

“Can you do me a favour?” she asked.

“Anything.”

“Can you start mentioning to people that Les transferred to Interior? Not tonight. But you’ll beep everyone to let them know how your meeting went, right? If you could just mention it. At least then they’ll know before I see them next.”

“Yeah, sure.”

She would still face questions, but at least the conversations wouldn’t start with *Where’s Lesley?*

David touched her arm. “We’ll all be there for you.”

“I don’t want to shut myself away in my quarters . . . like I did last time.”

“We won’t let you.”

Her eyes welled up again. Without her family and friends, she'd never survive until she reunited with Les. "I noticed Jackie isn't here," she said, wanting to change the subject before she became too weepy. Jackie's party had taken place the previous evening. She and Les had declined their invitations, saying they had a previous family engagement. The excuse wouldn't have seemed far-fetched—military often visited family during leave.

"You know things were completely casual between us, so we could have attended each other's parties and enjoyed ourselves. But we didn't think it would look good."

She stifled a sigh. For once, could someone please do something that wasn't a violation but didn't look good? "Ann and Kary aren't here either."

"Kary wanted to come, but it's her cousin's eighteenth birthday today. I was a little disappointed, but what can you do? As for Ann, I sent her an invitation, but never heard from her."

That didn't surprise Mo. She couldn't remember Ann ever showing up for a social event when on leave. "You know she's not going back to the *Falcon*, right?"

His eyes widened. "No, I didn't know."

"Really?" Odd that Ann had told her and nobody else. "She's going back to domestic. Something about needing to be close to home."

"We weren't exactly friends, so I can't say I care all that much."

The back door swung open. "David! What are you doing hiding out here? There's a lineup waiting to dance with you. They won't get another chance."

David rolled his eyes. "Coming, Mama." He looked at Mo. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I should go back to Les."

She followed David into the house. If she walked into the living room and saw Les dancing with someone, she'd never speak to her again. Ha! Talk about an idle threat. She'd upset Les more by threatening to send her a dispatch from the *Falcon*.

A woman latched onto David and led him to the dance floor. Mo scanned for Les, saw her standing alone in a corner, sipping a drink. "I think we should go," Mo said as soon as she reached her. "I can't go on pretending that we're not saying good-bye in two weeks."

"We might offend David."

"I told him about your transfer. He won't be offended if we leave."

"You told him?"

"Yeah, I did. But don't worry, I made it sound like we were both in on the plan."

Les's brows drew together. "Why?"

"I don't know. Some of us remain loyal no matter what, I guess." She narrowed her eyes. "And some of us don't." She immediately regretted the jab when Les flinched. "Anyway, I'm leaving. Are you coming or not?"

"I'll just return this glass," Les mumbled.

"I'll meet you out front." She looked around for David's parents and saw them dancing—she'd send a dispatch to thank them for the party, rather than interrupt.

Outside, she pushed away the guilt she felt over taking that shot at Les. If Les expected her to constantly suppress her anger, she expected too much. Les wouldn't have to put up with her mood for long, anyway. She'd soon be rid of her, exactly as she'd flaming planned.

Lesley followed Finney through a maze of brightly lit, carpeted corridors and tried to muster some enthusiasm. Her first visit to headquarters. Any other time she would have been thrilled to be here; she would have soaked up every detail and peppered Finney with questions. But the reason for her visit had driven a wedge between her and Mo, perhaps forever. Normally a transfer would mean a new beginning and new responsibilities, but not this one. She'd always associate this transfer with an end, not only to her relationship with Mo, but to any hope of a happy and fulfilled life. What could have been would always overshadow what was.

They finally reached their destination. "This is my real office," Finney said with a sweep of her arm after inviting Lesley to sit. "I have an office in a couple of the C3 outposts, like the one we usually meet in, but this is home."

The office had a personal touch the others lacked. Images of Finney's Chosen and children hung on one wall, and perhaps sat on her desk—the backs of the frames faced Lesley. On the opposite wall, several drawings with *To Mama* scrawled in their top left corners were tacked up near a bookcase. She scanned the book titles. Not surprisingly, many were about the Chosen Tradition.

"You should become familiar with the military aviacraft routes," Finney said. "I zip between here, C3, and an outpost near home in no time."

When Mo had thought she might fail the pilot program entrance evaluation, she'd considered flying military aviacraft—for all of five seconds. She would have been bored out of her skull. Lesley could use the military's transit service, but perhaps it was time she bought her

own aviacraft. Mo's craft had spoiled her.

Finney sighed. "Let's talk about your duties in Interior." She clasped her hands on the edge of the desk. "C3 covers a large area, but has a low population. It's quiet. It doesn't need a full-time commander."

Morton had intimated that Finney oversaw C3 because it was all she could handle, but Lesley had never believed that.

"Admiral Hall assigned me to C3 precisely because it wouldn't occupy all my time. I also head a small group of Interior officers who specialize in investigating potential Chosen Violations. We investigate tips about residents in sectors A1 to D8—Admiral Hall's sectors."

Lesley struggled to maintain a bland expression. Was Finney insisting that she and Mo sever contact because she headed this group? "Did this group spark your interest in the history of the Chosen Tradition?" she said, posing a safe question instead of the one she wanted to ask.

Finney's face tightened. "No."

She'd blundered. The question had hit a nerve.

"When we receive a tip about a potential Chosen Violation, we investigate it quickly and discretely," Finney continued. "We don't want gossip, rumours, or hysterical Chosens. Just about all tips turn out to be false alarms, which is fine. We *want* Rymellans to err on the side of alerting us to potential violations." She paused. "I'd like you to join this group."

And all the group's members would have to be above reproach when it came to the Chosen Tradition. Finney wouldn't tolerate even a whiff of inappropriate behaviour, including writing to former girlfriends while waiting for Chosen Papers. And so she and Mo were being wrenched apart.

Lesley mentally shook herself. She had to stop making Finney out to be a villain to justify her desire to stay in touch with Mo. Finney wasn't being unreasonable; she was doing her duty. Forcing them to build separate lives had nothing to do with this group. "I'd noticed that, for the past while, all the cases you gave me to study were related to the Chosen Tradition."

"And now you know why," Finney said, her mouth turning up at the corners. "Now, if you'd rather be assigned to a sector and a regular patrol rotation, just say so. I don't want people in the group who don't want to be there."

"No, this group sounds interesting." She crossed her legs. "Does this mean I'll report to you?"

"Yes. But not only to me. I'll be your primary report, but you'll have a secondary report, too."

"What do you mean?"

"We receive a fair number of tips, but not enough to keep everyone busy full-time. We all have other roles. When we arranged your transfer with Defence, we agreed that you'll go onto the supply list for domestic patrols and that you'll maintain your readiness to fly, should they need you."

"I don't want to fly out of 72."

"I've already made that clear to Defence." Of course she had. "Defence won't need you very often. You'll have time for other duties. So I have something else in mind for you." Finney picked up a pencil and tapped it on the desk. "You might not like it, but try to keep an open mind."

She waited, more curious than apprehensive.

"We monitor all cases that go before the overseers. We—the military—aren't permitted to advocate in cases. But we can offer an opinion, which we'll do when we think an amendment will be difficult to enforce in practice, or when the presiding overseer asks us for one. Commander Blair heads the group that writes opinions. Based on the analyses you've written, you'd be a good fit for that group."

"Advocacy? Are you serious?" Lesley blurted.

Finney held up her hand. "Not advocacy. Advocacy deals with the theoretical. You'd be concerned with the practical. Advocates debate. You'd submit your written opinions directly to the overseers."

"But it's essentially advocating."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but you're good at it. And unless you hated writing those analyses, and your sometimes zealous responses to my comments would indicate that you didn't, you might actually like doing it."

Her responses hadn't been zealous!

"I can sort of see why your parents thought you might pursue advocacy as a vocation," Finney said with a pained expression.

Lesley rejected a comeback that would have boiled down to *You're wrong, I'm not good at it and don't like it*. She had to keep her emotions out of this and respond logically. "I don't think I'm a good fit for the group. You said the opinions focus on the practical. I don't have any practical experience enforcing the Way."

"You did well when you analyzed the commentaries. Sometimes your analyses were better than the source material."

"But I had something on which to base my analyses. I wasn't starting from scratch."

"You wouldn't be starting from scratch here, either. You'd have access to every opinion we've offered. And you'd be assigned a case because the group that monitors cases believes an amendment would be problematic for us. You'd be able to contact them to find out why."

Then why couldn't someone in that group write the opinion?

"What if an overseer made the request?"

"Then the overseer will have specified exactly what concerns him or her and will likely have provided background material."

Finney seemed to have an answer for everything. "None of that changes the fact that I don't have any practical experience," Lesley said.

"If that's important to you, we can put you on the supply list for Interior so you can go out on a patrol every once in a while. I was going to suggest that anyway. But frankly, I think you'll get enough appreciation for how theory sometimes differs from practice when you investigate tips for me."

But it would still be advocacy. Mama would love it: *If you'd listened to me, you'd be a real advocate, not a pretend one!* "I don't know."

"Lesley, you can directly influence the Way by writing opinions. Granted, most amendments aren't significant, but still. Do this, and it won't be a matter of if you'll be an admiral, it'll be a matter of when." Finney dropped the pencil into a mug that contained several others. "But if you don't want to do it, I won't force you. You can take on longer supply assignments to fill your time, for both us and Defence. Oh, and when Lieutenant Commander Grant heard about your transfer, he said he'd love to have you back on the announcements team."

"No." Announcements were broadcast not only on Rymel, but on Defence ships. Having her smiling face on the monitors wouldn't be fair to Mo. "I'm not interested in doing announcements. I'd rather write opinions." She'd rather not hurt Mo. "I'll join Commander Blair's group."

Finney nodded. "That's settled, then. I'll let her know. You'll probably assist others before you write opinions on your own, but I'll let her fill you in on the details." She flicked on her station's display. "So you'll report to Commander Blair and myself," she said absently as she typed, "and the appropriate superior officer when you're subbing, of course. I hope you like having a variety of duties."

"I want to be busy, and it sounds like I will be." In fact, if her work occupied her every waking minute, she wouldn't mind.

Finney peered at her over the display. "When would you like to start?"

"You're leaving my report date up to me?" Lesley asked, surprised.

"I thought you might like some time after the *Falcon* leaves."

So Finney wasn't oblivious after all. "I'd like to start the day after it leaves." The sooner she could throw herself into her duties, the better.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And when you add me to the supply lists, you can set my availability to always."

"Commander Blair and I might need you occasionally," Finney said dryly.

"I meant I'll always be available when you don't need me."

Finney stared at her. "You probably think I have a heart of stone because I want you and Mo to end it, completely, right now. I don't. I don't enjoy having to break up a relationship. I won't enjoy seeing you run yourself to the point of exhaustion to cope. But I'm doing this for your own good, and Mo's. I know you don't believe that right now, but it's true."

Suddenly overcome, Lesley lowered her head and closed her eyes.

"If you think it's hard now, imagine how hard it would be if you were dealing with this at the same time you were meeting your Chosen and her family. That could still happen, because your Papers can come anytime now. We can only hope you'll have time to adjust to life without Mo before they do."

If adjusting meant learning to live with yearning for another person while struggling to build a family with a Chosen she'd never love, she'd adjust—somehow. If it meant forgetting about Mo, never thinking about her, never lying awake at night wondering about her and wishing Mo was lying next to her instead of someone else, then it would never happen.

"You both have promising careers ahead of you. Risking them to stay together would be foolish. In the end, you'd end up right where you are now, but with damaged reputations."

Lesley raised her head, even though her eyes were moist. "I said as much to her when I told her about the transfer. I understand that. I think she does too. But it doesn't make it any easier."

"I know. I just wanted you to know that some duties are more difficult to perform than others."

"I appreciate that." Not only the truth of it, but Finney admitting it.

Finney cleared her throat. "I'm now your commanding officer. If I tell you to take a day off, you will. Understood?"

She nodded.

"Well then, I'll schedule you on a short training course before I put you onto the Interior supply list. I'll also see what Commander Blair initially has in mind for you. Report to me at 08:30 in the C3-1 outpost office and we'll go from there."

"Yes, Commander."

"And I guess it's time for your cloaks and uniforms and then

we're done." She pressed a button on her comm station and instructed someone to bring them in. A minute later, a frazzled-looking officer entered and nodded to Finney as he hung them on Finney's rack.

Finney walked over and unzipped one of the bags. "You should try this on, to make sure these are yours and not someone else's." She pulled the cloak off the hanger and held it out to Lesley.

Lesley rose to accept it, then groaned. "They made a mistake. It has a lieutenant commander's insignia on it."

Finney turned it toward herself. "So it does. But it's not a mistake. You're joining Interior as a lieutenant commander. Congratulations."

"Thank you." She forced a smile, but doubted she was fooling Finney. When she'd been promoted to lieutenant, she couldn't stop smiling, but this promotion meant nothing.

"Would you like to go for lunch, to celebrate?" Finney asked.

Any other day she would have quickly accepted. Sharing a meal with Finney would be a privilege. Lesley respected her and valued her opinions, and knew that any resentment she currently felt toward her was temporary and unfair. But she'd be terrible company and didn't want to be dishonest. Every time she smiled, laughed, or showed interest in what Finney was saying, she'd be lying. "I'd like to, I really would. But . . ."

"Not today?" Finney said. "How about in a few weeks' time, then?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll schedule it, so we'll be sure to go."

"Thank you."

"Dismissed, Lieutenant Commander."

Lesley nodded to Finney and collected the rest of her clothing. She'd just achieved another career milestone, but it felt hollow. She'd feel this way from now on, she realized with despair. To give her life a modicum of meaning, she'd throw herself into her new duties with enthusiasm. Lieutenant Commander Thompson would be the most hard-working, dedicated, and loyal officer Interior had ever seen. And an empty shell.

Mo lifted the lid off the cookie jar and peered inside. Cinnamon, ginger, and . . . She replaced the lid with a sigh. Not even her favourite oatmeal raisin cookies could entice her today. She wandered into the study and eyed the comm station sitting on one of the desks, but didn't feel like reading announcements. She didn't feel like doing anything—that was the problem.

Three days—three flaming days!—until she returned to the *Falcon*. Yet here she was, wasting away an afternoon on her own. Les hadn't beeped her all day. Mo couldn't blame her. She wanted to be with Les, but no matter how hard she tried, Les's transfer and their impending separation always came between them. Mo hadn't given much thought to what her last few weeks with Les would be like—she'd honestly thought they'd never arrive. She would have imagined them spending every last second in each other's arms, comforting each other, not at each other's throats to the point that they almost couldn't stand to be together. Okay, only she constantly went for the jugular, but then, she was the one who'd been wronged. She found it impossible to put her hurt feelings aside.

So here she was, wondering what to do with herself while fighting the urge to beep Les and pedal over to the Thompsons'. Going over there would be a bad idea—she'd end up reduced to a snapping, snarling, insensitive moron who'd hate herself every time she hurt Les, while hurting her anyway. Until she figured out how to control her anger and resentment—and she didn't have much time—loving Les meant staying away from her.

The comm station beeped. After glancing at its display to see if it was Les, she pulled the chair from under the desk and sat. "I've been expecting to hear from you," she said.

David chuckled. "It's been a busy two weeks."

"So? What's she like?"

"Her name's Angie. Well, Angela, but everyone calls her Angie. She's twenty-eight and lives in B6."

"That's only two sectors away from you."

"Still a ways away, but at least she won't have to adjust much to the weather."

"So what does she do?"

"She's a physician."

"Really?" Mo had expected his Chosen to be a little less . . . cerebral.

"But she's into research."

"Just like Karen! Maybe they know each other."

"Who?"

"Les's sister. Where did Angie study?"

"Somewhere in B5, I think."

"Oh. Karen studied in C2, so they probably don't."

"Speaking of Lesley, I, uh, mentioned her transfer to a few people. I figured I'd beep them before I beeped you."

Mo tensed. "What did they say?"

"Everyone's shocked. I think they expected something to happen, given that you're both twenty-five now, but a transfer to

another ship, maybe? And since neither of you mentioned anything before you left the *Falcon*, everyone figured you'd both be back."

Until Les had dumped her surprise news on her, Mo had figured the same.

"I told Angie about the two of you, about how we met and how long you've been together. She said it'll be a rough time for you and that you'll need your friends around—"

Mo liked her already.

"—so we should invite you to supper. How about the day after the *Falcon* undocks?"

"She's going on tour with you?"

"Mo, we have to hold the Joining Ceremony within a year. It wouldn't be smart to not see each other for six months. I could have dropped from the tour. I checked into it and they allow that under these circumstances."

It should have occurred to her that David might drop from the tour because of his Chosen Papers, but she was too wrapped up with her own life at the moment. At his party, he probably hadn't wanted to add to her misery by mentioning that he might not be returning to the *Falcon* either.

"But she's a great fit for the *Falcon*," David continued. "I'll be moving to quarters with two bedrooms."

Well, that answered the unspoken question that had popped into her mind.

"Though I'm sure she won't be able to resist this dashing pilot for long."

Mo snorted and rolled her eyes. "Is Jackie dropping from the tour?" Or would they both be on board with new people on their arms?

"Yes, but not because of me. Anyway, Angie's looking forward to meeting you, so you'll come for supper, right?"

She wanted to say no. She wouldn't be in the mood for light chit-chat, and socializing without Les would feel strange. Obviously she'd done it before, but Les had still been a part of her life. Everyone had spoken of her in the present tense, but now they'd refer to her as someone Mo used to be with. For people like Angie, her relationship with Les would be a thing of the past. Les wouldn't be a real person; she'd be someone they only knew of second-hand, someone who used to serve on the *Falcon*.

Supper with David and Angie could be a struggle. Being with people, trying not to talk about Les too much, appearing interested in others' lives, smiling—it would be so much easier to stay in her quarters and avoid them all. So she had to accept their invitation. "Yeah, I'll come." She'd also beep Willis the moment she stepped back aboard the *Falcon*.

"Great! Um, I hate to run, but I'm meeting her soon. Have to get ready. Oh, will you tell Lesley about her?"

"Sure." She didn't need to ask if he liked Angie; the eagerness in his voice offered the answer.

"Thanks. See you in a few days. I'll drop in on you, see how you're doing." The connection went dead.

At least someone was happy. Mo rose from the chair with a sigh and strolled into the hallway. Now what? Maybe some fresh air would invigorate her. She collected her comm unit from her bedroom and left the house through the back door. "Oh, I didn't realize you were out here."

Papa jumped. The book that had been lying open on his chest slipped to the grass.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Mo said as she bent to pick it up.

"I wasn't dozing, I was thinking," Papa spluttered.

She read the book's title: *The Rymellan Government: Organization and Responsibilities*. Definitely sleeping. She set the book on the table next to his lounge chair, taking care not to tip over a jug of juice and Papa's half empty glass.

"Heading over to the Thompsons'?" he asked.

"No, I'm not." She sat cross-legged on the grass, picked up a twig, and rolled it between her fingers.

He studied her from under his wide-brimmed hat. "If your mama were here, she'd know what to say to make you feel better."

Mo shook her head. "Even Mama couldn't have made me feel better."

"I don't get it. I thought you'd want to be with Lesley right now."

"Me too." She threw down the twig and started plucking blades of grass. "I'm mad at her, Papa. How could she do that to me? Just transfer like that?"

"Now come on, Mo. You knew you couldn't stay together forever."

Why not? Why couldn't they choose to be with each other? Why did the flaming Chosen Council get to decide for them?

A chill ran up her spine. Not only would thoughts like that lead straight to an execution site, but she didn't much like them. She desperately wanted to be with Les, but she would never violate the Chosen Tradition. The Way came first, not her. Easy in theory, sometimes flaming difficult in practice, but she wasn't weak in the Way. She believed in the Way, and so did Les. She'd joined the military to protect it, and so had Les. And according to the Way . . .

"We wouldn't be violating any articles if we stayed together until our Chosen Papers arrive."

"That's not the point. You're twenty-five. You're supposed to be ready to meet your Chosen. How can you be ready if you're still with Lesley? People would talk."

She couldn't care less if people talked, but Les might.

"One of you had to make a move," Papa said. "Can you blame her for not telling you until after she'd transferred? Look at how you're reacting now."

"Yeah, I can blame her! I should have had a say."

"Maybe she didn't tell you earlier because she was afraid you'd talk her out of it."

"I would have tried."

"See?"

She picked up another twig and snapped it in half. "Okay, maybe I can understand why she waited." At least her head did. "But no matter how many times I tell myself that she didn't do it to hurt me, I can't get past it. Every time I see her, I end up being mean to her, and I don't like being mean to her."

Papa raised his eyebrows. "And that's why you're here instead of over there?"

Mo nodded. "I don't know what to do. I mean, what'll happen if I can't get past this before I go back to the *Falcon*? I don't want to leave things like this."

He gulped down some juice and smacked his lips together. "Did I ever tell you that your mama came to see me at the workshop the day she died?"

"No," Mo said, puzzled and a bit shocked at the abrupt change of subject. Maybe a glance at Mama's garden had reminded him.

"She did. It was a half day at the Indoctrination Academy for her. She dropped in on her way home to see if I wanted to go for lunch. We went to that new eatery near station C3-1. Well, it's not new now, but it was then."

Mo couldn't believe that Mama had been dead for almost two years. Sometimes it all came rushing back as if it had happened yesterday.

"I've always been grateful that we didn't bicker over lunch. We had a leisurely meal and enjoyed each other's company. We talked about Neil and Barbara and when they might have another baby."

Barbara was due with their second child, a girl, in two months. "Did you guess right?"

"Mmm . . . we thought it would be a bit sooner." Papa sipped his drink again. "We talked about you going on your first tour, and Andrew's eighteenth and whether he'd be a Chosen . . ." He stared into the distance. Maybe he was back in that eatery, enjoying his food and laughing with Mama.

Mo waited, not wanting to intrude on his thoughts. At times like this, she always felt as if she should apologize for the accident, even though she'd accepted that it wasn't her fault.

Papa's eyes focused on her. "We didn't say good-bye at the eatery. She went back to the workshop with me. A client was waiting, a little too early for his appointment, I might add. He was suddenly more important than your mama." His eyes glistened. He topped up his glass, drained it in one go, and set it back on the table. "So instead of a proper good-bye, your mama got an absent-minded one. You know how it goes," Papa said, waving in one direction and facing another. "Your mind's already onto the next thing. I didn't even kiss her." He shook his head. "I wish we'd said good-bye at the eatery. I would have taken more time. If I'd known . . ." His shoulders slumped.

"Papa, everyone does that."

"Does what?"

"Says good-bye without thinking about it. You can't treat every good-bye as if it's the last time you'll see the person. Nobody lives like that."

"Maybe not, but I wish I could live those few minutes at the workshop over again. Five minutes, that's all I'd want. I'd take my time, especially since that client was early. I'd look your mama in the eye, talk to her, make sure she knew I loved her. Five minutes. That's all I'd want."

A lump formed in Mo's throat.

Papa met her eyes. "Do you know how lucky you are? You have three days. Three whole days. What I wouldn't do for three days with your mama."

Mo swallowed. "Les isn't going to die in three days, Papa."

"She is for you, Mo. She is for you."

Her chest felt tight. She shook her head. "No."

"Yes. You'll never see her again. You'll never talk to her again. She'll be gone. And if you let these three days go to waste, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. You'll never be able to put it right. It'll hang over you, hurt you every time you think of her or someone mentions her name. You don't want that, do you?"

"Of course I don't," she whispered.

"Forget how she handled the transfer. Don't let it erase all the years you had with her. Don't let it dictate how you say good-bye."

Mo couldn't answer him, not when she was pressing her lips together to stop herself from crying.

"You're still young, Mo. Your Chosen, your daughters, furthering your wonderful career doing something you enjoy—you have all that ahead of you. Don't spoil your chances for happiness. Let Lesley go gracefully. Think about all the good times and all the times she stood

by you.”

She didn’t want to; it would only hurt more if she did.

“Mo?” Papa swung his legs off the lounge chair, sat up, and peered at her. “Oh no, you’re crying,” he moaned. “Oh, I’m no good at this. I knew I shouldn’t have tried.” He leaned forward and rubbed her arm. “I should have been gentler. Your mama never made you cry.”

“Sure she did.” Mo lifted her sleeve to wipe her nose, but then accepted the handkerchief Papa held out to her. She blew her nose into it and shoved it into her pocket. “I’m not crying because of what you said, okay? I’ve been holding this in all day. If you’d said supper’s ready, I probably would have cried.”

“I doubt that.” He paused. “My cooking’s not *that* bad.”

Mo almost smiled.

Papa pointed at her, his finger nearly touching the tip of her nose. “I saw that.”

She struggled to her feet and hugged him. “I understand what you’re trying to say,” she murmured. “And I don’t want to leave feeling angry with her.” She wanted them to part on the best possible terms, so they could pick up where they’d left off the moment they reunited. This breakup would be temporary; in fact, she didn’t see it as a breakup at all. They’d be physically separated and out of touch, but still in a relationship. Les would still be her girlfriend, or at least that was how Mo would feel inside—she’d never tell anyone. Would Les feel the same way, or would she consider the relationship completely over once the *Falcon* undocked? Probably the latter. Les didn’t believe they were Chosens. Mo would have to believe for both of them . . . and so she could survive.

“Go see her,” Papa said, patting her back. “Don’t waste any more time.”

No, she wouldn’t rush over to Les just yet. She needed to be with her, but at the same time, being with her would be unbearable, maybe worse than after Mama had died. This time she knew in advance when her life would undergo a devastating change, but she couldn’t do anything to prevent it. She had to accept that it would happen. No hiding within herself—there wasn’t time. No letting her anger get the better of her and turning on Les—there wasn’t time. Before she saw Les, she had to somehow put aside her hurt over the transfer and figure out what she’d say to her.

She let go of Papa and brushed the grass off her behind. “Why are you reading that book, anyway?” she asked.

“I’m going to run for the government,” Papa declared.

Not this again. Since he hadn’t talked about it for several years, she thought he’d wisely given up on the idea.

“Dan’s retiring after this term, so I thought, why not? I wish I’d

done it while your mama was alive. I kept saying I would, but I never did."

"Mama didn't care if you ran for the government."

"She probably got sick of hearing me talk about it all the time. She probably wanted to say do it or shut up."

Mo silently agreed. "What about your clients? Wouldn't you have to give up the business?"

"Dan says the position isn't full-time for the C3 representative. And Andrew can handle things when I'm not there."

Andrew had helped out at the workshop for over a year now. He'd made her a pair of pants during her last leave. Amazingly, they'd fit.

Her comm unit beeped; she glanced at its display. "It's a pilot, I better take it."

Papa nodded and lifted his book from the table. She moved away and hit the connect button. "David told us about you and Lesley," Sheila said after they'd exchanged greetings. "We're sorry. And surprised. Interior? That's quite a change."

"We thought it best." There she went again, protecting Les. "If she'd transferred to another ship, I would have been tempted to transfer too."

"They probably wouldn't have let you."

But she would have tried, and appeared weak in the Way. The transfer, the separation, not communicating with each other—it was all about appearances now. And that rankled.

"Sorry, this is probably the last thing you want to talk about. I just wanted to say that Ruth and I were sorry to hear about it."

"Thanks."

"I beeped Lesley to tell her the same, but she didn't answer. Will you tell her?"

"Sure," Mo said absently as she wondered why Les was ignoring beeps.

"Oh, and we were wondering if you'd like to come for supper and maybe play a little cards? Ruth wants to catch up. Maybe a few days after we undock?"

"Sure," Mo said again.

"I'll send you an invite. Take care, okay?"

"You too." She terminated the connection. Apparently she was on the top of everyone's pity-invite list. No, that wasn't fair. Her friends were rallying around her, trying to help. Wait a minute. They were Les's friends too, but they wouldn't be there for her. Les wouldn't have anyone; she was leaving behind everyone and everything she'd known for the past seven years.

At David's party, Mo had resented that she'd have to explain

Les's transfer to everyone, but now she realized that she'd be in a much better position to cope with their separation than Les. She'd be doing what she knew and loved while surrounded and supported by friends she trusted. Les would face new duties in a new division and have to readjust to being home all the time. And whose shoulder would she cry on? Finney's? Adelaide's? Alan's, maybe, but he might follow Adelaide's lead. Karen would normally be there for her, but she'd recently Joined. Forget Jason—Adelaide's golden boy would never cross his mama by propping up a sister who should just grin and bear it. So Les wouldn't have anybody. She'd have to cope on her own.

Suddenly Mo feared for her. Les was strong, but everyone had a breaking point. Leaving on an angry note, letting Les believe that she'd destroyed them, would add a burden Les didn't need. Mo hadn't had a say in the timing of their separation or the details of it, but she was flaming-well going to influence how they parted. This wasn't the time for temper tantrums, tears, and cheap shots. She had to make sure Les knew how much she loved her and that she forgave her. Les would need something to sustain her until they reunited.

But first she had to purge herself of her anger, disappointment, and resentment—all the negative emotions that had swirled within her since the night of her twenty-fifth birthday. So she'd find a private spot in the woods on the estate and let it all out. She'd scream at the top of her lungs, throw rocks, stamp her feet, tell Les exactly what she thought of her and her stupid transfer and this farce of a separation. She'd collapse into a heap and cry, beat her fists against the ground, and rage about how unfair it was. And then she'd do it again, until she got so sick of it that she wanted to throw up. Only then would she be ready to see Les.

She strolled back to Papa. "I'm going for a walk. When I come back, let's have supper together."

Papa frowned. "I thought you'd be going to see Lesley."

"I will later. I want to have supper with you first. After that, I don't think we'll be seeing much more of each other before I go back to the *Falcon*."

"I should be offended." His face softened. "But I understand."

"I'll see you in a bit, then." She stalked off. Some tree out there was about to get it.

Lesley stuck her spoon into her pudding and stirred it—again. Even though disappointment and regret had killed her appetite, she'd managed to force everything down but dessert. Ever since she was a

child, dessert had been the fun course, a treat after the harrowing ordeal of eating Brussels sprouts or broccoli. But tonight she wasn't in the mood for fun. She doubted she ever would be again.

Why hadn't Mo beeped or dropped by? Yesterday Mo had stormed away after a tense evening that had left them both in tears. Lesley's first impulse had been to go after her, to try to smooth things over. She desperately wanted Mo to forgive her for the transfer and for keeping it to herself for so long, but Mo could hardly stand to look at her right now. So she'd restrained herself and had decided to wait for Mo to beep her, to give Mo time to cool off. She hadn't considered the possibility that Mo wouldn't beep her at all.

So now what? Continue to wait, or cave in and beep her? She didn't want to squander away their remaining time together, but a repeat of last night wasn't appealing. How would they resolve the rift between them when Mo couldn't bear to be with her? How would she live with herself if Mo left angry with her? If only they had more time . . .

Mama walked into the dining room. "Still not finished?" she asked as she buttoned her cloak.

Lesley pushed away the pudding. "I'm full."

"Are you sure you don't want to come to Karen's with us? You barely know William."

"I'm not in the mood." She'd have plenty of time to acquaint herself with Karen's Chosen after Mo had left.

"Why don't you trust the Chosen Council like everyone else does?" Mama said, frowning. "They just might match you with someone you'll like and eventually love."

Like, perhaps. Love, never. She loved Mo. Period.

"If they weren't good at what they do, there would be lineups at execution sites. They probably know you better than you know yourself. They'll match you with someone you'll love, you'll see."

Only if Mo were right and they were Chosens. But she couldn't let herself believe that. She had to prepare for the worst.

Mama tutted. "What is the point of talking to you? If you'd done what every other Rymellan does and dated others, you wouldn't have this childish notion in your head that only Mo will do. But no, you knew better. And now look at you." She jutted her chin toward Lesley. "You're in Interior now. Rymellans expect their military to be strong. We don't want weak people protecting the Way. So pull yourself together. You'll be home a lot more now. I don't want you moping around the house all day."

"Adelaide?" Papa called.

"I'll see you later," she muttered, then turned on her heel and strode from the room. Moments later the front door shut.

Lesley stared at the pudding until her eyes lost focus, then glanced around the empty table. This dining room seated ten; the formal dining room could seat forty. But here she sat, all alone. Well, she'd better get used to it. Even if every chair at the table were occupied, she'd still be lonely, still long for Mo.

The front door slammed shut. Lesley straightened. Her parents must have forgotten something. She'd get an earful if Mama came in and found her crying into her pudding.

"Les?"

Her spirits instantly lifted. "I'm in the dining room," she shouted.

Mo pulled out the chair to Lesley's left and plunked herself into it. She eyed the pudding, then looked at Lesley. "Okay, I know I've been a pain, but your transfer knocked me sideways."

"I'm sorry," Lesley said, relieved and elated. "I should have told you sooner. I put it off because I didn't want to hurt you." And because she'd struggled to face and accept it herself. Every step of the transfer process had seemed surreal.

"Can I have that pudding?" Mo asked, pointing at it.

Lesley slid it over to her.

Mo scooped out a spoonful and lifted it to her mouth. "You know, I thought we'd stay together until our Papers came."

"We always knew we'd have to split up around this time, like everyone else does."

"But we're not like everyone else."

"What do you mean?"

Mo waved the spoon at Lesley. "You'll hate what I'm about to say, because you'll think it's silly and that I'm setting myself up for a gigantic fall. But I'm going to say it anyway." She swallowed and dipped the spoon into the pudding again. "We're Chosens. Each other's Chosen."

Mo was right; Lesley thought she was setting herself up for heartbreak. "Mo, you can't count on that. I know it's what you want." She hesitated, then decided it wasn't the time to hold back. Anything left unsaid would remain that way for the rest of their lives. "I'd like that too."

"Really?" Mo said around a mouthful of pudding.

"Yes. If the Chosen Council were to ask me who I want, I'd say you. But it doesn't work that way. The Chosen Council chooses for us. We have to trust it." She hated parroting Mama, but it was true. Only those weak in the Way doubted the Chosen Council.

"I am trusting it! Don't you see? I trust that the Chosen Council will choose the best match for me. That's you. You're my best match. If the Chosen Council chooses someone else, it will have failed. But I know it won't, because I trust it. I trust the Way. That's why I believe

you're my Chosen. See?"

What she saw was convoluted logic based on a single assumption. "Every Rymellan who's ever been in this situation must think that."

Mo scraped out more pudding and licked it off the spoon. "How many Rymellans do you know who've been in this situation?"

Well, nobody, really. She knew of a few couples who'd broken up as they approached twenty-five, or had even stayed together beyond that point, but they'd been casual pairings. David and Jackie were a typical example. There had to be serious couples hanging on to the bitter end somewhere on the planet, but they'd be the exception, not the rule, and their commanders would know exactly who they were.

"Like I said, we're different," Mo said, interpreting Lesley's silence as agreement. "We've stayed together for years. And we'd continue to stay together if we could, right?"

"We can't stay together," Lesley said, wondering where this was leading.

"If nobody cared if we stayed together—if it wouldn't damage our reputations and Finney and everyone else wouldn't bat an eye—then we'd stay together, right?"

"Well, yes."

"You said it yourself—we have a strong bond. We're not struggling with this because we're weak in the Way and should have broken up months ago without blinking, but because we're Chosens. We're meant to be together. We'll never break up. We're not supposed to." She dropped the spoon into the empty pudding cup.

Lesley's heart sank. Now the conversation would degenerate into an argument and Mo would storm out. They'd be right back where they were after she'd marched out last night, but with one less day together. "I can't go back on the transfer, Mo. We have to split now. We have no choice."

"I know," Mo said, surprising her. "I went for . . . um, a quiet walk earlier and had a bit of a think. Everyone's working on the assumption that we're not Chosens, and we're supposed to assume that, too. So fine, we'll force ourselves apart. You'll be here, I'll be on the *Falcon*. We'll be out of touch. We won't see each other for a bit. But as far as I'm concerned, we'll still be together. You'll still be my girlfriend. That's how I'll see it." She gazed at Lesley.

The unspoken question—*Is that how you'll see it, too?*—hung between them. Mo had verbalized exactly how Lesley would feel, even after her Chosen Papers arrived. She'd always feel bonded to Mo. Her life with her Chosen would be one long betrayal, her Joining something to endure, not embrace. And that was why she and Mo had to part and could never, ever see each other again.

The vulnerability in Mo's eyes frightened her. She should tell her that she wouldn't see it that way; that their relationship would end the moment Mo left for the *Falcon*. But Mo had been brutally honest and deserved honesty in return. Again, this wasn't the time to hold back. She took Mo's hands in her own and kissed them. "That's how I'll feel, too. That's how I'll feel for the rest of my life."

Mo's eyes shone. "Then I don't want to hear the words breakup, split, or anything like that again. That's not what's happening here. We'll be separated for a little while. It'll be tough, but temporary. If we're lucky, we'll reunite in six months." She drew a quavering breath.

"The average age for Papers is twenty-seven."

"Aha! You're starting to believe what I believe."

"No, I'm just saying that it could be a while before either of us receives Papers. I'd like to believe we're Chosens, but I can't."

Mo caressed Lesley's cheek. "Yeah, I know, that logical mind of yours is getting in the way."

Actually, her logical mind had a habit of disappearing when Mo was involved. But when it came to the probability of her and Mo being Chosens, it refused to budge. Yes, they had a strong bond. Yes, if it was up to them, they'd stay together for the rest of their lives. But the Chosen Council had considered every same-oriented female within five years of their ages when determining their best matches. She couldn't take the same leap Mo had taken. Sometimes her inability to throw rational thought out the window was a curse, but this time, it was protecting her. If she embraced the belief that Mo was her Chosen and it turned out to be untrue, she'd never recover. She worried that Mo wouldn't, either.

At the same time, she knew it would be pointless, and perhaps cruel, to try to dissuade Mo from her conviction. Mo might need to believe they were Chosens to cope, to see her through the bleak months until she no longer needed to believe or Papers forced her to accept reality. Lesley wouldn't take that away from her, not when she wouldn't be there to deal with the consequences. But she dearly hoped that Mo would have abandoned the notion by the time one of them received Papers. If she hadn't . . . Lesley couldn't bear to think about what might happen. It would probably be better if she received her Papers first; then Mo would have time to grieve before she met her Chosen. If Mo received hers first, a stranger would have to support and help her, while Lesley lay awake at night, worried and resentful.

"Will you promise me something?" Mo said.

"What?"

"Will you beep me when you receive your Papers? If you get yours first, I mean. And don't leave me a message or send a dispatch. Talk to me. I'll want to hear it from you, not read about it or hear it

second-hand.”

“I’ll beep you if you’re here on Rymel. If not, I’ll have to send you a dispatch. I won’t be able to talk to you after my notification meeting. It would be too risky.”

“If you have to do it by dispatch, promise me you’ll read my reply. If we’re not Chosens, I’ll want to say a proper good-bye.” Mo’s chin trembled.

Lesley’s eyes filled; she wrapped her arms around Mo and squeezed her. “I promise,” she said against Mo’s ear. “And I want you to promise that you’ll do the same. If you get yours first, tell me. You’ll definitely be here, so beep me.” She’d want to hear Mo’s voice one last time, to know that Mo would be okay. If she suspected that Mo was struggling, she’d beep Willis, corner Mo’s siblings, talk to Michael, do whatever it took to see that Mo received the support she needed. Well, anything except beep Mo’s Chosen. She’d avoid ever hearing the woman’s name, if she could.

“I promise.” Mo sounded strained. “I didn’t want to do this,” she said as she drew back and wiped her eyes. “No more talk. Let’s do something.”

“I’m sorry about not telling you about the transfer sooner,” Lesley murmured.

“Forget it, Les. No matter when you’d told me, I wouldn’t have liked it. There’s nothing you could have done to make this easier.” Her face tightened. “I’m still angry, but not at you. I’m angry at how stupid this separation is and at how little everyone trusts us.”

“They’re trying to protect us.”

Mo snorted. “Enough talk.”

Lesley touched her forehead to Mo’s and gently kissed her lips. “Lake?”

“No. Next time we go to the lake, we go as Chosens.” She gave Lesley a defiant look, then relaxed when Lesley didn’t challenge her. “How about the Dance Hall?”

“Are you sure? You couldn’t dance at David’s.”

“I’ve calmed down since then.” Mo paused. “But I can’t act as if everything’s wonderful. I may get a little teary-eyed now and then.” She pressed the palm of her hand against Lesley’s cheek. “Don’t feel guilty because I’m blubbering on the dance floor and you’re not. You’ll fool everyone else, but not me. I’ll know you feel as bad as I do.”

Lesley covered Mo’s hand with her own and struggled for control. Mo could see through her because they shared a level of trust and intimacy that Lesley would never share with anyone else.

“But let’s try to forget, just for tonight,” Mo said. “Let’s go to the Dance Hall and pretend we’re eighteen again.” She smiled through her tears. “Remember the first time we went there after we turned

eighteen?"

"It was during our first break from the Military Academy," Lesley said, nodding. "We couldn't go before then because someone," she tapped Mo's nose, "hadn't turned eighteen yet."

"Yeah, that's right. We had so much fun that night! Remember how grown-up we felt?"

Lesley chuckled.

"Twenty-five seemed so far off then, but here we are." Mo sighed, then slapped her hands against the table and pushed back her chair. "So let's go dance the night away. Let's close the place. It'll be a while before we dance together again. And we *will* dance together again, Les. We will."

Lesley almost believed her.

Mo dropped her bag into the cargo container and shut the container's lid. She closed her eyes, slowly inhaled, and exhaled through her mouth. Nope, that didn't help one bit—she still shook inside and felt as if her stomach were digesting lunch over and over. She took another deep breath anyway, then hopped off the aircraft.

Only Les stood outside. At least she'd been standing when Mo had entered the craft—now she was pacing.

Mo had said good-bye to Papa and Nathan at the house. Papa had been uncharacteristically worried, insisting that she beep him when she reached the *Falcon*. Did he think she'd fail to report? That would be insane and counterproductive—the whole purpose of this charade was to protect her precious reputation and career. What a flaming farce—no! Anger would have to wait. When she got to the *Falcon*, she'd go to the simulators, load up a combat sim, and shoot everything that moved. Would anyone object if she asked Larry to modify the sim so that all the ships looked like Finney? Probably, since it would violate Article 117.

Les's cloak billowed as she spun around to pace in the opposite direction. Mo didn't understand why Les had worn a civilian cloak. Les wouldn't have upset her by wearing her Interior cloak, since she'd already worn it several times since receiving it. So why a civilian cloak today? Mo had asked, but Les had changed the subject. She hadn't pressed her—they didn't have time for arguments or in-depth discussions.

"I'm ready to go."

Les continued to pace, oblivious to her.

"Les!"

Les stopped mid-pace and looked at her.

"I'm ready to go." Her breath quickened. She clenched her hands and dug her fingernails into her palms. For both their sakes, she needed to hold herself together for the next few minutes. She could fall apart in the aircraft, leave the flying to auto-navigation. She still didn't fully trust it, but this once, she'd make an exception.

Les stood in front of her. They stared at each other. Mo didn't know what to say. What could she possibly say that would mean anything? Everything she thought of sounded trite.

"Well." Les reached out to straighten Mo's collar. "Don't forget to do your laundry. Keep up your violin. And tidy your quarters every once in a while," she said, completing her work on the collar with a pat. "And . . . um . . ." Her mouth moved but nothing came out. Blood flooded her face; she blinked rapidly.

Mo swallowed. Watching Les struggle was unbearable, especially when she was on the verge of breaking down herself.

"Know that I'll be thinking of you every day." Tears rolled down Les's cheeks; she didn't seem to notice. "And know that I love you. I love you very much."

"I love you, too," Mo managed to say before collapsing into Les's arms and weeping. She held Les; Les held her; they cried until they were spent, and still clung to each other. "This is not good-bye," Mo said into Les's shoulder. "We'll see each other again. We'll see each other again." She grabbed Les's cloak, balled it in her hands. "You remember that, okay? We will see each other again." She thought she felt Les nod, but wasn't sure.

Les drew back, took Mo's face in her hands, and gazed at her.

"I know, I look like a wreck," Mo said, attempting a smile that probably made her look worse.

"You look beautiful." Les's eyes welled again. A tear escaped and ran down her cheek and onto her neck. She wiped it away. "I have to go now."

Mo pressed her lips together and started sniffing. She still had her arms around Les and didn't want to let her go.

Les reached behind her, unlaced Mo's fingers, and kissed Mo's hands. "I have to go."

"No. Not yet." She pulled her hands from Les's and reached for her. They locked lips and shared a tender, lingering kiss that might have to last them the rest of their lives. Mo felt dazed when Les kissed her forehead. "You'll let me know if your Papers come, like you promised, right?" she remembered to say.

Les nodded and started to open her mouth.

Mo shook her head. "Don't say anything. Just go."

They met each other's eyes. For a moment, only the two of them existed. Then Les squared her shoulders, whirled, and walked away.

Mo wanted to run after her; she wanted to lunge at her and pull her sleeve and beg her to stay for another minute or two; she wanted just one more hug, one more kiss. *Please!* She grabbed her head with both hands and watched as the distance between them lengthened. *Keep walking, Les, keep walking. Don't look back.* If she looked back, they'd both be lost. Over the coming months, Mo would believe for both of them. But right now, she was relying on Les's strength to resist the magnetic force pulling them together.

Les was growing smaller; Mo had to squint to see her. Then she was gone. Gone. Mo stayed for a minute, half expecting Les to suddenly reappear and run back to her. But she didn't. Les was gone, maybe forever. *No! Believe!* They hadn't said good-bye. This wasn't the end. They'd hold each other again—as Chosens.