

Intervention

by Sarah Ettritch

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Lesley paused at the entrance to the pilot training complex and breathed in the fresh morning air. If not for her scheduled practicum session, she'd stay outside and stroll around the academy. While she enjoyed the training stints at Space Station 72, the arboretum and artificial lighting were poor substitutes for the sun, the breeze that coloured her cheeks, the trees lining the paths, and the flowers dotting the dormitory's garden. She couldn't fathom being away on a six-month tour of duty; fortunately, she wouldn't face one for a couple of years. Perhaps by then she'd be used to seeing darkness whenever she looked out a window.

She strode across the lobby and swung open the door to the simulator wing. Only one more practicum before graduation. In three weeks, she'd become Sub-lieutenant Thompson. She'd been surprised to learn that graduating pilots skipped ensign rank. Defence valued fighter pilots more than she'd realized.

Lieutenant Leeds stood near the equipment counter, two helmets in hand. Leeds had taught several of Lesley's classes, but hadn't supervised any of her practicums. Lesley nodded to her, and the lieutenant returned the gesture. "It'll be interesting to see what you can do in the cockpit," Leeds said, smiling. "Of course, I'll see you in action a lot more often from now on."

Lesley didn't know what she meant—a few sessions in the simulator was hardly a lot more often.

Leeds noted her blank expression. "You haven't heard? I'm moving to 72 to supervise its domestic patrols. So we'll be seeing much more of each other, maybe even flying together. I'm not one to sit in an office all day." She handed Lesley a helmet. "Anyway, let's get to it."

"We're not suiting up, Lieutenant?"

"No." Leeds started up the corridor to the simulators. "Once you have the maneuver down, we'll fly an intermediate, but that's at least a session away. Did you remember not to eat?"

"Yes."

"Good," Leeds said over her shoulder as she hit the *Enter* button to one of the training simulators. "I'll take the right."

Lesley settled into the left seat and lifted her helmet.

"Not yet. You haven't logged much time in this model. I'd like to review the controls before we start."

"Yes, Lieutenant." She lowered the helmet. Leeds was certainly thorough. Lesley's other practicum supervisors had only reviewed the controls the very first time she'd flown a particular craft. She may not have flown this model often, but she *had* flown it, and recently.

Leeds leaned across her. "Let's start with navigation."

Annoyed, Lesley pushed herself back against her seat. Why

couldn't Leeds point out the controls on her own panel, clearly visible from Lesley's position? Holding her body away from Leeds was uncomfortable and interfered with her concentration. By the time Leeds finished, Lesley's muscles ached.

"Now you can put on your helmet." Leeds lifted hers.

Lesley gladly complied, relieved to have some breathing room.

"Are you ready, Cadet?"

"Yes."

"Ready," Leeds barked into her mouthpiece.

The simulator darkened.

"Go!"

Leeds turned out to be a superb and patient instructor, though reviewing the controls had left them only enough time to run through the maneuver twice. "I'll view the replay, identify areas that need improvement," Leeds said after they'd turned in their helmets. "Why don't we meet in my office before our next session? We can discuss which steps need work."

"That sounds like a good idea, Lieutenant," Lesley said, once again impressed with Leeds' thoroughness and efficiency. Her other supervisors had always used the first five minutes of the following session to review the last one.

"Excellent, I'll book the time. And well done today, Cadet. You're a quick study, and handled the craft well. I'm very much looking forward to seeing you in action again."

Lesley felt herself blush. "Thank you, Lieutenant," she said, embarrassed but pleased. Too bad Leeds had only been assigned as her supervisor for this one practicum—they worked well together. When Leeds had told her about her move to 72, Lesley hadn't cared one way or the other, but now she considered it good news.

Mo surveyed the open closet in dismay. All those times she'd tossed something into one of the boxes on the closet floor with the intention of dealing with it later had come back to haunt her. Later was now. She and Les had to be out of the room in three weeks, so if she didn't sort through everything here, she'd have to lug it all home.

Three weeks, and then they'd no longer officially room together. They'd have their own rooms on the space station, a perk she could do without. Nothing would stop them from spending their nights together, but it wouldn't be the same. Les would be glad to have her own closet, though. She probably wanted to scream every time she opened this one.

A pair of boots sat on the topmost box. Mo moved them to the

floor, then lifted the box from the pile and set it down near the bed. She opened it with a feeling of anticipation. Several pairs of shoes, what a letdown! They could wait; she wasn't in the mood to sort through them. She shoved the box out of the way against the nightstand and turned back to the pile in the closet. Now that it was shorter, she could see the top of what looked like a rolled-up piece of cloth, propped in the corner behind the boxes. Curious, she reached for it.

Someone knocked at the door. "Come in," Mo shouted, turning. She felt her face tighten when Ann stepped into the room.

"So this is the love nest," Ann said, glancing around.

"What do you want?"

"Charming."

"Well?"

"I want you to link with me." Ann avoided Mo's eyes. "I'm having . . . well, I don't quite have maneuver 16C down. Ross said that if I can't demonstrate that I've got it by graduation, I'll have to stay behind until I do."

"So go practice it."

"I have been. But I need someone to watch what I'm doing, give me a few pointers."

Mo shifted her weight to her right foot. For anyone else, she'd readily agree. But nobody else made cracks about her height whenever an opportunity presented itself, and always when only Mo could hear. Ann had nerve, showing up here, asking for help. "You'll have to find someone else. I'm busy."

"Come on," Ann said. "The only thing we have to do over the next few weeks is the practicum."

"I have other things to do."

Ann put her hand on her hip. "You know, you never link with me."

"I do too!"

"Only when you have to. You help everyone else, so why won't you help me? Lesley links with me."

Yeah, and that grated, but Mo couldn't blame her. She'd never told Les the identity of her tormentor during the evaluation, nor about Ann's continued harassment. Ann made a great show of treating her respectfully when others were around. "Like I said, I'm busy. Find someone else."

"Ross said to ask you."

"Well, you asked me and I said no."

Ann stared at her for a moment, then whirled and marched from the room, slamming the door behind her. Mo winced at the rattling windows. But what had Ann expected, an enthusiastic yes? Now who

was the delusional one? And she'd have to stay behind if she couldn't master the maneuver. Ha! Served her right.

But Mo's glee at Ann's predicament didn't last. Like everyone else, Ann was probably looking forward to the break. Having to stay behind and watch everyone else excitedly bound down the stairs to the train would be depressing. She must be desperate to get the maneuver right, otherwise she never would have lowered herself and asked Mo, of all people, for help.

Maneuver 16C was a tough one. Even when it was performed on auto-navigation, the pilot had to fire weapons at precise moments for it to be effective. A significant part of Mo's training over the past year had involved learning to manually fly maneuvers, in case auto-navigation failed or was knocked out. Unlike other maneuvers, 16C had challenged her.

She felt a twinge of regret. Maybe she should have agreed to link with Ann, rather than acting like a petty airhead. Wait a minute! Ann had treated her like dirt all flaming year. Why should she feel guilty because she'd shown some self-respect and not meekly gone along with what Ann wanted? That was exactly what she hated about people like Ann—they trampled over feelings until they wanted something, then made the other person feel bad for not going along. Or maybe what she hated was people like herself, people who were so soft, they felt as if they'd done something wrong because they'd stood up for themselves. She needed to learn not to be such a pushover.

Mo shook her head. Enough of Ann; back to the closet. She lifted out the cloth, unrolled it, and read *Happy Eighteenth, Mo*. Oh yeah, the banner from her surprise eighteenth party. At the time, she'd wanted to forget everything associated with turning eighteen, including the banner, but she'd felt obligated to keep it. Now it reminded her of how kind her parents and friends had been to arrange the party, and how much she missed some of those friends, several of whom had left the academy almost two years ago. But nostalgia aside, she'd never hang the banner, so it was time to get rid of it. Enough time had passed that nobody would be offended. She'd wait until she got home, though, and quietly—

Her comm unit beeped. Oh, great. Ross. "Cadet Middleton," Mo said.

"I'd like to see you in my office, Cadet. Now."

"I'll be right there." She stalked from the room. Why did people like Ann always get their way?

To Mo's dismay, Ross wasn't alone. Ann turned around when Mo tapped at Ross's open door.

"Come in, Cadet," Ross said.

Mo stepped into the office and nodded to Ross, then forced

herself to nod at Ann. Ann nodded in return, a smug smile on her face.

"That will be all, Cadet Hawkins," Ross said to Ann.

Ann's smile faded. "Yes, Lieutenant Commander."

"Close the door behind you."

Mo focused on Ross and tried not to gloat as the door clicked shut.

Ross gave her a stern look. "Why did you refuse Cadet Hawkins' request for help?"

There was no point in lying. "We don't get along. I doubt she'll listen to me. She'll pick up the maneuver faster if she links with someone else." Someone she respected.

"I want her to pick it up from you. You know that maneuver inside out." Ross folded her hands on the desk. "I'm aware of the tension between you and Cadet Hawkins, but she's willing to put her personal feelings aside to get the job done. I expect you to do the same."

Mo pressed her lips together. Ann had teased her all year, but had somehow convinced Ross that *she* was the gracious one? Flaming unfair!

Ross's face softened. "Look, the other student pilots regard you as their leader, and so do I. I expect more from you than I do from the others. You might not like Cadet Hawkins, but you have to fly with her. Helping her master this maneuver will benefit everyone and set a good example. So I want you to arrange simulator time with her, all right?"

Not really, but Mo nodded.

"Good. If you do find that she isn't listening to you, let me know. But try to work out any difficulties yourselves, first. Understood?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander."

"I'll expect Cadet Hawkins to demonstrate the maneuver in a week's time. Dismissed."

Not surprisingly, Ann was waiting outside. "So are we on, then?"

"Yeah, we're on," Mo muttered.

"Try not to sound so enthusiastic."

"Just book simulator time for tomorrow, okay? After 10:00. Send me a dispatch to let me know when it is."

Ann rolled her eyes. "Of course, Cadet. I'll send you a dispatch. I wouldn't dream of beeping someone as important as you."

Mo's hands clenched. "You know what? I'm doing you a favour. If you don't like the way I want to do things, find someone else. And you better listen to me when we're in the simulator."

"I'll be on my best behaviour."

Somehow Mo doubted that. Maybe it was the smirk on Ann's face. Well, one short joke, and she was gone; she didn't care what Ross said. If being a leader meant she had to grin and bear it while

someone insulted her, follower would suit her just fine.

Lesley sank into the chair in front of Leeds' desk, eager to learn which parts of the maneuver she'd performed well and which could use improvement. She waited while Leeds read over the sheet in front of her—notes from the replay, Lesley presumed.

Leeds looked up. "It's nice to have the opportunity to sit down and chat with you. There's never any time when the year is in full swing."

"That's true," Lesley said politely.

"Have you always wanted to be a fighter pilot?"

"I have. Well, ever since I sat in a fighter during a tour of a military installation."

"Really? How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"It sounds as if you were interested in something else before that. What was it?" Leeds asked.

She'd convinced herself that she was, but . . . Lesley shifted in her seat. She'd rather talk about the replay than answer personal questions. "Advocacy."

"Advocacy?" Leeds repeated, clearly surprised. "Oh, that's right, both your parents are advocates, aren't they? I guess they expected you to follow in their footsteps. Were they disappointed?"

The last thing she wanted to discuss was whether her parents were disappointed with her career choice. "No."

"That's good. I'd be surprised if they were. I can't imagine anyone being disappointed with such an intelligent and pretty daughter."

Her face suddenly hot, Lesley stared at Leeds.

"The military is lucky to have you, given your Learning and Indoctrination Academy records and how well you did during the entrance evaluation. You could have chosen any career you wanted. Is anyone else in your family in the military?"

"No. I'll be the first."

"Really? Then again, we don't get many from C3."

She crossed her legs, surprised at how much Leeds seemed to know about her personally.

"But now we have you," Leeds said, smiling.

"And Cadet Middleton," Lesley added. "She's also from C3."

Leeds' smile wilted. "Oh, yes, of course." She cleared her throat. "Well, then, let's talk about the replay."

Relieved, Lesley listened to Leeds' analysis and felt pleased with

her performance during the last session. She was definitely ready to perform the maneuver during an intermediate sim.

When she and Leeds reached the equipment counter and the attendant asked if they'd be suiting up, Lesley nodded.

"No, not today," Leeds said.

Lesley looked at her in astonishment. "But I thought—"

"You did well, but I did say that your transition from steps three to four and steps twelve to thirteen could be smoother."

Yes, but not enough to warrant another novice session. Perfection normally wasn't required to move on to the next level, where the maneuver could be further refined.

"You take the left again," Leeds said when they entered the simulator.

She grudgingly did as she was told, convinced that they should be preparing for an intermediate sim, not a novice one.

"Now, when you transition from step three to four and from step twelve to thirteen, remember to slow your velocity by tapping this area of the panel," Leeds said, leaning across her and tapping the panel.

It was all Lesley could do not to slap Leeds' hand away. She knew where the velocity control was, as she'd amply demonstrated during her last session.

Leeds straightened, lifted her helmet, and nodded. Lesley put on her helmet and gripped the weapons control a little tighter than usual.

"Are you ready, Cadet?"

"Yes."

Leeds chuckled. "You know, I've taught you so many times and seen that pretty face of yours on the monitors so often, I feel as if I know you. Do you mind if I call you Lesley?"

The question caught her off guard. Despite feeling uncomfortable with the idea, she said, "No," not wanting to deny a request from a senior officer. Finney used her first name, but Finney was her mentor—a different type of relationship.

"And you can call me Christine."

Uneasiness snaked through her. Using Leeds' first name wouldn't be right. She didn't use Finney's first name; in fact, she didn't even know what it was, and Finney had been mentoring her for two years. "If you don't mind—"

"Ready," Leeds said. The simulator darkened. "Go!"

Hardly having to think, Lesley executed the first three steps of the maneuver and glided into step four after slowing her velocity.

"Excellent," Leeds said. "You did that well." She patted Lesley's leg.

Lesley went rigid with shock. She tried to remain focused on the

simulation, but her mind raced. Leeds must have patted her for emphasis, because she couldn't see her face. Leeds wasn't—no. . . it would be inappropriate. She mustn't have realized, must have absently—

“Lesley!” Leeds snapped.

Too late, she noticed the friendly cargo ship in her path. The panels went dark. *Simulation Failed* flashed on one.

“That’s all right,” Leeds said. “We’ll just start again.”

“Can I have a minute first?”

“Of course.”

Lesley pulled off her helmet and tried to collect herself. Perhaps she’d imagined it. Or maybe the seatbelt strap had slapped against her leg, though she usually made sure the belt wasn’t hanging loose. A quick look down confirmed that it was tightly secured. Still, she hadn’t actually seen Leeds touch her. If it had been Leeds, it could have been an accident. They’d been in the middle of a simulation and in motion.

She took a deep breath and put her helmet back on. “I’m ready.”

“Good. Stay focused this time.”

Lesley bit her tongue.

Even though she couldn’t concentrate, she managed to fly the simulation twice without making any mistakes. Leeds didn’t touch her again, if she’d touched her in the first place. By the time Lesley turned in her helmet at the equipment counter, she’d convinced herself that she’d blown the incident out of proportion.

Leeds motioned for Lesley to move away from the counter. “I’m certain you’re ready to move on to an intermediate sim, but we should still review the replay,” she said when they were out of the attendant’s earshot. She bit her lip. “I was planning to meet a friend tomorrow for supper, at that new eatery near station C6-12, but she had to cancel. Perhaps you’d like to take her place? We can discuss the replay then. It’s only a five minute train ride away.”

Lesley struggled to keep her expression neutral. She felt as if she was back at the Learning and Indoctrination Academies, where she’d grown used to politely declining advances. Back then, she’d turned down invitations from her peers, her equals. Leeds was not only an officer, but her supervisor for the last practicum she needed to pass before graduation. Maybe Leeds was looking for a supper companion, nothing more, but given what Lesley now had to concede had happened in the simulator, she doubted that. “An eatery wouldn’t be the best place to review a replay,” she said, deliberately taking Leeds at face value. “And our next session is a few days away, so there’s no need to work over supper on my account. Invite another friend and have a relaxing meal.”

Leeds smiled stiffly. “You’re right. Why work over supper when I

don't have to? I'll schedule a time for us to review the replay. Dismissed, Cadet." She turned on her heel and walked away.

Lesley couldn't understand why Leeds had asked. She must know about Mo, so it didn't make sense. She'd created an uncomfortable situation, and now Lesley wished that Leeds wasn't transferring to the space station.

Back at the dormitory, she swung open the door to her and Mo's room. Mo was in front of the closet, a jumble of shoes at her feet. She swivelled to face Lesley. "Do you think I'll ever wear these again?"

Lesley assumed she was referring to the pair of shoes she held. "Aren't those the shoes you wear when you perform?"

"The shoes I used to wear."

Right. She'd no longer be a member of the student orchestra. "I'd keep them, just in case you decide to audition for the military orchestra."

"Given that I missed half the performances last year, I doubt I will. My schedule will be worse when we're flying domestic patrols." Mo tossed the shoes into a box near the nightstand. "How did your session go?"

"Okay." Part of her wanted to tell Mo what had happened, but the other part worried about how Mo would react. Mo might think she'd done something to attract Leeds' attention or to give her the wrong idea. Worse, Mo's insecurities about their relationship could resurface—she might assume that Lesley secretly wanted a relationship with Leeds, no matter how strongly Lesley denied it. Better to not bring it up, especially since she'd already dealt with it. "You've never had Leeds as a supervisor, right?"

Mo shook her head. "I've heard she's good, though."

She was, when she stuck to business.

"What do you think of her?" Mo asked.

Lesley hesitated; she wanted to choose her words carefully. "She's—"

Mo's comm unit beeped. She read its display. "It's Mama. I better take it."

Relieved, Lesley sat on the bed to untie her boots.

"Guess what? You'll be coming home a little sooner than you thought," Susan said, excitement evident in her voice.

Mo looked at Lesley, her brow furrowing. "Why?" she asked her mama.

"Neil's Chosen Papers have arrived."

"What?" Mo shrieked. "No, I mean, wow! I mean, obviously I knew they'd arrive at some point, but I'm shocked."

Susan laughed. "Everyone's reacting that way."

"When's his meeting?"

"Thursday."
"That's in three days!"
"But you'll need to be home in two, for his notification party. Lesley's invited, of course."
Is he the Principal? Lesley mouthed at Mo.
Mo shook her head and leaned forward. "Just a sec, Mama."
"Is he the Principal?" Lesley whispered.
"Oh, yeah. Mama, is he the Principal?"
"Yes!" Susan said. "So we're hosting lunch. I still need to get hold of the caterers, so I've got to go. Try to be home by two on Wednesday. Your papa wants to make sure that whatever you'll wear on Thursday fits nicely."
Mo rolled her eyes. "Mama, he made just about all my clothes."
"Still, he wants to make sure. It's a special day."
"Yeah, okay."
"And plan to go back to the academy after lunch on Friday."
"After lunch?"
"Yes. Your papa and I would like to talk to you about something, and there won't be time before Friday."
"What do you want to talk to me about?" Mo asked, raising her brows at Lesley.
"Not now, Mo. Friday. Anyway, I've got to go. See you soon."
The connection went dead.
"Flaming Argamon, can you believe it?" Mo said, sliding her comm unit back into its holder.
"He's twenty-seven. That's the average age for Papers."
"I know, but I still can't believe it. Just think, someone out there got her Chosen Papers today, and she's getting Neil!" Mo grinned. "You know, she could do worse."
Lesley nodded.
"And she'll be a Middleton, too."
"That's right." Lesley almost added that she wouldn't mind being a Middleton, but stopped herself. Mo would take that to mean that she wanted to be Mo's Chosen, when she meant that the Middletons were a respectable family that anyone would be pleased to Join into. Well, that was mainly what she meant.
"Anyway, I better go see Ross, let her know. I'll have to juggle around a few sessions." Mo rushed to the door, then rushed back to Lesley and kissed her on the cheek. "Sorry, I'm excited," she said, then rushed from the room.
Lesley smiled. So, the first family member in her and Mo's generation had received Papers. It was beginning. She stopped smiling.

Mo dragged herself to the pilot training complex and resisted the urge to pull the fire alarm—she didn't want a level three strike on her record. When she'd told Ross about Neil, she'd hoped that Ross would let her off the hook about Ann, but no such luck. *We'll extend the deadline by a few days. There will still be time*, Ross had said.

And there was Ann, standing by the equipment counter. Mo already hated helping her, and she hadn't started yet.

"I was about to beep you to see if you'd forgotten," Ann said. "I checked for you in the lobby, in the bathroom. I even checked underneath that little table over there, in case that's where you were waiting."

"Very funny," Mo mumbled, refusing to rise to the bait. Ann wouldn't win that easily. "I hope your Chosen isn't short," she couldn't help saying as they walked to the simulators.

"I'm a Solitary," Ann said.

Mo's respect for the Chosen Council went up a notch. "Oh."

"What do you mean, oh? I don't mind leaving the breeding to others. I have other things I want to do."

Like what, torment people? Mo bit back the words and remained silent. She'd sound patronizing if she tried to say something nice, and she regretted raising the topic in the first place. "Let's start with a sandbox sim. I'll watch you fly 16C, see if I can figure out what you're doing wrong."

"I didn't say I was doing anything wrong," Ann snapped. "I said I could use some tips."

Mo quietly sighed. The next hour would be a long one. "Okay, fine. I'll see if I can give you any tips."

"So you're just going to watch?" Ann said after they'd linked and initiated the sim.

"Yeah. You fly it, I'll observe from a distance."

Minutes later, Mo understood why Ross had suggested that Ann find help. "Just a sec, I want to review the sensor log." The maneuver had fallen apart at step six. "You're not executing the Hanson spiral correctly in step six. If you don't hit that, you come out at the wrong velocity and trajectory, making it impossible to execute the next step. Once you recovered, the rest of the maneuver looked okay. So . . . I think it's just a matter of hitting the spiral."

"I did hit the spiral," Ann said.

"No, you didn't. I saw you blow it, and the sensors confirmed it."

Silence, then, "Fine, I'll do it again. Pay attention this time."

Pay attention this time, Mo mouthed back. With luck, Ann would hit the spiral, do it a few more times, and declare herself ready to

show Ross. Flaming Ross! Anyone could have told Ann where the maneuver was falling apart. Mo had the sneaking suspicion that Ross had thrown them together in the hope that they'd iron out their differences. *Well, keep hoping, Lieutenant Commander, because it isn't going to happen.* "You ready?"

In response, Ann started to fly the maneuver again. Mo watched in disbelief; this attempt looked exactly like the last one. "You missed the spiral again."

"You're wasting my time."

"No, you're wasting *my* time. Do it again. I'll call out the steps, and when I say Hanson spiral, do it." She ignored the loud sigh that emanated from the comm piece in her left ear. "Start again. Please."

Ann silently complied.

Mo called out steps one to five. "Next is the spiral," she said as Ann executed step five. "Hanson spiral!" she said. "Hanson flaming spiral!" she shouted when it became obvious that Ann wasn't entering the spiral.

"I'm doing the flaming spiral!" Ann shouted back.

Okay, that was it. Ann was probably laughing herself silly right now. Mo felt like an idiot. "I'm done." She pulled off her helmet and left the simulator, barely stopping to punch the *Disinfect* button. Flaming waste of time. Forget her suspicion about Ross; now she suspected that Ann had set this whole thing up by convincing Ross that only Cadet Middleton could help her.

Ann caught up to her halfway to the equipment room. "Where are you going?"

"Where does it look like I'm going?"

"I hope it's to tell Ross that you're a lousy teacher."

Mo stopped and pointed to herself. "I'm a lousy teacher? It's hard to teach when the student refuses to listen."

"When didn't I listen?"

Mo shook her head. "No. I've had enough."

"Seriously, when didn't I listen?"

"I told you right away that the Hanson spiral was the problem. You ignored that. Then I said I'd call it for you. You ignored that. So what do you want me to do? Keep trying so you can giggle to yourself every time you ignore me?"

"I was doing the spiral," Ann said indignantly. "What are you trying to do, distract me from the real problem so I'll be stuck here for weeks on end? Or maybe you don't know what a Hanson spiral is."

She flaming-well knew! She could fly the spiral with her eyes shut. If anything, Ann was the one—wait a minute. Only two maneuvers contained the Hanson spiral: 16C and 19A. "What score did you get for 19A?"

"None of your business."

"Look, tell me, okay? I might know what's wrong here." If not for her history with Ann, she would have figured it out earlier and not assumed that Ann was fooling around.

Ann looked at her feet and sharply exhaled. "Well, it wasn't my best score. I passed. Barely."

"Come on, let's go back into the simulators," Mo said.

"Why, so you can scream at me some more?"

"No, so I can teach you how to do a Hanson spiral." Mo raised her finger. "And don't tell me you know how to do one, because you flaming-well don't. You can get away with that in 19A, but not in 16C."

"Whatever you say."

They started back to the simulators. "You're going to listen to me, right?" Mo said. "Otherwise we're both wasting our time."

"I'll listen!" Ann hissed. "I want my full break, and I'll do whatever I have to do to get it. Even listen to you."

Mo restrained herself. "Let's focus on the spiral, then."

Half an hour later, she turned to Ann in the equipment room. "You've almost got it. I figure you'll only need part of the next session to master it. After that, it shouldn't take you long to master 16C. So maybe one more session, two tops."

"That's great." Ann smiled tightly. "I think I can stand another two sessions."

Ann could stand another two sessions? If Mo hadn't been wearing a helmet, she would have torn out half her hair.

Lieutenant Leeds strolled into the room and checked her comm unit. She probably had a session scheduled with a cadet. It wasn't Les; her next session wasn't until Thursday, the same day as Neil's meeting. Speaking of which . . . "Don't forget, I'm leaving tomorrow and won't be back until Friday," Mo said to Ann.

"Do you know when? Maybe we can fit in a session."

"I'm not sure." It depended on what her parents wanted to discuss. She hoped it had nothing to do with her and Les's relationship. "Once I know exactly when I'll be back, I'll book a session, send you a dispatch."

Ann snorted. "Check my schedule first. I also have a practicum." She paused. "I suppose I should say congratulations about your brother. Stand up straight when you meet his Chosen, okay? Otherwise she might not be able to see you." She marched from the room, denying Mo the chance for a witty retort. Not that she had a witty retort—she'd probably think of one on the way back to the room.

"Cadet Middleton." Mo turned to see Leeds stepping toward her. "Did I hear you say that you'll be away until Friday?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. My brother received his Chosen Papers. His

meeting's on Thursday."

Leeds smiled. "That's wonderful! Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Will Cadet Thompson also be away? I have a session with her on Thursday."

Mo would love it if Les could be at the lunch on Thursday, but that would be inappropriate, a word she was starting to hate. Plus, Les had an appointment at the Military Academy on Thursday morning. "She's attending my brother's notification party, but that's Wednesday night. She'll be back in time for her session."

"I was wondering if I'd have to reschedule it."

"No," Mo said, surprised that Leeds would consider that a possibility. Wanting to be in the same sector as your girlfriend while she met her brother's Chosen wasn't an acceptable reason to reschedule sessions.

Sheila, a fellow student pilot, strode into the room. She wiggled her fingers at Mo. Mo waved back, causing Leeds to glance over her shoulder. "There's my 15:00," she said. "Congratulations again, Cadet." Leeds turned to Sheila.

Mo set off for the dormitory, her excitement about Neil growing now that her session with Ann was over. Maybe it was fitting that Les couldn't attend Neil's lunch—the first post-notification lunch they attended together should be their own.

Lesley sank onto the bed and pulled off her boots. She covered her mouth as she yawned. Neil's notification party the previous evening had finally broken up at 01:30. Six hours later, she'd been on a train back to the Military Academy, arriving just in time to record the last batch of announcements for the year. Staying up late had been worth it—getting caught up in the Middletons' excitement, seeing Mo's parents present Neil with more land, Susan's emotional speech . . . Today they must all be running on adrenaline. Mo hadn't sounded tired when she'd beeped earlier.

Can't talk long, just thought I'd beep you, let you know that Neil's Chosen is named Barbara. She seems nice. Oh, she's a teacher at the Learning Academy, and—okay, have to go. Mama's calling me. I'll tell you more when I see you.

Lesley smiled. Mo could probably go dancing tonight, whereas she was ready to get into bed with a book at 20:00. Yes, she had the entire evening to herself, and she'd probably be fast asleep by 21:00. She'd sleep soundly, too; Leeds had been completely professional during that afternoon's session. Focusing on the replay had quickly

dissipated the first few awkward moments, and Leeds had finally decided that Lesley was ready for an intermediate sim.

She was in the middle of unbuttoning her shirt when someone knocked at the door. "Just a minute," she called, quickly refastening the buttons. If it was David, he'd have to find another partner for cards. She opened the door and froze.

Without waiting for an invitation to enter, Leeds brushed by her. "I was just passing by and thought I'd let you know that the replay of this afternoon's session looked great. One or two more sessions and you'll be done."

"Well, uh, thank you for letting me know," Lesley said, trying to get her head around Leeds being there.

Leeds walked to the corner of the room nearest Mo's side of the bed and picked up Mo's violin. "Is this yours?"

"No, it's Cadet Middleton's." She fought the urge to grab the violin from Leeds' hands. "It's probably best that you don't touch it."

Leeds chuckled. "Cadet Middleton's? My, you're formal," she said as she propped the violin back in the corner. "Is that what you call her when you're alone?"

Voices drifted into the room from the corridor. Lesley shut the door, not wanting anyone to see Leeds, but then kicked herself. She'd just made it more difficult to get rid of her.

"Are you musically inclined?" Leeds asked.

Lesley hesitated. "No, I'm not." Fortunately her flute was hidden away on the closet shelf.

"But you like to read." Leeds rounded the bed and picked up Lesley's book from the nightstand. She flipped through its pages.

Lesley swallowed. Why did this have to be happening with an officer? If Leeds were another cadet, she'd tell her to leave. Well, she could try asking Leeds if she wanted anything else, and then say, *No thank you, goodnight*. "Is there anything else, Lieutenant, or was the replay the only thing you wanted to discuss?"

Leeds looked up. "It sounds like you're trying to get rid of me."

Yes! And it would be nice if Leeds took the hint.

"Actually, there is something else. I was wondering if—"

Another knock at the door. Oh please, let it be someone who'd save her from having to turn Leeds down again. Lesley opened the door a crack.

Ann stood in the corridor. "Is Mo here?"

"No, she's not," Lesley said, disappointed.

"She was supposed to send me a dispatch about a session tomorrow, but I haven't heard from her, even though I've sent her two. I saw you after supper and thought maybe she'd come back with you. I thought I'd try the direct approach."

"She's still at home."

"If you hear from her, can you ask her—" Something thudded inside the room. Ann tutted. "Oh, I get it. She's not here. Sure." She pushed past Lesley. "I'm coming in, Mo, and you—oh. Lieutenant Leeds." Ann gaped a moment, then clamped her mouth shut.

"Cadet," Leeds said, straightening and setting the book she must have dropped back on the nightstand.

Ann's eyes darted between Lesley and Leeds. "Sorry to interrupt."

"No, no, you weren't interrupting anything," Lesley quickly said, her cheeks burning. "Is there anything I can help you with? Anything at all?" She rubbed her forehead as she willed Ann to come up with something.

Ann appeared to think it over. "I'm still working on 16C."

"We can see if any simulators are available and fly it together," Lesley said, trying not to sound as elated as she felt.

"Isn't Cadet Middleton helping you with that?" Leeds said.

"Yes, she is," Ann said.

"Then wait for her. Cadet Thompson and I are busy . . . discussing her next session."

Ann's mouth twitched. "Of course, Lieutenant. Sorry to bother you. Good night." She gave Lesley a long look as she walked from the room. Lesley listened to her fading footsteps in dismay.

"Helping Cadet Hawkins isn't your responsibility," Leeds said. "Cadet Middleton is supposed to be helping her."

"She is helping her," Lesley said, her teeth on edge. This time, she'd leave the door open. "You were about to say something when Cadet Hawkins knocked."

Leeds nodded. "Shut the door."

Lesley reluctantly did so and turned to Leeds.

"It's early." Leeds moistened her lips. "I was wondering if you'd like to spend some time together."

"No," Lesley said firmly. Then she grudgingly added, "Thank you."

Leeds' face tightened. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm tired. I was getting ready for bed when you knocked."

"Were you?" A smile played on Leeds' lips. "You don't have to go to bed alone, do you?" Leeds stepped toward her.

Blood rushed to Lesley's face; she stepped back.

Leeds chuckled. "I'm sure you get tons of offers. Do you blush like that every time?"

It wasn't the offer; it was the manner in which it was being made. She had to put an end to this, be blunt, and hope that Leeds wouldn't hold it against her when scoring the practicum. "Look," she

said with a sigh, "you're my practicum supervisor and that's all you are. I'm not interested in a relationship."

"Neither am I. Not a serious one, anyway. It would be nice to spend some time together, including the occasional night, when we can. That's all I'm looking for."

"I'm not interested."

"Come now, I'm sure Cadet Middleton doesn't always sleep alone when she's away."

Lesley hoped and believed that she did. "What Cadet Middleton does is her business."

"And what you do is yours." Leeds closed the gap between them and reached for her.

She caught Leeds' wrists. "I'm not interested in having any type of personal relationship with you," she said evenly. "You have to leave. Coming here was inappropriate."

Leeds' expression hardened; she yanked her wrists from Lesley's grasp. "Inappropriate? You have the nerve to say that *I'm* being inappropriate? I'll tell you what's inappropriate—you and Middleton, you're flaming inappropriate. You're both Chosens, and you both need to grow up! Clinging to each other the way you do . . . it's unhealthy! I'm sure your Chosen would prefer that you have more experience, you know what I'm saying?"

"My relationship with Cadet Middleton isn't open for discussion. You have to leave." Lesley opened the door and stood aside.

"You're making a mistake."

"Not according to Article 493."

Leeds' jaw dropped. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me." Lesley hoped Leeds wouldn't push her—it would be her word against a lieutenant's and horribly embarrassing.

Her shoulders sagged with relief when Leeds said, "Fine, I'll leave." She stopped in front of Lesley and jabbed a finger at her. "But I'll leave you with this. I'm not the only one who thinks your relationship with Middleton is inappropriate. I was at a reception last week, one that Commander Morton hosts every year for the faculty. Do you know what he said about you?"

Leeds was obviously going to tell her, so she tried not to look too interested and waited.

"He said that your priority is your girlfriend, not the Way. So you might want to consider being seen out with someone else on occasion, to show that you're not too attached to anyone. Otherwise, people will talk, and all it takes is a few whispers to sink a career. Think about *that* when you're lying alone in bed tonight." Leeds glared at her, then strode from the room.

Lesley shut the door and stood shaking; she hadn't expected

such a venomous reaction. The entire situation was surreal. Had she finally got through to Leeds? Perhaps angering her would turn out for the best—Leeds might wonder why she'd ever been interested and stick to being her practicum supervisor. On the other hand, Leeds might go on a vendetta against her. But what else could she have done? She'd already tried to politely turn Leeds down—twice. That hadn't worked. She'd had to be blunt.

Then there was Ann. What conclusions had she jumped to? More importantly, would she say anything to Mo? Probably, given how the two of them hated each other. Lesley had better tell Mo what had happened.

She reached for her comm unit, then sat on the bed and buried her face in her hands. She couldn't beep Mo now, interrupt a family celebration—make that two family celebrations. And she'd rather tell Mo in person. Mo might think she was interested in Leeds, or had said or done something to give Leeds the wrong idea. Lesley was sure she hadn't, but Mo might assume otherwise, as she had in the past.

Another knock at the door. She didn't want to answer it, in case it was Leeds, but forced herself to stand. Leeds knew she was in the room; no point trying to hide. She slowly swung the door open. Leeds. Lesley didn't try to hide her displeasure. "Yes?"

"I owe you an apology. You're right, I behaved inappropriately," Leeds said.

Lesley closed her eyes. Finally.

"You'll soon be a sub-lieutenant. I should have waited until then."

Her eyes snapped open. "What?"

"And I came on too strong. I assumed too much, and I can see I frightened you. I also see that Commander Morton was right and that you do need to get over your dependence on Middleton. So I want you to take some time to reconsider you and me. I could be good for you, in more ways than one."

Lesley couldn't believe it. "I don't need any time. "

"Take some time, Lesley. There's no rush. We'll be seeing a lot more of each other on 72. Come to think of it, I can schedule you and Middleton on different rotations, give you some time for yourself."

"No!"

"Well, I'll be less inclined to do that if you show signs of being less dependent on her. So think about it." Leeds smiled; she looked as if she were baring her teeth. "We can talk about it again before our next session. Good night."

Without a word, Lesley shut the door and collapsed against it. What a flaming nightmare! Why was Leeds being so persistent? She wasn't doing it to impress Morton, was she, because of what he'd said?

Maybe she saw it as serving the Way, though Lesley could make a case for the opposite. Leeds' behaviour was disturbing and dangerously weak in the Way.

Perhaps Lesley should report her. No; she couldn't prove anything. Leeds could deny it, even turn it around and make it sound as if Lesley were the one who refused to take no for an answer. But Lesley had to do something, not only for the Way, but because the thought of sitting in Leeds' office, of being in a simulator with her when the lights went out . . . the thought sickened her. And if Leeds went through with her threat to tinker with the schedules on 72 . . .

She flopped onto the bed. Forget about being sound asleep by 21:00—she had some serious thinking to do.

Mo walked with her parents along a path on the Middleton estate, her patience wearing thin. They'd said they wanted to talk. They'd insisted on going for a walk. And so far, they'd discussed . . . the weather and yesterday. "So are you going to talk, or what?" she blurted.

"About what?" Papa said.

"Oh, come on. I need to get back to the Military Academy." She hoped to fit in a session with Ann, and she wanted to see Les. When they'd spoken that morning, Les had sounded distracted, though she'd insisted that nothing was wrong. "You said you wanted to talk to me about something. So talk."

"I think they're a good match," Mama said. "I couldn't believe it when Barbara said she enjoys bird watching. Did you see them talking about it? It was as if they'd known each other for years."

Papa grinned. "It won't be long before there are little Middletons running around."

"There are a few details to take care of first," Mama said with a chuckle. "They have to Join, he has to be reversed—"

Mo wheeled around. "Okay, that's it, I'm going home." She drew the line at discussing Neil's privates. "You can talk to me after the graduation ceremony."

"No," Papa said, grabbing her arm. "We're almost there."

"Almost there?" He'd piqued her curiosity. "Where?"

Papa pointed ahead, to the right of the path. "There."

She squinted into the distance, shielding her eyes with her hand. Something was reflecting the sun. They moved closer. It looked like . . . no, it couldn't be, but . . . "What's an aviacraft doing in the field?"

"Not an aviacraft, *your* aviacraft." Papa swept his arm toward the craft, an ear-splitting grin on his face.

"What do you mean, my aviacraft?"

Mama threw an arm around Mo's shoulders and squeezed her. "Congratulations, soon to be sub-lieutenant. We're so proud of you!"

They weren't serious. "You bought me an aviacraft?"

"Do you like it?" Papa patted the craft's side. "Perfect gift for a pilot, don't you think?"

"I hope you don't mind that we didn't give it to you yesterday while everyone was here, but we didn't want to upstage Neil," Mama said.

"No, you did the right thing." She would have been mortified if they'd presented it to her in front of everyone. "I mean, I appreciate it and all, but don't you think it's a little extravagant? I can't accept this."

Their faces fell. "You only graduate from the Military Academy once," Papa said.

"You've been complaining about how long the train ride is to the shuttle—um, thingie you have to leave from to get up to the space station—remember? Over three hours by train, but—what did he say it would take by aviacraft, Michael?" Mama looked at Papa.

"Twenty minutes," Papa said.

"Well, yeah, it would be faster, but I wasn't hinting for a craft or anything," Mo said. "I hope you didn't get it because of that."

Papa dismissed her concern with a wave of his hand. "No, no, we ordered it months ago, when you told us you'd passed the exam for your full licence."

"What's the point of having an aviacraft licence if you don't have an aviacraft?" Mama asked.

"Mama, most fighter pilots occasionally fly military aviacraft, so most eventually get aviacraft licences. Les and I mainly took lessons to help us get into the program. It was a head start, that's all."

"That may be, but that doesn't mean you can't have your own craft." Papa beckoned to her. "Take a look inside."

"Take us for a ride," Mama suggested.

Mo inwardly sighed. She was fighting a losing battle. Maybe she should humour them today and then wear them down until they finally saw sense and agreed to return it. "I wouldn't mind checking out the interior," she said, then felt guilty when their faces lit up. "What's the code?"

"The code?" Mama repeated, confusion plain on her face.

"The entrance code. So I can unlock the craft."

Mama's eyes widened. "Why would it be locked?"

"Safety regulations."

Papa nodded. "The pilot who delivered it gave me quite a stern safety lecture. They don't want just anyone climbing in and pressing

on the panels in case they accidentally take off on automatic pilot. Listening to him, it sounds like any idiot could fly one of these things.”

Mo placed her hands on her hips. “Thank you very much.”

“Not you!” Papa said with a pained expression. He pulled out his comm unit. “I’ll dispatch the code to you.”

“Thanks. I’ll need to hang on to that dispatch until I memorize it.”

Mo entered the code and slid the aircraft door open. They climbed inside. “Don’t touch anything,” she said as she sat in the pilot’s seat and ran her hand along the control panel and then along the back of the seat next to her. She had to admit, it certainly felt nice sitting in a brand new craft. Not that she’d keep it. “When did it arrive?”

“You mean on the estate?” Mama asked from one of the seats behind her.

Mo twisted around and nodded. Room for eight, including the pilot, she noted. She could fly people home for their breaks. Well, she could if she kept it, but she wouldn’t. Seriously, she couldn’t.

“Do you remember when Papa and Andrew went out for a walk? Then.”

And Andrew hadn’t told her? He’d been more useful when he couldn’t keep a secret.

“Adelaide and Alan saw it delivered,” Papa said. “I guess they noticed it land and came over to see what was going on.” He paused. “I doubt Lesley will be getting one. Adelaide called it a monstrosity.”

Mama snorted.

Papa nudged Mo’s arm. “Oh, I know—let’s fly over the Thompson estate.”

“I’m not flying over the Thompson estate,” Mo said.

“Michael!” Mama said. But then she smiled. “It would be fun, though, wouldn’t it?”

Papa gleefully clenched his hands together. “Let’s do it! How close can you get to the house?”

Mo opened her mouth to protest, but her comm unit beeped, forestalling her. She stifled a groan when she read its display: Ann—again. She’d already beeped once that morning, and sent numerous dispatches. If Mo didn’t answer this time, Ann would probably beep her every five minutes. “I’ll just step outside and take this,” she said, rising from her seat. The last thing she needed was her parents overhearing Ann making fun of her. “Don’t touch anything.”

“We won’t,” they both said.

Outside, she pressed the connect button. “Yeah, I know, I was supposed to let you know about the next session, but I was waiting until I knew for sure when I’d be back. Sorry.”

"Do you know if you'll be back in time to do one tonight?"

"Should be."

"How about 19:30?"

"Yeah, okay."

"So everything went okay with your brother?"

"Yeah, fine," Mo said, surprised at how pleasant Ann sounded.

"Have you talked to Lesley today?"

"Why?" Mo asked, instantly guarded.

"I was just wondering if she mentioned Leeds."

"Leeds?"

"Yeah. I went by your room last night to see if you were back, and Leeds was there."

"Oh. Well, Leeds is her practicum supervisor." Though even as she said it, Mo wondered why Leeds would need to see Les in their room.

"They didn't look like they were discussing a practicum," Ann said.

Mo could hear the smirk in Ann's voice. "What do you mean?"

"Let's just say that when Lesley answered the door, she was in her socks and her shirt's top buttons were undone. And she looked a little flushed. I don't know about you, but practicums don't excite me that much." She chortled. "Leeds seemed really anxious to get rid of me. Who knows when she left? Last night, this morning . . ."

"You're such a liar! Stick to your short jokes."

"Hey, I'm just telling you what I saw, okay? I thought you should know. I don't care if you believe me or not."

"Just be at the simulators at 19:30," Mo snapped.

"I'll be th—"

Mo terminated the connection and rammed the comm unit back into its holder. She could hardly think; she grabbed her head with both hands. How could Les do this? No, consider the source: Ann flaming Hawkins. But why would she tell a lie that Les could easily refute? And Les *had* sounded distracted earlier—had Leeds been with her when Mo had beeped? Why hadn't Les said anything about Leeds being in their room? *How could Les do this?*

No, she shouldn't jump to conclusions. She'd assumed the worst before and been wrong. She wasn't a child anymore—she'd give Les a chance to explain. There was probably a perfectly logical explanation for why Leeds had been in their room, and why Les had answered the door to Ann *half-naked!* So she'd remain calm. Calm, calm, calm. Return to the Military Academy, talk to Les, sort it out. Les would explain—and that explanation better be flaming good.

The train ride would be excruciating and feel like hours, so the sooner she left, the better. Mo turned back to the aircraft. Then again

. . .

"I just want to check something," she said as she slid back into the pilot's seat and entered a set of coordinates into the navigation panel. Estimated time to the Military Academy: seven minutes.

"Something's come up. I have to go back to the academy right now."

Mama and Papa groaned.

"I know, I'm sorry. Do you mind if I fly the craft there? I mean, I still don't know if I can accept it, but I'm in a hurry."

Papa nodded vigorously. "Take it! Take it!"

"Is everything all right?" Mama asked.

Mo nodded. "Everything's fine." Fine, fine, fine. "I'll take you on a ride after the graduation ceremony, okay?"

Papa narrowed his eyes. "So you'll hang onto the craft until at least then."

"Uh, well, I guess so. I owe you a ride, right? And a thank-you."

Papa grinned. "I knew you'd want it as soon as you sat in the pilot's seat."

"No, no, I'm just in a hurry," Mo said feebly.

She joined them outside and hugged them. "An aviacraft . . . such a wonderful thought. But extravagant."

"You think about it." Mama cupped Mo's chin with her hand.

"You'll make us very happy if you keep it."

Mo embraced her again. Making her parents happy was important, right? Keeping it for that reason would almost be noble. Not that she would keep it. She couldn't.

"You don't need anything at the house?" Mama asked when they parted.

"No."

"What about the candies you picked up at the Trading Centre?"

"I'm not going back just for them." She sighed when Mama's face creased with concern. "I'll beep you later." Before Mama had a chance to respond, Mo climbed into the craft and slid the door shut. A minute later she waved to them as the craft ascended, quelling the guilt she felt over running out on them. She'd deal with it later. After Les. Right now, she had to focus on remaining calm. Calm, calm, calm.

"I'll see you at 15:30, then," Lesley said.

"Don't be late." The connection went dead.

Lesley slid the comm unit back into its holder.

"Who was that? Your girlfriend?"

She spun around. Mo stood in the doorway. "I didn't hear you

come in," Lesley said.

"I *bet* you didn't." Mo pushed the door shut and flung her cloak onto the bed. She glared at Lesley.

"You've spoken to Ann."

"That's it? That's all you have to say? It's a good thing I spoke to Ann, otherwise I wouldn't have a clue what goes on around here. She told me what you forgot to mention this morning."

Lesley sighed. "I didn't tell you because I was afraid of this."

Mo's hands went to her hips. "Afraid of what?"

"This!" Lesley thrust her arms toward Mo. "Your reaction. I figured in person I'd stand a chance of explaining what happened."

Mo folded her arms. "I'm all ears."

She'd better start from the beginning. "Leeds asked me on a date a few days ago."

"Oh, great. Flaming g—" Mo stared at her. "Don't tell me last night was a date with her."

"Of course not. I turned her down. I thought that was the end of it. But then she showed up here last night and barged into the room."

"And stayed, from the sounds of it."

"Not for long. I told her to leave, and she did."

Mo snorted. "You expect me to believe that's all that happened? Ann said you looked pretty comfortable, with your boots off and your buttons undone."

"My buttons? I don't think so."

"Oh, but your boots were off," Mo said, pointing at her.

"Yes, they were. This is my room, right? I don't go to bed in my boots." She winced. "I was getting ready for bed when she showed up. I'd already taken off my boots."

Mo folded her arms again. "Why would Leeds come here when you'd already turned her down?"

"There's a problem."

"What problem?" Mo said, her eyes betraying the deadly calm of her voice.

"She's being persistent. Now she's saying we should get together on 72."

"I don't flaming believe this!"

"Neither do I."

"So what are you going to do, get together with her on 72?"

"No!"

"Because this whole thing sounds a little odd to me. She asks you on a date, you turn her down, she comes here, you turn her down, but, oh no, she still wants you. Come on, do you think I'm stupid?"

Lesley blinked back tears of frustration and disappointment. Though it wasn't Mo's fault; she was assuming Leeds was a reasonable

person, as Lesley initially had. "It's true! I want nothing to do with her. If I had my way, I'd never see her again, but it'll be tough not to because she's my practicum supervisor, the practicum I have to pass to graduate."

Mo stared impassively at Lesley, her arms still folded.

"Are you listening to me?" Lesley placed her hands flat against her chest. "I'm telling you the truth! She asked me out, I said no. She came here and made a pass at me, I said no, and in no uncertain terms."

Mo's eyes bulged. "She made a pass at you?"

"Yes! And I told her no and to leave, even though she's an officer and can stop me from graduating and can stop us from seeing each other. Maybe if you trusted me and listened to what I'm saying, you'd realize why there's a problem. A huge problem. Listen to me!" Lesley turned away, struggling for control. Why wouldn't Mo listen? Maybe if she kept repeating it, Mo would eventually hear. She drew a deep breath and looked back at her. "She asked me on a date. I said no. The last thing I expected was for her to show up here. She must have known you wouldn't be around, but I don't know how. No, I didn't tell her."

Mo unfolded her arms. "I told her."

"You?"

"Not on purpose." Mo pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I thought she was being nice, taking an interest."

"When?"

"A few days ago at the simulators. She overheard me telling Ann about Neil and came over to ask when I'd be away. She asked about you, too. Now I know why."

"Mo, I don't like her. I don't want anything to do with her. I hated her being here last night." She felt her lips trembling, but willed herself not to turn away. "I need you to believe me."

Mo stepped toward her. "I do. But if something like this happens again, you tell me right away. Even over a comm unit. I want to hear it from you first, not someone else."

Lesley wrapped her arms around Mo and fought tears of relief when Mo squeezed her back.

"I'm sorry," Mo said into her shoulder. "But you have to admit, it sounds unbelievable. I mean, if what you're saying about Leeds is true . . ."

"I know," Lesley said, drawing back. "But I'm not sure what to do about it. My instinct says to report her. She could be falling from the Way. Not only will she not take no for an answer, but she's completely ignoring you, our relationship."

"That doesn't surprise me. After all, I'm nobody, right?"

"That's not true," Lesley murmured, stroking Mo's cheek.

"It is in the sense that everyone sees us as temporary," Mo said, a little too casually. "According to the Way, this isn't a real relationship."

She had to admit that was true.

"So while it bothers me that she's acting as if I don't exist, I don't see her asking you out as worrisome, as far as the Way goes. It's her persistence . . ."

"That's why I need to do something."

"It will be your word against hers."

"Ann can corroborate that she was here last night, to prove that I'm not making the whole thing up."

Mo sneered. "The same Ann who made it sound like Leeds spent the night? I wouldn't count on her."

"It's a capital violation to lie to the military during an investigation. And I find it strange that Ann made it sound like I wanted Leeds here. Last night, I had the impression that she was trying to help me out of the situation." Lesley waited, hoping that Mo would finally tell her about Ann's harassment. She'd stood on the sidelines all year, knowing that Mo wanted to handle it on her own. It would be nice to get it out in the open so she could stop pretending that she didn't see the daggers shooting from Mo's eyes whenever Ann was around.

Mo didn't bite. "Still, it would be her word against Leeds'." She paused. "What did you mean when you said she could stop us from seeing each other?"

"She threatened to schedule us on different rotations on 72. But right now, my immediate concern is graduating. I have to figure out what to do before my next practicum. That's why I'm seeing Finney this afternoon."

"You're going to tell Finney?"

Lesley nodded. "At 15:30. That's who I was talking to when you walked in. Do you have a better idea?"

"No. What's the point of having a mentor if you can't talk to her about stuff like this?"

"I'm not looking forward to it." An officer making a pass at her wasn't on her list of comfortable topics.

"It'll only get worse. It doesn't sound like Leeds will give up."

"That's why I'm doing it, anyway."

"Leeds mustn't know about Finney," Mo said. "Or at least I hope she doesn't, because if she does, she's definitely falling from the Way."

"I thought the same thing." Lesley let go of Mo. "I hate to do this, but I should probably get going. I don't want to be late. Finney's being good, fitting me in at such short notice."

"You don't have to run off right away if you don't want to. I can go with you."

"That wouldn't be a good idea. Even if it was, we'd still have to leave now to make the next train."

"I meant I can drop you off."

Lesley frowned. "Drop me off?"

"Um, yeah. I have an aviacraft. I flew here." Mo shifted her weight. "Remember my parents wanted to talk to me? Well, they gave me an aviacraft. For a graduation present."

"They gave you an aviacraft?" Lesley said, wondering if she'd misheard.

"Yeah. I'm not keeping it, though. I flew it here, and I'll fly you wherever you're meeting Finney, and then I'll fly home and take the train back."

"It would probably be easier if you just flew back here."

"Yeah, it would. But since I'm not keeping it, I shouldn't keep flying it around." Mo shifted her weight again. "Though it would make my parents really happy if I kept it."

"Why don't you keep it? I would, if I got one. Not that I will. I'm pretty sure I'm getting a complete set of Law books."

Mo gaped. "Law books? How do you know?"

"I overheard them talking about it last time I was home."

"They never give up, do they?"

"Mama never gives up." Lesley wished her parents were as proud of her as Mo's parents were of Mo. Papa tried; sometimes she believed he'd accepted that the military suited her. But Mama . . . no matter how wide the smile, Lesley could still see the disappointment. "You're very lucky, Mo."

Mo nodded. "I need to properly thank them. It was a great idea, even if I can't keep it. Though I guess me having an aviacraft would benefit you too, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would." Lesley slipped on her cloak.

"If I'm flying you, we don't have to leave yet."

"I'd like to see it. And we don't have to go straight to the military outpost. Take me for a ride."

Mo grinned. "You sound like Mama and Papa."

"Have you taken them for a ride yet?"

"Not yet. I rushed over here when Ann beeped me," she said sheepishly.

"Then after you drop me off, fly home and take them for a ride. I'll beep you when I'm done. Maybe by then you'll have finished talking yourself into keeping it and can come and get me."

"What if I decide not to keep it?"

Lesley shrugged. "I'll take the train." She lifted Mo's cloak from

the bed and held it open for her. "Let's go."

Lesley walked to the window and peered outside. Nothing had changed in the last twenty seconds. "And then she marched down the corridor. And that was it." She moved away from the window and looked at Finney.

"Has she communicated with you since then?"

"No. The last thing she said was that we'd talk about it before our next session."

"It' being getting together on 72?"

"Yes." Lesley rubbed her forehead; she felt exposed.

"And she said you'd talk about it in her office?"

"Not explicitly, but that's where we usually meet before a session."

Finney lifted a mug to her lips and sipped, watching Lesley over its rim. "Do you think you can sit down now or do you want to keep pacing?"

Lesley stiffly lowered herself into the chair in front of the desk. Her mug was still full. She didn't trust herself to reach for it.

"I know this has been difficult," Finney said, lowering her mug, "but you did the right thing. I'm glad you came in."

"You don't think I'm overreacting?"

"No. This is definitely an Interior matter." Finney paused. "She hasn't violated any articles, though I agree that she was pushing 493. Hard. But her behavioural pattern indicates that she's slipping. Your instincts are sound."

"I wish it hadn't come to this. She's a good teacher."

"Don't feel bad. You've done her a favour. The best time for us to intervene is before she falls, when we can still help her. That's why the indoctrinators teach that you should contact the military the moment—the *moment*—you suspect that someone is having a problem," Finney said, slapping her hands together. "It can mean the difference between a refresher stay at the Indoctrination Academy and an execution site."

"If she hadn't been so persistent—"

"Then you wouldn't be here. If she'd accepted your answer when she first asked you out, would there be a problem?"

"No."

"Exactly. It's not unheard of for officers to date cadets, though chasing one of your own students is definitely a show of poor judgment. Having said that, if someone were to complain to the administration, the Military Academy would deal with it, not Interior.

But Lieutenant Leeds went beyond that. That's why you're here." Finney tipped her head to the left, then the right. "I could try to strike her under 662 for what she said about scheduling you and Mo on different rotations, but that would be extremely difficult to support."

"If she hasn't violated any articles, what can you—oh. Article 998."

Finney nodded. "Very good. But we have to build a case that she'll be a potential threat to the Way unless we intervene." She swivelled the desk's comm station until the keyboard was directly in front of her and started to type. "Now, are you sure you've never had a problem with her before, when you took classes with her?"

"No, never."

"She never wanted to talk to you after class or anything like that?"

"No. That's why I was surprised when she started to get personal in her office. She knew what my parents do, my sector of residence, she knew a bit about my Indoctrination and Learning Academy records."

"She probably read your military file, the sections available to instructors, anyway. However . . ." Finney tapped away at the station's keys. Lesley heard the familiar click of a connection being established.

"Yes, Commander," a voice said from the station.

"I've just dispatched a file identifier to you. I want you to check all accesses of that file over the past year. Look for anything unusual and get back to me within an hour. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander. I'll look into it right away."

"Thank you." Finney terminated the connection and looked at Lesley. "Did Lieutenant Leeds ever say anything to you over a comm unit about, um, getting together?"

"No."

"Did she ever say anything while you were flying a sim?"

"No. Never during a sim."

"Cadet Hawkins is the only one who saw her in your room?"

"Yes."

"And she handled Mo's violin case and a book on your nightstand?"

Lesley nodded.

"Is the book still on your nightstand?"

"Yes."

"When do you next meet with Lieutenant Leeds?"

"Tomorrow at 14:00, but I don't want to—"

Finney raised her hand. "You'll have to trust me. Go to her office tomorrow, but don't initiate a conversation with her about anything related to this."

"I won't. It's the last thing I want to talk about."

"Good." Finney leaned forward. "I'll have to bring Commander Morton in on this."

Lesley grimaced. She couldn't imagine telling Morton what she'd just told Finney.

"It would be discourteous of me to investigate one of his officers without telling him. And it will be easier to build a case with his cooperation."

"Do you think he'll cooperate when he finds out I'm involved?" Lesley asked.

"Yes. He's done exactly what he said he'd do and left us alone. He hasn't interfered with my mentoring. He hasn't tried to hold you back in any way. Now, he's probably done that because he figured we weren't worth his time, but that's fine. It's been better than having him on our backs."

Finney leaned back in her chair and sipped her drink again. "But even if he had been causing trouble, he wouldn't let something like this go. The worst thing that could happen for him would be that Lieutenant Leeds eventually commits a serious violation, and it comes to light that he was warned and refused to cooperate with an investigation. So don't worry about him. I'll deal with him."

"Thank you." Lesley sat quietly while Finney typed, the overwhelming compulsion to ask the question at the back of her mind growing stronger. She had to know. Shifting in her chair, she asked, "Do you think my relationship with Mo is inappropriate?" The vulnerability in her voice made her wince.

The typing stopped. Finney picked up a pencil from the desk and twirled it in her fingers as she looked at Lesley. "Inappropriate is the wrong word. It implies that you're doing something wrong, when you're not. You're not violating any articles. You're not even pushing any. Many twenty-one-year-olds are in relationships."

"What word would you use?" Lesley asked, sensing a "but."

Finney inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled. "Most young Chosens try not to get too serious with anyone, for obvious reasons. You and Mo aren't typical in that you've been together for some time. You're not an academy romance or a casual relationship. Given that you'll serve with Mo for at least the next couple of years and perhaps beyond, you'll probably still be together when you're approaching twenty-five. I'd be careless not to keep my eye on you. Having said that, I've come to know you, and I'm confident that you'll do what the Way expects of you without much prodding from me."

Lesley swallowed. "I know what I have to do."

"I know you do. And I know it won't be easy. You'll both need time to recover before you meet your Chosens. That's why you don't

want to leave it too late. You probably won't receive Papers the moment you turn twenty-five, but you never know. You can't count on not receiving them until you're twenty-nine." She tapped the pencil on the desk. "When you decide it's time, I can help, if you want me to."

"How?" Finney wouldn't put one of them in the Indoctrination Academy, would she?

"I assume you'll want to stop serving together at that point. Let's say you want to transfer to another ship, so you won't be on the same tour together. I can whisper a word in the right ear to make sure that happens. Things like that."

"I see." That would be useful if she were to put in a transfer request and Mo tried to follow her, though if she stuck to her plan, she'd request a transfer to Interior. She couldn't see Mo doing the same.

"When the time comes, just let me know if you need my help."

Lesley nodded and hung her head. Actually thinking and planning and talking about their eventual breakup saddened her almost more than she could bear, but at the same time, she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, a weight she hadn't realized was there. She wanted to believe that she'd have the strength when the time came, but if she faltered, Finney would help. In fact, Finney would force them apart, if it came to that—she could put a word in the right ear whether Lesley wanted her to or not. She must never forget that Finney was not only her mentor, but the commander of her sector, and Mo's.

"So to get back to your original question, I don't agree with Lieutenant Leeds," Finney said briskly. She put down the pencil and resumed typing. "I'm glad you didn't let her intimidate you."

Lesley's comm unit beeped twice—a dispatch.

Finney looked up. "I think I have everything I need," she murmured.

"Then I won't take up anymore of your time. Permission to leave."

"Permission denied. I want to take another minute of yours." Finney clasped her hands on the edge of the desk. "I was going to talk to you about this after the graduation ceremony, but I might as well do it now, when it's quieter."

Lesley waited, her heart pounding. Finney had never denied her permission to leave before. Did she have more to say about Mo?

"You're graduating, but that doesn't mean you'll stop needing a mentor. In fact, you'll need one more than ever. Most of the cadets on Morton's list will continue their relationships with their mentors after graduation."

Lesley's heart sank—she could guess what was coming. Finney

wanted to stop mentoring her, and who could blame her? Despite offering to be her mentor on the spur of the moment and probably regretting it later, Finney had honoured her commitment for two years. She'd done enough.

"You're a special case. We were sort of thrown together. On paper, I'm not the best mentor for you. You're pursuing a career in Defence, and in a couple of years you'll be away from Rymel for months on end. I'm in Interior. I'll always be stationed here." Her face hardened. "The committee that oversees the lists at all the academies, the one Commander Morton reports to, contacted me last week with a list of potential replacements for me. I just dispatched it to you. You should read it over, consider the choices carefully, and let me know if you're interested in meeting anyone on the list before making a decision."

"I will." How unfortunate that she was losing Finney at the same time she'd needed her for more than the usual advice on classes and extra activities!

"Mentoring you over the past two years has been a positive experience for me. I hope it's been a positive experience for you. No matter whom you choose to guide you through the next few years and beyond, you'll be a fine officer."

"Thank you," Lesley said, though a sense of loss tempered Finney's praise. "The past two years *have* been a positive experience."

"Good." Finney cleared her throat. "If Lieutenant Leeds talks to you about what we've discussed before you meet with her tomorrow, contact me immediately. And remember not to initiate a discussion with her."

"Yes, Commander."

"And about what we talked about, about you and Mo, you beep me anytime if you want to talk about it or need my help. Understood?"

"Yes."

"You did the right thing, coming to see me about Lieutenant Leeds. Dismissed."

Lesley nodded to her and left the outpost, relieved that the meeting was over and confident that Finney would resolve the problem with Leeds in the best way possible, for all concerned. But losing her as a mentor . . . she'd gladly show up for more of Finney's 08:00 meetings, if only she could. After today, she felt like she could talk to Finney about anything. Her next mentor would have a lot to live up to.

She beeped Mo. "So am I taking the train?"

"Only if you don't trust my flying."

"I knew it!"

"Papa was right. If I didn't want to keep it, I should never have sat in the pilot's seat. But forget that, how did it go?"

"She agreed that Leeds' behaviour indicates a potential threat. She's trying to build a case under Article 998."

Mo sucked in her breath.

"It's better than an execution site. Anyway, I'll tell you all about it when I see you. Should I go to the same place where you dropped me off?"

"Yeah. You know, it'll take me longer to walk to the craft than it will to pick you up and fly back to the academy. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"See you then."

Five minutes later, Lesley stood in a field and searched the sky, even though she knew Mo couldn't possibly be in the area. She decided to give the list of Finney's possible replacements a quick look while she waited. Heavy with disappointment, she pulled out her comm unit, opened the dispatch, and started to skim names. She didn't recognize the first five, all in Defence. According to the blurbs after their names, they were all involved with fighter pilots in some way. The sixth name was familiar: *Lt. Cmdr. J. Larson, Defence Division*. Morton had pushed him when he'd first approached her about being mentored. Larson might be suitable for the next two years, since he oversaw domestic patrols, but she wasn't sure he'd be the best choice long term. The next four names meant nothing to her.

She moved down to the last name on the list and blinked. *Cmdr. L. Finney, Interior Division*. Underneath, the following: *I persuaded the committee to add my name to the list. Finney*. She laughed; she couldn't believe it! But Finney had said she wasn't the best mentor for her. Actually, no. She'd said *on paper*. That sounded more like an explanation of why the committee didn't consider Finney the best mentor, not Finney's thoughts on the matter.

Despite wanting to stick with Finney, Lesley planned to spend her remaining free time at the academy researching the others on the list. Finney would expect that of her. She read over Finney's note about persuading the committee and chuckled. She wouldn't have wanted to be on the other comm unit for that conversation. Her mirth died. Nor would she want to be Leeds.

Mo pasted a smile on her face and sauntered over to Ann, standing near the equipment counter. "I'm not suiting up because I'm only going to observe."

Ann seemed surprised to see her. "I wasn't sure you'd make it tonight."

"I would have beeped you if I wasn't coming."

"So everything's okay between you and Lesley?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be? Anyway, sim time is slipping away here." Mo checked the board behind the counter. "It looks like five is free. I'll grab it. Link to me when you're ready."

"Sure."

Mo accepted a helmet from the attendant and headed up the corridor without a backward glance. Ann would just love to know what had happened when she'd returned to the academy and confronted Les. Too bad she'd never get the satisfaction.

She'd just settled herself into the simulator when her comm unit beeped. She frowned at its display. "What?"

"I have to cancel," Ann said. "Can we reschedule for tomorrow morning?"

"What do you mean, you have to cancel? You were just about to suit up."

"Mo, some Interior officer just beeped me. They want to see me." Her voice quavered. "They're over in administration."

Mo's grip tightened around the comm unit. Finney didn't waste any time.

"Do you know what they want?" Ann asked. "Have you heard anything?"

"No, nothing." It was probably about Leeds, but she didn't know for sure. "You better go. I'll reschedule for 11:00 tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay." The connection went dead.

Her mood sombre, Mo returned to her and Les's room. Les looked up from her book when Mo entered.

"Interior beeped Ann. She's with them now," Mo told her. "I hope she realizes it's not a game and answers their questions honestly."

"I'm sure she realizes it's not a game," Les said.

Considering how nervous Ann had sounded, Les was probably right. Mo pulled off her boots and snuggled up to Les on the bed. "What if she makes it sound like you wanted Leeds here?"

"She might make it sound like I didn't." Les squeezed her. "Don't worry. Interior probably wants to confirm that Leeds was here, nothing more. They might ask her to describe what she saw and heard, but I don't know how much weight they'd give to her interpretation of events."

"What if she says she didn't see Leeds here?"

"That would be really stupid. They can pull her recent comm conversations."

Mo hoped they didn't. She'd sounded like an idiot when she'd spoken to Ann earlier that day, and Ann had made it sound like she'd caught Les and Leeds in the act. "Do you think they'll want to see

you?"

Les took her time responding. "I've already talked to Finney. I can't see them talking to me unless they have a strong reason to doubt either her record of what I said, or me."

"Why would they doubt you?"

"I could be lying. Maybe I hate Leeds and want to get her into trouble."

"But you're the one who'd end up in trouble," Mo said.

"Yes, but if I was the one falling from the Way, I wouldn't care."

Speaking about Les falling from the Way, even in hypothetical terms, made Mo uncomfortable. "Why couldn't she have accepted it when you said no? Why did she have to come here and get all weird?"

Les shrugged. "I don't know. I hope I never understand what goes on in someone's head when they're starting to fall."

"Me neither." To think that someone who might be falling had been here, in this room. Someone she'd actually spoken to. She held Les a little tighter.

Les kissed the top of Mo's head. "You okay?"

"Yeah." And ever so grateful for Interior. "Things are moving quickly."

"They would. Interior won't wait around until Leeds decides she'd be good for a Joined Chosen."

Mo shuddered and silently recited the Words.

Lesley pulled on her cloak with a sigh and grasped the doorknob, then hesitated. She felt Mo's hand on her back. "This probably doesn't help, but I'll be thinking of you," Mo said.

"It does help. Thanks."

"Do you want me to walk over with you? I'm meeting with Ross and Ann at 14:30. I can fly a sim until then."

"No, I'll be fine on my own." If she could, she'd keep Mo away from Leeds—the thought of Mo anywhere near that woman made her feel ill. "I'll see you later."

Her dread grew as she crossed the lobby of the pilot training complex and entered the wing that contained Leeds' office. Finney had said to trust her. Even so, when she spotted Leeds at her desk through the open office door, she wanted to turn and bolt.

"Right on time," Leeds said, gesturing toward the chair in front of her desk.

Lesley lowered herself into it and glanced around. Everything looked exactly as it had the last time she'd been here. Well, what had she expected, the office to be crawling with Interior officers?

"The replay looked good." Leeds gave Lesley a pointed look. "As I mentioned the other night. So there isn't anything to discuss as far as your last session goes. But we have other things to discuss, don't we?" She rose from her chair. Lesley's skin crawled when Leeds walked by her to shut the door. Leeds returned to her desk. "Have you given any more thought to what I said?"

"I told you, I don't need to think about it." So much for trusting Finney!

"And I told you that I think you do. Do you want people whispering about you? What will it take to get through to you, Lesley?"

She wanted to ask Leeds the same question.

"Being seen out with someone else will be good for you. I'll be good for you. I don't understand why you can't see that."

Lesley remained silent.

"Are you just going to sit there?"

"I've told you several times that I'm not interested in having any type of personal relationship with you. Can we go to the simulators now?"

"Tell me you'll give some thought to seeing me on 72 and we'll go to the simulators."

They stared at each other. The awkward silence lengthened. Lesley jumped when someone knocked at the door.

Leeds frowned. "Yes?" she called.

The door opened. "I'd like to see you, Lieutenant. In my office."

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander." Leeds rose. "Wait here," she said to Lesley as she walked past.

A moment later, Lesley risked a look over her shoulder, and saw Leeds turning the corner at the end of the corridor. She darted out of the office and stood outside. When Leeds returned, Lesley would start walking toward the simulator wing; hopefully Leeds would follow, not order her back into the office. But then what? Would Leeds continue to badger her in the simulator—or worse? What had been the point of seeing Finney and having her initiate an investigation, if nothing was going to happen? Had Interior decided that Leeds wasn't a problem? How could she not be a problem?

Forget 998; Lesley was certain a case could now be made under 662. Leeds' continued pressure to become personally involved with her was no longer just persistent—it was harassment. But Leeds always made sure that she didn't say or do anything when it could be recorded, and things were only going to get worse. Leeds would have more power over her on 72. She'd be in charge of—

"Cadet Thompson."

Startled, Lesley jerked her head toward the lieutenant approaching her. "Yes, Lieutenant Browne."

"I'll be supervising the rest of your practicum. Let's go to the simulators."

Lesley fell into step with him.

"I reviewed your last two sessions," he said. "It looks like you have the maneuver down. Did Lieutenant Leeds explain why she wanted you to attend another session?"

Not explicitly, though Lesley could guess, and it had nothing to do with the maneuver. "No."

"I see. Well then, you can fly the maneuver for me, and if it looks good, I'll score you and that will be it."

"Thank you." She paused. "Where is Lieutenant Leeds?"

Browne turned to her and smiled. "I'm afraid I don't have any information about Lieutenant Leeds. I was asked to take over your practicum. That's all I know."

He couldn't possibly have reviewed the two sessions since Leeds had been called from her office—they each ran for about an hour. "Do you mind if I ask when you were asked to take over my practicum?"

"Not at all. This morning. I was told to collect you from Lieutenant Leeds' office at 14:10."

Mo stood with Ann in front of Ross's desk, relieved, and surprisingly proud, that Ann had executed 16C to Ross's satisfaction. "I'm pleased that the two of you worked together," Ross said. "It only took two sessions for you to accomplish your goal. You see what you can do when you put your differences aside? Keep it up on 72. Dismissed."

"I suppose I should thank you," Ann said as they strode down the corridor to the lobby.

"I didn't do much. It was all about the spiral."

Ann swung open the door to the lobby; Mo followed her through. Time to get rid of her. She wanted to beep Les, find out if anything had happened with Leeds. Les's session must be over by now.

"Anyway, see you at the ceremony. I'm heading—" She bumped into Ann, who'd stopped dead. "Sorry," she said, to head off the inevitable *Watch where you're going, pipsqueak!*

"Look!" Ann said, her voice low, urgent.

Mo sidestepped her to see what was happening. Everyone stood frozen, their attention on a small group marching toward the exit: Leeds, surrounded by four Interior officers, the ring of their boots echoing around the lobby. The moment the group left the building, everyone rushed to the window and craned their necks. The whispering started as soon as Leeds and her escorts could no longer

be seen.

"Argamon," Ann breathed.

Mo had been dying to ask Ann what Interior had wanted the previous evening, but had restrained herself, since the question was personal and they weren't exactly friends. But now . . . "Is that what they wanted to see you about last night? Leeds?"

Ann turned to her. "Yes, it was. I guess it's okay to tell you. They didn't tell me not to tell you, and I guess you know anyway."

"I wasn't sure."

"You weren't? I assumed Lesley reported her." She leaned forward and stuck her face close to Mo's. "Or maybe you did."

"I didn't."

"So it was Lesley."

"She didn't report her. She asked an officer for advice. And, uh, that officer took it from there. I wasn't sure that's what Interior wanted to see you about, though. What happened?"

"Not much. I was only with them for five minutes. If I'd known it would be that short, I would have told you to fly a sim until I came back."

"Five minutes?"

Ann nodded. "All they wanted me to do was confirm that Leeds had been in your room."

Then why had Ann jumped to the conclusion that Les had reported Leeds? If Ann's interpretation of what she'd seen had been accurate, Les wouldn't have had any reason to report her. "Why did you think Les reported her?"

"Because of what they asked. They asked me if Leeds had been in your room, and when I said yes, they asked me to describe what I saw. Of course I gave them my impression of what was going on, too."

Of course. "I'm glad they didn't listen to you."

Ann's brow furrowed. "Who says they didn't listen?"

"We just saw them take Leeds away."

"Which means my impression of that evening was correct," Ann boomed. Then she elaborated in her normal tone. "I told them that Lesley wanted to get away from Leeds." She started to laugh. "You should have seen her. I thought she was going to pass out! I took pity on her, tried to give her an excuse to go to the simulators with me, but Leeds told me to get lost."

Mo wanted to slap the smile off Ann's face. "Then why in the flaming Argamon did you make it sound like they were all over each other when you told me about it?"

"Because it's fun to pull your strings and make you dance," Ann said, moving her body as if she were a puppet.

"You know what? I've had enough of you." Mo walked away.

"But we work so well together," Ann called in a sing-song voice. "Think of what we could accomplish."

"I don't understand you," Mo said over her shoulder. "I hope I never do." If Ann replied, she didn't hear her. Forget about beeping Les; she wanted to be with her, hug her, tell her what she'd seen. Tell her that Leeds wouldn't bother her anymore.

Lesley caught a glimpse of herself in one of the mirrors that lined the corridor to the reception hall. Was that really her, in an orange cloak, a sub-lieutenant's insignia on her left breast?

Someone slapped a hand onto her right shoulder. "Did Mama tell you I passed the Advocacy Entrance Exam?" Jason asked.

"Yes." Several times. "Congratulations. Oh, and if you ever need a specific Law book for a paper or presentation, check my room." That was where she planned to store her graduation present. A set of Law books wouldn't be in high demand on the space station.

"I have my own set," he said with a grin. "Mama got it for me, for passing the exam."

She forced a smile. "Great. No need to use mine, then." He'd received a better gift than she had for passing the Military Academy entrance exam. Nothing wasn't difficult to beat.

They checked their cloaks, entered the reception hall, and surveyed those gathered below them. "Lesley!" a voice rang out. "Or should I say Sub-lieutenant Thompson?"

She peered in the direction of the voice. Neil waved and beckoned to her. She waved back, then descended the wide steps and threaded her way through the crowd to him.

"Congratulations!" Neil said.

"Thank you."

He proudly presented the woman at his side. "I'd like to introduce Barbara, my Chosen. And this is Lesley Thompson."

Barbara smiled. "Neighbour and Mo's girlfriend. Sorry, I'm meeting so many people lately, I have to label everyone and keep repeating the labels, otherwise I won't remember who's who. You'll be easy to remember, though. Your name comes up a lot, especially when Mo's around. I'll be seeing a lot of you, I'm sure."

Over the next couple of years, perhaps, but after that, she and Mo would be away for months at a time. And once they received Chosen Papers . . . Lesley didn't want to think about that yet, beyond knowing that she'd be incapable of living next door to Mo. She preferred to honour tradition and always strove to do so, but if Mo and her Chosen ended up living on the Middleton estate, Lesley and her

Chosen wouldn't live on the Thompson estate, even if Lesley was the Principal. In fact, she'd have to avoid the estate unless she knew that Mo wouldn't be around. Running into her would be too dangerous, for both of them. Ideally, Mo would remain in Defence and often be away on tour. "Will you live on the Middleton estate?" she asked, her gaze taking in both Neil and Barbara. Mo hadn't mentioned their plans in that regard.

Neil nodded. "Mama and Papa said we don't have to build on the land, we can use it for whatever we want. But we've decided to build."

"The estate is lovely." Barbara slipped her arm into Neil's. "The climate is a little warm for this time of year, but I'll get used to it."

"She's from L9," Neil explained.

"It's not this warm all the time," Lesley told her.

"That's what Neil says." Barbara's eyes lit up. "Jason, neighbour."

"You remembered," Jason said, joining them. "You'll be at my eighteenth next month, right?"

"Yes, Jason, we'll be there," Neil said, sounding like he was saying it for the twentieth time.

"You'll be there, right?" Jason said to Lesley.

"Of course I'll be there. Why wouldn't I be there?"

"Mama says you'll hardly be around now."

"Mama's wrong." Perhaps she should forget tradition and plan to live somewhere other than the Thompson estate, regardless of where Mo lived. "I'll be around more than I have been for the past three years. I'll be home between rotations." Over Neil's shoulder, she saw Finney accept a glass of juice from one of the servers. "Excuse me, I need to speak to someone. Nice meeting you, Barbara. I expect I'll be seeing you again soon."

She skirted around them, anxious to catch Finney before someone else did. Unfortunately she didn't get to Finney first, but Finney acknowledged her with a nod and pointed to the floor with her left hand. A familiar signal, one Finney often used—*I'll come talk to you when I'm finished here*.

While she waited, Lesley scanned the room for Mo. They should have stayed together after the ceremony, but Mo had needed the bathroom. Though Lesley had just left them, she couldn't help looking at Neil and Barbara again. They were getting along well. Lesley doubted they'd wait the full year to schedule their Joining Ceremony. Barbara would become a Middleton, live on the Middleton estate, be there for all the family celebrations, meet Mo's Chosen, know Mo's daughters . . . And there was Mo, walking toward them. Lesley watched her smile and shake Barbara's hand. Well, she would—Barbara was family. Barbara had known Mo all of five minutes, but she

was family.

"Congratulations, Sub-lieutenant."

Lesley turned to Finney. "Thank you. Did you read my dispatch?"

"I did. Are you sure? Building a relationship with some of the Defence officers on that list could be very advantageous for your career."

"I understand that." She hesitated. She wanted to tell Finney that she respected and trusted her, one of the primary reasons she wanted Finney to continue as her mentor. Her experience with Leeds had taught her that even military could go astray; she'd naively never considered that possibility. From now on, military would have to earn her respect and trust—she wouldn't give it by default. Finney had it; the others on the list didn't. But Finney might scoff if Lesley were to tell her that, and ask for a better reason, one related to her career. As it happened, she could provide one. "But you're a better fit for my long-term plan."

"Your long-term plan?" Finney said, her brows shooting upward.

"Yes." Lesley took a deep breath. Saying it out loud would feel like a commitment. "I'm looking forward to flying domestic, and it'll be interesting to go on a couple of deep tours. But after that, I'll probably be ready to stay on Rymel. We've talked about how much I enjoyed the Interior courses."

"Are you saying you'd want to transfer into Interior after a few deep tours?"

Lesley nodded.

"You'd be a good fit for Interior. Not only that, we value officers with knowledge of both Interior and Defence procedures. I'm glad you told me. It'll definitely affect who I introduce you to and how I advise you. If you're willing, I can help prepare you for the transition. You can study Interior material when you're on 72, get a head start."

"I'd like that," she said, smiling to herself. Finney would continue as her mentor.

"Good." Finney sipped her juice. "So if your rough timeline is to transfer after two or three deep tours, that would make you how old when you come over to Interior?"

"About twenty-five."

Finney studied Lesley over the rim of her glass. "About twenty-five." She took a long drink this time, probably weighing what to say. "I think that would be the perfect time." A passing server relieved her of her empty glass. "Of course, twenty-five is a few years away and things can change. So I won't hold you to it if it turns out you don't want to transfer to Interior, or there's," she waved her hand around, "less of a reason to. We'll plan for it, but we won't neglect the possibility that you might remain in Defence."

Lesley selfishly wanted the next few years with Mo, wanted to be a part of Mo's life until it became unbearable and, yes, inappropriate. Unless Mo decided to end their relationship, there wouldn't be less of a reason to transfer when Lesley turned twenty-five.

"I hope you didn't feel that you had to come up with a plan because of what we talked about. I wasn't trying to apply any pressure," Finney said.

"No, I've been thinking about it for a while."

Finney looked her in the eye. "I can understand why you didn't mention this to me before. I'm only your mentor."

Blood rushed to Lesley's face. "I'm sorry, I—"

Finney sighed and shook her head, but she was smiling. "I'm joking, Lesley. I don't expect you to tell me everything the moment it crosses your mind."

Since Finney seemed to be in a good mood, Lesley decided to ask a potentially risky question. Nothing terrible had happened when she'd asked about her relationship with Mo. If anything, talking to Finney had been a great relief. With that in mind . . . "Can I ask what happened to Lieutenant Leeds, or is that something you can't tell me?"

"Not here," Finney said. "Let's go for a stroll."

Lesley expected it to take forever to maneuver their way through the packed room, but everyone quickly moved out of the way when they realized it was a commander saying "excuse me." At least this time Finney wasn't escorting her from a reception in disgrace. Finney had to stop and promise to speak to two officers, but otherwise they reached the room's exit without much trouble.

"Lieutenant Leeds is in the adult wing of the Indoctrination Academy," Finney said as they walked along the deserted corridor. "The indoctrinators will remind her of what we consider appropriate behaviour. I expect she'll spend quite a bit of time with a counsellor, too."

"I passed by her office yesterday. Her name is still on the door."

"Of course it is. She's on an unscheduled break, that's all. Once the indoctrinators are satisfied that she's regained her equilibrium and respect for the Way, she'll be back. As you said, she's a good teacher. Though I doubt she'll be permitted to supervise one-on-one for a while, if ever."

Lesley didn't need to ask what would happen if the indoctrinators weren't satisfied. "I gather that Commander Morton cooperated with the investigation."

Finney chuckled. "Do you remember me asking that accesses to a particular file be checked?"

She nodded.

"Those sorts of things are always monitored. I only had to ask

because any anomalies for your military file would be reported to him, not me. And they were."

"You mean she accessed my file when she shouldn't have?"

"More than she should have, and he knew that. But that alone wasn't enough to initiate an investigation. It's not a violation for an officer to be interested in a cadet. However, it meant he was receptive when I beeped him and told him about what was going on, probably more than he would have been if he hadn't already had the nagging suspicion that she'd developed an unhealthy interest in you. You provided the pieces he was missing."

Finney stopped walking and faced Lesley. "So you see, coming forward early is always the right thing to do. We're helping Lieutenant Leeds, rather than executing her. I'll teach you how to spot worrisome situations and behaviours before they escalate to the point of no return. When we have to execute a Rymellan, everyone has failed, not only the criminal. So it's always better to be proactive, anticipate, recognize potential problems before they occur," she said, slicing her hand through the air as she made each point. "Always keep your eye on things. Don't wait for something to happen. Anticipate."

Perhaps advanced Interior courses covered how to anticipate who could fall from the Way—she'd only had room in her schedule for basic courses. "It sounds like I have a lot to learn." And who better to learn it from than Finney? "Thank you for telling me what happened. I didn't know if you would."

"Well, you're one of us now," Finney said. "Anyway, I should go speak to those officers before they come looking for me. Let's go back."

As soon as Lesley reentered the reception hall, she spotted Mo, standing with David. "Look at us," Mo said with a sweep of her arm. "Remember when we met? Now we're sub-lieutenants. Time flies."

"And so do we," David said.

Mo groaned.

"Did she tell you that she wants to pick you up and take you to the shuttle base for our first rotation?" Lesley asked David.

"You mean that she wants to show off her aviacraft?" David said, winking. "Yep, she did. She's agreed to let me fly it."

"What?" Mo shrieked.

"Oh, my mama's waving to me. Be back in a minute." He darted away.

Mo raised both her hands, palms up. "His mama's waving to him. How convenient."

Lesley stifled a laugh. "I'm sure the sub-lieutenant will be back soon."

"I can't believe it," Mo said, looking down at the insignia on her

uniform. "And you, too." She stepped forward and traced her fingers along Lesley's insignia. "But you know what the best thing is about today? It's official. We'll be flying domestic patrols and then going on deep tours!" Mo squeezed Lesley's fingers. "And I'm so glad we'll be doing it together, experiencing so much for the first time."

"So am I," Lesley said, though she felt guilty, and hoped the shadow she felt hanging over them didn't show on her face. Would it always feel this way, now that she'd drawn a line in time and called it the end? Unable to look Mo in the eye, she looked past her and noticed Finney watching them. Their eyes briefly met, then Finney shifted her gaze back to the officer in conversation with her.

"What is it?" Mo asked, glancing behind her.

She refocused on Mo and managed a smile. "Nothing." Just Finney, keeping her eye on things.