

Misinterpretation

by Sarah Ettritch

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Mo glanced at the sensor panel. Argamon! Two hostiles were on her tail. The incoming indicator flashed; the earpiece in her left ear emitted an urgent beep. "Where are you?" she snapped as she fired a countermeasure. Direct hit—missile neutralized—but with two hostiles pursuing her, one remaining countermeasure in her arsenal, and no decoys, she'd bought a minute at most.

The comm-piece in her right ear crackled to life. "I'm almost there," David said.

"Hurry up! I can't hold out much longer."

Another incoming missile. Fire the last countermeasure or evasive maneuvers? A second missile appeared on sensors. Okay, this was not going well. Wait! Evasive pattern 23-A at half velocity just might . . .

She keyed a command sequence into the navigation panel and braced herself. The ship spiralled downward, pitched left, then right. The eggs she'd eaten for breakfast slid into her mouth. She choked them down. Through the nausea she focused on the sensors, her thumb hovering over the countermeasure trigger. A friendly appeared on the panel.

"I'm in range," David said.

"Pull one off me."

"Engaging."

One hostile broke off pursuit. Her spirits lifted—they might get out of this!

Wait for the missiles to start converging . . . Ready, and . . .

She pressed the trigger. The countermeasure sped toward the missiles.

"Yes!" she shouted. Now to take care of the hostile still after her. Her eyes widened. Uh-oh. She'd forgotten to—

The cockpit shook and the panels went dark. "Simulation failed," an impassive voice said in her comm-piece as she was slowly returned to an upright position.

No kidding. Thank you very much for rubbing it in. She slapped the navigation panel with both hands and groaned. Argamon! They'd almost had it.

"What happened?" David asked.

"Oh, a move I thought was brilliant turned out to be stupid. I tried taking out two missiles at once by getting them to converge."

"Their programming would prevent them from destroying each other."

"I know. But they were close enough that I only needed to hit one to take both out."

"And you missed?"

"No, I hit." Mo sighed. "But I didn't take the increased damage radius of the chain reaction into account." She'd blown herself up. Idiot. "Sorry."

"It wasn't all your fault. I ran into heavy resistance at the supply depot and took way too long to destroy the weapons cache. I was supposed to be on my way back when that patrol showed up."

"Maybe," she said, unconvinced. He hadn't destroyed himself, and she wouldn't have either, if she'd had more options available to her. The simulation had been completely unfair! How had the designer expected anyone to hold off the opposition with such a measly allotment of missiles, decoys, and countermeasures? She'd been outnumbered three to one, hardly conducive to whittling down a hostile with the fighter's laser weapons.

"Come on," David said. "It's the first time we've tried this one, and it's rated high difficulty. We did good."

He'd done well; she'd committed a huge blunder. But she said, "Yeah, I guess so."

"Do you want to try again?"

She pulled off the helmet and checked her comm unit. "I don't think we have enough time." And she was no longer in the mood. "That's it for me."

"Okay." He paused. "I'll meet you in the lobby. I want to fly a short speed sim."

Mo unbuckled herself, stepped out of the dim simulation booth, and pressed the *Disinfect* button to the right of the portal.

The soft lights in the corridor eased her transition from darkness to light—she didn't even blink when she reached the brightly lit equipment room and handed her helmet to the attendant with a murmured "thank you." If she ever flew an intermediate sim she'd have to suit up, but she hadn't tried one of those yet. The novice ones required only a helmet.

She sank into one of the lobby sofas and stared out the large picture window. Last week the path outside had bustled with cadets hurrying to lectures and exams, but now it was empty. Most were on break; the only cadets remaining were those who'd just completed their second year and hoped to enter a specialized program for their third.

Mo swallowed. The next two weeks would decide whether she'd spend her third year training to be a fighter pilot or enter the general stream, putting herself at the mercy of the military's whims when she graduated. Two years of books, aviacraft lessons, and barely palatable food had come down to this. She better not blow it—she'd rather spend her career flying than performing whatever mundane duties the

military assigned to her. She'd hate to be stuck washing floors and cooking meals while Les was out blasting hostiles.

David strolled into the lobby. She pasted a smile on her face, still smarting from her miscalculation in the simulator.

"I can't believe it's only 08:00," David said. "I'm still half asleep." He yawned as if to emphasize his point. "You had breakfast yet?"

She grimaced, reminded of the eggs she'd almost deposited on the simulator floor. "Yeah, I have. But I wouldn't mind a mug of tziva." She had no reason to rush back to the room. Les wouldn't be there, and Mo had just completed the one activity that might give her an edge in the upcoming evaluation. She couldn't really prepare for the essay exam or interview, but the simulator test was a different story. Blowing herself up was hardly encouraging, though.

"When's Lesley due back?" David asked as they left the pilot training complex and walked toward the mess hall.

"She said she'd arrive on the 10:12 train at the earliest."

"She must get up at the crack of dawn for these meetings."

"Normally, yeah, but this time she went home last night."

David drew back in mock surprise. "You mean you managed to get up, have breakfast, and show up for 07:00 all by yourself?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Believe it or not, I did." When Les had beeped her, Mo had already had her shower. Rising early hadn't been difficult—she didn't like sleeping alone. Finney and her flaming 08:00 meetings! At least this time Les had been able to travel the night before, but Mo had selfishly missed snuggling up to her in bed. "Though she did beep me."

"Aha! I knew it."

"I was up! I was up!" she protested, laughing.

"I bet Lesley was surprised."

Mo responded with an absent "Mmm," distracted by a familiar voice off to her right. She felt compelled to look that way, despite knowing what she'd see: Les, talking to the lone Rymellan standing in front of a nearby monitor.

"Hi Lesley," David called, waving at the image on the monitor. Mo rolled her eyes. The first few times had been funny, but the joke had grown stale over the past year. "Will she record announcements over the break?" he asked.

Mo shook her head. "She recorded her last set a few days ago." Unfortunately, Les would have to return from the break a couple of days early to record the announcements that would greet everyone upon their return.

David pulled open the mess hall door and almost bumped into a fellow cadet. "Oh, hi," he said as Ann passed through the doorway.

Ann grinned at him. "Just dragged yourself out of bed?"

"No, I've been up since 06:30," he said, letting go of the door.

"Why?"

"Had simulator time booked at 07:00. We've just come from there."

Ann seemed to notice Mo for the first time. "Both of you?"

David nodded.

"I can understand why you'd want to use the simulator, but why would you?" she asked, frowning at Mo.

"Why wouldn't I?" Mo replied.

"Don't tell me you're trying out for the fighter pilot program."

"Um, yeah, I am," Mo said, irritated. She and Ann weren't friends, but her aspiration to become a fighter pilot was hardly a secret. Surely Ann had heard about her plans from someone—what they hoped to do in their third year had been the main topic of conversation among cadets over the past month.

Ann looked down at her. "No offence, but are you sure you're not too short?"

Blood rushed to Mo's cheeks.

"There's no height requirement," David snapped.

"Well, not officially, but there's a glut of applicants this year, so they can afford to be choosy."

"That doesn't mean they'll reject applicants based on their height," Mo said.

"There's that little thing called an evaluation that'll determine who makes it in and who doesn't," David added.

"Well, you'd better hope you ace every single part of the evaluation," Ann said to Mo. "And even if you do, if it comes down to you and someone . . . bigger, anyone with a smidgen of common sense knows who they'll pick." She smiled tightly. "I'd hate to see you waste your time, so take some friendly advice and go after something a little more suitable for you, okay?"

No, it wasn't okay. Being a fighter pilot would suit her just fine.

"Unless you have more wisdom you'd like to share, we want to eat," David said, pulling the door open again. "See you."

"I'm only trying to help," Ann called as Mo hurried into the mess hall after him.

Help her do what? Drop out of the evaluation? Yeah, that was probably exactly what Ann hoped would happen. Ann was also trying out for the program, so why not narrow down the field of applicants and give herself a better chance?

"Don't listen to her. She's only trying to rattle the competition," David said, thinking along the same lines.

"Yeah! She must be worried her skills aren't up to snuff." Mo wished she'd said that to Ann, instead of thinking of it a minute later. Then she changed her mind; she wouldn't want to stoop to Ann's level. The best way to show Ann would be to make it into the fighter pilot program, exactly what she intended to do.

Lesley bounded up the stairs to the station's waiting area and stepped into the late morning sun. The meeting with Finney had gone well, she looked forward to spending the rest of the day with Mo, and she was eager to undergo the evaluation. What a difference from this time last year, when she'd felt confused and tired. Finney could take credit for part of the change—she believed in a balanced schedule. The Chosen Tradition group had been the first thing to go. Lesley hadn't missed it.

Her comm unit beeped; she smiled when she read its display. "Good timing," she said to Mo. "I just stepped off the train. Are you at the dorm?"

"No, I'm in the middle of a round of cards. We're at the mess hall. Do you want to come here?"

She wasn't in the mood for cards and wanted to see Mo alone. Since they'd switched to wearing cadet uniforms at the beginning of the year, they hadn't felt as comfortable expressing their affection publicly. If she went to the mess hall, she'd be lucky to get a peck on the cheek. "I think I'll just go to our room."

"Okay. I should only be another twenty minutes or so."

"I know it's only just gone eleven, but can you bring lunch with you? I had breakfast at six."

"Yeah, I'm starting to get hungry, too. What do you—"

"Mo, your turn," someone said in the background.

"Just get me the usual. I'll see you soon." Lesley terminated the connection and continued on to the dormitory, cringing when she passed a monitor and heard her own voice. Another announcement reader had said she'd get used to it. When?

As in the rest of the academy, the dormitory was quieter than usual. She swung open the room door and hung up her cloak. Her book about the evolution of Article 44 lay on her nightstand. She'd meant to take it with her to read on the train, but in her hurry to leave, she'd forgotten it. Well, she had time to read a few pages before Mo arrived. She took off her boots and lay on her side of the makeshift double bed.

The first thing she and Mo had done when they moved in was push the two single beds together. The result was still smaller than her

bed at home, but then, her room at home was at least four times the size of this one, richly furnished, equipped with a comm station and several bookcases filled with books, and—well, she had everything at her fingertips there. This room was cramped and drab by comparison. But lying in her bed at home last night, she'd wished she were back here with Mo . . . despite the two pairs of dirty socks inexplicably draped over the back of the chair near Mo's side—though neatly draped, she had to admit.

Her comm unit beeped twice. Over the past year, she'd learned to read dispatches promptly, since scheduling changes often arrived with little notice. She flipped up the unit and leaned forward to peer at its display, then opened the dispatch. Oh good, Finney had thought of two advocates who might be suitable for the Law group's first meeting of the new academic year. The speakers committee had been at its wit's end, trying to find one to speak about Article 223. Even Lesley's parents had drawn a blank. Since the article hadn't been amended for over seventy years, a historian specializing in the Law would have been easier to find, but the new Law group leader had insisted on an advocate. What next—would the Chosen Tradition group want an advocate to speak about an article pertaining to triads?

She opened her book and started to read. Six pages later, the door opened. Mo strode into the room, a paper bag in hand. "Lunch," she announced, setting the bag on the dresser.

"Good, I'm starving." Lesley snapped the book shut, then hastily placed it on the nightstand when Mo rounded the bed, her arms outstretched. She pulled Mo close and breathed in the scent of her hair. Mo's lips and cheeks felt cool. "Weren't you cold without your cloak?" Lesley asked when they finally parted.

"A little. I should have checked the weather bulletin before I left." Mo picked up the bag and nudged Lesley over so she'd have room to sit. "How'd your meeting with Finney go?"

"Good. We can't really plan the year until we know for sure what I'll be doing, but we tossed around a few ideas. How'd it go in the simulator?"

"Great, if you don't count blowing myself up and almost regurgitating breakfast." Mo reached into the bag. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to some of those evasive maneuvers," she murmured.

"You blew yourself up?"

Mo nodded. "I'll tell you in a minute. Okay, egg for you," she tossed Lesley a sandwich wrapped in wax paper, "and cheese for me." She lifted out two covered mugs. "Tziva, and maybe a little something for dessert." Mo set the bag on the floor.

"Is dessert in the bag, or did you have something else in mind?" Lesley couldn't resist asking.

Mo grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. "I guess you'll have to wait and see."

Mo let go of Les's hand as they approached the pilot training complex. "Which room again?"

"Conference room two," Les replied, pulling the door open and holding it for Mo. "I think it's down the corridor to the right."

She veered that way, glad the evaluation was finally starting. She'd had enough of playing cards and sitting around speculating about what questions might be asked during the interviews. As Papa would say, time to get on with it.

Though the meeting wouldn't begin for ten minutes, every chair at the long, oval conference table was already occupied, and several cadets stood against the wall. "Nobody wants to arrive late in case it counts against them," Les murmured as they joined the cadets along the wall.

Mo nodded. She searched faces, looking for David. Many of those present were strangers, aspiring pilots from academies that didn't have a fighter pilot program. Kary was off at the F10 academy undergoing the evaluation for the counselling program. Mo couldn't think of a more perfect career for her; she'd be a shoo-in.

She grabbed David's arm as he walked past. "Didn't see you," he said, squeezing himself between her and the cadet to her left. He glanced around. "Quite a few here—what, around forty?"

"Forty-five, not counting the lieutenant commander," Les said, "and a few more will probably arrive."

He grimaced. "Not good. There are nowhere near thirty spots, let alone forty."

Mo turned toward him to say something reassuring and saw Ann walk into the room. Great. She watched the other woman move to stand almost directly across from them. Mo briefly met her eyes, then focused on the blackboard behind the lieutenant commander seated at the front of the room.

Two more cadets entered. The lieutenant commander stood and did a head count. "It looks like everyone's here, so we might as well start," she said, closing the door. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Ross, and I'd like to welcome you to this brief orientation meeting." She motioned for those at the table to stand.

Mo grabbed Les and David's hands. Two circles formed, one around the perimeter of the room, the other around the table. Ross nodded. "Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who

violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way!" Applause echoed around the room.

When everyone had settled down, Ross picked up a piece of chalk. "So, you want to be fighter pilots. Time for a dose of reality." She wrote 232 on the board and circled it. "That's how many cadets applied to undergo the evaluation." Next, 186. "That's how many passed the aptitude test.

The number surprised Mo. Anyone who'd played with blocks as a child or had the slightest notion of how objects related to each other in three-dimensional space should have breezed through.

Ross wrote 48 on the board; Mo shuddered when the chalk squeaked. "This is you, the ones in this room. Your aptitude results ranked in the top twenty percent. And this is how many spots you're competing for." Dismayed murmurs filled the room when Ross wrote 21 on the board. "That means most of you will not enter the fighter pilot program next year," she said to a greatly subdued audience. She tossed the chalk back into the tray.

"Your aptitude results got you this far." Ross scanned faces. "Now the real evaluation begins. Over the next ten days, you'll write an essay exam, be interviewed, and show us what you can do in the simulator." Her eyes paused on those standing across from Mo. "When there are an abundance of applicants, as there are this year, performing well during the evaluation may not be enough. We may consider other factors when deciding who we'll invite into the program." Her eyes touched Mo's as she shifted her attention to those on Mo's side of the room. "Don't take it personally if we don't select you. Making it this far is an accomplishment you can all be proud of." She cleared her throat. "Now, before we tour the facility, I'll quickly go over the evaluation schedule."

Mo couldn't concentrate on what Ross was saying; her mind kept replaying the moment when Ross's eyes had met hers. Was it her imagination, or had Ross deliberately looked at her when she'd spoken about other factors influencing their decision-making process? Had Ross meant height? She looked at Ann. To her horror, Ann smirked and held her hand waist-high. Mo turned away, her heart pounding. She tried to focus on Ross, but couldn't help sizing up the cadet sitting directly in her line of vision, and then the cadet next him, and the one next to her, and the three cadets in her peripheral vision on the other side of the room. They were all taller than her. She could be the shortest one here. She wanted to size up everyone in the room, but no way would she look in Ann's direction again. Ann was probably still staring at her, that stupid smirk on her face.

Mo self-consciously shifted her weight to her left foot and tried to look relaxed by bending her left leg a little, but she felt awkward

and probably looked even shorter. Standing next to Les didn't help. She closed her eyes, disappointed with herself, and silently apologized to Les. It wasn't Les's fault that she was tall, any more than it was her own that she was short. And yeah, she was short. So what? Other factors could mean anything—grades, Learning and Indoctrination Academy records, the colour of a cadet's hair.

If she didn't stand a chance, they wouldn't have passed her through to the evaluation, especially given the number of applicants. Ann was only trying to raise her own chances of getting in by rattling others into blowing it. Mo pressed her lips together. Then again, Ross's eyes *had* lingered on her when she'd mentioned other factors . . .

Ross clapped her hands, dragging Mo back to her surroundings. "All right, time for the tour," she said. "C6ers familiar with the facility don't have to come along, but you're welcome to. Any questions before we go?" Nobody raised a hand. "All right, then. We'll start in the lobby."

The low murmur of conversation competed with rolling chairs and shuffling footsteps as everyone prepared to follow Ross out the door. Ann seemed to have befriended a couple of cadets from other academies; it looked as if she was planning to go with them on the tour.

"Let's tag along," Les said in the corridor. "We've never had an official tour of the place."

With Ann staring at her the whole time? No, thank you. "I think I'll skip it. I'm not really in the mood."

Les frowned. "You sure?"

"Les, it's not like we'll see anything new. I'll meet you back at the room."

"I'll come along," David said.

"Have fun," Mo said when they reached the lobby. She left the building without looking back and hoped the tour would last a while, since she had no intention of going to the room right away. Ross's "other factors" still nagged at her. The *How to Apply for the Fighter Pilot Program* brochure hadn't specified a height requirement, but maybe there'd been a misprint or someone had forgotten to update the information on the network—they could have thought it only fair to allow the error to stand this year, rather than reject applicants like her. Or maybe they'd recently dropped the requirement on a trial basis and now regretted it.

Half an hour later she leaned back in the wooden chair in one of the library's study cubicles and placed her hands behind her head. Nothing. Not one mention of height in anything she'd read, and she'd gone back twenty years. So either height wasn't a factor, or the

requirements had always had a loophole and she was in on a technicality. She could imagine the conversation:

"Oh no, another short cadet ranked in the top twenty on the aptitude test."

"Oh dear. Pass her through, and we'll do what we always do—reject her based on other factors."

She snorted; now she was being silly. What actually happened during the meeting? Ann had smirked at her and done that stupid thing with her hand, and Ross had happened to look at her when saying that they might consider more than the evaluation when making a decision. Big deal. She'd just wasted half an hour reading archived brochures—brochures!—when she could have been reading about simulator techniques, interview tips, anything but brochures. If Ann had intended to distract her from preparing for the evaluation, she'd succeeded, but only because Mo had let her.

Mo snapped off the monitor and left the library in disgust, determined to ignore any more of Ann's pathetic attempts to make her feel as though she shouldn't be trying out for the program. She was in the evaluation. If that bothered Ann, too flaming bad.

Mo walked into the classroom and scanned for an empty seat—there, in the fourth row. She threaded her way between the desks toward it. If Les were here, she'd want them to sit in the two empty desks at the front. But she'd been assigned to the other classroom for the essay exam, which suited Mo just fine—no distractions. And she hated sitting right under the proctor's nose.

This should be the easiest part of the evaluation. According to the information packet describing the evaluation process, the interview would focus on why an applicant wanted to become a fighter pilot and on the applicant's career goals, while the essay exam would consist of a series of questions about the applicant "to help us get to know you." How much easier could an exam be? All she had to do was write about herself.

She adjusted the monitor and keyboard on the desk and surveyed those seated in the rows in front of her. Sheila and Ruth were sitting next to each other, as usual. They'd been together for a while and, lucky for them, were Solitaries. Well, sort of lucky. They couldn't have daughters, their relationship would never be officially recognized, and while the military tried to keep Solitaries in relationships together, there were no guarantees. Chosens, on the other hand, would never be separated.

The military could separate her and Les after graduation, especially if the pilot program declined her. Mo was sure that Les would be invited into the program, so she *had* to get in, not only because she wanted to be a fighter pilot, but because it would mean training in the same program as Les next year, and probably serving with her for at least a year or two after that. She'd heard that pilots who trained together flew domestic patrols together after graduation. Another two to three years would be—

"Um, excuse me," someone bellowed behind her. "You, with the brown hair, sitting in the third row. Hello?" The room went quiet.

Mo looked over her shoulder. Flaming Argamon, not Ann.

The cadet sitting in front of Mo, the one Ann seemed to be referring to, turned around.

"Don't you think you should move to another seat?" Ann said. "She can't see."

His face screwed up in confusion.

"The cadet sitting behind you. The short one." Ann enunciated every word. "You're blocking her view."

Mo's cheeks burned; blood pounded in her ears. She shrank in her seat, then thought better of it and sat as straight as she could.

The cadet in front stood and leaned toward her. "Would you like to change seats?" he asked.

"No, that's okay, I'm fine," Mo mumbled.

"You sure?"

"Yes, yes," she said, motioning for him to move away and sit down.

"Mo, switch with him," Ann said. "Then you'll be able to see."

Mo whipped around. "It's a flaming essay exam. I don't need to see," she hissed, then faced forward, feeling foolish and self-conscious. Everywhere she looked, faces stared back, cold and unsympathetic.

"I'm only trying to help," Ann trilled.

Mo's hands clenched. If she heard that one more time . . . Ann said something else, too low for Mo to catch. A gale of laughter rose behind her. She sank lower in her seat, then quickly straightened again and glanced at the neighbour to her right, but for what? Reassurance that they weren't laughing at *her*? She didn't get it—he looked away the moment she met his eyes, his keyboard suddenly fascinating.

For a split second, she had the overwhelming urge to bolt from the room and forget about the whole flaming evaluation. But what would she tell Les? That she was too short? There was no height requirement. No height requirement! She had as much right to sit the exam as everyone else here. She'd applied to undergo the evaluation,

just as they had. They wouldn't have accepted her application if they'd known she had no chance, right? Surely someone had noticed how short she was at some point during the application process. Her medical records must have been examined, for one thing.

A lieutenant strode into the room. "Good afternoon, everyone," he said on his way to the front. "I'm Lieutenant North. Welcome to the essay portion of the fighter pilot program evaluation. The exam . . ."

Mo only half listened, the humiliation raw and the laughter still ringing in her ears. Not only Ann thought she was too short; everyone did. For all she knew, she was the laughingstock of the evaluation—the short, deluded cadet everyone whispered about. *Poor thing. Thinks she can be a fighter pilot.* Well yeah, she did. She'd wanted to be a pilot from the moment she'd sat in a fighter. She'd never considered anything else. Maybe she should have.

"Begin!" North's voice rang out, startling her.

She flicked on her monitor and tried to focus. If she didn't do well on the exam, it wouldn't matter if she were a giant—being a fighter pilot would be out of her reach. But then she read the first essay question—*Describe yourself*—and had to restrain from typing *I'm short. Short, short, short!* Her temples pulsed. The next question didn't help: *If your friends were to describe you, what would they say?* How much trouble would she be in if she picked up the monitor and flung it against the wall? Question three—*What would your fellow cadets say?*—made her want to rest her head on the desk and cry.

Half an hour later, she still hadn't written a single word.

Mo flung open the room door and stalked inside, almost bumping into Les.

"I was about to come looking for you," Les said, holding her cloak. "I don't know why they gave us ninety minutes to write the exam. I left after an hour, but only because I wanted to triple-check my answers. I think I was the second to last one out." She hung her cloak back on its hook. "When I didn't see you in the hall, I figured you were back here."

No, at that point, she'd been on question two, after frittering away half the allotted time. Not in the mood to blather on about herself, she'd written terse, pointed answers. Whoever read them would probably think she hated herself. Right now, that wasn't far from the truth. She sighed and slipped off her cloak.

Les's face creased with concern. "You okay?"

"I'm tired." Mo sank onto the bed, untied her boots, and pulled them off. "Maybe I'm coming down with something."

"Do you want to go to the infirmary?"

"No." She doubted they had a cure for her condition: the post-delusional blues, often seen in those who'd discovered their career aspirations weren't and never had been attainable. For the first time, she wished she wasn't sharing with Les. She wanted to be alone so she could lie down, pull the blanket over her head, and not go out until the evaluation was over and everyone had gone home for break. Lying down would have to do. She settled on her side and curled up in a fetal position.

Les rounded the bed and looked down at her. "Are you sure you shouldn't go—"

"Les, don't fuss, okay? I'm not dying. I just want to lie down for a while."

"Okay," Les mumbled, though she continued to stare. "Do you mind if I sort through some clothes, then? I want to take home anything I haven't worn for a while, which will probably be at least half of what's here."

"No, go ahead." Anything to distract her for a bit.

"You'll tell me if you're feeling worse, right?"

"Yes," Mo said through clenched teeth.

Les looked as if she had something else to say, but she turned away and slid the closet door open. She lifted out a shirt, examined it, and apparently decided that the shirt would go home—she slid it off the hanger, folded it, and placed it on top of the dresser. Even when doing something so mundane, her movements were graceful. She always looked so cute when her face crinkled up in concentration. And Argamon, she wore a uniform well.

Not for the first time, Mo wondered where she'd ever found the courage to kiss Les, all those years ago at the Indoctrination Academy. Well, she hadn't exactly given it a lot of thought, and if it had backfired, she'd be looking back on it as impulsive and stupid, not courageous. But it hadn't, and as she watched Les examine another shirt, her mind wandered back to when she was fourteen and in agony.

She and Les had always been best friends. Growing up next door to each other and only five months apart in age, they were always together, at family functions, at the Learning Academy, and at the Indoctrination Academy. Mo knew Les almost as well as she knew herself; she could talk to Les about anything. When they entered the Indoctrination Academy at thirteen for their Level Four, Les had been a fixture in her life for as far back as she could remember—she was like a part of the family. Around Les, Mo didn't have to be polite or pretend to be someone she wasn't. She could be herself.

But then something changed. Suddenly Mo felt self-conscious around Les. Did she sound stupid? Was she laughing in the right places? Did her hair look all right? Did she have a piece of lettuce from lunch stuck between her teeth? Half the time, she couldn't focus on what Les was saying, distracted by Les's blue eyes with their long, delicate eyelashes. Worse, she wanted to reach out and touch her—her hand, her cheek, her hair. Forget the talking; she just wanted to gaze into Les's eyes. She even imagined herself sitting on Les's lap!

At first she didn't understand what had happened, but one day, during class, it all became frighteningly clear. Level Four expanded on the basics of the Chosen Tradition covered during Level Three, and that meant sex education. Sure, she knew about sex, but up to that point, she hadn't thought about it much, nor about whether she was diff- or same-oriented. She certainly hadn't thought about it in relation to Les. They were friends; they knew everything about each other. Her feelings for Les weren't *those* types of feelings, she was sure of it. She didn't plan on having any of those until she met her Chosen—if she had one.

But on that excruciating day, the indoctrinator talked about sexual attraction and how sexual orientation was a discovery, something one learned about oneself, not something one chose. She sat in horror as he described exactly what she was feeling, and watched the large monitor at the front of the classroom in disbelief as several adult Solitary Rymellans, both diff- and same-oriented, recalled their "adolescent crushes." She could hardly breathe; she wanted to crawl under her desk and hide. Most of all, she did not want Les, sitting up front, to turn around; she was convinced that how she felt was plain on her face. She wouldn't be surprised if a bright light suddenly shone down on her and the indoctrinator said, "Now, class, I want you all to look at Mo Middleton. She's another example of a Rymellan with a crush, and on Lesley Thompson, no less."

She left class in a daze, her mind turning over the same question again and again: what was Les's orientation? It had never come up; they'd never discussed boys or girls in that way. Did Les know? Was she experiencing the same sorts of feelings as Mo . . . but for a boy? Would it affect their friendship if she was? Could they be as close, understand each other as much as they did now, or at least as much as Mo thought they did?

Well, that was enough for her. She didn't want anymore of this sexual attraction nonsense. She wanted to feel comfortable with Les again. If she accidentally spat on her while talking, she didn't want to feel as if she'd just done the most embarrassing thing ever. If she stumbled and Les caught her arm, she wanted to laugh and thank her, not blush and wish it hadn't happened. She wanted back that familiar

ease between them, along with the certainty that Les would always be her friend no matter how dumb she sounded or how her hair looked. Who would want those other feelings? Not her. They were annoying and inconvenient. From now on, she'd pretend those other feelings for Les weren't there.

Les came out of the classroom and walked toward her. "That was an interesting class," she said, shifting her notebook from her left to her right hand.

"Yeah," Mo mumbled, her heart pounding.

Les stared at her and shifted her notebook back to her left hand. "Do you . . ." The notebook moved again. "Do you know . . . if you're same- or diff-oriented?" she asked.

Mo gulped and tried not to hyperventilate. "No," she managed to say faintly. Les must have the bluest eyes on the planet. "I mean, I'm not sure. I don't know. I've never experienced anything that would help me tell." They needed to open the windows—it must be one hundred degrees in the corridor.

"Oh."

What about you? *What about you?* But the words wouldn't come out. She couldn't ask a question when hearing the answer terrified her.

The moment passed. "Uh, I thought I'd take a walk during break, get some fresh air. Want to come?" Les asked.

"Sure," Mo said. A walk with Les would be great—as long as she didn't spit on her, didn't trip, and didn't forget herself and grab Les's hand. Les must never know that she had those sorts of feelings for her. Ever.

Over the next few weeks, Mo noticed that she wasn't the only one who'd discovered her orientation. Actually, the signs had been there before, but she hadn't put two and two together. Now she understood why Simon and Judith spent most of their time grinning at each other like morons, and why Sheldon had stood and glared at Timothy at lunch one day, until Timothy had surrendered his seat next to Raymond. She'd even seen classmates kissing. *Kissing!*

Feeling like she'd explode if she didn't tell someone about her own discovery, she decided to tell Mama and Papa on the next family visitation day. They nodded knowingly and smiled at each other.

"You already know?" Mo asked.

"We've known for quite some time, ever since your last appointment with the Chosen Council," Papa said. "They know then, you see, and tell the parents. But it's best that you find out yourself, when you're ready."

But she wasn't ready, not if it meant she couldn't have back her old friendship with Les. The comfortable one, not the one they had now. Over Papa's shoulder, she could see Les chatting with her

parents. They knew. They flaming knew. Did Les? Is that what she was talking about with them? Did she have a crush on anyone? Did she know how many of her classmates had a crush on her? Mo knew how many: a lot.

She wasn't the only girl walking around in misery with Les the object of her affection. Last week at supper, she'd noticed Caroline staring at Les from a nearby table, and her stomach had clenched when she'd recognized the look in Caroline's eyes. She'd also lost count of the number of boys offering to carry Les's books, squeezing themselves in at the same table at mealtimes, and ogling her during class. Once Les had dropped her pencil, and Mo had almost been trampled in the stampede to reach it first, pick it up, and present it to her.

Mo wondered how Les felt about the attention—whether it bolstered or bothered. They never talked about it. In fact, they never talked about anything related to sex, crushes, orientation, or the like. It was almost as if they had an unspoken agreement to not discuss what ninety percent of their classes were about, or the obvious displays of affection right in front of them every time they went outside on break. Mo lived in fear that one day she'd round the corner of the sports equipment shed and find Les pressed against its side, kissing some pimple-faced idiot.

The chances of that happening were slim, though, since she and Les were pretty much always together. If Les planned to go outside on break, she always asked Mo to go with her. She always wanted to sit together at meals, and she spent more time quietly doing homework in Mo's room than she spent in her own. Mo understood why—Les was using her as a shield against all the attention. She didn't mind. If Les wanted to stick to her like glue, that was fine with her. Despite the constant longing when Les was there, despite the ache to touch her, to feel her skin, to press her body against Les's, the almost physical pain when Les wasn't with her was worse.

She tried not to think about the day when Les decided she no longer needed a shield. Les would have her pick of the boys or same-oriented girls. Mo knew it wouldn't be her. Even if she hadn't been Les's friend all these years and as familiar as an old pair of shoes, she was plain, and she didn't seem to be growing much. Anywhere. Les looked taller and curvier every time Mo saw her. So did most of the other girls. But not her. Sometimes she wondered if she had a defective mirror.

Mo told herself that being Les's friend was enough, but deep inside, she knew that wasn't true. One day, sitting directly behind Les and admiring the nape of her neck as Les peered down at her notes, she considered telling Les how she felt. If she knew Les's orientation, if

she heard from Les's mouth that she didn't stand a chance with her, maybe she could let her feelings go, stop irrationally hoping, stop lying in bed at night doing with Les in her mind what she wished she could do with her in reality. Maybe they'd get their old friendship back. Yeah, and maybe she'd wake up tomorrow and the sky would be pink with red polka dots.

Plus, she'd thought of another reason why Les spent so much time with her, and why it would be a disaster to tell Les about her orientation and her feelings. Les was probably diff-oriented and assumed Mo was, too. So Mo was a safe person for Les. Les could be sure that, with Mo, she wouldn't have to deal with unwanted attention, wouldn't have to rebuff unwelcome and awkward advances. The last thing she'd want to hear was that Mo was same-oriented and had a crush on her. Les would find another safe person to latch onto, and that would be the end of their friendship. Nope, it had to stay a secret. Mo would never tell her. Ever.

The months wore on. Nothing changed. Before she knew it, they were due to leave the academy in less than a month. They'd go back to living next door to each other, not down the hall from each other. Mo dreaded it. She hadn't realized it until now, but here at the academy, she'd know almost instantly if Les paired up with anyone. That wouldn't be true, once they left. They probably wouldn't be in all the same classes at the Learning Academy, they'd spend less time together, and she couldn't wander outside her room and bump into Les within five or ten minutes. The prospect of Les having the opportunity to find another best friend, or worse, frightened her more than she cared to admit.

A week later, she stood next to Les and stared out the lounge window, trying to decide if the grass was dry enough to go out and kick a ball around. It had rained most of the day, but the sun had come out a couple of hours ago and had been shining ever since.

"We can go out and feel the grass," Les said.

"Yeah, let's. We've been cooped up all day."

Outside, Les crouched and ran her hand along the grass. "It's a bit slippery."

"We'll be careful," Mo said, wanting to remain outside in the sun. "I'll get the ball." She ran to the equipment shed, plucked a ball from the pile near the back, and stepped back into the sunlight.

Les had moved away from the academy; she motioned for Mo to kick the ball to her. Mo dropped the ball, stepped back, then ran forward and kicked it. Good shot! Les hardly had to move. She kicked the ball off to Mo's right, forcing Mo to race toward it and snag it with her foot. It rolled slowly to Les, who promptly kicked it to Mo's left, then bent over, laughing. Oh, so that was how she was going to play,

was it? Mo ran as fast as she could, determined not to let the ball get past her, though she'd have to kick it while still in motion. Almost there. . . She swung back her leg and—*whoomf!* She was on her back, staring at fluffy, white clouds.

Seconds later, Les peered down at her. "Argamon, Mo, are you all right?"

She wiggled her fingers and toes. Everything still worked. She'd had the wind knocked out of her, that was all. "Yeah, I'm okay." She pushed herself upright.

"I'm sorry," Les said, offering Mo her hand. "I forgot about the grass." Mo grasped Les's hand and Les pulled her to her feet. "I'm sorry," Les said again. "I was being stupid."

"Forget it," Mo said, acutely aware of the warmth of Les's hand. "I'm fine."

"Maybe we should go in."

"No." She reluctantly pulled her hand from Les's, not wanting to give her the wrong idea. Well, the wrong idea from Les's point of view. "I want to keep playing." And delay walking through the lounge looking like she'd been run over by a bike. If she timed it right, maybe the other students would be on their way to supper, though she'd definitely have to change before going to the dining room.

"You sure?" Les asked.

"Yeah, positive. Now get back over there."

Mo fetched the ball and dropped it onto the grass. "I'm changing the game," she shouted to Les. She wanted to show Les that she could bounce back from one little fall, and it would be boring if Les always kicked the ball directly to her. "If you want the ball, you'll have to take it off me."

She darted behind the ball and kicked it away from Les—not too far, just enough so she could continue to kick it as she ran. Almost immediately, she realized what a dumb idea this was. No matter how fast she ran, she wouldn't outrun Les. Sure enough, Les's footsteps soon thudded behind her, then Les was next to her. She almost tripped when Les stretched out her right foot and tried to get control of the ball, but she regained her footing and punted the ball away.

Les darted after the ball; Mo drew on every shred of energy she had and charged after her. They reached the ball at the same time. Mo swung back her leg and kicked, but suddenly Les's leg was there, not the ball. Their legs locked. Mo tumbled forward and broke her fall with her hands. Les crashed down next to her.

Silence, then Les said, "We really should go in," much to Mo's relief. Les was okay, and so was she. She rolled onto her side to agree—enough was enough. Les lay on her back, grinning. "We're asking for

it otherwise," she said, rolling toward Mo. "I should have insisted that —"

Their faces were so close, their noses were almost touching. Les's smile faded. Their eyes met. Before Mo could stop herself, she moved in and touched her lips to Les's. Les's lips were softer than she'd ever imagined. She pressed harder, slipped her arm around Les, slid closer to her. She wanted to feel Les's entire body; she wanted to hold her and squeeze her and—

It felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice-cold water over her head. Was she out of her flaming mind? This was Les, not only the prettiest girl at the academy and probably diff-oriented, but her best friend, the one who'd never shown any interest in her and would probably run into the academy to throw up as soon as Mo let her go. She'd ruined everything. Now her secret was out, and Les wouldn't want anything to do with her.

Mo snapped her arm to her side and drew back. "Les, I-I'm sorry," she said, trying to move away from her, but unable to do so for some reason. "I don't know what came over me. I wasn't thinking. It won't happen again, I promise."

Les gazed at her, her normally pale face flushed. Mo swallowed; Les was probably so angry and disgusted, she couldn't speak. But then Les said, "That's too bad, because I'd really like to do that again."

Mo could hardly believe her ears. "You mean kiss?" she said, wanting to be absolutely sure before she committed herself. Whatever was preventing her from moving away tightened, forcing her body against Les's. She realized with a start that it was Les's arm. Les had her arm around her!

"That's exactly what I mean." This time Les moved in. Their lips locked, and Mo's surroundings melted away.

Later she thought about why she'd finally thrown caution to the wind. Had she seen something in Les's eyes? Had she reached her breaking point and been willing to risk their friendship because the alternative was too painful? Or had it been a completely impulsive act? She'd concluded that it didn't matter. All that mattered was that they were together.

And now years later, lying in their room at the Military Academy, she couldn't help but wonder if Les had ever regretted how she'd reacted that afternoon. Would she have been so quick to kiss back if she'd known that she'd eventually be saddled with a short, flat, plain girlfriend who was the laughingstock of the Military Academy because she thought she could be a fighter pilot? If she'd known, maybe she *would* have run into the Indoctrination Academy and thrown up.

Mo watched Les fold another shirt. She made folding clothes look like an art form. She turned heads wherever she went. And Mo? The

only time she stood out was when she happened to be next to a tree stump. She was also selfish and pathetic, because she'd hang onto Les until the bitter end.

Unfortunately, that end could come sooner rather than later. Les's twenty-fifth birthday had always been the looming doomsday date, the day Mo's life would turn into a day-by-day, nail-biting existence until her and Les's Chosen Papers arrived. Turning twenty-five had been the furthest thing from her mind when she'd first kissed Les. It had seemed so far away, some mysterious state that adult Rymellans entered that she wouldn't have to worry about for a long, long time. Now she could fill in the blanks between now and then, and despair at how close it was. But at least it was still a few years away. If she'd blown the essay exam or didn't have a hope of entering the fighter pilot program because of her height, the end could come as soon as their third year. For the first time, they'd spend a significant time apart.

"Les?" Mo said.

Les looked up from the pair of pants she was folding. "What?"

"What do you think will happen if one of us makes it into the fighter pilot program and the other one doesn't?"

"What do you mean?" Les said, adding the pants to the neat stack on the dresser and reaching into the closet.

"To us. What would happen to us?"

Les dropped her hand and looked at Mo. "Nothing. Why would anything happen?"

"The student pilots go away for weeks. We've never gone that long without seeing each other."

Les hesitated. Mo could guess what was running through Les's mind—that the time would come when they'd never see each other at all, so it wouldn't be prudent to admit that being apart for a few weeks would be difficult. Once, just once, she wished Les would say something, anything, to indicate that she'd be upset if they weren't Chosens. That she'd struggle to adjust, that never seeing each other again was unimaginable. Just once.

"You were away a few times with the student orchestra. We survived," Les said.

"Yeah, but I was only ever away for a night or two." And she'd missed Les terribly and had hated sleeping on her own. "You—or I—would be gone for weeks." Plenty of time for Les to grow close to someone else, someone who'd understand more than Mo what it was like to be a fighter pilot. Les would come to dread returning to the Military Academy. "And what about afterward, when we graduate? If we're both pilots, there's a good chance we'll be posted together. If not, who knows?"

"Well, if I'm not accepted into the evaluation, the first thing I'll do is examine all the options and figure out what else interests me." Les walked to the bed. Mo started to move over, expecting Les to sit on the edge, but Les sat on the floor, rested her arm on the bed, and rested her chin on her arm. "From there, I'll figure out which items on the list are closely associated with fighter pilots," she said, her eyes level with Mo's. "Off the top of my head, there's tactical, fighter maintenance, weapons development and testing, um . . ."

"But the evaluation for most programs is happening now."

"True, but there are still the second-round evaluations."

"What?" Mo had never heard of them.

"If you're not accepted into a program now, you can try out for a different one during the first couple of weeks of your third year. Though only for programs that still have open slots."

"How do you know about them? Oh, wait. Finney."

Les nodded. "Well, sort of. Finney only mentioned them in passing, as something we'll consider if we have to. I decided to look into them further. Apparently, if you fail your first-round evaluation, they tell you about the second-round ones during your results meeting. You can't try out for the same program you just failed, though."

Well, at least that was something. Maybe she wouldn't end up cleaning toilets after all. But even if she enrolled in one of these second-round evaluations, she might end up serving with Les in the future, but not necessarily training with her. In fact, she could end up at a different Military Academy, depending on the program.

"I bet tactical will still have a few places," Les said. "I've heard it's not that popular. I don't know why. I think it would be interesting."

"Why didn't you tell me about these second-round evaluations before?"

"There wasn't any point. You only have to concern yourself with them if you fail the evaluation."

"Did you look into them in case I fail?"

Les chuckled. "No. I looked into them in case *I* fail. You know me, I always like to have a backup plan." She paused. "So why are you suddenly concerned about what'll happen if one of us fails the evaluation? You've never said anything about it before."

"I don't know, I guess it wasn't real before. Now that we'll know if we're in or out in a week's time, probably everyone's thinking about what'll happen if they fail."

Les didn't look convinced. "Did your essay exam go okay?"

"Fine," Mo said, though she avoided Les's eyes.

"It's just that it took you a while."

"Yeah, it did, okay? So what?"

"You seemed upset when you got back."

"I told you, I'm not feeling well."

"Come on, Mo. You might get away with that with someone else, but not with me." Les stroked Mo's cheek.

Mo felt herself soften, but Les wouldn't get around her that easily. "Look, like I said, now that we're finally at the point where we'll know if we have a chance of being pilots or not, failing seems like a real possibility."

"And you think you'll fail?"

She remained silent.

"You did well on your aptitude test, and you said the essay exam went okay."

It had in that she'd answered all the questions. Maybe not going on and on about herself would end up working to her advantage, and perhaps the essay exam wasn't given as much weight as the interview and simulator test. She could hope, anyway.

"I'm sure you'll do okay in your interview, and you know you'll ace the simulator part," Les said.

"Not necessarily. Last time I was in the simulator, I blew myself up."

"Yes, but you were with David. You know how he likes to push. Remember that time he said he wanted to try an intermediate sim, just to see what they were like? It took him longer to suit up than he lasted."

Despite her mood, Mo smiled. They'd linked with him just to observe. *Here we go*, he'd said. The next thing they'd heard was *Simulation Failed*. "Yeah, I guess that's true," she said. "And we did fly a difficult sim."

"I bet he chose it."

Mo nodded. "Speaking of the simulator, we should see if we can book another slot before the evaluation sims start. Might be tough, though. I think they're giving priority to cadets from other academies that haven't had much chance to fly them before."

"So if the essay exam went okay, and you're not particularly worried about how you'll do in the interview and simulator, why are you so worried that you'll fail?" Les asked.

Great, Les wouldn't be derailed. If Mo didn't say something, Les would never let it go. Maybe she should tell Les what was on her mind, so it wouldn't be a total shock when she came back from her results meeting and said she'd failed. "Les, I think I'm the shortest applicant this year."

Les frowned. "Maybe you are, I haven't noticed. But it doesn't matter. There's no height requirement."

"Officially, no. But with all the candidates this year, I doubt my height will work to my advantage. Probably the opposite. I probably don't stand a chance. Not this year."

"Mo, that doesn't make sense. If they didn't want someone of your height in the program or if they prefer taller candidates over shorter ones, they would have rejected your application for the evaluation. You would never have made it this far."

"Maybe I'm in on an oversight."

Les's brows rose in surprise. "You don't believe that. You're right, there are a lot of applicants this year. So the last thing they'd do is fill an evaluation slot with someone they have no intention of accepting. I'm telling you, you're in the evaluation because you have the same chance as everyone else of being invited into the program."

Even if Les was right, that wouldn't change the fact that other candidates were laughing at her because she was short. Les hadn't seen Ann smirking during the meeting. She hadn't noticed that Ross had singled Mo out when talking about "other factors." Most of all, Les hadn't been in the essay exam room. Maybe Mo did have a chance, but without the respect of her fellow student pilots, what was the point?

Les tapped Mo's nose. "You were short when you decided you wanted to be a fighter pilot, you were short when you tried out for the Military Academy, and you were short when you put in your application for the fighter pilot program. You've never been concerned about this before. Why now? What gave you the idea that your height might be a problem?"

"Nothing. I just heard it mentioned as a possible problem, that's all."

"Where? Who mentioned it?"

"I don't know, I just heard it around."

Skepticism was written all over Les's face. "Has someone been bothering you?"

"No," she said firmly. The last thing she needed was Les talking to Ann. *Mo, you're so short, someone else has to fight your battles for you. Hey Mo, I thought Lesley was your girlfriend, not your mama.*

"You sure?"

"Yes!"

"Remember what David said when we first met him? Pilots tend to be shorter than average."

Yeah, but how shorter than average? Hadn't she already mentioned that she was the shortest applicant of the bunch?

"If height's a factor, I'm the one who should be worried," Les said.

Mo restrained herself from snorting. Time to surrender, or at least pretend to; the conversation wasn't going anywhere. Trying to talk to Les about this had been a mistake. Les didn't understand. How could she? "You're right. I'm probably worrying about it for nothing. I don't know, I guess I'm more stressed about the evaluation than I thought I'd be. I feel a bit better, now that I've let some of it out."

Les studied Mo's face, then reached for her hand. "Promise me you'll be confident during the interview. It's important that you come across as confident and enthusiastic, so promise me that no matter what doubts you have, you'll go in there and tell the interviewer that you want to be a fighter pilot and that you'll be one of the best fighter pilots they've ever seen." Her hand tightened around Mo's. "Promise me."

"I promise," Mo said, meaning it. She might not be able to muster up much enthusiasm for herself, but she could for Les, for them. She wouldn't let Les down by not giving it her best shot, or Les might think *she* didn't care if they stayed together. "I promise," she said again.

Les's grip relaxed. They stared at each other. Mercifully, the conversation had come to a natural end. "Do you feel up to the mess hall, or would you rather I go and get us supper?" Les asked.

She wasn't ready to face others yet, especially those who'd been in the exam room. "Get us supper."

Les kissed Mo's forehead and used the edge of the bed to push herself to her feet. "I'll beep you when I get there, tell you what the choices are."

"Okay."

Moments later, the door clicked shut. The room felt empty, as it always did when Les left. Mo sighed. If she failed the evaluation, the room would feel empty a lot more often.

Mo paused to take a breath outside the pilot training complex, glad her interview was over. She had a good feeling about it. The interviewer hadn't burst into laughter when she'd entered the room, for one thing. And once she'd started talking, she'd relaxed, almost believing that she had the same chance as everyone else of being invited into the program. A couple of times she'd felt her confidence wavering but, remembering her promise to Les, she'd looked the interviewer in the eye and answered the question with conviction and what she felt was the appropriate level of enthusiasm. If she failed the evaluation, it wouldn't be through lack of trying.

She pulled out her comm unit and beeped Les. "I'm done."

"And?"

"I think it went okay."

"You sounded like you want to be a fighter pilot, right?"

"Yeah, Les, I did." For some reason, she craved an apple turnover. "I'm just going to drop in at the mess hall to get a snack. Do you want something?"

"I'll meet you there, walk with you back to the room," Les said.

Mo smiled. Ever since their conversation after the essay exam, Les had wanted to be with her every second of the day. "No, don't. There's no point, you coming to the mess hall. I don't want to stay, I just want to pick up a snack."

"Aren't you chilly? The sun's gone in. I can bring your cloak."

Well, it was a little breezy, but the mess hall was only a couple of minutes away and then she'd be going straight to their room. "I'll be fine. Do you want anything?"

"No, thanks."

"Okay. See you in a bit."

At the mess hall, Mo requested the largest apple turnover of the bunch and decided to treat herself and have it heated. "Certainly," said the counter attendant. "It'll only take a minute."

Her mouth watered; she couldn't wait to sink her teeth into it. After her sim test, she'd treat herself again, maybe to a gigantic piece of chocolate cake and ice cream with sprinkles. And if she passed the evaluation, as many cookies as she could carry. They'd have to roll her home! Mo grinned. Yeah, she just might pass. Why not?

A spirited conversation drew her attention to her left. She groaned and looked away. Ann, with three of her new friends from other academies, all male. She'd attracted quite the entourage. Their chatter grew closer. Mo peeked at them from the corner of her eye. They were standing near the hot meal section, discussing how hungry they were and whether they wanted a full meal.

"Oh, remember when we were talking about what makes a good fighter pilot?" Ann said loud enough for Mo to hear. "Well, I thought of something else. You have to be at least as tall as me."

Mo's jaw tightened.

"Why?" one of her companions asked.

Come on, come on. How long did it take to warm an apple turnover?

"Let's say auto-navigation fails, so you have to control the fighter manually," Ann said. "To do that, you'd need to see out of the cockpit. Imagine if you were so short, you couldn't see over the control panels."

Several voices spoke at once.

"What?"

"You'd be all over the place."

"It would look like nobody was flying the craft."

Ann shrieked with laughter. When someone made another comment, too low for Mo to hear, Ann sounded like she couldn't breathe.

Idiots. As long as sensors were still operational, a pilot could fly the craft without having to see out of the cockpit. And Mo could see over the control panels, thank you very much.

"Who would you want on your wing if you're in trouble? Someone using a booster seat?" Ann gasped out.

A chorus of laughter this time. Where was that flaming attendant?

As if he'd heard her, the attendant returned, holding the apple turnover between a pair of tongs. He slid the turnover into a bag and held it out to her. "Here you are."

She wanted to snatch it from his hand, but restrained herself. "Thank you," she murmured, then slunk toward the exit.

"Oh, Mo," Ann called, just as Mo thought she'd escaped Ann's notice.

She turned around.

Ann stepped toward her. "I hope you don't think I had you in mind when I was talking about short pilots."

Making fun of them, more like.

"With your skills, I'm sure you'd be fine, flying a craft with no auto-navigation."

"My skills?" Mo squeaked.

"Well, sure. There's a lot more to you than meets the eye, isn't there?"

Mo had the sinking feeling that Ann was setting her up. Ann's new friends stared curiously at Mo. "Oh, that's right, you wouldn't know," Ann said to them. "You know the tall blonde in the evaluation?" She held her hand above her head. "The pretty one? You can't miss her, she's on the monitors."

"Thompson?" one of them said.

Ann nodded.

The other two looked confused. "Who?"

"The blonde." The one who'd matched Les's description with the name traced curves through the air with his hands. Mo's hand tightened around the bag.

Both their faces lit up. "Oh, *her*."

"Yes, her," Ann said, smirking at them. "But down, boys, because you don't stand a chance. She's same-oriented. Not only that, she's had the same girlfriend ever since she entered the Military Academy. And guess what?" Ann spread her arms toward Mo. "You're

looking at the girlfriend. So you see, Mo here must have hidden skills and talents that we can only imagine.”

They eyed Mo up and down. She could guess what they were thinking—why would someone like Les be interested in someone like her? Well, let them. What did she care, what they thought? They could stare and snicker and whisper all they wanted.

But her silent, brave words rang hollow. How many others wondered when they saw her and Les together? Argamon, she sometimes wondered herself. She’d never stood in front of a bunch of gawkers who’d calculated her worth and come up with a big, fat zero, though, and she withered under their scrutiny. She should say something, show some spirit, defend not only herself, but Les. Instead she whirled and marched toward the exit.

“Where are you going?” Ann shouted. “I was giving you a compliment.”

Did Ann think she was stupid? She may be short, plain, and as curvy as a wooden ruler, but she wasn’t stupid. Outside, she fought the tears but lost, their saltiness stinging her tongue as she licked them away. She couldn’t go back to the room, not like this. She headed in another direction, not caring where she ended up.

What was she doing here, anyway? Why had entering the military ever crossed her mind? Her account was overflowing with credits; she could sit around and pick her nose all day and still live well. Too bad nobody would respect her, including herself. How could she ever join hands again and say the Words while contributing nothing to her fellow Rymellans? All Rymellans used their skills to support the Way, and that was what she wanted to do. Yeah, right—her skills. Ha! What a laugh!

A cadet was walking toward her. She wiped her nose on her sleeve and peered into the bag at the turnover as she passed him, grunting a hello. Five minutes ago she couldn’t wait to eat the dessert, but now she gagged at the aroma wafting from the bag. She rolled it shut and glanced around for somewhere out of the way to sit, before she ran into someone who’d want to talk to her and wonder why her eyes were so red.

The track field was up ahead. She still jogged around it occasionally, and felt drawn to it now. Finding a seat was easy; the field was deserted and the bleachers empty. Mo set the bag on her lap, wiped her eyes, and stared out at nothing in particular.

What was she going to do? Les’s backup plan might work for Les, but Mo wasn’t sure it would work for her. Tactical would bore her—she wanted to fly, not stand in front of a grid as if she were playing a game. Weapons testing? Shooting at the other side was the extent of the weapons testing she wanted to do. And fighter maintenance would

grate. Working on fighters would be a constant reminder that others soared while she stayed behind.

Well, she could fly aviacrafts. Not as exciting as flying a fighter, but flying, nonetheless. She could even fly military aviacraft, and she didn't need to enroll in a special program for that—all she needed was a licence and nothing better to do. But just thinking about it made her want to yawn. Plus, the point was to do something that kept her close to Les.

Maybe she was stupid after all, because she honestly wanted to be a fighter pilot. She'd wanted that ever since she'd sat in that fighter during the tour of the military installation with the Indoctrination Academy, and she'd honestly believed that she could achieve that dream. The first time she'd flown a sim had only confirmed her desire—she'd left the simulator exhilarated and convinced that she'd been born to pilot a fighter. Les wanting to be one too had validated her career choice. It couldn't have been more perfect. Too perfect, as it turned out. She hadn't counted on not having the respect of her fellow cadets, had never thought that others would laugh at her, but what could she do? She couldn't change the fact that she was short, so where did that leave her?

The wind was picking up. Mo shivered and hugged her legs to her chest, squishing the turnover. She should go inside, but she couldn't face Les—not yet. If it weren't for Les, she'd be packing her bags and going home right now, but she didn't want to disappoint her, not by dropping out of the evaluation, anyway. That could wait until she received her evaluation results, when there would be plenty of disappointment to go around for both of them. What in the flaming Argamon was she going to do?

Her lips trembled and a tear rolled down her cheek, then another. She could sit here forever trying to figure it out, but it wouldn't change a thing. The end result would be the same: her dream shattered, and potentially her relationship with Les, too.

Lesley strode along the path pondering where to look next. She'd already checked the mess hall, the library, the pilot training complex, and the recreation centre, including the practice rooms. The latter had been done in desperation; she'd seen Mo's violin propped in the corner of their room. Where was she? Why wasn't she responding to beeps? Didn't she realize Lesley would be worried? Even David was out looking for her. Lesley shifted Mo's cloak from her left arm to her right and looked over at the track field. No joggers, and it would have been odd

if Mo had suddenly decided to go for a run. Well, it was odd that Mo hadn't—

Someone was sitting up in the bleachers. Lesley quickened her pace, and swallowed when Mo's familiar figure came into focus. Mo must be freezing up there. She pulled out her comm unit. "I found her," she said to David as she bounded up the steps to the second-last row. She stopped. Mo was at the other end of the row and seemed oblivious to her presence.

"Is she okay?"

That depended on what he meant by okay. "She's all right."

"Where are you? Do you want me to come over?"

"No. I want to talk to her, find out what's going on. Thanks for looking for her."

"No problem. Think you'll be at Ellen's get-together tonight?"

She doubted it, but said, "Maybe. I'll beep you later and let you know." She terminated the connection.

Mo looked up as Lesley approached, then looked away and rubbed her eyes. Lesley's throat tightened. If Mo thought she could hide that she'd been crying, she was wrong. Lesley knew Mo's face too well—every blemish, every mole, every contour; she could close her eyes and bring Mo's face into sharp focus, as if Mo were standing in front of her. The glimpse she'd caught of that precious face had been more than enough to tell her that Mo had shed tears.

"What are you doing up here?" she asked as she draped Mo's cloak around her shoulders and sat next to her. Mo was hugging her legs to her chest. Lesley put her arm around her to help warm her. She covered Mo's hands with one of her own, then rubbed them. They felt like ice.

"Thinking," Mo murmured.

"About what?"

"What to do with my life."

"What do you mean?"

Mo sighed. "Les, I might fail the evaluation. Even if I don't, I don't know if I should be a pilot."

"What?" Not wanting to be a pilot was new.

"Pilots have to work together, be a team. How can I be a pilot when nobody respects me?"

Lesley mentally kicked herself. This was her fault; she should have met Mo at the mess hall. When they'd talked after Mo's essay exam, she hadn't believed for a second that Mo was suddenly jittery about the evaluation. She'd vowed to stick by her side, hoping to deter whoever was bothering her, or at least find out who it was. Mo had sounded fine after the interview, so she must have run into trouble afterward. But with whom? "Who doesn't respect you?"

"Other cadets who'll be pilots."

"But who? I respect you. David respects you. You've linked with a couple of other cadets. They didn't have a problem flying sims with you. So why do you think nobody respects you?"

Mo sighed again and stretched out her legs, revealing a bag on her lap. Lesley gingerly picked it up and peeked inside. If she had to guess, it contained a pulverized apple turnover. She set it on the bench next to her, then stifled a groan at the stain on Mo's pants. It would have to wait. "Mo, if you don't tell me what's going on, I can't help."

"There's nothing you can do," Mo said, buttoning her cloak.

"At least tell me why you don't want to be a pilot."

"I do want to be a pilot!" Mo snapped. "I said I don't know if I should be."

"Well, I don't know if this counts for anything, but I think you should."

Mo gave her a sidelong look. "Why?"

"Because you're good. You're meant to be in a fighter. Anyone who's linked with you would say the same."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I'm not," Lesley said, bristling. Why did her opinion count less than that of whoever was harassing Mo? She'd linked with Mo; her opinion was based on experience. Mo was almost a different person in the simulator—calm, confident, no-nonsense, focused on the mission objectives and on achieving them as efficiently as possible. Lesley wasn't a slouch in the cockpit, but Mo naturally took the lead. She'd grown used to following the clipped orders Mo probably didn't realize she was giving. "These other cadets who don't respect you . . . have you linked with any of them?"

Mo hesitated, then shook her head.

Ah, so someone *was* getting to her. "Then what do they know?"

"They know I'm short."

So it was back to that, and nothing Lesley said would make a difference. She could tell Mo until she was blue in the face that there was no height requirement and that her fellow pilots would care more about her abilities than her height, but it would be a waste of time. "I hope you're not planning to drop out of the evaluation."

"No, I'm not. But you know why I'm not? Because I want us to stay together, not because I flaming care about the program anymore."

Lesley knew that wasn't true, but if Mo wanted to claim that, fine. As for staying together, unbeknownst to Mo, she had two backup plans—the one she'd already told Mo about, and the one she'd kept to herself, the plan for if she passed the evaluation but Mo failed.

She'd arrived at the Military Academy with one goal in mind: to be a fighter pilot. But studying at the academy and following Finney's advice had opened her eyes to other possibilities. She still wanted to be a fighter pilot, but if that didn't work out, two other areas interested her. The first was tactics, as she'd mentioned to Mo, though that would work best if Mo passed and she failed. The second was, surprisingly, Interior. Finney had advised her to take two Interior courses, so she could "see the other side." She'd enjoyed them, to the point that she hoped to take more in her third year. If Mo failed and decided to drop out of the Military Academy, Interior would keep them together, in the sense that they'd both remain on Rymel. Mo would never follow Lesley into Interior, something Lesley might use if they were both pilots and still together when they turned twenty-five.

But that was for later. Right now, she had to make sure Mo showed up for her sim test, and she'd use everything at her disposal to do it, no matter how crummy. "Well, then, you'd better pass the evaluation, because it'll be a lot easier for us to stay together if we're both pilots, and I have every intention of passing."

Mo stared at her, her face tight.

"And I want to remind you of what you said to me when I was waffling about taking the entrance exam. You said I had to think about the rest of my life and follow my dream, not do what others thought I should do. So now I'm saying the same thing to you. I don't know what these cadets are saying to you, but I do know you belong in a cockpit, and you've worked hard to get to this point. Don't throw it all away over a few stupid comments."

"Stupid comments? You don't even know what they said!"

"Why don't you tell me?"

Mo remained silent, her mouth a stubborn line.

"Okay, don't tell me. But I'm not letting you out of my sight until the evaluation is over." She raised a finger when Mo opened her mouth. "Unless you want to tell me who's bugging you. Then I'll keep my eye on them, instead." She waited. "No? Then you'll have to get used to having a shadow."

Mo tutted. "Everyone will wonder why you're always with me."

Lesley squeezed Mo and took her hand. "They'll think I find you irresistible, which is true." She regretted her words when Mo's nails dug into her palm. For some reason, that had been the wrong thing to say.

A gust of wind almost blew the bag off the bleacher. Lesley snatched it up. "Let's go back to the room before we're blown away." And before she put her foot in her mouth again.

Mo mumbled agreement, then groaned. "Is it Ellen's thing tonight? Because I'm not sure I want to go."

"I don't feel like going, either," Lesley said, standing up and offering Mo her hand. "I'd rather spend the night alone with you."

"I don't want to talk about the evaluation, so if that's what you're planning to do, forget it. I'd rather go to Ellen's."

"Actually, I thought maybe we could go to a practice room and play together for a bit."

Mo brightened. "Sure! We haven't done that for a while. Did you have anything in mind?"

"Well . . . yes." Suddenly she had butterflies. "I've had this melody in my head for a while. With all the waiting around, I finally had a chance to write it down."

"You've written music?" Mo said, her eyes widening.

"Just a short piece."

"For flute?"

"And violin. Your violin. But you know what? We probably won't get a practice room at such short notice."

"Les, hardly anybody is here. And I've never had a problem getting one, no matter when I've tried."

"You probably don't feel like playing."

"No, no, a spot of violin will do me good, take my mind off things."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

When they reached the field, Mo turned to her. "I can't believe you wrote a piece and you're going to let me play it."

Neither could Lesley. She hadn't planned to tell Mo about the piece just yet—she'd wanted to refine it further before sharing. But music usually lifted Mo's spirits, and Lesley would do anything to see Mo's eyes dance again. She put her arm around her and steered her toward the dormitories. "Come on. You need to get out of that uniform. I'll take it to the laundry and get us supper."

"And then we'll go to a practice room?"

Lesley nodded, the butterflies fluttering again. Oh well, seeing Mo energized was worth the embarrassment she'd suffer later. If only Mo were as enthusiastic about the evaluation. Mo's refusal to divulge her tormentors' names was wise. Very wise.

Mo willed herself to hold her head up as she walked through the pilot training complex lobby with Les. Great, one of Ann's airhead friends was sitting near the reception desk, his nose in a book. If he looked up, she knew exactly what he'd think. *Wow, Ann wasn't kidding. That is her girlfriend!*

"You don't have to wait for me," she said to Les. She couldn't bear the thought of Les talking to that moron while he sat and ogled her, not hearing a word she was saying.

"After what happened last time? I'm not going anywhere," Les said.

"Do you want me to pass or not? I'll feel rushed if I know you're out here waiting." What she'd actually do was worry about Les, but the end result would be the same: she'd be distracted in the simulator.

"I really think it's best that I stick around."

"If I promise to beep you as soon as I'm finished and to wait for you to come here, will you leave?"

Les pursed her lips. "Well . . ."

"I'll do better if you go. Honest."

Les slowly exhaled. "Okay. But you'd better beep me as soon as you're done."

"I will."

They reached the entrance to the simulator wing. "You don't need it, but good luck," Les said.

"Thanks. Now leave. I'm not going in until I see you pass by the window."

Les rolled her eyes, but squeezed Mo's hand and walked away. A minute later, she waved to Mo from outside. Mo waved back. Once she was satisfied that Les was heading in the direction of the dormitories and hadn't ducked behind a tree, she strode to room 18B.

A lieutenant sat inside the small office; he looked up and smiled. She nodded to him. "Cadet Middleton."

"Oh, yes." He gestured toward the single empty chair in front of the desk. She didn't think it was his desk; the bare walls and absence of any personal items suggested that he was using the room on a temporary basis. "I'm going to give you a written overview of your mission objectives and a summary of the expected opposition," he said when she'd taken the seat. "In other words, what you'll usually have before flying a mission. You can take ten to fifteen minutes to think about your strategy, then you'll fly the simulation. Oh, and if any of the other candidates have told you about their tests, it won't help. Every test is different."

They hadn't. Les and David hadn't flown their tests yet, and she'd avoided everyone else.

"Here you are." He pushed a sheet across the desk. "Let me know when you're ready."

Time to get down to business. She read through the information and inwardly snorted. Were they kidding? Ten to fifteen minutes to come up with a strategy? She could think of two possible approaches off the top of her head, one of which was almost guaranteed to

succeed—okay, unless she blacked out, it would succeed. Not only that, the expected time at the bottom of the page said thirty minutes, but anyone could complete the sim in fifteen. Who'd written this thing? She lowered the sheet. "I'm ready."

His brow furrowed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"All right." He pressed a button on his comm unit. "Cadet Middleton is ready to fly her test."

"On my way."

"Lieutenant Commander Ross will escort you to the simulator."

Oh great, just who she wanted to see.

Ross appeared in the doorway and motioned for Mo to join her. "I'll take that," she said, pointing to the sheet in Mo's hand. "And this is for you." She held out a helmet.

"Thank you," Mo murmured, cringing as she accepted it. Size small.

"Good luck," the lieutenant said behind her.

She thanked him and followed Ross to the simulator, her eyes adjusting to the reduced lighting. "I'm looking forward to seeing what you do with this one, Cadet," Ross said, pressing the *Enter* button and moving aside so Mo could pass through the portal.

"Oh, um, good." She didn't know if Ross was being serious or sarcastic. To cover her uncertainty and embarrassment, she busied herself with settling into the pilot's seat, buckling up, and plugging the loose end of the helmet cable into the helmet's port.

"I'll be waiting right here," Ross said. "The simulation is loaded and ready to go, so when you're ready, just start."

"Understood," Mo said, already thinking ahead to the mission. The portal door swooshed shut. Now that Ross wasn't watching, she tightened the seatbelt straps, then placed the helmet on her head and adjusted it so the earpieces were sitting correctly. She swung the mouthpiece out and said, "Ready."

The lights went out. In the blackness, she realized that this could be the last time she sat in a simulator. At least she'd go out with a bang, and it wouldn't be herself blowing up this time. She flexed both her hands, then poised her left over navigation and gripped the weapons control with her right. "Go!"

Thirteen minutes later, she bid Ross good-bye at the equipment counter and beeped Les. "I'm done."

"That was quick. You didn't throw it, did you?"

"It wasn't hard. I'll tell you about it, but everyone flies a different sim."

"I could still learn something. Don't leave. I'm coming over."

"I'll be in the lobby." Mo slid her comm unit back into its holder and looked over her shoulder at the corridor that led back to the simulators. Despite Ann, despite worrying that other pilots would never respect her, she wanted to walk up that corridor again. If only she hadn't let Les talk her into going on that tour of Installation 22; if she hadn't sat in that fighter . . . but there was nothing she could do about it now.

She returned to the lobby. Since the airhead was nowhere in sight, it didn't matter where she sat, so she plunked down in the same place where she'd waited for David after they'd flown that disastrous sim. Then, the evaluation had been ahead of her; now it was over. She felt at a loose end. No more classes, no more exams, no more simulator bookings—all she could do was wait for her results meeting, then go home exuberant or crushed.

If they didn't invite her into the program, she had no idea what she'd do. Despite racking her brains about what else she could do with her life, she'd always come back to being a fighter pilot. She'd come to realize that, for her, the military and the fighter pilot program were intertwined. Until recently, she hadn't seriously considered the possibility that she might not make it into the program.

In hindsight, that had been naïve, but if she'd allowed herself to consider failure, she might not have rolled out of bed all those dark mornings and dragged herself to the simulators when any sane person was still snoring. She wouldn't have slogged through all those books, and she certainly wouldn't have remained focused on her classes and assignments when she and Les were having problems during their first year. If she'd stopped to think about what she'd do if the program rejected her, it would have been easy to give up.

But a part of her had remained steadfast, even during the last couple of weeks. Her wobbles had occurred between phases of the evaluation, not during them. Les's support had been invaluable, but it wasn't the only reason Mo hadn't stopped trying. Somewhere inside, she'd still believed that she could be a fighter pilot, and a flaming good one! Argamon, the part of her that believed she could do it was probably the same part that believed she and Les were Chosens. Ann would probably say that part of her was delusional. Maybe it was. She'd soon find out, at least as far as the fighter pilot program went.

Les's blonde hair caught her eye; she was outside, approaching the entrance. Mo stood and waved when Les stepped into the lobby and paused to search for her. Les strolled over. "You must have aced the sim."

Mo grinned. "I don't know about acing it, but I didn't have any trouble completing the objectives."

"Good. And now you're done. All that's left is your results meeting," Les said, beaming.

Les looked so gorgeous with her face lit up and the sun accentuating her blue eyes. Mo could hardly breathe, and was absolutely certain that she could never feel more for anyone than she felt for Les. If they weren't Chosens, the Chosen Council didn't have a clue what it was doing—not that she'd ever say that out loud.

"I know it's been rough," Les said, her smile fading. "If they invite you into the program, I hope you'll accept."

"Of course I will! I've never once doubted that I want to be a fighter pilot. I've had some doubts about getting into the program, but that didn't stop me from trying. There's no way I'll say no if they invite me in." And if they rejected her because of how she'd performed and not because of "other factors" that she couldn't change or control, she honestly wouldn't know how she could have done better. Okay, she hadn't been as wordy as she could have been on her essay exam, but otherwise, she thought she'd done well. "I'm just worried that the other student pilots won't take me seriously. If I get in, that is."

Les chuckled. "I'm sure they'll take you seriously, but if they don't, what problem would you rather have? Proving yourself to the other pilots, or figuring out what to do with your life because you didn't get into the program?"

She had a point.

"Come on, let's go to David's."

"David's?"

"He wants to hear all about the sim. And so do I."

"I guess it's over for me, but not for you two," Mo said as she slipped her arm into Les's. She'd done her bit—her fate was now out of her hands.

Mo flipped up her comm unit, read the time, and let it drop. She looked toward the mess hall entrance.

"Relax. Her meeting only started five minutes ago," David said from his place across from her.

Already long enough for Les to know. At this point, Les would be smiling and accepting congratulations, or listening to the officer explain why she'd been rejected and what her options were. They'd all agreed to wait at the mess hall rather than in the lobby at the training complex, so they could each have some time alone after their meeting if they needed it. But now, waiting here, Mo wished she could be there for Les, either way.

"I'll barely have enough time to hear if she's in before I have to leave for my meeting," he said, his hand gripping his tziva mug a little too tightly.

Mo envied him. Her meeting was still an hour away—plenty of time to imagine the worst. A rejection would mean not only the end of her dream, but potentially the end of her and Les. Sure, Les said nothing would change, but Mo wasn't convinced. At the very least, they'd see much less of each other, and that would be a difficult adjustment to make after the past year. She suspected more would change, though. Even if they were both rejected, there'd be a problem. She loved Les, but unless another military role sparked her interest, she couldn't see herself remaining at the Military Academy. Staying for Les might hold them together a little longer, but ultimately it would hurt them. Their relationship would have a better chance if she left. That was what she'd tell herself, anyway.

Unfortunately, if she dropped out of the Military Academy and Les stayed, everyone would expect them to split up. "This would be a natural time to end it," they'd say. Natural? The end of her relationship with Les would never be natural. It would be forced, and abrupt, and leave her gasping and dead inside. She hoped—no, believed—it would never happen. If she had her way, they'd stay together until they received their Chosen Papers, which would arrive on the same day if they were each other's Chosen. But her fear right now was that she wouldn't be invited into the program, and Les would say, "Now would be a natural time to end it." Telling Les she believed they were Chosens and should stay together wouldn't do, not for Les. She'd dismiss the notion as a fantasy.

"What are you thinking about?" David asked.

"Les," Mo said, shaking herself.

"Even if she's rejected, she'll be okay. She's mentioned tactics a few times."

"What will you do if you're not accepted?" she asked him, realizing they'd never talked about it.

He sipped his tziva. "I'm not sure. I've talked to my papa about a few ideas, but I didn't want to jinx myself, so I haven't given any of them serious consideration."

"Do they all involve the military?"

"Of course," he said, as if she'd asked a rhetorical question.

"What about you? What will you do if you don't get in?"

"I haven't really thought about it." Not beyond leaving the academy and how that would affect her and Les, anyway.

They sat and drank their tziva in silence, the tension palpable. Mo raised her empty mug to her lips for something to do, then said, "I heard from Kary earlier. They accepted her."

"Good. I'm glad things are looking up for her."

"Me too." Ben had been rejected as part of the post-first-year purge and had left Kary behind along with the academy. He'd sent her a dispatch to break it off, claiming that to see her would be too painful because he associated her with his time at the academy. "Painful?" Kary had screeched. "I'll give him painful!" She'd put on a brave face in class, but had spent many of her evenings in tears, swearing off dating until her Chosen Papers arrived and wishing she'd never set foot inside the Military Academy. Mo had worried that she might drop out or even fail her second year, but she'd rallied.

"I'll miss her," David said.

"She'll be in Defence, so who knows, we could serve with her." There, she'd managed to sound optimistic. "And we'll beep each other." Though it wouldn't be the same as having her down the hall.

All thoughts of Kary left Mo's mind when Les walked in. She searched Les's face.

Les smiled. "I'm in."

"That's great!" Mo said, but something about Les's demeanour was off. She didn't seem overjoyed.

"Congratulations!" David said, rising. "I hate to run off, but it's my turn now. We'll celebrate later."

"Good luck," Mo and Les said in unison.

Les lowered herself into the chair on Mo's right. "An acceptance certificate," she said, handing Mo a sheet of paper. "The officer said that some pilots frame them."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Mo read the sheet; a ton weight dropped onto her shoulders. She slid the paper back to Les, then reached for Les's hand under the table. She wanted to hug her, tell her how proud she was, but while the mess hall was quiet, it wasn't empty. Plus, she sensed from Les's mood that an enthusiastic hug might not be welcome. "Is something wrong? You don't seem happy about this."

Les shrugged. "I'll be happier when I know you're in. Then we'll celebrate together."

"And if I'm not in?"

"I'll be very surprised if you're not in."

Sure, no pressure or anything. Now she'd really feel like a disappointment if she wasn't invited into the program. She squeezed Les's fingers. "But what if I'm not? I know you probably don't want to hear this, but I'm worried. About what'll happen to us." Les stroked Mo's hand. It felt nice, but at the same time it irritated Mo. Les was trying to distract her, but this was too important to ignore. "I just—"

"No matter what happens, we'll work something out," Les said, staring down at their hands. "I promise."

"Even if I were to leave the Military Academy?" Mo said, wanting to get that possibility out in the open.

"Yes." Les paused. "The sensible thing to do would be to break up, not work to stay together." She lifted her head and looked into Mo's eyes. "But for some reason, I can't be sensible when it comes to you." Les's cheeks reddened.

If they weren't in the mess hall, Mo would have grabbed her and kissed her and who knows what else. That was probably the closest thing she'd get to an "I love you" until their Chosen Papers arrived, and much more than she'd expected. She raised Les's hand to her lips and kissed it, then quickly tucked their hands underneath the table before Les could protest.

"You'll get in, though," Les said.

"I hope so." She should probably ask Les if she wanted a tziva refill, but she selfishly didn't want to let her go.

Les's comm unit beeped. She flipped it up and groaned. "Mama. She's probably wondering how my meeting went. I'll beep her later."

"Are you sure? I don't mind if you talk to her now."

"I'll beep her after your meeting. And Finney," Les said firmly.

"So what exactly happened at your meeting, anyway?"

Les was halfway through telling her when David bounded into the mess hall. He rushed over to the table and raised an acceptance certificate over his head. "I'm in! I'm in!" he shouted, grinning from ear to ear.

That was how Mo had expected Les to react. Two more ton weights were added to her shoulders. "Congratulations." She attempted a smile that probably looked more like a grimace. She was happy for him, but also acutely aware that she was now the odd one out. Having to tell them she'd been rejected would be more embarrassing and disappointing than she could bear.

"I'm glad you made it," Les said to him. "Congratulations."

"I guess you're stuck with me for at least another year," David said.

"I guess so," Les said.

The lack of enthusiasm in Les's voice gave Mo pause. She was certain it had nothing to do with David. "You heading home now?" she asked him.

"Are you kidding? We're in this together. I'm not leaving until we've celebrated together, which we'll do after your meeting."

She'd been afraid of that.

"You might want to eat something," Les murmured to Mo. "Your meeting's at 12:00. You don't want your stomach to grumble."

Her stomach grumbling was the least of Mo's worries, but she nodded. A snack wouldn't hurt. "I'll get a muffin. Do either of you want anything?" she asked as she rose.

"Bring over a tziva jug," David suggested.

She returned to the table a few minutes later and handed Les the jug. Let her pour; Mo didn't know how steady her hands were. While she picked at her muffin, she did her best to follow the conversation and appear as if she wasn't thinking about her impending meeting. Normally she was the talkative one, but not today. Les was doing an admirable job of engaging David, her left hand on Mo's leg. Mo would thank her later, ideally when they were holding their own private celebration.

Too soon, it was time for her to head to her meeting. She wiped her hands with a napkin and stood. "Now, I might need some time after the meeting. Don't come looking for me."

"We won't," Les and David said.

"Just give me some time."

"We will."

She swallowed. "I'll see you later, then."

Les touched her arm. "Good luck."

"Yeah, good luck," David echoed.

"Thanks."

She walked to the exit, breaking stride only to look at Les over her shoulder one last time. Les smiled and raised her thumb. Mo nodded and left the mess hall. She imagined Les and David huddled together, discussing how to react if she was rejected. If it was up to her, she'd leave the meeting, walk straight to the train station, and go home. After a good cry on Mama's shoulder, maybe she'd be ready to face Les and beep David. But that would be cowardly. She didn't want to lose their respect altogether.

She kept her head down as she strode through the lobby of the training complex. She'd either be doing this a lot more often in the future, or she'd never want to step foot in the place again, regardless of Les.

Her meeting would take place in room 22A, which turned out to belong to a group of offices that shared a small reception area. Good, the three chairs in the waiting room were empty, though muffled voices emanated from behind the closed door to 22B. Before Mo had a chance to sit down, Lieutenant Commander Ross stepped into the room from 22A. "I thought I heard someone. Come in, Cadet, come in."

Not her again. Resigned, Mo entered the office and accepted Ross's invitation to sit. Great, her feet weren't touching the floor. If she were anywhere else and for any other reason, she wouldn't think

twice about lowering the seat, but not here. Her legs would have to dangle.

A single file lay on the desk. Ross opened it and looked at Mo. "Let's get to it. I have to say, in cases like yours, I always feel I should start by apologizing for putting you through the evaluation instead of just giving you an extra two weeks off."

Mo wanted to bury her head in her hands. Flaming Argamon! Ann had been right all along! She'd never stood a chance of getting in. All that work for nothing. Nothing!

"You see, every year, there are always one or two applicants we know we want in the program before the evaluation even starts. This year, you're one of them."

"What?" she blurted. Okay, Les was about to elbow her in the ribs and tell her to wake up, right? Or maybe this was really happening and she was sitting here gaping at Ross like an idiot. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant Commander. I'm just surprised."

Ross chuckled. "We've followed you ever since you flew your first simulation. We suspected immediately that we had a natural on our hands. The simulation you flew a couple of weeks ago clinched it for us—the one with Cadet Bryson. Do you remember it?"

How could she forget? "I blew myself up."

Ross chuckled again. "Yes, you did. But it was nothing short of incredible that you lasted as long as you did." She paused. "When I watched the replay, I got the impression that Cadet Bryson chose the simulation?"

Mo nodded. "I told him to choose and linked with him."

"He chose a difficult one."

"Yeah, he did."

"I remember him reading the mission objectives to you and suggesting a strategy, but I don't recall him mentioning that the simulation was rated for three pilots, not two."

Three?

"One pilot is supposed to destroy the weapons cache while the other two intercept any incoming hostiles."

David!

"I watched the replay with two other officers. We gave you about, oh, four to five minutes, tops. We never imagined you'd come so close to victory. There was lots of cheering in the viewing room that day," Ross said, smiling. "That little mishap at the end was nothing. Calculations of blast radius and the like will soon be second nature to you. We were amazed that you thought of the maneuver in the first place, given the pressure you were under."

Mo didn't know what to say.

Ross lifted a piece of paper from the file. "Your acceptance certificate. Normally we give applicants a few days to confirm their intent to enter the program, but I have orders not to let you go until you've confirmed that you'll join us. I hope you do, otherwise I'll have to try to persuade you, and I'm hungry. So what do you say?"

"I'm definitely on board," Mo said, feeling dazed as she accepted the sheet.

"Good. I'm looking forward to training you. See you in a month, Cadet. Enjoy your break, and be ready to work hard when you get back. Dismissed."

Mo nodded and left. She paused in the lobby to read the certificate. There it was—her name in black and white. She traced it with her fingers, to make sure it was real. Outside, she stood blinking in the sun. The buildings were where she expected them to be, the sky was blue, and she recognized the two officers strolling past. Not a dream, then—which meant Les and David were waiting for her at the mess hall, and she had no reason to delay heading there. She folded the certificate and slid it into her back pocket. Other pilots might frame it, but not her. A lot could happen in a year. She'd wait for her graduation certificate.

She set off for the mess hall, her step lighter than it had been in weeks. Not only had she been accepted into the fighter pilot program—no, make that the *elite* fighter pilot program—but she and Les could stay together next year without anyone thinking they were foolish. And if what she'd heard was true and pilots who'd trained together were posted together after graduation, they'd just bought themselves another two to three years without others pressuring them to end their relationship. That "natural end" would have to wait.

Someone let out a loud whoop behind her. Startled, Mo spun around.

Ann ran up to her and thrust an acceptance certificate into her face. "Yes!" Ann shouted. "Yes!"

Mo drew back and waved the certificate away.

Ann fell into step with her. "Just left your meeting? Oh dear," she said with an exaggerated pout. "I don't see an acceptance certificate, so I guess you didn't make it."

"I was accepted," Mo snapped.

"Are you sure?"

She reached for the certificate in her pocket, then stopped. She didn't have anything to prove to this airhead. "I wouldn't say I was accepted if I wasn't."

"I guess they figured it wouldn't be a big deal to raise this year's quota to twenty-one and a half student pilots." Ann doubled over with laughter.

Mo felt her face tighten. She was so tempted to tell Ann what Ross had said, but that would only cheapen it. "I'm tired of you making fun of me," she said instead, surprising herself.

Ann straightened. "Argamon, lighten up! It's only a joke. And just when have I made fun of you?"

Mo gave her a withering look.

"Oh, come on. You didn't think I was serious, did you? Nobody's *that* naïve. We were in competition," she said, as if that explained everything. "So no hard feelings, right?"

Mo couldn't believe it. Ann had humiliated her in front of her peers and now expected her to just brush it off?

"Anyway, I have to go. See you next month, squirt!" Ann let out another whoop and jogged away.

Mo wanted to strangle her. Worse, she'd be stuck flying with her. Well, if Ann ever got into trouble during a mission, Mo might suddenly discover that she couldn't see over the control panels! She shook her head in exasperation and continued on to see Les and David, people who counted.

They both stood as she approached the table. Les stepped forward, her face grim. Of course—Mo wasn't carrying anything. This time, she pulled the certificate from her pocket. She smiled broadly and raised it over her head. "I'm in."

Suddenly they were all jumping and pumping their fists into the air. Not caring that they were in the mess hall, Mo ran to Les and leaped into her arms, almost sending her flying backward.

"Now we can celebrate," Les said, laughing.

Yes, they could! She was in! She was going to be a fighter pilot! Better than that, the part of her that had remained steadfast, that had believed, that had refused to let go of the dream when the rest of her had wanted to—that part of her had been vindicated. She held an acceptance certificate to the fighter pilot program in her hand, and now she believed with every fibre of her being that she was in her Chosen's arms. She pumped her fist into the air again. Yes, she was short, and yes, she was plain, but she was also the luckiest flaming Rymellan alive!