

Priorities

by Sarah Ettritch

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Lesley buttoned her cloak and followed Mo from the mess hall, leaving the cacophony of voices and clattering dishes behind. She slipped her arm around Mo and steered her toward the dormitories. "I'm glad we had supper together."

"Me too," Mo said, smiling up at her. "You're—I mean, we're so busy these days, we hardly ever sit down and talk. Not that the mess hall is the best place to talk, mind you."

Lesley inwardly cringed. That was precisely why she'd asked Mo to meet there. Her plan had worked—the topic of sharing a room hadn't come up—but would Mo broach the subject on the way back to their rooms? Usually Lesley enjoyed strolling with Mo on a clear, crisp evening, but not when she was worried about what Mo might say next.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that I talked to Mama earlier today," Mo said. "Newton's retiring."

Lesley relaxed slightly. "Really? None of the mandatory bulletins mentioned it." Newton had been C3's commander for as long as she could remember.

"They haven't announced it yet. She found out through an indoctrinator whose Chosen works at B5 headquarters."

"I wonder who'll take his place."

"A Commander Finney, apparently."

Finney . . . The name sounded familiar, but Lesley couldn't place it. "Apart from the name at the bottom of C3 bulletins, I doubt we'll notice a difference. I think I saw Newton once, from a distance." She held up her right index finger for emphasis, even though Mo couldn't see it. "That's it."

"I don't think I ever saw him," Mo mumbled.

They lapsed into silence. Lesley felt relieved and disappointed when they reached her dormitory's entrance. She lifted her arm from Mo's shoulders and faced her.

"Can we go to your room for a few minutes?" Mo asked. "I want to talk to you about something."

She nodded, despite knowing what was coming. With luck, Jackie would be in the room, though she'd more likely be at the library. "I don't have much time," she said over her shoulder as they climbed the stairs to the third floor. "It's group tonight."

"That's at 20:00. It's 19:15."

"An advocate is speaking. I want to get there early so I can review my notes." Not true. She'd already gone over them twice, determined not to slip up in front of an advocate who specialized in the Chosen Tradition.

"We can't keep putting this off," Mo said when they reached Lesley's room.

Lesley opened the door. Unfortunately, no Jackie. "Putting what

off?"

"You know what I'm talking about. The deadline for room requests is in two weeks."

She crossed to the satchel lying on her dresser and made a show of buckling its straps. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mo hovering, waiting for a response. "Well, I can't talk about it now."

Mo let out an exasperated sigh and slapped her thighs. "When, then? Tell me when. Every time I bring it up, you suddenly have to rush off. I thought we'd have time tonight."

"We'll be home in two days. We can talk about it then." Lesley grasped the satchel's handle and started to lift it from the dresser.

"Most of our time at home will be taken up with the festival and visiting."

She stopped. Mo had a point. Maybe they *should* discuss it now. No, they couldn't. She hadn't made up her mind about what to do—Mo could talk her into something she'd quickly regret. And once they'd started, they'd probably want to talk for more than five minutes. She couldn't risk missing group. Choosing to miss group so they could discuss sharing a room would be choosing Mo over the Way. Not acceptable. "We'll make the time."

"You promise?"

"Yes." Lesley lifted her satchel and looked at Mo. "I really do have to go now." She reached for Mo's hand. Mo stared at her for a moment, then slipped her hand into Lesley's.

Without a word, they left the room and headed down the stairs to the lobby. Lesley searched for something to say. "I'm sorry I don't have more time."

"Are you?" Mo pulled the dormitory's main door open. "You better keep your promise."

"I will."

"We'll see."

They stepped outside and stared at each other, the air heavy between them. "What will you do for the rest of the night?" Lesley asked.

Mo shrugged. "Homework, I guess. And get in some practice for the concert."

Oh no, another uncomfortable subject. Now would be a good time to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow, then." She lowered her head to kiss Mo.

Mo barely brushed Lesley's lips. "Enjoy your meeting." She turned and walked away, her shoulders stiff.

Lesley watched her for a few seconds, then forced herself to start moving toward the recreation centre. Now she had a deadline—no more avoiding the question of whether to share a room. But every

time she tried to make up her mind, she felt torn in two. Normally decisions didn't paralyze her, but this one involved the two most important things in her life: Mo and the Way.

She couldn't come up with an answer that would satisfy both. Sharing a room would make Mo happy, but living together—because that was what they'd be doing—would put their relationship on a more serious footing. Not a good idea, since they both had Chosens, but Mo probably wouldn't see it that way. Lesley dreaded the hurt she'd see in Mo's eyes when she finally stopped avoiding the issue and told her what she should have told her weeks ago.

Well, the indoctrinators had never said that following the Way would be easy. She'd love to share with Mo, but her priority had to be the Way, not what she and Mo personally desired. Anything less would be weak in the Way, and those weak in the Way were ejected from the Military Academy, or worse.

Her hand tightened around the satchel's handle. Perhaps Advocate Phillips's talk would give her the courage to tell Mo that she wouldn't share a room with her.

Mo ripped off her cloak and threw it at its hook. She eyed the violin case propped up in the corner, but all she'd do was rage at Les on her way to the practice room, then smash her violin to pieces at the first sour note. Homework? No, she was too keyed up to concentrate.

She threw herself onto her bed, rolled onto her back, and interlaced her fingers behind her head. Her frustration had gotten the better of her. Despite knowing that pushing Les wasn't the right way to handle her, she'd gone ahead and done it anyway. It was that flaming deadline! If she had more time, she'd do what she normally did when she suspected something was tying Les up in knots: wait for Les to bring up whatever was bothering her.

Les preferred to solve problems on her own. She thought everyone would think her weak if she asked for advice or needed help to figure something out. It was okay for someone to ask *her* for advice, but she held herself to a tougher standard. When Les seemed troubled, Mo had learned not to push, not to probe, not to try to wheedle anything out of her. Eventually Les worked it out, or swallowed her pride and talked.

But this time, Mo's patience was wearing thin. If Les didn't agree to share a room by the deadline and then decided shortly afterward that sharing would be okay, they'd have to wait until their third year. Mo sighed. And she'd stupidly told Kary to go ahead and request another roommate, positive that Les would jump at the chance to

share. So not only could she not end up with Les, she could end up with a roommate she didn't like.

Mo wanted to shake Les, but she also wanted to hug her. As frustrated as she was, she didn't like to see Les tense, nor the weariness and unhappiness she glimpsed on Les's face whenever Les let her guard down. If Mo knew for sure what was bothering her, maybe she'd work subtle advice into their conversations by talking about "a friend" with similar concerns. But she only had suspicions, and ever since Les had joined that Chosen Tradition study group, they'd had less time for serious conversation.

Flaming group! What did they do at those meetings anyway, examine every word in the Tradition with a magnifying glass? That advocate would probably drone on for two hours about an article that consisted of five words. If she'd been thinking, she would have joined the group months ago, around the time she'd turned eighteen and was having problems sleeping. One meeting would have instantly cured her insomnia. No, just preparing for a meeting would have had her snoring at her desk.

The door opened. Kary bounced into the room and dropped her knapsack onto the floor. "You look comfortable," she said with a grin. "Taking a break?"

"Not exactly," Mo mumbled.

Kary frowned. "What's wrong?"

Mo hesitated, but decided there was no harm in telling her. "Les still hasn't agreed to share a room."

"You asked her again?"

"Tried to."

"And she still won't talk about it?"

Mo shook her head.

Kary opened her mouth to say something, then closed it.

"What?" Mo asked apprehensively. Kary wasn't one to hold back.

"Well . . . have you considered that maybe she's trying to tell you something?" Still wearing her cloak, Kary perched herself on the edge of her bed and leaned toward Mo. "You have to admit, things have changed between you two. You don't see each other half as much as you used to."

"She has her group. And the guest speakers committee."

"She doesn't have to do both. Doing both pretty much eats up all her free time, leaving none to spend with you. It's as if she's avoiding you."

"I don't think she is," Mo said. She stopped there, unwilling to discuss her suspicions with Kary. Les was a private, guarded person. Mo wouldn't betray her. "Anyway, she's promised to talk about it when we're home for the festival."

"Do you think she will?"

Mo hoped so, but said, "I don't know. I've decided to leave it up to her to bring it up. If she doesn't, I'll let it go." Pressuring Les would get her nowhere and could damage their relationship—she had to remember that and restrain herself. She'd rather have Les and not share a room than not have her at all.

Kary reached out and patted Mo's arm. "Good for you. Enough chasing her about it. You have to have some self-respect."

She wished Kary hadn't brought up self-respect. First of all, her decision to stop trying had nothing to do with self-respect and everything to do with how best to get what she wanted. Second, Kary wouldn't think she had much self-respect when she told her that Les wouldn't attend the concert, something she hadn't mentioned because it would reflect badly on Les. But since she and Kary were already talking about her, now was as good a time as any. "That's why I'm not going to push her about the concert, either," she said as casually as she could.

Kary's brow furrowed. "The concert? What about the concert?"

Mo braced herself. "She's not going."

"What?" Kary shrieked, almost bolting off the bed. "What do you mean, she's not going?"

"It's the same night as group."

"Who flaming cares?" Kary said, her eyes ablaze. "She can skip group for one night."

"She doesn't want to."

Kary balled up her hands. "She—same night—the nerve!" She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "Let me talk to her."

Mo nearly gasped. "No, don't!"

"She should be there. Did you tell her they only selected four violinists out of everyone who takes lessons? They didn't ask her to play her flute."

Because Les didn't like playing in front of others. She'd rather be paraded naked around the Military Academy than get up on stage and perform. Okay, maybe not, but give Les the choice and it would be a close call. When the music instructors had started to organize the concert, Les had made it clear that she wasn't interested. She'd only ever played her flute for her instructor and Mo.

"Stand up for yourself! Tell her you're more important than her flaming group," Kary said.

No, no, no! That would be the worst thing she could say, especially right now. She appreciated that Kary was trying to help, but Kary didn't know Les very well. "I'm not going to push her, Kary. If she doesn't want to go, she doesn't want to go." She cursed the quaver in her voice.

Kary's face softened. "Are you sure she's not trying to tell you something?" she asked gently.

Positive. Almost. They didn't spend as much time with each other as they used to, but when they were together, their relationship felt solid. She didn't have the impression that Les wanted out. Les seemed to be trying to figure out how their relationship fit into her life, now that they knew they had Chosens. Mo had thought she was the one who'd struggled with turning eighteen and that Les had breezed through the experience, but now she'd calmed down and Les seemed to be struggling. She was certain that Les did want the relationship, though, and also sure that pressuring her to put it first would have the opposite effect.

So she was doing her best to accept that Les wouldn't be at the concert. She hadn't pouted, cried, or stamped her feet and insisted that Les be there. "If you change your mind, let me know," was all she'd said. Then she'd gone ahead and submitted Les's name for one of her four allotted reserved seats, along with Mama's, Papa's, and Kary's. Probably a stupid thing to do, but Les could indeed change her mind. In the meantime, she'd practice, hope, and keep reminding herself not to be resentful, that Les's behaviour had more to do with Les than with her.

Her eyes welled up; she bit her lip. It still hurt, despite knowing that.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," Kary said.

Mo blinked back her tears. "No, it's not you." It was that woman she wanted to hug and shake. "But I think I've had enough of talking about Les."

"Then let's not talk about her." Kary stood and gazed sympathetically at Mo. "Listen, Ben and I are going to the track semis. It's the F8 academy against us. We're meeting in, oh . . ." she flipped up her comm unit and read the time ". . . twenty minutes. Want to come?"

How pathetic would that be, tagging along with Kary on a date?

"It's a beautiful night out there," Kary added.

Mo sat up. "Thanks, but I do need to practice." She wouldn't make a fool of herself on that stage, Les or no Les.

"We won't mind if you come."

"Maybe next time." She paused. "Did you request Ben as a roommate?"

Kary chuckled. "Um, no. We talked about it, but it's too soon. So I don't know who I'll get. I wonder if I can cancel the request, if it turns out you and Lesley won't be sharing after all?"

"If you can, would you?"

"Hmm." Kary looked at the ceiling and rubbed her chin, then

grinned. "Of course I would. But I hope Lesley comes around. I really do."

"Me too."

"We can talk more about Lesley later, if you want."

She probably wouldn't want to, but nodded.

"I better go. I want to stop at the mess hall to pick up a snack or two before heading to the field."

Mo managed a smile. "Have a good time."

After Kary had gone, she eyed the violin case again, then collected it and headed to the recreation centre. On the way, she forced herself to mentally review the two pieces that needed the most attention, to keep her mind off Les. But as she passed Building B, she couldn't help but think about Les sitting inside, and quickened her pace, wanting to be long gone before Les's meeting ended. If they bumped into each other, Les would think she'd planned it that way. She wasn't that desperate. Yet.

Lesley stretched her legs under the table and tried to concentrate on Advocate Phillips's closing comments. "I've had a wonderful time," he was saying. "Thank you for the lively and challenging discussion."

She half-heartedly joined in as the group clapped. When the applause petered out, Heather rose to say, "Thank you, Advocate Phillips. It was an honour to have such a distinguished advocate lead us tonight."

Phillips nodded in acknowledgment. "I hope you'll invite me back," he said with a smile. "There's more to the Tradition than Article CT65."

"We'd love to have you back," Heather said. The majority of those around the table nodded, including Lesley. Perhaps next time she'd be more in the mood. "I know we said the Words at the beginning of the meeting, but I think it would be fitting for us to say them again." Heather motioned for everyone to stand.

Lesley held hands with her neighbours. "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!" She clapped and forced a smile, then quietly sighed. Not even the Words could cheer her.

Several in the group gathered around Phillips, wanting to continue the discussion. Normally Lesley would be among them, but there was no point, when she couldn't focus. She tuned out their

voices and the chatter going on around her and gathered her notes.

Nothing was turning out the way she'd expected. She'd regularly attended the Chosen Tradition study group, not missing a single meeting, and she sat on the committee that engaged guest speakers for it and related groups. As often as she could, she'd reminded herself that she and Mo had Chosens. And for months, she'd limited her time with Mo outside of classes and aviacraft lessons to a mere few hours a week, to prove to herself that life without Mo could be satisfying and enjoyable. But therein lay the problem. It wasn't. She missed Mo and, against her better judgment, wanted to spend more time with her.

Would sharing a room really be weak in the Way? Going to the concert was out of the question—that would be a clear choice of Mo over the Way. But sharing wouldn't interfere with any of her activities; in fact, she could do more and still have daily private time with Mo. Other cadets shared with lovers or friends, so why shouldn't she? She worried that sharing would encourage Mo's fantasy that they were Chosens, that it would feel like a commitment of sorts, but how could it? Not only would Mo continue to hope they were Chosens whether they shared or not, but they couldn't commit to each other—and both knew it.

Someone nudged her arm. "Are you okay tonight, Lesley?" Heather asked, speaking loud enough to be heard over the spirited conversation between three nearby group members. "You were a little quieter than usual."

Great, Heather had noticed that she wasn't herself. That could be another benefit to sharing—she might give meetings her full attention again, rather than daydreaming or agonizing about Mo. "I'm fine," she said, sliding her notes into her satchel. "Just a bit of a headache, that's all."

"Nip over to the infirmary and let them take care of it for you."

If the infirmary could help with what was bothering her, she'd be over there in a second. "Good idea," she said, nodding.

Heather smiled at her. "Great job, getting Phillips. I heard your parents helped."

"Yes, they did." She started to buckle the satchel's straps. "They don't advocate for the Tradition, though." Few advocates did, since most articles in the Tradition were closed to amendments.

"Have you considered inviting one of them to lead the Law group for an evening? I'm sure Jeremy would love—"

Lesley was so focused on her satchel that it took her a few seconds to notice that Heather hadn't finished her sentence. Then she realized the whole room had gone quiet. She looked up. Heather was staring in the direction of the door, a strange expression on her face. Lesley followed her gaze and swallowed. Commander Morton stood in

the doorway, his cloak open and his thumbs hooked through his belt loops. "Cadet Thompson!" he snapped. "A word."

Her legs turned to jelly. Trying to look casual, she lifted her satchel and carefully walked toward him.

"Get your cloak and walk with me," Morton murmured. He spun around and started down the corridor.

The skin on her back crawled as she slipped on her cloak. When she stepped through the doorway, whispers arose within the meeting room.

Morton couldn't possibly know what she was grappling with, could he? She'd been careful not to discuss it with anyone, including her counsellor. Commanders were powerful, but they weren't mind readers. She tried to remain calm as she followed him to the building's exit.

Outside, he waited for her to draw even before starting to walk again, his hands clasped behind his back. "Remember me?" he asked.

"Yes, I do, Commander Morton." She couldn't help glancing toward Building D, where the practice rooms were. *Focus!*

"It's hard to believe your evaluation was over a year ago."

"Yes, it is." First year exams were less than a month away, and she'd turned nineteen a few weeks ago. Time was moving quickly—too quickly. She'd be twenty-five before she knew it.

"Are you still planning to choose Defence?"

A cluster of cadets stood on the path that led out of the recreation centre complex. Seeing Morton, they parted and stood quietly as he and Lesley walked past. "Yes, I am," she said as they left the complex.

Morton stopped and faced her. "And still interested in the fighter pilot program?"

She forced herself to meet his eyes. "Yes."

"I think you belong in Interior, but it's your choice." He paused. "You're probably wondering why I'm here."

Lesley nodded.

"As I'm sure you've figured out, your first year is a probationary year. We've become quite adept at identifying cadets who pass their evaluation, but turn out not to be a good fit for the military. We're also adept at identifying cadets who are an excellent fit. Those who could become admirals. Those like you."

Shock stabbed through her. "It's a little early to think about admiral," she blurted.

Morton almost smiled. "Cadet, it's never too early to think about admiral." He motioned for her to resume walking and fell into step with her. "We'd like a mentor to guide you through your remaining years here. Have you met Lieutenant Commander Larson?"

"No."

"He's a former fighter pilot who now teaches here and oversees our domestic patrols. There's also Lieutenant Greeves. She isn't a pilot, but she excelled while a student here and her knowledge of military history is second to none. Would you like a mentor?"

"Yes."

"Good. Along with Larson and Greeves, there are a few other officers you'll want to consider. I'll dispatch a short list to you. When you return from your break, let me know which one you think would be the best fit. You'll also want to develop your public speaking skills. We'd like you to join the group that records announcements for the academy. At first, you'll record announcements for C6 only. Once you have the hang of it, you'll record announcements intended for all academies."

"How often are announcements recorded?" she asked, wondering how much time she'd have left for Mo.

"Daily. But each member of the group is required for only a couple of hours a week. Later on, you'll branch out and perform duties that require you to speak to Rymellans in general, but we'll start with the academy announcements. Lieutenant Griffiths is in charge of the group. Shall I tell her to expect you at the group's orientation meeting?"

Faced with a crossroads, Lesley glanced at Morton. He slowed down, but didn't indicate which path to take. She decided to go left, toward the dormitories. Lights out was approaching.

"Well?" Morton said.

At the same time she told herself that a couple of hours a week would leave hardly any time for Mo, she heard herself say, "Tell her I'll be there."

"Excellent. You'll receive a dispatch with the meeting details. It'll take place sometime during the first week of your second year." He stopped. "I'll be following your progress, Cadet. Good night." Morton nodded to her and strode off.

Lesley quickly continued on, not wanting Morton to catch her gawking at him, should he look over his shoulder. Who would have thought that speaking up at the execution site during her evaluation would lead to this? He thought she could make admiral. Admiral! What would Mama think? What would Mo?

Her excitement died. Mo probably wouldn't care one way or another, but she would care about how any new activities would impact their time together. The question around sharing a room and Lesley's decision not to attend the concert were already causing tension between them. Mo would throw a fit when she found out their time together would be further reduced in their second year. Perhaps

that was more of a reason to share a room, but what would Morton think if they did? Now that his attention was focused on Lesley, she had to be careful, not only for the sake of her future career, but for Mo's.

One thing she did know for sure: she'd have to choose the right time to tell Mo about her encounter with Morton, and do it in private. The conversation would probably be a loud one.

Mo slipped her arm through Les's as soon as they left Station C3-8's waiting area and veered onto the path that led to the Thompson and Middleton estates. She'd spent the entire train ride biting her tongue, not only about sharing a room, but about Morton. Did Les honestly believe that her run-in with Morton hadn't gotten around? Mo had hardly believed her ears when Bruce had told her about how Morton had strode right into the middle of Les's meeting and commanded her to report to head office. "It's true!" he'd insisted when she'd rolled her eyes and shaken her head. "Tim told me. He heard it from Sheila. One of her friends knows someone who goes to meetings in the same building and at the same time as Lesley's group. Everyone's talking about it!"

It couldn't have been about anything terrible, since Les was very much alive, hadn't been thrown out of the academy, and didn't seem any tenser than usual. So why hadn't she mentioned it? And would she keep her promise to discuss sharing a room?

"It's nice to be home for longer than an overnight stay," Les said. "This time we'll be here for a few days." She smiled at Mo.

Mo smiled back and reminded herself that pushing Les would be the wrong approach. She had to be patient, wait until Les was ready. Maybe spending a few hours together without talking about anything important would help relax her. A few hours . . . what a luxury that would be! They hadn't sat alone and simply enjoyed each other's company for ages. She squeezed Les's arm. "Do you want to go to the lake tonight? Tomorrow's the supper and then it's the festival. After that, I'm visiting my aunt and uncle. So tonight is probably our only chance to go." Her right hand tightened around the handle of her violin case. She also had to fit in practice, but that was better left unsaid.

"Um," Les said, "well, I'm not sure. I'd like to."

"Then let's do it."

"I might have stuff to do."

"What stuff?"

"Well . . . I have some reading to do for group."

"I don't know about you, but I want to leave the academy and

everything associated with it behind for a night," Mo said, trying a different tack. "I want to sit by the lake, relax, and forget I'm a cadet for a few hours. Well, apart from having to wear my cadet cloak."

Les frowned. "I'm pretty sure that if we stay on the estates, we don't have to wear our cloaks."

Mo wanted to believe her, and Les was usually right about such things, but she made a mental note to check exactly what the regulations were regarding the wearing of cloaks. Cuddling wouldn't be the same if they had to keep the flaming things on, but the evening would be ruined if they were caught not wearing them when they should. "Cloaks or no cloaks, let's go. Do you really want to miss a chance to go to the lake?"

"No, I don't," Les said softly. "It wouldn't feel right, going back to the academy without a visit to the lake."

"Then I'll come by right after supper," Mo said, thrilled that they'd spend the evening alone together, even though the topic of sharing a room would be off-limits.

A flash of orange up ahead caught her eye. A military was walking toward them. Odd; usually military patrolled in pairs, and this one was using a branch as a walking stick, as if she were out for a leisurely stroll.

"Mo," Les said, pulling her arm away and stopping.

Irritated, Mo whirled to face her. "What?"

"Look at her sleeves."

She turned her attention to the military's cloak and took in the gold-trimmed sleeves. As the woman drew closer, the insignia sewn onto the cloak's left breast confirmed what Mo had already surmised: Commander, Interior Division. Mo lowered the violin case to the ground and stood at attention, her hands clasped behind her back. Les stepped next to her and followed suit.

The commander stopped in front of them and threw the branch off to the side of the path. She eyed them up and down. "At ease, cadets."

Mo unclasped her hands and let them fall to her sides, but her body remained taut.

"You must be Lesley Thompson," the commander said, nodding to Les.

"Yes, Commander."

"And you must be Mo Middleton." She met Mo's eyes.

A chill ran up Mo's spine. "Well, my name is Ramona Middleton, Commander. But nobody calls me that. Everyone calls me Mo. Commander."

The commander's mouth twitched. "I know. That's why I called you Mo."

Mo wanted to hide her face behind her hands. If there were an article that covered making a fool of oneself in front of a commander, this commander would be reaching for her data collector.

"But I have you at a disadvantage," the commander said. "I'm Commander Finney. I've taken over C3 from Commander Newton."

As of that moment, Mo had seen Finney more times than she'd seen Newton. "How did you know who we were?" she asked before she could stop herself. The sooner her brain re-established its connection with her mouth, the better.

"Everyone I talk to mentions the two cadets representing C3 at the academy, so the cloaks were a giveaway," Finney said. "But even without them, I would have known who you were. I've just left the Thompson estate, so I knew you were due home. You look very much like your papa," she said to Les.

"Is everything all right at the estate?" Les asked. Her voice sounded even, but knowing her as well as she did, Mo detected a trace of apprehension.

"Oh, yes, everything's fine," Finney quickly said. "I happened to be in the area and thought I'd stop by and introduce myself. I didn't mean to alarm you."

"We didn't see much of Commander Newton. That's why I wondered."

"Well, expect to see more of me. C3 is a quiet sector, but complacency is dangerous. Did you know that a few years ago, E8 was a quiet sector? And guess who lived there?"

"The Adamses?" Mo and Les said together.

"Yes. The Adamses." Finney placed her left hand against her chest; the Chosen ring on her third finger glinted in the sun.

"Whenever possible, I want to prevent capital violations before they happen. No one likes to be at an execution site, including me. So is there anything either one of you would like to tell me?"

Mo wasn't sure what Finney meant. She glanced uncertainly at Les.

"Anyone you're concerned about, anyone who might be falling from the Way?" Finney said.

Oh. "I'm not concerned about anyone," Mo said, determined to contribute and to show that she wasn't an idiot. "But we've been away at the academy."

"We've had our heads down, studying," Les added. "We're a bit out of touch with what's going on in C3."

Finney nodded. "I guess you'd be more likely to raise a concern with Commander Morton." Mo peeked at Les from the corner of her eye, but Les's expression remained bland. "I went to the C6 academy," Finney said.

Mo found the idea of Finney at any academy difficult to grasp. It was hard to imagine that the confident woman in front of her had once worn a light blue cloak, done homework, shared a room in the dormitories, and been evaluated by the military. Would any of this year's cadets eventually have the power to decide between life and death?

"I chose Interior, and that's where I've stayed. From what I hear, you two will choose Defence."

"We're hoping to enter the fighter pilot program," Les said. Mo stood a little taller.

"I see," Finney said. "That's a tough one to get into, but not impossible. The aviacraft lessons you're taking should help."

Mo stared at her in disbelief. "My parents don't know about the lessons," Les said slowly.

"They won't hear about them from me. You're nineteen. You don't have to tell your parents everything. As for the fighter pilot program, you might want to look into booking simulator time."

"I thought only those in the program were allowed to use them," Les said.

"That's what they like you to think, but it's not true. The student pilots take priority, but you can try. If you're willing to get up early, you stand a better chance." Finney paused. "If you find out when the pilots are away on exercises, you might be able to book time at a reasonable hour. Book time together and you can fight each other."

Fight against Les? Mo would love the opportunity. Not only would it be fun, but blasting lasers at her would be a safe way to vent her frustrations. Don't want to share a room? *Blam!* Can't get together because some long-winded advocate is leading group and you have to prepare? *Blam-blam!* Can't make the concert? *Blam-blam-blam!* "We'll look into that as soon as we get back," she said, hardly able to contain her excitement at the prospect. She was almost glad they'd run into Finney.

"Get in as much practice as you can. How well you perform in the simulator will definitely be part of the evaluation when you apply for the program."

"Thank you for telling us," Les said.

"Yes, thanks," Mo added, a little bewildered that she was standing on a path chatting away with a commander. Finney almost seemed like a normal person. Maybe she could help save the agony of wading through regulations later. "Do you mind if I ask you a question about our cloaks?"

"Of course not," Finney said.

"I know we're supposed to wear our cloaks whenever we leave the academy. But does that mean we have to wear them at home?"

Finney pressed her lips together and studied Mo. "Do you mean inside the house?" she finally asked, a hint of laughter in her voice.

Mo's shoulders sagged. She was back to sounding like C3's resident simpleton. "No, I mean on the estates. We've been home a couple of times, but they were only overnight stays, so I never even went out. But this time we're home for a few days. Let's say I go for a walk around the estate. Do I have to wear my cloak?"

"No. When you're not sure, read Article 18. You have to wear your cadet cloak whenever you're in a public place in accordance with that article. Otherwise, you don't. The rule changes a bit when you're no longer a cadet, but you don't need to concern yourself with that now." She looked down at Mo's violin case. "Are you playing in the concert at the academy, the one that's taking place in a couple of weeks?"

"Yes," Mo said, trying not to sound too enthusiastic with Les standing next to her.

"I'll be there. One of my cousin's sons is performing."

"Oh." With her luck, she'd trip on stage or blow her duet, giving Finney even more reason to think she was an idiot.

Finney looked past them. "I want to talk to that patrol, so I'll have to go. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that attendance at all the festival's morning events is mandatory."

"No," she and Les said in unison.

"Good. Enjoy your break." Finney nodded to them.

They nodded in return and moved aside so she could pass between them.

"That was a surprise," Les murmured as Mo watched Finney join the two military down the path.

"It sure was." She picked up her violin case. If she'd also had a knapsack, her back would probably be killing her, but neither she nor Les had packed anything. Half their clothes were still at home, and since they would dress formally for all the festival-related events and visits, the casual clothing back in their academy rooms wouldn't do them much good. They wouldn't dress up tonight, though. Tonight, they'd go to the lake. She couldn't help but smile at Les.

"What?" Les said.

"Nothing." Mo slipped her arm through Les's, and they continued on their way.

Lesley dodged several caterers whisking food into the kitchen as she made her way to the Thompson home's formal dining room. Festival suppers were always held the night before the festival—

nobody had time to prepare a five-course meal on the festival day itself. If past years were any indication, tomorrow's supper would be a cold buffet in the smaller family dining room.

Mama stood at the near end of the long, rectangular dining table, studying a paper she held. "I'm just having one last look at the seating plan before I give it to the hostess," she murmured when Lesley stopped next to her. "She said she'll memorize it, even after I told her we're expecting over thirty." She lifted her head, then gaped. "You're not wearing *that*."

"Mama, the supper is four hours away. I thought I'd go over to Mo's for a bit, get out of everyone's way."

"Be back in three. But don't go just yet. You should know about a change in the seating plan." She passed the sheet to Lesley. "And before you think I'm completely heartless, Susan and I discussed it. We both agreed it's time."

Lesley read the plan with a sinking feeling. There she was, seated between Karen and Jason, with Mo at the other end of the table. She sighed. "Why now?"

"Because you both have Chosens. We could have done it last year, when we knew for sure that you're a Chosen, but we held off. Now that we know you're both Chosens, it's time to start respecting that, at least symbolically. The chair next to you belongs to someone other than Mo."

"There are two chairs next to me. We don't know if my Chosen will claim the one on the left or the right, but we do know she won't claim both."

"Be that as it may, seating you next to Mo is no longer appropriate." Mama snatched back the seating plan. "It's only for a few hours. You have to start accepting that you have a Chosen."

"I do accept it!"

"Then you must understand that treating you and Mo as a couple at family events is only going to become more awkward. Nobody's saying you should stop seeing each other, but you can't expect to be treated as if you're Joined."

Lesley rubbed her forehead, then ran her hand through her hair. "I know, Mama." She paused. "Does Mo know?"

"Susan planned to mention it to her sometime today, before they arrive. Do you want me to beep her and ask her to do it now?"

"No." It would only take ten minutes to bike to the Middleton home. She'd rather tell Mo than arrive five minutes after Susan had told her.

"I have you down for CT12 tonight. Is that all right?"

Lesley nodded. After supper, those eighteen years and older would stand in turn and read an article from the Tradition. Tonight

would be her second time and Mo's first.

Mama's mouth turned up at the corners. "It'll be nice to have you at the table again."

"It's good to be home," she said. They stared at each other. Lesley tipped her head toward the doorway. "I guess I'll go." She turned and walked out of the dining room.

Her cadet cloak hung on a hook near the door, but she reached for her brown one. Wearing the light blue one would only make her feel weak, reminding her of everything she was avoiding with Mo. The change in seating plan had dampened her spirits; she didn't need the cloak mocking her, too.

She set off for Mo's on her bike, looking forward to seeing her again, even though she'd seen Mo the previous evening. The visit to the lake had been idyllic—she couldn't remember the last time she'd taken the time to breathe. Mo had stuck to her plan to leave the academy behind, not raising the subject of sharing a room once, when she must have been dying to talk about it. Lesley had almost managed to forget that she had a Chosen; everything she loved about Mo—her feelings for her . . . everything—had rushed to the surface, and for the first time in a while, she hadn't berated herself. She'd felt alive and rejuvenated, almost seeing her relationship with Mo as something positive, rather than something she had to overcome.

But the conversation with Mama had brought her back to reality. She did have a Chosen; she did have to overcome and eventually cast aside her relationship with Mo. The change in the seating plan was only the first step of many. She understood the reason behind it, but without Mo beside her, the festival supper would never be the same. And how would Mo feel, sitting almost a room away? Mo already felt that Lesley was squeezing her out of her life. Now she'd have another slight to add to the list—now the families were doing it, too.

Sharing a room would run counter to what everyone apparently expected them to do: remain a couple, but publicly behave as friends. On the other hand, perhaps that was an argument in favour of sharing? Perhaps they needed to claim what they could while they could, because tradition, and *the* Tradition, would gradually take it all away from them. Or perhaps that was her way of rationalizing something she knew was wrong. If it was inappropriate for Mo to sit next to her at supper, how could she justify sharing a room? The answer had to be no.

She hopped off her bike at the Middletons' and guided it into the rack that stood to the left of the front door. Mo opened the door seconds after she knocked, saying, "I saw you ride up."

They kissed. Lesley drew back. "Did your Mama—"

"I know about the seating plan," Mo said tersely. "Maybe we can

hide our comm units under the table and use them to talk to each other." She smiled, but her eyes remained dull.

"I didn't ask for the change."

"I know."

"I thought I heard your voice," Susan said, coming into the entrance hall from the living room. "It's nice to see you. We haven't seen you for a while, and now we're not only seeing you this week, but the week after next, too."

"The week after next?" Lesley said, confused.

"Yes! At the concert." Susan put her arm around Mo. "We're looking forward to it. Though she won't tell us what she'll be playing," She squeezed Mo and ruffled her hair. "You must know, Lesley. Tell me. Give me a hint."

Her face grew hot. She had no idea what Mo would be playing. They'd avoided all discussion of the concert since Lesley had made it clear she wouldn't be attending. Why hadn't Mo told her parents? Now she was on the spot. "I—"

"Now, now, Mama, that would be cheating," Mo said. "I want you to find out when you read the program. And I told you, I don't want any talk about the concert over the break. It'll only make me nervous."

"She practised outside this morning," Susan said, with a look that indicated she thought her daughter was a bit strange.

"Enough about the concert!" Mo said, ducking out from Susan's arm. "I thought you said you were going to the Indoctrination Academy."

"I am. It's my turn this year," she said to Lesley.

"Mo told me." And since Susan would be at the Indoctrination Academy for the festival, so would Mo, to Lesley's disappointment. Even though she and Mo weren't due back at the academy for three days, they wouldn't have much time alone together for the rest of the break. After the festival, Mo was off to visit relatives and would only return late the next day. The day after that, Lesley had to meet her cousins for brunch, then she and Mo would return to the academy on an early afternoon train. She wanted to see if the academy's library had information about her potential mentors that wasn't available on the public network, and she believed Mo had a concert rehearsal.

"So yes, I'm off to help finish with the preparations." Susan shrugged on her cloak. "I'll see you later."

"What should we do?" Mo asked after Susan had gone. "We could maybe go to the Trading Centre. I want to stock up on those candies the academy's centre never has. Or we could stay here and maybe talk?" she said, hope in her eyes.

They should talk; otherwise, when would they? But Lesley wasn't ready. Every time she thought she'd come to a firm decision,

something happened that called it into question. How could she tell Mo she wouldn't share a room when Mo had just covered for her, saving her a ton of embarrassment? And did she want to tell Mo today, after they'd just found out they'd sit at supper like strangers? Perhaps it would be better to wait for Mo to force the issue, or to let the deadline slip by. No, she'd promised they'd talk before they returned to the academy. But how?

She couldn't imagine telling Mo that she wouldn't share a room. Every time she tried to rehearse a conversation about it, something inside wouldn't let her say the words, even in her head. It should be easy. All she had to do was say one sentence, a sentence that would take less than three seconds to say. So why couldn't she say it?

Maybe because sharing a room wouldn't be so bad. They were both at the academy. They didn't intend to split up. If they didn't share, when would they see each other? But then, if they weren't supposed to sit next to each other at supper, should they share a room? Morton and the academy's administration would be scrutinizing her behaviour. Sharing a room with her lover might raise eyebrows.

She couldn't risk it.

So the dilemma that had paralyzed her for weeks was still there: she didn't intend to share a room, but she didn't want to hurt Mo. Once she'd figured out how to not do both, she'd open her flaming mouth and talk about it.

Mo waved her hand in front of Lesley's face. "Well?"

"Let's go to the Trading Centre," she said, cringing. "I'll have to go home to change cloaks first, though."

The hope faded from Mo's eyes. "Fine. I'll go with you." She stepped around Lesley, grabbed her cadet cloak, and marched out the door.

Lesley plucked a stone from the pile in her left hand and tossed it toward the lake. *Plop*. She transferred another to her right hand—a flat one, one that would be perfect for . . . She whipped it sideward toward the lake. It skipped along the water four times before sinking beneath the surface. Not bad.

"I had a feeling I'd find you here," Papa said behind her. When he reached her side, she held out her hand and displayed the stones in her palm. He selected several. "I almost didn't recognize you in that cloak," he said as she threw one underhand. "I thought, what's that cadet doing on the estate? Then I realized it was you."

She chuckled. "When it's orange, you'll mistake me for a patrol."

"Seeing you in an orange cloak . . . now that'll take some getting

used to." He threw a stone into the lake. "Mama's wondering where you are."

Wanting the goods in the knapsack at Lesley's feet, no doubt. She'd meant to return home as soon as she'd finished trading, but had found herself taking the path to the lake instead.

"We're a bit worried about you."

"Why?" she asked without looking at him.

"You don't seem yourself. I first noticed it during the festival supper."

And her demeanour at the festival itself probably hadn't helped. The skits, music, and food hadn't kept her mind off her dilemma, nor had the conversations with former classmates: "*How's Mo doing? Does Mo like the Military Academy? Which division is Mo choosing?*"

"Mama's worried that you're not happy at the Military Academy."

Lesley rolled her eyes. Hoping, more like.

He tossed three stones into the lake. "There'd be no shame if you decided the military isn't for you. Sometimes you don't know until you try."

"It's not that. I'm happy at the academy." She should be delirious—she expected to finish her first year at the top of her class, was on track to apply to the fighter pilot program, and the military had taken notice of her. Yet she dreaded returning to the academy, where the tension between her and Mo would only increase.

"What is it, then?"

She crouched to look for more stones. "I'm just tired, that's all. It's been a busy year," she said as she scooped some up and looked for more. Papa didn't want to hear about her problems with Mo. He'd only think her weak and indecisive, and he'd probably tell Mama, the last thing she needed. Anyway, what advice could he offer? Had he ever had to choose between a girlfriend and the Way? "Papa, can I ask you a question? And if you don't want to answer it, don't. I'll understand."

"What is it?" he asked, curiosity in his voice.

"Did you have girlfriends before Mama?" Lesley kept her eyes on the three stones she was lifting from the sand. "Well, I'm sure you did, but was there anyone special?" She swallowed and slowly stood. Papa wasn't answering; he'd either decided it was none of her business or hadn't heard. As long as he wasn't angry . . . She selected a stone from her new supply and threw it underhand.

"There was someone," he said softly.

Really? She fought the urge to look at him, instead tossing another stone.

"We met in college, through a study group. I couldn't help but notice her, she picked up the lessons so quickly. I've always liked

women with sharp minds, like your mama."

Mama had a sharp tongue to go with hers, though. "Were you still together when your Chosen Papers came?"

"Oh no, we split up long before then—when we left college."

"Because you had to?"

"Well, we didn't have to, not at that point. But we did. She was a Solitary. I was a Chosen. I think we both saw it as a college relationship from the beginning." He paused. "That doesn't mean it wasn't difficult, but you do move on."

She and Mo would eventually have no choice but to move on, but she couldn't imagine never seeing or talking to Mo. "Do you think about her much?"

"Not much, no. Occasionally, when I'm researching a case, I come across a case she advocated. And though I haven't seen her for over twenty-five years, I instantly think of her whenever I smell baking bread." His voice grew wistful. "Her papa was a baker."

Lesley realized she'd stopped throwing, too absorbed in the conversation. She dropped the remaining stones and finally looked at him. "What was her name?"

Papa shook his head. "That, I'll keep to myself. And I meant this to be a conversation about you, not me. Why the sudden interest in my past relationships?"

She scrambled for an answer, but couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound like a lie. Just curious wouldn't do—he'd ask why she was curious.

"How are you and Mo doing?" he asked when it must have become obvious that she was flailing around for a reply. "She also seemed a little subdued at the festival supper."

"We're doing great. We would rather have been sitting next to each other, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He studied her; she stared back and concentrated on relaxing the muscles in her face. "If there's a problem . . . if you want to talk . . ."

"Really, we're fine," she said firmly.

"Good afternoon," a man shouted. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

They whirled as two military strode up. Lesley recognized both men: Lieutenant Wilson and Sub-Lieutenant Taylor. "Nice to see you, Alan. And you, Cadet," Wilson said.

She stifled a chuckle. It had been plain old Lesley, last time she'd seen them. "Nice to see you, Lieutenant and Sub-Lieutenant."

"Did you enjoy the festival yesterday?"

Papa nodded. "We did. That new skit about the Adams Incident

was quite good. A couple of the masks scared the children, though."

Taylor laughed and elbowed Wilson in the side. "We were just saying that they'll have to make a few adjustments for next year."

Lesley smiled. They'd have to either do away with the masks that suggested the character had been struck with a horrible flesh-eating disease, or not ask the children to gather near the front of the stage. Three of the poor things had run screaming for their parents when the "Adamses" had made their entrance.

"Did you meet Commander Finney yet?" Taylor asked. "She's been making the rounds."

"A few days ago. We were surprised when she beeped us." Papa glanced down at his comm unit, as if he were expecting her to beep again at that moment. "And grateful, of course."

"She always beeps beforehand. Nobody wants to open the door and find a commander on the doorstep unannounced," Wilson said to murmurs of agreement.

"She certainly has a different way of doing things than Commander Newton," Papa said. "He was here for, what—twenty years? I think he visited the estate twice."

"I don't remember him visiting the estate," Lesley said.

Papa frowned. "You were either too young or not even born. That's how long ago it was. Commander Finney said to expect her more often."

"Everyone will have to be on their toes now," Taylor said, wagging a cautionary finger.

"Including us," Wilson said wryly. "Not that I'm complaining. When we heard the rumour that the admiral was considering her for C3, we hoped she'd get it."

"Why?" Papa asked.

"She has an excellent reputation. Several decorations, even though she's only in her mid-thirties. Strong in the Way. Doesn't hesitate to stick anyone who decides the Way isn't good enough for them, but at the same time won't stick someone unless she's sure. Not that I expect she'll load her stick much here, but if you do find yourself teetering on the brink, she'll give you a fair hearing."

Taylor nodded. "Tough but fair, that about sums it up. And military who've served under her have only good things to say. We're glad she's here."

He'd piqued Lesley's curiosity. Why would someone like Finney, strong in the Way and apparently highly regarded by her peers, end up overseeing C3? The sector was so quiet, it almost ran itself. "Was she just promoted to commander?"

Wilson shook his head. "That's another thing. She made commander quite young."

"Which sector did she oversee before?" Lesley asked.

"C4."

"Why did she switch?"

Taylor and Wilson exchanged bemused glances. "I think she's practising an interrogation technique she learned at the academy. I'd be careful," Taylor said. They shared a laugh.

Lesley's cheeks burned. "I'm sorry. I—"

Wilson waved her apology away. "He's only teasing. As for your question, I don't know why she transferred to C3. That's between her and the admiral. All I can tell you is that she's just returned from leave, after having her son."

"Her son?" Lesley blurted. For some reason, she'd never pictured commanders with children.

"Yes. She has two sons and a daughter."

That must be a strain. As far as she knew, commanders worked long days and were on call all the time. Finney would inevitably be summoned at odd hours, even in C3.

"Anyway, if we don't get moving, we'll fall behind on our patrol, and that won't impress our new leader at all." Wilson motioned for Taylor to follow him. "Let's go."

"Enjoy the rest of the afternoon," Taylor said.

Papa nodded to him. "Thank you."

They started to walk off, but then Wilson turned around, still walking. "Oh, I'll give you the same advice I'm giving everyone else," he said. "If you can't think of anything to say when Commander Finney visits, ask her about the history of the Chosen Tradition. She'll talk your ear off."

No wonder Finney's name had sounded familiar when Mo had first mentioned it! A few years ago, she'd given a lecture at the academy about the history of Article CT52. When group had studied the article last month, the suggested reading list had included a transcript of the lecture. Lesley would have to dig it up and read it again.

"I'm heading back, or Mama will start worrying about me, too," Papa said. "Are you coming?"

"I think I'll stay here for a bit, enjoy the peace and quiet while I can."

"Okay." He bent forward to pick up the knapsack and slung it over his shoulder. "You can talk to me if you want. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Papa." She expected him to set off, but he didn't seem to want to leave. "I'm fine. Really."

"If you change your mind . . ."

She nodded. "I know."

"I'll leave you be, then." He pulled out his comm unit. "I should let Mama know I'm on my way back. See you later." She watched him walk away. "Supper's in two hours," he called over his shoulder.

When Lesley couldn't see him anymore, she crouched and gathered the stones she'd dropped earlier. As she tossed them into the lake, her mind returned to Mo, relationships, and sharing a room. Papa had apparently survived a serious relationship and seemed to look back fondly on the experience. How would Mo look back on their relationship? Would she grow wistful, as Papa had, thinking about the times they'd laughed and smiled and danced together, or would she remember the last few months, when their time together was always rushed and everything important turned into a battle? "*We weren't that serious. We didn't even share a room when we were at the Military Academy,*" she imagined Mo saying. "*The relationship fizzled out on its own. By the end of our second year, we hardly saw each other.*"

No! That wasn't what she wanted. Their relationship *was* serious, and she wanted to share a room. That was why she couldn't talk to Mo, why "no" wouldn't come out. If only she could justify it, figure out how to show that she was strong in the Way and serious about her future military career, despite caring too much for someone who wasn't her Chosen.

Lesley threw the remaining stones down and walked along the beach. If she intended to keep her promise to Mo, she'd better do her deciding quickly. She had to come up with a solution by the end of the day, or she'd have to break her promise or say no, and she didn't want to do either. Both would disappoint Mo.

Frustrated, she kicked at the sand again and again and again, not caring when the wind blew it back at her. As much as she hated to admit it, as much as she wished she felt differently, she couldn't deny that disappointing Mo would hurt her much more than disappointing the military. She'd go along with Morton's suggestions, but perhaps the military had made a mistake this time. Perhaps Mama would get her wish after all.

Mo rummaged through her closet to see if there were any clothes she wanted to take back to the academy. She'd sort of missed a couple of shirts, but her drawers were already bursting and Kary would flip if she asked for more closet space. Since it looked like she and Kary would share again next year, Mo didn't want to antagonize her.

She backed out of the closet, slid the door shut, and tried to

think positive. Okay, so she'd been home for over an hour and had left Les a message, but Les hadn't beeped. The day wasn't over, and there was still tomorrow morning. Yeah, right. Who was she kidding? It was already 22:45. That left tomorrow. But Les was having an early brunch with her cousins; unless she intended to visit at the crack of dawn or to squeeze in a discussion on the train platform so she could claim she'd technically kept her promise, they wouldn't be talking about sharing a room anytime soon, if ever.

Les must still be struggling with whatever was on her mind. Flaming Argamon! Mo appreciated that Les thought every decision through carefully and always tried to do the right thing, even when it hurt her personally—that was one of the reasons Mo loved her. But just this once, she'd take rash and shallow!

She sighed. No, she wouldn't. That wouldn't be the Les she loved, the Les she wanted to scream her lungs out at. Nor would it be the Les who'd always kept her promises . . . until now. Mo hoped Les's silence wasn't a sign of things to come.

Her comm station beeped twice in rapid succession—a dispatch. It could wait. But then it beeped again, this time signalling that someone was trying to reach her. Mo rushed to the station and read the screen, then read it again: *L. Thompson*.

"Hi!" she said as soon as they were connected.

"Is it too late for me to drop by? I want to talk to you . . . about sharing a room," Les said.

"No, come on over," Mo said, working hard to mask her surprise. "I'm still up."

"I'm leaving right now." The connection went dead.

Mo flopped onto her bed, dazed and relieved. Les may have left it to the last minute, but she was honouring her promise. No matter what she said when she arrived, their relationship still meant something to her. But what had she decided? Finally, an answer, but after desperately wanting one, Mo dreaded what she'd hear and imagined the worst.

By the time the tap at the door came, she'd convinced herself that Les was definitely going to say no, but pasted a smile on her face and swung the door open.

Les strode into the room. "I'm sorry it's so late. I know I sent you a dispatch, but I still wanted to talk to you about it in person."

"A dispatch," Mo said slowly, confused. "Wait, you mean just before you beeped me?"

"Yes."

"I haven't read it."

"Oh."

"I would have read it if I'd known it was from you. But right after

you beeped me, I had to . . . help Mama with something." Les didn't need to know she'd lain on the bed for the past ten minutes, sweating about this conversation.

"I sent you the room request form, with my half filled in and signed."

"Oh, okay," Mo said, determined not to let on that Les had just made her week. Since Les was treating it matter-of-factly, so would she. "I'm glad. You know it's what I want."

"Well, it makes sense. We're both so busy, and it's only going to get worse. If we don't share a room, we'll hardly see each other."

Mo nodded and said, "I know," while frantically wondering what Les meant by "it's only going to get worse."

"Can we sit down?" Les asked.

"Sure." Mo sat on the edge of the bed, expecting Les to sit next to her. But Les pulled the chair out from under the desk, wheeled it toward the bed, and positioned it directly in front of Mo. She lowered herself into it; their legs touched. When Les took Mo's hands and kissed them, Mo braced herself—she had the feeling she wasn't going to like whatever was coming. Still, her heart sped up when Les gazed at her, and not from apprehension.

"Commander Morton came to see me last week," Les said. "Remember him?"

"Of course I remember him." She wasn't likely to forget the commander who'd taught her that, if she was tense enough, she could pull a muscle while standing still. But even if she'd forgotten about the incident at the evaluation, the recent tales flying around about Les's encounter with him would have reminded her. So, she was about to find out what had really happened. About flaming time. "What did he want?"

"To give me some extra help."

"What do you mean?" Les didn't need help; she was doing well in all her classes, as usual.

"He said I'm an excellent fit for the military. They want to give me a mentor, and they want me to work on my public speaking skills."

"Why public speaking?"

"Well, he said I could make admiral," she said sheepishly.

"Admiral? Um, you do realize that to get to admiral, you have to go through commander, right?"

"I doubt he meant it."

Mo was sure he meant it. If anyone could make admiral, Les could.

"Admiral or no, the first step is to graduate from the academy. If they're willing to help, I won't turn them down." Les's hands tightened around Mo's. "But it means I'll be busier next year."

So that was it.

"I'm joining the group that records announcements for the academy. And I'll also want to volunteer for more activities related to the Way, to show that I'm strong in the Way."

Mo pulled her right hand from Les's and scratched her nose, hoping to hide her dismay. Now it was all clear. Les wanted their relationship, but it was low on her priority list. Impressing Morton and his cronies was most important to her. So how to do that and keep Mo happy? Well, how about share a room with her? What a brilliant idea! Mo could imagine the conversations now: *Les, we hardly spend any time together! Now Mo, that may be true, but just think—every morning when you wake up, you get to see the indentation on my pillow where my head lay all night.*

But what was she supposed to do? Tell Les to limit her career options and throw away a great opportunity because it meant they'd see less of each other? Refuse to share a room, forcing Les to either spend time with her or dump her? Considering that Les probably viewed their relationship as a practice run for the real thing, making her choose between their relationship and her career would be stupid.

If they were Chosens this conversation would be completely different. They probably wouldn't even be having it. But they didn't know if they were. No wonder Les had put their almost five-year relationship at the bottom of her list.

Calm down! Les wouldn't be there if their relationship meant nothing to her. She would have let the deadline slip by or said no. Wait a second—"Why would they think you're not strong in the Way?"

Les hesitated, then shrugged. "I don't know how they'll look upon me being serious about you."

Mo swallowed. "Les, don't share a room if you think it's the wrong thing to do."

"I want to share with you."

"Are you sure?"

Les nodded. "I'm sure."

Now Mo felt selfish, though she wasn't sure she should. Maybe Les was holding herself to too high a standard; maybe she wasn't. Either way, agreeing to share a room when she thought it might tarnish her image was a huge concession on her part. Mo wouldn't throw it back in her face, even though she wasn't thrilled with the way things were turning out. She suspected that Les planned to knock herself out with all these new activities whether they shared or not, so better to move into the same room and then work on their schedules than to refuse the room and never see her.

"Like you said earlier, it makes sense," Mo said. "Right now, it's hard to even study together when Kary or Jackie is around. When we

share, we can at least do that. It'll be nice to be together, even if we're just reading." She inwardly snorted. Who was she trying to convince, herself or Les?

"Let's hope the request goes through."

She restrained from retorting that it would have had a better chance if Les hadn't taken so long to make up her flaming mind, and said, "I'm sure it will."

They sat and stared at each other. There didn't seem much else to say—not that night, anyway.

"I'd better go," Les said. "I don't want to fall asleep during the brunch tomorrow." She rolled the chair back under the desk, then held out her arms.

Mo went to her without hesitation. "I'm looking forward to sharing a room," she murmured into Les's ear. And she was, despite her suspicion that Les's full days would soon have them at each other's throats.

Les drew back and kissed her, a lingering kiss that left Mo breathless when they finally parted. "I'll see you tomorrow," Les said.

Mo smiled at her. "Enjoy brunch."

After Les had gone, Mo sat on the edge of her bed and reviewed the conversation. Okay, so she'd got what she wanted—sort of. She'd have to see how much time they actually had for each other after Les had scheduled all her activities, though she wasn't sure what she could do if it turned out that they hardly had any. She couldn't ask Les to risk her dreams and her reputation for their relationship, not when their relationship might not have a future. At the same time, it was a struggle not to feel resentful about Les's current priorities.

Her determination to be patient and understanding while Les tried to impress Morton and company had better turn out to be worth it. She still harboured the hope, the belief, that they were Chosens. If they weren't, she was a fool to be making sacrifices for Les and her career when some other woman would reap the benefits.

"So you agree that I should go with Larson?" Lesley said as she followed Mo onto the train platform.

"Yeah, for sure." Mo switched her violin case to her left hand and reached behind her with her right.

Lesley smiled. "They all sound good," she said, grasping Mo's fingers. "But not only has Larson gone through the program, he's still an active pilot."

"According to that biography, he's also in charge of domestic patrols. You can't beat that. He'll help us a lot. Well, you."

"Us. I'll tell you everything he tells me."

"You better." They walked through the station's waiting area and entered the courtyard. Mo glanced around. "Not many back yet. Oh, there's David. David!" Mo called, waving as vigorously as she could while holding her violin.

He waved and sauntered over to them. "You two are back early."

"So are you," Lesley said.

"I haven't finished two assignments due tomorrow, and with a house full of screeching cousins, I figured I'd have a better chance of getting them done here." He pointed at Mo's violin case. "You back for a rehearsal?"

Mo nodded.

"The concert's what, just over a week away now?"

"Yeah, don't remind me."

"I'm looking forward to it, and the reception afterward."

Lesley felt like an outsider. Everyone would gather around Mo, congratulating her and sharing her special evening. Everyone except her.

"Our last chance to enjoy ourselves before the exam crunch," he continued.

Mo groaned. "Instead of practising, I'll be cramming. Wish I could relax for a bit. Oh, guess what? The commander of our sector is going to the concert."

"Are you serious? Everyone's going!"

"Well, I'm sure not *everyone* is going," Mo said, for Lesley's benefit, no doubt. "But I don't want to humiliate myself in front of the ones that are, so I better get going. I want to get an hour in before rehearsal."

"You two want to meet at the mess hall for supper?"

"Yeah, let's," Mo said. "Around 18:00?"

David nodded.

"We'll see you later," Mo told him.

"I'm not sure I want to have supper with him," Lesley said when they'd walked out of earshot.

"If he brings up the concert, I'll tell him I don't want to talk about it because it makes me nervous," Mo said. "Which isn't exactly a lie."

"Thanks," she mumbled, feeling small. Along with everyone else, David had assumed she'd attend the concert. She'd lacked the courage to correct him.

"I want to change before I practice," Mo said. "You going straight to the library?"

Lesley wanted to stay with Mo. They still held hands, but the tension that had lessened at home had risen between them again. A

whole five minutes back at the academy—that was all it had taken. “I can come with you if you want, walk partway to the recreation centre.”

Mo appeared to think about it. “No, you go ahead. I’ll see you later.” She squeezed Lesley’s hand, then hurried down the path to the dormitories before Lesley could respond.

Lesley stared after her. As much as she’d like to go to the concert, she couldn’t—not after she’d already given in to sharing a room. Too bad none of the potential mentors could advise her on how to reconcile Mo, the military’s expectations, and the Way. That was where she really needed help, though she’d never admit that to anyone, especially her mentor. *So, Thompson, you think you can make admiral, but you can’t even put your girlfriend in her place?*

She was trying, but it was tearing her apart.

Mo wiped her violin and carefully placed it in its case.

“Remember, 19:00 sharp!” the conductor said.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Tomorrow night she’d be right here on this stage, but facing an audience. Her parents, her siblings, her friends, even Commander Finney—they’d all be out there, listening. But no Les. Mo sighed. It wouldn’t be the same without Les.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” one of the other violinists said, excitement and anticipation raising her voice an octave. Mo nodded as she picked up her violin.

As soon as she stepped outside, she turned on her comm unit and checked for messages. A couple of dispatches had arrived. She requested the list and almost dropped the comm unit when she saw *RE: Room Request #3432-976*. Her heart raced. Please, please let it be a confirmation.

First things first—she put down her violin. Throwing it into the air with glee or smashing it in disappointment wouldn’t bode well for her impending performance. Her hand shook as she opened the dispatch—a lot rode on this.

Your request to share a room with Cadet Lesley Thompson has been fulfilled.

Yes! Yes, yes, yes! She danced a little jig around her violin, then read the message in its entirety. It had arrived almost an hour and a half ago. Les must have received the confirmation, but she hadn’t beeped and left a message, even though she’d said she’d be in her room all night, preparing for her group meeting. Well, this news called for an interruption.

After dropping off her violin, Mo hurried to Les’s room and rapped sharply on her door.

Les opened it; her face lit up with surprise. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Didn't you get a dispatch?"

"A dispatch?" Les said, stepping aside so Mo could enter the room.

"Les, we got a room!"

"We did? Let me look. I've been ignoring beeps." She grabbed her comm unit from her nightstand and peered at its display. A smile spread across her face. "It's in this dormitory. I won't have to carry my clothes very far."

"No, you won't," Mo said, wondering if Les was smiling because they had a room or because of the room's location. "I wonder where Kary will end up. I hope she's in this dormitory, too."

"She might end up next door. I'm pretty sure Kyle and Jeremy are moving."

"That would be great. We've become good friends."

"We both did well with roommates," Les said. "I wouldn't call Jackie and me friends, but we get along okay. I wanted a roommate who didn't snore and wasn't messy, and she worked out that way." Les paused. "At least with you, I know for sure I'll be sharing with someone who doesn't snore."

"That's right." Wait a minute . . . "Hey!" She playfully punched Les's arm.

Les chuckled and pulled Mo closer. "I'm looking forward to it," she said, wrapping her arms around her.

Mo snuggled against Les. This was more like it.

"It'll be nice, waking up with you every day."

It sure would. So would sharing a bed after lights out.

"We'll be living together! We were under the same roof at the Indoctrination Academy, but that wasn't the same." Les squeezed Mo tighter and kissed the top of her head. "I can't wait!"

"What about the concert? Are you sure you can't go?" Mo said, caught up in Les's excitement. She instantly regretted it; doubly so when Les stiffened.

Les let go of Mo and dropped her arms to her sides. "I can't."

"I know you'd have to miss group, but it's only one night."

"Haven't you been listening? I've already agreed to share a room. I can't do anything more right now." Les turned away and straightened the pile of notes on her nightstand.

"You really think missing group for one night will matter?"

"Yes, I do. And not finishing my assignment will matter, too, so I'd better get back to it."

Mo bit her tongue. She had to get out of the room before she exploded. "I'll see you tomorrow, then." Without a backward glance,

she marched from the room and stormed along the corridor.

One night. One flaming night! She'd honestly believed that Les would change her mind, that there was no way she'd miss the concert. She was trying hard to accommodate everything important to Les, so why couldn't Les give up one measly evening and support her for once? Mo shook her head. She was sick of trying to figure it out.

On the way back to her room, she considered what to do with Les's seat. She couldn't give it to one of her siblings, because the others would feel slighted—one of the reasons she'd given the leftover seat to Kary in the first place. Maybe give it to Ben, so he and Kary could sit together? She reached for her comm unit, knowing Kary wasn't in their room, but then shoved her hand into her pocket. She might be a fool and a hopeless, idiotic moron, but she wasn't ready to concede defeat, not yet. Until the auditorium doors closed and the concert began, it wasn't over. Les still had time to change her mind. And if she didn't, Mo would rather see an empty seat than someone in Les's place. Nobody could ever take Les's place.

Lesley shut her room's door with a sigh of relief and set the bag containing her supper on the nightstand. In here, she wouldn't have to listen to someone going on about tonight's concert. In class, in the library, on the paths . . . it seemed like everyone was talking about going. Of course, that wasn't true—the auditorium only held so many. But since all the musicians were first- and second-year students, much of the audience would be as well, and that included just about everyone she knew at the academy. At least she could eat supper in peace, though she'd have to hurry. Dodging everyone between the mess hall and the dormitory had put her behind schedule. She didn't want to be late for group.

As she ate, she thought about Mo. After last night, she'd expected Mo to be angry with her, but Mo had seemed preoccupied, probably with the concert. What would Mo be doing at that moment? She was probably backstage, perhaps squeezing in some last minute practice, or whispering nervously with a fellow musician, the hum of the crowd growing louder as excited family and friends arrived and took their seats. Mo's parents and siblings were probably already there, or rushing from the train station to the auditorium. They'd be at the reception afterward, proud and happy, celebrating with Mo and her friends. And tomorrow, everyone would say what a wonderful time they'd had and how much they looked forward to the next one.

Lesley swallowed the last bit of potato and looked around the room. Suddenly it seemed very quiet and felt very lonely.

Well, she'd be with people soon enough. Time for group. She returned her dirty dishes to the bag, planning to drop them off at the mess hall on the way to the recreation centre. Since both were in the same direction as the auditorium, it would be safe to take the direct route—everyone would assume she was on her way to the concert. She reached for her cloak, then dropped her hand. The recreation centre wasn't far and it was warm outside; she hadn't worn her cloak all day. Instead she cradled the bag against her chest and started to lift her satchel, then stopped as if paralyzed.

What was she doing? Did she honestly think she could skip Mo's concert and everything would remain the same between them? How would she face Mo tomorrow? Would Mo still believe that she cared, that their relationship was important? Tonight was a huge night for Mo. Lesley couldn't miss it, nor did she want to.

She slammed down the satchel, yanked her comm unit from its holder, and punched in a code with her thumb as she hurried out the door. "Heather?" she said, bounding down the stairs two at a time. "It's Lesley. Sorry for the short notice, but I won't be at group tonight."

"Oh." A pause. "Is everything okay? When I ran into you earlier, you were reading Whitner's commentary. I figured you were preparing for tonight."

"I was. But I've decided to go to the concert," she said, too focused on getting to the mess hall to come up with a believable excuse.

"Nobody else has beeped to say they're not coming." Heather said, her tone eloquent with disapproval.

"Sorry. Anyway, I have to go." She'd need both hands to unload the dishes.

"See you next week, then, I guess." The connection went dead. Lesley winced. She'd beep Heather tomorrow, try to smooth things over. Right now, the concert was her first priority.

Approaching the auditorium from the mess hall, she was relieved to see a few Rymellans still waiting in line. She joined the end of the queue and listened to the excited chatter filtering from the lobby, her own anticipation growing.

"Ticket," said the usher when she reached him.

Ticket? Mo had never said anything about tickets! "I don't have one."

He frowned. "You don't need one if you're on the reserved list. What's your name?"

"Lesley Thompson. But I don't know if I'm on the list." While he entered her name into his comm unit, she stared at her feet, despairing. Half an hour ago she hadn't been planning to attend, but

now she'd be crushed if he turned her away.

"Here you are. A friend of Cadet Middleton, right?"

She lifted her head, surprised and grateful that Mo hadn't given her seat away. "Yes."

"Do you know Michael and Susan Middleton and Kary Dixon?"

"Yes, I do."

"They're already here, so look for them. They'll be somewhere in the first four rows. Enjoy the performance."

"Thank you."

The concert would begin in less than five minutes, leaving no time to linger in the lobby and take in the atmosphere. She accepted a program from another usher as she entered the auditorium and scanned those seated near the front as she walked down the aisle. Movement caught her eye—Kary, waving at her from the third row. Lesley smiled and repeatedly murmured "excuse me" as she sidled along the row to the remaining empty seat.

"Glad you could make it," Kary said.

Michael leaned forward and looked at her across Kary. "You cut it a bit close, didn't you?"

Before she could respond, a lieutenant walked onto the stage and motioned for everyone to stand. Lesley held hands with Kary and the man seated to her left. The lieutenant joined the rather rectangular circle formed by those in the first and second rows. He nodded, and everyone present recited, "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 filled the auditorium.

The lieutenant returned to the stage. "Thank you, and welcome. Tonight, you'll be treated to a wonderful variety of pieces by our talented first- and second-year musicians. The concert will run for approximately one and a half hours, after which we hope you'll join us at the reception in the main hall off the lobby. And now, please welcome our musicians."

Still on her feet, Lesley watched in anticipation for Mo to appear, her height allowing her a clear view of the stage's wings. The auditorium thundered with another round of applause as the musicians filed onto the stage and took their places. There she was! Lesley willed Mo to look her way, but Mo's attention seemed to be focused on making it to her seat.

Everyone clapped when the conductor entered. She bowed and waited for the applause to die before introducing the first piece. Lesley only half listened, her eyes on Mo. Now that Mo was safely seated, she was scanning the front rows. Her eyes met Lesley's; slowly, she

smiled. Lesley smiled in return, so widely that her cheeks ached. For a moment, grinning at each other, they were the only two people in the auditorium.

Then a polite round of applause dragged Lesley back to her surroundings. The lights dimmed, Mo's attention shifted to the conductor, and the musicians launched into the piece. Lesley watched Mo play and wondered how she'd ever thought she could miss the concert. She'd earned Heather's disappointment and put Mo before her commitment to group, but she was sure she'd made the right decision. For once she'd trusted what her instincts had screamed at her—and now that she was here, what she fully believed. Going to group would have been a mistake. Tonight she belonged here, with Mo.

Lesley walked down the wide steps that led to the reception hall and picked up a glass of grape juice from one of the refreshment tables. Beside her, Susan surveyed the selection and chose apple juice. "She did great, didn't she, Mama?" Neil said, joining them.

"She certainly did."

"When she told us she was taking violin lessons, I thought it would be a passing fancy," Michael said, selecting his own glass of juice. "But now she's talking about auditioning for the student orchestra."

"If it accepts her, she'll play at other academies," Lesley said, dismayed but not surprised that this was the first she'd heard of Mo's interest in the orchestra. Now that they wouldn't have to avoid everything related to Mo's violin, she couldn't wait to ask her about it, and to tell her how she'd sat enraptured throughout the concert, her ear to the violins and her heart bursting with pride.

They moved away from the table to make room for others.

". . . looked petrified when he walked onstage," a familiar voice was saying nearby. David. "I thought he was going to faint."

"He was okay once he sat down," Bruce said. "Oh, look who's here," he added as Lesley and the Middletons joined the circle.

"You must be proud of Mo," David said. "She looked totally at ease up there."

"The duet was beautiful," Beth, a fellow first-year student, said. "I think that was my favourite part of the concert."

Susan's face lit up. "When she first started, I was so nervous for her, I couldn't enjoy it. But once I settled down, all I could think was, 'That's my daughter up there!'"

Lesley grinned, remembering how she'd listened in awe, mesmerized by the movement of Mo's bow. And to be here now,

reliving the experience with others . . . hearing about it tomorrow, second-hand, would have been a poor substitute. She couldn't remember the last time she'd smiled so much or felt so relaxed—her inner struggle around how to please everyone seemed to have called a truce for the evening. Perhaps she should trust her instincts more often.

Kary squeezed herself between David and Bruce; Ben hovered behind her, his hand on her shoulder. "When they got to that tricky part in the middle, I was holding my breath. I knew she was worried about it," she said.

"She played it flawlessly," Lesley said, gesturing in Kary's direction with her glass. "And she—"

"Cadet Thompson!" a voice cracked behind her.

She turned. Her fingers tightened around the glass. Commander Morton stopped in front of her. "What are *you* doing here?"

Lesley tried to speak, but her mouth wouldn't move.

"Doesn't the Chosen Tradition group meet tonight?"

She nodded. Those around her fell silent.

"Then I'll ask you again, *what* are you doing here?"

"Um . . ."

"I assume she came for the concert, like everyone else," came an answer from her right in a low, feminine voice. Lesley's heart sank when she placed it: Commander Finney.

Morton's jaw tightened. "I'd like an answer from the cadet."

"Why don't we ask her privately?" Finney said.

He looked past Lesley's right shoulder. "This doesn't concern you."

"This cadet is from my sector. It concerns me."

Morton continued to gaze over Lesley's shoulder for several seconds. Then he looked away. "Very well. Follow me." He whirled.

"Hold onto my drink. I'll be back in a few minutes," Finney murmured to someone, at the same time Susan lifted the glass from Lesley's hand.

Lesley willed herself to move, keeping her eyes on Morton's back and aware of Finney walking behind her. Shame flooded through her. She couldn't feel more mortified, having two commanders march her out of the reception in front of the Middletons, her friends, and many of her classmates. She'd ruined the entire evening, not only for herself, but for Mo. Now everyone would talk about the cadet in trouble, not the wonderful performances.

Morton ushered them into a small office near the auditorium's entrance, startling the Rymellan sitting at the desk. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Out!" The wide-eyed woman scurried from the room.

"What has she done that's so terrible that you had to make a public spectacle of her?" Finney asked after he'd shut the door.

He jabbed his finger at Lesley. "This cadet belongs to a group that studies the Chosen Tradition. She skipped its weekly meeting to come to this concert."

"That's it?"

"What do you mean, that's it?"

Finney shrugged. "I'm sure whatever article they're studying tonight will come up again."

"That isn't the point. And it's not the only reason I'm upset." He pulled his comm unit from its holder and tapped its buttons. "File 3432976, Academy Section."

Finney yanked out her comm unit, presumably to pull up the file. "I still don't see the problem," she said a minute later.

"Would it help if I told you that Cadet Middleton was one of the performers tonight?"

"No, it wouldn't," Finney replied.

"No wonder the admiral has you babysitting C3. Speaking of which, don't you think you should be getting back?" Morton examined the floor around his feet. "Someone might have dropped a piece of litter while you've been here."

Up to that point, Lesley had avoided looking directly at either commander, but now she couldn't help glancing at Finney.

Finney's face was a blank slate. "Cadet Thompson is nineteen. Don't you remember what it was like when you were a student at the academy? Everyone paired up and shared rooms."

Morton's face reddened. "I don't care what everyone was doing or is doing. I care about what *this* cadet is doing. Every year, we handpick a few cadets we think will go all the way. Those we think are different from the rest. Those who hold themselves to a higher standard. Those who don't toss aside commitments without any thought. Those who minimize unnecessary distractions, especially ones that won't lead anywhere. This cadet is on that list, and that makes her behaviour unacceptable."

"I know about the list. But—"

"Then I shouldn't have to explain everything to you." He shifted his attention to Lesley. "You know Heather, the leader of the Chosen Tradition group?"

Lesley nodded.

"She's being mentored. Did you see her at the concert tonight?"

"No."

"Did you see her deciding that she didn't have to bother with group?"

"No."

"You chose to skip group because of Cadet Middleton, didn't you?"

"Yes," Lesley said without hesitation.

"You chose Cadet Middleton over your commitment to the group."

"Yes."

Morton's eyes bored into her. "I'm extremely disappointed with your display of poor judgment. But I'm willing to give you one chance to get your priorities in order. You can start by rescinding the room request and making sure that you attend all of this year's remaining group meetings." He paused to draw breath. "I have a meeting with Lieutenant Commander Larson on Thursday to discuss the possibility of mentoring you. He's a busy man. He'll want some assurance that his time will be well invested, and he may not feel that way when he hears about this. What should I tell him that'll ease any doubts he has about you? What can you tell me that'll ease my doubts?"

Lesley scrambled for something to say in her own defence. But all that ran through her mind was how sure she was that her decision to attend the concert, to be there for Mo, had been right. If arranging her priorities to match Morton's expectations meant turning her back on Mo and others she cared about, she couldn't do it. If that meant she was weak in the Way, then she was; and if that meant she'd serve her career out as an ensign, so be it. She'd rather wear an ensign's insignia and be at peace with herself than wear an admiral's and cringe at her reflection in the mirror. "Nothing," she said, her voice stronger than she'd expected, given that she was about to jeopardize her future. "You misjudged me."

Shock crossed his face, shock he quickly masked. "Well, then. I'll remove you from the list. One less cadet I have to worry about."

"Removing her from the list would be a mistake," Finney said.

Lesley looked at her in surprise.

"Oh, would it?" Morton said. "Even she thinks I've misjudged her. You don't?"

"No, I agree with her," Finney said, to Lesley's dismay. "But I don't think you should remove her from the list."

"I'm not going to waste my time trying to convince Larson or anyone else to mentor her when even she doesn't think she deserves a mentor."

"Just have them read her file."

"Finney, not all of us have time to lounge around reading files," Morton said, rolling his eyes. "These are busy people, unlike some I could mention."

Finney inhaled deeply and took her time exhaling. "I assume they'll take the time to read the file of anyone they're considering. If

they don't, they're not worth having as mentors."

Morton barked a laugh. "If you're such an expert on mentoring, why don't you mentor her? After all, you're the one who thinks it's a mistake to remove her from the list."

"You know, that's not a bad idea. I think I will."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Yes, I am. I'll mentor her. It'll allow me to keep an eye on the situation."

Morton shook his head. "No. Perhaps I was a little hasty about taking her off the list. I let my disappointment get the better of me." He turned to Lesley. "And I can understand why you think I may have misjudged you, Cadet. You're young, and you might find the sacrifices we'll require of you difficult to make. That's why you need a mentor. If you'd already had one, I'm sure your lapses in judgement would have been avoided. With Lieutenant Commander Larson advising you on all your future decisions, we can avoid a repeat of tonight. I'll soothe over any misgivings he might have."

"Why can't I mentor her?" Finney asked. "I thought she could request anyone."

"She can. She requested Lieutenant Commander Larson."

"And now I'm putting my name forward for consideration. Since you haven't talked to Larson yet, it's not too late."

Morton glared at Finney and folded his arms. "I guess it's up to the cadet, then. So, Cadet, do you want to stick with Lieutenant Commander Larson, or take Commander Finney up on her offer to mentor you?"

They both stared at her. Lesley forced herself to look back at them. Who to favour: the commander of her sector, who could oversee C3 for years, or the commander of the Military Academy, who probably held her future in the palm of his hand? Both choices could have dire consequences, and that annoyed her. Did either of them have her best interests in mind, or were they using her to spite each other?

Morton, despite his backtracking, had doubts about her. Well-founded doubts, since she knew that she couldn't meet his expectations and didn't want to. He'd only changed his mind about keeping her on the list to prevent Finney from becoming her mentor. As for Finney, did she honestly intend to act as a mentor, or had she only offered in the heat of the moment? And why had she insisted that Lesley stay on the list, when she'd agreed that Morton had misjudged her? Was it just a way of getting at Morton? At first Lesley had been grateful to Finney for defending her, but now she wondered if Finney would have done so if Morton wasn't involved.

She couldn't be sure of their motives, so she'd have to assume that they both wanted to help. Her instincts were telling her to go with

Finney, but they were the same instincts that had landed her in this mess in the first place. Going with Morton wouldn't make sense, though. Two minutes ago he'd been more than ready to remove her from the list, and his priorities weren't her priorities. Plus he'd referred to Mo as a distraction, dismissing her as if she were nothing. Just for that, she'd prefer to deal with him as little as possible.

Finney it was, then, though she hoped she wasn't about to saddle herself with an incompetent mentor. The military at home had spoken highly of Finney, but Morton, who'd have more information, didn't seem impressed. Still, Finney's interest, if sincere, could prevent Morton from sabotaging Lesley's future. She took a deep breath. "I accept Commander Finney's offer."

"Good," Finney said as Morton scowled at Lesley. "And since I'll be mentoring her, I decide if she stays on the list or should be removed. If you have a problem with her, talk to me."

"Oh, don't worry," Morton said, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'll make sure that everyone knows you're responsible for this cadet."

"I'm sure you have a plan prepared for her second year. I'd like to see it."

Morton whipped out his comm unit and pressed several buttons. "I just dispatched it to you. But I'm responsible for reporting to our superiors about the list, so I expect regular progress reports from you."

"Of course," Finney murmured.

"Apart from that, you're on your own. So I'll let you decide where the cadet goes when she leaves this room. If it were up to me, I wouldn't reward her by sending her back to the reception, but I'll leave it up to you. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to continue with my evening. Good night." He nodded to Finney and strode from the room.

Feeling awkward, Lesley faced Finney. "I'll look over his plan and be in touch to set up a time to meet," Finney told her.

"Is there anything you'd like me to do right now?" Lesley asked, sure that Finney wouldn't tell her to rescind the room request, but asking just in case.

"No." She paused. "It would be prudent for you to return to your room."

"Yes, Commander. And thank you."

Finney nodded. "Dismissed."

Lesley walked as fast as she could, glad that she didn't have to pass through the reception hall to exit the auditorium. She wouldn't think about what had just happened, not until she was in the safety of her room.

Ten minutes later, she shut the room's door behind her. The

satchel lying on the dresser reminded her of how she'd raced out earlier, determined to make the concert. At the time, she'd had a bright future with the military. How quickly life could change.

All she'd wanted to do was be there for Mo. Other cadets had attended to support their friends, so why hadn't they been publicly dressed-down and escorted from the reception? Because they weren't on that flaming list, that was why. No, that wasn't it. They hadn't tried to be someone they weren't. Perhaps Mama was right. She wasn't cut out for this.

No! She'd never doubted her dedication to the Way, or her willingness to serve, until she'd known for sure that she and Mo had Chosens. Before then, she'd always been confident in her strength in the Way, even though she hadn't spent every free moment participating in activities with an obvious connection to it. But when she'd known for sure that she and Mo had Chosens, and had still wanted to be with Mo, had still cared for her so much . . . Her feelings for Mo weren't logical; trying to think her way out of them wouldn't work—that had led her to doubt herself and her instincts.

She'd do what the indoctrinators had always advised on the rare occasions when she'd struggled: go back to basics. Realign with the articles. Worry only about not violating them, not about deeper issues, like caring for someone so much that the thought of losing her was terrifying. She'd follow the articles without analyzing them and, once she'd regained her equilibrium, face the problem. If she'd done that in the first place, instead of panicking and trying to prove that she was strong in the Way and that her relationship with Mo didn't matter, Morton might have forgotten about her and tonight wouldn't have happened. Instead, she'd given him the wrong impression about what she believed it meant to be strong in the Way.

Hiding behind the Way, using it as an excuse to treat Mo badly, was about as weak in the Way as one could get. She wouldn't make that mistake again. No matter how her schedule turned out next year, her priority would be to make Mo feel special. No more squandering their time—they'd run out of it soon enough without wasting it themselves. If they were still together in a few years, she'd have to face her fears, but for next year, at least, she'd go back to basics, regain her equilibrium, and breathe.

Someone knocked at the door. "Just a second," she called, but the door opened before she reached it.

Mo rushed into the room, worry etched across her face. Without a word, she reached for Lesley and hugged her. Lesley wrapped her arms around Mo and rested her cheek on the top of Mo's head.

"I got here as soon as I could," Mo said. "Are you okay?"

Actually, she was. Tired, apprehensive about facing everyone the

next day and unsure about her future, but okay, especially now that Mo was here. "I'm all right. I guess the entire reception's buzzing about it?"

She felt Mo nod. "I walked everyone to the station, then came straight here."

Lesley sighed; she'd forgotten about them. "I'll expect a beep from Mama tomorrow."

"They won't say anything. They thought Morton was horrible, putting you on the spot like that in front of everyone. If I'd been there, I would have said something."

"Then I'm glad you weren't there."

She lifted her head when Mo drew back. "What happened?" Mo asked. "I mean, I heard about what happened in the reception hall, but what happened after you left?"

"Well, Morton was upset that I skipped group for the concert." She'd leave out the part about the room request; Mo didn't need to know about it, or that their relationship had caught Morton's attention. Or maybe Mo should know—she had the right to decide whether she wanted to stay together and possibly risk her future. "Finney stuck up for me, so much so that she's now my mentor."

"Finney's going to be your mentor, instead of Larson?"

"If she's serious about it, yes. I know that's disappointing. He's an active pilot, she's in Interior and not part of the academy."

"You had no choice."

"No, I had the choice. I chose Finney."

Mo's brow furrowed. "Why?"

Lesley considered the question. At the time, her choice had been more against Morton than for Finney, but now she realized that something else had influenced her decision. "I trust her more than I trust Morton. I suspect Morton's suggested mentors are all loyal to him, so as far as I'm concerned, dealing with them is the same as dealing with him." Especially since he'd given her the impression that she had to choose a mentor from his short list, when apparently she could have requested anyone.

"Okay, so we don't get inside information on the pilot program, but you get a commander for a mentor. That kind of worked out, right?"

She wouldn't call being caught between two commanders working out, but she nodded. "There's something I need to tell you, though."

"What?"

Suddenly overcome with weariness, Lesley backed toward the bed and sat down.

"What?" Mo asked again, softer. She reached out and stroked

Lesley's cheek.

Lesley looked up at her. "Morton isn't happy about our relationship. Finney didn't seem to care, but he made it clear that he'd be much happier if we weren't together."

Mo's face fell. "Les, don't do this. I know you're going to be busy, and I'll keep myself busy. I'll stay out of your way, I promise."

"No, no, no," she said, grabbing both of Mo's hands and hanging onto them. "I don't want to break up. I'm telling you in case—well, in case you'll want to split. Staying with me could hurt you." Lesley hoped it hadn't already. She could forgive herself for losing her way over the past few months, but she'd never forgive herself if she'd damaged Mo's future.

"You're worried about me?" Mo said incredulously. "I'm not going anywhere. And you'd think Morton would have more important things to worry about than two junior cadets seeing each other. Is he Joined? Because if he is, I pity his Chosen."

Lesley chuckled. "I don't think so. I don't remember a Chosen ring."

"Well, good for the Chosen Council."

"But he is the commander of the Military Academy, so he has a lot of clout. He could influence whether we're accepted into the fighter pilot program, and who knows what else. He's not impressed with me right now. Perhaps he'll limit his disappointment to me. Perhaps not."

"Les, I'm sorry," Mo said quietly. "You told me what could happen, but I kept pressuring you—to come to the concert, to share a room, to spend more time with me. I should have listened."

"I'm glad you didn't. Because I wasn't saying what I wanted to say, but what I thought I should say, and I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm glad we're sharing a room, and I wanted to go to the concert." She took Mo's face in her hands. "And by the way, you were brilliant. I'm so proud of you. I don't regret going for a second."

Mo's eyes glistened. "That's good," she said, her voice quivering. "Because when I was onstage looking for you, and I saw you were there . . ." Her lips trembled. "I'll remember that moment for the rest of my life."

Lesley's eyes filled. She closed them and touched her forehead to Mo's. In her mind, she saw herself at the lake, one of her daughters at her side. "*Mama, before you were Joined, was there anyone special?*" Yes, she'd say, and tell her daughter about the woman with the dark brown eyes and lopsided smile; the woman she instantly thought of whenever she heard a violin.