

# Shattered Lives

by Sarah Ettritch

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Lesley stared at her comm station's screen in dismay. She'd managed three paragraphs in two hours. The case wasn't complex; any other day she'd have already finished writing the military's opinion and sent it to the presiding overseer. But today wasn't just any day.

Someone knocked at the door and opened it without waiting for an invitation to enter. Laura strode into the office, shutting the door behind her. "Do you have time to investigate a tip we just received?" she asked as she sank into one of the guest chairs and crossed her legs.

"Yes, I do." Lesley turned away from the comm station. "I don't seem to be getting anywhere with this opinion."

"I'm surprised you agreed to write it. Isn't Mo coming back today?"

"Yes." The *Falcon* had docked with Space Station 72 an hour and five minutes ago, to be exact. Mo would soon be sitting in a conference room at the shuttle base. Would one of the couriers call her name? Lesley swallowed and tried to focus on the conversation.

"If you'd asked me to, I would have told Blair you were busy."

Lesley couldn't blame Laura for doubting her. The first time Mo had returned to Rymel after their separation, Lesley had agreed to write an opinion, wanting to keep herself occupied. What a mistake! She'd almost missed the deadline, and reading the opinion now would probably horrify her.

"You said you'd never try to write an opinion when Mo was on leave again. I remember it clearly. You said Interior supply patrols, yes, Defence supply patrols, yes, investigate tips, yes, opinions, no." Laura ticked off each point on her fingers.

"I have almost a month to write this one, and it's straightforward."

Laura raised an eyebrow. "And you decided to start it today?"

Lesley sighed. "I know, bad idea." By now she should have accepted that her brain stopped functioning when Mo returned and only started working again when she left. At least that had been the case for Mo's past two leaves, and it looked as if her third would have the same effect. Three tours . . . almost two years . . . "I don't know if I want her to get her Papers today or not. Part of me wants to stop living in limbo."

"And the other part?"

Lesley hesitated, but only for a second. "The other part doesn't want it to be over." Two years ago she never would have been that honest with Laura. But somewhere along the way, they'd become friends, despite the almost twenty-year difference between them. Lesley had grown so close to the Finney family that she'd stayed with them the last time Mo was on leave. Mo had bunked at the Military Academy over her first leave and, as far as Lesley knew, would do the same for this one. According to Michael, she couldn't stay on the Middleton estate, not with Lesley so close. Wanting to be fair, Lesley had told Michael that they'd alternate, that she'd stay at the

Military Academy the next time. But Laura's invitation had changed her plans. *You can use my son's room—he's at the Indoctrination Academy. And no, I'm not offering so I can keep my eye on you. I know I can trust you.* The sentiment was mutual, hence her honesty. "I do know it's over, but I guess I won't fully accept it until the Chosen Council makes it official."

"You're twenty-seven now. That's the average age for Papers, so you might get them soon, before Mo does."

Ideally she would, and while Mo was on tour. The notification party, the fuss, the "celebration," it would all be over by the time Mo returned. Lesley had decided that she wouldn't live on the Thompson estate, even if she were the Principal. It wouldn't be fair to Mo and their Chosens and would be a disaster in the making.

Laura uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. "I know this doesn't mean much, but you're doing all right, and she's doing all right. Life did go on."

Perhaps, but it had lost its spark. Yes, she could become absorbed in writing an opinion or forget for an hour while she investigated a tip, but the ache was always there. She thought of Mo first thing in the morning, when she closed her eyes at night, and numerous times throughout the day. So many reminders . . . something would catch her eye or ear, and the ache would flare into an unbearable pain. She was trying to keep an open mind about building a life with her Chosen, but that life would be one gigantic lie. Lesley had learned that she could exist without Mo, but couldn't live without her.

But enough with the self-pity; it wouldn't change anything. "Life did go on and I have a tip to investigate," she said to steer the conversation away from Mo, though she knew she wasn't fooling Laura. "What is it, exactly?"

Laura played along. "A counsellor sent us a dispatch. Apparently she's received a fair number of new clients lately, all coming from the same counsellor, who's Joined."

Lesley waited for more, then said, "That's it?"

"Well, we do prefer that everyone err on the side of contacting us," Laura said. "And I doubt anything can top the one I investigated last week."

Lesley chuckled.

"How much time do we spend at the Indoctrination Academy role-playing all sorts of scenarios?" Laura stood. "Months! And people still don't understand what's considered flirting under CT21. I rushed all the way to A3 because someone said, 'I like the colour of your shirt.'"

Lesley chuckled again. The dispatch had made it sound as if two Rymellans had been caught in the act.

"But better that than someone turning a blind eye." Laura blew out some air, then pulled out her comm unit and tapped at its keys. "I've just sent you the dispatch."

Lesley turned back to her comm station and skimmed the missive. Sector B4. She flicked off the monitor and rolled back her chair. "I'm on my way." With luck, investigating the tip would distract her for an hour or two. She'd already arranged to spend the evening with Karen, William, and her new nephew, Richard, and would be busy with supply assignments over the next three weeks. So perhaps she'd already weathered the toughest day and the rest of Mo's leave would be easier to bear.

As she reached for her cloak, the ache that dogged her every moment mocked her.

Mo clapped for the officer waving an envelope in the air and stared at the single remaining courier. *Please, please, let him call my name.* He stepped up to the microphone and peered at the envelope in his hand. "Lieutenant Steven Hughes." An officer three rows in front of her leaped to his feet and bounded down the aisle. She clapped again and blinked back tears.

"Thank you, everyone, and congratulations to all who received their Papers today," said the lieutenant who'd opened the meeting. "Dismissed."

She remained seated while everyone ripped open envelopes or rose to leave the room. To whom did she have to beg to receive her Papers? She'd get down on her knees in front of them, if that was what it took. She didn't know how she'd bear another six months without Les. Sure, she could still get her Papers before she left for her next tour, but the chances of that were slim. Of course, Les could get hers anytime. No, she couldn't; not if they were Chosens, and they were. So why hadn't they received their Papers? Les was already twenty-seven, and Mo would be soon. What was the delay? They could have had a daughter by now, instead of sitting around waiting for life to resume. Wasn't that the point, to have children strong in the Way? So where were their flaming Papers? Where were they?

"Enjoy your leave, Mo," someone shouted from the aisle as he rushed by.

"Yeah, you too," she said with a wave, though she hadn't the faintest clue who'd shouted.

Another wonderful flaming leave—three weeks of resisting the urge to beep Les, of knowing that she was so tantalizingly close, yet out of reach. Deflated, Mo collected her bag and cloak from the back of the room and headed to the shuttle base's holding area. Time to rally herself.

The engineer working on the craft parked next to hers gave her a smile. "Welcome back, Lieutenant Commander. The craft's in tip-top shape. I ran all the diagnostics myself."

Mo forced a smile and nodded to him. "Thank you, Sub-lieutenant."

She hoisted herself into the craft, stowed her bag in a cargo container, and slipped into the pilot's seat.

Half an hour later, she dumped the bag on the floor of her assigned room at the Military Academy's faculty residence. So many memories had stirred as she'd walked from her craft to the residence, but many more would flood her if she were on the estate. Les had thoughtfully stayed elsewhere last time, but where had she stayed? Papa had originally said that Les would stay at the Military Academy, but then Les had stayed with "a friend." What friend? Papa had claimed he didn't know who it was, that Adelaide hadn't been specific. Had he been protecting her?

She sat on the end of the bed with a sigh and picked at her fingernails. Wondering about Les, what she was doing, if she still cared, if she was involved with someone—Mo would only drive herself crazy, thinking that way. They were still together, she reminded herself. Though did Les still believe that, or had she moved on, discovered that life without Mo wasn't so bad after all? Not knowing was the most difficult part, followed closely by the wasted time they'd never get back—birthdays, festivals, family events, just being there for each other. She had no idea how Les had settled into Interior, whether she loved it or hated it. Was she still playing her flute and writing music? Did she look the same?

A couple of months ago, Mo had awakened in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, relieved that it had only been a nightmare. She'd been searching for Les, asking people on the *Falcon*, on the train, everywhere, "Are you Les? Are you Les?" That was her fear—that Les had changed, that she wouldn't recognize her, that they could walk past each other and not realize it.

Her heart pounded. She abandoned the bed for the desk and punched Papa's comm code into the station. "It's me, Papa," she said as soon as he answered.

"Mo! Welcome back. It's so good to hear your voice."

She smiled.

"So?"

Her smile faded. "No."

"No? Oh, I'm sorry. I know how much you wanted them to be ready."

"They'll be ready next time," she said, sounding more optimistic than she felt. "Les hasn't received hers, has she?" They'd promised to tell each other, but did Les still intend to honour that promise?

"No, she hasn't. I would have told you if she had."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Papa said indignantly. "Not only would the Thompsons tell me, but I do read the weekly announcements, especially the C3 section. You must get those on the *Falcon*."

She didn't read them. She was supposed to, so she'd know who was

off limits. The lack of a Chosen ring didn't mean someone was fair game. Chosens were bound to each other the moment they met at their notification meetings, but didn't receive rings until their Joining Ceremonies. But she wasn't interested in dating anyone, and the conversations on the first day of a tour always revolved around who'd received Papers. It wasn't difficult to keep up when someone's status could only change when on leave.

Plus, she dreaded seeing Les's name on the list. She wanted to hear it from Les herself, or, if Les had forgotten about their promise, from someone like Papa. She didn't want to find out about it as a stranger would; she deserved better than that. "I just wanted to double-check," she said to Papa.

"So when am I going to see you?" he asked. "Do you have to stay at the Military Academy? Why don't you come home?"

"Papa, we've been through this. I can't come home, not with Les so close by."

"Even after all this time?"

Her eyes welled. "Even after all this time," she said faintly.

Silence, then, "Okay, so when can I see you? Tell me and I'll clear my schedule."

She brushed away a tear. "Well, I'm having supper with one of my old instructors tonight. And tomorrow I'm spending the day with a friend. I'm free after that."

"Spending the day with a friend, are you?"

She could hear the curiosity in his voice. "Not that type of friend." In fact, friend was pushing it. Argamon, she wished she wasn't so desperate to fill her time! "How about the day after tomorrow?"

"Done! Where should we meet? Oh, Nathan will probably come with me. And Andrew. And Barbara said—"

"I'm here for three weeks, you know," Mo said, brightening.

Papa laughed. "We're all eager to see you."

Her throat tightened. She looked forward to seeing them, too. If not for her family . . .

"Why don't we meet in C4 for lunch and then decide what to do from there?" Papa suggested. "A new eatery opened last week. One of my clients has been raving about it. I'll make a reservation and send you the details."

"Yeah, okay."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Me too." She paused. "Papa?"

"What?"

No, she'd promised herself she wouldn't ask if he'd seen Les, or about anything related to her. Whatever he said, no matter how mundane, would only remind her that she was no longer a part of Les's life. "Nothing. I'll see you Sunday."

"All right. See you then." He terminated the connection.

She sighed and stared at the keyboard. Her fingers twitched. Les was six keystrokes away. Six keystrokes! But not for her. What was Les doing right now? Had Les thought about her today? Did she know how close they were, that the *Falcon* had returned? Or was she too busy running around for Finney?

Mo's hands clenched. How could Les stand working with that woman? Finney better be ready with one big, fat, flaming apology when their Papers arrived. Mo would almost be inclined to move away from C3, so they could get away from her. But why should they let Finney continue to control their lives? Les would probably transfer back to Defence, and someone would eventually replace Finney. They'd be rid of her, and none too soon.

She drew a deep breath and glanced at the time. Still an hour until she met Ross. She'd unpack, keep her hands busy. Those six keystrokes were awfully tempting.

Lesley entered notes into her comm unit as she waited for Janet Tyson to arrive. Ten minutes ago, the accounting office's receptionist had led her to this meeting room, invited her to sit, and assured her that Tyson would join her shortly. Lesley had grown accustomed to waiting for interviewees. Being summoned for an interview by an Interior officer often had Rymellans running to the bathroom or breathing into a paper bag to calm themselves. She'd learned to take advantage of the time to expand on her notes.

She stopped typing and read over her notes regarding the interviews she'd conducted so far: *Counsellor Abrams became concerned when she noticed that three of her new clients within the past month had switched to her from Counsellor Owen. According to Abrams, it's unusual to receive that many new clients from the same counsellor within that period of time. When Abrams asked the clients why they'd switched, she received typical responses (counsellor wasn't helping, didn't feel comfortable with the counsellor), but decided to report the anomaly regardless. Owen is Joined and all the new clients are female (I checked his file and he's diff-oriented). Abrams doesn't know Owen personally and hasn't heard anything bad about him professionally. She also pointed out that some clients go from counsellor to counsellor until they find one that tells them what they want to hear.*

*After interviewing Abrams, I decided that the case warranted further investigation. I interviewed Cynthia Hubert, one of the three clients who switched from Owen to Abrams. Hubert said she transferred because she didn't feel comfortable with Owen. When I pressed her further, she told me that her first few sessions with Owen were fine, but then he started to ask her about her sexual experiences, even though the matter for which she was*

*seeing him (anxiety regarding public speaking) had nothing to do with her sex life. Since Owen quickly backed down on both occasions when Hubert told him she didn't want to answer the questions, and the context was a counselling session, he didn't violate Article CT84. However, since the questions were unrelated to Hubert's problem, I decided to pursue the case further and interview the other two clients.*

So here she sat, waiting for Tyson. Although Owen's behaviour disturbed her, it wasn't a Chosen Violation or a violation of the Law. And she'd only heard Hubert's side of the story. Hubert may not have been seeing Owen for a sexual problem, but she may have said something that triggered his questions. Still, when Lesley reported her findings to Laura, she'd recommend that they refer the case to a military counsellor. He or she could decide whether to report Owen to the organization that licensed and oversaw counsellors.

A woman hovered in the doorway. Lesley rose. "Janet Tyson?" Tyson nodded, her eyes avoiding Lesley's. "Come in and sit down, please."

As Lesley shut the door and returned to her seat, Tyson crossed her legs, then uncrossed them and smoothed her long skirt. She cleared her throat.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Thompson. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your former counsellor." Tyson's head bobbed. "You were seeing Counsellor Owen, but you recently switched to Counsellor Abrams, correct?"

"Yes."

"Why did you switch?"

Tyson stared at Lesley and clenched her hands in her lap. "Did I do something wrong by switching? Was I supposed to inform someone? I didn't know. Was it a recent amendment?"

"No, you didn't do anything wrong."

"I keep up with all the amendments."

"I'm sure you do. You didn't do anything wrong. I'd like to know why you switched counsellors, that's all."

"Oh." Tyson relaxed slightly. "Well, I don't know. I, um . . . well, it's going to sound silly. I should have handled it better."

"Handled what better?" Lesley asked, keeping her voice even.

Tyson unfolded her hands and started to pick lint off her skirt. "I went to see him because I wasn't feeling that great about myself. My boyfriend had dumped me, I'd auditioned for a part in the festival play but didn't get it, the Animal Commission turned down my request for a dog because of my work hours . . ." She sighed. "Nothing was going my way. I needed to talk to someone. I don't know . . ."

"So you went to see Counsellor Owen," Lesley prompted.

"Yes, and he seemed genuinely interested. He was very kind. He

listened to me, helped me see a few things about myself and suggested how to work on them." She met Lesley's eyes. "I really trusted him, felt as if I could tell him anything. But then . . ."

"What happened?"

"I'd become involved with someone new. We had an argument and said things we probably shouldn't have. I was devastated, in tears. I beeped Counsellor Owen to see if he could fit me in and then went to see him." She placed her hand against her chest and shook her head. "I felt as if all the progress I'd made had been wiped out."

"Did Counsellor Owen help?" Lesley didn't want to rush Tyson, but hoped she'd get to the point.

"Well, he could see my self-esteem was crushed." Tyson rolled her eyes. "Again. I felt terrible. He told me he could make me feel better using touch therapy."

"Touch therapy?" Lesley said, masking her shock.

Tyson nodded. "I asked him what it was, and he said that the human touch can have a powerful transformational effect. Touch therapy involves touching certain points on the body, called conductors. Touching them infuses the body with positive energy and raises self-esteem."

Lesley couldn't believe what she was hearing. If Tyson's account was accurate . . . A knot formed in the pit of her stomach. "And did he perform this, uh, touch therapy?"

"No," Tyson said, shaking her head. "He told me to lie down on the couch, but I balked, said I didn't have time and had to leave right away. I rushed out of his office without so much as a good-bye."

"Why didn't you contact us?"

Tyson's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You weren't alarmed that a Joined Chosen wanted to touch you?"

"Physicians touch me," Tyson replied.

"Physicians are covered under CT48."

"So are counsellors."

"Not for physical contact." And touch therapy definitely wasn't on the list of exemptions listed in the article. CT48 did have a discretionary aspect to it, but Lesley was certain that "touch therapy" wouldn't pass scrutiny. However, she still couldn't accept that Owen may have committed a Chosen Violation. Again, she was only getting one side of the story. Tyson could be exaggerating what had happened, or perhaps she'd misinterpreted; she struck Lesley as being overly sensitive and excitable. "If you weren't alarmed, why did you run out of the office?"

"Because I felt horrible," Tyson said, looking at her as if she were a moron. "The last thing I wanted was someone touching me. And then afterward I felt so stupid about the way I'd reacted. I should have just explained why I ran out, but I was so embarrassed, I couldn't face him. So I

decided to see Abrams. A friend recommended her."

"Did Owen contact you after your last session with him?"

"No."

The knot in Lesley's stomach tightened. If Owen's motives had been innocent—if this touch therapy was actually legitimate and she just wasn't aware of it—surely he'd have wanted to know why Tyson had run out and not returned. Any decent counsellor would have followed up.

She'd heard enough. "Thank you," she said, standing to indicate the interview was over. "That's all for now, but we may need to speak to you again." Laura would probably want to bring Tyson in for a chat. Did Tyson realize how close she'd come to an execution site? What a stupid woman! If she hadn't left Owen's office, had agreed to . . . Lesley couldn't bear to think of it. She still clung to the hope that Tyson had spun her an exaggerated yarn.

"So . . . we're done?" Tyson asked.

"Yes, we're done."

Tyson beamed and rose from the chair. "Thank you, er, Lieutenant Commander. Thank you."

Lesley nodded to her. "Good day."

Back in her aviacraft, Lesley sat in the pilot's seat, staring out the window. If Tyson's version of events was accurate, they could be looking at an actual Chosen Violation. She struggled to comprehend it—there hadn't been a Chosen Violation since the Adams Incident thirteen years ago. At least the current situation was nowhere near as bad as that. Her appreciation deepened for how the Interior investigators assigned to the Adams case must have felt. How awful it would have been as they uncovered the horrors the Adamses had committed, discovering yet another violation each time they peeled away a layer of the sordid mess! Both Chosens involved, in addition to two Solitaries—madness. Hearing the name "Adams" always sent a small shock through her. Thinking about them wasn't pleasant, either. Monsters!

She pushed them from her mind and refocused on the investigation. Before she beeped Laura to sound the alarm, she'd better be sure. Was touch therapy legitimate? A military counsellor would know. She typed Lieutenant Kay Woods' comm code into the craft's comm panel.

"Woods," the counsellor answered. "How are you, Lesley?"

"I'm all right. I have a question for you."

"Sure."

"Have you heard of touch therapy?"

"Touch therapy?"

"Yes. A technique counsellors use. Something to do with touching conductor points on the body to raise self-esteem."

Kay laughed. "Is this a joke?"

"No, it's not."

"Well, I can tell you that nothing we do involves touching the client. Ever. Where did you hear about it?"

"It came up during an investigation."

"Oh." Then, "*Oh. Argamon.*"

"Keep this to yourself, okay?"

"I will," Woods assured her.

"Thank you. Thompson out." She terminated the connection, signed into Interior's network, and punched in the code that identified her as a member of the Chosen Tradition investigative group. Now she could access counselling records. Counsellors had to keep detailed client lists that included everyone they'd seen in the past two years. Had other women recently left Owen for another counsellor, or were the three Lesley knew about the only ones?

She entered the appropriate search parameters. The resulting list contained six names; three other women had recently switched from Owen to other counsellors. A quick perusal of their records brought two interesting points to light: all six women were in their twenties and Solitaries. Perhaps Owen had thought that Solitaries would be less likely to resist him. Had any of the women not resisted him? Her skin crawled. She wished Mo was still on tour, safely away from a potential catastrophe.

Mo. She hadn't beeped, but that didn't mean she hadn't received Papers. She could be busy with her family or had forgotten about their promise. Or perhaps she no longer cared . . . Lesley shook herself and again focused on the list.

The remaining four women would have to be interviewed, to see if any had stories similar to Tyson's. It was time to beep Laura—she'd want to involve other members of the group to speed up the investigation. Lesley braced herself as she typed in Laura's code. She was about to give her the worst possible news, though there was still a slim shred of hope that Tyson's story was the work of a depraved imagination.

"Finney."

Lesley drew a deep breath. "Laura, we have a problem."

Lesley stifled a yawn as she pulled a chair out from the conference room table. She nodded to Laura and Woods, both of whom looked as tired as she felt. Why had Admiral Hall invited her to this 07:00 meeting? Laura knew as much about the investigation as she did, probably more. They'd spent half the night searching and wiring Owen's office and then restoring it to how they'd found it, right down to the number of centimetres the door had been ajar. Lesley would have to make it through the day on two hours'

sleep, and it could turn out to be quite a day.

An officer she didn't recognize strolled in and dropped a file onto the table. He nodded to everyone as he also sat down. From the meeting's invite list, she deduced that he must be Lieutenant Commander Russell from the liaison office.

Moments later, Admiral Hall entered the room. "Good morning," he said as he shut the door. "Before we start, I want to remind you that everything we say in this meeting is need-to-know. Understood?" Everyone nodded. "Good." He sat at the head of the table. "Based on the interviews Commander Finney's group conducted with Owen's former clients, we know that we probably have a Chosen Violation on our hands."

All but one had told stories similar to Hubert's. One had also said that Owen had raised touch therapy as something they might try in the future. So Tyson had told the truth, and Hubert probably hadn't said anything to prompt Owen's questions about her sex life. A clear pattern of behaviour had emerged, one Laura had taught Lesley to recognize. The search of Owen's office and a careful reading of his recent records hadn't yielded any evidence, which wasn't surprising, or encouraging. If Owen's reasons for asking his former clients about their sex lives had been sound, why hadn't he documented the sexually-related questions or his reasons for asking them in any of his client files? And they hadn't found anything in his office related to touch therapy. No books, no notes, nothing.

"I could justify executing him based on what we have," Hall continued, "but since we're talking about a man's life and destroying a Joining, I'd like to be absolutely sure by witnessing a violation ourselves. Based on what we've discovered, I'm sure we won't have to wait long. It also gives us a bit more time to prepare. I want to avoid the chaos that occurred during the Adams Incident. This time we know what's coming in advance. So let's review the plan for today. Commander Finney?"

Laura leaned forward. "Owen has two appointments with clients who fit the profile. The first is at 11:00 and the second is at 15:30."

Hall pressed a button on the table. The large comm screen on the wall flickered to life. "Channel?"

"Eight."

He switched to eight; Owen's office appeared on the screen. "Good."

"I'll watch from outpost B4-5, two minutes away. My people will be assembled there, ready to move." Lesley would be in that group. They were to bring Owen back here, to headquarters. Again, she wondered why she was at the meeting.

"Unless you need to intervene immediately, wait until the session ends," Hall said. "We don't want to start a panic."

"Understood. I'll also have people out interviewing all of Owen's current clients that fit the profile. We may find a few that brushed off his

questions and stuck with him."

"I hope that's all you find," Hall murmured. So far it looked as if Owen was the only one who'd committed a Chosen Violation. Everyone hoped it would stay that way. Hall shifted his gaze away from Laura. "Lieutenant Woods?"

"We're tracking the locations of his Chosen and her parents. As soon as we receive word, we'll break the news to his Chosen's parents. And then we'll go with them to tell his Chosen," she said, grimacing.

Lesley didn't envy Woods. She couldn't imagine how it would feel to find out that one's Chosen had violated the Chosen bond. She certainly wouldn't want to be the bearer of the horrible news.

"Once the home has been vacated, we'll search it," Laura said.

Hall nodded, his eyes still on Woods. "I know it will be an emotional time for the family, but try to keep it quiet. As I said, I don't want a repeat of the Adams Incident. I want to control the flow of information. I want Rymellans to find out about the Chosen Violation from us, not from each other, and only when we're ready to announce it. Which brings me to you, Lieutenant Commander Thompson." She tensed when Hall looked at her. "Someone has to be the military's face during this time. I want that someone to be you. You're experienced at recording announcements, Rymellans know you, and you're involved in the investigation. You'll be able to say that you were present during the planning of the operation and participated in Owen's capture. That will reassure Rymellans. You'll bring credibility to the announcements."

Lesley's heart sank.

"Communications is working on the initial announcement you'll give. When you've returned here, report to the studio and stay there. We'll want to release information in stages."

"Yes, Admiral." *I'm sorry, Mo.*

Hall's attention left her. "Lieutenant Russell?"

Russell straightened. "I've informed the Chosen Council. It will review its data for the lines involved and let us know if we should be concerned about anyone else."

"I doubt it, but knowing that the Chosen Council has checked will reassure Rymellans. At least this time we won't have to deal with children, as we did during the Adams Incident."

"Children?" Laura said, voicing the question in Lesley's mind.

"Yes. The Adamses had children. Two." His brows drew together. "You didn't know?"

"None of the public documents mention children."

"That's not surprising. We didn't change their names, but we did try to protect them. Well, some tried. The debate about them dragged on for weeks, when Rymellans should have been focused on pulling together and

reaffirming the Way.”

“What debate?” Laura asked.

Hall glanced around the table. “That’s true, I doubt any of you would have been aware of what was going on behind the scenes. E8 isn’t one of our sectors, and some of you would have been at the Indoctrination Academy. I’m dating myself,” he said ruefully. “I only know about it because I was a commodore at the time and was working out of F8 headquarters.” He pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on the table. “I don’t see any harm in talking about it now. After the Incident, some Rymellans, including members of the government and military, called for the children’s executions. Both parents involved in Chosen Violations? What did that say about the children? What had they learned at home? What had they witnessed? Were they destined to fall? Would there be another Adams Incident in the future if they remained alive?”

“I can understand the concerns,” Laura said.

“So can I, but executing children . . . would you have wanted to be the commander at the execution site that day?”

Lesley wished she could see Laura’s face, but Laura was sitting next to her. She didn’t want to be obvious and turn toward her. “So they were both underage?” Laura asked quietly.

“One was. The other was barely of age. Seventeen, I think. Those wanting the executions petitioned the Law for addition of an article pertaining to children whose parents had both committed Chosen Violations. They also petitioned for a dispensation to Article 62, so the younger one could be executed despite her age.”

Lesley’s curiosity trumped decorum. “What happened?” Maybe the children were long dead.

“The overseers denied all petitions, saying it would set a dangerous precedent. That didn’t sit well with many Rymellans. To be honest, I felt uneasy about it, but I agreed with the overseers. It was an emotional time for Rymellans. Everyone was reacting rather than thinking. If we’d gone ahead and executed the children, would we have regretted it a few weeks or months later, when we’d all calmed down?”

“Not if the children fell, as some predicted,” Laura said.

“They haven’t. An overseer said to me back then, ‘If the children are compromised, they’ll eventually find their own way to an execution site. Trust the Way.’ He was right.”

Lesley shifted in her seat. Maybe he was, but how many Rymellans would they take with them? Four had been executed during the Incident; only two had been Adamses. The knowledge that members of that sick family still walked among them unsettled her. A glance at Woods, seated across from her, told Lesley that she wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

“The Chosen Council would have checked all the related bloodlines,”

Russell said. "And double-checked, I presume. If they'd turned up anything . . ."

Still.

Laura cleared her throat. "Are they living in our sectors now?"

Hall shook his head. "No. They're not our problem." That earned a collective sigh of relief. "So enough about them. We have our own potential crisis brewing. For my part, I'll try to watch the two appointments, but I have a meeting with the government this morning to inform them that we'll soon be invoking Article 553."

Lesley understood why. The curfews and restrictions covered by 553 would help prevent the chaos Hall wanted to avoid.

"If the meeting runs long, I'll miss the 11:00 appointment. I trust your judgment, Finney. Don't wait for me, just move in."

"I will."

"And if nothing happens during the two appointments today, we'll do the same tomorrow."

"Four will fit the profile tomorrow," Laura said. "I'd guess that something will happen in one of those six appointments."

Hall nodded once. "Agreed. I'll be surprised if we have to observe beyond that."

"We have him under surveillance, so he can't do any damage in the meantime."

"Good." Hall paused. "Anything else?" When nobody spoke up, he slapped the table with both hands. "Then let's get to work. Dismissed."

Laura motioned for Lesley to walk with her as everyone rose. "Having you make the announcements wasn't my idea," she murmured after they'd left the conference room.

"I figured that." Lesley shrugged. "Oh well, it can't be helped."

"After this, every Rymellan will know who you are. It will be great exposure for you."

And potentially hurt Mo. At this point, Lesley was sure Mo hadn't received her Papers. She would have heard by now, if not from Mo, then from Michael or one of Mo's siblings. Was Mo upset? Relieved? Depressed? Would seeing Lesley on a public monitor cheer or darken her day? Perhaps she'd be indifferent and care more about the Chosen Violation than the announcer.

Lesley inwardly sighed. She was losing her focus again. She should care more about doing her duty and playing the role the admiral wanted her to play than about how Mo would react to seeing her image. Her primary concern shouldn't be Mo.

But it was.

Lounging on the bench in front of the faculty residence, Mo squinted down the path. Nope, couldn't see her, and it was—she swung up her comm unit and checked the time—12:40. They were supposed to meet at 12:30. Maybe the shuttle had been delayed or an aircraft hadn't been available. She'd wait another five minutes, then beep her.

Her comm unit beeped. Mo snorted; that must be her now. Without bothering to look at the unit's display, she pressed the connect button and barked, "Where are you?"

"At home."

She gasped. "Papa, I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

He mumbled something unintelligible, then said, "Listen, I might not be able to see you tomorrow."

Her shoulders slumped. "Why?"

"Uh, government business. I might be called into a meeting. Look, why don't you come home?"

She bit back an angry retort. "I've told you already, I can't be at home right now," she said through clenched teeth.

"Yes, you've said, but I really wish you'd change your mind. I'd feel better if you were on the estate right now."

Something in his voice made her pause. "Why?"

"I just would."

"But why?"

"Can't you do what I ask for once without an argument?" His voice held an edge of irritability.

"I'm not arguing, I'm just asking why," she said, bristling herself.

He took his time answering. "Because I'll worry about you if you're not here. Something's in the air. That's all I can say."

She didn't know what to make of his answer, couldn't decide if he was genuinely concerned for her or trying a new tactic to get her to come home. No, she'd see through that as soon as she arrived on the estate, and be furious with him. Maybe he was being evasive because it was related to the government business he'd mentioned and he couldn't give her specifics. Whatever it was, he was overreacting. She was on Rymel. Everywhere was safe, especially the Military Academy. "Papa, I don't know what you're worried about, but whatever it is, you don't need to worry about me. I'm at the Military Academy, remember?"

"I know, but—"

"I have to go. My friend's here," Mo said, spying the figure striding up the path. "I'll beep you later and we'll talk more about tomorrow, okay?"

He sighed. "I guess it'll have to be."

Mo didn't like cutting him off, but she'd only lose her temper if he kept badgering her to come home. "Bye, Papa." She slipped the comm unit into

its holder and stood.

Ann stopped in front of her and eyed her up and down. "It's a good thing you stood up or I probably wouldn't have seen you."

She ignored the barb. "You're late."

"Yeah, well, the stupid aviacraft wasn't ready." She motioned at the knapsack on her back. "Let me drop this off in my room, then let's eat. I'm starved. What are you doing out here, anyway? I would have figured out where you are and knocked on your door."

"I felt like some air," Mo said, following Ann into the residence and up the stairs to the third floor.

Ann opened the door to the second room on the left. "Home!" she announced. "Where's your room?"

"Three doors down on the right." Mo glanced around and noted the bare walls and lack of personal belongings. "Do you always stay in this room, or do you get a different one each time?"

"No, this is mine." Ann shrugged off the knapsack and let it fall onto the bed.

"Oh." Ann was on a three weeks on, five days off rotation. Mo didn't know why Ann was no longer living with her mama; Ann had ignored Mo's questions on the subject. She'd "lived" at the Military Academy for almost a year, but maybe she viewed the room as temporary, regardless. "Have you thought of getting your own place?"

"I don't see the point, given my schedule." Ann walked to the door. "Mess hall or dining room?"

"Dining room. We won't have to shout."

Ann nodded and patted her stomach. "Let's go."

"Don't you get tired of staying here?" Mo asked as they bounded down the stairs to the first floor.

"Don't you?" Ann shot back. "You have a home and a family that wants you there."

So Ann was at odds with her family; Mo had suspected as much.

When they reached the dining room, a server who recognized Ann greeted them, led them to a table, and took their order. Mo lifted the jug from the centre of the table and filled her glass with water, then Ann's. "Why don't you come back to the *Falcon*?" she suggested. "If you're not taking care of your mama anymore . . ."

"No." Ann leaned back in her chair and folded her arms.

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "I've discovered that I like feeling the sun on my face more often."

Mo had a feeling that wasn't the only reason.

"Anything exciting happen on tour?" Ann asked.

"Nope. Oh, David and Angie had their baby, three days before we

docked! A boy."

Ann frowned. "Glad I won't have to pretend I care when they start shoving the kid in everyone's face. Why do parents expect everyone to coo over their smelly baby? Dimwits."

"I'll remember that when I have one," Mo said, grinning.

"I'll need a magnifying glass to see yours. And I'll have to watch where I step until the kid is at least five." Ann stamped her foot for emphasis. "You haven't committed suicide, so I guess you didn't get your Papers."

Mo tutted and shook her head.

"You'd better hope they don't do it by height, or you'll get yours the day before you turn thirty."

Why had she agreed to spend the day with Ann? When Ann had returned to domestic duty, Mo hadn't expected to hear from her. But several weeks after arriving back on the *Falcon*, she'd received a dispatch from Ann asking how things were going. At the time, she'd still been struggling to cope without Les; corresponding with Ann had been another distraction. They'd stayed in touch. Mo had seen her at least once during every leave. Ann had got the idea of staying at the Military Academy from her. Fortunately they were both at least lieutenant rank; otherwise they'd be sleeping in the barracks.

Each visit followed the same pattern: Ann would get all her short jokes out of her system and then settle down. Mo didn't mind her company, and Ann apparently didn't mind hers. They were both lonely, their lives in a holding pattern. They also loved to fly and to talk about it. Knowing that someone other than a relative was mildly interested in what she was doing had helped Mo get through some dark moments. She'd even talked to Ann about Les, though she was careful about what she said—she still didn't completely trust her. Ann held back details, too. It was an odd . . . friendship.

"Not that I'm giving your height remark any credence, but my Chosen is probably taller than I am," Mo said to her.

Ann barked a laugh. "Probably?" Then her eyes narrowed. "Did Lesley get hers yet?"

"No."

"Since you're staying here again, I guess you're still not over her." She'd never be over her.

"I wonder if she's over you. Oh, here comes our salad."

Relieved, Mo unfolded her napkin as the server set down their salads and drinks. Ann inched her chair closer to the table. "How is the new batch of pilots?" Mo asked, jabbing her fork into a piece of lettuce.

Ann grimaced. "They're okay, I guess. Maybe I'm biased, but our class was one of the best."

Finally, something Mo could agree with wholeheartedly. As she and

Ann nibbled their way through a leisurely lunch, they discussed Mo's last tour on the *Falcon* and Ann's work on 72 in more detail. Over tziva, they threw around a few ideas about how to spend the afternoon. Mo chuckled to herself when they settled on flying speed sims against each other, if they could book simulators on such short notice. They were pilots, through and through.

"Let's just head over there." Ann stood. "If simulators are available, great. If not, I guess I wouldn't mind going for a swim."

Ann had suggested a public lake in C7, but Mo had quickly shot down the idea. She'd managed to avoid lakes for almost two years. The Recreation Centre had several pools. "I'd rather race."

"You might not feel that way after I've beaten you," Ann said as they neared the residence's exit.

Mo snorted. "Still clinging to that fantasy?" Ann had never beaten her. Not in the simulators, anyway; she'd beaten her to the door. She shielded her eyes as they stepped out into the sun. "You domestic pilots—"

Her comm unit chimed. Not beeped—chimed. So did Ann's. Chimes seemed to be sounding all around Mo. Her mouth dropped open at the same time Ann's did. The government or military would make a mandatory announcement in five minutes. Everyone nearby was converging on a public monitor just up the path. Mo and Ann joined those assembled in front of it. Someone had already turned it on.

"Wonder what's going on?" Ann said.

"It can't be that the Preeminent Ruler has died," said an officer near them, referring to the reason for the last global announcement, years ago. "She's young—relatively young."

Mo swallowed. The Preeminent Ruler was around the same age Mama had been when she died. Wait a minute—could this announcement have anything to do with Papa's government business? He'd sounded worried. She waited impatiently for the announcement to begin, listening to the speculations of those around her.

When the chimes were sounding every two seconds, the insignia of the Interior Division appeared on the large monitor mounted above the unit. Interior. Not good. The chimes stopped. The insignia faded. Mo covered her mouth.

"It's Lesley," Ann breathed.

Yes, she could see that, thank you. And she wasn't hallucinating. The strip under Les's image read *Lt. Cmdr. L. Thompson*.

"My fellow Rymellans," Les intoned. "I have grave news. I ask you to remain calm and to remember that we are all Rymellan and that, together, we are strong."

Mo registered the words, despite focusing more on Les than on what she was saying. That nightmare had been just that—a bad dream. She

would have recognized Les anywhere, even if Les had aged or changed her hair, though she hadn't. Les looked tired, but otherwise the same as when Mo had last seen her.

"Earlier today, Interior witnessed a Chosen Violation."

Many around Mo gasped; several couples reached for each other.

"This is not another Adams Incident. One person has fallen. I belong to the team that investigated and apprehended the criminal, and I assure you that we have contained the situation. At this time, we have no reason to suspect that others are involved in the crime, but our investigation is ongoing. If others are involved, we will find you." Les looked directly through the screen, as if meeting the eye of every viewer. "And we will punish you. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation."

The crowd rumbled its agreement.

"The military has invoked Article 553, effective immediately. I will remind you of what that means. There is now a curfew of 8:00 p.m. for all Rymellans, with the exception of Interior personnel and those whose professions require them to be outside their homes after that time. To be outside your home between the hours of 8:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. is now a violation unless you are accompanied by a member of the Interior Division or you are working at a profession that requires you to be away from your home during that time."

Now Mo could see why Papa wanted her home. They'd have to cut their days together short until 553 was lifted. Well, tough, because she couldn't go home. Her insides were quaking at the sight of Les. She wanted to elbow her way to the front, reach up, and press her hand against the monitor. What a terrible time to be on leave.

"We have increased the military presence in all sectors," Les continued. "Curfew violations will not go unnoticed or unpunished." She paused. "We understand that news of a Chosen Violation is shocking and upsetting and that you will look to each other for support and comfort. Do so privately, with your families, not publicly. Public discussion of the Chosen Violation will not be tolerated. We will disperse groups of more than four Rymellans, unless the group is within an area immediately surrounding a public monitor. Be prepared to answer any questions the military poses to you quickly and honestly. Your cooperation with the military is always important, never more so than now.

"When Article 553 is in effect, the punishment for several articles is upgraded to execution. I'll read those article numbers now—pay close attention: Article 73, Article 74, Article 101, Article 122, Article 167, and Article 168. All these articles relate to cooperation with the military."

"Maybe I should have stayed on 72," Ann murmured.

"Article 553 will remain in effect until we have completed our investigation. I will announce the name of the criminal later today."

Please, no more announcements. Why had Les agreed to do them? Surely someone else had been available. Anyone would have leaped at the chance to become so widely known; it would do wonders for anyone's career. Oh. Mo felt sick.

"I know this announcement has upset you and I encourage you to discuss it with your families. However, I remind you that emotional distress is not an excuse for violations against the Way, and that we will not tolerate public speculation about the nature of the violation or those involved. Above all, fellow Rymellans, remember that disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way. Thank you for your attention."

The insignia of the Rymellan government replaced Les's face. It quickly faded. The Preeminent Ruler appeared on the display. "Greetings to all Rymellans. We are all shocked by the horrible news Lieutenant Commander Thompson has just delivered, but we must remain calm. The military has the situation under control. The criminal is in custody, and we all want to see the criminal punished. Commander Finney of the Interior Division will execute the criminal tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

Mo's jaw tightened.

"At two o'clock in the afternoon, those of you who reside in D2 and nearby sectors are invited to view the criminal's body as it is carried from the execution site in D2 to the Wall's crematorium, where it will burn, as all criminals burn. The criminal's ashes will be added to the communal urn for offenders, and the name of this heinous individual—I will not refer to this person as a Rymellan—will be added to the Wall of Offenders as a reminder to all of us of what happens to those who fall from the Way. We will broadcast the procession. All non-essential businesses will close for the day, to allow as many of you to attend or view the procession as possible."

Ann jabbed Mo in the ribs and whispered, "We should go." Mo ignored her.

"All Level Four and Five classes from the Indoctrination Academies in Sector D2 will attend the procession. Several members from each class will march at its rear." She paused. "I would like to extend the gratitude of all Rymellans to Interior for capturing the criminal and protecting the Way. Our military works tirelessly to preserve our way of life. We might comfort ourselves by saying that this is the first Chosen Violation we've had in thirteen years, but that would be folly. The Adams Incident taught us that serious threats to the Way can arise at any time, as happened today. We must always be on guard. Only our continued diligence and the protection of our military will keep us safe.

"Before I close, I would remind you that Article 553 is in effect and that you are to give the military your full cooperation at all times. Because of what has happened, what I am about to say has never been more

meaningful to me and to all of us. Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way. Thank you." Her image faded. The text of Article 553 started to scroll slowly up the display.

"Flaming Argamon, can you believe it?" Ann said. "Who would do something like that?"

Mo knew Ann didn't expect an answer. She couldn't imagine why anyone would fall from the Way and didn't want to try to understand such a warped mind.

"All right, everyone, move along," an officer in an Interior cloak shouted.

"Looks like they're cracking down even here," Ann murmured. "Let's start walking."

Mo fell into step with her. Rymellans strode quickly past, their heads down, but she managed to glimpse the occasional shocked or disbelieving face. She probably looked shattered too, but for a different reason. Les had looked okay. She looked okay! Mo felt dejected and stupid. She'd imagined Les pining for her, especially now, while Mo was on Rymel. But Les probably hadn't given her a second thought. Argamon, she probably wasn't even aware that the *Falcon* had docked; she was too busy capturing criminals and furthering her career.

Okay, now she was being immature. Did she honestly expect Les to address Rymellans with tears streaming down her face? And how she looked wasn't necessarily an indication of how she felt. Mo looked fine, even though her life often felt like an endurance test. She wasn't shut away in her quarters, depressed. She took pride in her duties, hence her promotion. She regularly socialized and belonged to a quartet that gave concerts on the *Falcon*. Granted, the main reason she'd forced herself out of her quarters was so Les would be proud of her when they reunited, but only she knew that. Outwardly, she'd moved on. Inwardly, her life was on hold. Les may or may not feel the same. Mo didn't know; that was the problem.

"So should we go tomorrow?" Ann said.

"No."

"Why not? You know Lesley will definitely be there. You can see her!"

Which was why Mo wouldn't be going—she visualized herself breaking from the sidelines and rushing to Les. "I can't, Ann. I might do something I'll regret."

Ann stopped and peered at her. "Mo, you have to get over her. You're going to get yourself killed."

No, she wouldn't. She'd never get over Les, but she'd also never fall from the Way. She wouldn't disappoint Les and disgrace her family. *Believe!* she reminded herself. They were Chosens. She just had to hang on until they received their Papers. So she'd stay away from the procession.

Constantly seeing Les on the monitors over the next few days would be difficult enough. Each time would be salt in an open wound. Seeing her in the flesh, within reach . . .

"We can watch it here," Mo said. "They'll probably set up monitors in several of the auditoriums." The prospect of seeing Les in the procession didn't thrill her, but she couldn't skip watching it; it would be the main topic of conversation for a while. Plus, she was curious—she'd never seen an execution procession. "Anyway, let's get to those simulators." Mo suspected they'd become her refuge, something to soothe her every time an announcement ripped her apart.

Lesley wearily climbed the stairs and crept along the hallway so she wouldn't wake her parents. She slipped into her bedroom and quietly shut the door. What a long day, with no relief in sight. Tomorrow, the execution, followed several hours later by the procession.

Hall had ordered an autopsy, to determine if a medical problem was behind Owen's fall. They'd performed the usual tests and turned up nothing, but perhaps slicing his brain or another organ would provide a clue—too late for Owen, but not too late for the Chosen Council to understand the implications for the Owen line.

She changed into her pyjamas but didn't get into bed, despite her fatigue. Instead she gazed out the window in the direction of the Middleton estate. She often did so at night, even though Mo wasn't there. How was Mo feeling? How had she reacted to the news, to the announcements? Lesley knew she should hope that the sight of her on the monitors hadn't affected Mo at all beyond curiosity, but that would mean Mo didn't love her anymore. If she truly loved Mo, shouldn't she be pleased if Mo had moved on? Shouldn't Mo's happiness be the most important thing to her?

Mo had been at the back of her mind, and sometimes at the forefront, all day. Today Lesley had not only witnessed a Chosen Violation with her own eyes, but had seen the turmoil, distress, and pain one caused—two families devastated, numerous lives shattered. Officers rarely shed tears during an investigation, but many eyes had been moist today. But not Lesley's. She hadn't cried since she'd left Mo standing outside her aircraft. She'd become so used to repressing her feelings, pushing everything down so she could get through her days, that she sometimes wondered if she could still cry, if her smile would ever be genuine.

Lesley wanted to be with Mo more than anything, but they'd had to part, not just for their sakes, but for the two women they hadn't yet met. She might pine for Mo and struggle to give her life meaning, but she wouldn't put her Chosen through what Owen's Chosen was going through.

Mo wouldn't either. Mo might believe that she'd have trouble accepting her Chosen, but she never gave herself enough credit. She'd do it. She'd serve the Way. Lesley wouldn't have loved her all these years otherwise.

Laura had been right to insist that they split up. They never would have committed a Chosen Violation, but remaining together until their Papers arrived would have been weak in the Way. The Way must come first, no matter what. She and Mo weren't criminals, weren't depraved like the Adamses and Owen. They hadn't allowed their personal desires to dictate their behaviour. They were strong in the Way and would be remembered for their devotion to it, in both their personal and professional lives. They were born Rymellan. They'd live the Rymellan Way. And they'd die Rymellan.

Albert Watkins strolled into his office in sector C3's Chosen House, opened the blinds, and set a mug of steaming tziva on his desk. Mornings were his favourite time of day; he always prepared Chosen Papers before lunch. Nothing beat the excitement of requesting the list of Principals in the sector whose time had come and seeing a name or two appear on the screen. Most days, the list was empty. Many of Rymel's wealthiest and oldest families resided in C3; their estates occupied large tracts of land. As a result, the sector population was much lower than average, but a number of Rymellans of Joinable age called it home. If any were Principals, he'd be one of the first to know, beaten only by the scientists who'd determined their matches years ago.

But this morning he was in a foul mood. He shouldn't take a Chosen Violation personally, especially since he'd had nothing to do with the Owen Joining, but he couldn't help it. Every Chosen Violation reflected badly on the Council, and the Owen Joining had lasted a mere eight months. What a disaster! The Council's scientists had been up half the night poring over the data related to the Owen line. They hadn't found any errors, of course, but they'd had to check. At least this violation hadn't been on the level of the Adams Incident, when military had demanded that the Council review every Joining even remotely related to the Adamses.

Oh well, the day could only improve. Owen would be executed in a couple of hours, and you could bet that many from the Council would be at the execution procession, including him—D2 wasn't that far away. But first he had work to do. He switched on his station screen and requested the list of Principals whose Papers should be prepared that day. A single name appeared on the screen: Lesley Thompson. Now wasn't that interesting . . . on the same day she'd walk in an execution procession in triumph, she would receive her Chosen Papers. It was almost poetic.

Watkins rubbed his hands together in glee. What better way to take

everyone's mind off a Chosen Violation than to announce that Thompson would Join? Everyone knew her—they'd all been in front of their comm stations since her first announcement of the Chosen Violation, and she'd also appeared on the monitors several years ago. Just last night, his mama had said she slept better, knowing that Interior had officers like Thompson moving up its ranks, and he'd overheard others expressing similar sentiments this morning on the train. Several of his colleagues had even wondered aloud when she'd Join. Rymellans trusted and respected her. Yes, very good timing, indeed.

He'd talk to Thompson about spotlighting her Joining. If she agreed, and he was sure she would, he'd contact communications and set the plan in motion. They'd arrange to show images of the happy couple on the monitors and periodically interview them, so Rymellans could see how delighted they were with each other. Interest in the Joining would run high; Rymellans would crowd the courtyard on the couple's Joining Day. Owen's Chosen Violation would soon be forgotten, mentioned only in the Indoctrination Academies. The Adams Incident would continue to remind Rymellans of the depravity of Chosen Violations, as it should.

That Thompson was a Principal didn't surprise him. Some lucky man or woman was about to gain the Thompson name and one of the most eligible Chosens on the planet. Thompson was personable, attractive, strong in the Way, and clearly headed for admiral. Her Chosen's family would be ecstatic, and he was about to find out which family it was—not that he could tell anyone outside the Council. He'd earn a swift execution if he revealed any details before Thompson and her Chosen had been notified.

To ensure the integrity of the Chosen Tradition, the files of the two Chosens involved in a Joining weren't associated with each other, and made no reference to each other, until a Council member with the appropriate authorization level asked to link the files. The data system contained a master list accessible to only a handful of the Council's members. Scientists who determined matches could add to it but couldn't read it. Linking files, as he was authorized to do, would be through indirect access. The system notified the military every time someone accessed the list, either directly or indirectly, and the military regularly audited all accesses. Anyone who accessed the file inappropriately or without the proper authorization would find military on his or her doorstep and have a considerably shorter life than he or she had expected!

Hardly able to contain himself, Watkins asked to link Thompson's file with her Chosen's and waited for the name of her Chosen to appear on his screen. Seconds later, he frowned and squinted at the display. Something was wrong. Two names had appeared; he gasped when he read the second. At about the same time, his eyes widened when he understood what he was seeing.

He immediately beeped his superior. An unusual day was turning into an extraordinary one, and it was only 8:10!

Lesley held her breath as Laura carefully lifted a small vial of green fluid from the silver case that lay open on the ledge in front of her. Laura looked calm, even though she'd confided to Lesley that she hated this part of an execution the most. Apparently a commander had accidentally killed herself when loading her stick and Laura worried that she'd do the same. But her gloved hand was steady as she inserted the vial into her stick and snapped the receptacle lid shut. The stick wouldn't be armed until she lifted it to Owens' neck and pressed the green button on its handle. After that, she'd only have to press the trigger to deliver the deadly chemicals into the bloodstream. Owen would die within seconds.

The officer next to Lesley coughed. Only a handful of officers were observing Laura's preparations. Hall had surprised Lesley when he ordered her into the hut at the execution site's entrance without offering an explanation for why her presence was required. *When we leave the hut, take up the rear and follow the lead of the officers in front of you*, was all he'd said.

Laura holstered her stick. After closing and sealing the silver case and returning it to its secure storage container, she peeled off the gloves and inserted them into a plastic bag. "Is he ready?" she asked the military physician waiting nearby.

The physician nodded. "Yes, Commander."

"Then let's proceed," Hall said. "Observers first."

Following Hall's earlier instructions, Lesley waited for the other observers to leave the hut and then joined them outside. They'd formed a double column. She stood in the remaining open position at the rear, surprised to find herself on Hall's right.

"Forward!" one of the lead officers barked. The group marched up a path lined with military and entered a dirt clearing ringed by more military, though they'd left a gap at its southernmost edge. The two lead officers peeled away in opposite directions and joined the end of the lines near the gap. The officers in front of Lesley did the same. *Follow the lead of the officers in front of you*. She pivoted to her right, to stand to the left of the officer she'd just marched behind, and found herself with a front row seat to the execution. Not six feet away, Owen waited, secured to a metal pole. He'd been sedated by the physician, and his head had fallen forward; the metal chains held him upright.

Lesley looked past him and noticed the Rymellans gathered on the other side of the fence, straining for a glimpse of the criminal. Executions

weren't open to the public, but they did take place outside. If Rymellans happened to be passing by during an execution, they were always welcome to watch. Apparently many Rymellans were "passing by" that morning. Considering that Owen had committed a Chosen Violation, she couldn't blame them.

"Let's join hands," Hall said.

She reached for her neighbour's hand and resisted the urge to walk forward and take Hall's. No circle this time. "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!"

Everyone dropped their hands but remained silent. The incomplete circle and the absence of applause made the gesture feel strange, almost warped. But that was the point—the Way had been tainted. Owen's execution would cleanse it.

Footsteps thudded up the path. Laura and the physician marched into the clearing and stopped in front of Owen. With her left hand, Laura grabbed Owen's hair and lifted his head. "Anthony Burke Owen, you committed a Chosen Violation and must give your life for the Way." Owen didn't respond; his eyes were closed. She pulled the stick from its holster and raised it to Owen's neck, pressed the green button, and moved her thumb to the trigger. "Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way." She pressed the trigger and let go of Owen's hair. His head fell forward again; he looked as he had when Lesley entered the clearing.

The physician examined him, then nodded. "He's dead."

Laura holstered her stick and offered her right hand to the physician and her left to Lesley. Once the circle was complete, everyone chanted the *Words Every Rymellan Knows* and burst into applause. When Laura moved to the centre of the clearing and thrust her right fist into the air, they clapped wildly again. There was no better service to the Way than to eliminate a threat to it, no greater satisfaction.

Hall stepped to Laura's side as two undertakers rolled a stretcher into the clearing. "Take the body to the D2-4 morgue immediately," he said to them, then he turned to Laura. "Thank you, Commander Finney."

She nodded to him. Lesley remained focused on Hall and Laura, though out of the corner of her eye, she could see the undertakers working near the pole.

"Every Chosen Violation is an abomination, and so are those who commit them," Hall said. "Commander Finney and her group will march directly behind those carrying the body, to honour them for dealing with this latest fall swiftly and efficiently. Today we should all be proud to be Interior officers. Dismissed."

Lesley hesitated, unaware of the protocol for leaving the execution site. The observers she'd entered with started to form up in the middle of the clearing, behind Laura and the physician. Relief flooded through her when Hall joined the end of the line and motioned for her to do the same.

The military lining the path saluted the group marching past. Later, the procession route would be lined with Rymellans. Would Mo be there? Lesley's pride turned to shame. She'd just witnessed a man die because he'd committed a Chosen Violation, and here she was, hoping to bump into Mo. If her peers knew what she was thinking, they wouldn't salute her.

Lesley would never commit a Chosen Violation, but she'd forgive them if they all wondered how long it would be until she found herself secured to a metal pole.

"So we've got a triad," Jean Simpson, a senior Council scientist, said. The small group clustered around Watkins' screen moved in for a closer look. Simpson pointed to the display. "This is the superimposed data from the three Chosens' files. It's almost beautiful, isn't it?"

"What are the odds?" Watkins asked.

"Extremely low, and only possible with a same-oriented Joining."

"Which is why we haven't had one for 232 years," Mary Stone said as she bustled into the room. The House's archivist plunked into a chair a short distance from the group and started to tap away on her comm unit.

Watkins swung around to face the others. "So let me get this straight. All three of them are Chosen to each other."

Simpson nodded. "Correct. In layman's terms, it's a tie—well, a bit more than a tie, actually. Three ties. When we evaluated the data from their psychological and genetic tests, these three had results that were the best match for each other. Exactly the best match. So Chosens one and two are tied as the best match for Chosen three, Chosens one and three are tied as the best match for Chosen two, and—well, you get the idea. Given the number of parameters measured for both types of evaluations, the probability of this happening is . . . it's . . ." She shook her head in frustration, unable to express how rare it was. "Let's just say I never expected to see a triad in my lifetime. Did you say the last one was 232 years ago, Mary?"

"Uh-huh," Stone said absently, still focused on her comm unit.

"There's usually a larger gap between triads."

"Is it because Thompson is so strong in the Way?" asked Richard Howard, Watkins' supervisor. He pointed to the screen. "Look at these projections. Look at how strong in the Way her children will be with either one of these Chosens."

"Any pair among the triad will produce children who are projected to be equally strong in the Way, so it's not Thompson per se," Simpson said.

"Here." Stone waved her comm unit at everyone. "A treatise on triads." She muttered the words to herself as she scanned the information on the unit's display. "Oh, that doesn't sound very good."

"What?" Howard asked.

Stone looked up. "When the first triad surfaced, we declared them unnatural and a threat to the Way. So we turned one member of the triad into a Solitary, over the protests of those who said that not Joining Chosens was even more unnatural and asking for trouble. It turns out they were right."

"What do you mean?" Watkins asked.

"It worked for the first two triads, but not for the third. Apparently the one who'd been turned into a Solitary crossed paths with one of the Joined Chosens." Stone grimaced. "You can guess what happened."

"What bad luck!" Watkins said.

"I'd call it stupid," Simpson said. "Not Joining Chosens together? That's a Chosen Violation waiting to happen. Not only that, triads aren't unnatural or a threat to the Way. They're rare, but natural."

"But technically it wasn't a Chosen Violation," Stone said. "They *were* Chosens."

Simpson shook her head. "Not if we turned one into a Solitary, but I understand what you're saying. Yet another reason it was a regrettable course of action. Anyone who grumbles about the frequent audits of our data and assigned matches should read that treatise to understand why it's critical that the integrity of our matches is protected. A Chosen should never be arbitrarily changed to a Solitary."

"And that's why we decided to Join the three Chosens together," Howard declared.

"Um, no, we didn't," Stone said. "Not then, anyway. And Jean, I'd practice saying that triads are natural and not against the Way. According to this, the view that triads are unnatural and a threat to the Way comes up every time a triad does. It happened with the last one."

"And it'll definitely happen with this one, considering who's in the triad," Watkins murmured.

Stone's brow furrowed. "Why, who's in it?"

Watkins read the names.

She paled. "Oh dear."

"Yes," Watkins said. "If anyone does consider the triad unnatural and against the Way, you know who they'll blame. And everyone will expect the triad to fail because she's in it."

"Which would be completely unfounded," Simpson snapped. "None of the data indicates that she's more likely to commit a Chosen Violation than

anyone else. We wouldn't Join her if it did."

"That won't stop the talk," Stone said.

Simpson nodded wearily. "No, I suppose it won't."

"Let's not get sidetracked," Howard said. "Please go on, Mary."

Stone continued to read, then barked a laugh. "Oh, you won't believe this. You'll love this, Jean. After the Chosen Violation related to the third triad, we decided to avoid Joining the three Chosens together by executing one member of the triad. We always executed the oldest member."

"You can't be serious," Simpson said.

"It's right here," Stone said. "Can you imagine, showing up for your notification meeting and being told, 'Sorry, you're in a triad and you're the oldest member, so if you'll just follow me to the execution site, thank you.'"

"I guess that was one way of solving the problem of having a Chosen walking around who wasn't Joined to his or her Chosen," Howard said sardonically.

Watkins rolled his eyes.

"How long was this enlightened solution to the problem in effect?" Simpson asked dryly.

"Until an Advocate Samuels successfully argued that the practice of executing the oldest member was barbaric and that, in the case of female triads, it reduced the number of children strong in the Way that could come of the Joining." Stone looked up. "So the practice was discontinued and we finally decided to Join the three Chosens together. Unfortunately, most triads were still touched by execution, regardless."

Watkins frowned. "Why?"

Stone looked back at her screen, brushing aside a stray lock of hair that slipped over her eyes. "Hmm . . . in one case, one of the triad members committed a Chosen Violation with a Solitary. But more commonly, jealousy within the triad was an issue. One member of the triad frequently assaulted another, treated another rudely in public, or publicly expressed the sentiment that the Joining was flawed. Despite repeated warnings and strikes, the behaviour continued until execution was deemed appropriate. That's why we now have Article CT134 in the Tradition."

"Article CT134?" Simpson said.

"Yes. Triads have two years to schedule the Joining Ceremony, not one. If the Principal and one of the other triad members think the third member will have a destabilizing effect on the triad, therefore threatening the viability of the triad and the Way, they may petition for the execution of that triad member. However, the case must be made and the execution performed before the triad Joins. And . . ." She read some more. "That's exactly what's happened for most of the triads since then. The Principal and another member successfully petitioned for the execution of the third."

"So the Principal is always safe?" Watkins asked.

"Yes."

"Is CT134 still in effect?" Howard asked.

Stone nodded. "I presume so."

Watkins spun around to his station, quickly verified that it was, and spun back again.

Howard frowned. "So the Thompson triad could be reduced to two Chosens." Watkins shifted nervously and looked at Howard, who said, "I know, I know, but a case has to be made and Thompson is the Principal. If she lives up to her reputation, she'll ensure that the article is only exercised if she's absolutely convinced that the triad won't be viable."

Watkins remained silent but looked uncertain.

"Did the last triad end with CT134?" Howard asked.

Stone skimmed to the end of the treatise. "No. The three Chosens Joined." She smiled. "And remained Joined until death. Their natural deaths."

"Female?"

"Yes."

"How many daughters?"

Stone's brows shot up. "Fourteen."

"Fourteen!" Howard breathed. "If this triad is as successful, think of the children."

"And every one of them projected to be very strong in the Way," Simpson added.

"I'm still not sure how it works in practice, though," Watkins said. "How do the articles apply to them?"

"Exactly the same way they apply to a Joining of two," Stone said. "In fact, there's a set of articles that applies specifically to them, many of which state that the usual articles apply to all three Chosens and that the word 'Chosen' refers to both Chosens."

"So they can mix and match however they want within the triad, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes. As long as all sexual activity remains within the triad, nobody cares about the details."

"It sounds to me like we need to brush up on everything concerning triads," Watkins said. "The Joining Ceremony must be slightly different. And what's the protocol for notification?" His hands flew to his head. "The Chosen rings? The names?"

"I'll find and dispatch the relevant documents to everyone," Stone said.

"Thank you." Howard tapped his upper lip. "My son knows Thompson, we were just talking about her last night. Thompson and Middleton are already involved. Well, at least they *were* involved. They split up when they turned twenty-five."

"That's happened before," Simpson said. "They're Chosens. The time apart won't have made a difference."

"But what about CT134?" Watkins said. "If they're already involved . . ."

Howard's face darkened. "Albert, Thompson's the Principal. She won't do anything rash!"

"You *hope* she won't do anything rash. Considering that she's already involved with Middleton and that the third Chosen is—"

"Yes, that's going to be interesting. We knew it would happen at some point and cause a stir, but obviously we didn't anticipate a triad, and with two of our oldest families." Howard tapped his lip again. "Do you think we should notify the military before announcing it?"

"The military? Why would we notify the military?" boomed a voice from behind them.

Everyone turned. Humphrey Stevens, one of the Chosen Council heads, stood in the doorway. "I got here as soon as I could. So we've got a triad," he continued briskly as he strode into the room. "What's all the fuss about? It's happened before, there are records available, and how the articles apply to them is explicit. What we need to do is prepare for their notifications, because I'm sure they'll be filled with questions, especially about how to conduct themselves. Did I hear you say the Thompson and Middleton families are involved?"

Howard nodded.

"Those are two of our best lines. I don't want any mistakes or omissions on our part, especially any that result in a Thompson or Middleton at an execution site. Who's the Principal?"

"Lesley Thompson."

"Good. If anyone can guide them through this, she can, but hold their Papers until tomorrow. Thompson already has a busy day, and we need extra time to prepare. If any of you were thinking about going to the execution procession, forget it. We have too much work to do. You can catch the replay on the monitors." Stevens paused. "I'll schedule a meeting for 4:00. We can review exactly how the notifications will go, including what information we need to provide to them. So come on, we have a busy day ahead of us. Let's get to work."

Nobody moved. He stared at them. "Are you deaf? I said, let's get to work. Why are you all standing there looking like you're about to wet yourselves?"

"It's the third Chosen," Howard said.

"The what?"

"The third Chosen in the triad."

Stevens folded his arms. "What about her?"

Howard glanced at the others and bit his lip. "It's the Adams girl."

Jayne Adams glanced around the clearing, prepared to dart back down the path if necessary. But nobody was around. Everyone was at home, glued to their comm stations, as she would have been if she hadn't lost track of the time. She felt uneasy being outside while Article 553 was in effect, but the prospect of spending another agonizing minute cooped up in her apartment had outweighed her reservations. Only a couple of hours, she'd told herself, intending to be back in the safety of her home well before 2:00, when the execution procession would start. But it was already 1:55. Even if she ran home, she'd miss the beginning of the procession, so she'd risk a public monitor this once.

She leaned her sketchbook against the left side of the monitor's podium and tapped the *On* button to bring the monitor to life. It displayed the huge, cheering crowd assembled near D2's execution site. Jayne listened intently to the commentator's droning voice as the camera panned over the area.

One of the Indoctrination Academy's classes came into view. She flinched, reminded of her time at the Academy. Her experience of Levels One to Three hadn't been worse than anyone else's, but after the Incident, everything had changed. Not only had none of the children wanted to commit social suicide by associating with her, but angry parents had deluged the Academy with letters and visits, demanding that their children be protected from the Adams taint. In response, the Academy had isolated her from the others outside of classes. That had left her plenty of time to sketch in peace, but she'd been terribly lonely and sometimes subjected to pain. The indoctrinators had brought out their rods at the slightest perceived provocation. If she'd even looked at them—

Jayne jumped when a loud roar erupted from the crowd. The image on the monitor shifted to one of the elevated platforms holding representatives from the military and government, and then to an approaching aircraft. Excitement shot through her. It was about to begin. She moved closer to the screen, wanting to see and hear every detail of what happened next. Like all Rymellans, she wanted to be sure that the criminal had been executed for falling from the Way. After all, *Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way.*

Lesley's jaw dropped when she peered out the aircraft window. So many Rymellans were assembled that, apart from a circular landing area

that would receive the craft and a narrow strip that marked the procession's route, she couldn't see the ground. When the craft touched down, she left her seat and followed Laura to the front. The six military selected for the honour of carrying the corpse and the rest of the Chosen Tradition group joined them. They waited while military outside hastily erected a tent that would initially shield the head of the procession from the gathered crowd. When it was ready, Laura slid open the door. The deafening roar of the crowd assaulted the ears of everyone inside.

The six military arranged themselves around the body bag that had rested on the floor of the craft for the entire journey; the rest of the group stepped outside. Two drummers were waiting for them, their drums hanging from straps around their necks, ready to set the pace. While those who would carry the corpse removed it from the body bag and bound its hands and feet, Lesley and the others formed up and prepared to march. Once everyone was in position, one of the drummers spoke into her comm unit. Seconds later, the din of the crowd slowly faded to silence.

"My fellow Rymellans," the Preeminent Ruler said. "The execution of a criminal is always unfortunate, but the Way must be observed. When it is not, punishment is swift, as it was for the criminal executed this morning. It doesn't matter what position you hold in our society. It doesn't matter where you live. It doesn't matter who you are. All that matters is obedience to the Law and the Chosen Tradition. Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way.

"Today I am announcing that Admiral Derek Lacey will lead a review of all procedures and curriculums at our Indoctrination and Learning Academies. In addition, Admiral Michael Hall will lead a review of all procedures pertaining to our counsellors' obligations to the Way. I am also announcing that all Rymellans will undergo a refresher examination within two months. The examination will focus on key areas of the Law and Chosen Tradition. The Indoctrination Academies in each sector will dispatch details to you.

"And now, if you will all join with me in singing the Song of Rymel."

The Rymellans gathered along the route sang the song a cappella, their voices ringing out with pride. Lesley and those assembled with her enthusiastically joined in.

Rymellan we are and always shall be,  
We are one, Chosen and Solitary.  
The Law and Chosen Tradition are the Way,  
Protect it we must, and be sure to obey.  
Rymellan we are and always shall be,  
We are one, Chosen and Solitary.

The Way is the foundation of our society,  
With no Law and Chosen Tradition, we would not be.  
Rymellan we are and always shall be,  
We are one, Chosen and Solitary.  
Disobedience is not tolerated, punishment is quick,  
Chosen Violations will lead to an executioner's stick.  
Rymellan we are and always shall be,  
We are one, Chosen and Solitary.

As the final refrain ended, those assembled clapped and whistled loudly. The military responsible for the body hoisted it onto their shoulders. At Laura's barked command, the drummers started their beat. Everyone started to chant the *Words Every Rymellan Knows* and the procession moved forward.

As soon as those with the body left the tent, the crowd erupted. When Laura and her group became visible, the crowd went wild. It felt to Lesley as if the ground were shaking, though she knew it wasn't.

A flower bounced off her shoulder. Another followed, then two more. Every type of flower rained down on the procession, their scent filling the air as the marchers crushed them underfoot. The beat of the drums slowed as the footing became more hazardous with each step. Lesley strained to see more than a few feet in front of her.

The military carrying the body occasionally pleased the crowd by thrusting the cadaver into the air or veering off to the side so those lining the route could see for themselves that the criminal was indeed dead. The body bounced as its bearers walked and weaved, performing their macabre dance.

When the procession was about halfway to its destination, groups of teens ran from the sidelines to join its rear. Level Four and Five classes from nearby Indoctrination Academies were in attendance, and the indoctrinators were taking full advantage of the display. "This man committed a Chosen Violation," they screamed into their megaphones. "Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Chosen Tradition. Look, look at the corpse! That's what will happen to you if you commit a Chosen Violation. Look at the executioner. She will come for you if you commit a Chosen Violation. Know the articles. Know the articles. Know the articles. Death to those who disobey!"

Jayne felt sick and averted her eyes from the monitor. Was that what it had been like for her parents? What had she hoped to accomplish by watching? Did she think it would help her to understand? If she didn't

understand after thirteen years, she wouldn't understand by watching the procession for a criminal who'd had nothing to do with the Incident—which, curiously, the Preeminent Ruler hadn't mentioned. Jayne could have taken the omission as a sign that this recent crime would displace the Incident from the notorious position it held in the minds of Rymellans, but she knew better. What this man had done, while terrible, didn't compare to what they'd done. This one would eventually blow over.

She'd seen enough, and was about to turn off the monitor when she heard the crunch of a footfall on gravel. Orange flashed in the corner of her eye.

*Oh no.*

"Well, what have we here?" a female voice said off to Jayne's right. "An Adams watching the execution procession for a criminal who committed a Chosen Violation. I guess it brings back fond family memories for you, right Jayne?"

Jayne remained silent and kept her eyes on the monitor. Of all the military who could have walked through the clearing, why did it have to be this lieutenant? Everyone who patrolled E6 treated her like dirt, but this one was the worst. Not long ago, this lieutenant had struck her with a level three violation for speaking up, not back, when the lieutenant had insulted her. That had cost her almost a full month's living allowance. If Carol hadn't bailed her out, she would have starved.

"I've heard they don't die right away when they're executed," the lieutenant said.

"What happens to them?" a male voice asked. Great, there were two of them.

"They jerk around, like this."

A burst of laughter followed the lieutenant's words. Now that they'd had their laugh, maybe they'd leave her alone. She turned off the monitor and turned toward her sketchbook.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" the lieutenant said.

Jayne froze.

"Where do you think you're going? Article 553 is in effect. You do *not* walk away from military right now, Jayne. And I think you, especially, should watch the rest of the procession. Don't you agree, Tim?"

"Definitely."

"Keep an eye out." Jayne winced when the lieutenant grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back. "Turn the monitor back on," the lieutenant barked.

Jayne managed to tap the button with her free hand.

"Now watch!" the lieutenant shouted into Jayne's ear, making it ring.

"You're violating Article 822," Jayne managed to gasp.

"What did you say?" The lieutenant jerked Jayne's arm up. Pain shot

through her back; she cried out and sank to her knees.

"Cheryl, be careful," Tim said. "Don't break her arm. We don't need the hassle."

Cheryl snorted. "What hassle? Obviously I would have been acting in self-defence when she attacked me."

"Hey, wait a minute," Tim said slowly. "We're just having a bit of fun here, not trying to have her executed."

"Why not?" Cheryl said. "We'd get medals for bringing her in. Though I'd miss not having her around to play with." She grabbed Jayne's hair and pulled her head back. "If I transferred to another sector, would you miss me?" she asked, pouting. "I bet you would." Her pout turned into a sneer. "Now get up!"

Jayne struggled to her feet. When her head neared the top of the podium, Cheryl pushed it forward, smashing Jayne's chin against the podium's edge. Her teeth snapped together. Cheryl giggled. "Oops. You'll get a nasty bruise there. And here I thought you couldn't get any uglier. Oh look, it's the executioner." She pointed at the screen. "See, that's a true Rymellan, right there. And there's Thompson, right next to her. Another true Rymellan. I bet they'd love to get their hands on a freak like you, Jayne. See, they protect Rymellans. They don't protect freaks."

"Maybe we should beep them, see what they're doing after the procession," Tim said.

Jayne couldn't breathe. The thought of being in the presence of Finney and Thompson terrified her. She turned away from the monitor. Cheryl slapped the side of her head. "Keep watching!"

Gulping back the bile that rose in her throat, Jayne watched.

Through the flowers that still showered the procession, Lesley glimpsed the entrance to the crematorium. The drummers had almost reached it. They beat on their drums five times in rapid succession, then the drums fell silent.

The procession stopped. Everyone stood quietly while the military carried the body through the gates. Once they'd disappeared from view, Laura turned to face the procession and thrust her right fist into the air. The crowd roared its approval and, as the floral storm resumed, it spontaneously broke into the Song of Rymel.

Lesley started to sing along but faltered. Was Mo here? She quickly recovered and resumed singing, but her mind remained on Mo. Was Mo all right? Was she proud of her? All the feelings Lesley had locked away suddenly started to surface. She desperately fought for control; she couldn't break down here, in front of a crowd and live on the monitors. *Focus on the*

words. *Sing. Smile and sing.* She did, and wept inside.

Surprised, Jayne watched Thompson's face. For a moment it had almost looked as if she was going to cry, something Jayne would not expect of an Interior officer. They were all cold, calculating, and single-minded. Then again, if they were going to get emotional, an execution procession would be just the place, wouldn't it?

Another stab of pain. Her arm throbbed and her neck felt stiff. Suddenly the lieutenant released her arm and shoved her roughly to one side. Unprepared for the move, Jayne stumbled and fell. Everything burned. She gripped the podium, slowly hefted herself to her feet, and faced her tormentors.

"I certainly enjoyed that, did you?" Cheryl said cheerfully. "It's important that we spend time getting to know those who live in our sector, so I'm so glad we were able to spend the last little while together." Tim laughed; Jayne gritted her teeth. "Now get your ugly face out of here and stay home. If I run into you again, I might not treat you as nicely."

Relieved, Jayne turned off the monitor and bent to retrieve her sketchbook. She started to walk away, her eyes downcast.

"Wait a minute," Cheryl said.

Jayne held her breath.

"What's that you're carrying? Your sketchbook? I should take a look at it, make sure nothing's in it that violates any articles."

No, please, not her drawings! Jayne held the book against her chest. She'd get over the rest of the abuse, but handing over her sketchbook would be giving them a part of herself.

Cheryl beckoned for the sketchbook. "Give me the book, now! Unless you'd rather receive a level four strike?"

Jayne reluctantly held it out, mortified to see it trembling in her fingers.

"I think she's going to cry," Cheryl said to Tim, watching Jayne.

Tim glanced at Jayne. "Let's just go, we've had our fun. Give her the book back." He reached for the sketchbook.

Cheryl pulled it away from him. "No, I want to look." She flipped through the pages. "Oh look, a leaf," she said in a high-pitched voice. "And here's another leaf. And isn't that cute—another leaf." *Flip.* "And another." *Flip.* "And yet another." She snorted and shook her head. "Just think, we've had a true genius living in the sector all this time and we didn't even know it. A leaf artist. Imagine." She grinned. "I don't know why you waste your time doing this, Jayne. You really stink at it."

Hot tears stung Jayne's eyes. She bit her lip—hard.

Cheryl smiled smugly and threw the sketchbook on the ground. "Pick that up or I'll strike you for littering. And then get out of my sight. I've had enough of you for one day."

Jayne swallowed and picked up the sketchbook. She turned and slowly walked away, expecting them to call her back again. When they didn't, she quickened her pace and eventually risked a look over her shoulder. They were nowhere in sight. She broke into a run and raced toward her sanctuary.

Mo followed the flow as everyone left the auditorium, but unlike those around her, she wasn't pumping her fist in the air, cheering, or babbling on about the procession. If she heard one more person excitedly say that Finney and Thompson had attended this Military Academy, she'd scream. Cool air washed over her as she passed through the auditorium's front doors.

"Woo!" Ann shouted, making her jump. "Chalk one up for the Way!" She ruffled Mo's hair.

"Don't do that," Mo snapped, covering her head with her hands.

"Come on, Mo, you haven't cracked a smile all—oh!" She grabbed Mo's arm, pulled her off to the side of the path, and waved at someone in the crowd. An officer waved back and maneuvered his way over to them. He smiled at Ann.

"Hey there," Ann simpered, her voice suddenly an octave higher. She turned to Mo. "This is Ensign Paul Bennett. And this is Lieutenant Commander Mo Middleton."

"Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant Commander," he said, still staring at Ann.

Mo mumbled a hello.

"I met Paul at the track this morning," Ann said. "We, uh, bumped into each other when we were jogging." They grinned at each other like idiots. "What did you think of the procession?" she asked him.

"Thought it was great! And guess what? Thompson and Finney went to this Military Academy!"

Mo dug her fingernails into her palms.

"I know Thompson," Ann said breathlessly, placing her hand on her chest.

Bennett's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yeah, she used to be a pilot. Well, she still is, but only supply. We were in the same year and flew together for a while on the *Falcon* and 72."

"Wow!"

"But that's nothing compared to Mo, here. She—"

"Ann!" Mo barked.

"Uh, she knows her, too."

"Oh," Bennett said, barely glancing at Mo. "So you want to do something?"

"Sure! Uh . . ." Ann's eyes slid to Mo.

"I'll talk to you later." Mo forced a smile. "Have fun."

"Yeah," Ann said, already walking away with Bennett.

As she wandered away, Mo wondered why she'd bothered saying anything; they wouldn't have noticed if she'd left at the beginning of their conversation. What to do now? There was no point beeping Papa or Neil or anyone else in her family. With 553 still in effect, by the time they arranged to meet somewhere away from the estate and everyone managed to make it there, it would practically be time for them to leave. She wouldn't be good company anyway. Might as well go back to her room.

When she reached the faculty residence, she slumped on the bench outside and thought about the procession. She'd been okay until the end. Up to that point, Les's appearances on the screen had been frequent but brief—mainly shots of her marching next to Finney, and with all the flowers, sometimes all Mo had made out were their cloaks. But then the close-up of Les's face as everyone sang the Song of Rymel, when Les had almost cried . . . She'd almost cried—cried!—in front of everyone. Yesterday Mo had been upset that Les had looked fine; now she was upset that Les obviously wasn't fine.

Les's struggle to maintain her composure had endeared her to those in the auditorium, who'd all moaned in sympathy, interpreting Les's emotional display as evidence of her devotion to the Way and pride in a job well done. But Mo knew better. Les was devoted to the Way and would be pleased at how efficiently Interior had handled the Chosen Violation, but she would never cry or even come close to crying in front of a crowd. Yet she had!

Mo curled her hand around her comm unit. She wanted to beep Les so badly. Les's distress may have had nothing to do with their separation—in a way, Mo hoped it didn't. She'd hoped Les hadn't moved on, but now she realized how selfish that was. She loved Les and wanted her to be happy. And she wanted to talk to her, and be with her, and have daughters with her. Argamon!

"Mo!" Ross called, coming up the path. Mo stood and started to salute, but Ross waved the gesture away. "I told you not to do that. I know I'm a commander now, but you don't report to me and I hate ceremony unless it's absolutely necessary. I'm not Commander Dunlop," she said, referring to an uptight commander on the *Falcon*.

Mo dropped her hand. "Sorry."

"Did you watch the procession?"

"Yeah, in one of the auditoriums."

"I'm all keyed up after seeing it," Ross said.

"Me too," Mo said, knowing she sounded as keyed up as a sleeping baby. The Way had triumphed, a cause for celebration. Everyone would be out partying, as Ann and Bennett probably were. If Les hadn't been at the centre of it all, Mo might not feel so deflated. She wouldn't be as jubilant as everyone else, but maybe she would have beeped Papa or Neil. Maybe she would have tried.

Ross studied her. "With everything cancelled, I'm at a loose end. We added a new combat sim last week that's rather challenging on the highest level. Want to give it a whirl?"

"You want to fly a sim with me?" Mo asked, surprised.

"We haven't flown together for years. And I'll admit that I do have an ulterior motive. I want to pick your brain about some new additions we're considering to the curriculum. Though we might not be able to talk much while we're flying. I wasn't exaggerating when I said it's a challenging sim. We can talk over supper afterward." Ross started to stroll away and motioned for Mo to accompany her. "Come on."

Mo followed her without argument. Ross had an ulterior motive all right, one that had nothing to do with the curriculum. It wasn't what she'd said; it was what she hadn't said about the procession, especially those in it. Mo was fortunate—she had people around her who cared. Did Les?

Jayne stumbled into her apartment and made a beeline for the bathroom, tossing her sketchbook onto the sofa as she passed. She reached to open the medicine cabinet, then stopped and stared in dismay at her reflection in the mirror. Her chin, already throbbing, had turned an angry red. Good thing she wouldn't be going out for a few days, not after what had just happened. Her hand shook as she drew a bottle of painkillers from the medicine cabinet, struggled to remove the cap, and tipped several pills into her hand.

After gulping down a couple with a glass of water, she returned to the living room and eyed the sketchbook. She'd been making real progress on capturing the detail in leaves, but the sketchbook would only remind her of an encounter she'd rather forget. Blinking back tears, she ripped it to shreds. The recycling chute in the apartment's small kitchen sucked the pieces from her hands. Now she was down to one empty sketchbook. That new pair of shoes she was saving for would probably have to wait.

She sank onto the sofa in the living room with a sigh. How stupid to go outside, today of all days. She should have listened to her gut and stayed indoors. The Incident had created a different set of rules for her; pushing them was as risky as pushing the Law. Flaming military, swaggering around

in their orange cloaks doing whatever they pleased.

No, she couldn't blame them. Running into her during an execution procession for a Chosen Violation had been too appealing an opportunity for her tormentors to resist. Since she'd created the situation by leaving her apartment, she had only herself to blame. It had been her fault. It always was.

Mo grabbed her comm unit from the night table and squinted at the time—09:27. She set it back down, rolled onto her side, and pulled the blanket over her head. The creaking floors and hurried footsteps in the corridor were getting to her. She should get up, but for what? When she'd beeped Papa last night, he'd said he'd be tied up in meetings all day, so their plans were still on hold. She could beep Kary, see if she wanted to meet for lunch or an early supper. But truth be told, Mo wasn't in the mood to socialize.

Spending time with Ross had distracted her for a bit, but then she'd had plenty of time to brood on her own. And, oh yeah, to hear Les's name dropped in every flaming conversation she happened to overhear. Yesterday had been one long reminder that she no longer shared Les's special moments. What a day to remember for Les, but Mo hadn't been a part of it; she hadn't been there to cheer her on and to embrace her afterward and tell her how proud she was. No, she'd sat in an auditorium, like a stranger whose only connection to Les was a familiarity with her image on a screen. At least this time another woman hadn't screeched Les's name from the sidelines, but that would change. She and Les weren't Chosens. They'd never be together again. This drudgery known as her life wasn't a temporary state of being. She had years of this to look forward to, while pretending she cared about some woman she'd rather not meet in the first place.

Les was clearly on the way up. Her appearances on the monitors would only increase, especially since she apparently hadn't given two thoughts about how Mo would feel about it. Mo pulled the blanket off her face and balled it in her hands. She'd hear about every one of Les's career milestones and imagine the celebrations afterward, while her own milestones took place in obscurity. It wasn't fair!

Not only that, she'd overestimated her importance to Les. Had she honestly believed that Les would pine for the rest of her life, instead of striving to honour the Tradition by embracing her Chosen and her family? This was Les, right? Les had almost cried at the procession because she was proud of her role in capturing the criminal. Argamon, next time they printed a new edition of *What It Means to be Rymellan* for the Indoctrination Academies, they should put Les's image on the front cover! Yeah, Mo had

been kidding herself all this time. Les would eventually view her as nothing more than a footnote, someone she'd bided her time with before Joining.

Mo sighed and rolled over again. Okay, why was she suddenly mad at Les? What else was Les supposed to do? Lie around in bed all day, like her? Disobey orders? Finney had probably shoved her in front of the monitors and made sure she was front and centre at the procession. That was who Mo should be mad at—Commander flaming Finney. From the moment she'd got her claws into—

Someone rapped at the door. Mo lay still. Whoever it was could just move along and leave her alone. Her jaw clenched when they rapped again, louder. Would they give up, already? She was on leave . . . if she wanted to take a day off from her life to indulge in a little self-pity, that was her business. After almost two years of dragging herself out of bed and making a great show of enjoying her life, she deserved one. Tomorrow she'd get back to acting as if she cared.

"Lieutenant Commander Middleton!" shouted whoever was on the other side of the door. "If you're in there, please come to the door, or I'll be forced to activate your beacon."

That got her attention. She kicked off the blanket. "Just a minute," she called as she scrambled into her housecoat. Wait a second . . . it better not be Andrew or Nathan disguising his voice. Andrew, in particular, would pull a prank like this. But she couldn't risk not opening the door. Ignoring someone with the authority to activate a comm unit beacon would likely offend someone very powerful.

She tied the housecoat's belt, swung the door open, and—a gold-cloaked courier stood in the corridor. "You are Lieutenant Commander Ramona Middleton?" he said.

Mo gaped at him. *Nod, you imbecile, nod!* She nodded.

The courier handed her an envelope, then bowed. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," she said, more out of habit than because she was coherent.

He smiled and strode down the corridor. Somehow Mo had the presence of mind to shut the door. In her hand, her fate. She turned the envelope over several times. Opening it would either shatter her dream forever or give her a reason to keep hoping. If she was the Principal, it would be a matter of waiting to see if Les also received her Papers today. If not, and her meeting wouldn't take place in C3 . . . She tossed the envelope onto the desk, sat on the bed, and stared at it.

Only a few days ago, she'd wondered who to beg to receive her Papers, positive that their arrival would bring her and Les back together. Since then, she'd doubted. To open that envelope, she needed to believe again, needed to reach inside and find that part of herself that never wavered. Les was her Chosen. She had to be. If she wasn't—no, Mo had to

believe. She had to believe!

She took a deep breath, then went to the desk. Her hands shook as she carefully ripped open the envelope and slid out the sheets inside. Another deep breath, then she started to read. *Lieutenant Commander Ramona Middleton . . . pleased to inform you that I will introduce you to your Principal . . .*

Mo stopped. She wasn't the Principal. If her meeting wouldn't take place at the Chosen House in C3, it was over. Really over. She swallowed and forced her eyes back to the page. Okay . . . *introduce you to your Principal on July 10th, at 11:00 a.m., at the Chosen House in your Principal's sector of residence, C3.*

She blinked and read it again . . . *at the Chosen House in your Principal's sector of residence, C3.*

Okay, that said C3, right? Her brain wasn't translating it to what she wanted to see, was it? She traced the letter and number with her hand. C . . . 3 . . . it really did say C3! And she was certain she wasn't dreaming. But she wouldn't celebrate, not until she knew for sure. A shot of adrenaline had just resuscitated her flagging hope, but it was still only hope. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that her Principal was another woman in C3, though that would be too awful to bear. It must be Les, and if it was, she could see Les *today*. And she could beep her right now, as she'd promised.

But what would she say? Flaming Argamon, just talk! She was beeping Les, not someone she didn't know. At least she hoped she wasn't beeping someone she no longer knew. She punched in Les's comm code and tried to slow her breathing. Les's message played. "Les, it's me. Mo. We promised to tell each other—" *Calm down!* She was talking so fast, she sounded as if she'd inhaled helium. "We promised we'd tell each other when we received Papers," she said, trying to enunciate her words. "Well, mine came. Um, today, they weren't waiting for me when the *Falcon* docked. I'm not the Principal. The funny thing is, my Principal lives in C3!"

A quaver had crept into her voice. She gulped and forged ahead. "It has to be you, right? So if—when you get your Papers today, beep me. Here are the details of my meeting, in case you want to compare them to yours." Mo read them, making sure to mention that someone named Albert Watkins was handling her case. "So beep me, okay?" she said again. "Even if you don't get them. Remember, I want to say a proper good-bye."

Her chin trembled. She disconnected, not wanting to end the message by sobbing into her comm unit. A hundred things she could have said flooded her mind. She'd say them later, in person. Until then, she'd have to keep herself busy; she didn't want to sit alone in her room, biting her fingernails and tormenting herself with the worst possible scenario: not hearing from Les at all. If Les didn't beep . . . if she wasn't Mo's Chosen and didn't honour her promise . . . Or what if Les listened to the message and

desperately hoped that her Papers wouldn't arrive today? What if she—okay, enough. See? She couldn't wait alone, or she'd become an incoherent wreck.

Mo punched another code into the comm unit. "Good, I caught you before you went into a meeting," she said when Papa answered.

"I'm about to go into one."

"I have to talk to you. Just for a minute."

"Are you all right? You sound funny."

"Papa, my Papers came." He gasped. "Ten minutes ago."

"Are you the Principal?"

"No." Her eyes filled. Hope mingled with fear. "My Principal lives in C3. C3!" No reaction. "Papa?" Apparently she'd rendered him speechless. "It has to be her, right? I mean, the Way . . . it wouldn't be that cruel, would it?"

"I want you to go home," he said firmly. "I'll excuse myself from the meeting."

She was hoping he'd say that. "But what if—"

"Everyone will understand when I tell them your Papers just arrived."

"But—"

"We have plans to make. And I'll feel better if you're at home."

So would she. If Les didn't beep . . . if she wasn't her Chosen . . . Mo would need her family more than she'd ever needed them before. "But what if Les is home and it's not her?"

"She won't be home. She'll still be dealing with the Chosen Violation, probably stuck in meetings all day like I would have been." He paused. "I'll beep Adelaide, let her know what's happened and that Lesley might have to stay somewhere else for a while."

"No! Please don't do that, Papa! Don't tell anyone, okay?" If he ruined her chances of speaking to Les one last time, she'd never forgive him. "Keep this between us for now."

"Nathan might be home."

"If he is, I'll tell him when I get there. I want to make sure he keeps it to himself."

He tutted. "All right, all right, but we can't wait too long."

Hopefully they wouldn't have to. As soon as Les beeped to say she'd received her Papers, they could shout it from the rooftops. But if Les hadn't beeped by the time the sun set, Mo didn't want her entire family staring at her as the realization sank in that she'd never speak to Les again and would be forced into a relationship with a stranger—in three days!

"I'm leaving now," Papa said. "When I get home, I want to see your aviacraft there."

"I haven't even showered."

"Then get going!" His voice softened. "I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Me too." She terminated the connection and checked her messages.

None. Well, a whole five minutes had passed, and if Les was in a meeting, she'd probably turned off her comm unit.

After a quick shower, Mo checked her messages again and beeped the residence coordinator to surrender her room. She was in the middle of stuffing the few things she'd unpacked into her bag when someone knocked at the door. Mo's heart leaped into her mouth. It couldn't be—no, she'd beep first, surely. Her heart stopped racing when she opened the door to Ann.

"I'm on my way to the dining room for a late breakfast," Ann said. "You eaten yet?"

"Uh . . ."

Ann looked past her into the room. "You unpacking the rest of your stuff?"

"Um, not exactly." Mo walked over to the bed and motioned for Ann to follow her. "My Papers just came."

Ann's jaw dropped. "Your Chosen Papers?"

What else? "Yeah, my Chosen Papers. You didn't hear the courier?"

"I was probably in the shower."

"Oh." And yet her hair looked as if she'd just dragged herself out of bed. Maybe she'd spent the night with Ensign Bennett and didn't want to say. "They came about half an hour ago. So I'm going home."

Ann's face fell, then she quickly masked her disappointment with a smile. "Good. I thought I'd have to spend my entire downtime babysitting you. I have things I want to do."

Mo rolled her eyes and returned to her packing.

"I thought you'd be a wreck when your Papers came."

The wreck part would come later, if Les wasn't her Chosen.

"You the Principal?" Ann asked.

Mo shook her head.

Ann looked away, thoughtful. "Wonder what your name will be."

"There's a good chance it'll be Thompson."

Ann snorted. "Time to give it up, Mo. Seriously."

She might as well tell her. "My Principal lives in C3."

Silence, then, "No way."

Mo zipped up the bag and gestured toward the desk. "See for yourself. My Papers are right there."

Ann picked them up and read the top page. Underneath were a map to the Chosen House and a notification meeting rules refresher. "Argamon," Ann breathed. She threw the sheets back onto the desk. "I guess you won't be needing me anymore. Enjoy your life." She marched from the room.

For a split second, Mo considered not doing anything. Then she sighed and ran after her. "Ann! Wait a minute."

Ann spun around. "What?"

"Just because Les is probably my Chosen doesn't mean we can't hang

out.”

“You say that now.”

“I mean it! Look, I know you never show up for stuff when you’re on a break, but I’ll send you an invitation to the notification party, okay?” She must be insane. “You can catch up with everyone.”

“Well, I’ll have to check my schedule, see if I’m available,” Ann said, shrugging.

“Yeah, do that. Anyway, I have to go. Check your dispatches!” Without waiting for a reply, she returned to her room and tried to quell her growing excitement at the thought of celebrating with everyone at her and Les’s notification party. They’d hold a joint one—it would be silly not to. She couldn’t wait to dance with Les—she’d told her they’d dance again! No, she shouldn’t imagine what they’d do. She knew it was irrational, but she’d always been afraid that visualizing and planning what would happen when they received Papers would jinx their chances. Though Les’s Papers must be in a courier’s bag by now, right?

Mo lifted her bag from the bed and grabbed her Papers from the desk. Time to go home . . . and wait.

“In conclusion, we recommend that information be distributed to all Rymellans about the acceptable therapies and techniques employed by counsellors, along with a list of suspect behaviours to watch for. We have also included the list of articles we would like covered during the refresher examination.” Hall glanced around the table. “Agreed?”

Affirmative sounds filled the room. Lesley stifled a yawn and stretched her legs under the table. Apart from a couple of quick breaks, during which she’d barely had time to dash to the bathroom, they’d been in the room since 09:00. They’d ordered in lunch.

“I’ll dispatch this to the government immediately,” Hall said. “Before we adjourn, I’d like to say two things. First, I’m pleased with how you’ve all handled the past couple of days. This morning I reviewed yesterday’s sector report. Only six strikes related to Article 553. Impressive. If other regions report the same, we’ll likely lift 553 tomorrow. Until then, keep up the good work.” He stood. “And now the type of announcement I always enjoy making. I invited Lieutenant Commander Thompson because I thought she’d have valuable input to offer regarding our report to the government.”

Lesley had been wondering. Over half the room outranked Laura.

“But that’s not the only reason.” He turned to Lesley and smiled.

“Finney and Thompson, stand up.”

She rose to her feet, resisting the urge to look at Laura.

“Commander Finney, Lieutenant Commander Thompson, I’m pleased

to announce that you will both be awarded the Medal of the Protector for protecting the Chosen Tradition. Congratulations.”

Everyone rose to their feet and clapped. Cries of “Good work!” and “For the Way!” filled the room. Lesley was taken aback—she hadn’t done much—but she smiled and said, “Thank you.”

“The Preeminent Ruler will present you with the medal at an awards ceremony to be announced soon.”

The Preeminent Ruler! Mo would—Lesley continued to smile.

“At the same ceremony, Counsellor Abrams will be presented with the Commendation of the Way for her diligence. I have sent her our congratulations.” Hall paused. “And that brings us to the end of the meeting. Finney and Thompson, if you would remain behind, please. The rest of you, dismissed.”

After everyone else had left, Hall rounded the table to join Lesley and Laura. “Again, congratulations.” He exchanged glances with Laura; Lesley had the feeling Laura knew what he was going to say next. “I continue to be impressed with your work and dedication, Lieutenant Commander,” Hall said. “Commander Finney’s days as a commander are running out. Next month, she’ll be promoted to commodore.”

Laura had mentioned her promotion when they’d lunched together last week, but in her usual self-effacing manner, had quickly moved on to another topic after confirming that she’d still head the Chosen Tradition group.

“Commander Myers will retire next year. That will leave me two commanders down.” Hall assumed a more relaxed stance. “Commanders have a tremendous amount of power. Anyone who may be promoted to that rank must undergo a six-month training program. You’re exactly what we look for in commanders. I’d like you to enter the training program next month, but the choice is yours. It’s perfectly acceptable to not want to advance to commander. About a third of those we approach decline to advance.”

“And we don’t approach many,” Laura added. “Only the best.”

“We’ve had our eye on you for years, as you know. Perhaps you’ve already given some thought to this decision.”

Lesley had. Her work would always be her sanctuary; she didn’t have to pretend that it interested her. And as she’d said to Mo, having career goals, something to strive for, would give her a reason to get up in the morning. “Yes, I have. I’d be honoured to enter the training program.”

Hall and Laura smiled. “Excellent,” Hall said. “I’ll make the arrangements. Dismissed.”

“I’m having a ‘the mentoree catches up with the mentor’ moment,” Laura said as they left the room. Lesley hoped that meant Laura was proud, and a glance at Laura’s face confirmed that she was. “We’ll have to remove

you from the Defence and Interior supply lists. You should still have time to investigate the odd tip, and I want you to continue writing opinions. Hall wanted to keep you on the monitors, but I told him you'll be too busy."

"Thank you," Lesley said with relief.

"Don't thank me. I've only bought you some time. He'll probably bring it up again once you've completed the training program."

Then in the meantime, she'd keep her eye out for other opportunities, perhaps request that Blair assign her more cases. Unfortunately the medal news would be all over the monitors, and perhaps the presentation, too.

"Congratulations on the medal," Laura said, as if she'd read Lesley's mind.

"Congratulations to you, too. You deserve it. I don't feel I do."

Laura's brows rose. "Why?"

"I understand why you're receiving it—you head the group and you executed him. But why am I receiving it? Why aren't the other members of the group?"

"They weren't involved in the investigation to the extent that you were. You decided to move forward with the case. You were involved in every step of the investigation. They conducted a few routine interviews, that's all." Laura stopped in front of her office. "What time do you start your patrol tomorrow?"

"11:00."

"Then let's meet here at 09:00. I want to talk to you about the training program."

Lesley nodded and murmured a good-bye, then continued on to her own office. Her comm unit had been off all day; the first thing she did when she sat at her desk was check her messages. She had twenty-two! She decided to scan the list before listening to them, to see if any required her immediate attention. Most of her recent messages had been congratulatory in nature and could wait. Higgins—probably congratulatory. Thompson—Lesley would be home in a couple of hours; Mama could wait. Middleton. Middleton? She couldn't breathe. *Middleton! Lt. Cmdr. R. Middleton!* That could only mean one thing. Or was she beeping because she was sick of seeing Lesley's face all over the monitors? With trembling fingers, Lesley selected the message and played it.

*Les, it's me. Mo.*

Lesley started to weep.

*We promised to tell each other . . . We promised we'd tell each other when we received Papers. Well, mine came. Um, today, they weren't waiting for me when the Falcon docked. I'm not the Principal. The funny thing is—*

Lesley paused the message, stood, and walked to the window. *Les.* She hadn't heard that for almost two years. Two years of pushing down and locking away her feelings, struggling to keep them at bay, only to have one

word instantly disarm her. *Les*. She drew a shuddering breath and wiped away her tears. So Mo hadn't been the only one clinging to the possibility that they could be Chosens. Had Lesley fooled everyone, or just herself? And now what? All she could do was try to make sense of it, try to understand how she was supposed to live the rest of her life without the only woman she'd ever loved and ever been interested in loving. Try to assure herself that the crushing sense of loss threatening to drive her to her knees would eventually subside.

She hadn't taken much leave since joining Interior. If she asked, would Laura grant her leave, effective immediately? She wanted to be as far away from C3 as she could get, didn't want even a glimpse of Mo and her Chosen. But she couldn't stay away forever. How would she make sense of this? She and Mo were only five months apart in age; they'd met before they understood they existed. Never to see her again . . . The last two years had been difficult, but she'd had hope—buried, but there. Without it . . .

Her comm station beeped. Lesley stepped toward it and peered through her tears at the screen. Hall. She cleared her throat and pressed the connect button. "Yes, Admiral."

"Can you come back to the conference room? There's one more point about the investigation I'd like to clear up."

"Of course. I'm on my way." Afterward, she'd tell Laura about Mo and request permission to go home. She wanted to pack a bag and be away from the estate as soon as possible. Later, when she'd pulled herself together, she'd listen to the rest of Mo's message and figure out what to say to her. Now she wished she hadn't promised to reply. It was over. Talking to Mo would only hurt.

But first, Hall. Lesley headed to the bathroom to splash water on her face. She studied herself in the mirror, straightened her collar, and squared her shoulders. Presentable—barely.

She could hear chatter and laughter emanating from the conference room as she approached. Hall must be in the middle of another meeting and someone had raised a question that required her input. All she had to do was get through the next couple of minutes and then go see Laura.

Hall, on his feet, motioned for her to enter. She walked in—and stopped dead. Applause and cheers filled the room. Hall walked over to the Chosen Council courier standing at the front. "I ran into a very patient courier in the lobby," Hall said, to laughter. "She's looking for you."

Blood rushed to Lesley's face.

"Lieutenant Commander Lesley Thompson?" the courier said.

She stepped forward. "Yes."

The courier handed her an envelope and bowed. "Congratulations."

The room burst into applause again. Lesley could hardly breathe.  
Mo . . . her Papers . . .

"Open it!" someone shouted, then another. She glanced at those gathered—Blair, Laura, the Chosen Tradition group, Woods, other colleagues with whom she worked, in the past or in the present. "Open it!" more shouted. But not Laura, who looked mortified, her hand covering her mouth.

Lesley ripped open the envelope and drew out her Papers. "I'm the Principal," she said after skimming the first paragraph. She forced a smile. It wasn't genuine. Not yet.

Congratulations and applause rang out again. "This is turning out to be quite a day for you, Lieutenant Commander," Hall said, beaming.

If what she suspected turned out to be true, he didn't know the half of it.

He turned to Laura. "I think it would be appropriate for the lieutenant commander to take a two-week leave, don't you, Commander?"

"I completely agree," Laura said, her eyes on Lesley's face. "We shouldn't have a problem finding others to fill her supply assignments. And I'm sure the lieutenant commander would like to inform her family. Let's not keep her any longer."

Hall clapped his hands together. "Dismissed."

Lesley graciously accepted murmured congratulations on her way out of the room. Forget her family, she wanted to listen to the rest of Mo's message!

Laura caught up to her in the corridor. "I tried to tell him that it might be better if you received your Papers in your office, but he wouldn't hear of it. Are you all right?"

"I might be. I want to get back to my office, have a few minutes alone."

"Sure. You beep me if you need me, okay?"

Lesley nodded absently and quickened her pace. After shutting her office door, she started Mo's message again, from the beginning. Still standing, she listened.

*Les, it's me. Mo. We promised to tell each other . . . We promised we'd tell each other when we received Papers. Well, mine came. Um, today, they weren't waiting for me when the Falcon docked. I'm not the Principal. The funny thing is, my Principal lives in C3! Mo's voice started to shake. It has to be you, right? So if—when you get your Papers today, beep me. Here are the details of my meeting, in case you want to compare them to yours.*

Lesley paused the message and drew out the top sheet from the envelope she still held, then hit *Resume*. Her excitement mounted as she listened to Mo's meeting details. The same Council member was handling their cases and her meeting would take place one hour before Mo's. Not only would Watkins not have time to meet with another Principal before Mo's meeting, but the two meetings were always held an hour apart. Karen, David, Neil, other Principals she knew—they'd met their Chosens an hour

later.

*So beep me, okay? Even if you don't get them. Remember, I want to say a proper good-bye.*

Lesley sank into her chair, her vision blurring. There wouldn't be any good-byes today. Mo had been right all along. She'd been flaming right all along. *Mo Middleton, I love you. I flaming love you!* She wouldn't have to imagine Mo with someone else, nor would she have to try to care for someone else. Lesley lowered her head onto the desk and cried, filled with joy and shame. Yes, shame! She never should have doubted the Way. Mo hadn't.

A knock at the door had her reaching for a handkerchief. "Just a minute," she shouted.

"It's Laura," came the muffled reply.

Lesley dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose. "Come in."

Laura took one look at her and shut the door. "I was starting to worry." Her forehead creased. "You should go home. I'll go with you, if you like."

"It's okay. I'm not upset, I'm happy."

Laura raised a brow. "You don't look happy."

"Mo's Papers came today."

"What?"

"Her Principal lives in C3. The same member is handling our meetings and they're one hour apart. She's my Chosen." Saying it almost had her in tears again, but she managed to fight them back.

Laura swallowed. "Lesley, I—"

"Don't." Lesley rose and lifted her cloak from its hook. "I would have done exactly what you did under the same circumstances. I hope you'll come to our notification party, all of you."

"We will."

"Good." Lesley slipped into her cloak. "I'm going to the Military Academy. I'll beep her on the way."

"Um, I wouldn't go to the Military Academy," Laura said sheepishly.

"Why not?"

"She's at home."

"Oh." Lesley gave Laura a long look. "I guess I'll head that way, then. Thanks for letting me know." Without another word, she turned and left.

Jayne read her Papers for what must have been the twentieth time, then sighed and let the sheets drop to the table. This was the moment she'd dreaded since the day she turned eighteen and learned that she wasn't a Solitary. When she'd turned twenty-five last month, the thought that she

was old enough to receive Papers had flitted across her mind, but she'd ignored it, since it was rare to be notified so early. Yet here was her notification, in black and white, right before her eyes.

And somewhere, some poor woman had received her Papers and was probably celebrating the news with her family and looking forward to the future, not knowing what was about to hit her. What a shocking disappointment it would be when this Albert Watkins told her who her Chosen was! The poor woman would be saddled not only with the Adams name, which was bad enough on its own, but with Jayne.

Although Jayne wasn't naive enough to believe everything others said about her, she sometimes wondered if there must be some truth to the whispers. They couldn't all be wrong, could they? What if there was substance to what they said? What if she *had* inherited her parents' taint? What if she *was* ugly, and stupid, and everything else they claimed in their taunts? She'd always told herself that she had no friends because it would be social suicide to associate with her, but what if that wasn't the only reason nobody had ever taken an interest?

Now someone would at least pretend to, but Jayne wished it would be by choice, not because she was forced on the woman. She'd always been forced on people, making the rounds with reluctant yet dutiful relatives until she was old enough to live on her own. For once, it would be nice if someone other than Carol chose to spend time with her, but why would anyone want to? Even her own parents hadn't cared enough to want to see her grow up. That said a lot about her, none of it good.

If her Chosen couldn't see past her name and family history, Jayne would have to accept whatever her Chosen was willing to give. It would be nice to have some company every once in a while, someone to talk to, to walk with, to share the occasional meal. If that was all her Chosen could manage, it would have to be enough. It was certainly more than she had now, especially since Carol had Joined.

Jayne read her Papers again. C3. Home to many old families. Respectable families. Her mouth felt dry. She sipped tziva from the mug that sat at her elbow.

Someone tapped a familiar pattern on her apartment door, then Jayne heard the door swing open. Moments later, Carol bustled into the kitchen. "What's the panic?" she barked, shrugging off her cloak and throwing it over the back of a chair. "Don't tell me you've been docked your living allowance again. I helped you out last time, but I can't keep doing that. Ronald won't be pleased if I hand you another bunch of credits." She frowned. "What happened to your chin?"

"Oh, I was stupid, banged it on a cupboard door," Jayne said, avoiding Carol's eyes. "Anyway, I haven't been docked my allowance." She waited while Carol plunked into a chair and poured herself some tziva, then pushed

her Papers across the table.

Carol instantly recognized them. "Already? But you only just turned twenty-five." She scanned the top sheet. "When did they arrive?"

"About two this afternoon." The courier had practically thrown the envelope at her.

"Three is an odd time for a notification meeting. Notifications usually take place in the morning. I've never heard of one taking place this late."

"What do you think it means?" Jayne asked, holding her voice steady despite her fear.

Carol shrugged. "I don't know. There's probably some Chosen Council function that day and so the notifications are later." She pointed at the sheet. "Your Chosen lives in C3. That's one of the oldest sectors."

"Filled with respectable families, none of which will want me," Jayne said quietly.

Carol looked at her. "Your Chosen belongs to one of those families. That means you belong to one of them, too."

"I doubt it'll be that easy." Especially with a Chosen Violation fresh on everyone's mind.

"Maybe not in the beginning, but once they get to know you, I'm sure everything will be fine," Carol said as she returned her gaze to the sheet in front of her.

"I'll be a good Chosen to her."

Carol lifted her head again. "I know you will. And she'll eventually realize that, too. Look at me and Ronald."

"You don't have the name."

"I have the blood."

"Only on your mama's side." And Jayne's aunt never missed an opportunity to remind everyone that she was the good sister who'd had no idea there was a monster in her midst. That was the name of the game for Jayne's relatives—distancing themselves from the Incident and expressing nothing but disgust for those involved. Unfortunately their contempt extended to her. Apart from Carol, none of her relatives had bothered with her much since she'd turned seventeen. She was a walking reminder of what had happened; her mere existence sullied their reputations and names.

"Carol, I'm their *child*." She couldn't distance herself. *Freak!*

Carol was honest enough not to argue. She glanced at the sheet again. "So, you'll be introduced to your Chosen in three days. Do you have anything to wear?"

"I . . . yeah, I'm sure I have something in the closet."

"And I'm sure you don't. We'll have to go to the Trading Centre."

"Carol, I—"

"Don't worry, I've been putting aside credits for this. I wasn't expecting it to happen so soon, but it doesn't matter. I have enough for a

new outfit and a bit to spare. I was saving for caterers in case you were the Principal."

A lump formed in Jayne's throat. "Why? I know you said you were going to, but you were nineteen. I didn't think—I mean . . ."

"You didn't think I'd actually do it?" Carol eyed her over the rim of her mug. "Why wouldn't I? It didn't look like anybody else was going to. Anyway, it was nothing, just a few credits here and there."

"Does Ronald know?"

"Yes, he knows. He's okay with it. I told you, it's not a big deal."

"It is to me." Jayne went to Carol and embraced her, forcing Carol to set her mug on the table. "Thank you so much." A new outfit wouldn't make a difference, but Carol's gesture mattered more than Jayne could express.

"It's nothing, really," Carol said gruffly. She gave Jayne a squeeze. "I can't believe you're being Joined. You're so young." Suddenly she pushed Jayne back. "No sketchbook."

"But—"

"No. Absolutely not. You can't possibly take a sketchbook to your notification."

Jayne felt a frisson of anxiety. She never went outside without a sketchbook. What would she do with her hands?

"You'll be focused on the meeting and your new family," Carol assured her. "You won't even miss it."

She could sit on them, perhaps.

"Jayne," Carol said urgently.

"Okay. I won't take one with me."

"Good." Carol drained her mug and studied Jayne's face. "What about Robert?"

Jayne immediately forgot the sketchbook. "What about him?" she asked, sitting down next to Carol.

"Have you told him?"

When she didn't answer, Carol said, "You haven't told him, have you? Are you going to?"

"I don't see why I should."

"Come on. You have to tell him. How do you think he'll feel if he finds out by reading a public announcement?"

"I doubt he'll care."

"Of course he'll care," Carol said sharply. "He's your brother! He should hear it from you. Why don't you beep him, let him know? I'm sure he'll want to be involved. He'll want to support you."

Jayne snorted. "Robert, supportive?" That would mean he'd be thinking of someone other than himself. "And what does he know about being Joined? He's a Solitary."

"That may be, but he's older than you and he's been with Kelly for

years. And he's the only person who can stand with you on the steps of the Chosen House on your Joining Day. Do you want to stand all by yourself?"

Hmm, stand with Robert or alone? Not a difficult question to answer. "I don't need him to stand with me."

"You're so stubborn, you know that?" Carol said, shaking her head. "Why don't you give him a chance? He wants to be involved in your life, Jayne. He misses you. He's sorry about what happened, he really is."

"Is he, now?"

"He knows he handled it badly."

Jayne's eyes almost fell out of her head. "Handled it badly? Is that what he said? *Handled it badly?*"

Carol placed her hand on Jayne's arm. "Calm down."

Jayne drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

"Why won't you agree to see him? Even once a month?"

"I saw him on his birthday," she mumbled.

"Only because Kelly practically begged you on her knees to have supper with them. And when you were there, you hardly said two words."

Jayne shot to her feet. "Well, I'm sorry my visit didn't meet everyone's expectations. I was there, okay? I didn't even want to go. And yes, Kelly begged me, not Robert. I don't know why you two won't get it through your heads that we want nothing to do with each other."

Carol opened her mouth, then clamped it shut when Jayne raised her hand. "And don't tell me again how sorry you think he is. I've heard it all before—how young he was, how he'd do it all differently if he had the chance, how he'll make it up to me. And you know what? I don't care, because I know that's you talking, not him. We both know he's not sorry. So stop trying to push us together. It's not happening, Carol. It's not." She sank back into the chair, trembling.

Carol lifted her hands in a gesture of surrender. "All right, all right. I just thought you might want him around right now."

"I have you." She looked at Carol. "I hope," she added hesitantly, mortified at her outburst.

"Of course you do."

Jayne sighed. "I don't know why you take his side."

"I'm not taking his side. I'd like to see the two of you talking to each other, that's all. You're each other's closest family."

As of her notification meeting, that would no longer be true. And yes, she'd complained about being lonely, but she'd never be so desperate that she'd let Robert back into her life.

"Okay, so you don't want to tell him," Carol said. "Do you mind if I do, just to let him know?"

"Do whatever you want. Just don't talk about him anymore."

"Fine." Carol leaned forward. "Oh, guess what Ronald heard on the

train the other day.”

“What?” Jayne asked, settling back to listen to Carol recount a story about Rymellans she didn’t know. Anything was better than talking about Robert. If she never heard his name again, it would be too soon.

Mo bit her thumbnail and stared out the living room window. “What time is it?”

Papa sighed. “Two minutes later than the last time you asked.”

About 16:30, then. She groaned when she tasted blood and shoved her hand into her pocket. She needed that thumb to fly. “Les should have had them by now.”

“She could still be in a meeting.”

Or hadn’t been in a meeting all day and wasn’t her Chosen.

“Come sit down.”

“I can’t. Why hasn’t she beeped?” Mo turned away from the window when Papa didn’t respond.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Why don’t you have a bite to eat? You barely touched lunch.”

“I can’t.” She couldn’t do anything, not until she knew one way or the other. “Who else do we know in C3 that’s female, same-oriented, and the right age?”

“We’ve already done this,” Papa said with a pained expression.

“Maybe we forgot someone. Oh, what about Julie Slater?”

Nathan, lounging on the sofa, lowered his biology textbook. “She’s twenty-three.”

“Oh. And you’re sure Tina Lane was already notified?”

“Positive.”

“Okay. What about—” Her comm unit beeped. She yanked it from its holder. *Lt. Cmdr. L. Thompson*. “It’s her!”

Papa and Nathan stood. She took a deep breath and pressed the connect button. “Hi.”

“I got my Papers. Our details match,” Les blurted.

Her knees buckled. “Where are you?” she managed to say as Papa gripped her arm.

“Approaching the estate. I’ll land next to your craft.”

Mo had to ask. She’d rather work at rekindling their love than live a lie while Les despaired. “Les . . . is this still what you want?” She’d sounded tentative. “Be honest. I’d rather know the truth.”

“Mo, I want this more than anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! I can’t wait to see you. Why don’t you come meet me?”

Mo didn't need to be asked twice. "I'm on my way!" As soon as she disconnected, she started to cry. "Papa, it's true, it's actually happening," she wailed.

He embraced her. "It's about time we had a Middleton-Thompson match."

Nathan patted her back. "Congratulations."

She pulled away from Papa. "I'm going."

"Here," Nathan said, holding out a handkerchief.

Mo hastily wiped her eyes. She'd cry when she saw Les, so there wasn't much point in worrying about how she looked.

Papa followed her into the hallway. "Mo, you have to come right back. The Thompsons have to be told, we have to plan the party, they'll want to arrange the notification lunch . . ."

"I know." If it were up to Mo, they'd go right to the lake and catch up. But she could be patient; after all, they had the rest of their lives. The rest of their flaming lives! She punched her fist into the air and grabbed her cloak. "See you in a bit."

She went to hop on her bike, but decided against it. What would she do with it when she met Les? A military patrol wouldn't be too impressed with a bike left out in the middle of nowhere and would strike her, so she'd have to walk it back. Strolling arm-in-arm with Les was much more appealing. She started walking as fast as she could without running, chewing her other thumbnail while keeping her eyes peeled for Les.

Her breath caught in her throat. Was that Les, walking toward her? Argamon, it was her! "Les!" Mo broke into a run, almost tripping in her haste to reach her. She wanted to touch her, squeeze her, make sure she was real. And then she was in Les's arms, her lips on Les's neck, her cheek, pressed against her mouth; she ran her hand through Les's hair and then collapsed against her and sobbed.

Les held her and stroked her hair; Mo could feel her trembling. She raised her head and brushed away Les's tears. "We did it, Les. We survived." And nobody would ever have the power to come between them again.

Les took Mo's face in her hands. "We never should have doubted the Chosen Council. No, *I* never should have doubted the Chosen Council."

"I had my moments," Mo admitted. "But inside, I always knew. We've always loved each other like Chosens."

"And we'll always be together," Les said, touching her forehead to Mo's.

Mo nodded, dazed. It would be nice to have something pleasant sink in for a change.

Les ran her fingers through Mo's hair. "It's long."

"I'm overdue for a cut. I'll get Neil to cut it before the party." And what a party it would be! "How did you know I'd be here and not at the Military

Academy?"

"Laura told me."

Laura? "Who's Laura?"

Les's brow furrowed for a moment, then she said, "Oh. Finney. Laura Finney."

Mo felt her mouth tighten. So it was Laura now, was it? They'd talk about that later. She wouldn't let Finney, or whatever the flaming Argamon she was called, put a damper on their reunion.

"I want to hear how you've been, what you've been doing," Les gripped Mo's shoulders, "everything."

"I want that, too. I mean, I've wondered how you're doing in Interior, if you like it." And about the friend Les had stayed with during last leave . . . They'd also have to discuss their careers, with her being in Defence and Les being in Interior. But again, that could wait. "And the last few days must have been insane."

"It wasn't my idea to go on the monitors," Les told her.

"I figured."

"I just hoped you were proud of me." Les swallowed.

Mo compressed her lips until she was sure she could hold herself together. "Oh, Les, of course—" Her comm unit beeped. Papa. "I know, I know, we're coming back," she muttered.

Les motioned for the comm unit and took it from Mo. "I have to tell my parents," she said to Papa. "Why don't you come over to us and tell everyone else to meet us there? We should all have supper together, start celebrating."

"That's a splendid idea!"

Les handed the comm unit back to Mo. "Do you have your Papers with you?" she asked.

Mo shook her head. "Bring my Papers with you," she said to Papa. "I'll see you there." She disconnected to forestall any argument. "Do you have yours?"

"In my inner pocket." Les sighed. "We'd better go. I do have to tell my parents. But let's walk. I'll come back for the craft later."

Mo smiled when Les stretched out her arm and snuggled into her as they strolled toward the Thompsons'. She slipped her arm around Les's waist. "Mo Middleton Thompson," she murmured, looking up at her. "It has a nice ring to it."

Les briefly closed her eyes. "It certainly does."

Mo sipped her juice and surveyed the dance floor, relieved that she had a minute to herself while Les danced with a cousin. A joint notification

party with Les was a dream come true; she still half-expected to wake up in her bed on the *Falcon*. Fortunately Interior had lifted 553 the previous day. An afternoon party wouldn't have been the same.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder and asked her to dance. Oh well, it had been nice while it lasted. She turned around and gaped. "Are you serious?"

"It's the only way we can talk. You've been on the dance floor all night," Ann snapped.

Mo couldn't deny that. "Okay." She set her glass on a nearby table and walked onto the dance floor, muttering, "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"I'll lead," Ann said.

"Fine." She felt Ann's hand on her back. "So what do you want to talk about?"

"I was just wondering what you'll be doing. Will you be going on tour? Is Lesley transferring back to Defence?"

Mo waited until they'd completed the next dance step before replying. "No, I'm not going on tour. As for Les, I don't know. I'm not sure what's going to happen there."

"You mean you might never go on tour again?" Ann exclaimed.

"They want her to be a commander," Mo said, leaning toward Ann even though nobody else could hear her over the music. "And she seems to enjoy what she's doing. But she doesn't want to stop me from doing what I enjoy, either. So we're not sure what we'll do. All we've decided so far is that I'll sit out the next tour." She let go of Ann's left hand so Ann could spin her around, then grasped it again. "You just might see me on 72 every once in a while."

"Maybe we'll fly together."

"Maybe. I won't be flying a regular rotation—not right away, anyway." No more separations, even short ones, unless she had no choice. Les would no longer have time to fly supply for Defence, not with her six-month commander training, so Mo had replaced her on the supply list. Les had said there was always work, that she'd had to turn down supply opportunities. But would Defence want Mo to do more? And how would she and Les resolve their careers long-term? What would she do if Les remained in Interior? Mo wanted to build a home with her, not relegate her to off days.

She caught a glimpse of Les and felt herself smile. Worrying about their military careers could wait. Tonight she felt optimistic about the future; somehow they'd work it out. She'd rather have this problem than others she could have faced—such as how to accept someone other than Les as her Chosen. "I don't want to leave Les right now," she said, refocusing on Ann.

Ann snorted. "Mo, she's your Chosen. You won't have to worry about her fooling around on you while you're flying a rotation."

"I wouldn't!" Why did Ann always have to reduce relationships to sex?

"I meant that I don't want to buzz off and fly rotations after we've just been separated for almost two years."

"Oh." Ann paused. "I guess it'll be a while before we hang out when I'm off."

"The Military Academy is less than ten minutes away. If . . . you think you'll still be there." Mo interpreted Ann's lack of response as confirmation that her room at the faculty residence would be her home for the foreseeable future. "You're on a three-week rotation, right?"

Ann nodded.

"Beep me next time you're off. I'll see what I'm doing." She was in a generous mood. Plus, Les's impromptu two-week leave would be over by then.

"Yeah, okay," Ann said, though she didn't sound very enthusiastic about the idea.

"If you'd rather spend your time with Ensign Bennett, I'll understand. Where is he, anyway?"

Ann frowned at her. "What do you mean? Why would I bring him here?"

"I don't know, I thought maybe—"

"He was a bit of fun, that's all. I'd forgotten about him until you brought him up."

"Sorry," Mo mumbled, not knowing what else to say. They finished the dance in silence, then parted and clapped for the band. Ann wasn't a bad dancer; Mo's toes had survived unscathed.

The band segued into its next piece. Oh no, a slower tempo. Everyone around them started to waltz. Mo stared at Ann in horror. Ann shrugged. "We might as well."

Suddenly Les was there. "Do you mind if I have this dance with Mo?" she said to Ann.

"No, go ahead," Ann said, to Mo's relief. "Thanks for rescuing me."

Rescuing *her*? "Thank you," Mo murmured to Les. "You have impeccable timing."

Les smiled. They positioned themselves and were about to fall into step with the music when Mo saw Ann standing at the edge of the dance floor on her own. She felt smug; at least *she* had a dance partner. But Ann looked lost and a bit uncomfortable, and had kept to herself most of the evening. She'd skulked around the ballroom and observed, rather than participated. Ann not having anyone to waltz with shouldn't bother Mo, but it did.

She pulled away from Les and scanned those around her. "Andrew!" she shrieked, waving her arms about. Les quickly moved to the left to avoid a punch in the nose.

On his way off the dance floor, Andrew turned and backtracked.

“What?”

“Remember I introduced you to Ann earlier? The lieutenant over there.” Mo nodded toward Ann.

He followed her gaze. “Yeah.”

“Ask her to dance.”

“What? She’s old,” he said, pulling a face.

“Excuse me? She’s the same age as me.”

“Well, yeah. Old,” Andrew said. Les smothered a grin with her hand.

Mo knew he was teasing but still wanted to slap him. “Just do it, okay?”

He sighed and slumped his shoulders. “Okay. But only because it’s your party.” He shuffled toward Ann.

Mo rolled her eyes, but instantly forgot about him when Les pulled her into an embrace. “It’s your notification party, too,” she said into Les’s shoulder as they swayed to the music. Despite the part of her that had always believed they were Chosens, she’d never expected to be at Les’s notification party, giddy with joy. If Mama were here, tonight would have been perfect. A couple coming onto the dance floor caught her eye—Finney and her Chosen. Make that almost perfect.

Mo had silently fumed when Finney had offered congratulations but no apology. Maybe expecting an “I’m sorry” had been unreasonable, but an “If I’d known, I wouldn’t have separated you” would have been nice. And regardless of whether Les remained in Interior, Finney would be part of their lives. To Les, she was Laura. They were friends, though Mo wondered how genuine the friendship was on Finney’s side.

What better way to watch someone than to be her friend? Every time Finney—or rather, Laura—came up, Mo had to bite her tongue. Curious, how Finney had stayed on as Les’s mentor when she could have backed out, and then had ended up as Les’s commanding officer. And Les had stayed with her while Mo was on leave—again, the perfect setup for Finney. Frankly, Mo wouldn’t care if she never saw Finney again, but Les would be hurt if the friendship wasn’t real. At least Finney couldn’t touch them now. Mo could afford to sit back and see if Finney still had time to mentor Les, to see her when off-duty, or if she was suddenly too busy.

She closed her eyes. Forget Finney; she was in Les’s arms the night before the Chosen Council would give them to each other. “Should we ask tomorrow if we can hold the Joining Ceremony right there and then?” she asked dreamily, then felt the vibration of Les’s chuckle.

“The Chosen Council might agree, but my mama won’t. She’ll want a grand ceremony, with half the sector in attendance.”

“Can we at least commission the house so we can move into it the moment we’re Joined?” She didn’t mind staying overnight at the Thompsons’ or having Les stay with her, but couldn’t wait for them to have their own

home.

"We'll see what land I get."

It had to be almost 01:00; Alan and Adelaide would present Les with a deed soon. Mo remembered when Mama and Papa had surprised her with land on her eighteenth birthday. She opened her eyes and raised her head. "I wish my mama were here. She would have been so pleased." She swallowed. "Do you think we can visit her soon? I haven't gone yet this leave." She'd paid her respects every leave, slipping onto the estate when Papa had assured her that Les would be on duty.

Les stroked Mo's cheek. "Of course. We'll go as soon as we can."

"I guess you haven't visited since we separated." She'd felt compelled to search for Les's name on recently slotted articles near Mama's resting place, but had never spotted it.

Les looked away for a moment, then met Mo's eyes. "I've visited. I go every few months. But I didn't want to ruin your visits, so I never slotted anything. I've felt bad about it, but I can't hurt your mama. I can hurt you."

Mo melted inside, but then guilt snaked through her. She hadn't thought of Les when she'd slotted articles. "Did you see my articles?" she asked faintly.

"I didn't look. I couldn't."

"I should have thought—"

"No, no," Les said, shaking her head. "She's your mama. It's only right that you were thinking of her. If I'd been in your boots, I would have done the same."

Mo's eyes welled; she squeezed them shut so she wouldn't blubber and rested her head on Les's shoulder. Every time she thought she couldn't possibly love Les any more than she already did, Les said or did something that proved her wrong.

Too soon, the dance ended. As Mo clapped, Alan and Adelaide strode onto the stage. The musicians put down their instruments and filed off for a well-earned break; one handed Alan a microphone as she passed him. Alan raised his hand to quiet everyone. Mo patted Les's arm. "I'll wait here for you," she said, then looked at Les in surprise when Alan called both her and Les to the stage.

Hand in hand, they made their way through the crowd, drowned in applause, and stood next to Les's parents. Mo surveyed the faces peering up at her—her family, friends, and fellow pilots. When they teased her about the big, goofy grin on her face, she'd laugh along with them. Yeah, she was deliriously happy. What a change from just a few days ago.

Alan began to speak. "On behalf of the Thompson and Middleton families, I want to thank you all for coming tonight. We're celebrating not one notification, but two. How often does that happen?" Another round of applause answered his question. "Lesley and Mo have important

appointments tomorrow morning," he said, to much laughter, "so we'll be leaving you shortly. But we have the ballroom until three, so the party isn't over. I hope you stay and continue to enjoy yourselves."

Cheers and whistles greeted his words.

"As you know, Lesley is the Principal of her Joining, and so my Chosen and I have a presentation to make to her tonight." He faced Les. "Before I hand the microphone to your mama, I just want to say that I hope you and Mo live a long and happy life together and that you have . . ." He faltered, clearly fighting tears. A smattering of applause grew to a supportive crescendo. Alan drew a deep breath. "I wish you many daughters," he said hoarsely, then quickly handed the microphone to Adelaide, who looked as if she were about to grab it from his hand.

"Thank you, Alan," Adelaide said as Les hugged him. She swept her arm toward Les and Mo. "I'd say the Chosen Council has outdone itself this time."

"Yes!" the crowd shouted as one.

"The Thompsons and Middletons have been neighbours for many generations. Our children have played together, grown together, and now will Join together. Two strong, respectable families will now become one. I can't tell you how pleased I am that Lesley and Mo will Join. Mo, we watched you grow along with our daughter. Welcoming you into our family as our Chosen daughter will be effortless because we already love you and consider you part of our family."

A chorus of "Aw" rose from the crowd. Mo shot Les a sidelong glance. Maybe she was dreaming, because Adelaide had almost sounded sentimental.

"And now, the presentation." Adelaide turned to Les and accepted a folded piece of paper Alan had pulled from his inner jacket pocket. "Lesley, this is a deed to land on the Thompson estate, land you now own. I'll echo what your papa said—may you and Mo lead long and happy lives and have many daughters."

She handed the deed to Les, who unfolded the paper and read it. Les's face flooded with blood; she looked sharply at her parents. Mo tensed. Had they given her only a small plot of land, or a piece located in a far corner of the estate? Karen had received the land owned by Adelaide's late uncle, a prime location with a stately house and enough real estate to hand down to her children. Only one of the uncle's children had been a Principal, and he'd decided to live elsewhere. Les embraced Adelaide and murmured into her ear. Ever polite, Les would hug Adelaide no matter what land she'd received. Mo couldn't wait to look at the deed.

When Les wordlessly handed it to her after hugging Alan, Mo skimmed it and understood. They'd not only given her more than enough land to build a house and pass down to children, but also part of the lake. Maybe this

signaled a change in Adelaide's attitude toward Les. Nah, that *would* be dreaming; Adelaide never let honesty get in the way of appearances. Still, she and Alan had been incredibly generous. Mo stepped toward Adelaide to thank her, but then Les turned to address everyone.

"I also want to thank you for coming tonight," Les said. "After the events of the past week, I'm sure you can all appreciate how wonderful it is to stand here and celebrate the Chosen Tradition." More shouts, cheers, and applause. "This is a joint notification party." She smiled at Mo. "I won't embarrass Mo by telling you how I feel about her."

"No, it's okay—go right ahead," Mo shouted.

Les grinned and shook her head as she waited for the resulting merriment to die down. "Like I said, I won't embarrass her by telling you how I feel, but I will say that when I'm introduced to my Chosen tomorrow, it will be the happiest moment of my life." Uh-oh, now Les looked like Alan had minutes ago. Mo wasn't surprised when she cut her comments short. "Good night, everyone." Les waved and handed the microphone to Adelaide.

"The band will resume playing in ten minutes," Adelaide announced before turning the microphone off and setting it on one of the musician's chairs.

"I can't believe they gave us part of the lake," Mo said when Les slipped her arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the steps, apparently eager to get off the stage. Les motioned for Mo to give her the deed and read it again, maybe to convince herself that it was indeed true.

Papa met them at the bottom of the steps. "Time to go," he said briskly. "We have to be up tomorrow. I'll meet you outside."

Mo turned to face Les. "I'll thank your parents properly tomorrow, at our notification lunch." She squeaked out the last part in excitement. Les seemed at a loss for words. "I better go. Next time I see you . . ."

Les bit her lip and nodded. They studied each other, then shared a kiss, a sweet, gentle kiss. Anything more would embarrass Les. "I'll see you tomorrow, at the Chosen House," Mo squealed.

She ducked through a side door to avoid being delayed by well-wishers, but couldn't resist a glance over her shoulder. Les stood watching her. Mo smiled and wiggled her fingers, then tore herself away.

She'd desperately miss Les, but not for long. Tomorrow they'd stand in the Chosen House, where Albert Watkins would inform them that the Chosen Council had selected them for each other. They would Join, build a home together, and have daughters—daughters they'd love and cherish and bring up true to the Way. No more uncertainty; no more separations. She was Les's and Les was hers. Nothing would ever come between them now. Nothing could.

Jayne threw the blanket aside in frustration, sat up, and turned on the lamp. By now it must be almost three in the morning, and she still hadn't slept a wink. Good thing her appointment was in the afternoon, though she planned to take an early train to ensure she arrived on time.

Giving up on sleep for the time being, she padded into the kitchen and poured a glass of water. Several mugs sat on the counter, waiting to be washed. After Carol and Ronald had left around eleven, she'd returned to sorting through her drawings, looking for two or three to show her Chosen, ones of which she was proud. Then she'd realized the futility of it and gone to bed.

She could be the most beautiful Rymellan alive, the most intelligent woman to ever grace the planet, and her Chosen would still see only her name. What difference would a few drawings make? Did she seriously think her Chosen would care, that her Chosen would think, *Oh, Jayne isn't worthless after all?* Tomorrow her Chosen would see the daughter of two depraved criminals. She'd see actors in those hideous masks, the "Adamses" stumbling around the stage during the Festival of the Way. She'd hear every announcement and speech made over the past few days in which "Adams," "Chosen Violation," "weak in the Way," and "worst crime in history" had been mentioned in the same breath. All while hoping her notification meeting was only a bad dream.

Her drawings weren't any good anyway. Carol said she liked them, but then, she would. Jayne's final report from the Learning Academy had stated that she spent far too much time sketching, considering how little talent she had. The report had contained other criticisms, such as "too quiet" and "never interacts with her peers or participates in group activities." Carol had laughed over that last part and had told her to ignore the entire report, but the sketching remark had stung. Jayne had never forgotten it.

She gulped down the water and set the glass next to the mugs. Getting herself keyed up wouldn't help her sleep. She climbed back into bed and reached for the sketchbook that was never far away, flipped to an empty page, and . . . nothing. Sleep wasn't the only thing eluding her tonight. Sighing, she tossed the sketchbook onto the floor and switched off the lamp. Hopefully her lack of inspiration would be temporary, but who knew what tomorrow would bring? Sketching had always soothed her; she could lose herself in it and forget for a while. But would it still offer that solace after tomorrow? If her Chosen hated her . . .

Why couldn't she have been a Solitary? How would she live with someone else? Her apartment was small, but it was her own little haven. Nobody called her names in here or glared at her disdainfully. No matter what she faced when she ventured outside, she could return home and feel safe, as she had after her latest run-in with the lieutenant. But soon she'd

have nowhere to hide, nowhere to be alone until she'd gathered enough strength to weather the next bombardment. She'd share space with a Chosen who resented her presence and wished she'd die, thereby releasing her from a commitment she despised. And then there was her Chosen's family. Would they accept her, or would they stick her in a corner during family occasions and pretend she didn't exist?

Jayne was lonely now, but she was also alone. She'd learned that she felt worse in a room full of people than she did when she was by herself. When she was alone, she didn't have to watch as others smiled and joked with each other, touched each other fondly, and shared their concerns and triumphs. Her loneliest times had been at the Indoctrination and Learning Academies, surrounded by others her age. Here, in her apartment, she could fool herself into thinking she wasn't missing anything, that she was content to spend most of her time amusing herself. That it didn't matter to her that she could die and nobody would notice.

Well, Carol eventually would. And now her Chosen would too, and would likely rejoice, having honoured the Tradition even though she'd hated and resented Jayne from the moment she'd met her. No article could force love, compassion, and kindness. As long as they remained together to the bitter end and— Jayne swallowed. Her parents hadn't . . . what if she *was* like them? Maybe her Chosen had good reason to be afraid, to distrust, to expect the worst from her. Maybe she wouldn't disappoint her Chosen in the long run, after all.

Fighting panic, she turned over and balled the pillow in her hand. At this rate, she'd never sleep, and tonight might be the last night she could truly dream.

Lesley landed her aviacraft in the holding area for C3's Chosen House, then tugged at her collar; her dress uniform always felt tight around her throat. She smiled at her parents. "Ready?"

"Are you?" Mama asked.

"Of course I am. After all this time . . ." A lump formed in her throat. She swallowed; it wouldn't do to lose her composure before they were even inside.

"Ah, yes," the young Rymellan at the reception desk said when they presented themselves after hanging their cloaks. "I'll let Albert Watkins know you're here." He swivelled in his chair and spoke a few words into his comm station.

A slightly balding man on the plump side bustled into the reception area. "I'm Albert Watkins," he said, beaming. "I recognized you immediately, Lieutenant Commander. Welcome to C3's Chosen House. It's

an honour to meet you.”

“Thank you,” Lesley said, a little overwhelmed by his effusive manner. He belonged to the Chosen Council; she was a lowly lieutenant commander. “But the honour is mine.”

He inclined his head.

She turned to her parents. “These are my parents, Adelaide and Alan.” Her siblings were waiting at the Thompson home; Mo’s siblings would soon join them there. Only parents were allowed to accompany Chosens to notification meetings.

Watkins nodded to them. “If you’ll follow me, please.”

To Lesley’s surprise, he led them to a room that was already occupied. The woman sitting near the desk at the front smiled up at them. “This is Counsellor Morris,” Watkins said. “I asked her to be present with us today, as Article CT54 permits me to do. Please sit down.”

A counsellor? Lesley lowered herself stiffly into a chair. Perhaps Watkins routinely involved a counsellor. Any family would be pleased to have their daughter Join with Mo. Nothing about her background would shock or disappoint—quite the opposite. And in this case, he must have guessed that the two families already knew each other, given the proximity of their estates. He might even know about her and Mo. The counsellor wouldn’t have to do anything at this meeting besides offer congratulations—unless Mo wasn’t her Chosen! Lesley tensed, then forced herself to relax. Watkins would meet with Mo next. Mo was her Chosen.

She felt foolish. She knew her Chosen’s identity and already loved her, yet she was ready to jump out of her seat. Imagine how Rymellans meeting their Chosens for the first time must feel!

Watkins opened a file and arranged several papers in front of him. After what felt like hours, he lifted his head. “I suppose we should begin. Counsellor Morris, feel free to jump in at any time.”

He appeared hesitant, almost apprehensive. Though Lesley expected good news, her stomach churned. Mama shifted in her chair.

“Lieutenant Commander, when you were at the Indoctrination Academy, do you remember any mention of triads?” Watkins asked.

What an odd question. Perhaps he thought a mini-lecture on some aspect of the Chosen Tradition would help everyone relax. “A brief mention,” she said. “And since then, I’ve become more aware of the articles in the Tradition that pertain to them.” Well, she remembered a conversation with Laura a few years ago, during which they’d briefly touched on triads.

“Of course you’d know of the articles,” Watkins quickly said. “You’re an Interior officer.”

Lesley crossed her legs. “I don’t know the details. Since we currently don’t have a triad, there’s no—” She suddenly understood the reason for the counsellor’s presence. No, it wasn’t possible. Not her. Not Mo. “You’re not

saying . . ."

Watkins nodded. "Yes."

She sat speechless, blindly reaching for Papa's hand. When his hand gripped hers, she clung to it.

"Lieutenant Commander Thompson, are you all right?" Morris asked.

She wasn't but nodded numbly.

"I'm not," Mama said. "What's going on? I don't remember anything about triads at the Indoctrination Academy."

"You wouldn't," Watkins said. "Triads are only discussed as part of the Level Five same-oriented curriculum, since they're only possible with same-oriented Joinings. Of course, now that we have one, that will change."

"A triad suggests three," Mama said, frustration evident in her tone. "What does that mean here?"

"I have two Chosens," Lesley murmured, finding her voice.

Now Mama had apparently lost hers.

"Two Chosens?" Papa echoed faintly.

"Yes, that's what a triad is," Watkins said. "A Joining of three Chosens." His explanation met stunned silence. After glancing at Morris, Watkins held up an image of an inverted triangle and touched each tip of the triangle with a pencil. "Each point is a Chosen. The lines of the triangle represent the best match for each Chosen. As you can see, a triad is formed when each Chosen is equally the best match for the two other Chosens in the triad." He lowered the diagram. "They're rare. Having two equal matches for a Chosen is unusual. It's almost impossible for those two best matches to also be the best match for each other."

"Not impossible enough!" Mama snapped. "Why haven't I heard of three Chosens being Joined before?"

"As I said, it's rare. We Joined the last triad 232 years ago."

"So Lesley will Join with two Chosens?"

"Yes."

Papa sucked in his breath. "I'm finding this very hard to understand. A Joining is between two Chosens. It seems unnatural to Join three. If my daughter wasn't involved, I'd wonder if it was against the Way."

Watkins leaned forward. "I assure you that triads are natural and not against the Way. The Chosen Tradition has included articles about them for many years."

"Though how the Tradition treats them has evolved over time," Morris said. "In the past, some Rymellans viewed them with suspicion. When we announce this triad, history may repeat itself. Some may initially react the way you did."

"Except they won't know my daughter, like I do," Papa said, frowning. "They won't be so quick to change their minds."

"Your daughter has an excellent reputation. The Council is pleased that

she's the Principal." Watkins looked at Lesley. "Lieutenant Commander, you have our full support. We'll do whatever we can to help you."

"We'll remember that when the Thompson name is being dragged through the mud," Mama muttered, too low for Watkins to hear, but Lesley caught it.

"The best you can do is support your daughter and her Chosens," Watkins said to Papa. Lesley felt Papa squeeze her hand.

"You haven't said much, Lieutenant Commander Thompson," Morris said. "What do you think about being in a triad?"

She didn't know what to think. Two Chosens? How would a triad work in practice? The rings, living arrangements, children, sex—dear Argamon, the three of them wouldn't have to do it together, would they? She wouldn't *have* to sleep with her other Chosen, would she? And would Mo? No, any articles to that effect would be unenforceable. Anyway, there was no way she would share Mo with someone else. Ever. Just the thought made her want to break something. They belonged to each other, period. Her other Chosen would have to accept that. *Other Chosen* . . . And Mo had another Chosen . . .

Her mind froze. She was assuming Mo belonged to the triad. But what if notifications for triads were handled differently and she wouldn't meet the other triad members today? Nothing else was turning out the way she'd expected; perhaps the Chosen Council had summoned Mo to meet someone else. Before she tried to make sense of anything, Lesley wanted to know for sure that Mo was her Chosen. "I have questions about how the triad is supposed to work," she said. "But right now, I'd like to know who my two Chosens are."

"Of course." Watkins moved the triad diagram aside and lifted a sheet of paper. "Your first Chosen is twenty-six years old and resides in sector C3. She belongs to the military."

Lesley's heart skipped a beat. It had to be Mo. It had better be.

"Her papa is a member of the government and runs his own tailoring business. Her mama is deceased. She has five siblings. Two are Chosens, three are Solitaries. I believe you know her." Watkins lowered the paper and smiled. "Her name is Ramona Middleton."

"Thank goodness," Papa said as Lesley let out the breath she'd been holding.

So it wasn't a complete disaster; she and Mo were Chosens. As for . . . the other one . . . she could almost feel sorry for her. The woman would have been better off a Solitary. Lesley couldn't think of any other circumstance in which she'd consider that true.

Watkins set Mo's information sheet on top of the diagram. He heaved a sigh, then lifted another sheet and squared his shoulders. Morris's chair creaked as she straightened. It almost looked as if they were bracing

themselves. "Before I reveal the name of your second Chosen, I want to remind you that the Chosen Council selected this Chosen because we determined that she's the best match for you, equal to Ramona," Watkins said. "Please try to bear that in mind."

Lesley glanced at Papa in alarm. His smile might have reassured her if it hadn't looked so forced. Nor did she find solace in Mama's grim expression. The triad was unwelcome news to all of them, but while she and Papa were trying to put on brave faces, Mama's displeasure was plain.

Watkins cleared his throat. "Your second Chosen is twenty-five years old and resides in sector E6. Both her parents are deceased."

"What a shame," Papa murmured. "Was it an accident?"

"We'll get to that in a moment," Watkins said. "She has one sibling. He's a Solitary." He hesitated, then looked at Lesley. "Her name is Jayne Adams."

Lesley felt a shimmer of shock, as she always did when she heard the name "Adams." But she usually heard it as part of the phrase "Adams Incident." Her mind needed extra time to understand what it meant in this context. "Are you telling me that one of the Adams children is my Chosen?" she asked, every bone in her body resisting the notion.

Watkins licked his lips. "Yes."

"No," Mama breathed.

The blood drained from Papa's face. Lesley pulled her hand from his and leaped to her feet. "That's impossible! I'm strong in the Way. We're a respectable family. And I'm supposed to believe that an Adams is my best match? Equal to Mo?"

"Sit down, Lieutenant Commander," Watkins said quietly.

"You haven't explained to me how this is possible. I'm not sitting down until I understand. Explain!"

"Sit. Down. Remember where you are. Do I have to beep Commander Finney?"

Papa pulled on her sleeve. "Sit down, Lesley." He sounded tired, defeated.

"We don't need Commander Finney," Morris said as Lesley sat and glared at Watkins. "Everyone is understandably shocked. Lieutenant Commander Thompson is merely trying to digest the news."

Digest the news? Lesley would have laughed if she wasn't so horrified.

"The Council determined that Jayne Adams is your Chosen using the same methodology it used to determine that Ramona Middleton is your Chosen," Watkins said, setting the sheet down. "You can't accept one as your Chosen and not the other."

"And it's not a reflection upon you or your family," Morris added. "We all know you're strong in the Way. And no one would dispute the respectability of the Thompson family."

"Until now," Mama muttered. Then louder, "First you tell us that Lesley belongs to a triad. Then you tell us that one of her Chosens is an Adams. Is that it, or do you have any other surprises up your sleeve?"

Watkins' eyes bulged. "I beg your pardon. You are speaking to a member of the Chosen Council and everything we're discussing is in accordance with the Chosen Tradition. I—"

"Again, this is a huge shock to everyone," Morris said, cutting across him. "I'm sure the same things would be running through your mind, if you were in her position."

Watkins still sat stiffly. "That may be, but it doesn't hurt to remind everyone of what we're doing here."

"That's just it, though," Mama said. "We came here expecting to hear the name of our daughter's Chosen. Just the one, mind. We expected a Chosen who, on the surface at least, seems to be a good match for her. I have a hard time believing that the daughter of two sick criminals is a match for *my* daughter. And what we've heard goes against everything I've been taught."

Watkins' face reddened. "But it doesn't. Triads have been a part of the Tradition for ages. And I assure you that Jayne Adams is your daughter's Chosen. Surely you don't doubt the Chosen Council? *That* would go against everything you've been taught."

"He's right, Mama," Lesley said, wanting to defuse the situation. Arguing with him would get them nowhere, except perhaps to an execution site. "If we—I—don't accept . . . her as my Chosen, it would bring every Joining on Rymel into question, and it would bring Mo as my Chosen into question, and I know without a doubt that Mo's my Chosen."

Watkins bowed his head toward Lesley. "Thank you."

She nodded in return, but inwardly seethed. Despite knowing he was only the messenger, she hated him. *Hated* him.

"The Council understands that belonging to a triad may be a challenge. As I said earlier, we're pleased that you're the Principal. It gives us hope that this triad will be as successful as the last one."

"And it will ensure that the Adamses don't threaten the Way any further by reproducing," Lesley said, a hard edge to her voice.

"What do you mean?" Watkins asked, his brow furrowing.

"It's obvious, isn't it? There's something wrong with the Adams line. First two Chosen Violations, now a triad. Its taint is spreading. Well, it ends here. The brother's a Solitary and she won't be reproducing."

"You won't have children with her?"

Lesley folded her arms. "Is there an article that says I have to?"

"Well, no," Watkins admitted. "But the triad isn't her fault."

"Perhaps not. But even though someone can't be blamed for being ill, if they knowingly pass on their illness to others, they're no longer blameless."

It's too much of a coincidence that an Adams is involved in a triad. As I said, there's obviously something wrong with the Adams line. To protect the Way, it would be best that she not have children, and I'm in a position to see that she doesn't. She won't be having *my* children, and I'm confident that she won't be having Mo's, either."

"To refuse her children would not be within the spirit of the Tradition."

"It would be within the spirit of protecting the Way," Lesley countered.

Mama smirked. "That's the first sensible thing I've heard since we entered the room. Apart from hearing that Mo is your Chosen," she added softly, patting Lesley's knee.

Watkins frowned. "But not the best attitude for the Principal of the triad to have. As the Principal—"

"I will accept her as my Chosen! At the same time, I'll protect the Way. Don't you dare suggest that I should have a different priority." Lesley stared at him, challenging him to contradict her.

Morris interjected. "We're getting off track. Talk of children is premature." She turned to Watkins. "You brought up the lieutenant commander being the Principal. Let's continue along that vein and discuss the rest of the day."

Watkins tore his gaze away from Lesley and looked past the Thompsons. "You'll be introduced to Ramona—Mo," he amended, glancing at Lesley, "at eleven."

"Will I be present when she's told about the triad and the identity of her other Chosen?" Lesley asked.

"I believe we can be flexible here," Morris said to Watkins. "I don't see why you can't introduce Mo to her Principal and then tell her the rest. Having the lieutenant commander present may help."

Watkins pursed his lips. "You're right, nothing says we can't introduce one Chosen and then proceed from there. So yes, you'll be there."

Lesley silently thanked Morris. "Good." And afterward, she and Mo would be left to deal with everything. What a mess it had all turned out to be. Today was supposed to be their perfect day, the start of their life as Chosens. Now it was ruined, their lives were ruined, everything—ruined.

"At 3:00, I'll introduce you all to Jayne. We thought it would be best to give you and the Middleton family some time to absorb everything before you meet her. But keep the triad and the identity of its members to yourselves until Jayne has been informed."

"What about the rest of the family?" Mama asked. "We'll all be having lunch together, since we thought we'd arrive home with two Chosens and that would be it."

"You can tell your family, but nobody else," Watkins said, scowling.

"We're not exactly dying to tell anyone," Mama said under her breath.

Watkins didn't hear her. "You should return here by 2:45 and enter

through door C.”

“What about Mo?” Lesley asked.

“She should come with you, of course. You’ll both be introduced to Jayne.” He paused. “I think we’ll conduct Jayne’s meeting in the same way we’ll conduct Mo’s—introduce you to Jayne and then tell her about the triad.”

She could hardly wait. “So I will be present when you introduce Mo to her?”

“Yes.” Watkins’ face softened. “Look, I know this is a huge shock—two huge shocks. But if anybody can deal with this, you can. You have to believe in the triad for it to work. Your two Chosens will need you to believe.”

Too many conflicting thoughts and emotions jammed Lesley’s mind for her to formulate a coherent response. She’d try to sort everything out later, with Mo.

“I’m now officially advising you that, since you know the names of your two Chosens, you are bound to them from this point forward in accordance with all the articles in the Chosen Tradition. You are now in a position to commit a Chosen Violation if you violate any article in the Chosen Tradition that applies to a Joined Chosen. Do you understand and accept what I’ve just told you?”

“I understand and accept it,” Lesley said numbly.

“Then if you would please read this over and provide your confirmation . . .” Watkins spun the comm station monitor at the left edge of the desk toward her. Lesley read the single paragraph it contained, which included the names of her Chosens, then pressed her thumb against the display in the designated spot until the station beeped.

“Thank you,” Watkins said, spinning the monitor back to its original position. He surveyed the Thompsons and smiled weakly. “Well, this is certainly an exciting and historic day. I have this information packet for you about triads.” He handed Lesley an envelope. “I want to bring two points to your attention. First, as a triad, you have two years to schedule your Joining Ceremony.”

That quick ceremony she and Mo wanted would have to wait.

“Second, Article CT134 is an important one for triads. I’ve included detailed information about this article. Please read it over, and if you have any questions, any at all, don’t hesitate to beep me or Commander Finney. I’ll be meeting with her after we’ve announced the triad to make sure she understands it.”

Lesley almost laughed out loud. Laura would love being called in to have an article of the Chosen Tradition explained to her. She’d probably end up explaining the article and describing its history to *him*. Suddenly it wasn’t funny. What would Laura think of the triad, of one of Lesley’s Chosens being an Adams? Her opinion mattered to Lesley, on both a personal and professional level. And how would Lesley’s peers react? Would she still start

the commander training program, or would she suddenly be unsuitable?

Watkins checked his notes one last time. "I think that's it for now. Do you have any more questions before we close the meeting?"

Lesley glanced at her parents and wondered if she looked as pale and bewildered as they did.

"Very well. Let's stand," Watkins said when no one responded.

Lesley stood and dropped the envelope onto her chair. Everyone moved together so they could join hands. "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!" They clapped half-heartedly. Lesley didn't bother to muster a smile.

"I'll see you again in about half an hour. Once I've told Mo that you're the Principal, I'll beep you and let you know what room we're in. All the rooms are located along this hallway." Watkins gathered his papers and left the room. Morris trailed after him, closing the door behind her.

Lesley swung to pace the room. "We have to accept her. We have to," she said, more to convince herself than anyone else. Her mind turned to Mo, who at that moment would be on her way to the Chosen House, filled with hope for the future. Lesley wanted to sit and weep, but fought it by stopping in front of Papa and focusing on him, willing him to say that it would be all right, that the situation wasn't hopeless.

But his face told her that he couldn't give her what she sought. "You still have Mo. Mo is your Chosen. Don't forget that," he said with a sigh.

His words deepened her despair. "But there's someone else, for both of us. Who expects to hear that at their notification meeting? Who expects their Chosen to have another Chosen?"

"I know."

"Today was supposed to be the start of our life together as Chosens."

"It is."

"Not the way we envisioned it," Lesley said bitterly.

"No."

"So what are we supposed to do, Papa? What are we supposed to do?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. But I know you, and I know Mo. I have to believe you'll make it work, and you'll have to believe that too. Somehow you'll have to come to some arrangement with Adams that you can all live with."

"Or you could have Adams executed," Mama said.

Lesley and Papa turned to her. The envelope Lesley had left on her chair lay open on Mama's lap. In her hand were several sheets of paper. "Remember he mentioned Article CT134? Listen to this." She read from the top sheet. "Article CT134. If the Principal and one of the other triad members believe that the third member will have a destabilizing effect on

the triad, therefore threatening the viability of the triad and the Way, they may petition for the execution of the third member. However, the case must be made and the execution performed before the triad Joins." Mama lifted her head. "So if you and Mo can make a case that the triad won't be successful if Adams remains alive—and let me tell you, any advocate could scribble a case on a scrap piece of paper in five seconds—your problems are solved. You won't have to Join with her. You and Mo can live the life you've always wanted."

"We can't do that," Papa snapped.

Mama looked at him. "Why not?"

"Adelaide, we're advocates. We're supposed to preserve the spirit of the Way, not trample all over it when it doesn't suit us."

Mama tapped the paper with her finger. "This article exists for a reason."

Papa nodded. "Yes. From what you've read, it should be exercised if the triad is in trouble. This one isn't."

"It has an Adams in it!"

"And? We don't execute children for the crimes of their parents, with good reason. This woman hasn't done anything to threaten the triad. We haven't even met her yet and you want to send her to an execution site." They glared at each other.

"Executing her would be harsh, don't you think?" Lesley said, hoping to break the tension by shifting their attention to her.

"Would it?" Mama's eyes remained on Papa. "What sort of life will she have with you and Mo? You two love each other. She'll be in the way and she'll know it. And do you really want to be Joined to an Adams?"

"It's not a matter of want, Mama. If it was a matter of want, I would have Joined with Mo the moment she turned twenty-five. And if Adams was my only Chosen, I would have no choice but to accept her."

Papa nodded. "She has a point. Since when can Rymellans reject their Chosens?"

"Since when do Rymellans have two Chosens?" Mama shot back.

"If she wasn't an Adams, we wouldn't be having this conversation, at least not yet," Papa said.

"So you're not ruling it out, you just think it's too early to discuss it." Mama slid the sheets back into the envelope. "I can agree with that. So fine, we'll go along with this," she waved her hand around, "triad, for now. But I'll be watching her, and the moment she steps out of line, we'll have this conversation again. I won't let her destroy our family."

A chill ran up Lesley's spine. "Don't worry, Mama, I know what my priorities are." One she'd made clear to Watkins, and the other was protecting Mo. Her hands clenched. If Adams threatened Mo in any way . . .

She reclaimed the envelope, sat down, and began to read how the

articles of the Tradition applied to triads, aware of her parents reading over her shoulder. Later she'd go over everything she could find on triads with a fine-toothed comb, learn exactly what her obligations were to Adams.

As she read the information on Article CT134, an ugly thought formed in her mind, one she initially rejected, but that kept coming back. What if Adams wasn't really her and Mo's Chosen? What if the Chosen Council had thrown them together in the hope that she and Mo would exercise CT134?

Mo grinned in anticipation when Watkins pulled a sheet from the pile in front of him. "Your Principal is twenty-seven years old and obviously resides in sector C3," Watkins read. "She's a member of the military. Both her parents are advocates. She has two siblings. Both are Chosens. I believe you know her." He smiled. "Her name is Lesley Thompson."

Tears stung Mo's eyes as she bowed her head. Papa squeezed her shoulder. "That's wonderful," he said. "The Middleton family is pleased."

"I thought you might be," Watkins said.

Mo looked up. "When can I see her?"

"Whenever you're ready."

She stifled a snort. She'd been ready for this moment for years. The counsellor Watkins had insisted be present wouldn't be needed. "I'm ready."

Watkins pressed a button on his comm station. "We're ready for you, Lieutenant Commander. Room Four."

"We're on our way," Les said, to Mo's delight. Morris opened the door. When Les walked into the room a minute later, Mo stood and broke into a smile. Her Chosen. And so dashing in her crisp white uniform.

Her smile faded. Les's answering smile was strained and her eyes were a little too bright. Behind her, Adelaide and Alan stood grimly. Mo didn't understand. Last night at the party, everyone had looked forward to this moment. What could have happened in the meantime? Had Les argued with her parents? Suddenly the counsellor's presence worried her.

She relaxed slightly when Les embraced her and whispered "I love you" into her ear, but her uneasiness returned when Les continued to cling to her. Something was tearing Les apart, and whatever it was, Alan and Adelaide knew about it. Finally Les let her go.

"Welcome to the family, Mo," Adelaide said. She tucked an envelope she'd been holding under her arm, grasped Mo's shoulders, and kissed her cheek, but she looked unhappy. Alan's face told the same story. Confused, Mo sat down. Les sat next to her; Papa and Les's parents sat behind them.

"Normally I'd ask you to say hello to each other, but I can see that's not necessary in this case," Watkins said with a small smile.

Nobody responded to his comment. Mo could feel the tension in the

air. She'd expected this meeting to be a joyous one. Instead, an undercurrent of negative emotion ran through the room, as if the Thompsons were going through the motions, pretending they were pleased when they weren't. Actually, they weren't doing all that good a job of pretending. Mo wanted the meeting to be over so she could find out what was going on. "I guess you need my confirmation and then we can be off," she said to Watkins.

"Not quite. I have more news for you today."

More news?

"Can I tell her?" Les said.

Watkins glanced at Morris, who nodded. "All right. But not the name."

Mo grew more confused when Les said, "Before I tell you, I want you to know that nothing will change between us. Nothing at all."

She swallowed and braced herself, though for what, she had no idea. Watkins had said they were Chosens.

"Do you remember learning about triads when we were at the Indoctrination Academy?" Les asked. "Well, not learning, exactly, because they were only mentioned in passing." She sounded bitter. "But do you remember hearing about them?"

Vaguely. "You mean when there are three Chosens? I think Indoctrinator—" Her breath caught. "No. Not us."

Les closed her eyes and nodded.

This was a sick joke, right? "No. Not us. This can't be happening to us."

"I don't understand it either," Les murmured.

"No, we can't have another Chosen. We love each other too much. No, no." Please, if she said no enough times, would it go away?

"What's all this talk about another Chosen?" Papa asked, leaning forward.

Mo wouldn't answer him. She wouldn't say it—that would make it real. She looked at Les. Her Chosen. Nobody else's. Hers!

"A triad is a Joining of three Chosens," Watkins said. "It can only happen with same-oriented Joinings."

"I've never heard of this before," Papa said, sounding indignant.

"Neither had we," Adelaide said. "We just found out."

"Triads are natural, though rare. There are articles addressing them in the Chosen Tradition," Watkins said. "I have a diagram I can show you."

"We don't need the diagram," Papa said firmly. "The Middleton family fully supports the Chosen Tradition and the Chosen Council. If you say they're natural, then they are."

Mo turned to gape at him.

"So you don't have any problem at all with the notion that your daughter has two Chosens?" Morris asked as Adelaide and Alan exchanged a

sidelong glance.

"I would never question the Chosen Council."

Oh, now she understood. Mo faced forward in disgust. She couldn't wait to hear what he really thought once they got out of this flaming room. More importantly, what did Les think? Les always tried to honour the Way. Would she expect them to have a relationship with this other Chosen? Children? She'd said nothing would change between them, but . . .

"I'm sure you'd like to find out who your other Chosen is," Watkins said to Mo.

She bit her tongue and slipped her hand into Les's.

Watkins pulled another sheet toward him. Mo waited, aware of Les's eyes upon her. "Your second Chosen is twenty-five years old and lives in sector E6. Both her parents are deceased. She has one sibling. He's a Solitary." He took a deep breath and looked at Mo. "Her name is Jayne Adams."

Mo tightened her grip on Les's hand. "Adams? As in Adams Incident? Is that why her parents are dead? Because they were executed?"

"Yes."

"Now just a minute," Papa sputtered.

Watkins shifted his gaze to Papa. "Yes?"

After a long silence, Papa mumbled, "Nothing."

"Mo, are you okay?" Les asked.

"No. I don't know. We need to talk about it." She stood. "Can I provide my confirmation now, please?"

"Don't you have any questions, Lieutenant Commander Middleton?" Morris asked.

Oh yeah, she had a bunch of questions, starting with how in the flaming Argamon this could have happened. But why ruin this wonderful meeting by being dragged to an execution site? Her questions would wait until she could scream them. She smiled at the counsellor. "Not at the moment."

Watkins nodded. "Then I'm now officially advising you that, since you know the names of your two Chosens, you are bound to them from this point forward in accordance with all the articles in the Chosen Tradition. You are now in a position to commit a Chosen Violation if you violate any article in the Chosen Tradition that applies to a Joined Chosen. Do you understand and accept what I've just told you?"

"I understand and accept it." Watkins spun the screen toward her and Mo pressed her thumb against it until the station beeped.

"Thank you. Here's an information packet about triads." Watkins handed Mo an envelope. "I'd like to highlight two points. As I explained to Lieutenant Commander Thompson . . ." He trailed off when Mo raised her hand.

"Would it be all right if my Principal explained it to me later?" she asked. "I'm not sure I can handle explanations right now."

"I don't see why not. Oh, but I do have to tell you that you'll meet Jayne at 3:00."

"We'll all come back together," Les said.

"Good. Let's close, then." He stood and motioned for everyone to do the same. As they joined hands and said the *Words Every Rymellan Knows*, Mo felt as if she were at a farewell ceremony, not a notification meeting. "See you all at 2:45!" Watkins said cheerfully.

They all followed Watkins and Morris from the room. After they'd left the Chosen House, Mo spun to face everyone. "I hate to ask this, but would you mind taking the train so Les and I can talk about what just happened?" she said to Papa, Adelaide, and Alan. She and Papa had taken the train to the meeting; they'd all intended to return to the Thompsons' together in Les's aviacraft, looking forward to a lavish lunch to celebrate the Joining of their families. "We might not get another chance before we have to come back, and we really need to talk." And Les better not contradict her.

"We don't mind," Adelaide said. "In fact, maybe we'll take a little stroll before we get on the train, figure out how to deal with this."

"Yes, let's," Papa agreed.

Adelaide handed Les her envelope. "You take this. We can't look at it on the train."

"We'll wait for you near the estate's main entrance," Les said. "I want to be there when everyone else hears the news." She grabbed Mo's hand. "Let's go."

They strode to the aviacraft in silence. As soon as they were safely inside and Les had slid the craft's door shut, they tossed their envelopes onto a seat and embraced.

"I don't understand it," Mo murmured. "Today was supposed to be it. We were supposed to belong to each other."

"We do." She felt Les shake her head. "I can't believe we're in a triad with an Adams."

Mo pushed her away and stepped back. "That's all you care about? That she's an Adams? You don't care that we're in a flaming triad?"

"No, that's not what I—"

"I wouldn't care if we were in a triad with someone in a family so respectable, they regularly broke into the Song of Rymel," Mo shouted, shaking with anger. "I don't care who the third Chosen is, I care that she flaming exists!"

"Okay, okay," Les said, holding up her hands. "I feel the same way. I wish we weren't in a triad. But you have to admit, being in one with an Adams doubled the shock."

Maybe, but the Adams part bothered Mo a lot less than the triad part.

"Why did this have to happen to us? I can't believe it. First the separation, then nothing but joy that we're Chosens, and now this? And we're talking the rest of our lives, here. It's not like we'll go to the notification meeting this afternoon and then it's over." Mo slapped her hands against her thighs. "What are we going to do with her?"

"Nothing. Between our meetings, I read the information Watkins gave us. We don't have to have a relationship with her."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll read more about the articles and I'll talk to Laura, but I'm pretty sure."

"Then what's the point of this flaming triad if we can act like we're not in one?"

"We can't act like we're not in one," Les said, closing the gap between them and taking Mo's hands. "We *will* be Joined to her. I guess the expectation is that we'll eventually . . . love her."

"Well, we won't. I'll never love anyone else, especially her. So what's the point?"

Les bit her lip.

"What?"

"Article CT134."

Mo scrunched her face up in concentration. "It must be an obscure article, because it's not coming to me."

"It is. It's specific to triads, sort of a safeguard, I think. According to the historical information, triads have been volatile. Most have ended at execution sites."

"Oh, great!"

"So they added something of a loophole to the Tradition. CT134. Here." Les picked up one of the envelopes, rummaged inside it, and pulled out a sheet. "Read this."

Mo read the information about Article CT134 and handed it back to Les. "So if you and I were to make a case, she'd be executed?"

Les nodded.

"Les, I'd like the woman to disappear, but not like that."

"What if that's what they want us to do?" Les said carefully.

"Who? Our parents?"

"No, the Chosen Council. Don't you think it's odd that out of all the women we could have ended up with in a triad, we ended up with her? I didn't tell you about this, but Admiral Hall was talking about the Adams children just the other day. He said that after the Incident, some Rymellans petitioned to execute the children, but the overseers denied the requests. Maybe they're hoping we'll manage one execution for them."

She couldn't believe Les, of all people, would suggest such a thing. "That's hard to believe, Les."

Les's face tightened. "So you think she's really our Chosen, then. Yours and mine. An Adams."

When she put it like that . . . "I don't know. But if they want us to exercise the article, don't you think Watkins would have steered us that way? I mean, he didn't even discuss the article."

"You didn't give him a chance," Les said. "He told me about it. And he may not be in on it. I'd imagine anyone who knows would be high up. We're talking about fiddling with a Joining, here."

Mo swallowed and glanced around. Nobody could hear them, but she still felt uncomfortable. "Or she could be our Chosen and this triad is legitimate." That felt uncomfortable, too.

"I don't know what to believe, to be honest." Les sighed. "If she is our Chosen, well, that's unbelievable. If she isn't . . ."

"I hate to say this, but let's assume she is."

Les's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Because despite what's happened, I'd like to see my twenty-seventh birthday. So let's forget we had this conversation." Mo drew a shaky breath. "And as far as CT134 goes, not unless we're absolutely sure. I already hate her. I hate this triad, hate what they've done to us. But I won't execute her unless she somehow forces us to that. I can't." Her chin trembled. "I want our daughters to be proud of us, Les. They won't be proud if we kill her because we love each other. We wouldn't be proud of ourselves, either. We'd see her every time we looked at each other. Executing her would rip us apart."

And the triad might do the same. They wouldn't lead the charmed lives she'd imagined, supporting each other's careers and raising daughters. To have everything she'd hoped for given to her and then snatched away . . . the last few happy days had been nothing but a cruel illusion, a puff of smoke that had dissipated the moment Les said the word triad.

Bewildered, Mo sank into one of the passenger seats and rested her head against the seat in front, but her eyes remained dry. The enormity of the day's events hadn't sunk in. She couldn't cry when everything felt so surreal. She could be angry, though. Oh yeah, angry about how unfair it was. For almost two flaming years they'd suffered alone, honoured the Way, desperately tried to find meaning in lives without each other. If they'd ended up with other women, they would have honoured their Chosens to the bitter end, done all they could to limit the pain and emptiness to themselves. They didn't deserve to be in a triad. This time, the Way was asking too much. Too much.

The seat in front of her squeaked. She felt Les's fingers in her hair. "We'll do whatever's best for us," Les said softly. "We might be pressured to execute her."

Mo lifted her head. "Les—"

"I know. I don't want to do it without good reason either. It would go against everything I believe. So we'll have to stick together." She touched Mo's cheek. "That's the only thing that makes sense today. That we're together."

Les's comm unit beeped. "We're heading to the train station," Adelaide said. "Are you on your way?"

"We will be in a minute."

"Make sure you are. We have to tell everyone the news and have lunch." The connection went dead.

Les shook her head and slid the comm unit into its holder. "Let's just try to get through today," she said with a sigh. "Perhaps after we've met her, we'll have a better idea of how things will go, have a sense of whether she'll be difficult or respect our relationship."

Now Mo felt like crying. It didn't matter. Execute her or Join with her—either could, and probably would, destroy her relationship with Les. Today was supposed to bring an end to any possibility of losing Les. But there was no end. She could never relax. Not anymore.

Lesley opened the door to the Thompson home with trepidation. As she stepped over the threshold, Jason popped into the hallway, then darted back into the living room, calling, "They're back!" Those inside chattered excitedly.

"I'll make sure all the caterers are in the kitchen or dining room and shut the doors." Mama strode down the hallway.

Lesley tightened her hold on Mo's hand and walked into the living room. Concern erased the smiles on the faces of those waiting. "What happened, did you fight on the way home?" Mary asked.

The few chuckles quickly died when a scowling Michael walked in, a sombre Papa on his heels. Lesley threw her information packet onto an end table—Mo had left hers on the craft—and scanned the room. Only the children weren't here. Barbara's parents had taken Jacob and Lynn for the day and had kindly offered to take Karen and William's son as well.

Neil rose from the sofa, his eyes wide. "What's going on?"

"Wait for Adelaide," Michael said. Several fidgeted impatiently or cleared their throats.

Finally Mama strode in and nodded. "They can't hear us."

"So what's going on?" Neil said again.

"The notification meeting was horrible," Michael said.

"What do you mean?" Jason asked. "Obviously Lesley and Mo are Chosens."

"Yes," Michael said, moving farther into the room so everyone could

see him. "But they have another Chosen."

"I don't understand," Barbara said as the others exchanged puzzled glances.

"They're part of a triad." Papa said. "Three Chosens, equally matched. I'd never heard of them before this morning. It can only happen with same-oriented Joinings. Apparently the last one was 232 years ago."

"It's a triangle," Mama added, tracing the shape in the air with her hands.

"Triads were mentioned during my training," Karen said. "I think it came up when I was doing a course on reproductive technology. If I remember correctly, the last triad had quite a few daughters."

"You mean all of them will be Joined?" Nathan asked.

"That's the idea." Mama grimaced, whispered to Papa, and squeezed herself onto the sofa next to Karen.

"Is this a joke?" Jason asked, dropping with a thud into a chair.

Michael sighed. "I wish it were. And you haven't heard the best part yet."

Jason frowned. "I'd think this triad is bad enough."

Mo squeezed Lesley's hand; she squeezed back.

"It's got to be the other Chosen," Neil said. "Who is it, Papa?" He looked at Lesley and Mo. "Who is it?"

"Ever heard of the Adams Incident?" Michael said before Lesley had a chance to speak. "Well, their daughter is Chosen sister to all of you. Congratulations to us."

Everyone gaped, then started talking at once. Jason leaped to his feet. "No! This is outrageous!" he bellowed; the others grew silent and stared. "You'll have the Adams name." His mouth moved; he looked as if he were struggling for air. "The Thompson and Adams names will be linked," he whispered hoarsely.

Lesley sucked in her breath. She hadn't given any thought to the names. Chosens normally had two last names, though they only used the Principal's socially. Perhaps they could choose which two names to retain, but somehow she doubted it.

"And you can bet this whole triad is her doing," Matthew said, his mouth twisting. "There's something wrong with that family. Every time an Adams is involved in a Joining, something goes wrong."

"And it's not just your family affected, Jason," Mary said. "Ours is, too."

"It's not fair!" Jason shouted, his voice regaining its vigour. "Why our family?"

"Why not our family?" Karen asked.

Jason's hands clenched. "Because we're a respectable family that doesn't consort with criminals, that's why!"

"Any family's daughter could have been a match."

"But we ended up with her. Her parents were sick criminals. She's their flesh and blood and they brought her up, so she's probably sick too. We don't deserve her."

"No family does," Matthew said.

"Oh, come on. You haven't even met her," Karen said.

Mary grimaced. "I wish we didn't have to. I wonder if she looks like them."

Jason shuddered. "A walking reminder." He looked at Lesley and Mo. "If I were you two, I'd keep an eye on her day and night. Or maybe you shouldn't. She'll do us all a favour if she commits a Chosen Violation."

"Jason!" Papa hissed.

"I'm only saying what every Rymellan will think when they hear about this."

"That's not what I think," Karen said. "Does that mean I'm not Rymellan?"

"Karen, maybe you should stand by your family instead of someone you've never met," Matthew said.

Karen frowned. "Why do I have to take sides? And that's my point. We haven't met her."

"My Chosen is doing what the Tradition expects of her," William said, placing a protective arm around Karen's shoulders. "Accepting her sister's Chosen into the family."

Jason snorted. "That's easy for you to say. After all, you're not a Thompson by blood. You won't care when everyone starts to whisper."

William recoiled as if he'd been struck. Karen shot up, her face red. "And that's what it's all about, isn't it, Jason? What everyone else will think."

"When they find out my sister is in some type of unnatural arrangement with an Adams? Yes, Karen, I'm a little worried about what everyone will think," Jason shouted.

"Worried about Lesley, or about you?" Karen shouted back.

"Enough!" Mama roared. "This isn't helping."

Jason threw up his arms and stepped away, muttering. Karen folded her arms and sat back down. "What's her name?" she asked.

It took Lesley a few seconds to understand the question. "Jayne."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-five."

"Yeah, I guess that's why it took so long for us to get our Papers. We were waiting for her to turn twenty-five," Mo said bitterly.

"He didn't tell us what she does," Papa said.

Lesley turned to him. "You're right, he didn't." If she hadn't felt so overwhelmed during the meeting, she might have noticed and asked.

"So what happened during the meeting?" Andrew asked. "What did he

say? I mean, how did you find out? Did he tell you about Adams first, or the triad?"

"I hope he told you about Mo first, Lesley," Nathan said.

Lesley nodded. "He did. Well, first he told us about the triad." She recounted her meeting up to the point when Watkins had confirmed that Mo was her Chosen. "Then he moved on to the other Chosen. He didn't seem eager to—"

"Yes!" Jason suddenly shouted. Everyone's attention shifted to him. Lesley's heart sank. He hadn't been listening to her; he'd opened the information packet from Watkins. From the triumphant look on his face, she could guess what he'd just read. "It's okay, everyone," he said excitedly. "We can execute her. That will solve everything. No triad. No Adams. Only Lesley and Mo."

Lesley snatched the sheet from his hand. "I know about the article."

Shock crossed his face. "If you already knew, why didn't you say something? Why did you just stand there and let us all think we'd be related to an Adams?"

"What article? What are you talking about?" Neil asked.

Mama jumped in when Lesley hesitated. "An article that allows Lesley and Mo to execute her."

"Only if they can make a case that a triad with her won't survive," Papa quickly added.

"There you go." Jason smiled and held out his hands, palms up. "Problem solved."

Some smiled back at him; others mumbled their disagreement. "You can't execute someone because they're inconvenient," Karen said.

Jason tutted and frowned at her. "We won't be. The fact that she's an Adams means the triad won't survive."

"I completely agree," Mary said. "A triad would cause a stir on its own. Who knows how Rymellans will react to a triad with an Adams in it?" She pointed at Lesley and Mo. "If you exercise your right under this article, the whole unsavoury situation can be resolved before anyone even knows about it."

Papa vigorously shook his head. "A case has to be made that she *is* a threat. Not that everyone *thinks* she is a threat."

"You're splitting hairs," Jason said.

"You're a decent advocate. You know I'm not splitting hairs."

Jason shrugged. "I could make a case either way."

"You can't do it. You're too close."

"No, but I know plenty of advocates who would be willing to prepare a case, especially one that will dispose of a threat of this magnitude to the Way."

"Dispose of a threat to the Way?" Karen said incredulously. "Jason,

you're talking about executing someone, not throwing something into a recycling chute."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Don't be so soft. Lesley, just give me the word and I'll contact an advocate who specializes in the Tradition."

"You can't tell anyone about the triad until all Chosens have been notified," Lesley reminded him.

"I can set up an appointment."

"Lesley, don't do it," Karen said. "At least get to know her first."

"I can probably get you an appointment for tomorrow," Jason pressed. "Any advocate will clear his schedule for this. After you've met her today, you can talk, make up your minds, then see the advocate. It won't take long to prepare a case. As Mary said, it'll all be over before anyone knows about it. Perhaps the Chosen Council won't have to announce the triad at all, since it won't be a triad by the time it announces this week's notifications."

"You're talking about a capital case, Jason, which advocates rarely handle," Papa said. "It will take longer than a day to prepare," he held up his hand to forestall Jason's protest, "no matter how foregone you think the conclusion is."

"At least we'll be able to say we're preparing a case when everyone asks what we're doing about it." He turned to his sister. "Lesley?"

"Excuse me, I believe the article states that Les and one of the other Chosens have to present the case," Mo said. "So don't I get a say in this?"

"Of course you do," Matthew said quickly.

"Good. We, Les and I, just talked about it. We're not making a decision right now. We've just been told we're in a triad and we'd like some time to understand what that means before we talk about executing anyone."

"Don't be such a baby!" Mary spat. "You don't have to waste time understanding what it means. There's a solution staring you in the face, if you'd only have the guts to take it."

Mo's face tightened. "It involves executing someone. If you don't mind, I'd like more than thirty seconds to make up my mind."

"I would have thought you'd want to be rid of her."

"Not like that."

"Two military officers and you're both flaming stupid!" Jason snarled, tapping his temples.

"We're not saying we'll never consider the article, we're saying it's premature," Lesley said through clenched teeth.

"Try to keep in mind that this Adams woman is as much Lesley and Mo's Chosen as they are each other's," Papa said. "You shouldn't doubt the Chosen Council."

"That's a bit strong, Alan," Michael said; Lesley had almost forgotten he was there. "What I see is the Chosen Council in a difficult situation. Every once in a while these triads occur and the Council has to spout that they're

natural. But three Chosens? Please! The Council, in its wisdom, added CT134 to the Tradition for a reason. It allows families like ours—respectable families—to deal with an undesirable situation in a manner that doesn't violate the Way."

"It's as if they wrote it for this very situation," Mary said. "And let's face it, how much of a case would the advocate need to prepare, given who it is?"

"Exactly," Jason agreed. He turned to Mama. "What do you think?"

Mama caught Lesley's eye before answering. "I agree with Lesley. Am I happy she's in a triad? No. Do I want an Adams as my Chosen daughter? Definitely not. But do I think she should be executed? I'm not sure yet. Let's see how it goes."

Jason sighed and shook his head. "Should I set up an appointment?" he asked Lesley again.

"I agree with my Chosen," she said, managing to smile at Mo. "No appointment."

Some groaned; others nodded. "You're doing the right thing," Neil said.

"No, you're not!" Jason said, his hands clenching again. "Don't you understand why this article exists? Even the Chosen Council recognizes that triads are undesirable. And you're in one with an Adams. Open your eyes, Lesley!"

"It's too early to make a decision," Lesley said slowly.

"Well, I don't know what it'll take for you to come to your senses, but I'll tell you one thing. I'll eventually Join and have children, and no child of mine is going anywhere near an Adams. I'm positive I won't be the only one who'll feel that way. So who would you rather turn your back on? An Adams, or everyone else?"

"You can only speak for yourself, Jason," Barbara said softly.

Lesley wasn't so sure. News of the triad and the identity of the third Chosen had split both families down the middle. If Rymellans who loved her and Mo wouldn't accept the triad and Adams, how would Rymellans in general react?

"I'm disappointed with you, Mo," Mary said. "Doesn't our name mean anything to you?"

"How can you ask that?" Mo exclaimed as Lesley squeezed her hand and moved closer to her.

"You don't seem very interested in maintaining its respectability."

"Adams will use the Thompson name socially, not the Middleton name," Papa said.

Mama sighed.

"That might be, but how will I explain to the sector that my daughter is involved with an Adams?" Michael asked.

Mo spun toward him. "Is that all you care about? Your next run for the government?"

"Don't act as if my concerns are trivial. I'm the one who'll be here dealing with the consequences while you're off flying a patrol somewhere."

"And what about Mama?" Matthew said.

Mo shrank against Lesley. "What about her?"

"Have you thought about what she would want?"

"Don't start with that, Matthew," Michael said.

"Papa—"

"Don't." Michael held Matthew's gaze until Matthew looked away.

"Look, we're not making a decision right now," Lesley said, wanting to bring the discussion to a close before Mo got hurt. "Let's drop it and have lunch. We have to be back at the Chosen House for 14—um, 2:45. Mama, what will we do about supper? I assume she'll be coming back here."

Jason's eyes bulged. "Are you serious? You're bringing her here, to the estate?"

She didn't have much choice. "We're not hosting her for lunch, so you'll have to meet her over supper."

"I won't. If you think I'll eat with that woman, you can forget it."

"You won't meet her?" Lesley asked him.

"No," Jason said, his face grim.

His answer stunned her. "If you can't do it for her, do it for me and Mo."

"I am doing it for you and Mo. I won't help you endanger yourselves. You're in shock and operating on automatic. Once you've had time to think, really think, you'll thank me for not being there. You'll see."

"I won't be there either," Mary said.

"Anyone else?" Lesley asked quietly.

Matthew raised his hand. "Count me out."

"I'll be there," Nathan piped up.

Lesley wanted to hug him.

"You'll be there, right Papa?" Mo asked.

"Yes, yes," Michael said, his mouth pinched.

"So will we," Karen said. Andrew, Neil, and Barbara nodded in agreement, though Andrew looked unsure.

"It's good to know where everyone stands," Lesley said in disbelief.

"I don't think we should have her here for supper tonight," Papa said.

"What?" Lesley gasped. From the corner of her eye she saw Jason gloating, while Mama gaped.

"Hear me out. I propose that we have her for supper tomorrow, instead. Just the, uh, triad, me and your mama, and Michael."

"William and I would like to meet her," Karen said.

"I know, but it'll be embarrassing to bring her tonight," Papa said.

"We'd have to explain why half of you don't want to meet her. And it will be intimidating for her. She'll be by herself."

"You could always have a picnic at the Wall of Offenders," Matthew said.

Papa's voice cut through the snickers. "And now I'm even more convinced that a quiet supper without all of us would be better, after we've all had a chance to sleep on what's happened. And she can bring someone with her tomorrow, so she won't be alone."

"Her brother," Lesley murmured.

"Oh, so now there will be two Adamses here. Why don't we just open up the estate to every criminal out there?" Jason said.

Lesley closed her eyes. The entire day had turned into one unending nightmare and she'd only been in a triad with Adams for a couple of hours. If it was always going to be like this, CT134 might not be such a bad idea. "I like your idea, Papa, let's invite her for supper tomorrow. And now let's go through to the dining room. I'm sure lunch is ready to be served." Without giving anyone a chance to reply, she steered Mo into the hallway.

"What are we going to do, Les?" Mo moaned. "What are we going to do?"

Lesley rubbed Mo's back. "I don't know," she whispered. "Let's just get through today."

Jason stood near an open second-floor window and watched as the group returning to the Chosen House started out for Lesley's aircraft. "Good luck!" someone—it sounded like Neil—yelled. Lesley looked over her shoulder and waved, then said something to Mo. Scowling, Jason pulled out his comm unit, typed a quick dispatch, and sent it. Moments later, he read the replies and grunted in satisfaction.

When he could no longer see Lesley and those with her, he headed downstairs and slipped out the back door. Mary and Matthew soon joined him. They strolled farther across the grounds, away from any curious eyes peering out a back window. "So how will we stop this insult?" Matthew asked. "We've got to do something. They're both too soft."

"Maybe they're just overwhelmed," Mary said. "It's a lot to take in."

"That may be, but they're military officers who should be capable of making a decision under pressure, especially one that's in the best interests of themselves, their families, and the Way."

Mary kicked a stone off the path in disgust. "I can't believe Papa. I thought he'd stand up for Mama's name."

"Give him a chance," Matthew said. "He has to play along today. The Chosen Council wouldn't appreciate it if he didn't show up with Mo. They

might consider that a sign of disrespect they couldn't ignore. The same goes for Adelaide and Alan. Anyway, he's not the one we need to convince. Lesley and Mo are."

"I'm positive they'll exercise the article," Jason said. "They just need time to think."

Mary raised her brows. "Or perhaps a little push?"

Jason's eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that if they were presented with a compelling case for execution, I'm sure they'd act. Especially Lesley. If she can be convinced that the Way is threatened if Adams remains alive . . ."

Matthew nodded. "You're right. She'll do whatever it takes to protect the Way, including persuading Mo."

"Once the shock wears off, she'll talk to Mo about executing. I'm sure of it," Jason said.

"And we should be ready with a case so that no time is wasted when she does come to her senses," Mary said. "Then again, why wait? Let's give her a case to help her along."

"But she and Mo have to request that a case be prepared first," Matthew said, his brow furrowing.

Jason shook his head. "No, they don't. I read the full text of the article. They have to authorize its presentation, but anyone can prepare a case."

"And the longer they delay preparing a case, the longer they have to form an attachment to the woman." Mary's face hardened. "The Adams woman is not only a threat to the Way, she's a threat to them. We need to do whatever we can to help them make a decision and make it quickly, before her influence contaminates them. Or do you want to see *them* at an execution site?"

Jason blanched and pulled out his comm unit. He searched the code directory for the name he wanted. Moments later, a strong voice emanated from the unit. "Phillips here."

"Advocate Phillips? This is Jason Thompson. We met at a lecture a few months ago."

"Yes, I remember. How are you?"

Jason forced a chuckle. "I'm not sure. I was wondering if I could set up an appointment with you for sometime tomorrow. I'd like you to prepare a case on behalf of my sister, Lesley."

"Uh . . . I'm quite booked."

"It's urgent. I can't give you any details right now, but you'll understand when we meet."

"I'm intrigued. And since it's for the lieutenant commander, I'll squeeze you in." Phillips paused. "How does half past four sound?"

Jason glanced at Mary and Matthew. "I'll go," Mary mouthed, pointing

to herself.

"That's fine. Um, I'll have someone else with me. Two names will go on the case, and the other person will represent the second party."

"The lieutenant commander and the other party won't be with you?"

"No. I'll explain everything tomorrow."

"All right. Half past four tomorrow, then."

"Thank you. Good-bye." Jason terminated the connection. "If we're lucky, this'll all be over in a few days," he said to Mary and Matthew.

They smiled.

Jayne stood in front of C3's Chosen House and gazed up the steps that led to the entrance. She'd arrived in C3 two hours ago. That had left plenty of time to worry about the notification meeting, now only minutes away. Part of her wanted to wheel around and make a run for it, but she willed herself forward. Despite what Rymellans thought they knew about her, she wasn't weak in the Way. She believed in the Way and would prove it.

As she ascended the steps toward the double doors, she couldn't avoid thinking about her parents. They'd probably arrived at the Chosen House filled with optimism and curiosity and left it expecting to live out their lives together. Well, they had. They'd died together too, and so she'd face this meeting alone. No great loss; they hadn't cared anyway. She pushed them from her mind, swung open the doors, and hung her cloak on an empty hook.

Before she could open her mouth, the Rymellan at reception looked down his nose at her. "I know who you are. Wait there and I'll let Albert Watkins know you're here."

"Thank you," she mumbled. She didn't have to wait long; a man soon approached her from across the foyer. "Welcome to Sector C3's Chosen House," he said with a smile. "I'm Albert Watkins."

"Thank you," she said, this time meaning it. As she'd wandered around outside, several people had smiled and nodded to her, but they hadn't known her identity. He did. Given where they were and why, she wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been less than cordial.

"Follow me." Watkins led her into a room where another woman waited. "This is Counsellor Morris." Morris slightly inclined her head.

The counsellor's presence didn't surprise Jayne. Her Chosen must be taking the news that she'd Join to an Adams badly.

"Please have a seat, Jayne," Watkins said.

She tried to sit still while Watkins shuffled through the papers in a file in front of him. What she wouldn't give for a sketchbook. She looked at the counsellor, then quickly focused on Watkins' desk. Another rejection, and in

front of an audience. She should be used to it by now, but she wasn't. And this would be the worst, the ultimate rejection, the one she'd dreaded since her eighteenth birthday. She played with the buttons on her shirt. The room felt unbearably hot.

"Let's begin," Watkins said. "The Principal of your Joining is twenty-seven years old. She obviously resides in Sector C3 and is a member of the military."

Jayne squeezed her eyes shut. Not the military! Oh no, don't let it be the lieutenant from E6! No, it couldn't be. She doubted very much the lieutenant lived in C3. But it didn't matter. No military member would ever be pleased with her. While fretting outside, she'd convinced herself that if her Chosen were mild-mannered and thoughtful, maybe they'd eventually manage a friendship. A military member? Forget it.

"Both her parents are advocates," Watkins droned on. "She has two siblings. Both are Chosens." He looked up. "Her name is Lesley Thompson."

Jayne registered and rejected the notion simultaneously. "Do you mean Lieutenant Commander Lesley Thompson, the one on the monitors?" The one who'd just taken part in capturing a criminal who'd committed a Chosen Violation? The one who'd walked in the execution procession?

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander Lesley Thompson," Watkins said, his brows drawing together.

He must think she was an idiot. Who else would it be? Lesley Thompson. Strong in the Way, rigid, cold, single-minded—in addition to being educated, accomplished, and respected, none of which applied to Jayne. Compared to the lieutenant commander, she was nothing, and felt certain Thompson would see it that way. Everything she feared would happen. Everything.

Her chest heaved rapidly and her head started to float. The room spun. She grabbed the arm of the chair to steady herself.

"Are you all right?" Watkins asked, sounding far away.

"I'm fine," she managed to mumble. "Just surprised."

"Would you like some water?"

Jayne shook her head. Watkins looked to Morris for help. "Jayne, I can understand why you find the prospect of Joining with Lesley Thompson daunting, but try to keep an open mind," Morris said. "She is your Chosen."

"Over time, I'm confident the match will be pleasing to you," Watkins added.

Their words brought Jayne back to her senses. She mustn't give the impression that she doubted the Chosen Council. "I'm—I'm sorry. I meant no disrespect to the Council."

Watkins waved away her apology. "It's not the first time I've had someone almost faint on me at a notification meeting. Are you sure you don't want a glass of water?"

"I'm sure. Thank you."

"Are you ready to meet the lieutenant commander?"

No. She would never be ready. The thought of meeting Lesley Thompson terrified her, but she had no choice. "Yes," she said, still hardly believing that Thompson was her Chosen. And Thompson was here, waiting. She must be devastated, disappointed, maybe angry.

"Jayne, I'd like to offer you a bit of advice before the Thompsons are brought in," Morris said. "The Thompsons are a respected family. I can see that you're already familiar with the lieutenant commander and her reputation. If I were you, I'd follow the lead of your Principal. And honour the Tradition. Don't follow in your parents' footsteps."

Blood rushed to Jayne's face. "I won't!" she blurted. She wasn't a criminal, like them.

"I'm sure your parents would have said the same thing at their notification meetings."

She shivered, sure Morris was right. But then, every Rymellan would say it, and 99.99 percent of them would never commit a Chosen Violation. But most Rymellans didn't have— She gulped several times. What if she was like them? No, stop it. How many times had she gone over this in her head? She wasn't like them. She would never be like them.

"I'll bring the lieutenant commander in now," Watkins said.

Jayne nodded. Might as well get the public humiliation over with, at least. The private humiliation could last the rest of her life.

Watkins pressed a button on his comm station as Morris opened the door. "We're ready for you, Lieutenant Commander. Room Six."

"We'll be right there," came the reply.

Jayne recognized Thompson's voice; she'd heard it enough times recently, never imagining that she was listening to her Chosen. Would that voice eventually elicit a smile, or evoke hatred? She sat on her hands, and almost jumped when she heard a tap at the open door.

Watkins motioned for the Thompsons to enter. Jayne stood, hoping she didn't look as terrified as she felt. Thompson walked in, followed by two people who must be her parents. Jayne's heart beat faster as the tall, slender, blond woman approached. The Interior insignia on Thompson's dress uniform drew her eye. Never in a million years would she have expected to be in the same room with this woman, especially this room.

She glanced at Thompson's face. Expecting to see anger, resentment, and disappointment, she saw . . . nothing. Thompson's eyes contained no hint of how she felt or what she thought. They looked impassive and detached. Jayne knew Interior officers were cold, but the complete lack of emotion disturbed her.

Thompson's voice broke into her thoughts. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Lesley Thompson." She extended her hand.

The move surprised Jayne. Thompson was being courteous. "Jayne Adams," she mumbled in response as she shook Thompson's hand. She couldn't help snatching another look at her, but jerked her eyes away when Thompson nodded.

"These are my parents, Adelaide and Alan." Thompson moved aside. Alan looked Jayne in the eye and grasped her hand. Adelaide looked past her, her fingers barely brushing Jayne's before she pulled her hand away. After an awkward moment, everyone moved to their chairs and sat.

"Thank you." Watkins cleared his throat. "Normally I'd ask if you have any questions and then you'd provide your confirmation," he said to Jayne. "But I have more news for you."

Jayne blinked. More news? Did it have anything to do with who she was? She struggled to remain calm and waited for Watkins to continue.

"Do you remember the Indoctrinators mentioning triads when you were at the Indoctrination Academy?" Watkins asked.

She'd rather not think about the Indoctrination Academy and didn't have to—she could recite every article in the Tradition from memory, including the obscure ones. Nobody could ever accuse her of not knowing the Chosen Tradition! Triads? Yes, the Tradition contained numerous articles about them. A Joining of three Chosens, only possible when dealing with a same-oriented Joining. Each Chosen was the best match for—oh dear Argamon, no. Not two. One would be difficult enough, especially with an Interior officer, but two? She became aware that everyone was waiting for her to speak and sensed Thompson looking at her. "I'm part of a triad?" she asked, hoping she'd jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Watkins nodded. "Do you know what it means?"

"Yes."

"I have a chart I can use to explain it to you if you like."

"No, it's okay," she said quietly. "I understand what a triad is." The brief discussion at the Indoctrination Academy came back to her. Rymellans had viewed previous triads with suspicion, and with her in this one . . . everyone would blame her. She always told herself that life had already dealt her its cruellest blow and that she'd lived through it and survived. Now she wondered if the worst was yet to come.

As if life were mocking her thoughts, Article CT134 rocketed into her mind; she almost cried out. The Principal and her other Chosen could execute her! She snuck a sidelong glance at Thompson, the woman who now held her life in her hands. As much as she hated to admit it, Morris was right. The best thing she could do was keep her head down and go along with whatever Thompson and the other triad member wanted. One step out of line, one perceived insurmountable inconvenience, and her life would be over. She'd be the one executed, regardless of whether it was her fault.

She hadn't expected her Chosen to love her; she'd hoped to be treated

as a human being and left alone to sketch. But her Chosens didn't have to tolerate her existence in their lives at all. Unlike one Chosen, who'd have had no choice but to accept her, two Chosens could reject her without violating the Way. Was that why Thompson didn't seem upset—because she knew the triad would be short-lived?

"If you don't have any questions, I'll tell you about your second Chosen," Watkins said, then took her silence as an indication to proceed. "Your second Chosen was notified earlier today because she also resides in Sector C3. She's twenty-six years old and is a member of the military."

Jayne's shoulders sagged. One military member was bad enough, but two? And they both lived in C3? She couldn't bear to think of the implications.

"Her papa is a member of the government and runs his own tailoring business. Her mama is deceased. She has five siblings. Two are Chosens, three are Solitaries. Her name is Ramona Middleton."

The name meant nothing to Jayne.

"I'll bring her in now." Watkins spoke a few words into his comm station.

Soon thereafter, a short woman with thick black hair, also in full military dress, strode into the room with her papa. The new arrival breezed toward Jayne and extended her hand. "I'm Ramona Middleton," she announced. "But call me Mo. Nobody calls me Ramona." She shook Jayne's hand.

When Mo pulled her hand away, Jayne realized she hadn't introduced herself, but Mo was already taking her seat on the other side of Thompson. "Les," Mo said with a nod as she sat. Thompson nodded in return.

Les? They definitely knew each other.

"Michael Middleton," Mo's papa murmured as he shook her hand. Jayne sank into her chair and sat on her hands again.

"And now you're all together," Watkins said with a satisfied smile. "Do any of you have questions?"

"I do," Mo said immediately. "When do we all have to be together?"

"What do you mean?"

"There are three of us, right? And there are activities that Chosens normally do together. The Dance Hall, parties, concerts, that sort of thing. Do we all have to be in attendance, or is it only necessary that two of us be present?"

Watkins clasped his hands on top of the file in front of him. "If the Chosens in a Joining would normally attend together, then you should all attend together. Now, nothing in the Tradition dictates that you must attend social events with your Chosen, but it would be rather odd for a Joined Chosen to attend such events alone."

"Odd? Interior would investigate a Chosen who regularly attends social

events alone," Thompson said.

"And in your case, attending social events with only one Chosen would likely elicit the same response, especially if it's always the same Chosen," Watkins said. "So use this as your guideline—if both Chosens would normally be expected to be present, then it's something the three of you should do together. Does that answer your question?"

Mo sighed. "Yeah."

Watkins' face clouded. "When you read the material I've given you, you'll see that what you do in private is your own affair. But when you're in public, you would do well to treat each other as equally as you can."

Thompson shifted in her seat. "We'll need time to adjust to our new circumstances."

"Of course," Watkins said, brightening. "That's true of all Chosens, not only those in triads."

"What will our names be?" Thompson asked.

"Like all Joinings, your name will be used socially. Legally, you'll take all three names. We decided that the names of the two non-Principal Chosens would appear in alphabetical order. So your full names will be your first names followed by Adams Middleton Thompson."

"That's a mouthful," Mo said.

Nobody laughed.

"Do you have any questions, Jayne?" Watkins asked her.

Jayne shook her head. He wouldn't be able to answer the only question she cared about: how long did she have to live?

"Any more questions?" Watkins looked past them—to the parents, Jayne presumed.

"I'm sure questions will come up over the coming weeks. Can we contact you when they do?" Thompson asked.

Watkins nodded. "Feel free to beep me or to set up a meeting. And this would be a good time to mention that we'd like you all to see a counsellor for the next little while. Lieutenant Commander Thompson, I'll contact you in a few days to set up a time. Please coordinate with your Chosens."

"You mean we'll see the counsellor together?" Mo asked.

Watkins nodded.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jayne caught Mo rolling her eyes at Thompson.

"If there are no further questions, I'll need Jayne's confirmation." Watkins paused, then forged ahead. "Jayne, I'm now officially advising you that, since you know the names of your two Chosens, you are bound to them from this point forward in accordance with all the articles in the Chosen Tradition. You are now in a position to commit a Chosen Violation if you violate any article in the Chosen Tradition that applies to a Joined Chosen."

Do you understand and accept what I've just told you?"

"I understand and accept it," Jayne said, certain that she'd just disappointed her Chosens. If she'd said no, she would have been at an execution site within the hour.

He swung the comm station screen toward her. She carefully read the paragraphs it displayed, then pressed her thumb in the designated spot and made a vow to herself: no matter what happened, she would remain loyal to her Chosens until the day she died. Unfortunately that day might not be far off.

"Counsellor, do you have anything to add before we close the meeting?"

"Just that you're all welcome to beep me at any time," Morris said.

Watkins stood up, beaming. "Well then, congratulations. I look forward to seeing you all at your Joining Ceremony."

Jayne hadn't thought much about her Joining Day, but given the alternative, she now fervently hoped to be there.

"Shall we?" Watkins said.

Everyone rose from their seats. Thompson quickly grabbed Mo and Adelaide's hands. Jayne ended up holding Watkins' and Alan's.

"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!"

Their applause was tepid. Everyone avoided each other's eyes. Watkins gathered his papers. "Oh, I almost forgot." He handed Jayne an envelope. "Information about triads. Pay particular attention to the sheet about Article CT134. If you have any questions, beep me."

Her skin crawled; she just knew everyone was looking at her. "Thank you," she murmured. Watkins and Morris left the room. Jayne swallowed and clutched the envelope to her chest.

"Uh, we were wondering if you'd like to come to supper tomorrow night," Thompson said. Jayne turned to face her. "We obviously didn't know about the triad, so we didn't plan a notification supper for tonight."

The thought of having supper with them filled Jayne with dread. Her mind went blank. She stared stupidly at Thompson.

"And please bring a guest or two with you," Thompson continued as if she'd replied. "Perhaps your brother?"

Jayne snapped out of it. "I'd like to bring my cousin and her Chosen, if that's all right." Please, let Carol and Ronald be free.

Thompson looked as if she were about to speak, then nodded. Alan touched Thompson's arm. "Why don't you and Mo take Jayne home? It will give you a chance to talk. We can take the train."

Alan's question told Jayne more than he'd perhaps intended. He hadn't said, "Why don't you take Mo and Jayne home?" Now she was certain that

not only did her two Chosens know each other, but their families were close, and it apparently wasn't unusual for her Chosens to do things together. And wouldn't they all be taking the train, but to different destinations?

"Yes, we should take her home," Thompson said. Neither her face nor her voice offered any clue that she might prefer to throw herself off a cliff. The woman had shown more emotion on the monitors; here, she was unreadable. Mo, at least, wasn't a blank slate; her politeness didn't fully mask her dismay.

Jayne didn't relish a three-hour train ride with them. She could talk to them at tomorrow's supper, with Carol and Ronald there to support her. "No, it's okay. It's a long train ride."

"You live in E6, right?" Mo said.

She nodded.

"It'll only take about half an hour."

"We're both pilots," Thompson said. "I'll fly you home."

"Oh." Both pilots, both in the military, and both from C3. If they hadn't looked so different and their last names weren't Thompson and Middleton, Jayne would have wondered if they were twins.

"Let's go." Thompson whirled and walked away. Mo followed her. Jayne had no choice but to trail after them.

"Looks like the nearest landing area is here." Mo stabbed her index finger onto one of the craft's panels, which currently displayed a map of the area around Jayne's apartment. "Do you know where that is?" she asked Jayne.

Jayne leaned forward in her passenger seat to peer over Mo's shoulder. "Yes. It's not far from where I live."

Thompson tapped a panel a few times. "Do up your seatbelt," she said.

Mo twisted around in her seat. "Have you flown before?" she asked as the craft lifted off.

Once, years ago, when— Her hand tightened around the information packet on her lap. She felt ill.

Amusement—or was it contempt?—flickered across Mo's face. "Are you okay? Aviacrafts aren't like passenger shuttles. They do fly a little faster."

"I'm fine," Jayne said, her cheeks burning. She wasn't about to tell them that the military had flown her and Robert to their uncle's right after they'd dragged off her parents. Now here she was again, sitting in a craft with military personnel. How could these two women in orange cloaks be her Chosens?

She glanced at Thompson's back and shrank into her seat. If

Thompson knew what Jayne had just thought, she'd land the craft at an execution site. Jayne must never question the Chosen Council in front of them. True, conversations between Chosens were supposed to be privileged, but with CT134 hanging over her head, she couldn't be too careful. Any excuse, any reason, no matter how flimsy . . . It wouldn't take much of a case for a stick to be at her neck. One word from her Chosens would be enough.

"Let's talk about tomorrow," Thompson said, her tone making it sound like a command. "Supper will be served at 19—7:00. We'll come fetch you and your guests."

Jayne swallowed. "No, that's okay. I don't mind taking the train." Yet another long stretch without her sketchbook, because they couldn't know about her sketching. Not ever. They'd make fun of her, just like the lieutenant had. They were all the same.

"Are you sure?" Thompson said.

"Yes."

"If you *insist* on taking the train, then we better have a look at the schedule." Mo whipped out her comm unit.

"We'll definitely fly you all home, though," Thompson said. "Otherwise you won't get home until two or three in the morning."

"Thank you, um . . ." What should she call her? "Lieutenant Commander."

Mo looked at Thompson. "Lesley," Thompson said.

Jayne wasn't sure if she should apologize. Fortunately, Mo spoke. "There's a train from the station closest to you that will get you into C3 just after six. That will leave plenty of time to walk to the estate."

The estate?

"We'll meet you at the station. Beep one of us if you're running late," Lesley said.

Beep Lesley Thompson? She couldn't imagine it.

Mo turned to Lesley and murmured something, then smiled and touched Lesley's arm. Her fingers lingered for a moment, then she ran them along Lesley's forearm and lifted her hand. Jayne quickly looked at the envelope on her lap. Argamon, these two didn't just know each other, they were *together*! She knew a caress when she saw one.

Jayne's hand went to her neck; her situation was more precarious than she'd thought. Did the Chosen Council expect her to believe that she'd just happened to end up in a triad with two military women who were already a couple? What had they offered Lesley and Mo to agree to a triad with her? Medals? Promotions? Credits? Each other? Had they sat around a table with members of the Chosen Council and discussed how long they'd put up with the charade before they presented a case for her execution? What had they decided would be palatable to Rymellans? A day, week, month? How long

until Lesley smiled on the monitors and informed everyone that she'd removed a threat to the Way by executing another Adams? Talk about a direct route to admiral. Would they eventually figure out a way to get rid of Robert, too? She may hate him, but she didn't want him to die at an execution site for a violation he hadn't committed.

Jayne couldn't believe it. Thirteen years ago, her parents had died at an execution site. That was supposed to end it—they'd paid for their violations. The circle had reformed, but it had excluded her. She remained on the outside and continued to pay for their crimes. First the petitions to have her executed, then the last thirteen years of social isolation, taunts, whispers, constantly looking over her shoulder for a patrol, strikes on her record because some Interior idiot was having a bad day or felt like a little entertainment. They'd taken everything from her—everything! And now this. Despite believing in the Way, following it, struggling not to be bitter or to blame others for judging her, they'd kill her in the end anyway. She'd never stood a chance. How naive of her to think that one day—one day!—it would be over and they'd leave her in peace.

She lifted her head. Her two Chosens—no, her two executioners—were staring ahead. They'd probably forgotten she was there, which suited her fine, though tomorrow she'd sit and eat with them. She'd managed to square her shoulders and hold her head high in the face of abuse that would have destroyed those weaker than her, so somehow she'd carry on polite conversation with the two military who would kill her. She wouldn't hand them their precious case on a silver platter. If they wanted her chained to that pole, they'd have to present a case they knew wouldn't be accepted if her last name wasn't Adams. But would they care? Would anyone care that the case didn't hold water?

When Lesley landed the craft, Mo rose and slid open the door. They seemed as eager to be rid of her as she was of them. "We'll see you tomorrow," Mo said.

Jayne mumbled a good-bye and hopped out of the craft. Almost immediately it lifted off. She watched it rotate and burst away, then trudged to her apartment, deflated and tired. Why fight it? Those who wanted her dead had already won. She wasn't weak in the Way, but she'd meet her end at an execution site regardless, and everyone would say she'd deserved her fate. Her destiny had been decided at birth. Now all she could do was wait for them to come for her.

"Now you know why they added CT134 to the Tradition," Lesley said when Mo finished reading the brief history of triads Watkins had given them. The aviacraft, on auto-navigation, banked toward the Thompson estate.

"Three triads were successful, not counting the earlier ones when they turned one into a Solitary," Mo said.

"Wow, three triads out of all the ones on record. I don't like those odds. And we're in a triad with an Adams. If all those other triads couldn't survive, how will this one? It includes the daughter of two criminals. Two criminals executed for Chosen Violations."

"And us. Why us?"

Lesley didn't respond. The answer she'd suggested earlier had made Mo nervous.

Mo sighed. "I keep hoping I'll wake up tomorrow and find out it's all a bad dream. Just the triad part, though. Not the you part."

Lesley chuckled.

"And can you believe how everyone reacted? We're the ones in the triad, not them." Mo shook her head at the memory.

"They're worried."

"So? That doesn't mean they should breathe down our necks to make a snap decision. We're the ones who'll have to live with the consequences, not them." Mo shoved the history back into the envelope. "We have to tell her about us. Soon."

"We'll tell her tomorrow."

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

Lesley shrugged and checked the navigational panel. "I don't know." The thought of laying eyes on an Adams had set her heart racing as she'd approached the meeting room. Then she'd stepped over the threshold, had seen her . . . Adams was just a woman, and a rather shy one at that. The only remarkable feature had been the bruise on her chin. But what had Lesley expected? Someone who looked like the actors staggering around the stage during the Festival of the Way? A flashing sign on Jayne's forehead that read *I'm a threat to the Way*? Someone twitching to rush from the Chosen House and commit a Chosen Violation? Lesley felt silly, but at the same time, she would not let her guard down. Jayne may look normal, but that didn't mean she wouldn't take after her parents and threaten the triad. The Adams line was tainted. *Tainted!*

"She's almost as tall as you."

Lesley didn't need to look at Mo to know that Jayne's height bothered her; the lift in Mo's voice said it all. "So are a lot of other Rymellans. Who cares?"

After a moment, Mo said, "Do you think she . . . you know, looks like either of her parents?"

Lesley grimaced. "I have no idea. I've never seen images of them, nor do I care to."

Mo grunted.

"What about you? What did you think of her?"

"Not much. I mean, not much in the sense that she didn't say much, so I don't know what to think."

"Tomorrow will be interesting."

"Yeah."

"Don't you find it odd that she's bringing her cousin and not her brother?" Lesley asked.

"Maybe he's busy."

Or perhaps he had no respect for the Chosen Tradition and had told Jayne he would never acknowledge her Chosen. Several of the Thompsons and Middletons were struggling with the news, but they had good reason. He didn't. Any family would have been a step-up for him and his sister. Landing two families in C3—well, they couldn't have done better. So already, a red flag. Lesley would keep her eyes open for others.

"I keep reminding myself that we're Chosens," Mo said. "That's the only way I can cope with this right now."

Lesley put her arm around Mo and tried to convince herself that everything would be all right, that their lives, careers, and relationship would weather the storm. But she couldn't. That morning she'd been so sure of her future; now the only certainty was that her life would be nothing like she'd imagined.

The worst part was not knowing what to do. She agreed with Papa that it was too soon to exercise CT134. She understood Mo's position that executing Jayne for the wrong reasons would probably destroy them. But how would they know if and when to execute? How could they predict the future? Unless Jayne blatantly threatened the Way, how could they be sure? Criminals went to execution sites because they'd clearly violated the Way. At what point could she and Mo be confident that Jayne would cross the line or threaten to push them over it, making it impossible for the triad to survive? How would they *know*? Hall's words came back to her: *If we'd gone ahead and executed the children, would we have regretted it a few weeks or months later, when we'd all calmed down?*

But if they didn't execute this Adams because they were unsure, would they live to regret it? Would their lives become a cautionary tale for future Rymellans? Would historians refer to her and Mo as fallen Rymellans who'd failed to protect the Way?

Usually the Way provided the answers, but in this case, it posed questions. Perhaps it would still offer her guidance, and she'd seek advice from those she trusted, like Laura. But with so many conflicting opinions already evident among her and Mo's families, and with her own feelings ranging from disbelief to resentment to anger to grief, how would she know who to listen to? Could she even trust herself, be certain that her relationship with Mo and their now-perilous dream of a life together wouldn't cloud her judgement?

She silently recited the *Words Every Rymellan Knows*, words that always strengthened her, reminded her of who she was and what was important. *Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way.*  
They rang hollow.