

The Accident

by Sarah Ettritch

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Mo gazed at the framed image in her hand and traced the faces smiling back at her: Mama and Papa, relaxed and happy next to Mama's garden. The image had sat on the fireplace mantel for several years, always drawing her eye whenever she entered the living room. When Mama had asked if she wanted to take any family mementos with her on tour, she'd instantly thought of it. But would seeing it in her quarters on the *Falcon* warm her, or make her homesick? For six months, the only contact she'd have with her family would be dispatches that arrived hours after they were sent. She'd never been in that situation.

A knock at the bedroom door, then Mama peered into the room. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." Mo turned and slipped the image between two shirts in the open bag on the bed, then transferred the bag to the floor.

Mama sat where the bag had been. "Packing already?"

"Just a few things I don't want to forget."

"I can't believe you'll be gone in two weeks."

Neither could she. The thirty months she'd flown domestic patrols had whipped by.

"Are you looking forward to it? You used to talk about going on tour all the time, but lately, you've been quiet."

Because time was moving too quickly. She could count the number of tours until Les turned twenty-five on one hand. "I'll miss everyone, especially you and Papa. I've never been away from you for that long."

"Yes, you have. At the Indoctrination Academy."

Mo crouched and made a pretense of fussing inside the bag to hide her face. "I saw you once a month, and you weren't far away."

"I'll write to you every chance I get. I'll record my dispatches, if you like."

"It won't be the same as seeing you." Mo looked up. "Will you miss me?"

Mama tutted. "Of course I'll miss you. Not being able to beep you whenever I feel like it will take some getting used to. You won't be able to beep me, either. So if you want to talk to me about what's really bothering you, you'd better do it before you leave. Now would be a good time."

Mo sighed. Mama knew her too well. Maybe talking to her would help—it had to be better than lying awake at night, thinking the same thoughts over and over. She plunked down on the bed next to Mama. "It's Les."

"What about her?"

"She seems excited about the tour and everything, but . . ."

"But what?"

Mo couldn't shake the feeling that Les was slipping away. She'd hoped that Les would want to stay together until their Chosen Papers arrived and confirmed they were Chosens, but lately she'd started to wonder if Les had other plans. Why had Les been reading Interior cases on Space Station 72? *I mentioned to Finney that I would have taken more Interior courses if I'd had room in my schedule. She offered to give me some reading material,* Les had explained. A perfectly logical explanation—so why did Mo have the nagging suspicion that Les hadn't told her the whole story?

Maybe because Les hadn't told her anything until she'd noticed an Interior file on Les's station display and asked about it. Or maybe because Les would attend an Interior reception with Finney next week. Why would Finney take her to an Interior reception? Okay, Finney wasn't in Defence, but she was a commander—surely she could get her hands on a couple of invitations to a Defence reception. Wouldn't that make more sense for Les's career? Mo figured she must be missing a piece of the puzzle—a piece Finney had. "I don't know, Mama, I just feel as if we're not as close as we used to be. She spends a lot of time with Commander Finney."

Truth be told, she was jealous of Finney's influence with Les, hated that Finney might know things about Les that she didn't. Les was with Finney right now; who knew what they were discussing? Well, she'd soon be out of Finney's clutches for six months. A good thing, as far as Mo was concerned.

"Lesley has ambitions," Mama said. "Commander Finney is helping her."

Mo stared at her lap. "I know, but . . ." But she was afraid that some airhead would end up on Les's arm, nodding and smiling at all the receptions and telling everyone how proud she was of Admiral Thompson and how she'd supported her dream. Would she be as proud to be on Lieutenant Thompson's arm in thirty years? Mo would. She'd be proud of Les, and respect and love her, no matter what insignia was sewn on Les's uniform. All she'd ever wanted was to love Les, to support her, to be by her side, always. But would the Chosen Council let her? She bit her lip to stop it from trembling.

Mama slipped her arm around her. "You know, your papa and I, we've stayed out of it. We didn't want to interfere. But now I can see it's starting to hurt." She paused. "Maybe it's time to think about breaking up."

"No!" Mo leaped to her feet and crossed to her desk, keeping her back to Mama. "We're only twenty-three."

"Mo, you don't want to wait until you're twenty-five. The longer you wait, the harder you'll make it for yourself, and Lesley."

It was already impossible. They could break up tomorrow and it wouldn't make a difference; she'd always long for Les. Oh, she'd do her duty and Join with her Chosen, but she'd never love her. She'd struggle to not resent her, despite knowing it wasn't the poor woman's fault. No, Les had to be her Chosen. Too many lives would be ruined if she wasn't. "Mama, let me deal with this in my own time." Mo turned to face her. "I understand what you're saying, but I'm not ready yet."

"I'm not suggesting that you break up right now, not when you're about to go on tour with her. But you have to start thinking about it, for your sake and hers." Mama pursed her lips. "Maybe you can transfer to another ship after this tour. You'll be almost twenty-four at that point. It'll be rough, but you'll have at least a year to come to terms with it before your Papers arrive." She wagged a finger. "You definitely don't want to wait until Papers force you into it. It wouldn't be fair to your Chosen."

But Les is my Chosen. Saying that to Mama would probably alarm her. "I don't know."

Mama frowned. "At least promise me you'll think about it while you're away. It'll ease my mind."

Mo felt a pang of guilt; she'd had no idea that Mama was worried. "I will," she said, the desire to reassure winning out over honesty. She'd never break up with Les—not unless she had to.

"Your papa and I will always be here for you," Mama said, rising. She pulled Mo into a hug. "You can lean on us. We know how hard it'll be . . . when you decide it's time."

Tears stung Mo's eyes; she clung to Mama. If Les turned out not to be her Chosen, Mama and Papa would be her lifeline. She wouldn't survive without them.

Mama drew back and smiled. "So are we going to the C5 Trading Centre? That's the one that has my seeds. You said you'd take me."

"Oh, right," Mo said, brightening. She loved flying her parents around. Their faces shone with excitement every time the craft lifted off, even though she'd taken them for dozens of rides. They seemed so proud of her. Her eyes welled up again; she felt silly. Brooding about Les was turning her into an emotional wreck. An afternoon with Mama would be a welcome diversion. She'd rather think about which candies to take with her on tour than about the future of her and Les's relationship. "Well, yeah, let's go. And hey, why don't we take the train?"

Mama laughed.

Lesley read the list Finney had just dispatched to her and gulped. Was Finney serious? There were over a hundred articles here. "So you want me to read and comment on at least one analysis of each article on the list?" In six months?

Finney shook her head. "Of course not. They focus on those articles in the Advanced Chosen Tradition course, but the students have a year to do it and they're cadets, not officers on duty." Her brow furrowed. "And I believe they only have to hand in forty to pass. I've highlighted the critical ones, around fifteen. The others are optional. Do what you can. I sent you the entire list so you can see what they usually cover."

Relieved, Lesley scanned the list again, paying more attention to the article numbers. Good; the Chosen Tradition group she'd belonged to during her first year at the academy had covered a number of the critical ones. She'd dig up her notes, see what she could reuse. "There aren't any articles between CT120 and CT230." And for some reason, she couldn't recall what those articles were about—oh, wait. "They all pertain to triads."

"That's right. There's no point studying them when we don't have one. Most of the articles just clarify how other articles apply to triads, anyhow."

No wonder they hadn't been at her fingertips—the Indoctrination Academy had spent half an hour on triads, if that. "I remember the indoctrinator saying that there hasn't been a triad for . . ." Had it been 200 years? No, 210 years.

"For 228 years," Finney said, impressing Lesley. Finney had known off the top of her head; she hadn't touched the comm station on her desk. One of her interests was the history of the Chosen Tradition—she sometimes lectured about it at the Military Academy—but still.

"One seems to show up about every 350 years, so I doubt we'll see one in our lifetime," Finney continued.

"Maybe I should study one or two, just in case we do."

Finney snorted. "If the Chosen Council gives us a triad, the only officers who won't be scrambling to brush up on those articles are historians and people like me. So don't waste your time on them. You have enough to do already."

That was certainly true.

Finney leaned forward and clasped her hands on the edge of her desk. "Have you told Mo yet? About your plans?"

"Not yet. I didn't want to tell her while we were flying domestic, in case she wanted time alone. It's hard to get away from someone on a space station, and we only had a few days at home between rotations."

Finney lifted an eyebrow. "As opposed to getting away from someone when you're on a ship with her for six months?"

"That's why I'm going to tell her tonight, while we still have two weeks off," Lesley said, knowing how feeble that sounded. However, the truth would sound worse: that she was so terrified of telling Mo, she'd delayed the conversation too long. Her unspoken plan hung between them, mocking every word and making everything she said about the future feel like a lie. She'd never lied, but at the same time, she'd held back the truth—and hated herself. Lately it had become easier to draw back from Mo and avoid the issue altogether.

Mo must have sensed it. She hadn't said anything, but she'd grown subdued over the past month. Lesley wanted to bridge the widening chasm between them; she wanted the rest of their time together to be honest—if Mo wanted to stay together. She desperately hoped Mo would.

Finney's comm station beeped three times in rapid succession. "I have to go. My son's giving a presentation at the Learning Academy and I promised I'd be there." She rolled back her chair and stood. "Are you heading to the train station?"

Lesley nodded.

"We can continue this conversation on the way, then."

They put on their cloaks and Finney flicked off the light. Though Lesley was half a head taller than Finney, she had to hustle to keep up with her as she strode to the train station.

"Don't forget to wear your dress uniform for the reception," Finney said.

She hated her dress uniform; it always felt tight around her neck.

"I'll be introducing you to quite a few officers, including a couple of admirals."

Lesley's stomach fluttered. "I'll try not to say anything stupid."

"You don't have to say much. We want them to become familiar with your name, that's all. Many of them probably already are, given how often you're on the monitors."

After graduation, she'd moved on to recording announcements available to all Rymellans. Much to Lesley's embarrassment, people were starting to recognize her wherever she went.

"We'll meet you at station B2-3 at 19:30."

We? Right—she'd meet Finney's Chosen. She'd seen him from a distance, but had never spoken to him.

"And don't worry about the reception. Stick close to me, follow my lead, and you'll be fine."

Despite her apprehension at meeting powerful members of Interior, the reception was the least of Lesley's worries. Telling Mo

about her plan to transfer to Interior intimidated her more than conversing with admirals. If she survived the conversation with Mo, she could survive anything.

Mo slid open the aviacraft door and looked down at the two bags stuffed with candies. Climbing aboard would be difficult with them weighing her down. Mama wasn't empty-handed, but several seed packets and a gardening book wouldn't hinder her momentum. "How about you get on first and then I'll pass the candies to you?"

In response, Mama entered the craft and put the seeds and book into one of the cargo holders, then motioned for Mo to pass her the candies. "Are you sure the craft will lift off with these on board?" she said with a smile as she lifted the bags from Mo's hands. "I thought this tour was for six months, not six years."

Mo grinned and hoisted herself into the craft. "I want to take a selection with me, just in case. I have no idea what the *Falcon's* Trading Centre carries." She slid into the pilot's seat. "Seatbelts," she said, fastening her own.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Mo grinned again, so glad she'd decided to spend the afternoon with Mama instead of moping around in her room, dreaming up all sorts of doomsday scenarios about her and Les. Worrying about it all the time was skewing her perspective. Okay, Les was reading Interior material, but she was still in Defence. Mo had seen Les's orders to report to the *Falcon*, so there was nothing to worry about. If she didn't stop blowing everything out of proportion, she'd squander away the next two weeks with everyone and regret it the moment she left the planet. She wanted to start the tour on a positive note, not a remorseful one.

And what a tour it would be! She'd see Argamon. Argamon! She sometimes forgot it was an actual planet; she couldn't wait to see it up close. And serving aboard a research ship would be a whole new experience—for her, Les, David, several pilots she'd flown with on 72. Once again, they'd be the new recruits, learning their way around the *Falcon* and adjusting to a new lifestyle. Too bad Ann would be on board. Oh well, she couldn't have everything.

She entered the coordinates for the Middleton estate and engaged the automatic pilot. The craft ascended, rotated, and burst in the direction of C3. After checking the navigation panel to ensure they were on course, Mo leaned back in her seat. Five minutes and they'd be home.

"You seem less tense," Mama observed.

"I am. It's a glorious day, I'm in a pilot's seat, and I'm with my mama." If Les were here, things would be perfect. She turned to Mama. "I'll help you plant the flowers, if you like."

Mama nudged Mo's cheek with her knuckle. "You've never shown any interest before."

"Yeah, well, I've never been out of reach for six months before, either. If I plant them with you, they'll remind you of me."

"Don't be silly," Mama said, rolling her eyes. "I won't need anything to remind me." She paused. "I guess I'll have to limit myself to Trading Centres near home, or spend hours on the train."

"Oh, so that's it. You'll miss having your personal pilot around."

"Exactly." Mama winked, then grew serious. "You know I'll miss you."

Mo's throat tightened. "I'll miss you too, Mama. And Papa. I'll even miss Nathan and—"

She shot forward when an alarm sounded, both audibly and in her mind. They should be over C4 by now, but the navigation system hadn't chimed when they'd crossed the border. Shock coursed through her when she read their current coordinates. The craft had drifted off course—they were heading toward B5!

"What is it?" Mama asked.

"Autopilot acting up," Mo said casually, even though the auto-navigation system had sounded the alarm. "I'll switch to—"

The craft suddenly dropped. Mama shrieked. "What's happening?"

Mo disengaged auto-navigation and grasped the navigational control with both hands. She rotated the altitude dial with her thumb to ease the craft to a higher altitude. Nothing happened. She rotated it again. Nothing. The altitude readout continued to fall. She tried to steer the craft, to see if it would respond. No response. The navigational control system had failed. They were going down. And there was nothing she could do.

She hit the emergency communication button on the comm panel. "This is Lieutenant Middleton, aviacraft 7652. Navigational control has failed. Current coordinates C5-885-227. Altitude 443 and falling. Advise."

"Lieutenant Kent. We have you, Lieutenant," came a reply moments later. "Dispatching tractors. Intercept two minutes, thirty seconds."

She glanced at the altitude readout. "They won't make it in time."

"Projecting impact coordinates and conditions."

Mo waited impatiently. If the craft continued its somewhat controlled descent and they came down in a wooded area, they might survive.

She heard Kent suck in his breath. "Lieutenant, you're on an impact course with the B5-1 Learning Academy!"

No! "Estimated time to impact?"

"Ninety seconds."

"Mo, that academy is filled with children!" Mama shouted.

"Contact the B5-1 Learning Academy and tell them to evacuate immediately," Kent barked, sounding more distant than he had previously.

"They don't have enough time." Her voice sounded far away, but Mo felt calm and in control of herself, at least. Somehow, she had to alter the craft's course. "Impact coordinates?"

"Roughly B5-072-235. Unless you change course, you'll hit the eastern wing. Do you have any nav control at all?"

"None." But there had to be some way to change the—yes, that might work. However . . . "One moment." She muted her side of the comm connection and looked at Mama. "I might be able to miss the academy by—"

"Seventy seconds," Kent said.

"—venting some chemicals and ejecting parts of the craft. Important parts. Once I do that, the craft will probably go into a spin. We'll go down. Hard. Do you understand?" She stared at Mama's ashen face and willed her own not to tremble.

Mama gulped. "I understand," she said with only a slight tremor. "But all those children . . . we have to save the children. Do what you have to do."

Mo reopened her side of the connection. "I'm going to vent energy cells one through five and eject cells six through twenty. That should push the craft east, altering its course enough to miss the academy."

"But you'll lose all power! And it might not work."

"It's that or the academy."

Silence, then, "I've already dispatched medical."

"Time to impact?"

"Forty-five seconds. Are you sure about this?"

"Yes. Middleton out." Mo terminated the connection and punched in the override code that would allow her to disable the craft in flight. To her relief, a beep signaled success. Only navigation, then. "I'm sorry, Mama," she said as she rapidly queued up a series of directives. Sorry they'd never plant those flowers.

"I'm proud of you," Mama said, her voice breaking. "Proud."

With a lump in her throat, Mo braced herself. One tap on the panel and the craft would commit suicide, taking them with it.

"Mo, the academy!"

Yes, she could see it now, hurtling toward them. Again, that calm. She held out her right hand and felt Mama's slip into it. With her left, she tapped the panel. At first nothing happened, but then the craft started to veer east.

"It's working!" Mama exclaimed. "Mo, it's working!"

The academy disappeared from view. Mo opened her mouth to whoop, but suddenly it felt as if the bottom had dropped out of the craft. Mama screamed; Mo's grip tightened. She was thrown back against her seat. Pressure on her chest. *Can't . . . breathe.* Ears—bursting. She tried to cry out—Mama! Les! *I'm sorry, Les. Had to save the children. Had to sa—*

Lesley gazed out over the lake and sighed. Two hours of pacing the beach while rehearsing what she'd say to Mo, and she still wasn't ready. Perhaps she should wait until she was satisfied that she'd found the right words. If she gave it more thought—no. No more excuses. She'd already left it too long. It had to be tonight.

She pulled out her comm unit and punched in Mo's code. Mo didn't answer. "Um, it's me," Lesley said after listening to Mo's message. "Do you want to go for a walk tonight? I want to talk to you about something, something important. I know you mentioned the lake, but maybe we can do that tomorrow." They'd never argued here; she wanted to keep it that way. "Beep me, okay?"

There, she'd committed herself. Mo would be bursting to find out what she wanted to discuss; she'd probably ask when she beeped. Lesley would promise to tell her as soon as they got together, and Mo would pester her until she did.

Her comm unit beeped before she'd slid it back into its holder. Expecting to see Mo's name, she smiled at the display, then frowned. "Yes, Mama."

"Where are you?"

"At the lake."

"Come home."

The urgency in Mama's voice set Lesley's heart pounding. "Why?"

"Just come home, Lesley, as quick as you can." The connection went dead.

She broke into a run, slipping the comm unit into her cloak pocket instead of its holder. With her feet sinking into the sand, it took

forever to get off the beach. She'd ridden her bike to the train station on her way to see Finney, and then to the lake when she'd returned; she'd left it leaning against a tree at the side of the path. Practiced at mounting a moving bike without catching her cloak in its wheels, Lesley grabbed the bike's handlebars, ran with it, and hopped on. She pedalled as fast as she could. Her legs ached and her breath grew ragged with the effort of feeding her hungry lungs, but she kept up the pace. Something was wrong. She could feel it.

But as she rode up to the house and slammed on the brakes, sending a spray of dirt into the air, she wondered if she'd read something into Mama's voice that wasn't there. Nobody rushed out to greet her. Everything seemed quiet.

After maneuvering the bike into the bike rack, she entered the house. Her heart pounded again, but not from exertion. Someone was crying. She peered into the living room—Andrew! Why was he crying? And why was he crying here? Should she go in and comfort him? What in the flaming Argamon was going on?

"Lesley," a voice hissed behind her.

She turned around. Mama beckoned to her and walked into the dining room. Lesley followed, her apprehension rising. A close look at Mama's face didn't reassure her—Mama had shed tears. Mama! "What's going on?" she asked, fear making her voice harsh.

"There's been an accident." Mama drew a deep breath.

"Lesley . . . Mo's aviacraft went down."

No. No, no, no. It couldn't be—Mo was an excellent pilot, she—there was no way. "Are you sure?"

Mama closed her eyes and nodded.

Andrew was crying! Andrew was flaming crying! She hugged herself, braced herself. "How is she?" *Don't say it, Mama. Don't say it.*

"She's alive, but critical."

Critical. She started to shake. "What happened?" she shrieked. "Why did the craft go down? What flaming happened?"

"I don't know, Lesley. All I know is that it went down somewhere in B5."

"B5? What was she doing up in B5?"

"I don't know. I overheard the military say it crashed in B5. That's all I know."

"The military?" Asking clipped questions was all she could manage. Half of her was holding the conversation; the other half was holding a tidal wave of panic at bay.

"They were with Michael. They flew him to the infirmary."

"Was Susan with him?"

Mama's hand went to her mouth. She stared at Lesley.

"Don't tell me Susan doesn't know. Where is—" She went cold with dread. Mama was trying not to cry. "Mama, what is it?"

"Susan was with her, on the craft," Mama whispered.

Lesley swallowed and gripped the back of one of the dining room chairs. "How is she?"

Mama's fingers trembled. "She's dead."

Her mouth moved, but nothing came out; she felt as if all the air had been sucked from her. Susan, dead? Dead! *No. Argamon, no.*

The front door slammed. "Adelaide," Papa called.

Mama turned. "In here."

Papa strode into the room. "I got here as fast as I could." He held out his arms to Mama.

The sight of them embracing threatened Lesley's fragile composure. He let go of Mama and reached for Lesley. His reassuring presence, the feel of his stubble against her cheek, brought tears to her eyes. She used every shred of willpower to not cry unabashedly into his shoulder. She'd cry later, once she knew Mo would be all right. And Mo *would* be all right. She had to be. "Do you know which infirmary she's in, Mama?" Lesley asked when she trusted herself to speak.

"The one in B5-1."

Almost two hours by train. "I need to be there."

"You'd better go with her, Alan. Michael's in a terrible state. I tried to get him to stay until you arrived, but he wanted to go right away. I'm not sure he knows what he's doing."

Papa frowned. "Will you be all right? Why don't you come with us?"

Mama shook her head. "I can't. Michael dropped Andrew here because he didn't want him at the infirmary."

"Andrew's here?"

"Yes, and we can't leave him by himself. He said he wanted time alone, but I should see how he's doing." She covered her mouth with her hands.

"What?" Papa said, grasping Mama's shoulders.

"As far as I know, only Michael and Andrew know. Nobody else knows! Michael wasn't in any condition to tell them."

"You'd better beep them before they see it on the monitors."

"Beep Neil," Lesley said. "No, Barbara." Neil shouldn't hear about Susan and Mo over a comm unit. The news would upset Barbara, but Susan was Neil's mama and Mo was his sister. "He'll probably beep everyone else or ask you or Barbara to do it." Enough of this. She wanted to be near Mo, will her to survive. "We should get going."

Papa hugged Mama again. "We'll beep you, let you know how she's doing."

"All right. I'll check on Andrew." Mama paused. "Then I'll beep Barbara." Her face left no doubt that she wasn't looking forward to it.

"Come on," Papa said to Lesley.

They decided to ride to the train station, both anxious to get to the infirmary as quickly as possible. They joined several C3 residents on the train platform; Lesley managed to return their waves, but not their smiles. Look at them, going about their business as if today were just another day. It wasn't. Susan was dead. Mo was fighting for her life. Yet everyone and everything looked so normal. Didn't they realize that Mo was dying? Argamon, she was dying!

No, she was fighting for her life! *Fighting!* Those other thoughts—not allowed. Lesley had to stay positive, for Mo, and to hold herself together. That tidal wave of panic was still roiling beneath the surface; she wouldn't burden Papa with a hysterical daughter right here on the platform.

On the train she stared out the window, even though there was nothing to see. The more she tried not to think about Mo, the more Mo entered her mind. She pushed away the negative thoughts and desperately searched for something—anything—remotely positive or reassuring. Whatever had happened, it must have happened quickly. Given that Mo was critically injured and Susan was . . . dead, the craft must have gone down hard. Susan probably hadn't known they were crashing, and Mo? Perhaps seconds before the aircraft crashed. At least that was something. They hadn't suffered long, if at all.

But what *had* happened? Had the craft just dropped from the sky? Mo could have handled most emergencies—done her best to descend in a controlled manner, or even ditched in an area with a high probability of survival.

"I can't believe it," Papa said, breaking into her thoughts. "Poor Michael."

She turned to him and noted his drawn face. "I've known Susan almost as long as I've known your mama," he said. "She made me feel welcome when I was adjusting to a new sector—well, a new life, really. I can't believe she's gone." He sighed. "I don't know how Michael will cope. At least he won't have to deal with the loss of his daughter, because Mo will survive. She will."

Lesley didn't think she could talk about Mo right now. Instead she asked a question for which she already knew the answer. "Were Susan and Michael joined when you met Mama?"

"Yes. They received their Papers a few years before we did. And I think Neil was three when Karen came along. In fact, Mary was—"

"Excuse me, Alan." Alice Timson, a C3 resident who lived three estates south of the Thompsons, stood in the aisle, her comm unit in

hand. "My Chosen just beeped and said Susan and Mo were in an accident. Do you know if it's true?"

Papa nodded. "I'm afraid it is."

"Oh dear," Alice said, placing her hand against her chest. "How are they?"

"Didn't Paul tell you?"

"No. He didn't know."

"Oh." He swallowed. "Mo's in an infirmary in B5. That's where we're going now. I don't know how she's doing. Susan . . ." He gripped the arm of his seat. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Alice, but she didn't make it."

The blood drained from Alice's face. "Oh no. Oh, that's terrible. Oh no." She made a beeline for the bathroom at the rear of the car.

Lesley met Papa's eyes. "I had to tell her," he mumbled. "It'll be on the monitors soon."

She turned back to the window. Argamon, the crash had actually happened. It wasn't that she hadn't believed Mama, but now it was starting to sink in. Soon everyone would know; everyone would be talking about it. She rubbed her forehead. Arriving at the infirmary, seeing Michael, hearing details about Mo's injuries—that was when it would really hit home. She'd have to control herself, remain strong for Mo. To keep her mind busy, she recited articles of Law.

They were directed to the critical care section when they arrived at the infirmary. "She said waiting room 3A," Papa said as they hurried along a corridor, scanning room numbers.

They hesitated outside 3A. Once they opened that door . . . Papa pushed it open.

Michael started to rise from his chair, then lowered himself back down. "Oh, it's you. I thought it was a physician. In surgery—that's all they keep telling me. In surgery. I've been here over three hours and I don't know any more than I did when I arrived." He exhaled sharply.

Lesley decided to follow Papa's lead, grateful that she wasn't facing Michael alone. All thoughts of peppering him with questions about Mo and the crash fled her mind. She'd never seen him so pale, nor so small.

"We're so sorry about Susan," Papa said. "A terrible, terrible loss. If there's anything we can do—if there's anything you need from us, don't hesitate to ask."

"Right now, all I need is to know that Mo will be all right. I can't lose both of them . . . I can't. Losing Susan . . . the only thing holding me together is knowing that she'd want me to be here. That's what she'd want. I'm doing what she'd want." He twisted a handkerchief in his hands. "I keep hoping someone will walk through that door and tell me it's all been a mistake, that my Chosen isn't dead and my daughter

isn't in surgery. Because I don't know what I'll do without Susan, Alan. I don't know what I'll do without her. And if Mo dies . . . I . . ." He shook his head and covered his eyes with the handkerchief.

Papa sat next to him. "You'll get through this," he said in a soothing tone. "You have your children, your friends, your extended family. . ."

Lesley moved away from them. Though Michael hardly seemed aware of her presence, she wanted to give him privacy. She felt awkward—under normal circumstances, he wouldn't allow her to witness him in such pain.

Her comm unit beeped. Finney. She motioned to Papa that she'd take it outside and stepped into the corridor.

"I just heard," Finney said. "How's Mo?"

"She's in surgery. We're waiting for a physician to come see us."

"I'm sorry about Susan. I know your families are close."

"Thank you." Perhaps she'd feel Susan's death later. At the moment, all she could think about was Mo. "Do you know what happened? I don't know anything except that they crashed."

"I spoke to one of the military at the scene. I don't know if what he told me is accurate, though. He's not one of the crash investigators, he just overheard snippets of conversation between them."

"What did he hear?"

"Well, he said Mo intentionally crashed."

What?

"Something about ejecting energy cells. Apparently they would have hit the B5-1 Learning Academy if she hadn't done that."

Hit the—navigation must have failed. Argamon, Mo had known exactly what would happen to them, and Susan might have known, too. They'd known—they'd sacrificed themselves for the academy. Lesley's composure started to crumble. No, not here, out in the corridor. Not before she'd heard the extent of Mo's injuries.

"They're calling Mo a hero," Finney said. "Hundreds of children were in that academy, and their instructors."

She pressed her lips together and struggled to stem the tide.

"I gather that ejecting the cells resulted in an instant loss of power?" Finney said.

If she opened her mouth to reply, she'd lose the battle and collapse into a weeping heap. As it was, she brushed away an escaped tear.

"Lesley?"

Focus on Finney. Answer the question. "Um . . ." Her voice was shaking. From the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of gold as a Chosen Council courier strode past.

"Think about it and beep me later, let me know how Mo is doing," Finney said.

"I'm sorry, I'm . . ."

"It's okay, Lesley. Beep me later, or tomorrow." The connection went dead. She slid her comm unit into its holder and wiped her eyes.

Matthew was coming up the corridor. "Lesley! How is she?"

"I don't know. We're waiting for a physician." She followed him into the waiting room.

Papa and Michael had both stood, hoping for a physician. "I can't believe Mama's gone," Matthew said, embracing Michael and holding him tightly. "I can't believe it."

Lesley felt Papa's arm slip around her shoulders. She leaned into him, grateful for the support. His comm unit beeped. She shifted position so he could slide it from its holder.

"How's Mo?" Mama said.

"She's in surgery. That's all we know."

"Word is spreading. I'm telling people to come here."

Papa glanced at Michael and Matthew. "I think that's best."

"Mary's here. So is Barbara. Neil has gone to get Nathan."

"Nathan!" Michael exclaimed, letting go of Matthew. "How could I forget Nathan? It's visitation day next week. He'll be looking forward to seeing his mama." His Adam's apple bobbed.

"Neil will tell him," Matthew murmured.

Michael sat with a thud and buried his face in his hands.

Someone knocked at the waiting room door and swung it open. A physician stepped into the room.

"A physician just arrived. I'll beep you later," Papa said, quickly terminating the connection.

Michael and Matthew were already on their feet; Matthew held Michael's arm. Lesley could hardly breathe. If the physician said Mo had died—no. Don't even think it.

"Michael Middleton?" The physician's gaze shifted between Michael and Papa.

Michael stepped forward. "I'm Michael Middleton."

The physician nodded and shut the door. "I'm Physician Sands. I'm coordinating your daughter's care team. First of all, I want to express my condolences for the loss of your Chosen."

"Thank you," Michael said. "But what about my daughter?"

"She's just come out of surgery. I'm pleased to tell you that she's going to be all right."

Lesley hugged Papa and blinked back tears. Mo would be all right. She'd be all right.

"We've moved her to an accelerated healing chamber. Depending on how her body responds, she'll remain there anywhere

from three to five days." He paused. "The right side of her body suffered most of the trauma. She broke several bones, her right lung collapsed, and she has chemical burns on her right side. In addition, we stopped some internal bleeding during the surgery. Despite all that, she was very lucky—she didn't suffer a head injury. I'll provide you with detailed information about her injuries tomorrow, after you've had a chance to digest what I've just told you."

Lesley held Papa tighter. The summary of Mo's injuries was bad enough.

"Will there be any scarring?" Matthew asked quietly.

"Not if we do our job properly. Dermagenesis has already received her genetic material from the Chosen Council and is growing new skin."

Michael had grabbed Matthew's arm for support. "Can I see her?"

"Not while she's undergoing accelerated healing. The chamber is sterile, and even if you could enter it, you wouldn't see much of her. The body requires a lot of support while it's undergoing the process, and since her broken bones will be knitting, it's important that she remain absolutely still. That's why she'll remain sedated until the process completes. And she'll be extremely tired once she's brought around. In fact, she'll experience fatigue for the next month or so."

The next month or so? But Mo was due to report to the *Falcon* in two weeks. Lesley had feared for Mo's life; now she worried that she'd be separated from her sooner than she'd anticipated.

"You said she'd be in the chamber for up to five days," Michael said. "But my Chosen's farewell ceremony . . ."

"I'm afraid she'll have to miss it. I'm sorry."

"No. I . . . understand."

"Is there any reason for us to remain here?" Papa asked.

Sands shook his head. "I'll beep you immediately if there's any change. Otherwise, there's really no reason to be here until we bring her around." His gaze shifted to Michael. "Would you like to be present when that happens?"

Michael nodded. Lesley wanted to be there too, if Michael would let her.

"That's all I have to say for now. Do you have any further questions?" Nobody spoke. "I'll dispatch updates to you on a regular basis. I'll also dispatch my comm code to you. If you have more questions later, don't hesitate to use it. I'll beep you tomorrow to provide you with more details about Ramona's injuries." His mouth turned up at the corners. "Don't be alarmed when you see my name on the display."

"Thank you," Matthew said. Michael nodded to Sands, unable to speak.

"I'll leave you, then. Please, take your time and leave when you're ready." He nodded to them and left the room.

"You heard what he said," Michael said gruffly the moment the door shut. "There's no point hanging around here. I can't do anything for Mo right now." He pulled out his comm unit, then collapsed back into a chair and grabbed his head, his comm unit still in his hand. "I was just about to beep your mama, to let her know we're leaving," he said to Matthew. "But she'd be here, wouldn't she? She wouldn't be at home." His eyes widened and he reached up to Matthew. "I don't know where she is. I don't know where they've taken her. I've been so worried about Mo, I forgot about her. How could I forget about her? Where is she? Where have they taken her?"

"The military who brought you here must have told you, or at least given you a code to beep," Papa said, using the same soothing tone he'd used earlier. "Let's go. When we get home, we'll take care of Susan."

Matthew helped Michael to his feet. "Come on, Papa. We need to go now."

As they walked down the corridor, Lesley couldn't help wondering if Mo was nearby. She wanted to go to her, hold her, tell Mo how grateful she was that she was still alive. But it would be days until Mo came around; days until she found out her mama was dead.

Lesley slipped out the Middletons' back door and strolled away from the house, glad for a moment of solitude. Most of the guests had trickled away, leaving a mess the caterers had started to clear. She'd only be in their way.

Apparently she wasn't the only one who'd sought a bit of peace and quiet. Mama stood on one of the paths that led south into the Middleton estate. Lesley stopped next to her and looked up at the dark clouds. "At least the rain held off," she said. It had threatened throughout that morning's farewell ceremony, held at the Middleton crypt's entrance.

"Mmm," Mama murmured.

"I'm glad the weather didn't discourage anyone from coming." Mourners had jammed the area outside the crypt, leaving only a narrow path for the undertakers. They'd gingerly carried the closed casket to the entrance, where the Middleton family waited.

A closed casket was unusual; Lesley had tried not to think of the possible reasons for it. She'd focused her thoughts on Mo, who still lay

in an accelerated healing chamber, “progressing as expected.” Perhaps it was silly, but she’d felt as if she were at the ceremony not only for herself, but to represent Mo. Others would scoff if they knew—she and Mo weren’t bound to each other in a manner Rymellans recognized—but she’d felt that way, all the same.

Mo would have been proud of her papa. Despite the dark circles under his eyes testifying to a lack of sleep, and the pallor of his skin, Michael’s voice had been strong when he’d read his prepared words. Mo’s siblings had struggled to appear stoic, an occasional flash of a handkerchief the only sign of their grief. Even little Jacob had remained quiet for the most part. When he’d started to fuss, Barbara had gently rocked him in her arms and he’d settled down, unaware of the tremendous loss he’d suffered. He’d understand later, when he listened to stories about the grandmama he’d never know.

Enough! Lesley had felt gloomier than the sky all day; these maudlin thoughts weren’t helping. She turned her mind back to the practical. “Did you invite the Middletons to supper?” she asked Mama. “You said you were going to.”

Mama didn’t respond; she continued to stare up the path.

“Mama?”

Mama’s eyes focused on her. “It’s so final, isn’t it, when the crypt door closes. Then everyone has their sandwiches and tziva and goes home, and that’s it. The end. We’re all expected to get on with our lives, as if nothing’s happened.”

She realized that Mama hadn’t heard a word she’d said.

“It doesn’t seem all that long ago that Susan and I were skipping down this path. And now she’s gone.”

Lesley felt her throat tighten. She and Mo had used the same path—it led to another path that, in turn, led to the lake. When they were young, they’d skipped. Later, they’d done a couple of other things along the way, things Mama and Susan wouldn’t have done. Not with each other, anyway.

“We may have had our differences, have wanted different things for our children, but that didn’t stop us from being friends,” Mama continued. “We still talked just about every day. Do you know what had been on Susan’s mind lately?”

Lesley shook her head.

“You and Mo. She was worried. We all are.” Mama gazed back into the distance. “When you and Mo first showed an interest in each other, we all thought, ‘How cute! Our daughters are dating.’” She paused. “It’s not cute anymore, Lesley. It hasn’t been cute for a while. We keep hoping you’ll sort things out yourselves, but there’s no sign of that happening.”

"Do we have to talk about this today, of all days?" Lesley asked with an exasperated sigh.

"Yes, we do. Your papa would rather stick his head in the sand, Michael will be distracted for a while, and Susan's gone. That leaves me to make sure you do what you have to do. And I do mean you, because you know Mo won't do it."

Lesley hesitated, then decided to be honest. Mama would only badger her, otherwise. "I am dealing with it, but . . . well, I haven't talked to Mo about it yet, and I want to do that before I tell anyone else about my plans. I was about to tell her, but then the accident happened." She swallowed. "I'll have to wait for a bit. You can't expect me to dump it on her now."

Mama studied her. "No, I suppose not. But you can't leave it too long."

"I won't."

"And you'd better not be lying to me." Mama's face hardened. "If you disgrace the Thompson and Middleton names, I'll never forgive you. I loved Susan, as much as friends can love each other. I've shed tears for her, several times. You're my daughter, and I love you. But if you end up at an execution site, I won't shed a single tear for you. Do you understand? Not one tear."

Lesley shook with rage. Her hands balled into fists; she couldn't speak. Rain splattered onto the path. She felt a drop hit her head, then another.

"Don't disappoint me," Mama said as she wiped a raindrop from her cheek.

She was about to say that she couldn't believe Mama would even consider the possibility that she'd die at an execution site when a cacophony of voices rose behind her. She spun around.

"What now?" Mama snapped, looking toward Susan's garden, where the commotion seemed to be originating. Lesley followed Mama over to Neil, Barbara, and Mary, who were huddled near it.

"It's raining, Papa. Come inside," Neil was saying.

Now Lesley could see Michael kneeling in the dirt, pulling at a weed.

"Papa, please! Come inside," Mary said.

"There are weeds. She wouldn't want weeds," Michael said.

"There are only a few." Neil carefully stepped around flowers to grasp Michael's arm, then frowned when Michael pushed him away.

"We'll come over tomorrow and weed the garden," Barbara said. "I promise."

"I have to do it now." Rain dripped from Michael's hair and nose. "She wouldn't want weeds. If she were here, there wouldn't be any."

Lesley's vision blurred.

"Michael!" Mama's voice cracked. "Get up! You'll catch cold. Susan wouldn't weed in the rain, you know that. So come on—inside! You're getting your clothes dirty and we're all getting soaked."

"We'll keep up the garden," Mary said. "Matthew said he'd tend to it."

"All of us will." Mama leaned over and looked Michael in the eye. "So come on. Inside."

Neil grasped his arm again. Michael struggled to his feet and allowed Neil to steer him into the house. Mama, Mary and Barbara shook their heads and followed them. Lesley stayed outside, letting the rain wash away her tears.

Mo slammed the door to her and Les's room and marched down the dormitory's corridor. Why did Ross want to see her? She didn't have time for any nonsense—she had an exam tomorrow.

She bounded down the stairs to the first floor, swung open the lobby door, and stepped into Ross's office. "You wanted to see me?" she said to the back of Ross's chair.

The chair spun around. A broad smile spread across Ann's face. "Guess who just made lieutenant commander." She placed her hands behind her head, leaned back in the chair, and plunked one foot on top of the desk, then the other. "What, no congratulations? Did you hear what I said? Can you hear me, Ramona? Can you hear me? Ramona, can you hear me?"

No flaming way! She whirled and ran into the simulator.

"Ramona, can you hear me?"

"I told you, nobody calls her Ramona," Papa said. "If you keep calling her that, she'll never come around. Call her Mo."

Papa? She tapped the earpiece in her left ear.

A panel beeped—incoming hostile. She glanced at the sensors and gasped. A look out the cockpit window confirmed her worst fear. A learning academy! And it was heading her way. "This is Lieutenant Middleton, requesting assistance. I repeat, requesting assistance. A learning academy is on an intercept course. Advise."

Static crackled in her left ear.

"Can anyone hear me?"

Another beep. The academy was arming missiles!

"Mo, can you hear me?" said an officer she didn't recognize.

"Yes, I can hear you. Advise."

"Engage."

"No, there are children inside. I have to save the children. Advise."

"Mo, can you hear me?"

"Yes! Advise!" Funny, she was sure she was shouting, but it sounded like a whisper.

"She must be dreaming," the officer said.

"She wants you to tell her what to do." *Les! But where was she? There were no friendly craft in the vicinity.*

"Oh." The officer again. "Open your eyes, Mo."

"What?" Mo murmured.

"Open your eyes."

She opened her eyes.

"I think she's awake"—Papa, peering at her. Then Les was there, staring over Papa's shoulder. What was the matter with them? Les looked like she could burst into tears at any second, and Papa looked haggard and pale, as if he hadn't slept for days.

They drew back; suddenly Mo was looking up at a stranger.

"Welcome back," the stranger said.

She wanted to pull the blanket up to her chin, but her right arm felt heavy and lethargic, as if she'd lain on it too long. Actually, the entire right side of her body felt that way. And though she'd apparently just awakened, she felt like closing her eyes and drifting off again. But not before she found out what this strange man was doing in her bedroom. She turned her head slightly. No, this wasn't her bed—hers didn't have bars attached to its side. "Where am I?" Her raspy voice shocked her.

"You're in the B5-1 infirmary," the stranger said. "I'm Physician Sands."

Infirmary? "What am I doing here?"

"I think I'll let your papa explain that to you." He said something to Papa, too low for her to catch, then left the room.

Papa sank into a chair near the bed; Les stood next to him. He took Mo's left hand. She waited, but he seemed reluctant to talk.

"Papa—"

"Your brothers and sister wanted to be here, but I knew you'd be tired. I didn't want you to feel overwhelmed." He started to play with her fingers.

Yeah, okay. But . . . "Where's Mama?" She almost cried out when his grip tightened. "Papa?"

"You have no idea why you're here?" Les said.

She slowly shook her head.

Les looked at Papa, then back at her. "Mo, your aviacraft crashed."

What?

"You were badly hurt. You've just come out of an accelerated healing chamber."

Was that why her right side felt funny? "How long?"

Les hesitated. "Four days," Papa murmured.

Four days!

"Do you remember anything, anything at all about what happened?" Les asked. "What's the last thing you remember doing?"

Well, she'd been at the Trading Centre, choosing candies. No, she'd already traded for candies. And was . . . *She slid into the pilot's seat. "Seatbelts," she said, fastening her own . . . on the craft. Navigational control has failed. Current coordinates C5-885-227. Altitude 443 and falling.* She stared at Les. "Navigational control failed."

Papa's hand left hers. He covered his mouth.

"*Mo, that academy is filled with children!*" Wait. Mama had been there—in the craft with her. Mama had been in the craft! *We'll go down. Hard.* "Where's Mama? Where's Mama!" She tried to roll toward Papa, but didn't have the strength. His eyes glistened. *No!* She looked at Les. *Please, please say Mama's here at the infirmary, in another room.*

Les drew a deep breath. "Your mama was killed in the crash." Her voice broke. "I'm sorry."

Argamon, she'd killed Mama. She'd killed Mama! "Papa, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"No, no," Papa murmured, shaking his head. "It was an accident. I'm just so grateful you're alive." He took her left hand again and touched it to his cheek.

It wasn't a flaming accident! She'd intentionally crashed the aviacraft, killing Mama. A tear rolled down her cheek. She wanted to brush it away, but her flaming, useless, stupid right hand wouldn't obey her.

Les gently wiped away the tear for her. "You saved all the children in that Learning Academy."

Yes, and killed Mama! Were they both stupid? Were they flaming imbeciles? They must be, all of them. Mama was dead. Hotshot pilot Lieutenant flaming Middleton had killed her. Yet here she was, fresh out of an accelerated healing chamber, all patched up, with her whole life ahead of her. *Idiots!*

They shouldn't have saved her. They should have let her die.

Lesley's anticipation grew as she climbed the stairs to the infirmary's third floor. She'd last seen Mo three days ago, when Mo had come around. Mo was never awake for long, so Lesley had wanted to give others, especially Mo's siblings, an opportunity to visit.

Being separated from Mo, unable to even beep her, had been excruciating, and a frightening taste of what was to come. No matter what she'd been doing or who she'd been talking to, Mo had always been at the back of her mind. Everything else had been a distraction, to keep her busy until Mo was on her feet and life stopped being on hold. Was that what it would be like for the rest of her life? Would her Chosen, her daughters, and her career be one long distraction, a way to dull the pain until death ended it? Was going through the motions all she had to look forward to?

She forced a smile and walked into Mo's room. "You're sitting up!"

"Propped up, more like," Mo muttered. "They're threatening to walk me around the floor tomorrow."

"You think you'll be up to it?" She sat in the guest chair nearest the head of the bed and leaned forward.

"Maybe. My right side is starting to feel like it's mine again." Mo lifted her right hand and flexed her fingers. Her sleeve slid down to her elbow, revealing a patch of grafted skin. She pointed at it. "Neil said it's pinker than Jacob's bottom."

Following Sands' instructions for visitors, Lesley resisted the urge to touch it. Instead, she gently squeezed Mo's fingers, afraid of doing anything more, lest she hurt her. Mo squeezed back, but didn't meet Lesley's eyes. "Your papa said two crash investigators came to see you yesterday," Lesley said.

Mo closed her eyes and nodded. Lesley waited for her to elaborate, but Mo remained motionless. The silence lengthened. Just as Lesley started to suspect that Mo had fallen asleep, Mo spoke. "Did Papa tell you I'll be reporting to the *Falcon*?"

"Yes, he did." Much to her relief. "You won't be on duty for the first couple of weeks, but that's better than being assigned to another tour." Apparently Commander Baker, the officer in charge of the *Falcon's* pilots, had consulted with Mo's care team before deciding that Mo would remain on the roster. The desire to have pilots who'd flown domestic together on the same tour had also factored into his decision. "And your papa also said they're going to let you out of here a few days before our report date." She tapped the top of Mo's hand. "So you'll have a few days at home, too."

"They also said they'd be willing to transfer me directly to the *Falcon*," Mo said. "I haven't decided what I want to do yet."

"You don't want to go home?" Lesley asked, surprise raising her voice.

Mo shrugged.

"I think your papa's assumed you'll be home." He'd been lamenting how empty the house felt with only Andrew and him in it,

now that Nathan had returned to the Indoctrination Academy. He was looking forward to having Mo home, if only for a few days. "He started to see clients again today, only a couple, though. He said there's no point working full days until after you've left on tour, since he'll want to be home with you." Though she suspected that wasn't the only reason Michael was easing back into his regular routine. He wasn't ready to work a full day. He was still in shock—functioning, but barely.

"I don't see the point of going home."

Mo's words dismayed her. "I just thought that—well, I don't know, I thought you'd want to be with your family." And with her. "You won't see them for six months."

"I can see them here," Mo said flatly.

"But what about your mama? Don't you want to visit the crypt? You missed her farewell ceremony—"

"It'll take me all day to walk there."

Considering it normally took half an hour, Lesley doubted it would, even in Mo's weakened condition. Still, she said, "Then it'll take all day. I'll go with you. We'll take it as slow as you want. We can pack a lunch, have a picnic on the way. You can even nap if you want. I'll bring a book."

"No."

"If you let me know what article you'd like to slot, I can have it prepared."

"I said no!" Mo reached for the cup of water on a tray next to the bed and gulped some down.

"You won't have another opportunity for six months," Lesley said.

"You know, I was thinking about what happened." Mo set the cup back on the tray and closed her eyes again. "Maybe I shouldn't have ejected all the cells I didn't vent. Maybe ejecting only some of them would have lightened the craft enough, and we wouldn't have lost all power. The craft might not have spun if we'd still had power."

Lesley didn't know any details about the crash and Mo's actions in the cockpit, beyond what Finney had told her. She wanted to hear them, but not now, when Mo could fall asleep at any second. "From the little I know about what happened, it sounds like you didn't have much time to make a decision. Whatever you did worked. You missed the academy."

"I might have missed the academy if I'd ejected fewer cells."

"There's no point thinking about 'what ifs.'"

Her eyes still closed, Mo didn't reply.

"Let the investigators sort it out."

"What if they conclude I did the wrong thing?"

"Did they say anything to give you that idea?"

"No," Mo said, her face taut.

"Then don't worry about it." She'd expected Mo to be sombre and tired; she hadn't expected her to doubt her actions in the cockpit. She wanted to hold Mo, tell her that it hadn't been her fault. Navigational control had failed; Mo had made a difficult decision and saved hundreds of children. But Sands had been clear about the permitted level of physical contact. Again, Lesley had to be content with squeezing Mo's fingers.

The investigation would confirm that Mo had taken the appropriate action. Mo was a superb pilot with sound instincts. If she'd ejected all the cells, then that had been the only way to avoid hitting the academy, Lesley was sure of it. But Susan had died. Perhaps it was only natural for Mo to second-guess herself so soon after the crash.

"I think I'm going to fall asleep," Mo said.

"Oh," Lesley said, disappointed. "I guess I'll go, then. I'm not sure when I'll see you next." More long days of keeping herself occupied. "Your papa and Andrew are visiting tomorrow afternoon, and others want to visit, too. I'll try to squeeze myself in as soon as I can."

No response. Mo hadn't been joking when she'd said she was about to fall asleep. Lesley touched her lips to Mo's hand, then tucked it under the blanket. She rose and tip-toed away.

"Les," Mo said.

She turned.

Mo's eyes were on her. "I almost forgot. They delivered a new comm unit this morning, so you can beep me."

"That's great! I'll beep you later." It would be a struggle not to beep her every five minutes.

"If it's off, it means I'm asleep or have a visitor." Mo paused. "I had a few messages. One was from you. You said you had something important you wanted to talk to me about."

Blood rushed to Lesley's face; she turned away. "Um, yeah," she said, thinking furiously. "But it seems so trivial now, after what's happened. Just me blowing something out of proportion. We can talk about it later." Much, much later.

She snuck a look at Mo. Mo had closed her eyes again. Lesley crept from the room, wanting to escape before Mo opened her eyes and saw the guilt on her face.

Mo accepted Papa's arm and leaned on him as they walked down the medical aircraft's exit ramp. She'd boarded it filled with dread, expecting those final moments in her craft to come rushing back. But

medical equipment had jammed the craft's interior, leaving the pilot's seat barely visible to passengers. Still, she hadn't dozed, despite being overdue for a nap. She'd never relax in an aircraft again.

"Let's get you inside," Papa said after he waved the craft off.

Her heart pounded as they approached the house. If she'd had her way, she'd be back in her bed at the infirmary, not here. But Papa had wanted her home, and she'd acquiesced, not wanting to add to the hurt she'd already caused him.

The moment they stepped through the front door, the rest of the family streamed into the hallway. Everyone spoke at once.

"Do you need help?"

"Do you want tziva?"

"Welcome home."

"Don't crowd her!"

Everyone was there. No, not everyone. Nathan had gone back to the Indoctrination Academy. And . . . though she knew it was pointless, she searched for her, expecting her to be hovering behind Neil, or to suddenly bustle in from the living room and hold out her arms. But that would never happen again. The house would never be the same. The family would never be the same. Her life would never be the same. *I'm sorry, Mama.* Mo's eyes filled; she quickly looked at her feet.

"She's tired," Papa said. "Move out of the way so we can go into the living room and sit down."

"No." She looked up. "I think it would be better if I went up to my room. I want to lie down." And get away from everyone. "I appreciate that you all came, though."

"We'll still be down here if you need us," Barbara said.

Neil stepped to her side. "Let me take your other arm." She didn't need his help in addition to Papa's, but nodded anyway.

A vase of limp flowers sitting on a table just inside the living room caught her eye. The dried petals surrounding its base and the curled edges of those still clinging to life condemned her. "I'm sorry, but I need to get into bed now." She cringed at the brave faces that peered back at her. Despite everyone's show of concern, they must blame her. How could they not? She'd survived; Mama hadn't. Maybe they were asking themselves the same question she'd had on her mind since she'd first awakened after the crash: had she subconsciously sacrificed Mama to save herself? She was the pilot—*she* should have died in the crash.

With Neil and Papa supporting her, she climbed the stairs, and averted her eyes as they passed Mama and Papa's bedroom. "I can make it from here," she said outside her bedroom door, but they remained at her side until she reached the bed.

Neil covered her with a blanket. "Do you want me to sit with you for a while?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Can you close the door?" They glanced at each other. "I'll be fine. I'll probably be asleep before you reach the bottom of the stairs."

"Wait." Papa fumbled in his cloak pocket, reminding her that she'd soon receive a new military cloak to replace the one she'd worn that awful day. She'd waved away the cloak Papa had brought to the infirmary, knowing that she'd only be outside for a few minutes. He still had it over his arm. "Here." He set her comm unit on the nightstand. "Beep me if you need anything."

She wouldn't—she'd feel silly beeping him when he was only downstairs, and she wanted to be left alone.

The door clicked shut. Footsteps receded along the hallway, then thumped down the stairs. The journey home had tired her. She closed her eyes and started to drift . . . *Lieutenant, you're on course to impact with the B5-1 Learning Academy! . . . They don't have enough time to fully evacuate . . . I'm going to vent energy cells one through five and eject cells six through twenty . . . Mama screamed, Mama screamed, Mama screamed!*

Her eyes snapped open; she covered her ears. Why had she ejected so many cells? If she'd ejected only nine through sixteen but vented one through eight, the extra force could have compensated for the extra weight and they wouldn't have lost all power. Or maybe venting one through five had been okay, but ejecting six through twenty had been unnecessary. If she'd only ejected six through eighteen, maybe the craft still would have altered course, but not gone into a spin.

She blew out a sigh and rolled onto her left side. If she'd kept her eye on the control panels instead of talking to Mama, maybe she would have noticed earlier that they'd drifted off course. A few extra seconds could have made all the difference. Or what if she'd vented the cells on the other side of the craft? If she'd vented eleven through fifteen and ejected one through ten, they still would have had sixteen through twenty. No, the craft had been on course to impact with the eastern wing of the academy. Venting the other side . . . too far west . . . still would have hit . . .

She closed her eyes.

Mo opened her eyes and squinted into darkness. A light flashed in her peripheral vision. She turned her head toward it and could just make out Les, sitting hunched over the desk. "How long have you been here?" Mo asked.

Les spun around and snapped off the cylindrical reading light in her hand. "Around half an hour. Can I turn on the light? I'm starting to go cross-eyed."

"Sure."

"I came earlier, when I saw the medical aircraft," Les said as she pressed a button on the desk and bathed the room with light. "But they told me you'd gone to bed, so I went home for a couple of hours and then came back. At least I can sit with you while you sleep." She placed a bookmark in her book and snapped it shut. "I couldn't do that at the infirmary."

Mo swallowed. Les still cared.

"How are you feeling?" Les sat on the floor next to the bed and touched Mo's cheek. The tender gesture brought tears to Mo's eyes. She closed them. "I'm sorry, I should have beeped before I came over," Les said softly. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"You didn't." She opened her eyes. "Do you think I could have saved her? I keep thinking that if I'd reacted differently, come up with another plan . . ."

"I'm sure you took the right course of action."

"You weren't there."

"No, I wasn't. But you were, and you're a good pilot, with excellent instincts."

"I crashed the craft." Her voice quavered. "I killed her."

"No, you didn't. You did not kill her." Les shifted to a kneeling position. "Can you handle a hug?"

In response, Mo slid over and reached out with her left arm. Les cautiously embraced her, murmuring, "I don't want to hurt you."

Mo leaned into her, comforted by her warmth.

"You did what you had to do," Les said into Mo's ear. "It wasn't your fault, it was a horrible accident."

One in which she'd lived and Mama had died. Why had she survived? Had it been a fluke? Had the way she'd hit the ground or her position in the craft protected her? Had she somehow placed Mama in harm's way to save herself? She squeezed her eyes shut and let go of Les. "I'm sorry, Les, but I'm tired. Now's not a good time for a visit."

"So I did wake you up. I'm sorry." Les kissed Mo's forehead and stood. "I'll come again tomorrow. I'm going with Finney to that reception tomorrow night, but otherwise I'm free. Actually, no—I have to run an errand, but it won't take long." She paused. "I need to ask you something."

Mo cracked an eye open. "What?"

"I know you don't want to go to the crypt," Les raised her hands as if expecting an argument, "but I want to visit one more time before

leaving on tour. I've prepared an article. I'm picking it up tomorrow afternoon. Do you want me to put your name on it, too?"

"Which article?"

"CT30."

She inwardly winced. CT30 belonged to the set of articles that addressed the obligations parents had toward their children. What about the obligations children had toward their parents? If there were such a set of articles, Mo was sure that not killing one's parents in a crash would be right up there on the list. Too bad it wasn't—Finney could put her out of her flaming misery and that would be that.

Rymellans often slotted CT30 for their parents, so she could understand why Les had chosen it. Their families were so close and they'd spent so much of their childhoods together that it had sometimes felt as if they each had two sets of parents. By slotting that article, Les would honour Mama. Mo would respect that, not make a mockery of the gesture by adding her name to it. "Don't put my name on it."

Les frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I want to slot an article myself." *Liar!* "Eventually."

"And you don't mind me slotting CT30?"

"No. Mama would like that." She pulled the blanket above her waist; she wished she could pull it over her head and hide beneath it for the rest of her life.

Les collected her book and reading light from the desk. Mo felt oddly detached when Les leaned over and gently kissed her on the lips. "I'll beep before I come tomorrow, see how you're feeling. And, of course, you can beep me."

"I know I'm not good company right now, but I'm glad you came, Les."

Les's answering smile didn't mask her concern. "Me too. Now get some rest."

She left the room. Mo could hear her talking to someone at the bottom of the stairs, then the front door thudded shut.

Moments later, Barbara poked her head into the room. "Do you want something to eat?"

She supposed she should, even though she wasn't hungry. "Something light, maybe?"

"I'll take a look at the list they gave your papa," Barbara said. "Do you want to come downstairs or would you rather I brought it up?"

If she could, she'd stay in her room until she had to report to the *Falcon*. "Can you bring it up?"

Barbara smiled. "Sure."

"Thanks." She didn't deserve Barbara's kindness. Not only had she killed Barbara's Chosen mama, but her son would never know his

grandmama. Mo rolled onto her side. There had to have been another way. If she'd vented cells six through ten instead of one through five, maybe the craft wouldn't have spun. Or maybe venting one through ten and not ejecting any cells would have been enough. No, the craft still would have been too heavy. But if she'd only ejected cells eleven through fifteen . . .

Lesley tugged at her collar for the umpteenth time and leaned over the safety railing to survey the reception below her. Finney must have introduced her to half the room; now the names and faces were nothing but a blur. Not long ago, the prospect of rubbing elbows with admirals and other high-ranking officers had intimidated her, but the accident had put everything into perspective. Mo had been at the back of her mind all evening. She'd seemed more alert that afternoon and mildly interested in the reception, but had only lasted about twenty minutes before declaring that she was tired.

Michael had said he'd had a terrible time persuading her to go for a walk, something she was supposed to do at least three times a day. He was still fragile and barely coping. Mo's behaviour—first not wanting to come home and now shutting herself away in her room—wasn't helping. He'd mentioned perhaps taking her to the crypt, but when Lesley had told him about Mo's reaction when she'd suggested it, he'd abandoned the idea. *She hasn't asked about the farewell ceremony*, he'd said in bewilderment. Nobody had expected her to come home with a smile on her face and a bounce in her step, but they hadn't expected her to be so withdrawn, either.

Perhaps they should give Mo her space. Everyone was concerned and wanted to be there for her, but if she truly wanted to be alone, buzzing around her was probably the worst thing they could do. It made them feel better, but not her.

Lesley knew she was floundering; she wanted to support Mo, but didn't know how. She'd never lost someone close to her, and in Mo's case, the circumstances under which that loss had occurred must be devastating—almost too much to bear. She couldn't imagine what Mo must be feeling. Instead of assuming that Mo needed her and wanted her around, she should follow Mo's lead, be there when Mo wanted her company and accept it when Mo didn't. Less than two weeks had passed since the crash, so it was still early days. Mo wouldn't want to be alone forever.

Finney stopped beside her and propped herself against the railing. "You all right?"

"I'm just thinking about Mo. She doesn't seem to want people around right now. She doesn't want to go to the crypt, either. I'm going by myself tomorrow."

"Give her time. It's still raw."

"That's why I'm not telling her about my plan to transfer—not yet." She'd wanted to tell Finney all evening. "I'm sorry if you find that disappointing, but I can't do it when she's so low."

Finney snorted and tapped her breastbone. "There is a heart beating in here, you know. Of course you can't tell her. It's not the right time." She shifted position and scanned the crowd below. "I think I've introduced you to everyone on my list. No, you haven't met Commodore Parker. Morton's been hogging him all night. I'd rather you not meet him at all than meet him with Morton present."

"You think he'll say something bad about me?"

"No, he'll likely have a dig at me. Normally I wouldn't care, but I want the focus to be on you, not me."

"Morton's opinion of you seems to differ from everyone else's." Lesley wanted to ask why, but doubted Finney would tell her.

Finney gazed expressionlessly ahead. "When I was at the Military Academy, Morton was a lieutenant. He hasn't changed much—he had the tendency to loudly berate cadets back then, too. One day I'd just left the dormitory and was walking to Building 5C when I heard someone shouting near the point where you veer left. You know where I mean?"

Lesley nodded.

"Well, as I got closer, I could see the path was blocked with people. Then I recognized Morton's voice. He was ripping someone apart, right in front of everyone. That someone turned out to be my roommate. From the sound of it, she'd left a public monitor without turning it off, but from the way he was going on, you would have thought she'd committed a Chosen Violation."

Finney shook her head. "I didn't even like the woman—she was a bit too vacuous for me. On a breezy day, you could hear the wind whistling between her ears, so I could certainly see her forgetting to turn off a monitor. But I don't like bullies, and he'd reduced her to tears."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't think, that's what I did. I steeled myself, marched up to him, and suggested that he'd made his point and it was time to stop, probably less diplomatically than I should have. You should have seen his face." Finney pressed her mouth into a thin line and bugged out her eyes, much to Lesley's amusement. "He turned his wrath on me, started railing on about how disrespectful I was, daring to tell him, a lieutenant, what to do. Remember, I was a cadet then. The gawkers

were on my side, though, and he knew it. So he slunk off. And since then, he's never passed up an opportunity to put me down."

"Fortunately, nobody pays any attention to him," Brian, Finney's Chosen, said from behind them. They both turned. He must have overheard the latter part of the conversation. "Everyone knows that he'll still be the commander of the Military Academy when he retires, whereas you'll be an admiral," he said to Finney. "He must understand you better than he lets on, though. Otherwise, he'd stop. You'll eventually be in a position to crush him."

"I'd never use my position to hurt someone just because I don't like them."

"Exactly. And he must know that. Either that, or he's an idiot."

"Well, he is an idiot," Finney said, to laughter. Then, "No, I shouldn't have said that. He's good at what he does. The C6 Military Academy has an excellent reputation, mainly due to his knack for recognizing and grooming good teachers. But he knows nothing about what it's like to be an Interior officer on the outside, so he's not in a position to judge anyone's performance. That's why nobody takes his remarks about me seriously."

"Would you still have spoken up if you'd known that he'd hold a grudge against you?" Lesley asked. She could guess the answer, and Brian's nod indicated that he could, too.

"Oh, probably," Finney said. "Protecting the Way and protecting Rymellans go hand in hand. And despite how it turned out, I learned something important. I never reprimand anyone publicly. If I have something to say, I say it privately."

"Too bad Morton didn't learn anything," Brian muttered.

"What happened to the roommate?" Lesley asked. "Is she still in the military?"

"No," Finney said with a chuckle. "She was ejected as part of the first-year purge." She turned to Brian. "Had enough?"

"I'm ready whenever you are," he said.

Finney scanned the room again. "I don't think we'll get to Parker tonight, but that's all right, we'll catch him next time. Let's go."

They walked to the train station, only a couple of minutes away from the reception hall, in silence. When they reached the waiting area, Finney said, "It'll seem strange, not seeing you for six months. When you send me your analyses comments, let me know how you're doing."

"I will." She hoped Finney would reply. Now that they were saying good-bye, she realized how much she'd miss her.

"It was nice to finally meet you," Brian said. "I have the feeling we'll be attending more receptions together."

"It was nice meeting you, too." Lesley meant it—his relaxed manner had immediately put her at ease.

Finney nodded to her. "Enjoy your tour, Lieutenant. Good night."

She returned Finney's nod. "Good night, Commander."

The Finneys headed down to the train that would take them home. She waited until she couldn't see them before descending to her platform.

Lesley hefted Mo's bag onto the bed and unzipped it. She lifted out a shirt and walked over to the closet. Though she'd already unpacked Mo's other bag and hung her uniforms, the closet and drawers were still half-empty. "Our quarters have more storage than I'd expected," she said to Mo.

"Mmm," Mo said absently.

She glanced over her shoulder. Mo was sitting at the comm station; she'd walked over and flicked it on the moment they'd entered her quarters. "What are you looking at?" Lesley asked.

"Oh, I just wanted to see what level of network access we have," Mo said, her eyes still on the display. "It looks like we have the same access we had on 72."

"Good." Lesley hung the shirt, pleased that Mo was finally showing an interest in something other than lying in bed. Perhaps surviving her first aviacraft ride since the accident—well, the first ride in a craft similar to the one she'd lost—had lifted Mo's spirits. Lesley had flown them to the shuttle base in one of the Military Academy's aviacrafts. *Forget a three-hour train ride, I'll find you an aviacraft*, Ross had said when she'd beeped a couple of days ago to see how Mo was doing. *One of the 72 or 73 pilots can fly it back.*

She'd picked it up that morning, and had held her breath as she'd helped Mo into it and settled her into the passenger seat. She needn't have worried. Mo had sat quietly, albeit with her eyes closed for most of the journey. Lesley wasn't sure whether Mo had really been dozing, and it didn't matter. The important thing was that she'd done it.

She returned to the bag and pulled out a pair of badly folded track pants. This must be the bag Neil had finished packing—Michael had done a better job with the other one. She slipped the pants into a drawer, pulled a sweater from the bag, and hung it. Back to the bag, to lift another shirt—she dropped the shirt on the bed and stared at the framed image that had lain beneath it. Susan and Michael, near Susan's garden. They looked so happy . . . but now . . . The image had

been on the mantel in the Middletons' living room! Mo loved this one. "Where do you want this?" she asked.

"What?" Mo said, still focused on the screen in front of her.

"This image." Lesley held it out to her. "Where do you want it? On the nightstand?"

Mo turned to look; her face tightened. "Put it back in the bag."

Back in the bag? "Don't you want it out?"

"I'll deal with it later."

"If you let me know where you want it, I can—"

Mo leaped to her feet. "Put it back in the flaming bag!" she screeched. "I don't want it out!"

"Okay, okay," Lesley said, taken aback. She made a show of putting the image back in the bag, then picked up the shirt. "When's your first appointment with the counsellor?" she asked casually as she hung it in the closet.

"Why?"

"Just wondering."

"The day after tomorrow, at 23:00."

"So you're shifting your sleep cycle with the rest of us?"

"Yeah, I figured that was best."

Lesley turned away from the closet. Mo was sitting again and had spun the chair to face her. "You better go," Mo said. "The orientation meeting is in half an hour. I can finish unpacking."

"I don't mind doing it. It'll only take me five minutes to get to the meeting room."

"You haven't unpacked your own stuff yet. Plus, I'm tired. By the time I've finished unpacking, I'll want to lie down."

Lesley was starting to wonder if Mo was really tired, or just claimed she was to get rid of people. "Does that mean you're not coming to the meeting? I know Baker said you don't have to, but we'll be getting a tour of the fighter launch area."

Mo shrugged. "I'll only slow you all down. I can check out the launch area another time."

"I'll drop in after the meeting, let you know how it went."

"I'll be in bed, so there's no point." Mo spun to face the station and tapped a key on its keyboard.

"Okay, but the ship's undocking at 19:00. David suggested we go to one of the observation decks." They'd watched numerous ships undock from 72. This time, they'd be on the ship. "I can come get you. You have time for a nap before then."

"I'd like to, but it's already been an active day. I don't want to push it."

"You won't see Rymel close up again for six months." No response. "How about I drop by after we've undocked, then?" Lesley

was trying hard to keep exasperation out of her voice. "We can have a late supper."

Mo finally showed interest. "Can you bring us supper here?"

"Sure! And if you want, I'll stay over tonight."

"My right side's still tender."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant. I'm just saying that I can only sleep in certain positions right now. Sometimes I have trouble getting comfortable. I might keep you awake."

"I'll take my chances. We're supposed to try to stay awake until 03:00 tonight, anyway."

"Then maybe you better stay, to help keep me awake." Mo turned back to the comm station. "Now go, already."

Lesley stepped toward her, hoping for a parting kiss, but Mo continued to gaze at the station's display. She settled for patting Mo on the shoulder, then reluctantly left the room. Even though she'd have supper with Mo and stay overnight, she felt disheartened. Mo hadn't exactly been enthusiastic about spending time together. But what did Lesley expect? She was being selfish, expecting too much too soon after the accident. Mo was right—compared to the last two weeks, today had already been a busy day for her. *Patience, remember? Give her time.* She went to her quarters, on the deck below Mo's, and managed to unpack one bag before the orientation meeting.

The meeting room was half full of former 72 pilots when she arrived. David waved her to the empty chair next to him, in the middle of the second row—she would have preferred to sit in the first. She nodded and waved to everyone as she made her way to the seat.

"Is Mo coming?" David asked.

She shook her head. "She's tired. I doubt she'll watch the undocking, either."

David frowned. "That's too bad. I wanted to tell her how sorry I am about her mama. And that I'm glad she's okay."

"She'll surface soon."

They sat in silence as the room filled. Not everyone she'd trained with at the Military Academy and flown with on 72 was on the *Falcon*. A couple of pilots had opted to continue flying domestic patrols and others had been told that they weren't ready for a deep tour just yet.

A lieutenant commander strode into the room, a clipboard under his arm. "Lieutenant Commander Monahan," he announced. "And I assume you're all 72 and 73 pilots on your first tour, otherwise I'm in the wrong room," he added, eliciting a few chuckles. He motioned for everyone to stand.

Two circles formed and everyone chanted in unison, "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!" Lesley clapped, though the Words didn't lift her spirits as much as usual.

Monahan waited for everyone to sit down before continuing. "I know you want to get to the launch area tour, so I'll keep this short. I oversee the night rotation, and since new pilots always start on the night rotation, that means you all report to me. If you have a problem or a question, you come to me. Understood?" Everyone nodded.

"Did everyone receive the steps we suggest to shift your sleep cycle?" he asked. Again, Lesley and the others nodded. "Do follow them. I know it'll be tough in the beginning. You might find yourself dozing off when you're on patrol, but that's what automatic pilot is for." More laughter. "No, seriously, we'll be in Rymellan space for most of the tour and in Jessimite space for the rest, so if you're not at your sharpest for a week or so, don't worry about it."

Monahan removed the clipboard from under his arm and slid a pen from his breast pocket. "You'll patrol in pairs. There are four shifts. You'll cover the first two, and the pilots in the next meeting will cover the others. When I point to you, state your last name." He pointed at the pilot sitting at the end of the first row.

"Harris."

"Next," Monahan said, pointing to the pilot to Harris's left.

"Reid."

"Harris and Reid, you'll fly together on shift one." He made a note on the clipboard. "Next."

Lesley waited for her turn. Monahan was Joined; she caught a glimpse of the Chosen ring on his right hand when he pointed to the pilot directly in front of her. Not the Principal, then. His Chosen would be on the ship—about thirty percent of those on board were non-military Chosens, filling non-military positions. When placing military on tours, finding positions for their Chosens was as important as finding positions for them. The *Falcon* had an extensive medical research centre and Learning and Indoctrination academies. Yes, the children were along, too. Most decks were off-limits to them.

She straightened as Monahan pointed to her. "Thompson," she said.

He pointed to David. "Bryson," David said.

"Thompson and Bryson, you'll fly together on shift one."

David grinned and gave her a thumbs-up.

Lesley smiled back, despite her disappointment. She would prefer to fly with Mo. Perhaps that could be arranged later. Since Mo wasn't here, she probably wouldn't be assigned to anyone.

Minutes later, Monahan proved her wrong. "And you appear to be the odd one out," Monahan said, pointing to someone in the back row. "But you're not. Lieutenant Middleton isn't here. I'll pretend she's next to you."

She glanced over her shoulder to see who Monahan was talking to. Oh no!

"Your name?" Monahan said.

"Hawkins. H-a-w-k-i-n-s."

"All right, Hawkins, I'll temporarily assign you a pilot from another rotation. When Middleton returns to active duty, you'll fly with her on shift two."

Ann pulled a face. "Looks like I drew the *short* straw."

A chorus of gasps filled the room. Lesley stared at her, open-mouthed.

"Argamon, Ann," someone said.

"What? It was a joke."

"Is there a problem?" Monahan asked.

Ann folded her arms. "Only that nobody in this room has a sense of humour."

"They laughed at my jokes."

"Yours were funny," David said.

Ann glared at him.

"Lieutenant Hawkins, do you have a problem, flying with Lieutenant Middleton?" Monahan asked.

"No."

"Good. That's it, then. I'll dispatch these assignments to you." He stepped back and surveyed them. "With that out of the way, let's proceed to Deck 12. Oh, and don't forget the meet and greet next week. I know it's at an odd time, but we want as many pilots to attend as possible."

As everyone filed from the room, Lesley fought the urge to pull Ann aside and suggest that she stick to business when flying with Mo. There wasn't any point—Ann would ignore her and Mo would be mortified. No, talking to Ann was out of the question. She'd settle for fantasizing about ripping Ann's arms and legs off instead.

Mo threw the pencil down on the desk when her comm station beeped. Her hands clenched. She took several deep breaths to calm herself. It wasn't Les's fault; it was hers. If she'd paid more attention

during math classes, she'd have completed her calculations by now. The station's calculator didn't help when the formulas befuddled her and she kept losing her place. In the cockpit, she could somehow visualize the numbers and answers, but not here. "Yeah, Les."

"Oh, you're there. I wasn't sure you'd be back from your session," Les said.

She stifled a snort. "I've been back for about fifteen minutes."

"How did it go?"

She'd been trapped in a room with an airhead for an hour, but said, "Fine." At least her counselling sessions didn't require her full attention. She could get away with nodding and grunting most of the time, while she mentally analyzed her decision to vent and eject the energy cells and considered what else she could have done. On the few occasions she'd missed her cue to make the appropriate noise, Counsellor Airhead had chuckled sympathetically and asked if she needed a break. Yes, please—a permanent one.

"That's good," Les said, dragging Mo back to the present. "I'll be up in a few minutes."

"Up in a few minutes?"

"Yes. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

"Um . . ."

"We're approaching Argamon."

"Oh."

"You are coming, I hope. We won't be this close again, and practically nobody has seen you since you boarded. There's a whole ship outside your quarters, you know."

Despite Les's light tone, Mo's jaw tightened. She scrambled for an excuse to stay exactly where she was, but quickly realized that none would do. She had to go—everyone would expect her. "Yeah, I'm coming," she said, making an effort to show some enthusiasm.

"Great! I'll be right there." The connection terminated.

She picked up her pencil and tried to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. Well, she had to face them all sometime. None of them had ever crashed a craft. Nope, she was the only one with that distinction, and she'd killed her mama, too. How many pilots could make *that* claim?

Who flaming cared about Argamon, anyway? It was just a planet—she could see it from Rymel using a telescope. She had more important things to do than stand around the observation deck pretending she cared. Then again, making an appearance this time meant she could pass up the next few gatherings, like that stupid meet and greet, without raising eyebrows.

She chewed the end of her pencil and studied the schematic on the station's display. What if there'd been only six seats? She scribbled

on the paper in front of her, then crossed out what she'd written. No, they weren't heavy enough. Plus, they'd have been bolted down. Okay, what if— The door indicator chimed. She pressed a button on the desk.

Les strode into the room, smiling. "Ready to go?" Her smile faded when she looked at the display, then at the stack of papers next to it. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to figure out if I could have lightened the craft enough without ejecting all the cells."

"Why?"

Mo gaped at her. "What do you mean, why? I need to know if I could have done something else. I might be in that situation again."

"Mo, the chances that you'll ever be in that situation again are pretty low."

"But not impossible."

"Well, no, but—"

"I need to be prepared. If I'd been prepared, Mama might be alive."

Les sighed and sat on the bed. "Look, I've never asked you for details about what happened. I thought I'd wait until you brought it up."

"I crashed the craft, Mama died. What other details do you need?" Her face and chest felt tight.

"I meant details about the situation you were in, and exactly what you did to crash the craft." Les paused. "When I picked up the aviacraft, Ross told me you vented one through five and ejected six through twenty. You were going to hit the Learning Academy, so you lightened the craft by ejecting the cells, vented the remaining cells to alter the craft's course, and then went into a spin due to losing power while rotating."

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Mo said flatly.

"She said she couldn't believe you did it."

Mo could hardly breathe. "What do you mean?" she gasped, clutching her shirt.

Les frowned. "You okay?"

"Tell me what Ross said." She rose from the chair. "What did she think I should have done? Tell me!" she shrieked.

Les's eyes widened; she raised both her hands. "Calm down. She meant that she couldn't believe you thought of it. Most pilots would have smashed right into the Learning Academy because it never would have crossed their minds to do what you did, especially in the time you had. I don't know if I would have thought of it."

She thudded back into the chair, her chest heaving.

"Ross sounded impressed. And proud."

Mo wanted to cry. Why didn't anyone understand? She'd killed Mama! Were they all flaming stupid?

"Let the investigators do their jobs," Les said. "If they think you could have done something else, they'll say so. But honestly, I doubt they will."

No, there must have been some way to save Mama. She'd survived—why hadn't Mama? But Les obviously didn't understand. Nobody did. "Let's go, or we'll miss it."

"We can talk for a few more minutes if you—"

"I don't. Let's go." She flicked off the monitor and rubbed her eyes.

Les offered her hand. "You haven't been to the observation deck, have you?"

Mo shook her head as she slipped her hand into Les's and allowed Les to hoist her to her feet, even though she didn't need the support. In the six days since they'd undocked, her strength had returned. Her sleep cycle was out of whack—she still slept more hours than usual, and shifting her bedtime in preparation for returning to active duty wasn't helping—but merely thinking no longer fatigued her, and she didn't doze off in the middle of conversations.

Her breath quickened when they reached the entrance to Observation Lounge 2. Les punched the *Open* button. They stepped into laughter and the buzz of conversation—the excitement in the room was palpable. Mo waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim light—the window shields were closed, though there wouldn't be more light if they were open.

"Mo!" David came over, several other pilots trailing behind him. "Good to see you."

"Hi Mo."

"How are you?"

"Can I get you a drink?"

She nodded and smiled. It felt unnatural, forced.

A lieutenant commander joined the group. "So you're Lieutenant Middleton," she said. "I've been wondering when I'd meet you."

Mo swallowed.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Quinn," Les said. "She flies day rotation."

"Yes, this is a little late for me. I'll be tired tomorrow," Quinn said, grinning. "But seeing Argamon never gets old. And I love being here when you greenies see it for the first time."

"Oh," Mo said as someone pressed a drink into her hand.

"She's on her fourth tour," Les said.

"Fourth tour?" Mo said, trying to sound interested.

Quinn nodded. "Second on the *Falcon*. My first two were on the *Hawk*."

Suddenly Ann was there, just behind Quinn. Mo tensed. Their eyes met. Ann nodded and moved on. Mo caught only part of something Quinn had said: "—so far?"

Mo stared at her. "Um . . ."

A loud clap drew everyone's attention, much to Mo's relief. An officer waved his hand above his head. "All right, everyone. I've just received word from navigation that we've exited the hyper-route, which means we're here."

A mix of applause and cheers assaulted her ears.

"Argamon is our closest neighbour and the first planet we ever visited, way back when," he said. "The entire planet is uninhabitable. One hour on Argamon and you'll never complain about the weather at home again." Laughter filled the room. Mo drained her drink and set her empty glass on a nearby table. Could he just get on with it so she could get back to her quarters?

"In a moment I'll open the window shields and you'll get your first glimpse. I'll then ask navigation to maintain position over . . ." He pointed at nobody in particular.

"Argamon's flaming valleys!" several people, likely old hands, shouted.

"That's right. Okay, everyone, get ready." He hovered his hand over the window shield control.

Mo stepped to her left to get a clear view and tried to muster up some excitement.

"I present you, Argamon!" The window shields lifted. And there it was, looking like a bald person with a skin condition who'd been out in the sun too long. Silence, then thunderous applause. Mo clapped too, even though she couldn't have cared less.

Les smiled, her eyes alight. "That's Argamon! Can you believe it?"

Mo nodded, but felt empty inside. She'd looked forward to this, sharing moments with Les that they'd remember for the rest of their lives. But what about Mama, lying in the crypt back home? What had she been looking forward to when her life had been cut short? What would she never experience?

"Here come the valleys," the officer shouted.

The planet turned angry; red blotches dotted its surface. One suddenly intensified and appeared to leap out, as if reaching for the ship. Everyone gasped, then exclamations rang out and several people clapped in delight, including Les. Mo was unmoved; she felt detached from the entire experience, as if she were in a bubble, an impassive

observer to a phenomenon she didn't understand. She tugged on Les's sleeve. "I'm tired."

Les leaned toward her. "What?"

"I'm tired. I'm going back to my quarters."

"Already?" Les dragged her eyes away from the windows. "Stay a bit longer. We'll be resuming course in five or ten minutes."

"No." Every second here worsened her mood.

"I'll go with you."

That was the last thing she wanted. "Stay here, Les. There's no reason for you to miss out. I'm only going to get into bed, and you're flying soon."

Les's face creased with concern. "But—"

"I'll beep you later, after your shift."

Mo walked away. Another round of applause set her teeth on edge as she stepped through the doorway.

Back in her quarters, she plunked into her chair, flicked on the monitor, and studied the schematic. Maybe she was approaching the problem from the wrong angle. Maybe shifting weight, rather than ejecting it, was the answer. What if Mama had put the candies in the other cargo container? What if Mama had been sitting behind her, rather than next to her? What if . . .

Two Months Later

Lesley dabbed up the last of the egg yolk with a bit of bread and popped the bread into her mouth. The officer at the next table was working his way through a huge piece of chocolate cake. The thought made her stomach roil. She'd become used to eating breakfast at 19:00.

A shadow fell across her plate. "Mind if I sit down?" David asked.

"No, go ahead."

He set a mug of tziva on the table and sat opposite her. "No Mo today?"

"Uh, no. You know how she likes her sleep." She inwardly cringed. Covering for Mo had become a habit, one she didn't like. Lying to her friends and peers didn't sit well, but telling the truth would be disloyal to Mo. She couldn't win.

David sipped his tziva. "How long are we going to play this game?" he asked quietly.

She picked up her napkin and wiped a crumb off her upper lip. "What game?"

"Come on, Lesley. I can't remember the last time I saw you having breakfast with Mo. Or lunch or supper, for that matter. Argamon, I can't remember the last time I saw Mo. Well, okay, I see

her in meetings and pass her in the corridor occasionally, but that's it." He set his mug down again. "I hate to ask this, but I've been wondering. Are the two of you still together?"

"Yes, we are." Well, they were in the sense that they'd never explicitly broken up, often spent time together in the same room, and often shared a bed, though if someone were to ask if Mo had scars on her body from the accident, she'd have to make up the answer. "But since the accident, she's not been herself. She prefers to stay in her quarters."

"It's only been, what—nine, ten weeks? People handle grief differently. Some bounce back quickly, some don't."

No, it was more than not bouncing back quickly. She wouldn't be concerned if there were signs that Mo would eventually return to her former self. But there weren't any. Mo was obsessed with the accident; more specifically, with whether she could have saved her mama. Nothing else mattered. Her life consisted of going through the motions until she could get back to reliving the moments before the crash and questioning her every decision. Her duties were nothing more than an obligation to fulfill. And their relationship . . . Lesley didn't know what their relationship meant to Mo anymore. But she wouldn't say that to David. She already felt guilty for suggesting that Mo might have a problem. "So you think I should just give her time?" she said, figuring that agreeing with him would be the fastest way to move on to another topic.

"Yes, give her time. I'd like to see her out and about a bit more, but if she wants to be alone right now, I understand. I can wait."

Easy for him to say.

"Hey, you two." Quinn stopped at their table. "A bunch of us are hanging out at the Dance Hall tonight." Her brow furrowed. "Though I guess it's morning for you, isn't it? Anyway, do you want to join us? You have a few hours before you go on duty."

David looked at Lesley. "Er . . ."

"Go ahead," Lesley said. His eyes always lit up when he saw Quinn, and she suspected that Quinn was interested in him, too.

"What about you, Lesley?" Quinn asked. "I can think of a couple of officers who wouldn't mind giving you a tour of the dance floor."

"No, that's okay. I have a few things to do before my shift."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Enjoy yourselves."

"See you later," David said as he stood. "Oh, wait." He reached for his half-full mug.

"I'll take care of it," Lesley said, then chuckled when he rushed off with Quinn without giving her an argument.

She placed his mug on her tray and walked everything over to the dirty dishes rack. Now to order Mo's breakfast, the reason she was here in the first place. Most evenings she ate breakfast with Mo, in Mo's quarters. But occasionally she ate in the canteen, wanting a change from the same four walls and feeling the need to be among people. She'd always enjoyed her own company—Mo was the more social one, or had been. She never felt lonely when she was alone and reading a book, studying an Interior case, or writing music or a dispatch. But lately she felt lonely when she was with Mo, and would rather eat alone than eat while Mo ignored her. The latter left her demoralized. Sometimes she could bear it; other times, like today, she couldn't face it.

Mo had woken her at about 14:00 with another one of her nightmares and had tossed and turned for an hour afterward. Lesley had finally dropped off again around 15:45. Perhaps that was why she'd eaten breakfast here—she wouldn't have the energy to rally herself in the face of Mo's indifference.

"Here you are," the counter attendant said, handing her a bag.

She thanked her and returned to Mo's quarters. Outside the door, she braced herself, then hit the *Open* button, as Mo had told her to do several weeks ago. *Stop pressing the Chime button, Les, it breaks my concentration. Just come in.* Though she'd known what to expect, her heart sank. Mo was in front of the comm station, as usual. "Breakfast," Lesley announced, her cheerfulness ringing false to her ears.

"Just put it there," Mo mumbled, gesturing to the corner of the desk, her eyes still glued to the display.

She set down the bag. "Listen, on the way to the canteen, I checked to see if any practice rooms are available after our shifts. There are a few open slots. Do you want to play together later?"

"I don't know. Go ahead and book one if you want. You can always play alone."

"I don't want to play alone." Despite an overwhelming sense of futility, Lesley pushed on. "Do you even know where your violin is?"

Mo tapped a key.

"Mo! Do you know where your violin is?"

No response.

"I know where it is," Lesley said. "It's exactly where I put it the day we came on board. You haven't touched it."

"I'm not in an orchestra anymore," Mo said.

So she was listening. "You haven't been in an orchestra since we graduated from the Military Academy. That's never stopped you from playing before."

"I'm busy now."

"Doing what? Reviewing the same thing over and over again?"
Mo ignored her.

"Fifteen minutes. We'll play for fifteen minutes and that's it."

"I don't want to, okay?" Mo pressed her lips together.

"How about flying a simulation, then? You haven't done that for ages. Have you even flown one since we boarded?"

Silence.

Lesley gave up; she wouldn't get anywhere today. "Eat your breakfast." That was another concern; Mo was losing weight.

She stifled an exasperated sigh at the clothes heaped on the floor at the foot of the bed. Time for another trip to laundry. As she stuffed the clothes into a laundry bag, she remembered the dispatch she'd recently received from Michael. She'd promised to talk to Mo, but now would be a bad time to bring up Mo's three-line dispatches to her family and gently suggest that Michael would appreciate more. But when would be a good time? And if she couldn't get through to Mo, how would she tell Michael that receiving three lines of communication from Mo on a regular basis was more than Mo gave to everyone else?

She tied the bag shut and slung it over her shoulder. "I'm just taking this to laundry."

No response.

"Mo?" Apparently she was back to talking to herself. At least Mo was showing interest in her breakfast—she'd eaten a bit of muffin. "I'll be back soon." She left without waiting for a reply—there wasn't any point.

In the corridor, a passing officer nodded to her. "Good evening, Lieutenant." He smiled when she met his eyes and returned his nod. A lump formed in her throat. She'd just shared a more meaningful exchange with an officer she didn't know than she was likely to share with Mo for the rest of the day.

Mo hurried toward the launch area's elevator, eager to return to her quarters now that she'd completed her shift. Her plans for the rest of the day filled her with excitement. No more studying her craft's schematics—she knew them so well, she could visualize the entire set in her head. She'd checked, rechecked, and triple-checked every calculation, and then done it again. But the schematics hadn't yielded an answer. It was time to move on . . . to another set of schematics. She couldn't wait to bring up those for her craft's predecessor to see what changes the engineers had made, especially for safety reasons.

"Hey, Mo!"

She turned around in dismay; she'd almost made it to the elevator.

"We need to talk," Ann said, blocking Mo's path.

"About what?"

"Talking! I've tried, I've really tried. I've kept my mouth shut for two months, but I can't take it anymore." Her hands went to her hips. "Do you know how boring it is out there, flying around in circles in complete silence? Every time I try to start a conversation, I get dead air in return."

Mo resisted the urge to roll her eyes. As if she cared. Let Ann vent—the sooner she said her piece, the faster she'd shut up.

"See, this is exactly what I mean. Do you even know how to hold a conversation anymore?" Ann pointed to herself. "I say something, and then you," she pointed at Mo, "say something back. Or how about a snort every once in a while? Or a cough or a burp. Snore, for all I care. Anything!"

"I'm too busy to talk."

"Doing what?"

"Flying the craft," she said in a tone she usually reserved for two-year-olds.

Ann gaped. "Are you flaming serious? Since when can't you talk and fly at the same time?"

Since she'd learned that the slightest distraction could lead to disaster. "Instead of gabbing, we should focus on what we're doing, in case something happens."

Ann snorted. "What do you think is going to happen? Hello, are you sleeping through all the meetings? There's a reason we were assigned to the *Falcon* for our first tour. We're in Rymellan space."

"We weren't a few days ago."

"No, we were in Jessimite space. You know—the Jessimites, our closest ally. Argamon!" Ann forcefully exhaled. "They call this a deep tour, but it isn't, not really. Those last for years."

Yeah, maybe she should apply for one. There was nothing for her at home anymore, and she could get away from all the naggers. Unfortunately, they probably wouldn't accept her for a lengthy tour until she was Joined. "Still, we need to stay focused."

Ann looked as if she were about to explode. She muttered under her breath, then said, "Okay, so you don't want to talk. Do you mind if I play a little music over our channel, then? You might be okay with sitting in a stupor for hours on end, but I'm going crazy."

Mo shifted her weight. "I'd rather you not."

"You can't have it all your way."

"I don't want any distractions, okay? If you don't like that, tough." She sidestepped Ann and strode to the elevator.

"What's wrong with you?" Ann said, chasing after her.
"Nothing."
"Mo, there's something wrong with you."
"Just because I won't go along with what you want?"
"No, because you're not you. You'd talk. You'd want music. Remember when we flew together on 72? That's you. This isn't you."
And Ann thought there was something wrong with *her*? She stepped into the elevator. "No music. If you don't like that, talk to Monahan and ask him for another flying partner," she said as she pressed the *Close* button.

"I just might do that," Ann said. "Hey! Wait—"
The elevator door slid shut. Mo breathed a sigh of relief, then frowned at the time on the elevator's control panel. Talking to Ann had wasted two minutes, two minutes she could have been studying schematics. And how long would she have before Les showed up and started bugging her about eating supper, or until Papa sent her yet another dispatch? How did everyone expect her to figure it out when they kept interrupting her, nagging her, telling her what to do? Sometimes the constant interruptions frustrated her so much, she could cry. If everyone just left her alone, she'd figure out what she'd done wrong, understand why she'd lived and Mama had died. She had to know, so she'd be prepared next time. And if they couldn't understand that, she didn't need them. She didn't need any of them.

Lesley stepped off the elevator and dragged herself to Mo's quarters. Mo's nightmares had kept her up three days in a row; the lack of uninterrupted sleep was catching up with her. She'd sleep in her own quarters today—Mo hardly noticed she was there, anyway. If she could, she'd have a quick supper in the canteen and then go to bed. But Mo's quarters needed tidying, and if Lesley didn't bring her supper, Mo would probably skip the meal, something she couldn't afford to do.

"Oh good, you're here," Mo said, her eyes alight. "I want to show you something."

Her spirits instantly lifted. Mo hadn't been this animated since the accident. Was she finally snapping out of it?

"Look." Mo rolled her chair away from the comm station to give Lesley a clear view of its display.

Lesley felt like screaming. Not another schematic! She wanted to pick up the display and hurl it into the flaming corridor. Instead, she swallowed her anger and disappointment and started to gather the

remains of Mo's lunch. "What's special about this one?" she asked, trying to show some interest.

"It's the precursor to my craft. Newer models must be safer than older ones, right? So I'm going to study the differences between my craft and this one."

"Why?" she asked as she activated the recycling chute and threw in what Mo hadn't eaten. She set the dirty dishes on the small table near the door, to take with her when she fetched supper.

"Maybe it'll give me some ideas."

Her temples pulsed. "Ideas about what?" Perhaps making the bed would head off her growing frustration; she hadn't had time earlier.

"Ideas about what I could have done differently."

Lesley dropped the blanket she'd just whipped off the bed and whirled toward Mo. "I'm sure they improved the safety of the craft, but I don't understand how knowing what they did will help you. If there were further safety improvements to make, ones so obvious that you can figure them out by comparing your craft to its predecessor, don't you think they would have figured them out and incorporated them into your craft's design? After all, we're talking about aviacraft design engineers, here." Now that she'd started, she couldn't stop. "And the design document for your craft would list the safety improvements they made. I'm sure you could locate that and just read about them, rather than trying to puzzle them out by studying schematics, but then you wouldn't have an excuse to sit in front of your comm station all day instead of dealing with what happened."

Mo's face reddened. "What do you think I'm doing? I am dealing with it."

"No, you're not. If you were dealing with it, you'd face up to it and accept that there wasn't anything you could do." She pressed on, determined to get through to Mo. "Has it occurred to you that you haven't figured out the exact steps you could have taken to save your mama because they don't exist? That what you did was the best thing, perhaps the only thing you could have done to avoid hitting the Learning Academy?"

"The best thing? Mama died!"

"I know. But it wasn't your fault. It was an accident."

Mo shot up from the chair. "I am so sick and tired of people saying it was an accident! I crashed the flaming craft!"

"Mo, you were going down. If you hadn't done anything, the craft still would have crashed. And you probably would have died, along with your mama and half the Learning Academy."

"But I didn't die. Only Mama did. And I have to understand why."

Lesley rubbed her forehead. "Things don't always make sense. Sometimes there isn't a logical explanation." She gestured toward the comm station. "When will you stop? At what point will you say, yeah, okay, I understand? What if you do discover that you could have handled it differently? Do you think that'll make you feel better? You had to make a decision within a very short period of time. You made it, and saved hundreds of Rymellans. You were willing to sacrifice your own life."

"But Mama died." Mo sat back down. "You know, I'm really disappointed with you."

"What?"

"Disappointed. I thought you'd be on my side. I thought we understood each other. But I guess we don't. And that's disappointing."

Mo's words left her speechless. She had to get out of there. Now. "I'll go get us supper."

Outside, she paused to collect herself as the door swooshed shut behind her. *Disappointed*. She blinked back tears and headed for the elevator. Fortunately the corridor was deserted—not many were up and about at 05:30. *Disappointed*.

She was at her wit's end. Was she selfish because she wanted the old Mo back? The one who readily smiled and grinned, the one who had to drag her to parties, the one who doubled over with laughter when she hit a sour note on her violin? The one who made Lesley feel as if she could do no wrong and that she was the most special woman alive—where was that Mo? Was she trapped and desperately trying to get out, or was she gone?

Lesley had always counted on Mo for reassurance when Mama made her feel like a failure or she doubted herself. No matter what, Mo would still care—that was what she'd always told herself. But now she couldn't do anything right in Mo's eyes. She was running herself ragged covering for her, caring for her, and worrying about her, but Mo didn't see that. *Disappointed*.

Perhaps she should stop, let Mo sink until she had no choice but to start caring again. But what if she didn't? What if she continued to neglect herself and started to neglect her duties? What then? Lesley couldn't stand by and watch. But as she accepted their supper from the counter attendant, she realized that she'd been doing just that, hoping, irrationally, that one day she'd wake up and the old Mo would be back. *Give her time*, everyone had said. So she had. In the beginning, that had been the right thing to do. Now, it was avoiding reality. Mo wouldn't suddenly snap out of it. She wasn't well. She needed help.

But was it up to Lesley to ask for it? What would the consequences be? Would it negatively affect Mo's career and reputation? Would Mo understand why she'd sounded the alarm? No, she should talk to Mo first—it would be better if Mo recognized her problem and asked for help herself. So far, talking to her, trying to get her to see reason, hadn't worked, but one more try wouldn't hurt.

She returned to Mo's quarters. "Supper," she announced.

Mo acknowledged her with a grunt and ignored the food and drink that Lesley set next to the keyboard. Had the circles under Mo's eyes always been that dark and her face so pinched? She looked so tiny in that sweater—Michael would be horrified.

Lesley put her own meal on the nightstand and sank onto the bed. She'd long given up on trying to engage Mo in supper conversation—she'd talk to her later about getting help. No. No she wouldn't. She wouldn't start lying to herself on top of everyone else. Talking to Mo would be an exercise in futility. Mo wouldn't listen—she'd probably become angry. And after this schematic, there'd be another one, and then another. She'd spend the rest of the tour in her quarters, sitting in that chair, staring at that display, while her life crumbled around her ears. Lesley could sit and rack her brain for reasons to not do what she now knew she had to do, but they'd only be excuses to not act.

She picked at her supper and finally cleared her plate, but the food wasn't sitting well. "I'll drop my dishes off at the canteen and then go to my quarters to get some sleep." The lid still sat on Mo's plate. "I'll pick up yours later, take them back with the breakfast dishes, okay?" Probably after throwing out her supper.

"Yeah, sure," Mo mumbled.

Though Lesley knew Mo wouldn't care, she put her arm around Mo's shoulders and kissed her cheek. "Good night." Her composure wavered. *I'm sorry, Mo, but I have to do this.*

Again, her vision blurred as the door closed behind her. Would Mo understand that she'd done it because she cared? If Mo didn't forgive her, their relationship would probably end, but Lesley was willing to pay that price if it brought the old Mo back. Since the accident, their relationship had been nothing but a habit, and they'd always known that it had no future. If Mo's eyes danced again, if she picked up her violin, beat everyone soundly at cards, and stopped tormenting herself, losing their relationship would have been worth it.

After dropping off her dishes at the canteen, she took the elevator to the launch area, hoping that Monahan would still be in his office. Now that she'd reached her decision, she wanted to see him before she lost her nerve.

"Come in, Lieutenant," Monahan said when she hovered in his office doorway.

She stopped in front of his desk. Her mind went blank. She should have rehearsed what she'd say.

Monahan leaned back in his chair and pressed his fingertips together. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to talk to you about Lieutenant Middleton."

He looked at her expectantly.

How to start? "You know she was in an accident just before boarding the *Falcon*?"

"Yes."

"Well, she's not doing very well."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I know she flies her shifts, but that's all she does. She's neglecting everything else—her hobbies, her family, her friends." Her girlfriend. "She's not eating or sleeping properly. She's obsessed with the decision she made that day, or rather, with what decisions she could have made." Saying it all out loud in one go sounded awful. "But I'm not suggesting that she can't perform her duties," she quickly added. "She can. And I'm not here because I doubt her commitment to the tour."

"You're here because you're worried about her," Monahan said.

"Yes."

He pursed his lips. "I'm going to be up front with you. Lieutenant Middleton has come up during the senior officers' weekly review." He tapped his left temple. "She set off my alarm bells a few weeks ago. She rarely speaks in our meetings and she hasn't put any time in at the simulators. Not only that, I've yet to see her at a social event. Now, nothing says that everyone has to be an extrovert and a social butterfly. Off the top of my head, I can think of several excellent officers who don't say much and keep to themselves. But they've always been that way. She hasn't. I've read her file. Abrupt, significant behavioural changes almost always indicate a problem.

"But when do you step in, especially in a case like this?" he mused aloud. "That crash . . . the decision she had to make and then losing her mama under those circumstances . . . horrible, horrible." Monahan shook his head. "We expected her to be subdued for a bit, but lately we've become concerned. And it sounds like you're concerned, too."

"Yes, I am. That's why I'm here."

"Not an easy step to take, I'm sure. As I said, I've read her file."

Her face felt hot.

"You're the second pilot to express concerns about Lieutenant Middleton in so many days," he said, shocking her. "Given how close

you are to the lieutenant, I'm inclined to give your assessment of her a lot of weight. Thank you for coming to me with this. You did the right thing."

Perhaps, but hearing him say it didn't make her feel any better. If anything, she wanted to run to her quarters, throw herself onto the bed, and weep. She felt as if she'd just betrayed the person who mattered to her more than anything.

Mo's hands clenched when the door indicator chimed. It couldn't be Les—she'd only just left to fetch them breakfast and wouldn't activate the chime. Why couldn't they all leave her alone? She flicked off the monitor, then punched the intercom button. "Yes?"

"It's Commander Baker. I'd like to talk to you."

Flaming Argamon, what did he want? She opened the door and stood at attention.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Baker said, stepping over the threshold. After the door closed, he clasped his hands behind his back and cleared his throat.

Her heart raced; she felt trapped.

"I'm here to tell you that I'm removing you from active duty and placing you back on medical leave," Baker said.

Medical leave? "All my injuries are healed, Commander. Physician Collins cleared me for duty."

"Yes, she did. But it's not your physical injuries that concern me. They're often the easiest to deal with. Sometimes it's the emotional and psychological wounds that linger."

She didn't understand.

"I like my pilots to be healthy, on all levels. Based on our observations and on concerns expressed by your peers, it's clear that you're no longer mentally fit for duty."

What?

"Your new orders are to report to the infirmary at 21:00. That's in two hours. I'm advising you now that Article 844 will apply to your situation, so if you need to do anything before you report, please do it before then."

Article 844 . . . She started to tremble.

"You'll be working with Counsellor Willis. He's dealt with the type of depression that you're apparently experiencing and has agreed to shift his sleep cycle to match yours. I want you to follow his directions. I want you to listen to him. I want you to treat your time with him and at the infirmary as seriously as you treat your duties in the cockpit. You won't return to active duty until he says you're fit to do so." He

paused. "I want to make it clear that I'm more than satisfied with your performance in the cockpit and that I'd like to see you back out there as soon as possible. Understood?"

She nodded.

"Good. And Lieutenant, it would be best for you to report to the infirmary on your own initiative. I don't want to have to send someone to escort you."

"Yes, Commander," she managed to whisper.

He nodded to her. "Good night."

Her trembling progressed to shakes the moment the door swooshed shut. Not mentally fit? Article 844? Her peers had expressed concern? Yeah, she knew exactly who'd expressed concern. Ann! Ann had flaming tattle-tailed, all because Mo wasn't a chatterbox and wouldn't agree to music in the cockpit. Mo hated her. Hated! Jokes were one thing; this was quite another and had gone too far. What lies had Ann told them? She wasn't depressed—depressed people lay around in bed all day. Morons!

They couldn't do this to her—she still hadn't figured it out, and now she wouldn't have access to a comm station. The infirmary would have stations, but with 844 in effect, she'd be forbidden from using one or someone would be looking over her shoulder the whole time. Her throat constricted and her heart pounded. She felt dizzy; she grabbed the edge of the desk to steady herself, then sat on the end of the bed. It wasn't fair! Why were they doing this to her? Baker was satisfied with her performance, so why should he care what she did when she wasn't on duty? It was none of their business! If they understood, they'd leave her alone.

Maybe joining the military hadn't been such a good idea after all. Being a pilot had brought her nothing but grief. And now the military was poking its nose into her affairs and telling her what to do, even when she was performing her duties well. So fine! She'd report to the infirmary and endure yet more wasted time with another airhead counsellor. She'd tell him what he wanted to hear, and once he'd patted her on the head and cleared her for duty, she'd finish out the tour like a good little girl. And then? She'd quit.

"Breakfast," Lesley announced as she strode into Mo's room. She stopped dead. Mo wasn't in her habitual spot in front of the comm station; she sat slumped at the end of the bed. "You all right?"

Mo looked up. "You won't believe what just happened. Baker was here."

"Commander Baker?"

"Yeah, right where you are. He's relieved me of duty and placed me back on medical leave. Can you believe that?"

Yes, she could, but Mo wouldn't appreciate that answer. However, she didn't want to lie, so—

"Oh, well, thanks for the flaming support!" Mo said in response to Lesley's silence. "You don't even look surprised that Baker was—" Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "It was you! You went to them!" Her voice grew shrill. "How could you do this to me? How could you humiliate me like this?"

Lesley set their breakfasts down on the table next to the door and stepped toward her. "Mo, I—"

"Don't you come near me," Mo shouted, standing and holding up her hands to create a barrier. "Stay away from me!"

"I was trying to help."

"Oh, so that's what you think you were doing? Helping? Helping who? Me? Or you?"

"You!"

"Don't kid yourself." Mo blinked rapidly. "If you wanted to help me, you would have supported me. You wouldn't have gone to them and made it sound like I've lost my mind." A tear rolled down her cheek.

Lesley swallowed. "I didn't make it sound like you've lost your mind. But since the accident . . . since your mama died . . . you don't care about anything anymore."

"Of course I do! I still get up, don't I? I fly my shifts. What do you want from me?"

"I want you—"

"I know exactly why you went running to them," Mo shouted, pointing at the door. "You don't want your reputation harmed, because that would compromise your chances of becoming admiral."

"What?"

"Better get Mo help, otherwise they'll think I've lost my mind, too."

Lesley couldn't believe it; she wanted to grab Mo's shoulders and shake some sense into her. "That has nothing—"

"Or did you do it because I won't sleep with you? Is that it? Let's get Mo out of the way for a while so I can find someone else."

Trembling with anger, Lesley whirled and marched to the door. If Mo wanted to throw her life away, let her. They had no future together anyway—it wasn't her problem. Let the military deal with it. Not her problem.

But she couldn't bring herself to press the *Open* button and stood there, struggling for calm as she listened to Mo cry, every sob tearing into her. She couldn't walk out, not on Mo. Yes, Mo's words

hurt—they wounded her to her very core. But Mo wasn't well, hadn't been well for a while. And right now she was distraught, probably frightened. If they were Chosens, Lesley wouldn't have the luxury of deciding that enough was enough, of washing her hands of the entire situation; she'd have to stay, support Mo, be there for her as she clawed her way out of the abyss. Wasn't that what love was about? Yes, love—*love!* She loved Mo, she'd always loved her. So she'd act as if they were Chosens and remain at Mo's side. Walking out wasn't an option—she wouldn't be able to look at herself in the mirror if she did.

She turned around. Mo had sunk to the floor and sat slumped against the bed, sniffing. "Mo, your mama loved you," she said, taking a tentative step forward. "She'd want you to go on with your life, be happy. You know she always wanted you to be happy. She wouldn't want to see you like this."

Mo slowly shook her head. "Just before we crashed, she said she was proud of me. Or at least I think she did." She grabbed her hair with both hands. "I've gone over it so many times in my head, I'm not sure what actually happened anymore. It doesn't matter anyway. If she'd known what was going to happen, she wouldn't have said it."

Lesley sat next to Mo but didn't touch her. "She still would have said it."

"No," Mo whispered. "I let her down. I let her down." She hugged her knees to her chest and buried her head against them, hiding her face.

Lesley knew nothing she said would get through, so she didn't try. She cautiously put her hand against Mo's back, prepared to pull away. But Mo either didn't notice or didn't care. "Did Baker say anything about seeing your counsellor more often?" Lesley asked, presuming he must have.

"I'm getting a new one," Mo said, her voice muffled.

Good.

"I have to report to the infirmary at 21:00." Mo turned her head toward Lesley. "Will you go with me?"

Overcome, she almost couldn't speak. "Of course I'll go with you."

"He said Article 844 would be in effect." Mo's chin trembled. "So you won't have to bring me supper tonight."

That meant they planned to put her on medication. Mo would be confined to the infirmary, and under supervision, to ensure that she didn't commit any violations—particularly capital ones—due to the medication. They'd lift 844 when she came off the medication or when the physicians and her counsellor were satisfied that it wasn't impairing her judgment, whichever came first. "I'll visit you after I've eaten. I'll visit you as often as I can. If . . . you want me to."

"I do. But that doesn't mean I forgive you. You shouldn't have done this, Les. You shouldn't have done it." Mo hid her face in her knees again.

Lesley wanted to explain why she wasn't sorry that she had. And one day she would, when Mo—her Mo—had emerged from the abyss.

Three Months Later

Mo made her way down the shuttle's aisle, searching for two empty seats. "Over there, on the left," Les murmured behind her. They stowed their cloaks and bags in the overhead cargo container and sat down. The shuttle was filling quickly; everyone was eager to get home.

David came up the aisle and stopped when he saw them. "Dress uniforms? What's the occasion?"

Mo tensed.

"Oh, we've decided to start a tradition," Les said. "We're going to wear them home after every tour."

"Interesting," he said, though his face clearly indicated that he thought the notion odd. He glanced over his shoulder. "I'd better move, I'm holding everyone up. I'll see you next week at the Military Academy reunion."

"Now he'll expect us to wear them every time," Mo whispered to Les.

"Don't worry, he'll have forgotten by the next time."

Les was probably right. Mo's comm unit beeped twice. She almost deleted the dispatch when she saw Ann's name, but then decided to read it. *See you in three weeks, squirt. Oh, and mind the gap when you get on the train. You're so tiny you might fall in.* She sighed and deleted it. Things were definitely returning to normal.

"I'll probably doze on the train," Les said.

"Me too." In preparation for the break, they'd shifted their sleep cycles as much as possible while still flying their shifts. Sleeping odd hours would be difficult at home, though they were both going to try. They were on nights again next tour.

The comm system crackled to life. "Welcome aboard, everyone. Before we launch, I want to remind all Chosens twenty-five and over who aren't yet Joined that you must proceed to conference room three when we reach the shuttle base. Again, all Chosens twenty-five and over who aren't yet Joined, proceed to conference room three when we reach the shuttle base. Thank you. Prepare for launch."

Mo fastened her seatbelt. A minute later, the shuttle left 72 and started its journey to Rymel. She stared out the window, hardly believing that the tour was already over. It hadn't turned out the way

she'd expected. Three weeks in the infirmary, then five more on medical leave while she continued to undergo intensive counselling. She'd been on active duty for the past month, though she'd still seen Willis every second day. He was returning to day shift next tour, but she had a standing appointment with him every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday at 08:00—late evening for her. *By the end of the tour, we'll have that down to once a week*, he'd confidently stated. She believed him.

Willis had gained her trust during their first session. She'd plunked herself in the chair, folded her arms, and boldly announced that since she'd decided to quit after the tour, seeing him was a waste of time. *I see*, he'd said without blinking, much to her disappointment. *Well, I don't want the session to go to waste, so why don't I help you write your release request to Commander Baker?* He'd invited her to stand where she could see his comm station's display, and then had created a new dispatch, typed in the date and time, and seeded it with the standard *I'm writing to request my release from the military* line. *Now, they'll want to know why you want to leave*, he'd said, looking at her. *You're a good pilot—your performance is stellar—so you'll have to explain. Why don't you want to be a fighter pilot anymore?*

Her pathetic attempt at an answer had provided him with the opportunity to question and challenge. But most importantly, he'd listened, without passing judgment, without telling her that she was wrong, that she shouldn't think this or shouldn't feel that. In the next session, he'd brought up the schematics for her aviacraft and its precursor and invited her to sit next to him and talk about them. Many sessions later, she'd realized that most of his questions had nothing to do with schematics—their discussion had slowly shifted from energy cells and weight distribution to guilt and fear. She'd finally seen how it had been easier to study schematics and do math, of all things, than let herself feel. Why else would she have willingly sat and done math if not to numb herself? Seriously.

So she'd made strides, but still had work to do. Nightmares still haunted her, though they were less frequent, and the image of Mama and Papa still lay hidden away in her closet on the *Falcon*. She no longer cringed every time she thought of Mama, but she wasn't ready to be reminded every time she returned from her shift, climbed into bed, and woke up in the morning. And she still felt guilty—but not about the crash, not really. The accident report had helped assuage her guilt about that, especially its concluding paragraphs:

Our simulations have shown that Lieutenant Middleton took the only viable course of action to prevent the aviacraft from impacting with the B5-1 Learning Academy. Anything else would have failed, resulting in great loss of life. Among the alternatives we tested,

Simulation 18A (see pg. 42) would have resulted in the least number of casualties (projected 132 losses, mostly children). Due to Lieutenant Middleton's skill and presence of mind, the number of casualties was limited to one.

We recognize that Lieutenant Middleton was willing to sacrifice her life to save the lives of others, and that Susan Middleton did just that. We also recognize that few pilots would have taken the same course of action as Lieutenant Middleton, and we are grateful that a pilot of Lieutenant Middleton's skill was in the cockpit that day. As such, we have recommended to the military that Lieutenant Middleton receive the Medal of Service to the Way, and we have recommended to the government that Susan Middleton be awarded (posthumously) the Commendation of the Way for her bravery and selflessness.

Mama's commendation had been presented to the family last month—Mo had told Papa to go ahead without her, that there was no need to reschedule the awards ceremony on her behalf. And when she'd heard that Monahan was planning to present her with the medal in the presence of all the pilots, she'd requested, through Willis, that she receive the medal privately. Despite knowing that she'd been awarded it to recognize her role in saving lives, celebrating it with her peers wouldn't have felt right, not when Mama had died. The medal was in her bag—she'd throw it into a drawer in her bedroom for now. Maybe someday she'd look at it and feel something other than sorrow. Maybe not.

Now she felt guilty about how terribly she'd treated everyone, especially Les. In the past, she'd sometimes wondered if Les's feelings were genuine and whether Les would rather be with someone else. Never again. Les might not speak of love, but she sure knew how to show it. Mo didn't know where she'd be without her. And then there was Papa and the rest of her family. Reading over her terse, sometimes angry, dispatches to them had horrified her; she hadn't recognized herself in them. She'd also ignored all her friends, taken them for granted. Given how she'd behaved, she didn't deserve the kindness and understanding everyone had shown her since her release from the infirmary.

The comm system crackled again. "Arrival, two minutes."

A cheer broke out, and she felt herself smile through a burst of panic. As soon as the shuttle touched down, Les unfastened her seatbelt and lifted down their cloaks and bags. Mo's stomach churned, despite the three-hour train ride ahead of them. She followed Les into the packed waiting area, busy with families waving eagerly to loved ones and calling greetings. Several gold cloaks stood out amidst the pandemonium—Chosen Council couriers on their way to conference room three, no doubt. In just two more tours, she and Les would be

among those in the conference room, wondering if their Chosen Papers were ready. Where had the time gone?

She didn't bother scanning for her family. At her request, they wouldn't be here at the shuttle base. Neither would the Thompsons, for the same reason. "Do you think everyone will be at the house?" she asked Les on the train.

Les squeezed her hand. "I'm sure of it."

Well, she hadn't received responses from Mary and Matthew, but that wasn't unusual. *Please, let them be there.*

Mo managed to doze off and on, but the closer they came to C3, the more agitated she became. She'd spent much of her recent sessions with Willis talking about this day. When she'd told him that she'd wear her dress uniform for the entire journey home, he hadn't laughed. Neither had Les, when Mo had asked her to do the same. Willis and Les had understood that changing into it at home would give her an opportunity to back out. And so here was Les, sitting stiffly next to her, pulling on her collar. She hated the feel of the dress uniform against her neck, yet she'd readily agreed to wear it for hours. Mo loved her for it.

As they walked to the Middleton estate, she felt herself withdrawing. Would they be angry? Would they ask what in the flaming Argamon she'd thought she was doing, sending them horrible dispatches like that? Did they blame her, despite the report? She'd soon find out. The house loomed in the distance.

When they reached the front door, Les gave her a reassuring smile. Mo felt like pushing Les in first and hiding behind her, but that would be cowardly. She grasped the door handle, blood pounding in her ears. As soon as she opened the door and stepped through the doorway, everyone streamed into the hallway. She flashed back to the day she'd come home from the infirmary, except this time Nathan was here and the flowers in the vase were blooming.

She met Papa's eyes, but held back, not sure if she should hug him. He didn't hesitate. "Welcome home," he said, reaching for her. "I missed you, Mo. Very much." Despite promising herself that she wouldn't cry, she buried her face in his shoulder and let the tears flow.

Everyone gathered around her, their love and support palpable. She wanted to tell them how sorry she was and how much she loved them, but that would have to wait. First things first. She stepped back, sniffing, and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I guess we should go." So heavy was the sense of dread hanging over her, she almost couldn't breathe.

"Are you sure?" Papa said. "We don't have to rush there."

"I'm sure." If she didn't go now, she might never go. "Do you have the article?"

"Here." Neil handed it to her, his eyes bright.

She slipped off the cloth ring and unrolled the parchment. Article CT30, beautifully calligraphed. "Thank you," she said, rolling it up and slipping the ring back over it. "Oh, he's standing," she exclaimed, noticing Jacob for the first time.

Barbara laughed. "With my help." Jacob, clutching Barbara's hand, suddenly pointed to Mo and looked up at Barbara.

"Yes, that's your aunt Mo. Aunt Mo," she repeated slowly.

Mo drew herself up, then felt silly. But who knew what he was thinking? Maybe he was trying to decide if he should be impressed or wish that he'd been born into another family.

Papa glanced at the others. "We thought we'd have a bit of time before we went. We want to give you something, and I guess now is as good a time as any." He removed a small case from his top sweater pocket. "We talked about it, and we all agree that this should belong to you." He handed the case to her.

Curious, she undid its clasp and lifted the lid. Inside lay a silver badge. In its centre, an engraved circle. Underneath the circle, the words *Susan Middleton, for bravery and selflessness*. Mama's commendation. Her lips trembled as she formed the words to tell them she couldn't accept it; that she was the last person who should have it.

But then she realized that it was their way of telling her that they didn't blame her and that they still loved her. She couldn't refuse it—she'd caused them enough pain already. At least she'd feel pride along with sorrow whenever she looked at it. Her mama had earned the highest civilian commendation. Her mama. "Um . . . I don't know what to say," she said, not at all embarrassed by her quavering voice. "Thank you. I'll always cherish it."

Their faces lit up in delight. And as she looked from one to another, her heavy sense of dread about visiting the crypt lifted. Mama wasn't there. She was here, and always would be. She was in the tilt of Neil's head, in Mary's smile, in Nathan's baking. She was in Matthew's love of gardening and Andrew's mischief. She was in Les and Barbara's memories. And Papa . . . she'd never look at Papa without thinking of Mama.

Most of all, Mama was in her—she saw her every time she looked in a mirror and felt her whenever she laughed. That wouldn't stop Mo from desperately missing her, but knowing that Mama would live on in all of them offered her some small comfort.

Mo closed the case and slipped it into her inner cloak pocket. She'd cry over it some more in private.

"Shall we go?" Papa said.

She reached for Les's hand. "Yes. I'm ready now."