

The Military Academy

by Sarah Ettritch

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Lesley looked at her lap and stifled a yawn. The warmth of the dining room, fed by the afternoon sun streaming in through the windows, was lulling her to sleep. The topic of conversation didn't help, either. She shifted in her chair, trying to rouse herself. The worst thing she could do was doze off.

"Are you listening?" Mama asked.

Lesley lifted her head, hoping her eyes conveyed interest she didn't feel. "Yes."

Papa slid a sheet of paper across the table toward her. "It's a lot of information to absorb."

Feeling another yawn coming on, Lesley picked up the paper and shielded her face with it as she read *Entrance Examination Dates for the Advocacy Training Program*. She scanned the list of colleges and dates in despair.

Mama yanked the paper from Lesley's hand and laid it on the table. "The ones in Sectors C4 and D2 are the closest," she said, pointing them out on the sheet with her pencil.

"But all the colleges are good," Papa said. "All of them teach the same curriculum."

"You went to the one in H2, right?" Lesley asked.

Papa nodded. "And your mama attended the one in A7."

"I did. An excellent college," Mama said. "But Papa's right, they're all decent." She paused. "It would be nice if you could still live at home during your studies, but you have to think ahead." She tapped another name on the sheet. "Advocate Cooper teaches there."

"A brilliant advocate," Papa murmured.

"You'll want him to supervise your final year," Mama said.

Lesley hoped there wouldn't be a final year, but played along. "Everyone will want him."

"True, but assuming you keep your marks up, which you will, your name will give you an extra edge. The Thompsons have had at least one advocate in every generation. The archives are filled with cases handled by our family, and we're not finished yet," Mama said, indicating herself and Papa.

Papa smiled. "And now you and your brother will carry on the tradition."

Yes, well, Jason would jump off a cliff if Mama told him to, and shout about what a wonderful idea it was on the way down. Lesley crossed her legs. "Karen won't be an advocate."

"No, but we knew early on that your sister's interests lay elsewhere. She'll make a fine physician." Mama patted Lesley's hand. "And you'll make a fine advocate. I wasn't surprised when you sent us the list of courses you'd chosen for your final year at the Learning Academy."

"Neither was I," Papa said. "You love the Law. You love the Way. Qualities every advocate needs."

Lesley wanted to scream. "Every Rymellan serves the Way, no matter what they're doing."

Mama nodded. "Of course they do. But advocates serve the Way more directly than most others." She looked down at the pile of papers in front of her, material she'd had delivered to her office and brought home with her that day. "Material you should have already requested," she'd said to Lesley with a frown at the beginning of the conversation.

"Advocates aren't the only ones who directly serve the Way." Lesley paused to swallow before forcing out her next words. "Maybe I should look into other vocations, too."

Mama's head came up. "Like what?"

"Indoctrinators serve the Way," Lesley said, starting with a vocation she had no interest in pursuing.

"That's true."

"Overseers."

"Overseers are all former advocates or admirals," Papa said.

Exactly. "That's another one. The military."

"The military?" Mama snorted. "The military isn't for thinkers. It's for those who need to be told what to do. Here." She picked up the papers and held them out to Lesley. "The areas the advocacy exam will cover, along with a suggested study list. You should go to the Trading Centre as soon as you can and pick up the books. The exam is only two months away. You have a lot to cover."

"Admirals who become overseers must be thinkers," Lesley said as she accepted the papers.

"Admirals who became overseers should have been advocates," Papa said. Mama turned to him and laughed. He laughed along with her.

Lesley's shoulders sagged. What was the use? "I'll go to the Trading Centre right now. If we're done."

"Isn't this exciting?" Mama exclaimed. "You're about to take your first step toward becoming an advocate."

Lesley could hardly contain herself. She forced a smile. "I'll probably stop in at Mo's on the way home."

"Supper's at six. And you'll have to buckle down now, Lesley, not spend all your free time with Mo. Keeping up with your Learning Academy classes and preparing for the advocacy exam won't be easy."

Mama didn't know the half of it. "Mo has to study, too."

"I doubt the Military Academy entrance examination will be as demanding as the one you'll be taking."

Lesley felt her face tighten. "May I go now?"

Mama motioned toward the dining room entrance. "Yes, go."

"We'll see you later," Papa said.

"Wait!" Mama pointed at the sheet listing the examination dates. "Don't forget that one."

Lesley snatched it from the table, went up to her room, and slipped the pile of sheets into her satchel. Outside, she strapped the satchel onto her bike's rear rack. Her comm unit beeped. As soon as she hit the connect button, Mo said, "Where are you?"

"I'm just leaving, but I have to go to the Trading Centre first."

"Well, hurry up. If we don't get through at least two sections, we'll fall behind."

"I'll ride as fast as I can." She pressed the disconnect button and mounted her bike.

Lesley climbed the stairs to the second floor of the Middleton home and peered through the open door at Mo, who lay on her stomach on her bedroom floor, open books and several diagrams scattered in front of her.

Mo looked up. "You finally made it. What was so important that you had to go to the Trading Centre right away?"

Lesley opened her satchel and handed Mo the study sheets.

"I thought you were going to tell them," Mo said after glancing at the top sheet. She handed them back to Lesley.

"I tried. But they have their hearts set on me becoming an advocate." She put her satchel down and sat on the floor next to Mo, resting her back against the side of the bed. "I'm thinking maybe I'll have to do it."

"What?" Mo pushed herself up from the floor and sat cross-legged, facing Lesley. She rested her hand on Lesley's arm. "You can't do that. It's not what you want."

Lesley covered Mo's hand with her own. "I'll get used to it."

"Get used to it? You think you'll get used to it? Because this is what your life will be like." Mo picked up one of the books lying on the floor and adopted a stern expression as she held it away from her.

"Yes, Overseer, I am here today to request an amendment to Article 721. The article states that a maximum of three Rymellans may view announcements on the same public monitor at the same time. I am here to request that the word 'three' be amended to 'two.' I have prepared this four hundred-page case that supports my proposed amendment, which I will now read to you, explaining every word in detail."

Lesley chuckled. "It's not that bad."

"Just about." Mo set the book back on the floor. "And why should you get used to something you don't want to do? Why not do

something you like?"

"If I don't become an advocate, they'll be disappointed. Terribly disappointed."

"So? Les, this is the rest of your life we're talking about. You have to think of yourself. They'll get over it."

"But they're right. I do love the Law. And the Way."

"Who doesn't? But we're not all advocates. Look me in the eye and tell me you want to be an advocate."

Lesley looked directly at her. "I can't."

"That settles it, then."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes, it is," Mo replied. "Look, all you've talked about the past few months is the Military Academy. You were so excited after those cadets visited the Indoctrination Academy. I mean, you got *me* interested. I didn't know what I wanted to do. The military crossed my mind, but I wasn't interested in Interior. I forgot about Defence. Then we went on that tour of Installation 22, tried out the simulator, got to sit in an actual fighter. I was hooked! And I never would have signed up for that tour if it hadn't been for you."

Lesley smiled at the excitement in Mo's eyes. "That was fun, wasn't it?"

"Yes! And you were as excited about it as I was. What did we say afterward? Oh, I know—we'll be able to serve the Way, hands-on, without being stuck in an office all day."

"But then I left the Indoctrination Academy and found out my parents will hate me unless I become an advocate. So now what do I do?"

"You write the entrance exam for the Military Academy. They won't hate you. They might be mad at you, but they won't hate you."

Lesley grimaced. "I don't know."

"You don't even have to tell them unless you pass the exam. The exam is only the first phase, remember?" Mo squeezed Lesley's hand.

"So write the exam. Keep your options open." She looked at the satchel. "Where are those sheets again?"

Lesley flipped open her satchel and pulled them out.

"Those entrance exams are held year-round, right?"

She nodded.

"When did you say you'd take it?"

"I agreed to take this one." Lesley pointed to the listing for the college in Sector C4. "Two months away."

Mo was silent for a moment, then said, "Okay, so you can take both exams. You'll have five weeks to study for the advocacy exam after you've written the one for the Military Academy."

"Mo, that's a lot of work."

"I know. But you can probably pull it off, if you have to. So this is what you do: we'll get our exam results around two weeks after taking the exam. If you pass, you tell your parents and postpone the advocacy exam for a few months. If things work out and you're accepted into the Military Academy, you can postpone it permanently."

Lesley doubted it would be that easy. Her parents wouldn't forget about advocacy just because she'd passed the entrance exam. They'd be disappointed, perhaps angry. "I don't know."

"If you pass, you'll have to tell them. The next phase is the three-day evaluation. How will you explain being away for three days?"

She wouldn't be able to, and wouldn't have to if she declined the evaluation and gave up on pursuing the military. As Mo had said, the exam was only the first phase.

"And don't forget, the Military Academy exam isn't held year-round. So if you don't write it and then decide you want to, you'll have to wait an entire year. You'll end up a year behind me, and we wouldn't want that, would we?" Mo looped her hands around Lesley's neck. They touched foreheads. "So what do you say? You going to throw away all the hard work you've already done, or take the exam?"

Lesley took Mo's face in her hands and kissed her. What would she do without her? "I'll take the exam. But I don't know what I'll do if I pass."

"That's fine. One step at a time." Mo grinned and pulled away. "So let's get back to studying, before we get caught up in doing other things."

Lesley let go of Mo's hand, got down on her hands and knees, and reached under the bed to drag out a knapsack.

"Did you start section seven?" Mo asked.

"Barely. I'm on page three," Lesley said, opening the knapsack and lifting out all her study material for the Military Academy entrance exam.

Mo paced outside the examination room, her agitation growing every second. Where was Les? The exam would start in ten minutes, and there was no sign of her. Les better not have changed her mind. Not showing up would sink her military career before it even started. If she missed the exam she'd registered for, she'd get a zero, and she probably wouldn't be permitted to register for it again.

Without thinking, Mo reached for her comm unit, but its holder was empty. As required, she'd surrendered it, along with her knapsack and cloak, when she'd signed in at the reception desk. "We'll provide everything you need," the clerk had said. Yeah? Well, right now, she needed her flaming girlfriend to show up. Last night, Les had said

she'd be here. What could have happened since then?

Mo stopped pacing. Maybe Les had been in an accident. She could be lying in the infirmary! Or maybe she'd lost her nerve. Mo peered into the examination room. The clock at the front read 9:52. Eight minutes. Wait— She listened to rapid footsteps, the sound drifting from a nearby corridor. Someone was coming, someone in a hurry. And whoever it was would turn the corner and come into view just . . . about . . . now.

"Where have you been?" Mo snapped when Les reached her.

Les took a few seconds to catch her breath. "Mama wanted to talk about plans for the Festival of the Way. I couldn't say, 'Sorry, I have to go, I have to take the Military Academy entrance exam.'" She glanced over her shoulder.

"Maybe you should have."

Les glanced over her shoulder again.

"Will you stop doing that? They won't pop up out of nowhere."

"I'm not used to lying to them, okay?" Les replied. "If it were you, you'd be jumpy, too."

"Karen's covering for you," Mo reminded her.

"I know, but what if they decide to visit her?"

"Les, if they wanted to visit her, they would have turned it into a family outing when you told them you were planning to see her. But Karen invited you because she wants to show her little sister around the college. She wants to introduce you to everyone, spend some time with you because she's only seen you once since the Indoctrination Academy."

"She wants no such thing! It's not even happening!"

"They think it's happening. That's all that counts."

A pained expression crossed Les's face. She rubbed her forehead. Mo reached up and touched her cheek. "It was either that, or tell them about the exam. You didn't want to tell them, so—"

"I know. I just don't feel good about lying to them, that's all."

"At least one member of your family understands what you're doing. Karen thinks it's great that you're taking the exam."

"She won't think it's so great when Mama figures out she was in on the whole thing," Les said.

"Your mama won't have to figure it out. If you pass, you'll have to tell them. About everything."

"I'll worry about that if I pass."

"You are going to try to pass, right?" Mo said, her temples pulsing. "You're not going to throw the exam?"

Les shook her head. "I'd never throw an exam. But I have to take this one step at a time."

"Well, if we don't get a move on, you won't have to tell them at

all. Come on." Mo grabbed Les's sleeve and tugged her toward the exam room.

Few empty seats remained, all near the back of the room. Les would hate that. "Over here," Mo said, pointing to two desks in the same column. "You take the one in front." At least then, Les wouldn't be right at the back.

Mo settled herself into her chair and adjusted the positions of the monitor and keyboard until she felt comfortable. Ignoring the pencil and several pieces of scratch paper on the desk for now, she read the orange letters on the screen: *MILITARY ACADEMY ENTRANCE EXAMINATION*. Where she was, and why, suddenly became real. She better not blow this. Unlike some people—she glanced at Les's back—she wasn't a natural study. But she wanted this badly. If the military accepted her, she could serve the Way, really serve the Way, without sitting in an office shuffling paper. If she failed, she didn't know what she'd do.

She had to pass. She would pass. Argamon knew she'd studied enough. And here she was, sitting in a military outpost in C2, taking what she hoped would be the first step to her future career. Okay, it wasn't military headquarters, but it was one of the larger outposts, not one of those single-room jobs.

Someone plunked himself down at the desk to her left. Good, they hadn't been the last ones to arrive. She stared at Les. Was Les as excited to be here as she was, or too busy worrying about her parents?

The door shut behind her. The proctor, who'd been sitting at the front of the room when Mo had first stuck her head in to see if Les was there, stood. A woman, presumably the person who'd closed the door, bustled to the front and stood next to him.

"Welcome to the Military Academy Entrance Examination," the proctor said. "This is the examination location for residents of Sectors C1 through C3, inclusive. Is anyone here not a resident of Sectors C1 through C3?"

Nobody raised a hand.

"Good. The examination will run from ten to noon. You will then have a one-hour break for lunch. The second part of the examination will start at one o'clock sharp and run until three. During the examination, there will be no talking. No leaving the room without permission. If you need to leave the room, raise your hand." He raised his hand in demonstration. "Wait for me or Sub-lieutenant Kent to come to you. When you've finished the examination, turn off your monitor and sit quietly. Any questions?"

Silence.

"At exactly ten, your keyboards will unlock and your monitors

will display the first page of the exam. Good luck.” He focused on the clock.

Mo glanced around the room, counting heads to keep her mind occupied. Around thirty people, but this wasn’t the only exam room. She recognized only one other person from C3. He’d graduated from the Learning Academy the previous year. What had happened in the meantime? Les was sitting as stiff as a board, facing straight ahead. Was she—

“Begin!” the proctor’s voice rang out.

Lesley finished reading a page of the study material for the advocacy exam and imagined herself ripping it to shreds. That was the second time she’d read it, but she still hadn’t absorbed anything. Studying for the Military Academy entrance exam, keeping up with her classes at the Learning Academy, and cramming for the advocacy exam had proven too much for her.

No, that wasn’t true. She rested her head on her desk, using her arms as a cushion. The truth was that the study material bored her. Yes, she loved the Way; yes, she loved the Law, but that didn’t mean she wanted to spend her life arguing over the wording of articles, or preparing cases that requested minor amendments to them. She wanted to serve the Way by protecting it against threats. The military was the best place to do that.

Her comm station beeped twice in rapid succession, announcing the arrival of a dispatch. Lesley flicked on the monitor, requested the list of new dispatches, and gulped. *Military Academy Entrance Examination Results*. Her mind raced. What if she’d passed? What if she’d failed? Because she loved her parents and wanted them to be proud of her, part of her wanted to read *We are sorry to inform you*. But in her heart, she hoped to read *We are pleased to inform you*, despite the problems that would cause. Finally telling her parents about her dream to serve the Way in the military would be a relief. Hiding part of her life from them, going along with their plans for her future when she’d rather do something else, was too much of a strain.

She glanced at her closed bedroom door. *Stop dithering*. Mama could burst in at any moment and see the dispatch list on the screen. Quickly hiding it wouldn’t work. Lesley knew she’d look guilty. She swallowed and opened the dispatch.

Her shoulders slumped as she let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She’d passed. She’d passed! But the next phase was the three-day evaluation.

The dispatch provided two prepared replies—one that confirmed her intent to proceed to the next phase and one that essentially said

she'd changed her mind and wished to be removed from the evaluation process. Without giving herself time to think, she sent the confirmation dispatch and snapped off her monitor. There, it was done. She couldn't back out—not that she wanted to.

Now came the hard part. But first she wanted to share her excitement at passing, the excitement that had clawed its way to the surface despite the dread she felt, before telling her parents subdued it. She snatched her comm unit from the desk and opened the bedroom door. Silence greeted her. Mama must still be in the study. Good.

She hurried downstairs and slipped out the front door. Her bike tempted her—she could see Mo, rather than beep her. But she'd only be further avoiding a conversation she'd already delayed too long. Plus she hadn't heard from Mo, which probably meant Mo hadn't received her results. She'd stick to her original plan.

It could also mean that Mo had failed, Lesley realized as she walked down the path leading to the entrance to the estate. That wasn't likely. Mo had studied hard, really applied herself, and had seemed optimistic after the exam.

Lesley stopped as soon as the path curved and hid the house from view. She felt a bit silly—it didn't matter if anyone saw her. She wasn't doing anything wrong; all she was doing was beeping Mo. Well, beeping Mo about her exam results, the exam her parents didn't even know she'd written because she'd lied to them about seeing Karen and had deliberately misled them into thinking she wanted to be an advocate, that was all.

She punched Mo's code into her comm unit and smiled when she heard Mo's voice. "Mo, it's me. My exam results came. I passed."

Mo whooped, but then went quiet. "I haven't received anything," she finally said.

"They probably haven't reached your name yet. You'll get the dispatch soon."

"Maybe they're notifying passes first. Maybe I failed."

"I doubt it. Remember when we talked after the exam? We answered almost every question along the same lines. So if I passed, I'm sure you passed."

"I hope so." Mo paused. "You'll have to tell them now."

Lesley sighed. "I know. Mama's home. I thought I'd tell her right after we disconnect, before Papa arrives. Then it won't be two against one."

"Too bad it's not the other way around and your papa was home."

"I know."

"Do you want me to come over?"

"No. That could make things worse. They might think you—"
"A dispatch just arrived. Just a sec." Silence, then Mo screamed,
"I passed! Les, I passed!"

Lesley grinned. "Mo, that's great."

"Did you confirm?"

"Yes."

Mo screamed again. "I just did, too. We're going to the Military Academy. We're going to the flaming Military Academy!"

"What's all the commotion?" Lesley heard Susan say.

"I passed the entrance exam, Mama." Mo's voice was fainter than before; she must have turned away from her comm station.

"That's wonderful! We have to celebrate. Michael! Michael, come here," Susan shouted. "Mo passed her exam."

"Les, beep me after you've—"

Her papa's voice drowned out the rest of her sentence. "I knew you'd pass," he said. "Come on, we'll all go out for supper."

"Yeah, okay, okay," Mo said. "Oh, Les passed, too."

"Lesley?" Susan said. "I thought she was studying for the advocacy exam."

"She is. She, um, hasn't decided exactly what she wants to do yet. But she's glad she passed."

"She should be. I'll beep Adelaide. We can all go out together."

"No!" Mo shouted. "She hasn't told them. That she passed. Her papa isn't home yet."

"I was planning to tell them over supper," Lesley said, her hand clenched around her comm unit. What was Mo thinking?

"You could tell them as soon as your papa gets home," Susan suggested.

"Mama, let her do it the way she wants to," Mo said. "I'm starved. I want to go now."

"Well, if you want to."

"I do."

"Okay. If that's what you want."

"I'll round up the boys," Michael said.

"Beep me later," Mo said to Lesley, then whispered, "Beep me sooner if you need to. Good luck." She terminated the connection.

Lesley slid her comm unit into its holder and started walking back to the house. Somehow, she doubted her parents would react the way Mo's had. They definitely would not be going out for a celebratory supper. Perhaps she should beep Karen, ask her if she could visit within the next few days and hold off on telling her parents until then? No. Not only would that be unfair to Karen, but Susan was Mama's closest friend. It couldn't wait. Mo had forced the issue by telling her parents. Lesley couldn't blame her—Mo knew her too well.

She paused on the doorstep, then entered the house. Beyond the open study door, Mama sat at her desk, head down, scribbling on a notepad. Mama hated using a comm station to make notes. She only used a station when she was ready to write the case she'd present to the overseer. Lesley hesitated outside the door. How many times had she run to the study when she'd scraped her knee, had an argument with Karen or Jason, or needed help with her homework? The study, the familiar sight of her parents' heads bent over their desks, was usually comforting, reassuring. But not today.

"Mama?" she said, tapping at the door.

"What do you want?" Mama asked, without looking up.

"I want to talk to you about something."

"If it's about the exam, I don't have time to help you right now."

Mama stopped writing, flipped over the paper, and continued to write on the other side. "Ask your papa when he gets home."

"I don't need help," Lesley said, stepping into the room and standing directly in front of Mama's desk.

"Well, what is it, then?"

She might as well get to the point. "I wrote the entrance exam for the Military Academy."

Mama stopped writing and looked up. "What?"

"I wrote the entrance exam for the Military Academy."

"When? I don't rem—" Mama's eyes narrowed. "The exam was the same day you were with Karen. You told us you'd decided on that day because Mo would be tied up most of the day at the exam."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry." Mama stared at her.

"I tried to tell you. But you wouldn't listen, neither of you. You —"

"Don't you dare blame your papa and me!" Mama shouted, making Lesley jump. "You lied to us."

"I—I know. Because I knew you'd be disappointed. But it's what I want to do, Mama. I don't want to be an advocate. I want to serve in the military."

"Why? You're bright. You could do anything. Why waste yourself on the military?"

"What's wrong with the military? It serves the Way. It defends the Way."

"Of course it does. But it's for those who don't have any initiative. Who don't want to think. Who can't serve the Way in a more . . . stimulating capacity." To Lesley's surprise, Mama smiled and leaned forward, clasping her hands on top of the desk. "Don't stand there looking petrified. Sit down. So you want to serve in the military. Fine. Let's talk about it."

Lesley lowered herself into the chair next to Mama's desk. She sat stiffly, uneasy about Mama's sudden mood change.

"Now, I want you to listen to me," Mama said. "You're young. I can see how the idea of walking around in an orange cloak seems exciting to you. Perhaps you think wearing an orange cloak gives you power. It doesn't. Everyone in an orange cloak is doing exactly what they're told to do. They never think. They don't have to. They're always told. Thompsons are thinkers. We're leaders. We aren't followers. The military is for followers. You won't like it. You'll be bored."

Well, she'd definitely be bored if she became an advocate. "I might be bored," she allowed.

"No, you *will* be bored. Once the novelty wears off, you'll regret not entering the advocacy program. You'll also regret all the time you wasted. You don't want to graduate from college when you're thirty. Listen to me. I don't want you to ruin your life."

"Mo's parents don't think she's ruining her life."

Mama rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "Now, you know I love the Middletons. They're dear, dear friends, especially Susan. But they're not . . . ambitious. They're happy sewing clothes and cutting people's hair. Having Mo at the Military Academy will be a step up for them."

Lesley took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "Susan's an indoctrinator."

"Yes, well, I said the Middletons, but all of them except Susan have Anderson blood. From what I know, the Andersons aren't exactly driven. The Middletons have a bit more initiative. Michael Joined into that estate."

"I know, but—"

"And yes, she's an indoctrinator. But she ended up with a master tailor. The Chosen Council selected an advocate for me. That should tell you something."

"Michael's planning to run for the government."

"Michael's been planning to run for the government for years," Mama said, dismissing the notion with a wave of her hand. "He'll still be planning to run for the government when you're fifty. As I said, I love the Middletons. They're good neighbours. But I want more for my children than Susan does. Susan wants everyone to be happy. That's all well and good, but I want more. I want you to live up to your potential. You won't do that in the military."

"Mama, I won't be happy being an advocate."

"You don't know that. You should give it a chance."

"Why shouldn't I give the military a chance?"

"Are you listening?" Mama leaned forward, jabbing her finger

against her desk for emphasis. "Because the military won't challenge you. There are better ways for someone like you to serve the Way. Leave the military to those with fewer options." She sighed and sat back. "Now, I'm not pleased that you lied to us, and I'll certainly have a talk with your papa about it, including Karen's role. But at least you finally told the truth. Susan said that if Mo passes, she'll have to undergo another phase, some evaluation step. Just decline that step. I've seen you studying for the advocacy exam. You have been studying, right, not just pretending?"

"Yes, but—"

"Good. Continue with your studies. Once you start the advocacy program, you'll forget all about the military."

Lesley shook her head. "It's too late."

"What do you mean, it's too late?"

"I passed the entrance exam."

Mama shrugged. "So you passed. Just decline the next step."

Lesley stared at her.

"What?" Mama's face fell. "Oh, you haven't. Oh, Lesley! Why didn't you talk to us first?"

"Because I knew you'd react badly."

"Well, that's one thing you got right." Mama pursed her lips. "But you haven't been accepted into the Military Academy yet. What's the next step? When is it? What do you have to do? I vaguely remember Susan talking about it, but I wasn't paying attention. I didn't think I had to."

"It's a three-day evaluation at the Military Academy in C6. At the end, you find out if you'll be admitted to the academy."

"Ah, so there's still time, then. When do you have to go?"

"In three weeks."

"And you'll write the advocacy exam in two," Mama said, brightening. "It would be perfectly reasonable to decline your acceptance into the Military Academy because you've decided to pursue advocacy instead. You can say that you couldn't make up your mind and so you decided to write both exams, but since then, you've settled on advocacy. Make it sound good. Tell them it was close, that the military would have been a worthy career and it was a difficult choice."

Lesley couldn't believe her ears. "But it's not true! If I'm accepted, I'm not turning it down, Mama. I can't."

"Of course you can."

"No, I can't. I don't even want to write the advocacy exam. I'm tired. I've been studying non-stop for exams for weeks now, and trying to keep up with my homework at the same time. And now I have to prepare for the evaluation. I can't do everything."

"You have to write the advocacy exam," Mama said, her voice firm.

"Why? There's no point. Even if I pass, I won't enter the advocacy program. I don't want to. What's so bad about the military? The military protects and defends the Way. Can't you say even one positive thing about it?"

"It's not the military per se, Lesley. It's *you* being in the military that I don't like." The clock on the wall behind Mama chimed. Mama waited until it had finished announcing six o'clock before continuing. "But Interior does uphold the Law and the Tradition. That means you'll have to keep up with every amendment. And I guess having a solid grasp of how the Way is applied in practical terms could serve an advocate well. Given that, you won't be too far behind when you finally admit you're bored and switch to the advocacy program. If you're not stubborn and proud, you'll only waste a few months before you get back on track."

Lesley gripped the arms of her chair.

Mama stared at her. "What? You asked me to say something positive. I'm trying!"

"I know. It's just that . . . I'm not planning to join Interior. I'm hoping to join Defence."

"Defence?" Mama's mouth tightened. "Wait a minute. What exactly are you hoping to do in Defence?"

Lesley braced herself for the inevitable explosion. "Be a fighter pilot."

Mama shot out of her chair and leaned over the desk, her eyes ablaze. "You stupid girl! Don't you have any sense at all? You're throwing your life away because of Mo. Mo isn't your Chosen. The relationship won't last. It can't. Following her to the Military Academy is pointless."

"I'm not following her. I want to be a fighter pilot. I'm the one who got Mo interested, not the other way around."

"Sure you are."

"I am!"

"Mo's been talking about being a fighter pilot for months. You've been talking about it for thirty seconds. But you know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe you'd be better off being a fighter pilot. Advocates think." Mama tapped her temples. "They're capable of rational thought. You obviously aren't."

"I'm not stupid."

"Throwing your life away because of Mo? I'd call that stupid. Because that's what you're doing. You just can't see it."

"I told you, it's not because of Mo."

"You can't be sure of that, Lesley."

Yes, she could. Mo hadn't given a second's thought to the military or flying until Lesley had persuaded her to sign up for the tour at the military installation.

"But nothing I say will change your mind. Common sense can't compete with teenage hormones. So go ahead." Mama thrust out her hands. "Throw your life away. Go into the military. It's probably for the best. Your papa and I would have loved another advocate in the family, but I'm starting to see that you would have disappointed us. At least we'll have Karen and Jason to talk about when people ask. At least that's something. Now get upstairs and do your homework."

"Mama—"

"Go!"

Lesley rose from the chair and turned toward the door.

"Oh, and forget about seeing Mo later," Mama said.

She tensed.

"I haven't forgotten that you lied to us, and when I tell your papa, he'll have something to say about it, too. I don't think you'll be seeing Mo outside of class for a while."

"I wasn't planning to see Mo later anyway," Lesley said without turning to face Mama. "She's out celebrating her exam results with her family."

"Well, isn't that nice. I'll tell you what. When you do something worth celebrating, we'll go out, too. But that hasn't happened yet. Now go!"

Lesley left the room and headed for the stairs, fighting tears. The conversation had gone much worse than she'd expected. She'd not only disappointed Mama, *she* was a disappointment. She'd failed to live up to the Thompson name and to her parents' expectations. Was it worth it? Should she do what Mama had suggested—take the advocacy exam and decline the invitation to enroll in the Military Academy if she passed the evaluation?

She reached her room and snapped on her station monitor to reread the military's dispatch. Had it mentioned a procedure for backing out of the evaluation after accidentally confirming? She didn't think so, but she sat at her desk and reread the dispatch anyway.

Once again, excitement managed to burst through her despair. She didn't want to back out; she wanted to serve in the military. Not following through would only lead to a regret she'd carry with her for the rest of her life. Every time she saw an orange cloak, she'd cringe, reminded of her lack of courage. It came down to being a failure to her parents or a failure to herself. The former would be easier to live with. Selfish, but true.

Her bedroom was at the front of the house. She heard the faint thump of the front door closing, then muffled voices. Mama's rose and

fell, while Papa's remained calm—when Papa had a chance to speak. The voices stopped. Papa was climbing the stairs, his heavy footsteps growing louder. A sharp knock at the door, then Papa swung it open and stepped into the room without waiting for an invitation.

He closed the door behind him and stood with his arms crossed. "So, you're determined to enter the military. I'm a little confused. You seem to enjoy our weekly discussions. You can be quite animated when defending your point of view."

"I do enjoy them." Lesley said. "They're one of my favourite times of the week."

"So what's wrong with advocacy?"

"Nothing."

"Then why the military?"

"I want to protect the Way. Defend it."

"Advocates protect the Way, with the help of the overseers. We ensure that every amendment preserves its spirit," he said, tapping his fingers against his arms.

"I understand that, and I know it's important. But it's not how I want to protect it. I want to protect it from threats. Concrete threats, not theoretical ones."

"I see. And you've thought about this?"

"I have, Papa, a lot."

"Then why haven't you mentioned it before? Why did you lie to us?"

He was trying hard to hide his disappointment, but she could hear it in his voice. "I tried to tell you. But every time I mentioned the military, you dismissed it."

"Perhaps if you'd tried 'I'd like to join the military,' we wouldn't have."

"You still would have tried to talk me out of it."

Papa was silent for a moment, then said, "Probably."

"That's why I had to write the exam without telling you. If I'd told you, you would have been upset and I wouldn't have written the exam. Same with moving to the evaluation phase. If I'd told you before confirming, I might have ended up backing out. But I don't want to back out, Papa. It's what I want."

"Are you sure it's what you want and not what Mo wants? Because your mama's right. If you're doing this because of Mo, you're being foolish."

"It's what I want. One of the reasons Mo and I like each other is because we tend to be interested in the same things. Why can't anyone understand that? You and Mama are both advocates."

"Me and your mama are Chosens," he said sharply. "And we were both advocates when we met. You and Mo can't last. You know

that. So make sure it's what you want, Lesley. Because in a few years, you won't want to be working with Mo. If she's the only attraction, you're making a huge mistake."

"It's what I want."

"Why Defence and not Interior?" Papa asked. "At least in Interior you'd be directly applying the Law and Tradition."

Lesley knew he wanted a logical answer, one that would help him understand the connection between her love of the Law and her choice of Defence. But there wasn't one. How could she explain the visceral reaction she'd had when she'd sat in a fighter's pilot seat and knew she wanted to learn how to fly? How could she make him understand her fascination when the guest speaker had provided a brief and simplistic overview of combat tactics, and the excitement she'd felt at the thought of belonging to a group of Rymellans working as a team to protect the Way, dependent on each other for their very lives? Would he understand if she told him that preserving the spirit of the Way was pointless if nobody was there to ensure that a species didn't take it away through hostile action, or would he think she was saying that advocates weren't important? Yes, Interior also protected the Way, by ensuring that Rymellans themselves didn't threaten it, but she wouldn't learn how to fly a fighter in Interior.

"It's hard for me to explain why, Papa," she said. "I wish I could tell you something that obviously connects studying the Law and Tradition with Defence, but I can't. I do love studying the Way, and maybe someday I'll end up in Interior. But right now, Defence appeals to me more."

"And you're sure that's not because of Mo?"

"Yes."

He looked as if he were going to question her response, but said instead, "What about the advocacy exam? Your mama says you don't want to write it."

"I have to start preparing for my evaluation at the Military Academy. And I have to keep up with my homework. My Learning Academy record has to be good, no matter what I decide to do. I don't have time to study for the advocacy exam and to keep up with everything else." Plus, the study material was putting her to sleep, but it was probably best not to mention that.

"Well, you're right." He dropped his arms. "If you've decided that serving in the military is what you want to do, then you have to give it your all."

"Does that mean you approve?" she asked, surprise making her voice sound higher than usual.

"I don't seem to have much choice. I'm disappointed, but it's your decision. If you're making a mistake, you'll face the

consequences. And isn't that the Way? Responsibility, accountability?"

She nodded. "Mama's sure I'm making a mistake." Mama thought she was a failure.

"Your mama wants what's best for you. Maybe that'll turn out to be the military. We'll see. I'm willing to suspend my judgment and see what happens." Papa frowned. "But I won't excuse your dishonesty, or Karen's. No article of the Law dictates that you have to tell your parents the truth, but several dictate that you must always tell the military the truth. I think it would be appropriate for you to study one of them. Tomorrow, I'll bring home a few cases pertaining to Article 882. After you've read them, you can discuss them with me and your mama." He held up his hand. "And before you tell me you already have a lot to do, since you won't be leaving the house for a few weeks, except to go to the Learning Academy, you should be able to squeeze it in."

"A few weeks?" Lesley exclaimed.

"At least until you've undergone your evaluation at the Military Academy. You said you need to prepare. Well, now you'll have lots of time to do so."

Lesley swallowed. "Can friends visit?"

"No, Mo can't visit. You can see her at school. And no, you can't beep her, either."

"She might beep me."

"Send her a dispatch explaining the rules, all right? Or would you rather I send it?"

She hid her face behind her hands. "No, no, I'll send it."

"Good. Do it now, and then come down for supper." Without another word, he left the room.

Mo pointed toward the window in the train station waiting area. "Here she comes."

Mama shielded her eyes and looked out. "She's alone."

"Or course she's alone," Papa muttered. "Adelaide and Alan didn't want to lower themselves by coming to see her off."

"Oh, hush," Mama said. "Though you're probably right."

"I know I'm right. I can't believe the fuss they kicked up. You'd think they'd be pleased, but no—joining the military isn't good enough for their precious children."

"They want what's best for Lesley, that's all."

"What's wrong with the military?"

"Nothing. But they were hoping—"

"Will you two please stop?" Mo said. "Les doesn't need to hear this." And Mo was sick of it, too. That was all they'd talked about for

the past three weeks, ever since Adelaide had marched into the living room unannounced and insisted that Mo must have persuaded Lesley to give up on advocacy. Relations between the two families had never been as tense as they'd been since then, though Mama and Adelaide were showing signs of putting the rift behind them.

"Please don't say anything," Mo said to her parents as Les passed through the station entrance. Then she smiled at Les. "You made it. Train leaves in ten minutes."

Les didn't return Mo's smile, but her face softened. She nodded a greeting toward Mo's mama and papa.

"Your parents not with you?" Mama said.

Mo wanted to groan. *Flaming parents!* They ordered her around and expected her to do everything they said, but ask them to do one simple thing . . .

"No." Les studied her shoulder and started to tighten one of her knapsack's straps.

"I think we should go down to the platform," Mo said before her parents could say anything else stupid.

Les looked up. "I still have to pay." She pulled out her comm unit and wandered over to a nearby trade station.

"I'll carry your bag," Papa said to Mo, lifting it off the floor.

"No, I'll take it. Please don't come down to the platform with us," Mo said.

Mama pinched Mo's cheeks. "Will we embarrass you?" Papa dropped Mo's bag back to the floor.

She pulled Mama's hands away. "Stop it."

Mama grinned and enveloped Mo in a hug. "Good luck." She pulled away and held Mo at arm's length. "Next time I see you, I'll be congratulating you."

"I hope so."

"We will be," Papa said, putting his arm around Mo's shoulders and squeezing her. He kissed her forehead. "See you in a few days. You can beep us, you know."

"I know."

"Bye, Lesley," Mama called. "Good luck." Les looked over her shoulder and waved. Papa waved in return. "It's a shame," Mama said as she and Papa walked away.

"I bet they're hoping she fails," Papa said.

Mo willed them to walk faster and keep their voices down. She jumped when Les tapped her shoulder and said, "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." Mo wanted to hug her, but Les seemed distant and preoccupied. Maybe she'd relax once they were on the train, putting distance between themselves and her parents.

"Is that your bag?" Les asked, pointing. In response, Mo hefted

her bag from the floor and struggled to get her arms through its straps. "It's almost as big as you," Les said. "We're going for three days, not three weeks."

"Well, you never know what might happen. I want to be prepared." Mo grunted as the left strap finally slipped over her shoulder. "The last thing I want to do is fail the evaluation because my clothes are wet or dirty." Les opened her mouth, but then closed it. "Anyway, let's go." Mo walked toward the steps that led down to the platform. The bag weighed a ton, but she was determined not to let it slow her down.

"Do you want me to carry it?" Les asked from behind her.

"No, I don't," Mo said, though she hung onto the railing and moved carefully down the stairs. If she lost her balance, she'd be at the mercy of wherever the bag wanted to take her.

The train pulled into the station shortly after they reached the platform. They boarded, stowed their bags, and settled into two empty seats near the rear of the car. "Finally we get to spend some time together," Mo said, snuggling against Les. "I'm sick of snatching a minute here and there."

Les stiffened. "We're not going on holiday."

Mo's stomach sank. Hadn't Les missed her at all? "I know that. But this is the first time in three weeks that we've even talked to each other outside the Learning Academy. It wouldn't have been so bad if you'd carried on using our bags to exchange notes. Or walked with me to and from the academy."

"They were clear that I wasn't to walk with you. And as far as the bags go, I was worried they might check my bag when I got home. I didn't want to risk it. They're upset enough as it is."

"I know it's been rough," Mo said, rubbing Les's arm. "And I know I'm being selfish. It's just that I missed you. A lot." She held her breath. *Please say you missed me, Les. Please!*

Les grabbed Mo's hand and held it still. Mo tensed, half expecting Les to pull her arm away, but she relaxed when Les's fingers curled around hers. "I'm sorry," Les said. "I missed you, too. And I should be happy to be with you and excited that we're going to the Military Academy. But I can't be. Not when I know my parents wish I wasn't doing it. I don't mean seeing you," she said, giving Mo a quick smile. "I mean going through with the evaluation."

"Are you sure? They're not thrilled with me right now."

"They're getting over that. I stole a peek at the seating plan for the Festival of the Way supper. Mama's seating us next to each other. She wouldn't do that if she was still mad at you. It's me they're mad at."

"You're not doing anything wrong."

"I know that up here," Les said, touching her forehead with her free hand, "but it's hard to feel good about it."

A number of responses ran through Mo's mind. *You're doing what's right for you. They'll come around. You'd only hate them if you put your dreams aside for theirs.* But nothing she said would matter. "It would be dumb to change your mind now, on the way to the evaluation," she said, opting to focus on the pragmatic.

"Oh, I don't want to," Les said. "I wish I could get excited about it, that's all."

The announcement system crackled to life. "The train will depart in one minute. Please clear the doors."

Mo eyed the monitor fitted into the back of the seat directly in front of hers, but decided not to read the latest announcements or military bulletins. The train ride could be the last chance to relax for the next three days. As soon as the doors closed, she leaned her head against Les's arm. The train started to move. Station lights whipped by, then it looked as if night had abruptly fallen. Mo closed her eyes. There wouldn't be much to see for the next hour or so except tunnel walls and train stations, and all the stations looked the same.

She lifted her head when Les nudged her arm. "What?"

"We're almost there."

"Already!" She must have dozed off. "Sorry, it took me a while to fall asleep last night. Excitement, I guess." And nerves.

Les waved away Mo's apology. "I didn't feel like talking anyway."

The train pulled into the station. "Military Academy, Sector C6," the announcement system reported.

When they stepped onto the platform, Mo looked in dismay at the flight of stairs leading to the station's waiting area. There must be four times as many steps as there were in the station they'd left. Suddenly the weight was removed from her back. She turned around.

Les shrugged into Mo's bag and held out her own. "Here."

"You don't have to," Mo said, trying not to look too eager to accept Les's bag.

"I know."

Mo slipped Les's bag onto her back. "Thanks."

As they ascended the stairs, Mo's excitement grew at the sight of military personnel heading down to the platform in their orange cloaks. That could be her in a few months! Well, no; cadets didn't have orange cloaks, they had light blue ones, but still.

A *Registration for Evaluation* sign in the waiting area pointed them to one of the many station exits. They crossed a courtyard and entered a three-storey brick building where four lines had formed in the lobby before a rectangular table. The hum of conversation filled the air. From what Mo could see, four of the military behind the table

registered the arrivals, while a fifth answered questions from those who had already received their registration packet. The lines were moving quickly, with no clear winner, so she and Les joined the nearest one.

Mo glanced around, wondering if she'd recognize anyone. A girl in the next line seemed to be staring at her. No, at Les. Mo bristled when the girl raised an appraising eyebrow. Oh, great. They'd been here five flaming minutes and already someone was eyeing Les up and down. She glared at the airhead and slipped her hand into Les's. Les stared toward the front of the line, oblivious.

"Comm unit," a man barked.

"Oh, sure," Mo said, bewildered. They'd already reached the table. She let go of Les's hand, quickly slipped her comm unit from its holder, and handed it to him.

He slid a thin black rod down the comm unit's side and looked at the monitor in front of him. "All right, Middleton. You're in Barracks 22, Bed 6. You'll find three jumpsuits folded at the end of the bed. Wear a jumpsuit to all your sessions and appointments."

Now that Mo was at the table, she could see the boxes of envelopes on another table against the back wall. He spun his chair around, rolled forward, and leafed through a box. "Here we are." He rolled back and handed the envelope to her. "All the information you need is in there, including a map of the academy and the rules that apply to the evaluation. Read the rules carefully. Any violation of the rules will result in the automatic failure of your evaluation. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. Proceed to your barracks." He looked past her. "Comm unit," he barked.

Mo moved aside and decided to wait for Les in the courtyard. Outside, she slipped the information from the envelope and found the itinerary. Nothing until supper, then a two-hour orientation session. *This is as much your opportunity to evaluate us as it is ours to evaluate you*, the preamble to the itinerary stated. Yeah, sure. Somehow she doubted the military would be crushed if it failed her evaluation and she decided not to join after all.

She read the next day's schedule—*06:00: morning alarm. 06:15: breakfast*—and her eyes bulged. *What's 06:00? Six o'clock in the morning?* They better not expect her to be coherent.

A shadow fell across the papers. "What barracks are you in?" Les asked.

"Twenty-two."

"I'm in nineteen."

"Too bad."

"Maybe it's better that way."
"Maybe. Did you see what time we have to be up? Six o'clock!"
Les grinned. "Did you think you were going to lie around all day?"
"Well, no. But six o'clock?"
"You'll cope." Les patted Mo's arm. "Come on. Let's find our barracks and get changed."
"Don't forget to give me my bag," Mo said.
"Believe me, I won't." Les shot out in front of Mo, then turned around and spread her arms. "Can you believe it? We're at the Military Academy!"
Mo smiled, pleased to see Les excited, so excited that Mo could hardly keep up with her as they went in search of their beds for the next three nights.

Lesley left the classroom and sat in a nearby lounge area, grateful for the breather. The day had been a whirlwind, a rush to get from one session or appointment to another. She'd undergone a rigorous medical examination, written an essay about why she wanted to join the military, spent two hours in conversation with a counsellor, which she guessed had actually been a psychological evaluation, and had just finished writing an exam. A surprise exam, one the lecturer had sprung on them immediately after his talk about past military campaigns. It hadn't been difficult, but it would separate those who'd prepared for the evaluation from those who hadn't. Not all the answers had been covered during the lecture.

She glanced at the classroom door. Mo was still inside, and she must be exhausted—she'd arrived on time for breakfast, but with her eyes barely open. Given the pace since then, she probably felt dead on her feet, and the day wasn't over yet. Supper was next on the agenda. After that, a workshop. The itinerary offered no details beyond the workshop title: Group Dynamics. Forcing everyone to work together at the end of a long, busy day was almost cruel, but they were all there to be evaluated, after all. Fortunately the workshop would end at nine, and nothing was scheduled afterward. Lesley knew what she'd do—go straight to the barracks and get into bed. Tomorrow's agenda was as packed as today's.

The classroom door opened. She hoped to see Mo, but a short, slender young man with cropped brown hair stepped into the corridor. He caught her eye and walked toward her. "Taking a short break before heading to the mess hall?" he asked.

"I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh, right, your friend. With the black hair. You always sit

together.”

She was surprised someone had noticed.

“I’m David. David Bryson.”

“Lesley Thompson.”

He sat in the chair closest to hers. “I’ve hardly had time to breathe all day.”

“I know what you mean,” she said, trying to look past him without being obvious.

“At least we finish up at nine.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll need to wind down before trying to sleep,” he said, leaning forward. “I was thinking of walking around the academy grounds. Maybe you’d like to go for a quiet stroll, just me and you? I’m sure your friend can find something else to do.”

She stifled an angry retort. “I’m same-oriented.”

He flushed and drew back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—I mean, I should have—I guess you and your friend, you’re, um . . . ”

Lesley nodded.

“I’m usually not this dense or rude—honest!—but I’m operating on four hours of sleep.”

“Only four?”

“I don’t sleep well in strange beds. Look, I really am sorry. I should have realized.”

“You couldn’t have known we were more than close friends,” she said, feeling some sympathy for him. He seemed genuinely contrite.

“Maybe not, but I could have asked before making a fool of myself.”

“I guess it’s safe to assume you’re diff-oriented.”

David chuckled.

The classroom door opened again. Mo, this time. Lesley waved; Mo immediately came over, shaking her head. “That was completely unfair, giving an exam like that. I hope I didn’t write anything stupid. Oh, hi,” she said, noticing David.

“Mo, this is David Bryson,” Lesley said. “David, Mo Middleton.”

They nodded to each other. “Mo must be short for something,” David said.

“Ramona. But nobody ever calls me that.”

Lesley inwardly smiled. If the stories were true, she was responsible for Mo’s nickname. *When you started talking, you couldn’t pronounce Ramona. You called her Mo. And that’s what everyone else started calling her, too. For some reason, it stuck,* Mama had said, an explanation Mo’s parents had corroborated.

David stood. “Well, I’d better get something to eat. We seem to be in the same group, so I guess I’ll see you at the workshop later.

Nice meeting both of you."

"If you're going to the mess hall, we might as well go together," Lesley said. He seemed pleasant enough, and it wasn't as if she and Mo would have had a quiet, romantic supper in the crowded, noisy mess hall. Everyone sat at long tables, with very little elbow room and zero privacy. On top of that, getting to know some of the other candidates was probably a good idea. Perhaps the military was evaluating everyone's behaviour between sessions, too. She and Mo wouldn't want to appear unsociable.

"Yeah, why not?" Mo said. "If we're all accepted, we could end up seeing a lot of each other." She paused. "I hope I did okay on the exam. I wasn't sure about question six."

David nodded. "That was a tricky one."

"What did you both put?" Mo asked.

They compared answers on their way to the mess hall and while they pushed their trays along the rail, adding dishes to them. By the time they sat down at a table occupied by other Rymellans in jumpsuits, Mo seemed more confident that she'd passed the exam. "Most of my answers match yours," she said. "And I'm pretty good at, um, making it sound like I know more about something than I do."

Lesley opened her mouth to tease Mo, but Mo forestalled her with a quick, "And no comment from you."

David grinned. "So where are you from?" he asked as he spread butter on a bread roll. "I'm from B8."

"C3," Lesley said.

His eyebrows drew together. "C3? What are you doing here?"

Lesley's jaw clenched. Not him, too. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're probably both from old families with connections. You could do anything."

"What's wrong with the military?" Mo asked. She bit into a vegetable pie and made a face. "Military food," she muttered, as if offering an answer to her question.

"Nothing. I'm just surprised it's your first choice."

"Isn't it your first choice?" Lesley said. "There's nothing stopping you from doing anything else."

"I guess not. But I'm still surprised about you two. I haven't met many military from C3."

"You know a lot of military?" Lesley asked.

David took his time chewing a mouthful of food before replying. "My papa's a lieutenant commander." He smiled sheepishly.

Lesley snorted. "You're better connected than we are." She picked up her knife and fork and glanced at the large clock over the entrance to the hall. They had to be at the workshop in twenty-five minutes and she hadn't touched her food. Mo could do the talking from

now on.

"I don't know any military," Mo said. "I mean, I know a few faces and names, the ones that patrol the estate, mainly, but that's it. Is your papa in Defence or Interior?"

"Defence."

"We want to join Defence. And we want to try for the fighter pilot program."

His eyes widened. "Me too! I want to be a fighter pilot, too. I always knew I wanted to join the military, but I wasn't sure which division. My papa said it was up to me. Then I toured an installation when I was at the Indoctrination Academy, and that's when I knew."

"The same thing happened to us," Mo said, awe in her voice.

David looked at Lesley. "You'll be tall for a pilot."

"Really?"

"Papa tells me they're usually short."

"I'll fit right in, then," Mo said, grinning. "This is great! It's great talking to someone who wants the same thing we do."

Lesley, her mouth full, nodded. It was certainly more enjoyable than talking to her parents.

"But we better hurry up and finish supper," Mo added. "It'll take us ten minutes to walk to the workshop."

They put their conversation on hold and focused on eating. David finished first. He leaned back in his chair and pulled his itinerary from a pocket in the leg of his jumpsuit. "Did you see we have a session with a commander tomorrow?" he asked, unfolding and smoothing the itinerary and then pointing at a line on the second page. "But there's no description of what the session's about."

Mo shrugged. "Probably executions."

"Single file," the commander shouted. "Everyone move in and form a circle around the clearing. Face the clearing, please."

Lesley followed the Rymellan in front of her and stopped when he stopped. She turned toward the dirt clearing. Mo had been right. The commander had arrived at the classroom and ordered them to line up and follow him to this execution site. She glanced at Mo, now standing on her left. David, next to Mo, looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

"Face me," the commander shouted as the tail end of the line filed into the site.

Lesley surveyed the clearing. There weren't enough aspiring recruits to fully ring the site. A military stood in the gap, near a metal pole at the clearing's southernmost edge. The commander and another military remained at the centre of the clearing. If an actual execution

were about to take place, military would ring the site, not potential cadets, and a criminal would be secured to the pole. Lesley had learned the details during her Level Four at the Indoctrination Academy.

The commander signaled for silence by raising his hand. The few Rymellans who'd been whispering immediately stopped. "I am Commander Morton." He turned to his left. "This is Lieutenant Commander Eckles, and near the pole is Lieutenant Danson. Before we begin, let's say the *Words Every Rymellan Knows*."

Lesley reached for Mo's hand and the hand of the Rymellan on her right. Morton and Eckles walked to Danson and held out their hands. When the circle was complete, Morton nodded. Everyone spoke the Words. "Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way!" They all let go of their neighbours' hands and applauded.

Another difference, Lesley thought. Before an execution, the circle would be incomplete. It would break at the criminal, the only time Rymellans said the Words without completing a circle. After the execution, those present would complete the circle and say the Words again.

Morton returned to the centre. "Now, as you can see, we're standing in an execution site. I thought I'd start our session on the Interior Division here, to remind everyone that Defence isn't the only military division that defends the Way.

"All Rymellans preserve the Way by observing its articles. The Way is the foundation of Rymellan society, and many of us dedicate our lives to its service, notably our overseers, advocates, indoctrinators, counsellors, the military, and, of course, the Chosen Council. We all support each other. We all want to follow the Way.

"It seems unbelievable that a Rymellan would fall from the Way, but some do. And when they do, they end up here." He pointed at the pole. "Death to those who disobey. The Interior Division ensures that no Rymellan will ever harm the Way. Because no Rymellan is more important than the Way."

A chorus of agreement rose from the group. Lesley nodded and added her "yes" to the many others.

"The gravest threat the Way has ever faced in recent history didn't come from another species. It didn't come from out there somewhere." Morton pointed above his head, then to the ground. "It originated right here, on Rymellan soil. Rymellans threatened the Way. And it happened just three years ago, an event known as . . . ?" He looked to the group to complete his sentence.

"The Adams Incident," the group said in unison.

"That's right. The Adams Incident. The worst case Interior—" A loud gasp drowned out his next word. He spun to his left.

Lesley leaned forward to see what was going on. Three Rymellans appeared agitated, furiously whispering to each other.

"What's the problem?" Morton shouted.

"He said something awful," said one of the three, pointing at the boy next to her. Lesley recognized him. He'd introduced himself to her and Mo on the first day of the evaluation, at the mess hall. Tom Elliott.

"I heard it, too," said the Rymellan to Elliott's left.

"Heard what? What did you say?" Morton asked.

"Nothing. I didn't mean anything," Elliott said, his face ashen.

Morton marched over to him. "What did you say?" he shouted into Elliott's face.

Everyone leaned forward for a better view. Lesley shifted position slightly, using her height to her advantage.

"I just—I said I wondered if the Adamses and the other two . . . I wondered if they were all secured to the pole together."

The girl shook her head. "That's not all he said. He also said that if they were, they probably enjoyed it."

More gasps.

"Silence!" Morton shouted.

"It was a joke. It was just a joke!" Elliott shrieked.

Morton reddened. "Two Chosens violate their Chosen bond, four Rymellans executed, the worst threat to the Way anyone can remember, and you're joking about it?"

"I'm sor—"

"I wasn't planning to offer a demonstration today, but now it looks like I will be." Morton straightened and motioned to Danson and Eckles. "Secure him to the pole."

"What?" Elliott drew back, his eyes widening.

Morton grabbed Elliott's arm and pulled him into the clearing.

"No, please. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!" Elliott wailed.

Danson and Eckles took over from Morton, each taking one of Elliott's arms. They started to haul him toward the pole, but he resisted, pulling back and digging his heels into the ground. "It was just a joke. Please. Please don't—" His voice choked off.

Behind them, Morton shoved him forward. "Move!"

Elliott's head snapped back; he lost his balance and hung limp between Danson and Eckles as they dragged him toward the pole, his toes leaving two parallel trails in the soil.

"I'll beep for a physician and load my stick," Morton said. "And you will all remain silent. Anyone who speaks will be next." He strode from the clearing.

Elliott sobbed as Danson and Eckles forced his back against the pole and secured him to it using metal restraints Eckles pulled from a box at the pole's base. "Please," he managed to say. "Please, don't do this to me." He dropped his head and wept.

A metallic ringing filled the air. Lesley didn't understand where it was coming from. Bells? No, but it had a rhythm to it. It— She swallowed. Elliott was shaking, causing the restraints to vibrate against the pole. She felt Mo's fingers brush hers and squeezed them, but didn't dare look at her.

Morton returned and lifted his stick in the air. "The physician is on his way," he announced.

Lesley looked at the stick in disbelief. He wasn't actually going to do it, was he?

"What's your name?" Morton shouted at Elliott. When the only reply he received was a whimper, he grabbed Elliott's hair and yanked his head up. "I said, what's your name?"

"Tom. Elliott."

"Well, don't worry, Tom. Once I inject you, you'll be dead within seconds. You won't feel a thing."

Morton let Elliott's hair go. Elliott dropped his head. The metallic ringing intensified.

"What's your name?" Morton asked, pointing at the girl who'd gasped.

She looked at him uncertainly.

"You can speak if I speak to you," Morton said. "What's your name?"

"Rosemary Mathers," she said proudly, standing ramrod straight with her hands clasped behind her back.

"And yours?" Morton asked the boy who'd been on Elliott's left.

"James Gladstone."

"And, of course, you both agree that I should execute Elliott."

Mathers nodded enthusiastically. Gladstone seemed unsure, offering only a half-hearted nod.

Morton took a few steps back "Does anyone here think I'm wrong?" He slowly turned in a circle, surveying the group. "Does anyone think I shouldn't execute him?"

Lesley took a deep breath and forced her hand up. Mo inhaled sharply.

Morton rushed toward her. "You think I'm wrong?" he shouted, his face so close to hers that she could tell he'd had fish for lunch.

"You thought his joke was funny?"

"No," Lesley said.

"I know what you're thinking. It was only a joke. Oh, boo-hoo-hoo," Morton said, raising his voice an octave. "Let him go,

Commander. Let the poor thing go.”

“No.”

“You don’t think those who violate the Way should be punished?”

Lesley resisted the urge to step back when spittle hit her cheek.

“No, they should be.”

“Well, then, why do you think I’m wrong? Are you a coward? Afraid to watch a criminal die?”

“No. Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way.”

“Don’t parrot the Words at me. Why shouldn’t I execute him?”

“Perhaps you’d tell us what capital article covers distasteful jokes.”

Morton cocked his head. “Perhaps Elliott has a record filled with strikes and this pushed him over the threshold.”

Lesley shook her head. “I doubt he’d be here, being evaluated, if that were the case. And you didn’t know his name. If he had that many strikes on his record, you would have known his name.”

Morton stared at her a moment, then laughed. “What’s *your* name?” he asked, stepping back.

“Lesley Thompson.”

“Well, Lesley Thompson, you’re right!” he roared. “Which is why my stick isn’t loaded.” He returned to the middle of the clearing.

Lesley wiped her cheek while his back was turned and hoped her legs would stop shaking.

“What’s the matter with you?” he shouted at the group. “Were you all going to stand there and watch me do it? Listen to me. We all serve the Way, even executioners. The Way protects us.” He pointed at Elliott. “The Way protects him. It ensures that no commander will ever execute him unless that commander can justify his execution under the Way. Any commander who abuses his or her position would end up at an execution site him- or herself. If any of you ever sees someone about to violate the Way, you must speak up, no matter who it is. Even if it’s a commander.”

Morton nodded at Danson and Eckles. They released Elliott from the restraints; he fell to his knees, trembling. “Still think the Adamses enjoyed it?” Morton said to him. “Now get up!”

He struggled to his feet.

“Look at me.”

Elliott lifted a face streaked with tears.

“While joking about the Adams Incident isn’t a capital offence, it’s certainly enough to show that you’re not right for the military,” Morton said. “Lieutenant Danson, escort him to the barracks to pack his things. Then escort him to the train station.”

"Yes, Commander." Danson grasped Elliott's arm and led him from the site.

"As for the rest of you, let's return to the classroom. In addition to discussing in more detail how Interior defends the Way, I think we'll also review the articles that dictate what to do if you suspect the Way is about to be violated. Lieutenant Commander Eckles, take up the lead."

As the line that ringed the clearing followed Eckles from the site, Lesley noticed that Mo moved stiffly. She understood why—every muscle in her body had been clenched, too.

Mo turned a page of the book she wasn't really reading, then gave up and rested the book face-down on her lap. Another one for the insomnia pile next to her bed. It wasn't the book's fault. She couldn't concentrate, not when she was about to find out if she was in or not. What would she do if the military said no? Ever since she'd decided she wanted to be a fighter pilot, she hadn't considered for a second that the military could reject her application. But now, waiting for her name to be called, the possibility was frighteningly real. She had absolutely no idea what she'd do with her life if she'd failed.

One of the three doors on the opposite wall swung open and a grinning Rymellan bounded through the doorway. Well, it looked like he was in. In the thirty-five minutes she'd sat here, about half had come out looking like he did. The other half had tried to smile, or at least not cry, but a quick shake of the head to a waiting friend or the redness and strain around the eyes had betrayed them. Mo had told Les not to wait with her. "I don't want everyone to think I can't do anything by myself," she'd said, and now added another reason to the list: if she hadn't made it, she wanted to sneak off and have a little cry before she had to put on a brave face and pretend her life wasn't ruined.

A military stepped into the waiting area. "Nelson," she called. A boy stood. She ushered him into the office and shut the door.

Mo glanced around the room. Only seven left, including her. That would take care of the Ls to the Ps. Les's group, the Qs to the Ts, would be next. Les didn't have anything to worry about, not after her performance at the execution site. Morton had even spoken to her after the session, wanting to know if she planned to train for Interior or Defence. Nope, Les was in, and so was David. He'd already left the academy, anxious to return to his family to celebrate the good news.

"Good luck," he'd shouted as he'd waved to them and disappeared down the steps to the train platform. Then, ten minutes later, he'd beeped them and made them promise that they'd beep him

once they knew. Well, she'd beep him if she was accepted; otherwise she'd send him a dispatch. It would be bad enough facing Les and her family without having to actually talk to him.

Another door swung open—the doom door. As far as she could tell, everyone who'd been called into that office had been rejected. Rosemary Mathers stepped out, her face grim. So, even Rosemary-flaming-Mathers had been taken down by the doom door. Good riddance. Elliott's joke had been in poor taste; it had probably been the stupidest, dumbest, most moronic thing he could have said, but it hadn't been a violation. Anyone else would have realized that everyone was tired, stressed, and uneasy and let it go, or at least talked to Elliott in private. But not Rosemary-flaming-Mathers.

Fortunately, the Defence session the previous evening had been nowhere near as tense as the Interior one. Mo had learned that cadets could only apply to the fighter pilot program after they'd completed their second year at the Military Academy. Apparently the curriculum for the Interior and Defence streams was pretty much the same during the first year of training. The second year was when the two streams significantly branched. "So if you change your mind about divisions, it's better to do it during your first year," the lieutenant commander had said. Cadets were only eligible to enter special programs like the fighter pilot program—those with a limited number of spaces and rigorous entry requirements—when they began their third year.

"But we won't wait until our second year to start planning for the fighter pilot program," Les had said afterwards. "We have to make sure we take the right courses, get involved in the right activities, from our very first day." Yeah, well, that was if they were both at the academy. Les talked as if they'd already been accepted. She had reason to be confident. Mo didn't.

She heard shuffling inside the doom door's office and picked up her book, hoping that shielding herself with it would mean she wouldn't have to pass through the doom doorway. But no such luck. "Middleton," bellowed the military who'd emerged from the office.

Mo stood and placed her book on her chair, trying not to look crestfallen. Only six people, maybe a couple less, would see her on her way out. That wouldn't be too humiliating. No, the humiliation would come later, when she told Les, and Mama and Papa. She forced herself to follow the military into the office.

"I'm Lieutenant Williams." He gestured toward the chair in front of her. "Sit."

She did so, crossing her legs in an effort to look relaxed. He flipped through a file on his desk, presumably hers, occasionally stopping when something on a page caught his interest. Maybe he enjoyed dragging it out and making the candidate squirm before

delivering the bad news.

"It says here that you've expressed interest in the fighter pilot program," he said.

"Yes."

"You'll have to work very hard to get in. The number of applicants is always much greater than the number of spots. And more than half the students usually fail the program."

A glimmer of hope rose within her. "I'm not afraid of hard work."

"That's good. If you thought the Indoctrination Academy was demanding, you're in for a shock."

Her mounting excitement got the better of her. "Does that mean . . . ?"

He looked up from her file and managed a small smile. "Are you still interested in serving in the military, or has the evaluation changed your mind?"

"I'm still interested," she said, a little more eagerly than she would have liked.

"Well, then, welcome to the Military Academy, Cadet Middleton."

"Thank you," she said, grinning. Jumping up and down and whooping would have to wait. *Take that, doom door!*

"Within a week, you'll receive a dispatch with your report date, which will be two to three weeks after your final day at the Learning Academy. Congratulations, and good luck."

Being accepted was one of the best things that had happened to her, but he made it sound so routine. "Thank you," she said again, more subdued this time.

"Dismissed."

It took everything she had not to run for the door, hurl it open, and race to the barracks where Les waited. As it was, she was halfway across the courtyard before she realized that she'd left her book behind. Three hours and fifty minutes remained before the book would be considered abandoned, but she didn't want to take any chances. Not only would violating Article 302 not be a good start to her military career, but doing so at the Military Academy would be horribly embarrassing. She may as well have put a *Strike Me!* sign on her back. She rushed back to get the book and then walked as fast as she could to Barracks 19.

Les sat cross-legged on her bed, reading. Unfortunately, she wasn't alone. Two girls were busy packing their bags. Mo recognized one of them. If the girl's face hadn't lied earlier, she was also a new cadet. Les snapped her book shut and put it aside when she spotted Mo. Mo motioned for her to meet outside and stepped back into the midday sun. She wanted to share her news privately.

"So?" Les said, joining her.

"I'm in!" Mo launched herself into Les's arms. "I'm a cadet!"
Les's arms tightened and Mo felt her feet leave the ground.
"That's great!" Les said.

Mo wanted to give Les a lingering kiss, only drawing back when she felt light-headed. But Les didn't like displaying overt affection in front of others, and she'd seemed even more sensitive about it here, at the academy. She'd stiffened up at the smallest peck on the lips. She'd even balked at holding hands in the mess hall. Mo hoped she'd loosen up a bit when they returned in a few months. After all, they'd be spending the next three years of their lives here. Other days, she would have told herself that they probably wouldn't be together in three years so it didn't matter, but today, everything seemed possible.

Her feet touched the ground. Les held her at arm's length and smiled. "I knew you'd get in. You had nothing to worry about." Her smile faded. "Now it's just me."

"Come on, you're in," Mo said. "I'm surprised Morton didn't tell you you'd passed the evaluation yesterday. Oh, guess what? Rosemary Mathers didn't make it."

"I'm not surprised. I would have been surprised if you hadn't made it, though."

"But I did! And so will you."

"I'll feel better about me when I get the official word." She glanced at her comm unit. "I should probably head over there."

"I'll join you after I finish packing. And I want to beep Mama and Papa."

"They'll be so proud."

The wistfulness in Les's voice immediately tempered Mo's excitement. She squeezed Les's hand. "Yours will be, too."

"I doubt it," Les said. "Anyway, I'd better get going." She started to walk away, but turned back. "Mo?"

Mo stepped toward her. "What?"

"I'm glad you made it." Les paused. "Not just for you. For me, too. It wouldn't have been the same. I would have missed you—if I've made it, I mean." Her cheeks reddened. "Okay, now I really have to go."

Speechless, Mo watched Les walk away. Tears stung her eyes. She wanted to be a fighter pilot. If she had failed the evaluation, she would have been devastated and left wondering what to do with her life. But the terrible truth was that she wanted Les more. If the Chosen Council promised her that it would make Les her Chosen if she gave up her dream to become a fighter pilot, she'd do it in a heartbeat. And that was wrong, and something she could never, ever tell Les.

She willed herself to focus on the present, on today, a happy day! She'd just been accepted into the military. *And perhaps gained*

another three years with Les, a little voice whispered.

Lesley did her best to smile when the train pulled into Station C3-8. A long face wouldn't be fair to Mo. "We're home," she said a little too brightly.

Mo looked out the train window. "I don't believe it. My parents are on the platform. I hope they don't act too embarrassing."

"At least they're here," Lesley said, knowing hers wouldn't be, but searching for them anyway.

"You should have beeped them," Mo said.

"Why? They won't consider it good news."

"Well, they should."

The train stopped. They collected their bags and stepped onto the platform. As one, Mo's family rushed toward them. Mo dropped her bag. Susan pulled her into a hug, then drew back. "Do we need to salute?" she asked, smiling.

Mo groaned. "Mama, please."

"Congratulations," Michael said, putting his arm around Mo's shoulders and squeezing her.

"Look at me, I'm saluting at Mo." Nathan stood at attention, smartly saluting, his eyes crossed. Andrew started to laugh, then covered his mouth.

"Nathan, stop that now," Michael snapped. "You must never do anything that disrespects the military."

"Sorry," Nathan mumbled, dropping his hand.

"You don't have to salute. You're not in the military," Mo told him.

"And neither is she. Not quite," Lesley added.

"Yeah, that too." Mo caught Lesley's eye. They exchanged bemused smiles.

"But she will be." Susan embraced Mo again. "We're so proud of you."

"Can we go for supper now?" Andrew asked.

Michael picked up Mo's bag. "Sounds good to me."

"Matthew can't make it." Susan lowered her voice. "I think he has a date." She let go of Mo and looked at her. "But Neil and Mary will meet us at the eatery."

"They don't have to." Mo sounded as if she didn't care whether her two older siblings made it, but Lesley could tell she was pleased.

Susan's eyes widened. "They want to. They wouldn't miss it. A Middleton isn't accepted into the Military Academy every day." She turned to Lesley. "Neither is a Thompson. Congratulations are in order for you, too."

"Thank you," Lesley said, uncomfortable at suddenly gaining the spotlight.

"Where are your parents? I thought they'd be here."

Lesley looked away. "Oh, I haven't told them yet."

"But they must have known what time the train was arriving. And why didn't you beep them with the news?"

"I want to tell them in person."

"She wants to see the happiness in their eyes," Michael said.

"Papa!" Mo said, her voice strained.

Lesley pretended she hadn't heard him. "Well, I guess I should get going or they'll wonder where I am. Enjoy your supper."

"We'll go with you," Susan said. "It would be nice if we all went for supper together."

"No, that's okay," Lesley said quickly. "I don't know if—I mean, they might be busy. I don't know."

"Yeah, really Mama, it's probably not a good idea to just show up," Mo said. "And I'm starved. Aren't you starved?" She nudged Nathan, who obliged her with a nod. "Plus, Neil and Mary might be waiting."

"They won't have left yet. I said I'd beep them when we know for sure what time we'll be there. Now, come on." Susan's mouth pressed into a determined line and she led the way to the waiting area.

"I'm sorry," Mo whispered, falling into step next to Lesley. "I had no idea."

"Maybe it'll help," Lesley whispered back. "My parents won't react too badly while you're all there. By the time we're alone, they might have calmed down." But the knot in her stomach mocked her. It would have been depressing enough facing them by herself. Now she'd have an audience. Everyone would see how disappointed they were, how she'd let them down by passing the evaluation. And everything they said to slight her would slight Mo, too. This was a day of celebration for Mo, for the entire Middleton family. She'd hate it if Mama and Papa ruined it.

"So what sorts of tests did you do?" Michael shifted Mo's bag to his left shoulder. "Or is it a secret?"

Mo frowned. "They didn't say anything about it being secret, did they, Les?"

Lesley shook her head.

"Okay, well, we didn't have a moment's rest." Mo paused as they all filed through the exit. "Classes, workshops, tests—one thing after another."

Susan slowed her pace. "Did you have a physical?"

"Yeah, and a long talk with a counsellor."

"And they still wanted you?" Andrew quipped.

Mo swatted at him. He ducked and ran ahead to join Nathan, busy kicking stones off the path.

"Anyway, we didn't always know we would have a test. A couple of them were surprises." Mo launched into a detailed account of the evaluation period.

Lesley only half listened, her mind on her parents. Her apprehension deepened when the *Thompson Estate* sign loomed ahead. By the time the house came into view, her dread was almost making it difficult to breathe. If she hadn't seen Mo's bag on Michael's back, she would have sworn it was on hers, along with her own and every other recruit's.

"Settle, boys," Susan said as they approached the front door. "Actually, you know what? Why don't you stay out here and play? Don't go far."

"Can we borrow a couple of bikes?" Andrew asked.

"If you can find two that fit," Lesley said.

"I'm taking Jason's," Nathan announced. He sprinted to the bike rack near the front door, Andrew hot on his heels. A tug-of-war ensued over Jason's blue bike.

"His older bike is still there. The other blue one," Lesley said to them as she opened the front door. She dropped her bag to the floor inside. The hallway was empty and the house quiet. For a split second, her mood lightened. Maybe they were out. But then she heard footsteps in the study. Mama appeared, followed by Papa.

"So, you're home." Mama's face tightened. "And the Middletons are with you."

Lesley could see Mo out of the corner of her eye and sensed Susan and Michael behind her.

Papa stood behind Mama and put his hands on her shoulders. "Did you pass?"

"Yes."

Awkward silence. Well, what had she expected, that they'd rush to her and tell her how proud they were, as Mo's parents had done?

Susan stepped into view. "Isn't it wonderful? Both our daughters will serve the Way in the military."

Mama and Papa stared at her.

"We're on our way to supper to celebrate. Why don't you join us?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mama said. "I have an early case tomorrow."

"We won't be out late."

"We have fresh salmon in for tonight."

"Well, do you mind if Lesley comes with us?" Susan said with exasperation. "It would be nice if you both came too, but if you don't

want to, at least let Lesley."

"She stood up to a commander," Mo said. "You should be proud of her. She—" Mo broke off when Susan glanced back and motioned for her to be quiet.

"Stood up to a commander?" Papa said. "I'd like to hear that story."

"We can all hear it over supper," Michael said.

Papa nodded. "Why not?"

Mama whirled to face him. "Alan, the salmon—"

"We can have it tomorrow." He moved forward and reached for Lesley. "Congratulations."

Lesley hugged him, surprised and grateful. "Thank you," she managed to say. Mama hovered on the periphery of her vision. Lesley let Papa go and turned to Mama, holding out her arms in anticipation.

Mama turned away. "If we're going, let's go." She whipped her cloak off its hook.

Susan and Michael met Lesley's eyes. She quickly looked away, shamed by their pity. Mama left the house without a backward glance.

"You okay?" Mo murmured.

She nodded, determined not to let her dismay show.

"I'm proud of you," Papa said, patting her arm as he walked past to catch up with Mama. Susan and Michael followed him out.

Lesley pasted a smile on her face, took Mo's hand, and walked outside to join everyone. One day, Mama would be proud of her. One day, Mama would look back and realize how important today had been. One day.