

# Turning Eighteen

by Sarah Ettritch

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Mo stared at her reflection in the dresser mirror and sighed. No matter how she looked, she'd have to endure the sympathetic glances of others when they thought her attention was elsewhere. If she showed up a mess, they'd also whisper that she was too depressed to care for herself. She picked up her comb.

"Mo!" Papa bellowed.

"Coming." She shoved the comb into her back pocket and went downstairs to join her parents. As soon as they were on the train, she'd excuse herself, go to the bathroom, and touch up her hair. She might fall apart at midnight, but she was determined to arrive tidy and composed.

"Finally," Papa said, already in his cloak. "What were you doing up there? Trying on every outfit in your closet?"

No, procrastinating. Usually she looked forward to a party, but she couldn't muster up any excitement over this one. Les, eighteen. Mo wished she could celebrate the milestone with her, but the entire day was a reminder of where her relationship with Les was going—or rather, not going. She grabbed her new cloak from its hook and shrugged it on.

Mama studied her. "It looks lovely. You outdid yourself this time, Michael."

Papa beamed and started to fuss, adjusting the cloak's collar and pulling down the sleeves, much to Mo's annoyance. "I'll have a light blue one soon," she said, stepping around him and heading out the door.

Mama and Papa followed her. "I know that," Papa said. "But I want you to look smart when you arrive at the Military Academy."

Mo managed a small smile for him. "I certainly will, in this."

Mama quickened her pace. "If we hurry, we can catch the five o'clock train."

"We don't want to be late for the supper," Papa said. "The meals at the Dance Hall are always tasty."

Mo wouldn't know. She'd only been to the Dance Hall once, and that eighteenth party hadn't included a proper sit-down meal. Rymellans under eighteen weren't admitted to the Dance Hall—private functions like Les's party were an exception. Now that Les was eighteen, would she want to spend all her free time at the Dance Hall, dancing the night away with other eighteen-year-olds?

"Any Solitary Notification yet?" Papa asked.

Mo perked up, all thoughts of Les leaving her behind forgotten.

"Not when I spoke to Adelaide an hour ago," Mama said. "They usually arrive by seven, don't they? Only a few hours to go."

Papa shook his head. "It can happen right up until midnight. Ten to twelve—that's what time the Solitary Notification arrived at an

eighteenth I attended.”

“That’s late,” Mama said, frowning.

Papa sniffed. “A family of half-wits. Nice enough, but none of them had two brain cells to rub together. Up to that point, all the children had received Solitary Notifications. I think a member of the Chosen Council must have realized that one was about to slip through and breed, and rushed a Solitary Notification over.”

Mo rolled her eyes. “Papa, that can’t be true. That’s not the way it happens.”

Papa ignored her. “And at another eighteenth, the military delivered the Solitary Notification, not a courier. What happened was that someone spotted the Chosen Council’s courier and alerted the family. They figured that if they could dodge the courier until midnight had passed, the Solitary Notification wouldn’t be valid.”

“Were they related to the family of half-wits?” Mo asked.

“Eventually the courier contacted the military. They finally caught up with everyone around eleven-thirty and had to coax the young man out of a tree to hand him the Notification.”

Mo snorted. “First of all, they would have activated his comm unit beacon, so it wouldn’t have taken them long to find him. Second, they wouldn’t have coaxed him down. They would have shaken him out of the tree and dragged him to an execution site. Article CT43.” In accordance with the article, Les had sent a dispatch to the Chosen Council that detailed her expected whereabouts on her eighteenth birthday. Mo had watched her do it. *Mine will be easy. We’ll be at the Military Academy*, she remembered saying.

“I must admit, when I saw that CT43 had been added to the Tradition, I wondered if it was because of what happened at that eighteenth,” Papa said.

“What?” Mo shrieked.

“Don’t listen to him,” Mama said with a grin. “That article was in the Tradition when I did my Level Four, and he’s younger than I am.”

Mo nodded. “It’s probably been there for centuries.”

Papa let out an exaggerated sigh. “It was a lot more fun telling you stories when you were younger.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it was.” Mo paused. “Anyway, what’s wrong with being a Solitary? You aren’t disappointed with Mary and Matthew, are you?”

“Of course not,” Mama said firmly.

“But it can be disappointing for the Solitary,” Papa said. “No children, for one thing.”

Mama stared at him, wide-eyed. “Better no children than children weak in the Way! You don’t have to have children to serve the Way. Look at the Preeminent Ruler. He’s a Solitary.”

"I agree. I was just saying it can be disappointing for them when they first find out."

"Were Mary and Matthew disappointed?" Mo asked.

"Why don't you ask them?" Mama said. "They'll be at the Dance Hall."

"I just might," Mo said, despite knowing she wouldn't. She wasn't close to either of them. Funnily enough, she felt more comfortable with Neil, even though he was the oldest. Mary had never wanted her little sister around when their breaks from the Indoctrination Academy coincided, and Mo didn't have much in common with Matthew. Plus, he never laughed at her jokes. How could she be close to someone who never laughed at her jokes?

"And don't worry. We won't be disappointed if you turn out to be a Solitary. Chosen, Solitary, as long as you serve the Way, it doesn't matter," Mama told her.

It mattered to Mo. She wanted to be whatever Les turned out to be. If they were both Chosens, she could cling to the minuscule possibility that they were each other's. She shouldn't, but she would. If they were both Solitaries, they couldn't have daughters, but they could choose to stay with each other for the rest of their lives. Nobody could split them up, not even the Chosen Council.

But if one of them turned out to be a Solitary and the other a Chosen . . . Mo's throat tightened. That would be it. Their relationship would be over. Staying together would be torture, and pointless, and stupid. Every look, every touch would remind them that they had no future. They'd try to be friends, end up acquaintances that only saw each other in class and on exercises, and request assignments on different ships upon graduation. And that downward spiral could begin in as little as five months, on her eighteenth birthday.

Lesley wiped her mouth with her napkin and stole a look at Mo, sitting on the other side of the table, four chairs down. Usually they sat next to each other when the Thompsons and Middletons dined together, but doing so tonight, the night she'd know for sure if she was a Chosen or a Solitary, would have raised eyebrows. Considering how many Thompson relatives were in attendance, Mama seating the Middletons at the head table indicated how close the two families were. She could have placed them at one of the many tables assigned to family friends and acquaintances.

Suddenly Mo caught Lesley's eye and smiled, or tried to—she looked more pained than anything. Lesley smiled in return and shifted her attention back to her dessert.

“. . . be okay.”

“What?” Lesley said, turning to her right.

“I said, she’ll be okay.” Karen sipped her water. “I remember Derek’s party. When everyone was clapping and cheering at midnight, I felt like crying my eyes out. But by the time my eighteenth rolled around, I was over him. I haven’t spoken to him for a couple of years. I don’t even know what he’s doing.”

“I heard he’s apprenticing with Bradley Walker.”

“See? You know more than I do. So don’t worry about Mo. She’ll have mixed feelings about you being a Chosen. You might, too. But your Chosen Papers are still a long way off.”

“I could be a Solitary.” Though she hoped she wasn’t. She wanted children, and she didn’t want Mama to have yet another reason to be disappointed with her. Few Thompsons had received Solitary Notifications.

“I doubt it. Your Notification would have arrived by now. It’s not as if the Chosen Council met this morning to decide.”

“It’s not official until midnight.”

“Well, when it’s official, don’t try to comfort Mo with a bunch of empty promises.”

“Karen, I’m not stupid.”

“Maybe not, but when it comes to Mo, you’re too sensitive. So remember me and Derek. She’ll get over it. So will you. You’ll have moved on by the time you’re twenty-five.”

“You went on to college and Derek didn’t,” Lesley said indignantly. “Mo and I will both be at the Military Academy. We’ll see each other every day.”

“You won’t break up as soon as you leave the Learning Academy, but you will eventually. You’ll have to. So no empty promises, okay?”

“I wasn’t planning on making any. Like I said, I’m not stupid.” Lesley narrowed her eyes. “Did Mama put you up to this?”

Karen chuckled. “No! I’m older than you. I’ve been to more eighteenth parties.”

“You’re only four years older. Wait, now you’re only three.”

“Three and a half.”

“Oh. Well, then.”

“There’s a big difference between eighteen and twenty-one,” Karen told her.

They jumped when Mama leaned in between them. “Are you two talking about anything I should know about?”

“No,” Karen said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Mama arched an eyebrow. "You see, I never used to worry when the two of you had your heads together. I never thought anything of it. But then you lied to us about the Military Academy entrance exam. I can't be complacent anymore."

"We're talking about eighteenth birthday parties, that's all," Karen said, her voice strained.

"Is that what you're talking about, Lesley?"

"Yes, Mama, that's what we're talking about."

Mama gave Lesley a long, hard look. "I guess I'll have to trust you. Don't make me regret it." She straightened and patted them both on the shoulder, then went back to her place.

"She'll never forgive us," Karen mumbled. She turned back to her cake.

Mama's intrusion had killed the conversation, probably what she'd intended. Lesley lifted a forkful of cake to her mouth, then almost dropped it when someone—it sounded like Susan—shrieked with laughter. Was Mo laughing, too? Lesley wanted to check, but Karen would think she couldn't keep her eyes off Mo. Instead, she focused on her plate.

Yes, tonight was awkward, and yes, she'd have mixed feelings at midnight. But her Chosen Papers were years away. When they arrived, she'd meet the woman the Chosen Council had selected—her ideal match, the woman she was meant to be with. Wouldn't that mean she'd eventually have stronger feelings for her Chosen than she'd ever had for Mo? And wouldn't the same thing happen for Mo and Mo's Chosen, assuming she had one? After all, the Chosen Council knew what it was doing. One look around the room was ample proof, along with the rarity of Chosen Violations.

So sure, when the clock struck midnight and it was official, she'd think of Mo. And yes, okay, she'd want to go to her, hug her. Not to make empty promises, but to show Mo that she understood that, for them, it was the beginning of the end and hardly something to celebrate. But she wouldn't. It would hurt not to, but she couldn't. Even though it may not feel like it, tonight *was* something to celebrate. She had a Chosen! Someone the Chosen Council had selected for her. Someone she'd love and have daughters with and grow old with. Someone who would not only please her, but please the Way. And someone more suited to her than Mo. Hard to believe, considering how deeply she felt for Mo, but the Chosen Council had the entire planet to choose from and didn't make mistakes.

It did not make mistakes.

Mo let go of Les and applauded the band. The musicians bowed, set down their instruments, and left the stage. Seeing Alan, Adelaide, and Karen bound up the steps, Mo nudged Les's arm. "Les, you better go," she said as Adelaide scanned the crowd. "It's two minutes to midnight. They're looking for you."

Les touched Mo's cheek, then turned away. Mo's stomach churned as she watched Les make her way to her family. They'd only managed two dances together. Les, the guest of honour, had dutifully danced with everyone who'd asked—all Solitaries or those not Joined, of course. Three times, Mo had been on her way to suggest they dance, only to see someone else get to Les first.

She'd resigned herself to standing on the sidelines while Les danced with others, but then Les had sought her out at about ten-thirty. "I don't know if we'll have another chance to dance before midnight," she'd said. Mo had assumed they wouldn't, so she'd been surprised when Les had tapped her on the shoulder at seven minutes to midnight and extended her hand. She didn't know whether to read anything into it. Had Les wanted them to have the last dance before midnight? Had it been her way of saying good-bye? Had she meant to signal that tonight wouldn't change anything, at least in the near future? Or had it been happenstance, in that she'd suddenly found herself without a dance partner?

"I guess it's time for the big moment," Mama said behind her. Mo glanced over her shoulder. Papa and her older siblings were there, too. "Adelaide must be pleased," Mama continued. "She was hoping—"

Applause drowned her out. Les had made it onto the stage. Mo started to clap, not wanting to look surly. She could hardly believe it: Les up on that stage, a Chosen. She'd grown up with the Chosen Tradition, been surrounded by it from the moment she was born. But it had never felt as real as it did tonight.

Alan raised his hand to quiet everyone and gazed at his comm unit, waiting for the right moment to begin the countdown. If Les had been a Solitary, they would have thanked everyone for coming and the dancing would have resumed. But she wasn't.

"Ten, nine, eight," Alan started. Everyone joined in, their voices growing louder with each second. "Two, one . . ."

The room exploded into another round of applause. Mo joined in, feeling insincere and self-conscious. Was everyone looking at her? Because they all knew what it meant, and they knew she did, too. Well, let them cluck their tongues in sympathy. She'd hold her head up and show them how strong in the Way she was.

Suddenly Mama's arm was around her shoulders. Mo leaned into her, grateful. It was a good thing Andrew and Nathan were at the Indoctrination Academy, or they'd probably be laughing at her right

now.

Les embraced each of her parents and then hugged Karen. The four Thompsons waited for the applause to die down. Then Adelaide stepped up to the microphone. "So, you're a Chosen," she said to Les, smiling broadly.

More applause. Mama's arm left Mo's shoulders. Mo didn't know how much more she could take. She focused on Les, but couldn't tell if Les was happy, embarrassed—what?

Adelaide moved aside; Les took her place. Mo inwardly cringed. Les would do exactly what was expected of her. She'd beam at everyone and babble on about how wonderful it was to be a Chosen and how much she looked forward to receiving her Chosen Papers. Mo wanted to bury her face in Mama's shoulder and cover her ears. But that would be cowardly. She'd continue to hold her head high. Anyone who glanced her way would see her looking directly at Les, not clinging to Mama for support.

"Yes, I'm a Chosen," Les began.

Mo felt for Mama's hand and hung onto it. A little covert support wouldn't hurt.

"As the Song of Rymel says, 'We are Rymellan and always shall be. We are one, Chosen and Solitary.'"

Okay, this was different.

"It wouldn't have mattered if I had turned out to be a Solitary. All that matters is that we serve the Way. And I have never had a greater appreciation of what it means to serve the Way than I do right now."

Much to her amazement, Mo agreed with everything Les was saying.

"As all Rymellans do, I trust the Chosen Council. I know the Chosen Council has selected the best woman for me, for my family, for all of us."

Mo tightened her grip on Mama's hand. *Here it comes.*

"And as all Rymellans do, I will embrace my Chosen, Join with her, and serve the Way." Les paused. "I won't hold up the dancing any longer," she said, to Mo's surprise. "Thank you very much for coming and celebrating my eighteenth with me. Let's say the *Words Every Rymellan Knows.*"

Still holding Mama's hand, Mo reached for Neil's. She was slightly bewildered; Les hadn't gone on and on about how wonderful her Chosen must be and how much she looked forward to meeting her. That suited Mo just fine, but what would others think about Les's atypical eighteenth speech?

Les, having formed a circle with her parents and Karen, waited until a few in the room had finished clearing their throats, then

nodded. "Disobedience means death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way!" Everyone let go of their neighbours' hands and clapped.

The band was waiting to take the stage again. Les followed her family down the steps only to be swallowed in a crowd of well-wishers. Mo craned her neck to see her as the musicians settled into their places on the stage and picked up their instruments.

"We should dance," Papa said to Mama when the band immediately launched into the next piece.

"Will you be all right?" Mama asked Mo.

Mo nodded. "I'll get a drink or something." Mary and Matthew brushed by her, on their way to the dance floor, she presumed.

"I'll go with you," Neil said.

Apparently satisfied that Mo wouldn't dissolve into tears and that Neil would take care of her if she did, Mama accepted Papa's arm. They disappeared into the crowd.

Neil eyed her sympathetically. "If it helps, I felt the same way at Catherine's eighteenth."

It didn't, but she loved him for saying it. "Whatever happened to her?" she asked as they manoeuvred toward one of the refreshment tables. "When I entered the Indoctrination Academy for my Level Three, you two were inseparable. By the time I left, it was as if she'd never existed."

"She was going to college and I wasn't. Since we'd be living sectors apart, we decided it was a good time to end our relationship."

"Just because you wouldn't be living on each other's doorstep? You really cared about each other."

"And had Chosens waiting for us. We could have made the effort to see each other, but why?" He patted Mo's shoulder. "You and Lesley will do the same thing. After the Military Academy, you'll go your separate ways. You'll see."

Mo didn't know what to say. To agree would be lying, but to disagree would be weak in the Way.

Lucy Benton planted herself in their path, forcing them to stop. "Neil, there you are. Do you want to dance?"

"Um . . ." He turned to Mo.

"Go ahead," Mo said, relieved. "I don't mind. I'll be fine."

"Well, let's go, then." Benton grabbed Neil's arm and pulled him toward the dance floor. Neil looked back at Mo and pulled a face.

Any other night, Mo would have laughed, but she stood stone-faced until she couldn't see them anymore and then continued on to the refreshment table. Several punch bowls and an assortment of

dessert trays awaited her. She'd come for a drink, but now that she was here . . . She picked up a plate from the stack and added a chocolate cupcake to it.

"I'm surprised it ended so quickly," Mo overheard a man say as she slid a piece of lemon cake onto her plate.

"I wasn't surprised at all," a woman said. "I would have been more surprised if she'd stood up there and gushed. Lesley's not like other girls, you know."

"Oh, I know. Very serious, that one."

"Precisely. She's very strong in the Way, and it was the Way she wanted to talk about."

"That's true. I . . ." The voice faded.

Mo resisted the urge to glance over her shoulder. Whoever it was had already moved away. A platter of cookies caught her eye. One or two wouldn't hurt. She added four to her plate and decided she better find somewhere to sit before other goodies called out to her.

"Excuse me," she murmured to a man next to her, one of Les's great-uncles, she thought. Up ahead, two of her classmates watched the dance floor. Everyone knew Steven and Roberta had crushes on each other—maybe one of them would pluck up the courage to ask the other to dance before the party ended. Mo reversed direction and skirted around them. She'd only be in the way.

A couple of empty chairs stood at a nearby table. Mo nodded to the Johnsons, who lived several estates west of the Middleton and Thompson estates, and sat down.

Caroline Johnson's eyes widened. "Are you sure you'll be able to manage all that?"

"Do you want a cookie?" Mo asked, pushing her plate toward Caroline.

"At this hour? No, thank you."

"I'll have one," said Sandra, one of the Johnson daughters.

"Go ahead," Mo said.

Sandra smiled shyly and selected a cookie from the plate.

"What do you say?" Elaine Johnson asked.

"Thank you."

Elaine nodded. "Good. Now, after you've finished that, it's time to go."

The three daughters groaned in unison. Caroline and Elaine had five, but two were at the Indoctrination Academy.

"Can't we stay a bit longer?" Anna asked.

"No."

Anna looked at her other mama. Caroline shook her head. "We said we'd stay until midnight. So come on, time to go."

"We should say good-bye to Lesley," Anna said.

"We already did that." Caroline shifted her attention to Mo. "I hope you don't think we're running out on you. But I'd told them five more minutes just before you sat down."

"No, no, don't worry about it." Mo didn't need company to eat and feel sorry for herself.

"Well, good-bye, then. Say hello to your parents. Tell your mama I'll pop around next week with the seeds I promised her."

"I will."

After they'd gone, Mo shoved a forkful of cake into her mouth and looked around the hall to see how many people were still there. Okay, who was she kidding? Where was Les, that was what she wanted to know. Les wasn't near the stage. Perhaps back at the head table? Mo leaned to her left to see if she could catch a glimpse. Nope, Les wasn't there. Maybe on the dance floor? She couldn't see it through the crowd. She sliced off another mouthful of cake, lifted it to her mouth, and froze. There was Les, walking right toward her! She smiled and lowered her fork.

Les abruptly stopped, then stepped forward, then pivoted to her right and darted between two groups of Rymellans. Mo stared after her in disbelief. So that was the way it was going to be from now on, was it? If she had any sense, she'd break it off right now. After all, as of today, she was only the stand-in until the Chosen Council handed Les the real thing, the woman with whom Les would Join. So why bother?

Mo repeatedly jabbed her fork into the remaining cake, reducing it to a crushed mess. *Forget the cake.* She put the fork down and picked up a cookie. The problem, she thought as she took a bite, was that she'd already made the mistake of breaking up with Les when she hadn't really wanted to. They were still young; there would be plenty of time for them to break up later. For now, they were together—or at least she hoped they were.

And now she knew what she wanted to happen on her eighteenth. She wanted to be a Chosen. Desperately. It was her and Les's only chance. If she received a Solitary Notification, she would . . . their relationship . . . their relationship wouldn't survive past midnight. As much as she loved Les, she couldn't stay with her, knowing they were doomed. How could they ever laugh with each other again?

Nope, the only solace a Solitary Notification would offer was that she wouldn't be forced into a relationship with someone else. Because she didn't think she could love anyone other than Les. Not even her Chosen. And that meant she was weak in the Way.

Mo swallowed the last bit of cookie and stared at the two couples sitting a table over. She'd always taken for granted that Joined couples were happy and loved each other, but now she wondered if some

Chosens were going through the motions, living in quiet despair while praising the Chosen Council for its wisdom. She shivered and grabbed another cookie from the plate. If any of the military on-duty at the party knew what she was thinking, they'd probably drag her back to the Indoctrination Academy for a refresher stay. Not only would that be horribly embarrassing, since she'd completed her Level Five within the past year, but she'd have to forget about the Military Academy.

She couldn't be the only Rymellan who'd felt this way, though—worried about her future, her Chosen Papers, her life; hopelessly in love with someone and unable to imagine being happy with anyone else. But given how few Chosen Violations were committed—only the Adams Incident in the past thirty years—the Chosen Tradition obviously worked. She had to be stronger, trust the Way, expect all her doubts to be swept away when her Chosen Papers arrived and she met her Chosen.

Mo shook her head. She was assuming she was a Chosen, and for the wrong reason.

"What are you talking to yourself about?"

Mo jumped, and twisted to look behind her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Les rounded the chair so Mo could see her without straining her neck. "And I'm sorry about before. I don't know why I did that." Les looked past Mo for a second, then refocused on her. "I don't know, it's awkward. I just want it to be over."

"Want what to be over?" Mo asked, her heart pounding.

"The party."

"Oh."

Les held out her hand. "Would you like to dance?"

"Yes. I would."

"Then let's dance."

Mo took Les's hand and did her best to smile at her. Some girl out there was the luckiest girl on the planet, and she didn't even know it. Was it so wrong to want to be a Chosen so she could keep the tiniest shred of hope alive that the luckiest girl was her?

She squeezed Les's hand when they walked onto the dance floor and hugged her before they got into position and fell into step with the couples whirling around them. But despite being in Les's arms, she felt unsettled and scared. Her relationship with Les, her entire life, could be shattered on her eighteenth birthday. She wished she could know right now what the Chosen Council had decided for her, but she'd have to wait. The next five months were going to be the longest five months of her life.

## *Five Months Later*

Mo opened her eyes to darkness and inwardly groaned—she'd woken up early, yet again. She thrust her arm out from under the blanket and groped around on the nightstand for her comm unit. Her fingertips brushed against it, but she couldn't quite grasp it. She slid closer to the edge of the bed and reached out . . . and it fell off the nightstand and thudded onto the floor. A pencil rolled off after it. Mo froze and listened. Kary's breathing was still rhythmic. Good; she hadn't woken. Kary always slept soundly, falling fast asleep moments after lights out and never waking until her comm unit sounded her morning alarm. Mo envied her.

She slipped out of bed and picked up her comm unit. Its illuminated display read *06:12*. Great. Her first class was at 08:30. Shivering as goose bumps rose on her arms and back, she ducked back under the blanket and closed her eyes, hoping to grab another hour's sleep. But it was no use. Today was the day she'd dreaded and the day that couldn't have arrived fast enough. Today could turn out to be the worst day of her life. Today she'd find out if she was a Chosen. And today she'd have to do what she'd done on most days for the past month—operate on barely six hours of sleep.

Figuring she might as well get up, Mo slipped out of bed again. She scooped her sneakers from the mat near the door and grabbed her track suit from the back of a chair. In the bathroom, she pulled the suit on over her pyjamas. Nobody had noticed her odd attire so far—but then, not many jogged at the crack of dawn.

She left the room and crept down the corridor to the stairs that led to the first floor and the dormitory's exit. She'd expected to be assigned a bed in one of the barracks, a notion that had earned an incredulous look from the admitting lieutenant and the admonition, "The barracks? Those are temporary lodgings, for potential recruits or Defence members on leave or visiting students from other academies. They're not for you, Cadet!"

Sharing a room with Les would be ideal, and they'd discovered that they could request each other as roommates for their second year. But neither had pushed the other to fill out the form, even though the earlier they submitted the request, the greater the chance it would be fulfilled. Mo knew why they were stalling. If she received a Solitary Notification today, there wouldn't be any point in sharing a room. They might as well volunteer to be targets when the cadets practised shooting to wound with live weapons. It would be less painful.

As soon as she was outside, she broke into a jog, too keyed up

to stretch. Jogging was okay. Flat-out running would earn her a strike. She'd wait until she reached the track before trying to outrun her fears.

"Cadet," barked a passing lieutenant, obviously in a hurry to get to her post.

"Morning, Lieutenant Dunnigan," Mo replied, then stopped and looked over her shoulder. Was that her? Was that Les's Chosen? Her hands balled into fists. Today would be stressful enough without playing the *Is that Les's Chosen?* game, a game she played much too often. And anyway, Dunnigan must be at least twenty-six or twenty-seven, too old to be Les's Chosen. At most, Les's Chosen would be twenty-three, maybe twenty-four, depending on when her birthday was. So Dunnigan couldn't possibly—

Mo sighed. She was doing it again. Some days she hardly thought about it; other days it constantly occupied her mind. Worse, the shadowy figure who would eventually take Les away from her lurked in the background whenever she and Les were together. Sometimes Mo felt as if she was in a relationship with two other people.

She resumed her jog, and picked up the pace the moment her sneakers hit the track. Her poor body was running on nervous energy. Something had to give, and soon. Her studies would suffer and her health would fail unless she calmed down. The only reason she'd wanted this day to arrive quickly was because it would settle the uncertainty around her and Les's relationship—permanently, if she was a Solitary; for at least seven years, if she was a Chosen. Ha! As if they'd still be together in seven years. A lot could happen between now and then, and for the millionth time, she told herself to worry only about today, not tomorrow. Hey, she was eighteen today. Eighteen! But who flaming cared if she lost Les?

Lesley shifted the warm bag to her left hand and tapped on Mo's room door. She waited. Nothing. Mo probably had her comm unit set to wake her at 08:00, just enough time for her to quickly shower, dress, and make it to her first class, albeit on an empty stomach. Well, not this morning. Lesley knocked again, a little louder this time, and strained to hear movement within. A faint thump, then shuffling toward the door. It opened a crack.

"Oh, hi." Kary swung the door open and smothered a yawn.

"Did I wake you?"

"What time is it?" she murmured, her eyes barely open.

"Just after 07:00."

"Well, yeah, you did, but my alarm would have gone off in ten minutes anyway."

"Sorry."

Kary yawned again. "Doesn't matter." She sniffed. "Do I smell eggs and, um, hash browns?"

Lesley smiled. "I thought I'd surprise Mo with breakfast today."

"Oh." Kary glanced back into the room. "She's not back from her morning jog."

What morning jog? "I figured she'd be back by now," Lesley said, making the effort to speak evenly.

"I'm sure she'll be back soon." Kary stepped back from the door. "So come on in."

"Thanks." She walked into the room and took in the tangled bedclothes lying in a heap on Mo's empty bed. Since when had Mo jogged in the mornings, and why hadn't she mentioned it?

"She'll kick herself for missing breakfast in bed," Kary said, opening a drawer and rummaging through it.

"I brought breakfast for you, too. But I wasn't sure what you like." Lesley opened the bag and carefully lifted out a covered plate of eggs, hash browns, and toast. "If you don't want it, that's okay."

"Want it?" Kary dropped a pair of pants onto her bed and eagerly accepted the plate. "Of course I want it. Thanks. It was sweet of you to think of me."

Lesley handed her a knife and fork. "I have tziva, too. Do you want some?"

"Argamon, if I was same-oriented, Mo would have a problem," Kary said, grinning. "But no, thank you. I'm fine."

Lesley rolled the bag shut, set it on Mo's nightstand, and moved a pile of folded clothes from the nearby chair to the bed so she could sit down. Kary perched herself on the edge of her bed and balanced the plate on her lap. They stared at each other. "Go ahead and eat," Lesley said. "Mo could be a while."

"If you don't mind." Kary lifted the steamed cover from the plate and set it face-up next to her. She tucked in. "Everything set for the party tonight?" she asked around a mouthful of food.

Lesley nodded. "Try to be there by 19:45 at the latest."

"Does she suspect anything?"

"I don't think so." Lesley paused. "So she's been jogging for a while, hasn't she? When she first started, I didn't think she'd keep it up."

"Me either. I mean, you know how much Mo loves her sleep. Never thought I'd see her getting up every morning at dawn."

Neither did Lesley.

Kary gestured with her fork. "But she's having problems

sleeping.”

Lesley nodded.

“I tried to talk to her about it, but she brushed me off. I’ve wondered if her eighteenth has anything—”

The door opened. Mo walked in, red-faced, her hair plastered to her head. She gaped at Lesley. “What are you doing here?”

“I brought you breakfast,” Lesley said, standing. “It’s your—”

“Have you heard of a flaming comm unit?” Mo slammed the door shut. “You couldn’t beep me to let me know you were coming over? Maybe I don’t want breakfast. Maybe you could show a little more consideration.”

Lesley stared at her in shock.

“I think I’ll hop in the shower,” Kary said, flipping the cover back over her plate. “This’ll still be warm when I’m finished.” She gathered her clothes, glanced at Mo and Lesley, and hurried into the bathroom.

Mo threw up her arms. “Great. Now I can’t get a towel.” She snatched a shirt from the pile on her bed and wiped her face with it. “And I was hoping to shower as soon as I got back. Now I’ll have to wait. Because *you* woke her up.” She flung the shirt onto the bed.

Lesley bit back a retort and waited until she could hear the shower running before speaking. “I wanted to surprise you with breakfast. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“I don’t feel like breakfast,” Mo mumbled.

“I have eggs and hash browns. And toast. I even threw in a couple of blueberry waffles.”

“Blueberry waffles?” Mo said, her face softening. “You hate eating blueberry waffles in the morning.”

“You don’t.”

Mo’s shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can’t believe I yelled at you for bringing me breakfast. I just . . . I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“You didn’t want me to know you’ve been getting up early.”

Lesley wanted to hug her, but didn’t know if she’d receive a hug or a slap in the face in return. She lowered herself into the chair so she wouldn’t tower over Mo. “Kary said you’re having a problem sleeping.”

“Kary’s got a big mouth,” Mo muttered.

“What’s bothering—”

“You know, we should eat that breakfast before it gets cold.” Mo stepped toward Lesley, hesitated, then held out her arms.

Lesley pulled Mo onto her lap and held her tight. She’d let Mo get away with diverting the conversation—for now.

Mo pulled back. “I shouldn’t have done that. I’m all sweaty.”

“If you hadn’t done it, I would have, given that irresistible outfit you’re wearing.”

Mo looked down at herself. "I didn't want to wake Kary up. And nobody ever notices."

"I noticed," Lesley said, caressing Mo's cheek with her thumb. She'd also noticed that Mo had been quieter than usual lately, and the dark half-moons under Mo's eyes. But she hadn't thought anything of it. Everyone was tired—their busy schedules didn't allow much time for relaxation. When they weren't in class or participating in practical exercises, they were doing homework or getting to know the other cadets. Privacy and time alone were at a premium. Everyone looked a little ragged these days, but adjusting to the Military Academy apparently wasn't the only reason behind Mo's fatigue. Kary had mentioned Mo's eighteenth. Lesley knew eighteenth birthdays could be stressful, but why hadn't Mo talked about it? She wasn't the type to keep things bottled up.

"Let's eat," Mo said, breaking into Lesley's thoughts. "I definitely have to shower and change before going to class." She moved from Lesley's lap to her bed.

Lesley unrolled the top of the bag and lifted out one of the two remaining breakfasts. "Move your stuff so we can use the nightstand."

Mo slid the nightstand's top drawer open, scooped two pencils, several scribbled sheets of paper, and what looked like a half-eaten cookie into it, and pushed it shut. Lesley opened her mouth to make a crack, then closed it. *Not this morning.* She focused on emptying the bag, transforming the nightstand into a tiny table for two, although it was barely able to handle two breakfast plates, a jug of tziva and two mugs, and the cutlery and napkins. The two blueberry waffles ended up in Lesley's upturned plate cover, next to Mo on the bed. If they weren't careful, the tziva would end up on the bed, too. She lifted the cover from Mo's plate with a flourish and dropped it into the bag, now resting on the floor.

"Thank you," Mo said with a small smile.

"When will your parents be here?" Lesley asked when they were halfway through the eggs and hash browns. She hoped Mo would eat both waffles, but she'd force one down if she had to.

"I told them to come on the 16:20 train. I'll just have time to meet them and show them my room before my last class. They said they'd walk around until supper." She gulped down some tziva. "I could have told them to arrive on the 17:50, but I didn't want to meet them and then rush them to the mess hall."

"And they'll probably want to present you with your gift in private."

"They'll have time for that after supper."

Lesley smiled to herself. They wouldn't, but Mo didn't know that. Mo picked up a waffle and bit into it. They lapsed into silence again.

"I hope I'm a Chosen," Mo suddenly said. "Mama and Papa said it doesn't matter one way or the other, but three Solitaries in a row would be a bit much." She paused. "Do you think it would be better for me to be a Chosen?"

The question took Lesley by surprise. "Of course I do."

"Why?" Mo asked, staring at her plate.

The bathroom door opened. Kary emerged, rubbing her wet hair with a towel. "All done," she announced. "And I think I'll finish my breakfast in the kitchen."

"You don't have to," Lesley said.

"I have to finish the assignment for my first class. I need to think."

"Kary, I'm sorry about before," Mo said. "I'm an idiot."

"Well, you certainly didn't react the way I would have reacted to breakfast in bed. But I wouldn't say you're an idiot. Insane, maybe?" She bent down and examined herself in the mirror standing on her nightstand, then straightened. "Anyway, you two sorted it out, I take it?"

They nodded.

"Good. Be back in a sec." Kary disappeared into the bathroom again and returned a minute later without the towel, her hair combed. "Happy eighteenth, Mo. Lunch?" She picked up her half-eaten breakfast.

Mo glanced at Lesley.

"I have my flute lesson, remember?" Lesley said.

"Right. Sure, Kary."

"See you around 12:30, then. Bye." Kary slung her knapsack over her shoulder and left.

"I'm glad she's not mad at me," Mo said. "She's a good roommate."

"Do you want the other waffle?" Lesley asked.

"Oh, no, you have it." Mo held it out to Lesley, who forced a smile and reached for it. "But if you don't want it, I'll have it."

"It *is* your birthday," Lesley said, snatching her hand back.

Mo grinned. "So you want me to be a Chosen?"

"Yes."

"Because?"

"You want children, don't you?"

"Yeah." She chewed a mouthful of waffle and stared at Lesley.

Lesley's heart sank. Perhaps Mo wanted her to say they could be each other's Chosen? They could be, but what were the chances? They'd be setting themselves up for a huge disappointment if they allowed themselves to believe they were Chosens. Not only that, they had to trust the Chosen Council. Whenever Lesley considered, even for

an instant, what it would be like to spend the rest of her life with Mo, she reminded herself that the Chosen Council had already selected her best match. Her feelings for Mo were strong, so imagine how she'd feel about her Chosen? Well, she couldn't imagine it; she just knew it would be wonderful, beyond anything she'd ever felt before.

It would be best to stop any silly fantasies in their tracks. That was what Mo should be doing, and what Lesley was confident Mo would do. Once they—once Mo was well past her eighteenth, she'd forget about the Chosen Council for a while. And perhaps sleep a little better? Was that what it was all about? Then it was definitely best not to encourage any hopes Mo might be harbouring about them being Chosens. They weren't. Even though they lo—cared about each other.

"I want you to be happy," Lesley said. "I see you with a big family and a Chosen you love. I don't think you'd be happy being a Solitary."

"Is that what'll make you happy, Les? A big family and a Chosen you love?" Mo asked softly.

Lesley swallowed. "Yes."

Mo blinked rapidly and looked away.

"The Chosen Council knows what it's doing." Lesley reached out and squeezed Mo's fingers, then gently held onto them.

Mo pulled her hand away. She bit off another piece of waffle and slowly chewed it, but then dropped the waffle to her plate. "I think I've had enough. You want the rest?"

Lesley shook her head. Suddenly her breakfast wasn't sitting right. Eating blueberry waffle would be risky.

"I guess I should get into the shower."

"I can wait, if you want. We can walk to class together."

Mo stood. "No, that's okay. I'll feel rushed if I know you're waiting." She turned her back and started to sort through the pile of clothes on the bed.

Sensing that Mo didn't want to chat, Lesley gathered up the dirty dishes and napkins and returned them to the bag. She hesitated, then pressed herself against Mo's back and wrapped her arms around her. "See you in class?"

Mo nodded.

She kissed the top of Mo's head and searched for something reassuring to say. But there wasn't anything. Nothing Mo would want to hear, anyway. "Enjoy your shower." She forced herself to let Mo go, picked up the bag, and headed for the door.

"Les?"

She turned.

Mo met her eyes. "Thanks for breakfast." She shifted her attention back to the shirt she held, her face tight.

“Sure.” Lesley stepped into the hallway and shut the door behind her. Halfway to the stairs, she stopped. Maybe she should go back, tell Mo she understood how difficult today was and how it would be nice if they did turn out to be— No! She wasn’t weak in the Way. She trusted the Chosen Council, and so should Mo. Lesley squared her shoulders and continued walking.

Mo sat paralyzed at the desk, one of her knapsack’s straps in her hand. Fellow cadets rushed by, eager to leave the stuffy classroom. She should get moving, too—Mama and Papa’s train would arrive in ten minutes. But a courier from the Chosen Council could be waiting for her in the corridor, waiting to hand her a Solitary Notification.

Her hand tightened around the strap. She willed herself to stand. That morning, it hadn’t been so hard, not after Les had practically said she didn’t care one way or another if they were Chosens. But as the day had worn on, Mo had forgiven her. What else could Les have said? That whole part of the conversation had been stupid. She should have known better than to put Les on the spot and expect her to thumb her nose at the Chosen Council. Too bad they hadn’t had much of a chance to talk during their three classes together. Then again, what would they have said?

Mo slipped her arms through the knapsack’s straps and fell into step behind another cadet. As she left the classroom, she walked as close to him as she could without risking a strike for harassment. For once she was glad she was short. A courier scanning for her could easily miss her. But what good would that do? She was acting like those supposed half-wits in Papa’s story. She couldn’t escape the Chosen Council’s will. Nobody could, if they wanted to live.

She stopped. A Rymellan was coming toward her, a man she didn’t recognize. He didn’t look like an instructor, didn’t have a knapsack or books, didn’t seem familiar with the layout of the building. Her heart pounded. She couldn’t breathe. Everything around her looked distorted, except the man—the man a few feet away from her, closing fast. She clawed at her throat to assure herself that it wasn’t really collapsing and stared at him in horror.

He strode past, not even glancing at her.

She scurried away, not caring where she went. Somehow, she made it outside. She sucked in air until her senses returned to normal and her brain started to work again, the brain that had seized up the moment she’d spotted the stranger. Of course he hadn’t been a Chosen Council courier. They wore gold cloaks—his had been green. Wait! She frantically scanned the crowded courtyard for gold cloaks,

ready to duck back into the building if she saw one.

Her eyes welled up, making it impossible to see clearly. No, she wouldn't cry. Not here, in front of everyone. But Argamon, she was tired, and frustrated, and fed up with feeling scared all the time. Maybe it would be better if she did receive a Solitary Notification. If she was having such a hard time coping with today, how would she cope if she and Les were still together when they turned twenty-five, when their Chosen Papers could arrive at any time? Every day would be like today. Every flaming day!

"You all right, Mo?"

Mo turned toward the voice. Bruce, a member of her study group, peered at her. "You look lost."

"No, I was just wondering if I have time to drop off my bag before I go meet my parents." She made a show of checking the time on her comm unit. "But I don't think I do. I'll see you in class."

"Yeah, sure. See you in a bit." He strolled off.

Mo hustled to the train station and dashed down to the platform, arriving as the train pulled in. The doors slid open. The number of disembarking passengers in orange and light blue cloaks made it easy to spot her parents. Despite her mood, she smiled and waved.

Mama waved enthusiastically and made a beeline for her. "Happy birthday!" She held out her arms.

Mo clung to her, struggling to control herself. At least now she wasn't alone. If a Solitary Notification arrived, she'd have Mama's shoulder to cry on. And Papa's. He enveloped her in a hug as soon as Mama let go of her.

"You look tired," Mama said, studying her.

"I was up early . . . preparing for class."

"Have you lost weight?"

Papa touched Mama's arm. "Stop fussing."

"We should head over to my room," Mo said, half because it was true and half because she wanted to distract Mama. "I have a class in twenty-five minutes."

"Lead the way," Papa said.

"You're dressed normally," Mama said as they climbed the stairs to the waiting area.

"What do you mean?" Mo asked.

"You're not wearing a uniform. Or your cadet cloak."

"We only have to wear our cloaks when we leave the academy," Mo said. "And we don't get uniforms until our second year, after we've chosen our division." She figured they didn't want to waste time sewing uniforms for first-year students, when thirty percent of cadets failed their first year and were ejected from the academy. "To be honest, I feel like I'm still at the Learning Academy, except I live

here.”

“That sounds more like the Indoctrination Academy,” Papa said.

“Yeah, maybe.” She spent most of her time sitting at a desk, as she had at the Learning Academy, but the courses had a narrow focus, like the Indoctrination Academy. She also had scheduled physical exercise and practical sessions, like weapons training and combat manoeuvres. Okay, the Indoctrination Academy won.

They crossed the courtyard and came to a crossroads; Mo veered to the right. “I didn’t expect the academy to be so big,” Mama said.

“It’s huge. I doubt I’ve seen all of it. But the dormitory isn’t far.” Mo walked faster—she didn’t want to have to race off to class the moment they entered her room. “I’m on the second floor,” she told them as she pulled open the dormitory’s main door. A minute later, she ushered her parents into her current home with a sweep of her arm. “Here we are.”

Mama glanced around the small room and placed her hands on her hips. “Are you sure this is your room? Look how neatly those clothes are folded. I didn’t know you could fold clothes. Did you know she could fold clothes, Michael?”

“Mama!”

“I know your room had to be tidy at the Indoctrination Academy, and you’re managing to keep it tidy here. Why can’t you do that when you’re at home?”

Because there weren’t spot checks at home. An untidy room wouldn’t lead to a black mark on her military record or a rod across her back. Mama and Papa would tut and nag and eventually ground her until she cleaned her room, but that was it.

Papa laid his hand on Mo’s shoulder. “The important thing is that her room here is neat. We can talk about her room at home next time she’s home. She’s a big girl now, and a busy one. So let’s get on with it.”

Mama gave Papa a long look, then reached into her inner cloak pocket and pulled out an envelope. “This is from Papa and me. Happy eighteenth.” She held out the envelope, her eyes bright. “I can’t believe you’re eighteen already.”

Mo accepted the envelope and opened it. She had a good idea of what it would contain—a deposit into her trade account. No more allowances for her. She slid out a sheet of paper and unfolded it. Her eyes bulged. “Are you sure there isn’t an extra zero on the end?”

Papa leaned over her shoulder and read the amount. “Positive,” he said gruffly.

“I don’t know what to say. This is very generous.” Generous? She could never earn a credit in her life and still die with a healthy

balance. "Thank you." Mo reached for them.

"There should be another sheet," Mama said. "Underneath?"

Mo took a closer look. There was. She flipped to the second paper and read it, then looked at her parents in confusion. "This is a land deed." Land was usually presented the day before meeting with the Chosen Council, and only to Principals. "But I may not be the Principal. I may even be a Solitary."

"We said being a Solitary didn't matter, and we meant it," Mama said. "We did the same with Neil, Mary, and Matthew on their eighteenth. We know it's not customary, but it's only a small piece of land, barely enough to build a house. If you turn out to be the Principal of your Joining, we'll give you more."

"We just wanted to make sure you know that you can always come home," Papa said.

Overcome, Mo launched herself into his arms. Her cheeks felt wet, but she didn't care. As long as she had Mama and Papa, maybe, just maybe, she'd get through the next few years and learn to cope with losing Les without losing herself. "I love you. Thank you so much," she managed to say.

Papa cleared his throat. Mo let go of him and reached for Mama. "And you, too, Mama."

"I love you, too," Mama murmured, hugging her.

Mo sighed and drew back. "I know what I'm going to do with some of these credits."

"What?"

She wiped her nose on her sleeve before replying. "Take aviacraft lessons."

"Aviacraft lessons?" Papa exclaimed. "Why would you want to do that?"

Mo gave him a withering look. "Because I want to be a fighter pilot. Les figures knowing how to fly an aviacraft could give us an edge when we apply for the pilot program."

Mama raised her eyebrows. "Lesley plans to take lessons too? Does Adelaide know?"

Probably not. "I don't know. I mean, we've only talked about it a couple of times. We were waiting until I'm old enough to get a licence before seriously looking into it."

"And until you had enough credits?" Papa said.

Mo flushed. "Well, yeah, that too." Along with waiting to see if they still had a relationship; the same reason they hadn't rushed to request the same room, though neither of them had ever said that out loud.

Mama frowned. "Adelaide's still holding out hope that Lesley will switch to advocacy."

"I doubt that'll happen." Les seemed content at the academy. She hadn't mentioned advocacy once.

Someone knocked at the door. Mo tensed. Blood pounded in her ears. Fortunately, her apprehension was short-lived—the door opened and Kary peered into the room. "It's just me. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, come in, come in," Mo said, resisting the urge to run over and hug her. "These are my parents, er, Michael and Susan." Calling them by their first names never felt right, and probably never would. "And this is Kary, my roommate."

Kary nodded at them; they nodded in return. "Mo mentions you a lot," Mama said.

"She talks a lot about you, too." Kary stepped into the room. "I wasn't sure I'd get the chance to meet you later. I knew Mo was planning to bring you here before her class, so—"

"Flaming Argamon!" Mo checked her comm unit. "I forgot about my class. I have to go. I'll meet you back here in an hour." But then she hesitated. Running out on her parents would be rude, especially given their generosity. Then again, Lieutenant Bailey would have a fit if she was even a minute late—he didn't suffer latecomers very well. "Sorry, but I have to go now." She looked around for her knapsack, realized it was still on her back, and headed for the door. Oh, but—"Wait! I have to sign you in. You need a pass to wander on your own." Her shoulders sagged. "I'll be late for class."

"We'll stay here until you get back," Mama said. "Don't worry about us."

Kary shook her head. "I'll sign you in."

"You sure?" Mo said, trying not to sound too eager.

"Positive. I'm done for the day. Now go, before Bailey pops a blood vessel." She shoed Mo out the door.

Mo caught Les sneaking a look at her comm unit and quelled her irritation with difficulty. That was the third time. If Les was bored, she should excuse herself. Sitting with Mama and Papa wasn't the most exciting thing they could be doing, but it wouldn't kill Les to pretend she was interested.

"It's much quieter now." Mama sipped her tziva. "I could hardly hear myself think earlier."

"We could have eaten in my room," Mo said.

"Oh, no, we wanted the mess hall experience," Papa said. "And it gave us a chance to meet some of your friends."

All of whom had rushed off after wishing her a happy eighteenth.

Not that she could blame them—they weren't obligated to socialize with her parents. Only Les, being her girlfriend, was stuck with that apparently excruciating task.

"So what should we do now?" Mama asked.

Les leaned forward. "Do you want to see the recreation centre?"

So Les was paying attention. The recreation centre wasn't a bad idea, but it was already almost 20:00. It would take at least an hour to show them around the centre, a network of connected buildings. They hadn't said how late they planned to stay. "If you have time," she told them. "It's pretty big."

"We're here until at least midnight."

"You don't have to stay until midnight," Mo said, though she hoped they would. She wanted to celebrate with them if she was a Chosen, and lean on them if she wasn't. If she hadn't been at the Military Academy, they would have thrown her a party. They'd offered, but she'd turned them down. Rules were rules—the military wouldn't grant her an overnight leave for something as frivolous as an eighteenth party. So her parents had come to the academy, and she grew more grateful to them by the minute. They were keeping her mind busy. She hadn't thought about Chosen Council couriers for at least an hour. Okay, now she'd ruined it, but still. If Mama and Papa weren't with her, she'd probably be in her room, hiding under a blanket with the light turned out.

"Nice try, but you're not getting rid of us that easily." Mama plunked her empty mug onto her tray. "Let's go see this recreation centre. We've been sitting here for over two hours. Time to stretch our legs."

Mo's anxiety level rose as soon as they stepped into the cool night air. She'd be easy to find out here, if anyone was looking. "No Solitary Notification yet," she felt compelled to say, then wished she hadn't.

Mama put her arm around Mo's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "It's almost eight o'clock. I think we may have another Chosen in the family."

Mo wondered if Les, walking a few feet ahead of them, had heard.

"I thought you'd be a Chosen," Papa said.

"Why?" Mo asked.

He pursed his lips. "I don't know. I just had a feeling."

Her parents' certainty made her uneasy. Declaring she was a Chosen before midnight was tempting fate. "It's not midnight yet."

Papa nodded. "True."

Mo relaxed a bit when he said nothing more. "You see those buildings off to the right?" She pointed. "Those are the barracks. We

stayed there when we were here for the evaluation." Mama and Papa squinted toward them. "And coming up is the infirmary." She continued to point out landmarks, determined to keep the conversation away from Chosens and Solitary Notifications.

"You were right. This *is* big," Mama said when they arrived at the recreation centre.

Les held the main building's door open. "Let's start with the meeting rooms on the second floor."

Mo opened her mouth to ask why they'd start on the second floor when there were all sorts of facilities on the first, but Les and her parents were already climbing the stairs. "I take my violin lessons here, in one of the other buildings," she said, but they ignored her. "And Les takes her flute lessons."

Nothing.

"We may as well show you one of the larger rooms first," Les said as they strode along the second floor corridor. She started to open a door, then stopped. "Mo, why don't you lead the way?"

Les was acting awfully strange tonight. "Sure," Mo said, not wanting to be difficult in front of Mama and Papa. She pushed open the door and flicked on the light.

"SURPRISE!"

Time seemed to stop. Mo stood confused, staring at the multitude of faces peering at her. David and Kary. Neil and Matthew and Mary! Bruce and others from her study group. And was that Adelaide and Alan standing in the corner? *Happy Eighteenth, Mo* the banner strung across the back wall proclaimed. A party? For her? "Wow!" When everyone clapped, she realized she'd said it out loud. "I had no idea."

"You didn't suspect anything?" Les said.

"No. Who arranged it?" One look at her parents provided the answer. They were grinning from ear to ear like a couple of children. "Thank you," she mouthed to them.

"We couldn't let you turn eighteen without a party," Mama said, to another round of applause.

"So let's have a party," David shouted. "Put the music back on."

Bruce, nearest the comm station, turned and hit a key. Up-tempo music filled the air. Everyone quickly grabbed a partner.

"Can I have the first dance?" Les asked.

Mo responded by holding out her hand. "You must have helped," she said once they were out of earshot of her parents.

"I cleared it with Richmond and booked the room. Oh, and helped with the invitations. That's it. They took care of the catering, the decorations, everything."

Now Mo noticed the refreshment tables against one wall and the

streamers stretched across the ceiling. It was almost like being at the Dance Hall. Well, except the room was much smaller and supper hadn't been served, but who cared? This was her party, and the room was packed. She hadn't known she had so many friends at the academy.

"I can't believe you never let it slip," Mo said, reaching up and looping her arms around Les's neck. "I never would have guessed you were planning a party for me."

Les looked down at her. "I guess we all have our secrets." The next piece blared from the comm station. "I like this one." She spun Mo around. They fell into step with the music.

Mo silently thanked the station for saving her from what might have been an uncomfortable conversation and tried to concentrate on dancing. Tonight, it would be her turn to dance with everyone. Though that would leave Les available to dance with others, and there were probably a couple of women here who'd love to spin Les around the dance floor. Like Joanna, for example. Mo was convinced that Joanna had a raving crush on Les. The moment Les was without a dance partner, Joanna would move in, try to impress Les with her fancy moves and—

Tears prickled at Mo's eyelashes. What was she doing, tonight of all nights? Why worry about Joanna? What was the point? Les's Chosen would get her in the end. Who cared what happened until then? What did it flaming matter? *You're only the stand-in, remember?* Her feelings for Les . . . they didn't count, not to the Chosen Council. So let Joanna dance with Les. Some woman out there would eventually live with Les, sleep with Les, have daughters with Les, be everything to Les, so what would one dance matter?

She stopped dancing. Les looked at her, puzzled. Mo let go of her and drew back. "I should go properly thank my parents for arranging this."

"Now?" Les asked, her arm still around Mo's waist.

"Yeah." She turned and walked toward Mama and Papa. When Les's hand brushed hers, she grabbed it and held on. Les must be terribly confused. Mo knew she wasn't being fair to her, wanting her one second and rebuffing her the next. But her heart and mind were at constant war, and her behaviour reflected whichever was winning at the time. It would be easier for both her and Les if they agreed with each other. She needed to find the button that all other Rymellans apparently found—the one that would instantly turn off her feelings for Les and have her beaming brighter than the sun when the Chosen Council summoned her. If it summoned her—there were still a few hours to go until midnight.

Her parents, Adelaide and Alan, and her siblings stood in a

corner, deep in conversation. It figured that all the old people over twenty would stick together.

"My parents are here," Les said with surprise. She must not have noticed them earlier.

"You didn't know they'd be here?" Mo asked.

Les shook her head.

Mama's brow furrowed when she saw them. "I thought you were dancing."

"I sort of felt bad, running off without really thanking you," Mo said. "I mean, you didn't have to do this, but you did, and it was a nice surprise."

"Aw," Mama said, squeezing Mo for the umpteenth time that day.

Mo looked at Neil, Mary, and Matthew. "And I can't believe you're all here." She nodded toward Adelaide and Alan. "And you."

"I didn't know you were coming," Les said to her parents.

"We wouldn't miss Mo's eighteenth," Adelaide said indignantly.

Les's hand tightened around Mo's. Mo glanced at her, just in time to see Les smooth her features and resume the mask of indifference she worked so hard to maintain around her parents. Les had invited them to visit her twice, and had received excuses in response. Mo wished they hadn't come.

"Well, maybe you'll come see my room." Les paused. "When you have a minute."

Alan nodded, but Adelaide appeared to mull over the request. "Since we're here, I suppose we should," she finally said. "But it'll have to be soon. Unfortunately, we can't stay until midnight. We both have early cases tomorrow."

"Why don't you go now?" Mama said.

Adelaide shrugged. "We might as well."

Mo squeezed Les's hand. What she really wanted to do was hug her and tell her how much she loved her and how proud she was that Les had stood up to her parents and followed her dream. But such an obvious display of affection in front of their parents would mortify Les. Plus, Mo had never told Les that she loved her, not explicitly. She couldn't commit to Les, promise her anything, or plan a future with her. "I love you" would sound desperate and hollow—Les may even think her weak in the Way. If Les ever said it, Mo would definitely say it back. But Les never had, maybe because she didn't feel the same way, or maybe because she knew it would only be a reminder of the future they probably wouldn't have. Why say something that would only hurt?

"Maybe we can try dancing again later?" Les said, turning to Mo.

"I'd like that." She pulled on Les's hand. Les bent forward. "I'm

sorry about before," Mo said into Les's ear. "It's a weird day today, you know? I—"

"Hey, Lesley, you're not going to hog Mo all night, are you?" bellowed Carl, a fellow cadet. "There's a whole lineup of people waiting to dance with her. I'm first." Mo wanted to strangle him.

"Save me a dance," Les whispered, then straightened. "Perfect timing. I'm just about to take my parents over to the dormitory." She let go of Mo's hand and motioned for her parents to follow her.

"Happy eighteenth!" Carl offered Mo his arm.

Mo accepted it and smiled weakly, though her attention remained on Les, who was almost at the door. The room was filled with people, but the moment Les left, it felt empty.

Lesley popped a cheese-topped cracker into her mouth and watched Mo and the rest of the Middletons gather at the front of the room. She'd deliberately chosen to stand in a dark corner. She wanted to be alone, and Mo would have to strain to see her. Only four minutes to midnight. She doubted a Chosen Council courier would suddenly race into the room and thrust a Solitary Notification into Mo's hands, so it was official. Mo was a Chosen.

Good. That was what Lesley wanted. It would be easier knowing that Mo had a special someone in her future—for Mo, too. Now it was crystal clear that their relationship, while important, was temporary. To pretend otherwise would not only be futile, but cruel. Actually, it had been crystal clear since Lesley's eighteenth, but Mo seemed to be clinging to the possibility that they could be each other's Chosen. Lesley had no intention of saying or doing anything to encourage that notion. She cared too much about Mo to help set her up for disappointment. Reiterating that they must trust the Chosen Council and reminding Mo that they'd come to love their Chosens, as all Rymellans did, would be the best thing she could do for her. Though it would be hard, perhaps even hurt.

Maybe they should stop seeing each other? No, that would be silly. Were they that weak in the Way that they'd have to remain single until their Chosen Papers arrived? Other Rymellans didn't shun relationships. She and Mo weren't the only couple in the room without a future. As long as they were honest about where the relationship was going—nowhere—they had no reason to distance themselves from each other, especially when they were at the Military Academy and couldn't avoid each other. If they were still together in a few years' time, they'd have to cool things. Staying together now wouldn't do them any harm. Ideally, the relationship would naturally run its course

long before they turned twenty-five.

The music stopped. "Everyone count with us," Michael and Susan shouted together, clearly enjoying themselves. "Ten, nine, eight—"

Mo was scanning the room. Lesley stepped forward and waved. She didn't want Mo focused on her at midnight, but she didn't want Mo to think she'd left, either. Mo caught Lesley's eye and quickly shifted her attention to her parents. Lesley stepped back into the shadows.

"Three, two, one—" Everyone broke into applause. A few whistled. Mo suddenly disappeared, crushed between her parents as they embraced her.

Lesley couldn't help but smile. Mo's parents were so different from hers. She hadn't received land on her eighteenth—Mama and Papa always followed tradition to the letter. They'd only give her land if she turned out to be the Principal of her Joining. She hoped she was, because she couldn't imagine living anywhere but the Thompson estate.

Susan and Michael parted. Mo hugged her siblings and then stepped forward. "Shh," someone said over the noise. The applause petered out. Lesley shifted her weight to her left foot.

"I'm not one for speeches," Mo began with a smile—Lesley was too far away to see if the smile reached Mo's eyes. "So I'll be brief. It looks like I'm a Chosen. And I'm very happy about that." She shoved her hands into her front pant pockets. "It'll be a while before I find out who my Chosen is. Let's see . . . right now, she could be as old as twenty-three or as young as thirteen. No matter—"

"Thirteen and already taller than you," someone shouted.

The room exploded into laughter. Mo laughed too, but Lesley couldn't bring herself to join in, despite knowing the joke was only a bit of good-natured ribbing. Mo seemed to have taken it in the spirit intended, but as far as Lesley was concerned, whoever had said it should have kept it to himself.

Mo waited for the laughter to die down before continuing. "Yeah, I guess I can say that whoever she is, she'll probably be taller than me." She glanced in Lesley's direction. "But what I was going to say is that no matter how old she is, I'm sure we'll get along very well. The Chosen Council has selected her for me, and me for her. I'm sure I'll be happy with her, and I hope she'll be happy with me."

She'd better be, Lesley thought.

"My family . . . and I . . . will look forward to meeting her." Mo smiled again. "I can't really think of anything else to say. Like I said, I'm not one for speeches. The party has to end at 00:30 and it would be nice to squeeze in a few more dances, so I'll stop there. Except to thank my parents for the party. And, of course, Lieutenant Commander Richmond, for allowing us to have it." She nodded at him

and clapped; everyone followed her lead. "And now let's say the *Words Every Rymellan Knows*."

Lesley moved toward the centre of the room and joined the circle that hastily formed. "Disobedience means Death. Death to those who commit a Chosen Violation. Death to those who disobey. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way. Death to those who violate the Way!"

Everyone smiled and clapped. Mo nodded. "Thank you all for coming."

Another round of thunderous applause, this time for Mo. Lesley enthusiastically clapped her hands, so proud of Mo, who'd looked so composed in front of everyone after what had probably been a tiring and stressful day. Whoever heard the name Ramona Middleton during her notification meeting with the Chosen Council would be very lucky indeed. Lesley certainly wouldn't be disappointed if Mo was her Chosen. Wouldn't it be funny if she cared so deeply for Mo *because* they were Chosens?

She stopped clapping and dropped her hands to her sides. What was she thinking? Mo was *not* her Chosen. She must never allow that thought to enter her mind again. That it had in the first place was worrisome. Her hands clenched. She was growing weak in the Way.

Had she already forgotten what she'd learned at the Indoctrination Academy? Nothing was more important than serving the Way and trusting the Chosen Council. Not her military career, not Mo, not anything. Perhaps she should join the group that met twice a week to discuss the articles of the Chosen Tradition. Heather, the group's leader, had invited her to a meeting, but she'd declined. Reading the history of an article each week, along with commentaries by several advocates, would be a challenge to fit into her already busy schedule. Few first-year cadets belonged to the group for that reason. But now, she reconsidered. It would diminish the meagre amount of time she and Mo had to spend together when they weren't in class or studying, but the Way must come first. Tomorrow, she'd beep Heather and tell her she'd changed her mind.

She needed to put her relationship with Mo into perspective. They enjoyed each other's company. They trusted each other. And yes, they cared about each other. But they also had Chosens. Eventually Mo would look back on their relationship, see it for what it was, and realize how silly she'd been to think it would be difficult to leave behind. Lesley would do the same. She'd love and cherish her Chosen beyond anything she'd ever felt for Mo, and Mo's Chosen would share Mo's life in a way Lesley never had. And that was exactly as it should be.

Her fingers ached. She unfurled her hands and stared at the

angry red indentations her fingernails had left in her palms.

Mo watched the train pull out of the station, then left the platform. Even though she'd been up early and it was past 00:30, she felt wide awake. What a day! Was there any emotion she hadn't experienced? And to top it all off, despite spending the entire day hoping and wishing and silently bargaining with the Chosen Council, despair had tempered her relief when the clock had struck midnight and sealed her fate as a Chosen. A Solitary Notification would have ended it—the relationship, the agony, the idiotic fantasy she couldn't shake no matter how hard she tried. And oh, how she pitied her Chosen! Not only would the poor woman never live up to Les, she'd be stuck with someone who went through the motions while pining for someone else. *I hope she'll be happy with me.* Mo snorted. Yeah, sure. Good luck to her.

She was a coward, intending to remain with Les because a Solitary Notification hadn't arrived to force an end to their relationship. She should have the courage to end it now, tonight—to do what anyone with the tiniest amount of sense would do. After all, she wasn't a child. She was eighteen. An intense period of grief and adjustment would be better than clinging to a dying relationship. And what if they were still together when Les turned twenty-five? Every knock at the door, every sighting of a Chosen Council courier would send Mo into a panic. Not only that, if they couldn't break up now, how would they break up after they'd been together for eleven years? Unless their relationship eventually became a habit, a mutually agreed-upon, casual affair until one of them received her Chosen Papers, ending it would only become harder with time.

Splitting up now made sense. It was the right thing to do. It would be painful at first, but better in the long run. And she was a complete idiot, because despite everything she'd just told herself, she didn't want to do it. If she honestly believed that she and Les belonged together, why would she end their relationship?

There must be something wrong with her. She shouldn't feel like this, shouldn't hope for a particular Chosen. Other Rymellans didn't, or if they did, they hid it well. Had she hid it well, when she'd stood in front of everyone and talked about her Chosen, all the time thinking about Les?

"Argamon, Mo, what's with the grumpy face? You're eighteen! You're a Chosen!"

Mo jumped at David's voice. She hadn't seen him, even though he was directly in front of her. "I know. It's great," she said, forcing a

smile. Nobody could ever know about the turmoil inside her. Nobody. Anything she said could be misinterpreted, twisted to sound like she wouldn't accept her Chosen. That wasn't true. She would—she'd just never love her, that was all.

David returned her smile by leaping into the air. He landed on both feet with a thud, a wide grin on his face.

"What are you so happy about?" Mo asked, grateful for the diversion. "You'd think it was *your* birthday."

"I asked Lynn out on a date and she said yes!"

"Lynn? Lynn Fielding?"

"Yes!"

What could he possibly see in her? Okay, Mo could think of one attraction. Well, two. Was it just physical, then? "Wasn't it you who said that Lynn probably got into the academy because her uncle's a captain? You said she'd be more suited to working in the mess hall." He'd practically called her an airhead.

"Mo, we're going on a date, not Joining. Come on. She's a Chosen, I'm a Chosen. I want to have a little fun, pass the time until my Chosen Papers come. She won't be the only woman I date, believe me."

Was that what she and Les were doing? Passing the time?

"Will you help me decide where to take her?" David asked.

"You want to talk about that now?"

"No, tomorrow. It's almost 01:00, and you know what Richmond said. You're walking in the wrong direction."

"I want to say good night to Les. Is she still there?"

"Yeah, I think they've almost finished cleaning up. Anyway, I'm going. I'll see you tomorrow." He waggled his fingers at her. "Bye."

Mo jogged the rest of the way to the recreation centre, pulled open the door, and—oh! "All done?" she asked Les.

Les nodded. "Kary's still stacking chairs, but there's only a few left."

"We should go help."

"No, no, she said to go ahead. Richmond's given her until 01:15 to get back to the dormitory. And Ben's helping her."

"Ah. Best to leave them to it, then."

Les held out a rolled up piece of cloth. "Do you want it? It's the Happy Birthday banner."

No, she didn't. It would remind her of how stressful the day had been, not of how touched she'd felt because her parents and friends had cared enough to throw her a party. But she nodded and took the banner. In time, she might change her mind. If she didn't, she'd quietly dispose of it in a few months, when nobody would be offended.

"Let's go," Les said, motioning for Mo to move.

Mo stepped aside and held the door open until Les had walked past. "Thanks for cleaning up. I should have come back sooner," she said as they walked toward the dormitories.

"You were seeing your parents off. And it wouldn't have been very nice to make the guest of honour clean up after her own party."

"Well, thanks." Mo paused. "I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to dance again. Every time I started to look for you, someone grabbed me."

"That's okay. You probably wouldn't have found me anyway. Showing my parents my room took longer than I expected. And around fifteen minutes after we got back to the party, it was time to take them to the train station."

"How did that go . . . showing them your room?"

"Better than I thought it would. I think Mama was curious about it." Les shot Mo a bemused look. "She just didn't want to admit that she wanted to see it. The party gave her the perfect excuse."

"Did you mention the aviacraft lessons?"

"No. I didn't want to spoil things."

Would Les ever tell her parents? She didn't have to—the lessons were only a means to an end. They wouldn't be landing on the estates or flying anywhere near them, so her parents need never know. "Think they'll visit, now that they've been here?"

Les sighed. "I don't know. And I don't really care. It's up to them. I won't keep asking."

Mo was sure that Les did care, but didn't look at her. The whole conversation felt weird. Not awkward, not uncomfortable, just stilted. She felt as if she was making polite conversation with an acquaintance. They hadn't touched each other once, and they were walking with a respectable distance between them, as if they were already joined to other women.

The dormitories loomed ahead. Mo reached out and lightly touched Les's sleeve, wanting to break through the barrier that had sprung up at midnight before saying good-bye. When Les didn't move away, Mo veered over and slipped her arm around Les's waist. Les stopped walking. Mo drew back and looked at Les uncertainly. She dropped the banner when Les's arms wrapped around her. The ground was dry, the banner could wait. Mo threw her arms around Les's neck and pressed her face against Les's shoulder. She squeezed her eyes shut. She wouldn't cry. She would not cry. Les's hold tightened; Mo could feel Les's heart beating. How could the Chosen Council force them apart? How? They belonged together.

Suddenly it all became clear. Mo opened her eyes, excitement coursing through her. The Chosen Council would give her Les! It had to. Nothing else would make sense. She wouldn't be content with

anyone else—could never be happy without Les. So if she and Les weren't Chosens, then everything she believed in, everything she'd been taught, was a lie. And that wasn't possible. Everyone important to her, everyone she respected . . . they couldn't all be deluded.

She felt better than she had all day—no, than she had in weeks, months, even; ever since Les had turned eighteen. No more agonizing. No more worrying about meeting her Chosen. No more dreading a life without Les. She'd do what every other Rymellan did and trust the Chosen Council. She'd stay with Les, love Les, and look forward to receiving her Chosen Papers, her way of showing that inside, deep down inside, she truly believed that she and Les were Chosens, that it wasn't a pathetic, childish fantasy she clung to because she couldn't accept the inevitable.

"We have to go," Les murmured into Mo's ear. "Richmond was firm about everyone being in bed by 01:00, and it's probably that now. He might do a spot check."

Mo reluctantly pulled back. She smiled at Les and held her hand as they walked the remaining distance to the dormitories. For the first time in a long time, she felt optimistic about the future. *You're kidding yourself*, a little voice whispered. Well, maybe she was. Maybe her epiphany was her way of coping, a way to keep herself sane until she had no choice but to let Les go. Or maybe, just maybe, time would prove her right, and she and Les would stand next to each other in the Joining Chamber.