

# ALIEN ROADS

By Katherine Padilla

Book 2 of

## DOMINION OVER THE EARTH



Published by **Novaun Novels** at  
novels.zerosilver.com

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Katherine Padilla

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*Alien Roads* is a work of fiction. The characters and plots are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

*To Michael, David, Timothy and Samuel*

## SECOND WARNING!

This novel is not typical apocalyptic fiction. It does not attempt to present realistic speculation on the building up of Zion in the Last Days or on the creation and existence of other planets. The wild stuff that happens in the *Dominion Over the Earth* series is still just that—wild stuff. My work may be serious in tone, but it is fantasy. Period.

In the first book of the series, *Fall to Eden*, I stood on the springboard of an alien future that was, in many ways, connected to our own world—or at least our own world in 2003—and took the dive. In *Alien Roads*, I hit the water and don't come up for air. For that reason, you, as the reader, shouldn't expect much of anything I write in *Alien Roads* about the policies and procedures of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to reflect current policy, nor should you assume that anything presented is an accurate explanation of a scriptural concept or a literal interpretation of prophecy. While I'm careful in my world-building not to violate any basic Church doctrines as I understand them, my aim in writing these books is to entertain and provoke thought, and my standard for the creation of my alien future is plausibility, not probability, and certainly not prophecy.

In *Fall to Eden*, at the advice of my editor, I provided a glossary of both Mormon and fantasy terms to make it easier to differentiate between the real and the unreal in the novel. Since I believe that some readers will still find a glossary of this kind useful, I've included a slightly updated version of the original glossary at the end of *Alien Roads*.

Okay, now that I've made it clear that I'm just playing around and not reinterpreting Church doctrine or wresting scripture, let's have some fun!

Katherine Padilla  
October 2017

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## PROLOGUE: THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

When the Washington, D.C. Spaceport received the message to evacuate all non-essential citizens to the Nation's resort in the Grand Teton National Park, environmental technician Varia Day worked to repair an Awareness monitor that was used to examine luggage from the inside out.

Varia didn't leave with the first group, or with the second, or even the third. She had no desire to wait out the invasion in the mountains, where there was nothing to do but watch wildlife graze and snow fall. In Washington, D.C., at least, she could use her skills to ensure the survival of the Holy Nation of the Son of God.

She would give her life without hesitation for this righteous cause, just as her parents had and their parents also. An only child of only children, Varia had no one waiting for her in Teton Colony. She had been alone since the last invasion three and a half years before, the one that had sent her parents to the World Beyond the Stars. If she died doing her duty, no one would mourn.

The last airbus to head west left the spaceport the morning before Admirals Nexyun and Jaxzeran were due to attack, and all commercial flights out of the area had been cancelled. The only vehicles that would leave during those final hours would be shuttles carrying Star Force personnel to the fleet. Since the Tryamaz Spaceport was still not fully operational, this was no small number.

Varia had heard that even the Divine Prince Jahnzel would travel to his flagship via Washington, D.C. Prince Jahnzel walked into the control center while she worked with a team of technicians to test the readiness of all communication devices. All of the technicians arose when they saw him and stood at attention.

"Petty Officer Trinaav!" Prince Jahnzel cried. "Why hasn't this young civilian woman been evacuated to Teton Colony?"

Panic gripped Varia. Certainly Prince Jahnzel meant someone else. Her steel gray jumpsuit had no Star Force patch on the breast or rank patches on the shoulder, but it was in every other way the same as those of the other technicians. There was no reason he should have noticed her. She held her breath, wondering what reason Trinaav would give for her presence.

"Technician Day refuses to leave, my Prince."

He really *was* talking about her. Her cheeks grew hot, shame shadowing the panic, but she continued to stare straight ahead. An environmental technician's job was to keep ships and now spaceports operating so smoothly that no one would ever have a reason to complain, and the most effective way to do that was to do one's duty quickly, efficiently, and more silently than the hum of an engine. Varia worked as if she were a machine, and one didn't notice a machine unless it malfunctioned.

Prince Jahnzel and the men in his guard approached her in a blur of purple, white, and wine red. "Relax, Technician Day, and look at me."

His voice was a beautiful baritone and would have been pleasant to listen to had it not been directed at her. Varia couldn't relax, but she did allow her eyes to focus on Prince Jahnzel. She had never seen him this close and couldn't help but be awestruck. He smiled, his deep green eyes appearing worried but kind.

"Why do you remain in Washington, D.C., Technician Day?"

"To do my duty, my Prince."

"If you are so determined to make the spaceport's readiness your duty, why have you not enlisted in Star Force?"

"I am forbidden by law, my Prince. I am the only surviving member of my family left in the Nation."

"Then your duty, Technician Day, is to live, and if you stay here, you will become a target."

"The last airbus has already left, my Prince."

"That doesn't matter. Get as far away from the spaceport as you can in the time left and take cover."

Prince Jahnzel's words horrified Varia. She cast away all dignity and begged, "Please let me stay, my Prince. There is so much to do, and I can help!"

He grabbed her hands and squeezed, his face resolute. "There are too few of us left; we can't throw away lives needlessly. You *must live*, Technician Day. I'm going to lose too many warriors in this battle as it is. Don't give me another death to mourn. Go now." He released her hands and waved his own in the direction of the exit.

The words sent a thrill of joy through Varia, making her tingle all over. Not only did Prince Jahnzel want her to live, he would mourn her death. Could there ever be a Divine Prince as compassionate and charismatic as this? No wonder everyone loved him! Here was a man who would lead their people to safety.

The only place Varia could think of where she could wait out the invasion was in D.C. under the mysterious light. "Thank you, my Prince. I'll live. I promise."

Prince Jahnzel nodded and turned away. Varia hurried out of the spaceport and went to her dormitory, her mind racing through all of the possible modes of transportation. The metro trains had come out of the city the day the light had descended and had not returned. Since all of their routes required them to go through the city, they weren't running at all. Many buses were still running, but their schedules and routes were confused. Varia hadn't heard whether taxis were still in business and decided that was a good sign. Perhaps she could hire a taxi to take her to the border of the light.

Varia made a phone call and learned that she could, indeed, hire a taxi, but that the rates had gone up. While she waited, she synthesized an emergency kit and changed into trousers, a cotton shirt, and hiking boots. When everything was synthesized, Varia loaded it into a backpack and went to meet the taxi.

"Take me to the Sousa Bridge," Varia told the driver.

"You're the first person who's asked me to drive them *to* that alien light," the driver said as he pulled away from the curb. "I've driven plenty *away* from it."

"You've made some good money, I imagine."

"I sure have."

Varia relaxed against the back of her seat, relieved the driver hadn't asked her why she was going into the mysterious light. She wasn't sure why she was going into it herself, except that she was sure it would be safer than the spaceport.

Varia understood, contrary to what those ignorant savages believed, that the light wasn't a weapon engineered by Admirals Nexyun and Jaxzeran. If her Nation couldn't build a light shield like that, then certainly those heathens Nexyun and Jaxzeran weren't capable either. Even if they had developed such a shield, they would be using it to protect themselves, not the savages' communities! Varia decided that if the light wasn't a

weapon developed by Nexyun and Jaxzeran, then perhaps it was a weapon that could be used *against* them.

Varia fiddled with the strap on her backpack, tapped her fingers on her thighs, and redid the braided bun in her hair. The light began growing in her mind after entering the District, even though she couldn't see it yet. It burned through her with an odd sense of sweetness and warning. Somehow she knew that if she entered the light, her life would undergo a transformation. Was she ready for such personal upheaval?

Varia almost told the taxi driver to turn around and take her back to the spaceport, but her promise to Prince Jahnzel stopped her. If she wanted to live to provide posterity to the Nation, she had to venture into the light and face whatever great change waited for her there.

By the time Varia saw the uncharacteristic glow over the buildings, she felt the telepathic caress of Earth's planet-spirit and was shocked. She wasn't anywhere near arelada and shouldn't have been able to feel the spirit or emotion of any person or creature, much less a planet-spirit, particularly one as silent and docile as Earth.

In the two years Varia had been a technician for the Divine One's planetary repair team, Earth's planet-spirit had never communicated an articulated thought or rebelled against the manipulations in any way. Most of the terraformers had been relieved their job repairing Earth's land, bodies of water, and atmosphere had been so easy. Many had been bored and had eagerly accepted the assignment to go to the planet Eden and wrestle with a planet-spirit they knew would be unpredictable and interesting.

When the taxi pulled to the side of the street to let Varia out, Varia paid the driver, jumped out of the taxi, and ran to the bridge. Apparently everyone who had wanted to evacuate the light was gone. No vehicles of any kind traveled across the bridge in either direction, and she didn't see any other pedestrians.

Varia shouldn't have been able to feel Earth's planet-spirit at all, but as she crossed into the light, what had been a mere caress blossomed into an embrace of joy. She stopped on the bridge, the Anacostia River rippling like strands of diamonds under her feet.

"You are so beautiful, Earth," she whispered.

"So are you, Varia Day." The voice was deep and motherly.

Varia glanced around to see who had spoken. Seeing that she was, indeed, alone on the bridge, she asked, "Is that you, Earth?"

"You may call me Crystal."

"Planet-spirits aren't supposed to be able to speak, only communicate telepathically." And when they did communicate, they didn't do so with mere technicians. Whether the terraforming job was large, small, complex or routine, the planet-spirit had only one point of contact while doing the work—the terradirector.

"I am able to do many things now that I could not do before."

"What other new thing can you do?"

"You will see."

"How do you know my name?"

"You are the essential one who tries to be invisible. You aren't invisible to me."

"It's true that environmental technicians are essential, but we're *supposed* to be invisible. The Divine One's planetary repair team, in particular, was supposed to be invisible to the savages."

"But you try to be invisible to everyone, even the others like you. Why?"



"If someone had noticed me, I might have been sent to Eden. I didn't want to go there."

"What is Eden?"

"A planet near the Erdean Portal that is fully functional but uninhabited. We believe this planet is rebellious and difficult to manage."

"Why do you believe that?"

"Because it's in an important place and, to our knowledge, people have never lived there. That doesn't make sense unless the planet-spirit is dangerously rebellious."

"Then why do your people want to go there at all?"

"The Divine One wants Eden as an outpost."

"Do your people often encounter rebellious planets in their travels?"

"Sometimes, but usually not those so rebellious that people can't live on them. Most of the planets we go to were terraformed by our own people many centuries ago, before the fall of our Home World. The people left long ago to join the fleets, so there is no one left to monitor the planet-spirits on a regular basis. If there were, they wouldn't be rebellious."

"Then why didn't your people find a home on one of those planets?"

"We can only stop at those planets to lift resources." Varia had assisted in that work during her apprenticeship. They could recycle the elements of their existence indefinitely in the synthesizers, but they couldn't make new items out of nothing. Every time the rival fleets took or destroyed a ship, the Nation required metals for the new priming solution that would be used to manufacture parts to rebuild. "We had to abandon the last planet in our territory three and a half years ago; we're too few in numbers to hold even that. Our enemies would destroy us."

"What, then, makes your emperor think he can establish an outpost on Eden?"

"It's on the frontier of Gudynea's space territory. The rival fleets don't go there very often. If the colony can survive the rebellious planet-spirit, it will have time to grow and become strong enough to fight the rival fleets."

"But you just told Prince Jahnzel that you are ready to die. Why were you afraid to go to Eden?"

"I wasn't afraid. I just wanted to stay here. You are beautiful, Crystal, and I trust you."

"And I trust you, Varia Day."

"You do?" It was such a strange thing for a planet-spirit to communicate to a mere technician, and Varia wondered what it meant. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because it is something that you need to know. I will be working with the angels presiding over your nation to help you fulfill your glorious mission."

Varia was certain she hadn't heard correctly. "Who do you mean by 'you'?" Certainly the planet-spirit didn't mean her personally. What kind of 'mission' could she have that would require the planet-spirit and angels to work together to help fulfill it? Crystal's 'you' must mean the Nation.

When Crystal didn't reply, she asked, "Are you the light?"

Crystal still didn't reply, her telepathic embrace of joy dissipating into something more subtle, like a serene breeze, but Varia realized that she already knew the answer. Earth's planet-spirit somehow was the light. Of course it was. Varia remained on the bridge a little longer, basking in the peaceful feeling that flowed through her, making

her feel as if she were glowing. Eventually she pulled the map out of the backpack and started walking again toward the center of the city.

As she moved deeper into the city, she approached one of the neighborhoods renovated by the Guardians of Earth's Governments. Seeing the solar panels on the roofs of the buildings glinting in the eerie light unnerved her a little. She and her compatriots had never been able to understand how so many of the savages had been able to reject the Nation's technology in favor of primitive methods that weren't nearly as reliable or cost effective. Washington, D.C., in fact, was no different from the other world capitals she had visited, in that the primitive fought with the modern and existed in as much force, creating an environment of extremes that she and her compatriots had never experienced in their space travels—even the rival fleets used the same advanced technology the Nation did.

The Nationalists installed solar panels on their homes and businesses while the Federalists renovated their buildings with synthesizing technology; the Nationalists planted gardens everywhere while the Federalists fed themselves with convenient synthesized food; the Nationalists pedaled themselves around their new cooperative communities on bicycles, while wealthy Federalists zipped around the city in aircars. Now, as Varia saw the solar panels everywhere and realized just how perfect this imperfect solar technology appeared to be for this new light environment, she wondered how the Guardians had known the light would come, because they had to have known—luck didn't exist on that kind of scale.

Then again, the light came from spirit, not the sun. Perhaps the primitive solar technology didn't respond to the spirit energy at all and worked only with the sun. Perhaps the Guardians *hadn't* known the light would come any more than anyone else on the planet had.

The further into the city she walked, the more people she saw. They waved at her as she passed and sometimes conversed, eager to discuss this new phenomenon. Varia wondered whether the savages would be so friendly if they knew she was a Zarrist and decided it would be better not to enlighten them. Most believed the light had come from God to protect them from the invasion. It was a good enough explanation, and since the savages knew nothing about planet-spirits, Varia had no language to articulate a more detailed view of what was happening, even if she wished to do so.

The savages believed their theory was proved late that very afternoon when Nexyun and Jaxzeran invaded. Varia watched the combined rival fleets obliterate most of her Nation's ships on a television in an abandoned red brick house she found on Capitol Hill. The residence had been renovated with a synthesizing system and, therefore, possessed all of the comforts to which she was accustomed. Eventually the television screen turned to white noise as the invading fleets destroyed the satellites orbiting the planet.

Grief overcame Varia as she thought about all of her compatriots who had died. As she mourned, a gentle voice whispered, "Trust Prince Jahnzal, Varia. With him lies the hope for your future. Pray for Prince Jahnzal, Varia." The voice sounded like that of a man, not the planet-spirit. It had to be an angel or maybe God Himself, and Varia wondered why she had felt a spark of hesitation upon entering the light. This wasn't personal upheaval; it was a personal miracle! How could God, even for a moment, believe that she might prefer to reject these wonderful gifts?

Varia did pray that Prince Jahnzel would survive the battle and salvage as much of Star Force as possible. Then she stepped outside with others in the neighborhood and watched as projectiles and laser blasts fell on the dome of light over their heads and dissipated on impact. As Varia witnessed this miracle, she, like the natives who had remained in the city, was filled with the understanding that God really had magnified Earth's planet-spirit in this unprecedented way and that He was the source of the Light. People shouted with joy, wept, embraced, and thanked God that they and their homes were safe. Varia wept for the dead of her people and continued to pray for Prince Jahnzel. Very late, she returned to the house and slipped to sleep in a bed constructed of deep red-brown wood, her body exhausted but her mind charged.

She dreamed of a fortress-like white marble building with six gold spires rising out of the trees and walls between them that looked like battlements. A column of energy from the heavens pulsed into the building like a mammoth laser, making it glow like the sun. Amazed the building wasn't being vaporized by this raw power, she looked more closely and saw that the heavenly energy flowed out of the building, deep into the planet itself, turning the stone under the Light into unadulterated crystal that freed the planet-spirit to radiate from the ground surrounding the fortress of God. The heavenly energy was so powerful that the crystal expanded away from the Light like roots did from a tree, forming a network of crystal threads under even the dark parts of the planet.

Dazed, Varia contemplated the implications of this wonder. Was the glory of God really coming from Heaven and using this grand building as a conduit? Was it really turning the earth into crystal? Why? It was all so bizarre and yet so wonderful! The Light wasn't just hovering over the city, protecting people in a random way; it had a source and a focus and could be directed.

Even as Varia wondered if mere mortals could harness this kind of divine energy, she saw another vision, one of a huge white room with a high ceiling. Men and women of many ages, dressed in white, filled the room. Their eyes shone with the Light, and their voices combined with excitement and conviction as they sang:

Hark! the herald angels sing  
Glory to the newborn King!  
Peace on earth and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!  
Joyful, all ye nations rise;  
Join the triumph of the skies;  
With th'angelic host proclaim  
Christ is born in Bethlehem!  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
Glory to the newborn King!

Varia puzzled over the phrase "Christ is born in Bethlehem," but all of the references to angels made sense. She thought she could hear the voices of angels intertwined with those of the people in white. She opened her eyes wider and beheld that there were, indeed, other beings in the room singing, youthful men and women with flowing white hair, shimmering white robes, and countenances so luminous their skin, too, appeared white.

Following the eyes of the angels, Varia discovered that Christ Himself stood in the highest place, shining with the Light of Heaven. Varia dropped to her knees, awed by His brilliance. Her soul sang with the people of the Light:

Hail! The heav'n-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail! The Son of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
Ris'n with healing in his wings . . .

The Lord floated upward through the ceiling, toward a blue sky laced with tree branches. He smiled at Varia and extended His arms, silky orange and black wings like those of a monarch butterfly forming behind Him. Out of His wings emerged twin angels with wavy, shoulder-length hair and luminous emerald green eyes.

Varia perceived that these men were angels with a particular mission to minister to her people, not the natives. During their mortal lives they had been noblemen of the Holy Nation of the Son of God. They had to be the ones who presided over her Nation, the ones to whom Crystal had referred. She arose and began bending her knees in a curtsy, but before she could complete the motion, the angel on the right said, "Please do not bow to us, Varia Day. We are your brothers."

Startled, Varia realized that this was the voice that had urged her to pray for Prince Jahnzel. "You both look like my liege lord, the Divine Prince Jahnzel."

"You have chosen your liege lord well, Varia," said the angel on the left. "Jahnzel Zarr's faith is true."

The angel's words confused Varia. "I did not *choose* him. He is of the Divine Blood."

"His blood is no more divine than yours."

"That can't be true!"

"We would not tell you something that was not true." The angel's tone was gentle, not offended.

"I'm sorry," Varia responded, abashed.

"Jahnzel Zarr's faith is true, but he is in danger of being destroyed by despair. You have a mission at this time to give him a reason to live."

The request made no sense. "But there is no one lower in our Nation than those, like me, who were born to keep our ships habitable, and he is almost the highest. I have no power to do any such thing for him, even if I wanted to."

"Do you want to?"

The feeling that her life would undergo a transformation descended on Varia again, only this time, it nearly smothered her with the understanding that if she said yes, she would meet the prince again and he would yank away her comfortable cloak of invisibility as he had done on their first meeting, only this time, he would take it away forever. "I . . ."

"Well, do you?"

Varia almost turned to run, but an image of this brave and compassionate prince flooded her thoughts, and she found herself whispering instead, "Of course I do."

"Keep praying for him, and you will be shown the way. Remember, his blood is no more divine than yours is."

"I don't understand."

"You will once you find the House of God."

Excitement chased away Varia's panic. They had to be talking about the fortress of Light! "Where is this 'House of God'?"

Before either one of them could answer, the dream faded and Varia again found herself in the wood bed. As she awakened she knew that she had to find the "House of God" and, still a little stiff from the long walk into the city, didn't want to do it on foot. She had seen many people on bicycles and thought that had to be a better way to explore the city. Even the Federalist owners of the home she was using had bicycles. She had never ridden one, but could it be that difficult?

After eating two of those delectable oranges the Federalist owners had in their house, despite the synthesizing machine they owned to produce food, Varia took a bicycle that looked as if it would fit her to the street and gave it a try. She tried it again and again. Every time she thought about giving up, she recalled all of the children she had seen riding the contraptions. If the savages' children could ride these things, certainly she could! Eventually she figured out the balancing trick and rode around the block again and again to get used to it.

As Varia set out that morning, the image of the "House of God" refused to leave her mind. She spent many hours riding around the city and found nothing that even remotely resembled it. As the afternoon progressed, she noticed that everyone in the city seemed to be traveling east in automobiles, on bicycles, and on foot. This particular city often had the savages' helicopters in the sky above it, but there seemed to be more than normal that afternoon. Curious, she almost followed the crowds to see what was going on, but something inside of her compelled her to keep searching for the "House of God" instead.

Frustrated that she couldn't find it, she finally gave up for the day and began making her way back to the Federalist home on Capitol Hill. As she did, she approached several people and described the six-spired building to them.

"That sounds like the Mormon temple," a woman on a bicycle told her.

"What is 'Mormon'?"

"A religion."

Suddenly Varia remembered, shocked, that the Mormons were some of the strongest supporters of the Guardians of Earth's Governments. They hated her people and refused to have contact with them. How could they possess the building that was the source of the Light? Despite Varia's uneasiness about the Mormons, she asked, "Where is this Mormon temple?"

"In Maryland. You can see it from the Beltway."

"How do I get there?"

"There's a trail behind Union Station, next to the tracks."

"Where is Union Station?"

"On Massachusetts Avenue, just up the street." The woman pointed in the direction Varia should go. "It's a huge building with arches and pillars."

Like so many other buildings in the city!

"You can't miss it. Once you get on the trail, just follow the signs; it ends in Silver Spring. By the time you get there, the people you meet will know how to direct you to the temple."

"How far is it?"

"Ten miles, maybe. If you don't have to stop much, you could get there in about an hour."

“Thank you!”

Varia easily found Union Station, just as the woman said she would, and then returned to the house. She fell asleep, exhausted, and dreamed of the white fortress again. The dream proceeded in the same way it had before, only this time, she asked the green-eyed angels, “How can the House of God be in the possession of people who hate our Nation?”

“The Mormons do not ‘hate’ our people, but they are right to avoid contact with them. Your nobles have telepathic powers they do not.”

“Members of the Nobility possess telepathic power to be sure, but they aren’t dangerous!”

“On the contrary; they are very dangerous.”

“If the Mormons believe our people are so dangerous, how will I ever persuade any of them to communicate with me?”

“Describe your vision of the House of God, then ask the question that is in your heart.”

The angels’ words bewildered Varia. “What question?”

But the dream ended, and Varia awoke. She did exactly what the woman the evening before had suggested and headed north from Union Station on the trail next to the tracks. Varia crossed the border into Maryland in about an hour, and the other bikers she met in Silver Spring did, indeed, know how to direct her to the “Mormon temple.” She didn’t see the gold spires through the trees until she was on Jones Mill Road. She crossed under the Beltway and rode up the hill, not stopping until she was directly in front of the Mormon temple. The United States flag flapped at half-staff in the breeze above her head.

Varia leaned over the handlebars, panting. She had almost expected angels to greet her with songs, but instead, no one appeared to be on the grounds. Being early winter, even the birds were scarce. Something seemed to be going on at the building directly to her left, but since it wasn’t the structure she had come ten miles to find, she decided not to investigate.

The temple itself was constructed of gold-flecked white marble, with gold spires reaching into the sky that were, indeed, connected by what appeared to be battlements. Varia could feel the Light emanating from it rather than see it with her eyes.

Once Varia’s breathing returned to normal, she approached the huge, gated doors and looked for some kind of buzzer or bell. Not finding one, she began walking around the temple in search of another door. As she walked, a middle-aged man wearing a gray wool coat approached her. “May I help you?”

“Do you work here?”

“Yes. I watch over the temple.”

The man’s words were so absurd that Varia protested, “But I thought angels guarded this fortress of God!”

The man smiled. “We mortals help where we can.”

Varia felt her cheeks grow warm. “I’m sorry. It’s just that . . .” She hesitated, remembering the counsel of the twin angels. Now that she was standing next to a tangible building talking to a mortal security guard, her dream of angels seemed outlandish. If she related it, would he think she was crazy?

As if in answer to her thoughts, the man asked, “What brings you to the temple, sister?”

Varia told him about her dream and sang the song the angels had sung in the mammoth white room in the temple. When she was finished singing the song, she recognized the question that was in her heart and asked, "What do the words 'Christ was born in Bethlehem' mean?"

Understanding lit the guard's face. "You're a Zarrist, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'm not dangerous! I'm of low rank and am forbidden to communicate telepathically unless I need to because of my job, I swear! Please tell me what it means that Christ is born in Bethlehem, because it doesn't make sense, because Christ just *is*, He couldn't have been born, could He?"

Compassion flowed into the man's eyes. "How can it be that your people have been on Earth these three years and you haven't learned the story of Christ's birth?"

"Is it so common?"

The man nodded.

Varia sighed. "I studied your language, but not your holy writings. I was too busy with my work."

The man patted her arm in a kind way. "It's all right. Your questions will be answered." He pointed in the direction of the busy building Varia had seen near the flag pole. "Your people are gathering at the visitors' center."

Varia almost didn't believe it. "There are others?"

The guard began walking toward the visitors' center. "Yes. They've been arriving since yesterday."

Varia walked with the man. "How many?"

"I've lost count."

"And your people don't mind?"

"No, of course not. This is a unique situation."

The guard left her at the visitors' center in the care of a middle-aged woman. The woman took her into a room full of beautiful little icons, and Varia learned that the icon displays were representations of Christ's birth from all over the planet. The story Varia heard of Christ's birth awed her, and she went through the remaining displays at the visitors' center wondering if the savages had any idea how blessed they were to have had Jesus Christ actually born on their planet.

Many of her people lingered at the visitors' center, just as the temple guard had said, although Varia didn't know anyone there. She learned that her people were gathering at the ambassador's home in Chevy Chase and that aircars were shuttling people there. Since she had a bicycle and didn't need the aircar, and since she wasn't ready to leave the temple yet, she sat down in a chair in front of the large window looking out over the temple. Behind her stood a large statue of Christ, and she could see its reflection in the glass in front of her.

As Varia gazed at the reflection of Christ, thinking about everything she had learned and felt since she had come into the Light, the still, ethereal form of Christ solidified into a glorious, glowing, tangible Man. Men, women, and children dressed in archaic clothing gathered around Him, and Varia understood, astonished and thrilled, that somehow she was seeing the Ancient World Diron as it had been fifteen hundred years before when Christ had come down from Heaven and established His theocracy by taking Myri Preysou as His wife.

Throbbing with excitement, Varia scoured the multitudes for a sign of the Holy Wife. The Lord laid His hands on the head of a little girl and healed her broken arm, and

then the crowd parted as a group of important-looking people approached, bearing a canopied stretcher.

The stretcher-bearers laid their burden on the ground at the Lord's feet, while a woman dressed in a voluminous blue silk gown knelt before the Lord, weeping. "Please, Dear Lord, heal my sister. She was ill with the Fever and died this morning. She carries the babe of the late King Deryhan in her womb."

The Lord parted the white satin curtains and looked upon the woman, smiling. "Arise, Queen Myri Preysou and be healed."

How strange! Myri Preysou had been married to a King Deryhan during the Visit and had been carrying his baby? Why did history say nothing of this first husband and his child?

Riveted to the scene, Varia watched as the Holy Wife extended a fair hand through the curtain, followed by delicate feet in white slippers. She emerged carefully, her long, wavy blond hair draped down her back. Varia could see that she did, indeed, have a baby in her womb. The Holy Wife looked up at the Lord in gratitude, her eyes the same deep green possessed by so many of noble blood. She and her party worshiped at the Lord's feet and departed only when He ascended into Heaven.

Varia watched Him return again and again, but except for that one time, the Lord did not converse with the Holy Wife. Varia waited to witness a marriage, but it never occurred. Instead, the Lord called twelve men, the "Chosen Witnesses," to lead the church in His absence. He didn't establish a new civil government at all.

Before Varia could ponder the implications of what she beheld, the Lord ascended to Heaven for good, and Time began moving at an accelerated pace. Varia watched Queen Myri Preysou and her entourage return to their kingdom and teach their people the words of Christ. Within two months, Queen Myri delivered twin sons—Zarr and Vahro.

The people of the land rejoiced at the births of Zarr and Vahro and dubbed them the "Miracle Princes." Their mother taught them that they owed their lives to Jesus Christ, and as they grew into manhood, Varia recognized them as the twin angels who had emerged from the Lord's wings. As Varia watched, her amazement increased. How had she, an orphan of low rank, become so privileged to receive two visits from the fathers of her Nation?

Zarr and Vahro became holy men who were both called to be Chosen Witnesses to replace two of the original men the Lord had called to lead the church. Since Zarr and Vahro's ecclesiastical duties took the bulk of their time, Zarr's eldest son acted as king. Under his reign the kingdom so flourished that all of Diron beheld in wonder and pronounced it blessed. Some even went so far as to say it was the most chosen of all kingdoms and that the Lord Himself could not have sired such holy children as Zarr and Vahro and their posterity.

When at age eighty Zarr and Vahro and their wives left the kingdom and never returned, leaving no evidence of their deaths, the people deduced that their "Miracle Princes" had been granted the gift of immortality and taken into the bosom of Jesus.

A hundred years after the departure of Zarr and Vahro, the people of the land were referring to them as the Immortal Princes and Queen Myri Preysou as the Blessed Mother. The kingdom spread as other nations were deceived into believing that the Zarrists' "blessedness" gave them the right to rule all Dirons.

Five hundred years after the Visit, Myri Preysou had become the Holy Wife of Christ and had borne Him the Divine Sons Zarr and Vahro. The monarchy had evolved into a



theocracy, and the kingdom had become an empire that governed the planet and was beginning to expand into space.

One thousand years after the Visit, the majority of Dirons rejected the Zarrist nobility's claim to divinity and threw them out of power, breaking into many tiny nations once again.

Fifteen hundred years after the Visit, only a few thousand faithful citizens remained of the once glorious Holy Nation of the Son of God, and one of those faithful had been Varia Day.

## PART 1: DESPERATE CIRCUMSTANCES

### CHAPTER 1: MIND BOND

Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro walked to the Divine Emperor's office in Teton Palace, her heart fluttering with anxiety. No matter how often Jahnzel tried to convince her that they had nothing to fear, that they were for each other and always would be, Myri knew they would have to give each other up for the survival of their race. So many others had been invited to make this sacrifice, and the Nation's status had never been as grim as it was now.

As soon as Jahnzel emerged from his brother's office, Myri knew they had argued. His face was flushed, his brow was damp with strain, and his eyes flashed with anger.

Dread nearly submerged Myri. How could he be angry about this request without being angry with God Himself? If anger sapped his faith, he would lose his divinity too. If a Divine Prince couldn't remain faithful, their Nation was doomed for sure!

Jahnzel clasped Myri in his arms. She tried to keep herself from becoming frantic but couldn't. *Please tell me that it isn't what I suspect.*

Jahnzel grunted. *The great Lezz Zarr himself will tell you his plan.*

Myri slid her fingers into his long brown curls one last time. *Please don't put it that way, darling. It makes you sound . . . blasphemous.*

*I'm not only a blasphemer, I'm a bona fide apostate.*

Myri threw her arms around his neck. *Don't be stupid!*

Myri felt his lips on her neck, then her cheeks. *There are more choices than you realize, Myri. You can tell Lezz no.*

*But the contract between our families doesn't protect us from a decision by the Divine Emperor during a time of extreme peril.*

*That's open to interpretation. Your mother is the daughter of an emperor! The two of you can fight this!*

As the daughter of Arulezz's great-grandfather, the late Emperor Denahz Zarr, her mother did have a great deal of influence in the Nation. Perhaps what Jahnzel believed was true, but his suggestion still made Myri uncomfortable. *To fight it would be selfish when so many others have made the same sacrifice.*

*This is a sacrifice that none of us should have had to make!*

*Your father believed otherwise.*

*Lezz is not my father. What he's commanding you to do is wrong! You have no idea how much power you have, Myri; you can fight him!*

Hearing the door to Arulezz's office open, Myri tore herself away from Jahnzel. Smoothing her silvery green gown, she turned to Arulezz and curtsied. *At your service, Divine One.* His short black hair and dark American suit had never appeared as incongruent as they did now at this, her first official meeting with him in his role of Divine Emperor. A faceted arelada prism still hung from a gold chain around his neck, and he wore a purple brocade sash around his waist. The diamond jewel that should have been in his hair to display his rank as a nobleman, however, pinned the sash in place. Myri inwardly cringed. The combination of the American with the ancient had never been so jarring.

Arulezz dismissed Jahnzel with a look. Jahnzel stormed away without a backward glance.

Arulezz took Myri's hand and kissed it. *You have no need to be so formal with me, Myri.*

Myri bowed her head. *Your new position makes taking such liberties feel awkward.* He hadn't stopped being her cousin or her sister's husband, but it still felt strange.

Arulezz patted Myri's hand. *Who can call me "Lezz" if not you, my sister-in-law and a woman of the highest nobility?*

Myri allowed him to lead her into his office, having difficulty shaking away her agitation. She would give up Jahnzel for God alone. Only the Divine Emperor Himself could make the request, not a cousin or a brother-in-law. *Jahnzel claims that it is "Lezz Zarr" who asks us to make this unbearable sacrifice, not the Divine Emperor.*

Arulezz motioned Myri into a chair across from his desk, smiling. *My informality has made you bold—more like the Myri I've always known.*

Myri's defenses dropped. Perhaps a man could be both a Divine Emperor and a close family member. She would have smiled had she not been so upset by the prospect of losing Jahnzel. *I'm not sure the bold Myri is the one you wish to communicate with right now.*

*Yes it is, as a matter of fact.* His expression became serious. *I have a mission for you that will require every bit of boldness you possess.*

*I daresay it's a lack of squeamishness that will be most required, not boldness. You do want me to take a savage as a consort, don't you?*

*No, God wants you to marry a man who will one day be an admiral and saint.*

Myri felt as though her heart would stop. *Our situation must be desperate indeed if you're planning to elevate one of the natives to such a position.*

*Would I separate my brother from his beloved were it not absolutely necessary?*

*No. Of course not.*

*We're on the verge of extinction, Myri. If our race is to survive, all of age not married must take native spouses. But you know this. Your own gift of prophecy has whispered the truth to you already. You knew before I summoned you what I would ask.*

Myri's eyes filled with tears. *I knew.*

Arulezz handed a tissue to Myri. *My father loved you like a daughter and dreaded this day, but he prepared for it. He searched for many months and took special care to find a chaste native for you, one who would appreciate your purity and treat you tenderly.*

Myri and Arulezz's father *had* shared a bond of affection that transcended the actual family tie. Technically Myri and the late Divine Emperor were first cousins, but he had been much closer in age to her mother and had been more like a brother to her mother than a nephew. Myri had known for some time that the late Divine Emperor thought of her and Jesalya as the daughters he didn't have. Since their own father had died, he had filled the fatherly role for them. She already missed him dreadfully. How could everything have gone so completely wrong? *Rumor whispers that it was a Novaunian ship that shot you and the Divine One down.*

*Yes, it was a Novaunian frigate.*

Myri dabbed her cheeks with the tissue Arulezz had given to her. *Why in the galaxy were the Novaunians even here?*

*To pick up some agents. Your future husband, in fact, is the brother-in-law of one of them.* Arulezz transmitted a thought to activate the telepathic transmissions recorder.

The image of a sturdily built young man with very short dark hair appeared. *This is David Pierce, Brigade Commander of the United States Naval Academy.*

Myri shuddered. Pierce possessed an attractive military bearing to be sure, but his nearly-bald head made him ugly. She didn't know how she could ever become attracted enough to such a man to bear his children, even if she weren't in love with Jahnzel. Suddenly Jahnzel's advice to tell Arulezz no didn't seem so outrageous. *What did Jahnzel mean when he said there were other choices?*

Arulezz studied Myri's face for at least a minute before responding. *Jahnzel wants our people to join with the domies.*

Myri had felt Jahnzel's desperation and knew it was true. Still, to take such a course would be to admit defeat and dissolve the Holy Nation of the Son of God forever. Sadness sank into Myri's heart. Jahnzel really was an apostate. She had already lost him. *God have mercy on his soul.*

*Do you think, then, that you can marry this native?*

Myri had never felt such despair. *I can do anything God asks me to do.*

\* \* \*

Arulezz Zarr dismissed Myri and began pacing in front of the picture window in his office. What did Jahnzel think he was doing, telling Myri there were "other options"? What would he tell her now that Arulezz had revealed his plan to them both? Jahnzel had left him with the feeling that he had accepted—albeit grudgingly—Arulezz's decision to remain on Earth and marry Myri to David Pierce. So what had Jahnzel hoped to accomplish by telling Myri about these "other options"?

The more Arulezz thought about it, the more unsettled he became. Jahnzel wielded a powerful influence in the Nation, and so did Myri. If Myri began feeling any inclination at all to go to the domes, Jahnzel would not be capable of letting the matter rest. Together they would put pressure on him to change his mind. If that didn't work, they might take their ideas to the Nation, despite Jahnzel's promise to the contrary.

Was Jahnzel right? Should he make going to the domes on the Home World an option? Arulezz couldn't fathom it. Such a course would do more than break the Nation's pride—it would strip it of its identity and purpose. It would mean extinction by assimilation instead of death.

No. Extinction of any kind was not an option. Tohmazz Zarr had brought the Nation to Earth to survive, and as long as Arulezz was Divine Emperor, it *would* survive. He simply had to keep Jahnzel from having a reason to rebel, and the only way to do that was to do everything in his power to make sure Myri remained faithful.

Now that it came to it, Arulezz didn't know if Myri could go into that Mormon city and remain loyal to him. The light had a strange effect on those who became ensnared in it. Those who had managed to escape it had returned with stories of disembodied voices and waking visions that almost always urged treason. The treacherous nature of the light, combined with Myri's abhorrence of David Pierce and her love for Jahnzel, might make going to the domes palatable to her after all.

As Arulezz's mind churned, a thought entered that was almost too terrible to contemplate—he could bond Myri's mind to his. The harder he tried to expel the idea, the more it clung. Myri wanted to remain faithful, and she didn't want to join with the

Malrezzites. A little bond would simply strengthen the ideals and desires she already had. It wouldn't change her essence or even fight with it.

Still, Arulezz's father had never used the bond on a citizen, and Myri was more than a citizen. She was a noblewoman, a high priestess. To even consider such an act was sacrilege, and if Jahnzel ever found out, he would organize a coup d'état that might well succeed.

Something inside of Arulezz urged him to summon Jahnzel and Myri that moment to withdraw their new assignments. There would be no binding a high priestess, no coup or even a debate. There would also be no David Pierce or secrets of the mysterious light shields. The Nation might survive as this little colony in the mountains, but would it conquer?

A weak leader might humble himself in such a way, but Arulezz was not weak. He couldn't admit he was wrong to someone like Myri who not only believed in his divinity but in her own. Divesting himself of his divinity would destroy hers also.

No, this Divine Emperor would empower his high priestess with a bond, not abase her with an admission of error. He would just have to figure out a way to do it so that neither Myri nor Jahnzel would ever find out.

\* \* \*

Jahnzel left Myri in the Grand Hall with Arulezz and bounded up the stairs to his apartment to get control of his anger and think. He paced in front of the huge arched window in his sitting room, the falling snow silent yet restless in the wind.

He went over and over his discussion with Arulezz in his mind and had no choice but to concede that yes, their father had taken great pains to choose a suitable husband for Myri from among the savages. Jahnzel didn't doubt that his father would have issued the ultimatum himself had he lived. Jahnzel's anger toward Arulezz lessened as he forced himself to accept that fact.

Feeling compelled, Jahnzel slipped the disc Arulezz had given to him containing information about David Pierce into the telepathic transmission recorder. Images and assessments sank into Jahnzel's consciousness within minutes.

He was from an obscure Mormon family in Kansas, the youngest of five children. His father and two of his brothers were in business for themselves as electricians. After the brothers came into the business and received the requisite training, the business gradually switched to solar panel installation almost exclusively. Because of this skill, the members of the Pierce family had been some of the first Mormons to join the Kansas City Temple Community. The Pierce men had installed solar systems in many of the homes in that community.

David, however, had not been interested in joining the family business and had, instead, enrolled in the United States Naval Academy and studied physics in preparation for a career as a submarine officer. He was an excellent athlete, an extraordinary student, and gifted military leader. He treated his subordinates in a stern but just way and they, in turn, liked and respected him. He thrived on order and had never been officially disciplined.

The agent who had observed him had never seen him do anything dishonest or immoral. He was as chaste as a saint and had never even been observed looking at lewd media images, which was unusual for an American man. Women were attracted to him,

but he kept them at a distance—all but the girl who resembled Myri, Ashley Carroll, and even she had occupied no more than an iota of his life.

He spent thirty minutes a day reading the holy writings of his religion, went to worship services every Sunday, spent an hour in a religious study group once a week, and attended the Mormon temple twice a month.

David Pierce was determined and passionate, impeccable and impressive—the kind of man Jahnzel liked to appoint to his own staff. If ever there was a perfect native for Myri, David Pierce was it. On the other hand, if there existed a man who had the power to resist Myri’s noble strength and beauty, David Pierce was that also. This was a man who would and could fight a cell bond and win.

Then again, he was weak at the moment, having been injured in a riot Jahnzel suspected had been instigated by his father through the cell bonds. Jahnzel removed the disc from the telepathic transmissions recorder and put it into a drawer, more disgusted than ever with the despicable course his Nation was on and downright outraged by Arulezz’s plan to send Myri to Kansas City to bond David Pierce’s mind.

Jahnzel had, from the beginning, disagreed with using the cell bonds on the natives, but he had placated his conscience with the fact that the natives, albeit unknowingly, did open their minds to receive the bonds and could, if they desired, fight the subliminal messages that came through them. Bonding a physically and perhaps even mentally helpless man, however, was something different. This was an act akin to rape, and no matter how Jahnzel looked at the situation, he couldn’t reconcile it with his conscience.

With or without one of those vile cell bonds, Jahnzel couldn’t believe that this Mormon David Pierce could ever value Myri more than he did. Pierce would appreciate Myri’s beauty and might even grow to love her, but he would not understand her upbringing, perspective, or role in the Nation. Unless she accepted his religion, she would never be quite good enough by his strict standards, just as David would never be quite good enough by Myri’s.

Jahnzel couldn’t help but believe that if this union occurred, it would cause a great deal of unhappiness to both Myri and David Pierce. How could entering into such an incompatible marriage ever be the will of God? By the same token, how could this mission of his father’s to join their race to these Earth savages ever be the result of Divine decree? It just couldn’t be, and that was that. Somehow he had to get his brother and Myri to set aside national pride long enough to see reason.

Jahnzel left his apartment and strode to the opposite wing of the Palace, where Myri lived with her mother. The Divine Princess Francezka Zarr-Vahro spent her mornings teaching priestess novices at the Divinity Institute and therefore wouldn’t be home. Myri would have to stop by her rooms for her coat and boots before returning to the Institute herself, which would provide Jahnzel the perfect opportunity to communicate with her alone.

Jahnzel let himself into Myri’s apartment and waited for her on the couch in her sitting room, watching the snowstorm from her large, arched window. Jahnzel didn’t have to wait long.

When Myri saw Jahnzel, she stepped backward toward the door, blood rising into her pale cheeks. *You shouldn’t be here, Jahnzel. Have your apostate desires torn all feelings of propriety from your heart?*

Myri’s discomfort pained Jahnzel, but he had to press forward. Despite his assurances to Arulezz, Jahnzel couldn’t bring himself to give Myri up so easily. He arose

and walked toward her. *Please don't page your mother. I need to communicate with you alone.*

Myri reached to open the door. *I won't allow you to compromise me. We can communicate somewhere else, as we always do.*

Jahnzel had long hated the formality he and Myri had been forced to adopt. He yearned for a closer companionship with her that their lack of time alone together could not possibly produce. *Is it more a disgrace to be found here alone with me than to marry a savage?* He communicated with as much gentleness as he could manage.

Myri released her hold on the door and looked away in confusion. Obviously she did consider marriage to a savage a more shameful prospect than a few innocent minutes alone with him. *Why are you here?*

Jahnzel took her hand and squeezed it, thrilling in the smooth warmth of her skin. *Because I need you to open your mind.*

Myri yanked her hand out of his as if burned. *My mind will forever be closed to the possibility of joining the domies!*

*Do you have any idea how many people live under the domes now?*

*During the survey eight years ago, it was just under thirty million.*

*Do you know how many remain of our Nation?*

*No. The Divine One didn't give me a number.*

*Just under three thousand.*

What little color Myri had in her cheeks disappeared. She stepped forward, fumbling for a chair. *We aren't desperate; we're desolate.*

Jahnzel helped her into the chair, afraid she might faint. *No, it's worse than that. We've been abandoned.*

Myri shook her head. *There must be another explanation. It's not up to us to question God.*

Jahnzel sat down in a chair near hers. *It isn't God I question. It's our so-called divinity I question.*

Understanding came into those beautiful green eyes. *You wonder why the Divine One's immortal genes didn't save him from being killed by the Novaunians.*

*No, I wonder how we, or any of the other nations in exile, can be "chosen" when the domies outnumber us all.*

*You would rewrite history and make Malrezz a true prophet?*

*What makes our history right and that of the Malrezzites wrong?*

*Our records have been meticulously kept since the Visit. We cannot argue against the facts.*

*The Malrezzites make the same claim. Who's right?*

Myri averted her eyes. *My calling requires me to help people work through their doubts, but I can't fill this role with you.* She stood up and walked to the door.

*We don't have to believe in the history of the Malrezzites to go to them for aid.*

She turned to face him again, her gaze accusing. *You would humble our people to the dust just so that you and I could marry?*

*With only two battleships, a cruiser, a flagship, a transport, a mere twelve sub-light vessels, and fewer than three thousand people, we're less than dust, Myri!*

Jahnzel couldn't help but think of the frigate that should return any day from Eden with messengers to assure him that the planet-spirit had been bridled. Since the colony's survival depended on maintaining complete communication silence, using the frigate as

a mail ship had been necessary. What a help that frigate would be now, and what a relief it would be to learn the colony was viable!

*You aren't the Divine Emperor.*

*No, but if you refuse to do what he asks, then the two of us together might be able to persuade him to consider all of the options.*

For a flicker of a moment, Myri almost looked as though she would agree. After several moments of pondering, she shook her head. *I would rather marry a savage than go with you to the domes. I'm sorry, Jahnzel.*

Myri's thoughts chilled Jahnzel. She could not possibly feel the passion for him that he felt for her or she could not have so quickly dismissed the possibility of "other options." Then again, for Myri to defy the Divine Emperor and consider other options would be to deny her heritage and redefine who she was. Could there ever be a love strong enough to drive a person to change his or her essence so completely?

Confused and heartbroken, Jahnzel forced himself to stand up and join Myri at the door. *There's no need to be sorry, darling. I didn't expect you to feel otherwise, but for my own peace of mind, I needed you to communicate it to me.*

*Her eyes glistened like ice. I'll always love you, Jahnzel.*

Her declaration did nothing to appease him, because he didn't believe it. She didn't even love him now—not enough to trust him and certainly not enough to want to be with him at all costs.

Her eyes seemed to thaw, spilling tears onto her cheeks, and her lips quivered. For a moment, Jahnzel thought—he *hoped*—she would throw her arms around him and let him comfort her as she wept.

Myri pursed her lips but in every other way maintained her composure. She removed the ornate arelada brooch she wore at her throat in token of their betrothal and placed it into his hand. *Please go, Consecrated One.*

Not certain he even wanted her anymore, Jahnzel leaned toward her and brushed her wet cheek with his lips in farewell. *I will pray that your native gives you all the happiness you deserve.*

\* \* \*

Arulezz avoided his wife all day, afraid of how she would react to his plan to bond Myri. As soon as he recognized his own uneasiness, Jesalya recognized it also through their dijauntu bond and, as the perfect wife she was, left him alone with his worries. He had dinner in his office and finally saw her when he went to their apartment late that evening.

She met him at the door, her long golden curls and pearly white skin luminous against her purple lace nightgown. As she drew him into her arms and mind, everything in his body and spirit came alive, and he pressed her close, his lips caressing hers and his hand finding its way into that luxurious hair he so loved. As their souls merged, she closed her eyes so that he couldn't see out of them, and he did the same for her.

Arulezz couldn't have hidden his plan to bond Myri from Jesalya, even if he had wanted to, so he didn't even try. Privy to Arulezz's mind in a way no one else was, she saw problems even he had not been aware existed and felt more urgent about his plan than he did.



*Myri must marry the Mormon David Pierce, even if it results in her abandoning the Nation for the light. Otherwise she will marry Jahnzel in two months when she comes of age, and he will corrupt her through the Holy Joining. Alone, Jahnzel is powerless, but together, they might do significant damage.*

*You don't think, then, the Nation would hearken to Jahnzel alone?*

*No, I don't. We've been successful on this planet, and most would rather die than go to the domes. Jahnzel will lose all credibility if he suggests it.*

*Do you really think she might decide to stay with David Pierce rather than bring him back to us?*

*You know that Myri is incapable of giving anything less than her whole heart to the man she marries. Jahnzel told you that himself.*

*You're right. He was, in fact, very concerned that Myri's feeling for David Pierce would be stronger than Pierce's would ever be for her.*

*Combine Myri's sense of conjugal loyalty with the light's treachery, and I think it's a very good possibility she would decide to stay with David Pierce.*

*It was a bizarre thought but one Arulezz couldn't discount, given Jesalya's unique understanding of Myri. David Pierce won't be any use to us at all if he stays where he is.*

*One thing is certain: Myri wants to be loyal to you. If you explain to her the deceptive nature of the light, she might agree to let you bond her. I think she would appreciate the added strength.*

*And if she tells Jahnzel?*

*He will then reveal his true self to the Nation, and they will destroy him.*

*I don't want to lose my brother, Jesalya.*

*And I don't want to lose my sister. If it needs to be done secretly, then do it secretly. I could use your help.*

*What do you want me to do?*

*Dr. Zedrul prescribed a tranquilizer for Mother when Father died. Get one of the pills and dissolve it in Myri's drink tomorrow evening at dinner. I'll do it quickly, as the drug begins to take effect.*

\* \* \*

Myri sat down at the dinner table, exhausted from her day of study. Her beautiful long blond curls were gone, replaced by a short, angled cut that made her feel ugly and exposed. Thankfully, there were no guests at the table that evening to comment on her hair. Just her mother, Jesalya, Arulezz, and Arulezz's mother, the Dowager Empress, were there, and they were too compassionate to comment.

Learning that Jahnzel had ordered dinner in his apartment again, Myri felt more depressed than ever. Her rejection had demolished him. Myri almost wished she could discard her ideals and go with Jahnzel to the domes.

Myri hadn't eaten in two days. Her stomach growled, but nothing appealed to her. She assimilated the conversation around the table without participating, twirling the stem of her goblet between her fingers. Little by little, she drank her punch. It settled her stomach and her nerves, and she decided she would nibble on a piece of bread. If she could get that down, she would try the soup.

As Myri reached for a slice of bread, her elbow dropped to the table and slid forward a little on the smooth varnish; her head drooped to meet it. Realizing what had happened, she sat up and shook her head in an attempt to wake herself up. She felt the warmth of her mother's hand on her arm. *Are you all right, dear?*

*I'm just a little tired. It's been a long day.*

Her mother buttered her bread for her. *Try to eat a little, and then you can go to bed.*

Myri nodded and put the bread to her mouth. She managed a little bite, and then reached again for her punch. Her glass was empty. Feeling dizzy, she leaned her head into her hand. She felt warm all over, and the next thing she knew, she was walking up the stairs, her arms linked with those of her mother and Jesalya.

"I'm still thirsty," Myri whispered.

*You may have a drink after we get you to your room,* Jesalya soothed. *Then you may sleep.*

## CHAPTER 2: ORIGINAL AGREEMENT

Even after all of the terrors Eden's Eleventh Colony had experienced, First Assistant to the Governor Rachel Vance still couldn't believe that the alien seductress who called herself Sara Carroll hadn't sabotaged her colony. Yes, she had married Bishop Cameron Carroll in front of the colony and had claimed she had been in love with him since age fourteen, but why would a young woman committed to living Ben Carroll's Equality of Zion marry a boy who had shown, time and time again, that he was nothing more than a Church bureaucrat who clung to the most out-dated and irrational interpretations of Church doctrine and followed mere policies as if they were commandments?

The very thought of it made Rachel angry. She and the other colony leaders had been so careful in their screening of the applicants and had made certain that all they invited into the colony shared their more mature view of the gospel. They knew that if they could throw off the cultural biases long held by many members of the Church and get away from the bureaucracy, they could create a truly free community. Then out of the blue, Ben and Barbara Carroll's own son turned out to be the kind of robot whose application would have been rejected, had he been anyone else.

Rachel and many others were still wondering how such a freak of nature could have happened. Rachel and Duane had met Cameron a few times when he was a teenager, but neither had perceived that side of him. Ben and Barbara had never discussed it, and why should they have? He was a child behaving in a childish way, and they had assumed he would grow out of it. How wrong they had been! It was bad enough that someone like Cameron had ended up in the colony at all, but his call to be the colony's bishop had been plain outrageous.

That prestigious call, however, was the only thing that explained how Sara Alexander, one of the students most passionate about the Equality of Zion, could have married such a boy. Of course she claimed she had a change of heart about her own ideals and that she wanted to follow in the footsteps of her stepmother, who had no education and was a full-time homemaker with eight children and no ambitions for herself. Rachel wasn't gullible enough to believe something so ridiculous, but others were. Somehow this twenty-year-old child had persuaded the rightful governor of the colony to fall in love with her also—fall in love so completely that he had announced in front of the colony that he wanted to dump his beautiful, intelligent, and accomplished wife of twenty-three years and marry Sara, and this after he had already married her to his son! Not only that, but Ben had thrown away his high, rational ideals and fallen in with his son's fanaticism.

Rachel had spent too many years in politics not to recognize a gold digger when she encountered one. These beautiful young women chased men of power for their own selfish purposes, not caring one iota for the broken families and careers that followed in their wakes. Not only had Sara seduced both the bishop and the rightful governor of the colony, she had ended up as the governor herself! Most gold diggers weren't able to accomplish so much so fast, but Sara had something most didn't have—telepathic powers.

To become the governor, Sara had claimed that the so-called spirit of the planet was sending storms and earthquakes because the colonists weren't following some rigid interpretation of the commandments, a rigid interpretation that looked—surprise, surprise—like that of the bishop's Nazi-like traditionalism. Of course, the colonists

weren't stupid, and many of them had rejected these claims just as Rachel had. The only solution had been to take away the crystals that gave Sara her telepathic power and isolate her so that she couldn't tamper with any more minds. Rachel and the others staging the coup had almost accomplished their goal when their minds had been pried open by a mental tornado. Images of the coup plans had blown into the colonists' minds, along with the words: *Sara Carroll will be your ruler. She is the empath and telepathic communicator. I will give you my will through no one but her. Anyone who opposes her will die.*

At the time, everyone, including Rachel, had been convinced that the planet-spirit was, indeed, real and demanding that Sara become the governor, but Rachel's skepticism was returning. She had not believed at first that Sara could have had images of the coup plans to reveal to the colonists during that demonstration of telepathic power, but now Rachel wondered if one of her associates had betrayed them and given those images to Sara telepathically. Rachel also wondered if Sara could have gained telepathic power over the planet-spirit. Rachel had a difficult time believing in the idea of planets having spirits to begin with, but if they did exist, wouldn't God make them answerable to His children, not the other way around? Aside from that, Rachel still wasn't sure the planet-spirit wasn't a mere manifestation of Sara's mind, despite the fact that clinical psychologist Ann Eagle, who had interviewed Sara extensively before recommending her for the colony, had discerned no mental illness.

When a storm shook the colony with vengeance yet again, rattling the windows of the dining hall, Rachel insisted that she be joined in mind with Sara as she communicated with the so-called planet-spirit. Sara's black brows rose in question. "You realize that you will feel Tempest's unbridled fury."

"I've faced down some of the most powerful people in the world." Rachel heard some chuckles. "I think I can handle it."

Sara sat in a camp chair facing her, her arm against the flimsy silver table she shared with Cameron, Ashley, and Brandon Carroll. She was wearing jeans and an Orioles T-shirt, her black hair straight and draped on her shoulders. She never wore any makeup at all, and Rachel doubted she had ever even thought about wearing a suit. She didn't look the part of a gold digger, a governor, or an alien, for that matter, and that irritated Rachel as much as anything.

"You realize our spirits will be overlapped and that both Tempest and I will be able to discern many of your thoughts and feelings."

"I have nothing to hide." Rachel spoke promptly—perhaps too promptly. What if the little witch really could read her thoughts? What would she learn? That she was angry? Skeptical?

Blood flooded into Sara's pale cheeks. She turned slightly toward Cameron and gazed at him in a way that suggested they were communicating telepathically. She tugged on his hand, and he stood up and positioned himself behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. He really was a beautiful boy—tall, with a runner's build, pale blond hair, and aqua eyes.

Despite Sara's obvious reluctance to allow Rachel to share her communication with the so-called planet-spirit, she shrugged. "All right. Let's give it a try."

Rachel felt energy flow around her, lively and colorful, like a rainbow. The youthful perkiness of Sara's spirit irritated Rachel and she recoiled.

Sara pushed harder, and Rachel discerned her thoughts: *There is no other way. I'm sorry.*

Determined to expose this little tramp for good, Rachel relaxed and let down her guard as much as she could. When their spirits overlapped, she felt a grating, like sandpaper scraping across skin, and while her spirit was yet raw, astounded realization from Sara surged through them both: *Your hate for me comes from personal pain. Certainly you aren't in love with Ben Carroll?*

Rachel's mind darted to an image of that student bimbo who had been the object of her husband's one-night stand. Not wanting Sara to discern her thoughts, she fought them away, but she was too late.

Sara deduced the source of Rachel's pain at once. Sara's memories of Duane flew by, images of his verbal attacks on her husband the bishop and finally his appalled words about her personally, "She's just a child, Ben!" Sara had believed at the time that Duane had been defending her, but now she understood the comment for what it had been—an effort to cover his own sin—and anger flashed through her, not just at Duane but at Ben Carroll for victimizing her and at herself for being so gullible and following him and all of his messed up/apostate friends to Eden in the first place.

Rachel somehow perceived that had Sara not married into Ben Carroll's family, she would have been first in line with the other students to demand his resignation, and yet Rachel still couldn't accept the idea that Sara was Ben's "victim." Rachel wanted to scream that Ben and his "friends" were not messed up, but given Ben's recent actions and Duane's history, how could she, on some level at least, disagree? Of one thing, however, she was certain—neither marital troubles nor advocating for policies in Congress that supported the nations of the earth in federalizing under Zarr's nation made one an apostate!

Sara's thoughts charged into Rachel's mind, *I am not the "bimbo" you think I am, and you are in too much pain to be as cold-hearted as I thought you were, but the truth is smacking you in the face and you are ignoring it. Tempest is very real.*

Just when Rachel thought Sara had come to some sort of reconciliation in her mind and that her spirit would relax, it flexed in panic. *Calm, Sara, calm. She can't know about this new development. Calm!* Sara didn't feel calm at all. She directed her thoughts to Rachel again: *You must stay completely calm and not bring any memories of your husband's sin into your mind, and you must curb your anger toward me. You can still back out. It's only been a few seconds, and no one will know anything.*

Rachel realized that while she felt a little more enlightened, she didn't trust Sara any more than she had before they had overlapped spirits. *I can't back out. I have to know.*

*Very well, then. Assimilate, but keep your thoughts to yourself! If you don't, I can guarantee you that your pain will be made public.* Sara's spirit shuddered in frustration as she thought about Ben and Barbara Carroll and their secret estrangement that had become public in an odd and humiliating way. The planet-spirit had supposedly believed that Barbara was "lying" when she concealed her grief and anger toward Ben and had almost destroyed the colony as a result. The emergency, however, had yielded one good thing—Ben and Barbara had reconciled.

Another second or two passed, and Sara did seem to calm her agitated emotions. She pulled Rachel's spirit along with hers into the floor, and then into the ground. A force that did, indeed, feel like a mental tempest seized the connection with such strength that Rachel felt as if her spirit were being sucked out of her body. The planet-

spirit thrust a vision of Barbara Carroll screaming at the sky in a gorgeous rose-filled clearing: “My planet, the earth, will progress to be the celestial kingdom, but you will be nothing but a rock in outer darkness, fit only to be inhabited by Satan and his—”

The vision dissipated as Rachel saw Ben lunge forward and cover Barbara’s mouth with his hand, her green eyes bulging and blond hair brushing against his perfectly-manicured fingers. Tempest’s thoughts stabbed through Rachel and Sara: *What did Wounded-Mortal-Who-Hides-Behind-Lies mean when she said those things?*

Panic from Sara spiked through Rachel. Sara could not keep herself from recalling other things Barbara had yelled about the planet-spirit’s being the vilest of sinners and unworthy to ever stand in the presence of God. *Barbara was angry and trying to make you angry. What she said doesn’t mean anything. She feels sorry now for what she said.*

Ben and Barbara had been away from the colony a week and a half to rescue the refugees from the twelve colonies that Tempest had already destroyed. From the beginning, Sara had been uneasy about Ben and Barbara’s plan to undertake this rescue effort in the colony’s single aircar. If the aircar malfunctioned, they could be stranded thousands of miles away with no ability to receive help until the primary synthesizing machine could be fixed and produce more aircars. The colony’s truck could eventually get to them if they went down on the northern continent, but it wouldn’t be of use at all if a breakdown happened on the southern. The continents were more than a thousand miles apart at their closest point, and the truck didn’t have the range to get over the water. Ben and his brother Trevor, a physics professor from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had assured Sara that the aircar had been designed for global use and that as long as it had twelve hours a day to repair and recharge itself, it would be safe, but Rachel discerned that Sara’s reservations about the matter had returned tenfold, knowing that Ben and Barbara were out there with nothing to buffer them from Tempest’s wrath.

Rachel understood then that Sara truly believed the planet-spirit was real, which meant that it either was real or Sara was suffering from multiple personality disorder of the worst kind. Even if it was multiple personality disorder—a controversial mental illness to begin with—wouldn’t the alter egos manifest themselves separately instead of in this immediate way?

Almost as soon as Rachel was aware of her own thoughts, she assimilated dismay in Sara. *Withdraw now, before more harm is done!* Sara’s reaction was so instinctive and so genuine that Rachel discovered she could more easily believe that Tempest was, indeed, the planet-spirit or some other alien creature than that Sara had multiple personality disorder. Sara gave Rachel a powerful mental shove, and, suddenly feeling frightened, Rachel attempted to pull her mind out of Sara and Tempest’s grip. It held firm.

Rachel could do nothing but attempt to bring her thoughts and emotions under control and remain as invisible as Sara had commanded. Tempest seemed to be too consumed by its own concerns to be affected by the mental interplay between Rachel and Sara or even by Sara’s worries about Ben and Barbara. *What is celestial kingdom? What is outer darkness?*

The questions shocked and intrigued Sara. She wondered how the planet-spirit could not understand the meaning of these things and what sort of veil covered its mind. Sara struggled to respond in a calm way. *Do you know who Satan is?*

*Is he one of the dark spirits the mortals brought with them?*

The possibility horrified Sara. *We brought dark spirits with us? Can you see them? Are they with us now?*

*They are everywhere the humans are. I can't see them, but I can feel them creeping on my face. They are terrible!*

The idea that a planet-spirit, even if it existed, could feel demons on its face really was far-fetched. Even Sara was a little skeptical, because she asked, *How do you know what they are if you can't see them?*

*Because after I received my body, my Creator told me that He would leave me for a time and that the dark spirits would come.* The creature's urgency increased. *He commanded me to ignore them. It was a test, He said, to see if I was worthy to receive life.*

Absurd! To think God would really do such a thing!

Rachel perceived that Sara was trying hard to ignore her, which seemed odd, because if a person were really ignoring someone, wouldn't that fact be imperceptible? If Tempest was aware of this telepathic subtlety, she didn't acknowledge it.

*Why are you so angry, Tempest?* Sara asked.

*It wasn't a fair test! He awakened me when I was all mixed up with light and dark matter and cleared my vision. He gave me a body, and then He made me filthy on purpose!*

*But the dark spirits didn't stay, did they? You said we brought them with us.*

*The dark spirits came, and they made me so filthy that I did everything I could to make them leave. How could that be wrong?*

*It's always wrong to rebel against a command from God.*

*Why would God command me to become filthy? Why would He give me a test that wasn't fair?*

He wouldn't! And couldn't—this creature only thinks that because it's delusional!

Sara stumbled along: *You only think it was unfair because you don't understand it.*

*Do you understand it, Governor Carroll?*

Rachel bristled at Sara's being addressed as "Governor" Carroll and almost responded, but she restrained herself.

*I understand that God wants His children to be able to choose good from evil and that they can't do that unless evil exists. My planet, Earth, has evil all over it, but it doesn't send earthquakes and storms every time something bad happens.*

The prospect surprised the planet-spirit. *Evil all over it? What does that mean?*

*People fight with guns and knives and bombs, and they kill each other and do other terrible things to each other. They profane the Lord's name, and break the Sabbath, and commit whoredoms.*

Rachel couldn't help it. Her mind went to Duane and his bimbo. A wave of nausea erupted within her. What had she done?

Sara's emotions relaxed, as if she had resigned herself to an inevitable course of events, and for some odd reason, that frightened Rachel more than anything else that had been communicated in this bizarre exchange of thoughts and emotions. *They do these things so much that many people don't even know they are doing things that are wrong.*

Duane had known it was wrong! As soon as the thought entered Rachel's mind, she hurled it out, feeling more ill than ever.

*How does your planet live with such filth?*  
*She trusts that God will cleanse her.*  
*What does it mean that she will be the celestial kingdom?*  
*It means that she will become part of Heaven and be in the presence of Jesus Christ and God the Father Himself.*  
*What does outer darkness mean?*  
*It's the place where Satan and the other dark spirits will live.*  
*For how long?*  
*Sara hesitated. Forever.*  
*Fury erupted, filling Rachel with terror. Wounded-Mortal-Who-Hides-Behind-Lies thinks I will have dark spirits on my face forever?*  
*She isn't God; she isn't your judge. She doesn't know anything about your destiny. Please don't be angry with her.*  
*Are there planets in outer darkness?*  
*I don't know. The scriptures don't say.*  
*Where do the planets go that do not pass the tests?*  
*Where did people go who didn't pass the tests? The planet-spirit's urgency about the matter became Rachel's own in a way it never had been before. In the Book of Mormon, Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life described people wandering into "strange roads" and "forbidden paths." Rachel tried to force the questions out of her mind and couldn't. They were too significant. She had always regarded herself as someone who held firm to the iron rod—someone who passed the tests—and now she wasn't so sure about herself. What "strange road" were people who were stuck on an evil planet destined to travel?*  
*I don't know. The scriptures don't say that either. You should know this better than I do. What did God tell you after you failed the test with the dark spirits?*  
*That I would have to be put in a dark place and wait for mortals to put life on my face.*  
*What mortals?*  
*He didn't say at that time. I waited here in the dark for a long, long time and was at peace. Then an immortal came and told me that God was giving me another chance.*  
*Another chance at what?*  
*To become part of Heaven.*  
*Then you knew all along what your destiny was supposed to be! That you were supposed to become part of the celestial kingdom like my planet!*  
*I did not understand the term "celestial kingdom," and I still do not completely understand what it is. I've never seen it.*  
*I've never seen it either, but I still want to go there.*  
*I like the way I am. Why should I try to become the celestial kingdom if I've never seen it?*  
*But you did agree to let someone put life on your face, didn't you? So you must have believed at one time that you wanted to become part of the celestial kingdom.*  
*Then an immortal came and told me that a race of mortals would soon come and want to make an agreement to "terraform" me. God wanted me to make the agreement.*  
*Who were those mortals, and why don't they live here?*  
*They broke the agreement, so I don't have to live by it. They are gone.*  
*What was the agreement they broke?*



*They lied to me! The immortal told me that God wanted me to become a part of His kingdom but that I could choose.*

*Couldn't you have made a new agreement with the mortals who gave you life?*

*I don't want mortals to have dominion over me! God said I could choose!*

*The mortals with me are not the same as the mortals who gave you life—*

*No, they are not! They are so stupid they are unbelievable! At least the others knew enough to respect me, and I still got rid of them! I am not accountable to you!*

Rachel perceived that Sara was anxious to end this discussion before more harm could be done. *I didn't mean to suggest you were. I'm sorry. Please tell us what we did to cause the storms.*

*I was troubled and wished to communicate with you.*

*You sent storms to hurt my colony because you wanted to talk?*

*You try hard to avoid me. There was no other way.*

*If I agree to schedule a time every week to communicate with you, will you agree to stop sending storms and earthquakes to hurt my colony?*

*As long as every one of you obeys the commandments of God with perfectness and does everything I say.*

*We're doing the best we can. I'll communicate with you again this day and time next week.*

*Very good, Governor Carroll.* Tempest withdrew.

When Rachel became aware of her body again, she realized that she was shaking. Duane rested his hand on her shoulder and rubbed in an attempt to calm her down. She welcomed his attention. She really did want to forgive him and thought she had until that fateful morning when he had declared, "She's a child, Ben!" as if he couldn't comprehend, even for a second, a man their age falling for a pretty student.

Sara didn't withdraw her spirit immediately. *I won't tell them anything about your husband's sin, but don't think you're off the hook.*

*Is that a threat?*

*I have no desire to threaten you; my desire is to keep Tempest from killing us all. She knows about your husband's sin now, and that you haven't forgiven him, which means, at the very least, that if you act as though you've forgiven him, she'll think you're lying, and you know what will happen then.*

Sara pulled her spirit away from Rachel's, and at that point Rachel became aware of her physical surroundings. The first thing she saw was that Sara was looking at her with urgent blue eyes.

Ann was the first person who dared speak. "What happened?"

Rachel turned her head toward Ann and whispered, "I . . . I can't find words."

Ann frowned, her straight red-blond hair sweeping across her jaw as she leaned forward to take Rachel's hand from across the table.

Sara stood up to address everyone who had gathered around them. "I'll tell you what Tempest communicated, but you must keep your anger and accusations to yourselves."

Kevin Krantz, Ben's student, had made his way to the front of the group and faced Sara with arms folded across his chest. "Who brought the storms this time?" Sara and Kevin were exactly the same height, giving an appearance of equality between them, but everyone knew that they weren't equal in Ben's eyes. Kevin was more skeptical of Sara than anyone, but that didn't mean he trusted Ben again either.

"Tempest did. Tempest always does."

Thank goodness Sara left out the initial exchange between the two of them and dove right into the encounter with Tempest, omitting the parts about Duane's indiscretion. Hearing actual words describe Rachel's own thoughts, emotions, and mental images was almost as strange as the encounter itself had been. Perhaps Sara really wasn't the bimbo and gold digger Rachel had long believed, but there could be no doubt that she really was a little witch.

Seriously jarred, Rachel longed to close her eyes and tune out Sara's all-too-astute words, but her instincts of preservation wouldn't let her. She released Ann's hand and stood up, her gaze flitting from one face to another, analyzing expressions and reactions. Sara was giving them almost too much to digest at once, and the reactions reflected the stupor that came with being gorged.

Sara came to the end of their conversation with Tempest: "If I agree to schedule a time every week to communicate with you, will you agree to stop sending storms and earthquakes to hurt my colony?"

"As long as every one of you obeys the commandments of God with perfectness and does everything I say."

"We are doing the best we can. I'll communicate with you again this day and time next week."

"Very good, Governor Carroll."

No one spoke for many moments. When they did, the voices seemed to come all at once.

"You've got to be kidding!" said Marc, the idiot medical student who, on that fateful Sunday, had failed in his assignment to tranquilize Sara and had put out Ben's son Brandon instead.

"She sent the storm because she wanted to talk?" said Trevor's daughter Samantha, sounding as if she were on the verge of hysteria. She, like Sara, never wore makeup, but unlike Sara, her features were bland enough that she really did require it. Unfortunately, she took after her mother, not the Carrolls. Today Samantha appeared especially pale and gaunt, and she twirled the end of her long, golden brown hair in a nervous way.

Brittany Novak, Ann's student, shrugged. "At least it's an easy problem to fix."

"Is it?" asked Brian Webster, one of only four survivors of Eighth Colony. "Even if Sara communicates with the planet-spirit on schedule, and even if we are 'perfect,' what guarantee do we have that she won't change her mind and kill us for no reason?"

"There is no guarantee," Sara said.

No, there was no guarantee, and the colonists needed to understand their true position. "How do I say this?" Rachel couldn't come right out and say the planet-spirit was evil, because it heard everything that was being said. "This planet is beautiful on the surface, but inside, there is no light. Whatsoever. Communicating with it nearly froze my heart."

"Then you're certain it's real." Duane sounded troubled.

Rachel turned and looked down at him. "Yes."

"And that she can't be resisted."

"Sara told you exactly what was communicated between the three of us. You be the judge."

He gazed up at her, those beautiful pale blue eyes filled with meaning. "Then the planet-spirit is . . . mentally challenged."

Thank goodness he hadn't come right out and said it was dangerously delusional! "It would appear so."

"It is useless to resist Tempest," Sara said.

"But she's a big hypocrite!" said Erica Rice, a beautiful and cultured African American girl from New York City who was one of Rachel's own students.

Rachel's other student, Jordan Tressler, stepped toward Sara. "Can't you get her to see that?" Jordan was slightly built and balding, but he made the most of his personal appearance and was brilliant and formidable. He had been an intern in her office on Capitol Hill.

Sara glared at Erica and Jordan, shaking her head. "How can you be so bullheaded and blind?" Obviously she hadn't forgiven the two of them from taking her *arelada* and tossing it in the decomposer. "Tempest knows she's rebelling against God, and she doesn't care! She doesn't want to change!"

"She can't require this of us; it isn't right," said Russ Brodsky, one of Cameron's counselors and Barbara's only student of journalism now that Sara had become the "governor."

Sara aimed her glare at Russ. "She doesn't want us here! If we want to survive, we have to be so perfect that we become virtually invisible."

"I'd rather die than submit to this tyranny," said one of Mike and Pat Dixon's sons.

Sara motioned to the door. "As you wish. Just live somewhere else."

"Surely there's some way to fight her," said Anita Ireland, the engineer in charge of the colony's electrical power and communications.

Anita's student, Brent Hall, towered over her. "The Zarrists must have brought *arelada* with them. Maybe we can use it to fight her telepathically." As if Brent actually had any fight in him at all! As the one member of the bishopric who didn't know Sara well, he had been the natural choice to take Cameron's place as the leader of the Church, and he had agreed to do it. The spineless kid, however, had fallen apart in front of the colony and all because Cameron had been "inspired" to ask him to speak on a topic so common in the Church that it could hardly be considered inspired at all—the Atonement of Jesus Christ!

"The Zarrists, who knew much more about telepathy than we do, used their own *arelada* to try to 'bridle' her," Sara said. "For that, she sank their island!"

"What do you think, Rachel?" Dr. Sean Marshall, an African American man in his early thirties, appeared too calm to have just lost his wife and one of his daughters, and yet Rachel knew he was devastated. He was the president of the elders quorum and the only member of the ward leadership with any maturity or experience at all.

"I don't think we can fight her or even reason with her," Rachel replied, "but we might be able to negotiate with her."

"I'm hoping she will reveal who terraformed her and what her agreement with that race is," Sara said.

The idea was so obvious that Rachel should have thought of it herself. "She *was* very defensive about the fact that she is in no way accountable to us."

Cameron nodded. "That suggests that she may be accountable in some way to those who terraformed her."

"You're right!" said Tony Wright, Cameron's first counselor. He had become close to Samantha and was sitting with her family as usual. "The best chance we have is to

encourage her to live by the original agreement. It can't have included ordering colonists around and killing them for silly reasons."

"Rachel, Ann, didn't the Zarrists tell you anything about the political situation in this area of space when they brought you out here to stake out the colony?" Trevor asked. He wasn't as tall as his brother, or as lean, but he had the same golden blond hair and stunning blue eyes.

"We don't know anything the rest of you don't know," Rachel said. "We're so far out on the periphery of the galaxy that the astronomers from Six assumed it was undeveloped space territory."

"The trip was so quiet and uneventful that we just assumed this was an uninhabited, peaceful area of space," Ann added.

"Which reminds me," Rachel said. "Originally the Zarrists didn't intend to give us a look at the planet at all. It was only when the leaders of the fourteen native colonies threatened to back out that the people we were working with obtained permission from Tohmazz Zarr himself to make the trip." The memory disturbed her. The colony leaders had believed at the time that the Zarrists hadn't wanted to make the trip because of the length and expense, but she wondered now if there had been more to it than that.

"I'd forgotten that," Ann said.

"Did the Zarrists say anything that would have led you to believe they were the ones who terraformed the planet?" Trevor asked.

"Nothing at all. We all believed the Zarrists had discovered it recently and that it was just waiting for people to colonize it."

Brandon moved toward Sara. "Didn't your dad say the Zarrists were pirates? And that terraforming takes mega money and mind power?"

Sara nodded.

"It would be like pirates managing NASA. That doesn't make sense."

"What are you talking about?" said Trevor's son Luke. "The Zarrists built Star Force, which is a zillion times bigger than NASA!"

"I'm talking about NASA for other planets—something really big that only an important, really established planet could do."

Rachel was impressed. For a teenage kid, Brandon had made an acute observation.

"Could the Novaunians be the terraformers?" asked Samantha.

Sara shook her head. "My father didn't know anything about Eden other than the fact that it is in a strategic location and coveted by more nations than Zarr's. I think he would have known more if it belonged to Novaun."

"He didn't tell you anything about what other planets might want to have a base here?" asked Cyndi, Trevor's wife.

"Nothing at all."

"This makes me sick!" said Kevin Krantz. "If you or your father had told us all of this before we left Earth, we would have stayed home!"

"That's assuming you would have believed me!"

"If Eden is in a strategic location, then perhaps there are other planets close by that could give us help if we send a distress signal," Sean suggested.

"There are no inhabited planets or space stations in this system, and to send a message to a neighboring system would take years," said Anita.

"The Zarrists will be back with more colonists before that," said Duane.

"Could we send divers after the equipment in Control Colony and perhaps repair it?" Cameron asked.

Sara shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't know much about diving, but I've got to believe Tempest buried the colony too deep for that."

"You can't know that for sure," Jordan said.

"It's in a pit. Tempest showed it to me."

"Could we send the robots?" Anita asked Trevor.

"Perhaps," Trevor said, "but we don't know whether they can realistically be submerged and whether they could withstand the pressure."

"But the big synthesizing machine might have suitable robots in its programs already," Brent said.

"It may," Trevor agreed, "but there's no way of knowing that until we get the unit up and running again."

"Didn't the Zarrists have arelada?" Brian asked. "Couldn't we have Sara get it out for us and use that to send a signal into space?"

"What do you mean?" Sara asked.

Brian turned his head toward Sara, his black braids swinging over his shoulders. He gazed at her with earnest brown eyes. "Pull it out of the ocean with your mind." Brian's level of confidence in Sara shocked Rachel. People who had known her better and longer than Brian didn't trust her.

"I can't move anything larger than a cell with my mind. I can only see inside of myself and communicate telepathically."

"Maybe if Sara got close enough to the arelada, she could use it to send a message," suggested Ashley Carroll.

"I don't know," Sara said. "It sounds good in theory, but I don't know if I could expand my spirit that deep into the ocean, and even if I could, it would need to be a very strong signal to get out of the solar system. I might need more people to help than we could fit in the aircar."

"It's worth a try," said Cyndi.

"I wouldn't know how to direct the signal. It could end up anywhere."

"It's still the best idea we've heard so far," said Ann.

Sara nodded. "It is the best idea we've heard so far, but it doesn't do us much good. We can't make the trip until Ben and Barbara and the aircar get back."

"How long will that be?" asked Tony.

"If all goes well, about five weeks," Anita answered.

"That's presuming we don't get the synthesizing machine fixed before then," Trevor said.

Rachel directed her words to Trevor: "Just how close are you?"

"It's impossible to say, but we're not giving up yet."

\* \* \*

The colonists eventually left the dining hall and began the clean-up work as they had done so many times before. As Rachel worked, she pondered her dilemma. If she told Duane what Sara and Tempest now knew about his relationship with a former student, she would bring the situation to Tempest's attention. If she didn't speak with Duane about the matter or in any way acted as if she didn't care, Tempest might perceive her

attitude as lying. Neither approach was a wise one; which was the lesser of two evils? Round and round her mind went all day. Sometimes she was grateful she had so much time to think about it, and other times she wished she had been forced to make a fast decision.

Eventually Rachel asked herself what she would do if they were still on Earth and interference with the planet-spirit wasn't an issue. In that situation, the answer was obvious. She thought back to her disastrous first marriage. She had been twenty years old, and Mark had wanted her to be a stay-at-home wife and mom. Since Rachel wanted to have children and give them the best of herself, she tentatively agreed to the arrangement. This was what the Church had taught was right, and, in those days, there hadn't been as many Latter-day Saint professional women who had learned how to balance the demands of motherhood with a career. Even her mother, a highly educated woman, had been involved in civic activities instead of a career. Had more role models existed, Rachel would not have made such a concession to Mark and they probably wouldn't have married at all.

Rachel had her son Steven right away, but she still managed to finish her undergraduate degree at Brigham Young University; that much was non-negotiable. After graduation, Michael came. And more bills. And the boredom that came with being with an infant and toddler day in and day out. Certainly there couldn't be anything wrong with going to work part-time? Many LDS women did so, and it seemed a reasonable compromise, but Mark was adamant. Their children needed a full-time mom.

She worked hard to convince Mark that what she wanted wasn't wicked. It would be good to use her degree. She would be a *better* wife and mother if she could exercise her talents in this way. But he would not yield to her persuasion; their sons needed her to be a full-time mother and that was that. Once she realized he would not relent, no matter what she said, she decided to go ahead and get a part-time job anyway. Eventually he would see that the boys would actually be better off, because she would be happier.

Having a job didn't make her happier, however, because Mark refused to let the matter go. He insisted she quit, and she refused. They fought about it all the time. Who would have thought that such a little thing could cause so much contention? Rachel became so depressed that she took the children home with her to Bethesda, Maryland for a vacation. Her parents were outraged by the way Mark had treated her and supported her eventual decision to make the separation permanent. They urged her to pursue her dream of going to law school, particularly now that she would be a single mother.

Rachel met Duane in her first year at George Washington University. They became instant best friends. He was always so wonderful with Steven and Michael and never treated them any differently than he did their own son Joshua, when he came along. After law school, she took a job as an assistant state's attorney in Montgomery County. That kept her near home. She wanted to remain close to her kids and so became involved in the parents' organizations at their schools. Duane coached many of their teams and became actively involved in Boy Scouts. She was elected to the school board, then county council, then state congress. Duane was hired onto the faculty at Georgetown Law Center. Given that Washington, D.C. was closer to Bethesda than Annapolis was, she made the off-hand comment that she ought to run for U.S. Congress so that she could get a shorter commute. Duane said, "Well, why don't you?"

When Rachel looked at herself now and what she might have been had she remained with Mark, the difference was like day and night. Duane had betrayed her, but he was too precious to throw out of her life. They had discussed his affair extensively afterwards and had come to peace with it in their relationship. She had begun to trust him again. They had both so looked forward to their chance for a new life together in the Eden Colony. Keeping what had happened with Tempest to herself meant marital stagnation. To continue on their quest for an eternal marriage, Rachel had to tell Duane everything.

The evening was late before Rachel and Duane were finally out of earshot of the other colonists. Rachel didn't hesitate, "Something happened with the planet-spirit that you need to know."

He stopped and turned toward her, frowning, his white hair glowing in the light of Eden's three small moons. "You and Sara didn't tell us everything?"

"No, this was personal."

"So Sara edited out what happened."

"Yes."

"I would have never guessed; she's smooth."

"She's a little witch."

"Then at least your opinion of her in that regard hasn't changed." He smiled, and Rachel might have laughed had she not been so anxious about what she had to tell him.

Rachel slid her hand under his arm, and they began walking again, side-stepping the muddy puddles on the trail. "I'm not sure what to think of her anymore. She seriously believes that she's Ben's 'victim' and is angry with herself for following him and his 'messed up friends' to Eden."

"Are we the friends she thinks are 'messed up'?"

He was quick, and that relieved Rachel. He wouldn't require too many details to understand. "Within the first few seconds of joining minds with her, she could feel my pain. At first she thought I might be in love with Ben myself, but obviously that isn't the case, and I couldn't stop myself from thinking about—"

"I thought you had forgiven me."

"So did I."

"So what's the problem?"

"It really irritated me when you acted so shocked and horrified that Ben could be attracted to a twenty-year-old girl."

"No, not *attracted*. That never surprised me. The fact that he would *pursue* her that way shocked and horrified me."

He said he had been shocked and horrified, but there was no trace of those emotions in his voice. Rachel stopped and turned to confront him. "Oh, so you have no idea how a man your age could pursue a little girl."

"Seeing Ben lose his moral center disturbed me."

Rachel sighed. "Of course it did." Rachel was more than disturbed; she was disillusioned. Ben's actions had betrayed them all—Duane included.

"Why didn't you tell me your concerns sooner?"

He appeared genuinely concerned that he had hurt her, and that thawed Rachel's heart. "Everything went crazy that day, and then you left with Ben to investigate Control Colony's disappearance. It seemed too serious a topic of conversation for the little time we had, and yet, it seemed petty too. I wasn't sure it was worth making an issue over."

"Obviously you didn't really think it was petty."

Rachel had made the decision to forgive her husband, and revisiting that decision took more mental and emotional energy than she was willing to devote to the task, so yes, the issue really had been petty. On the other hand, the anger and hurt had returned, at least in part—despite her best efforts to erase the feelings. “I’m not sure anymore what I really feel.”

“I never felt anything for her; you have to believe me.”

“That much I do believe. I keep thinking about Barbara and how awful it would have been for me to find out that you were in love with that girl and wanted to marry her.”

“And yet Ben never slept with Sara.”

“You really don’t think so?” Rachel sincerely didn’t know whether Duane’s sordid act or Ben’s passionate pursuit had been worse.

“I wasn’t sure at first, but I really don’t think so.”

“At any moment now, either Sara or the planet-spirit could make this public, and the colonists will blow up again, just as they did when they learned about Ben.”

“Do you think Sara will tell?”

“I don’t know; I don’t understand her at all. I’m not sure which is more disturbing—that she’s a gold digger or that she’s everything she claims.”

“It bothers you that she may really love Cameron?”

“Yes, I guess it does.”

“Because he’s so much like Mark?”

“You see it too?”

“How could I not? So Sara’s either evil, calculating, and downright brilliant or she’s good, completely guileless, and naïve to the point of being stupid.”

He said it in a joking way, but the words were too pointed. Rachel brushed a speck of mud off of his bare arm. “You can’t say things like that. The planet-spirit hears everything, and whatever else Sara may be, she is definitely the creature’s pet.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have told me any of this.”

“I already feel better, so yes, I should have. We just have to figure out now what we’re going to say if it becomes public.”



### CHAPTER 3: UNDER THE LIGHT

With every day that passed, Jahnzel thought he might see signs of depression in Myri's eyes, or hysteria, or longing, but all he saw in those brief moments in her presence was acquiescence. He yearned for some little flicker of warmth from her, something to assure him that he hadn't just imagined being promised to her for the past seventeen years of his life, but it never came.

Jahnzel began wondering whether Myri had ever loved him at all. As disconcerting as this possibility was, Jahnzel forced himself to confront it. Learning that Myri would rather marry a savage than consider, even for a minute, going with him to the domes had suggested that her feelings for him were not as deep as his were for her. Maybe Myri's feelings for him had never been deep at all. Perhaps Myri had merely believed that she loved him, when in her heart, their relationship had been nothing more than a habit, devoid of any real passion.

No. That couldn't be true. Perhaps Myri's feelings for him weren't as strong as his were for her, but she *had* felt passion for him. He recalled how terrified she had been when he had left Teton Colony to lead the defense against the invasion, how she had clung to him and wept against his neck. She had composed herself enough to walk with him to the shuttle with the elegant dignity of a future Divine Princess, but he didn't think he would ever forget how pale her face had been as she had waved farewell and how haunted her eyes.

She had met him on the landing field upon his miraculous return, trembling and smiling as she had thrown her arms around him and kissed his lips there for everyone in the Nation to see. The crowd had cheered as he and Myri had walked hand-in-hand to the Palace. She had waited for him in the Grand Hall while Arulezz debriefed him, and even before showering and sleeping, he had gone to her apartment and sat on her couch, stroking her hand and telling her and her mother everything that had happened in the battle.

Of course Myri loved him. Her love for him, however, had simply been overshadowed at the moment by her duty to the Divine Emperor. In the end, though, she wouldn't go through with this disgusting plan to bond David Pierce's mind and force him to marry her. She couldn't; she was too virtuous to ever do such a thing, and her love for him would triumph over her duty to the Divine Emperor.

Just when Jahnzel assured himself of these facts, the doubts assaulted him again. Finally, when he could bear the mental turmoil no more, he decided to set aside the question of Myri's love and wait. If she didn't return from Kansas City a few days after departing, thereby proving that she really could go through with such a diabolical scheme and that the pure and guileless Myri he had always loved had been a fantasy, he would let her go and never regret it. If, on the other hand, she failed in her mission to bond David Pierce and returned, he would know that her heart had always been true, even if her mind hadn't been, and he would cling to her more strongly than ever.

His beloved Myri was worth a little patience.

\* \* \*

After a week in the Kansas City Light community, David Pierce's orthopedic surgeon released him from the hospital into the care of his parents. As they rode home in his

brother's van, David stared out the window, disoriented. He saw the rolling hills and stubby trees of his childhood, but he wasn't going to the house in Shawnee, Kansas where he had spent his childhood. The world around him was Missouri, and although the landscape whirring by was more rural than Shawnee, everything was too still. The van was the only vehicle on the road. Where was everyone? Had they all left when the Light had descended?

In the front of the van, his mother turned her head toward his father. "I didn't expect the roads to be so empty."

"Neither did I."

"Everyone's doing a good job following the rules."

"Amazing, isn't it?"

As David listened to his parents' conversation, information began trickling into his conscious thoughts. David's mother and father had told him a great deal about local conditions during their visits to the hospital. No one was driving a motor vehicle without a permit, and permits were only issued for emergency vehicles. Not all homes and businesses had been converted to solar power yet, and since electricity was a higher priority than transportation, gasoline was being siphoned from abandoned cars for use in the generators. That was why the roads were silent and his parents were as amazed as he was. They had been staying with a family in Liberty during his week in the hospital and had not been on the road to their home in the new Stonefield development since he had arrived.

Acknowledging these facts hurled David from his haze of detachment into reality, and he was suddenly aware that his body ached. A vision came to his mind of plebes with bats, breaking his bones and destroying his future as an officer in the United States Navy.

Why had Tren brought him to Missouri? At least in Maryland he had been surrounded by military doctors and nurses. His life in the hospital there had possessed something of the familiar military order, anchored in the future he had chosen. Now not only had his future been annihilated, but his present also, and although his past hadn't been destroyed as well, it had certainly been redefined.

Fear seized David. As he struggled against it, his thoughts crashed into each other and became confused, like a broken kaleidoscope. As David tried to gather his thoughts, they spun faster and flew farther from his grasp until the haze of detachment returned.

Eventually David became aware that they were approaching his parents' home in Stonefield. The house glowed in the Light ahead of him, eerie with its solar panels and multitudes of windows. Clay County, Missouri, had not possessed the infrastructure to accommodate the large number of people who wished to join the Kansas City Temple Community. For that reason, the Church had developed property in the area into subdivisions designed to operate both on the grid and off, using solar power. Some of the developments were more communal, with homes clustered close, sharing utilities, gardens, and wells, and others, like Stonefield, were patterned after more traditional rural neighborhoods with one-acre lots that were self-sustaining.

The van entered the garage and stopped, and after a couple of minutes, David felt strong hands help him into his new wheelchair. The chair rolled into the mud room. Once inside the house, the chair rolled down the hall and into his bedroom at the back of the house. His father and his brother Jim carried him into the sunroom that was

attached to the bedroom and helped him into the recliner. David sank into it, exhausted, his body throbbing with pain.

His mother rested her hands on David's uninjured shoulder and kissed his cheek. David knew that he should thank his parents for making things so comfortable for him, but he couldn't muster the strength to even feel grateful. He gazed out the windows and counted the trees in the backyard. Since there were only two saplings planted there, it didn't take long. His gaze moved from the trees to the wood pile, finally coming to rest on the large stone that jutted through the grass in the community park behind the backyard.

\* \* \*

Three weeks after the invasion, Jahnzel could finally report that all of the Nationalists' principal military bases had either been destroyed or were under their control.

Arulezz tapped his fingers on his lips. *But we don't know what's hiding under the Nationalists' light shields.*

*Yes, we do. The light shields cover urban areas. Not one of those areas includes any primary base that we know of.*

*But they do include auxiliary bases.*

*A few hospitals, research facilities, and armories for ground forces. And then, of course, there are the local police stations. Nothing major. Nothing that could damage us in any significant way.*

*You're certain about that.*

*I know it's a strange coincidence, but it's true. I double-checked the research. That not one of these areas of light contained any primary base was one of the strangest phenomena Jahnzel had witnessed on this eerie planet.*

*How many of our own people did we lose to those light cities?*

*Four hundred and twenty-four did not evacuate to Teton Colony. Most of them were consultants to Holy Nation Technologies, worked for the Imperial Placement Agency, or were affiliated with the embassies and therefore lived in the capitals—which sustained heavy losses.*

*So there could be several hundred traitors out there living in those light cities now who will give our telepathic secrets to the Nationalists.*

*What good will our secrets do them without arelada?*

*I want technicians at the monitors around the clock watching those patches of light.*

*There is nothing to see.*

*That Satanic light is our enemy, or have you forgotten that?*

*And I can't spare that many technicians to chase space dust.*

*Humor me.*

*Jahnzel sighed. I won't give up more than three.*

*That will do for now.*

*Are the Haven's renovations complete?*

*Not quite. I'll be ready to take it to Erdean in four days.* Jahnzel hated turning his one transport into a freighter, and yet he might have done it even if he had still

possessed a ship capable of transporting a shipment of arelada. An enemy scout would not immediately suspect it was hauling such precious cargo.

*You're not going anywhere.*

*I can't guarantee this mission if I'm not there to see it through.*

*Of course you can. The three warships will be an adequate escort for the Haven or they will not. The Empress of the Stars will do nothing for the mission but alert the rival fleets that you're on the hunt with our entire fleet.*

*Then we'll disguise it.*

*That won't work. They know that ship too well.*

*Then I'll go on the Saint Usayvel.*

*I can't spare you for that long, and we need the Empress to act as the control center for rebuilding space dock.*

No one knew better than Jahnzel how badly and how quickly they needed to build new ships, and he had no argument. *What do you want me to do?*

*Get the fleet into orbit today and send it to Erdean tomorrow, not in three days.*

*The Falcon is due to arrive on Sunday.*

*No, the Falcon was due to arrive four days ago. Sunday is the day we will officially declare the Eden Colony a failure.*

*I need that ship!*

*One frigate isn't going to make much difference. Are the Haven's renovations adequate yet or not?*

Jahnzel had no real reason to hesitate. Yes.

*Then send it.*

Jahnzel knew as well as Arulezz did that it shouldn't have taken a whole two weeks for Control Colony to bridle the planet-spirit and that waiting for the *Falcon* probably was just wishful thinking on his part. He stood up. *I'll give the order now.*

*Then find out which key people are still alive and gather them all to the Empress, even if you have to send to the far reaches of the planet to do so. If the domestic militaries are all gone, as you say, then aircar travel should be safe.*

Jahnzel left his brother and immediately gave the order for his belongings to be packed and his shuttle prepared. He summoned Saint Admiral Hosev Vahro to his office, put him in command of the mission to pick up the arelada, and ordered him to send a scout to check on the Eden Colony. Despite the fact that five weeks had passed since the colonists had been set down on Eden and all evidence pointed to the likelihood that they were dead, Jahnzel couldn't ignore the nagging feeling that there might be some survivors.

*Don't take the fleet any closer to the system than you have to. Have the scout run a quick scan and get out of there fast—he shouldn't land. Whatever happens, maintain complete communication silence.*

*And if there are survivors?*

*Send the smallest ship capable of transporting the number of people remaining.*

*And if there are enough survivors to require the Haven?*

If that many colonists survived, Arulezz would probably declare the colony a success and would want them to remain on the planet and fend for themselves. *If by some miracle that many people survive, then they obviously aren't in significant enough danger to risk our arelada. Leave them and return to Earth with the Haven. If the*

*Divine One gives permission, we'll return for them, the Falcon, and the colony's store of arelada at a later date.*

*Very good, Consecrated One.*

\* \* \*

Betty normally loved the Christmas season, but this year she felt nothing but sadness. She didn't think she would ever forget the last hugs and kisses from her sweet grandchildren, knowing she would eventually be nothing more to them than a memory, or her last glimpse of Teri, her face trembling and her eyes glistening, mouthing the words "I love you." Teri had blown a kiss to the family before boarding the Novaunian spaceship, never to be seen by any of them on Earth again.

Betty had never wanted to be the mother of a hero, and yet her daughter had married an officer in an alien space fleet, her youngest son had come home almost dead because he'd looked to become some kind of hero by joining the Navy, and now her eldest son had decided that being a policeman wasn't enough. He would be his brother's bodyguard if it killed him. As if anyone should need a bodyguard in Middle-of-Nowhere, Missouri! Under the Light! What was wrong with being a regular person? With living a good, safe life and enduring to the end?

Only the desire to provide the four children and eleven grandchildren who remained a Christmas as normal and festive as possible, despite the feeling that they were all on an extended camping trip, motivated Betty to get up every morning and function. She wrapped the presents she had purchased before the invasion, made fudge with her precious chocolate chips, nuts, butter, and marshmallow cream, and triple-ground the white wheat she would use to make rolls on Christmas Eve. Her preparations were mechanical, and even when she decorated the Christmas tree with her grandchildren, the spirit of the season eluded her.

David had not left the house since he had come home, spending most of his time in that sunroom of his, gazing out the windows, but on Christmas morning, Betty and Gene took him to Bob's house, which was larger than theirs, to be a part of the family festivities. Betty hoped the excitement of the children would shake David out of his stupor, if only for a few minutes.

David hadn't spoken to anyone since he had come home. He did allow Gene and the boys to move him, wash him, and take him to the bathroom, and he even did the exercises he was supposed to do as they coached him. Physically he was recovering as rapidly as could be expected, but mentally, he lived in his own strange universe. Betty and Gene would have been concerned that David's brain wasn't functioning correctly had Teri and Tren not assured them that David had been completely coherent and communicative on several occasions before leaving the hospital in Bethesda, Maryland.

As the children opened their presents, David stared at the Christmas tree. Betty handed David a present, and as his fingers touched the shiny red paper, he looked into Betty's eyes and whispered, "Thank you."

Betty laid her hand on David's and squeezed. "You're welcome, son." For the first time in three weeks, she felt a spark of happiness.

The children's hands stopped on their packages and all of the adults turned toward David. Five-year-old Elizabeth jumped up and scampered over to his wheelchair. "Open it, Uncle Dave!"

“You can open it for me, sweetheart,” David replied, barely.

Elizabeth tore the paper off of the present and opened the box, revealing biking gloves. She shook the gloves at her mother in exasperation. “What’s he s’pose to do with these?”

At that moment, Jim walked into the living room, pushing a bicycle he had refurbished to replace the one David had left in Annapolis.

Everyone laughed, and even David smiled. Kim took the gloves from Elizabeth and set them next to David. “They’re for later. When Uncle Dave’s legs get better, he’ll be biking all over the place!”

## CHAPTER 4: JUDGMENT DAY

The work of the Eden colony had come to a tolerable place when Christmas arrived. Everyone was able to forget their troubles for a little while and meet for a religious devotional led by Cameron, followed by a dinner, a Nativity play by the children, and caroling. After the singing, Trevor Carroll announced that the big synthesizing machine was finally fixed and that a new aircar was already in production.

It was the best Christmas present anyone could have asked for short of getting off of Eden, and Sara was more relieved than anyone. The colonists could now travel around the planet without worrying about getting stranded thousands of miles from human habitation.

Trevor did learn that the synthesizing machine had a program to synthesize robots that would be suitable for working under water, but since he and his team didn't know how much time would be required to program the units and did know that it would take at least a week just to manufacture the air vehicles to transport them and their operators, the colony decided that sending Sara with a small team of telepathic communicators would be a more efficient use of time and resources.

On Saturday Sara finalized her team: Cameron, Ashley, Trevor, and Cyndi Carroll. Cameron and Ashley had used telepathy before, and the other colonists insisted Trevor and Cyndi go since they were in the strange position of being trusted by every faction in the colony. Sara, on the other hand, had hesitated to take both Trevor and Cyndi because she was concerned about Samantha. Samantha's mentor, Eva Marshall, had been killed in the earthquake three weeks before with one of her children, and Samantha often tended the two surviving daughters while Dr. Marshall worked. With Trevor and Cyndi gone, Samantha would be required to keep track of her two teenage brothers also, and all of this while she was dealing with her own trauma.

Despite her concern for Samantha, Sara looked forward to the five-day trip to the southern end of Eden's northern continent, where she and the others would be able to look out over the ocean where Control Colony had been located before Tempest had destroyed it. She would have nothing to do but see tropical scenery, talk with people who didn't think she was a gold digger and bimbo, and sleep.

On Monday, a rescue team with the other two new aircars headed east toward Fourth Colony, and Sara and her team set out for Control Colony, arriving late Wednesday afternoon. The tsunami Tempest had sent to destroy Control Colony's island had also submerged many miles of coastline on both the northern and southern continents, destroying Ten and Two as well as Control. Six weeks had passed since that fateful tsunami, and the water had begun to recede, but it hadn't receded enough to leave a strip of beach large enough to land on. Waves broke against jungle foliage, and ocean stretched south as far as the eye could see.

"What a horrible place this is," Cyndi said.

Sara hadn't known quite what to expect, but now that they were so close to where the destruction had been and could see the results of Tempest's rage firsthand, this trip no longer felt like a vacation. "I agree. It's seriously creepy."

Sara and her team traveled the coast for many miles in both directions, looking for a place to land and could find nothing.

Ashley tapped on the door of the aircar. "How can there not be someplace to land?"

Sara felt her frustration. She, too, was ready to get out and stretch, but she was more concerned that they would be required to travel further inland to land, which would increase the distance between them and Control's arelada. "The trees grow like weeds here, and there are no people to make clearings through the jungle."

After an hour, they did give up and head inland again, finally finding a small clearing more than a hundred miles from the coast.

Once they were on the ground, Trevor said, "I'm sorry, but this is the closest we're going to get."

Sister Ireland had advised them that the planet would be in the best position to send a message directed toward the central, most habitable part of the galaxy in the morning, but Sara wanted to make a practice attempt that evening. She didn't have much hope that they could expand their spirits three hundred and sixty miles, but they had to try. The thought of taking the aircar that far over the open ocean, with nowhere to land for hundreds of miles, frightened her. Not only that, but they wouldn't have the benefit of Trevor's telepathic power.

They unfolded their camp chairs, maneuvering around the fern. Tall, narrow trees surrounded them, allowing only a few meager rays of light into the clearing. The air was fragrant and sultry. Cameron handed pieces of arelada to everyone as they sat down.

Sara looked in Trevor and Cyndi's direction, and they gave each other nervous little glances. "This shouldn't be difficult," Sara explained. "Simply follow my lead and push hard with your mind. The weirdest part of this experience will be joining minds with Tempest, but no amount of practice would have prepared you for that."

All of them had felt Tempest's thoughts that day during church when she had demanded that Sara become the governor of the colony, and none of them wanted to duplicate the experience. No one said anything as Sara overlapped spirits with Cyndi first, then Trevor. Sara felt Trevor's strong disillusionment regarding the actions of his older brother, particularly those of pursuing Sara. Cyndi hurt for Trevor but was also angry with him for following Ben to Eden to begin with, and Sara wondered how her own actions had affected her younger brothers and sisters. Were they disillusioned too?

Sara must have mentally articulated the questions she had asked herself, because Trevor's spirit started with surprise and embarrassment. *You weren't supposed to know that.*

*I'm sorry. I'm good at reading emotions.*

Trevor immediately understood at least one reason why his brother was so in love with Sara and felt pity for him. Cyndi was not at all pleased, which made Trevor ashamed. He instinctively withdrew his spirit, and the connection dropped.

"I'm sorry," Trevor said. "Let's try again."

Sara expanded her spirit. She allowed several moments for Trevor and Cyndi to become semi-comfortable with it before she invited Ashley and Cameron into the connection. They held the connection for many moments, marveling at the power that emanated from their union. Even Sara was surprised by its intensity.

When the five of them were ready, Sara expanded her spirit into the ground, the singing of the birds and insects fading away. With Tempest's help, Sara would be able to pinpoint the location of Control Colony's arelada, which would allow her to expand her spirit into it.

Instead of seeing the planet around her, Tempest smacked her with a vision of the colony.



The colonists were finishing up lunch, when Rachel Vance stood and said loudly, "Everyone listen to me, please." She appeared as immaculate as ever in her expensive safari clothes, not one strand of her short dark hair out of place.

The colonists stopped talking and turned their chairs to face Sister Vance.

"Now that the rightful governor of Eleventh Colony has returned, it seems an opportune time to discuss his possible reinstatement to office." Ashley telepathically moaned, if such a thing were possible. *Not again!*

Ben, who was sitting at the same table as the Vances and Sister Eagle, shook his head and waved his hand. "There isn't anything to discuss. The planet-spirit appointed Sara to be the governor."

"No," said Sister Eagle. "The planet wants to use Sara as its voice. Why should it care if someone else actually manages things?" *Why indeed?* Trevor thought.

"I think you all jumped the gun in agreeing to let Sara be the governor," Brother Vance said. He had been away from the colony rescuing refugees when Tempest had made her wishes known.

"We didn't come here to *not* live the commandments," said Barbara. "If we live the gospel, are completely truthful, and don't yell at each other, the planet should leave us alone." *Oh Barbara, don't,* Cyndi thought. *Ben's ideas aren't worth it.*

Sister Vance said, "There isn't any reason at all that we can't live the Equality of Zion and also appease the planet spirit." *Except that the Equality of Zion is a load of nonsense!*

Sara didn't agree with Cameron's dismissal of the Equality of Zion. If nothing else, it was a governmental structure that the colonists had committed to follow. She might have felt hope had she not been so aware of Tempest's fury. She didn't want to manage the colony. If the colony could find some other way to make things work, she was all for it.

*Sara, as long as they persist in living the Equality of Zion, they will never achieve the real Zion.*

*I can't care about that now. My goal is just to keep them alive.*

Tony raised his brown eyebrows in a mocking way. "You're that certain Dr. Carroll hasn't been telepathically bonded by our exotic little alien?" Sara's gaze swept the colony in an attempt to ascertain whether anyone still held that false belief. Too many wore uneasy expressions for her comfort. Cameron and Cyndi's attention went straight to Barbara; she appeared as poised and as impassive as ever. If Tony's comment caused her any pain, she didn't show it. Trevor's focus went to Cameron's father; he cringed.

"Certain enough." Sister Eagle said. Sister Vance didn't appear so certain.

Tony shook his head. "Sara can't work with him; you don't want her to work with him."

"Kevin Krantz can be the liaison between them," Sister Vance suggested.

"It's a bad idea," Cameron's father said. "Sara argued with the planet-spirit and insisted the job belonged to me, and the planet-spirit didn't agree."

"Maybe if Sara tries to explain it to the planet-spirit she would understand and change her mind," said Brittany Novak. Tempest's fury swelled through Sara and the others, leaving Sara feeling frustrated. How could the colonists still be so blind?

"You didn't see the destruction of my colony!" Deb Webster said. "The planet is irrational!" *Thank goodness not all of them are so ignorant!* Ashley thought.

"Which is precisely the point," Brother Vance said. "The planet-spirit is unreasonable, and it's influencing Sara to be unreasonable. We need someone lucid to be the governor." Sara's frustration succumbed to anger.

Russ frowned. "What makes you think Sara is being unreasonable?"

"You knew Sara fairly well before we came to Eden. Is she the same person she was before?" *Yes!* Cameron wanted to shout. *She just didn't know it!*

Russ shrugged. "Yes and no."

"Yes!" Tony said. "I knew her better than anyone here, and she's essentially the same person she always was!"

Barbara shook her head. "I disagree. She was passionate about the Equality of Zion before we came here, and in just a few weeks, she's thrown it all away for a needlessly strict view of the gospel that only the most insular members adhere to." She hadn't used the word "fanatic" or mentioned Cameron by name, but she didn't have to; her opinion was obvious. That his own mother would, after everything that had happened, still think he was a fanatic hurt Cameron deeply, and Sara hurt for him.

"A point of view that looks an awfully lot like that of the planet-spirit," said Sister Vance.

"The point of view held by the bishop, you mean," said Erica Rice.

Jordan nodded. "Sara seems to be more influenced by him than the planet-spirit."

"Some might call that faithfulness!"

*Thank you, Tony,* Cameron thought, calming down a little.

"Faithfulness or fickleness?" said Marc.

"I agree that Sara has changed," said Cameron's father, "and I also agree that love for my son has been the primary reason for that change. It's also the case that, despite the fact her father is an alien, she was raised in a very conventional family, so maybe we shouldn't be surprised that she so quickly embraced Cameron's point of view." Sara might have been imagining things, but had Cameron's father put just enough of an inflection on the word "conventional" to make it sound as if her family had some sort of disease none of them wanted to catch?

*Yes, Sara, he did,* Ashley thought, her anger stabbing through them all.

"I don't believe there is enough evidence to suggest that the planet-spirit motivated the change," said Cameron's father.

"Perhaps the evidence is lacking," Sister Vance admitted, "but logic tells me that the fact that Sara and Cameron's approach to the gospel looks so much like that of the planet-spirit is proof that the mindset is unsound."

No one would argue, not even Tony. Sara couldn't believe it. Almost the entire colony had been together that fateful day and assimilated Tempest's demands. They had all even stood up in sacrament meeting afterwards with softened hearts and thanked God that they were still alive. How could it be that in less than a month, so many of them were back to believing that their bishop was a simple-minded fanatic and that Sara was a danger to the colony? The Vances had toned down their rhetoric, but that was essentially what they were still saying and what the colonists still, on some level, believed.

Many moments of silence passed, and for the first time, the colonists glanced to the windows, realizing that rain was falling.

"Obviously the planet doesn't agree with this plan to kick Sara out of office," said Samantha.

"We aren't trying to kick Sara out of office," Sister Vance said, "so there's nothing to disagree with. We just want to acknowledge Sara's real role and put the person most qualified to actually manage things back where he belongs."

"I say we take a vote," said Sister Eagle.

"You can vote all you want," said Cameron's father, "but I won't agree to it. I won't put the colony in jeopardy that way."

"You can't refuse," said Sister Vance.

"You're the only one who knows how to manage it," Sister Eagle agreed.

Barbara squeezed her husband's hand on the table and gazed at him in admiration. "The colony has been your dream for a long time. It can work!" For the first time ever, Cameron considered the possibility that his mother was a negative influence on his father. The thought so appalled him that he chased it away at once.

"You owe this to us, Ben," said Sister Ireland.

Cameron's father sighed. They were his closest friends and colleagues, and they had given up their careers on Earth and trusted him enough to follow him halfway across the galaxy to make his dream a reality. Sara could see that he wasn't going to fight them. When the vote was taken, Cameron's father won by four votes. Trevor and Cyndi weren't surprised. Ashley wanted to scream out her frustration. Bitterness so overcame Cameron that Sara was, for the moment, more worried about him than she was about anyone.

The rain pounded the roof and the wind howled. Sara's supporters fidgeted in their chairs. "How can we make it stop?" demanded Brian. "Sara isn't here to communicate with the planet-spirit!"

Tony threw up his arms. "It won't stop it until we meet its demands. Sara keeps telling us that we're living in a dictatorship. Do we all have to be dead before we believe it?"

The scene faded, and Tempest communicated, *You are the ruler of the mortals, Sara Carroll, and all who refuse to follow you will die.*

*Please, Tempest, what they want isn't bad. It's not even rebellious. I can be your voice and still let someone else manage the colony.*

*The choice isn't theirs. I'm the one who rules here, not them.*

*Can't you try to see this situation from their point of view? They'll follow you better if they can have some choice in who leads them.*

*No. Until they agree to follow you completely, they will continue to fight. If you want them to live, you will make them follow you.*

*If I try to do that, they will fight more.*

*Then take those that follow you and lead them away from the others.* Sara had never dreamed this mess might end that way, but she had no doubt of it now. She wrenched away from Tempest in terror. Tempest would not let her go but instead, showed her a vision of the beautiful red-haired girl who had been the object of Duane Vance's one-night-stand.

*Governor Carroll, you will tell the others about Cold-Logical-Mortal's sin.*

Sara couldn't help but be horrified; Cameron, Ashley, Trevor, and Cyndi were shocked. *Why? What possible purpose could that serve?*

*If the others know, they will not want to follow these two mortals who are your enemies.*

*And they will believe that I reveal this information because I want to secure my own power in the colony. They'll never believe you commanded me to do this.*

*Then they are too stupid to live.*

*No! They aren't! Please don't hurt them until I can return to the colony and put everything back in order.*

*Then you will tell them?*

*Yes, I will tell them after you show me the Zarr-mortals' sunken island.*

Tempest yanked her spirit away from Sara's. The act was so sudden and intense that her telepathic connection with Cameron, Ashley, Trevor, and Cyndi seemed to blow apart.

Sara was again aware that she was sitting in the light-speckled forest. The others stared at her, and she became aware that it wasn't raining.

Ashley's short, golden blond hair fluttered around her face, her green eyes huge with incredulity. "What just happened?"

Cameron jumped out of his chair, brushing an insect off of his long khaki shorts. "She didn't show us Control Colony."

Sara took Cameron's hands and allowed him to help her up. "We have to leave."

"You're kidding, right?" said Cyndi.

"Tempest obviously has no intention of showing us Control Colony before we fix this mess in the colony." The aircar had only enough power to travel a couple of hours before it had to be shut down for the night, but Sara wanted to get as far as they could that day. Tempest was angry enough to do some serious damage.

"Can't we find Control Colony without Tempest?" Trevor asked.

"Theoretically yes, but it could take weeks."

"Who's that red-headed girl?" Ashley asked. "Is Cold-Logical-Mortal Dr. Vance?"

Sara collapsed her chair and headed to the aircar, saying nothing. She believed it would be wrong to reveal something so personal and incriminating to anyone in this casual way.

Sara could hear someone close behind her and assumed it was Cameron. "I can't believe that they're equating my desire to faithfully live the gospel with Tempest's dictatorial attitude."

"I can," said Cyndi.

"Certainly you don't sympathize with their opinion!"

"Well yes, in a way. None of us believe it's helpful to make the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is supposed to be simple, into a regimented belief system that dictates who you can speak to or where you should live."

"This shouldn't surprise you, Cameron," Trevor said. "You grew up in a home that was built more around the spirit of the law than the letter." He pressed a button on the remote control for the aircar and opened all of the doors, including the one on the back.

Cameron took Sara's chair and set it into the back of the car with his own. "A home that was built around rationalizing away the counsel of prophets and apostles, you mean." Sara sat down in the backseat, hoping that if she refrained from participating in the conversation, they would forget what Tempest had communicated about Brother Vance.

"Yeah, and look where that got us," said Ashley. "Here on a crazy planet that wants to kill us. I wish we *had* followed the counsel of the prophet and moved into a temple community."

“We’re in a unique situation here,” said Trevor. “Things on Earth aren’t that simple.”

Cyndi leaned against the aircar and faced Cameron instead of taking her place in the front seat. “All I was trying to say was that the other colonists don’t look at the world in the same way you do, Cameron. Tempest appears to be the embodiment of all they see wrong with the traditional approach to the gospel—an approach that many of them came here to get away from—so it isn’t much of a stretch that those who disagree with the traditional approach the most would think the existence of a creature like Tempest proves what they already believe—that such a rigid point of view is fanatical and irrational.”

“And evil. Don’t leave that part out.”

“Now you’re becoming cynical.”

“No, I’m just tired of being in an environment where people think good is evil and evil is good and can have evil shoved in their faces and still have the gall to say that it’s proof good is evil.”

“The Vances’ idea of good isn’t the same as yours,” said Trevor. “That doesn’t mean that what they think is good is necessarily evil.”

“Fighting true good and true faith is evil, whether it comes from enemies, strangers, family members, or friends of my parents. I can’t change the truth.” Cameron sighed. “I am, though, praying for compassion and understanding. I really do want to deal with this situation correctly. I mean, I’ve known Brother and Sister Vance for years. Not well, perhaps, but they welcomed me home from my mission with smiles and hugs. Since I was made the bishop, though, their few efforts at kindness toward me have seemed insincere. I don’t want to be their enemy, but they aren’t giving me much choice.”

“Maybe it would help if you try to look at the Vances and some of the others as people who are having a hard time giving up the dream of what brought them here in the first place.” Cyndi twisted her body slightly and sat down in the car.

Cameron slid into the middle of the back seat and put his arm around Sara. “That ridiculous Equality of Zion, you mean?”

“If you take out the word ‘Zion’ and the spiritual aspects of your father’s community plan,” said Trevor, taking his place in the driver’s seat, “you’ll find that it’s no more evil than any other utopian idea.”

“Even I can agree on that much,” said Cyndi. “The Vances would tell you that they lived it before your father coined the term and that it works.”

“Yeah, it worked so well that Dr. Vance had an affair with a red-headed girl who could have been one of his students,” said Ashley, sitting down on the other side of Cameron.

“You don’t know that,” said Trevor.

“Sister Vance joined minds with Tempest, so that girl’s image had to come from her. The girl’s no older than Sara; no wonder she hates Sara so much.”

Ashley’s voice trembled with bitterness, and she blinked away tears. Cameron patted her hand in a compassionate way. Trevor and Cyndi couldn’t bring themselves to look at her.

Sara leaned over Cameron, toward Ashley. “I’m so sorry. None of you should have found out about it this way.”

“He’s my mentor!” Ashley paused and reconsidered. “No, he *was* my mentor. David was right. I should never have come here at all.”

Cyndi glared at Trevor. “None of us should have.”

After returning to the colony two days later, Trevor let Sara and the others off right in front of the door to the dining hall. Cyndi had only to put her feet down on the wood stairs into the large, bow-roofed structure made of the Zarrists' "building boards," but Sara and the others in the back seat had to take a couple of steps on the saturated ground.

As Sara entered the dining hall, Tony approached her. "Thank goodness you're here! I'm guessing you know what happened."

Sara grunted, then jogged to a central place in the room and said in a loud voice, "May I have your attention please!" She looked around the room, clapping to get their attention. "Time to decide whether you're going to choose to live with me as the governor of this colony or whether you're going to follow someone else and die."

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic," Erica said with a chuckle and then returned to her sandwich.

"Why are you back so soon?" asked Marc.

"You're lucky I am back to save your necks!"

"We *are* glad you're back, Sara," said Samantha.

"We weren't in any real danger," Brother Vance said, annoyed.

"What we want isn't unreasonable, Sara," said Sister Vance. "Even you can't argue with that."

She said it in such a kind way, and the look in her brown eyes was so innocent and unexpected that it almost took Sara's breath away. To see her sit there so brazen—especially when she knew enough about Tempest to understand full well that Sara had been given a vision of what had happened two days before in the colony—made Sara angrier than ever.

"This isn't about what I think or want, and it never was. I warned you that if you weren't careful, your secret would come out, and then as soon as I'm gone, you stage another coup."

Barbara laughed. "It is hardly a coup when the colonists peacefully decide that the original governor isn't, perhaps, quite as unfit to manage the colony as they thought a couple of weeks ago."

"Yes, it was a coup."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. "So now you're going to punish me for my lack of loyalty to a usurper?" Her voice was still kind, but there was something in her tone that made Sara sound like the villain. Sara knew in that moment that this wasn't just about reinstating Ben Carroll as governor; the Vances were working to discredit her. Perhaps Barbara was also.

"No, I'm simply here to tell everyone that Judgment Day has come."

Seeing that the colonists were, for the most part, focused on her, Sara began. "You all realize, don't you, that by trying to replace me as governor, you've postponed our chance for getting help by a week at least."

Cyndi shook her head and aimed her gaze at the Vances. "It really was an unreasonable thing to do."

"We came here to succeed, and we can't do that without Ben Carroll in charge," said Sister Eagle.

“All right, then. I’ll regurgitate the last communication and vision I had from Tempest, and you tell me whether the colony can ‘succeed’ by following your plan.”

Leaving out the personal comments of Cameron and the others, Sara told the colonists what she had heard and seen, including Tempest’s demand that she reveal “Cold-Logical-Mortal’s sin.”

Sister Vance exchanged glances with her husband in such a way that indicated he already knew about the original incident with Tempest, leaving Sara with no doubt that they would try to manipulate it all to their advantage. Was this why they were trying so hard at this time to discredit her? Because they thought such a tactic would distract the colonists’ attention away from their own corrupt actions?

Of course the colonists suspected that “Cold-Logical-Mortal” was Brother Vance and looked toward him, as if they wanted to know what his sin was, but as compelling as that question was to most of them, Tempest’s suggestion that Sara “take those that follow her and lead them away from the others” was considerably more pressing.

Cameron’s father was the first one to speak: “I hope this incident will prove, once and for all, that if we want to survive, we will accept Sara as the governor of this colony.”

“How do we know that she really isn’t irrational?” asked Kevin. “That the planet-spirit isn’t taking control of her mind?”

“The planet-spirit isn’t taking control of Sara’s mind,” Cameron said, “and even if it was, it doesn’t matter. Have we forgotten those who have already died in this colony? Have we already forgotten that the planet-spirit destroyed twelve of the fifteen colonies?”

Sara saw emphatic nods from the refugees of those colonies that they had been able to rescue. “As far as I can tell,” Brian said, “Sara is the only reason Eleventh Colony still exists. If she decides to leave, I’ll be the first in line to go with her.” His new wife Deb and many others murmured their agreements.

“Certainly you’ve thought about this, Sara,” said Russ. “What do you propose we do?”

“Yes, I have thought about it, and I have a plan, but before I give it to you, I want to know right now, by a show of hands, those who will give me unequivocal support.”

Most of the hands went up, but a substantial minority, around thirty, did not, including the Vances and Dr. Eagle and most of their students. Seeing so many frustrated Sara, and yet she knew that they really hadn’t made their final choice yet. “All right, those of you who won’t accept my leadership, stand over there, and those of you who do, move in that direction.”

The colonists shuffled into new positions, and the Vances and Dr. Eagle were surprised—although Sara wasn’t—to see that they had already lost a few of their supporters. It was one thing to decline from raising one’s hand; it was quite another thing to physically separate from the larger group.

Sara nodded, telling herself over and over that she had to harden her heart and that the survival of the colony was on the line. “Father, these people would like to separate into their own colony. Would you be willing to work with them to stake out a new site?”

“Certainly it hasn’t come to that!” said Cameron’s father.

“I said when I got here that Judgment Day had come.”

“You can’t send us away!” said Jordan.

Erica shook her head. “We won’t go!”

“You’re the one who is supposed to go!” Brittany declared.

“Why should I and the majority of the colony, who accepts my governorship, leave? It’s far more expedient for the smaller of the two groups to leave. Trevor, will you organize the division of equipment?”

Like Cameron’s father, Trevor appeared shaken. He turned to the Vances’ group. “Before I agree to do anything of the kind, I want to know about this ‘sin’ the planet-spirit referred to. She indicated that it would disturb people and keep them from following the Vances. This would be a good time to explore that before certain people make the decision to leave the colony.”

Sara saw several nods. “All I can tell you is what I learned from Sister Vance herself when our thoughts were joined.”

Russ’s dark eyes narrowed in outrage. “Then you left this information out when you gave us the conversation before.”

“Yes, I did. There were more important things to discuss, and I truly didn’t want to invade the Vances’ privacy.”

“You were wrong to withhold that information,” Kevin declared.

“You really want me to reveal every private matter I learn through Tempest? Next time it could be you!”

“I have nothing to hide.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

Sister Eagle frowned at Sister Vance. “What is this all about? I want to hear it from you.”

Sister Vance shook her head. “If Sara wants to get her revenge and secure her position, she can tell you herself.”

Sara glared at Sister Vance. “Let me remind you that if you tell the colony that I’m lying, Tempest will react violently.”

“Threatening her isn’t helpful, Sara,” said Sister Eagle.

“I am simply stating a fact.”

“Please, Sara,” said Cameron’s father, “why don’t you repeat the discussion you and Rachel had with Tempest in its entirety. Those of us who weren’t here can hear it, and those of us who were here can put what you gleaned in context. Then when you’re done, we can ask Rachel and Duane questions about it.”

Sara nodded. “All right, but not before the children are taken out of earshot.”

Cyndi motioned to Ashley. “You and I can entertain them.”

Ashley nodded, appearing relieved, and began gathering the children to the far side of the room. Once they were removed, Sara regurgitated her communication with Tempest again, only this time adding in the portions that had to do with Sister Vance’s anger toward her husband. Sara watched the faces of the colonists as she spoke, not surprised to see indignation on those of the students and frustration and exhaustion on those of the original colony leaders. Nearly all of the students moved from the Vances’ group into Sara’s.

When Sara was done, everyone was silent for many moments. She understood that the students felt disillusioned in the same way they had when learning about Ben Carroll’s indiscretions. They had followed Ben Carroll, along with the Vances and the other colony leaders, to Eden with the idea that they would be spiritual leaders as well as government officers and teachers. To learn, yet again, that one of their leaders wasn’t as righteous or trustworthy as believed was a blow, and Sara suspected that they felt more anger toward themselves for coming to Eden than they did toward the Vances. The



Vances' lack of transparency, however, made them easy targets for all of that repressed anger, and Sara could see that many of the students were itching to scream out their reprimands and demand answers. The only thing stopping them was the knowledge that Tempest would send another storm even more furious than the last.

Finally, Sara asked Brother Vance the question she knew that most of the colonists would want to know and the only question she thought mattered. "On Earth, did you confess your sin to your priesthood leaders and receive Church discipline?"

"I can't see how the answer to that question makes any difference."

"It would tell us whether you're a liar or not," Russ said, "and that, given the fact that the planet-spirit sends earthquakes and storms when people tell lies, makes a huge difference."

Other students grunted and nodded their agreement.

Sister Vance slid her arm under her husband's. "Duane may not be perfect, but he isn't a liar. He had a brief affair, to be sure, but he came to me right away and confessed. A liar wouldn't have done that."

"I felt terrible! I didn't want to hurt my wife, whom I love dearly, or break up my family. It was a very difficult time for us."

Sister Vance continued, "You have to understand also that the Church's current climate of Nationalism, combined with my own political service, made our position precarious. We were afraid that confession to Church leaders at that time would result in excommunication, which, if it became public, would seriously damage the Federalist agenda I've worked so hard to promote."

"And we had made such advances!" said Brother Vance. "By the time we left Earth, members of the Church were beginning to feel more comfortable publicly professing views that were intelligent and open-minded, and people outside the Church were beginning to see that Church members aren't as intolerant and insular as they believed—that we are truly Christian in doctrine and practice."

Sara shouldn't have been surprised to see several thoughtful faces and nods, especially among the young women who had long looked to Rachel Vance as a role model, but she was. She wanted to shout, "Surely you don't believe this cowardly rationalization!" but she refrained. For the moment.

"I always planned to confess, but the timing was never right. My intention was to make things right here with a bishop who shared my more forward-thinking view of the gospel."

Brother Vance said it in just such a tongue-in-cheek way that most of the colonists couldn't help themselves—they laughed.

Sara felt too queasy to laugh. Here was a high priest who had been sealed in the temple to his wife, who had committed adultery and then evaded repenting completely. And here he was—so proud and hardened in his sin, or so much in denial that what he had done had been terrible—joking about it and brushing it off as if it were nothing. No wonder Sister Vance was still so angry about it.

Cameron didn't laugh either, and Sara suspected he felt the same way about it that she did. Brother Vance had served in many ward and stake leadership positions and undoubtedly knew from firsthand experience that any man called to be the bishop of the Eden Colony Ward would not have the authority to call a Church court on a Melchizedek priesthood holder, which is probably what would have happened had Brother Vance confessed on Earth. Cameron might have told him that he had done himself an extreme

disservice for waiting, but that was not Cameron's way. Whatever he said to Brother Vance would come later—privately.

"No wonder the two of you have been such enemies of the bishop since we left Earth," Tony said. "This whole situation disgusts me!"

"Your judgmental attitude is hardly the Christlike one a member of the bishopric ought to have!" said Brittany.

"This supposedly virtuous leader of our community commits adultery, refuses to complete the repentance process, and has the gall to stand here and *joke* about it, and *I'm* the one who's in the wrong?"

Brent grunted. "Get off your high horse, Brittany. Five weeks ago, you were working to toss Dr. Carroll out of office on a similar issue."

"Sister Vance didn't do anything wrong! It was her *husband's* sin."

"She covered it up," said Russ.

"She was trying to save her marriage and career!"

"It wasn't just immoral, it was unethical," said Samantha. "The girl was his student!"

Brent nodded. "And probably twenty years younger than him at the very least!"

"And how do we really know she was a 'bimbo' and 'gold digger'?" asked Kevin. "Maybe he exploited her and lied to his wife."

"How did you keep the press from finding out about the affair?" Russ asked Brother Vance.

"I gave her a substantial amount of money to remain quiet."

"You *bribed* her?" Samantha gasped.

Sara was just relieved that he hadn't tried to lie about it.

Russ nodded. "Of course he did."

"We live in the real world, and we had to do what we had to do," Sister Vance explained. "The important thing is that it's over and I forgave him. One of the reasons we wanted so much to come to Eden was to get out of the D.C. cesspool and work on our marriage in a community that was built around the ideals we've always believed in and lived."

"If you really did forgive him, why did you reveal such anger when you communicated with Sara and the planet-spirit?" Dr. Marshall demanded.

"I'm only human. Duane made a comment a couple of weeks ago that upset me, and we just hadn't had a good chance at that point in time to really talk about it. Some of those old feelings of betrayal came to the surface during the telepathic communication with the planet-spirit, but we're working through them."

"If those feelings of betrayal really are so 'old,' then why have you been so determined to believe that Sara's a 'bimbo' and a 'gold digger' like that girl who slept with your husband supposedly was?" Dr. Marshall persisted.

As Sara listened to the exchange, she realized, in shock, that Dr. Marshall wasn't so much attacking Sister Vance as he was arguing for Sara's credibility.

Dr. Marshall's astute defense of Sara must have surprised Sister Vance as well, because she responded to his question with a trace of defensiveness in her tone: "I've never accused Sara of being a 'bimbo' and a 'gold digger.'"

"You've never used those particular words in front of the colony, but you and Ann and others have been questioning her integrity for weeks!" Dr. Marshall tilted his head in Sister Eagle's direction.

Sister Vance hesitated. She couldn't deny Dr. Marshall's accusation this time. She responded with no remorse in her voice or expression: "If I have, it's only because I've seen too many young women like that student who seduced my husband not to recognize the type, and yes, at first glance, Sara fits the description perfectly."

"So you admit now that Sara isn't the 'bimbo' and 'gold digger' you thought she was at first," Dr. Marshall said.

"Yes, but I still don't believe she's qualified to govern the colony."

Dr. Marshall nodded. "That's a reasonable concern and one I think we all have. Let's keep the focus on that point and stop making unjust attacks on Sara's character and mental state."

Murmurs of agreement sounded from around the room. Sister Eagle asked Sister Vance, "Are you really willing to risk your life on Sara's lack of qualifications?"

Sister Vance gazed at Sister Eagle, pondering. "No," she finally said.

Sister Eagle shook her head. "Neither am I."

Sara smiled at Dr. Marshall in gratitude, then addressed the Vances, Sister Eagle, and the few colonists who remained with them: "Does that mean you agree to accept my leadership and remain a part of the colony?" She received cautious nods from all of them in reply. "Good. It turns out that I have a proposal that I think most of you will agree with. I believe that we can live most of the tenets of the Equality of Zion without incurring Tempest's wrath and am, therefore, perfectly in agreement that we should keep as much of the original colony structure as we can. To do that, I suggest that we make Trevor Carroll my First Assistant and colony manager and my father-in-law my Second Assistant, to be a liaison with the other two colonies and to assist his brother in implementing the Equality of Zion."

"You can't just throw us out of office like that!" Sister Eagle protested.

Sisters Eagle and Vance had not expressed regret for their previous attacks on Sara's integrity or the damage those attacks had caused, and Sara, therefore, felt no compunction whatsoever for firing them. She gazed in determination at Sister Eagle, then at Sister Vance. "Oh yes I can, and I do. After this last coup, it's impossible for me to work with either you or her. I may not be able to work with my father-in-law either, but I trust him not to fight me, and yes, I'm willing to work with Kevin as a liaison between us. And Trevor Carroll as colony manager is the obvious choice. Everyone trusts him." She held out her hand to Trevor. "All in favor of this new arrangement, raise your hands."

Even those who didn't want Sara to be the governor agreed that Trevor Carroll was the correct choice for the position of colony manager, and every hand went up but his. "I don't have time for this," Trevor said. "I'm still working to understand the Zarrists' technology. Too many things could still go wrong."

"Those gadgets won't do us a bit of good if we can't unite under one voice of leadership," said Dr. Marshall.

"Please, Uncle Trevor," Brandon said, "Sara's right. Everyone trusts you."

"You are the perfect person to work with Ben," Barbara agreed. She appeared relieved and almost happy about this new arrangement. "He can teach you how to manage everything."

"And you know the Equality of Zion inside and out," observed Sister Ireland.

"I sincerely don't want to change anything about the colony structure that we don't have to change," Sara said. "I see my job as keeping in contact with Tempest and

keeping everything on track. The Carroll brothers can appoint people to work under them and organize everything however they see fit.”

Trevor didn’t like it, but he couldn’t argue. “I’ll do it, but only if Cameron agrees to put his new physical education assignment on hold for a while and comes back to my engineering team.”

Cameron smiled and nodded once. “With pleasure.”

After the meeting was over, Sara spoke briefly with Cameron’s father and Trevor. “I haven’t changed my mind about locating another site for the colony.”

“You want a permanent resort, then,” Cameron’s father said, troubled.

“Yes. If someone decides to stage another coup, I want a place prepared where we can go.”

\* \* \*

Rachel watched Sara step away from the group with Ben and Trevor, feeling disoriented. The only thing she was certain of at the moment was that she did not understand the things she had thought she understood. Sara wasn’t evil, and she wasn’t good. She was calculating and guileless. She seemed to be innocent and a little naïve, but brilliant about many things; she certainly wasn’t stupid. She simply didn’t make any sense. She was alien. And Rachel still despised her.

Rachel had thought that she understood Tempest, but she realized that she didn’t understand her either. What she and Duane had proposed should not have set the creature off, but it had. It insisted on Sara’s being the governor, and yet it hadn’t objected to Sara’s proposal to put Trevor and Ben in charge of colony management, which, for all practical purposes, would do exactly what Rachel had proposed. The storm had dissipated, so yes, Tempest was pacified. The creature simply didn’t make any sense. It, too, was alien. And that made it even more frightening than Rachel had previously believed.

In the middle of it all, Tony Wright’s perceptive words jarred her equilibrium: “This supposedly virtuous leader of our community commits adultery, refuses to complete the repentance process, and has the gall to stand here and *joke* about it, and *I’m* the one who’s in the wrong?”

Duane slipped his hand under Rachel’s arm to guide her to the synthesizing machines for lunch, and she tensed at his touch. Panic seized her for one dreadful moment. If he reacted by pulling away, the planet-spirit might interpret her previous words as lies. Thankfully Duane didn’t react in such a way, but he did give her a “so you’re still angry with me after all” look, and it wasn’t so much a contrite “I’m so sorry I hurt you” look as it was an impatient “so we’re going to go through this again” look. Rachel felt guilty that she couldn’t seem to let it go, but she also felt angry that he seemed so indifferent to the fact that he had done something despicable. She forced herself to smile and allowed him to lead her to the synthesizing machines, feeling doomed to act a part to keep the colony safe and wondering if this was how Barbara had felt.

## CHAPTER 5: VISION OF ASHLEY

On the day before Myri's departure, all eleven high priestesses of the Nation escorted her out of the Imperial Sanctuary into the Hall of Thrones, followed by the quorums of priestesses. Myri wore red like the others, but her dress was contoured in an Earthon style, knee-length, and made of smooth silk instead of satin brocade. She did, however, wear her red lace veil, which flowed to the white marble floor around her almost-bare legs and hid her ugly hair. For the first time in the three weeks since she had received her mission to bond David Pierce, she felt covered.

Thousands of people—the whole Nation, Myri assumed—watched her stroll through the Hall of Thrones. Myri was surprised and moved so many were there. This wasn't a wedding, after all; it was merely a public blessing reserved for those who were given particularly difficult assignments. She could feel the confidence the Nation had in her and felt powerful. With so many supporting her, she couldn't fail.

Myri stopped in front of the altar that was positioned at the head of the Hall. The Divine Emperor stood behind the altar, dressed in his purple ceremonial robes, embroidered with spirit crystal. On his right was Jesalya, Divine Empress and Highest Priestess, and to his left, standing next to the altar instead of behind it, was Jahnzel, Prince of Defense and now Highest Elder also, the position formerly held by Arulezz. Jahnzel held the Crystal Sword across the front of the altar, symbolically guarding access to the Divine Couple.

Myri curtsied to the High Three. "Divine One, Hallowed One, and Consecrated One, I, Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro, petition you this day for a blessing of strength and comfort."

"Kneel to the Divine One and the Hallowed One, Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro," Jahnzel said, "and your petition shall be granted." The thoughts that flowed into Myri's mind, however, were different from the ones Jahnzel had uttered: *It isn't too late to change your mind. Lezz is no more a god than I am. You can tell him no.*

Jahnzel lifted the Crystal Sword and held it at an angle above the kneeling pad, its blade glistening in the rays emanating from the skylight and casting shards of light on the altar. Myri knelt at the altar and rested her hands on the soft purple satin. *If the Divine One is not a god, then what are we?*

*Human beings doing the best we can to understand the universe and survive. There is no shame in that. There is shame, though, in manipulating a man into the Divine Emperor's service against his will.*

Having been to these ceremonies in the past, Myri knew that the blade of the Crystal Sword was positioned directly above her neck. That an apostate like Jahnzel would be the one wielding it, acting as the executioner for God, seemed ironic and wrong. She would try one more time to get him to see reason. *There can never be shame in doing the will of the Divine Emperor. You are in danger of losing your soul, Jahnzel.*

Jesalya lifted Myri's veil and placed her fingertips on Myri's forehead. Myri shivered with excitement. This was Jesalya's first opportunity to bless someone as the Divine Empress. Jesalya's voice rang out, beautiful and powerful: "Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro, my beloved sister and queen of nobles, you are truly the spirit crystal in God's crown. He is so pleased with your sweet, strong nature and the power of your faith. With His approval and aid, you will be able to accomplish any request He commands. By looking

to Him in everything you do and following the will of His Son and Prophet the Divine Emperor, your life and death will be blessed. Amen.”

The Divine Emperor rested his fingertips next to his wife’s and gave his blessing: “Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro, my beloved sister-in-law and queen of nobles, God has chosen you to do a great work. He knows your strength and the desires of your heart and has confidence that you will not fail Him or your people. Your great name gives you an unerring example of womanhood to emulate, and your status as noblewoman gives you the critical responsibility to direct and influence for good those with whom you associate. As you fulfill your new calling, you will do much to reclaim these Mormons and other Nationalists, whose minds are as dark as their communities are bright. I bless you now with greater faith, wisdom, and ability to accomplish your task and promise you before God and all of the witnesses here today that if you succeed, your mortal lives will be complete and your next death will take you into the arms of Jesus Christ and his glorious wife, the Holy Mother Myri Preysou. Amen.”

Myri trembled with ecstasy. What a wonderful blessing! What a magnanimous Divine Emperor!

“Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro,” Jahnzel said, “arise and go forth to conquer. May you be worthy to abide the presence of those who have died to preserve the Holy Nation of the Son of God.” To Myri, alone, he communicated, *I will remain in Teton Colony for a few more days in case you need me, and I will be monitoring your transmissions.*

He meant that he would wait there for her in case she failed. Myri stood up and backed away from the altar, her ecstasy fading into resolve. The Crystal Sword flashed like flame in the sunlight as it fell to its place in front of the altar. Myri could not fail. She *would* not fail.

\* \* \*

With a growing sense of dread, Jahnzel watched Myri receive her blessings. Jesalya’s was sincere enough, but Arulezz’s disgusted him. Jahnzel knew that Arulezz’s true faith in God was as weak as Myri’s was strong. Jahnzel doubted Arulezz cared much about the Immortal Afterlife at all, and here he was promising Myri exaltation in it!

Jahnzel felt certain that Arulezz had given those promises to Myri solely to increase her determination to succeed with David Pierce, not because he believed them. Jahnzel had never thought Arulezz could behave in such a cold, manipulative way, especially toward a pure and guileless girl who was a member of the Imperial Family.

Arulezz was continuing down the questionable path established by their father, but Jahnzel was becoming more and more aware that Arulezz wasn’t their father. Tohmazz Zarr’s vision had been skewed by desperation to be sure, but he had been a charitable man, a moral man.

Arulezz, on the other hand, appeared to lack a similar sense of humanity to temper his own desperation. Jahnzel couldn’t help but fear that Arulezz’s reign would not be one that directed the Nation’s thoughts and actions to God, but would instead defile it with despotism.

As Jahnzel watched Myri turn and stroll through the Hall of Thrones, back to the Imperial Sanctuary to pray for success, he said his own silent prayer of desperation: *Dear God, please let Myri fail and come back to me, not just for me, but for herself and David Pierce and for the Nation. Please, God, let her fail. Please let her fail!*

Myri's aircar soared over the snow-clad mountains and then the brown flatlands. Occasionally she could discern a glow over the landscape and knew she was seeing the Mormon cities under their light shields. Whenever a black patch of destruction deformed the land, anger welled up inside of her. Nexyun would pay someday, and in time, what was left of Jaxzeran's people would bow to the Holy Nation.

When Myri came to the eastern side of Kansas and finally saw the desolation for herself, a feeling of despair washed over her, mingled with rage and panic. Her Nation really was on the brink of extinction. She had certainly believed it before leaving Teton Colony, but now she understood it with the whole of her essence.

No wonder Jahnzel believed God had abandoned their people. Jahnzel had rebuilt their crippled fleet of seventy-eight warships into a respectable fighting force and had then been forced to watch Nexyun and Jaxzeran destroy it in a few hours. Myri had been so grateful that Jahnzel had survived the attack at all that she had not taken into consideration the emotional consequences such events would have on him. What was a Prince of Defense with three warships? A prince of nothing! Jahnzel had been right—the Holy Nation really was less than dust. Abandoning Jahnzel now when he most needed her felt so wrong. Would his life ever be right again? Would hers?

Myri reminded herself that God, Himself, had chosen David Pierce for her. Certainly this was a man who would make her happy, a man she would, in time, grow to love as she did Jahnzel.

It disturbed her, though, that she would have to pose as a Mormon girl to get close to David Pierce. Eventually she would have to unmask herself and bring him to live and work among her people, and when that time came, he would realize that he had been deceived by The Enemy. What would he think? What would he do? Myri didn't like the possibilities, and every time she thought about it, she developed a headache. What would happen to her if he rejected her?

Even as these thoughts unsettled her, she wondered why she should care. The savages were, after all, nothing more than potential warriors and breeding stock. She reminded herself of that fact over and over again, but it gave her no peace of mind. How would it feel to spend the rest of her life with a man who was nothing more than a fighting and breeding machine?

The thought repelled her, and she began to understand why she was troubled. She had to believe David Pierce was a man with feelings, or she wouldn't be capable of loving him at all, dooming herself to a life of loneliness.

Myri's aircar touched down in the area that had been Lawrence, Kansas. Myri's bodyguard helped her out of the aircar. Myri shuddered and put a tissue to her nose. She had no smell in her memory that even remotely compared to the rotten odor of this rubble. The destruction was so complete that there was no life for many kilometers in all directions. Even the sky was silent and dead. Arulezz had been right. The University of Kansas was gone. No one would be able to disprove her story.

Myri turned toward her bodyguard, whose thin face was pale and grave. He looked odd wearing a coat instead of a cape, his brown hair cut short instead of braided down his back in the custom of the Vahro Noble Guard. "Let's go. There is nothing more to

learn here.” Her bodyguard nodded and helped her back into the aircar. They lifted off and headed east toward Chicago.

Myri pressed her forehead against the window, her eyes scanning the burnt landscape for Tryamaz Camp. The Divine Emperor had sent teams of skilled workers to strategic areas all over the planet to provide food and shelter for the multitudes of natives whose lives had been thrown into chaos by the invasion. Thousands of natives had already gathered to Tryamaz from all over the continent and were helping with the clean-up in exchange for the necessities of life.

Seeing the neat lines of barracks constructed of building board did nothing to kindle even a spark of hope. It was all so ugly compared to the beautiful sanctuaries, palaces, and parks that had been Tryamaz. As Myri studied the ground, she saw lines of savages moving in sync, as though they were marching. Myri thought she should take comfort in the fact that Arulezz was building an army, but instead she wanted weep. What could these marching insects do against the rival fleets?

Several hours later, Myri’s aircar veered close to a light city as it descended into Chicago, and she wondered more than ever what secrets these pockets of light held.

Myri spent two days exploring the University of Chicago and Hyde Park before heading back west to the Kansas City area. David Pierce’s parents and his three brothers lived in a rural subdivision in the northeastern corner of the light. Arulezz had explained that if an aircar traveled from Chicago to the Kansas City light city, landing in the Pierces’ subdivision would be a perfectly natural thing to do.

Eventually Myri’s aircar approached the strange Kansas City light community. She braced herself as they descended into the light, expecting it to repel them or seize them with nightmarish visions. Instead it caressed away her despair, penetrating every cell of her body until she felt as though she were glowing with hope for her people. She would rest in this beautiful place and then go to the domes with all of the others who were weary of war and wanted to live the rest of their lives in peace.

The aircar landed near a large stone and shut down, jarring Myri out of her daydreams. Her bodyguard was supposed to leave her in the designated park, then immediately lift off. What did he think he was doing? Myri looked into his gold-gray eyes and knew. He felt the same glowing hope in the light that she did and didn’t plan to leave it.

Myri’s wits returned. The light was tricking them; there could be no other explanation. They had to fight it. Myri tapped her bodyguard hard on the arm. “Captain Sauvel! You can’t stay. I won’t be able to explain you.”

“My Saintess, what you’re planning to do to this savage isn’t right.”

His audacity shocked her. “I could have you executed for such an accusation!”

He smiled and shook his head. “You are a true holy woman and would not kill a man for such a reason. Allow me to take you back to the Consecrated One.”

“I will do the will of the Divine Emperor.” Myri turned to the door, grabbed her bag, and slid out of the aircar. She leaned over the seat and almost told him, in no uncertain terms, to leave, but then she hesitated. What would happen to her if something went wrong and she couldn’t contact Captain Sauvel? Arulezz had said that only static came from the light communities. “Take the car to the inner edge of the light and wait for six hours. If you receive no signal from me by then, return to Teton Colony.”

Captain Sauvel shook his head as if shaking away the light’s lies. “Yes. Of course. I’m sorry, my Saintess.”



Once Myri backed away from the aircar, Captain Sauvel started it up again, and it lifted off and disappeared into the pale, yellow sky.

\* \* \*

David tried to focus on the book in his lap, a Christmas present, but couldn't. He knew what the words were supposed to say, but he couldn't hold more than a few in his mind at the same time and so they meant nothing. He re-read the first paragraph over and over until he finally gave up and stared out the windows of his sunroom.

To his astonishment, an air-limousine descended into the park that adjoined his backyard, the sort of luxurious vehicle belonging to a wealthy Federalist or part of a fleet of vehicles hired out for weddings and fancy dances. David leaned forward as well as he was able and watched in fascination. The air-limo landed near the large stone and shut down, then started back up. One of its doors opened and out slid a girl wearing a tan wool coat and carrying a bag of the same color. Her blond hair blew in the wind from the aircar, then settled around her face as the air-limo lifted off. David gasped. It was Ashley Carroll!

"Mom! Dad! Bob! Come here now!"

As David waited for Bob and his parents, he watched Ashley turn her head to survey her surroundings and realized that it couldn't be Ashley. Even if she had returned to Earth in the Eden transport, she wouldn't be here in his park. It was simply a girl who looked like Ashley from a distance.

Bob rushed into the bedroom first. "What's the matter?"

David raised his good arm and pointed at the windows. "Look! An air-limo just dropped that girl in the park!"

"Is that all?" his mother exclaimed. "You scared us half to death!"

David watched the girl slip the bag over her shoulder. "Go get her!"

Bob strode toward the door. "Mom, come on. Let's go find out what she's doing here. Dad can deal with David."

"I'll bet she sounds foreign."

They both sounded so skeptical that David wrenched his gaze away from the windows and turned toward his father, who was frowning. "What did he mean— 'Dad can deal with David?'"

His father sat down in the swivel chair that was positioned next to David's recliner. "There's something important we haven't told you. Before Tren and Teri left, they cautioned us to keep strangers away from you. They're afraid that Tohmazz Zarr's sons may send an agent to bond your mind and recruit you into what's left of Star Force."

David burst out laughing. He laughed so hard his fractured ribs began hurting again. "Yeah, and Tren's paranoid!"

"He makes sense this time, son."

"This is the man who refuses to drink water unless it's in a bottle, who won't eat a fresh vegetable unless he's washed it twenty times, and who's never in his life hired a babysitter for his kids!"

"Apparently Lieutenant Quautar was the one who originally perceived your danger."

David couldn't stop laughing. "Lieutenant Quautar is a spy, and a crazy one!"

His father raised his eyebrows.

"I'm serious! When he started trying to get into the mind of Eden's planet-spirit, even Tren thought he was insane!"

"Still, son, it wouldn't hurt to take their advice about strangers. For another month or two, anyway. Then you can see anyone you want."

David couldn't read one paragraph of a stupid novel. He couldn't even go to the bathroom by himself. The idea that Zarr's sons could want him badly enough to send an agent into the Light to bond his mind was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard! David waved his hand over his metal-filled legs. "If the Zarr boys want this, they can have it!"

"You won't be in that chair forever."

"I want to meet the girl!"

"I just don't feel good about that at all."

"What if she's one of those Zarrist refugees Bob told us about? What if she needs help?"

"The good Zarrists who came into the Light after the invasion look like the aliens they are. None of them wear jeans."

"How do you know?"

"Have you ever seen a Zarrist wear jeans?"

"Well . . . no."

"They're all very quaint-looking. Besides, the only other flying machine that ever landed in our park belonged to an alien."

"Tren's brother doesn't count."

"If I was one of those Zarr boys and wanted to snare a fine Navy fella, I'd send a pretty girl!"

"Fine. Go interrogate her. Ask her to her face if she's a bad Zarrist if you want. I don't care, as long as I get to meet her today."

"You haven't even seen this little gal up close enough to know if she's pretty."

"She's not just pretty; she's *beautiful*. I say those Zarr boys know a 'fine Navy fellow' like me has even finer taste in women!"

"You're real ornery today. You must be feeling better." He sounded pleased.

"I've been down for over a month, and I'm going crazy. Seriously, Dad, that girl looks like someone I know."

"Who?"

"Ashley Carroll. She went to Eden with Sara, and Tren's certain she'll soon be Sara's sister-in-law."

"Is Ashley beautiful?"

"Absolutely!"

"If Ashley went to Eden, then this gal's not her. But she very well could be someone Zarr found who *looks* like her."

David threw his head back and laughed until he cried.

\* \* \*

Once the aircar was gone, Myri turned her attention to her surroundings. The air was as cold as that in Tryamaz Camp, which meant that the protective light didn't have all of the same properties as sunlight and didn't come from the sun. She expanded her spirit into the light and stretched outward and then downward, hoping to find its source.

After several minutes of probing, she realized that whatever it was, it permeated the planet as deeply as she could reach. Did that mean it came from the ground?

Myri withdrew her spirit from the ground and looked around. She saw that the chalky gray stone was even wider than it had appeared from the air. The glassy backs of new solar houses surrounded the park, and walks made of a strange black material wound through the grass. Funny, with all the information she had assimilated, she couldn't identify something as simple as the substance the walk was made of.

Myri scanned the houses to identify the one belonging to David Pierce. A man who had the same dark brown hair as David but was not as tall emerged from one of the houses with an older woman who had dark brown hair that was short, teased, and shaped to have strange little points on her temples. The woman looked like Elizabeth Pierce, the mother, and Myri assumed the man was David's brother Robert, the policeman. Both were wearing clothing that was even more casual and ugly than what she was wearing, if that was possible—those awful denim slacks, clunky boots, and bulky dark coats. Robert wore a blue cap with the white letters KC on it. As they drew closer, Myri could see that both wore expressions of wariness. She smelled a floral scent on Elizabeth that contrasted sharply with her casual clothing. She assumed Robert Pierce was armed.

Myri felt relaxed—almost too relaxed. She stepped toward the Pierces and extended her hand. “My name is Marya Soszka.”

The Pierces glanced at each other in a knowing, suspicious way. Myri perceived that her accent was giving her away. If only she had had time to get rid of it!

Instead of shaking Myri's hand, Robert folded his arms over his chest. “All right, girl, what is your real name and why are you in Stonefield?”

The light caressed Myri in an effort to melt the truth from her. She fought the feeling with all her strength. “My parents are—were—professors at KU. If they survived the invasion, they might have come here. I have been in Chicago, attending the university.”

When Elizabeth Pierce shook her head, her hair didn't move. “Girls with foreign accents don't just drop out of the sky into the backyard of a Naval Academy brigade commander.”

Myri could not pull her attention away from Elizabeth Pierce's unnatural hair. She concentrated hard to get the correct words to come out of her mouth. “I was born in Poland. Krakow. That is why I have an accent. I came to America when I was fourteen.”

“Don't fight it . . .” the light seemed to whisper. Myri hurled her words at the Pierces: “My parents worked in the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies at KU.”

Robert stepped closer to Myri. “That's just the sort of cover a Zarrist spy would use. Again I ask: What is your real name and what are you doing here?”

Myri was horrified to hear herself say, “My name is Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro. I have come to this place to make David Pierce my consort.”

Robert Pierce gaped. “A Zarrist noblewoman?”

Myri had no choice but to nod.

“Why David?” Elizabeth Pierce demanded.

Myri felt as though the light were unraveling her from the inside out. “The Divine Emperor chose him for me. I am a high priestess and can only marry a warrior of the highest virtue.”

Robert Pierce looked as though he wanted to laugh. “Why not marry your new emperor? Isn’t he virtuous enough for you?”

What was she going to do? They would never let her near David now. “He is already married to my sister.”

Elizabeth Pierce’s brown eyes dug into Myri’s with determination. “You can’t have my boy, Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro.” She motioned to the sky. “Call your air-limo and tell it come back for you.”

Myri could do nothing but comply. She telepathically transmitted her request to Captain Sauvel, relieved that she hadn’t sent him directly back to Teton Colony.

Robert Pierce rested his hand on Myri’s arm. His touch was so gentle that she didn’t pull away. “If your emperor is already married to your sister, then why don’t you marry his brother, Prince Jahnzel?”

Mention of Jahnzel unraveled Myri completely. Tears began to flow, and sobs gushed forth. She felt so weak that she had to sit down right there on the cold ground and rest her head on her knees. Never in her life had she been so humiliated.

Many moments passed, and Myri felt Elizabeth rest her arm on her back and squeeze her shoulder. “Go back to your prince, Saintess.” Myri opened her eyes and saw that Elizabeth was kneeling on the ground next to her. “David isn’t what you want.”

The Pierces’ kindness hurt more than their suspicion. Myri recoiled from Elizabeth and jumped to her feet. She grabbed her bag and ran to the middle of the park, where Captain Sauvel had left her.

Myri didn’t have to wait long for Captain Sauvel to return. When he did, he helped Myri into the aircar, then stowed her bag. She didn’t have to say a thing to him. The mere fact that he was there meant she had failed. Utterly.

Once the aircar flew above the light, Myri’s senses began to clear. How foolish she had been! Running from the light like a superstitious savage! What in the galaxy had possessed her to tell the Pierces her true name and reveal her feelings for Jahnzel?

Myri leaned her head on the seat and reached out with her thoughts to Arulezz. *I failed. I’m coming home.*

*What happened?*

Myri told him everything, feeling sick with guilt. *I allowed myself to be tricked by the light. The Pierces will never let me near David now.*

*Don’t give up yet, Myri! There may be other options.*

*If there are, I certainly can’t see them.*

*Go to Tryamaz Camp to wait. You may stay in my home, which only last week became ready for occupation. I’ll contact you later this evening with new instructions.*

\* \* \*

From his office, Jahnzel could monitor all planetary and many interstellar transmissions, along with air and space vehicular traffic. Particularly interested in communications to and from Teton Colony, he intercepted the telepathic transmissions between Myri and Arulezz while they occurred. Learning of Myri’s emotional outburst when Robert Pierce had suggested she marry her prince so relieved Jahnzel that he was afraid he might break down and weep also. Myri loved him, and she was coming home. He bowed his head into his hands. *Thank you, God!*

David watched in anger as the girl who looked like Ashley sat down on the ground and sobbed. His brother had undoubtedly upset her by accusing her of being a bad Zarrist, and David wouldn't tolerate it. Shoving hard with his left arm, he pushed himself over the foot of the recliner and to his feet, but pushed too hard. He fell against the glass, causing pain to shoot through his body.

His father quickly moved to his side. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to teach Bob some courtesies!" Realizing that he couldn't possibly get to the door before Bob and his mother returned, he slammed his fist on the glass.

David's father put the foot of the recliner down and positioned the chair against the backs of David's legs. "Now sit down and trust Bob and your mother to do the right thing with that girl."

David allowed his father to help him back into the recliner. "She wouldn't be crying if Bob hadn't made her mad."

"Look, son, she's leaving. Bob and your mom will tell us why she was crying in a couple of minutes."

"She's leaving?" David didn't believe it until he looked out the windows and saw the air-limo descend for her. When the vehicle finally disappeared, David turned his head toward his father, confused. "Maybe she really was a Zarrist agent."

"Maybe."

Bob burst into the sunroom first. "You'll never believe what happened!"

David's mother rushed into the room right after Bob. "It was a miracle!"

"So was she a Zarrist?" David's father asked.

"She sure was," Bob said, "And she wasn't just any Zarrist."

"She was a *noblewoman*!" David's mother took off her coat and hung it on a hook next to the door, and Bob did the same.

"Prince Jahnzel's girlfriend, in fact."

David was certain he hadn't heard Bob correctly. "Prince Jahnzel's girlfriend? What are you talking about?"

"She tried to pass herself off as the daughter of Polish professors at KU, but the Light wouldn't let her lie to us. Bob demanded that she tell us who she really was and what she was doing here, and she did."

David's father waved his hands in their direction. "So?"

Bob chuckled. "She came to make my stud brother her consort."

Bob's information dumbfounded David. His father, however, had no problem finding his voice. "Her consort?"

"Yeah, her consort. That's the exact word she used."

"Is this some kind of a sick joke?" David finally managed to ask.

"Even I couldn't come up with a joke this good," Bob assured.

David's father leaned toward Bob. "Tell us exactly what happened."

David's mother and Bob took turns relating their conversation with Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro. David listened to it all with a growing sense of astonishment and curiosity. "Me a 'consort' to a Zarrist noblewoman? That has got to be the weirdest thing I've ever heard."

"Isn't it, though?" Bob agreed.

"Odd, isn't it, that her emperor chose me as a 'warrior of the highest virtue'?"

"Not really. You are virtuous."

"Well, we think so, but their value system is different from ours. It's hard for me to believe I meet their criteria for a 'warrior of the highest virtue' any more than those Zarr boys meet *mine*."

"You wouldn't wonder if you'd met this gal," his mother said. "She wasn't the sleazy type of spy you see in the movies."

"No," Bob agreed. "Once she admitted who she was, she seemed as innocent and sweet as she was beautiful. Had she been wearing an old-fashioned dress and had long hair I might've thought she was one of our Zarrist refugees."

"They knew what kind of girl I'd like, right down to the haircut."

David's mother rested her hand on David's arm. "None of that matters now. The important thing is that the Lord saved you from this Zarrist beauty."

"Can you be sure about that? How do you know she won't come back?"

His mother shook her head. "She's too much in love with Prince Jahnzel to be that determined."

"She was determined enough to leave Prince Jahnzel in the first place!"

"We know her now," Bob said. "If she comes anywhere near Stonefield, we'll get rid of her again."

"I wonder how long they've been watching me."

"So do I," Bob said.

"They obviously knew about Ashley. That means it's been around three months, at least."

"You're beginning to sound paranoid!"

Did his mother want that badly to believe he wasn't in danger? How could she not see the obvious? "They tried to murder me, and now they send someone to marry me. I think I have plenty of good reasons to be paranoid!"

"I agree," Bob said. "I'm going to see how many officers I can get to help me protect you."

"How long do you think they'll be able to stay?" his father asked.

"Don't know. We're stuffed to the brim, and all jurisdictions are stretched pretty thin. I think we can manage a few days, at least, long enough to see if she's set on coming back."

David's father turned his head toward him. "I'll sleep in your room tonight. Would that make you feel better?"

"Actually, it would."

## CHAPTER 6: NEW INSTRUCTIONS

When Arulezz summoned Jesalya to his office at midday, she went immediately, despite the fact that she had been in the middle of a healing. Seeing him there leaning against his father's desk, which was now his own, sent a thrill through her as it did every time she had seen him there since his elevation to the exalted rank of Divine Emperor.

Arulezz held out his arms to her, his anxiety coursing into her soul through their dijauntu bond like blood through her body. As her mind sank into his, she experienced his thoughts as if they were her own and perceived the cause of his anxiety. Pierce's family had unmasked Myri within a few minutes of meeting her, and she was waiting in Tryamaz Camp for further instructions. Jesalya's fear and worry mingled with his, along with her questions and possible solutions.

*How could Myri have failed so soon?*

*She's too guileless. The Pierces sucked the truth right out of her.*

*A disaster!*

*If she comes home, she will marry Jahnzel and he will receive every memory she's ever had through dijauntu.*

*Including the memory of receiving the cell bond.*

*He may recognize it for what it was.*

*We should never have bonded Myri!*

*We did, and there's nothing we can do about it now.*

*We're doomed.*

*Not yet. She could break into David Pierce's house and put a dijauntu bond on him while everyone else is asleep.*

*She would never do it.*

*Yes, she would. She's bonded, remember?*

*The cell bonds can be resisted. If we command it, she will return to Teton Colony and go straight to Jahnzel.*

*The cell bonds are incredibly powerful. You know that when my father commanded the savages through the cell bonds, they did what they were told, almost without exception.*

The bonds had commanded the savages to give them money, to elect them to office, to found organizations to support them, and to join Star Force and die for them. Were they strong enough to urge a virtuous noblewoman like Myri to commit an act that was both a capital crime and an unpardonable sin? The thought outraged Jesalya. *It would be wrong, Lezz.*

*More wrong than putting a cell bond on her?*

*I don't know.*

*More wrong than Jahnzel's executing both of us for that stupid cell bond?*

*Even if they marry, Jahnzel may never become aware of the cell bond.*

*Do you really want to take that chance?*

The mere thought of it sent tremors of terror through Jesalya.

*If Myri does it, she'll be as culpable as we are. She will never be able to tell Jahnzel what happened. Even if she believes Jahnzel would spare her life, she will never believe he would spare the life of a savage, his rival.*

*After it's over, she may loathe David Pierce and not care that Jahnzel executes him for contaminating a high priestess.*

Arulezz's soul convulsed with laughter. *Like you loathe me?  
As if I could loathe my own soul!  
Exactly.*

Jesalya kissed him. *I'm an idiot.  
Arulezz returned her kiss hungrily. An irresistible idiot.  
David Pierce wouldn't be able to resist Myri.  
He would be ours in a microsecond.  
He would also know everything about us.*

*That would only be a problem if he resisted the bond, which he won't do. Even without the bond, he'll have all of her private memories, which would be a sore temptation for any man, even one as chaste as a saint.*

The thought of a man having those memories of Myri's prematurely revolted Jesalya, and yet she knew how right Arulezz was. *I don't care how strong the cell bond is, Myri will never do that!*

*She's so naïve, she'll never think of it.*

He was right again; Myri really wouldn't think of it, not because she didn't understand the nature of dijauntu but because she possessed such an undeviating faith in the Divine Emperor's holiness that it would never occur to her that he might require her to do something that would compromise her purity.

*Even without the cell bond Myri might do this thing. She believes in me completely, or she wouldn't have so easily rejected Jahnzel.*

Another explanation of Myri's quick rejection did exist. *Maybe she doesn't love Jahnzel as much as we've always believed.* It was a strange thought, but perhaps true.

*She loves him more than you loved me on our wedding day.*

*Without a doubt.*

*Which makes it even more critical that we keep her from marrying him.*

How could Jesalya require her blindly faithful, virtuous sister to do such a shameful thing with a savage? Then again, how could she and Arulezz allow Myri to return to Teton Colony and marry Jahnzel? *We don't have any choice, do we?*

*It's either Myri's virtue, or our lives.*

*Make sure you tell her to return immediately. The longer she remains there with her bondmate, the less likely she will ever leave.*

\* \* \*

Myri waited up for communication from Arulezz, and when she began falling asleep in the chair, she finally gave up and went to bed. Sometime later, she heard a sharp rapping on her bedroom door. Groggy, she sat up. "Yes?"

"My Saintess," Captain Sauvel said, "the Divine One is here to see you."

Shock woke Myri right up. She slid out of bed and scrambled for a housecoat, then met Arulezz in the front room. He watched her in a careful, studious way, and she suddenly felt a twinge of alarm. What new plan could be so complex that he had to come to her in person to communicate it, hidden by the dark of night?

"You may wait outside, Captain Sauvel," Arulezz said.

Captain Sauvel hesitated. Arulezz Zarr might be the Divine Emperor, but he was a man, and she was an unmarried high priestess, and the hour was late and lonely. Myri knew she had nothing to fear from him, but the meeting did appear unseemly. She



wondered why he hadn't brought Jesalya with him. "It's all right, Captain Sauvel. The Divine One will only be here for a few minutes."

Captain Sauvel bowed and stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

Once Captain Sauvel was gone, Arulezz stepped closer to Myri, "There's another option for success, Myri, but it's one you'll find extremely distasteful." She suspected that he used his voice so that no one could inadvertently intercept his thought transmissions and that he spoke in a whisper so that Captain Sauvel wouldn't hear him through the door.

Myri wanted to step away from him but didn't dare. "What could possibly be more distasteful than taking a savage as a consort?" She said it, but Arulezz's covert manner suggested that he wanted her to do something too distasteful to reveal to anyone else.

"Breaking into his home at night and joining your mind to his." He was so close that she could feel his warm breath on her forehead.

Nothing could have prepared Myri for such a scandalous suggestion. Could the Nation's situation really be so desperate that they had to consider such a dishonorable notion?

Almost in answer to her thoughts, Arulezz said, "Our Nation is on the verge of extinction. Desperate circumstances require distasteful decisions."

Myri stepped back. "But certainly a cell bond would be strong enough to draw David Pierce to Teton Colony after he recovers."

Arulezz stepped forward, closing the gap between them. "You've studied this man and know something of his character. Do you really believe a cell bond will be strong enough without love?"

"No. You're right. It wouldn't be. He would fight the bond and probably subdue it." How could she feel no outrage at such an outrageous request?

"A dijauntu bond is the only bond powerful enough to compel this man to marry you and still retain his mind."

"Still . . . the Holy Joining? I might as well take him into my bed before the nuptials!"

"Nothing the Divine Emperor commands is sin."

Myri's mind screamed that he was right, but a nagging feeling deep in her heart warned that if she followed him in this matter, she would regret it forever. "If I do it and anyone ever finds out, the Nation will demand my execution and his."

"I'm risking as much as you are simply by making this request. Would I put us both in such a precarious position if God didn't command it?"

"David Pierce is a savage!"

"As soon as the man marries you, I'll make him a saint."

Despite Arulezz's assurances, Myri couldn't comprehend dijauntu with anyone but Jahnzel and only after being lawfully married. The mere thought of a different man with a different arrangement made Myri feel polluted. "Are there any other choices?"

"Yes. You can return home in disgrace."

"The Pierces sent me away for no other crime than being a Zarrist. Do you really believe they will allow me to stay after doing such a thing to David?"

"No, they won't. Bond his mind and then leave. Let the pressure of the bond compel him to us."

"He may have guards now that his policeman brother knows about me."

Arulezz reached inside of his shirt and brought forth a large faceted piece of arelada in a plain silver setting. "Take this. If David Pierce has guards, put them to sleep."

Myri recoiled from the arelada. "The Pierces had a Novaunian to coach them. What if the guards resist the touch of my Awareness monitor? They'll capture me!"

"You're a high priestess, Myri, and they're savages. You should have no trouble overpowering them. If you're that concerned about it, have Sauvel help you."

"How can I use my healing skills in such a diabolical way?"

"If you're that determined to avoid the obvious, you'd better pray that there are no guards." Arulezz slipped the necklace over her head. "I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

Arulezz turned and left the house, and Myri returned to bed, feeling numb. She dreamed she was sitting at her vanity, where she watched with glassy eyes and a pale face as her beautiful long hair dropped to the carpet under the shears of one of her ladies-in-waiting.

When the haircut was over, Myri shook her head at the reflector and sighed. "Now I'm as ugly as the savage the Divine One chose for me. I suppose that means we're meant for each other."

Lady Faunehz fluffed Myri's hair with her hands, smiling. "You could never be anything but beautiful, my Saintess, both inside and out. This man who will be your husband won't be able to help but love you."

"I wish I could be as sure as you are, Lady Faunehz."

Myri assimilated American history all that day, not taking so much as a minute to eat or drink until that evening, when she sat down to dinner. Despair darkened her already depressed mood when she learned that Jahnzel had ordered his meal in his apartment again. She wished that she could feel good about Jahnzel's idea to go to the domes.

Unable to bear the thought that she was so hurting her beloved, Myri couldn't bring herself to eat yet. She did sip from her glass of punch, nervously twirling the goblet's stem whenever she set it on the table. As the stem spun, it tied her brain into a knot. She scratched her head hoping to pick out the knot in her brain, but all she managed to do was make it fuzzy.

As the first rays caressed Myri's face the next morning, she opened her eyes and looked around the room, her mind still hazy. Something terrible had happened, but what?

Myri stroked the dark green bedspread, the events of the previous day slowly returning to her mind. Arulezz had commanded her to do dijauntu with David Pierce; that was the terrible thing that had happened. How could she defile herself with this savage? Could God really require such an abominable merging of minds?

Jahnzel's thoughts reverberated through hers: *There are more choices than you realize, Myri. You can tell Lezz no.*

Myri's own thoughts countered: *I would rather marry a savage than go with you to the domes.*

*I'm not only a blasphemer, I'm a bona fide apostate.*

*You are in danger of losing your soul.*

Was Jahnzel right? Would their Nation better fulfill its destiny under the domes than on Earth? To even ask such a question felt like treason.

Myri knew then that even if she failed with David Pierce, she could never marry Jahnzel and give him her mind, even if he would be willing to reconcile. He would learn of his brother's instruction to bind David Pierce's mind to hers in the Holy Joining and be outraged. Jahnzel would insist they reveal Arulezz's sacrilege to the Nation. Arulezz's position as Divine Emperor was not so firmly established yet that he could effectively dismiss such an accusation. Arulezz and Jesalya would be pronounced fallen.

By law Jahnzel, as Highest Elder, would have no choice but to order their execution. A fallen Divine Emperor and his wife, the Highest Priestess, could not be allowed to live to corrupt the Nation. Jahnzel's first act as the new Divine Emperor would be to lead their people to Diron and join with the Malrezzites.

Myri had no doubt that marriage to Jahnzel instead of David Pierce would lead to such a coup. These treasonous possibilities appalled the faithful side of Myri's being, and she struggled to banish them. *Arulezz Zarr is not a fallen Divine Emperor! There have been only three fallen emperors in the entire fifteen hundred years of the Nation's history!*

Myri's prudent side protested: *But dijauntu with a savage is sacrilege!*

*The Nation is on the verge of extinction. Desperate circumstances require distasteful decisions.*

*Dijauntu with David Pierce would be more than "distasteful"; it would be depraved.*

*Arulezz is the Divine Emperor. He has the authority to make David Pierce a saint.*

*Dijauntu before the nuptials is a heinous sin.*

*Nothing the Divine Emperor commands is sin.*

*If I refuse this command, the Divine Emperor will fall.*

*He should fall. No true servant of God would make such an outrageous request.*

*If the Divine Emperor falls, the Nation will die.*

*The Nation won't die; it will be reborn on Diron and blossom under the domes.*

*My choice will decide whether the Divine Emperor lives or dies.*

*I have the power to lead my people to safety and prosperity.*

*The Divine Emperor is God's Chosen. I cannot consent to his fall and my sister's degradation.*

*My sister consents to my degradation.*

*There can never be shame in doing the will of the Divine Emperor.*

\* \* \*

When Arulezz's aircar touched down in Teton Colony early the next morning, Jahnzel met him with a scowl, wearing fur-lined boots and a hooded cape. *What in the galaxy have you been up to?*

Arulezz adjusted his scarf as he began walking to the palace on the path of packed snow, vowing to himself that by next winter, he would have an enclosed, heated hangar for his personal aircar. He had never agreed with his father's policy of making their lives uncomfortable just so that they could become as physically strong as the savages. *Myri failed on her first trip to Kansas City. I made a trip to Tryamaz Camp to give her new instructions.* Jahnzel, of course, already knew what he was up to. He was just galled that he hadn't been able to intercept the communication between Myri and him.

*In the middle of the night? I thought Myri's mission was secret only to David Pierce and his family.*

The beauty of the jaunt to Tryamaz was that it really had allowed his communication with Myri to be secret. Jahnzel suspected Arulezz had given Myri an unseemly assignment, but he would never be able to prove it. *She was very discouraged, and I was afraid that she would refuse to return to the light city unless I gave her the new task in person.*

*And just what was this new task?*

*To slip into his house tonight and bond his mind as he's waking out of sleep.*

*That's despicable! She won't do it.*

*She already planned to lie to David Pierce about her identity and put a cell bond on him. Breaking into his house isn't any more despicable than that.*

*In your opinion, maybe, but not in hers.*

Myri had been astonished by the assignment, but she had been no more repelled by the idea of spiritual intimacy with a savage than she had been upon learning that she would have to marry one and bear his children, and she had not been outraged. The cell bond he had on her mind was working remarkably well. *Face the truth, Jahn. Myri wants to be faithful. She'll do it.*

*Not if I go to Tryamaz myself and stop her.*

He might just do it too, which would be a disaster. Arulezz wasn't sure that Myri, in her present state of mind, would be able to resist Jahnzel if he communicated with her in person. *What? Are you going to pick her up and chain her into your aircar?*

Jahnzel hesitated. *No, I'll get her to see how you've been manipulating her.*

Arulezz laughed. *Just as you did after I gave her this mission?*

Jahnzel couldn't argue against the reminder of his previous failure and responded without conviction: *She won't do it.*

*We'll see.* Jahnzel could always be counted on to protect his pride. He would no more fly to Tryamaz Camp to grovel to Myri than Myri would rebel against the Divine Emperor.

\* \* \*

David's father did sleep in the recliner in David's room the night after Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro appeared in the park. The next day he appeared so tired that David regretted his paranoia.

David talked about the matter all the next day. He hoped that talking about it would help him understand what had happened, but at the end of the day he found that he was no closer to comprehending any of it than he had been the day before.

Why had Tohmazz Zarr and his sons targeted him above the many more qualified Nationalist military men? Had the Zarrs known that Tren was a Novaunian that long ago? Why was it so important that Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro marry a "warrior of the highest virtue"?

"Let it go, son," his father said, smiling.

"I don't want to let it go. I haven't had anything this interesting to think about since I found out Tren's an alien."

"None of us have."

"I'm afraid that if I stop talking, my mind will turn into jelly again."

"Then by all means, keep talking."

\* \* \*

Myri remained in seclusion in Arulezz's cottage all the next day and returned to Stonefield under cover of night. The plan was to hover just inside the light over the Pierces' home and monitor the property. Concerned for her safety, Captain Sauvel would not consider approaching the property in any other way.

As Myri and Captain Sauvel descended into the light for the second time, Myri saw another craft descending below them. When she looked closer, she saw that it was a Novaunian frigate. "Captain Sauvel! Get us out of here!"

Myri felt the aircar jerk upwards. When they were surrounded by stars again, she asked, "Where did that Novaunian frigate come from?"

"There's no frigate."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There is no frigate."

Relief washed over Myri, laced with anger. "It was a trick of the light. Descend again."

Sauvel did as commanded.

Surrounded by light, Myri saw the Novaunian frigate again, but this time, it landed on a helipad at what looked like a hospital. Three Novaunian officers wearing white coats with diamond buttons brought an injured man out of the frigate, strapped to a mobile bed. Myri knew at once this was David Pierce and that one of the black-haired Novaunians was his brother-in-law, Trendaul Alexander. Seeing David's bruised and broken body firsthand, Myri realized how close to death he had certainly come. A savage was with them who appeared to be directing the officers. Myri assumed he was a medic or doctor.

The four men moved David into the hospital and were met by members of the staff. Two of the Novaunians returned to the frigate, while David's brother-in-law walked deeper into the hospital and joined three people in a lounge.

One was a middle-aged woman with brown eyes and golden brown curls; Myri recognized her as Teri Alexander, David's only sister. Seeing the Novaunian come into the lounge, she turned toward the older woman. Myri recognized her as Elizabeth Pierce. "That's the real Tren, Mom! That's the way he's supposed to look!"

Teri jumped up and moved toward her husband. An older man with short, graying light brown hair and green eyes placed his hand on Elizabeth's with a squeeze. Myri recognized him as Eugene. "We always knew Tren was an alien; now he looks it."

The Novaunian embraced and kissed his wife, as happy to see her as she was to see him, then removed his coat and gloves and laid them on an empty chair. He looked younger than she was, but given that the Novaunians lived a long time, he probably wasn't.

"She's really going to leave us, isn't she?" Elizabeth said to Eugene, tears escaping from the corners of her eyes.

Teri sat down in a chair next to Elizabeth and handed her a tissue. The Novaunian moved a chair so that he could sit facing all three of them. He rested a hand on

Elizabeth's arm. She dabbed her eyes with her free hand and looked up to see the Novaunian gazing at her with compassion. "I'm so sorry, Betty. For everything."

"So am I, Tren," Elizabeth said.

The Novaunian squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "Unfortunately, your worries aren't over yet. Lieutenant Quautar is convinced that Tohmazz Zarr planned to recruit David into Star Force."

"But surely that danger is gone now that Zarr's dead and Star Force is destroyed."

Eugene didn't appear so certain. "Both of Zarr's boys are still alive, aren't they?"

"Arulezz Zarr ejected from the aircar. Jahnzel Zarr saved his flagship and three warships, so Star Force hasn't been completely destroyed. And with this foothold into space, they'll be able to start rebuilding almost immediately."

"Where are they now?"

"They're lying low. The ships are under cover in various mountain ranges around the world, and we assume Arulezz and Jahnzel have taken refuge in the Grand Teton National Park here in the United States. There's a dense force-field bowl in the park that indicates a base."

Myri shouldn't have been so surprised that the Novaunians knew so much about her people, but she was, and the more she heard, the more exposed she felt.

"If your ship can detect a base, why couldn't the invading ships?" Elizabeth asked. "Why wasn't it destroyed with all of the other military bases around the world?"

"Without the shield, it doesn't look like a base. The Zarrists didn't raise the shield until after the invading ships left Earth, I assume to protect themselves from us and any domestic forces that might still remain in the cities under the Light. Gavaun didn't suspect a base in that region either. We examined the images procured on the way in, and even when magnified, the area appears to be a vacation resort—a remote vacation resort. There isn't even a standard road going into it or a modern landing field. We suspect they kept it hidden by flying their people into neighboring states on commercial flights and then bringing them in a few at a time in 4-wheel-drive vehicles."

"It sounds like they didn't have their shield up before or during the invasion," Teri said. "That was risky."

"The resort would have bunkers," the Novaunian said. "If the invaders didn't know about the base, they wouldn't have destroyed the bunkers the way they did in Tryamaz." "

"Do you think that's where the President and his family went when they disappeared?" Elizabeth asked.

"Maybe," the Novaunian said. "He may have given the Zarrs permission to put a resort on national park land in exchange for protection."

Eugene drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair. "So unless the Zarrists leave Earth altogether, they'll be looking to rebuild Star Force."

The Novaunian nodded. "And with so many of their own warriors dead, they'll be searching for a fresh source of talent and manpower."

Elizabeth looked as if she could not bear the thought of another threat. "But our forces around the world did put up a fight and were destroyed. Why would those Zarr boys think they could get a reasonable number of soldiers from that source?"

Hearing the Divine Emperor and the Consecrated One referred to in such a disrespectful way both outraged and unnerved Myri.

“Most of what wasn’t protected by the Light was destroyed, but that doesn’t mean every soldier with Nationalist leanings was killed.”

Eugene frowned. “Which means that David would not only be a good leader for the Zarrs, he would be very valuable for the other Nationalists he could influence and recruit.”

The Novaunian nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“You haven’t said anything to David about this, have you?” Elizabeth said. “After everything he’s been through?”

“No,” Teri said. “I was afraid it would upset him too much, and he’s been too groggy with pain medication to be able to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes at a time.”

“Surely, though, the Light will discourage any Zarrists who come looking for him.” Elizabeth sounded as if she were struggling to keep her voice calm. “Most of them are scared of it.”

“Most of them?” the Novaunian asked in surprise. “Did Kansas City pick up some Zarrist refugees?”

Eugene nodded. “About fifty, Bob tells us.” Both Jahnzel and Arulezz had told Myri that many traitors had “defected” to the light after the invasion.

“I guess that makes sense, considering how close you are to Tryamaz. Are they being allowed free movement?”

“For now, but what arelada they had has been taken from them. Turns out these Zarrist refugees have been real cooperative, and most of them didn’t have arelada anyway.”

“They’re from the lower classes, then.”

“Most of them. There is, though, an important fella they look to as their leader.”

“What do you know about him?”

Eugene shrugged. “He has a catchy name.”

“Lieutenant Lanner Laddan,” Teri said. Hearing that Laddan was an actual officer shocked Myri. Aristocrats didn’t desert any more than nobles did!

“An *officer* who deserted?”

“You think he’s dangerous, Tren?” Eugene asked.

“I don’t know. I can’t believe an agent would risk exposure by posing as a refugee, especially a Star Force officer, but be careful anyway. David’s danger will be especially great during these next couple of months while he’s recovering. A spy could easily bond his mind, and neither he nor you would ever know.”

“Then what can we possibly do?” Elizabeth asked, her voice shrill. “He’s going to be here at the hospital for a week or two at least, with all kinds of people looking in on him. And if we warn him, he won’t trust his doctors and therapists!”

Teri put her arm around Elizabeth in an attempt to comfort her. “It’s a miracle David survived at all, Mom. We’ve always teased him about being cocky or crazy for being so certain that he has a grand and heroic mission to perform in preparation for the Second Coming, but now I’m beginning to think he was right all along. If there’s one thing I am sure of, it’s that the Lord doesn’t mean him to fall to the Zarrists.”

“Since there’s a danger, we’ll just get David home as soon as possible,” Eugene said in a reassuring tone. “Chris, Jim, and Bob will help me move him and take care of his needs. It’ll be easy enough to keep strangers away from him at home. In the meantime, one of us will always be here with him.”

The Novaunian nodded, appearing relieved. "When you feel he's ready, tell him that an attack will feel like a blanket of warmth around his head. He can resist it by tensing his mind and shoving the warmth away. And if you, at some future time, suspect he's been bonded, he can fight that too. The Zarrists can't force him to do anything."

"Surely it won't come to that!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"Teri and I can still take him with us. He'll get the best of care."

"It's bad enough that you're taking Teri and the children!"

Eugene glanced at Elizabeth in a tentative way. "Actually, I've thought about sending David to Novaun with you and Teri."

Elizabeth glared at Gene. "He wouldn't want to go!"

Myri felt a jerk. Captain Sauvel's voice nudged its way into her conscious thoughts. "My Saintess? Are you all right?" The hospital scene faded, leaving only stars against the night sky, and Myri realized that Captain Sauvel had again taken the aircar out of the light.

Since Captain Sauvel had not detected a Novaunian frigate and they were some distance from a hospital, Myri assumed that she had seen a vision of the past. "How many guards does David Pierce have?" She felt a strong sense of reluctance to approach the light again.

"Four on the grounds, my Saintess, and one in his bedroom."

"Which means that getting into the house secretly tonight would be difficult."

"I don't think we could get into the house secretly at all. There isn't much cover, and although I might be able to incapacitate all of the guards, I don't think I could do it without awakening the parents and neighbors."

Myri considered Arulezz's suggestion that she overpower the guards telepathically and thought about the vision the light had given to her of the Pierces and the Novaunian brother-in-law at David's hospital. "I'm more afraid than ever that these guards would resist any attempts I might make to put them to sleep."

"I agree, my Saintess."

"What do you suggest, Captain Sauvel?"

"That we return to Teton Colony."

"I won't give up the mission and return in disgrace!"

"In that case, I believe the best course would be to return to Tryamaz Camp and wait until the Pierces feel secure enough to let the guards go."

"How long do you think that will be?"

"I think we should wait a week and try again."



## CHAPTER 7: BLIND

The colony required a massive clean-up effort after the storm, which made Trevor so angry that he ordered the Vances to oversee it while he made a plan to divide the colony's equipment.

Sara, Trevor, Cameron's father, and the original Board of Advisors decided that putting the resort fifty miles away would allow it to be distant enough to avoid many of the problems that might inflict the original colony, yet close enough that the colonists could travel there on foot if they absolutely had to do so. They felt certain they could find a site suitable for farming and went to work trying to decide which colonists could be trusted to separate and work the land there.

Monday morning, Cameron's father, as Sara directed, took an aircar, and, with a team of specialists, left to scout out a site for a colony resort. Sara and her communications team left Woodland Park again and arrived in the rain forest one hundred miles from the coast on Wednesday. After making camp, they again tried to telepathically reach the site of Control Colony. When Sara dove into the ground with her spirit and those of the others, she expected Tempest's to grab hers and cling. When Tempest didn't expand her spirit to connect with Sara's, Sara dove deeper. She discerned mixed emotions in Tempest that she couldn't quite identify—impatience, perhaps, maybe frustration, and maybe even confusion.

Sara continued to delve and, in several minutes, asked again, *Tempest, please show me the remains of Control Colony.*

Tempest did not respond. *You showed them to me before! Tempest, where are you?*

The others were beginning to get impatient and maybe even tired, and Sara knew they wouldn't be able to hold the connection indefinitely. Cameron, in particular, was perplexed. *This is so different from the other times. She was downright eager then.*

*And she sent storms when you didn't communicate with her for a while,* Ashley communicated.

*What do you think it means?* Trevor asked. *Could she be asleep?*

*I can feel her emotion, so I know she isn't asleep. For some reason, she just doesn't want to communicate with me. I have no idea why. Nothing like this has ever happened before.* Sara took another dive into the Awareness surrounding her, and still Tempest didn't respond.

*Let's try to locate the arelada without Tempest's help and see what happens,* Cyndi suggested.

Sara agreed that there was nothing else they could do. She withdrew her spirit from Tempest's depths and concentrated on the Awareness coming from the particles of soil and the life that lived or grew nearby. Her expanded spirit crept along the forest floor, looking for the coast. Sara stretched and stretched and could sense nothing but forest. Thirty minutes passed, and they had to stop from exhaustion.

Even speaking required too much effort. Sara slouched in her camp chair, tilted her head back, and stared up at the sky, listening to the insects buzzing around her. She remained like that a long time before she felt she could sit up. Instead of using her energy to lift her torso, however, she poured herself into Tempest again. Perhaps the planet-spirit would communicate with her if she made the attempt alone.

When Tempest didn't respond, Sara hurled her thoughts at her in desperation, *Where are you, Tempest? Why won't you communicate with me?*

For the first time since Sara had begun communicating with Tempest, she missed her. Without her, the planet wasn't just lonely, it was desolate. She felt as if they were on a deserted island, never to get rescued. Sara pressed and pressed until her spirit had no more strength and faded back within her body as fog dissipates in the sun.

Eventually the five regained enough strength to discuss what had not happened.

"It looks as though we're going to have to take the aircar out over the ocean tomorrow," Trevor said.

"I don't know what else we can do," Sara agreed.

The next morning, Sara and the others made one more attempt to communicate with Tempest from the clearing, and she still refused to show Sara the location of Control Colony.

Sara slid into the back seat of the aircar feeling nervous. She had never completely trusted this aircar to be capable of traveling thousands of miles around the world without having any technical difficulties that might cause it to lose power in some out-of-the-way place. Logically she knew that Cameron's parents had traveled all over the eastern half of the southern continent and back again without any trouble and that she and her crew shouldn't have any difficulty at all traveling three hundred and fifty miles out to Control Colony and back, but a feeling of dread nagged at her.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Sara admitted, feeling ridiculous.

"I don't know how many times I have to tell you, the aircar is completely safe," Trevor said.

He sounded irritated that she would bring this up again, and Sara felt more ridiculous than ever. "I know, I know, and we've travelled eleven thousand miles without any trouble, but I just can't shake this feeling."

"Well we can't turn around now," Ashley said. "We've come eleven thousand miles and spent a week of our time trying to do this. We have to finish it."

Everyone agreed, and Sara tried to redirect her thoughts so that she could make the trip without too much anxiety. She was only successful for a while, however, because the sky clouded over and the wind picked up enough that the aircar bobbed around in a way that made her queasy. "The babies don't like this at all. If I can get there without puking it'll be a miracle."

"This is a little storm; nothing to worry about." Trevor pointed to the weather reader on the dashboard. "See?"

Sara leaned across Cameron so that she could see. She was glad this wasn't a tsunami like the storm that had destroyed Control, Ten, and Two, but she wasn't sure her stomach recognized the difference. "Cyndi, can you synthesize me a bag or a bowl or something?"

Cyndi chuckled. "Of course."

"I'm beginning to agree with Sara," Cameron said. "The closer we get, the more uneasy I feel. I'm wondering whether we should stop trying to send a message and return to the colony."

"Do you really want to be stuck in this terrible place forever?" Ashley exclaimed.

"It won't be forever. Eventually someone from Earth will come and check on us."

"And there's no guarantee that this message would even get to someone who could or would give us help," Sara reminded.

"And it could even be picked up by someone hostile," Cameron said.

"No one could be as hostile as Tempest!" Cyndi declared.

“By all appearances, that seems to be true,” Cameron said, “but really, we have no idea what other threats are out there. If we stop now, we’ll be able to conserve more of our arelada—arelada we need to deal with the threat we know about.”

Trevor, Cyndi, and Ashley didn’t come close to agreeing, and neither Cameron nor Sara felt strongly enough about the issue that they believed they should turn around and return to the colony with the information that, fifty miles away from the arelada, they had, all of a sudden, decided they weren’t going to finish the job. All five of them knew that such news would infuriate the other colonists.

In another twenty minutes, they hovered directly over the coordinates of Control Colony, lurching back and forth in the rain. Sara felt more queasy than ever, but she thought she had time to find the arelada before she lost the contents of her stomach. She joined spirits with Cameron, Ashley, and Cyndi, and they telepathically searched the ocean floor from the aircar. They were relieved to find evidence of the sunken island right away. They pressed forward and within minutes spotted the one thing none of them ever dreamed they would find—a spaceship.

*I wonder if it still works,* Ashley communicated.

*I don’t know why it wouldn’t,* Cameron replied. *The inside would be airtight, at least.*

*Do you think the water robots Uncle Trevor found in the synthesizing machine’s data files could pull it out?*

*Maybe, but there’s no way to know for sure until we try. After we get everyone from around the planet gathered, we should have the time we need to synthesize enough of them to attempt the job.*

*What a relief! If sending this message doesn’t work, we can leave in the ship!*

*It doesn’t look big enough to hold the entire colony,* Cyndi observed.

*Someone could go for help,* Sara suggested.

Cameron agreed and almost felt excited. *That’s presuming someone in the colony could figure out how to pilot it.*

The spaceship was such an intriguing sight that they continued in their search a little reluctantly. They scoped the dead colony, searching among the corpses and debris for the glow that would indicate arelada.

When Sara finally found it, she poured her spirit into it, pulling the others with her. The arelada immersed them. When they felt as if they were burning with a bright light, Sara directed her thoughts through the top of her head, pushing as hard as she could: *Help! Stranded Earth colo—*

Before she could finish the message, Tempest’s spirit grabbed hers and flung it, breaking Sara’s connection with the others and the arelada so violently that pain ripped through her head and throbbed through her body. She heard screaming and wasn’t sure whether it was her own or that of her companions.

Sara knew then that she would lose her breakfast and attempted to get the plastic bag she was holding to her mouth. As she became aware of her surroundings, the aircar tilted sharply. Cameron slammed into her, knocking her against the door. She got the bag to her mouth and heaved again and again as the aircar lurched up and down, side to side.

Even when her stomach seemed to be empty, the reeling in the aircar and in her head didn’t stop. Cameron laid a hand on her shoulder. “Please be okay.”

“I am.”

Cyndi's voice trembled with anxiety. "Tempest has never wanted us here. Why would she not want us to get rescued?"

"I don't know." This last incident proved that the reason Tempest had refused to cooperate with her was because she didn't want her group to send a message off of the planet, but why? Sara felt too miserable to even want to know.

"Could she know something we don't about threats out there?" Cameron asked.

Sara was pretty sure Tempest would have told her directly about any known threats, but the words wouldn't form. She shook her head.

"We did get a message off, though. Didn't we?" Ashley said.

Sara nodded.

"Can't you communicate with Tempest, Sara, and ask her why she's still trying to kill us?" Ashley asked.

Sara shook her head. "Feel too rotten."

The minutes passed, and the reeling became so bad that Sara's fear that they were all going to die overpowered her physical discomfort. She had to find some way to communicate with Tempest and get her to do what she could to stop the storm. "Cameron," she whispered, "try to communicate with Tempest. She might talk to you."

"I'll try, but I don't think it will work."

The aircar lurched back and forth for what seemed like an hour before Cameron finally shook his head. "There's nothing. She wants to talk to you, Sara, not to me."

"Please, Sara, try," Ashley begged.

Sara didn't have the strength to do more than open her mind, but that was enough. Within seconds, she felt Tempest's spirit nearly crush hers. *Why are you so angry with me, Governor Carroll?* Her spirit was charged with panic, perhaps hysteria.

Of all the questions Sara might have imagined coming from Tempest, she had never anticipated this one. *I'm not angry; I'm sick. Please stop the storm. It's going to kill us.*

*Not until you tell me why you are so angry.*

What in the galaxy was Sara supposed to say to that? Sara's dumbfoundedness frustrated Tempest even more and she squeezed harder. *Tell me now!*

Fortunately, Sara found it easier to think than to speak, especially since she wasn't so aware of her body. *Since yesterday I've been trying to communicate with you and you refused. Why?*

*How can you ask that?*

*I'm asking that because I don't understand.*

*How can you not understand?*

*There are many things I don't understand.*

*But you and I are alike. We understand each other.*

*I don't understand you as well as you think I do.*

*But you are an empath.*

*Even if that's true, I can't understand your feelings unless my spirit touches yours, which you didn't allow.*

*That isn't true. You could feel my feelings.*

Technically, Tempest was right. *Okay, so I could feel your feelings, sort of. That doesn't mean that I could correctly interpret them.*

*Then you really don't know why I refused to communicate with you.*

*I really don't know why you refused to communicate with me and then stopped the message I sent off the planet.*

*How can you not know?*

*How can I know everything you are thinking if you refuse to tell me?*

*I shouldn't have to tell you!*

*Yes, you should. Even people who are a lot alike have to tell each other what they're thinking, otherwise they won't know.*

*I'm not a person. I don't communicate like they do. You should know me better than that.*

*You and I aren't that much alike, Sara persisted.*

*How do you think we're different?*

*I try hard to do what God wants me to do and you don't.*

*Do you obey all of God's commandments?*

*I try to obey all of God's commandments.*

*Then you're saying you don't always obey all of them.*

*Tempest had a point. I obey all of the most important ones.*

*What makes a commandment more important than another?*

*"Thou shalt not kill" is a big one.*

*But humans kill all the time.*

*Only the bad ones do.*

*I saw you kill a mosquito this morning!*

*Were Sara not so weary, she might have laughed. Certainly God gave you a commandment not to kill His children.*

*Tempest was silent for many moments, as if pondering. That commandment doesn't matter anymore. I've already broken it.*

*Yes, it does matter. You can repent.*

*What does "repent" mean?*

*It's when you feel sorry for breaking God's commandments and don't do it again.*

*The spirit of God cleanses you, and you change and become better.*

*What will happen if I don't repent?*

*Then you could end up in outer darkness, with evil spirits crawling on you for eternity.*

*You said that Wounded-Mortal-Who-Hides-Behind-Lies was angry and didn't mean what she said!*

*I told you that what she said didn't mean anything, and it didn't, because she was trying to make you angry. I'm not trying to make you angry. I'm trying to tell you something about the way God works.*

*Why do you think that I could end up in outer darkness with evil spirits crawling on my face if I don't "repent" for intentionally killing God's children?*

*The scriptures teach that my planet, the earth, lives the law of the celestial kingdom and will become a part of Heaven. Earth's planet-spirit doesn't intentionally kill God's children, so that must be part of the law she has been given to get to that place. If you have been given that law and don't live it, it's only logical to conclude that you will not become a part of Heaven and will go to another place.*

*What other place?*

*All I know is that there are three other places: the terrestrial kingdom, which is just under the celestial; the telestial, which is just under that; and outer darkness, where Satan and the evil spirits go. You will go to the place that corresponds to the law you have lived.*

*And you think it could be outer darkness with the dark spirits?*

*I don't know. I just know that if you don't live the law you have been given, you will have to go to a lower place—a place farther from the presence of God. But if you live the law you have been given, then you should be able to progress to a higher place and get a new law.*

*A new law? God would give me a new law? That isn't right! It's hard enough for me to live the first law! I shouldn't have to get a new law! That isn't fair! Why does God keep doing things that aren't fair?*

Sara realized then that she had communicated too much and was dismayed. *Please calm down and tell me what I need to do to stop the storm.* How many times had she asked that question since she had begun communicating with Tempest?

*No one but Bishop Carroll may speak for God.*

*What do you mean?*

*There are others who act like Bishop Carroll but who lead worship that is different. I feel agony when they speak.*

Sara's first thought was of Fourteenth Colony, the refuge for children with its lone chaplain. Her mind also went to Third Colony and how it was an experiment in religious tolerance, having come to Eden with people of many religions and their clergy. Surely Tempest wasn't demanding that they and others who had come to Eden in the other colonies adhere only to the Latter-day Saint faith! *You can't do that! God gives all of His children the freedom to worship Him as they choose!*

*Maybe that is true on the filthy planet you come from, but it is not true here.* Tempest withdrew.

Sara shouted after her: "I can't require that of them! I won't!"

When Sara became aware of her surroundings, the first thing she saw was Cyndi staring at her in fear, her hands clenching the seat of the aircar. "What does she want us to do now?"

The aircar rocked, and Sara realized that the storm hadn't subsided at all. She moaned. "I really messed things up."

"What happened?" Ashley demanded. "Is she going to stop the storm?"

"I don't know."

"Show us the conversation," Cameron said.

After Sara had regurgitated her encounter with Tempest, Cameron said, "You're right; this is bad."

"And it's my fault for provoking her. How can I face the colony?"

"Wait just a minute, Sara," Cyndi said. "You've made a particular point to assure the colonists that they are not at fault for Tempest's tantrums. You have to allow the same thing to apply to yourself also."

Cyndi was right, but it didn't matter. Sara still blamed herself. "What are we going to do?"

Cameron tapped his fingers on his thigh. "We should have seen this coming. We should have anticipated this demand."

"I don't know why we would have," Cyndi said. "How long have we been here? Seven weeks?"

Sara was incapable of doing math at the moment, but Cameron and Ashley appeared to be figuring in their heads. Cameron was the first to nod.

"There are two other colonies that have survived as long as we have—both with non-LDS clergy. Why should we think this matter would be high on Tempest's list of priorities?"

"I hope you're right," Cameron said. He didn't sound as if he had any hope.

Sara didn't have any hope either. "It doesn't matter. This may have not been high on her priority list before, but that doesn't mean she won't destroy the other two colonies for not complying with her demand."

"Thank goodness that new colony of refugees Mother and Father gathered on the southern continent doesn't have clergy yet," Cameron muttered.

Ashley leaned toward Sara. "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm too sick to be able to even think about the matter clearly." The aircar lurched and Sara put the bag to her mouth again.

Trevor was too busy wrestling with the wind to participate in the conversation, but after many minutes of silence (except for Sara's heaving) he managed to say, "Cameron, why don't you communicate with your father and tell him what happened? He can then contact the other colonies."

Cyndi understood what her husband had in mind and finished his suggestion for him: "Perhaps the colonists who are not members of our church would be willing to hold off on their official worship for a short period of time while you try to reason with Tempest."

Sara leaned her head against the window, exhausted. "By all means, contact my father-in-law. Just don't expect me to reason with Tempest."

Cameron, Cyndi, and Ashley took turns praying vocally. Sara was too tired to keep her eyes open, but the aircar was jerking around too spasmodically for her to fall into a restful sleep. Instead she fell asleep for seconds and was almost immediately awakened by the reeling of the aircar or the need to vomit. They traveled in this nightmarish way for what seemed like hours.

Eventually Sara woke up enough to gain some sense of her surroundings. She snuggled up to Cameron, and he squeezed her in relief. "Have we reached the coast yet?" The trip should have lasted an hour and forty minutes.

"We aren't even in range."

"How long have we been in the air?"

"Three hours."

"I guess we should be glad we're still alive."

"I don't think Tempest wants to kill you."

"She may have set forces in motion that she can't control. For a little localized storm, it's sure giving us a lot of trouble."

"Are you ready to try communicating with Tempest again?" Cyndi asked.

"I think so."

"Good, because I have an idea. We keep expecting Tempest to be a rational adult spirit, and then she keeps communicating and doing things that make us think she's a deranged adult spirit. In this last conversation you had with her, though, she sounded like a child."

"Actually, that's true. She did." Tempest wasn't a child, and yet thinking of her in that way gave Sara hope that she might be able to persuade Tempest to behave in a humane way after all. "How do you think I should talk to her differently because of that?"

“When you’re talking to children, you try to get down on their level, so I would suggest trying to think the way she does. Demonstrate somehow that you understand her.”

“She does seem very upset that you don’t understand why she tried to prevent us from sending a message off of the planet,” Cameron said.

“I know she’s upset about that, but I really can’t read her mind.”

“You don’t have to be able to read her mind. Think about what you already know about her and try to imagine how she may feel,” Cyndi suggested.

What did they know about Tempest? She claimed she didn’t want humans on her face, and yet she had been so eager to communicate that she had sent storms to force Sara to reach out to her. She had killed most of the colonists who had tried to settle on Eden, but she had told Sara flat-out that it would please her to communicate with her. She claimed to hate the humans, and yet she expected Sara to be like her and therefore understand her. She was angry with God and thought His methods were unfair, but she craved information about the way He worked and seemed to trust Sara to give it to her. And this last communication had begun with her being almost hysterical with the belief that Sara was angry with her.

Sara didn’t have to think about the matter very long or hard to understand why Tempest had tried to prevent her from sending the message that could result in their getting rescued. Instead of giving her new observations to the others, she reached out to Tempest again in the spirit of contriteness. *I’m sorry, Tempest, for being angry with you. And I’m sorry I tried to leave.*

*Then you won’t leave?*

*Not right now. I’ll be here for a long time to answer your questions.*

*Then you don’t plan to leave if other humans come?*

Sara hesitated. She couldn’t say she didn’t know, because she did know and Tempest would correctly interpret her answer as a lie. She evaded the question as well as she could: *It depends on who the humans are.*

*Then you would leave if humans like you came.*

*Yes.*

*Then you really aren’t sorry!*

*I am sorry for upsetting you, but my people don’t belong here. You said so yourself.*

*I have allowed them to live for your sake!*

*Then please, for my sake, allow the humans to worship God in their own ways.*

*If those who worship God differently go away, you will still survive.*

*But if you kill more humans, I will be extremely unhappy. Doesn’t it matter to you that I am happy?*

*I do not know what “happy” means.*

*It means having pleasure with something. Joy. Good feelings.*

*I cannot have good feelings if people worship differently. You must tell them, Governor Carroll.*

Sara realized then that Tempest was rational in her own way and that her underlying fault was selfishness. Sara felt the beginning of an idea nudge into her mind, an idea that she dared not reveal to Tempest.

She decided to shut down the conversation. *If I am to tell them, I need to be able to return to my colony. Please stop the rain so that I can travel.*



Tempest withdrew, and Sara said, "Tempest isn't withdrawing her new command. Cameron, you need to tell your father to beg the other colonies to refrain from formal worship until I have a chance to visit with them personally to explain the demand."

"That's it, then," Cyndi said, stunned. "You're just going to ask these faithful people to stop worshipping God according to the dictates of their own consciences."

Sara wanted to tell them that she really intended to protect them with her presence while they did worship according to their own traditions but didn't dare. If Tempest suspected her true plan, she might destroy Third and Fourteenth Colonies before she could act. "I'm doing nothing more right now than giving Tempest's edict to them. Surely they deserve to know about it, don't they?"

The others grudgingly agreed.

"I think that if we change our course to go to one of the other colonies instead of home, Tempest will stop the storm."

"Which colony has first priority, Sara?" Trevor asked, his tone wry.

Now that the moment of decision was at hand, Sara had no idea which one to choose. The colonies were on opposite sides of the planet, with sixteen thousand miles of ocean between them, which meant that she couldn't see both in the same journey. She wouldn't, in fact, be able to arrive in the second choice any sooner than a month.

"Which colony would be more likely to hold off on official worship for a while?"

"The one with the children," Cyndi said. "I think that chaplain would do anything to keep their lives safe. Not only that, but there's only one woman to convince of the danger, not a whole council of clergy."

"And our own people are due to arrive there today, I think, with refugees from Six," Cameron said. "They might be able to convince her."

"And no one's been out to Three yet," Cyndi reminded. "We have no idea what's going on there."

Everything they said made sense, but Sara's instinct was to head toward the children. This was too big of a decision to trust to her foggy mind, but what choice did she have? She had to choose, and she had to do it now. "What's your opinion, Trevor?"

"Three."

"Then let's go."

The trees of the jungle finally began appearing above the waves. The storm slowly diminished over the next several hours, and the ride grew calmer as they flew over the rainforest. Just when Sara thought she might be able to get some real sleep, Trevor said, "We've got a problem. Our power supply is dwindling, and there's nowhere to land."

"But we should have hours of power left," Cyndi protested.

"Under normal circumstances, yes, but the aircar must have used more power than normal getting through the storm."

Cameron rubbed his forehead with his thumb and fingers. "We should have foreseen this."

"I don't know why we would have," Trevor said. "We've put twenty thousand miles on this unit, and nothing even remotely similar has happened before now."

"There was a river a few miles back," Cameron said. "Can we land on it?"

"The landing would be relatively okay, but the aircar would sink. We would lose our supplies and the ability to synthesize more."

"That's a problem. I was hoping the aircar would float."

“So we could land in the river, abandon the car, and then what?” Cyndi asked. “Live off of the land until help arrives with a new car?”

“You’ve got it.”

“That’s a scary thought.”

“I could hover over the river and you could jump in. We could drop supplies into the jungle next to the river.”

“Could you make a clearing by using telepathy, Sara?” Ashley asked.

“I can move cells; I can’t move trees.”

“Could Tempest?” Cameron asked.

She could send storms and cause earthquakes. Maybe she could move trees. “I don’t know.”

“How many miles have we come from the beach?” Cameron asked Trevor.

“Four hundred and thirty-two.”

“How many miles of power do we have left?”

“Fifty if we’re lucky.”

“Which is twenty minutes.”

“Even if Tempest could move trees, that isn’t very much time to actually do it,” Cyndi said.

“I might be able to telepathically find an optimal landing place that even the aircar’s scanner can’t detect.” Sara didn’t wait for a reply but telepathically dove into the Awareness of the living things around her. She felt through the ground and eventually found a spot that was a little less dense than the rest and might provide just enough clearance for an aircar. “Fifteen miles northeast,” she said as she came to herself.

Trevor turned the aircar in the direction Sara suggested.

“How much time do we have left?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Cameron said softly.

“Then it’s going to be close.”

“Maybe we should have chanced the river,” Cyndi mumbled.

“I’m sorry we didn’t listen to you, Sara,” said Ashley. “You’ve had a bad feeling about this trip all along.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it now. We did send the message; be thankful about that.”

Sara opened her mind again to the Awareness of life around her but didn’t allow herself to become engulfed. She wasn’t able to perceive as much detail as before but enough to give accurate directions. In what seemed like a very long time, the aircar finally hovered over the mini-clearing.

“Are you sure?” Cyndi asked. “It doesn’t look any different from the rest of the forest.”

“This is the place. We’re right over the clearing.”

“We didn’t take the canopy into account,” said Cameron.

“The canopy is going to be a problem,” Trevor admitted. “I’m not sure how the branches will affect the car’s performance.”

“But the branches are small here,” Sara said. “Can’t we just break through them?”

“We don’t have any choice at this point. It’s too late to go back to the river.”

The aircar began its vertical descent. Sara whispered a prayer; Cyndi and Cameron did the same. When they heard the tree branches scraping loudly against the metal and snapping, Ashley began weeping.

As Trevor suspected, the branches impeded the aircar's mechanisms, causing the vehicle to wobble as it lowered. The aircar lost power and went into freefall. Cyndi moaned; Ashley sobbed. The power resumed, seeming to catch them in mid air. They had received a miracle after all. *Thank you, Heavenly Father!*

The floor of the forest came closer, and just enough of it was showing to allow the aircar to land. Just when Sara thought they were out of danger, the aircar sputtered and rocked backward, then rolled to the side. Sara felt an explosion of pain, and then everything went black.

## CHAPTER 8: CHANGE OF PLANS

Ben had been busy coordinating rescue efforts around the planet and preparing for the colony resort, which the colonists couldn't resist naming Camp David after the presidential retreat in northern Maryland. Rachel had been directing the colony clean-up, and Ann had been giving trauma counseling to the three new refugees from Fourth Colony who had arrived on Monday. Rachel wasn't surprised that she and Ann weren't able to discuss their own future positions in the colony with Ben until Thursday after lunch.

"Hello, ladies," Ben said as he motioned Rachel and Ann into his home.

Rachel crossed the threshold and observed that they were alone. "Careful now. This almost looks like an executive meeting. We might be accused of planning a coup."

Ben gazed at Rachel, then Ann with a significant gleam in his eyes. "There can hardly be the need for a coup when our new governor arranged things in such an adept way."

Rachel sat down with Ben and Ann in the living room camp chairs. She perceived that Ben was trying to tell them that the more things changed, the more they remained the same. At the moment, Ben was the acting governor of the colony, and she and Ann were at his disposal.

Ann understood the same thing, because she said with that same meaningful gleam in her eyes, "It is interesting that Sara chose you and Trevor to be her new assistants."

"Sara knows that she lacks the proper experience. Her desire is to manage the colony in the most effective way and to keep us all safe."

"Do you believe she's serious about wanting to maintain the original colony structure?" Rachel asked.

"I do, and to me, that was the most interesting thing that came out of that discussion."

"It *was* interesting," Ann admitted. "If she was serious, she obviously doesn't share Cameron's point of view."

"No, she doesn't. When she said what she did, Cameron was unhappy and perplexed—but not surprised."

"Then they've disagreed on this issue before," Ann observed.

"Sara has never wanted to throw out the Equality of Zion and establish a new order. That's all Cameron."

"You've come to such a new appreciation of Cameron's point of view that we weren't sure that *you* didn't want to throw out the Equality of Zion."

"When fables starting coming alive and my own failures smacked me in the face, I was perplexed about many things; I'll admit that. Barbara, however, convinced me that those things don't prove anything about the worth of the Equality of Zion."

Relief gave Rachel a sensation of relaxation that she hadn't felt in a month at least. "She's right."

Ann laughed a little in happiness. "Remind me to hug Barbara next time I see her!"

"Barbara and I have been talking a lot about this, and the fact is, most of the Equality of Zion doesn't require a spiritual component at all. We can get rid of the few elements that do collide with the Church, such as analyzing patriarchal blessings to help a student determine his or her life's mission. We don't need that component to give students excellent career counseling."

Rachel nodded, immediately understanding what he was proposing. "And we could move the family team-building sessions to a night other than Monday for those who are interested. It's a lifestyle and governmental structure that can and should (under the present circumstances) be operated completely outside of the Church."

"That's true," Ann said, "although I don't believe you should dismiss yourself so completely as a spiritual leader just yet, Ben."

"I won't disagree with you, but that doesn't change the fact that I won't be operating in a spiritual capacity for some time. Cameron is the spiritual leader of the colony, and he doesn't approve of the Equality of Zion. Let's just accept that and proceed with that reality in place."

That was an interesting, almost subversive statement. "Certainly you're not advocating rebellion against the bishop."

"Not in the least. Cameron won't accept any concept of Zion that doesn't come directly from the Church, so we remove all reference to Zion in our discourse. We can start by changing the name to the Equality of Eden or to some other innocuous term. It'll also make the ideas more accessible to the non-member refugees we're taking into the colony."

"That's brilliant!"

Ann nodded. "I don't know why we didn't think of that before. If we don't call it Zion, there's nothing for anyone to disapprove of. It's colony organization, nothing more, nothing less. Our cooperative structure is set up to accommodate the diverse points of view the refugees will continue to bring with them."

Ben's phone rang. He looked at the caller identification and said, "Excuse me for a minute." He answered the phone. "Yes?" He listened, his features gathering into a frown. "I'll be right there." He hung up and arose.

Understanding that there was some crisis in the colony that had just ended their meeting, Rachel and Ann also stood up. "What's going on?" Rachel asked.

Ben moved to the door. "Cyndi's on the radio. Apparently the planet-spirit has made a new demand."

Rachel's tension returned. "Did the operator tell you what it is?"

"No, Cyndi demanded to speak to me."

On their way down the trail into Government Grove and the communications center of the colony, Rachel tried to concentrate as Ben explained their new positions. "Ann, you're doing an excellent job with the trauma counseling, and I anticipate that the need for it will continue to grow as we get more refugees. As you're talking with these people, do assess their education and abilities so that we can find the best places for them within the colony organization."

"You want them grouped into professional families, then."

"Yes. I think we can do that much now. Everything else will probably have to wait until the gathering is finished. Rachel, I'd like you to help Ann oversee the needs of the refugees as they continue coming in, with more of a focus on their permanent physical needs. If all goes well, the aircars we sent this morning should return with the group from the southern continent next Wednesday. We'll start them out at the campsite, and from there, as the two of you begin grouping them into professional families, you can help them choose from the new homes that we're building in all of the professional villages."

"What if they want to be located together?"

"The group on the southern continent is such a hodgepodge that I don't think they will care about that, but if some of them do want to live together in their own neighborhood, let the group choose their spot on the outskirts of the village. There's plenty of space for everyone, and we want to encourage the spirit of consensus as much as possible. Include the new colonists (if they are able) in the work of building the new homes and doing repairs around the village. Once the repair work gets to a tolerable place, have the men plank the trees we've cut down and build boardwalks and the women work on the landscaping."

Once they arrived at the communications center, Ben took the transceiver from Brent Hall, who was operating the equipment, and said, "What's going on, Cyndi?"

"Tempest now insists that only Cameron can speak for God in an official capacity."

Rachel suddenly felt sick. Did that mean what she thought it meant? Could the planet-spirit really be that evil?

"Are you saying that she won't allow for clergy outside of our church?" Ben said.

"You've got it."

"But that's outrageous—" He quickly stopped himself from saying the angry words.

Rachel felt faint. She leaned against the table and gripped it. What was she thinking? The planet-spirit had already destroyed twelve out of the fifteen colonies. Of course it was that evil!

Ann laid her hand on Rachel's arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"Sara has communicated with Tempest twice about this matter, and there's no getting around it. Sara wants you to talk with the other governors and persuade them to hold off on their public worship until she can visit them directly and explain this new demand. We have, in fact, already changed our course and are heading to Third Colony. We should get there next Thursday."

"I'll do what I can." He didn't sound very hopeful.

When Ben was done speaking with Cyndi, he had Brent make contact with Third Colony. While they were waiting for Governor Lambert to get to the radio, Ben said, "The answer is to gather everyone to Woodland Park, but I don't see them being any more open to that idea than they were four weeks ago when I suggested it to them the first time."

"We didn't have the aircars then," Ann reminded. "Or this new demand."

"And they haven't communicated with the planet-spirit or taken in any refugees," Ben said. "They have no idea what they're really dealing with."

"And if we bring them here and they refuse to halt their worship, then what?" Rachel said. "They could kill us all!"

"They may agree to let Cameron and the other members of the bishopric officiate in their rituals," Ann suggested.

The idea calmed Rachel's anxiety considerably. "I hadn't thought of that. LDS chaplains do it all the time. It might work."

"It's probably the best chance they have of survival short of leaving this planet," Ben said.

Eventually Governor Lambert's voice crackled over the speaker, "I received your message earlier today. I can't tell you how relieved we are that your people got a message off the planet! Thank you!"

"I wish I had more good news, but instead, we just learned that the planet-spirit only recognizes my son as a spokesperson for God. It is demanding that all official religious observance stop."

"Unless it's presided over by your son?"

Ben grimaced. "Yes."

"You can't be serious!"

"We're all outraged. Our Novaunian girl is trying to persuade the planet-spirit to change its mind."

"I know I asked you this before, but I've got to ask it again. Are you sure the alien girl isn't just making it all up?"

"Yes. This girl is completely guileless. She isn't capable of making something like this up."

At this point, Rachel intervened. "This is First Assistant Rachel Vance. I communicated at length with the creature. It is very real and very angry. Please, you must take this threat seriously. At the very least, hold off on your public worship until Sara can get there."

"Sara is already on her way and will be there next Thursday."

"What does that mean for this weekend? I can't just tell my people not to go to temple, and church, or to gather for jumu'ah. It'll cause panic, and havoc, and outrage."

"I'm sorry. I really am. And heartbroken. I don't know what to tell you, except that I'm afraid that if you gather for worship this weekend, the planet-spirit will kill you all." Ben's words sounded so melodramatic that Rachel was certain no rational person who hadn't experienced communication with Tempest would take them seriously.

"I'm not sure any of us believe that life without worship is a life worth living."

Ben's knuckles whitened as he gripped the microphone. "I understand exactly how you feel, but still, I'm begging you. At least wait until Sara gets there. She can help you communicate with the creature so that you can assimilate this demand for yourself."

"I'll discuss it with the colony. Please inform me as soon as there is any change in the situation."

"Will do. Good luck."

Once Governor Lambert was gone, Ann said, "If they can hold off for this weekend, Sara's presence should protect them after that."

"Until she decides to come home!" Rachel said.

Ben set the microphone down. "I have a really bad feeling about this. I need to go out there. I could get there a good day and a half before Sara does. Maybe that would help."

"I'll do it," Rachel said. "There's too much going on here for you to leave now."

"It really does need to be me."

Rachel didn't like that look; he didn't trust her to persuade the other colonists to relocate. "Listen, Ben. I'm not sure it's right to bring them here, or that there's much hope they would agree to it, but I agree that there isn't anything else we can do. And I think that having them teach Cameron and the other bishopric members to act as chaplains for them is a viable plan."

"There's another possibility." Rachel and the others turned to Brent in curiosity. He continued in a low voice, "We have the priesthood, the very power of God Himself in this colony. When Enoch spoke the word of the Lord to protect his people, the earth shook, and mountains moved, and the course of rivers changed."

Brent sounded so unlike himself that Rachel realized, for the first time, just how deeply he had been affected by everything that had happened the day he had fallen apart in front of the colony. Rachel recognized that he believed God had stopped the “coup” in a miraculous way that day by giving Cameron supernatural powers of perception, but did he seriously believe a group of returned missionaries could command this alien lunatic? If he wanted to cite a myth to support his suicidal proposition, she would cite one to counter it. “And when God sent a flood to cover the earth, he told Noah to build a boat—a simple boat. He didn’t give Noah’s family wings or even a jet!”

“God does tend to work in more naturalistic ways,” Ann said. “Third Colony’s best chance for a miracle is that they will allow us to rescue them. We can pray for that.”

“Where is your eternal perspective?” Brent said. “And your faith? Do we even belong to the same church?”

“Cameron is the only one who can make the decision to channel the powers of Heaven, and until he returns, the matter is *not* open to discussion.”

Ben’s response made Rachel uneasy. He had put an end to the idea without attacking Cameron—an approach that certainly would have backfired—but he had also suggested that Cameron, himself, might consider such an extreme solution viable. Rachel thought it best to change the subject completely. “How many aircars do we have available?”

“Three, if we hold off on moving people to Camp David.” Ben shot a wary sidelong glance at Brent. “I think you’re right, Rachel. I do need to stay here to keep everything under control, and the leaders of Three know you well enough to listen to what you have to say. Take two of the aircars. Go ahead and get going. I’ll contact Fourteen.”

Rachel found Duane and two others to go in the second aircar and quickly made arrangements for the four-and-a-half-day trip to the far western end of the continent, where Third Colony was located. They had been on their way for two hours when they received a shocking message from Ben: “Return immediately. Trevor’s aircar went down over the rain forest.” His voice sounded tense. “We’re sending your cars, along with the one we already have, with equipment and personnel to clear a landing spot and set up a hospital.”

“Then they’re alive.” How could such a thing have happened?

“Yes, thank goodness. But there are injuries, and the aircar won’t be flying again.”

“What about the six we sent toward Twelve this morning? Shouldn’t they be near that area this evening?”

“No nearer than we are. They have the vehicles, but they don’t have the right specialists or the equipment. Given our tight schedule, they might as well pick up the refugees from Twelve as planned. We’ll synthesize cars for you over the weekend and send you out again on Monday.”

\* \* \*

Sara could feel nothing but pain in all parts of her body. She heard voices and tried to concentrate.

“Sara, are you okay?” The voice sounded like Ashley’s.

Sara nodded and tried to speak.

“Her head moved! She’s conscious!”



“Sara, Ashley and I are going to pull you out of the aircar.” This time, the voice belonged to Cyndi. “If you can move yourself in any way, please do.”

Sara understood and nodded again. She felt hands under her thighs and back before she lost the thread of voices. When she became aware of herself again, everything was silent. She remembered that Cameron was next to her and reached out for him. He wasn’t there. She reached in the other direction, and he wasn’t there either.

Panic clutched Sara’s throat. “Where’s Cameron?” she tried to say. No one answered, and she felt herself drifting to sleep again.

When Sara woke up, she felt as if she were lying in water. Her legs felt light, as if they were missing something. She smelled vinyl. Someone was holding her hand. “Ca—”

“Aunt Cyndi! She’s conscious again!” The light pressure on Sara’s hand became stronger. She felt sharp slaps. “Sara, wake up! Wake up!”

Sara didn’t want to wake up. Not really. She hurt too badly. Where was Cameron? “Ca—?”

“Wake up, Sara.” The voice was different this time, more demanding. She fought it. More slaps on the hand. “You have a head injury, Sara. You need to wake up.”

Head injury? How could she have gotten a head injury? Sara tried to recall. Where was she?

“Cameron is in a different tent. You can see him when you wake up.”

Cameron was in a different tent? That made no sense. Why weren’t they together? “Why?”

“Wake up, Sara!”

Sara recalled being in the aircar. The aircar was landing just fine, and then something happened. It lurched crazily. There were air bags. There was pain. Sara opened her eyes and saw Ashley and Cyndi on each side of her, leaning over her, surrounded by green vinyl. Ashley’s face trembled with joy. “You’re awake!” Cyndi’s features relaxed slightly, but she didn’t appear relieved.

Sara realized several things simultaneously. Her mouth tasted sour. She was lying on a blanket in a small tent with a splint on her left arm. She had an intravenous tube inserted into her right hand. Every part of her body hurt, her left arm and leg more than anything else. Her legs were covered by a sheet but no pants. At the moment, the lack of pants seemed like the most incongruent thing. “Where are my jeans?”

Ashley glanced at Cyndi with a pained expression and then turned away. Cyndi’s eyes widened in a meaningful way. “You’re bleeding, Sara.”

She didn’t have pants on. She was in a different tent from Cameron and Trevor. Why would they have put her in a different tent unless they wanted to protect her modesty? The truth crashed down on her like a rock on her chest. She was bleeding. No, that couldn’t be true. She had a healthy Novaunian body. “The babies can’t be dead. I don’t believe it.”

Cyndi’s face was very grave. “You haven’t passed any tissue. Only a little blood.” Ashley nodded sadly.

What a thing to wake up to! “Please tell me Cameron and Trevor are alive.”

“They are alive. Cameron hit his head pretty hard and is still feeling disoriented and a little nauseated, but I think he’s okay otherwise. Trevor’s in and out of conscious just as you’ve been. He, too, has broken bones.”

“Is my arm broken?”

“I think so. Your leg too.”

And the one orthopedic surgeon from Tenth Colony was dead. "What will happen if we need surgery?"

"It's a low fracture and closed. Dr. Marshall ought to be able to set it without surgery."

Sara felt tears slide out of her eyes. "We should have landed on the river. I'm sorry."

Ashley stroked Sara's hand. "Don't be! We're all alive, and both the synthesizing machine and the radio are working. It's a miracle."

Cyndi nodded. "Ashley's right. This could have ended so much worse than it did."

Although Cyndi always carried an extensive medical kit on these journeys, she wouldn't have the colony's ultrasound machine with her and therefore would not be able to determine whether the babies really were dead. Sara would be able to ascertain that fact better by telepathically reaching inside of herself. "Where is my arelada?"

Ashley turned away from Sara and then placed the arelada pendant in her hand. Sara reached inside of herself and saw nothing. She tried again, and again, and still saw nothing. "It isn't working! How can that be?" She examined the arelada. It glowed with that unnatural luminosity that gave it its power. "The arelada looks fine."

"You have a head injury. I've got to believe that would affect a person's ability to use telepathy," Cyndi said.

In a way, Sara was relieved that she didn't have to know the true status of the babies just yet, but in a way, she thought she was being silly. After all, if the babies were fine, it was better to know sooner than later? Wasn't it? But if they were fine, Cyndi would have told her straight away instead of giving her a vague "You haven't passed any tissue, only a little blood" kind of response. Wouldn't she?

Before Sara could say anything, Cyndi arose to her knees. "I need to go check on the men. Ashley, keep her awake and call me if something changes."

Sara watched her slide toward the tent opening. She meant to say, "Please tell me the babies are still alive," but instead asked, "How long does a head injury take to heal?"

Cyndi turned toward her slightly. "Depends. Could be a few weeks. Or months."

Weeks or months without telepathy. The thought bewildered Sara, which, in itself was strange, given that for most of her life, she hadn't even believed that telepathy existed. "That means I can't communicate with Tempest." That thought was downright frightening.

"Perhaps your injury won't need to be completely healed."

"Let's hope not." After Cyndi had disappeared through the tent opening, Sara asked Ashley, "How are you?"

"I'm tired, a little bruised, and I have a headache. Other than that, I'm all right."

"How long has it been since we crashed?"

"A day. We're fortunate the radio and synthesizing machine are still working; the aircar's pretty smashed up."

Sara tried to figure the distance to Woodland Park in her head and couldn't. "When will the rescue team be here?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. They'll have to drop several men in by rope to clear the trees before any of the aircars can land."

Sara asked Ashley about all kinds of little details concerning the crash, all the while growing in fear for her babies, along with guilt that this tragedy could have been prevented had she heeded the sense of warning she had felt about traveling to Control Colony or at least kept her mouth shut about a landing alternative other than the river.

When Cyndi returned to the tent a little while later, Cameron crawled into the tent behind her. He had some ugly scratches on his face.

He looked awful, but he was moving, and he was there, and Sara wasn't sure whether to be full of grief or joy. "Oh Cameron!"

He collapsed on the ground to her right, cuddling close. "I'm so glad you're okay."

Sara was ready to know the truth about the babies, but she wasn't sure Cameron was. She glanced at Cyndi, then her abdomen.

"Please tell me they'll be okay."

Cyndi took her hand, her eyes full of compassion. "I can't tell you that. I really don't know."

"Have you told Cameron?"

Cyndi shook her head.

"Told me what?" Cameron asked.

Sara's throat burned. She wanted to turn and hug Cameron but couldn't. "I'm bleeding. I may lose the babies."

## CHAPTER 9: MYRI'S CHOICE

Myri spent the next week in seclusion and boredom at Tryamaz Camp. Knowing that the poor savages gathering to Tryamaz had not been ministered to by a priestess since the invasion, she yearned to go out among them and heal them of their wounds. Captain Sauvel insisted, however, that she not show herself at all, just in case spies from the light had infiltrated Tryamaz Camp. He also believed that diminishing her arelada before such a difficult and critical mission would be unwise. The advice made sense to Myri and so she followed it, as frustrating as it was.

Arulezz didn't like the new plan at all, but he accepted it. Myri was afraid all week that Jahnzel would come to Tryamaz Camp himself and try to talk her out of completing the mission. Seeing his apostasy pained her, and she dreaded a repeat of her earlier encounters with him. He never did come, much to Myri's relief, and she assumed he didn't want to relive those painful arguments again either.

Myri couldn't stop thinking about the meeting in the hospital between the Novaunian brother-in-law and the Pierce family. She was uncertain enough of its truth that she didn't tell Arulezz or Captain Sauvel about it. Sometimes she thought the light had given her the vision to scare her away from David. When her mind traveled in that direction, however, it always stopped at questions she couldn't get past: If the light had intended to protect David, wouldn't it have made her feel confident that she could get into the house safely and lured her into a trap? Wouldn't David be safer now if his guards had actually captured her and Captain Sauvel?

Around and around Myri's mind went, and she couldn't help but believe that the light had been trying to protect *her* by making her aware of her danger. Wondering why the light would aid an enemy that way, she went back to believing that the vision had been nothing more than a trick to keep her away from David, and her anger and determination to return to the light and complete her mission became stronger than ever.

Myri and Captain Sauvel set out again exactly a week after their second excursion into the light. As they descended for the third time, Myri gripped the armrest, bracing herself for another hallucination, but it didn't come. They hovered there in the light for several minutes, and Captain Sauvel said, "There are no guards on the property, my Saintess, and David Pierce is alone in the back bedroom."

"Your voice sounds cautious, Captain Sauvel. Is there a problem?"

"You know how I feel about this mission, my Saintess."

"Is it safe to approach the house or not?"

"Yes, my Saintess."

Myri felt the aircar lurch, then lurch again. Before she could ask Captain Sauvel what was happening, familiar thoughts slid over her mind, directed to someone else: *Father, look!*

Myri turned and saw that Arulezz appeared to be sitting in the aircar with her. *How did you get here?* Myri still couldn't decide whether she should address him as Lezz, as he requested, or as Divine One, which was proper. Neither felt right, so she didn't use either one and felt guilty.

Arulezz didn't respond to Myri. He didn't seem to be aware of her at all. He gripped the seat and wall, bracing himself for another lurch. Myri turned her head and saw that Arulezz was communicating to his father.

The late Divine Emperor leaned toward Arulezz and looked over his shoulder and out the window, where the light of the Kansas City Mormon community shone many kilometers away. The light appeared to vaporize the space debris on impact. *Move closer to the light*, the Divine Emperor commanded his driver.

As their aircar came closer to the light, Arulezz gasped. *It's completely untouched!*

*The Nationalists must be in league with the Novaunians. Or perhaps the Gudyneans. They couldn't have developed this shield technology on their own.*

*Perhaps you underestimate them.*

*Then we will crush them.*

Arulezz turned away from the window. *But we need them, Father! We need their brilliance and passion. And we need their genes, their blood, and their fertility.*

The Divine Emperor shook his head. *The Nationalists are our enemies. If we try to assimilate any of them, they will destroy us from within.* Myri couldn't help but be shocked. Was it true, then? The late Divine Emperor had not intended her to marry David Pierce at all?

Arulezz turned back to the window and didn't reply. The Divine Emperor watched his son thoughtfully. The aircar lurched again, then dove to the side. Within minutes it descended and rested on the ground in what had been a Tryamaz park. The Divine Emperor's driver opened the door for him and lifted his purple robes so that he could step out of the aircar without soiling them.

The smell of smoke assaulted Myri's nostrils as she stepped out of the aircar with the Divine Emperor and Arulezz. Dust from rock and building board stretched in front of their feet, and charred heaps of debris surrounded them. Myri turned toward the Divine Emperor, expecting him to be as horrified as she was by what they both beheld.

What Myri saw in his face, however, lacked the terror that she associated with horror. Instead she saw rage so palpable that it had mutilated his lovely features into something monstrous. The Divine Emperor seized the spirit crystal dangling over his heart, outrage and mortification seeming to pulsate from him.

Myri perceived thin black lines growing out of his head and connected like tightly woven lace to billions of the natives. The lines began to glow as the Divine Emperor's thoughts charged into the brains of the natives he had bonded: *Kill Mormons! Destroy the Nationalists! Gather to Zarr, your Divine Emperor!*

The vision ended as abruptly as it had begun, a feeling of horror its only residue. Myri looked around to assure herself that what she had seen had not been real. She became aware that her aircar had landed in a remote field.

So many of the details in the vision had been accurate that Myri couldn't determine whether it had been a true vision of the past or a hallucination, a daydream or a nightmare. The Divine Emperor of her vision had been both a father-figure who had rejected the option to marry her to a savage and a madman who had used his telepathic leashes to kill savages like the one the current Divine Emperor had sent her to marry. How could any man be both nurturing and psychotic?

"My Saintess?"

Myri decided that the vision had been a hallucination. No real person could be so contradictory. Myri leaned toward Captain Sauvel. "Let's get this done."

Sauvel stepped out of the car and opened Myri's door. She stepped out of the car and allowed her bodyguard to lead her toward the Stonefield development. Under the light, night didn't exist. The neighborhood, though silent, shone brightly and without

shadows. Almost as soon as Myri ducked behind her first parked automobile, her discomfort grew. She imagined that eyes from every house in the neighborhood watched her from the windows. "There goes Myri Vahro," a male voice whispered. "She has already rejected the love of an honorable man. Now she intends to reject God."

*How can I reject God when He was the one who commanded me to give up Jahnzel and bond David Pierce?*

"God did not command you to give up Jahnzel and bond David Pierce; Lezz Zarr did."

*Arulezz Zarr is the Divine Emperor!*

"Lezz Zarr put a cell bond on your mind." The tone was as gentle as the words were merciless.

*Preposterous! I would know if he had done something so depraved.*

"Jesalya put a tranquilizer into your drink."

*My sister would never do something like that to me!*

Myri felt as if God Himself were embracing her with confidence and love. "Your sister and Lezz Zarr have corrupted each other through dijauntu. Jesalya consented to the cell bond. If you leave the Light and return to your people without David Pierce as your eternal husband, Lezz Zarr will use the bond to kill you the way his father used the bonds to kill thousands of people whose only crime was to survive the invasion."

The possibility was absurd! The light was trying to deceive her. *The cell bonds are only used to soften the natives' distrust, not as instruments of murder!*

The feeling of love and confidence intensified, caressing away her anxiety. "Tohmazz Zarr lied to your people about the cell bonds. They are more powerful than he led any of you to believe. He urged the natives to do many unscrupulous things through them, just as Lezz Zarr is urging you to be spiritually intimate with a man who is not your eternal husband."

*I will not betray the Divine Emperor.*

The false love and confidence Myri felt from the light began to diminish. "A woman who serves a fallen Divine Emperor falls herself."

The final whisper stripped away the peace that had always clothed Myri's soul, leaving her naked to the penetrating eyes of the light. Feeling as if the light were gaping into her soul, Myri followed Captain Sauvel through the streets to the one in front of David Pierce's house, this time approaching from the front.

"You are the victim of a false tradition. Allow the God of the Light to heal you."

Myri ignored the accusations as well as she could, telling herself over and over that this phantom-voice was a trick of the light. The light was from Satan and would, therefore, put lying visions into her mind that suggested the late Divine Emperor hadn't meant for her to marry David Pierce at all. It would want her to think that the late Divine Emperor was so evil that he was capable of telepathically commanding billions of people to commit murder, and it would urge her to commit treason and betray her Divine Emperor and her people. She would not succumb!

They approached the house and hid behind an automobile in the driveway. They hurried to the back of the house. Captain Sauvel disabled the lock on the sunroom door and entered, motioning Myri to follow him. Blinds were drawn inside the sunroom, leaving cracks of light to peer around them. The room wasn't dark, but since it wasn't as bright as the outside, Myri's eyes needed a moment to adjust. By the time she could discern objects around her, Captain Sauvel had already opened the door into the

bedroom. He disappeared into the room for several minutes and then returned, nodding.

*It's him?*

*Yes. I shut the door into the hall. If you don't make a sound, you shouldn't wake the parents. They are right across the hall. I'll wait for you here. He is a large man and trained for combat. I recommend that you wait to heal him until after you have bonded him.*

Myri nodded. Realizing the room was warm, she took off her coat and set it on a chair, then slipped into David's bedroom. The drapes on the windows weren't so thick that the room was dark. She saw David on his back with his legs elevated under a sheet. The only thing that moved was his chest as he breathed, and even his breathing was shallow.

So this was the man who was destined to be her husband. It felt wrong to be in his bedroom with him alone like this. She wished she had been more resolute on her first excursion into the light, that she had found a way to become acquainted with David before committing them both to such a binding relationship. Now there was no time to do it right.

Myri approached David's bed and knelt down next to him. His dark brown hair had grown out, curling around his forehead and temples, making him much more attractive than he had been in his pictures. His face was a perfect oval, and his features were smooth, not sharp and angular like those of her people. He was different, but he wasn't, in fact, repulsive at all. His long black eyelashes were downright beautiful. The thought surprised her.

She didn't touch him, afraid she would compound his injuries. Captain Sauvel was right; the prudent approach would be to keep him helpless until she bonded him. Her desire, however, was to heal him straightaway. He didn't appear dangerous, and she didn't believe she could live with herself if she bonded a completely helpless person. As she began to reach out with her mind to activate the Awareness monitor in her ring, the voice of the light stopped her: "Do not heal David Pierce without his permission."

Suddenly terrified, Myri whipped her head around, searching for the source of the voice. Myri looked at David again, expecting him to be awake and glaring at her for being at his bedside uninvited. He continued sleeping, however, as if no strange voice had disturbed the quiet of his bedroom.

As Myri withdrew her mind from the Awareness monitor, another vision assaulted her. Her spirit seemed to be inside of David's body, just as it would be when she joined spirits with him. Three young men in uniform swung big wooden clubs at him, yelling. As he and another uniformed young man fought them off, two others joined the melee, then two more. There were cracking sounds as the right fibula and tibia broke, another when the femur in the same leg did, and still another when the upper right humerus did. He fell and felt blows to his left leg, hip, and head before losing consciousness.

Then there were the people at the hospital who twisted his limbs in unnatural ways to take pictures, the nausea that followed the pain medication, the multiple surgeries, the agony that throbbed through his body and his dreams.

Myri recoiled from David's trauma and found herself gazing at his sleeping face again, echoes of the pain he had experienced vibrating through her until it dissipated. How had she been able to feel his pain? She hadn't even touched her spirit to his. Was this another trick of the light?

The more she thought about it, the less she believed that what she had just felt through him was a trick. The particular injuries he had would cause the pain she had experienced in the vision. The light wasn't lying to her this time. David Pierce had been and perhaps still was in a great deal of pain, and he was almost helpless. She could do anything she wanted to him and he wouldn't be able to resist—physically or mentally.

Abhorrence nearly suffocated her. Was she really on the verge of joining her spirit and mind to this helpless man's? Arulezz hadn't commanded her to rape David's mind in the technical sense, a deed that would completely steal his volition and make him an automaton, but what he had commanded would result in a bond so strong that David would perceive it as mental slavery, a bond that would compel her to him as much as it would compel him to her, a bond that would mark both of them for execution. To join her spirit and mind to this man's would also mean that she would take his recent trauma into her own mind and feelings.

How could she voluntarily do something so potentially damaging to both herself and him? How could the Divine Emperor require her to do something so abominable? David's eyelids fluttered, and he tossed his head back and forth. His skin seemed to shimmer with the pure white of the Light, and she realized that she could no more defile him with illicit dijauntu than she could defile an angel.

The vision of Arulezz and his father in the aircar poured back over Myri, only this time, she knew that what she was seeing really had happened. And she also understood, starkly, that the late Divine Emperor's telepathic command to "kill Mormons" had resulted in David's being beaten by his bonded classmates.

Feeling sick with shame at what her people had done to David, Myri laid her hand on his and squeezed. "Please wake up, David Pierce," she whispered, "and give me permission to heal you."

David turned his head toward her and opened his eyes; they were gray like moonlight and as beautiful as the lashes that fringed them. He didn't seem to comprehend what she was saying.

"I'm so sorry for what my emperor did to you." She simply couldn't refer to the emperor as "divine" anymore. "I can't take away these past weeks of pain, but I can telepathically fuse your bones back together and make other repairs. You won't need to take any more medication, and you might even be able to walk. The muscles in your legs appear strong enough."

David seemed to wake up all at once. "How did you get in here?" he whispered. "Did you bring others?"

Myri was afraid that he might yell for his parents. "Only my bodyguard, but he's been against this mission from the beginning. He won't hurt you." Shame shuddered through Myri again, even more strongly than before. Why hadn't she believed Captain Sauvel sooner and put a stop to this disgraceful business? Perhaps Arulezz really had put a cell bond on her mind.

"Is he in the sunroom?"

Myri nodded. "I'm so sorry for what I did. I'm sorry for everything. Please allow me to heal you."

"What would it entail?"

Myri held up her ring. "This ring holds my arelada and Awareness monitor. The Awareness monitor reaches into your spirit and projects an image of every cell in your body. I then expand my spirit into the Awareness monitor and manipulate its image of



you. Then the Awareness monitor uses the new image and manipulates the actual cells in your body.”

“You’re very beautiful, Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro,” he whispered, ever so gently, “and I like your sweet disposition, but I can’t be your ‘consort.’”

He sounded as if he were trying very hard not to cause *her* pain. His words moved Myri, yet confused her. The late emperor really had taken special care to find a native who would treat her tenderly. How, then, could the late emperor have issued a command that had almost killed this benevolent native? “Your healing will be my gift to you, David Pierce. I don’t want anything from you in return.”

“But you told my mothe—”

“I couldn’t go through with it.”

David gazed at her, pondering. “What was it you were supposed to do to me? What was it you couldn’t go through with?”

“I’m too ashamed to tell you.”

“Why? If you didn’t do it, you have no reason to be ashamed.”

David’s logic relieved Myri a little. “It’s a long story.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I shouldn’t be here with you alone.” She knew it, yet she couldn’t bring herself to stand up and leave.

“You’re already here.”

“I’m not used to being alone with a man without a chaperone.”

“But you aren’t. Isn’t your bodyguard in the sunroom?”

“Yes, I guess he is. I’m just not used to thinking of my bodyguard as a chaperone.”

“You break into my house in the middle of the night and come to my bedroom all alone, and you’re uncomfortable with the fact we aren’t being chaperoned?” His face twitched, and the corners of his mouth curved up as if he were trying not to laugh.

“That really does sound absurd,” she agreed, feeling silly.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“I thought you were Prince Jahnzel’s girlfriend. Don’t you ever spend time alone with him?”

“What do you mean by ‘girlfriend’?”

“His favorite girl. The one he chooses to be with.”

Tears flowed into Myri’s eyes. “When I was born, I was promised to him under contract between our families. When I was twelve, we were formally betrothed in a ceremony before our people. We were supposed to be married in five weeks, on my eighteenth birthday.”

“You didn’t choose each other, then? You had no choice in the matter at all?” He sounded shocked.

“Why would I want a choice? Prince Jahnzel is a man of the highest nobility.”

“So if everything was arranged between the two of you, why did your emperor send you to marry me?” He slowly reached for a tissue with his left hand.

“My people are on the brink of extinction. For the survival of our Nation, the new emperor, Arulezz Zarr, broke the contract between his brother and me and commanded us both to take native spouses.”

He handed her the tissue. “I’m still not sure I understand.”

Myri took the tissue and dabbed it against her face. "My people are infertile. If a couple is able to have one child, they rejoice in the blessing. If they have two, they marvel at the miracle."

"Then I was chosen because I'm from a large family."

"Partly."

"Then why else?"

"The emperor wants you to recruit an army of Nationalists for him." She thought of the vision she'd had of David's Novaunian brother-in-law talking with his parents at the hospital. "But you already suspected that much."

"But what makes him think I would be loyal? That I wouldn't just recruit those men and women to use their positions in Star Force to fight *against* him?"

"I think the assumption is that if you love me and are bonded to me, you would do anything I ask."

"When you told Bob and my mom that you could only marry a 'warrior of the highest virtue,' what did you mean?"

Myri thought she should feel uncomfortable discussing such an intimate subject with a man she barely knew, but David Pierce's friendly, forthright tone and sincere curiosity put her at ease.

"I'm a high priestess, which means that I must always be pure and holy. The man I marry can never have been intimate in any way with a woman."

"Your prince is a virgin?"

"You sound surprised."

"On Earth, men in such high positions of power have historically been unrestrained in their appetites, so yes, that surprises me."

Myri could be forthright also. "If you weren't a savage, I would be offended."

David looked again as if he might laugh. "So you don't expect me to know any better, right?"

"Why does that amuse you so much?"

"Because many twenty-something men *and* women on Earth would be offended if someone suggested they *were* virgins."

The possibility astonished Myri. "You can't be serious!"

"Sadly, I am serious. Your people's high regard for chastity does explain, though, why your emperor chose me for you and how it is that you can be Prince Jahnzel's fiancée without ever spending time alone with him."

"I shouldn't mislead you. I was alone with him once, right after we were told we would have to take native spouses. He wanted to refuse and go to the Home World, and I told him I would rather marry a savage than go to the Home World."

"He really does love you, then."

Myri's throat tightened, and she could do nothing but nod.

"And I can see that you have feelings for him."

David's observation that she had "feelings" for Jahnzel sounded too paltry for what she actually felt. Defensiveness brought back her voice. "I *love* him; I always have."

"Then why didn't you tell your emperor no when he told you to give up this beloved prince of yours?"

"You don't tell the Divine Emperor no."

"But you said that the prince was ready to defy him. Why not you too? Would you have been executed or thrown in prison or something?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why didn't you put up more of a fight? Did you really feel that good about making me your breeding mate?"

"No I didn't. Not ever."

"You know what I think? I think you like the prince a lot and want to marry him, but I don't think you love him with any kind of devotion or even passion."

Myri didn't like the thought that she might not "love" Jahnzel, but she recognized the fact that she wasn't devoted enough to him to even, for a moment, consider going to the domes to be with him. She thought David Pierce was brazen for suggesting what he did, but his unguarded way of speaking fascinated her. "What could you possibly know about it?"

"I know that I could never really love someone I didn't trust, and I also know that if I truly love a woman, I would be willing to experience difficulty and even danger to be with her."

"Even if that meant going against your conscience?"

"That would be acting on emotions of obsession or lust, not real love, so no, of course not."

"Then your lofty words don't apply to my situation."

"On the contrary; they apply completely. You said yourself that you never felt good about forcing me into marriage and that your bodyguard was always against it. It doesn't sound like you were following your conscience when you decided to follow this command of the emperor's."

"But how can a person expect his conscience to lead him in the correct direction if he isn't willing to follow God's law?"

"You're right. He can't. But a person's conscience will urge him or her to follow God's true law, not a false tradition that masquerades as God's law."

Hearing David Pierce echo the voice of the Light startled Myri and sent a thrill through her. This had to be the strangest, most open, and most enlightening conversation she had ever had. "According to our law, which the Light claims is a 'false tradition,' both Jahnzel and Arulezz Zarr are apostates, but for different reasons. I'm not even sure that I'm not an apostate. I don't know anymore what was right or wrong about everything I did or didn't do."

"What you didn't do here tonight was right. You can start with that as you work to sort everything out."

Myri nodded and wiped away fresh tears. The words of the Light played over and over again in her mind: *If you leave the Light and return to your people without David Pierce as your eternal husband, Lezz Zarr will use the bond to kill you.* Did that mean Jahnzel was lost to her forever? How could she even ask that question? She was the one who had rejected him! "I should have at least tried to trust Jahnzel, and now it's too late."

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

"The Light tells me I can't go back."

"Are you in trouble?"

"If what the Light tells me is true, I'm in terrible trouble. I don't know what to do."

"If you tell me what happened, maybe I can help you."

His offer was sweet but senseless. "You can barely move!"

“Then I won’t be a threat to your virtue, and you can stay without a chaperone. Unless I’m so much better looking than Prince Jahnzel that you can’t control yourself.”

What David Pierce said was so absurd in so many ways that Myri wanted to laugh as much as she wanted to sob.

“That was supposed to be a joke, Your Highness.”

Laughter did begin erupting in Myri’s throat, hearing herself addressed in such a bumbling way, but she pursed her lips and looked away in an effort to stay silent.

“It’s all right to laugh. Just softly so you don’t wake anyone up. I told you. It was a joke, funny words meant to make you laugh so that you won’t want so much to cry.”

Myri did allow herself to smile, and it made her feel a little better. “You shouldn’t address me as ‘Your Highness.’ That is not a title we use.”

“What should I call you then?”

Myri knew at once that she couldn’t endure being addressed as “my Saintess” by this unreserved native whose bedroom she had invaded in the middle of the night. “You may address me as Myri. Just plain Myri.”

“There’s nothing plain about you, Myri. That’s why it still seems so odd to me that your emperor would have chosen a simple guy like me to be your husband instead of Prince Jahnzel.”

“You undervalue yourself, David Pierce.”

“It’s just David, Myri, or Dave. And simple doesn’t mean of little value; it just means simple.”

Oddly enough, Myri knew what he meant. “Then I’m simple too. My goals and desires are uncomplicated and easy for everyone to see.”

That she had so easily understood his version of “simplicity” seemed to intrigue him. “You live to serve God and your people. That much really is plain to see.”

“Before I came here I learned that you, too, live to serve God and your people. Now that I’ve met you, I see that you are exactly the way Arulezz said you would be.”

“Forgive me, Myri, but that’s disturbing.”

“What? That you and I may have more in common than you would like to believe?” The realization disturbed Myri also. If God had chosen David Pierce for her then it made sense, but since He had not, what did it mean?

“It’s that my enemy spied on me long enough to find a woman who seems to have quite a lot of important qualities in common with me.”

“I was told that the late emperor spent many months searching for the right husband for me.”

“You mean Tohmazz Zarr himself?”

Myri nodded.

“You knew him well, then?”

“He was like a father to me.”

“It appears that he wanted you to be happy in your marriage.” David sounded surprised.

“He was very compassionate that way. Or at least I always believed he was.”

“Come sit in this chair, Myri, and tell me what happened.”

Myri’s knees were starting to feel stiff, and she welcomed the offer of the chair. “It all started shortly after the invasion, when Arulezz summoned Jahnzel to his office, and then me.” She told David everything that had happened to her since that dreadful day,

and he listened to all of it, only asking questions when what she said didn't make sense to him.

"Do you think he can manipulate the cell bond through the Light?"

"All I know is that there are no signals of any kind coming from the Light. Arulezz told me that it is all static. If it doesn't come out, then maybe it can't come in either, but I did break into your house. I almost committed a capital crime. I would almost like to think that I was under the influence of a cell bond."

"Stop beating yourself up for what you didn't do! And breaking into my room was a good thing, as far as I can see. Had you not done that, we never would have met, and I, at least, am very glad we did."

Myri breathed deeply and nodded. "So am I."

"None of that is worth wasting another thought on. Just let it go."

"I'll try."

"Promise me you won't leave the Light for any reason."

"I'm not sure that I can. Jahnzel needs me. My people need me. I need to expose Arulezz for the fallen emperor he is!"

"You aren't going to be any use to your people if you are dead."

"There must be a way."

"There is no way. Because of that cell bond, you're trapped, and he knows it. He commanded you to do dijauntu with me because he knew that if you refused and returned to Teton Colony to expose him, he could kill you with a thought. Promise me you won't leave!"

"I can't just leave Jahnzel there to fight this battle by himself!"

"A drowning woman can't save a sinking ship! Promise me!"

"If I were to stay here, where would I live?" The aircar was set up to provide food, basic supplies and sleeping arrangements for her and Captain Sauvel temporarily, but Myri had no desire to live in such primitive conditions indefinitely.

"You and your bodyguard might be able to find an empty house near Stonefield."

"Might?"

"Apparently we didn't lose too many Federalists when the Light came, but we did gain a lot of refugees. Because we lost so few and gained so many, most of the houses have people living in them."

"That actually makes sense. Your church started gathering its people into temple communities before the late emperor purchased the property for Tryamaz. When my people finally did start gathering in this area, they found more available property on the Kansas side of the city."

David nodded. "It's where most of the Federalists in this area lived also, and now it's gone."

"If there is an abandoned home anywhere in the Light, the aircar will tell us, and if not, we could stay in the aircar tonight."

"Since you're staying in the Light, and I'll be months recovering from these injuries, I would really like it if you would come read to me and take care of me."

"Don't be stupid! I can heal your injuries in a few minutes. Why would you choose to take months to recover?"

"It's not what I would choose, but it is the right choice. If you telepathically heal me, my parents will never believe you didn't bond me too."

He was probably right, but did it matter? “They will never let me in here to nurse you, that’s for certain.”

“I disagree. If I can convince them that you really are in trouble, they’ll want to help you as much as I do. Besides. They have a lot to do. You already met my brother who’s a cop; he’s been dealing with crowd control more than anything. My other brothers are busy installing solar panels around the community. My mom and dad could use the help.”

“I didn’t think faithful Mormons were allowed to have contact with my people.”

“Circumstances have changed. Many of your people came into the Light after the invasion.”

Of course they had! Both Arulezz and Jahnzel had mentioned them, and David’s father had told the Novaunian the same thing in her vision. Why hadn’t she thought about them before now? “Where are they?”

“My brother tells us that they all went to a neighborhood in Liberty that’s close to the temple.”

“How bizarre! So your people are actually speaking to my people now?”

“It’s either that, or we kick you all out of the Light, and that doesn’t feel right to anyone. The Church has given us permission to speak with you but warns us not to communicate with you telepathically.”

“Why do they want to be near the temple?”

“They claim the Light is stronger there. It calls them, and when they get there, they don’t want to leave it. As for the particular neighborhood they chose, apparently it’s a wealthy one, with several homes that had been outfitted with synthesizing systems. Your people are savvy. They knew right where to go and took possession of the abandoned houses before anyone else could.”

Myri couldn’t help but smile. “Of course they did. They know their own technology.”

“There would be nothing improper about your nursing me. Promise me you’ll come to the front door tomorrow afternoon.”

“Are you always this demanding?”

“Always.”

“I am quite demanding also.”

“I doubt you’d be much of a noblewoman if you weren’t.”

“You’re absolutely certain you want a fastidious high priestess to oversee your care until you recover?”

“Yes. Now promise me that you won’t leave the Light for any reason.”

“I promise.” She removed the large arelada pendant that Arulezz had given to her from around her neck and laid it on the little table next to his bed, along with her ring. “Here is my guarantee that I won’t try to touch your mind with mine or with my Awareness monitor.”

Myri walked to the door of David’s bedroom, feeling at peace. She had gone to David intending to make him her slave and had come away with a new friend. The protective instinct he had for her felt right in a way that compulsory attachment through a telepathic bond never could. What surprised Myri more than anything was that she actually *liked* David Pierce and wanted to minister to him for as long as he needed her.

As Myri entered the sunroom, she realized that she needed to decide what to do with Captain Sauvel. The original plan had been for him to return to Teton Colony after

depositing her in Stonefield. He had a wife and a son and would want to go back, yet how could she function without a bodyguard and driver?

Myri paused there in the sunroom and looked up at Captain Sauvel's tired face, feeling a new appreciation for him. "You were right to caution me against bonding David Pierce's mind," she whispered. "It really would have been an evil thing to do."

Sauvel gazed down at her in relief. "Then you didn't do it."

"No. And that's not the only thing I didn't do."

"You rebelled against the Divine Emperor, then. I was afraid you would."

"You were?"

He smiled. "You are a true holy woman and are incapable of evil."

"But Captain Sauvel, I broke into a man's house."

"You weren't yourself. The emperor bonded your mind."

"The Light told you this?"

"Of course it did; it's my job to protect you. I am not to take you away from this place."

"My situation is worse than you realize. I'll tell you why after we've both had some sleep."

"Then you are at peace with staying?"

Myri nodded. "I made a promise to David Pierce. If his family allows it, I'll spend the next couple of months nursing him back to health."

"You didn't heal him?"

"It's a long story. For now, we need to look for an empty house near Stonefield."

"Yes, my Saintess."

\* \* \*

Jahnzel didn't sleep that night. When the monitor showed Myri's aircar returning to the light city instead of Teton Colony, he didn't believe it at first. How could his pure and virtuous Myri do something as indecent as break into a strange man's bedroom in the middle of the night?

Jahnzel waited to see what would happen. Maybe she would decide not to go through with the new assignment. Maybe she would emerge from the light shortly after she had gone into it the way she had on her first two trips. The hours passed, however, and darkness crept over Jahnzel as he realized she wasn't coming out of the light that night.

## PART 2: RESCUE?

### CHAPTER 10: A NATURAL BEDSIDE MANNER

Now that Sara was awake after the accident, she couldn't sleep. She lay in the dark tent, listening to the sounds of the jungle around her, feeling as if she were simmering in sweat. The flow of bleeding was increasing, but she couldn't tell if her abdomen was cramping yet or not; her body hurt too much all over for her to be able to distinguish anything but major pain. Cameron wouldn't leave her. He slept on her right side, where he had planted himself earlier that afternoon. Ashley slept on her left, ready to give both her and Cameron any necessary assistance.

Sara was technically nine weeks along, but nine weeks before, she had been on the transport en route to Eden, hearing Cameron's jokes about her being a "queen bee" and wondering how she could possibly want as many as thirty children, which was the norm on Novaun. In that short time she had married, become pregnant with twins, and been far happier about the situation than she could have imagined possible. The babies had come into her life in a flash, and now they might be dead. It didn't seem possible.

Sara heard snuffles from the ground to her left and listened with the intent to discover if Ashley was awake. She felt movement and realized that yes, Ashley was awake and weeping. This wasn't the first time Ashley had awakened Sara in this way, but that didn't lessen Sara's feeling of compassion for her. She wished she could reach out with her arm and lay her hand on Ashley's shoulder, but the splint would make the movement awkward. Instead, she whispered, "What's wrong?"

"You're not supposed to be awake, Sara," Ashley whispered back.

"Neither are you. You must be exhausted, after everything you've been doing."

"I am, but I still can't sleep."

"What's on your mind?"

"You don't want to hear about my troubles. They're so small compared to yours."

"Then tell me about them and help me take my mind off of my own." Sara wasn't sure anything could diminish the dread in the pit of her stomach, but she longed to put her mind in a different place for a while. She thought about how Ashley's family had gone crazy and how she had just learned something terrible about her mentor, a respected member of the community and her parents' good friend. She had been an innocent bystander in all of these events, but she had been deeply affected by them. It wasn't right that she thought her problems weren't significant enough to talk about.

"Do you think it's wrong of me to stop being Dr. Vance's student?"

"No, I don't. I don't think I could do it under the circumstances."

"It makes me feel better to hear you say that."

"Why are you so worried about it? Did someone try to talk you out of your decision?"

"When I talked to my parents about it on Sunday, they said that Dr. Vance's past mistakes didn't have anything to do with me, that he is an excellent teacher, and that I should give him another chance."

The thought of it made Sara angry, and she wasn't surprised that Ashley was so confused and upset. Sara had no idea how to advise her. "My parents wouldn't have seen it that way."

"Your family is so different from mine. I envy you."



"That's only because you don't know them that well. They aren't perfect, believe me."

"But you've never wondered whether your mother is a bad influence on your father, have you?"

"Cameron had a very brief thought to that effect when we were telepathically joined. It meant nothing."

"How do you know he isn't right?"

Sara didn't know. Cameron fought the thought away, but it may have been a true observation all the same, and even if it wasn't, Ashley seemed to need to talk about it. "Do you think he's right?" She felt movement to her right and was afraid she and Ashley had awakened Cameron.

"I don't know. I just know I don't like the thought. Why would Cameron even think that?"

Sara could feel Cameron lift himself to his elbow. He said, "I don't think that. It was just a senseless thought that popped into my head; that's all."

Ashley sat up. "But it did enter your mind. And it stayed there long enough to disturb you. Why would a thought like that come to you at all?"

"I think it was because Mother was pushing so hard to keep the colony organized by the Equality of Zion."

"But Sara, you don't think Mother is wrong to do that, do you? You think the colony should keep as much of the original organization as possible."

"I know what I said to the others, but to answer your question, I seriously don't know. I don't believe in the Equality of Zion the way I did before, but your mother's encouragement of your father's ideas empowers him in a way that is good."

"That much is true," Cameron agreed. "Father needs Mother to believe in him."

"Is her encouragement a good thing, though, if the fundamental ideas are bad to begin with?"

"That's a perceptive question. My gut feeling is no."

"Which explains why you had that thought."

Cameron hesitated. "I suppose it does."

"So the real question is this: Is there anything good about the Equality of Zion?"

"Yes," Sara said. "It's the strongest unifying organization in the colony right now, which makes it not only good, but critical to the colony's survival."

"The Church should be the strongest unifying force in the colony," Cameron said.

"Should be," Sara agreed, "but isn't. Not yet."

"What has to happen to make it stronger?" Ashley asked.

"More of the colonists need to realize how wrong they were to follow Father here and repent."

"I agree with that," Sara said. "If the colonists aren't willing to repent for coming here in the first place, I don't think they will follow Cameron back to Zion."

"Which means that you do agree with Cameron that the colonists will have to eventually give up the Equality of Zion if they want to follow him to the real Zion."

"Yes, I guess I do. Ultimately. But that shouldn't be such a big deal. Where else are we going to be able to live it but here? When we go back to Earth, we'll be subject to the laws there just as we were before, and if we get rescued by some other planet, it will be the same thing."

“What if the other colonists are right? That we would be allowed to colonize a different planet?”

“What are the chances of that, really? There’s a whole organized galaxy out there, and if I’ve learned anything by coming here, it’s that the people of Earth know very little about the way the universe really works and that we’d be a lot better off if we stopped making all of these smug assumptions.”

“Amen to that,” Cameron said.

“So the only thing the two of you disagree on is the timing. Cameron thinks that the Equality of Zion is getting in the way of the colonists’ repentance and needs to be abolished as soon as possible to make the Church stronger, and Sara believes the Equality of Zion needs to be in place long enough to get us off this planet, and then after that it won’t matter, because we won’t be able to live it anyway.”

Hearing Ashley come to correct conclusions about her beliefs—beliefs that Sara had only barely determined for herself—surprised her and disconcerted her a little. “The way you say it makes me think that my point of view is wrong. If the Equality of Zion really is getting in the way of the colonists’ repentance, it probably should be chucked sooner rather than later.”

“That’s funny,” Cameron said. “Hearing your observations in this way makes me think that maybe you’re absolutely right. Maybe it’s foolhardy of me to want to throw away the social order at a time when unity is absolutely critical, particularly now when the colony is taking in so many refugees who aren’t members of the Church.”

“What it means, then, is that if Mother persists in keeping Father focused on his pet project, she’ll become a bad influence.”

“That really is a big ‘if,’ Ashley,” Cameron said. “Please try to let this one go.”

“All I know is that despite your parents’ mistakes, they love you very much and are trying to fix the mess they made.”

“Do you think they love their children as much as they love their projects?”

“Does it matter?” Cameron asked.

“It would make me feel better if I thought they did.”

“What are you inclined to believe?” Sara asked.

“That they don’t. Oh, they’ve always said they love us more than anything, but I’ve never really believed it. I wish you would tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong,” Sara said.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Seriously, Ashley, I really don’t know. You probably really are wrong.”

“I don’t think so, and neither does Cameron.”

“Why should it matter now?” Cameron asked. “At least in terms of how you live your life?”

“Perhaps it doesn’t, but it’s really been bothering me. I was so hurt and angry for you when Mother underhandedly called you a fanatic—again! I thought that she had changed her mind about that.”

Sara, too, had hurt for Cameron at the time, but after a week of thinking about it, she wasn’t sure anymore that Barbara had been expressing her true belief. Sara had no doubt that Barbara and the Vances had been working more to discredit her that day than Cameron; Barbara’s comment may have been a calculated one with that sole end in mind and meant nothing beyond it. Sara considered telling Ashley and Cameron her observation but decided it wasn’t a good idea. The last thing the colony needed was for

Tempest to begin believing again that Barbara was a liar, and Sara wasn't sure that Ashley and Cameron would appreciate hearing that no, their mother may not really still believe Cameron was a fanatic but yes, she was still a subtle manipulator.

"Mother didn't mean her words for me." Cameron sounded as if he had chosen his words carefully, and his tone suggested that he was more disappointed than hurt. Sara suspected he had come to the same conclusion she had.

"Sara, how can you know all of these private things about people and not go crazy?"

"I'm not sure I can."

"Do you think it's this way on Novaun—everyone knowing everything about everyone?"

"I don't know. I hope not!"

"I don't ever want to communicate with Tempest again."

"Hopefully you won't ha—" Sara felt her stomach cramp in a way that almost took her breath away.

"Sara, what happened?" Ashley asked.

"Pain in my stomach." She had not expected the contractions to be so strong.

"I'd better go get Cyndi." Ashley fumbled for a flashlight, turned it on, and slid out of the tent.

Cameron laid his hand on Sara's stomach. "It's really happening, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I was stupid to have hope."

Sara felt a gush, and the pain ebbed. The fear was gone, replaced with a feeling of resignation. "Then so was I." She thought about asking Cameron to help her sit up completely and see whether the babies had come out, but there was no light, and so she didn't bother.

"How can they be dead, Sara? When the pregnancy was so right?"

Sara's abdomen contracted again. "There'll be other pregnancies. I'm the queen bee, remember?" She couldn't quite keep the bitterness out of her voice and wasn't sure she wanted to.

Cyndi came into the tent, followed by Ashley. "How are you feeling?"

"Wet."

"Ashley says you've been having contractions."

"At least two that I could identify."

"Let's check, then, to see what happened." Cyndi lifted the sheet covering Sara, aimed the flashlight, and took a look. She didn't say anything right away, and in that time, Sara had another contraction and felt another gush. Cyndi handed her flashlight to Ashley and removed the large absorbent pad Sara had been lying on. "I think you've delivered your babies. Ashley, clean her up, and I'll check to make sure."

"That's it?" If that was all there was to it, why did she feel so sad?

"We can't be certain yet, but probably. Most women do this in the privacy of their own homes and then see their midwife or obstetrician the next day."

Cameron sat up completely, took the flashlight from Ashley, had held it so that she could work. Sara said, "I really wish I could do this myself. Thank you, Ashley."

"Think nothing of it, Sara, really. I don't mind."

Feeling tears well up in her eyes, Sara fought them away, hoping to keep herself together long enough to tell Ashley her new thought. "Maybe you should go into

medicine instead of law. You're not grossed out easily, and you have a natural bedside manner."

"You are so kind to me, Sara, and you wonder why I don't mind doing this for you."

Sara's voice trembled. "I'm no kinder to you than you deserve. Really, Ashley, you should think about it. Medicine might be a good fit for you."

Ashley nodded. "I'll think about it."

"All of the tissue appears to be here."

Sara's throat burned and her eyes became blurry again. She blinked away the tears. She had to see; she had to know. "May I see them?"

"Of course." Cyndi held the pad closer to Sara and Cameron and pointed the light at the two little sacs amid everything else. Had Sara not had Cyndi there to tell her that yes, these were the babies, she might not have even known for sure. What would she have done in the same situation at home? Flush them down the toilet? She couldn't bear that terrible thought. The babies had been there in her womb and then gone, just like that.

"I can't bear this," Cameron said. "We'll never know enough about them even to name them." Sara couldn't restrain the tears anymore. She put her hands over her eyes, her shoulders shaking. Cameron dropped down next to her again and wept with her.

The light moved, and Sara heard a rustling noise, so she knew that Cyndi carried the babies away from her line of vision. Neither Cyndi nor Ashley said anything, but Sara could feel them work as she wept.

Many minutes passed, and Cyndi said, "The bleeding should slow down now. Once the equipment gets here tomorrow, I'll give you an ultrasound."

Ashley handed Sara a wad of tissues and then held her hand.

Sara handed some of the tissues to Cameron and used what was left to blot the tears from her face. Neither one of them had the energy or inclination to talk after that. Sara didn't know about Cameron, but all she wanted to do was sleep and forget, and, eventually, she did.

She awoke much later in the day to the buzzing of chainsaws. She reached for Cameron to wake him up, but she didn't need to; he was already starting to stir.

Ashley sat up and moved toward the tent opening. "They're here! Finally they're here!"

\* \* \*

By late that afternoon, Sara had been made as comfortable as possible in a spacious hospital tent on a medical bed with a real mattress. Her broken bones had been set, and she and Cameron had seen her empty womb on the ultrasound screen. How was it that she could feel such sorrow at the loss of these two people who were so tiny and so undeveloped that the sexes couldn't even be perceived?

When they were alone together, curtains gathered around them, Cameron whispered, stroking her arm. "I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you and the babies."

Sara had no doubt that he felt what he said deeply, but his words perplexed her. "There's nothing you could have done."

"I could have trusted your feelings of uneasiness more in the aircar. We could have turned around."

"I made a choice. There's nothing you could have done." Still, Sara couldn't help but wonder. Maybe they should have turned around.

"I could have insisted."

"But you didn't, because the colony would have been furious with us for refusing to send the message. It would have caused a major division and more people may have died." Sara had been wracking her brain over the last several hours, thinking through the alternatives facing her and Cameron in that aircar, and the situation always came back to that basic fact.

"I shouldn't have doubted you."

"Shouldn't have doubted what? My fears of being in that aircar?"

"Maybe it wasn't fear; maybe it was the Spirit."

"I didn't need the Spirit to warn me of the dangers of the aircars."

"What do you mean?"

"Traveling in alien helicopter-like vehicles for thousands of miles across hostile terrain has risks. It makes me crazy the way the colonists refuse to see the obvious. How can everyone trust this alien technology so blindly?"

"When you put it that way, you're right. None of us needed the Spirit to tell us that. So why would you feel the danger more acutely if the Spirit wasn't trying to warn you?"

"If it was the Spirit, it would have told you as well and the others too, and I don't think it would have used fear as the medium to tell us."

"Maybe it did tell me and I just didn't listen."

"You've been too close to the Spirit the whole time we've been here that I can't believe that."

"I'm still not convinced."

Oddly, this conversation did more to persuade Sara that they were not at fault than any thought she'd had previously. "Maybe the Spirit helped me perceive the true risks in aircar travel more sharply than the rest of you to assure me that the crash was an accident—nothing more, nothing less."

"An accident."

"Yes, an accident. Purely an accident. An accident that was bound to happen to somebody, sooner or later. We didn't do anything wrong." The guilt Sara felt for killing her babies lifted, and she knew, without a doubt, that this new feeling of relief did come from the Spirit.

"I still feel like it was my fault."

"Then stop it. We made the best decision we could under the circumstances. If I had to do it again, I can't think of anything I would have done differently other than jump into the river rather than land in that tiny clearing."

"You would have chosen the colonists over the babies?" He sounded shocked.

The way he said it really did make the choice seem horrible. "I would have chosen to send the message that only I could send." What kind of future could the babies have if they were stranded on this hostile planet for any length of time? Surely Cameron didn't need her to spell out the implications! "Think about it, Cameron. You would have made the same choice."

Cameron was silent for many minutes. Finally he said, "I'm not sure I would have."

It was Sara's turn to be shocked and disturbed. "Are you that certain someone from Earth will show up sooner rather than later to rescue us?"

"It's not that. How do I explain this, Sara? I came to Eden for you. Only you. Then the babies came along, and they were a part of you. Before now, I haven't had to choose between you and the babies and the other colonists."

“But you didn’t have to choose between the babies and the colonists.”

“I have a responsibility toward the other colonists and a desire to help them, but given a choice between you and them, my inclination will always be to choose you. This time circumstances made the decision for us. What if the time comes that I have to choose?”

“You’re going to make yourself crazy thinking like this. If something like that ever happens, the Spirit will tell you what to do, and you will do it.”

“I’m the bishop of these people, but I obviously don’t love them the way you do, and that’s wrong.”

“I’ve known most of them a lot longer than you have, and I chose to come here with them. Of course my feelings of affection for them are stronger.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

Sara heard a rustling noise and knew someone had come into her partitioned area. “Maybe it isn’t so much love for the other colonists that you need right now. Maybe it’s just that you’re realizing your original reason for coming to Eden isn’t adequate anymore for actually functioning here.”

“What do I need then?”

Cyndi approached them. “You need to stop worrying about the colony’s concerns for now and let yourselves grieve and heal. Dr. Marshall and I have already declared a moratorium on communication from the colony, and we won’t go back before the end of next week.”

## CHAPTER 11: GUILLELESS

David awoke the morning after Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro's visit to the urgent voice of his brother: "What happened in here last night?"

He opened his eyes and saw Bob standing over him with Myri's arelada dangling from his hand, his gray-green eyes wide and his cheeks flushed. "I'm fine, really. Please don't worry."

David heard his mother's voice from the direction of the door to the hall. "It was that Zarr girl, wasn't it?"

David's father examined Myri's ring. "Why didn't you yell for me?"

"She woke me up with an apology. I didn't feel threatened."

Bob returned the arelada necklace to the end table. "Of course you didn't. She probably put one of those cell bonds on you."

"She didn't bond me. She didn't use telepathy on me at all. All we did was talk."

His father handed the ring to Bob. "How can you be so sure she didn't bond you?"

"Because she told me exactly how the bonds work; what she described didn't happen to me."

His mother opened the drapes. "Why would she tell you something like that?"

"Because the Light told her that the emperor put a cell bond on *her*. She's in terrible trouble and needs our help!"

"Whoa now, bro. You shouldn't need any of us to tell you that that's just the sort of thing a spy would say to get close to you."

"Sure, but that doesn't apply to Myri. She isn't a real spy." As Bob and his father helped him into the wheelchair, David told them what had happened and that he wanted Myri to come to the house that afternoon and be his nurse until he recovered.

His mother exploded, "Are you crazy? Absolutely not! I won't have that evil princess in my house!"

"Haven't you been listening to anything I've said? She isn't a princess, and she isn't evil!"

"She came to make you her 'consort'; she told us that herself! She broke into our house! She's lying about being in trouble!"

"She isn't lying, Mom!"

"Watch your tone, son. Your mother has a point. Why should we trust this gal, when everything she's done tells us we shouldn't?"

"That isn't true," David said in a low voice. "She can't possibly be lying. She is completely guileless. She made a special point of admitting that yes, she had actually been alone with Prince Jahnzel once, only a few weeks ago when he told her that he wanted her to refuse to do what his brother commanded and go to Diron to be with him. Who do you know who's so scrupulously honest?"

Bob pushed David's wheelchair toward the bathroom. "He's right. Even honest people wouldn't have thought that very innocent incident was worth mentioning, not in that context anyway."

His mother wasn't convinced. "Maybe she's just a really good actress."

"Then why didn't she stick to her original story when she met us?" Bob said. "She had a different cover—a reasonable one—and any decent actress or agent could have pulled it off. I think she may be telling the truth."

"Of course she's telling the truth! She feels a very strong duty to her people and is totally displaced here. If she doesn't come and nurse me, she'll go back to Teton Colony, and the emperor will kill her through the cell bond he has on her."

"If this cell bond gives him such power over her, he could just as easily use it to command her to hurt you," his father said. "She may be honest; she's definitely dangerous."

"I disagree. The emperor already did command her to 'hurt' me, and she resisted."

"And if she really is so good at resisting the cell bond, then why couldn't she 'resist' him if he tried to telepathically kill her?" his mother asked.

"She might be able to fight him off, but probably not. That cell bond gives him a foothold into her mind and makes her vulnerable."

Bob stopped David's wheelchair at the threshold of the bathroom, and his father waved his mother out of the room. "I say we wait to make a decision until we meet her this afternoon. If she makes us even a tiny bit suspicious, we'll send her on her way."

\* \* \*

Arulezz arose early and went to his office to await Myri's return. She was supposed to be on her way back to Teton Colony, but she had not communicated yet with news of her success, and that unsettled him. He was afraid that dijauntu had made Myri so attached to David Pierce that she had remained with him in the light.

Arulezz watched for Myri's aircar from the window as he paced, believing that if she didn't return that day, she wouldn't—not voluntarily anyway. He had understood the risks when he had given her the assignment and still didn't regret what he had done—yet.

After hours of waiting, he felt her thoughts come into his mind. *Good afternoon, Lezz!*

*You must have been successful.*

*I was. Only God could have chosen a native this perfect for me. Love overcame any shame I might have felt manipulating him into your service.*

Arulezz had never been more in awe of his father than he was now as he heard of Myri's sincerity and success. *You're actually in love with him! A miracle!*

*After what happened between us, I was either going to love the man or loathe him. Did you expect me to loathe him?*

Arulezz wasn't sure whether she was amused or angry. *I wasn't sure what to expect, Myri. You've been devoted to my brother for a long time.*

*I gave Jahnzel up for the survival of the Nation. I thought that was the point of this mission.*

Arulezz hated to pain her this way, but he had to know if there was any possibility she would go back to Jahnzel. *Expediency doesn't erase feelings.*

*After the experience I had with David, I would go with him to the domes if he wished it. You don't have anything to worry about. I won't tell Jahnzel what you asked me to do.*

*How long have you been in the air?*

*I can't leave Missouri yet, not before David can walk.*

*Didn't you heal him?*



*I had planned to, but Captain Sauvel recommended I keep him incapacitated until I bonded him. When I saw how large David is, I agreed with Captain Sauvel. By the time I thought of it again, it was time for me to go.*

Arulezz tapped the armrest of his chair. *Does David love you as much as you love him?*

*Yes, but he's determined not to marry me. He has no idea how strong the bond is and intends to fight it. He believes that he won't go to the highest kingdom of Heaven unless he marries a Mormon girl in the temple.*

*It's a shame you couldn't convince his family that you're a Mormon girl.*

*It's better that the woman David loves is the real Myri. If I had made him love me and then lied, no bond in the universe could have compelled him to cooperate with either one of us. As it turns out, conditions are very primitive in the light. The people aren't using motor vehicles much or aircraft at all.*

Arulezz couldn't believe that he hadn't considered such a possibility. *Which means it would be difficult, if not impossible for him to get here on his own.*

*Precisely. I have to believe that the closer I am to him, the sooner he will reconcile himself to the inevitable.*

*Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it is better this way.*

*Trendaul Alexander warned his family that you might send an agent after David. My cover didn't fool them for a moment.*

*Did you learn anything from David about the light shields?*

*Everyone in the community thinks the light came from God to protect them from the invasion and the mobs.*

*Where do you think it came from?*

*I don't know.*

*You must have a speculation.*

*All I know is that those light shields are far more sophisticated than anything our people can engineer. The light was alive and intelligent and put words and visions into my head.*

*Of what?*

*It told me that I have more choices than I realize and that I should fight you.*

The light had urged Myri to betray him, yet she didn't automatically claim it was from Satan. Her "I don't know" answer indicated such a change in her essence that Arulezz couldn't allow it to pass. *The light's from Satan, then?*

Myri didn't answer immediately.

*Well?*

*If the light is from Satan, then the logical conclusion is that David and his people are of Satan, which can't possibly be true, because David is as beautiful and pure as prime arelada. I don't know where the light comes from.*

Arulezz pondered this new development. In his zeal to keep Myri faithful, he had inadvertently planted the seed of betrayal. Myri's union with David Pierce wouldn't be as destructive to Arulezz as her union with Jahnzel would be, but it would be dangerous. He would have to watch Myri and her Mormon husband closely. *Maybe the Mormons are broadcasting some sort of telepathic signal.*

*That's highly unlikely. David has a Novaunian brother-in-law, yet he had no idea how to communicate telepathically. He caught on fast, but I had to lead him in everything.*

*Did you find out whether the Mormons have an alliance with the Novaunians?  
If they do, David's family doesn't know about it.  
How long has David known that his brother-in-law is a Novaunian?  
Only since Trendaul Alexander's brother arrived.  
Do the Novaunians plan to return to Earth?  
David doesn't know anything about their plans.  
That's unfortunate but not surprising. Well done, Myri.*

\* \* \*

As far as Jahnzel could discern, only three explanations existed to explain Myri's decision to remain in the light: She had completed Arulezz's mission to bond David Pierce's mind and would remain with him; she had refused to complete the mission, rebelling against the Divine Emperor, and had remained in the light because she believed leaving it would be dangerous; or she had been captured.

Since the Pierces had ordered Myri to leave the light the first time she had gone into it instead of having her put in prison, Jahnzel doubted she had been captured. Because she had voluntarily gone into the light, thereby accepting Arulezz's disgusting mission, Jahnzel had no real choice but to believe that she had completed it. Then again, Arulezz had taken pains to go to Tryamaz Camp personally to give Myri the new assignment. Could he have told her to do something so shameful that Myri would feel her life was in danger if she refused to do it and returned to Teton Colony?

Arulezz had separated Myri from her betrothed, given her this supposedly holy mission to marry a savage, prepared her to bond Pierce's mind, told her to break into his bedroom at night, and had manipulated her without hesitation or regret, but would he put himself in a position to actually *kill* her? Arulezz was a tyrant, but Jahnzel couldn't believe he was a murderer, and he wouldn't even think about killing Myri, his bondmate's beloved sister. It wouldn't happen, and Myri knew it wouldn't happen. Unless the light had given her visions that had filled her with paranoia. The light had given such visions to others, but Myri had escaped from it once and had obviously not emerged afraid of Arulezz. Had Arulezz commanded Myri to do something terrible and she had, in the end, refused, her first inclination would be to return to Teton Colony and tell Jahnzel.

With every hour that passed without Myri's return, Jahnzel regretted it less. He and Myri had been the closest of friends for many years. She knew him better than anyone did, and yet in a moment of crisis, she had refused to trust him and had gone so far as to think he was an apostate. Myri had always seemed to be deeply religious and chaste, and yet this devout young woman had left Tryamaz Camp to break into a strange man's bedroom at night and bond his mind. While Jahnzel admired true devotion to a Supreme Being who had given life to all humankind, he deplored the sort of piousness that urged blind obedience to a mortal tyrant. Jahnzel was finally convinced that Myri's love for him had never been deep and abiding and that the Myri he loved had never existed.

Still, the fact that Arulezz had gone to Tryamaz Camp to communicate secretly with Myri disturbed Jahnzel. This act suggested that he was hiding something, and Jahnzel decided he would continue to watch the monitor, just in case Myri decided to return to Teton Colony after all.

When Jahnzel saw that Myri's aircar was ascending out of the light for the third time, he thought at first that perhaps his assessment was correct, that Arulezz had told her to do something truly immoral and that she was on her way home to reveal it. Jahnzel felt both hopeful and indignant until he became aware that Myri was hovering right outside of the light shields and wasn't heading home at all.

When the transmissions began, Jahnzel assimilated them with horror. Either Myri had successfully completed the despicable assignment or she had rebelled and was lying about it. Given the fact that Myri had never been able to lie, even if she tried, and that she had gone into the light intending to complete the assignment, Jahnzel concluded that what she was telling Arulezz was probably true.

If it was true, then Myri and David had come to know each other extremely well in a matter of mere hours by communicating telepathically. Since exchanging telepathic transmissions wasn't that much more intense than speaking, Myri and David had to have overlapped spirits in such a way that they could think and feel together. Everything Myri communicated to Arulezz confirmed this assessment.

Jahnzel shuddered to think of Myri's noble spirit touching that of a savage, much less overlapped with it to seal the cell bond. Only nobles communicated by touching spirits, and overlapping spirits in any degree was reserved for the Divine Emperor and for those nobles with only the closest of family ties. Even Jahnzel had never been permitted to communicate with Myri in this familiar way. That Myri had done so for such a length of time with David Pierce was unseemly.

No wonder Arulezz had communicated this new assignment in person. Myri certainly wouldn't have accepted it any other way, and had Jahnzel suspected it, he would have gone to Tryamaz Camp and tried to prevent it. Now that it was done, however, Jahnzel could not help but be so revolted by Myri that he was glad she was gone.

Jahnzel gave orders for his belongings to be packed and his shuttle prepared. If the thought of reconciling with Myri disgusted and mortified him, the thought of interacting in any way with Arulezz revolted and enraged him. He vowed never to communicate with him again except on business.

Jahnzel had already remained in Teton Colony a week longer than he had planned, and he couldn't bear the thought of sitting idle there any longer, with nothing to do but stalk his faithless former betrothed. One thing was certain—unless he increased the number of ships in his fleet, another attack from a rival nation would destroy their people and perhaps even cripple the planet beyond usefulness.

By mid-day, Jahnzel was in his shuttle and on the way back to the *Empress*, and Arulezz, understanding his state of mind all too well, had not attempted communication to ask him why.

As Jahnzel returned to work, however, a strange new thought haunted him: If the real Myri was so indecent at heart, how could a virtuous man like David Pierce, having communicated with her in this intense way that would expose her true thoughts and feelings, so quickly fall in love with her? Were the cell bonds really that strong?

And when in the galaxy had she started addressing the Divine Emperor as "Lezz"?

\* \* \*

Once David was settled in his recliner in the sunroom, Gene and Bob joined Betty in the kitchen. "I'm sorry that Zarr girl got into David's room last night," Bob said. "I should've been here."

"You're just one person, and you have a family and a job," Gene said. "You can't be here all the time. Besides, we all thought the Light had driven her away."

"We were wrong. And naïve."

"We were," Betty said as she added chocolate syrup to a pitcher of reconstituted powdered milk, "and that's why I can't believe the two of you are even considering allowing her into the house."

Bob removed four plastic cups from the stack. "We aren't going to do anything but talk to her, Mom. Surely there's no harm in that."

Betty stirred the milk. "For three years, the Brethren have been counseling us not to have any contact with the Zarrists since 'talking' to them at all is dangerous because of those cell bonds they secretly put on people!"

Bob sliced several homemade bagels and put them on a platter. "I can't believe this girl would try it on all three of us at the same time, and even if she did, Tren told us how to detect and fight off a cell bond."

"Why can't you just take her to Liberty to be with her people?"

Gene began spreading peanut butter on the bagel slices. "This Zarr girl isn't Tren, dear."

"How do you know? How do you know she won't take our boy to Diron or wherever-it-is she's from?"

"The way Tren took Teri to Novaun," Bob murmured in understanding.

"Aren't you being hasty?" Gene asked.

"No, I'm not. She was sent here to marry David. That was the original plan. Her emperor, in fact, took great pains to find a good match for her."

"David was chosen to do a job," Bob said. "It may be that Arulezz Zarr lied to the saintess about his father's motives."

"David doesn't think so," Betty said. "He even thinks he has some things in common with that girl! And if she comes here every day and sits with him, they're going to get to know each other way too well. He's already acting like he's half in love with her!"

Bob set the serrated knife on the counter. "But she's not in love with David. She's in love with Prince Jahnzel, remember? She sat down on the sidewalk and bawled when we told her she should marry the prince instead of David!"

"Her feelings could change easily enough."

"Not likely. Even the poorest of the Zarrists think we're savages. I have a hard time believing that a noblewoman would ever really want to marry David, even if she joined the Church. She would believe he's too far below her. And David's way too proud to marry a girl who would think of him like that."

Betty shook her head. "I have a bad feeling about this. If we let her into this house, she'll steal David away from us!"

"Mom, you're being paranoid!"

"Look what happened when we stopped being paranoid! That Zarr girl got into the house!"

Gene screwed the lid back on the jar of peanut butter. "Sounds like what you're afraid of is that she'll fall in love with David, not that she'll harm him."

Betty suddenly felt trapped. "I guess that is what I'm afraid of."

"Which means you mostly believe she's telling the truth," Gene said.

"I don't know that for sure yet."

"But it's what you believe."

"I guess so."

Gene sighed. "Heaven knows I don't want her to take David away from us the way Tren took Teri, but I also know that Tren is right for Teri."

Bob nodded. "That's true. And he's a good man."

"I also agree with Bob that this Zarr girl is unlikely to ever think seriously about David, but what if she does? David isn't your baby anymore. He's a man who has the right to choose his own friends and even his wife."

Bob chuckled. "He's pretty bull-headed too. He'll choose his friends whether you want him to or not."

"And what if the Lord wants David and this girl to be together? I don't want to stand in the way of that."

"Now who's being hasty?"

"You're the one who brought it up."

"I can't believe it could be the Lord's will that two of our kids are stolen away from us!"

"You must believe it a little, or you wouldn't be so worried!"

"Why do other people get to have all of their kids close by while we end up sending ours to another planet? Why would the Lord want that for us?"

Gene picked up the platter of bagels and moved in the direction of David's room. "I don't know the answer to that."

"This is the second alien we may end up bringing into our home, and one from a different planet to boot. Why are they all drawn to us? What are we, some kind of alien magnets?"

Bob picked up the pitcher of milk. "Face it, Mom. You've got a soft spot in your heart for aliens. It's from all those years of watching *Star Trek*."

"There it is, dear," Gene said over his shoulder. "You have your answer."

Betty moaned and followed Gene and Bob down the hall.

\* \* \*

Arulezz's transmission ended, and Myri slumped down in her seat. Many minutes passed before she stopped trembling and could command her voice. "He believed me. It's a miracle!"

Captain Sauvel turned around in his seat, his expression smooth with relief. "Praise God!"

"Now I just have to figure out how to explain this difficult situation to David Pierce's family. Go ahead and go back in." Unable to transmit a telepathic signal to Arulezz from the Light, Myri and her bodyguard had been forced to leave it.

Captain Sauvel started the aircar and descended into the Light. Myri sat back against her seat and closed her eyes, thanking God over and over again for helping her through this first difficulty. Myri knew they were in the Light again when she felt peace wash over her like a perfumed bath.

She felt so relaxed, in fact, that she wasn't intimidated when she saw David's father, mother, brother, and several guards waiting for them in the yard behind the house.

“Those guards are armed, my Saintess. Do you still want me to land?”

“We have nowhere else to go and have no choice but to cooperate with them.”

After the aircar came to a stop near the large stone in the park, Robert Pierce came to Captain Sauvel’s door. “The two of you get out of the vehicle and put your hands behind your heads.”

Captain Sauvel stepped out of the car and helped Myri do the same. A male guard frisked Captain Sauvel and took his weapons, while a female guard frisked Myri. Shuddering, Myri closed her eyes and tried to pretend it wasn’t happening. When it was over, Myri faced Robert Pierce again, this time unafraid but curious. “I’m so embarrassed about what happened during our first meeting. Thank you for forgiving me enough to communicate with me.” She couldn’t believe how relaxed she felt. After lying to Arulezz, nothing these natives did could frighten her.

Elizabeth’s attention appeared riveted on Myri’s veil. “Is there something in particular we need to forgive?”

Myri had worn the white veil belonging to her sister the whole time she had been in Tryamaz Camp and hadn’t been able to resist taking it with her when she left. She had known it might identify her as a Zarrist but hadn’t cared—anything to cover her ugly hair! It seemed to disturb Elizabeth, and Myri wondered why. In answer to Elizabeth’s question, Myri said, grimacing a little, “I’m afraid you may have to repair your locks.” The woman knew she was a Zarrist, so why would the veil matter now?

“If breaking our locks is all you’ve done wrong, then you’re forgiven.” Eugene Pierce extended his hand. “Fixing doors is my job. My name is Gene; I’m David’s father.”

Myri shook the work-worn hand as graciously as she could. “I’m happy to meet you, but I can’t possibly address you as . . . Gene.” Saying his name this way seemed too casual, too familiar.

“You can call me Mr. Pierce if that would make you more comfortable.”

Myri nodded. “Thank you.” The rest of the introductions were made, and Myri reluctantly agreed to call David’s brother by his first name to avoid confusion.

Once that was settled, Eugene asked, “What would you like us to call you?”

Even if Myri had wanted to adopt a native title, her people would never use it and would be offended to hear her addressed as a savage. “You may address me as Saintess Myri or just plain Saintess, whichever form feels most comfortable to you.” She tilted her head toward her bodyguard. “This is Captain Sauvel. He attends me everywhere I go.”

“Then perhaps both of you would like something to eat.” The gracious words didn’t match Elizabeth’s skeptical expression.

“No, thank you. We have a synthesizing machine in the aircar.”

Eugene, Elizabeth, and Robert led Myri and Captain Sauvel into David’s house through a back door and invited them to sit with them in a lounge. Myri sat down, and Captain Sauvel remained standing. “David tells us that he asked you to be his nurse while he gets better,” Eugene said as he sat down. Elizabeth followed suit. “Is this something you would like to do?”

Myri couldn’t possibly tell them that she wanted very much to nurse David. She didn’t believe that Elizabeth, in particular, would appreciate such eagerness. “As a high priestess, one of my primary tasks is to heal people. Since David won’t allow me to heal him telepathically, I would feel honored to keep him company and take care of some of his needs while he heals naturally. It’s the least I can do after the terrible thing my

emperor did to him.” She didn’t dare glance at Captain Sauvel. They hadn’t discussed the late emperor and his sins at all.

“Tell us why we should trust you.”

Myri watched Robert Pierce carry a hard wood chair from the dining room into the room in which they were sitting. “Because I am going to give you valuable intelligence about Tryamaz Camp.”

“Keep talking.” Robert positioned the chair near Myri and sat down, folding his hands in his lap.

“The leader of your nation, George K. Richardson, is there directing the clean-up effort and building an army. Being a central location, Tryamaz works very well as a gathering place.”

Elizabeth leaned forward in her chair. “The President? Here?”

“Are you sure about that, Saintess?” Robert asked.

“I dined with him the night I arrived in Tryamaz Camp a week ago.”

“Did he say why he was building an army?”

“He wants to bring order to the continent. He hates the Light and considers it the cause of the current chaos.”

“Does he plan to attack us?”

“If he does, he didn’t tell me, but I do know that his warriors are detaining everyone they find within twenty kilometers of this Light city. For that reason, the emperor apprised President Richardson of my mission and ordered him to allow me to pass into the Light unmolested.”

Robert raised his eyebrows. “The emperor, then, is in close contact with President Richardson.”

“I assume so.”

“Does the emperor have a cell bond on President Richardson’s mind?”

“The emperor doesn’t discuss such matters with me.” Since Myri could give Robert Pierce no more useful information about President Richardson, she changed the subject. “Did David explain that the emperor commanded me to join my mind with David’s?”

Eugene nodded. “He told us everything.”

“In commanding me to commit this act, the emperor made himself vulnerable. For me to join minds with anyone but a nobleman who is my lawfully wedded husband is sacrilege, and the penalty is death for both of us. As long as I appear to remain loyal to the emperor and David appears to be under my control, we are in no danger from the emperor. If, on the other hand—”

Robert nodded that he understood. “If he suspects you didn’t do to David what he sent you here to do, both of you will be in a certain amount of danger.”

“Yes. Captain Sauvel tells me that had I not reported my success to the emperor, he would send an army after David now.”

Robert looked up at Captain Sauvel. “You’re certain about that.”

“Permission to speak freely, my Saintess?”

“Go ahead. You’re the military man and the expert on these matters.”

Captain Sauvel went on to tell the Pierces more than he had told Myri that morning, particularly about the training he had received as a commander in the Nation’s armed forces and the mindset of the emperor, and he was emphatic. “If the emperor comes to believe my Saintess rebelled, he will send an army for both David and her; don’t doubt that for a moment. I can protect my Saintess from many dangers, but not from that.”

“Surely, though, the Light will protect them both,” Elizabeth protested.

“Perhaps, but perhaps not. It isn’t a force field.”

Myri agreed with Captain Sauvel. “The Light discouraged me from breaking into David’s room last night, but it didn’t stop me. In the end, I made the choice to rebel against the emperor’s command. Another person may not make the same choice.”

Knowing how close Myri had come to committing this abhorrent act against David sobered them all. Myri continued, “The best hope we have, however, is that the danger will last only as long as the emperorship of Arulezz Zarr stands. Prince Jahnzel assured me before I left Teton Colony that he would monitor my transmissions. When I communicated with the emperor this morning, I put phrases into the conversation that the prince would recognize and the emperor would not. Captain Sauvel and I believe that as soon as the prince realizes what I did, he will come to the Light to communicate with me.”

“Then what?”

“He will execute the emperor and take his place.” Myri couldn’t believe how cool she sounded.

“You’re certain about that.”

Captain Sauvel laughed. Myri turned to him in reprimand. Captain Sauvel straightened his face. “I’m sorry, my Saintess.”

Robert smiled. “We’ll take that to mean that yes, if Prince Jahnzel learns of his brother’s unlawful command to you that he will kill him.”

“Please excuse Captain Sauvel—”

Eugene waved his hand in a dismissive way. “That’s okay. He’s welcome to say what he’d like.”

“Actually, he isn’t, but I’ll let it go this time.”

Captain Sauvel bowed, appearing embarrassed. “Thank you, my Saintess.”

“What Captain Sauvel would like to tell you is that Prince Jahnzel is not only a God-fearing man who obeys the law, he feels a very strong protectiveness toward me. If he learns what his brother commanded me to do to David, he will absolutely organize a coup d’état.”

“Wouldn’t the emperor try to keep the prince from coming into the Light?”

“I don’t think he could—Prince Jahnzel commands the fleet.”

“What will you do if Prince Jahnzel *doesn’t* recognize the message for what it is and doesn’t come into the Light to talk to you?” Elizabeth asked.

“When the time is right, Captain Sauvel will return to Teton Colony and give a message to him.”

“What makes you think the emperor will allow Captain Sauvel to talk to the prince?” Robert asked.

“I think it’s very likely he won’t, but it’s a chance we have to take. Captain Sauvel believes that if he returns to Teton Colony without me with him, the prince will become suspicious and want to communicate with me directly.”

“And if he doesn’t, then what?” Elizabeth demanded.

“I don’t know.”

Eugene asked, “If Prince Jahnzel overthrows the emperor, will you then marry him as planned and become the empress?”



Myri hadn't thought that far ahead. If Jahnzel put his brother out of power and married her, she really would become the Divine Empress. "If he will have me," she said softly.

Elizabeth addressed her words to Captain Sauvel: "Can there be any real doubt about that?"

Captain Sauvel shook his head. "He is devoted to her, and it is what our people want and expect."

"Even though she was sent to marry David?"

"The people accepted this command of the Divine Emperor as they do all of his commands, but many were surprised and more than a little disturbed."

"Do you really think Prince Jahnzel will lead your people back to your home planet, Saintess Myri?" asked Robert.

"I would not presume to speak for Prince Jahnzel."

"What is your opinion?"

Myri hesitated. "I believe he would attempt to lead our people away from Earth, but I'm not certain."

"Returning to the Ancient World would require our people to redefine themselves," said Captain Sauvel. "Many would not wish to do it. Whatever Prince Jahnzel decides to do, his path will not be an easy one."

"When will you return to your people to give Prince Jahnzel your message?" Robert asked.

"When my Saintess releases me."

"The emperor would never believe I would release Captain Sauvel until I was firmly established in your family, and he would never believe that you would allow me anywhere near David after joining minds with him. In a few weeks, however, he might believe that you would accept me into your family to prevent David's leaving the Light."

Eugene frowned. "Is the dijauntu mind bond so powerful that he would believe such a thing?"

"Yes. In a very real way, I would have become David and David would have become me. It's very intense. My sister did not love Arulezz Zarr when she married him, and he didn't love her, although they were friendly to each other. After they married, however, that changed. At times, they almost seem obsessed with each other."

Captain Sauvel nodded. "There is a difference in dijauntu-bound couples that a non-noble can feel. It's what we expect of our nobles; it doubles their knowledge and leadership capabilities."

Eugene appeared fascinated. "Which means that if you marry Prince Jahnzel, he would be able to heal people and you, in turn, would be able to command Star Force."

Both Myri and Captain Sauvel nodded.

"That does explain why your people would consider mind-joining with David a capital crime," Robert observed.

"It also makes the emperor sound like a fool for telling you to do such a thing to begin with. I'm having a hard time believing it."

Elizabeth Pierce really didn't want her to stay and nurse David, and Myri had no idea how to gain her trust. "I can scarcely believe it either; I'm still in shock. I can only assume that because of the cell bond, he really did think I would do it. It would be a guarantee that I would marry David and not Prince Jahnzel, and it would also be a

guarantee that I would never tell the prince about it or that he would learn about the cell bond.”

Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest. “What would make the emperor so certain that David wouldn’t be capable of fighting the bond?”

“He understands both the cell bond and the dijauntu bond in a way none of us do—from firsthand experience. I assume he believes the cell bond is difficult to fight and that the dijauntu bond is so intense that it is impossible to fight.”

“Is it?”

“I can’t say. As far as I know, the dijauntu bond has never been used to violate someone in the way the emperor commanded me to violate David. I have every hope, however, that because the dijauntu bond is so intense, the emperor will not fight my staying in the Light for a year when I tell him that David can’t bear to not be married in the temple.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all. Too much could go wrong.”

Eugene squeezed her hand. “A lot has already gone wrong.”

“She should never have come here.”

“It doesn’t matter. That emperor has had his eye on David a long time, just like Lieutenant Quautar suspected. David’s own decision to join the Navy put him in this position.”

“I never liked that either!”

“The Navy’s a respectable job, Mom,” Robert said. “David knew it would mean putting his life at risk at some point in time. I think he would be less disturbed about these developments than we are.”

“It’s about time someone stated the obvious!” David’s voice called from close by.

Myri turned toward David’s voice and saw that he was sitting in a wheelchair at the entrance into the room, his right arm still in a sling. Myri wondered whether he had put himself in the chair. She hoped he wasn’t in pain.

David smiled at Myri, his eyes flashing with excitement. “Now stop blabbing and say she can stay!”

Elizabeth jumped up and moved quickly toward David. “How did you get into that chair by yourself? What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I wanted to be a part of this conversation and that getting myself into the chair was the only way it was going to happen.”

David’s eagerness to see Myri ignited her heart. Afraid of displaying her delight, she looked toward Eugene in question, adopting the most poised position she knew. Eugene smiled at her, and Robert laughed in a throaty, pleasant way. “This is the first time my little brother’s shown such gusto since he’s been home, and it’s about time. Thank you, Saintess Myri!”

Elizabeth turned away from David and strode toward the back door, not so much as glancing in Myri’s direction. Disappointment poured over Myri as she realized she really wouldn’t be staying. She stood up. “I’m sorry for troubling you. Obviously this isn’t going to work.”

“What do you mean, it’s not going to work?” David demanded.

Myri didn’t dare look at him but instead focused on Robert. “If you would be willing to return my arelada for a few minutes, I’ll heal David, and that will be that. You will never have to see me again.”

Eugene arose. "Whoa now, young lady! Just where do you mean to go?"

"To my people, in the place David called Liberty."

"David'll be unhappy if we let you leave."

Myri heard a slight whirring sound and suddenly realized that David had moved rapidly into the room and was positioned right in front of her. "Why won't you stay?" he asked.

She had to force herself to say, "Your mother doesn't want me here."

"This has nothing to do with her."

"This is her house!" Myri protested.

"It is her house," Eugene said, "and she is upset. Stay a little longer and let me talk to her. I think that she'll realize what a good thing you are for David after she cools down."

Myri tore her gaze away from David and looked at Eugene. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"I mean that she doesn't dislike or distrust you as much as you think she does. She'll accept you as a nurse and a friend to David soon enough."

"How can you be so sure?"

"We've been married for forty-one years. I don't need a dijauntu bond with her to know her heart." Eugene and Robert began helping David into the reclining chair and extended its foot. "Will you stay?"

Myri finally smiled and nodded. "I would be delighted, at least for today. If your wife doesn't change her mind, please assure her that I won't return."

"Will do, Saintess."

Myri turned to Captain Sauvel. "I need you to find our people and set up a household for me. Perhaps Robert Pierce would be willing to advise you."

"Sure thing."

Captain Sauvel bowed. "As you wish, my Saintess."

Myri flicked the white veil she was wearing. "And whatever you do, find a seamstress!"

Captain Sauvel smiled. "Of course."

\* \* \*

David wanted to see Myri again and listen to the conversation his parents and Bob would have with her. Knowing, however, that they wouldn't approve and might even send her away if he revealed his presence too soon, he struggled to put himself into the wheelchair and moved himself as quietly as possible into the hall.

David heard Myri's voice long before he could see her, and when he finally revealed himself, he expected Myri to be dressed as she had been the night before, in a pair of trousers and a blouse that Ashley Carroll might wear, her short pale blond hair falling seductively into her eyes. Instead, one of the heroines of his favorite novel gazed at him—the Saxon heiress Rowena, the love of Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe—wearing a long, frothy green skirt, a white silk blouse, a lacy Spanish veil, and jewelry made of pearls, emeralds, and gold.

David knew that as much as Myri resembled Rowena in appearance and deportment, she was a healer like the Jewish girl Rebecca who had nursed Ivanhoe back

to health after being wounded in the tournament and was probably more like her in mind, heart, and sheer exoticness.

Such perfection in a woman didn't even exist in one character in this great novel. It certainly couldn't exist in a real girl, and yet here she was, telling his father that she couldn't possibly stay and upset his mother. Myri's old-fashioned sense of honor impressed David and made him even more irritated with his mother for being so close-minded about a friendship between Myri and him.

When his father, Bob, and Captain Sauvel were finally gone and Myri was standing next to his recliner with an anxious expression on her lovely face, David stared at her, unable to speak.

Myri touched the lace draped over her shoulder. "It's the veil, isn't it? Your mother couldn't stop looking at it either. What's wrong with it?"

Myri's words brought David back to reality. Of course his mother had hated it! "It looks like a bridal veil, Myri. It reminds my mother of why you were sent here to begin with."

"Of course. How foolish of me." Despite the acknowledgment that she had made a mistake, she made no attempt to remove the veil.

"Did you find it in the house where you stayed last night?"

"No. Captain Sauvel and I could find no empty house and slept in the aircar. I brought the veil from Tryamaz Camp. The other things were made for me in Teton Colony to wear to church. Do I look so odd?"

"No, not at all. You've put everything together in a way that's elegant, yet very alien. It suits you; you look like yourself."

Myri nodded in satisfaction. "That was what I intended."

"Do you normally wear a veil?"

"In my official capacity as high priestess, yes. Today, though, I wanted to cover my horrible hair."

"The emperor made you cut your hair?"

Myri nodded. "It used to be long and wavy. He thought you would like me better if it were short."

David compared his mental picture of Ashley Carroll with this vision of Rowena/Rebecca that stood before him, only with long wavy blond hair under that luxurious veil. He laughed. "Your emperor is an idiot! You'll let it grow back, won't you?"

Myri nodded and finally smiled.

"Frankly, Myri, despite the fact your hair is short and doesn't really suit you, you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Her cheeks grew pink, and she lowered her eyes. "You're very kind."

She seemed more touched by his words than he had thought she would be. "I only say the truth."

Myri lifted her eyes just a little, her brows rising also. "Even though I'm not Ashley Carroll?"

That Myri knew of Ashley by name surprised David. "Ashley's very beautiful also, but there's something different about you." She wouldn't understand if he told her that she was Rowena and Rebecca come to life, and yet he knew it wasn't only that fantasy aura about her that made her different from Ashley. Myri possessed innocence, perhaps, or maybe a quality of maturity that gave her the mien of a woman several years older than she actually was without the worldliness David so often saw in women his own age.

Whatever it was, Myri exhibited a spiritual depth that David rarely saw in the young women he knew, a quality he had perceived in Ashley only as a spark, not as Myri's warming fire. He motioned to the couch. "Come sit down, Myri, and tell me what your emperor told you about Ashley."

Myri looked around the room and frowned. "Where did your father go?"

"He has work to do, I imagine."

"I didn't think he would leave me here with you alone."

"That's why you're here, so that he and the other members of my family don't have to be here all the time." He nodded toward the sliding glass door. "He left the blinds open."

"You realize that if your mother allows me to come tomorrow, I'm going to have to bring a chaperone."

David didn't like that idea at all. "That isn't necessary, really. My parents will be close by, and they'll look in on us from time to time. I really wish you could trust me; I trust you."

"It isn't that I don't trust you, David; it's a matter of custom. My people would never accept it."

"Why does it matter what they think?"

Myri seated herself on the couch. "If my people are given reason to suspect that I am not pure and holy, they will lose faith in my right to minister to them."

Had Myri not been such an unselfish person, David might have thought her comment was haughty. "Then I guess I can live with it, even though such close supervision for unmarried people isn't my custom. Now tell me what you know about Ashley Carroll."

"I saw a telepathic image of her, and Arulezz told me that she was your most recent love interest, that you had only known her for a day, and that she was a part of the Eden Colony."

Myri's information disturbed David more than he thought it should, considering the fact that he had already suspected the Zarrists knew about Ashley. "You saw pictures of me with her?"

"No, I only saw a picture of her. If you only knew her a day, how could she be a 'love interest'?"

"They saw me kiss her, I imagine." David wondered if the girl who had always had a chaperone had ever kissed her former fiancé.

"You kissed her? After only knowing her one day?"

"I liked her, and I liked kissing her."

"You didn't love her?"

"No, of course not. I had only known her one day."

"But that would be like your kissing me today!"

"No, not at all. Ashley wanted me to kiss her and you obviously don't. Besides, I make it a rule never to kiss a girl who has a bodyguard."

She wasn't amused. "What you did was so wrong, David!"

"Why?"

"Because a kiss is special—sacred. Don't you think so?"

"I always thought I did." David suspected he had lost a portion of Myri's respect for sharing himself with Ashley in this way, something he had thought nothing of at the time, and he didn't like the feeling.

"Then why did you do it?"

David realized in discomfort that he wasn't being completely honest with Myri. "Because I really, really liked her and wanted her to stay on Earth. The kisses were special to me. Why are you so disturbed by this?" Had the woman been anyone but Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro, beloved of Prince Jahnzel, David might have thought she was jealous.

Myri averted her eyes, abashed. "I'm not sure, but I think it's because I'm confused. I thought you were a certain way, and then I learn this thing that contradicts what I thought."

"A few kisses with a girl I like a lot but wasn't engaged to doesn't make me a reprobate any more than a few kisses with a man you like a lot and aren't now engaged to makes you a tramp, Myri."

Myri appeared thoughtful. "No, I don't suppose they do."

So she had kissed Prince Jahnzel, and she wasn't insisting anymore that she really did love him. David smiled. "And what am I supposed to think of you? You have such a modest air and claim to be so uncomfortable with me alone without a chaperone, and yet you speak more freely with me than even Ashley did and seem to enjoy it very much, as if you would really rather not have a chaperone at all. Talk about contradictory!"

Myri blushed. "I hope you're teasing me again."

"You like being so open with me; admit it."

"All right, I do like being able to speak freely with someone; I like it a lot."

"Have you never had someone you can talk freely with?"

"Yes. Jesalya, when we were children. Then she married, and that changed."

"You're hardly all grown up yet, Myri."

"That may be true among your people, but not among mine. There are so few of us to lead that we have to learn our responsibilities early. Arulezz and Jesalya govern the Nation, and Jahnzel commands Star Force. When my people learn that I am here permanently, they will look to me as their leader."

This unexpected information about Myri's future relationship to her people who lived in the Light sobered David. She seemed so young to have such a burden. "And yet you agreed to come and sit with me while I heal."

"I would rather be a healer than a governor."

"I'm honored."

She lowered her eyes, her cheeks still flushed. "You really are very kind." Her voice was almost a whisper.

David studied Myri's reaction, thinking over everything that had passed between them that afternoon, and realized, in astonishment, that he was more than a mere patient to her. She was attracted to him. David thought her feelings were strange—he looked terrible and she had recently been engaged to a man she had sincerely wanted to marry—but when he re-examined her behavior, he came to the same conclusion.

David couldn't help but be delighted by this new development, but he was afraid he shouldn't feel that way about this girl who was as complicated as she was extraordinary. He wondered whether he should send her to her people after all and heal without her care but found he couldn't vocalize the words. Instead he said, "And since you're their leader, you can tell Captain Sauvel and your chaperone to sit on the patio, or in the hall, and they'll have to do it, and then you can whisper to me everything that's on your mind, and they'll never hear a thing."

Myri lifted her head, her eyes huge, as if he had suggested something scandalous, and then she burst out laughing.

When she laughed, she looked like a little girl with no burdens at all, and David wished he could make her feel like that all the time.

## CHAPTER 12: THE TREE OF LIFE

When Captain Sauvel returned to Myri that evening with fantastic stories about visions that her people in the Light had received of the Visit and how the “temple of God” emanated Divine power, Myri wanted to see this “temple of God” for herself and speak with those of her people who had been drawn into the Light.

As Captain Sauvel took her away from David’s house, the power of the Light swelled within her until she felt as if she were emanating it herself. When they landed, Myri burst out of the aircar without waiting for Captain Sauvel to give her aid and faced the stone building with its two steeples and stained-glass windows. That God Himself could actually have a house among mortals seemed like a fantasy—an impossible dream—and yet she could feel the power of God in this place in a way she had never felt it before and had no doubt it was a little piece of The World Beyond the Stars.

What Myri didn’t know was what the existence of this house of God on this alien planet meant to her people. Captain Sauvel had told her that although her people seemed to feel the power of this temple in a tangible way that most others residing in the Light did not, they weren’t allowed to enter it. They needed to be baptized into the organization that had built it—David’s church—first, and were waiting for permission.

Now that she was the leader of her people in the Light, Myri needed to know what path her people were now on. She knew that they were not to return to Teton Colony or Tryamaz and become Arulezz’s subjects. Were they supposed to become a part of this church and the community in the Light and eventually lose their identity as a race, or were they to do as Jahnzel believed and return to the Ancient World and join with others of their own race and history?

Her deepest, most identifiable feeling was that Jahnzel should lead her people back to Diron, but if that was the case, why were her people feeling so compelled to gather in the Light around the temple instead of to Jahnzel’s side, where they would be able to better support him in accomplishing this difficult goal that would take every bit of courage and strength they all had?

Myri turned and saw Captain Sauvel gazing at the temple, the Light shining in his eyes. He didn’t vocalize his feelings, because it was her place to speak first, but she had no doubt that he was thinking about how much he wanted to bring his family to this beautiful place. That such a loyal supporter of Prince Jahnzel would feel more drawn to the temple than to the prince’s side seemed contradictory, so Myri decided to confirm her belief. “What are you thinking about, Captain Sauvel?”

“I was just thinking about how much I would like my wife and son to be here with me.”

Myri squeezed his arm and nodded. “I’m not surprised. Please leave me for a little while and keep others away from me. I need time to pray.”

Captain Sauvel bowed. “Yes, my Saintess.”

As he withdrew from her, she felt a gust of cold wind. She pulled the knitted scarf that was around her neck up around her head and over the veil she was wearing. She moved closer to the temple and sat down on one of the benches, bowing her head and pouring out her soul to God, begging Him to show her the particular path He had laid for her people.



As she prayed, darkness settled over her mind, eclipsing the Light of the temple. She felt compelled to lie down flat on the ground in an effort to escape this darkness, but it crept around her even more pervasively, as if it intended to suffocate her.

Beginning to panic, Myri reached out with her hands and explored the ground. The hard surface on which she lay felt as though it were made of the same black substance as the trail around the park behind David's house.

Was that where she was? In the park behind David's house? How could she be there when she was sitting on a bench in front of the temple? Or had the temple been the dream and what was occurring now reality? No, this couldn't be real. Everything in David's community was bathed in Light, not marred with this filthy darkness.

She felt a fresh breeze on her face, giving her hope. She had to still be sitting in the Light in front of the temple. Deciding this was another vision, she released her mind to it and accepted its peculiar reality, hoping to soon learn what it had to teach her.

She began crawling along the black path until her knees were bloody and her hands scraped up, growing so hungry she thought she would faint, and still she had come to nothing substantial that would assure her she was making progress toward anything. After what seemed like hours, she collapsed with barely enough energy to beg for the only goal that made sense to her at that moment, "Please, God, help me find David."

The shroud of darkness began to dissipate, and Myri became aware that she really was in David's park, and yet she wasn't. To the left of the path flowed a murky river. Many meters ahead, the path narrowed, and the river crossed under it, splashing the path and throwing up a black mist that hid the river.

Every now and then the mist cleared enough that Myri could see a strange tree that stood on the other side of the perilous bridge near the large park rock. The strange tree wasn't an oak or a maple or a cottonwood, but something exotic, as if it had come, not from another country or even an unknown planet, but from The World Beyond the Stars.

The golden brown trunk shimmered like the mineral tiger-eye, radiating a light that seemed to emanate from the sap. Its leaves glowed with the pale green of perpetual spring, and its branches stretched forth in a beckoning way, laden with glowing white fruit.

Myri's stomach growled again and again. She was so famished in both body and soul. If only she could reach that tree and eat before she collapsed forever. "Please, God," she whispered. "Help me get to the tree."

A pole of dull silver appeared next to the path, connected to a fence that led along the path to the tree. Myri gripped the bottom rail of the fence, then used the pole to help herself stand up all the way. Still feeling faint, she grabbed the middle rail with one hand and the top rail with the other and held on as tightly as her waning strength would allow.

Little by little, she shuffled along the path, clinging to the rail, keeping her eyes on the tree and its delectable fruit. She traveled for what seemed like an eternity. As she approached the narrow bridge, the mist from the river obscured the tree completely. Myri sank to the ground again and clung to the lowermost rail of the fence.

She crawled to the bridge, the path becoming wet under her knees. As she crawled, the water became profuse, rushing around her body like strong arms determined to pull her into the blackness. Myri couldn't see the tree with her eyes, but she could smell its

foliage and fruit, and that gave her strength to get across the bridge and away from the turbulent water.

Myri lay in the glow of the tree for some time before she could muster the energy to look around and find David. Perhaps he would pluck a piece of fruit from the tree and hand it to her so that she could avoid standing for a while longer.

As soon as Myri tried to find David, she saw him. He did have a piece of fruit in his hand and was so close to her that he would have handed it to her had he not been prevented by the cross of fire that hovered in the air between them, formed by ornately carved crystal swords fashioned in the same style as the one Jahnzel had held over her neck the day she had received her blessings from Arulezz and Jesalya.

Myri looked from one white-skinned hand to the other, then leaned back and saw that the fiery crystal swords were being wielded by two glowing men wearing flowing white robes. Myri recalled the scripture that said, "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life."

Was the Tree of Life really barred from her people? Was this why they weren't allowed to be baptized into David's church or enter the house of God? How could this be? Could they really be so fallen? The thought shocked Myri and saddened her. "Please God, tell me what to do to make the Tree of Life available to my people."

"God knows the desires of your heart, my daughter. He is very well pleased with you, and so are we," one of the angels said. "Our other children need you so much."

The voice was sweet and loving and familiar, the voice of the Light, and Myri couldn't help but feel that in some strange way, this angel really was her father. "Who are you?" She looked from one to the other and saw that they were alike, as though they were twins. They looked like Jahnzel and yet they didn't. "I feel as though I should know both of you."

"You do know us. You were named for our mother."

Myri gazed at them in wonder. "You're the Divine Sons, Zarr and Vahro. You really are my fathers."

"We are your fathers, but we are not divine. Our father was King Deryhan Preysou, not Jesus Christ."

"How can that be? How can the whole history of my Nation be wrong?"

"At the time of the Visit, Jesus Christ did heal our mother and thus saved our lives while we were still in her womb, and He took us into His presence at the end of our mortal lives."

"Over time, these glorious facts became obscured until legend replaced true history in the tradition of our people."

Oddly, Myri understood Zarr and Vahro's explanation. David's religion taught similar stories that she had learned in preparation of becoming his ideal Mormon girl. "You were translated? Like Enoch, Moses, Elijah, John the Beloved, and the Three Nephites?"

"Yes. You already know more than you think you do."

So much of what had been meaningless to her, important only as facts to regurgitate to David and his family when needed to maintain her cover, suddenly made sense, and yet there was still so much she didn't understand.

"I perceive the truth in David's tradition, but it's so utterly alien that I have no idea how to apply it to our people."

“God knows the difficult decisions you are facing and sent us to give you instructions.”

“Is it right that our people are baptized into this Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?”

“Yes, it is right, and necessary, but it is only the first step. You must join this church and submit to its authority, but you must not lose your identity as a people.”

“When the time comes, God will call our people back to the Ancient World. It is only by returning that our worthy children, both living and dead, will be able to receive all of the ordinances of the temple and therefore partake freely of the Tree of Life.”

“There are temples on the Ancient World?”

“Yes, many, built by the people of God who reside under the domes.”

Myri couldn't help but cringe. “The domies, you mean. The followers of Malrezz.”

“Malrezz was a true prophet. By the time he cursed the planet to withhold its arelada, telepathy had become a significant part of our people's religion and government.”

“In their pride, they refused to admit they were in error and went into exile. The time is close, however, when they will return and receive the high blessings promised to them by God.”

“When will that time be?”

“When the preparations are complete and our children are ready. Don't let them forget their responsibility and the glorious blessings that await them on the Ancient World.”

“From now on, you must walk by faith, always remembering that you have been born and bred under a false tradition. Trust in His true voice, and all will work out for the good of you and our other children.”

“Never forget that we are always near you.”

The angels faded, and Myri again found herself sitting on the bench in front of the temple. She opened her eyes and lifted her gloved hands to her cheeks to warm them. She looked for Captain Sauvel, finding him and everything else as it had been before she had begun to pray.

As difficult as some of the new information was to accept and digest, Myri felt such overwhelming joy that she had to share it with someone, and her first thought was of Jahnzal. She reached for the brooch that should have been at her throat and suddenly felt as sad as she did happy and began to weep.

Jahnzel had been the first to recognize the path their people should be on, and she hadn't perceived it. She had withheld her trust and rejected him, and now he was all alone to fight Arulezz, when they would, even now, be preparing to marry and perhaps to return to the Home World too. How she longed to beg him to forgive her!

The words of the angel Vahro returned to Myri's mind: “God is very well pleased with you, and so are we.” Perhaps she wasn't so fallen after all. As her mind seized this thought, the voice of the Light whispered, “Confide in our people and rejoice with them.”

Myri wiped her tears away and stood up to go to Captain Sauvel, her sadness fading. She felt an urge to embrace him but resisted the temptation. As alone as she felt and as close as Captain Sauvel was to her in rank compared to most others in the Nation, she couldn't break protocol and treat someone who worked for her in such a familiar way. “You'll never believe what happened! The Holy Fathers Zarr and Vahro appeared to me in a vision!”

“Did you see the Visit the way the others have?”

“No, my vision was different. The Holy Fathers spoke to me directly and told me many strange, difficult, and wonderful things.” She told him about her vision as they walked to the aircar.

Once in the aircar, Captain Sauvel lifted just enough to get them above the trees and flew over two major highways that were deserted. Myri took her compact mirror out of the handbag she now carried and touched up her makeup. A few minutes later, the aircar landed in the driveway of a large house made of brick and stone. A man wearing the coat of a Star Force lieutenant, his long, unbraided dark hair gathered in a gold clasp that marked him as an aristocrat, met them, bowing low. He was flanked by two Star Force warriors.

“My Saintess, Lieutenant Lanner Laddan.” Captain Sauvel sounded as if he could scarcely keep from choking over the title “lieutenant.”

Myri couldn’t fault a civilian who chose to evacuate to the Light instead of Teton Colony, but she, like Captain Sauvel, couldn’t help but be disturbed by an officer who had deserted his post on the brink of an invasion that had almost destroyed their people. Still, she didn’t know what had motivated this man to come into the Light and remain there. She wanted to hear his story before forming an opinion of him.

Myri extended her hand to raise Lieutenant Laddan to standing position. She could see by his smooth, fresh features that he wasn’t much older than she was. “What brought you into the Light, Lieutenant?”

Relief washed over his face. Obviously he sensed their disapproval and wanted to explain what had brought him there. “From the moment the Light appeared, it called to me like the aroma of a feast being laid out in a far corner of the ship. I realized how hungry I was and longed to eat, but since I had a job to do, I resisted. Lieutenant Commander Tazhyn received an order to investigate the Light. He chose me to do the job, and I came with Larynt and Neemon.” He motioned to the two men who were with him.

“Did you ever return to Tryamaz Camp?”

“The Light warned all six men in my team that if we returned, we would die. I gave the command to stay. Three of our team couldn’t stand the Light and returned; three of us remained.”

Lieutenant Laddan’s actions had been understandable enough that Myri felt a little less uneasy about him. “I understand that you have been acting as the leader of our people here in the Light.”

“Until your arrival, my Saintess, our people have looked to me as the highest ranked official.”

“I’m sure you have done an excellent job in that capacity, and I expect you will continue to do so over these next few months while I devote my time to nursing David Pierce back to health.”

Lieutenant Laddan appeared taken aback. “Certainly, my Saintess, David Pierce’s needs aren’t so great that you can’t concurrently serve as the governor of this people? Couldn’t someone of low rank be sent to fill that role?”

Captain Sauvel had warned Myri that their people would see nursing a savage as a debasement for a woman of her rank, but Captain Sauvel’s comments, given more as the counsel of a trusted advisor, hadn’t offended her the way they now did coming, uninvited, from an upstart. Had Captain Sauvel not felt she was still in danger, she

would have assigned him to govern the people instead of Lieutenant Laddan. “I appoint you as governor of our people in my absence.”

Laddan bowed. “As you wish, my Saintess.”

“Please introduce me to the others.” Men, women, and children stood in two lines facing each other on either side of the walk leading to the front door of the house, forming a Noble Path. As Myri approached them, they silently bowed or curtsied, waiting for her to pass. When she came to the double doors, she raised them from their positions of humility, then led them into the foyer and to the lounge at the back of the house. She positioned herself in front of a window, allowing Captain Sauvel to help her out of her coat and scarf. As her people came into the house, they filled in the large lounge around her, overflowing into the dining room and entrance hall. Some went upstairs and stood in front of the gallery rail and looked down at her.

Once they were all in the house, Myri invited those who had chairs available to be seated, and then she, herself, sat down on the couch with Captain Sauvel. Lieutenant Laddan positioned himself to one side in the empty space between her and the group. Once everyone was settled, Myri asked for their stories of how they came to be in the Light.

“When the Light descended, I felt cleansed and couldn’t leave it, even though so many were terrified and left.”

“We knew it was illogical, but the Light called to us and we couldn’t resist it.”

“My parents wanted me to go to Teton Colony with all of the other children, but I was afraid to get on the transport, and a voice told me that I would be safe in the Light.”

“My husband and I followed our daughter into the Light and couldn’t leave it, even to staff our posts. A voice told us that we would find rest at the House of God.”

“When I entered the Light, I could feel its source, like a fire in my mind. I followed it to this place. I saw the ancient ancestors of our people surrounding the House of God, and some of them spoke to me!”

“To me, it was like a big tunnel of Light that sucked me in and filled me with the love of God.”

The people relaxed in Myri’s presence and shared their visions of the Visit until she could almost see the images for herself. The glorious, glowing, tangible Jesus Christ with wavy white hair and eyes like fire. The men, women, and children gathered around Him. The canopied stretcher bearing Queen Myri Preysou. The queen’s fair hand, delicate feet, long blond hair, and rounded abdomen as she emerged alive from the luxurious stretcher. The call of the Chosen Witnesses to lead the church after His ascension into the World Beyond the Stars.

When the people seemed to have nothing else to say about themselves, Myri detailed as much of her vision with them as she had shared with Captain Sauvel and was surprised to learn that her experience had been unique and yet familiar. She was the only one of the group who had beheld the Tree of Life and had communicated directly with the Blessed Sons Zarr and Vahro, and yet her vision had been the only one that had followed a published pattern.

Lieutenant Laddan observed, “Your vision was very like the one given to the prophets Lehi and Nephi in the Book of Mormon.”

“It was! The Tree of Life, the mists of darkness, the muddy water—it’s all there except for the great and spacious building.”

“The silver fence was the iron rod.”

Of course Myri had learned this story in her study. She wondered why she hadn't thought of it while she was having the vision and decided that it had only entered the fringes of her mind, not deep into her heart. She would read the Book of Mormon to David and discuss it with him and the members of his family, and then maybe it would become part of her the way it had become a part of these people.

"We are like King Lamoni and his father and his wife," Lieutenant Laddan said, "who saw visions of the Lord and learned a new tradition, and we need a new name like their people did, to distinguish ourselves from the followers of the old religion."

"We will be the people of Malrezz," Myri decided, "or Malrezzites, because Malrezz was a true prophet, and we can never forget that we must return to the Ancient World and receive our blessings from the Malrezzites who live under the domes."

As obvious as this decision had been, with it came a new realization. Had Myri not come into the Light and had gone ahead and married Jahnzal as planned and had, with him, persuaded Arulezz to lead their people back to Diron, these new "Malrezzites" would have been abandoned on Earth to become a part of the race of natives. Though not a terrible path, it wasn't the right one, and Myri understood that her decision to come to the Light would somehow facilitate their getting on the correct path.

Her people looked to Lieutenant Laddan, frowning, and Myri suspected that they weren't comfortable with the idea of calling themselves Malrezzites. Again, Laddan spoke for the others. "We don't know absolutely that Malrezz was a true prophet, my Saintess."

"Yes, we do," Myri countered. "The Blessed Sons told me he was."

"But they didn't tell any of us," said a woman sitting near Myri.

Many of the others shook their heads, still frowning. Their reluctance surprised Myri and hurt her a little. "You don't trust me?"

"I don't feel the truth in my heart that Malrezz was a prophet," Laddan said. Others murmured their agreement.

"I know it's a repellent idea, but it isn't any more strange than the fact that Jesus Christ didn't really sire the Blessed Sons."

"We didn't see the Blessed Sons or Malrezz in a vision as we did the Visit," Laddan said.

"We can't call ourselves Malrezzites unless we believe Malrezz was a true prophet," said a man sitting in the lounge directly in front of Myri.

Laddan agreed. "It would be treason."

"But you've already committed treason, just by being here," Myri said, baffled.

"No we haven't. We have left the Divine Emperor's realm, but we aren't fighting against it."

"We still recognize the Divine One as the ruler of our Nation," a man in the gallery said.

"If we didn't," Laddan said, "we would have no reason to recognize your authority over us either, my Saintess."

The words might have sounded defiant had they been delivered in a challenging tone. The realization that her rank had no real authority outside of the emperorship wasn't any more alien than the fact that she, a noblewoman and sister of the empress, was a fugitive, and Myri had to admit that what had been said was true. Their status really was different from hers. "In that case, you need to know the truth about why I'm here at all. I didn't commit treason, but I did rebel against the Divine One."

She went ahead and told them how she had defied Arulezz by refusing to put a telepathic bond on a member of the church they wanted to join, David Pierce. She didn't tell them about the command to do dijauntu with David, but she didn't need to. The thought of her putting a cell bond on one of these dear people who lived in the Light unsettled them enough, and as Captain Sauvel had told her, they were equally disturbed that the emperor had commanded her to marry a native instead of Prince Jahnzel.

"I can't believe he would separate you from his brother," said the woman sitting near Myri. "Has he no heart?"

"The Divine One believes foremost in expediency," Myri explained. "The Consecrated One wants to lead us back to the domes, and his brother was afraid that if we married, I would begin believing it too and that the two of us would influence the Nation in that direction."

Laddan couldn't contain his astonishment. "The Consecrated One wants our Nation to return to Diron?"

"Unbelievable!" exclaimed a teenage boy standing in the dining room.

"He was very angry that his brother intended to separate us and thought it was wrong."

"It was!" said a woman standing in the hall.

"Was it? Could it be right for a noblewoman to rebel because the Divine One told her to marry a savage? The late Divine Emperor began making arrangements for the rest of us to marry savages three years ago!" Laddan seemed to be addressing the crowd, but his eyes never left Myri's face.

"I didn't think such a command could possibly be wrong either, as much as I disliked it, which was why I accepted the mission to bind David Pierce's mind and thereby recruit him to work for the Divine Emperor."

"But now that the Blessed Sons told you that we really should return to Diron, you believe differently," Laddan said.

"I believed differently when the Light finally succeeded in discouraging me from bonding David Pierce's mind. It would have been an evil thing to do, and that motivated me to accept the reality that between the two of them, the Consecrated One is the one more inclined to follow God."

"A command to marry a native and put a cell bond on him may make the Divine Emperor cold-hearted or even misguided, but it doesn't make him evil," Laddan said.

"The word 'evil' is too strong to account for what happened," said the man from the gallery.

"And I daresay the majority of savages were bonded long before the Divine One commanded you to do the same to David Pierce, and even the Consecrated One didn't protest against that," Laddan reminded.

Myri decided not to respond directly to Laddan but to the group as a whole. "I didn't say that I think the Divine One is evil. I said that what he commanded me to do was evil. I was under the impression that most of you were disturbed by what he sent me into the Light to do to David Pierce. Was I wrong?"

"No," someone in the entrance hall admitted. "I believe that what he commanded you to do to David Pierce was wrong."

Myri heard many murmurs of agreement. Even Lieutenant Laddan studied her face as if he were trying to come to a decision. "Is there something you're not telling us?" he asked.

Myri had no idea how to respond to such perceptive observations. Should she tell them about the cell bond Arulezz had on her mind and the command to do dijauntu with David? Her mind screamed no, that revealing such information would put her at greater risk, but her heart said yes, that she wouldn't be able to secure their trust if she didn't first trust them. These people respected her rank, but they had already cast off their ancient religion; her ecclesiastical authority as a high priestess meant nothing to them. They could just as easily disregard her position as saintess also.

Myri looked to Captain Sauvel for advice. He shook his head slightly, his gaze flashing in Lieutenant Laddan's direction in warning. Myri gazed at Lieutenant Laddan, pondering. He really had been assertive to the point of being impertinent. As a low aristocrat, either he had delusions of grandeur and equality, or he did not truly recognize her authority, or he did recognize her authority and didn't trust her.

Myri donned her most regal tone and expression. "Perhaps the word 'evil' really is too harsh, but the term 'treason' is not. Captain Sauvel and I are the only two citizens who have permission from the Divine Emperor to be in the Light. He considers the rest of you defectors and deserters, if not traitors. If you don't choose to trust me in the matter of Malrezz, please trust me on this: The Divine One is not your friend."

For the first time that evening, Lieutenant Laddan appeared too troubled to speak. One of the women smiled shyly. "I trust you in the matter of Malrezz, my Saintess."

Myri returned her smile. "Thank you." She arose. "Thank you all for sharing your visions with me. I look forward to sharing my life with you here in the Light, but for the time being, Lieutenant Laddan will continue managing the day-to-day affairs of our community. As some of you already know, I will spend the next month or two nursing David Pierce back to health."

The people who were seated stood up, and those who were in the way of the stairs parted, making a path for Myri. As Myri walked to the stairs with Captain Sauvel, he seemed unusually thoughtful. He opened the door to the bedroom for her and stepped in to make sure all was in order. When he was satisfied, she walked into the room and closed the door behind her.

"What's troubling you, Captain Sauvel?" she whispered.

"I don't trust Lieutenant Laddan," he replied, also in a whisper.

"I don't completely either, but I'm not sure why."

"He is a deserter, and yet he acts as if he's loyal to the emperor. An officer can't be both."

"Which is it, then?"

"He's a deserter."

"And I'm a rebel. I can't believe he's any worse than I am."

"No, but professing loyalty to the emperor suggests that he sees you more as a spy for the emperor than as a compatriot."

"He's suspicious of me, then."

"I believe so."

"Do you think I did the wrong thing leaving him in charge while I act as nursemaid to David Pierce?"

"No, oddly enough I don't—for now. He's competent in the role of governor, and your first priority is to act in the way the emperor expects you to act."

Myri nodded. She wanted to nurse David, and Captain Sauvel believed that doing so would, for the time being, keep her safer, so the matter was closed.



"Then what do you think I should do?"

"I think you should be very guarded and never tell Laddan or any of the others what the emperor really commanded you to do."

Myri agreed and dismissed him.

\* \* \*

On the morning of her first Sunday in the Light, Myri attended church with her people in the building next to the temple. After the meetings, President Gregory Mills, the leader of David's church in Kansas City, asked to visit with Myri. Myri agreed and allowed him to lead her into an office, posting Captain Sauvel just outside the door.

President Mills extended his hand. "Saintess Myri, I can't tell you how delighted we are to have you join us." He was a stocky middle-aged man, balding, with graying short brown hair. He wore a dark brown suit in the American business style.

Myri shook his hand. "I'm honored to be here, and yet I haven't officially 'joined' you. Do you have any idea when we will be allowed to be baptized?"

He waved her into a chair, smiling. "You sound certain it will happen."

"I *am* certain. The Blessed Princes told me that this is the next step my people must take."

"Tell me about the Blessed Princes."

"Next to Jesus Christ Himself, Queen Myri Preysou and her Blessed Sons are the most important people in our history; they are the very founders of our Nation." She went on to relate the details of the Visit, which her people had described to her, and then she recounted her vision of the Tree of Life and her meeting with the angels Zarr and Vahro. "I assume these holy angels came from the presence of God. If they tell me that being baptized into this church is a 'right' and 'necessary' step for my people, then I don't doubt that it will happen."

"I believe it will happen too. I don't know why there has been such indecision in the First Presidency about the matter, but I suspect that one of the reasons may be because until now, there has been no one who has the authority to speak for your nation."

"Then you think my coming into the Light may make it possible for my people to be baptized."

"I think it's very likely."

"Then despite all of the difficulties, it's right that I'm here."

"What kind of difficulties are you experiencing?"

Myri explained in detail her reason for being in the Light at all and the danger both she and David faced from Arulezz. "I believe that as long as the emperor thinks I did what I was told to do and intend to bring David to him, he will allow us to live unmolested for a year or two."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. Hopefully Prince Jahnzel will recognize the irregularities in my last communication with the emperor. If he comes to me, I will give him the information he needs to remove his brother from his position."

"Is a coup inevitable? Is it possible that Prince Jahnzel would consider taking just a portion of your people back to Diron?"

“Once he learns of his brother’s crimes, Prince Jahnzel will consider it his duty to execute both him and the empress to keep them from further contaminating the Nation.”

“Isn’t there another way? Prison, perhaps? Or exile?”

Myri shook her head. “As long as the Divine Emperor and Empress live, the Nation will follow them.”

“They would follow your sister, then, if the emperor died?”

“Yes. Even alone, she would be the head of state until she dies or until she and the current emperor have a son who comes of age. They have no child yet.”

“It sounds as though it would be easier for your people here in the Light to completely join with my people rather than take the enormous risks necessary to put Prince Jahnzel in power and follow him to Diron.”

“I agree that it would be easier. I know, however, that it wouldn’t be right. The Blessed Sons made that very clear.”

“They didn’t say anything about a coup.”

“There was much they didn’t say, but they were adamant about the fact that we should retain our identity as a people and return to Diron for our temple blessings.”

“How do you propose to maintain your national identity?”

“I’m not sure yet. All I know is that we should not, as a group, become so assimilated into your people that we become ‘Mormons’ and not ‘Malrezzites.’”

“Then you believe the Blessed Sons would discourage intermarriage between your people and mine.”

“They hardly need to discourage it. My people have never been comfortable with the idea of marrying natives.”

“And yet many of them have.”

“Not those who live in this particular Light city.”

“You bring up an interesting point. Why don’t you think more ‘mixed’ couples came into the Light after the invasion?”

“Our fertility is so low that we encourage all who can marry to do so, which means that when we arrived on Earth three years ago, only the very youngest of our adult citizens were in the position to take native spouses. It wasn’t a large percentage of the population to begin with, and it was made smaller after the invasion since so many in that group are—were—in Star Force.”

“It sounds as though your people live very brief, violent lives.”

For a flicker of a moment, Myri again saw her father’s corpse jettisoned into space in a wine-red body bag and felt the giddy relief that had poured over her as she watched Jahnzel emerge from his shuttle, sweaty, exhausted, and humiliated, but still alive. Myri shook her head with determination. “Not anymore.”

He smiled. “Not anymore.”

“Do you plan to tell the prophet everything we’ve discussed?”

“I’ll communicate with him via radio this evening. Please be assured that no decision will be made affecting your people without much fasting and prayer.”

“Thank you. That comforts me.”

\* \* \*

David awoke early Sunday morning. As his father and Jim helped him through his morning routine, he wished his family had taken Myri up on her offer to transport him to church in her aircar. He felt anxious to see her again and wondered what type of wild costume she would be wearing when she arrived that afternoon. He wasn't disappointed when she appeared in his bedroom in a crimson evening gown topped with a short, shimmering jacket, her neck and wrists draped with jewelry made of garnets set in silver. On her head was one of the most outlandish headpieces he had ever seen—a garland of red silk roses with red scarves of various patterns hanging from it in such a way that most of her hair was covered.

David wanted to laugh but didn't dare. Again, she looked elegant, luxurious, gorgeous and completely alien. Captain Sauvel posted a younger man wearing the navy blue uniform of Star Force's lower ranks in the hall by the door and followed Myri into the room. She dismissed him to the sunroom and motioned toward the new guard. "This is Shipman Second Class Neemon. He and Shipman First Class Larynt, who will come tomorrow, will help Captain Sauvel guard me."

David nodded. "Bob told us about the two new guards, and, for what it's worth, I'm relieved that you'll have twenty-four-hour protection." Because of Myri's danger, the weapons of all three men had been returned to them. Because the emperor posed a concrete threat to David's own life, a police officer had been stationed on the property. His brother had hoped to get more than one, but there weren't enough available.

"Fortunately for me, Captain Sauvel also found a seamstress among my people. She is not an aristocrat who has been educated to be a lady-in-waiting to a noblewoman, but she used to work for an aristocrat in Kansas City, is a widow, and is enough older than I am that the others will accept her as my chaperone. She spent many hours yesterday afternoon locating these items. She found two other dresses similar to this one and all of this beautiful fabric that she made into this headdress, but it isn't enough."

"Did she actually go around knocking on doors and ask for beautiful clothing and jewelry?"

"Yes, she did. She offered bread from the synthesizing machine in payment."

David couldn't help but wonder what Myri's people *weren't* eating so that she could have such fine things but couldn't bring himself to ask. She was so happy and radiant that he wouldn't have been surprised to learn that she had Light surging through her veins instead of blood. "You should feel fortunate that my people have been occupied with collecting food, gasoline, and tools, otherwise there wouldn't have been such wonderful jewelry left to scavenge!"

"When she finishes finding everything I need, she'll come here and sew and be my chaperone."

David laughed. "Will you put her in the sunroom too?"

Those green eyes sparkled in playful reprimand. "Why are you so amused? It was your idea!"

"I didn't think you would actually do it!"

"I didn't think you would like my chaperone and bodyguards sitting in the room with us so close."

"I wouldn't."

"Then Seamstress Kintz can sit just outside the door, in the corridor with Shipman Neemon."

"You're such a tyrant."

Myri rested a delicate jeweled hand on David's arm, sending a shiver of excitement through him. "I have something completely marvelous—almost unspeakable—to tell you."

David perceived at once that she had received another spiritual manifestation of some kind, and that excited him just as much as her touch did. "You had Captain Sauvel take you to the temple, didn't you?"

Myri sat down in the chair next to his bed. "Of course I did. Once I left you, it sang to me the way it did the others."

Her choice of words was interesting. "What? Like a march? A lullaby? Or more like a ballad?"

"Hymns. Hymns and anthems sung by angels, only it wasn't something any of us could hear; it was something we felt. Something that compelled us."

What followed were descriptions of sacred visions and conversations that really were marvelous and almost unspeakable. She spoke in a very low voice so that Neemon couldn't hear what she was saying. Even before the events of the previous day, David had been delighted to be the confidant of so angelic a young woman, but now that this role had put him in a position to hear such wonders, he felt uniquely privileged and blessed of God. And to think he had considered sending Myri away!

Myri's story so captivated David that he forgot about all of those things that made her so complicated until she told him that she had been tempted to reveal all of her troubles to her people.

David felt afraid for her. "Certainly that wouldn't be wise," he whispered. "All it takes is one person to be indiscreet, and suddenly you're yanked out of your bed in the middle of the night and taken to the emperor."

"You would be too."

"I don't care about myself."

"But I *do* care about you, and so does your family. Don't worry." She lowered her voice so much that David almost couldn't hear her. "I don't intend to confide in my people just yet, although I do trust them—for the most part."

"For the most part?"

Myri leaned closer to David. "Lieutenant Lanner Laddan makes both Captain Sauvel and me uncomfortable."

"How?"

As Myri repeated the conversation to David, he was surprised to find that Lieutenant Laddan's attitude made *him* uncomfortable. "He almost sounds like an American."

"What do you mean?"

"Americans believe in self-government and democracy and that a person's intelligence and ability qualify him to govern, with the consent of the people, not an ancient claim to nobility. If your people here in the Light were a group of Americans, they would resent an intrusion into their affairs by a noblewoman of the government they rejected."

"Which means they may never trust me."

David chuckled. "Don't give up hope, Myri! We trust you, after all, and our reasons for not trusting you are a lot greater than those of your own people."

Perhaps he was right; President Mills seemed to trust her well enough. Myri told David about the interview. "I was surprised to learn that the leaders of this Light

community keep in touch with the prophet by radio. The Divine One said that no signals were coming from the Light—that all our communications experts could get was static.”

David smiled. “It’s another miracle of the Light.”

## CHAPTER 13: THE BISHOP'S DECISION

The storm started mid-day on Sunday. Sara reached for her arelada and tried, yet again, to access her Awareness and communicate with the planet-spirit and failed. "Tempest, I can't communicate with you!" she said to the ceiling. "I'm sorry! My brain is broken!"

The storm still hadn't subsided that evening, and Sara thought she would go insane. "What's going on out there?" she said to Cameron. "I have to know!"

"I kind of like not knowing," Cameron admitted. His voice, however, sounded strained, as if he didn't quite believe what he was saying.

As if in answer to their conversation, the radio crackled from the other side of the tent, carrying a male voice that sounded adamant. Sara's partitions were pulled back, and she watched most of the medical staff gather around the radio. Cyndi and Ashley put themselves in Cameron's way. Cameron tried to step around them, but they insisted that he go no further. Sara strained to hear what the voice on the radio was saying, but she couldn't discern words.

Dr. Marshall argued with the voice for many minutes. Eventually Marc approached Cyndi and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned and looked toward Dr. Marshall, and he motioned to her. She wound her way to the other side of the tent, and she and Dr. Marshall whispered together for several minutes. She moaned and threw her head back, as if she were angry. Eventually she looked toward Cameron. "I'm afraid your reprieve is over, Cameron," she called. "Tony is demanding to speak to you."

Dr. Marshall nodded. "We're going to have to let you take this one. I'm afraid it's serious."

Cameron moved to the other side of the tent and sat down at the radio table. He remained there for a long time after the voice on the radio had gone, bowing his head into his hands.

Everyone in the tent waited in anxious silence. Sara wondered what could be so terrible and yearned to jump out of bed and join Cameron at the radio. Eventually Cameron stood up and motioned to Dr. Marshall and Cyndi. The three of them conferred for some time before Cameron returned to Sara's bedside and collapsed into his recliner.

"What's going on?" Ashley asked.

"We're returning to the colony tomorrow."

"What happened?" Sara demanded.

"Nothing yet. The good news is that Third Colony refrained from public worship this weekend and is safe. The bad news is that they are extremely unhappy about the situation and intend to rectify the problem this coming weekend."

"How so?" Sara asked.

"The whole colony will gather for jumu'ah on Friday at mid-day and pray for deliverance."

Frustration descended on Sara. "We should be halfway there by now. If we hadn't crashed, I might have been able to stop this!"

"How do you know the Lord won't grant their petition?"

"I *don't* know, but so far, the Lord hasn't stopped Tempest from killing anyone, and I've got to believe that a lot of prayers have been said in all the colonies."

“And to have a formal prayer meeting like that with an imam leading it smacks of rebellion,” Ashley said. “Tempest won’t like it.”

“Certainly someone from the colony is on their way out there!”

“The Vances would have been most of the way there by now, but they had to return so that their aircars could be sent here. They’ll head out again tomorrow and get there at mid-day on Friday.”

“Which may be too late.” Sara couldn’t help but again doubt her decision to press on to Control Colony.

“There’s got to be more to this,” Ashley said. “Why was Tony so frantic?”

“The colony’s been fasting and praying today for Third Colony, and many are convinced that it’s time to use the priesthood to stop Tempest from killing more people.”

Sara shuddered. What should have been a simple expression of faith sounded blasphemous. She couldn’t believe that so many in the colony still hadn’t come to terms with the fact that the spirit of apostasy had brought them to Eden in the first place. “Do you think the colony has enough faith to accomplish such a miracle?”

“As a whole? No. Frankly, I believe Third Colony has more faith than we do right now, because, as far as I know, they’re living their religions to the best of their ability and aren’t guilty of rebellion against God the way so many of our people still are.”

“But you aren’t guilty of rebellion, Cameron,” Sara said. “And Tempest recognizes your authority.”

“Yes! You could do it!” Ashley said.

“Apparently you’re not the only one who thinks so, and that’s part of the problem. Brent and Russ are at the head of this mess, and so is Samantha.”

Sara moaned. “No wonder Tony’s so upset.”

“So they think you should call down the powers of Heaven on Tempest,” said Ashley.

“Yes, and what’s worse, I believe that these particular three *are* motivated by faith, and yet, I don’t think I can do what they want. I’ve been thinking about this option since the problem started, and I’ve never felt good about it.”

“Why?” Sara asked. “Because you don’t think *you* have enough faith?”

“But you do, Cameron!” Ashley insisted.

“I don’t know why. I’m not sure about anything other than that I need to be alone tonight and return to the colony as soon as possible.”

Dr. Marshall moved to the center of the room and called everyone to attention. “Bishop Carroll has asked me to lead us all in prayer.”

\* \* \*

Sara spoke with Cameron briefly on Monday morning as medical students moved her bed to the tent opening. “Did you sleep at all?”

“More than I thought I would. I still feel pretty banged up.”

“Have you come to a decision?”

“It wasn’t as hard as I was afraid it would be. Any thought I have toward compelling Tempest to do anything gives me a horrible sick feeling. At this point, I have no doubt that the only way we’re going to survive on this planet is to cooperate with her completely.”

Sara wasn’t surprised to hear this, but she didn’t like it. “So what does that mean for Third Colony?”

"The Lord wants us to invite all of the remaining survivors on the planet, wherever they are, into our own colony and spend our best efforts getting them there."

"Which is what we've been doing." Sara had believed this was the correct approach from the day Hospital Hollow had been destroyed, killing many members of their medical staff. The only things preventing it had been the lack of transportation and the unwillingness of Third and Fourteenth Colonies, which were located on opposite ends of the northern continent, to relocate.

Cameron nodded. "This last edict has convinced Fourteen, at least, the necessity of moving. We have a couple of groups already on the way, and as we're able to return the aircars already out to Woodland Park and synthesize more aircars, we'll be able to gather more."

To keep Sara from getting wet in all the rain, an aircar had been backed right up to the tent door. Students moved Sara into an aircar with the back seats down. Because of the size of the bed and space required for equipment, Sara was the only one of the patients who could fit in the aircar. Dr. Marshall would travel with her, sitting in the front seat. Cyndi would travel with Trevor in a different aircar, and Ashley would travel with Cameron.

The two days en route to Eleven passed quietly, but not peacefully. The storm never abated, serving as a constant reminder of Tempest's anger. As Sara's aircar approached the newly-built hospital in Woodland Park early Tuesday evening, she saw that it had been relocated from Hospital Hollow onto a flat piece of land. Piles of mulch dotted the ground where the trees had been felled and their stumps ground.

Sara saw a group of colonists gathered in the clearing, their ponchos slick with moisture. "Please, Dr. Marshall, you have to let me stay out here for a few minutes and open a window so that I can hear what Cameron says to them."

"That's presuming Cameron even agrees to talk with them."

"Oh, he will."

"All right, but just a crack, and if they come to talk to you, it goes back up and you go into the building. I'm not delivering you up to those vultures."

Sara might have laughed had she not been so concerned about what the other colonists would say to Cameron and, more importantly, what some of them might do if what he said didn't satisfy them.

Cameron's aircar landed a few minutes later. Cameron and Ashley emerged from the back, both wearing ponchos. Ashley shut the back doors as colonists moved toward Cameron. His aircar was close enough to Sara's that she could hear what was being said clearly. "Your willingness to venture out in this storm suggests that you disagree with my decision to refrain from calling down the powers of Heaven on Tempest."

Most of them nodded. Brent was the first to speak. "Many of us can't believe that God means to stand by and allow Tempest to take the freedom of worship from His children. It just isn't something He would do."

"What God agrees with and what He allows are two separate things. He allows governments to take away freedom of religion, so why wouldn't He allow planet-spirits to do the same?"

Samantha held her poncho hood away from her face. "What a terrible thing to say!"

"Sometimes the truth is terrible."

"But this is different," said Kevin. "Governments are made up of His children, who have freedom of choice."



“So what you’re saying is that He considers the agency of His children to be more important than that of other intelligent life.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what we’re saying,” said Kevin.

“But there is nothing in the scriptures that teaches such a thing, and there is at least one passage that suggests the opposite, D&C 93:30: ‘All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence.’”

“Your interpretation of that scripture may be wrong,” said Samantha.

“It may be. It may not be. The point is, we don’t know what God’s relationship with the planet-spirit is, so it’s foolhardy to make assumptions.”

“But it’s so wrong that the will of a planet-spirit would take precedence over that of His children!” Brent said.

“I agree. I believe that’s one of the reasons the prophet told us all to stay on Earth, where God’s children do (theoretically) have freedom of choice.”

No one said anything for many moments. Finally Samantha broke the silence. “But those people in Third colony didn’t know that before they came here. They’re innocent. It isn’t right that they should be punished for something they didn’t know. I can’t believe God would allow it.”

“If a baby crawls into a campfire, he’s going to get burned, even though he had no idea that what he was doing was dangerous.”

“But in that situation, someone who knows better would grab the kid and keep him from crawling into the fire in the first place,” said Russ.

Kevin nodded. “We’re in the position of being the grown up here with Third Colony. We have the power in this colony to pull them out of the fire!”

“Yes, we do! We’re going to send every aircar we have to rescue them!”

Sara couldn’t help but think that those people in Third Colony weren’t babies and would be offended to hear themselves discussed in such a way. The leaders were grown-ups who had been warned about Tempest!

“But those aircars can’t possibly get there before Friday,” said Russ. “Why wouldn’t God want us to command the planet-spirit with the power of the priesthood?”

“What you’re suggesting would destroy the fire, not merely rescue the child from the fire.”

“We’re not suggesting that God destroy Tempest,” said Brent. “We just want Him to diminish her power over us.”

“Please be careful about what you say,” Ashley begged.

“God disagrees with your approach to doing that. He made promises to Tempest, and He doesn’t lie. We don’t know the promises, or the circumstances, so we can’t know the why.”

“She may be lying about the promises God made to her,” Samantha said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Cameron said. “God has forbidden it, so we’re not doing it.”

“How can you be so sure?” said Brent.

“Maybe you’re just scared,” said Kevin.

“Maybe *you* don’t have enough faith,” said Samantha.

Before Cameron could respond, Ashley said, “You’re questioning the authority of the one person that Tempest recognizes as having ‘proper authority.’ Are you insane?”

“We’re not challenging his authority,” Russ said. “We sincerely want to know.”

"This is a simple equation: We challenge Tempest, she destroys us," Cameron said. "That's the way it's worked ever since we got here. The difference now is that we have some idea what we're dealing with. So why would any of us choose to be stupid?"

"So you made the decision based on logic, not on faith," said Brent. He sounded shocked.

"No, the Spirit gave me this direction. This is one of those times when God's will corresponds with the logical approach."

"How did the Spirit manifest the Lord's will to you?" Kevin asked. "Are you sure you aren't misinterpreting the promptings?"

"How can I make you understand? The thought that Third Colony could go on with their plan and essentially commit suicide fills me with horror. It fills me with such horror that I want to vomit." Sara saw several emphatic nods. "Yes, you know how I feel, because you're feeling it too. The possibility really is terrible. When, though, I pray about the prospect of commanding Tempest in the way you suggest, I feel no relief, no peace, just a magnified sense of darkness and dread. That darkness and dread is so strong and so real it's like I'm being sucked into a black hole. That is absolutely the wrong path; I have no doubt of it."

"If that darkness is so real, why don't the rest of us feel it too?" Kevin pressed.

Sara couldn't help but believe that the people in Third Colony should be able to feel it also, which made her question whether their so-called faith was really just pride.

"Because your desire to save Third Colony is stronger than your desire to truly understand and do the Lord's will. Change that balance, and you'll feel it too."

"So what does all of this mean for Third Colony?" asked Russ.

"They'll either accept our invitation to join with us or they won't. They have their choice. We can't force them to do the logical thing any more than we can force Tempest to behave in the way we want."

"So that's it, then. We just stand back and do nothing," Samantha said, her voice shrill.

"No, we can fast and pray. And we can send all the aircars we have to Three and Fourteen as they become available."

Cameron's father stepped forward. "Our bishop has spoken. Please, let's stop agitating the planet-spirit and go home."

\* \* \*

Rachel and Duane and their party arose early on Friday morning with the hope of arriving in Third Colony before the colonists met for jumu'ah. Rachel had communicated with the governor of Third several times en route in an attempt to persuade him to hold off on their official worship until they could relocate to Eleventh Colony, and finally Governor Lambert had become so tired of her efforts to change his mind that he had ended his final communication with, "We will do what we do, the so-called planet-spirit will do what it does, and God will do what He does best—protect His people from evil. But He won't do that if His people allow themselves to be bullied into not worshipping Him."

Knowing how determined Third Colony was to do this faithful but foolish thing, Rachel had spent the last two days fasting and, since the reality that Tempest could hear their vocal prayers terrified her, reaching out with her thoughts in prayers more

passionate than any she had ever offered in her life: *Please, Heavenly Father, protect Third Colony. They are more faithful to Thee than I've ever been. Please save them from Tempest!*

As they came out of the mountains and onto the plain, all looked calm. Rachel couldn't help but be surprised that the entire area wasn't under storm clouds and rain. Perhaps God had already granted Third Colony's prayers. Then again, perhaps Tempest was refraining from sending storms so that Rachel's company could pass easily into Third Colony.

The ocean appeared over the horizon as they approached Third Colony. As they flew closer to the coast, they saw that the village was organized in a similar fashion to Woodland Park—the buildings encircled a large common area. When Rachel saw that all of the colonists appeared to have already gathered to the central park, her already-elevated heart rate increased wildly. She and Duane were too late, or were they?

Duane began lowering the aircar, and Rachel shouted, "No! It's already too late! If we land, we'll die with them!"

"Rachel, they're fine. If we don't land, then what's the point of coming out here at all?"

Not wanting to argue with her husband, she instantly reached over him and pushed a button that made the aircar shoot higher into the air.

Duane slapped her arm away. "What do you think you're doing? Stop that!"

Rachel settled back into her seat and looked down at the colony again. This time, instead of seeing neatly-laid out buildings and two hundred people gathered in the central park, the land below her blurred, dust rising like steam. Horror filled her soul.

"It's an earthquake!" Rachel shrieked. "They're being eaten alive!"

"What?" Duane set the controls to automatic hovering and looked out of his side window at the terrible scene below. Rachel stared out her window until she felt the aircar jerk to the side.

Duane held the aircar's steering control, the muscles in his arms so tense that his blood vessels bulged. "That massive earthquake will cause tidal waves. We've got to get out of here."

"But there might be survivors."

"There aren't any survivors."

Rachel looked down again and saw that they were hovering over water, not land. When Rachel saw that, something in her snapped. She felt herself start shaking. She gripped her arms with her hands in an attempt to stop herself from behaving in such a ridiculous way but was not successful. Her body continued to shake, completely out of control. She wanted Duane to hold her and make it stop, but he had to drive, and she had to be strong. Such thoughts seemed to make everything in her chest tighten up, and she knew that she had no power over her body right now. Everything was chaos. She started to sob. The minutes passed, and the shaking became worse, the sobs more intense, as if she were vomiting emotion.

Duane reached out and slid his hand under her arm. "Come, love, and put your head in my lap."

Rachel managed to move closer to her husband and lay her head on his thigh. He stroked her hair as he drove, but she didn't calm down for a long time. Hours later, when they were finally able to land and make camp for the night, she was still trembling.

Sara and Cameron received the awful news on Friday afternoon. Sara's first reaction was fury. She yearned to reprimand Tempest, screaming. Knowing that would only make matters worse, she remained silent.

Cameron gazed at her in anguish many minutes, then, appearing dazed, sank down to the side of Sara's bed in an attitude of prayer. His shoulders twitched as he wept. Dr. Marshall pulled the curtains around them. He mouthed the words to Sara, "No one, absolutely no one, gets in here until he's ready."

Sara nodded and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

Sara and Cameron remained in silence in that position for some time. As the minutes passed, Sara found herself growing as angry with the people in Third Colony as she was with Tempest. They had been warned again and again about how dangerous Tempest was, and they had insisted on their bull-headed course. Couldn't they have at least allowed Eleventh Colony to take their children out of there before engaging in such a foolhardy act? The more Sara thought about it, the more outraged she became. What good did it do to commit suicide like that?

Why hadn't she insisted on turning around when it became clear that Tempest didn't want them to send a message off-planet? Had their aircar not crashed, they would have arrived in Third soon enough to prevent this tragedy. Then again, perhaps Third would still have been stupid and killed themselves anyway.

No, had Sara been there, her presence would have protected them. She had known that right away and had planned on it, and now her previous idea haunted her. She had *intended* to travel to Third and use her presence to protect the colony while they worshipped God according to their particular religions that weekend. The thought had begun to take root in her mind after she had assimilated Tempest's edict, and she had ended the conversation before Tempest could detect it. What she hadn't thought of then was that Tempest probably would have been so angry by such a move that she would have destroyed Eleven instead. Then she would have destroyed Third anyway. And maybe Fourteen too.

The thought horrified Sara, and her rage toward Tempest blazed into an even hotter fire. Had Sara been able to fulfill her intention, her own colony might now be dead instead of Third, and that would have made her a murderer. Sending the message and crashing may have saved at least one of the colonies that weekend—perhaps two—and the other colonists would never know because Tempest could never hear what Sara's real intention had been that day when Trevor had turned the aircar toward Third Colony.

Sara couldn't help but be frustrated with herself for still wanting so badly to fight Tempest, even after Cameron had made it clear that the Lord wanted them to cooperate with Tempest in every way. Maybe Sara was really angry at the Lord for standing back and allowing all of these unthinkable things to happen, and that thought upset her as much as anything.

Eventually Cyndi checked on Sara and Cameron. She took Sara's blood pressure and heart rate and whispered her concern that both were high. Sara didn't dare vocalize her feelings. Instead, she raised her eyebrows and gazed at Cyndi in a meaningful way.

"I think I understand," Cyndi whispered. "I'm going to give you something that will calm you down."

Sara nodded. Cyndi left her bedside and returned a few minutes later with medicine and water. The medicine did help Sara relax. Everything in the hospital was so silent—uncharacteristically so—that she drifted to sleep.

When Sara awoke, she saw Cameron sitting in his chair with a set of scriptures in his lap. She reached out and touched him, but although he looked up, acknowledging her, he didn't want to talk. She felt her previous outrage begin growing within her again, but with it came understanding that she had only begun to perceive before. Until she got control of this anger and desire to fight Tempest, she was a liability to the colony, just as Barbara had been not so long ago. For the first time in a week, she was glad that she was physically unable to communicate with Tempest.

As the afternoon passed, the rain stopped and the sun appeared, as if Tempest were finally relieved, even happy. The sun that beamed into the windows of the hospital contrasted so harshly with the darkness they all felt in their hearts that everyone was disturbed. After dinner Cameron finally felt ready to face the colony. The hospital personnel drew back all of the hospital curtains, and Cameron moved to the threshold of the door.

This time, everyone in the colony, it seemed, had gathered in the clearing surrounding the hospital, although this time, all remained silent. Sara presumed that they, like her, were so afraid of Tempest at this point that they didn't dare speak, not knowing what innocuous-seeming words might provoke her wrath.

"We are all horrified by what has happened today," Cameron said. "I'm afraid that this event will cause many of you to doubt the goodness of God and to question your own faith."

Wouldn't Cameron be surprised if he ever learned that his own wife was at the top of that list!

"I've been praying and pondering all afternoon about this tragedy, and I feel inspired to remind you of the story in the Book of Mormon regarding Alma and Amulek in Ammonihah. This story has been playing over and over in my mind, almost to the extent that I can actually see it.

"Many in this city were converted because of the teaching of Alma and Amulek. In chapter 14 of Alma, we learn that the men who believed were stoned and chased out of the city. Their wives and children who believed were then burned, along with the scriptures, and Alma and Amulek were forced to watch. Amulek was so horrified that he wanted to use the priesthood to save these innocent people from the flames.

"We know that this scene disturbed Alma also, because he had already considered doing what Amulek suggested. His answer, though, was not what Amulek wanted to hear: 'The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day.'"

Hearing Cameron read so clearly "that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just" made Sara uneasy. Tempest would take that statement literally and personally, as, perhaps, she should. Was Cameron crazy? Or was this precisely what the Lord wanted Tempest to hear right now? If so, that was interesting.

Was Cameron feeling so strongly about this scripture because God *did* intend to bring Tempest to justice for what she had done and wanted her to know?

“I don’t know the reasons God has allowed such a terrible thing to happen, but I believe that He has accepted the sacrifice of Third Colony and looks upon their action as being one of great faith. Our mortal lives are short, and eternity is long, and their spirits live on to worship God in the spirit world; let’s never forget that. This is a time to examine our own hearts, our own faith, and repent of all of our sins before God. He loves those people of Third Colony, and He loves us. My plan is to spend several hours a day from here on out counseling with you individually if you need it. Brother Farrow will make the appointments.

“I know that all of you will want to talk among yourselves about what happened as a way of making sense of it all. I feel, with great urgency, that we should not do that. By all means, make an appointment with Dr. Eagle or my father or another qualified therapist to work through this trauma, or come talk with me, particularly if your concerns are more about spiritual matters, but I’m afraid that if we talk about these issues in an unguarded way, we will provoke the planet-spirit and put our own lives at risk again.

“I’ve said this before, and I will continue to say it. The only way we are going to survive on this planet is to cooperate with Tempest completely. We need to suppress any inclination we have to fight her. We need to follow the counsel of Jesus Christ when He said: ‘But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.’”

*Please, Heavenly Father, Sara begged, take away my anger and my desire to fight Tempest. And please, please keep me telepathically crippled until any inclination to fight Tempest I have is gone. I am so sorry for being so stupid that I almost killed my colony!*

When Sara was done praying, she became aware of Cameron’s concluding remarks: “I wish I could take questions, but I’m still recovering from injuries and am exhausted. I’ll start seeing you tomorrow at nine o’clock in the morning.”

## CHAPTER 14: DOGS IN A TRAP

After church the following Sunday, Myri appeared troubled. When the time seemed right, David asked her why.

"The Blessed Sons are counting on me to teach my people that Malrezz was a true prophet, but they still can't accept him as such."

"The visions have taught your people that many significant aspects of your religion and history are false, but the idea that Malrezz was a true prophet doesn't necessarily follow. On my world, if people learned that their religion was false and their theocracy was corrupt, they would be far more likely to shun the whole idea of religion than to conclude that the religion and government of their enemy came from God."

"You mean they would reject God Himself?"

"Yes."

"Then your people really are savages."

"Aren't there other religions among your people? If the Blessed Sons hadn't told you that Malrezz was a true prophet, how would you know that one of those other religions isn't the true religion of God?"

"Can you be serious? Those decadent fleets have no religion!"

That seemed unlikely. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Do you have any idea what those heathens do with the arelada they steal? They live lives of sloth and lust and addiction to telepathic fantasy. Telepathic fantasy is such a part of their cultures that they don't even live in the physical world completely in the same way that we do. Their ships are filthy and rundown because they decorate with visions instead of physical materials."

"They don't have synthesizing machines?"

"Yes, of course they do, and they use them to maintain the functionality of their ships and weapons, but they don't care about their physical living environments because they only care about what goes on in their minds. It was because of their corruption that Malrezz supposedly cursed the Home World to withhold its arelada!"

"And how do you really know how your enemies live? Have you been on their ships? Have you ever met one of them?"

"No, of course not. If I had met one of them, we wouldn't be having this conversation because I would never have come to Earth."

"You mean to tell me that your nation has no friendly contact with them at all? Ever?"

"No. For many generations back, we've been at war. When they capture our ships, they strip the minds of our people and make them into Eslavu. They are completely depraved."

"Eslavu?"

"An automaton controlled by telepathy. They're used as slaves. The more slaves they have, the more often and deeply they can live in their visions. If they have a religion, it's telepathy vision."

"You've actually recovered some of these victims and learned what kinds of horrors they've been exposed to?"

"We have reclaimed many of our compatriots but never recovered them. Once a person's mind has been stripped, we can't put it back."

"If all of their minds have been stripped, then you can't know what really happens on those ships other than the fact that they strip minds. Unless you strip *their* minds for information when you capture *them*."

"We only do that if they are leaders or particularly dangerous to us, and then we put them to death. If they are nothing more than soldiers or civilians following orders, we leave their minds alone and trade them back to the rival fleets for our own poor, lost souls."

"So what you know about them comes from what you've learned stripping the minds of their leaders."

"How else are we supposed to get the needed intelligence?"

"Oh, I don't know. Put agents under cover on their ships."

"That would require our people to communicate with them telepathically, which would expose them almost immediately."

"And they would end up mind-stripped."

Myri nodded.

"So what do you do with your mind-stripped compatriots once they've been reclaimed?"

"The merciful thing—we put them to death."

"Which means that the only difference between your people and the rival fleets is that you kill your prisoners instead of making them your slaves."

"You sound disgusted." She sounded surprised.

"I guess I am disgusted."

"Is it all that different from what your people do with prisoners?"

"My people confine prisoners; we don't usually kill them."

"In the fleet, we didn't have room for unused spaces such as prisons," Myri explained. "The rival fleets steal our ships, supplies, and people every chance they get. We barely had enough space for our own people. Telepathic slaves would have been useful, but making them of our enemies would be sinful. Execution has always been the more merciful, moral choice."

While David could never condone such convoluted morality, he could understand it, and he had to admit to himself that he would rather be dead than become the telepathic slave of his enemy.

David's lack of reply seemed to make Myri uncomfortable. "You disapprove of me."

"Oddly enough, I don't, but you are a woman of contradictions. The harshness of your law appears to come from the harsh existence you have lived. I hope that the comfort and truth of the Light will allow you and your people to live a higher law."

"So do I, especially now that both Arulezz Zarr and his father have plunged our people into the unethical realm of telepathically adjusting the minds of Earth's natives."

"By putting cell bonds on them, you mean?"

Myri nodded. "And by using other, stronger mind altering techniques on your criminals to make them docile."

"You make them into Eslavu, then?"

"No, their minds aren't stripped, but they are altered against their will and without the true consent of your leaders since we do not inform them of our specific techniques. If my people ever do begin creating Eslavu and using them as slaves, then I will have no doubt that they—we—are fallen and, as the Book of Mormon teaches, 'ripe for destruction.'"



"Like the rival fleets?"

"I suppose I don't really know about the rival fleets, why they are so strong and we are so weak, when we live a higher law than they do."

"You don't know that the law your people live is, in the eyes of God, that much higher than theirs."

"How can you think that after what I've told you?"

"All I said was that you don't *know*. I don't know either. Only God knows."

Myri nodded, her expression thoughtful. "I suppose you're right."

"I do believe that the rival fleets are stronger than you because there are more of them."

"I can't help but wonder how my people would be different had we not rebelled against the teachings of Malrezz and left the Ancient World."

"Not so long ago you thought the domies were lower than us savages. It never occurred to you that they might be the people of God and that they had temples among them."

"That's true. When Jahnzel suggested the possibility, I thought he was an apostate."

"But having God speak to you about the matter through the Blessed Sons changed your mind."

"Yes. Are you trying to say that God hasn't yet told my people that Malrezz was a prophet and that this is why they don't believe it yet, no matter how hard I try to tell them differently?"

"Exactly. Even with compelling evidence from Jahnzel on the comparative states of your two nations, you weren't willing to even try to believe it either. Your people have even less evidence than you did."

"I wish we had the true stories of our people, especially the true story of Malrezz."

"You have the true story of the ministry of Jesus Christ among your people. That's phenomenal! I envy you."

"Why? You already have the story in the Book of Mormon."

"But I've never seen it in a vision, and neither has anyone else I know. We have to accept the story by faith."

"Like my people have to accept Malrezz as a prophet?"

"Do they have to accept him?"

"Yes, absolutely. Without that acceptance, they will never believe that they should return to the Ancient World to receive the higher blessings from the people of Malrezz."

"All you can do is ask them to pray about it. God will reveal the truth of it to their hearts, just as He told them there would be safety and peace here in the Light."

"But this is as important as anything else God has told us! Why would He tell me and then wait to tell them?"

"Revelation from God comes when the person is ready to receive it." David couldn't help but think of Sara and her determination to follow Benjamin Carroll to Eden. "Some people are very bull-headed and refuse to listen."

"Like me with Jahnzel. I hope my people won't be so blind."

"You're hardly an example of blindness now, Myri!"

"But there's so much I don't know. I feel blind."

"No, blindness is ignoring the truth when it's clubbing you in the face. Blindness is doing something stupid when you really do know better."

"You sound bitter," Myri said in surprise.

David was irritated with Sara for not trusting him, and he was more than a little worried about what kind of trouble she might be experiencing on Eden, but bitter? “Do I really sound bitter? I don’t mean to.”

“Then what do you mean?”

David wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to Myri about Sara. He was even less sure that Myri wanted to hear anything about that experience and therefore decided not to answer her question. “I don’t think that what you’re feeling is blindness. Humility, maybe, and submissiveness. You’re so used to being the leader and teacher that you don’t know what it feels like to be the learner.”

“Perhaps that’s true, but it still doesn’t explain your bitterness.”

Why in the world was she being so persistent? “I’m not bitter!”

“Hurt, then. Why won’t you be open with me?”

Her eyes were wide and earnest, and David finally realized, in surprise, that with this question, she was demanding a relationship of equality with him. She had been pouring her soul out to him for a week, and he had told her very little about himself. He had assumed she wanted a confidant more than a real companion and had been happy to oblige. Becoming aware that she wanted a companion, however, made him uncomfortable, and those complications that had been so easy to dismiss earlier now blared in his mind.

Myri raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

David averted his eyes. She was so incredibly beautiful, and he really, really liked her, and he knew that if he started sharing himself with her in the way she demanded, he would fall in love with her. Then Prince Jahnzel would come and lay his claim, and she would marry him and go to Diron, and that would be that. His family would be relieved, everyone else would think he was a fool, and he would be devastated. He couldn’t do it. “Because what happened was, in large measure, the fault of your people.” He hoped she would shy away from discussing the flaws of her nation and start talking about something else.

“Nothing you can tell me can be more disturbing than learning that the Divine Emperor is corrupt and that Malrezz was a true prophet.”

David tried again. “How do you know I’ll tell you the truth? That I’m not just blind with my own warped perception of your nation?” He thought it odd that kissing Ashley had been easier than confiding in Myri and wondered why.

“Because you’re as clear as arelada and glow with the Light of God. I can’t believe your vision of the universe is skewed, and I know you would not purposely mislead me.”

She hadn’t trusted Prince Jahnzel half as much, and David knew at that moment that he was going to be a fool. He craved the companionship of a woman who had so much confidence in him, coupled with such spiritual perception, and he didn’t feel the need to resist her badly enough to muster the necessary strength. He finally looked at her again and smiled. “You’re a marvel, Myri. You barely know me, and yet you trust me in a way Sara never could.”

Myri sat back a little in surprise. “Sara? Do you mean Sara Alexander, the daughter of the Novaunian agent who married your sister?”

David nodded. “My niece. We were raised like cousins, but we’re more like brother and sister.”

“Then you’re close to her.”

“You didn’t know that already?”

She leaned toward him, intrigued. "Did you know that she was a Novaunian?"

"Not until Tren's brother showed up. It was a shock, let me tell you."

"Did *she* know?"

"Tren told her right before she left Earth, hoping to persuade her to stay, but it didn't do any good."

Myri suddenly appeared alarmed. "She left Earth? Where did she go?"

"With the Eden Colony, of course. I thought you already knew that."

"I knew about Ashley; I didn't know about Sara."

She seemed too disturbed by this new information. "What do you know about Eden? Is there something wrong with it?"

"I don't know how to tell you."

"Are they dead?"

She hesitated. "We don't know that for sure."

"Then your people believe they're in trouble."

Myri gave up a nod. "Serious trouble."

"Has a rescue ship been sent?"

Myri focused on him again, her mouth curled with cynicism. "From a fleet containing only four ships capable of interstellar travel? I doubt it."

"Then you don't know."

"No. I haven't been on such terms with Jahnzel over the past several weeks that he would tell me anything at all about the state of the fleet."

"Only one ship took them to Eden. What's wrong with sending one ship to rescue them? I thought Prince Jahnzel was a humane man."

"He is, but there are limits to what he can do. You don't understand the situation."

"Then explain it to me."

"The region is an important one, and we need a base there."

"Then why didn't you establish one on the planet years ago?"

"Because we didn't have a large enough fleet to secure our claim."

David stretched his arms. "If you establish a base on an uninhabited planet, then why such concern about 'securing your claim?'"

"The planet belongs to the Gudynean Federation, one of the most powerful governments in the galaxy."

"Tren and his brother talked a little about the Gudyneans. They aren't pirates and terrorists like your rival Diron fleets, are they?"

Myri shook her head. "They're a union of hundreds of planets."

"A legitimate government."

"I'm not sure your definition of 'legitimate' is the same as mine."

"A government with a solid claim in the region that other planets recognize," David explained.

Myri nodded. "Yes, the Gudynean Federation meets your definition of a 'legitimate' government."

"So the Eden transport went into Eden's system covertly, which is why getting it back in there would be complicated."

"Yes, but the Gudynean Navy is only part of the problem. The Erdean Space Force is another part of the problem."

"Are the Gudyneans and Erdeans—"

"Erdeanians," Myri corrected.

“Erdeanians. That’s a tongue twister! Are the Gudyneans and Erdeanians neighbors?”

“Yes, but the Erdeanians control the Erdean Portal, the hyperspace gate that allows travel into that region, and they charge a stiff toll per ship. Without access to the Portal, it would take many years to travel from Earth to Eden instead of only a few weeks.”

“Do the Erdeanians allow anyone to use their portal, even the rival fleets?”

“Yes, as long as they can pay. It must have cost Nexyun and Jaxzeran a fortune in tolls to use the Portal so that they could travel to Earth to destroy us. We expected an attack at some point, but we didn’t expect any of the fleets to come so soon or in such numbers. We didn’t think they had the resources.”

“Then it’s an area of space that the various rival fleets use also.”

“Absolutely. Both Erdean and Eden sit on the border of the space that all of the Diron nations, including mine, consider their own.”

“Then both planets are vulnerable to attack by the Diron fleets.”

“They are, but the Erdeanians are such a mixture of different races, including my own, that they are very accommodating. There is no reason to attack them.”

“Other than to take their portal by force.”

“An invasion was attempted only once. The Gudynean Navy and other fleets from the Interstellar Alliance of Planets repelled the attack. They don’t seem to like Erdean enough to invite it into their alliance, but they don’t want it to be controlled by any of the Diron nations.”

“Does this Interstellar Alliance of Planets include Novaun?”

“It does.”

“Okay, let me see if I understand you correctly. You want a base in this important region, with better access to the Erdean Portal. So you set out to steal a planet from the government that owns it by secretly establishing a colony there. Your plan, then, is to enforce your claim after the colony is successful and you’ve had time to build your fleet into a force capable of engaging an alliance of superior fleets.”

“Not quite. The plan was to attempt to harness and claim an uninhabited planet that Gudynea doesn’t use in an area of space it doesn’t patrol well. Then when we built enough strength on Earth to become a ‘legitimate’ government ourselves, we would negotiate a true claim to the planet.”

“How can it be that Gudynea doesn’t patrol the area well? Is Eden part of the Gudynean Federation or isn’t it?”

Myri frowned. “How can I explain this to you? On this planet you are so used to definite borders between nations that I can’t find words to describe the region.” She closed her eyes, pondering. After a few moments, she opened her eyes again and shook her head in frustration. “It’s an area that they claim, but it’s on the very farthest reaches of that area. No one lives there; no one works there.”

“A no-man’s land.”

Myri snapped her fingers. “That’s it! ‘No-man’s land’ describes the area as well as any. We believe Gudynea intends that planet to be a trap to catch our nations and therefore perceives no need to tightly patrol the system.”

“Like a land or naval mine.”

“Yes.”

“Which means the Gudynean Federation considers your nation its enemy.” It had certainly taken her a long time to get to this important point!

Myri's head inclined in a slight nod. "The reality is that Gudynea practically begs the Diron nations to take possession of Eden."

"*Dares* them to, it sounds like. So admit it. Your people had serious doubts about the viability of a colony on Eden. You knew all along that it was a terraforming project gone bad." David tried to keep the anger he was feeling out of his voice.

"Of course we did. That's why the transport that carried the colonists to Eden left a frigate there that was supposed to return to tell us that the planet-spirit had been bridled."

"What does it mean to 'bridle' a planet-spirit? Is that what causes the ecosystem to be destroyed?"

"What you're referring to is *binding* the planet-spirit or taking control of it. Bridling it simply means that many specialists gain access to its Awareness by way of an Awareness monitor. The specialists are then able to watch the planet's physical systems from the inside out and counter-manipulate any severe natural phenomenon."

"So they would be able to telepathically stop an earthquake from occurring."

"Or minimize its effect. Bridling is a very effective way to deal with a planet-spirit that has a rebellious streak."

"But it isn't foolproof."

"No."

"Why didn't the transport just wait there a week? Or better yet, why did it put the colonists on Eden at all before the planet-spirit could be bridled?"

"We didn't have enough specialists or arelada to do it from orbit, and even if we had, it would have been dangerous. The rival fleets—"

"The rival fleets go into the area and may have discovered it if it had remained there too long. Okay, I get it." The more Myri told him, the more convinced David was that sending colonists to Eden had been a criminal act—mass murder. "So the frigate didn't come back."

"No. Everyone was discussing it before I left."

"So if your emperor knew the planet was the bait in a Gudynean booby trap, why in the galaxy did he send all of those people there to begin with?"

Myri opened her mouth to speak and then stopped herself.

"Why, Myri?"

Myri averted her eyes.

"Well?"

When she finally answered, she could do no more than whisper: "Because they were expendable." She still couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"So the former emperor considered the high-and-mighty Dr. Benjamin Carroll and his coterie nothing more than trained dogs?" David might have thought the situation funny had he not been so concerned about Sara.

"I'm so sorry, David." She arose and turned her back to him, moving toward the sliding glass door.

David hated what Myri had told him, but he didn't blame her personally. "Where are you going?"

"I can't face you."

"Please turn around. I don't want to talk to your back."

She reluctantly turned to face him again, and he saw that a tear glistened on her cheek. “You were right. Hearing the faults of my Nation in this way is far more difficult than I thought it would be.”

“Why are you so upset? I’m the one who may have lost my best friend on Eden—not you. Something tells me there were no nobles in the colony.”

“That is why this upsets me. Until I learned that Sara was in the colony, I thought of it as nothing more than a large group of useful savages governed by a few of our own laborers and professionals. Now all of a sudden the Eden colonists seem real to me, and the thought that we may have casually sent them into that dangerous place to do nothing more than die appalls me.”

“It’s not your fault, and you’re living a higher law now, remember?”

Myri lowered her eyes. “I am more at fault than you realize.” Her shoulders trembled, causing the green scarf that was wrapped around her head and shoulders to flutter a little. “When the emperor told me that Ashley was a part of the Eden Colony, I was relieved she was dead so that she wouldn’t be in the way.” Her shoulders jerked up and down as she started to weep.

David handed Myri the box of tissues, feeling sick to his stomach. He wasn’t sure which emotion was the strongest—grief for the likely loss of Sara and Ashley, disgust for what Myri had told him about herself and her nation, or empathy for the shame Myri now felt as she admitted to herself and to him that she shared in her nation’s guilt.

Myri took a tissue and dabbed her eyes. After many minutes of silence, she said, “I really am sorry about Sara. And Ashley.”

“I know.”

\* \* \*

Knowing the precarious nature of the mission to buy arelada and check on the Eden Colony, Jahnzel had ordered communication silence from his four-ship fleet. He knew, therefore, before he assimilated the message from Saint Admiral Hosev Vahro that something had gone wrong.

*Consecrated One, Admiral Sutuzav detected the scout and now surrounds us with twenty-three warships. We will take as many of them with us as possible when we self-destruct.*

As quickly as the message had come, it ended, and logic told Jahnzel that the ships and all of those loyal warriors were gone. Unable to completely believe it, Jahnzel replayed the message on his telepathic systems recorder. Still stunned, he played it yet again.

In Jahnzel’s lifetime, no warship had ever been in such straits that self-destruction was required. Could there have been an alternative? Could four ships have outrun twenty-three? No. Had it been possible, Admiral Vahro would have done it. Had the fleet been in Erdean’s territory and a patrol from the Erdean Space Force been close enough, Vahro would have petitioned for aid. Had Vahro allowed even one of the ships to be captured, the minds of the crew would have been stripped and all of the Nation’s vulnerabilities would have been laid bare to their enemies.

Capture would have been worse than self-destruction, because it would have guaranteed that Sutuzav’s fleet would travel to Earth and finish what Admirals Nexyun and Jaxzeran had begun, with Jahnzel’s mind-stripped compatriots manning the most

dangerous posts as telepathic slaves. Had Jahnzel been in command of the mission, he would have given the same order. A part of Jahnzel grieved that he had not been a part of the mission to take his proper place in death with the others, for why would he want to live now that everyone he loved had betrayed him and his enemies had destroyed his fleet?

Feeling dizzy, he gripped his desk for support. He looked at his hand and realized it was shaking. "Dear God, give me control!"

Jahnzel couldn't stop himself from shaking, but he did receive presence of mind enough to observe how unspecific Vahro's message had been. He had not indicated the nature of the mission, where the scout had been headed, or whether anyone in the Eden Colony had survived. Certainly if they were all dead Vahro would have indicated it somehow, which meant that either there were survivors or Vahro hadn't been told the status of the colony yet and didn't want to alert Sutuzav to the fact that they were doing business on Eden. If nothing else, Vahro might have prevented Sutuzav from picking up the frigate and the arelada, and while that wasn't much of an accomplishment, it did give Jahnzel a glimmer of satisfaction. The frigate, the arelada, and the colonists were now lost to the Nation for the foreseeable future, but checking on Eden would remain on Jahnzel's list of unfinished tasks.

Jahnzel reached out with his thoughts and contacted Arulezz on his personal frequency. *The fleet is gone.*

*What do you mean, the fleet is gone?*

Jahnzel regurgitated Admiral Vahro's final communication.

*What in the galaxy was he doing sending a scout into the Eden system?*

*I gave the command. There might be survivors among the colonists.*

*You risked our ships and our officers and our arelada for dead savages?*

Risking valiant officers for laborers and savages who were probably dead did sound like a poor trade, and yet somewhere in the fog that had engulfed his mind, Jahnzel remembered that he had been aware of the risk and had decided to check on the colonists anyway. *I believed it was the right thing to do.*

*What I command is what is right!*

Arulezz's tyrannical declaration brought Jahnzel back to his senses, and all of the despicable things he had required of Myri gushed back into his mind. *You're not God; you're the Eslavu of Satan!*

*Your so-called honor has made you an incompetent fool!*

Perhaps Arulezz was right. Perhaps if he had been more concerned about the Nation's security than a group of savages and laborers, they wouldn't be in this predicament. *If I'm such an incompetent fool, then you'll be wanting someone else to oversee the rebuilding of space dock.*

*Stop being a baby. We all have work to do. I'll inform the Nation, and you'll inform your crew. Jesalya will organize the funeral.*

## CHAPTER 15: ONLY MEN

In the week following her return from the ill-fated Third Colony, Rachel was still so busy getting the new children's neighborhood set up for the incoming refugees from Fourteenth Colony that she hardly had time to think coherently, much less spend any time with Ann in trauma therapy. The nightmares were getting worse, however, and the only consolation Rachel could feel in the matter was that her relationship with her husband was closer than it had been in a couple of years. When Duane cradled her in his arms at night, she could almost believe that she hadn't seen Third Colony drop into the ocean or that he had slept with his student.

Like everyone else in the colony, Rachel worked herself to exhaustion in silence every day. Like everyone else in the colony, Rachel feared that a casual word might bring Tempest's wrath down on them and so said nothing. Their settlement grew and became more beautiful every day, and if the children coming from Fourteenth Colony didn't quite bring cheer to everyone's hearts, they did give everyone more of a reason to persist in their efforts to make Woodland Park an almost pleasant place to live.

While Rachel was inspecting the newest dormitory outside of Knowledge Knoll, she heard what sounded like a jet overhead. She frowned at Mike Dixon, the one leading her in the walk-through. Simultaneously realizing that the sound couldn't possibly have come from an aircar, the two of them moved to the door. "Maybe it's our rescue," Mike said.

Rachel didn't want to set herself up for disappointment by seriously regarding his observation, but she felt a spark of hope all the same. As she stepped out of the dormitory, she watched a spacecraft seem to float to the ground in Knowledge Knoll in an area that had been designated as a ball field for the schools. She leaped toward the boardwalk that led to the school area, breaking into a run, her heart pounding more from excitement than from the exertion.

The other colonists working in the new neighborhood emerged from the various buildings and gardens and headed in the same direction as Rachel, chattering.

"Finally! Someone's come to rescue us!"

"I wonder who they are."

"The ship is one of ours. Didn't you see the markings?"

"I don't know how you could have seen that this far away."

"They can't be Zarrists. It hasn't been long enough."

"That isn't true. Maybe when Earth lost contact with Control Colony, the emperor sent someone to find out what happened to us."

"Or they might have been in a nearby system."

The colonists crowded onto the boardwalk and within a few minutes spread into the field. A few people were already there, and more appeared from various places. Ben and Cameron came into the clearing from the vicinity of the hospital. Rachel couldn't help but feel relieved that Sara's injuries would keep her there and that Ben would be the one acting as spokesperson for the colony.

Because Ben was coming from the hospital and not Government Grove, Rachel deduced that he had not been in contact with the ship via radio. She wondered if the sky watchers had detected it in orbit and was glad the colony had picked up an astrophysicist and amateur astronomer from Sixth Colony, which had been established in the mountains with the intent of supporting an observatory.



The Zarrists had provided Sixth Colony with a large optical telescope, a radio telescope, and other large, sophisticated pieces of equipment, including a tracking device, but those items had been destroyed in the earthquake that had tossed the colony into the canyon below the peak where the observatory had been located. Eleventh Colony might not now have such specialized equipment, but it did have the ability to synthesize smaller telescopes and binoculars to chart objects in the sky and a good hill a few miles outside the colony to set up the equipment. Rachel was grateful they now had people who were competent to direct that work.

"That ship isn't big enough to hold the whole colony."

"Maybe others are coming."

"We could go in groups."

"There must be a bigger ship in orbit."

"Wouldn't we have known if that was true?"

"Not if it just got here."

"It's been too cloudy to see anything through the telescopes."

"Why didn't the Zarrists send the same ship we came on?"

"I already told you that. They couldn't have sent the same ship. There hasn't been enough time!"

Ben quickly approached the craft, and Rachel joined him. "Do you know anything about this?" she asked. She looked around for Duane and saw him jogging toward them.

Ben frowned. "Nothing at all."

The hatch opened, and two men in royal blue uniforms like the ones the Zarrists had worn when they had arrived on Earth emerged from the craft and approached Rachel and Ben. They smiled and bowed their heads and addressed them in a language Rachel didn't recognize.

Ben shook his head. "We can't understand you. Please speak in English or Spanish or French or any other number of Earth languages." He motioned to the group of colonists standing behind him. "Most of our people speak more than one language." He repeated what he said in Spanish, then invited Rachel to say it in French, Duane in German, Cameron in Mandarin, and several others in different Earth languages.

The astronauts appeared more puzzled with every language that was presented. "This is really strange," Duane whispered to Ben. "Why would the Zarrists send representatives who can't communicate with us?"

"It doesn't make sense," Ben agreed.

"Perhaps they aren't Zarrists at all," Cameron said in a quiet voice.

"That makes even less sense!" Rachel said. "If they aren't Zarrists, where did they get the ships? And the uniforms? Why would they pretend? Why would they even be here?"

"That makes even less sense," Ben said.

The astronauts issued their greeting in several other languages as well, none of them familiar. Rachel could hear murmuring from the other colonists behind her.

"They would pretend," Cameron said, "because that's who we're expecting to see and they know it. They've probably been monitoring our communications."

"Then why can't they speak to us in our own language?" Rachel asked. As if in answer to her question, one of the men pointed to his head. "He wants to communicate telepathically."

"That proves they aren't Zarrists," Ben said. "They don't communicate telepathically with natives. Even in the beginning the Zarrists spoke our languages."

Rachel couldn't bear the possibility that these men standing before her might be imposters or have some other evil intent. "It doesn't prove anything! Perhaps they would have communicated telepathically had there been an unusual circumstance such as this one."

"Perhaps," Ben admitted. "I just think we should remain skeptical."

"We shouldn't communicate telepathically with them," Cameron warned. "They may have the ability to take control of a cell in our brains the way the Zarrists did."

"Oh come now," Duane said. "There's no proof that ever happened. Certainly we would have known!"

"Sara's father was certain of this, and I trust him. Don't do it!"

"I'm willing to take the risk," Rachel said. "Even if they aren't Zarrists, they do have a ship and might be willing to get us off of this insane planet."

"If we refuse to communicate, they'll leave, and no harm will be done," Cameron said.

Rachel refused to accept that option. "Whoever they are, they can't be worse than Tempest."

After everything that had happened, even Cameron couldn't disagree, but he still appeared worried.

"Let's communicate with them together," Ben said to Rachel.

"No," Cameron said. "I'm the only one here who's had any real experience with telepathy."

"Are you sure that you know the mechanics of how the cell bond works?" Ben asked.

"I know enough, and I have some idea what it would feel like if they tried it."

"Do you have your arelada with you?"

"No. All of our arelada is in the safebox until Sara feels she can communicate with Tempest again."

Rachel couldn't stand this delay. Before anyone could stop her, she stepped toward the men and let the guard down on her mind in the same way she had when she had joined minds with Sara to communicate with Tempest. She felt the same energy flow around her that she had that day, only instead of Sara's colorful perkiness of spirit, she felt a sense of determination mixed with fear, and all of it was overpowered by great satisfaction.

In her mind, Rachel saw an image of Prince Jahnzel, the emperor's son and commander of the fleet, and took it as a greeting from him. She saw images of deep space and none of Earth and somehow understood that this man had been in space and not on Earth, which explained why they could not speak any Earth language. He felt sorry that they had not been able to communicate by speaking her language, and Rachel felt relieved that such a simple explanation existed to explain a situation that had caused the others such doubt. She felt the words: *Help! Stranded Earth colo*— and again saw an image of Prince Jahnzel and felt that he had ordered them there to provide the colonists with the rescue they had asked for. Such an emotion of reassurance washed over her that she thought she might weep. She saw an image of the interior of the ship in front of her. She counted twenty empty seats and understood that the colonists would have to go in groups. The ship could take twenty now to a larger ship in orbit.

The emotions of satisfaction and reassurance dissipated, and she was again aware of the astronauts standing in front of her with friendly eyes. The one who had communicated with her held his hand toward the group behind her as if to say, "What are you waiting for? Your rescue has come!"

Feeling such happiness that she was almost giddy, Rachel turned around and exclaimed, "Our rescue has come! They can take twenty right now!"

The colonists cheered and embraced, and many of them lunged forward shouting, "I want to go! Take me!"

Ben grabbed Rachel's arm and pulled her away from the mob of colonists; Ann and Cameron stepped in front of them to block access. "You can't just start loading people onto that ship. What happened? What did he say?"

Rachel explained everything she had learned as well as she could, given the fact that her knowledge had not come via words.

"How could they understand we were in distress if they couldn't understand our language?"

"Obviously they relayed the message to the prince and were told to come rescue us immediately."

"Are you sure they are who they say they are? Did he show you the inside or outside of any other ship that is in orbit?"

"No, but we know there's another ship, and if they're lying, wouldn't Tempest be throwing a fit?" Rachel said.

"Not necessarily," Cameron said over his shoulder. "She may not have enough information to know they're lying."

Ben hesitated, as if pondering. Finally, he shook his head. "I can't help it—I still have doubts. I don't think any of us should get on that ship. Not until we have time to think things through a little better."

"I had nothing but good feelings—no sense that they were lying—and I'll go alone to check it out if that's what it takes."

"No! Don't go in there yet!" Duane shouted.

Rachel turned and saw him standing at the bottom of the hatch, blocking the way onto the craft. Several people tried to push him aside. Ben and Cameron rushed to help him.

"You can't keep us off!" Samantha yelled.

"You think that just because you're the colony leaders you can go first?" Deb said.

Duane shook his head, his eyes adamant. "We think no such thing. Ben has had more dealings with the Zarrists than any of us, and he has doubts about whether these men are Zarrists at all. It won't hurt us to wait a few minutes."

"Is that true, Dr. Carroll?" asked Kevin.

The hatch began closing behind Duane, shutting down all efforts to board the ship. The Zarrist who had communicated with Rachel before raised his eyebrows, as if to ask, "What's the problem?"

Rachel did the best she could to distill the colonists' concerns into thoughts that she pushed as hard as she knew how toward the rescuers. *They want proof that you really are Zarrists.*

The men looked at each other and laughed. They pointed to the badges on their uniforms and to the symbols and numbers on their ships. Feeling embarrassed, Rachel

rolled her eyes and motioned to Ben. *He's one of our leaders. He has to be skeptical. He wants more proof.*

The men shook their heads and held out their hands, as if they had no idea what more proof was needed than what they had already shown. An image entered Rachel's mind of a fleet of approximately fifteen ships in orbit, and she had an idea. She tried to narrow her focus to one of the ships in orbit to see the insignia. If it matched that of the shuttle before her, she would take that as proof and so would Ben. As if in answer to her mental effort, an image was provided for her of a ship with the name *Saint Usayvel*, and then another one named *Admiral Tivtahn*. It was enough! Rachel withdrew her thoughts in excitement.

"They showed me ships in their fleet that are definitely Zarrist ships. What more proof do we need?"

"I sure don't need more proof," Brent said.

"Neither do I," Rachel said. "I'll lead the first group. Duane?"

Duane turned to Ben. "What do you think?"

"I can't stop any of you from taking the best chance of rescue we may have."

"But are you convinced they are who they say they are?"

"Not convinced, but my doubts are fading."

"I'm not convinced," Cameron said. "They may be telepathically tricking your wife."

Rachel couldn't believe it. "This from you, who married an alien witch!"

"It's that 'alien witch' who taught me about telepathy, and I don't have a good feeling about this."

"Your 'feelings' didn't stop you from crashing over the rainforest or Tempest from killing Third Colony," Rachel reminded. "I'm going. The only question is, how do we decide who will go with me?"

Duane gripped her arm, his eyes bright with alarm. "We can't do this!"

"Why not? What are you so afraid of?"

"It's not what *I'm* afraid of, it's what *you're* afraid of. I trust Ben on this. He's had more dealings with the Zarrists than any of us, and he's not certain enough for my comfort. If those people are lying about who they are—and there's a chance they are—they're dangerous."

"Ben admits that he isn't certain they *aren't* Zarrists. If there's any possibility that they are who they say they are, then we would be foolish to stay here with an enemy we know is more powerful than all of us. Even if these men are dangerous, they are only men. I know how to deal with men." She motioned toward the ship. "Let's go!"

Duane shook his head. "I'm not getting on that ship."

Rachel stared at her husband, stunned. "You think you can force me to stay here?"

"I don't think any such thing, Rachel. I choose not to get on that spaceship, and I beg you to stay here with me. If you make a different choice, that's up to you."

"You don't want to be rescued?"

"Of course I want to be rescued. But not until I can trust the rescuers."

"Isn't it enough that I trust them?"

"It sounds as if your choice is made." Duane embraced her and kissed her lingeringly on the lips. "I hope I see you soon, but if I don't, be happy." His bittersweet words startled Rachel into the realization that he really did have serious doubts about these rescuers and didn't know whether he would see her again in this life. That he could let her go into this so-called dangerous situation, subsequently make the choice to stay,

and therefore possibly be separated from her for the rest of his mortal life shocked her and made her choice to go all that more certain. Knowing now that he didn't want to be with her enough to get on that ship, how could she stay?

Rachel hardly knew what to say to him now. She thought she should love and trust him enough to at least consider staying with him, but she found that she couldn't. She couldn't even feel a twinge of guilt that she didn't have those feelings. "I can't be happy if I stay here. I'm so sorry, Duane." Had they really been living their lives in such a disjointed way that, at the emergence of a serious disagreement, they were ready and able to separate? What had happened to her eternal marriage?

Duane withdrew, and she spoke to the crowd, "Those of you who want to get on this ship right now gather around me."

Erica asked, "Will we have time to go back for our things?"

Rachel looked in the direction of the two Zarrist rescuers. They appeared tense and fidgety, as if they were in a hurry to leave; the one who had not communicated with her seemed almost agitated. "I don't think so. I'm sure they will have everything we need on the ship."

At least thirty gathered around Rachel, colonists who, like her, had been particularly traumatized by the actions of Tempest toward Third Colony. Erica Rice, Kevin Krantz, and Brent Hall were in the group, along with Samantha Carroll and Brian and Deb Webster from Eighth Colony.

"Brent, I need you here!" Cameron shouted, lunging toward him and taking hold of his arm. "Please don't go!"

Brent pulled away from Cameron with a jerk and shook his head. "I'm sorry, bishop, but I can't do this anymore. I just can't."

When Ben approached Kevin, Kevin waved at him. "Don't even try. I can't do this anymore either."

Ben stopped and stood immobile. "I'm sorry, Kevin. I truly am." His voice trembled.

Kevin turned to look at Ben, his gray eyes glistening. "So am I." He turned his back toward Ben and hurried forward to get as close to the shuttle as he could.

Tony Wright had no eyes for Brent or Kevin at all, only Samantha. "You know you can't go yet. Your dad's still in the hospital, and your mom's swamped; they need you!"

"They know I'm going crazy! It'd help them out!" She elbowed her way to the front of the line.

Tony pushed through the group, grabbed Samantha by the waist, and lifted her right out of the crowd. "I'm not going to let you do it."

Samantha screamed and struggled to get away from him, her hair flying, but he was a big man and too strong for her.

The hatch opened, and the rescuers began guiding the colonists into the shuttle. Fearing that Duane or someone else in the colony might restrain her from going, Rachel squeezed into the group and walked up the stairs to safety, not looking back.

\* \* \*

When the report came that a spaceship was landing in Knowledge Knoll, everyone in the hospital left to go meet it except Sara, Trevor, Cyndi, and Ashley. Three weeks had passed since the accident, and while both Sara and Trevor were feeling better, they were still not very mobile. Without an orthopedic surgeon on the planet, Dr. Marshall was

being extremely cautious in his treatment of their multiple fractures. They could not move away from their beds without help, and when the staff did move them, they were in wheelchairs. Mentally, however, they were alert, and Dr. Marshall had cleared them to do Church and colony business for a couple of hours a day, but running out to meet the spaceship was not on the list of allowed activities.

Sara watched out the window for Cameron and his father to return while Ashley chattered with Trevor and Cyndi about the possibility of rescue. For the first time in at least a month Sara felt a sense of relief, and yet she was afraid of vocalizing that feeling for Tempest to hear and so didn't contribute much to the conversation. More than anything, she wanted to get away from the planet before her ability to use telepathy returned and forced her to communicate with Tempest again. She knew, though, that Tempest didn't want her to leave and wondered why Tempest had allowed the ship to land at all.

When Sara finally did spot Cameron and his father entering the clearing, they were with Barbara, Brother Vance, and Sister Eagle, talking in a serious way that swallowed all feelings of relief on Sara's part. Not only that, but where was Kevin Krantz?

As soon as Cameron walked in the door, Sara demanded, "What's wrong?"

"Well, two men who claimed to be Zarrists took Sister Vance and nineteen others onto their ship."

"Wow, that's wonderful!" Ashley exclaimed. "When are they coming back for the rest of us?"

"That isn't clear. We assume the next group will leave in a couple of hours," Cameron's father said.

Despite his happy words, Cameron's father wasn't smiling. "Tell me everything," Sara said. As she listened to Cameron's father give his account of what happened she, too, was perplexed. She wanted to believe they were being rescued, but his uncertainty about the identity of the space travelers concerned her. "Just how uncertain are you?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Twenty percent, maybe."

"Will you get on that ship when it comes back?" Brother Vance asked.

Cameron's father hesitated. "When you put it that way, I'm not sure. Maybe I believe it less than I said."

"What is it about these men that makes you so skeptical?" Trevor asked.

"The fact that they didn't have a clue about any of the Earth languages we spoke to them and insisted on communicating telepathically. None of the Zarrists I've dealt with work that way."

"But their claim that they've been in space this whole time is a pretty strong one," Cyndi said.

"I know. They very well may be telling the truth, which is why I'm at least fifty percent likely to get on that shuttle when it returns."

"It really would be unwise to throw away our chance of rescue if they are telling the truth," Sister Eagle observed.

"The way I see it," Cameron said, "the real question is whether it's riskier to get on that shuttle with these men we're not sure about or whether to remain here with the huge threat we are certain about."

"Would you get on that shuttle yourself?" Sara asked.

"No. Not if I had any choice."

"Why?" Ashley asked.

"Because I trust Father's instincts on this. If they really are who they say they are, I don't think he would have such doubts about it. If they aren't who they say they are, they are lying, and why would they do that if they didn't have some sort of sinister purpose?"

"I agree," Brother Vance said, "which is why I couldn't bring myself to get on that shuttle myself."

"And yet Rachel felt perfectly good about going with them," Barbara said.

"Rachel hasn't been herself since she communicated with the planet-spirit that first time with Sara, and seeing Third Colony drop into the ocean unraveled her completely. She would have gone with King Kong."

"And yet you let her go," Sister Eagle said. She sounded almost accusatory.

"She made it clear that she expected to deal with those men on her own. When she gets in that mood, there's nothing I can do to stop her, and it may be that she's right about this."

Ben had said that Cameron was concerned that Sister Vance had been telepathically manipulated. Since there was no way to prove or disprove that concern, Sara decided she would examine the possibility from a different angle. "Cameron, did you feel any attempt from either one of those men to secretly touch his spirit to yours?"

Cameron pondered for several moments and then shook his head. "No."

"And you were standing right there in front with your father and Sister Vance."

"Yes."

"That, actually, is a good sign, isn't it?" Ashley said.

"Yes, it is," Sara said. "I think that as long as we don't communicate telepathically in any way with these people and continue to speak to them through Sister Vance, we can go ahead and communicate with them."

"I would feel better about moving forward if you would try to communicate with Tempest and get her observations about these people," said Cameron's father.

Trevor agreed. "She might be aware of something that isn't obvious to us."

Sara shook her head. "I tried just a couple of days ago, and my brain was still foggy. I'm afraid that if I take my arelada out of its safebox, I'll do nothing more than alert these space travelers that I have it. My father told me in no uncertain terms that the Zarrists would take it from me if they detected it."

"You don't think Rachel and the others won't tell their benefactors about you and your arelada?" Cyndi said.

Sara suddenly felt alarmed. "I certainly hope not! They all know that to do so would put my family in danger. My father said that if the Zarrists learn he's a Novaunian, they'll kill him!"

Duane grunted. "Rachel won't give them any information she doesn't have to give."

"They'll communicate telepathically. In images. It'll all come out," Trevor said. "I'm sorry, Sara."

Cameron's father nodded. "Sara, you and your arelada are the reason we're all still alive. It's too big. The Zarrists will know that you're a Novaunian and that you have arelada before the day is over."

Sara sighed. "Then you're right. I should try again to communicate with Tempest, but I'll need privacy."

Everyone but Cameron moved to Trevor's side of the large room, and Cyndi extended the partition to divide the space. When everything was quiet, Cameron took the safebox from the nightstand next to Sara's bed and handed it to her.

She took one of the pendants out of the box, dreading the possible encounter as she always did. She delved for her Awareness and couldn't find it. After several attempts, she returned the pendant to the safebox. "Tempest isn't going to be much help, I'm afraid. I do think, though, that it's time to hide the safebox."

Cameron nodded and carried it with him out the door.

\* \* \*

Rachel found a seat in the cabin of the shuttle and strapped herself in. As perplexed and sad as she was that Duane had chosen to remain behind, her strongest emotion was relief. She felt such relief, in fact, that she leaned her head back and drifted to sleep, or at least that was what she assumed when she awoke and learned that the shuttle had already arrived at its destination.

The spokesperson of the two Zarrists introduced himself as Lieutenant Sistrel and then led Rachel and the other nineteen colonists off of the shuttle and into separate decontamination chambers for the men and women. Rachel proceeded through the decontamination process with the other women and received a paper gown before emerging into a medical examination room. Rachel waited her turn to be examined and was then issued underwear, an ill-fitting pale blue jumpsuit, and slippers by a silent woman on the medical staff. She quickly dressed and was directed into a stark little waiting room.

Once all of the twenty colonists had finished their exams and were gathered in the waiting room, Lieutenant Sistrel appeared again and directed them into a pale blue corridor. They wound their way through the ship until they arrived at a lounge with a starry domed ceiling.

Just when Rachel prepared to sit down on one of the soft peach couches, Lieutenant Sistrel shook his head and beckoned her to follow him.

*Since you are the leader, he explained, you will go first.*

*To whom will I be communicating?* she asked, feeling gratified that she was acclimating to telepathy so quickly.

*With the captain of this vessel, he said.*

*How large is your crew?*

*Forty-five. We brought you to the largest ship in our flotilla so that you will not feel crowded.*

*Is there enough room on this ship for the whole colony?*

*No, I'm afraid not. Some of them will come here, but many will have to go to other ships.*

*We're just so grateful to you for getting us off of that insane planet!*

The corridors grew wider as they walked, and they passed people more often. The walls in this area of the ship were decorated with landscape scenes the way so many of the corridors on the Eden transport ship had been, and Rachel relaxed even more.

Lieutenant Sistrel led Rachel into a small waiting room, invited her to be seated, and waited there with her until a small man in his forties with black hair emerged from the office. Sistrel bowed to the captain and then communicated to Rachel, *The honorable*



Captain Nahn. To the captain he communicated, *This is Rachel Vance, sir. One of the leaders of the unfortunate colony.*

Captain Nahn smiled. *It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.* He lifted his hand to invite her into his office, and Rachel followed him into it. *I hope the decontamination process wasn't too uncomfortable.*

*It was no worse than I expected.*

Captain Nahn motioned to one of the chairs. *Sit, please, and be at ease. I'll try not to keep you too long. I'm sure you're anxious to settle in.*

*I am more anxious to get my friends off of the planet.*

*I don't blame you, and we'll do what we can.*

Rachel didn't like the caution in the captain's voice, as if these new benefactors might not be able to get the other colonists off of the planet at all. *Is there a problem? Do you not have enough room for everyone on your ships?*

*No, there is plenty of room for your friends in our fleet, although not all of our ships are here. Our problem is with the planet-spirit itself. It is fierce and fights the bridle we have established over it. We are not sure we can safely land another shuttle on the planet at this time.*

The situation suddenly became clear. *That's why Lieutenant Sistrél and his companion were in such a hurry and so nervous.*

*Yes. I'm hoping that you can tell us more about how the planet-spirit works and thinks so that we can better manage the bridle.*

Rachel nodded. *I communicated with it once, so maybe I can help you.*

*Let that conversation flow to the front of your mind, and I'll be able to assimilate it.*

Rachel closed her eyes and relived that horrifying experience in a way she hadn't since its occurrence. When the experience was over, Rachel opened her eyes again and saw that the captain was studying her in a strange way. He appeared thoughtful, puzzled, and excited all at the same time. *Did you learn anything useful?* she asked.

*Yes, actually I did. None of us suspected that the planet-spirit would actually show its memories in a vision to humans.*

*Why wouldn't a planet-spirit show its memories?*

*No one knows why. The only thing we know is that the spirits of habitable planets don't.*

*I don't understand what you mean.*

*For whatever reason, planet-spirits that show their memories also have no compunction about killing the inhabitants who don't do what they want. With the memories comes the killing. The qualities go together. Always. For this reason, a planet-spirit that shows its memories is not habitable.*

*Then you didn't realize that the planet was so evil. Dread descended on Rachel. Certainly you will still try to land more shuttles. You can't strand my friends in that accursed place!*

*No, of course not. Please don't worry about that. As I told you, your knowledge of the planet-spirit will help us secure a better bridle on the planet. Bring everything that happened down there to the front of your mind. I want to know it all.*

Feeling desperate to rescue the other colonists, Rachel did as directed. When she opened her eyes and faced the captain again, he was smiling. *You realize that you and the other colonists have experienced a miracle.*

*What do you mean?*

*Several hundred of you have survived for nine weeks on an uninhabitable planet. Had it not been for that Novaunian girl and her arelada, none of you would have survived the first week and a half.*

Rachel felt warm inside and more grateful to Sara than she could have ever felt possible, but she was still worried about the colonists on the planet. *Sara saved us all, yes, no question, but she's not a perfect savior. The planet-spirit communicates with her, but she has no control over it. All of the colonists are in an incredible amount of danger.*

*I believe wholeheartedly what you say, but I have the safety of my crew to consider. I must consult with Admiral Sutuzav and request more ships and personnel to hold the bridle.*

*How long will that take?*

He stood up. *I would like you to communicate with the colonists on the planet and tell them that we are sorry we can't rescue them yet but that we will be back in contact with them in two weeks.*

Rachel agreed. What else could she do? She knew, however, as she walked with Captain Nahn to the command center of the ship, that she should not frighten the other colonists any more than they already were by telling them that Eden was uninhabitable.

\* \* \*

Cameron's father communicated with Rachel Vance via radio that evening and learned that there would be no rescue for the remaining colonists for another two weeks. After Cameron and his father reported the conversation to Sara and Trevor, Sara said, "I knew there was something wrong. Tempest wouldn't have let the Zarrists land if she'd had any choice."

Trevor turned his upper body toward Sara as well as he could. "What does it meant to 'bridle' a planet-spirit?"

"I don't know, but Tempest hates it." For the first time in weeks, Sara wanted to communicate with Tempest and learn for herself what it meant to 'bridle' a planet-spirit.

"They will come back, won't they?" Ashley asked.

"We don't have any real reason to believe otherwise," Cameron's father replied, "but we'll know more once Sara is able to communicate with Tempest and learn what this bridling business is all about."

"Have the sky watchers been able to see any of the ships at all?" Sara asked.

"No. The sky has been too cloudy."

Cameron moved to the chair next to Sara's bed. "That ship we saw at the bottom of the ocean would have a tracking system. This might be the time to go after it."

"That's a really interesting idea," Trevor said. "There might be other advantages to having that ship in the colony."

"The arelada too," Cyndi said.

"I agree," Sara said, "and yet I'm not sure it wouldn't be a waste of time. I have a feeling that the Zarrists will want both of those items and will go after them once they get back." She wanted to say that she was afraid Tempest would throw a fit if anyone tried to retrieve the frigate, given it could provide a means of escape, but she didn't want to give Tempest an idea that she might not yet have.

Cameron patted Sara's hand. "You've got a point. Once they get back, they'll simply take them from us if we have them."

"Maybe not," said Cameron's father. "If there is something sinister going on with these people, having the spaceship here might be the only hope we have of effectively fighting them. I assume it has weapons."

"I don't know," Cameron said. "I didn't get a good enough look at it."

"I hear what you're saying," Sara said, "but if circumstances came to that, it would be one little ship against a fleet! It might be more effective to leave the ship and the arelada at the bottom of the ocean."

"I'm sorry, Sara, but I'm not following your reasoning," Trevor said.

"If they do want those items—and I believe they do—they will have to expend a pretty good effort to get them if they're still at the bottom of the ocean. That could provide a good distraction away from our affairs." Sara knew the reasoning was weak as soon as she spoke.

Cameron's father regarded her in a penetrating way. "What's your real concern, Sara?"

His perception made Sara uncomfortable. She was relieved that Barbara wasn't in the room to see how easily he discerned her mood. She wished she didn't have to work with him at all, but now that he was acting manager of the colony, what choice did she have if she wanted to keep Tempest at bay? She often chided herself for making him her second assistant to begin with, but she really hadn't had any choice if she'd wanted to keep peace in the colony, and the fact remained that he was the person who should have been the governor in the first place, not her. At least he never visited her without Cameron or Barbara with him. "I'm afraid that going after the ship would be more dangerous than it's worth."

Cameron frowned. "She has a point. We probably shouldn't do it until she communicates with Tempest again."

Thunder cracked overhead, confirming in Sara's mind, at least, Tempest's displeasure. "I think the Zarrists have withdrawn their bridle."

"What now?" Cyndi asked.

"I guess there isn't much we can do until I can communicate with Tempest."

\* \* \*

The storm didn't cease but did settle into a constant rain that kept the colonists indoors. Early in Sara and Trevor's convalescence, Sister Ireland and her team had installed overhead video screens in the hospital that worked with their phones, allowing them to communicate visually with people around the colony without having them visit personally. This arrangement turned out to be a convenient way to allow them more rest and proved to be quite effective during the rainy days.

Sara was particularly grateful for her calling as Primary president. The video/phone arrangement allowed her to interact with the children somewhat on Sunday, and being involved in the organization of their meetings and activities allowed her to put her thoughts in a wholesome, useful place.

Sara tried day after day to communicate with Tempest again, her desire for information slowly overcoming her compulsion to vent her displeasure with the planet-

spirit. Finally, four and a half weeks after the accident, she found her Awareness and sank into the ground, inviting Tempest to communicate.

The first thing Sara saw was an image of Control Colony's spaceship crushed in the ocean's pit and the arelada buried even more deeply than it had been in a crevice in the planet's depths. *You can never leave, Governor Carroll. I need you too much.*

Sara's anger toward Tempest flared. *You never wanted me or anyone else to come here in the first place! Why wouldn't you want us to leave?*

*I don't understand why you are so upset. I haven't done anything to hurt you or the humans close to you.*

*That isn't true. The storm you sent hurt me very badly, and my babies are dead because of it.*

*Your babies were not alive yet, so they didn't count, and if I had meant for you to die, you would have died. The storm I sent wasn't that strong.*

*My babies were alive, and they did count, and you are cruel if you can't understand how much losing them hurts me!*

*I am sorry that your vehicle wasn't strong enough to get through the storm. I didn't know that would happen. These many weeks that you haven't been able to communicate have been painful to me. It was a mistake.*

*But you don't believe that killing those people in Third Colony was a mistake, do you? It makes me angry that you would do that to hundreds of innocent people simply for saying prayers! Can't you understand how wrong that was?*

*It wasn't wrong!*

*Is it possible for you to think about anything but your own inconvenience?*

*My lawgiver promised me that everyone they brought to live on me would live the laws of the Creator. A group of people can't live the laws of the Creator when they all worship differently! Those people weren't supposed to be here at all!*

*But they were here. Certainly the agreement you made with your lawgiver stipulated that you should not purposely kill people!*

*That doesn't matter. The lawgiver promised that the people who came to me would live the laws of the Creator. When people with all kinds of different beliefs about the Creator came here, I knew he had lied to me. I don't have to keep a broken law.*

Could such a thing be true? Could a terraforming government have made such an ambiguous promise and then not adhered to it?

Tempest's outrage poured over Sara. *Do you really think I would lie about something like that?*

*No, of course not. I don't think you're lying. I just wonder if you misunderstood the agreement.*

*It was impossible to misunderstand the agreement! The lawgiver communicated, "I promise you by the authority of the Gudynean Federation that only people who live the laws of the Creator will be permitted to settle on this planet."*

*That sounds official, all right.* Now, finally, Sara knew what government had terraformed Eden. She wondered if Novaun made agreements like that with planet-spirits. The promise, however, certainly had been vague, and that didn't feel right. Why would a government go to such lengths to terraform a planet and then not create a contract more solid and specific?

*Do you really think the lawgiver was wrong to make that promise to me?* Tempest seemed surprised, as if she had never considered the possibility that such a thing could be wrong.

*I don't know. I don't know anything about the Gudynean Federation and what their terraforming policies are. I do know, though, that people can worship differently and still live the basic laws of the Creator. I also know that even when people in a group all have the same religion, some of those people don't live the laws of the Creator.*

*You don't think, then, that mortals are capable of living all the laws of God?*

Wariness gripped Sara. *I believe they are capable of living the laws of God to your satisfaction. I don't believe that you and your lawgiver agreed on what that meant.*

*The lawgiver understood my demand.*

Could it be that Tempest's "lawgiver" had made an unauthorized agreement? If so, that would explain why the colonists who had come later had not satisfied Tempest's idea of what it meant to "live the laws of the Creator." It also explained why Tempest was so sensitive to lying.

*I knew you would agree with me if you knew what really happened.*

*I believe that just because your lawgivers broke the agreement as you understand it doesn't mean the Creator would justify you in breaking yours.*

Anxiety seized Tempest. *Bishop Carroll said that "the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day." What did he mean?*

*It means that God doesn't punish intelligent beings for having bad intentions or inclinations. He allows them to go ahead and do the terrible thing so that when He pronounces a judgment on them, it will be fair.*

*Why did Bishop Carroll say that? Was he talking about me?*

*He said that because the spirit of God directed him to say that. Only you know whether God meant those words to be for you.*

*I don't know how they can be directed to me. I didn't do anything wrong!*

Sara felt another stab of anger. She stifled it by communicating, *We were told that those strange men who landed a week and a half ago "bridled" you. What happened, exactly?*

Tempest bristled. *They touched my spirit with their machines from their ships and calmed my systems in a very small place near where you live. I fought them, but they were too strong.*

*Could you actually see their ships in orbit around you?*

*I can't see ships that far out clearly, but I can when they come closer. A small ship came and landed a little distance from your settlement. The people on that ship took tighter control of my systems, but I fought even harder against them.*

*What did they look like? Can you show me your memory?* A moment later, Sara perceived seven men and three women in Zarrist uniforms in heavy concentration on a small ship similar to the one that had belonged to Control Colony and with the same markings. She tried to restrain her excitement. *How did these Zarrists succeed in bridling you when the Zarrists who came here with me did not?*

*They did not succeed! I fought them hard and was starting to throw them off. Then they gave up and left!*

*But there weren't as many of these people as there were of the others, and their bridle worked better. Why?*

*You are asking too many questions!*

Tempest withdrew, leaving Sara to contemplate all of the new things she had learned, the most important being that Tempest's story about the rescuers agreed with the one Rachel Vance had told Cameron's father. Not only that, but the people who had landed in a separate ship to secure the bridle on Tempest had come in a ship with Zarrist markings and they, too, had been wearing Zarrist uniforms. By all appearances, these rescuers really were who they said they were! Sara could hardly wait to tell the others.

## CHAPTER 16: AN UNKNOWN FUTURE

Every time Myri reflected on all of the visions and miracles that had occurred since she had come into the Light, she felt as if she were highly favored of God—not fallen at all—and basked in the glow of those blessings, floating through her new life as if it were a dream. She arose at six o'clock every morning and stood for Seamstress Kintz as she marked and pinned her new clothing, then dressed for the day and arrived at David's house promptly at eight—right after his father and one of his brothers finished taking care of his hygiene needs. She, her bodyguards, and Seamstress Kintz ate breakfast with David and his family, and then all embarked on their tasks for the day.

Myri helped David do his exercises, brought things to him, read to him, and more than anything talked with him. They never seemed to run out of things to discuss, and David never seemed to get tired of her presence or indicate a desire to be alone. Myri dismissed Seamstress Kintz and the second bodyguard at four o'clock in the afternoon. She and Captain Sauvel remained with the Pierces for four more hours to discuss their new religion with David, his parents, and whichever other member of the family happened to be there. The second bodyguard returned at eight o'clock in the evening to take her and Captain Sauvel back to Liberty. She took time away from David only on Sunday mornings, when she attended church with her people.

Myri loved her new life and could have continued sauntering through it indefinitely, but as the weeks passed, she became aware of the inevitable—David was recovering and wouldn't need her services forever. As this fact ruffled the edges of her consciousness, producing a twinge of dissatisfaction, Captain Sauvel shook her awake from her dream world.

"My Saintess," he said one evening as they left the house at eight o'clock to walk to the aircar, "may I have permission to speak?"

Captain Sauvel so rarely spoke out of turn that Myri knew immediately what he wanted to discuss and resisted. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Prince Jahnzel is obviously not coming into the Light to communicate with you, and the emperor is undoubtedly restless." His voice sounded anxious.

Concern for Captain Sauvel's safety overcame the outrage Myri felt for being defied. "The emperor isn't here, thank goodness!" She couldn't bear the thought that she might send Captain Sauvel to his death.

"You're putting your new friends in danger!"

Where had he been the past month? They all lived under a shield of God's protection! "We're all safe here in the Light."

"Has this new man in your life driven all thoughts of Prince Jahnzel out of your mind?" This time he sounded angry and appalled.

Suddenly the discussion wasn't about sending Captain Sauvel to Teton Colony anymore, and Myri wasn't sure what it was about. She stopped at the end of the walk, and Captain Sauvel stopped as well. They faced each other. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sorry, my Saintess. I was wrong to speak of it."

"Wrong to speak of what?"

"It's not my place to say."

"It's your place to answer any question I put to you! Now what did you mean by that outburst?"

"Whether you are willing to admit it or not, you and that savage are more than nursemaid and patient." He sounded embarrassed and still appalled.

"Of course we are; we're very good friends."

"No, you're 'friends' with the members of his family. You and David act like a couple that's courting."

Myri could not have been more shocked had Jahnzel materialized in front of her. "But he's never . . . we've never . . ."

"You really don't see it, do you?"

What exactly had Captain Sauvel seen to make him think what he did? "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You have never appeared in public with David Pierce, and yet our people already refer to him as your 'savage distraction' and your 'too-friendly friend.'"

"But that makes no sense. They have never even seen David!"

"You're here all the time. They notice things like that. And Seamstress Kintz likes to gossip."

"But we've never been affectionate. She's seen *nothing*!"

Captain Sauvel sighed. "You're so young, and you've been so sheltered."

Myri felt uneasy. "Do you think there's something wrong with my friendship with David?"

"All I know is that your 'friendship' with David is so intense it seems to be taking your mind away from your duty."

By "duty" Captain Sauvel obviously meant Jahnzel. Myri wasn't sure what disturbed her more—that she might have a "duty" to marry a man to whom she was no longer betrothed, a man who might not even want to marry her anymore, or that she really hadn't thought much about Jahnzel during the past month. "My duty right now is to help David get well."

"Then you need to communicate with the emperor and tell him that you are planning to stay here for another year. If you don't, David will become a target before he can heal completely."

The thought of David's dying so horrified Myri that she finally resigned herself to the inevitable. "This is it then—our second plan goes into motion." Putting words on a piece of paper to explain her supposed situation to Arulezz would be awkward, but Myri understood it was the only way she could communicate with him without compromising herself either to her own people in the Light or to the emperor himself.

"Yes, my Saintess. I'll leave on foot tonight with the letter. Once I'm outside of the Light, I'll be stopped and taken to Tryamaz Camp. From there, I'll take a transport to Teton Colony. Since I won't be in your aircar, I'll have to announce myself before landing. If Prince Jahnzel becomes aware of my transmission to Teton Colony, he may be disturbed enough by the fact that I'm alone that he'll investigate."

Myri resumed her walk to the aircar. "We can hope . . . and pray."

During the remainder of the walk and the ride to Liberty, Myri said nothing, her mind whirling. What in the galaxy distinguished a courting couple from a couple of friends if not physical demonstrations of affection, demonstrations that had never been a part of her relationship with David? Could it be sentimental topics of conversation? How? She and David had talked about everything but their friendship and future, and never in a sentimental way!



Captain Sauvel had used the word “intense” to describe her friendship with David. What did that mean? She pulled other words from her memory that were similar to intense: ardent, deep, extreme, fervent, passionate, profound, strong, vehement. These words did not so much describe the settled, kindly feelings one normally associated with the word “friendship” but seemed more suited, as Captain Sauvel had suggested, to a phrase like “courting couple.”

There she was, back to the idea that she and David were behaving like a “courting couple.” What was happening to her? Was her friendship with David really “ardent”? Yes, she had to admit that being with David gave her warm, even (sometimes) hot, feelings. Was their friendship deep? Yes, absolutely. She had told him things she had never told anyone, and he had been very open with her also. Was it extreme? Well, yes, if wanting to be together all the time was extreme, then it was probably that too. Fervent? Not sure.

Passionate? Myri hesitated on this one. She and David had never held hands or exchanged little tokens of affection in that way, but now that the question had arisen, she felt her cheeks grow hot. She hadn’t held his hand, but sometimes she did touch him in the normal course of her ministrations. Just thinking about the feel of his muscles under her hands made her heart beat faster. Why hadn’t other patients affected her this way? Why had David never tried to hold her hand or touch her with any kind of affection? He had actually kissed Ashley! And then he had said that he made it a rule not to kiss a girl who had a bodyguard. Of course he had never tried to hold her hand. There was a chasm between them he dared not cross. Would he, though, if he thought he could? Or was he still thinking about Ashley?

Tears started in Myri’s eyes, and she blinked them away, feeling foolish. Obviously her friendship with David really was passionate, at least on her part. Was it profound? Absolutely. Strong? Of course. Vehement? Yes. David had, from the beginning, been emphatic about wanting her to nurse him back to health, and she had wanted to do so far more than take her natural position as leader among her people, which had resulted in Captain Sauvel’s chastisement.

How had her life ended up in this insane place? She had spent most of her life betrothed to an honorable man who would have made her a happy wife, and then was told God wanted her to marry a practically bald savage who held no appeal to her whatsoever. Out of duty she had come into the Light to force this undesirable man to marry her and hadn’t been able to do it, in the process learning that God couldn’t have possibly inspired the Divine Emperor, who had never been a true spokesman for God at all, to choose this undesirable native to be her husband.

In a month’s time, she had become such close friends with this undesirable native that her bodyguard now thought they acted as though they were courting, and she realized that he really was desirable after all, and yet the Blessed Sons had told her that her people must return to Diron, which meant she couldn’t marry the desirable native. But wait! The emperor and everyone in Teton Colony expected her to marry the desirable native, although one among her people, at least, was disgusted by her attention to this man because her people (he claimed) really wanted her to marry the one to whom she had been betrothed in the beginning, the sensible choice if her duty really was to lead her people to Diron.

The emperor had said her “duty” was this, and her bodyguard now said her duty was that, and the Blessed Sons had explained the duty of her people, but never her specific

duty among them. Duty, duty, duty. With such a life of contradictions, how could she even know what her real duty was?

One thing was certain—if she couldn’t convince the emperor that she and David were each other’s love slaves, he would send an army after them and, in the meantime, probably kill Captain Sauvel. Her duty at the moment, then, was to lie fabulously, and fortunately she was in the perfect frame of mind to do so.

\* \* \*

Betty’s fear that David would marry Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro subsided somewhat after the saintess told them about her conversation with the temple community president and what she had said to him about the distaste her people had for marrying Earth’s natives. Had Saintess Myri kept a bit of emotional distance between herself and David and insisted on taking evenings and weekends off, Betty’s fears might have vanished completely, but the saintess chose to do the opposite and spent virtually all of her hours awake at the Pierce home, floating around the house in those formal gowns and outlandish headdresses she wore as if she were wearing jeans instead.

The girl really was tireless in her efforts to meet David’s needs and had thus taken a huge burden off of the family. She was courteous and smiled a lot, and she soaked up every fragment of information they gave her about the teachings of the Church. Betty couldn’t help but like her, despite the nagging feeling she had that love was growing between the saintess and her son.

As far as Betty knew, David hadn’t admitted to any member of the family that he loved Saintess Myri, and he didn’t treat the girl in the demonstrative way he would have had they confessed their feelings to each other, but his spirits soared in her presence in a way that wasn’t justified, considering the circumstances surrounding his injuries, and he never complained about anything she did or wanted her to leave him alone—ever.

That Saintess Myri never wanted to take time off from her “job” meant that she saw her time with David as pleasure, not work, and Betty both anticipated and dreaded the day when her son would make an advance, either frightening the saintess away or drawing her into a more expressive relationship.

Betty sometimes hoped the Brethren would soon make an announcement about the status of Saintess Myri’s people and that they would be forbidden temple blessings, thereby ensuring that David would never marry his beautiful saintess. Then Betty would feel ashamed for wanting such a restriction on this faithful group of people and resign herself to the realization that the Church wouldn’t outright ban a temple marriage to a Zarrist any more than it had banned Teri’s marriage to a Novaunian. Then Betty would tell herself over and over that eventually the saintess would perceive the needs of her people to be greater than David’s and drift away from them, and that would be that.

Saintess Myri arrived several hours late one day without Captain Sauvel, her customary smile gone and her face very pale. She entered the bedroom with Gene, where Betty and Bob were waiting with David for her, concerned that something was wrong.

“Captain Sauvel abandoned me.” The saintess went to David’s recliner and straightened the blanket over his legs. “He left the Light in the middle of the night. He had to have been on foot, so I sent Larynt and Neemon to look for him. They couldn’t

find him, so we assume President Richardson's soldiers found him first and took him to Tryamaz Camp."

"Everything'll be all right, Myri," David said.

"I wish I could believe it." She lifted the pitcher on David's end table and filled his glass. "I really don't know what I'm going to do without him."

"Not everyone can stand living in the Light," Bob said.

"I know he missed his wife, but I wish he would have given me some indication that he was dissatisfied with his life here." Saintess Myri set the pitcher down and adjusted the pillow behind David's head. "My people are in an uproar. They're afraid Captain Sauvel will take their names to the emperor, and they're probably right." Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes.

Watching the saintess do all of these little things for David that she knew better than anyone he could do for himself grieved Betty. The girl was worried about her bodyguard almost to the point of being frantic, and Betty liked her better because of it. "Will you be able to eat a little something this morning?"

Saintess Myri shook her head and ran her hands over David's blanket, attempting to smooth what was already perfect. "I'm sorry, but my stomach refuses to settle. I can't possibly eat today."

Betty felt an urge to put her arms around her and let her weep away some of her tension. She patted the spot next to her on the bed. "Then why don't you sit down and tell us what happened."

Saintess Myri tilted the pitcher to add another quarter of an inch of water to David's already-full glass. When she reached to touch her handkerchief to his forehead, David stopped her by closing his hand over her wrist in what could only be described as a caress.

"I'm okay. Really, Myri." David didn't sound irritated by all of her attention, and Betty wondered if he had stopped the saintess as an excuse to touch her.

Saintess Myri drank up David's caress the way a parched woman would gulp down a sip of water. She laid her other hand on David's and collapsed to her knees, trembling, the handkerchief floating to the armrest of the chair. "I can't bear this!"

When the sobs started, Gene and Bob left the room, leaving Betty there as an unwilling witness to the tenderness that was blossoming before her. David turned to his side and encircled Saintess Myri's shoulders with his free arm, gently drawing her close so that she could lay her head on his chest as she cried.

That David's reaction to Saintess Myri's anxiety was so sweet, so innocuous, and so unconscious almost made it worse, because it confirmed in Betty's mind what she already suspected—that he loved this girl, sincerely and perhaps irrevocably. The saintess snuggled up to David so gratefully and returned his embrace so warmly that Betty was pretty sure a kiss from him would not scare her away.

While the saintess was from a morally strict culture and used to courting under the watchful eyes of her mother, David, like all young American men, expected freedom and privacy in matters of the heart. Betty was pretty sure he wouldn't kiss Saintess Myri or confess his love while his mother was so close she could hear a whisper, particularly since he couldn't be sure how the former fiancée of Prince Jahnzel would react. Betty's husband would say she had no business remaining in the room, particularly since the saintess's chaperone would prevent anything truly unseemly from happening, but Betty could not get up. In her mind, she kept seeing Teri enter that Novaunian spaceship,

never to return. She could not—would not—do anything that would pave the way for David to make the same choice.

\* \* \*

Myri couldn't believe that she hadn't even thought of the danger that would come to her people in the Light when she sent Captain Sauvel to Teton Colony. She had no doubt Captain Sauvel had understood the risk all along, and yet he had chosen her long-term safety over that of the others and their families still living in the empire. She wasn't surprised, given the fact that he had taken an oath to protect her at all costs when he had become her bodyguard, but she was as angry with him for not telling her the risk to the others as she was worried about him. She yearned to discuss her anxiety with David and his family, but she couldn't tell them that she had released Captain Sauvel to take a letter to the emperor and a message to Jahnzel in front of Seamstress Kintz and Shipman Larynt, although she assumed the Pierces suspected the real reason Captain Sauvel had left the Light.

Myri tried to distract herself by attending to David's needs, but even that didn't work, because David needed nothing. She hadn't known how much she craved his touch until she felt his fingers on her wrist. He ran his fingers over her skin in a way that gave her both excitement and comfort, and she wanted him to draw her close and hold her in his arms for a very long time. The desire felt so senseless, so futile, so reckless, and yet so uncompromising that she lost her composure.

When he did wrap his arms around her shoulders and draw her closer, the sensation was even more wonderful than she had imagined, especially when she felt his hand stroke her head through the veil. After many minutes, she felt her impulse to weep soothed, but instead of pulling away and wiping away her tears, she continued to cling to him.

After they had been in that position for some time and Myri still couldn't bring herself to withdraw, she felt David's hand move to her cheek and brush her veil aside. Her face grew hot, and she felt compelled to lift her head and look at him. He was smiling, ever so slightly, those delicious long-lashed eyes studying her lovingly, and Myri knew, at that moment, that if he didn't kiss her, she would hate him.

He didn't disappoint her, and when his lips touched hers, everything inside of her wanted to eat him up. She returned kiss after kiss and didn't think she could ever stop, and then she heard the bed squeak and realized that Elizabeth Pierce had been there all the time and was just leaving.

Mortified, Myri jerked away from David and withdrew to the chair where she always sat while they talked. Before she could speak, David whispered, "I had to get rid of her somehow."

Of all the outrageous things David had ever said, this comment was the most scandalous Myri had heard yet. "You're so bad!"

"No, *she* was being bad. My dad and brother had the decency to leave the room when you began to cry, but my mother stayed because she didn't think I would kiss you in her presence. What kind of man would I be if I allowed my mother to dictate whether I should kiss you or not?"

"What we did was wrong, David." Her mind believed it, but her heart didn't accept it, and she allowed him to take her hand in his.

"I love you, Myri, and kissing you feels very right to me."

Hearing David tell her that he loved her gave her such a bittersweet feeling that she almost couldn't bear it. "But our . . . our . . . whatever-it-is-we-have can go nowhere!"

"How do you know?"

"My people are supposed to go to Diron."

"That doesn't mean you have to go with them, nor does it mean I have to stay here."

"I couldn't ask you to go to Diron too!" She had caused enough grief to her people. She *wouldn't* abandon them when it was time for them to return to Diron.

"And I'm not saying I would go any more than you could now say you would stay. All I'm saying is that neither one of us *knows* that we *couldn't* have a future together. What I do know is that I love you and want to see what happens."

Tears rushed into her eyes again, forcing her to retrieve her handkerchief and avert her eyes. "You're too wonderful. And totally reckless." Myri was sure he wouldn't love her so much if he knew how she and Captain Sauvel had put her people in the Light at risk. She tried to pull her hand away from his, but he gripped it even tighter, refusing to let go.

"No, Myri, I would be reckless if I asked you to marry me right now. I'm nowhere near ready for that, and neither are you, but I do know that everything's different now for all of us, and no one's future is certain. Even the Blessed Princes refused to show you your future. We really, truly don't *know* that we can't be married at some time. If it is possible, wouldn't it be a tragedy if we refused to have hope, or to be honest, or to get close, and made it impossible by our own rigid attitudes and actions?" David's words opened a vista of new possibilities to Myri, and for the first time since she had arrived in the Light, she realized just how much freedom there was in *not* knowing her future. Perhaps she really did have the autonomy to be with David in this romantic way and feel happy and not ashamed. "I think I love you too, David." She turned her hand over and allowed him to caress her palm.

David's smile widened. "You *think*?" He startled Myri with a laugh. "Those were pretty eager kisses for someone you merely *think* you love."

"I may only be insanely infatuated with you."

David laughed even more heartily. "The holy high priestess merely infatuated with her favorite savage? I don't believe it for a moment."

Myri loved the way it had never occurred to David that he was anything but upright and glorious and worthy of her in every way. He may not have been born to nobility as she had been, but his virtue and self-confidence made him a true nobleman at heart. "You're awfully self-satisfied."

"Were I any less so, I wouldn't have dared kiss my beautiful saintess." David tugged on her hand. "Now come back over here."

Myri longed to kiss him again but didn't dare. "I'm afraid I've already given Seamstress Kintz enough to gossip about." How could she have let her guard down so completely?

"So what if she does?"

"I'm not ready to share you with my people yet."

He almost appeared offended. "Are you ashamed of me?"

"No! Not at all." Or at least she didn't think she was. "If you really understood what sort of public person I am, you wouldn't have even thought to ask such a thing. Really,

David, I just want us to be Myri and David for as absolutely long as possible, not Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro and her . . . whatever-it-is-you-are.”

David grinned. “The word you’re looking for is ‘boyfriend.’”

“Boyfriend.” The word was too simple and insignificant to describe what she felt for David. “Certainly there’s another word.”

“Not unless you want to let people think we’re doing more than holding hands and kissing.”

Myri felt herself blush. “There are actually words for such . . . people?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then I guess ‘boyfriend’ will have to do.”

He tugged on her hand again. “Please, Myri, just one more time. You know you’re dying to.”

Myri glanced toward the hallway, where Seamstress Kintz sat every day, sewing. She seemed busy enough that perhaps she hadn’t seen anything at all. Then again, her mother had always told her that servants had invisible eyes on the backs of their heads, and Seamstress Kintz was there in the role of chaperone.

Myri removed her hand from David’s with reluctance. “I’m sorry, David, but, despite my feelings, I must be discreet in showing my affection.”

\* \* \*

Once Betty recovered from the shock caused by David’s gall in kissing that Zarr girl right there in front of her, only an arm’s length away, she could do nothing but jump up and get out of the room as fast as possible. She found Gene in the backyard, splitting wood. “I cannot believe how downright brazen that boy is.”

“What happened?”

“He kissed her, right there in front of me.”

“Good for him.”

“Didn’t hesitate for a second.”

“You raised your son to be a man, not a mouse. If he’d behaved in any other way, you’d be disgusted with him.”

“And that girl’s just as shameless as he is!”

Gene set the ax aside and looked at Betty with interest. “Now that I don’t believe.”

“Believe it. She was as passionate as he was. Seemed completely out of control.”

“Our prim and proper little saintess out of control? Are you sure you’re not exaggerating?”

“Not in the least.”

“Now let me see if I understand you correctly. The saintess was smooching with your son, right there in front of you and her chaperone?”

“Yeah.”

“Now that’s real interesting.”

“She’s a little hussy!”

“No, I’d say that underneath all those formal manners, she’s just a seventeen-year-old girl who’s crazy about our boy.”

“She really is a lot younger than he is, isn’t she? I keep forgetting that.”

“So do I.”

“We need to get her out of this house!”

"If that's really what you want, then let her heal him."

"I don't know whether I can do that, and David's coming along fine."

"She can finish him up. I thought you trusted her."

"I'm afraid I'll always have a little doubt in my mind about her if she goes that far."

"If we let her do her thing, she'll spend more time with her people in Liberty."

"Once he's able to get back on a bicycle, he'll just go see her there."

"Of course he will, but at least that way, he'll get out of this dream world he's in and see whether he can stomach being the consort-in-training to a Zarrist noblewoman."

Betty couldn't imagine her proud, patriotic son ever being happy as a "consort" to any type of noblewoman, particularly one of a nation who was The Enemy. "Perhaps that will be just the thing to cool his interest in her."

Gene took Betty into his arms. "Perhaps it will be, but perhaps not."

"It's just going to have to be!"

"I know this is torture for you, but you've got to come to terms with the fact that David really might marry this alien gal."

Betty jerked away from her husband. "How can you stand there and tell me to accept the unacceptable? How can you have let that girl into this house in the first place and assured me that she's unlikely ever to be seriously interested in our boy and then act like nothing's wrong when I tell you I saw them smooching?"

Gene shrugged. "Maybe she wants to flirt with David. Maybe she just wants a little romance on the side while she waits for her prince."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"Aren't queens allowed to have flings? Shouldn't a saintess be allowed the same perk?"

How could he even suggest such a thing about their virtuous little saintess? "She isn't that kind of girl!"

Gene gripped Betty's shoulders, his eyes boring into hers. "No, she isn't. She's a good girl, an extraordinary girl. If she was from around here, you'd be trying to match them up!"

He was so absolutely right that Betty looked away from him in shame. "There's no girl quite like her from around here."

Gene released her shoulders. "No there isn't, and that's kind of the point."

"So you're saying that you think I need to try and forget she's an alien."

"No, I think that's a terrible thing to do. You did a good job of forgetting Tren's an alien, and then you couldn't forgive him when he took Teri away."

Betty didn't like the possibility that she might be refusing to forgive her son-in-law for something he hadn't done wrong. "Then what are you saying?"

"I just think you need to get it through your head—really get it through your head—that your children are very strange, and that they really like aliens."

## CHAPTER 17: BRILLIANT AND DESPICABLE

For the first time in as long as Rachel could remember, she had nothing to do but to eat, sleep, and lounge on peach cushions, staring at the stars in the domed window and occasionally speaking with the other colonists who had come with her. Lieutenant Sistrel came every day and answered their questions.

*May we talk to the other colonists?*

*We have left the system to rendezvous with Admiral Sutuzav. A radio message would not reach them before we return. Be patient!*

*Can we take a tour of the ship?*

*This is a working vessel that cannot accommodate such a request. Is there something I can do to make your experience here more comfortable?*

*No, we are perfectly comfortable. We're bored, though, and would like to learn more about other planets. Isn't there something we could read, er, assimilate?*

*The information in the ship's libraries is composed in our unique telepathic shorthand, which you do not understand. Is there a particular question you would like me to answer?*

*Yes. How could your nation not know that Eden was dangerous?*

*Danger is a relative condition. We had been to Eden, of course, but without incident. We did not know why it was uninhabited. We suspected there could be a danger, but we thought the danger would be minimal and worth the risk. It is, after all, such a beautiful planet. Our people had been in space for so long. Eden seemed like a wonderful dream!*

Eden had seemed like a wonderful dream, and Rachel wanted to weep at times as she remembered all of the dreams of her life that had become bitter. As the days passed, she wished she hadn't been so hasty in leaving Duane. How she missed him!

After a week or so—it was impossible to tell for sure since no real activity existed to separate the days and the nights—Rachel realized that she was getting restless. She longed for work and wondered what kind of future she and the other colonists faced now that their settlement on Eden had been a disaster. The whole situation seemed so unfair. The Equality of Zion had never had a real chance to succeed, and yet during the past weeks, the colony had blossomed into a beautiful, functional community. The Equality of Zion would have worked if given half a chance. Rachel almost missed being there.

She asked Lieutenant Sistrel, *After we pick up the other colonists, will we return to Earth, or is it possible that we can colonize a different planet?*

*There aren't other planets to colonize—none like Eden anyway.*

*Why not?*

*Government restrictions, for one thing. Eden is located in an area where several different government jurisdictions come together. That, combined with the fact that it's a fully functioning planet, makes it unique.*

*Which means that other potential planets would need to be terraformed first.*

*That's right.*

*How long does it take to terraform a planet?*

*Many years.*

*Then we're definitely returning to Earth.*

*There's nowhere else to go.*



Learning they had nowhere to go but back to Earth disheartened the others also. They reminisced about the early days of the colony preparation on Earth and relived their excitement and hopes and dreams. Sometimes Rachel wondered whether such focus was helpful, but as the days passed, she realized that talking it all out was giving her a sense of serenity she hadn't possessed before. She believed that by the time she returned to Earth, she would be ready to put the Eden failure behind her and step forward into a new life.

Two weeks slid away, and Lieutenant Sistrrel came to the starry lounge and told Rachel that Captain Nahn wished to communicate with her again. She entered his office, and he arose, his dark eyes glowing in an undecipherable way. *I have some disconcerting news for you.* He motioned her into a chair. *Please sit down.*

\* \* \*

Anticipation increased once the colonists learned of Sara's communication with Tempest. No one could believe that a ship the colonists weren't even supposed to know about would land, bearing Zarrist symbols and people wearing Zarrist uniforms, unless those people really were Zarrists. Cameron's father, however, pointed out that just because the colonists *hadn't* observed the second ship didn't mean they *couldn't* have observed it, particularly since they had manufactured quite a fleet of aircars. If these space travelers had wanted to convince the colonists they were Zarrists, they would have disguised both ships and their crews as a precaution.

Nevertheless, Cameron told Sara that, despite his father's skepticism, most of the colonists believed the space travelers were Zarrists and felt only excitement about the possibility of their return. Sara thought it ironic that his father was the one who kept countering the colonists' excitement, not Cameron himself. Every time he did, Sara grew more and more convinced that he did not, at an instinctive level, believe that the rescuers actually were Zarrists, and that troubled her. For that reason, along with her family's danger and Tempest's claim that she would never let Sara leave the planet, Sara felt anxious most of the time.

Late on Thursday morning, exactly two weeks after the space shuttle had taken twenty of the colonists off of the planet, Sara heard many voices approaching the hospital. She looked over at Trevor, and he shrugged, as if he were wondering the same thing she was. "Do you think it's good news or bad?" she asked.

"Bad," he said as Cyndi and Ashley hurried to the door to keep the crowd from entering.

Within a minute, Cameron entered with his father close behind. Cameron approached Sara and took her hand. He said in a low voice, "You're not going to believe what happened."

Cameron's father said over his shoulder at the crowd, "I know you're all excited and want to know what's going on, but we really must discuss the situation with Sara and Trevor before we make an announcement to the colony."

Sara tried to smile, feeling more anxious than ever. "Good news or bad?"

"I hardly know. Father will tell you. He's the one who got the message."

Cameron's father closed the door and moved toward the spot between the beds where he always stood when he came to speak to both Sara and Trevor. He motioned to

Cyndi and Ashley, who were the only staff in the room at the moment, and pointed to the door. "I'm sorry, you two. You're going to have to leave for this one."

Ashley lifted her brows. "So much for transparent government."

The corner of Cyndi's mouth twitched, as if she wanted to laugh. "We can stand by the door and keep the others out." She said it with just such an intonation that Sara was pretty sure they would both end up listening at the door, which hardly mattered since neither one of them had ever repeated anything that had been discussed by the colony executives.

"Did we hear from the Zarrists?" Trevor asked after Cyndi and Ashley left the hospital.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we did. I just talked with Rachel."

"And?" Trevor said.

"Apparently the emperor considers the colony to be a success and has no intention of taking any of us off the planet."

Sara didn't believe it. "How can that be?"

"She claims that their intention in bringing us all here to begin with was to prepare the planet for a military base."

"Is that true?" Sara asked. "Certainly the Zarrists gave you some idea of their intentions."

"They never said anything about a base, but the idea isn't too much of a stretch, especially given what your father told you about Eden's being located in a strategic position. Apparently, the fact that so many of us have survived means we've done our job well."

"This has to be a mistake."

"Believe it. They want to make you the official governor of the colony and provide you with military support to enforce Tempest's demands."

The idea was simultaneously so brilliant and so despicable that Sara couldn't find words to respond.

"The emperor really believes such a course would make us all safe?" Trevor said. "I'd like him to live on this planet for a week or two and see how he feels about it then!"

"Perhaps the emperor cares only about his base," Cameron said, "not about who lives or dies."

"Rachel informs me that the Zarrists are deeply sorry they bridled Tempest and want Sara to apologize to her for them. They want to forge a new agreement with Tempest. They are willing to abide by any rules she sets and vow to enforce all of those rules in the colony if she will let them land."

Trevor frowned. "Could that even work?"

Sara reached for her water bottle. "It would, if the soldiers understood the dangerousness of the situation we're all in and kept the rules themselves."

"That's a pretty big 'if.' They could just as easily do something to get us all killed," Cameron said.

"What do you think Tempest would think of that arrangement?" Cameron's father asked Sara.

Sara returned her water bottle to the table next to her bed. "I think she would like it. It would make her job easy. Presuming she would be willing to let the Zarrists land at all."

"You don't think she would?"

"There's only one way to find out." Sara concentrated on the arelada hanging from the chain around her neck, opened her mind to Tempest, and received an immediate response: *I want soldiers here to enforce my commands. Make the agreement.*

*Then if they come, you will allow them to land?*

*Yes, as long as they don't attempt a bridle.*

As Sara's focus on the tangible returned, she heard Trevor say, "What did Rachel, herself, think about this? I can't believe she wouldn't fight it."

"What she said was actually quite interesting. Two weeks with nothing to do has given her plenty of time to think. She realizes that what we've accomplished here on Eden is something wonderful and would like to give it another try."

"You're right, that is interesting," Trevor said. "I hate to admit it, but she has a point. The colony is coming together in an amazing way, and we haven't had an incident in weeks."

"That's only because everyone is too terrified to speak or to do anything," Cameron said. "I don't want to live like that. Do you?"

"I hate the idea of having soldiers here ordering us around," Trevor agreed.

"The problem is," Cameron said, "we don't know what the Zarrists would do if we protest this new plan."

Sara opened her eyes. "Tempest wants us to make the agreement."

"What do *you* think we should do?" Cameron's father asked.

"I think it's mighty odd that she was fighting the bridle two weeks ago and now wants us to allow ships and soldiers to land."

"*Wants* is a pretty strong word," said Trevor.

"She responded immediately, and her emotions were clear. I told you she would like the idea."

"Could she be afraid of the Zarrists?" Cameron asked.

"I didn't feel any fear in her, but I only communicated with her for a few moments. I suppose she could be afraid of another bridle. The fact is, they put a partial bridle on her from orbit. With that being the case, they could put a much stronger one on her if they had enough ships, arelada, and skilled people."

"Early this morning, the sky watchers reported that they have observed twenty-eight ships in orbit around the planet," Cameron's father said, "and there may have been some they missed."

"Which means they might already have enough resources to secure a stronger bridle," Sara said.

"What could they do with it if they had it?" Cameron's father asked.

"Get us off the planet!" said Trevor.

"Given the fact that they don't intend to do that at the moment, what could be their Plan B if we refuse to cooperate with this new plan to establish a base?" Cameron's father asked.

"Bridle the planet, kill us all, and make their own agreement with Tempest," Cameron said.

Cameron's father shook his head. "The Zarrists aren't murderers."

Cameron looked at him pointedly. "Presuming they're Zarrists."

His father squinted slightly, pondering. "Point taken. The fact is, we have no obvious way to fight them. If they want to bridle Tempest and come, they can. And if they want to kill us all, they can do that too."

"Tempest wouldn't allow them to do that," Sara said. "If nothing else, she wants me alive."

"If that's obvious to us, it's just as obvious to them," said Cameron's father. "My guess is that your presence here is what is keeping them from taking us off of the planet."

Sara hadn't thought of this possibility, as logical as it was. "Then I'm the reason they feel comfortable coming down here without a bridle and establishing a base. They see me as their protection."

"Which means that they probably would be on their best behavior if they did come," Cameron's father said.

"Presuming they understand how dangerous Tempest really is," Cameron said.

"How could they not know that?" Trevor said. "Rachel gave them an eyewitness account of the destruction of Third Colony!"

"The same Rachel who wants to give the Eden Colony another try," said Cameron's father.

"Just how enthusiastic was she about that prospect?" Sara asked.

"Not enthusiastic, just willing."

"Which, actually, doesn't surprise me, now that I think about it," said Trevor. "We all sacrificed a great deal to come here. A part of me would like to stay and make it work."

"So would I," Cameron's father admitted.

"I understand where you're coming from," Sara said, "but it still bothers me. Of all people, Sister Vance would not want to return. As you said, she watched Third Colony drop into the ocean, and she also had quite a lengthy encounter with Tempest. She understands the danger in a firsthand way."

"What are you suggesting?" Trevor asked.

"I don't think we should rule out the possibility that they may be telepathically manipulating her."

"If that's true," Cameron said, "is there anything we can do about it?"

"I don't know," Sara replied. "I just think we should be very cautious."

"If we tell them not to land," Trevor said, "what do you think they would do?"

Cameron's father shrugged. "That depends on how badly they want the base."

"Twenty-eight ships means they want it," said Sara, "and more may be coming."

"There's nothing to stop them from killing all of us and keeping Sara," Cameron said. "In fact, I'm concerned that if we refuse their offer, they may bridle Tempest and do just that. They might lock Sara in a room somewhere. Or they may take her with them."

Cameron's concern alarmed Sara. "What possible reason could they want me other than to appease Tempest?"

"You have unique telepathic abilities and might be able to communicate with other planet-spirits as well as you communicate with Tempest. I'm guessing that the people who lead the bridling work have the same sort of ability, which they obviously need in their fleet. Not only that, but you're a Novaunian. They might be able to trade you for ransom."

His father nodded. "I agree. Among all the colonists, you are completely unique." He said it with a little too much worry and warmth for Sara's comfort. She remembered that one leg of her sweat pants had been cut at mid-thigh to accommodate her leg cast and

that she was wearing the Royals shirt with the sleeves cut out to accommodate her arm cast and felt exposed. With her good arm, she pulled the sheet up around her shoulders.

"Then the two of you think we should agree to let them land," Trevor said.

"I don't know," Cameron said. "I have a bad feeling about both possibilities." He reached for the blanket folded at the foot of Sara's bed and wrapped it around her. Feeling her cheeks flush, she almost told him telepathically that she wasn't cold. She decided not to distract him and savored the sweet gesture.

"Is there an alternative we haven't thought of?" his father asked.

"I sure can't see one," Sara said.

"Maybe things aren't as bad as we're making them out to be," said Cameron's father. "There's a very good chance that they really are Zarrists, and as I said before, the Zarrists aren't murders."

"You keep saying that, but how can any of us really know?" Cameron said. "What do we know? The Zarrists mentally tamper with peoples' minds, and they sent us to this accursed planet to fend for ourselves." He reached for Sara's hand again under the blanket. "Do you really think they knew nothing about this planet's danger?"

"We don't really know that either," his father admitted. "They did send a couple hundred of their own people here."

"But they never did tell you that this was a strategic location. They led you to believe that it was nothing more than unsettled space."

"I agree with Cameron on this," Sara said. "The fact is, there's a lot about the Zarrists we don't know. I said the same thing to my father—that the Zarrists aren't murderers—and he disagreed with me. That's when he told me that they were pirates, at war with Novaun, and that there are other Diron nations that the Novaunians also fight."

Sara recognized the import of what had come out of her mouth so casually. Her father had said there were others like the Zarrists. Why had she not recalled that basic fact before now?

Cameron squeezed her good hand. "Repeat what he said to you exactly."

Sara nodded. "My father told me that I was a pure-blooded Novaunian, and I was shocked, to say the least. I asked, only half believing what he had just told me: 'Why did you wait so long to tell me?' He answered, 'Because I couldn't take the chance that you might inadvertently tell someone.' I said, 'Which means you're in a certain amount of danger.' He responded with, 'I'm in a considerable amount of danger. If Tohmazz Zarr finds out who I am, he'll kill me.' I was certain he was exaggerating, so I said, 'Oh, that's ridiculous! He's no murderer!' Then he declared, 'All right. He's no murderer. He would try to "cleans" my mind the way he has "cleansed" the minds of so many of the world's criminals. Zarr's "cleansing" is nothing less than telepathic slavery. Since I will never allow Zarr or anyone else to break my mind, I would probably die resisting. Either way, I'm a dead man.' I still thought he was exaggerating, but his passion fascinated me, so I asked, 'Are your people at war, then, with Zarr's people?' That's when he said, 'Yes, in a manner of speaking. Our people are at war with the Zarrists and the many other Diron nations the way the early Americans were at war with pirates on the open seas.'"

"Did your father say anything else that might shed some light on this?" Cameron asked. "Think back."

Sara did mentally sift through the conversations she had had with her father about the Zarrists and Eden. "He said, 'Zarr's motives are far from altruistic, I assure you.' As

we've already discussed, my father was convinced that they wanted to make the people of Earth telepathic slaves. He felt certain that the emperor had placed 'cell bonds' on most of Earth's inhabitants, and he did mention that it was possible to completely drain a person's mind. He referred to those people as 'Eslavu.'

"Then again, the Zarrist nation is an enemy to Novaun," Trevor said. "Your father's point of view may not be completely accurate."

For a couple of seconds, Sara wondered if what Trevor suggested could be true—that her father's view of the Zarrists could be skewed—and then she wondered why she would doubt her father at all, when so far, his assessment of Eden and the Zarrists had been correct on every point.

Before Sara could think of an intelligent response, Cameron said, "I spent a week with Sara's father, and I trust his perception completely."

Cameron had spent a mere week with her father and unequivocally trusted his point of view. Why had Sara—having spent twenty years with her father—ever doubted his much more accurate Novaunian knowledge at all? Sara couldn't help but feel guilty and, at the same time, angry with herself for ever being deceived by the Zarrists and those in the colony who still trusted them.

"Either the facts my father gave to me about the Zarrists and their enemies are true or they are not. So much of what my father told me has turned out to be accurate, that it makes no sense to trust our own limited understanding of the Zarrists over his knowledge."

"Well said," Cameron's father conceded.

Cameron nodded. "One thing is absolutely certain: The Zarrists and any other Diron nations we may encounter are enemies of Novaun, which means that none of them would have any qualms about exploiting Sara."

"That being the case," his father said, "it will be safer for all of us if we play along with their plan to establish a base. As long as they see Sara as protection, they won't hurt her, and as long as we allow them to come and then follow the rules, we won't give them any reason to get rid of us. I really do think that if they come, they'll be on their best behavior."

"The more I think about it, the more I agree," Cameron said. "But I still don't like it."

"I don't like it either," Sara said.

"I would like to see Rachel personally and determine for myself whether she's changed in some significant way," Cameron's father said.

"So would I," Trevor agreed.

"Maybe we could ask the Zarrists to come in only one ship, with Sister Vance with them," Sara suggested. "We would learn more about her state of mind by talking with her directly."

"And it would allow us to put off the decision about the base for a few hours." Cameron's father clapped his hands together. "Are we ready to make an announcement to the colony?"

"Go ahead," Sara said, "but don't tell them about the possibility that these people may be from one of the other Diron nations my father mentioned. I'm not sure that possibility has any bearing on the decision, and I don't want the colonists arguing about the point at this critical time. There will be time enough to tell them if we ever get proof."

Before Cameron's father stepped out of the hospital to address the colonists, he called Trevor's phone, and Trevor cast the video to his overhead screen so that he could watch what his brother said to the colony. Cameron extended the folding wall to separate Sara and Trevor's beds, and then he called Sara's phone. Sara cast her video to her overhead screen so that she could watch Cameron's interaction with Brother Vance and then Brother Vance's interaction with his wife via radio.

When Brother Vance arrived at the hospital in an aircar, Cameron took his place in the front seat next to him and briefly told him about his father's conversation with Sister Vance and what they had decided to do.

Brother Vance didn't respond until he had heard everything. When he finally did, his voice was tense, "You're telling me that either my wife wants to give Eden another try or she's being telepathically manipulated?"

"Can you think of another alternative?"

"Maybe she's being threatened."

"Do you think that's more likely than the possibility that she's willing to return?"

Brother Vance brought the aircar to a stop in front of the communications center. "All I know is that the possibilities we've discussed don't make any sense."

\* \* \*

As Rachel waited in her cabin for the colony's return radio communication, she pondered the emperor's plan to continue to maintain the Eden colony. Had his purpose for establishing the colony really been to prepare it for a military base? The thought made her shudder. Had she known that fact beforehand, she wasn't sure she could have brought herself to be a part of the colony at all, despite her belief in Ben's vision of Zion. She doubted that Ben himself would have wanted any part of it.

Both Lieutenant Sistrel and Captain Nahn had told her, however, that Eden was located in a unique area of space, corroborating the information Sara had received from her father. That being the case, of course it made sense that Eden had been destined all along to become a military base. Rachel didn't like the plan any better because of it, but she could see how soldiers on Eden could provide order to satisfy Tempest. Having soldiers on the planet would allow the person responsible for Tempest's anger to be punished rather than the entire colony. Certainly that would be better . . . wouldn't it?

Her mind eased a little. She had sacrificed too much to be a part of the Eden colony. If there was a chance it could work, shouldn't she be willing to try it?

Then she realized, yet again, that Sara would be the official governor. She would have the sanction of the emperor and would be in charge of those soldiers. And she would still be a pompous little witch. Rachel shuddered again.

But that little witch was the reason the colony had survived at all. She was also the reason the Zarrists were giving the colonists this opportunity to live out the dream that had lured them to Eden in the first place. Shouldn't Rachel be *grateful* to her?

Perhaps she should, but she never would. Not ever.

Lieutenant Sistrel returned to take her back to the command center. She sat down at the consol and spoke, "Ben, do you have an answer for Admiral Sutuzav?"

"This isn't Ben, love. He's making an announcement to the colony. Are you okay?"

As much as Rachel had been missing Duane, hearing his voice was a shock—an unwelcomed one. Anger flared up within her. “You chose to stay on the planet, knowing we might never see each other again. Why should I speak to you?”

“Would you rather speak to Sara? She’s here with me via Cameron’s phone.”

“Has the colony made a decision regarding the emperor’s plan for a base?”

“We believe the plan is a little premature. We would like to speak with you in person before we make a final decision. We would like you to return to the planet today with a delegation of Zarrists small enough to fit into one ship. Tempest has given her approval.”

Had Rachel heard Duane’s words correctly? “Return to the planet today? Me?”

“Yes, you. I need to see you, Rachel. I need to know you’re all right.”

“I’m perfectly all right. I don’t want to go back to the planet.”

“An hour ago, you told Ben that you were willing to give it another try.”

Rachel pondered. She had told Ben that she was willing to give the Eden colony another try, and her reasons seemed logical enough, but now that it might happen today, Rachel realized that she couldn’t do it. “I know what I said, but I have changed my mind.” She stood up. “I can’t do it.” Her heart fluttered, as if it had skipped a beat. She looked around and saw the Zarrists in the command center staring at her.

*Is there a problem?* Lieutenant Sistrrel asked.

“Rachel?” her husband’s voice called from the console. “Are you still there?”

Rachel shook her head, but couldn’t answer him and Lieutenant Sistrrel. *I can’t go back there. Someone else will have to do it.*

*Do what? What do they want you to do?*

*Return to the planet with a delegation small enough to fit into one ship.*

*Then they want to negotiate.*

*As long as I’m with the delegation.*

Lieutenant Sistrrel turned to the captain as if conferring. Within a couple of seconds, he communicated, *Tell them that we will land on the surface shortly with only one small ship and that you will be with us.*

*No! Not me! I can’t do it!*

*Your husband needs you, Rachel. You have to go back.*

“Rachel! What’s going on?”

He sounded worried, and Rachel felt guilty that she was refusing to talk to him, but that guilt wasn’t as strong as her aversion to returning to the planet. She began walking to the door. *I can’t do it!*

“Rachel! Don’t leave me like this! Please!”

The panic in his voice was so compelling and yet so unlike him that Rachel couldn’t resist him. Maybe he really was worried sick about her. She turned and went back to the console. “I’m sorry, Duane. I was momentarily distracted. The Zarrists agree to your terms. We will land on the planet shortly in only one small ship.”

\* \* \*

Sister Ireland hailed the orbiting Zarrist ship and then waited for a response. Sara watched Cameron wait there to listen to the conversation and respond if necessary, but there was no question in anyone’s mind that Brother Vance was the one who should do most of the talking.



The three waited silently, anxiously. After many minutes, they finally heard Sister Vance's voice through the speaker, "Ben, do you have an answer for Admiral Sutuzav?"

Brother Vance leaned toward the microphone. "This isn't Ben, love. He's making an announcement to the colony." He lowered his voice. "Are you okay?"

"You chose to stay on the planet, knowing we might never see each other again." Sister Vance's voice sounded strained. "Why should I speak to you?"

Brother Vance raised his eyebrows, appearing more irritated than wounded. "Would you rather speak to Sara? She's here with me via Cameron's phone."

Sister Vance's voice sounded again from the speaker. "Has the colony made a decision regarding the emperor's plan for a base?"

"We believe the plan is a little premature. We would like to speak with you in person before we make a final decision. We would like you to return to the planet today with a delegation of Zarrists small enough to fit into one ship. Tempest has given her approval."

"Return to the planet today? Me?" Sister Vance sounded stunned and bewildered.

"Yes, you. I need to see you, Rachel. I need to know you're all right." Sara wasn't sure she had ever heard such gentleness in Brother Vance's voice.

"I'm perfectly all right. I don't want to go back to the planet."

Brother Vance frowned. "An hour ago, you told Ben that you were willing to give it another try."

A few seconds passed before Sister Vance spoke again. "I know what I said, but I have changed my mind." She paused. "I can't do it."

Brother Vance relaxed and put his hand over the microphone. "That's my wife, all right. She's acting exactly the way I expected. What now?"

"Tell her that if she doesn't want to come," Sara said, "we would like to speak with one of the others."

Brother Vance nodded and said into the microphone, "Rachel? Are you still there?"

At least a minute of silence passed. Brother Vance tapped his fingers on the desk. "Rachel!" he finally said. "What's going on?"

Silence gaped. Another minute passed, and Brother Vance stood up. "Obviously, she's gone. This is a waste of time." He headed to the door.

Before Brother Vance could step over the threshold, Sister Vance's voice sounded again from the speaker, "I'm sorry, Duane. I was momentarily distracted. The Zarrists agree to your terms. We will land on the planet shortly in only one small ship."

Brother Vance returned to the console, his eyes flashing with urgency. He grabbed the microphone. "What changed your mind?"

No one answered. The ship was no longer transmitting.

Brother Vance set the microphone back down on the desk and looked up at Cameron. "If she actually comes out of that small ship they send I'll believe it, but not before then."

## CHAPTER 18: PRINCE OR SAVAGE?

Aerospace control contacted Arulezz at three o'clock that afternoon with the message that Captain Tanyal Sauvel was coming into Teton Colony's air space alone in an aircar not assigned to him. Arulezz summoned Jesalya, and within minutes, she rushed into his office. Neither one of them could rid themselves of the feeling that something was wrong.

Captain Sauvel entered the office appearing tired, as if he hadn't slept, but proper in every respect.

Arulezz asked, "Where is Saintess Myri, Captain Sauvel?"

Captain Sauvel held out what looked like a piece of paper. "My Saintess released me from her service and asked me to deliver this letter."

"She released you?" Jesalya blurted out in shock.

Captain Sauvel bowed in an affirmative answer.

"Why in the galaxy did she do that?"

*Be calm, darling, and let me read the letter.* Arulezz took the letter from Myri's bodyguard and opened it. Jesalya looked over his shoulder and read with him:

To my dearest sister and brother-in-law,

As you must, by now, have ascertained, I no longer have arelada in my possession and am forced to relay the details of my situation in this primitive way. For a week and a half, I waited in agony for David to give up the fight and come to me, and in the end, I went to him. He had not told his family what I had done to him, thinking he could fight it all alone, and so I was able to sneak into his bedroom at night the way I had the first time, unhindered.

Our reunion was so glorious and intense that there could be no doubt he would be mine forever. He agreed to return to Teton Colony with me, and I, in turn, promised him that we would remain among his people until we could be married in the temple. I didn't think this would be a problem, since it had been part of the original plan. It means everything to David to be married in the temple, and I can't deny him that if it's within my power to give it to him. It will also give his family a feeling of goodwill toward our union. Right now, they are teaching me about their church, and I am waiting for permission to join. Everyone thought it would come before now, which is why I have waited so long to send you this communication. Perhaps in a month or two, David's family will be ready to hear that we're betrothed.

We had to tell his parents that I entered the light to put a cell bond on his mind and couldn't do it and now desired sanctuary. They were suspicious, of course, and demanded I surrender my arelada, which I did, as a token of trust. I'm still not sure they trust me, but they like me better every day. I'm able to spend every day with David, acting as his nurse as he heals from his injuries. I know you're wondering why I don't just heal him in the normal way, but believe me, this way is better under the circumstances. If they thought I had healed him telepathically, they would believe I had put a cell bond on him too and wouldn't let me near him.

Since Captain Sauvel's return would compromise my position in the Pierce family and among our people, I've released him from my service and ask that you allow him to return for David and me in fifteen months.

Affectionately,  
Myri

*Why didn't you insist she return? I knew she wouldn't be able to leave him!*

Arulezz folded the letter and tapped it against his hand, pondering. *Can it be that she and that savage are going to actually try to wait a year to be married?*

*I think that if waiting a year to be married in the temple is something David Pierce wants badly, Myri would want to give it to him.*

*But do you believe it's possible to wait for a year after doing dijauntu to physically consummate the union?*

*I don't think anyone's ever tried it.*

*Perhaps she and her savage plan to be intimate secretly while they wait.*

*It would be very unlike Myri to do something like that purposely. It would also be very unlike David Pierce.*

*Unless the two of them haven't done dijauntu at all.*

*Had Myri decided not to do dijauntu with David Pierce, she would have returned immediately and attempted to tell Jahnzel.*

*Perhaps, but perhaps not—not if she truly understands what's at stake for us.*

*She's not stupid.*

*She says that she told the Pierces that she was supposed to put a cell bond on David and couldn't, and then asked for sanctuary. What if she really did do that?*

Terror charged through Jesalya and seized Arulezz. *Then she would lie about doing dijauntu with David Pierce to give herself time and then send Captain Sauvel with a message to Jahnzel.*

When Jesalya expanded her spirit to clamp down on Captain Sauvel's mind, Arulezz stopped her. *Don't be hasty, darling. We can't sift the mind of a high-ranking member of the Vahro Noble Guard here in the middle of the day. Too many people know he arrived.*

*We can't take a chance with him, and we need to know what really happened.*

*Do we? Are we in that great of a hurry?*

*Perhaps not.*

As a plan formed in Arulezz's mind, Jesalya confirmed it, still uncomfortable. "How did you leave Saintess Myri, Captain Sauvel?" he asked.

"Very well, Divine One."

"Does she seem happy?"

"She seems . . . preoccupied."

"Preoccupied?"

"That savage consumes all of her thoughts."

"Does she spend very much time with him?"

"She wants to do nothing else."

"What do they do together?"

"He is in a bed or a chair recovering from his injuries, and she speaks with him, reads to him, and brings him food."

"Then his family accepts her."

"They seem to."

"Even though she's an enemy alien?"

"My Saintess is beautiful and kindly enough to melt the hardest of hearts, Divine One."

"She is indeed."

"How soon do they plan to marry?" Jesalya asked.

"My Saintess has not given me that information, Hallowed One."

"Then they aren't betrothed."

"Not as far as I can tell."

"Is she living alone?"

"No, Hallowed One. She resides with compatriots who fled into the light during the invasion."

"How many of these compatriots are in the light city?" asked Arulezz.

"Fifty-two, Divine One."

"What are they doing?"

"Surviving."

"Are they still loyal?"

"They recognize Saintess Myri's title, Divine One, and give her the best of all they have—living space, food, and clothing."

"Does she govern them?"

"She appears too busy with her savage to care about governing a few common people."

"What do they think of her relationship with David Pierce?"

"They refer to him as her 'savage distraction' or 'too-friendly friend.'"

Jesalya couldn't restrain herself from laughing. Arulezz had heard enough to feel comfortable giving Myri a little more time to prove she was still loyal. "Very good," Arulezz murmured. "Very good." He tipped his head toward Jesalya.

Jesalya was still smiling when she said, "Thank you for your service to my sister, Captain Sauvel. You are reassigned to my own personal guard."

Captain Sauvel bowed. "I am honored, Hallowed One."

After dismissing Sauvel, Jesalya asked, *Do you think he's telling the truth?*

*What he said sounded true enough.*

*If she did tell him what you commanded her to do and he did come here to pass a message to Jahnzel, he'll never bring Myri back when we send him for her in fifteen months.*

*Unless his desire to be with his wife is stronger than his sense of duty to your sister.*

*It isn't. He wouldn't have been Myri's bodyguard at all had my father not been certain he would do his duty to her at all costs.*

*Well, we'll see, won't we?*

*Myri may decide to return with her savage as a fake husband and communicate with Jahnzel herself.*

*A telepathic physical examination will tell you whether she's still a virgin, and all I need is five minutes with David Pierce to learn whether he's her bondmate.*

\* \* \*

Jahnzel was in the command center of the *Empress* that afternoon when he received a telepathic transmission from his personal signal scanner alerting him that it had received audio transmissions from the planet that had been tagged as ones that referred to Captain Tanyal Sauvel.

Jahnzel hated himself for continuing to track Myri this way, but a suspicion that he was wrong about her duplicitous nature nagged him. During the betrothal ceremony Jahnzel had taken an oath to honor, cherish, and protect her all the days of his life and to keep himself pure for her both in body and mind. Myri might have been able to break her own oath to him, but he discovered that he could not so easily break his to her. He couldn't let her slip out from under his surveillance until he was certain she would become the wife of David Pierce.

Sometimes Jahnzel considered going into the light himself and asking Myri what Arulezz had commanded her to do, but pride always stopped him. A Divine Prince groveled to no one. Until he received a firm indication that the situation was not what it seemed, he would remain right where he was.

He telepathically commanded his signal scanner to download the messages to him via his earpiece and was surprised to learn that Captain Sauvel had just arrived in Teton Colony in an aircar designated for use in Tryamaz Camp. Sauvel made a point of declaring that he was "alone" and that he needed to have an audience with the Divine One and the Hallowed One immediately.

Why had Sauvel returned to Teton Colony without Myri? Jahnzel understood that the original plan had been for Sauvel to leave Myri in Kansas City and return to Teton Colony, but that plan had been changed after she had been exposed by David Pierce's family. Or had it? Jahnzel recalled that Myri had told Arulezz that she intended to return to Teton Colony with David Pierce soon, but he could not remember whether she had given a specific time for their arrival.

Deciding to go over the original telepathic transmission again from Myri in private, Jahnzel left the command center and went to his office. As he replayed the message, something felt strange about it, something more than the fact that Myri had addressed the Divine One as "Lezz." He studied it again and again and then realized what was so odd—several phrases mirrored his own private communications with Myri:

*Love overcame any shame I might have felt manipulating him into your service.* When Jahnzel had held the Crystal Sword over Myri's head, he had tried to tell her that there was shame in manipulating a man into the Divine Emperor's service against his will.

*After the experience I had with David, I would go with him to the domes if he wished it.* When he had communicated with Myri after she received the despicable assignment, she had told him that she would rather marry a savage than go with Jahnzel to the domes.

*It told me that I have more choices than I realize and that I should fight you.* Right after learning about the despicable assignment and even before Arulezz had given it to Myri, Jahnzel had assured her that there were more choices than she realized, that she and her mother could fight it.

Jahnzel drummed his fingers on his desk. Maybe Myri *hadn't* gone into David Pierce's bedroom alone that night and communicated with him telepathically in an improper way. Jahnzel knew that Myri had returned to the light city in the aircar; he

*didn't* know what had happened after she landed. Even if Myri had met Pierce, she might not have communicated telepathically with him at all. Any other assumption was nothing more than speculation. Why hadn't Jahnzel perceived this possibility the night she had returned to the light?

Jahnzel had believed Myri had done something unseemly because he had not thought she could lie to anyone, much less the Divine Emperor. Now that Jahnzel thought about it, however, he was inclined to believe that Myri would lie to Arulezz before she would do anything truly improper or immoral at his command.

Then again, if Arulezz really had commanded Myri to do something improper or immoral, why hadn't Myri returned to Teton Colony to expose him? Why would she attempt to get Jahnzel's attention in such a covert way? What had Arulezz really commanded Myri to do that night he had visited her in Tryamaz Camp? What could be so terrible that neither Myri nor Captain Sauvel believed they could communicate with Jahnzel directly?

Jahnzel decided it was time to learn the truth about everything else from Myri herself. He packed a change of clothing and telepathically summoned the men in his guard to his hangar. He jettisoned from the *Empress* in his official armed shuttle, and his guards escorted him as far as Kansas City in their own armed shuttles. Arulezz attempted to contact Jahnzel, but Jahnzel ignored him and charged ahead.

Once Jahnzel could see the eerie light, he sent the men in his guard to Tryamaz Camp to await his signal. Almost from the moment Jahnzel discerned the light with his eyes, he felt it in his mind like a song that beckoned and soothed, wrapping around him and penetrating to his essence.

As Jahnzel descended further into the light, it seemed to whisper, "David Pierce is the truest friend you have." Jahnzel fought the feeling, not wanting in any way to be friends with this man he had long perceived as a rival, yet it persisted, manifesting itself as a man's voice: "David Pierce is the truest friend you have. He understands you as well as you understand him."

The voice of the light so surprised Jahnzel that he replied to it, speaking aloud, "That isn't possible. He doesn't know me."

"He knows you better than you know him."

Jahnzel realized that he did understand David Pierce, at least well enough to know that if Myri really were so indecent at heart that she would do something unseemly at the Divine Emperor's command, a virtuous man like Pierce would have rejected her. He would not have fallen in love with her at all. He certainly wouldn't have agreed to work for the Divine Emperor, despite a cell bond. Jahnzel thought it odd, in fact, that he had been more certain of Pierce's sense of honor during the past month than Myri's. "Why can I perceive what drives David Pierce when my brother cannot?"

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not comprehend it."

The answer was so perfect that Jahnzel had no doubt that the words of the Light were true. "Then my brother really is evil." Having the Light confirm what he already suspected didn't give him any comfort.

"He has done many evil things, but he is not beyond hope of repentance."

"What should I do?"

"Tell him and his wife that unless they turn their hearts to God and agree to live in harmony with the Light, they and the empire they build will be destroyed."

The Nation had come to Earth with twenty-one warships and fifty-seven auxiliary ships. Jahnzel had tripled the size of the fleet and then lost it all except for his own ship, the *Empress of the Stars*. He had wracked his brain over the past week and a half trying to understand how such a thing could happen, and now he knew. “My Nation is cursed, then.”

“Arulezz and Jesalya Zarr’s empire stands on the brink of destruction—or deliverance.”

Jahnzel brought his shuttle to a stop in the park behind David Pierce’s house. “How can I deliver my people?” Of course he was the one to do it—there was no one else. Before the Light could respond, Jahnzel became aware that David Pierce’s two guards were approaching his shuttle, their weapons drawn and aimed. Jahnzel opened the hatch on the armed shuttle and emerged, his hands in the air, feeling no anxiety about the encounter with David Pierce’s guards and curious to meet the man himself.

Jahnzel jogged down the stairs of the shuttle and allowed the men to search his body for weapons. “I am Prince Jahnzel Zarr of the Holy Nation of the Son of God. I wish to speak with Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro.”

\* \* \*

David’s house vibrated, and with the vibration came a loud noise that sounded like a sub-space craft. Myri jumped, her heart pounding in fear. Before Myri had time to look in Shipman Larynt’s direction, he was already gone.

“That sounds like an airplane,” David observed.

Myri couldn’t believe David was so nonchalant. “It must be a shuttle.”

“Who would come here in a shuttle?”

“The emperor.”

Myri finally saw a shimmer of anxiety in David’s eyes. Before he could speak, Larynt reappeared with a smile of such relief that Myri knew that she and David had nothing to fear.

“It’s the Consecrated One, my Saintess!”

Myri must not have heard correctly. “The Consecrated One? Here?” Could it be that Jahnzel really was still monitoring her communications and that he had finally recognized the irregularities she had placed in her conversation with Arulezz?

“Yes, my Saintess. I would know that shuttle anywhere!”

The fog dissipated, and memories of her long courtship with Jahnzel engulfed her, sweetened by the compassion and trust restored to her by the discovery of Arulezz’s cell bond. Myri looked down at David and felt all of the forbidden obsession of the past month and the controversial kisses of that very day.

The past collided with the present, crashing down on her in shame. She was supposed to be marrying Jahnzel in a week, not kissing this alien man! She jumped up and ran to the sunroom. Sure enough, Jahnzel’s shuttle had landed in David’s park. How was she going to face him? He was honoring his oath to her, but she had long ago broken hers to him.

When Myri returned to the bedroom and faced David again, she saw that he had more fear in his eyes now than he had when they had thought the emperor had arrived. Her heart swelled with longing for him, and then the fog descended on her mind again. She averted her eyes and put her hands to her temples.

“My Saintess, where would you like to receive the Consecrated One?”

“In the family room, downstairs.”

\* \* \*

David Pierce’s guards led Jahnzel through a back door, past a dining room, and down a flight of stairs. They left him there in a gathering room that seemed dark after the almost-blinding brightness of the Light.

After a few moments Jahnzel’s eyes adjusted and he saw Myri standing in a curtsy a few meters away, with a young shipman standing at attention behind her.

Seeing his beloved Myri in such a cold, stiff pose grieved Jahnzel. He had hoped she would run up to him and throw her arms around his neck the way she had when he had returned to Teton Colony after the invasion.

“At ease, shipman. Dismissed.”

Myri bowed her head at Jahnzel in deference, then said to the shipman, “If it pleases the Consecrated One, take Seamstress Kintz and go to Liberty. Return at eight o’clock.”

Jahnzel nodded once. “It would please me.”

The shipman bowed. “Yes, Consecrated One.” After he left the room, Jahnzel directed his attention to Myri. He reached out to her with his thoughts. *Please don’t be so formal with me, Myri. It just makes this more difficult.* He touched his spirit slightly to hers so that he could feel her emotions of the moment and invited her to do the same.

She relaxed a little but not completely. He was surprised to learn that she was extremely nervous. *Robert Pierce allowed you to keep your arelada?*

*I told him that I needed it to guarantee your honesty as we communicate.*

She finally looked up at him, her eyes shimmering with tears. *I guess I deserved that after the way I betrayed you and then told Arulezz terrible things.*

*Were the “terrible things” true?*

Her anxiety changed to concern. *You look terrible.* Worry crept into her thoughts. *What’s wrong in Teton Colony?*

*I’ll tell you my problems after you answer my questions.*

Myri nodded and motioned to a chair. *You have no idea how happy and relieved I am to see you, Jahnzel.*

She claimed to be happy to see him, but her emotions were far from joyful. *If you wanted me to come, all you had to do was ask.*

*It isn’t as simple as that, as you well know, or you wouldn’t be here at all.* Remorse clouded her thoughts. *I am so sorry for the way I treated you. You were right about everything, and I was a fool.*

Jahnzel thought he should feel relieved but didn’t. An underlying hopelessness lay under her thoughts. *If you really feel that way, why didn’t you come back to me?*

Myri sighed. *Now that it comes to it, I don’t know how to tell you what really happened.*

Dread descended on Jahnzel, darker than anything he had experienced so far. *Is it that bad?*

Myri nodded. *Worse.* She hesitated.

Jahnzel felt as though his blood had frozen in his veins. *Go on.*

*Not long after your brother gave me the mission to marry David Pierce, he put a cell bond on me.*



Jahnzel couldn't help but be incredulous. *A cell bond? On a high priestess?* This was the last thing he had expected Myri to tell him. One did not simply "put a cell bond" on one of the most refined telepathic minds in the Nation. *What makes you think that?*

*Much of my knowledge came from visions of the Light. I will be able to communicate them to you more accurately if we overlap spirits.*

The request surprised Jahnzel but didn't disturb him. They knew each other too well for this familiar way of communicating to be completely improper. *Are you sure you're comfortable with that?*

Myri smiled in a sweet way, and he could feel that she wasn't as nervous as she had been earlier. *After everything we've been to each other, I think we can at least be comfortable with that.*

Jahnzel knew then that all of the terrible things he had suspected of Myri were false. This was the same pure and guileless girl who had been his betrothed.

Myri must have perceived his renewed trust in her, because tears came into her eyes again and she lifted her hand to her mouth, trembling.

Jahnzel leaned forward and took her hand in his, feeling hope for the first time in two months. *It's all right, darling. Just tell me the truth.*

Everything in her recoiled at his touch, and she pulled her hand out of his. *You don't want to call me that.* She folded her arms in her lap.

Jahnzel felt warmth in her emotions that wasn't directed at him, and he finally understood Myri's nervous behavior. His hope for reconciliation died as quickly as it had appeared. *You really do love David Pierce.*

*I think I might love him, but I'm not sure. I'm sorry, Jahnzel.*

*How far has it progressed?*

*He declared his love to me today, and we're beginning to discuss marriage.* Now that Myri had revealed this scandalous information, her emotions relaxed.

The contract between their families had been broken only two months before, and she was already thinking about marriage to another man? *What you're describing isn't a courtship but a sordid romantic affair!*

*There isn't anything sordid about my relationship with David. I'm his nurse. I sit with him all day every day. We've spent hundreds of completely innocent hours together.*

She had never been permitted to spend more than a small fraction of that amount of time with Jahnzel. He couldn't keep the accusation out of his thoughts. *Do you communicate with him by overlapping spirits?*

*No. David and I have never communicated telepathically in any way.*

Her reply was so clear and emphatic that Jahnzel had no reason to doubt it. *Then you didn't put a cell bond on him.*

*No. I couldn't even do that. I haven't healed him yet either. Please let me show you, Jahnzel. You need to know what happened.*

Jahnzel replied by expanding his spirit and embracing her with it. As she returned his telepathic embrace, their spirits overlapped to such a degree that they could think and feel together.

The images began flowing into Jahnzel's mind: the day Myri had her hair cut and her mind bonded, her mortifying first experience in the Light, Arulezz's demand that Myri bond David in dijauntu and Myri's reaction to it. Shock sucked the breath out of Jahnzel. Never had he imagined his brother could be this evil.

Myri's experiences continued to fly by in all their starkness—her visions from the Light the night she had gone to David Pierce's bedroom, including one of his father commanding the savages to kill each other. As terrible as the killings had been, Jahnzel was more surprised to learn that his father hadn't resolved to marry Myri to David Pierce at all. He had ordered the research to be sure and had selected Pierce as the candidate with the most promise, but in the end, Arulezz had been the one to make the actual decision to send Myri into the Light.

Jahnzel experienced Myri's first meetings with Pierce and his family, was with her as she made plans with Captain Sauvel, and felt her fear as she communicated with Arulezz. Just as Myri couldn't hide her new passion for David from Jahnzel, Jahnzel couldn't hide his growing feeling of despair from Myri. By the time Myri finished her report, she felt the same paralyzing sense of desolation he did and had no idea why.

*What kind of trouble are you in, Jahnzel?*

*The fleet is gone.*

Her spirit became dark with horror. *Do you mean you have no ships at all?*

*Only the Empress and the shuttles and fighters that are harbored on her and in Teton Colony.* Jahnzel showed her everything that had happened with regard to the fleet.

*There can be no coup, Myri. If I provoke him, Arulezz will release your uncle's final communication and I'll be forced to explain to the Nation that I sent a scout to Eden against his command.*

*He hasn't actually threatened to do that, has he?*

*No, of course not. I understand that, just as he understands that if he tries it, I'll appeal to the Nation's humanity and attempt to persuade them to regard him as the pitiless person he is.*

*Which might work. Everyone loves you, and the families of those lost on Eden would be grateful to you for making the effort. Certainly you're wrong about this.* Jahnzel could feel that she doubted her own argument.

*We lost so many warriors in the invasion. There aren't very many family members of the Eden colonists left to be grateful. Even if we could prove that Arulezz put a cell bond on you and commanded you to do dijauntu with David Pierce, they would think those were small matters compared to the loss of one hundred and eighty-six men and women and four ships.*

Myri understood their people well enough to know that he was probably right, but the unjustness of his predicament outraged her. *You made a difficult decision and it turned out badly. You didn't deliberately break the law!*

*Arulezz will never admit he broke the law. If I confront him with his crimes, he'll not only release your uncle's last communication, he'll tell everyone that he separated you from me because I wanted the Nation to return to Diron. They will be crying for my execution, not his. Arulezz blames me for the loss of the fleet, and I'm not sure he isn't justified.*

*He is not justified! What you did for the Eden Colony was right; don't ever doubt it. Can't you see? You've been right about everything!*

That she could—finally—so support him and yet not feel the passion for him she felt for David Pierce tortured him. *I'm not sure I understand what you mean.*

*I mean that you were right that our people should return to Diron and join with the Malrezzites. You were absolutely, completely right about that, and I know it*

*because the Blessed Sons themselves told me so in a vision.* She poured the vision into him, along with descriptions of the Visit from their people, her experiences with their people in Liberty, and everything she had learned about her new religion.

As Jahnzel assimilated these particular experiences of Myri's, he learned that she had changed in some drastic ways. He also began to understand that these changes could not have occurred had she not come into the Light. They had come to a similar way of thinking to be sure, but that positive change in Myri was so entangled with her passion for David Pierce that she had become repulsive to Jahnzel. Had she loved him instead of David, he would have done anything for her. Nothing, not even his brother, could have ever separated them again. As the situation stood now, however, Jahnzel was anxious to escape her presence and cut all memory of her out of his heart and mind.

Myri felt Jahnzel's grief over their separation and seemed to want to mourn it too. *I wish things could have been different.*

Her pity angered him. *No you don't. Not really. You love David Pierce, and you're happy here.*

*Please don't be bitter, Jahnzel.*

*I gave you my life, and now I learn that after only a month's separation, you've devoted your heart and soul to another man, and you expect me not to be bitter?* The fact that he had been discarded so easily by the saintly Myri he had always loved instead of the manipulated Myri he despised made it worse.

*You're right. I don't deserve you.*

*No, you don't.*

*Please believe that I never wanted to hurt you. I'm so sorry for thinking you were an apostate and not trusting you in the way you deserved. If I could go back in time and reject Arulezz's mission I would.*

*But you wouldn't discard the past month you've spent with David Pierce.* Myri's emotions gave Jahnzel the answer before he finished articulating the question. Of course she wanted to be with David. He was full of hope and humor, and he enlivened her spirit in a way that was beyond Jahnzel's power, considering the heavy responsibilities he had borne for almost as long as he could remember.

*No, I wouldn't discard the past month I've spent with David, but that doesn't change the fact that you were supposed to be my husband. You know now that your father really didn't intend to take me from you—you should have been my husband. We would have been happy together.*

The thought of what should have been was too painful for Jahnzel to contemplate, and he longed to change the subject. *Would we have been?* He shook his head. *I'm not as sure about that as you claim to be. You didn't trust me or love me enough.*

*I did love you enough, Jahnzel. Don't ever think otherwise. If I didn't trust you it was because you've always been so far ahead of me, seeing things I can't see. That would have changed, though, after dijauntu. I would have shared your vision.*

*And my burdens.* What she communicated was true, and both of them understood that Arulezz had gone to such lengths to separate them for that very reason. *Even with dijauntu we wouldn't have been able to separate our marriage from the curse on the Nation.* The events of the past months had taught Jahnzel to believe what he communicated, and yet he had never so hated Arulezz for stealing Myri from him and giving her to another man.

*Are you sure you can't stay in the Light? Our Nation isn't cursed here. This is where you belong, you know.*

*Jahnzel shook his head. If I don't return within a couple of hours, Arulezz will send an army after all of us.*

*After learning about the uncanny loss of the fleet, I'm not sure that matters.*

*Since I don't know what exactly God intends for any of us, I'd rather not take any chances. It does seem to be my personal curse to have to deal with Arulezz.*

*Would you like to meet David and his family?*

*Not yet. Is there somewhere I can be alone for a while to think?*

*Myri stood up. No one will disturb you in this room, but if you feel you need more privacy, there's a guest bedroom over there. She motioned toward an open door.*

*Jahnzel arose. That should be adequate.*

## CHAPTER 19: PRINCE AND SAVAGE

Jahnzel almost regretted that he had asked to be alone with his thoughts. The more he contemplated the present situation, the more terrible it became. He had irrevocably lost his beloved, his brother, and his sister-in-law in one mortal blow. Jahnzel's father had already gone the way of all mere mortals, disillusioning him with his last murderous command through the cell bonds that had nearly killed David Pierce and had brought Myri and David together. Jahnzel's culture was collapsing under the weight of its corruptness, his race lived willingly in chains, and his religion manufactured darkness as if it were ammunition.

Were Jahnzel a woman, he would sob. Were he a madman, he would scream. Were he a warrior, he would drink himself into a coma. Were he a savage, he would kill himself. The problem was, he was none of those things. He was a Divine Prince, and a Divine Prince was always dignified, calm, sober, and sound.

Then again, his title meant nothing. He had told Myri that with fewer than three thousand people, their Nation was less than dust. He was the prince of dust. A prince of dust was less than a savage. The savages had small communities they called towns and villages that were larger than the Nation. A prince of dust could sob and scream and drink and die a wretched death. No one would care; no one would even notice.

Jahnzel collapsed to his knees and elbows and covered his head with his hands. His body shook. *Dear God, give me a reason to live or end my life right now.*

A vision came into his mind of a young woman with dark hair and brown eyes that gazed, awestruck, into his. He remembered her from the Washington, D.C. Spaceport—Technician Day, an orphan who wanted to serve in Star Force but was forbidden by law. He heard himself tell this young woman to leave the spaceport and take cover, that he didn't want another death to mourn. Then the vision carried him with her as she hurried away to pack and take a taxi into the Light.

He felt her amazement at his concern for her, her admiration, her trust, and her determination to follow his request to live so that she could provide posterity to the Nation. He knelt with her that night as she prayed: "Dear God, please protect Prince Jahnzel and help him lead as many warriors as possible to safety. Please let Prince Jahnzel live to save our Nation." Even now, two months after the battle that had all but destroyed Star Force, Technician Day, in the safety and serenity of the Washington, D.C. Light, continued to beg God to protect Jahnzel, as if she believed he was still in danger.

Jahnzel watched this vision of the orphan girl with a growing sense of wonder. What he had considered no more than a few kind words had not only saved this girl's life, but had given her hope and a reason to live. He wasn't a prince of nothing; he was a prince of this sweet girl and others like her who trusted him to lead them to safety.

The vision faded, and Jahnzel realized that he wasn't shaking anymore. Nor was he completely alone, with no one but his former betrothed and her new man to call friends. A compatriot he barely knew cared for him enough to pray for him even now, long after the invasion had ended. Gratitude warmed him, and he determined that moment to live for Technician Day, just as she had lived for him.

Jahnzel arose, straightened his clothing and smoothed down his hair, forcing himself to think about the matter at hand.

\* \* \*

The more David thought about Myri's emotional reaction to Prince Jahnzel's arrival, the more depressed he felt. He really had been a fool to think he had any chance of a future with her. Now that he had declared his love, they could never return to the warm and open friendship they had shared for the past month. She would leave, and that would be that.

Soon after Myri's departure, David's parents came into the room. They regarded David with compassion but mercifully didn't say anything. After many minutes of silence, knowing that Myri would walk into the room before long and say good-bye forever, David reached for his Navy sweatshirt and put it on. Understanding that David wanted to go outside, his father helped him move from the recliner to the wheelchair and opened the door into the sunroom. David rolled himself into the sunroom and then onto the patio.

David sat there in the brightness of the Light, staring at Prince Jahnzel's shuttle, attempting to look at the situation positively. Myri's presence in his life, as wonderful as it was, had never stopped being a complication. With her gone, he could go on as normal, looking for a wife from women who shared his religion, social class, nationality, and race.

The larger picture became better too. Now that Prince Jahnzel knew the truth about his brother, he could return to Teton Colony and put him down. The Zarrists could then leave Earth for good. Myri could marry the prince and become the empress and teach her people the truth about Jesus Christ and the prophet Malrezz as they returned to the safety of their ancient world. What a change that would make for her people!

It all sounded very good and right, but David hated it. He knew he shouldn't hate what was right, but he did. He wanted Myri with or without all of her complications, and now that it looked as though she really had loved Prince Jahnzel all along, he wanted her more than ever. He dropped his head into his hands.

After some time had passed, David heard the door open behind him and smelled the heavenly scent of Myri's perfume. He didn't dare turn to face her—afraid of what he would see in her eyes—but waited for her to approach, holding his breath.

He felt a soft touch on his arm and then arms around his shoulders and knew at once that he had been worried for nothing. His original assessment of Myri had been correct—as much as she admired Prince Jahnzel, she had never felt sincere passion for him. Her heart really had been free all along to love someone new. "My noble savage," she whispered. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

David took her hand in his and kissed it, smiling. "I think I do." He drew her into a molded plastic chair and turned his chair so that he could face her. She gazed at him with a pale face and grave eyes that reminded him of the expression that had been on her face the night he had met her. Something terrible must have happened. "Where's the prince?"

"In the guestroom downstairs, pondering this difficult situation."

David knew she loved him, but that didn't mean she wouldn't leave with the prince. "Will you go with him when he leaves?"

"No. It wouldn't be safe. Jahnzel's power in the Nation is precarious right now, and he has no fleet."

"He has no ships at all?"

"The only ship remaining is the *Empress of the Stars*. It's in orbit as we speak, acting as command center for the rebuilding of space dock."

She went on to tell him such a terrible story that David could scarcely believe it. "The prince is a good man, and I'll be grateful to him forever for attempting to rescue the Eden Colony."

"He is a good man—the very best man among my people—and that makes my betrayal of him so much worse somehow."

"Then things didn't end well between the two of you."

"No. In coming to love you so strongly and so quickly, I redefined our former relationship. He feels as if he's lost seventeen years of his life. I wish I could give that back to him."

"He's that sure you love me?"

"We communicated by overlapping spirits and felt each other's thoughts and emotions in a very clear and immediate way. He couldn't help but feel my passion for you, and his certainty about the matter actually convinced *me*."

David caressed her hand. "I almost wish you could have loved him more. He seems very right for you."

"He was, for the old Myri—not the new."

They sat in silence for a long time, both adrift in thought. David believed he should feel happy that Myri had chosen him over the prince but couldn't. Prince Jahnzel had already lost his father and his fleet. Then he had come to Kansas City, hoping to reconcile with the woman he loved, and had learned that his brother was evil and that the woman he loved had chosen another man. David wanted more than ever to help him in some way, and yet he had no doubt the prince detested him.

David gave Myri's hand a squeeze. "Where is the prince's mother? You never talk about her."

"When I left Teton Colony, she was having difficulty coping with her husband's death. She isolated herself in her suite. At that time, she was usually heavily medicated."

"What would she do if the prince organized a coup?"

"If she were coherent enough to know about it, she would disown him."

"You're sure."

"No question. It's terrible, isn't it? Arulezz sent me into Heaven, and Jahnzel is forced to remain in hell."

Myri's expression changed, and she stood up. "Jahnzel would like to communicate with you and your family. I'll summon your parents to the living room."

David couldn't help but be surprised. "He wants to meet me?"

Myri nodded. "I think he wants to advise us. Since he knows Arulezz's state of mind and access to resources better than anyone, he'll give us very good advice."

\* \* \*

After David went to the patio, Betty and Gene left his room and went to the living room, hoping to make themselves available to Saintess Myri and Prince Jahnzel if they needed anything. Seamstress Kintz and Shipman Larynt appeared to be gone, and Betty wondered if Saintess Myri had sent them back to Liberty.

After some time, Betty heard footsteps in the hall and assumed Saintess Myri was walking in the direction of David's bedroom. A little while later, Saintess Myri entered

the living room, pushing David's wheelchair, followed by Bob. "Prince Jahnzel would like to speak with you and David," said the saintess. "Would you receive him here?"

Her manner was so somber that Betty knew at once that something was wrong. This meeting would not be a casual, cheerful meeting and farewell. The saintess and Bob helped David into the recliner. The saintess reached for the handle that would extend the bottom of the chair. "Please lie back, darling," she whispered. "You must be tired."

David stopped her by resting his hand on hers. "Not yet. I want to meet the prince sitting up."

Betty watched the exchange with a growing sense of frustration. Saintess Myri was obviously not planning to marry Prince Jahnzel. She didn't appear to be going anywhere with him either. Not only that, but the prince's arrival had intensified her relationship with David rather than breaking it up. Nothing about this situation felt right.

Saintess Myri left the living room and returned a few minutes later with Prince Jahnzel. Betty had expected Prince Jahnzel to be as colorful and charismatic as his father had been and was surprised when she saw that the only things colorful about him were his deep green eyes and the purple and wine red emblems and piping on his long-sleeved white uniform. He wore white gloves and white patent leather shoes to match and appeared modest, clean, and businesslike. Even his long brown curls were pulled away from his clean-shaven face into a ponytail that hung neatly down his back, held in place by a diamond clasp. He was so like Saintess Myri in his fair skin tone, angular features, and willowy build that they could have passed as brother and sister.

When Saintess Myri introduced Betty, the prince shook her hand with a firm grip and held her gaze. Only then did Betty become aware that his face was very pale and thin and that he had dark shadows under those extraordinary green eyes. He looked as if he hadn't been eating or sleeping well for months. Panic stabbed through Betty. This boy appeared to be carrying too many burdens himself to be the rescuer they had all been expecting. "I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Pierce. Thank you for accepting me into your home."

Betty bowed her head. "I'm honored, sir." And she was. She couldn't help but be, really. She had been resting so many hopes on him for so long. As strange as it was to be inviting one of those "Zarr boys" into her home, there was something kind and quietly charismatic about this prince. He seemed too young to be the commander of a space fleet, making the stories both Captain Sauvel and the saintess had told about him all the more impressive. He was obviously a capable, decent boy, and were he not so run-down, he might be a nice-looking one. Why couldn't Saintess Myri love him instead of her son?

Prince Jahnzel finally turned his attention to David, and Betty could see that David held him in his gaze with gentleness in his eyes, as if he were a beloved brother, not an enemy and not even a rival. The prince studied David for many moments and finally said, "This is awkward. I feel as if I know you, and you obviously feel as if you know me, yet we have never met. How would you like me to address you?"

"As David, sir."

Prince Jahnzel nodded. He motioned to the chairs that were positioned around the room. "Please, everyone, be seated. I don't have much time, so I'm going to lay this out bluntly. Point one. I have only one ship and it isn't a large one, which means that the Nation won't have the ability to leave Earth for many years. Returning to Diron, always an outrageous idea, is, at present, impossible."



Which meant that the saintess could not take David with her to Diron for many years. That was a good thing, so why did Betty still feel so uneasy? She wasn't quite finished sitting down when the prince moved to his next item of business.

"Point two. My brother has proved himself to be a despicable person and an unfit ruler for my people. He has broken the law, and as Highest Elder of the Nation, it is my right and responsibility to put him out of power. Believe me when I say that no one in this room wants that more than I do. That's why it pains me to tell you that my power in the Nation right now is extremely unstable, and for this reason, there can be no coup."

Could it be possible that the Zarrists would refuse to follow this capable boy if he went to war against the emperor? Almost as soon as Betty asked herself the question, she knew the answer—it was written all over his haggard face. So this was the reason Saintess Myri wasn't returning to Teton Colony with him. Without a coup, she could never return.

"As maddening as it is, we have to look reality in the face and accept the fact that my brother's power over the Nation and Earth becomes stronger every day, which leads into point three. Saintess Myri and David are in an extreme amount of danger. If my brother suspects that she has betrayed him, he will send armies after them both. He absolutely can't allow her to live unless he believes her crimes are as great as his, and she is his wife's sister! David, as a 'savage,' means nothing to him whatsoever aside from his usefulness in recruiting Nationalists and acting as a commander in the Fleet. He'll kill him without a spark of remorse, and he'll kill your family to get to him.

"And before you bring to my attention the fact that Star Force is all but destroyed and that it seems unlikely my brother could get enough recruits to form armies, I need to bring to your attention the fact that more and more natives are pledging loyalty to the Nation every day. Tryamaz Camp alone harbors half a million natives and is expanding rapidly, just kilometers away from here. President Richardson would not hesitate to send troops in here after David if asked to do so by my brother. If Richardson's army doesn't succeed the first time, or the second, my brother himself will bond new groups of natives and send them into the Light after you. He cares nothing for their lives and will continue to send them until you are either captured or dead."

The scenario the prince outlined was too terrible to believe, especially since the Lord had sent the Light to protect them all!

"And before you bring to my attention the fact that God sent the Light to protect you and your family, let me remind you that this jewel of purity Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro, under the influence of a cell bond, came into the Light intending to put a dijauntu bond on David and got so far as to stand over his bed!"

And there she sat in the chair next to David, direct evidence that the Light, as miraculous as it was, could not protect them from every danger, and Betty suddenly felt naked to the evil will of this alien emperor.

"Point four." Prince Jahnzel turned his head toward Betty and bore those green eyes into hers. "Saintess Myri and I prepared for seventeen years to marry in five days. That's right. Our wedding day was supposed to be *next Monday*. We were the rare noble couple who actually loved each other before the wedding." He was so bitter that Betty wanted to avert her eyes and plug her ears. What she had perceived as quiet charisma, however, had suddenly clamored, and she couldn't pull herself out of his power. "This was what both the saintess and I wanted. It was what our parents wanted and what our people expected. And it should have happened. Had it not been for the cell bond my brother put

on her, she would have come back to me after the first failure. She may not have come here at all.”

Betty remembered Saintess Myri’s outburst that first day when Bob had suggested she marry the prince and knew it was true. What Betty couldn’t fathom was why the prince was giving them such explicit details about his relationship with the saintess when such intimate revelations, particularly in the presence of David, could do nothing but magnify his own pain.

“Oh Jahnzel, please don’t do this.” Saintess Myri sounded as if she were as dismayed as Betty felt.

Prince Jahnzel ignored the saintess and continued to stare at Betty, and she finally understood that he was exposing his own feelings in this passionate way entirely for her benefit. “There isn’t a person in this room who even comes *close* to hating this situation more than I do. I tell you this because I don’t want you to have any doubts whatsoever about how strongly I believe that the course of action I’m going to give you is correct. Saintess Myri and your son need to marry, and they need to disappear, and they need to do it soon. And you can never know where they are or have any contact with them whatsoever until my brother is dead.”

“A result I can help you accomplish.” David’s declaration turned everyone’s heads in his direction. “There is another option, and it is that Myri and I do exactly what the emperor expects us to do, except I recruit Nationalists to work for you instead of for him. Together, we’ll put him down!”

Betty was certain she hadn’t heard correctly. Had her baby just suggested that he work with this alien prince to organize a coup? Just as her body began to hurl itself out of the chair in protest, the prince’s quick reflexes propelled him to David’s recliner, yelling, “Are you crazy?”

Betty couldn’t have matched the intensity of the prince’s disapproval for any amount of money and lost the motivation to interfere. All she could do was gape as this little soap opera played itself out a few yards from where she sat.

“My brother has a cell bond on her! All he needs is one little doubt, and he’ll kill her like that!” Prince Jahnzel clapped his hands two inches from David’s face.

David didn’t flinch. “I’m not saying we should do it; I’m just saying that this is a reasonable option and I want it on the table.”

Saintess Myri nodded. “He’s right, Jahnzel. It would keep Arulezz away from his family, and it would allow you and I to do what we know needs to be done.”

Prince Jahnzel turned to Myri, more horrified than ever. “You mean to tell me that you’re going to stand in Lezz’s presence, day after day, and *lie*?”

“You are!”

“You think you’re going to go back to Jesalya and act as though nothing’s changed? You can’t do it; they’ll expose you within an hour! No!”

“You told me when I received this assignment that I could fight Arulezz, and now you’re telling me I can’t. Which is it, Jahnzel?”

“You would have to do *dijauntu* with David, and then I would have to execute you both! You could go under the sword before Arulezz since your crime would be a hundred times worse than his!”

Saintess Myri opened her mouth to reply and then closed it again and looked at David, troubled. David had no problem responding: “Of course we’d have to do it, but we wouldn’t tell you, so you wouldn’t officially know. Isn’t that what he’s afraid of? That

you'll find out Myri did dijauntu with me and then execute him? It would all be a part of the cover, part of the lie. You're not supposed to know, so you ignore it."

The prince pointed at David and screamed down at Saintess Myri, "You would do dijauntu with a *savage*!"

Saintess Myri jumped up and stared right into the prince's eyes. "I may marry David, but I will never agree to *that*."

Prince Jahnzel gazed at Saintess Myri for what seemed like many minutes. She held his gaze without moving an iota, although her eyes began to shimmer, and a tear spilled out. No one else stirred or even seemed to breathe. The boy was clearly in agony, and watching him so completely lose his regal air broke Betty's heart.

Finally, an expression of composure came over the prince's face that was more dreadful than his previous passion because it was such a false representation of his true feelings. He removed his ring and extended it toward the saintess. "Heal him now. I want to see him walk."

Saintess Myri hesitated, glancing in Betty and Gene's direction. Before either one of them could do so much as nod, Prince Jahnzel shoved the ring into Saintess Myri's hand. "I don't have time to wait for you to debate this. I'm not leaving until I know he's capable of being your protector. Do it now!"

The prince's tone was one of such command that no one in the room would have dared defy him, least of all Saintess Myri. The saintess returned to her chair and closed her eyes. Prince Jahnzel turned to Bob. "I would like to confer with you privately."

"I would be honored, sir."

Prince Jahnzel addressed Betty and Gene, "Please excuse us for a few minutes."

They nodded, and Prince Jahnzel stepped into the hall with Bob. When they were gone, Gene said softly, "That was quite a show."

"It sure was." Betty couldn't believe how calm she sounded.

Gene squeezed her hand. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Betty felt a burning in her throat and suspected that she really wasn't okay.

"That prince seems sincere."

Betty became aware that she was hot and quivery. "He sure does." She didn't want to believe anything the prince had said, but she believed everything.

"This has been an odd day."

"It sure has." A month ago, Betty had been worried that David might marry this Zarr girl and go to Diron sometime in the distant future. Now she faced the likelihood that he would leave within a few months and be in a certain amount of danger his entire life. If he died in some strange place, how would she even know? What kind of nightmare were they living?

Betty felt tears flood her eyes and struggled to hold them in. She tried to distract herself by counting the stripes on the tissue box that was sitting on the end table. Within half a minute, the stripes swirled together, and Betty choked back a gasp. She felt a tear escape her control, then another, and still another.

She couldn't sit in that room any longer, and yet she couldn't leave. Bob and the prince were standing in the hall outside of the living room. David and the saintess were in chairs near the French doors into the front sunroom, which had a door into the master bedroom.

Betty's nose began to run with as much fervor as her eyes. Having no choice, she stood up and reached for some tissues from the box of wavy stripes. Trembling, she pressed the soft paper to her face. She almost stepped around the coffee table to leave by way of the sunroom but couldn't bear to walk by David, who hadn't demonstrated that he had any comprehension, let alone understanding, of her suffering.

The prince, on the other hand, was in just as much agony as she was and would understand. Bob might not understand, but he would sympathize. She turned and strode toward the hall. Gene jumped up and hurried after her. When they were near the fireplace, Betty rested a hand on his arm and shook her head. "Someone has to stay."

"Are you sure?"

Betty nodded and broke away from him. She slipped by Bob and the prince with as much dignity as she could muster, muttering, "Please excuse me." Thankfully the only acknowledgement they gave her was a pause in their own conversation. She barely made it to her bedroom before her body began heaving with silent sobs.

\* \* \*

Jahnzel longed to say some words of comfort to David's mother as she passed him in such distress, but he longed just as much to escape this terrible place himself and everything he had learned there. Knowing there were no words that could soothe such grief and anxiety, he decided that the best gift he could give to her was silence. He felt some consolation in the fact that at least one person had the ability to escape into a quiet place all her own.

Once Jahnzel finished communicating with David's policeman brother and returned to the lounge, Myri arose and smiled down at David with a tenderness Jahnzel wished he didn't have to see. "You shouldn't need my help anymore." She handed Jahnzel's ring back to him.

Jahnzel took the ring. "Tell our people here in the Light that I insisted you heal David so that you could take immediate governorship over them." He had no doubt they would accept the explanation. According to protocol, a woman who had been destined to be his wife should never have abased herself with such menial work.

Myri nodded. "They'll believe that you would be unhappy with what I've done, and so will Arulezz." Her cheeks flushed. "I'm so sorry I embarrassed you, Jahnzel. Please forgive me. For everything."

Myri's apology surprised Jahnzel. His instinct was to tell her that she had no need to apologize—particularly since what she had done had suited the role Arulezz had designed for her and had certainly given her protection—but his mind told him that if he acted the role of the dishonored prince, she would take the belief that he was offended to Arulezz and their people and be better able to convince them that the healing was natural and right. "I accept your apology."

David put his hands on the armrests of the recliner and pushed himself out of the chair. He held onto the chair at first, not sure how stable he would be. He straightened and finally let go, finding that he could stand up just fine. Jahnzel nodded his acceptance. "Now that you're healed, David, I would like you to accompany me to the shuttle."

"I would be honored, sir."

David's brother brought Jahnzel's cloak and handed it to him. Jahnzel swung it over his shoulders and fastened it at his throat. Jahnzel bowed his head to David's father. "You have an extraordinary son, Mr. Pierce, which is why my brother wants him so badly. I hope that is some consolation to you and your wife. You can be very proud."

"It is. Thank you, sir."

Jahnzel turned to Myri and bowed. "I have fulfilled my oath to you, Saintess Myri. I won't be returning." He didn't particularly want to part with such cold words, but he needed to impress upon her mind that this separation was final, even if she didn't end up marrying David.

Myri curtsied. "Thank you, Consecrated One." The heaviness in her tone told Jahnzel that she understood his meaning perfectly.

Jahnzel motioned to David, and the two of them left the house through a back door. He could not stop thinking about David's shocking offer to help him organize a coup. Everything in Jahnzel revolted against the idea, which was why it was so brilliant. Arulezz might suspect such an alliance, but he wouldn't expect it. How could he, knowing how much Jahnzel abhorred David Pierce? It was the sort of suggestion Jahnzel would have made in a comparable situation, and he chastised himself over and over again for not anticipating it and therefore reacting disgracefully when it was revealed.

Jahnzel finally realized that David Pierce was a man he understood because they were so much alike. Why had he not perceived this fact before now? It was obvious, really. His father had wanted to give Myri a husband she could love and respect, and so he had set out to find the Earthon version of Jahnzel and actually had. It was unnerving and galling!

Just how serious was David Pierce about this coup idea? Would he really be willing to put Myri's life at further risk by entering into such a dangerous arrangement? Had he thought through the consequences of such a plan at all? After the door shut behind David and him, Jahnzel asked, "Why would you offer to help me organize a coup? I'm not only your enemy, I'm your rival."

"Why would you risk your fleet to check on natives your nation believed from the beginning were expendable?"

Jahnzel recalled David's connection to the Eden Colony and understood why Myri had defended his handling of the Eden affair so passionately. David had a family member and a friend stranded on Eden and would believe they were worth rescuing, no matter what the cost. Jahnzel didn't have the same connection to the colony that David did, but obviously he, too, believed the colonists were worth rescuing, no matter what the cost, or he wouldn't have risked the fleet. Was David trying to say that he believed Jahnzel was worth rescuing, no matter what the cost? Why? "Because he is the truest friend you have," the Light whispered.

So startled he almost jumped, Jahnzel retorted, "I did not believe they were expendable." He thought of his encounter with the low-born orphan girl Technician Day and knew that what he told David was true. "I do not believe—not for one moment—that any citizen of my Nation is expendable. But you didn't answer my question."

"A month ago, you really were my enemy. Now you are a trustworthy and humane commander that I would be honored to serve under in a fight that concerns both of our nations."

So in choosing to help the Eden Colony, Jahnzel had potentially lost the confidence of his own people but had gained that of Myri's savage. The irony bewildered him, but it also eased his grief just a little. "David Pierce is the truest friend you have," the Light again whispered. The truth of the Light's words finally penetrated Jahnzel to his essence, and he knew that David Pierce was a man he could confide in. Having come to this bizarre conclusion, he did something he hadn't done in many months—he relaxed. "You make it sound as if you thought of the coup idea for the first time today, after Saintess Myri told you about my failure with the Eden Colony."

"Yes and no."

"Yes and no?"

"When Saintess Myri first came to me, I thought the emperor's plan to enlist me in his cause was stupid; it would be too easy for someone like me to use the position he offered to fight against him. Today, after the saintess told me how you had lost the fleet and now had no support, it all came into my mind with perfect clarity."

Jahnzel almost laughed at Pierce's naïveté. "I would like to hear your perfectly clear thoughts on the matter." Did he really believe that Arulezz wouldn't anticipate such a tactic from a Nationalist and take measures to counter it?

"Unless you become evil like your brother, the two of you can't coexist. You're either going to kill him, or he is going to kill you. If he kills you, he continues with his plan to take dominion over the earth. If you kill him, you lead your people back to Diron where they belong. Unless you get support from someone, your brother is going to succeed in his plan to take control of the earth. I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, which means that your fight and mine are the same."

"Yes, you are correct in your assessment that my brother and I cannot coexist and that my brother is in the process of taking dominion of your planet. Now what role do you see Saintess Myri's playing in this scheme of yours?"

"This is Saintess Myri's fight too. It would gall her to run from her duty and abandon her people to the tyranny of your brother. Returning to life in your nation would also allow her to return to her mother, live in luxury, and utilize the healing skills she's been taught."

So David was serious about helping him organize a coup, but he hadn't thought it through at all. He was a typical brash young officer ready to plunge into a fight without taking the time to examine the feasibility of his campaign and develop a realistic strategy. Jahnzel had no choice but to destroy his coup idea and knew just the weapons to use.

"During my father's rise to power, what would you have thought of a classmate who planned to marry a Zarrist aristocrat or noblewoman?"

"That he was a traitor."

"Of course you would have. I have a feeling that no small number of your former classmates and colleagues would now see *you* as a traitor."

"But the attitude has changed among my people. We don't consider those citizens of your nation who came into the Light our enemies."

"How do you know what your compatriots really think? You've been stuck in that bedroom for two months. Just because you love Saintess Myri doesn't mean others of your people will easily accept her as your wife or that they would consent to follow my

orders. But that's not all. Did you know that not one of your Light cities contains any known military base?"

"That isn't true. I was hospitalized in a Maryland military base, under the Light."

"A hospital is hardly a threat. I meant *primary* bases."

"You mean to tell me that the Light just stops at the gates of primary military bases around the world?"

"In most cases, the bases are well outside of the urban areas covered by the Light. In some cases, however, the Light does stop right at the gates. I know it's a strange little fact, but it's my business to know strange little facts like that."

"If what you say is true, that really is strange."

"Oh it's true. Absolutely. Were it not, Arulezz would not have cleared the use of aircar for civilians and Saintess Myri would never have come here."

"Which means that you don't consider the domestic military organizations a threat."

"Of course I don't. They fell with their governments."

"And what of underground facilities? Do you expect me to believe that the invaders got all of them too?"

"Nexyun and Jaxzeran got many of them. After I retreated with my ships, the native forces launched everything they had and did enough damage that the invading fleets retreated."

"What happened then? Did *you* destroy the remaining bases?"

"I didn't have to. The violence you experienced at the Naval Academy happened all over the world. Nationalists were attacked and are still being attacked. Those who survive are still fleeing to your Light cities. They aren't safe anywhere else."

"Which means that your supporters are the only ones left to man the few bases that are left."

"Precisely, which shouldn't surprise you. The native governments were in the process of forming a federation with my government as the presiding nation and were already ours in everything but name. As soon as it was safe after the invasion, my brother began sending out ambassadors to meet with heads of state from all over the planet. He promises them help in rebuilding and assures them that our desires haven't changed."

"Which is why President Richardson is in Tryamaz right now."

"Richardson took refuge in Teton Colony before the invasion. My father himself made the alliance with him."

"So the military bases of my former government are now under your command."

"Not yet. My job is to rebuild the fleet, not command ground bases. Richardson still commands them, but he is under my brother's control."

David grimaced. "Through a cell bond, undoubtedly."

"Yes."

"Which means your brother commands our bases now."

"That is the most accurate way of looking at the situation, yes. Richardson and many others don't realize yet that your government really did fall. He has a certain amount of power, but he's not much better than a puppet."

"I suppose the Light also drew some of your own people, such as this under-governor of Saintess Myri's, Lieutenant Lanner Laddan."

Jahnzel thought of Technician Day, who had also been drawn into the Light at the time of the invasion. "This planet has undergone a polarization. Those with the most

desire and ability to fight my nation have been exiled to your territories.” What kind of visions had the Light given to Technician Day? The Light hadn’t shown Jahnzel those. Did she still consider herself a supporter of the Divine Emperor? Did she, like Myri, want to be baptized into David’s church?

“Which explains why you consider the Light your only real threat.”

“The only real *planetary* threat, and only in my brother’s mind. The fact that not one of your Light cities contains any known primary base tells me that my Nation has nothing to fear from them militarily. You know what else it tells me? That while the Light seems to protect your people from some dangers, its mission is not a military one.”

David’s face registered surprise, then understanding.

“God has a mission for the Light—I’m sure of it—but it isn’t to organize a military coup. Because of this, along with the fact that there are far more people outside of the Light than inside of it, I’m not at all certain you could get enough support from your compatriots to make a coup feasible. An unfeasible coup means a failed coup, which means that he kills me, he kills you, he kills Saintess Myri, and he keeps your children. They would be raised in that evil environment without the true story of you and the saintess and the Light. Would *they* be willing and able to fight my brother?” Jahnzel shook his head. “He would make them nobles and thereby recruit them to his cause, just as he is trying to recruit you.”

David stared at him, aghast.

Finally, Jahnzel’s ammunition had found its target. “Now let me ask you this: Could it be possible for you to be so eager for a coup and not be certain you want to marry Saintess Myri? The answer: No. Of course not. You want to marry her, and you intend to marry her, so get back in there and start making plans to disappear.”

David had not expected this observation and appeared completely taken aback. “Things really aren’t as certain as that.”

“Then you’re either a hothead or a liar.”

“If I’m a hothead, then you’re a fatalist.”

“No, I’m a prophet.” Jahnzel thought about the “vision” Myri claimed he possessed and also about his mission from the Light to call Arulezz to repentance and had to admit that, on a certain level, what he told David was true.

David tried to smile but didn’t quite succeed. “Don’t joke about it.”

Jahnzel knew he had struck a deep nerve. “You think I’ve been exaggerating the situation to keep Saintess Myri safe?”

“It had crossed my mind, yes.”

“I haven’t said one thing that isn’t absolutely true.”

“Yes, you did. You claim that you do not believe—not for one moment—that any citizen of your nation is expendable. If you really do believe a coup is hopeless, then you intend to die, which means you believe that at least one citizen of your nation is expendable.”

“Then you suggest I fight a hopeless coup?”

“If the fight will save your honor and give you something to live for, then yes. Absolutely. Even if it’s a fight you can’t win.”

“That is a fine thing to say, but on those terms, even you wouldn’t help me.”

David didn’t answer.

“I didn’t think so. You may be hotheaded, but you aren’t stupid.”

“And you aren’t expendable.”



Obviously the woman Jahnzel had loved thought he was expendable. To hear such a sentiment from the man who wasn't expendable to her was more than he could tolerate. "Don't you dare let that unpopular opinion distract you away from the safety of your bride, Mr. Pierce, or your own honor will be in jeopardy. Farewell."

\* \* \*

The prince's craft lifted off, and David's attention turned to the large park stone he had watched for so long from the sunroom. He observed in surprise that the stone was really quite beautiful. He ran his hand over the crystallized surface. He had never seen a piece of quartz this large.

When David returned to the living room and saw Myri sitting in the chair where she always sat, he became aware of what she had sacrificed in choosing him over the prince. A ferocious feeling of desire came over him, combined with a sense of warning so acute it nearly sucked the breath right out of his lungs. What did it mean? Did he need to restrain himself better and not make the commitment to her that apparently he really did want to make? Or had the prince been correct in his assessment of her danger? Was it time for them to run?

When Myri saw David, she jumped up and stepped forward to meet him. He wrapped his arms around her, savoring the pleasure all the more because holding her in this close way would have been impossible earlier in the day. After a few moments, she looked up at him. "What happened?"

David couldn't bring himself to release her. "The prince is brilliant, and he is shrewd, and when we talked, he was so far ahead of me on every point that I had no hope of adding anything useful to the conversation. He made me feel like a plebe."

His father chuckled and even Myri smiled. "You're being too hard on yourself."

David winced. "You made a poor choice I think, Myri."

Myri's smile faded. "Why would you think that? This isn't like you. What did he say?"

David led Myri to her chair and sat down in his own. He considered not telling her anything, knowing how anxious, and perhaps even guilty, the prince's suicidal attitude would make her, but then he realized that she probably knew better than he did just what the prince's state of mind was. She had, after all, communicated with him in a particularly revealing telepathic way.

"He seemed to be most concerned whether I was serious in wanting to help him organize a coup." David relayed his conversation with the prince as well as he could. "Before he got in the shuttle, he told me that my own honor would be in jeopardy if I let myself be distracted from your safety, and he was right. I'm so sorry I offered to help him organize a coup. I had no business doing that."

Myri stared at him with wide eyes. "Do you really think he's a prophet, David?"

Of all the things the prince had said, David had not expected Myri to focus on his "prophet" retort. "I thought he was being sarcastic or making a joke, but he doesn't have a sense of humor, does he?"

Myri shook her head. "If he said it, he meant it. Why would he say something like that?"

David turned toward his parents, for the first time noticing that his mother wasn't there. His father was frowning and thoughtful and didn't appear inclined to express an

opinion. Disturbed that he didn't automatically and emphatically deny that the prince was a prophet, David made an attempt to articulate his own confused opinion of the prince. "I don't think he has actually seen the future and is making true statements about our children. I do think he's an extremely perceptive person who is able to accurately foresee possible consequences of certain actions. There is no doubt that he was the first in your nation to understand that your people should return to Diron. Does that make him a prophet? I don't know." He shrugged. "If he really does have a mission to lead your people back to Diron, that would make him like Moses, so maybe he is."

Understanding replaced the shock in Myri's eyes. "I suppose that even if he isn't a prophet, he does have a sense of destiny about him."

"A sense of destiny that's being strangled by despair. I'm worried about him."

"Why?" his father asked. "He's nothing to you."

"That isn't true. We understand each other, and I feel a kinship with him, even if he doesn't feel the same way about me. Why is that? I don't know."

Myri squeezed David's hand. "Please don't feel you have to apologize for offering to help him organize a coup. I don't think I would have thought of it myself, but after you brought it up, I felt what you felt and wanted to help him too. I think what you did showed how great your heart is, even if it was reckless."

\* \* \*

When Myri returned to Liberty that evening, she expected to confer privately with Lieutenant Laddan before she spoke publicly to her people about stepping into the role of governor. When she landed, however, all of her people, it seemed, were in front of the house waiting for her. They formed a Noble Path along the walk, and as she disembarked, they humbled themselves in bows and curtsies. Protocol would not allow them to demand information from her, but their presence as a body made it clear that they wanted answers and wanted them now.

"Please arise," Myri said, feeling nervous. "You do me great honor."

As usual, Lieutenant Lanner Laddan stepped forward and spoke first. "The honor is ours, our Saintess." He didn't look as though he felt honored. He appeared downright skeptical.

Laddan's attitude annoyed Myri. How dare he question her! She was tempted to simply tell her people how things would be and let them think what they wanted, but the feeling from the Light was that if she wanted them to trust her, she needed to be as open with them as possible.

Myri forced herself to smile. "Today was an eventful one. Curious about my status here in the Light, the Consecrated One paid me a visit at the Pierce home. Since he would only be here a short time and under close watch, Robert Pierce allowed him to keep his arelada. Anxious for me to take my rightful place as governor of our people here in the Light, the Consecrated One insisted I use his arelada to heal David."

Jahnzel's command undermined Myri's authority with these people, and she hated revealing it. She knew as well as Jahnzel did, however, that neither her people nor Arulezz would believe that Jahnzel would permit her to continue in the lowly job of nursing a savage if he had any choice in the matter. Myri would have preferred to continue nursing David, but she had embarrassed Jahnzel enough already. She would humble herself and take her rightful position. "I am delighted to return to you for good."

I'll assume the duties of governor as soon as Lieutenant Laddan has briefed me. I intend for him to continue to manage many of the daily affairs of our community as lieutenant governor."

Laddan bowed. "As you wish, my Saintess."

She didn't wish it, but she didn't believe she had any choice. Laddan was more than competent, and her people liked him. "Thank you." Now came the truly difficult part. "You do need to know, though, that I will still spend time with David Pierce, both here and at his home. He has become very dear to me and is now my suitor. I will, of course, always be accompanied by Seamstress Kintz. I know that there have been many rumors circulating about my relationship with David, which is why I want to get everything out in the open right now. Ask me whatever questions are on your mind, and I will answer them."

Myri gritted her teeth and prepared for an onslaught. Laddan didn't hesitate. "What does the Consecrated One think of this new development, my Saintess?"

Myri wanted to reply with an evasive, "The Consecrated One and I gave each other up for the survival of our Nation," but she knew none of them would be satisfied by that answer. "When I spoke with the Consecrated One today, he couldn't help but observe my strong feelings for David. When he left, it was with the understanding that there would be no reconciliation between us."

"Why was the Consecrated One curious about your status here in the Light?" Laddan asked.

"He thought it was odd that Captain Sauvel returned to Teton Colony without me."

"Has he communicated with Captain Sauvel?"

"I don't know." Myri scanned the questioning faces. "Certainly Lieutenant Laddan isn't the only one of you who has questions. Please feel free to speak up."

Not one person in the group other than Lieutenant Laddan gave any indication that he or she intended to speak. After several moments of silence, Laddan asked, "Are you going to marry David Pierce?" No one but Laddan would have been brazen enough to ask such a question, and yet Myri perceived that the others would have asked it themselves had they dared.

Feeling warm, Myri wanted to loosen her scarf but decided against it. She could be open with her people to a degree, but she couldn't in any way reveal the fact that Laddan's questions disturbed her. "I don't know. We're talking about it, but no decision can be made until the Church allows our people to be baptized."

"Which means that he won't marry you unless you can be baptized and marry him in the temple."

"Correct."

"And under those circumstances, you rejected the Consecrated One for him?"

Myri had tried to make it sound as if Jahnzel had rejected her, but Laddan was too quick. She didn't know how to answer his question without revealing more of her private feelings than she intended. "I don't know how to answer your question except to say that as much as I admire the Consecrated One, I think that David Pierce may actually be more right for me."

"Do you love him?"

Myri nodded. As she expected, many of them appeared scandalized. A few of them, like Laddan, were unconvinced.

“How can you love him?” one of the women burst out. “You love the Consecrated One!”

“I know this is all very strange to you. It is to me too. The last thing I expected when I came here was to fall in love with David Pierce. It just happened after we spent so much time together.”

Laddan shook his head. “I might be able to accept it better if he wasn’t the very man the Divine One chose for you.”

Myri suddenly felt alarmed. “The late Divine Emperor was like a father to me. The current Divine Emperor told me that his father spent many months searching for a man I could love. Is it any surprise that he actually made a good choice?”

The scandalized expressions softened a bit in understanding. Many of them accepted this explanation. Laddan, however, wasn’t satisfied yet. “Wasn’t the reason you were sent into the Light to begin with so that you could make David Pierce love you? So that you can take him back to the Divine One?”

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“You’ve been here, what, a month? And David Pierce is already willing to discuss marriage with you? When you’re not even a member of the Church yet?”

“A technicality.”

“No, it isn’t a technicality. It’s enormous.”

What was he suggesting? That she really had put a cell bond on David’s mind? The possibility horrified her. She longed to shut this conversation down, but she needed to know where she stood with her people. “Are you accusing me of lying?”

Laddan’s lips parted. His cheeks—already ruddy from the cold—seemed to get redder.

“Do you think I really did put a cell bond on David and that I plan to trick him into working for the Divine Emperor?”

Everything about Laddan seemed to recoil. Obviously he hadn’t expected her to be so direct.

“Well?” Myri pressed. “Do you?” She now knew the answer to the question, but she wanted to make sure he had no doubt about who was in charge.

Laddan bowed deeply. “What I think doesn’t matter, my Saintess. I apologize for being impertinent.”

So he wasn’t ready to publicly call her a liar yet. “I accept your apology.” She swept her gaze over the group. They were all uncomfortable; most couldn’t even look at her.

Seamstress Kintz stepped forward, curtsied to Myri, then faced the group. “I hope my Saintess will excuse me for speaking out of turn, but I would like to say that I don’t think she put a cell bond on David Pierce. She’s very friendly to him, but I’ve never seen her communicate telepathically with him or any member of the Pierce family.”

Such a feeling of appreciation washed over Myri that she almost lost her composure. She smiled at Seamstress Kintz. “Thank you.” Myri struggled to maintain her smile and faced the group again. “Do you really think it’s impossible that a man could grow to love me in a month without a cell bond? Am I so lacking in beauty and charm?”

All eyes lifted to meet hers, and nervous laughter rippled through the group.

Having made her point and believing that there was nothing else to say about David, Myri decided to end the discussion. She turned to Laddan. “Please accompany me to my office.”

When they were alone, Myri motioned him into a chair. "I'm sure you have a lot to tell me, so you might as well start."

"You're not going to reprimand me, my Saintess?"

Myri wanted to relieve him of his duties altogether, but the feeling she received from the Light was that she should be patient and give him the opportunity to learn to trust her. "I think you've been sufficiently reprimanded."

"You're very merciful, my Saintess."

## CHAPTER 20: POINT OF NO RETURN

Rachel left the command center of the ship feeling dazed. Had she really just agreed to go to the planet again? How could she do that when every conscious feeling inside of her rebelled against it? Yes, she had heard the panic in her husband's voice when he had begged, "Rachel! Don't leave me like this! Please!" And no, she didn't want to return to Earth having failed with the Eden colony, but return to the planet? The idea that she was preparing to do just that made her feel as if she would vomit. She didn't know how she could do it.

*Rachel! Don't leave me like this! Please!* The voice reverberated through her consciousness again and again as she walked with Lieutenant Sistrél to the shuttle bay. By the time she stood facing the shuttle, she realized that she could return to the planet for a very short time, long enough to assure everyone that she was more than all right and persuade Duane to join her on the ship.

Lieutenant Sistrél motioned to the hatch. *Please, Rachel, it's time.*

Rachel thought she should be able to lift her foot and step into the shuttle, but her body wouldn't follow through on the thought. She waited there for at least a minute and tried again. She stared at the hatch as if paralyzed. *I can't do it. Can't you just bring the others here the way you originally planned?*

*No, but I can bring your husband here to be with you. He won't come, however, unless you go get him.*

That much was true. If she wanted to be with her husband again, she needed to go get him. She stepped onto the ship, one that was just as large as the shuttle on which she had left Eden but with a smaller cabin and fewer seats. She wondered if berths for sleeping were in the closed-off area to her right. The Zarrist delegation had already arrived, and Rachel marveled at how fast they had been able to prepare for this journey.

As soon as Rachel sat down near a porthole, she felt the engines come on. Panic stabbed her and she ran to the hatch, which had already closed. She pounded on the bulkhead. *I don't want to go! Let me off!*

A Zarrist who was sitting nearby stood up and approached her. *It's too late for that. We're on our way.*

Rachel felt a sting in her arm. She turned in the direction of the sting and saw a Zarrist medic with a syringe. *Just a little something to help you relax,* the medic communicated.

"You should have asked first," she whispered, dropping into a nearby chair. She heard a click and assumed that one of the Zarrists had strapped her into the seat.

The stars seemed to slide by in streaks as the shuttle moved. Rachel assumed they were approaching the planet, but she was on the wrong side of the ship to see it, which, perhaps, was better. Her head drooped against the porthole, her eyelids too heavy to hold themselves open.

When Rachel opened her eyes again, she saw trees in the distance and knew they had arrived. She looked around at the others and saw that they were tense, as if they, too, were nervous about landing on the planet.

Lieutenant Sistrél came from the cockpit and communicated with Rachel, *As you know, we can't communicate with your people. You will have to be the intermediary.*

*Perhaps they will agree to communicate with you telepathically now.*

*Perhaps, but we do not desire to force the matter. What they seem to need right now is to know that you are safe and happy. If they receive that assurance, they will be more likely to allow us to help them.*

*What message would you like me to give to them?*

*Tell them about your experience on the ship. Tell them that we mean them no harm. Tell them that the colony can be a success with our help. We will remain here on the ship until they are satisfied. There is no need for them to accommodate us in any way—everything we need is right here.*

Rachel nodded and stood up. Still feeling a little groggy, she staggered to the door. She leaned against the bulkhead and rested there a moment, gathering her strength. The hatch opened, and once it was stable, she walked down the stairs, clutching the handrail.

She saw Duane first, standing there with Ben, Ann, Cameron, and Sean Marshall. Duane did appear worried. As soon as he saw her, he jogged to the stairs and helped her to the ground. "What did they do to you?"

Seeing him there at the ship reminded her too much of the last time she had seen him and the fact that he had refused to go with her, perhaps separating himself from her for the remainder of their mortal lives. The thought made her feel a little queasy, but she welcomed his concern, and his touch was comforting. "It's nothing, really, Duane. They gave me a sedative so that I could more easily travel. I didn't want to come and face Tempest again."

"They *made* you come?" Duane said. Sean took her other arm and helped her in the direction of one of the aircars that was sitting in the clearing.

"It wasn't like that. I had decided to come, and then I had second thoughts. I was very tense."

"We haven't had any trouble from Tempest since you've been gone," Duane said.

"Is Sara able to communicate with her again?"

"Yes, much to everyone's relief," Cameron replied. Despite the talk of relief, he was frowning, as if he were worried, and his eyes moved from her hair, to her eyes, and to her chin, as if he were disturbed in some way about her appearance.

A whirring noise sounded as the ship's hatch closed. "Why aren't the Zarrists coming out?" Ben asked. He, too, studied her face in kind of a strange way, but being the sophisticated man he was, he was less obvious about it than his son was.

"They'll stay on the ship until the colony feels comfortable having them closer."

"How many of them are there?" Ann asked.

Ann gazed at her in that penetrating way she always did. Why, then, did it unnerve Rachel a little? "Six," she said. "Don't worry about them. They have a synthesizing machine and bedding and everything they need. Where is everyone?"

"We persuaded them to give you some space," Duane said. "We do need to take you to the hospital for an examination, and then Ann wants to talk with you. After that, the colony will want to ask you some questions."

"Of course." As Duane and Sean helped Rachel into the aircar, she saw that it had been fitted up to be an ambulance.

Once she was settled, she asked her husband, "Why is everyone looking at me so oddly?"

He squeezed her hand. "Your make-up and hair are a little different, that's all."

"Certainly that doesn't surprise anybody. The cosmetics they had on the ship aren't the same ones I typically use, and I did get rumpled on the trip here."

Duane started the aircar. "After your exam, you can go home and freshen up."

Home. She knew that Duane meant their little house in the colony made of the Zarrists' building boards, but the thought of that place as "home" filled her with dread. She thought back to her beautiful house and property in Bethesda and her life with Duane and her sons there, but too many painful memories corrupted the pleasant ones for her to regard that place as home anymore. No, "home" now was that cabin on the Zarrist ship where she had spent the last two weeks.

Because of this, she wasted no time telling Duane her desire when they were alone in the aircar after her physical examination. "The Zarrists say that they'll let you come with me when I return to the ship."

"I thought they wanted us all to stay here."

"That doesn't apply to you and me. The only way I would come back at all was to get a guarantee that I could return with you, so when we get back to the house, we need to pack so that we can get out of here as fast as possible."

"If everyone else has to stay, what will happen to us once we get to the ship? Where will we go?"

"Back to Earth. The Zarrists told me that there is nowhere else to go."

"When?"

"I don't know. They didn't say."

"I'm not sure, yet, that I want to go. I need to hear about your experience there first."

Duane's hesitation filled Rachel with alarm. "Why would you not want to go?"

"I didn't say that I don't want to go. I just said that I want to hear about what happened first."

"I had a physical examination. I communicated with the captain. I spent two weeks in a beautiful lounge with the others, as well as in a little cabin where I slept. What else is there to tell? It was comfortable. It was safe. There was no Tempest! Do you just not want to be with me?"

"Of course I want to be with you. That isn't the issue."

"Then what is the issue?"

"I just can't quite bring myself to trust those people."

"What? Do you think I'm lying to you or something?"

"No. I'm just not sure they haven't been lying to *you*."

"About what?"

"Their identity."

Rachel couldn't believe what she was hearing. "The ship is very like the one we came here on! They wear Zarrist uniforms! They speak with the emperor! What more proof do you need?"

"I just don't feel quite comfortable trusting them yet. I need details about your experience there first."

Duane's ignorance and obstinance frustrated Rachel. "I spent two weeks on that ship. If there was some indication—any indication at all—that the people on the ship weren't Zarrists, don't you think I would have noticed it?"

"I'm not sure. You wanted so badly to leave that you may have missed details."

Duane had spoken in a gentle rather than a matter-of-fact way, which made what he said sound patronizing. "What you're saying is that you believe that either they've



deluded me or that I've deluded myself." How could her own husband have such a low opinion of her sense of discernment?

"I'm not saying any such thing. I simply want to defer any decision I make until you've told your story and we've had a chance to ask questions."

"We?"

"Ben. Barbara. Ann. Sean. Trevor. Cyndi. And even Sara and Cameron. All of us."

Duane had never so doubted her judgment before. What had happened to him? Rachel couldn't restrain an exasperated little sigh. "I give up. If you trust the other colonists more than you trust me, you can stay here with them. I don't care anymore." As the aircar approached the house, Rachel saw that Ann and Barbara were waiting by the door. She knew that Ann was there to psychoanalyze her, which made Barbara's presence a bit of a mystery.

"You're really not going to allow me a little time to think about it?" He sounded offended.

"Why should I? There's nothing to think about!"

"When you put it that way, you're absolutely right. If you don't care enough about my peace of mind to give me a couple of lousy hours to think about it, then there really isn't anything to think about."

"Then you're determined to stay here."

"The only thing I'm determined to do is to make up my *own* mind. And no, I don't want to be with you badly enough anymore to be your puppet."

"My *puppet*? Is that the way you *really* regard being married to a strong woman? That you're my *puppet*?"

"I think that in a truly egalitarian marriage, a wife would respect her husband's opinions as much as she does her own."

His implication that they did not have a truly egalitarian marriage baffled Rachel. "But I've always respected your opinions."

"If it has seemed to be so, it's because for most of our marriage, we've wanted the same things. I'm not sure that's the case anymore."

The slight chance that he might be right about their "egalitarian marriage" troubled Rachel, but she stifled that thought—she wasn't in the wrong. "Why are we even having this discussion? The Zarrists will take us back to Earth and our sons! Isn't that what you *want*?"

The aircar landed in front of their house. Duane turned and gazed at her, his eyes sad. "You really do refuse to see it, don't you?"

Again, he questioned her discernment and judgment. Rachel felt like a fool for putting up with him for so long; she knew now that she should have divorced him after the affair. "I 'see' that you haven't loved me since you had that bimbo and that you don't want to be with me. What else is there to 'see'?" She got out of the aircar and strode to the door.

She forced herself to smile. "I didn't expect to see you here, Barbara." She gave her a quick hug.

"Ann asked me to come," Barbara said as she followed Rachel into the house. "She thought you might be more comfortable with just a chat between friends."

Ann crossed the threshold into the house behind Barbara. "Or we could ask her to leave and you and I could have a standard therapy session." Her tone was light.

“No thank you.” Rachel went to the full-length mirror in the bedroom to examine her appearance.

“Is something wrong?” Barbara asked.

“Nothing that I know of, but I’ve received too many strange looks this morning. I’d like to know why.” As soon as she stepped in front of the mirror and saw the heavy-handed way she had applied her makeup that morning, she understood. “Oh my! The lighting on the ship must have been really bad.”

Barbara moved into the reflection and examined Rachel’s appearance with her. “Are their cosmetics much different from the ones we use?”

“A little.” Rachel tried to maneuver a stray lock of hair off her forehead and back into place. “And we didn’t have access to a salon. It looks as if I need a haircut. And my roots touched up. No wonder everyone was looking at me so oddly.” She understood now why Barbara was there—she was the colonists’ second-best expert on matters of appearance next to Rachel herself.

Rachel turned and smiled at Ann. “If you ladies don’t mind, I’ll take a shower and start from scratch.” Then she would pack. There was no way she was going to stay in that house with Duane that night.

\* \* \*

After Rachel Vance had gone to her house to freshen up, she met with the colonists in Ash Auditorium to tell her story and answer their questions. Sara listened to everything via video phone and didn’t ask anything, choosing instead to let everyone else probe for information. Cameron’s father, in particular, insisted on hearing descriptions of the ship and the personnel in the finest detail. He was so persistent in his search for accurate details that Sara almost felt sorry for Sister Vance. By the end of the interrogation, Sister Vance did appear tired.

*Too* tired. Sister Vance was a high-energy person who could, under normal circumstances, field questions for an hour without showing any signs of fatigue at all. While everything she said made sense, she, herself, was somehow different.

At the end of it all, when Brother Vance went to take Sister Vance back to their home, Sister Vance shook her head and said, “You and the others go and discuss me in private. Mike can take me back to the ship.” Brother Vance said something to her in such a low voice that Sara couldn’t hear it. Sister Vance shook her head, waved her husband away, and turned to Brother Dixon.

Sister Vance was going back to the Zarrists’ shuttle instead of to her home? That seemed strange. Did this mean the Vances were now separated? What had happened? Sara knew things had been tense between them for some time, but what had occurred to cause the rupture now? As Sara waited for Cameron and the others to get to the hospital, she pondered all of those questions.

Cameron, his father, Barbara, Sister Eagle, and Dr. Marshall did arrive a few minutes later to consult with Sara and Trevor about Sister Vance’s condition and make a decision about whether to invite the presumed Zarrists to land on the planet. Brother Vance ended up coming also.

As governor, Sara spoke first: “Is it just me, or did any of the rest of you think it was odd that a former U.S. Congresswoman like Sister Vance would be so tired after an hour of answering questions?” Several of the others in the room nodded. Sara turned her

head toward Dr. Marshall. "Could this fatigue be explained by the fact that she was tranquilized earlier in the day?"

"It could be. I can't think of anything else that would explain it. There's no evidence that she has changed physically in any significant way. The only needle mark I could discern was the one in her arm where she would have been tranquilized just before coming here. I have no reason to believe we'll find anything unusual in the blood work."

"Then you've observed nothing that would suggest she spent the last two weeks in a way different from what she reported."

"Nothing at all."

Sara turned toward Cameron's father. "Everything she said made sense to me. Did you discern any discrepancies?"

"None whatsoever. By all appearances, these people really are who they say they are."

"Anyone else?"

Sara saw heads shake, but instead of excitement on faces, she saw consternation. Then again, what was there to be excited about? Even if these people really were Zarrists, the colonists weren't going anywhere with them.

Sister Eagle spoke up. "Rachel truly believes that these people are Zarrists. She has no doubt about that fact whatsoever."

Brother Vance nodded. "That much is true. When I suggested they might have lied to her, she wouldn't even consider it. Now after hearing her story, I have no reason to believe that she's been deluded in any way. Not only that, but she's herself in so many ways. Still, the less-than-perfect makeup and hair bothers me. When she's in public, she's immaculate."

Barbara nodded. "The color was a bit off, and there was a little makeup line on her chin. And you're right, her hair wasn't perfect either. When she saw herself in the mirror, she claimed the lighting on the ship was bad and that she needed a haircut. Both explanations make sense, and if it had been any other woman in the colony, I would accept the explanation without question, but with Rachel, I don't know."

"Do you think she did her own makeup and hair this morning or not?" Sara asked.

"On one hand, I would say she couldn't have possibly done it. A meticulous woman learns how to do her makeup and hair well under less-than-perfect circumstances. On the other hand, the explanation she gave makes quite a bit more sense than any other alternative."

"What is the other alternative?" Trevor asked. "That everything that happened to Rachel over the last two weeks occurred in her mind and that the 'Zarrists' dressed her themselves this morning and then woke her up?"

Sara nodded. "When said like that, it really does sound outrageous. And paranoid."

"It does," Cameron's father said. "There's no hard evidence to support that view."

"And yet we're all still just slightly unsure," Brother Vance said.

"Does it matter that we're unsure?" Trevor asked. "We can spend a lot of time doubting and worrying, but won't the Zarrists come whether we want them to or not?"

Cameron's father nodded. "There's a good chance of that. Yes. What do you think, Sara?"

"I think that if anyone has 'hard evidence' regarding these so-called Zarrists, it would be Tempest. I also think that if she thinks they have lied, she would be quite an ally for us."

“Or she could just as easily kill us,” Cameron said.

Sara motioned to Cameron to extend the wall to close off her area of the room so that she could communicate privately with Tempest. Ever since Cameron had suggested the possibility that the “Zarrists” might bridle the planet, kill them all, and make their own agreement with Tempest if the colonists refused to cooperate, Sara had been afraid they might do just that. How would she know? Was it possible Tempest would make an agreement with these people and lie to her about it?

Determined to pay as much attention to what Tempest didn’t communicate as to what she did, Sara poured her spirit into her arelada and opened her mind. *Tempest, do you have any reason to believe that these people who have come are not Zarrists?*

*No.*

*Have they tried to communicate with you in any way?*

No. Again, the answer was immediate and terse, and her emotions felt restrained instead of relaxed and confident.

*What would you do if they did try to communicate with you?*

*If I must communicate with mortals, I choose only one, and that one is you.*

*Which means that if you want to communicate with the Zarrists, you’ll do it through me?*

*Yes.*

*Are you sure you’re willing to allow many of their ships to land?*

Tempest’s emotions seemed to settle. *Yes.*

*They’ll be here to enforce your rules. What will you do if one of them breaks your rules?*

*What I always do when someone breaks the rules.*

Sara was about to communicate that it was generous of her to give the Zarrists a second chance in this way, but Tempest withdrew before she could.

Sara pondered her conversation with Tempest. The planet-spirit had been uncomfortable through most of it, but did that mean she was lying? She had never lied to Sara before, but she did withhold information. She also had no love for the colonists, even Sara. Yes, she wanted Sara to be near and to communicate with her from time to time, but she had never shown any true compassion. Sara couldn’t trust her.

\* \* \*

Mike Dixon dropped Rachel off at the shuttle after the colony meeting and left her there. She sent a telepathic message and waited for the hatch to come down. Lieutenant Sistrrel emerged from the shuttle and stood at the top of the stairs. He regarded her in surprise, motioning to her luggage. *What is this?*

*My belongings.*

*We assumed you would remain with your husband until we take the two of you to the ship.*

*That would be impossible!*

Compassion softened his features. *What happened?*

Rachel telepathically gave him the conversation. *Our marriage has been troubled for some time, but his attitude today went too far. I can’t live with that man anymore.*

*But he doesn’t know us as well as you do. It’s natural, isn’t it, that he would want to talk to you about your experience on the ship before he committed himself?*

*This isn't so much about knowledge as it is trust.*

*Sometimes details and facts can help trust along.*

What he communicated did make sense. Perhaps she had been too hasty in her rejection. Still, Duane had suggested that they had never had a true egalitarian marriage. How could she go back to a husband who thought she treated him like her puppet?

*Have you spoken with him since you told your story? Maybe he's more comfortable with the idea of coming with us than he was before.*

Duane had tried to speak to her after the meeting and she had refused. What if he really did want to apologize? Rachel suddenly felt guilty. How could she treat her husband in such an unforgiving way? *I'm afraid I really did treat him badly.* She gripped the suitcase handle, turned away from Lieutenant Sistrrel, and strode away from the shuttle.

Duane would be with the others at the hospital. The closer she came, the worse she felt. When she arrived, she left the suitcase outside the door and went right into the only open area, which was Trevor's partitioned room. Everyone turned to look at her.

Duane walked to her, frowning. "What's the matter?"

Rachel's eyes stung and her throat burned. She was afraid she would weep right there in front of everyone and make a fool of herself. "I'm so sorry for the things I said. May we talk? Alone?"

He studied her face for one long moment, as if he were weighing his decision. His hesitation sparked anger in her, but it dissipated when he smiled, encircled her shoulder with his arm, and moved her toward the door. "Of course."

\* \* \*

Cameron opened the door in the portable wall and looked in on Sara. Sara nodded, and he collapsed the wall. She telepathically gave the conversation to the others, then said, "As much as we all hate it, I don't think we have any choice but to let them come, but if there's one thing I do know, it's that if these people are Zarrists—*especially* if they are Zarrists—we can't trust them to follow Tempest's rules with exactness. She already sank their island and will have no qualms about destroying this colony if they do something that offends her. I think we should move more people to Camp David. Father and Mother, I would like you to head up that operation, if everyone agrees."

Cameron's parents weren't the only ones who nodded. Cameron said, "I agree completely. I'll send Ryan out there to help Russ."

Trevor said, "If the Zarrists realize what we're doing, they may send guards to the resort also."

"Good point." Sara looked at Cameron's parents again. "For that reason, take your time. Let's see how the Zarrists react before we commit too many colonists to the effort. The one danger of splitting up is that I won't be there to provide protection to the other group."

Sara believed that of all the colonists, Brother Vance and Sister Eagle should remain in Woodland Park to keep Sister Vance under observation. She shifted her gaze around the room, looking for Brother Vance and didn't find him. "Where did Brother Vance go?"

"He left with Rachel when you were communicating with Tempest."

“Did she say anything?”

“Nothing to us,” Barbara answered.

“She wasn’t herself,” Sister Eagle said. “If the rest of you don’t mind, I’d like to remain here and keep a close watch on her.”

Sara nodded. “Exactly what I was going to suggest.”

## PART 3: BRIDLED

### CHAPTER 21: HAUNTED

Arulezz had not thought that a man in Jahnzel's lofty position of power could be such a fool for a woman. When Arulezz discovered that Jahnzel was on his way to Kansas City, he had known at once that he had intercepted the transmissions between Captain Sauvel and Teton Colony and been disturbed that Sauvel had returned without Myri. Arulezz had known he needed to wait a few more months before he started pushing Jahnzel to take a wife, but he had not considered the possibility that Jahnzel's devotion to Myri was still strong enough to motivate him to go into the light to talk to her!

Once he recovered from the shock of the realization, Arulezz attempted to communicate with Jahnzel in an effort to discourage him from completing the trip. When Jahnzel refused to acknowledge the communication, Arulezz knew that he had no choice but to let him go through with his plan to communicate with Myri directly.

Twenty minutes after Arulezz tried to contact Jahnzel, Jesalya appeared in his office, her spirit wound tight with alarm. *What happened?*

Arulezz stood up when his wife entered the room. *Jahnzel decided to pay Myri a visit.*

Jesalya moved toward the mahogany armoire. *He went to Kansas City?*

Yes.

*Captain Sauvel's arrival without Myri made him unduly curious, then. She removed her ceremonial veil and hung it in the armoire.*

*I assume so.*

Jesalya closed the armoire and turned toward Arulezz, her cheeks flushed. *Still, to go into the light and see Myri in the presence of David Pierce shows an appalling lack of pride. That isn't like Jahnzel at all.*

*Does it matter? Myri will either tell Jahnzel everything or she will tell him nothing.*

Jesalya turned away from him again and began pacing. *If she really did do it, she won't tell him. He might allow her to live, but he'd kill Pierce without a second thought.*

Jesalya's anxiety pulsed into Arulezz, and he found it difficult to maintain his own equilibrium. *And if she didn't do it and tells Jahnzel, and they decide to make it public, it will be her word against mine. Neither one of them has any real proof of anything and can have no power over us.*

*He could walk in here and shoot us both!* Jesalya moved again to the armoire and remained there. Arulezz perceived that she felt safer positioned as far from the door and Arulezz as possible.

Arulezz stepped around the desk and approached his wife. *And leave the Nation in the hands of our cousin Neklou Kravim? His mother may be a Zarr, but his father is a secondary noble.*

Jesalya's anxiety gave way to anger. *It galls me that he is next in succession after Jahnzel when your mother, my mother, and Myri still live!*

Arulezz took her hands and gazed into her eyes. *I agree with you, and I have no doubt others would also. The thought that Neklou Kravim could become the Divine Emperor when there are competent women of such high lineage still living isn't just galling—it's appalling. My mother isn't fit to rule right now, but your mother is and*

*could defy tradition and gain support for such a coup if she wished. It would tear the Nation apart. If it's that obvious to me, it's obvious to Jahnzel also. Arulezz shook his head. He wouldn't risk it.*

*Jesalya couldn't help but recognize the logic of Arulezz's observation, but she couldn't quite relax. You feel as if you're trying to convince yourself as well as me.*

*Jahnzel wants to be the Divine Emperor himself and manage things according to his own vision. Not only that, but he's handicapped by a strict sense of honor. He won't act outside of the law.*

*I wish I could be certain of that.*

*He squeezed her hands. Be patient, darling!*

*How can I, when everything inside of you is reeling?*

*Arulezz released her hands and motioned toward the door. Go find something else to do and let me deal with this!*

*Jesalya put her hands on her hips. Just like you "dealt with" putting a cell bond on Myri? Just like you "dealt with" telling her to do dijauntu with that savage?*

*You felt more strongly about the cell bond than I did!*

*Jesalya's eyes flashed. I'm not going to stand by while you murder my sister!*

*Believe me, Jesalya, if she comes back here with Jahnzel to accuse us of breaking the law, she's going to want you dead! And she's going to want your position of Divine Empress!*

*Arulezz felt a calm hardening of his wife's emotions, which meant that she had finally accepted the inevitable. I can't believe it's really come to this.*

*Nothing is certain yet. Even without the cell bond, when has Myri not been faithful to the Divine Emperor? When has she ever been capable of lying?*

*Doing dijauntu with a savage was never an issue! She began pacing again.*

*If she hadn't done it, she would have come back immediately and told Jahnzel everything.*

*Unless that Satanic light told her that you would kill her if she came back! Which would be true!*

*Arulezz threw up his arms. What? Do you now believe that the light tells people the truth? Could she be serious? For a fraction of a second, Arulezz wished she would go back to work and leave him alone with his worries, but, of course, that wouldn't do any good, because her emotions would affect him as strongly from any other part of the colony.*

*I don't know what the light told Myri, other than it told her to betray you. If it told her to betray you, it may have told her that you would kill her!*

*Arulezz followed her across the room and placed his hands on her shoulders. You're forgetting that she came out of the light after her first time in and went to Tryamazza Camp. She was so unafraid of me that she allowed me into her suite alone that night. Even Sauvel was disturbed that she received me without a chaperone.*

*Jesalya stopped. I had forgotten about that; you're right.*

*If the light had been serious about betraying me and protecting her from me, wouldn't it have urged her to return to Teton Colony before I gave her the command to join minds with Pierce? When Jahnzel still had some semblance of support?*

*She nodded. Yes, that's the logical conclusion.*

*She could have easily returned to Teton Colony before I commanded her to join minds with David Pierce, but she didn't, so if the light did urge her to return, she*



*ignored it. She could have just as easily left Tryamaz Camp after my visit, returned to Teton Colony, and told Jahnzel everything, but she didn't do that either. She ended up staying at Tryamaz Camp an entire week and still didn't change her mind and come home. She went right back into the light to break into Pierce's house and do dijauntu with him.*

Jesalya turned to face him. The muscles in her shoulders and face had relaxed, even if her emotions hadn't completely calmed. *Which we still aren't certain happened.*

*No, we don't have absolute proof it occurred, but everything points to it. Odds are that Jahnzel will have to communicate with Myri right there in David Pierce's house and be forced to see and feel how much she loves that savage. He'll come back without her and be utterly mortified.*

Jesalya allowed Arulezz to walk her to the large, comfortable chair near the desk. *He already refused to communicate with you. If she rejects him again, he might refuse to come back and face you.*

*Oh, he'll face me all right. Even if I have to hunt him down!*

Two hours passed before Arulezz received the message from the *Empress of the Stars* that Jahnzel had left Kansas City.

*Is he the only occupant of the shuttle?*

*Yes, Divine One.*

Feeling giddy with relief, Arulezz ended communication with the *Empress* and overlapped spirits with his wife. *All is well. He's alone.*

Jesalya's emotions were confused. She seemed to be simultaneously relieved and revolted. *Then she really did do dijauntu with that savage.*

*Could she have sent Jahnzel away alone had she not?*

Jesalya shook her head. *Inconceivable.*

Arulezz attempted to communicate with Jahnzel telepathically. Jahnzel refused communication but traveled to Teton Colony anyway instead of directly to the *Empress*. By the time he landed, both Arulezz and Jesalya had completely composed themselves.

Jahnzel strode into the office. "You're both here. Good. I have a message for you from God."

Shock paralyzed Jesalya and chilled Arulezz. For a lower-ranked official to break protocol and speak before a higher-ranked one was offensive. For a lower-ranked official, even a prince, to bring a "message from God" to the Divine Emperor and Empress was downright outrageous. "When did God start speaking to you?"

"God Himself didn't speak to me, but His messenger in the Light did."

Had he completely lost his mind? "What did this 'messenger' look like?"

"I didn't see him; I heard his voice."

"It was a man, then. How do you know it *wasn't* God?"

"I don't know. I just know it was a messenger, not God Himself. He told me that if the two of you don't turn your hearts to Him and live in harmony with the Light, God will destroy you and the empire you build."

"God speaks to you through a mere messenger, when we, as your Divine Emperor and Empress, have the privilege of communicating with Him directly?"

"Go ahead and be sarcastic. Go ahead and continue down your despicable path. I don't care if God destroys you."

Arulezz had not thought Jahnzel was capable of such hate. He might have been amused had he possessed a firmer idea of what exactly Jahnzel had experienced in the

light. "So you're still angry because I gave Myri to another man. I can understand that. I can even accept it. So why use God as your weapon of choice? Why not just hit me? It would probably make you feel better."

"You amaze me. Your belief in God is so minuscule and your fear of Him so non-existent that it doesn't occur to you—even for a moment—that the Light might be from God and that I could be telling you the truth."

Jesalya finally found her wits. "Are you completely *insane*, Jahnzel?"

Jahnzel leaned forward and gripped the desk, his eyes moving from Arulezz to Jesalya and back again. "We came to Earth with seventy-eight ships. Two months ago, we had four hundred and fifty-six ships. Then the Light came. Then the invasion came. Then we lost the rest of our ships except the *Empress*. Within two months, we lost our entire fleet. God has cursed us! How can I pound this fact into your bull-headed brains?"

So he really had lost his mind. Just how far did this delusion go? "What else did the light say?"

"That your empire stands on the brink of destruction or deliverance."

"What does that mean?"

Jahnzel slammed his fist on the desk. "You're the one who's supposed to have a direct conduit to God! Why don't you tell me?"

"Fair enough. Hear the judgment of your Divine Emperor. Stop blaming your own incompetence on a curse from God!"

Jahnzel's hand trembled, and for a fraction of a second, Arulezz was afraid that Jahnzel might strike him or draw his immobilizer. After a moment, he straightened and shook his head. "Talking to you is useless. I don't know why I bother." He turned and headed to the door.

Jesalya jumped out of her chair and ran after Jahnzel. She grabbed his arm and forced him to face her. "Did you communicate with Myri? What did she say?"

"She rejected me for that savage. What more is there to tell?"

"What do you mean, she 'rejected' you? Did you actually try and reconcile with her?"

"We had a conversation. It became clear that all of her passion is directed toward him and that she has nothing left for me but pity. The Myri I loved never existed." He wrenched his arm from Jesalya's grip and went to the door.

"Wait, Jahnzel," Arulezz called. "Did you learn anything about our people who are living in the light?"

"They are deserters from the lower classes. What else is there to tell?" He pushed the door open and disappeared as quickly as he had come.

Jesalya trembled with outrage. *I've had it with his insolence!*

*So have I, but there isn't much I can do about it.*

*You could command your guards to bring him back in here so that you can interrogate him!*

*That would only make matters worse. I'm having a difficult enough time dealing with Jahnzel without publicly humiliating him in that way. Besides, he'd probably just fire on the guards and then we would lose even more experienced warriors.*

*Perhaps you're right.*

*Of course I'm right.*

*Still, I really wish you could get him under control.*

*So do I, but I need him too badly. What leverage I have over him right now is fragile, and it will be gone once we get a few ships.*

Jesalya returned to her chair, appearing thoughtful. *But he just showed a weakness, didn't he? A very marked weakness, actually.*

*What do you mean?*

*Didn't he just throw away all of his pride to go talk to Myri? Myri loves Jahnzel, to be sure, but he knows that her love for him is weaker than her devotion to the Divine Emperor. He knows that she can never be his wife.*

Arulezz perceived that Jesalya was on the verge of something, but he wasn't quick enough to understand what it was just yet. *I can hardly use your sister as leverage!*

Jesalya's eyes glowed with insight. *No, of course not, but if Myri is so important to him that he was willing to throw down his pride to go see her in the light, imagine what value he'll place on the woman who really will be his wife.*

Arulezz drummed his fingers on the desk, pondering. *That's presuming he will love his wife as much as he loves Myri.*

*If he's certain of his wife's faithfulness and devotion, why shouldn't he love her?*

Why shouldn't he, indeed? Jahnzel was ready to be married and needed a wife, a woman with whom he would spend far more time than he ever had with Myri. He would want to love his wife. He would want to feel more devotion to her than he now felt for Myri. He would want to believe she was worth keeping safe and happy at all costs. *How do you propose we find such a faithful, devoted woman for him?*

*We don't. Don't give him the list of candidates your father compiled. Don't insist he marry a native at all. Let him choose his own wife from among our people.*

It was an intriguing idea but completely impractical. *How? He could go a year and never leave the Empress.*

*Then he can marry one of the female crewmembers on the Empress or someone else he's worked with—someone he actually knows.*

Arulezz almost laughed. *I daresay he doesn't know his technicians and engineers that well.*

*He knows them better than Myri knew David Pierce when she went into the light.*

Jesalya was right, but Arulezz still couldn't comprehend such a match. *A prince marry a woman from the professional or laboring class?* The very thought repelled Arulezz. The original plan for Jahnzel to marry a beautiful savage from a wealthy family would be less disgusting, if only because the national mission of procreation would give the union respectability. The correct woman for Jahnzel to marry, next to Myri, was Drysia Vahro, the daughter of the late Saint Admiral Hosev Vahro. Arulezz would have taken her from her intended spouse, sixteen-year-old Neklou Kravim, and given her to Jahnzel without a second thought, but she was only ten years old and wouldn't be of any use to Arulezz and Jesalya for another eight years.

*She wouldn't be of low rank once she married him. If you're going to raise David Pierce to the title of saint, why not raise one of our own women to the rank of Divine Princess?*

Arulezz raised his eyebrows. *You're going to make a technician into a princess? How?*

*We can give her to your mother. She needs something to do that will require her whole heart and mind.*

*A project like this probably would bring her out of her depression. If she succeeded in it, her pride would certainly be gratified.*

*It would indeed. I don't think we would even have to suggest it. It's the obvious course; Jahnzel will think of it himself.*

*And if he did marry a woman of low rank, she would be elevated, but her family would have no power to give her any real protection.*

*Jesalya smiled, satisfied. The perfect situation.*

*Unless he really does choose a noblewoman or aristocrat.*

*Aside from the fact that there aren't very many available women in those categories, something tells me that being rejected by Myri will make women of high rank repellent to him. He'll want companionship, not position or elegance.*

*Arulezz lifted Jesalya's hand to his mouth and kissed it. Darling, you're devious. It might actually work.*

*Jesalya moved her fingers to his cheek and gave it a little pat. Of course it will work. Don't say anything to him about marriage at all—that would just enrage him. She arose and moved to the armoire to get her veil. I'll monitor his transmissions and network use and find out who he communicates with.*

*Or, at the very least, what women he may be interested in enough to look up. Jesalya was right. Jahnzel wanted and needed a wife. He might fight his natural inclination for a while, but eventually he would crack and reveal an interest in someone. While Jesalya put her veil on and adjusted it using the armoire's mirror, Arulezz stood up and walked to the door.*

*Jesalya closed the armoire and moved toward Arulezz. I'll also keep a close eye on his crewmembers when they're here on leave. If he starts showing even a tiny preference for someone, they'll gossip. Once we get a name, we'll just give him a push in the right direction.*

*Arulezz stepped toward his wife and drew her close. A mere push? You don't intend to make this woman your spy, then?*

*Jesalya wrapped her arms around her husband's neck and returned his kisses. No. The ideal wife won't be an actress whose façade he might penetrate. She needs to be genuine, one he can love so deeply that he would do anything for her.*

\* \* \*

After returning to the *Empress of the Stars*, Jahnzel went directly to his stateroom, feeling as though he would collapse from anxiety and exhaustion. He ate, showered, and went to bed, but he couldn't sleep. Technician Day haunted his thoughts as if she were a ghost.

Everything about his meeting with her seemed eerie now, as if he had stepped beyond the gate of death for a moment and yanked her back into the realm of the living. Then she had done the same for him—was now *doing* the same for him. Without her prayers and concern, he would have no reason to live; without his kind words, she would not have survived the invasion.

Jahnzel still wasn't sure he wanted to live. What would now be his present state of mind had he not saved Technician Day's life to give back to him? Perhaps instead of delivering his message from God, he would have shot Arulezz and Jesalya on the spot. Had he done so, he would now be under arrest and awaiting execution, and Myri would be free forever.

A large part of Jahnzel wished that he had made Arulezz and Jesalya accountable in such a way. He believed that the result of such an assassination was worth the price he would have paid. Knowing, however, that compatriots like Technician Day were depending on him to save the Nation suggested that he really wasn't expendable—yet.

Did that mean Technician Day had stepped beyond the gate of death and yanked him back into the realm of the living? How did she know that his life was in danger? Why was she still praying for him two months after the invasion? Who was this girl who danced with him on the threshold of death? He didn't even know her full name! Perhaps she really was a ghost.

Unable to bear the curiosity anymore, he got out of bed and went to his computer. Suspecting that Arulezz was monitoring his transmissions and network use, Jahnzel didn't dare look up Technician Day directly. Instead, he brought up the personnel records of everyone who had been assigned to the Washington, D.C. Spaceport at the time of the invasion and read through them one by one.

Jahnzel learned that Technician Day's first name was Varia. She was an eighteen-year-old environmental technician who had been reassigned to the Washington, D.C. Spaceport from his father's planetary repair team when many of the experienced members of the team like her had been shipped off to Eden. Learning that Technician Day had barely missed going to Eden made Jahnzel feel even stranger—*twice* this girl had avoided death.

Since Technician Day had been in Washington, D.C. for so short a period of time, the record said little about her, but Jahnzel could deduce many things, given her previous assignment. Dealing with the air, water, and the accompanying machinery of everyday habitation, including the grime and grunge, environmental technicians were the lowest, most invisible laborers in the fleet. They did rearranging of matter—"terraforming" on a minuscule scale—and some of their most capable children had been apprenticed to the mining ships at age thirteen, where the geologists, meteorologists and other life scientists and engineers had used larger-scale terraforming techniques to procure resources for the Nation.

Terraforming was one of those telepathic jobs that required huge numbers of people, which meant that Jahnzel's father could not have done even a fraction of the work he had done repairing Earth alone. Knowing that his "miracles" would not have appeared nearly so miraculous if the savages had been aware of his planetary repair team, he had chosen laborers to do the work who had only barely finished their apprenticeships on the mining ships. Instead of marrying and taking their adult places in the Nation, these sixteen-year-olds remained single and anti-socially silent, following Jahnzel's father on his travels for two years. At age eighteen, they were released from their service to be matched to native spouses through the Imperial Placement Agency.

The savages had always believed that the gray-clad youth who surrounded his father were his servants, and so they were, just not in the assumed way. Varia Day, as a technician who had serviced the Awareness monitors and other machines used by those who did the actual terraforming, had been a servant of the servants. Jahnzel sifted through his memories of his father, trying to place her on his team, but he saw her nowhere. True to her station in life, she had been invisible—a part of the machinery.

Jahnzel wondered which of the mining ships Technician Day had done her apprenticeship on, but he didn't dare look her up in his father's records of his planetary repair team to find out. After assimilating what little information there was about the

girl, Jahnzel focused on her image. She didn't smile, she didn't frown, and there was no light or liveliness in her eyes. It wasn't a good likeness of her at all, but utility images weren't known for their artistry. Still, Jahnzel couldn't help but feel disappointed that the image gave him no new information about her.

Jahnzel went mechanically through the remainder of the files to disguise his interest in Technician Day. Most of those who had worked at the Washington, D.C. Spaceport were presumed dead, including Technician Day herself. Perhaps she wasn't a ghost, but for all practical purposes, she was a phantom. By the time Jahnzel returned to bed, he was no longer merely disappointed but downright dissatisfied.

When he finally drifted to sleep, he dreamed that he strode into the control center of the Washington, D.C. Spaceport. The plain gray uniform without rank and insignia stood out, like a stain that needed to be removed. "Petty Officer Trinaav! Why hasn't this young civilian woman been evacuated to Teton Colony?"

"Technician Day refuses to leave, my Prince."

The name was familiar to Jahnzel, but he couldn't place it. Had he known one of her parents? He and his men approached the girl, who held herself immobile at attention, staring straight ahead. "Relax, Technician Day, and look at me."

The girl blushed and finally focused on his face, gazing at him with awestruck brown eyes. "Why do you remain in Washington, D.C., Technician Day?"

"To do my duty, my Prince."

Her words made no sense. "If you are so determined to make the spaceport's readiness your duty, why have you not enlisted in Star Force?"

"I am forbidden by law, my Prince. I am the only surviving member of my family left in the Nation."

"Then your duty, Technician Day, is to live, and if you stay here, you will become a target."

"The last airbus has already left, my Prince."

"That doesn't matter. Get as far away from the spaceport as you can in the time left and take cover."

Her face twisted in panic. "Please let me stay, my Prince. There is so much to do, and I can help!"

"You would die, then, and send your honorable family into oblivion for the remainder of time?"

"My family is in the World Beyond the Stars. Why shouldn't I long to join them there, especially if I can die doing my duty with honor?"

Her words sang a battle anthem to Jahnzel so familiar that he couldn't stop himself from probing more deeply: "You want to die?"

"I have nothing to live for."

Jahnzel had never heard his own thoughts and feelings articulated so perfectly. Who was he to deny this loyal girl a chance to die with honor? He bowed to her. "Technician Day, you are a true heroine."

She lowered her eyes in embarrassment. "I'm just doing my job, my Prince."

"I appreciate your sacrifice, and so does the Nation."

"Thank you, my Prince."

He turned away and resumed his inspection. He travelled to the *Empress*, lost the majority of his fleet, was rejected by Myri, lost the rest of his fleet, and then visited Myri in the Light and learned of his brother's betrayal. Myri directed him to a bedroom in the

Pierces' basement, and he collapsed there on the floor, begging, "Dear God, give me a reason to live or end my life right now."

When he arose from the soft brown carpet, he knew what he had to do. He returned to Teton Colony, went immediately to Arulezz's office, where he and Jesalya were awaiting his return, and shot them both without a hint of warning. As he watched them collapse on the large desk lifeless, he felt laser fire in his own back.

Jahnzel looked around and saw himself in the Hall of Thrones in Teton Colony, floating in the air above two open coffins that were guarded by Star Force officers. Expecting to see the bodies of Arulezz and Jesalya, Jahnzel was surprised to see his own body in one of the coffins and in the other, that of a young environmental technician. Why would he, an assassin, be lying in state with a laborer?

People in black walked by the coffins in groups, weeping. Every now and then, Jahnzel could discern a comment. Most were mournful. A few were angry.

"What a tragedy!"

"What a waste!"

"How could they be so short-sighted?"

"How could they be so selfish?"

"Now the whole Nation will suffer."

"Both of them suffered, I think."

"They couldn't perceive their own eternal importance."

The people kept coming, and the weeping grew louder and more inconsolable, and just when Jahnzel thought every person in the Nation had paid his respects, the dead began coming with the living: Saint Admiral Hosev Vahro, Lieutenant Brentel Sauvel, and the other men and women who had died in the Eden fiasco. Other officers from other battles filed by—members of the Imperial Family, nobles, aristocrats, professionals, and laborers.

A man and woman of the warrior ranks paid particular attention to the girl in the other coffin. They, too, wore the steel gray of the environmental technicians. "She's so beautiful, even in death, and she would have done anything for him. How could he not see it?"

"He wanted to protect her. He wanted to protect us all. His heart was in the right place."

"No, his head was in the right place; hate turned his heart to stone."

The figure of a woman emerged from the shadows above the coffin and floated down to face the mourning couple, protesting, "How can you say that? You don't know how hurt he is and how he thinks he's failing the Nation!" Receiving no acknowledgement of any kind, not even a flinch, the floating girl moved closer to the couple and shouted, her eyes blazing with what looked like real fire, "Mother! Father! Listen to me! Please!"

Jahnzel recognized the floating girl as the same one who was in the other coffin and finally realized why she was so familiar to him. He had saved her life in the spaceport, and then she had saved his by praying for him. Her dark brown hair was down and she was wearing a plain, deep blue gown instead of a gray work suit, but it was the same girl—Varia Day. The couple had to be her dead parents, but why were they mourning her this way? She wasn't dead.

"How can you come back to me in this strange way and then say something so cruel about this honorable, heroic man? Our liege lord?"

None of this could be real. This phantom-figure of Varia Day could be nothing more than a piece of his imagination, but he couldn't stop himself from speaking to her. "Technician Day, this is all wrong."

Technician Day faced Jahnzel in astonishment. "Consecrated One!"

"Technician Day, you have to believe me—you're not dead! The Jahnzel Zarr who let you die in the spaceport was an imposter. I would never have allowed that to happen."

"I'm remembering now. You really did save my life."

"And you saved mine."

"How?"

"When I was in the Light, I saw a vision of you praying for me. Seeing that you were depending on me to save the Nation gave me a reason to live."

"Then you really did go into the Light to communicate with Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro."

"Yes."

"And she really did betray you for that savage."

"She did."

"Which means that everything I saw was true."

"What did you see?"

"Sad things. Terrible things. Is the fleet really gone?"

"All but the *Empress of the Stars*."

"Then you really do want to die." She appeared shocked.

"I have nothing to live for but to save the Nation from my brother and his wife."

"That isn't true!"

"How do you know?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Yes, I would."

"I'm certain you're not supposed to die yet, Consecrated One."

"How can you be sure that your certainty isn't a hallucination like the coffins and mourners?"

"The coffins and mourners make me more certain than I already was." She gestured to the black-clad masses below them, appearing more astonished than ever. "It appears we both have missions to live."

"For what purpose, Technician Day?"

Jahnzel awoke and saw that he wasn't really floating over his coffin or speaking with Technician Day. He was in his bed in his stateroom on the *Empress*. The horror of the nightmare settled into his heart like a poisonous fume. Perhaps Jesalya was right. Perhaps he really was insane.

He knew only one cure for insanity, and that was to get out of bed and go to work.



## CHAPTER 22: A PROUD MAN

After Myri returned to Liberty, David was left alone with his father. They hadn't had an evening of privacy like this for a month. When his father arose and opened his mouth to speak, David braced himself for a lecture.

"We've had a strange day with a lot of talk. Now, though, I think we need some time to let it all soak in. Good night, son."

"Good night, Dad."

Once in his bedroom, David began wondering whether he wanted to be left alone after all. He could ponder all night and still not come to a firm conclusion about anything. As far as he could tell, he could make no further move toward marriage without a statement from the Church about the status of Myri's people.

Since he no longer required Myri's services as a nurse, she would undoubtedly become the acting governor of her people. Would she choose to make her relationship with David public? If not, how would she arrange to see him privately?

David's mind was full of these questions the next morning when he woke up and found himself alone again. He had to get up and dress without help. He had to go to the window and open the drapes himself. The privacy and feeling of independence thrilled him until he went to the living room and found no one there.

After looking around and still not finding either one of his parents, he concluded that they had decided to sleep in, probably for the first time in two months. That was good. They needed the break.

David went to the kitchen and found a home-canned jar of peaches and some peanuts for breakfast. He took the food to the front porch and waited for Myri and her entourage. At least an hour passed before Myri's aircar landed in the driveway. Myri, Seamstress Kintz, and Shipman Neemon walked up the driveway. When they came to the sidewalk in front of the porch, Shipman Neemon and Seamstress Kintz stopped. Myri proceeded down the long walk toward David, but when she stopped just before the foot of the stairs, keeping the rail and the evergreen shrubs between them, he knew that something significant had changed.

David stood up and moved toward her. "What's the matter, Myri? You're acting like I have the plague!"

Myri held out her gloved hand as if to stop him. "Please don't come any closer, David."

David did stop. "Have you changed your mind about us?"

She smiled and shook her head. "On the contrary." She glanced in the direction of Shipman Neemon and Seamstress Kintz and lowered her voice. "In fact, I would like to formally ask you to be my husband."

David was certain he hadn't heard correctly. "You're asking me to marry you?"

"I am. I know you aren't ready to give me an answer yet, but I wanted to assure you that my intentions are serious."

David wasn't sure whether to be overjoyed that she wanted to marry him or offended that she had been the one to propose. "How can you be certain?"

"I gave up my beloved Jahnzel for you. Of course I'm certain. Until we become formally betrothed, however, I'm forced to set very strict parameters."

For the moment, he really was offended. "Certainly it's no sin for you to give the man you want to marry a hug?"

"Sin? No. Impropriety? I'm afraid so."

"What's wrong with hugging?"

"My people are having a difficult time accepting you. I absolutely can't do anything that would make them think you are anything more than an honorable suitor."

She hadn't used the word "suitor" the day before. "Anything more? You mean a lover?" How could such an outrageous notion even come into her virtuous mind?

"If that is your word for a partner in a sordid romantic affair, then yes."

"You can't be serious!"

"Of course I'm serious. This is why I can't be alone with a man without a chaperone. I explained this to you the second day we met."

David forced himself to recall the day she had arrived wearing what looked like a bridal veil and had to agree that they had conversed about this matter before.

"My people aren't accustomed to using the term 'suitor' in reference to a noblewoman, but that much they will have to accept."

"Does this mean that you plan to introduce me to your people?"

"Do you plan to continue courting me?"

For a fraction of a second David wasn't sure, and then it occurred to him that if he hesitated, she would leave and perhaps never return. "Yes! Of course!"

She appeared relieved. "Then I don't have any choice. A chaperone may gossip, which means that we have to be careful in the way we show affection."

"Are you trying to tell me that even holding hands is off limits?"

"No, but embracing is. And if I see you without a chaperone, there will be a terrible scandal. It's better that I am honest with my people about our relationship."

"Behaving like there's no affection between us is honest?"

"Why are you being so bullheaded about this, David?" she asked, her tone placid. "You've lived your whole adult life with protocol—at the Naval Academy and on your mission. This is no different. If you aren't willing to live with the protocol of my culture, you will be unhappy as my husband and we might as well end this right now."

Where they actually fighting? "That's not what I want!" How could this be happening? How could he make her understand? "I know that your culture has its protocols and that I need to respect them, but I would have preferred to come to a decision about how we would manage them together rather than stand here and listen to you make demands."

"As much as I value your feelings and opinions, darling, they have absolutely no bearing on this matter and wouldn't have influenced my decision. The situation is what it is."

Her response—compassionate and yet so unconsciously condescending—shook David out of what felt like a deep sleep. Instead of "darling," he heard "beloved consort." All this time he had fooled himself into thinking they had a relationship of equality when in reality, she had never stopped being the noblewoman and he had never been anything more than her "noble savage"!

"What I see is that you're the leader of your people in this new place that has different rules and that you have the power to act with some flexibility." Wasn't a noblewoman supposed to be the one in charge? The one who made the rules?

"Please try to understand. I don't want to put this formality between us, but I have no choice if I want my people to trust me."

“Certainly they’re reasonable people and won’t suspect us of having a ‘sordid romantic affair’ if they see us doing nothing more than hugging!”

“I did not tell Jahnzel that I had kissed you or held your hand, but when I told him we were discussing marriage, he accused me of having a ‘sordid romantic affair’ with you.”

David suddenly didn’t feel so sure of his position. “You didn’t tell me that yesterday.”

“There was no reason to give you that disgusting little detail.”

“That really is disgusting.” David had no choice but to revise his high opinion of the prince or to accept the fact that Myri really was in an inflexible position among her people. “Does the prince really believe there’s something immoral going on between us?”

“Immoral? I don’t know. Lustful and base? Probably.”

David might have been capable of setting aside such an outrageous idea had he not wondered the same thing himself as he contemplated this new urge to marry Myri as soon as she was baptized and not wait a year to be married in the temple. “Do you think our love is lustful and base?”

“No.”

“You don’t sound certain.”

“Everything happened so fast that perhaps I’m not absolutely certain.”

“I suppose that if we aren’t certain, it’s unrealistic to expect others to give us the benefit of the doubt,” David conceded.

“It’s actually worse than that. Many of my people think that I’ve been unfaithful to the prince by being so familiar with you.”

David believed he was starting to understand. “Like being married but falling in love with another man?”

“Exactly. Jahnzel certainly thinks I’ve been unfaithful to him, and so does Captain Sauvel.”

“Even though your betrothal was formally broken when you began loving me?”

“It’s one thing to reluctantly accept an assignment from the Divine Emperor to bond a native and force him to marry me. It’s quite another thing to rebel against the Divine Emperor after the fact, immediately fall in love with the native in question, and then discard my betrothed of seventeen years.”

“Do you feel guilty, Myri?” David couldn’t believe he was so slow that he hadn’t considered such a possibility earlier.

She averted her eyes. “Maybe a little.”

“What exactly passed between the prince and you yesterday?”

“I’m not sure you really want to know.”

“You need to get it out, and I need to hear it.”

Myri hesitated, then nodded. In a low voice, she gave the details as well as she could, still not looking at him.

David listened, becoming more and more unsure of himself as she spoke. Was it the easy way they communicated? Or was it that she didn’t hesitate to communicate telepathically with the prince when she obviously had no intention of doing the same with him? Or was it that they so easily read each other’s emotions? Whatever it was, Myri had a bond and rapport with the prince that was far deeper than he had believed it was. Perhaps she really had loved him. Perhaps she still did.

David felt weak. "He really should have been your husband."

Myri finally looked up at David again. "Should have been—yes. Should be—no. This is a distinction my people don't understand yet, which is why they are going to have a difficult time accepting you."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Myri. You have no reason to feel guilty."

"I want to believe you're right, but I don't think I'll be certain for some time yet."

"I love you, Myri. I'm certain about that."

"I love you too, David. More than I could have ever dreamed possible. When I think of how I shuddered when Arulezz first gave me your image, I want to laugh at my blindness!"

David walked down the porch stairs and joined her on the sidewalk, coming so close that he could reach out and touch her if he dared. "If we can't embrace, then maybe there's something else you can do for me."

She appeared both interested and alarmed.

"Stop wearing the veil. Then when I see your beautiful hair, I'll know that if you could give me a hug, you would."

Myri gasped and blushed. "How can you be so brazen?"

David smiled. "That's one of the things you love about me."

Myri laughed a little, and relaxed. "Are you *always* going to turn me into pudding?"

"I hope so!"

Myri took the pins out of her hair and removed her veil, uncovering white-blond hair that caressed her neck and shone in the Light. She handed the veil to David, her eyes flickering in a conspiratorial way. "It'll be our little secret."

David took the veil, feeling grateful. He couldn't help but wonder if any of this was even necessary. He leaned toward her and whispered, "You've decided absolutely, then, that you don't want to follow the prince's advice and run?"

"No, I haven't, but I don't need to make that choice yet and can't. The Blessed Sons told me never to let my people forget their responsibility to return to the Ancient World for the blessings God has promised to us and to our ancestors. They also told me that my people need me. How can I abandon them now?"

Myri's decision didn't surprise David, but it did worry him. "Perhaps you don't have to abandon them yet, but you are in danger. That's another thing I'm absolutely certain about."

"If I'm in danger, then so are you."

"I'm going to talk to Bob today to find out just how difficult it would be to disappear. When will I see you again?"

"In a few days, after I have established a new routine."

Myri left with Shipman Neemon and Seamstress Kintz, and David went back into the house and found his father in the kitchen, scooping peaches out of a jar and dishing them into bowls. "You'll never believe what happened. Myri asked me to marry her!"

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say yes, if that's what you're asking."

"But she *is* coming back."

The tone of his father's voice was too calm, as if a marriage proposal from a Zarrist noblewoman was an everyday occurrence. "Yes, she is. I'm not stupid enough to send her away for good over something that's probably petty."

"It really annoys you, then, that she proposed to you?"

"Mom didn't propose to you, did she?"

"Your mom isn't a queen, at least not in the mortal sense."

"Neither is Myri."

"Oh yes she is."

"I suppose her purpose in coming here at all was to make me her 'consort.'"

"It sure was. If you think about it, this is the natural order of things. A man doesn't propose marriage to a queen unless he's a king."

"And in her world, I'm nowhere near being a king."

"No, and you never will be. Prince Jahnzel is her king."

David couldn't help but be appalled at the suggestion. "You think she really will marry him then?"

"That's not what I said."

"Then what are you trying to say?"

"Compare what's happening on Earth right now to a game of chess. If that evil emperor and his wife are the opposing king and queen, who would be the king and queen on your side? The two good people who have the most power to conquer the evil king and queen?"

"When you put it that way, the answer's obvious—the prince and Myri, although I'm not sure Myri has the power you think she has. You seem to have forgotten about the cell bond the emperor has on her mind."

"The queen in chess is the most powerful piece, but that doesn't mean she isn't vulnerable."

"She has power to move, though, and attack all across the board, power that Myri can't possibly have while she's stranded here."

"Myri already changed the course of her nation, and perhaps all of Earth, by dumping the prince and coming here, and she saved you from mental slavery by rebelling against the emperor once she got here, and she's still saving you, literally, by lying to the emperor every time she talks to him. And, she changed the course of her nation again when she sent the prince away yesterday."

"How so?"

"Had he believed she still loved him, I don't think he would have left her. He sure couldn't have taken her with him without risking her life in a major way."

His father could very well be right about the prince, and David had no idea how to respond.

"That Zarr girl has a lot of power, son, and you're blind if you don't see it. And it doesn't matter whether she marries the prince or not; they are still the ones who can hurt the emperor the most. They are the good king and queen."

David still wasn't sure he was convinced. With all of her supposed power, Myri didn't think she had the license to be affectionate with the man she loved! "That sounds pretty figurative."

"It's figurative and literal, because your little saintess really is a queen, and unless you someday command Star Force instead of the prince, and become his nation's executioner, the most you can ever be is a knight."

David grunted. "If, by some odd circumstance, I ever did command Star Force and became the Zarrist executioner, I would, figuratively, be him, not myself, and so he would still be the king."

"I hadn't thought of it in quite that way, but yeah."

"King by proxy."

"Not the way a proud man would want to gain a kingship."

"Am I really so proud that I would reject the woman I love because I can't be her king?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"I get what you're saying, I think. I need to 'look reality in the face' as the prince would put it and decide what I can do—literally."

"That about sums it up."

"Where's Mom?"

"She isn't coming out of our room today."

A shadow crept over David's heart. "What do you mean, she isn't coming out of your room today?" He noticed that his father appeared exhausted, as if he hadn't slept much at all the night before.

"Your mother's very upset by everything that's happening and needs to be alone."

David had heard his mother yell when she was upset, and he had even seen her weep from time to time, but he had never known her to become paralyzed. Suddenly feeling unstable, he sat down on a stool at the bar. "But only you and I are here. What reason does she have to hide? Is she mad at me?"

"Yeah, actually she is."

David's first instinct was to be angry too, but concern for his mother tempered his inclination and left *him* feeling paralyzed. "What am I supposed to do? Stop living my life?"

"No, of course not."

"The problem is, she's never tried to see things from my point of view."

"And you've never tried to see things from *hers*."

"But her point of view is wrong."

"And what 'wrong' point of view would you be talking about?"

"That she doesn't want me to grow up and leave her."

"You're sounding very selfish and ungrateful."

How could he say such a thing? "I'm not ungrateful, and I don't want to be selfish, but honestly, I have no idea what to do about this!"

"Trying to feel a little compassion would be a good start. You have plenty of empathy for that alien prince. Why not some for your mother?"

His father might as well have hit him. "The prince's life has been turned inside out, and I might actually be able to help him." The reply sounded weak, and David was almost embarrassed to make it.

"In two months' time, your mother has had to cope with the loss of Teri and your severe injuries, and she's had to do it while learning how to live without many of her modern conveniences. Now she's learned that you're in so much danger that you will probably soon leave. She's afraid that she may never see you again in her lifetime. You don't think her life has been turned inside out?"

David slumped over the bar. "I really have been blind."

His father nodded.

"I guess I didn't expect her to believe the prince so completely."

"The prince was very persuasive, and she has a soft place in her heart for him."

"You mean she actually *likes* him?"

"I think so, but it's more than that. She sees his goodness and trusts him."

“And yet she doesn’t trust Myri.”

“That isn’t true. I daresay she actually loves that girl and doesn’t know it. She would miss her if she went away for good.”

“Then why does she disapprove of her as a daughter-in-law?”

“I don’t know that she does completely. I think your mother’s confused about a lot of things.”

“That makes two of us.”

David’s father took the food and returned to his bedroom, leaving David alone again with his uncomfortable thoughts. A minute passed, and he noticed the four loaves of homemade whole wheat bread sitting on a sheet of waxed paper on the counter, as if his mother had made the bread the day before and had been too distracted later in the day to cut it and put it away.

His mother probably stood in that kitchen every day and ground wheat and corn for bread, bagels, and tortillas and then attached the flaker unit to prepare wheat and oats for hot and cold cereal. Because they had a solar-powered house, she had electricity to power her mill and mixer, but she still had to make all of those items from scratch. Before the invasion, she had made homemade baked goods from time to time, but more often than not, she had purchased bread at the grocery store.

David knew that one of the first items of business after the invasion had been to collect food and other supplies from empty houses and gather it to neighborhood stations. Most of the stations used solar power to operate the freezers and computers. A few of these stations were located in homes that possessed complex synthesizing systems built into them and left by wealthy Federalists when they fled the Light. Any property the Zarrists, themselves, owned they now used. Since the Zarrists hadn’t had a strong presence in Clay County before the invasion, they hadn’t left much in the way of property or equipment. The synthesizing machines did produce food in a miraculous way, but they worked too slowly to feed the whole community at once, and although a large synthesizing machine could produce a smaller one, they required complex installations before they became usable. For that reason, the community relied heavily on the food collected from the abandoned homes to keep everyone fed.

From the community stations, residents could pick up their rations of food and supplies. To keep things equitable, every resident could only register at one station, and that station kept track of the food and supplies distributed. The fresh meat, dairy, and frozen goods that hadn’t already gone bad had been collected and either preserved or used at once, followed by the bread and produce. David’s parents were so good-hearted that they had probably, from the very beginning, given up their allotment for bakery items and perhaps many other groceries and supplies as well to others who didn’t have the knowledge or equipment to produce their own.

Many families, like his, had the ability and equipment to preserve much of the meat in their freezers and jars, but if they wanted fresh meat now, they had to kill it. After two months, most of the root vegetables were gone too. Most citizens in the Light were surviving off of food preserved in boxes and cans. No one would have fresh vegetables until they could grow them and harvest them from their own gardens and farms. Fresh bread didn’t exist unless someone made it. If David’s mother didn’t stand in that kitchen every day and make the bread, bagels, and tortillas, they wouldn’t have them.

Myri’s people and many others were willing to work hard, but they hadn’t had any of the needed skills before coming into the Light. For many people, the new life was a

camping nightmare, with no end in sight, and David doubted the situation was any different for his mother, who liked her little luxuries like a dinner out and an occasional manicure. David knew that skilled people were working on community projects such as converting more buildings to solar power and constructing wind turbines to generate electricity, but some supplies, such as the makeup and hair dye his mother used, might never be available again once they were gone.

David stood up and looked for a cutting board, the electric knife, and used bread bags. He sliced the loaves of bread and put them into the bags, then did the dishes. He looked for the grain his mother used to make bread and eventually found large metal cans of it stored in the refrigerator. He removed several cans and took them to the counter with a big bowl. He ground half a can, rested, another half a can, rested, and then managed to get one more done before he became too tired and had to go to bed, frustrated that he couldn't do more.

When he woke up a couple of hours later, he went outside in search of Bob. When he found him, he asked, "So what do you think about our strange conversation with Prince Jahnzel yesterday?"

"That you really are in a predicament. I did some checking last night, just to be sure, but National Guard patrols are saying the same thing the prince is, that people are gathering in large numbers to the area around Odessa. Not only that, but scouts from Tryamaz Camp have been seen as far away as Osawatomie, Lawrence, and St. Joe. You can't go by boat—you'd be stopped as you went by Tryamaz Camp. You could go by air, but the restrictions on fuel have kept most of our planes and choppers on the ground. Going out that way would look mighty odd and suspicious. The only way you could get out of the city secretly is to go at night in a 4-wheel drive vehicle, but I wouldn't do it. The risk of being stopped is too great."

"Greater than the risk of staying and being attacked by the emperor's bonded thugs?"

"Absolutely. And not only do you have the threat from Tryamaz Camp, there're still the crazy people who feel compelled to kill members of the Church and other Nationalists."

Had David not been the victim of this particular brand of violence himself, he might not have believed it. "Myri said that the cell bonds are broken at death, but this violent phenomenon makes me wonder if she just doesn't know."

"Maybe the bonds are like an addiction. A person can get drugs out of his system, but a part of him will still crave them for a long time after treatment."

"I wonder." David felt uneasy to realize that Myri's attraction to him might be motivated, at least in part, by the cell bond the emperor had on her. How could he know for sure?

"Whatever the case, those original cell bonds were strong. Strong enough to have some residual effect, at least on people who have no desire to fight them. Why else would everyone be gathering to that waste place Odessa?"

"You think, then, that Tohmazz Zarr commanded them through the bond to gather there?"

"It makes sense, especially if he wanted to keep them from coming into the Light. You and the saintess do not want to encounter one of those people alone in an out-of-the-way place."



“What do you suggest?” David folded his arms and gazed at his brother in expectation.

“Leave openly, in the aircar, and get completely out of this mess. Go to Washington, D.C. It’s got to be better fortified than any city on this continent, and you would be better protected for the time you’re there. In fact, I say go, and take Mom and Dad with you. They may not be in as much danger as you are, but they would be safer in a place like Washington if the emperor decides to go after them for information about your whereabouts.”

“In that case, you, Chris, and Jim are in danger also and should go.”

“There’s only so much room in that aircar.”

That much was true. David decided that what Bob suggested made good sense. “We *would* be safer in a fortified city like D.C.” Perhaps the D.C. Light community didn’t contain the primary bases the prince considered a threat, but it was larger than the Kansas City community and had no small number of military installations. Not only that, but many military men and women lived there.

“Then when you’re in Washington, get yourself a cruising sailboat and go anywhere.”

“If there are any good boats left in that area after the invasion.” David had a feeling that the expense of such a boat would be the least of his problems.

“You’ve got a point.”

“But you’re right. If I could find a good boat, we *could* go anywhere.” The thought excited David.

“And I don’t think the emperor would expect you to leave that way.”

“Then again, it might be *too* obvious. He knows my training.”

“Yeah, but by the time he realizes you’ve left Washington, you could be in Europe. Or Africa. Or South America. He would have no idea where to look for you.”

David chuckled. “He wouldn’t, would he?” Getting to the coast and sailing away was a good alternative, whether he married Myri or not, and David felt rejuvenated.

## CHAPTER 23: CONSORT-IN-TRAINING

As the days passed, David couldn't decide which was stronger, his desire to be with Myri or his disgust with the idea of being her "consort." Myri had told him that her people already called him her "savage distraction," and he couldn't help but believe that "consort" was just a fancy word for "boy toy." Knowing that he would resent being a "boy toy" and probably make Myri miserable in the long run, he decided that he had better learn all he could about what being a "consort" meant before he allowed the relationship to progress any further.

When David saw Myri two days later, he asked, "Do you think your people would ever accept me as your husband?"

"The Divine Emperor chose you to be my husband and publicly sanctioned it. Our people may not like the Divine One's choice, but if we do marry, they will have no alternative but to accept it."

"But even if they did, I would be in the role of 'consort,' wouldn't I?"

"To be a consort to a noblewoman is a great honor among my people. My father was a consort."

"Because as the daughter of an emperor, your mother was of higher rank than he was?" Why had David not discerned that obvious fact earlier?

"Absolutely. It was not possible for my mother to marry a man of equal rank, so her parents pledged her to marry a high-ranked saint. Noblewomen typically don't take consorts unless there are more noblewomen in the Nation than noblemen, in which case, the lower ranked noblewomen take husbands from the Aristocracy. These men receive career advancements they would not receive in any other way, and children from these unions become nobles, so it is in every way a benefit to the husband."

"Did your father become a prince after marrying your mother?"

"He did, but because of my mother's lineage, her power in the Nation was always greater."

"Why are you not a princess?"

"Prince and princess are exclusive ranks. They are reserved only for the consort of a Divine Emperor or Empress—such as when one dies and the other remarries—the child of a Divine Emperor and/or Empress, and the spouse of that child. All other nobles are given the titles saint and saintess."

"So the emperor's plan for me from the beginning was to raise me to your rank." Perhaps in this case, "consort" really didn't mean "boy toy."

"I don't know whether the late Divine Emperor intended to raise you to my rank, but Arulezz told me the first time he talked to me about it that he wanted to give you the title of saint."

"Given the fact that I'm a native, however, your people would never see me as your equal, even if I were to bear the exalted title of saint."

"No, they wouldn't. To ever have that kind of marriage, we would have to live in a place where my people didn't exist."

"An impossible desire right now." David almost wished so many Zarrists had not come into the Light.

"And an unworthy one. Unless I have no other choice, it would be wrong for me to abdicate my duty to my people."

David didn't completely agree, but he was afraid he would make her angry if he said so. "I understand why you feel that way, but deep-down I have this fear that to support you in your duty, I would have to become completely subordinate to you."

"Completely? No. There would be many things we would decide together, such as how to educate our children."

David almost didn't believe that she could admit so frankly that he really would be, to a great extent, subordinate to her and was shocked. "I'm not sure I could do that. Before I met you, I would have said that I could never be a consort."

A strange, almost seductive little smile flickered at the corners of Myri's lips. "I think that you are making too much out of nothing." She leaned forward and whispered in his ear, holding her hand next to her mouth and against his cheek. "Even Jahnzel asked my mother for permission the first time he kissed me. No one but you ever acted in such an insubordinate yet satisfying way in my presence."

David thought back on everything that had happened since they had met and saw that in most of the advances their relationship had made, he had taken the lead. He had been the one to keep her talking long enough that first night to make her comfortable in confiding in him. He had been the one who had insisted she nurse him, had made the decision not to send her away when he realized she was attracted to him, had kissed her and declared his love first, and had opened her mind to the possibility that they might be able to marry.

Feeling her hot breath tickle his ear, David became giddy with the desire to kiss her again and probably would have tried had she not pulled away. "Your people would say I'm an arrogant savage."

"Then I would tell my people that my beloved savage is a true nobleman at heart and knows it. That isn't arrogance. That is living his duty in an honest, passionate way."

The possibility of being Myri's consort still made David uncomfortable, but it no longer repelled him. "So how does a man get from suitor to consort?"

"As difficult as it may be, I need to present you to my people."

"When do I make my first appearance?"

"Tomorrow at church, if you would like."

\* \* \*

Myri wasn't wearing a veil when she, Shipman Larynt, and Seamstress Kintz picked David up the next morning, and that relaxed David. He relaxed even more when Myri allowed him to hold her hand as they traveled to Liberty. When they disembarked at the church, however, she didn't offer her hand to him again.

Myri introduced David to her people, who were gathered in the parking lot, standing still and immovable in two lines. She moved slowly through this corridor of impassiveness with David at her side, introducing each person to him. No one failed to give David a bow or a curtsy, but no one honored him with a word or even a smile, even though David freely distributed niceties such as "Good morning" and "Nice to meet you" to all.

David became more and more uncomfortable with every step, and by the time he and Myri had exited the corridor of impassiveness, David was so unnerved that he couldn't have held Myri's hand if she had begged him to do so. When he felt her fingers

under his arm, he instinctively stepped away. She looked up at him, and for a flash of a second, he saw agony and knew that she was afraid she had lost him already.

Unable to bear the thought that she would feel rejected, even for a moment, David leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

She smiled at him, her eyes shining with tears of relief. David returned her smile and allowed her to take his arm, gratified that his muscles now allowed him to stand in his proud military posture, at least for a little while. Her people already thought he was a savage, and David was determined not to embarrass her. He and Myri led the group into the church, not hearing so much as a whisper from those who walked behind them.

David maintained his posture, but by the time it was over, he was so exhausted that moving was painful. When he met Myri in the foyer after the meetings, she took his hands and whispered, "You look terrible, darling."

"I'm sorry to let you down."

She led him to a couch and urged him to sit. "You've handled yourself beautifully! I'm the one who should be sorry. Stay here, and I'll send Larynt for the aircar. He can take you home."

"Aren't you coming too?"

"You need to take a nap. I'll get away later if I can."

David welcomed the chance to be alone with Shipman Larynt. Once they were in the air, he asked, "Why did the others refuse to speak to me or give me so much as a glare? Are they trying to test me? Or do they want that badly for me not to exist at all?"

"To glare would have been rude. To speak to you would have been impertinent. They have no protocol to deal with someone like you and so they remain silent."

"Someone like me?"

"A native suitor to a noblewoman. You are the first man we have seen fill that role."

"So I'm elevated, yet I'm not. They feel forced to defer to me, and yet I have no authority to exact their deference."

"That is correct."

"Do their opinions of me matter at all?"

"Yes, because you are connected to our Saintess and their opinions of her matter."

"Why? She's a noblewoman!"

"She is in a very difficult position right now."

Myri didn't seem to think she was in a "difficult position" with her people in the Light, or if she did, she hadn't discussed it with David. "But that doesn't make any sense. She outranks all of you to such a degree that it seems she should be above reproach."

"The Light has changed us. Many question our Saintess in ways they would not have when we lived in the fleet."

"Who questions Saintess Myri?"

"Lieutenant Laddan and others who would follow him."

"Do you think he would rebel against her?" Myri had whispered a few words about the discomfort both she and Captain Sauvel felt regarding Lieutenant Laddan only once. David hadn't thought about the matter at all since then and was a little surprised to hear Larynt voice a similar observation, particularly since David hadn't discerned any disrespect in Lieutenant Laddan that day.

"No, but it doesn't matter. If they defer to him instead of to her, she would become nothing more than a beautiful girl in fancy clothes that we bow to."

“So she would be unofficially stripped of her rank.” The thought of it didn’t disturb David at all.

“That’s a mild way of putting it.”

“It would be the equivalent of a revolution, then?” That did disturb David.

“Yes. I suspect that in your society, as well as ours, there is no safe place for a deposed ruler.”

“Exile, maybe.” Maybe. Awareness of Myri’s danger stabbed through David again, and he felt more poignantly than ever how outrageous and wrong it was that an innocent seventeen-year-old girl had to be in such a position at all. “Can there be no safe place for her?”

“Only in those safe places we make.”

“That sounds like something Captain Sauvel would say.” David wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or more uneasy than he already did.

“Captain Sauvel told Neemon and me that once we became a part of our Saintess’s guard, we were no longer answerable to Lieutenant Laddan. Ever. We are only answerable to her.”

To her. Always to her and her alone. That was what it meant to be a consort. If David married Myri, he would be—in the eyes of her people—her servant, albeit an elevated one. Until then, he would be nothing more than a savage the emperor had chosen to be her husband.

David disembarked at home with much to think about. Oddly enough, as uncomfortable as he had been playacting as Myri’s consort that day, he was less opposed to filling that role than he had been the day she proposed to him. She needed a protector, a champion, and a husband who could handle himself well at public events, all roles David understood how to fill by virtue of his education at the Naval Academy. During those years at the Yard, he had believed he was training to become an officer in the Navy, when perhaps in reality, he had been training to become a consort to a Zarrist noblewoman.

It was such a treasonous irony, bordering on sacrilege, that David couldn’t believe he was actually considering it. Then he thought about Myri’s danger and that formal separation she was forced to maintain between herself and her people to keep her position and knew that the agony he had seen in her eyes earlier was real. Without him in her life to see the Myri underneath the saintess, she would have no one to make her laugh, no one she could completely confide in, and no one she could really relax with. David could scarcely even imagine a life of such loneliness.

\* \* \*

David didn’t say much about church after Shipman Larynt dropped him off, and Betty didn’t press him. He went to bed, leaving Betty and Gene to have lunch alone. “Do you think he’ll tell us about it when he gets up?” Betty asked her husband.

“I doubt it. He seems to be more in a thinking mood than a talking one these days.”

“I guess he does have a lot to think about.” Betty had spent the past four days engrossed in her own thoughts. David seemed to be more aware of her state of mind than he had been before that horrible day when he had kissed the saintess and then she, in turn, had broken up with Prince Jahnzel for good, but David hadn’t offered Betty his thoughts or pressed her for hers. Perhaps he didn’t want to see her tears, or maybe he

didn't want to argue, or perhaps he had nothing new to reveal. He loved the girl, but he couldn't commit to marrying her yet, so what more was there to say?

Still, Betty was beginning to believe that she could have a conversation about Saintess Myri with David and not weep or argue or in some other way succumb to hysteria, but she didn't feel ready to initiate it. When Saintess Myri arrived that evening with Shipman Larynt and Seamstress Kintz and invited Betty and Gene to Liberty with David for her birthday party the next day, Betty realized, in dread, that it was time for her to be ready for far more than a mere conversation with her son about his girlfriend.

"Thank you for your kind invitation, but certainly you don't really want us to be there," Betty protested in as soft and calm a voice as she could manage. "Won't we make things awkward for you?"

"Oh no! Not at all! You will be there to be my comfort!"

Shipman Larynt smiled. "It is the tradition among nobles on their birthdays to spend their mid-day meal with their closest family members and then to host a lavish party for everyone connected to them."

Seamstress Kintz nodded. "It is a great honor that our Saintess invites you to take the place of her family."

"Please, you must come. Lieutenant Laddan will dine with us also."

Gene nodded, smiling. "Of course we'll come."

Because she could do nothing else, Betty added, "What would you like us to bring?"

"Nothing. Just come."

After Saintess Myri and her entourage left, David said, "You should know that things didn't go well for me today at church."

"What happened?"

"Her people didn't speak to me at all." He told them about the disturbing conversation he had had with Shipman Larynt on the way home.

Betty suppressed her natural inclination to protest, "How can you still be thinking about marrying that girl and taking on all of her crazy problems?" and focused on what her son was saying. As she listened to him, she found herself growing more and more amazed with every word. His feelings and actions toward the saintess were exhibiting an attitude of humility that Betty had never perceived in him before. The change was so wonderful, and so opposite what Betty had expected, that she almost hoped that he really would marry the girl.

"I'm really worried about her. Everything in me screams that she's in danger. The feeling is so strong that I feel compelled to marry her soon, within the next few months, to make our relationship more compatible with the story she gave to the emperor."

"Do you believe, then, that the two of you will have to face the emperor at some future date?"

"I don't know. A part of me says yes, that there could be no other explanation for this feeling. Another part of me says no, that it's just a manifestation of my strong desire to have her now instead of waiting a year after her confirmation to be sealed in the temple. She can't even be baptized yet! I'm afraid that my feelings for her are fundamentally unwholesome."

Betty began to tremble. She felt a warm constriction in her heart just as she did when the Spirit prompted her to get up in fast and testimony meeting and testify to the congregation that she knew God lived and that Jesus Christ was her Savior. She could choose now to speak or not, but if she didn't, she would be doing her son a huge

disservice. “Your feelings for the saintess are everything wholesome, and pure, and right.” She saw Gene’s shock out of the corner of her eye, and that, in some odd way, gave her comfort. Perhaps the events of the past month had changed her for the better as much as they had David.

David’s features opened up, and he gazed at her with such hope and sweetness, laced with anxiety, that she wished she had refrained from arguing with him in the beginning and had listened to his observations and concerns more carefully all along. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because you’re throwing down your pride and stepping into this subservient role without one thought for yourself. You’re more concerned about her happiness and safety than you are about elevating yourself. If that isn’t true love, then I don’t understand the meaning of love.”

David threw his arms around Betty and held her tightly. “No one understands the true meaning of love more than you do, Mom. Thank you.”

Betty expected to feel relieved but didn’t. She had no doubt that David’s love for the girl was wholesome, but she did doubt that they could have a happy marriage.

Gene began moving toward the living room, and Betty and David walked with him. “Both Prince Jahnzel and Captain Sauvel believe as strongly as you do—if not more strongly—that the saintess is in danger. That puts you in mighty good company.”

“I had thought of that, but I had believed—hoped—that they might just be paranoid.”

“Both of them have had direct dealings with the emperor,” Gene reminded. “That, combined with your own strong feelings, tells me that the saintess is in as much danger as you believe she is.”

“Which means that this feeling that I should marry Myri soon probably really is coming from the Spirit.”

Betty sat down on the couch. “Are you feeling compelled to marry her before she’s baptized?”

“No. I feel we should be married shortly after she is baptized and then be sealed in the temple after a year.” David dropped himself into the recliner. “The thought of it makes me sad and angry at the same time.”

Gene sat down on the couch next to Betty. “Just because waiting a year to be married in the temple is the best choice doesn’t mean that being married immediately and sealed later is always the wrong choice. It just depends.”

“That may be true, but I still hate it, and I hate the emperor for putting me in this position.”

Gene shook his head. “There’s nothing you can do about that. You’ve just got to get over it.”

“It’s not just me but Myri too. You know that in her culture couples are engaged for years before they get married. She can’t imagine being married after only a couple of months and will think it’s sleazy. Her people will think it’s sleazy. They already think she was unfaithful to the prince by falling in love with me.”

“You’re afraid, then, that she won’t act in her own best interest?” Gene said.

“Yes, I am.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much yet. Your mother and I know it wouldn’t be sleazy, and you now know it wouldn’t be sleazy, and she’s a real spiritual gal. If it really

is right that you get married within a couple of months, she'll understand that soon enough."

"You're right; I should trust her. That will be easier now that I trust my own feelings." David looked at Betty in gratitude. "I'm sorry this has been so hard on you, Mom. Thanks for agreeing to go to her party tomorrow. She needs you and Dad as much as she needs me. If you could have seen her face this morning when she thought I would go away for good, you'd know what I mean."

"She's a good girl," Betty conceded, "and I'm not sure I would like her so much if she wasn't an alien."

Gene and David laughed, and the three of them passed the remainder of the evening in a pleasant way, even if Betty refrained from telling David everything she was thinking.

Betty awoke the next morning and decided to make a big birthday cake to serve at Saintess Myri's party. The more Betty thought about how she, Gene, David, and Lieutenant Laddan would replace Saintess Myri's family, the more she felt she wanted to fill the role well. That poor girl had lost everyone.

After taking the cake out of the oven, Betty dressed as if she were going to church, with makeup and even fingernail polish. She hadn't been to a party since the invasion and was a little excited.

\* \* \*

Disturbing dreams about Varia Day stole what little rest Jahnzel could salvage out of his harrowing schedule. When his dream-self entered the Washington, D.C. Spaceport again, everything was in order and he completed the inspection quickly. He traveled to the *Empress*, however, feeling as if he had forgotten something. He re-examined everything he had done and didn't perceive anything amiss. Since time was scarce, he dismissed the feeling and went on to fight against the invaders, be rejected by Myri, lose the rest of the fleet, and visit Myri in the Light to learn of his brother's crimes.

Myri showed Jahnzel to a bedroom in the Pierces' basement, and he collapsed there on the floor, begging, "Dear God, give me a reason to live or end my life right now."

When he arose from the hard, brown carpet, he knew what he had to do. He returned to Teton Colony, went to Arulezz's office, where he and Jesalya were awaiting his return, and lifted his arm to shoot them both. A dark-haired girl in a deep blue gown seemed to come out of nowhere. "Stop, Consecrated One! Don't do it!"

She hurled herself at him, attempting to knock the firearm out of his hand. It went off, and the girl dropped to the floor, lifeless. Jahnzel shouted at her and tried to revive her, but couldn't. Hearing Arulezz laugh, he turned, lifted his gun, and shot him. When he returned his gaze to the lifeless girl, she was in a coffin, positioned in the Hall of Thrones next to his own coffin. Why would he, an assassin, be lying in state with a laborer?

People in black walked by the coffins in groups, weeping and sometimes commenting.

"What a tragedy!"

"What a waste!"

"How could they be so short-sighted?"

"How could they be so selfish?"

"Now the whole Nation will suffer."



“Both of them suffered, I think.”

“They couldn’t perceive their own eternal importance.”

A man and woman of the warrior ranks paid particular attention to the girl in the coffin. “She’s so beautiful, even in death, and she would have done anything for him. How could he not see it?”

“He wanted to protect her. He wanted to protect us all. His heart was in the right place.”

“No, his head was in the right place; hate turned his heart to stone.”

The figure of a young woman hovered near the mourning couple, listening to their conversation. Jahnzel recognized her as the one who had tried to stop him from assassinating Arulezz and Jesalya. He floated forward to confront her. “The emperor is evil. Why would you try to save him?”

The young woman regarded him in astonishment. “I wasn’t trying to save him; I was trying to save you.”

“Why?”

“Because you saved me!”

“I don’t even know you!”

“We don’t exactly know each other, but we’ve met. In the Washington, D.C. Spaceport before the invasion. My name is Technician Day, Consecrated One.”

“I didn’t meet anyone named Technician Day in the spaceport.”

“That’s because I have a mission to stay alive. When I relived the days before the invasion, I evacuated to Teton Colony the way I was supposed to.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“Please try to remember, Consecrated One.”

It all began coming back to him like the scent of a feast after fasting. How could he have forgotten the orphan girl who had, from the first moment he spotted her, appeared so out of place standing in the Washington, D.C. Spaceport with the warriors ready to die? “I’m remembering now. I really did save your life.”

“And I’m supposed to save yours.”

“Why?”

“Because you still have a great mission to perform.”

“How do you know?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She gestured to the black-clad masses below them. “All honorable citizens of our Nation, both dead and alive, consider your death a tragedy.”

“How can you be sure that your certainty isn’t a hallucination like the coffins and mourners?”

“The coffins and mourners make me more certain than I already was. Can’t you feel it? This isn’t a hallucination; it’s a vision. An alternate reality.”

“Some kind of anti-prophecy, you mean? Why do you think that?”

“I’ve had other visions.”

“What did you see in your other visions, Technician Day?”

Jahnzel awoke before Technician Day could answer his question, but he found that he was more curious than ever to know what visions the Light had given to her.

The next time he dreamed of her, she was in the spaceport as she was supposed to be, and he spoke to her in exactly the way he had in real life. He relived the terrible events of the past month, then collapsed on the floor in David Pierce’s house, begging, “Dear God, give me a reason to live or end my life right now.”

The vision came into his mind of Technician Day praying for him, “Dear God, please protect Prince Jahnzel and help him lead as many warriors as possible to safety. Please let Prince Jahnzel live to save our Nation.”

Then the unprecedented happened. Technician Day stood up after saying her prayer and turned to face him. “May I have permission to speak, Consecrated One?”

She hadn’t asked permission when she had tried to knock the pistol out of his hand! “Yes, Technician Day, of course.”

“Saintess Myri was cruel and stupid to reject you for that savage, and you have every right to be hurt, but you can’t let your bitterness fill you with such hate that you kill your brother and his wife. Not now! Not outside of the law!”

Jahnzel couldn’t believe she would think that his desire to execute a fallen emperor and empress had anything to do with Myri! “If I don’t execute them, they will lead our people to destruction!”

“The Bles—the Light didn’t tell you to kill your brother; it told you only to warn him. How will he have time to repent if you kill him?”

Jahnzel started. “How in the galaxy do you know what the Light said to me?”

She was a shadow of himself. Of course she knew. “Every time I relive this vision, I see what happened to you from the time we met until we meet floating over our coffins.”

She spoke as if she really were the true Varia Day stuck inside of his head, and Jahnzel could not accept it. The thought that anyone could know every detail of the pain he had experienced since the invasion mortified him. He pushed past her and went to execute his brother and corrupt wife. The energy of his spirit pushed against Varia so hard that the force knocked her down and killed her.

Every nightmare was similar. They always started with the encounter at the spaceport and then ended with them both dead, floating over their coffins. Nightmare after nightmare tormented him until a fateful change occurred. When the time came to shoot Arulezz and Jesalya, he resisted the temptation.

Despite the fact that he did nothing to initiate death for either himself or Varia Day, they both ended up in coffins again, with the Nation gathered around them in mourning.

When Varia’s parents stood over her coffin this time, they spoke of her heart, not Jahnzel’s.

“She was so much like him, and he wanted to know her. How could she be so afraid of him? Of her destiny?”

“She was humble and modest. Her mind was in the right place.”

“No, her heart was in the right place; her mind was dark with self-imposed humiliation.”

The words helped Jahnzel understand something he had not perceived before. “Technician Day,” he called. “Show yourself and speak to me.”

She did float out from inside the shadows, her bearing exhausted and her expression one of confusion. “I don’t know what to say, Consecrated One.”

“Well, I do. Those phantoms consider *both* of our deaths a tragedy.” The realization was an astonishing one. What important thing or things could this orphan girl do for the Nation?

“I’m only important because I’m supposed to save *you*.”

She really was too self-deprecating, just as the warrior in mourning had observed, and that made Jahnzel feel ill. He decided that he would, from now on, address her as

the individual person she was, not by the invisible role with which she had been born. "That isn't true. You have much more to do, Varia Day."

She stepped back, startled. "You know my name."

"Of course I know your name. I know all kinds of things. I know that if you don't agree to do whatever it is you're supposed to do for the Nation, you really will die."

"What? What else do I have to do?"

"Live to provide posterity to the Nation, of course."

"Of course?"

"Wasn't that why you weren't permitted to join Star Force to begin with? Wasn't that fundamentally why I sent you away and required all of the other technicians to remain at their posts and die?"

"You think that if I don't have a baby, I'll die?" Jahnzel couldn't tell whether the prospect filled her with horror or terror.

"Not exactly." He shook his head, feeling a nagging, incomplete feeling. "And it isn't just about having a baby. There's something else, but I don't know what. I just know that you shouldn't think so meanly of yourself!"

"What a strange thing for you to say to someone like me, Consecrated One!"

Jahnzel discovered that he did want to know this girl who really was so much like him and yet such a mystery. "It's Jahnzel to you, Varia. Always Jahnzel to you."

She gaped at him, appalled. "I couldn't call you that, Consecrated One!"

"I saved your life and you saved mine. If that doesn't make us friends of the most familiar kind, I don't know what does."

She shook her head, then whirled around and shot away.

Jahnzel couldn't believe it. After all that had passed between them, had this girl just refused to be raised from a servant into a friend? What did she think he was? Some sort of arrogant tyrant with no sense of fairness? Or a princely statue with no feelings or need for friendship? "Varia, wait!" He chased her across the earth, and then into space, where she disappeared into blackness.

When Jahnzel awoke, he realized that his yearning to pursue Varia Day had not disappeared with the dream. He activated his telepathic systems recorder from bed and began searching through the personnel files of the now-dead mining ships, determined to find out where Varia had done her training.

He learned that she had been a dedicated, unnoticed student and worker. She had, however, left the *Extraction* toward the end of her apprenticeship to attend the funeral of her parents and everyone else who had died in the fateful Massacre Before the Flight.

So many thousands had died in the Massacre that Jahnzel decided it would be safe to go ahead and look up that list also. He learned nothing about Varia's parents that he didn't already know except their birthdays and the ship on which they had served—the cruiser *Comet*. It had probably been the place where Varia was born.

## CHAPTER 24: A VERY QUIET GROUP OF PEOPLE

Once Cameron's father told Rachel to "let the Zarrists come," they didn't hesitate. The first ships vaporized much of the forest behind Sara and Cameron's house to make space for a landing field. Sara hadn't expected this event, as logical as it was, and couldn't help but mourn over the loss of this beautiful place where she and Cameron had spent their honeymoon. A swath of trees separated their property and that of a few others from the landing field, but Sara and Cameron still couldn't help but feel claustrophobic.

The ships kept coming until there were hundreds of them, all sizes and shapes, and still they came, and what little doubt the colony leaders had about the identity of the "Zarrists" virtually disappeared when they saw rows and rows of the angel with wings spread, holding aloft a sword. Fourteen of the twenty colonists who had left Eden with Rachel Vance returned telling the same story about their experience on the Zarrist ship. The other five, they explained, refused to leave the ship. The five who remained were Brent Hall, Kevin Krantz, Brian and Deb Webster, and the lone survivor of one of the colonies on the southern continent—a young woman Sara hadn't met.

And yet, neither Rachel nor the other fourteen ever returned to the ship themselves. That wasn't the only odd thing. The Zarrists did not do the one important thing the Zarrists on Earth had done from the beginning—interact with their Earthon hosts. Not one Zarrist other than Lieutenant Sistrel and uniformed guards came out of all of those hundreds of ships. They didn't perform maintenance on their ships, they didn't once step out for fresh air, and even the guards didn't leave the landing field.

Sara and the others were relieved that the Zarrists' idea of providing guards to enforce Tempest's commands resulted in their doing nothing more than guarding their own ships, but as the days of inactivity passed, the colonists became more and more curious.

"Maybe they're afraid of the rain," Ashley suggested.

"The rain has to stop sometime," Marc agreed. "Maybe they'll come out of their ships then."

"Then I hope it never stops raining."

"Maybe they're preparing for war," Cameron said.

"Against whom?" asked Cyndi in a tense voice.

"No one's out here!" Trevor said.

"We don't know who their enemies are or where they may come from," Sara said.

"They obviously want this planet as a base," Cameron said. "That means they have enemies that are near enough."

About the time the ships stopped coming, the rain ceased, and still the Zarrists didn't come out of their ships and neither did the five colonists who had been with Rachel and the others. Had it not been for the five missing colonists, Sara would have believed they should count their blessings and leave the mystery of the inactive ships alone, but a feeling of dread grew in her heart. Finally, at her scheduled time to communicate with Tempest, she asked, *Would you please show me the inside of the ship that my colonists came out of?*

*Why?*

*You know as well as I do that five of the colonists didn't come out with the others. I'm worried about them. I need to know they're all right. That's all.*

*They're all right. I promise.*

*You can see them?*

*Yes.*

*Then why can't you let me see them?*

*Would you want me to let the Zarrists see you in your home?*

*That's never stopped you before.*

*In this case, there is nothing to see.*

*Why don't the Zarrists come out of their ships?*

*They are a very quiet group of people.*

*I don't understand what that means.*

*They don't talk.*

*You mean they communicate telepathically? Always?*

*Yes.*

*Do you know what they communicate?*

*Only if they transmit their thoughts.*

*Do they mean us any harm?*

*No.*

*What else do they do?*

*They work on their ships, of course.*

*But we never see them work on the outsides of their ships. Why not?*

*They don't need to.*

*You mean they have some sort of synthesizing technology that repairs their ships for them? Like the aircars?*

*That must be it.*

*If they have such marvelous technology on such a large scale, then why do they need people to actually do the work on the insides of their ships?*

*I don't understand their technology, so I can't answer that question. Tempest withdrew.*

Tempest's assurances only increased Sara's feeling that something was wrong. Sara had left Earth in a shuttle from an active spaceport and had boarded a much larger vessel in the space dock the Zarrists and space agencies around the world had built in orbit around Earth. She had observed Star Force personnel manually perform maintenance on the insides and the outsides of their ships both on the ground and in the space dock. The synthesizing technology the aircars used to repair themselves obviously wasn't completely adequate for the larger vessels, much in the same way it had not been adequate to repair the significant damage her own aircar had sustained when she crashed.

Of course it wasn't. The nanobots had to operate inside of a crucible that was protected by an energy field, making the synthesizing repairing technology good for engine repairs and not so good for exterior ones. Sara understood this basic fact, but perhaps Tempest didn't. Still, Tempest understood enough to know that the Zarrists didn't "need" to perform exterior maintenance on their ships. How could she know something like that?

The only thing Sara could think of was that Tempest had observed them doing the maintenance on the ships in space. The thought was almost too absurd to consider. Could exterior maintenance really be easier in space than on the planet? Images of astronauts moving laboriously on cords in space came into her mind, and she couldn't

believe it. If the Zarrists chose to land their large ships at all, which obviously they did, certainly they would do their maintenance on the planet.

Was it possible the Zarrists had landed their ships on another part of the planet, performed the maintenance, then moved them to Woodland Park? If Tempest had observed such a thing, she would have known enough to tell Sara that the Zarrists didn't "need" to perform maintenance on their ships. Still, would the Zarrists take such pains? Why?

And why wouldn't Tempest show Sara the inside of that ship? Had Tempest really developed a respect for the privacy of mortals, or was she hiding something? Sara thought it more likely that she was hiding something. Come to think of it, if the Zarrists were landing their ships on another part of the planet and doing maintenance before bringing them to Woodland Park, they were probably hiding something also, and Tempest knew what it was.

Round and round Sara's mind went, and the more she pondered, the more anxious she became, and the more paranoid she felt. Maybe it really was nothing. Either Tempest was changing for the better—a good thing—or she was lying and therefore becoming even more of a threat.

Even if Tempest had lied, the one thing that was probably true was that she could not assimilate the Zarrists' communications unless they transmitted their thoughts. This was an interesting fact about telepathy Sara had not known before the moment Tempest had revealed it, but it made sense, and it gave Sara an idea.

Later that evening, when Sara's wall had been extended and she and Cameron were alone, Sara decided to risk opening the safe box, exposing the arelada. If the "Zarrists" detected the arelada, Sara hoped they would think she was communicating with Tempest.

Cameron reached out to Sara with his spirit and overlapped his with hers the way they had when they had sent the message off of the planet. When they reached the level of joined thought, Cameron asked, *What in your discussion with Tempest troubled you so much?*

He had already vocalized that question earlier in the evening, and she had claimed that she was just tired, not troubled. That she could finally discuss it relieved her. She poured the conversation with Tempest into him, along with her musings about the matter.

*I don't think you're being paranoid, Cameron communicated. Despite the fact that these people appear to be Zarrists, they don't act like Zarrists.*

*Then you still have your doubts.*

*Absolutely. We did see the Zarrists working on their ships when we were still on Earth. They never landed their ships and remained inside of them in the way these people do.*

*No, and they started buying homes and buildings almost as soon as they arrived and constructed still more buildings and ships as they were able. They were always a very industrious group of people.*

*And given that we know Tempest is evil, I think it's more likely that she's hiding something than that she's changing for the better.*

How could Cameron appear so certain, when Sara still felt bewildered? *But hiding what?*

*The only thing I can think of is that if these “Zarrists” really are imposters, they would have to change the symbols on their ships. They could have landed their ships in another place and made the changes, and we would never know.*

*Except that the skywatchers could have, at any time, observed ships landing in a different part of the planet.*

*But it’s been raining, remember? They wouldn’t have seen a thing.*

*Cameron barely had time to think his next thought before Sara discerned it. You think Tempest may have manipulated the weather to hide what the “Zarrists” were doing?*

*It’s possible. We know she can manipulate weather.*

*The thought of it, though, is outrageous. Why in the galaxy would these people go to such trouble to manufacture a hoax on such a scale?*

*Their desire for a military base may be just that strong.*

*Cameron’s suggestion alarmed Sara. I know I’m not the only person in the colony who wants to know who they’re fighting.*

*It has to be the real owners of this planet, the people who terraformed it and then abandoned it.*

*The Gudyneans.*

*If you think about it, that’s what makes the most sense. This planet must be in their territory or just outside of it. They were able to complete a terraforming project, so they have access to large quantities of arelada. Your father told you that the Zarrists and the other Diron nations are pirates and that they steal arelada. He also said that this planet is in a strategic location, a fact that, according to Sister Vance, these “Zarrists” agree with.*

*You’re right. That’s what makes the most sense. This planet would give them an excellent foothold into Gudynean space. That has to be it.*

*The good and bad thing about that fact is that the Gudyneans probably won’t stand for it. I can’t believe the Gudyneans would ignore all the ships that have landed here. They must know that this pirate fleet has come so close to their own territory.*

*Fear struck Sara’s heart. Which means that they’re going to come and there’s going to be a fight. We’ve got to get the children out of Woodland Park!*

*Cameron motioned in the direction of the “Zarrist” ships. Fortunately, the “Zarrist” guards don’t appear to be interested enough in our affairs that we need to move slowly on the matter anymore.*

*Just because these people are preparing for a fight doesn’t mean they’re lying about their identity. What reason could Tempest have for cooperating with such a grand hoax?*

*Either they’re giving her something she wants or she’s afraid of them.*

*You feel so certain that she really did make a deal with them secretly.*

*It’s the possibility that best explains her evasiveness.*

*If that’s the case, then she’s been lying to me. Blatantly. Sara couldn’t help but be angry at the thought.*

*When has a murderer ever been opposed to lying?*

*But she’s always been so sensitive to lying. It’s the one commandment I always thought she would try to live.*

*She doesn’t care about the commandments. The only thing she cares about is her own comfort.*

How could Sara disagree? She had seen Cameron's observation play itself out time after time. *The problem is, though, that if I actually catch her in a lie and hold her accountable for it, she may get so angry that she'll destroy the colony.*

*That's always the risk, isn't it?*

*So what's the answer? Push until we learn the truth? Or allow things to go along in the same peaceful way and play along with the hoax?*

*Well, we know things aren't going to be peaceful for long. A fight's definitely coming.*

*Which means that the "peace" we're feeling right now really is an illusion.*

*I think that if there's any way we can learn the truth about these people we should, if for no other reason than we have five missing colonists. If Tempest did lie to you, then those colonists may not be okay at all.*

Sara looked away from Cameron and gazed in the direction of the "Zarrist" ships. *What I really want to do is get a look at the inside of one of those ships, and I think I know of a way to do it.*

\* \* \*

Six and a half weeks after the accident—a week and a half after the "Zarrists" had begun landing in Woodland Park—Dr. Marshall finally removed Sara's arm cast and declared her fit to go home. Her arm still ached a little, and she couldn't manage a crutch or a walker, but Cameron could help her into a wheelchair by himself and take care of her other needs.

Sara wasn't sure Dr. Marshall would approve of what she and Cameron planned for her first evening home and might not have released her at all, so she didn't tell him the plan. She didn't feel she had any choice but to inform Cyndi, however, using the spirit overlapping way to communicate. Thankfully she agreed, albeit reluctantly. She was very worried about the five colonists who had refused to leave the "Zarrist" ships. Sara used the same telepathic technique to invite Ashley to help them.

Cyndi and Ashley helped Cameron bring Sara into the house and settled her on the couch. Ashley understood the secrecy they were trying to maintain and, therefore, said little, but her expression was serious, her eyes brilliant with anxiety. "Can I get you anything, Sara?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you."

Cameron invited Cyndi and Ashley to sit next to him on the couch. Sara expanded her spirit to overlap with theirs and communicated, *Are you ready?*

Ashley's memories of their last experience joining minds in this way, hovering over the dead Control Colony, were too intense to allow her to be comfortable with what they were doing now. *No, but it needs to be done, so let's do it and get it over with.*

*Are you sure about this, Sara?* Cyndi asked. *It seems too easy. Surely these people would have some way to prevent spies from doing exactly what we're going to do.*

*When our minds reach a ship, we'll go slowly. If I run up against another mind, I'll pull back immediately.*

*It may be that they won't see the colonists as a threat and so won't guard themselves adequately,* Cameron suggested.

*That's the hope.* When Sara was satisfied that no one had any other concerns to express, she expanded her spirit well past the bounds of her body, pulling the others



with her. Her spirit flew into her property, through the roots of the trees, and into the stream that swelled over its banks. As their combined spirits approached the outermost ship on the landing field, they slowed to a crawl.

Having reached the point of no return, Sara paused for a moment to make sure they were all still willing to make the plunge. She discerned discomfort, but not disinclination. She moved forward, treading carefully, as their spirits flowed up into the cabin of the ship. Feeling no mental awareness or resistance of any kind, Sara kept going.

As their combined spirits became aware of the surfaces they were penetrating, the first thing they discerned was filth—rust, peeling paint, grease, dust. Sara’s spirit shuddered with the realization of it, and she thought it was odd that moving her spirit through the ground hadn’t created the same sort of disgusted sensation. When they became aware of the presence of small animals and insects, Ashley’s spirit recoiled, as if she couldn’t bear the sight of them. *Oh, this is gross!*

Cameron felt more curiosity than disgust and wasn’t about to let Ashley ruin this excursion by succumbing to her instinct to withdraw. *This is exactly what we came here to see. Don’t you dare pull out!* His spirit clung to hers as Sara drew them along.

As they came more fully into the ship, they saw machinery and attendants in threadbare silver-gray jumpsuits, with blank stares and round pieces of arelada glistening in their foreheads. They moved silently and unconsciously, as if they were robots. Some stood motionless against the wall, hands at their sides, staring straight ahead.

*They’re people!* Cyndi communicated in horror. *I can sense their bodily functions.*

*But what sort of people are they?* Ashley asked.

As the four observed them more carefully, they discovered that they were as filthy as the ship, with greasy hair and often with acne or other skin rashes. Appalled, they continued their exploration into other compartments of the ship. They observed more of the robotic people—men, women, and children of various ages and ethnicities, and discovered a different type of people—clean ones without jewels embedded in their foreheads who slept in tubes made of metal and glass, row by row and stacked, like a honeycomb. The robot-people who worked in the honeycomb cabins were cleaner than the ones who maintained the ship’s engines, especially their hands.

*They’re an underclass,* Cameron realized. *Slaves.*

*They must be controlled somehow by telepathy,* Sara thought. *That would explain their blankness and lack of concern for hygiene.* Were these people what her father had described as “Eslavu”? The temptation to telepathically probe one of them to learn whether she was correct in her assumption was almost too strong to resist, but she did resist, afraid that if they were telepathically controlled, the one or many doing the controlling would intercept her attempt.

They continued their tour of the ship determined to see someone—anyone—who looked like a normal, functioning human being, not a robot-person or tube-sleeper. As their spirits flowed deeper into the ship, Sara felt the touch of another mind.

*Withdraw!* Sara commanded the others, but before they could, a waterfall of minds gushed over them and held tight in a type of telepathic whirlpool.

## CHAPTER 25: THE FIRST PLAN

In the whirlpool of minds, one felt stronger than the rest. *Careful, careful! We can't take them yet. If we mar the Novaunian girl and her husband in any way, the planet-spirit won't cooperate with us.*

*If we free them, they'll tell the others what they saw.*

*We won't free them; we'll just hold them until I find out what we should do with them.* The lead mind withdrew from the whirlpool.

The departure of the lead mind gave Sara hope of escape. *No, you won't hold us! And we will tell the others what we saw!* She struggled against the other minds, as did Cameron, Cyndi, and Ashley. They made no progress whatsoever in freeing themselves, despite the fact the lead mind was gone.

*How can a Novaunian be so stupid?* one of the minds communicated in wonder.

*She's separated from her people for some reason and hasn't been taught what they all know,* another mind observed.

*She's obviously ignorant,* another mind agreed, *but she's still critical to our mission here. The admiral will know what to do.*

The lead mind returned. *The solution is simpler than we could have imagined. The other colonists will find these four in their telepathic comas and think the planet-spirit is at fault. We will admit that our plan to establish a base failed and will offer them escape. We'll open the ships, and that will be that. Once the other colonists are secured, we'll take the three and give the Novaunian girl to the planet spirit as originally agreed.*

Ashley, aghast, couldn't restrain her flow of anxieties. *As originally agreed? What does that mean? What's happening?*

*Tempest made a secret agreement with these people,* Cameron communicated. *That's what it means.*

Sara again attempted to withdraw. *We can't let the others get on those ships!*

*They want to make us all into robot-people, don't they?* Cyndi communicated, terrified. *I would rather die than end up like that!*

None of the whirlpool-minds articulated responses, but Sara could feel their amusement. Why in the galaxy would they kill such useful tools? She somehow understood that from their point of view, this was the natural order of the universe. They lived in the tubes, and the Eslavu did the physical labor.

For the moment, curiosity overcame Sara. *What do you do in the tubes?*

*We live in our visions.*

*Telepathic visions?*

*For a Novaunian, you really are ignorant.*

*Why didn't you make Rachel Vance and the other fourteen who returned with her into robot-people the way you did the others?* Cameron asked.

A new level of horror descended on Sara. Of course that was what had happened to the missing five. Before any of the minds could answer, thoughts from outside of the whirlpool invaded, *The planet-spirit wants the Novaunian girl now.*

Sara felt herself shoved out of the whirlpool. She attempted to retract her spirit completely, but before she could complete the process, Tempest grabbed her and clung.

Sara flung her thoughts at Tempest. *You lied to me!*

*Only to make you happy!*

*How could lies ever make me happy?*

*You should have trusted me!*

*How can I trust someone who lies?*

*Everything was fine until you looked into that ship!*

*How can you not understand this? Everything was not fine before I looked into that ship.* Rachel Vance's story of her experiences with the imposters had been so seamless. The imposters had to have put the twenty to sleep right there on the shuttle. They had probably telepathically looked into the minds of the five and learned what they needed to know about the colony. How had they done that? Tempest had communicated that they had machines, machines that touched her spirit. Could they somehow actually join minds using their machines? Break into minds?

*Everything was fine. Your people were free. Admiral Sutuzav's people were leaving you alone. Everyone was happy.*

*What about the five colonists the imposters made into robot-people? They aren't happy and free!* Perhaps looking into their minds with their machines had destroyed their minds and made them into robot-people. The imposters had gleaned enough information about the colony from those five to give a telepathic vision of a Zarrist ship to Rachel and the remaining fourteen. They had needed Rachel, at least, to act as a liaison, which was, undoubtedly, why they hadn't made her into a robot-person.

*How can you be so worried about five when Admiral Sutuzav wanted to make all of the colonists but you into robot-people?*

As sickening as the plan to make any of the colonists into robot-people was, Tempest's comment startled Sara into the realization that the imposters' plan for her had been different all along, and a feeling of curiosity and dread curbed her anger. For the moment. *Start from the beginning, Tempest. What was Admiral Sutuzav's plan, and when did you find out about it?*

*Their ships kept coming, but none of them tried to bridle me again.* She seemed eager to tell her side of the story. *After a while, the original ships returned, along with Admiral Sutuzav's ship. He communicated with me and told me he had a plan he thought I would like. If I would let their ships land, they would make sure you always had enough arelada to communicate with me. They would also keep the Gudyneans from taking you away.*

Tempest's information about the Gudyneans gave Sara hope. *Which means that you, and they, believe that the Gudyneans might come and take the colonists off of the planet.*

*Might have come to take you, and only you, away. The fact that you are a Novaunian is important for some reason. They planned to make the others into Eslavu, which is what they call the robot-people. They showed me the insides of their ships. As I told you before, they are very quiet people. The Eslavu don't do anything but work on the ships, and Admiral Sutuzav's people dream in the tubes. He explained that I would prefer the colonists as Eslavu, and he was right.*

*It all made a terrible kind of sense. So you agreed to the plan.*

*No, I didn't agree to the plan. I knew that you would be angry with me if I allowed Admiral Sutuzav's people to make the other colonists into Eslavu, so I said no. He was surprised, but he told me that his people would come up with a different plan.*

*So what you're saying is that if you hadn't said no to the first plan, the ships would be here and the colonists would be on them as Eslavu.*

*I knew that if I told you I said no to the first plan, you would be grateful to me, not angry.*

*Sara couldn't help herself; she was grateful. And relieved. And still angry. So what was the second plan?*

*They would continue to trick you into thinking they were Zarrists. I would provide them with cloud cover so that they could repaint their ships. You and your people would have your colony, Admiral Sutuzav's people would have their base, and I would have you to communicate with and protection from the Gudyneans.*

*Why do you need to be protected from the Gudyneans?*

*Admiral Sutuzav says that if the Gudyneans come, they will destroy me.*

*Why do they think the Gudyneans would destroy you?*

*Because of all of the people I killed.*

*But you aren't afraid that Admiral Sutuzav's people will destroy you?*

*No. They want very much to put their ships here and are willing to do anything I ask and give me anything I want. They understand better than your people do that if they don't do what I want while they are here, I will destroy them.*

*But if you do destroy any of them, they will bridle you. You won't be in control.*

*They are quiet people with no reason to break the rules. This is a beneficial arrangement for both me and them.*

*But these people are liars, Tempest. They've been lying about their identity since they got here over three weeks ago.*

*I don't care if they lie to you, as long as they don't lie to me.*

*How do you know they aren't lying to you about the Gudyneans?*

*Because I know the Gudyneans.*

*I don't think you know the Gudyneans as well as you think you do. Didn't you destroy their people before?*

*Yes.*

*And they didn't destroy you then, did they?*

*No.*

*Then why would they destroy you now for doing the same thing you did before? Especially when the people you killed weren't even from their own planet this time.*

*Because they destroy planets like me.*

*Admiral Sutuzav is lying to you, Tempest. The Gudyneans didn't destroy you before, so it is unlikely they would destroy you now.*

*Admiral Sutuzav tells me that the Gudyneans didn't know before that I was "uninhabitable."*

*How can he think you're uninhabitable? He knows that people have been living on you for several months! Sara thought back to everything Rachel Vance had said about her conversations with Sutuzav's people and could recall nothing about the planet's being "uninhabitable." What could it mean?*

*According to him, the fact that I show my memories to you makes me uninhabitable.*

*But that makes no sense. How can you not see that? Admiral Sutuzav lied to you!*

*Now that they know, they will destroy me!*

*But the Gudyneans don't know. Nobody's told them!*

*I won't let the Gudyneans destroy me!*

Tempest was so determined to maintain her delusion that Sara decided to play along with it. *If the Gudyneans are stronger than Admiral Sutuzav's people, then they will be harder on you if you join with Sutuzav than if you refuse to cooperate with him and persuade his people to leave.*

*Admiral Sutuzav's people are very strong. I like them better than I like your Earth people, the Zarrists, or the Gudyneans. They are the people I choose to live on my surface.*

Tempest was adamant. Sara understood, then, that she had no choice but to make her own deal with the planet-spirit, as distasteful as it was. *If that is the case, then I promise not to tell the other colonists about what I saw on Admiral Sutuzav's ships. When Cameron, Cyndi, and Ashley understand what's at stake, they'll make the promise also. We'll continue to live in peace with Admiral Sutuzav's people the way we have this past week and a half.*

*No, the second plan was all for you, and you ruined it. There can be no peace that way. Admiral Sutuzav was right. There can only be peace if the colonists become Eslavu. His first plan really was the better one.*

There was that first plan again, the plan that had all of the colonists become robot-people but her. In all that Tempest had communicated, Sara still hadn't learned what Admiral Sutuzav's plan had been for her. *If all of the colonists are made into Eslavu, what will happen to me?*

*You will go into one of the dream tubes and be put into communication with me permanently.*

In all of her most frightening nightmares, Sara had never imagined such a fate. She grasped for some way to counter this diabolical plan. *But it wouldn't be permanent. I won't live forever.*

*Admiral Sutuzav promises me your child.*

*I don't have a child!*

*When the time comes, your body will provide seed for a child.*

Staring into the heart of such evil terrified Sara and made her desperate. *But what they want to do to me is evil, Tempest!*

*Why don't you want to be my companion?*

Sara didn't dare articulate the first answer that came into her mind, but Tempest discerned it anyway.

*I am not evil!*

*It is evil to let Admiral Sutuzav make the colonists into Eslavu!*

*I need Admiral Sutuzav's ships to fight the Gudyneans!*

*It is evil to allow Admiral Sutuzav's people to make a member of God's bishopric into Eslavu or to leave His bishop in a telepathic coma!*

*If God cares enough about his bishop to save him, he can. He didn't care enough about the conspirator in the bishopric or the other four lost colonists.*

*God cares about you! He cares enough to allow you to make your own choices!*

*He does not care about me! He doesn't visit me! He doesn't help me! He isn't fair!*

Tempest's tirade jogged Sara's memory, and she made one more attempt to get Tempest to see reason. *Admiral Sutuzav and his people are evil! Didn't they bring more dark spirits? Can't you feel them?*

*The dark spirits are easier to bear than mortals who defy me.*

*If they're easier to bear now, it's only because you're getting used to them. Can't you see that if you get used to them and invite them to come, you may end up with them forever?*

The customary nothingness Sara experienced when she communicated with Tempest dissipated, replaced by a strange view of Sara's own dark living room surrounded by her property at nighttime. She, Cameron, Ashley, and Cyndi all sat in their various positions, completely still, eyes closed, and heads drooped. After learning that she was currently destined to spend the next one hundred and eighty years in one of Admiral Sutuzav's dream tubes, she hadn't thought that anything could inflict more terror, but seeing her lifeless body next to the others did.

Sara could feel that Tempest was disturbed in mind, but she couldn't discern any articulated thoughts. She understood somehow that Tempest had put her at a bit of a mental distance by tuning her into her own view of what was going on at the moment in Sara's living room. Sara struggled again and again to pull herself out of Tempest's hold, but was unsuccessful. When she rested, she prayed. When she began struggling again, she prayed.

*Heavenly Father, help me break loose! Please help me save my colony! Please watch over Cameron and the others and give them an opportunity to withdraw from Sutuzav's people. Please! Please bless me with a clear mind. Tell me what to do. Thank you for saving us from Sutuzav's people the first time. As bad as things are now, they could have been so much worse. Thank you! Thank you! Please help me break free so that I can keep the colonists off of the ships! Please inspire someone to check on us!* Dr. Marshall had removed Trevor's arm casts also and had cleared him to go home, and they would think it odd that Cyndi hadn't returned to help with Trevor's transport.

Over and over, Sara prayed and tried to withdraw. She did that for what seemed like hours. Night came, and the house glowed with moonlight when Sara finally saw Samantha and Luke Carroll coming up the walk. Sara saw Samantha knock at the door and heard the knock as it sounded on the inside of her house.

Samantha paused, then knocked again in more of a pounding fashion. "Cameron! Sara! Mom! Are you in there?" Luke went to the window to look, but since Cameron had not wanted to take the chance that anyone would observe what they were doing, he had closed up the house, leaving nothing to see.

"Samantha! Luke! Over here!" Sara tried to shout. "Help!"

Samantha frowned and listened.

Sara felt hope. Maybe she really had said something! Maybe Samantha had heard her!

Samantha went to the door again and turned the knob. Of course, the door was as locked as the windows were. Sara felt some comfort in the fact that the colony's doors and windows had been designed for privacy, not high security.

"Help!" Sara shouted, or tried to shout. "Help!" She felt as if she were in the middle of a nightmare, attempting to use a voice that didn't want to work. She had to keep trying, because she knew that she could speak when she was engulfed by Tempest, even if she didn't know what she was saying. During one of her first communications with Tempest, Cameron had told her that she had said, "You're a pervert, Ben Carroll, a louse! I will *not* be your femme fatale!"

"Help!"

Unable to open the door, Samantha jogged around the house with her brother, appearing more and more anxious each time she found a window locked and covered. Finding no way into the house and unable to see into it, Samantha removed her phone from a pocket and made a call, Sara assumed to Trevor; Samantha was still angry with Tony for preventing her from getting on the shuttle with the others and was avoiding him. "I don't know what's going on here, but something isn't right. No one will answer, and everything's locked up. We need help."

After she hung up, Luke said, "I think we should break into the house."

Samantha tried the door again. "Dad's coming up here in a few minutes to do just that."

Samantha and Luke again tried all of the windows, hoping to find a way into the house and were again unsuccessful. Eventually an aircar glided into the clearing in front of the house and from it emerged Dr. Marshall, Brother Dixon, and Brother and Sister Vance. Dr. Marshall helped Trevor out of the aircar and into his wheelchair. Brother Dixon hurried to the back of the house, and the Vances went to the door. Brother Dixon accessed the house's synthesizing system through a small exterior panel and disabled it, cutting electricity to the house and releasing the lock on the front door. Brother Vance opened the door and shouted, "We're in!"

Brother Dixon restarted the synthesizing system, and the lights went on as the Vances entered the house, with Dr. Marshall, Trevor, Samantha, and Luke right behind them. Sara tried again to yell, "Help! Help! Help!"

She saw her head move slightly, and a groan came from her throat. Cameron, Ashley, and Cyndi were silent and lifeless.

"Oh no!" Trevor moaned as he shot over to Cyndi.

Sara continued yelling for help, but she couldn't make her mouth articulate anything that sounded even remotely like a word. What was different about this experience with Tempest from the one when she had proclaimed Ben Carroll a pervert and a louse? The first time, she had expanded her spirit only enough to communicate with Tempest. This time, she had expanded her spirit clear into that ship. Was it that she hadn't retracted it nearly as much as she had believed when Tempest grabbed it? Was her spirit simply stretched thinner this time and unable to directly manipulate her body?

Dr. Marshall removed his phone from his pocket, made a call, and ordered, "I need two ambulances to Cameron's now with all available staff. Get them all up. Even those who aren't on call." He hung up and went to Ashley first. She was the most lifeless, horror distorting her face in a more severe way than the others.

"Mom!" Samantha screamed, running to Cyndi. She slapped her hand, attempting to wake her up.

Sara continued yelling, but heard nothing out of her mouth but an occasional groan.

Dr. Marshall finished checking Ashley's pulse. "She's alive." He moved next to Cameron.

Brother Vance removed the arelada pendant from Sara's neck. "They've been doing something with telepathy."

Trevor turned toward Brother Vance and held out his hand. "Give me that."

Oh no! Certainly he wasn't going to try and reach out to the lifeless four telepathically! He would be trapped just as they were! "No! No! No!" Sara shouted silently.

"What are you doing with that, Dad?" Luke asked.

"I was going to reach out with my mind and see what's going on."

"Please don't do it," Samantha begged. "You might end up like them!" She extended her hand to take the arelada pendant from him. He hesitated.

Dr. Marshall moved to Sara and checked her pulse. "They're all alive and appear to be in some sort of coma."

"We can't just leave them like that," Trevor insisted, his hand tightening around the arelada he held. "Someone needs to find out what's going on, and I'm the best person to do it."

This time, Samantha hesitated. She looked toward her mother and began to weep.

Before anyone else could protest, Trevor concentrated on the arelada, expanding his spirit toward that of his wife. Sara watched in agony as he slumped down in the wheelchair, lifeless like the others.

*Please, Heavenly Father!* Sara begged. *Inspire them to stop doing stupid things!*

Dr. Marshall, Luke, Samantha, and Brother Vance gathered around Trevor, attempting to revive him but were, of course, unsuccessful. They were all so focused on Trevor that they didn't notice Rachel Vance move to the door.

Dr. Marshall took the arelada from Trevor's hands and put it into his own pocket. "Nobody touches this again."

The ambulances arrived, and the five were put into them and transported to the hospital. Sara attempted to follow her body with her strange vision and was successful. She watched the medical staff make her body and those of the others comfortable and insert intravenous shunts into their hands. How ironic it was that on the day Trevor and Sara had been scheduled to return to their homes, they had ended up right back at the hospital and in the same beds, only this time, all of the walls were collapsed and the hospital appeared to be one giant room.

At that point, Cameron's parents rushed into the hospital and went straight to their children. That much, at least, relieved Sara. Had Cameron's father come to her first, he would have deserved Barbara's wrath. Almost as soon as Sara started feeling relief, she watched Cameron's father turn toward her with an expression of tenderness and anxiety that made her uncomfortable. She wanted to shout, "Don't be stupid, Father!" but, afraid such an outburst would compound the problem instead of alleviate it, she didn't even attempt to say it.

Apparently Cameron's father was determined to be stupid. He approached Sara and took her hand. "Please, Sara, speak to me." His voice was very gentle, very ardent.

Sara couldn't feel his touch, but it revolted her anyway. She flung her hands at him, and her head, and tried to move her legs, anything to make him let go of her hand. She watched her body quiver, and suddenly her head began moving back and forth, flopping from side to side on her pillow, as if she were shaking her head and couldn't stop.

Instead of dropping Sara's hand, Cameron's father squeezed it more tightly. "What's wrong with her? Help her!"

Dr. Marshall moved to Cameron's father, appearing disgusted and a little angry. He laid his dark-skinned hand on that of Cameron's father and removed it from Sara's. "Trevor, Ashley, and Cameron need you; Sara does *not*." Dr. Marshall extended his hand toward Cameron. Sara felt such gratitude at that moment that she wished she could give Dr. Marshall a hug.

Cameron's father stepped back, as if struck. Dr. Marshall motioned to Samantha, and Samantha left her mother's side and came to Sara's. Speechless, Cameron's father



turned and went back to Cameron. Barbara stood there, glaring at him. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Barbara rolled her eyes at him and shook her head before turning back to Ashley. Seeing how much his attention to her had hurt Barbara, grieved Sara. With this one careless action, he may have destroyed his marriage for good, and Sara couldn't bear it. Everything in her wanted to shout at Cameron's father and sob.

Samantha sat down next to Sara. "She's crying," she said with a gasp. "Why would she be crying?"

Dr. Marshall took a tissue and dried Sara's eyes. "Maybe she's reacting to what we're doing. If so, that's a good thing. She appears to be more aware than the others. Pay close attention to what she does. She may be trying to communicate with us."

Samantha continued to dab Sara's temples with tissues. Many minutes passed before she said, "She won't stop crying."

Sara watched Dr. Marshall whisper something to Barbara and tilt his head in Sara's direction. Barbara regarded him in surprise, then walked to Sara's bedside. Barbara stood there for many minutes, silent and motionless, watching Sara. Sara knew Dr. Marshall had meant to be kind when he sent Barbara to her side, but seeing her there and knowing how much Barbara hated her made the grief worse.

Barbara finally reached for a tissue and wiped the tears away from Sara's eyes herself. She motioned Samantha aside, leaned down, and whispered in Sara's ear, "I'll try to forgive him. I'm not sure it's possible, but I'll try. I don't hate you."

Barbara's words did make Sara feel a little better. Maybe they had a chance after all. If nothing else, Barbara was admitting in a semi-public setting that she was angry with her husband, which was something she had never done before their recent reconciliation. When Barbara walked away from Sara's bed, Rachel Vance entered the room with the "Zarrist" Lieutenant Sistrel.

"What's he doing here?" Cameron's father demanded.

"He says that they were communicating with Tempest and that she won't let them go."

"I think we all ascertained that much," said Dr. Marshall.

"Liar!" Sara shouted. This time, she did get a sound. The word came out of her throat as a raspy "Luh!" Everyone looked in Sara's direction, surprised and disturbed. Lieutenant Sistrel appeared impassive.

Satisfied she was saying what she wanted to say, she said it again and again. "Lie! Lie! Lie!" She had shouted it at least ten more times before anything actually came out of her mouth again, but it was coming!

"What could she be trying to say?" Samantha asked.

Dr. Marshall shook his head. "I don't know, but this is the first time since we found her that we've heard anything remotely like a word." He turned his head toward Sistrel. "And it didn't start until he walked in the door. Something about his presence is causing a strong emotional and physical reaction in her."

"Maybe these comas don't come from Tempest at all," Cameron's father said. He pointed to Sistrel. "Get him out of here."

Rachel communicated telepathically with Sistrel, and Sistrel left the hospital without protest. He waited outside the door, while Rachel remained and chided the others, "What was that all about?"

"I don't trust him," Cameron's father said. "Especially now. If he's lying about Tempest's involvement, then who else could have them under telepathic control this way but his own people?"

"Don't be ridiculous! These are the Zarrists we're talking about! You know as well as I do that they don't do this!" She waved in the direction of the five comatose people. "Sara's in a coma! She's talking gibberish!"

Barbara shook her head. "Sara seems to be aware of what's going on. Her words may sound like gibberish, but there's a point to them."

"Lieutenant Sistrel says that obviously the plan to build a base here has failed. His people are willing to get all of us off of the planet as originally agreed. Once we get these five into space, far enough away from Tempest, her hold on them will dissipate."

Cameron's father turned to Samantha, "Did your mother tell you anything about why she might choose to remain at Sara and Cameron's this evening?"

Sara was glad they were finally trying to analyze what had happened. Thus far, they had been so concerned about the physical needs of the five that they hadn't stopped to discuss what had actually happened.

"As far as I knew, she was coming right back here to help us get Dad home."

"She said nothing else at all?"

"No. We had no reason to believe she was going up there for any reason other than to help Cameron get Sara settled in for the evening."

"And yet, they were trying to do something with telepathy."

"Communicate with Tempest, of course!" Rachel said. "What else could they have been doing?"

Cameron's father shook his head. "Sara communicates with Tempest often enough by herself. She wouldn't have needed the others, and they wouldn't have been secretive about it."

"The only time Sara needed the help of others was when they sent the telepathic message off of the planet," Dr. Marshall said.

"We know it wasn't that," Cameron's father said. "There isn't enough arelada in the colony to do that."

"That can't be true," Barbara said. "Wouldn't there be arelada on the ships?"

Sara wanted to laugh. They were on the right track! They would get there!

"Now that's a weird thought," Rachel said, musing. "Sara and the others expanding their spirits into the fleet's arelada to send a message."

"It might explain why they didn't want anyone to know about it," Barbara said, "and yet it still doesn't make sense. Why would they do something like that and not tell anyone?"

"They wouldn't," Rachel said. "It really doesn't make sense. The only thing that does is that they were communicating with Tempest. Maybe they learned something about her she doesn't want us to know. When I communicated with her that one time and wanted to withdraw, she wouldn't let me. She has the power and the desire to do something like this!"

"Maybe they were trying to expand their spirits into one of those ships to get a look at it," Cameron's father suggested. "I've seen Sara do this sort of thing on a smaller scale." He turned to Barbara. "That's how she found you in the woods that day you ran from me and challenged Tempest. Sara probed the ground with her spirit somehow and found the path you had taken."

Barbara nodded. "That has to be it. They were trying to get a look at one of those ships. Of course they didn't tell anyone. They didn't want to risk being stopped."

"I wonder what they saw," Dr. Marshall said.

"Something someone doesn't want us to know about," Cameron's father said. He removed his phone from a pocket, pressed a button and said with urgency, "Lock the colony down! Doors, windows, everything! Don't communicate with the Zarrists! Don't allow them into any building! Don't come out until you hear from me!"

Rachel threw up her arms. "Oh, this is crazy! The Zarrists want to take us back to Earth. Why in the world would we not let them help us?"

"I'm not sure they want to help us," Dr. Marshall said. "I'm not sure they ever wanted to help us. Think, Rachel. Think about what really happened when you were taken on that ship. Could there have been a discrepancy?"

"You seriously think I might have been deluded? *Really?*"

Barbara moved away from her children's beds and approached Rachel. "Your makeup and hair weren't right. At the time, we considered the possibility that they put you in some sort of coma, telepathically fed you the events you experienced on the ship, and dressed you themselves when they woke you up and sent you back."

"There is no way they did that to me. What I experienced on that ship was real!"

"How do you know?" Dr. Marshall held his hand out toward Cyndi, Trevor, Cameron, Ashley, and Sara. "You can see for yourself that it's possible to be put in a telepathic coma."

"Remember what you looked like in the mirror that day," Barbara said. "Your makeup was wrong. There was a line on your jaw. Your roots needed to be touched up. You would never have made yourself up that way. Think!"

Rachel did ponder for about a minute. Sara hoped she would drop her pride, just a little, just enough to allow herself to consider the possibility that she, the savvy politician, might have been duped.

Rachel shook her head. "I didn't believe it was possible for my closest friends and colleagues to be so paranoid—so out of touch with reality. Well *I'm* not going to throw away our best chance of escape from this dreadful planet." She turned and walked with determination to the door.

"Rachel," Barbara said, "If those people are lying—and it appears they may be—then what they are offering is not escape."

\* \* \*

Their idiocy so offended Rachel that she couldn't bear it another second. She felt as if the building were on fire and that she had to escape it as fast as possible. She walked as fast as she could to the door. Several tried to stop her. Barbara even went so far as to grab her arm, but she elbowed her in the chest to get her to let go of her.

"Don't do this, Rachel!" Sean said, coming to her side. "There's something wrong with these people. They've done something to your mind."

"No, there's something wrong with *you*. All of you."

Barbara came to Rachel's side and put her arm around her. Rachel stopped and listened. "We've all been friends for years, Rachel. You've known these 'Zarrists' for only a few weeks. Can't you trust us?"

Rachel heard Barbara's voice, but it seemed distant. She wanted to trust Barbara and Ben, but how could she? She loved them, but they were both hypocrites in their own ways. She certainly didn't trust her husband, and there was safety on the ship.

Rachel felt Lieutenant Sistrel's thoughts. *What's happening?*

Rachel poured it all into his mind, and he received it, almost as if he were sucking it out of her with a straw.

*Don't worry about them,* he communicated with understanding and compassion. *We'll get them on the ships soon enough.*

*Even if that's true, I can't stay here another day. Please let me come back to the ship.*

*I agree that it's time.*

"We can't just let her go," Sean said, his voice becoming louder as he approached her.

As Rachel stepped forward to open the door, she felt strong hands on her arms and realized that both Ben and Sean were determined to physically restrain her from leaving the hospital.

The thought of it terrified her. She would not remain on this nightmarish planet any longer. Almost as if in a trance, she felt herself whip her body around in an attempt to get them to release their hold on her. Their grip only tightened, and she felt herself moved further into the room. She screamed and struggled and telepathically called out for help. Within moments, she felt warmth around her head, and her mind went black.

\* \* \*

Sara watched Rachel change from a pathetic, struggling, middle-aged woman into a fighting machine. She suddenly seemed to know exactly where to strike at Cameron's father and Dr. Marshall to get them to let go of her. They chased her to the door, and Rachel struck Cameron's father so hard in the face that he dropped to the floor. At that point, Dr. Marshall and everyone in the room directed their attention to him, not Rachel, and she escaped.

Rachel met Lieutenant Sistrel outside of the hospital with a blank stare, and Sara understood, with a deep feeling of disgust and grief, that Rachel was now a robot-person. Brother Vance, who had left in search of Rachel instead of going to the hospital, landed an aircar nearby. He jumped out of it and ran toward his wife.

"Rachel! Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!"

She didn't recognize him or respond to him in any way.

Brother Vance turned in anger toward Lieutenant Sistrel. "What have you done to her?"

Lieutenant Sistrel, of course, couldn't actually answer him in English or any other Earth language, but he did regard Brother Vance with a strange gleam in his eyes. Brother Vance wrinkled his brow and lifted his hand to his temple in a way that suggested Lieutenant Sistrel was attempting to communicate telepathically.

As Sara watched, she realized in dismay that Lieutenant Sistrel wasn't *attempting* to communicate telepathically—he was forcing the communication. Brother Vance winced as if in pain, then doubled to the ground in agony. He screamed for help, holding his head. He was resisting!

*Hang on, Brother Vance, hang on!* Sara urged, feeling a new respect for him. Before anyone from inside of the hospital could get to him, however, he collapsed, lifeless. Sara hoped and prayed that Cameron and the others had not suffered the same fate yet. When she had been bound by the whirlpool, the minds had indicated that Cameron, Cyndi, and Ashley would be last to be changed. *Please, Heavenly Father, let Sutuzav's people keep to that part of the plan! Please let Brother Vance be all right!*

Lieutenant Sistrel and Sister Vance walked together to the aircar Sistrel and Rachel had brought to the hospital. As Sara's vision followed them across the colony, she saw the other fourteen who had been on the ship with Rachel walk toward the fleet from their various homes. Friends and family chased after them, but the fourteen didn't respond to the entreaties to stay. Like Rachel, they fought all efforts to stop them. Like powerful robots, they were determined and successful.

Sara felt herself swept away from the hospital and back into communication with Tempest. *You were wrong about the Gudyneans. They are coming to destroy me.*

Tempest's vision opened, and Sara saw all of those hundreds of Admiral Sutuzav's ships that had lain in wait in the field behind her house launch into the sky. Sara's first thought was relief. If the imposters were busy fighting the Gudyneans, they would not be making the colonists into Eslavu. *They aren't coming to destroy you, Tempest. They are coming to get rid of Admiral Sutuzav and his ships.*

Sara tried to mask her joy at such a prospect, but Tempest understood her emotions anyway. *If they defeat Admiral Sutuzav's fleet, the Gudyneans will take you away before they destroy me.*

Sara could see Admiral Sutuzav's ships fly into space to meet the foreign ships as they dropped into Tempest's vision. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of ships swarmed around the planet, emitting laser fire and projectiles. The battle went on for what seemed like hours, both sides sustaining losses. Sara thought Sutuzav's people might give up and leave, but they were determined to win this fight.

When a damaged Gudynean ship came into a low orbit, Tempest hurled asteroids and ship debris at it, which knocked it out of orbit completely. The destruction of the Gudynean ship gave Tempest confidence, and Sara watched, aghast, as she targeted other ships. Sara had wondered sometimes why the owners of the planet had abandoned it so completely. Certainly they could have put a base on one of the moons. Now Sara understood what they did—that the planet-spirit's reach would have made such a course almost as dangerous as putting a base on the planet itself.

Sutuzav's ships appeared to understand what Tempest was doing and withdrew closer to the planet, forcing the Gudynean ships into range. Tempest fought hard, engulfing Sara in her anger and desire to destroy the Gudyneans, but often her throws went askew or didn't impact the opposing ship with as much power as she thought they should.

Just when Sara thought, with relief, that the Gudyneans would prevail after all, she saw Tempest's vision of the space surrounding the planet expand and discerned a familiar increase of energy. Sara realized that Tempest had remembered the Zarrists' arelada buried deep in the ocean and had poured her spirit into it, attempting to increase her ability to fight the Gudynean ships.

With the arelada, Tempest's ability to fight did increase, substantially. Her aim was better and her throws were more potent. Her range was greater. Between the powerful dual force of Tempest and Admiral Sutuzav's ships, the Gudyneans began to falter. After

losing several ships, they withdrew out of Tempest's vision, and Sara could no longer see them.

Everything in Tempest rejoiced. *We've beaten the Gudyneans! I'm free!*

Sara's only thought was that she and the colony were now doomed.

## CHAPTER 26: A GENEROUS OFFER

Another week passed, and even if Myri's people didn't accept David, they were starting to get used to him. Myri's first item of business was to meet all of the local government leaders she could. David helped her locate the offices of those leaders, made the visits with her, and acted as a cultural mediator in the discussions. With his help, she didn't make mistakes like the one with the ceremonial white veil.

Myri's people had been so focused on survival that they had interacted very little with the larger community. Despite their current semi-isolation, they had knowledge and skills that could make life better for everyone, and Myri was determined that they would share what they had as payment for the generosity of their native hosts. To achieve this end, she began interviewing all of her people to assess their abilities and determine the educational needs of their young people.

Just when Myri began feeling settled in her new routine, the mayor of Liberty paid her a visit with some startling news. "I just received word that an ambassador is coming from Washington, D.C. to speak with you on behalf of the Vice President. She should arrive Thursday."

"Why does she want to meet with me?"

"I wasn't told, and I would rather not speculate. I can tell you, however, that we received a request by radio from the Vice President's office over a month ago for information about your people here in our community. You had just arrived when it came."

"That's interesting." Myri knew that David's brother had suggested they move to Washington, D.C. for greater safety, but she had been reluctant to make inquiries herself about the situation there until David was better recovered. She had also wanted to be certain that he really did want to be her husband. "How large is this ambassador's delegation?"

"She's traveling with two members of her staff and an ambassador from your own embassy in Washington, D.C., a Captain Josel Fennyal."

Myri nodded. "I know of him." As aristocrats, he and his wife were probably the governors of her people in Washington, D.C.

"For safety reasons, they're bringing a large escort of military helicopters."

"Even so, surely they aren't planning to fly directly over Tryamaz Camp!"

"No. They plan to take a southern route in order to avoid it. They will enter the community from the west. If you could arrange accommodations for His Excellency Josel Fennyal and those of your people who accompany him, I will do so for The Honorable Rose Whitehall and everyone else."

"Yes, of course. I will ask them both to dine with me on Friday evening, and I would be honored if you and your wife would join us."

After the mayor left, Myri summoned Lieutenant Laddan and gave him instructions for the ambassadors' visit. That evening after Shipman Neemon brought David to her home, she spoke with him alone in her office. As she told David about her visit with the mayor of Liberty that morning, his expression changed from one of shock, to one of amazement, and then to triumph and finally, to an odd combination of fear and unhappiness.

David obviously had some idea what was going on, but his reaction was so mixed that Myri was almost afraid to ask, “Why do you think this ambassador wants to speak with me?”

“The Vice President wants you to be an advisor to the government; that much is obvious.”

“He wants just me? Or do you think he wants everyone?”

“That much isn’t obvious.”

“This ambassador will ask at least me, then, to go to Washington, D.C.”

“Naturally.”

Myri’s first thought was that this request was premature. “I’m not ready to go yet.”

“Neither am I.”

“Is that why you’re afraid?”

He started, as if caught off guard. “No.”

“Then why are you?”

David hesitated, glancing toward the open door. He leaned close to her and whispered, “The inevitability of this move of yours to D.C.”

Myri lowered her voice to match his. “You think we really will move then?”

“What do you think?”

Myri conceded to his observation with a nod. It made such perfect sense that she couldn’t believe it hadn’t been obvious to her right away.

“Of course you’ll go, because it’s so completely right.”

“Then why are you afraid?” Why was it taking so long to get to the question that mattered?

“Because as right as it is, it’s also utterly wrong.”

“How?”

“It’s precisely what the emperor would want us to do. Whatever contacts I still have in the Navy are in D.C. If you and I get married, I’ll have access to the Vice President and other high-level military officers. Do you have any idea what this *means*?”

Myri suddenly did understand. “You see that our relationship is, in a very fastidious and horrible way, following the story Captain Sauvel and I gave to the emperor.” A feeling of foreboding filled her heart, and she wasn’t sure why.

David nodded, his eyes flashing with anxiety. “Not only that, but this move would also set me up perfectly to help Prince Jahnzel organize a coup.”

The realization that she might really stand before Arulezz again and that David might really help Jahnzel organize a coup shocked Myri to such an extent that she almost couldn’t move her mouth to form words. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Wanted? No! It was a clever, right-feeling idea for a half an hour, maybe. Myri! How could I sincerely want to put you in that kind of danger? Can it really be possible we aren’t destined to live any kind of normal life? What does this mean for our children?”

Myri couldn’t speak; she could barely think. No wonder David was concerned that someone would overhear their conversation!

Myri didn’t get a chance to speak in such an uninhibited way with David again, but as the evening progressed, and he pressed her hand or smiled at her in that way he had—only now with eyes full of theories only they shared—she couldn’t feel horrified or afraid or anything but happy, because a marriage between them felt as inevitable as a move to Washington, D.C.



\* \* \*

Myri awoke the next morning feeling exhilarated. A move to Washington, D.C. felt right, and David was so close to committing to marriage that certainly he would come with her. She sent Shipman Larynt to Stonefield to get David and waited in the formal lounge for him to arrive as she always did. When Larynt returned alone, Myri almost didn't believe it.

Larynt placed a folded piece of paper into Myri's hand. "Mr. Pierce asked me to give this to you, my Saintess."

Panic seized Myri. Perhaps the situation wasn't what she believed. Perhaps he didn't want to see her again. No. That couldn't be it. Even if they decided not to get married, he wanted to get to the coast and buy a sailboat. "What else did he say?" She held her breath, waiting.

"Nothing, my Saintess."

"Thank you, Shipman Larynt."

Myri took the letter into her suite and opened it. David had written it in neat block letters:

My beloved Myri,

I know you were expecting me today, and I'm sorry that I won't be by your side during these next difficult days of planning and decision-making. Your people would resent it if they thought I was influencing your choices in the matter before you, so it's better that I stay away. More than that, though, I need to be home.

Since our conversation in your office last night, I've been deeply shaken. Whenever I left home in the past, it was always with the knowledge that I would return. Even as we've been discussing the possibility of disappearing, it's been theoretical rather than real. When I learned last night that you would probably be going to D.C., it suddenly became real and was almost like learning that we would be going to Diron. A year ago, when travel was easier and there wasn't this danger hanging over my head, it wouldn't have been a big deal. Now, though, if I go with you to D.C., whether we marry or not, I might not see my family again in this life. This prospect horrifies me in a way I didn't expect, and I'm having a hard time facing it.

I believe that our relationship has progressed to the point where we must either get engaged or break up, and I'm not ready to do either. I know that I don't want to be introduced to the ambassadors who are coming or to your people in D.C. as your "suitor." Your people will still think of me as your "savage distraction," and my people, including this ambassador, will think of me, at best, as your "date" or, at worse, as your "lover." Such opinions will do no credit to either one of us, and you need to be at your best in the days that come.

Please come to my house when you can find time to get away. Hopefully by then I will better know what I can do. I love you.

David

Myri read the letter again, her panic intensifying. He said that he loved her and was still talking about marriage, and yet he sounded so unsure. What did it mean? Myri read the letter again. She forced herself to admit that David really would be too much of a distraction and that he was right about staying away, at least for the time being. In the meantime, she needed to prepare for her guests.

Ambassador Rose Whitehall of the United States and Captain Josel Fennyal of the Holy Nation of the Son of God came into the Light Thursday afternoon in actual aircars, complete with a large escort of armed helicopters.

Myri invited the ambassadors into her formal lounge and offered them glasses of spicy fruit punch similar to a drink served at the Divine Emperor's table. Both ambassadors were middle-aged and dressed in dark American business suits, although Captain Fennyal wore the gold jewel on his tie that, as an aristocrat, had adorned his hair when long. After exchanging pleasantries and learning that Captain Fennyal and his wife, who had been educated as a priestess, were, indeed, the governors of Myri's people in Washington, D.C., Ambassador Whitehall came to the reason for the visit: "The Vice President of the United States, Samuel N. Madison, recognizes the unique contribution your people can add to our nation as advisors to the government and developers of new technology."

"What kind of technology does Vice President Madison wish to develop, Your Excellency?"

"He is intrigued by your understanding of nanoengineering and believes it could be used to disassemble matter and then reassemble it in another location."

"You mean travel distances without the use of vehicles. Teleportation."

"Precisely. Think what that would mean for travel between Light communities! For trade!"

What a wonderful fantasy. "Certainly Captain Fennyal has explained that our people have been working on this idea for decades, but little progress has been made. This research is quite controversial, actually. Many of our scientists don't believe it's even possible."

"That was before the Light came," Captain Fennyal said, "with that supernatural way it has of magnifying intelligence."

"And just exactly how has the Light magnified the intelligence of our scientists, Captain Fennyal?"

"Those living in Washington, D.C. have new ideas on the research in question and are, even now, pursuing them in our laboratories."

"I'll admit that it's an intriguing possibility," Myri said. Perhaps with the help of the Light they really could develop such marvelous technology!

"Vice President Madison invites you and your people to live in Washington, D.C. Your people already own extensive property in the metro area. Vice President Madison wants to assure you that your people have full use of this property under our laws. Our community is large, with many resources that are unavailable here."

"I have brought a company of soldiers to escort your people to Washington, D.C. We can stop in every other Light community on the continent where your people live and gather more. Washington, D.C. is close enough to the Chesapeake Bay to provide easy access for those who will come from overseas. We also have radio contact with our embassies around the world and can give your people assistance as they make arrangements to travel."

Myri suspected the aircars and shuttles of her people in that region, along with maintenance facilities, had been destroyed with the Washington, D.C. Spaceport, and the fact that the delegation had traveled to Kansas City with more helicopters than aircars seemed to confirm it. She wondered what primitive modes of transportation were available. "Is there travel by air and sea at this time between Light communities?"

"Some. It is difficult, but not impossible, as my own example proves. Vice President Madison would, of course, be glad to have as many of your people as you can gather, but he knows that you are concerned about their safety and would hesitate to encourage those located in the far places of the world to make what will be a dangerous journey."

Myri arose. "Thank you very much for your generous offer, Your Excellency. I will consider it and give you an answer tomorrow, after Captain Fennyal has apprised me of the details regarding our people in Washington, D.C. I would be honored if you would dine with me tomorrow evening."

After the U.S. ambassador left, Myri summoned Captain Fennyal and Lieutenant Laddan into her office. She motioned them into chairs and sat down at her desk. She addressed Captain Fennyal first. "Have you discerned any ulterior motives in this offer from Vice President Madison?"

"Yes. I believe that part of the reason he wants to gather us in Washington, D.C. is to keep us under observation."

"Then he doesn't trust us."

"I think he does trust us, but only so far. He's being cautious."

"Do you trust him?"

"Yes. I believe that as long as we cooperate with the government and obey the law, we will continue to live in as much freedom as everyone else who has gathered in that particular Light city."

"Is he working to rebuild the democratic government structure his people had before the invasion, or does he seem to be more of a dictator?"

"He is functioning within the original government structure."

"Then there is no indication that our prospects in Washington, D.C. will decline with a change of leadership."

"One cannot be certain about the future, of course, but I believe that our people will prosper in Washington, D.C."

"Do our people there interact with the natives?"

"Yes, in church and in business, but they prefer to socialize apart."

"They live near the temple, I presume."

"Most of them do. As Ambassador Whitehall indicated, we own extensive property in the metro area. As our people came into the Light, I assigned them to reside in homes around the area to hold them against squatters. Because we have more property than people, we're giving precedence to the homes in the Chevy Chase area, which is close to the temple. My former home in Chevy Chase has become our palace."

How different the situation was in Washington, D.C. compared to the one in Kansas City! "Former home?"

"My wife and I have moved into another home in Chevy Chase. The original home will become yours when you relocate to Washington, D.C., should you desire it." He handed her an envelope. "Here are photos of the home."

Myri removed the photographs of the home from the envelope and slowly, silently looked through them. It was far more spacious and luxurious than her house in Liberty,

with large areas—including a ballroom—for entertaining, ten bedrooms, a swimming pool and bathhouse, and several large terraces. The enormity of the house overwhelmed her, and for several moments, her only thought was that she might have to live in it alone, with no one but servants. With David, such a life would be bearable. Without him, it would be empty.

Struggling to keep herself from trembling, Myri returned the photographs to the envelope. “The house is lovely. Thank you for going to such great lengths to make it available for me.”

“You’re very welcome, my Saintess.”

“How many of our people live in the Washington, D.C. Light?”

“One hundred and forty-six.”

“Have they been having visions of the Visit?”

“Every one of them.” He told them his own story and those of several others, and then Myri shared what she could of her own reason for being in the Light.

After sharing her own vision of the Blessed Sons, Captain Fennyal said, “If our people are to return to Diron at some time in the future, my Saintess, we will have to be in a group. That may be the best reason we have for gathering.”

“I agree.” Myri wished she could ask all of her people from around the world to tell her whether they wanted to gather or not, but since that wasn’t possible, she had to make the best decision she could with the information she possessed. “What is your opinion about gathering our people to Washington, D.C., Lieutenant Laddan?”

Lieutenant Laddan said, “I don’t believe we need to return to Diron to fulfill our destiny as a Nation, but I do believe that we’ll be stronger if we come together in a larger group in a place like Washington where we have better access to our own resources.”

“It’s true that a larger number will make us stronger in some ways,” Myri agreed, “but it will also make us more vulnerable in others. If the Divine Emperor wants to attack us, he will have all of us in one place.”

“Do you really believe that such an attack could even be successful?” Captain Fennyal asked in surprise.

“No, I don’t, but we would be foolish not to take that possibility into consideration.”

“The Divine Emperor hasn’t tried to attack us here,” said Lieutenant Laddan, “and, given Captain Sauvel’s defection, he has some very specific information about us.”

“It’s only been a couple of weeks,” Myri said. “The biggest danger to all of us will come in fourteen months, when the Divine Emperor expects me to return to him with David.”

Captain Fennyal nodded. “Then let’s anticipate an attack at that time and be thankful we have a year to prepare for it in a place far better fortified than Kansas City.”

“What of those who live in faraway places?” Myri asked. “Do you think we should gather them too?”

“You could give them the option of coming or not,” Lieutenant Laddan suggested.

“If we are able to develop technology that will disassemble and reassemble matter, they could come sometime in the future,” Captain Fennyal said.

“True enough,” Myri said, “but what if we aren’t successful and they can’t come? Do you think they will be inclined to keep to themselves or join the race of natives?”

“They may keep to themselves for a generation or two, but their children and grandchildren would marry natives,” said Captain Fennyal. “In the end, they would undoubtedly become natives.”

Just as she and her children would if she married David and remained on Earth when her people left. Would the prophet make allowances for that course when he presented the new policy regarding her people? Myri considered taking the evening to pray about whether she should gather her people to Washington, D.C., but she realized that she already knew what to do. “Despite the difficulties, I agree that we should accept the Vice President’s offer and gather as many of our people as possible to Washington, D.C.”

Myri and her two aristocratic advisors spent many hours examining details and making plans. The next morning, Myri met with Ambassador Whitehall and then stood with her two advisors before their people to present the formal statement:

I am pleased to announce that I have accepted, on behalf of the Holy Nation of the Son of God newly established in the Light, the invitation of the Vice President of the United States, Samuel Neal Madison, to gather to Washington, D.C. Our people have the glorious mission at this time to bless our native hosts with the great knowledge we possess. To better fulfill this mission, I urge all citizens who live on the North American continent to gather to the Washington, D.C. Light community. I encourage all citizens who live on other continents to relocate to Washington, D.C. if safe, feasible modes of transportation are available. I caution all citizens to travel in large groups and proceed with prudence. If for whatever reason you cannot make the journey, please do your best to further our Nation’s mission where you are by offering your knowledge and skills to your particular communities. May God bless all of your efforts.

Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro

Witnessed by her advisors:

Captain Josel Fennyal  
Lieutenant Lanner Laddan

Myri’s people in Liberty listened in wonder and delight. When she was finished reading the statement, they clapped and cheered and embraced each other. Myri stepped aside and allowed Captain Fennyal and Lieutenant Laddan to explain what details they could of the upcoming move. She and Shipman Neemon then left to pay visits to their local government leaders and finally to President Mills at his home in Liberty. She told him about her decision to gather her people in Washington, D.C. and gave him the letter, then asked the question she was yearning to have answered yet dreading: “Why is the prophet taking so long to come to a decision about my people? Has he forgotten about us?”

“Perhaps he has been waiting for you to make the decision to gather your people to Washington, D.C.”

“Are you suggesting that he knew all along that we would gather?”

“I’m saying that while the Church sometimes tries to influence the lawmaking process when vital moral issues are at stake, it isn’t in the business of directing nations. Only you could make the decision to accept or reject the Vice President’s offer. And yes,

the decision to gather is a critical one. It will certainly make a difference in the finalization of the policy and in your own ability to live it once it's announced."

What President Mills suggested made so much sense that Myri couldn't believe she hadn't already made the connection herself. Of course the Church didn't direct nations. That was one of the things that made it so different from Myri's own ancient religion. "Then you believe the announcement will come soon, now that this important decision has been made." Myri realized that President Mills himself had never advised her on how to govern her people. He asked questions to glean information, nothing more, nothing less.

"I do, and I'm a little disappointed that I won't be the one assigned to give this wonderful news to you."

"So am I." As wonderful as it would be to learn that her people could be baptized, all Myri could think of at that moment was that in making the decision to gather her people, she may have separated herself from any possibility that she and David could be sealed in the temple.

\* \* \*

Now that Myri wasn't a regular presence in David's life and he felt capable, he worked in the basement, sorting through his boxes of belongings, trying to decide what to keep and what to either discard or pack away again in boxes that would probably remain in the basement until the Millennium.

All the while he wondered what momentous decisions Myri was making, yearned to be with her, and chastised himself for being such a fool, and yet he didn't know what made him more of a fool—that he could not mentally separate himself from her or that he had sent her away for good. How could she leave him? How could she not? How could he leave with her? How could he not? Why hadn't she been to see him or at least sent one of her bodyguards with a response to his letter? Had the letter hurt her that much?

After three days, everything had been packed but a few clothes, his scriptures and some favorite books, and several mementoes—his Duty to God and Eagle Scout awards, his journals, the letters he had received on his mission, and his class ring from the Naval Academy commemorating a class that would never graduate. The ring might be worth a lot of money someday.

David sat on his bed and gazed at the ring. He hadn't worn it since the day he had been beaten by his bonded classmates, and it was both a reminder of everything that had gone wrong in the world and the oath he had taken when he joined the Navy. The oath had branded a holy mission on his mind, and three and a half years at the Naval Academy had instilled it in his body and soul.

He whispered to himself, "Having been appointed a midshipman in the United States Navy, I solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter, so help me God."

Hearing movement at the door, David looked up and saw his mother standing at the threshold, her eyes glassy with tears. David set the ring on the end table next to his bed. "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Why don't you wear it?"

"You have to ask?"

She glanced around the room. "Looks like you're getting ready to move out."

He shrugged. "You're not getting rid of me quite so fast."

"You don't think Saintess Myri will go to Washington, D.C. then?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure she will go. I'm just not sure I'll go with her."

"You don't want to go?" She sounded surprised.

"I really don't know." He felt that if he didn't go to D.C. with Myri he would go crazy, and yet he felt such dread about going that he was afraid that if he did, both he and Myri would die. How could he tell his mother about these conflicting feelings that were beginning to make him doubt whether he should have become involved with Myri at all?

"Mom, what is it you have against Myri?"

"I don't have anything 'against' her."

"That isn't true. You have doubts about her. Why?"

"I'm not sure you really want to hear my opinion."

"Perhaps that was true before, but today, right now, I need you to be blunt. Please. Are you just worried that she'll take me away from Earth the way Tren did Teri? Or is there something else?"

His mother sat down on the bed next to him. "Yes, as a matter of fact, there is something else. Something that's been bugging me since the prince came. I don't doubt that she's attracted to you and likes you very much, but it bothered me when she and the prince seemed to think that joining minds with you was the most disgusting thing they could imagine."

"It's against their law; of course it's disgusting to them."

"What I'm talking about isn't law, but emotions. Your little gal obviously had no qualms about the idea of joining minds with the prince when he was the one she was planning to marry. Now, though, that she's thinking about marrying you, she can't bear the thought. It makes me wonder which one of you she really does love."

David suddenly felt cold. His mother might be right, and he had been blind for not perceiving the contradiction also. Aside from the question of whether Myri still loved Prince Jahnzel, she didn't have any intention of doing dijauntu with David, and that was a problem. It meant that standing before the emperor was not an option.

"She still has very deep feelings for the prince—there's no doubt about that."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Of course it does. In her favor, though, she rejected him for me."

"That doesn't mean that her feelings for you are stronger. It may mean that she's temporarily blinded by her attraction for you."

"You're suggesting that she may just be infatuated with me. Or that she's being influenced by the cell bond the emperor has on her mind."

His mother lifted her shoulders. "I guess so. I didn't want to believe that at first, because I always thought she was a good girl and wouldn't lead you along, but this dijauntu thing really bugs me."

David was about to point out that even the prince had been certain about Myri's feelings but stopped himself. Myri believed the prince thought their love was "lustful

and base,” which seemed to support what his mother was saying rather than contradict it.

When David didn’t reply immediately, his mother continued, “And it isn’t just that she may still love the prince. I’m also concerned about the very real possibility that she’ll always think of you as a second-class citizen. That would sour a marriage real fast, even if both people love each other.”

“If we change our identities and disappear, that may not matter.”

“Saintess Myri doesn’t seem to be looking at that as an option.”

“No, she doesn’t, and that worries me. Either she’s deluding herself, or I’m paranoid.”

“She’s deluding herself.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because the prince said it, and you say it, and the Spirit keeps saying it to my own heart.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to convince her.”

“Then sail away. Please. Do it for me.”

“You realize that means I should go with her whether I intend to marry her or not.”

“I know. As much as I hate the idea of you sailing across the world by yourself and ending up in some faraway place where we’ll never have contact with you again, I would rather you do that than end up planning a coup with Prince Jahnzel.”

The idea of sailing away sounded so easy. He could disappear and leave Myri and all of her complications and be safe for the remainder of his life. As appealing as the idea was, it didn’t feel completely right. Even if he couldn’t bring himself to marry Myri, David didn’t know how he could abandon her in her danger. Then again, he couldn’t believe that joining her in a suicide mission would honor her, their respective nations, or God.

Perhaps his job right now was to do whatever it took to convince her of her danger. Perhaps this was one issue he had both the right and responsibility to force. “If I can’t convince her of our danger, I will sail. That much I can promise.”



## CHAPTER 27: IMPERIAL LICENSE

To David's relief, Myri came to the house that afternoon. To his shock and delight, the cold, formal saintess fell off of her like a costume, and the warm, open girl who had nursed him for a month ran into his arms. He clasped her close. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

"You're too big of a distraction, darling." She touched her cheek to his, appearing oblivious to Shipman Larynt and Seamstress Kintz, who stood behind her, just inside the door.

David yearned to kiss her and had a feeling she wanted to kiss him just as badly, but he was also afraid that she would pull away if he did and wasn't ready to let go of her just yet. Several minutes passed before his curiosity overcame his desire to hold her. "What happened? Will your people go to D.C.?"

Myri withdrew, removed her coat, and walked with him into the living room arm in arm. "Yes. We'll leave as soon as preparations can be made. The plan is to travel around the continent and pick up our people from the various temple communities. We think it will take about a week to contact all of the communities and set up the route. The only question is whether I'll travel with the group or whether I'll go directly to Washington. I can't decide whether my presence would make the mission safer or less so."

"You don't think the emperor would make you land for questioning, do you?" The thought that Myri could have that kind of encounter with the emperor alarmed David.

"I don't know, but the possibility is a concern to me and my advisors."

As David sat down with Myri on the couch, it all became real to him, and he knew that she really would leave. He also became aware, starkly, of options he hadn't before considered. He could marry Myri immediately and disappear with her anywhere on the route. Her people would stop at several port cities, including Houston, San Diego, and Seattle. He and Myri could remain in any of those cities and send the aircar with the group to D.C. without them. As long as the emperor didn't force the aircar to land, he would think he and Myri were in D.C. until he tried to retrieve them in a year and a half. If Myri didn't want to marry him immediately and disappear, David could remain in any of those port cities by himself and get on a cruiser as crew. Myri would go to D.C. without him, and the emperor wouldn't know until he was far, far away.

David believed that if he took this opportunity to disappear, either with Myri or without, he would remain out of the power of the emperor for the rest of his life. He also believed that if he traveled with Myri to D.C., the possibility that they would have to face the emperor at some time in the future was far more likely, whether they married or not.

As Myri detailed all of her experiences of the last few days, David saw Ashley Carroll, and he wondered whether his relationship with Myri would lead to nothing just as his relationship with Ashley had led to nothing when she had gone away.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he knew Myri far better than he had known Ashley, and that he wanted to be with her enough to marry her and disappear. Yes, he did. If given the choice between being with Myri or his family, Myri was the one he would choose.

Almost as soon as he became aware of his own desire, he understood something else. His little romance with Ashley hadn't led to nothing; it had led to Myri. Of all the young men Tohmazz Zarr could have chosen for Myri, he had chosen David, and of all

the young women in the Church David had dated who had been far readier for marriage than Ashley, only Ashley, who looked like Myri, had been the one he had felt good about.

Miracles like that didn't just happen, and David perceived that God had prepared him to be Myri's husband. He had prepared David before the Zarrists had even arrived on Earth by directing him into the Naval Academy. Then He had urged Tohmazz Zarr to choose David for Myri, and Zarr had possessed enough goodness to feel the divine nudge and act on it.

Oddly enough, David had the feeling that *he* had been prepared for *her*, not the other way around, which he interpreted to mean that his father was right about her—she was, in a literal way, a queen. Her choices were setting the course for her nation and were critical at this point in time. If David traveled to D.C. and eventually married Myri under those particular circumstances, many of his own choices would be subordinate to hers.

David poured his thoughts out in prayer: *Heavenly Father, I know that Myri is extraordinary, but what kind of woman is she really to be so highly favored of Thee? Would I be happy being married to her?*

A vision bloomed in his mind of Myri arrayed in a way that reminded him of the woman of light from the Revelation of John. Stars wreathed her head, casting their light around her face like a veil. She wore a long, flowing white dress, highlighted by sunlight. Her white-slipped feet shone like moonlight. In his most sublime dreams, David had never imagined such a glorious, gorgeous woman, and he wanted this Myri more than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

The vision-Myri turned away from him slightly and tilted her head upwards, her eyes glowing with light and love. David looked to see who was there with her and was astonished to see himself, arrayed in a similar fashion. Stars wreathed his head, casting their light upwards toward Heaven. He wore a white shirt and slacks, highlighted by sunlight. His white-slipped feet shone like moonlight.

David finally understood. Yes, Myri was a queen to her people, and no, he would never be the corresponding king to her people that Prince Jahnzel would have been had she married him, but if David married her and they remained with her people, he would be *her* king, and because they would be united under covenant with God, she would be a much more spiritually powerful queen to her people than she would be if she became a mere princess under the direction of a mortal emperor.

David reached out to take her hand, but before he could grasp it, he heard her voice: "What's the matter, darling?"

David came to himself and gazed at her beautiful, puzzled face and knew that he wanted to be Myri's king, even if it meant her people would have to become as important to him as his own were.

"I want to marry you."

Light seemed to pour into her countenance, mirroring the vision of her he had just beheld. "Then surely you'll come to Washington with me!" She appeared so happy that David found it impossible to believe that her feelings for him were motivated by something other than real love. "We'll find you a house close to mine, or you can live near the temple."

Knowing Myri as he did, David suspected that if he went to D.C. with her, she would drift along with him in the courtship and perhaps even the betrothed state and put off actually getting married until they had no choice but to return to the empire. He finally

understood what he had to do. He stood up, pulling her up with him. He tilted his head toward the back of the house. "We need to speak privately."

Myri nodded and allowed David to help her back into her coat. They moved into the hall and headed to the door. David took his own coat from the hook next to the door and slid into it before stepping into the backyard with Myri. David closed the door and told her what he believed were their three options as they walked in the direction of the large stone in the park. She dismissed the possibility of marrying immediately and disappearing with him as they traveled with the group. "I'm not unwilling to disappear with you if it comes to that, but I'm not ready to do so yet. If we both go to Washington, we can always leave secretly later."

Even though David had expected her response, a part of him was disappointed. "That may technically be true, but disappearing now would be more certain and effective. It's not clear we'll get this good of a chance again. You're sure you don't want to take some time to think about it?"

She shook her head. "That's not an option. I'm going to Washington with my people, with or without you."

She was so adamant that David had no qualms about standing up to her with his own requirements. He tried, however, to be gentle, "I love you, Myri, and want to marry you, but I feel uncomfortable about agreeing to go to D.C. with you unless you can agree to do dijauntu with me after we're sealed."

"Impossible!"

"If you can't bring yourself to break your ancient law and join minds with a 'savage,' then you had better be prepared to disappear. Like it or not, our current path is leading us straight to the emperor. The only way I will go with you all the way to D.C. is if you have agreed to do dijauntu with me after we're sealed."

"How dare you stand there and make such a demand of me!"

"You've known from the very first night we met that I am demanding. I hate to cause you pain, but you can be quite demanding yourself, Myri, and I honestly don't know how else to deal with you."

"You talk as if I'm some sort of tyrant!"

"No, just a noblewoman who refuses to see her danger."

"Did the Light actually tell you that it would be wrong for you to go to Washington with me?"

"I know how the Spirit works with me; I don't need a voice or a vision to tell me we're in danger."

"Why should I believe you when the Blessed Sons gave me the responsibility to not let my people forget the great blessings that await them on Diron? Suggesting that I would remain in the Light long enough for me to teach them?"

"They never suggested you should teach your people at the expense of your own safety."

"And for me to be 'safe,' in your opinion, is to either disappear or do dijauntu."

"It isn't just my opinion, Myri; it's the truth. Captain Sauvel told you that in the beginning, and Prince Jahnzel was quite passionate about his opinion. But you don't have to take our word for it. Pray about it, please."

"Neither Captain Sauvel nor Prince Jahnzel would think it right of me to do dijauntu with you."

"Then it's time to disappear."

"Your brother believes it would be safe to go to a fortified city like Washington, D.C."

"No, he believes it would be safe-*er* for us there than here. From the very beginning, he suggested that we leave from there on a boat, not stay there."

"If I disappear, I would be abdicating my duty to my people."

"You aren't going to be much use to your people if you are dead. I think I've told you that before! Why do you have to be so bullheaded?"

"Why would God put me into this mortal life in the rank of noblewoman just so that I could abdicate my responsibilities and become so inconspicuous that I could never hope to serve my people or anyone as a healer, much less a governor?"

"How do you know that you haven't already done your duty to your people? Maybe you have another mission to perform among my people."

"But if I join your people for good, I won't return to Diron with my own people."

"No, you wouldn't. But we've already discussed this possibility—on the day I first kissed you. You didn't seem so opposed to it then!"

"I've never believed it would come to that. If I remember correctly, you weren't opposed to the idea of going to Diron with me."

"I am willing to go to Diron sometime in the future if that's the right thing to do."

Myri's mouth was set in a determined line. "It is the right thing to do."

"You can't possibly know that yet, nor can you make such a huge decision for me without my agreement. I want more than anything to marry you and be with you forever, but I can't completely discard my people for yours."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I need you to be willing to stay on Earth with me if that's the right thing to do."

"You're asking me to choose between you and my people?"

"No, I'm asking you to agree to an arrangement of dual citizenship, so to speak, and acknowledge that my desire to stay on Earth is just as valid as your desire to go to Diron with your people."

"But this isn't so much about my desire, David, as my duty. You knew I was a noblewoman when you began courting me."

"Yes, I did, and I have every intention of supporting you in your duty up to a point."

"Up to a point?"

"I'm not willing to follow you into suicide in the cause of your so-called duty, and I don't think you necessarily have a duty to go with your people to Diron. For me to concede to you completely on the Diron issue would be to dishonor my family and my heritage and everything I am."

"How do you know that you don't have a duty to help me lead my people back to Diron?"

"I *don't* know. All I need is for you to be *willing* to stay here with me. I need to have a wife who seriously respects my people, and my opinions, and is willing to compromise. If you can't compromise on this issue, what guarantee do I have that you'll be willing to compromise on anything important?"

"But some matters just aren't open to compromise, as you obviously believe, or we wouldn't be having this conversation at all. I have a duty to return to Diron with my people just as your brother-in-law had a duty to return to Novaun."

"It isn't the same thing. There is no superior officer on Diron waiting for a report of your mission on Earth."

"Don't you think it would have been easier for Trendaul and your sister if returning to Novaun had been the expectation from the beginning? Instead of making themselves crazy with indecision until it was time to actually go?"

David shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with you anymore. If you can't meet me halfway on this matter, then it's over between us. I won't marry a woman who isn't capable of compromising!"

"How can you say that? When you want to marry me and feel good about it?"

"Yes, I do feel good about marrying you, but no, I don't believe that the Lord wants me to do so completely on your terms."

"You think the Spirit's telling you to treat me in this abominable way?"

"I'm not treating you in an 'abominable' way. I'm being realistic. Whether you want to believe it or not, we really are in an extreme amount of danger."

"Whether we go to Diron or not with my people has nothing to do with our danger."

"Yes, it does in a way. If you are determined to go to Diron with your people, then we have fewer options."

"Then the Spirit didn't tell you that we should remain on Earth when my people leave."

"No, but the Spirit does warn me that if I do go to Diron with you, I will feel the loss of my own planet and people deeply. This is not a decision I can agree to now or one that I should ever make rashly. If you're determined to ignore my concerns about this matter, then this conversation is over."

Myri seemed to lose the desire to argue. "It appears our relationship really has been doomed from the start. I guess, then, that this is good-bye forever." Her lips trembled, and tears filled her eyes.

Seeing her grief was almost too much to bear. "Can't you just try, Myri, to see all of this from my point of view?" David asked in a soft voice.

Myri clenched her fists and pounded them on her thighs. "How can I? When your point of view is wrong?"

David stepped back, feeling as though he had been hit.

Myri moved toward him, appearing guilty. "I'm so sorry, David. I shouldn't have said that."

"Yes, you should have said that, and I'm glad you did."

"Does that mean you intend to reconsider your position?"

"No, not at all. But I will remind you that you took this same inflexible position with Prince Jahnzel not so long ago and were wrong . . . or were you?"

Her anger returned. "Reminding me of how blind I was in my dealings with Jahnzel hardly seems fair!"

"I don't mean to be unfair, only to point out that Prince Jahnzel's position was that you defy the emperor, marry him, and lead your people to Diron. Judging by our discussion this afternoon, that's exactly what you want to do."

"I don't want to marry Jahnzel."

"Why not? That was the one thing you were certain about before you came here, and now you're certain about the other two things too. You like him a lot, and you admire him, and his desire is the same as yours. I think there's a good possibility that he would take you back if you showed sufficient remorse about this 'sordid romance' you've had with me." Jealously stabbed through David, and he struggled to keep it out of his voice.

“Even if I wanted to marry Jahnzel, and even if he would be willing to reconcile—which I strongly doubt—I can’t go back to him. You know that.”

“If he thought you wanted him, he would come to you. You could govern your people together and then lead them to Diron when the time is right.”

The tears that had formed in Myri’s eyes dribbled down her cheeks. “You don’t, for a moment, believe Arulezz would allow Jahnzel to do what you say. To say you do is cruel.”

“No, I don’t believe it. I’m only stating the possibilities that are credible in your vision of the world right now. If you really believe we would be safe forever in Washington, D.C. you have to believe the prince would be safe there too. In that scenario, you ought to marry him; you’d be perfect for each other. What’s so cruel about acknowledging that reality?”

Myri wiped the tears from her cheeks in hard swipes with her gloved hands, but they kept coming. “I love you, David, not Jahnzel; that’s why it’s cruel. Do you really not know that, or are you just angry with me for arguing with you?”

“I do know that, and I’m not angry with you.”

“Then how could you say those terrible things?”

“You and I were both raised with a particular idea of what marriage ought to be. Our strange and dangerous circumstances have forced me to revise my own expectations, but you are still unwilling to revise yours. I had hoped that reminding you of your broken betrothal with the prince would help you see that.”

“What would be your expectation if we didn’t have this danger hanging over our heads?”

“I would want to go to D.C. with you now, announce our engagement after the Church announces the new policy regarding your people, and then get married in the temple a year after your confirmation. I want to do exactly what you want to do.” He reached out to touch her but, after a moment, drew his hand back. He didn’t dare do it.

David’s refusal to act on his feelings unraveled Myri. She broke into sobs and hurled herself into his arms.

David clung to her. “I love you, Myri. Insanely.”

Myri trembled in his arms, unable to stop weeping. *How can he send me to Washington alone?*

Surprised to feel an articulated thought from her that she certainly hadn’t meant to broadcast, David pulled away slightly and cupped her face in his hands, brushing away her tears with his thumbs. Curious, he pushed his own thoughts at her. *Don’t you get it? All you have to do is agree to my requests! It’s that simple!*

She jerked away from him, her eyes wide and shocked. *What you require isn’t that simple!*

*After everything we’ve been to each other, you won’t even consider it?*

Her hand shook as she attempted to wipe her tears away. *I don’t know!*

*Please, Myri!*

He moved his hands to her face, and his lips followed. They hadn’t kissed in at least two weeks, and she responded hungrily, again and again and again. In the end, he was the one who pulled away, panting.

Appearing embarrassed that she had lost control of herself, she lowered her eyes. “That was wrong.”

He brushed the remaining tears from her cheeks. “No it wasn’t.”

"I don't know what came over me."

He chuckled. "And you think *I'm* the one who's the savage?"

Mortified, Myri stepped away from him. "Please don't joke about it, David."

David stepped forward, coming as close to her as possible without touching her. "Are you afraid of your passion for me, Myri? That it's somehow . . . 'savage'?"

"I had never thought of it in quite that way, but maybe."

He pulled her close again and whispered in her ear, "You have nothing to be afraid of, because the real Myri under the saintess will always be safe with me."

Finally she said, "I don't suppose it would hurt to consider your ideas and requests—all of them."

He gave her a squeeze. "How is it that we can communicate telepathically? Could it be the Light?"

"It must be. As far as I know, there is no arelada anywhere near here."

"I'm not sure whether that's an amazing prospect or an eerie one."

"Right now, it's an eerie one." She withdrew into herself for several minutes. When she finally spoke, she said, "The energy field that is allowing me to have Awareness is particularly strong in this place. I wonder why." She touched the stone, frowning.

"What's the matter?"

"I think this rock has turned to crystal since the day I arrived."

"I don't understand. This is the way the rock has always been."

"Always?"

"Since I first saw it, which was on the day I walked with Prince Jahnzel to his shuttle."

"When I arrived, it was just a rock—gray and ugly."

"Could the Light have turned it into arelada?"

"It's easy enough to find out." Myri withdrew into herself again. Many minutes later, she reached out to David telepathically, explaining what she had learned and showing him images of the stone and the ground underneath it. *It's lacking a couple of minerals that arelada has, so it isn't arelada, but it is crystal. This stone goes deep. All of the stone underneath the surface of this Light community is crystal. That crystal expands into the rock beyond the Light in veins only.*

*That definitely is a change. An amazing change.*

*And dangerous. If this new crystal really is facilitating telepathic communication in this way, we should be careful about the people we tell.*

*Agreed. But people are going to figure this out sooner or later. There's a lot of exposed bedrock around the community. Geologists may already be studying this phenomenon.*

*I wish I knew more about geology. And terraforming. I'm hoping that when my Nation is gathered, I'll be able to find experts in those disciplines to advise me.*

\* \* \*

Despite the undecided state of her relationship with David, Myri persuaded him to be her escort at the dinner she was hosting for the ambassadors and several local dignitaries. She introduced David to Captain Fennyal easily enough. He examined David in the penetrating way he would a diplomat from an enemy nation and was anything but

shocked. Obviously someone had already told him about David, probably Lieutenant Laddan.

Ambassador Whitehall, on the other hand, regarded David with surprise. The only thing Myri could think about at that moment was David's concern that many among his own people might assume they were "lovers." Myri pressed Ambassador Whitehall's hand with hers and said, "Your Excellency, this is David Pierce, my . . ."

Myri couldn't call him her "betrothed," and she couldn't cough out the word "suitor" either. It was the perfect word to describe David to her people, but it didn't seem quite right for his. When her mind tried to find another word, it went blank. A very long second passed, and Myri felt a telepathic nudge from David, still amazed they could communicate telepathically without arelada. Relieved, she took the word he gave her and finished the introduction: "Boyfriend."

Ambassador Whitehall smiled her understanding and shook David's hand. "It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Pierce. Will you be relocating to Washington, D.C. with Saintess Myri?"

He smiled. "That's the plan."

Of course he had to act as if that really was the plan, and every time he said as much that evening, Myri felt a twinge of grief, knowing that if she didn't agree to his requests, he would disappear in a couple of weeks and she would never see him again.

When Myri was finally alone in her suite late that night, she pondered David's concerns. Could it be that God required her to prepare her people to return to Diron but wouldn't expect her to see it through? She knew that someone would lead her people there in the future and that Jahnzel was the logical choice. Perhaps this was his mission, or perhaps it was hers, or perhaps it was the mission of someone who hadn't even been born yet. The Blessed Princes hadn't told Myri to actually lead her people to Diron. They hadn't indicated who would fill that role. Myri didn't know yet whether she could agree to David's "dual citizenship," but she did doubt her previous opinions enough that she was willing to give the matter serious thought and prayer.

Dijauntu, however, was a different problem altogether. Myri had no doubt that if she ever had to stand before Arulezz again and hadn't done dijauntu with David, Arulezz would kill them both. David was correct on that point at least. His casualness about dijauntu, though, disturbed her. The law concerning dijauntu was so strict because misuse of the bond would be devastating both to the couple involved and to the Nation. No couple had the license to do it just because they agreed it would be a good or even necessary thing.

Strangely enough, Myri and David did have Imperial license to do dijauntu, which made it legal to a degree. The old Myri might have thought such permission was enough, but the new Myri needed to know God's true law concerning dijauntu before she could agree to such a bond with David, and the only person who was in a position to give her that information was President Mills.

Myri liked the idea of discussing her concerns with President Mills with David present, not just because they needed objective advice, but because they could have a long discussion in a relaxed, private setting. President Mills was available the next afternoon, and Myri was surprised to learn that David wanted the conversation as much as she did.



They spent over an hour detailing their concerns. David had a few he had not shared with Myri. “I’m afraid that if I go to Diron with Myri, I’ll become one of her people eternally and that our children will become Dirons and lose their Earth heritage.”

“Do you really believe that God’s kingdom in Heaven is partitioned so rigidly between mortal planets and peoples?”

“My sister married a Novaunian, and I don’t have any real fear that I won’t see her again, so no, I believe that God’s kingdom is mammoth and that those who dwell with Him are the freest beings in the universe. I just wish I knew how our planetary origins will specifically affect the time of our resurrection and our celestial inheritances; that’s all.”

“There is much about eternity that we don’t know yet, but I think it’s safe to assume that if the prophet gives you permission to be sealed, all will work out in the end.”

“I’m also afraid that when Myri’s people leave Earth, our family may be separated. Even if we go to Diron, some of our children may decide to remain here or vice versa.”

The threat of being separated from David was so strong that Myri hadn’t even considered that potential future separation, and it made her uncomfortable.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to avoid that possibility, no.”

“It seems a small concern compared to the possibility that we may be forced to raise our children in the empire, and yet I can’t get it out of my mind.”

“It isn’t a small concern. It’s one the two of you need to discuss and, in the end, accept. If you can’t accept it, then you shouldn’t get married.”

“If we change our identities, disappear, and Myri becomes one of us, then it will probably never be an issue.”

“Is that what you really want, David?” Myri asked in a low voice. “For me to become one of your people completely?”

“Yes, in a way, because I really do believe that if we leave now, we’ll never have to face the emperor. On the other hand, disappearing—whenever we do it—would require you to change so much that I really don’t know.”

Myri sighed. “No matter what we end up doing, our lives will never be completely right.”

“Everyone’s lives are a mish-mash right now. Maybe this is the Lord’s way of increasing our faith.”

President Mill’s observation surprised Myri a little, and not just because it reminded her of the counsel the Blessed Sons had given to her. “You don’t think David and I are that unusual, then?”

“Not in the fact that your lives are out of kilter and that you can’t see too far ahead. The thing that makes you unusual is your ability to get close to the emperor and the very real danger you face from him.”

“If we did disappear, would our ordinances be recorded in Church records under our real names or our false names?” David asked. “And if they’re recorded under our false names, would any record anywhere show our real names?”

“I suspect that your false names would be the ones that would show up in records available to the general public and that your real names would be recorded in documents that are only available to a select group of leaders and recorders. I’ll find out for sure and get back to you.”

Such a policy sounded relatively safe but not infallible, and Myri decided that David’s insistence on dijauntu wasn’t, perhaps, as unreasonable as she had believed. At

least that way they could remain who they were and would only have to trust the discretion of Jahnzel, Captain Sauvel, and David's closest family members, all people who had personal interest in keeping their secrets.

"There is a matter that is of even more importance than the records," Myri said. She went on to explain the problem that would arise if they ever saw the emperor again and her own concern that doing *dijauntu* with David, even under such necessary circumstances, would be breaking God's law.

"Consider this, Saintess Myri: If you really had done what the emperor commanded and joined minds with David, you would now know all of the sacred things he has experienced in the temple."

Myri hadn't thought of that, but obviously David had, because he was nodding thoughtfully. Of course David could reveal those matters to her easily enough without *dijauntu*, but that would be sin on his part, and for her to have taken the information from him by force through *dijauntu* would have been sin on her part. "Which means that, at the very least, we should be sealed in the temple before joining minds."

"At the very least. I don't know whether it would be moral even then, but I have no doubt that it would be immoral for the two of you to join minds without being sealed."

"That's why I only asked for your *agreement* to do *dijauntu*, Myri. I knew it would be wrong if we weren't sealed."

Excitement gripped Myri. Was this why the voice of the Light—the angel Zarr—had told her that Arulezz would kill her if she returned to Teton Colony without David as her "eternal" husband?

"This sounds like something that is only an issue because the two of you may have to face the emperor at some time in the future. If the two of you don't decide to marry, I think you would do well to forget that the act of mind joining even exists."

But it did exist, which meant God had commandments to deal with it, commandments the angels would know. Myri's first thought was that since they didn't have the *arelada* to engage in telepathy for anything but the rarest circumstance, it would never matter to the Light dwellers at all, but now that she and David had discovered that they could communicate telepathically, she didn't know. "You should know that there is something strange going on in the Light that we don't feel comfortable telling anyone else about yet. David and I were able to communicate telepathically yesterday without *arelada*."

"Tell me about it."

After Myri told President Mills about her experiences with David, she realized that the angel had subtly given her the true restriction on *dijauntu*—twice!—and for all of these weeks, Myri had refused to see it. "A sealing is what's required. That's the true condition for *dijauntu*. I've been blind *and* deaf! The angel told me this twice, and I didn't realize it until today!"

"What exactly did he say?" President Mills asked.

"If you leave the Light and return to your people without David Pierce as your *eternal husband*, Lezz Zarr will use the bond to kill you the way his father used the bonds to kill thousands of people whose only crime was to survive the invasion.' And: 'Tohmazz Zarr lied to your people about the cell bonds. They are more powerful than he led any of you to believe. He urged the natives to do many unscrupulous things through them, just as Lezz Zarr is urging you to be spiritually intimate with a man who is not your *eternal husband*.' I can't believe I didn't see this before now!"

David squeezed her hand. "Does that mean you're considering it?"  
Myri smiled at him. "I suppose it does."

\* \* \*

In his nightmares, Jahnzel continued to resist the temptation to assassinate Arulezz and Jesalya. Dream after dream, he found himself floating alone over his and Varia's coffins, listening to her parents discuss her "self-imposed humiliation." He called to her again and again, but she never appeared.

Eventually he began searching for her in the shadows, his dread growing. If he couldn't find her, what would happen? Would they both die after all? Just when he thought he had found her hiding place, she would run, and he would wake up, consumed with the feeling that something terrible would happen if he didn't find Varia Day.

Finally, in frustration, Jahnzel changed their first encounter. "Petty Officer Trinaav!" he cried. "Why hasn't this young civilian woman been evacuated to Teton Colony?"

"Technician Day refuses to leave, my Prince."

She refused to look at him as he approached her. "Relax, Technician Day, and look at me."

When her gaze finally met his, he asked, "Why do you keep hiding from me, Varia?"

She averted her eyes. "I can't face you, Consecrated One."

"It's Jahnzel to you, Varia. Always Jahnzel to you."

She cringed. "I can't call you that!"

"Of course you can, because I command it."

"But it wouldn't be proper!"

Jahnzel couldn't help himself; he laughed. "You're willing to contradict me but not address me by my given name? What kind of inconsistency is that?"

She blushed. "I'm sorry, Consecrated One. I was wrong to argue."

"I would rather you argue with me than keep up this 'Consecrated One' nonsense!"

"You are my liege lord," she whispered. "It isn't nonsense."

"You no longer live in the empire, so technically I'm not your liege lord."

"Then technically, we can't know each other at all." She turned and ran, and this time, Jahnzel didn't follow.

The next time Jahnzel relived his inspection of the Washington, D.C. Spaceport, Varia wasn't there. Determined to force her out of hiding again, when the time came for him to shoot Arulezz and Jesalya, he actually did it.

As he materialized above the coffins, he felt a rush of energy so strong it knocked him out of the Hall of Thrones and into the snowy sky above the Teton Range. Varia screamed at him, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Calling for you, as I do every time I have this dream."

She stood before him, her hands on her waist and her eyes flashing with fire. "How could you kill your brother just to talk to me?"

"I would kill my brother because he deserves to die, unlike you, who do not deserve to die but seem to be more willing to die than to talk to me! What's wrong with you, anyway?"

She threw her arms into the air. "I saved your life! What more do you want from me, Consecrated One?"

"You did *not* save my life! Our bodies are still lying in state in the Hall of Thrones. *Our* bodies."

"It's just a dream, Consecrated One."

"I thought you said it was a vision."

"I was wrong." She ran from him, and he chased her around the world until they ended up back in the Hall of Thrones and fell prostrate into their own coffins.

The next time Jahnzel dreamed, he shot Arulezz and Jesalya again, and Varia met him over the coffins, her shoulders sagging with exhaustion. "What do you want from me, Prince Jahnzel?"

She had almost addressed him in the familiar way he desired. He was making progress! "I want you to be my friend, not my bodyguard."

"Why?"

"You've lived these last harrowing months over and over with me, and you have to ask why?"

"I'm still asking: Why?"

"I'd like to know what kind of girl works so tirelessly to save my life. Is that too much to ask?"

Varia thought about his answer for many moments before saying, "Yes, it is. We might be able to be friends in our dreams, but in real life, there is too big of a gulf between us."

"But this isn't real life; it is a dream."

"What if it becomes real life?"

Jahnzel had never considered that possibility and had no idea what it would mean. "Do you think it will?"

"I just know that if it does, and we meet again, you will treat me in the cold and formal way dictated by protocol and I won't be able to bear it."

"If you really think that, then you're not being honest with me or with yourself. When we met in real life, I didn't treat you that way, and I didn't know you at all."

Varia frowned. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"It isn't my coldness you're afraid of, is it? It's that I might treat you with familiarity and warmth. Why would you be afraid of that?"

She looked away from him and shook her head in hopelessness. "I can't answer you." She turned and ran.

Jahnzel awoke, wondering what would happen if he really did meet Varia Day again in real life. How could he treat a girl he had only met once with any familiarity? Yet how could he see this girl who had fought with him, argued with him, run from him, and saved his life and act as if he didn't know her?

Then again, he only knew a dream version of Varia, not the real girl. Unless the dream girl somehow was the real Varia. Perhaps he was haunting her dreams the way she haunted his. That he could think such a thought at all surprised him. In the weeks he had been dreaming about her, the possibility that he was communicating with the real Varia Day had never occurred to him, so why was he asking the question now?

Jahnzel thought back over all of the dreams and came to the conclusion that he was asking the question because the dream-Varia was treating him as if *he* were real. She addressed him correctly, asked for permission to speak, and refused to accept friendship

from him because of the disparity between their ranks. If they knew each other in the real world, she would be right to maintain the proper distance. If she were a technician assigned to the *Empress*, he would be wrong to initiate friendship and insist she address him by his first name. To be friends with him in the way he wished would do nothing but cause her discomfort and maybe even compromise her.

Jahnzel knew it was true, and yet the possibility that he might have been speaking with the real Varia Day in his dreams captivated him—even excited him—and he became determined to learn the truth. He sifted through the personnel files of the *Comet* and saw images of Varia’s parents that matched those of the people in his dreams.

Since Jahnzel had never had any dealings with Varia’s parents when they had been alive and could not have known what they looked like, he regarded their images as proof that the dreams had come from a source outside of himself—the Light, probably. If that was the case, then perhaps the Varia of his dreams was the real girl. How would he know for sure?

If a friendship between Jahnzel and this orphan girl could not ethically exist, why was he having all of these visions about her and with her? Why were they trapped together in this strange limbo between life and death? Why was he the only one who had the power to save her, and she was the only one who seemed to have the power to save him, over and over again? Why this particular girl?

## CHAPTER 28: SMUG ASSUMPTIONS

When the Gudyneans left, Sara expected Admiral Sutuzav's ships to land on Eden again and force the colonists into their ships at gunpoint. Instead of landing, however, they hovered around the planet in readiness for further battle. That action led Sara to believe that the Gudyneans had only withdrawn, not abandoned the planet completely. Perhaps they were waiting for reinforcements.

The thought gave Sara such hope that she relaxed. She relaxed so much that she lost all sense of what was going on around her. She awoke to herself when Tempest cried out in anguish, *Where are you going? Don't leave me! You can't leave me!*

Disoriented, Sara replied, *I'm not going anywhere. How can I?*

*We had an agreement!*

Sara realized, then, that the ships in Admiral Sutuzav's fleet weren't just withdrawing; they were departing at high speed, leaving no telepathic messages to the planet-spirit in their wake.

They were running! They wouldn't land and make the colonists into Eslavu! The rightful owners of the planet had arrived to rescue the colonists! They would be free from Tempest forever!

*You will not be free from me forever. I will never let them land. They will never take you away.*

*I don't think you'll have a choice, Tempest.*

*There is always a choice, and I choose not to be governed by the Gudyneans.*

Sara felt telepathic energy well up inside of Tempest again. She threw asteroids and debris in what Sara assumed was the direction of the Gudyneans and caused storms as high in her atmosphere as she could manage. This went on for what seemed like days—or was it weeks?—grating on Sara's nerves.

From time to time Sara was able to slip back into nothingness, in what she could only deduce was sleep. Eventually Tempest's telepathic energy began to fade, and Sara knew that the arelada in the planet's depths was almost exhausted.

*The energy can't be gone—not yet! Not before they lose patience and leave!*

Sara felt a telepathic whirlpool descend once again and constrict Tempest, only this time, it was more like a hurricane. Understanding that the Gudynean fleet was finally beginning to bridle Tempest, Sara communicated, *Help! The planet-spirit has captured me and won't let me go!*

*No, I won't let her go! Not ever!*

*Planet-spirit, this is Macki Zrenden, terradirector of the Gudynean Federation. You will release your prisoner.*

*No I won't. You can have the rest of the colonists, but not this one. She's mine.*

*Prisoner, relax your mind and allow us to manipulate your spirit with our Awareness monitors. Please be patient. This is not a speedy process, but we will detach your spirit from that of the planet-spirit.*

*Thank you!* Sara did relax her mind. She felt heat around her spirit and a prickly sensation as that part of her spirit that was overlapped with Tempest's was slowly detached. She couldn't help but think of the sensation of a bandage being slowly pulled from the skin.

Tempest fought the detachment with all of her energy. When the last bit of bandage was finally being removed, Tempest seemed to shriek with agony. *You can't take her, you can't! Sara!*

Tempest's telepathic scream faded, and thoughts from the fleet came into Sara's mind again. *Prepare your people for immediate evacuation. Gather to the landing fields of your respective settlements. Do not bring any personal belongings. The ships have everything necessary to accommodate your needs.*

Sara wasn't sure she had ever felt such joy. *We will gather. Thank you.*

When Sara became aware of her body again, she realized that Cameron was holding her hand. Of course! Once Admiral Sutuzav's ships left the planet to fight the Gudyneans, Cameron, Cyndi, Ashley, and Trevor would have been released from their telepathic bond.

Sara opened her eyes and saw Cameron with all of the others who had been in the hospital before. "The Gudyneans are coming to take us off the planet," she said.

Cameron wrapped his arms around her. "You're all right! What happened?"

"It's a long story." Cameron helped her sit up. "Right now we need to gather immediately to the landing field." She looked around for Cameron's father and saw him moving toward her. His face was bruised from where Sister Vance had hit him. "You need to call Camp David and tell them to gather for evacuation." She looked at Cameron, then at Trevor, and then back to Cameron's father. "They're bridling Tempest as we speak, and there won't be much time. Tempest is full of rage and is fighting the bridle with all of her energy. We can't take anything."

Cameron's father and Trevor nodded. Trevor began making phone calls, and Cameron's father began urging the hospital staff out the door.

"What day is it?"

"Thursday," Cyndi replied as she removed Sara's I.V. "You've been in a coma for ten days."

"Then it was many days. I wasn't sure." Sara suddenly realized how hungry she was.

"What happened out there?" Cameron asked. "All we know is that there was a fight. There's wreckage from spaceships all over the colony."

Cameron and Cyndi helped Sara into a wheelchair, and Ashley handed her a cup of orange juice. As they moved her out of the hospital into the mid-day heat and then into the aircar, Sara told the others what she knew about the space fight.

As the aircar glided over the trees, Sara saw a Gudynean shuttle, in the shape of a graceful white bird, approach the airfield. The colonists moved en masse toward the air field from their various locations around the colony, and Sara hoped Cameron's father and Trevor were somehow accounting for everyone so that no one would be missed. As soon as she had the thought, she said, "Please tell me that Brother Vance is alive."

"Do you know what happened to him?" Cyndi asked in a low voice.

Sara felt tears come into her eyes. "Sistrel tried to take over his mind and make him into a robot-person. I'm sure he had the help of the tube-sleepers, and Brother Vance resisted. I watched him fight. And I saw his torment. Please tell me he's still alive."

"I'm sorry, Sara," Cameron said with a sigh.

Ashley's voice trembled. "Apparently Marc and the others found him outside of the hospital. He had a heart attack."

Sara's aircar landed in the clearing at the same time the Gudynean shuttle did. Cameron and Cyndi helped Sara out of the aircar and back into the wheelchair, and they

moved toward the shuttle with everyone else. Cameron's father, Trevor, and Sister Eagle were already there, organizing the colonists and keeping them out of the way of the shuttle.

A team of white-uniformed men with arelada on their foreheads that glistened in the sun on white bands disembarked from the shuttle with some sort of hovering chair. Sara, with Cameron, joined his father and Trevor at the front of the crowd to meet the Gudyneans. As the Gudyneans drew closer, she saw that the arelada on their foreheads had been cut into the likeness of a smooth white bird—all but one, who wore a faceted bird. The man with the faceted stone spoke—in English! “I am Lieutenant Haunz of Novaunian Fleet—”

“Novaunian Fleet!” Sara exclaimed. Then she understood. This man who spoke English was a librarian like her father. She wondered if her father had been the one who had given the English language somehow to Novaunian Fleet.

Lieutenant Haunz smiled at Sara. “Am I correct in assuming that you are the daughter of Lieutenant Trendaul Avenaunta of Novaunian Fleet?”

“Yes! Have you been in contact with my father?”

“Not personally, but he informed Novaun that you were among the colonists, and our government informed the Gudynean Federation, the nation that governs this region of space. Because of your presence in the colony, we came to assist the Gudyneans in driving away Admiral Sutuzav's fleet and to provide telepathic support for the planetary bridle.”

“So that's why they ran.” Sara looked away from Lieutenant Haunz when she saw other ships—ships that looked more like jets than large white birds—come into view. Recognizing the shape and the symbol, she knew at once that these were the ships that actually belonged to the Gudyneans.

“We assumed that you were the woman who was held prisoner by the planet-spirit and that you would need medical aid after such an ordeal. I have been ordered to administer to your needs and take you to my ship, the *Larv Ylendoshal*.” Haunz motioned to the hovering chair. “Do you require assistance?”

Sara looked at him again, hesitating. “I'm not sure I understand.”

Cameron squeezed her shoulder. “I think I do. Lieutenant Haunz has come for you—only you. The rest of us are supposed to go with the Gudyneans.” Sara wasn't sure, but she thought she heard a tinge of hysteria in his voice.

What in the galaxy did it mean? Did these people want to take her back to Novaun for good? To separate her from Cameron and the others? Sara gripped Cameron's hand. “But I can't go! I can't leave my husband!”

Lieutenant Haunz regarded Cameron in surprise. “You are her husband?”

Cameron nodded.

“Are you a Novaunian also?”

“No.”

Lieutenant Haunz looked from Cameron to Sara. “I am sorry, but my orders are to take you, and only you. Allow me to communicate with my superior.” He stepped away from Sara and Cameron, and his associates waited in silence.

“Cameron, how could something like this happen?”

“Nothing has happened yet.”

“I can't leave you to go to Novaun!”



Before Cameron could respond, Lieutenant Haunz approached them again and said, "I am truly sorry, Mineste, but you must come with us, and he must go with the Gudyneans. This is a legal matter involving rights and jurisdictions. To receive all of the legal protection that is your right as a Novaunian citizen, you must come with us. The *Larv Ylendoshal* will travel with the Gudynean Navy for some time yet, so you should be able to see your husband again soon."

"Legal protection?" Sara gasped. "Are we in trouble?" As soon as she said it, she wished she could take it back. She glanced from side to side, assuring herself that no one but those standing right around her had heard her.

Lieutenant Haunz gazed at them with compassion. "I am sorry. This is a terrible way to learn something so serious. This planet is under galactic quarantine."

"Galactic quarantine?" Cameron's father said, stunned. "What does that mean?"

For the first time, Lieutenant Haunz addressed Cameron's father: "It was illegal for any of you to come into this system at all. To settle here was an even more weighty crime."

What had never occurred to Sara or the others seemed obvious now. The colonists, with their very presence, had invited the enemies of Gudynea and Novaun into this dangerous area of space, and the alliance between those enemies and Tempest had resulted in the loss of many Gudynean lives. Sara thought about the thousands of lives that had been lost since they had arrived on Eden and the twenty that had been made into Eslavu. As all crimes, theirs had not been without victims.

"What will happen to us?" Trevor asked, sounding dazed.

"I cannot enlighten you on that point. I am no expert in Gudynean protocol for dealing with criminal aliens. Right now, you will board the Gudynean shuttles and be taken to their fleet."

Sara addressed Lieutenant Haunz, her voice quavering. "I should go with them, not you!"

"I am afraid that is impossible." Sternness had replaced compassion in Lieutenant Haunz's voice. He was losing patience, and Sara was suddenly afraid he might force her into his ship at gunpoint.

Cameron stepped in front of the wheelchair and knelt down in front of Sara. "Remember that conversation we had after the crash? The one where you said that if you've learned anything by coming here, it's that the people of Earth know very little about the way the universe really works? That we'd be a lot better off if we stopped making all of these smug assumptions?"

Sara's whole soul wanted to scream. "How could I forget?"

"I think those 'smug assumptions' are smacking us in the face right now."

"But leave you, Cameron? I can't do it!"

"I don't think you understand." Cameron's face was flushed and his eyes were wild. "You're the only one here who has any kind of legal status at all in the eyes of these people. It's your presence here that has saved our lives yet again! The Novaunians may not have come at all had you not been here, and then what would have happened to us? Sutuzav might have accomplished his goal of making us into robot-people and driving the Gudyneans away. Don't you see? You might be able to help us. You have to go."

Sara hated what he said, but finally, she understood. He was right. If she didn't advocate for the colonists, no one would. She had to go. She threw her arms around him

and clung for many minutes. Then they kissed, and he helped her into the hovering chair.

## CHAPTER 29: UPSIDE DOWN

After many days of thought, prayer, and talk, Myri still didn't feel good about disappearing quite yet, but she was ready to agree to dual citizenship. Whatever her personal feelings or David's, she couldn't agree to dijauntu until she met with President Mills again and found out what the prophet had to say about the matter. President Mills contacted Myri one afternoon about a week after her discussion with him, requesting a meeting with her and her advisors.

Myri met President Mills in the foyer of the church building with Captain Fennyal and Lieutenant Laddan and their entourage. President Mills greeted Myri and her advisors and said, "I would like to meet with your people personally after we talk. Could you have them gather to the Relief Society room while we discuss the matter privately?"

Myri agreed and sent one of her bodyguards to gather her people to the church building. President Mills invited her and her advisors into his office. Once the door was shut behind them, he smiled and touched a stack of papers on his desk. "The prophet's secretary dictated this letter to me this morning via radio. Your people finally have permission to be baptized!"

"That is fantastic!" Myri said. "Can it be done before we leave?"

"I don't see why not. You can work that out with your bishop. Your people will be allowed to be baptized and ordained to the Aaronic priesthood. They will also be permitted to do baptisms in the temple for their deceased ancestors. They won't, however, be permitted to be ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood or to do the higher ordinances in the temple. That will have to wait until you return to Diron."

"The Church is going to force us to become domies?" Lieutenant Laddan said, sounding dazed.

"Not exactly," President Mills replied. "In the letter, the prophet equates your people to the house of Israel and gives assurance that you have great blessings held in reserve for you by virtue of the covenants made with the Lord by your ancestors." He gazed in a meaningful way at Myri. "But there is an exception to this policy. When one spouse is a native, the couple may be sealed after receiving approval from the First Presidency. If the groom is of your people, then he will, of course, be ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood before he is endowed. This will allow those among your people who don't go to Diron to have their temple blessings in due time."

Which meant that Myri really could marry David in the temple! She almost didn't believe it!

Captain Fennyal appeared thoughtful. "That means that any of us can remain on Earth if we wish. To do so presumes that either we or our descendants would, in the end, become natives, not maintain our status as a Nation."

"Or we could presumably remain as a Nation in Washington, D.C. and just not have our blessings," Lieutenant Laddan said. Was Myri imagining things, or did she detect bitterness in his voice? Did he really have that much of an aversion to going to Diron? Then again, how could he not? Myri, herself, less than two months before, had considered the possibility mortifying.

"Of course, neither the Church nor anyone else can force you to return to Diron or to remain and marry natives," President Mills said carefully. "This is simply a statement of the Church's policy regarding your people at this point in time, and what I've told you is only part of it." He shuffled through the sheets of paper on his desk and handed several

to Myri. "This is a proclamation on the use of telepathy, addressed to the emperor himself and to all of the inhabitants of Earth, both native and Zarrist."

"Addressed to the emperor?" Captain Fennyal exclaimed. "How in the galaxy does the prophet expect to deliver it to him?"

Stunned, Myri grabbed the papers out of President Mills' hand and began reading as he explained what was there. "Basically, it says that God forbids the use of mind altering techniques on any person, even those convicted of heinous crimes, and that He also forbids any person, regardless of rank, to communicate telepathically with another person without that person's knowledge and/or consent. To minimize abuses of telepathy, its use should not be restricted to a select group of nobles, but should be mastered by Zarrists and natives from all stations of life. In this pursuit of telepathic skill, care needs to be taken to avoid contact that is too intimate. The simple sending and receiving of telepathic signals, combined with spirit touching, is the appropriate way to communicate most of the time. Spirit overlapping should be reserved for those people with whom we have close family and friendship ties. Spirit and mind joining is forbidden by God except between a man and woman who have been legally and lawfully sealed as husband and wife in one of the temples administered by the Church. Even with that license, they urge caution until we become more accustomed to the use of telepathy in general."

Myri's astonishment deepened as she read in more detail the new policy President Mills had merely outlined. She groped for a chair. "Do you require assistance, my Saintess?" asked Captain Fennyal.

"No, thank you."

Lieutenant Laddan burst out, "The lower ranks and *savages* will be allowed to do the mind-joining, but our nobles *won't*?"

Myri cringed at Laddan's harsh language. "Your use of the word 'savage' was uncalled for in this context, Lieutenant Laddan. Please apologize to President Mills."

President Mills said gently, "I understand your concern, Saintess Myri, but I also sympathize with Lieutenant Laddan's strong feelings about the matter and took no offense."

Laddan flushed and bowed to President Mills. "You are very generous, sir. Thank you. And I am sorry."

Myri continued to read the proclamation. By the time she came to the end of it, she was shaking so badly that she could hardly decipher the words on the paper. Of course the ability to do telepathy without arelada was somehow coming from the Light. There would be no need for this new policy in the Light if the ability to actually do telepathy on a large scale wasn't possible. She looked up at Lieutenant Laddan, feeling more empathy for him than she wanted to admit to anyone, least of all herself. She whispered, "The universe we've always known has been turned upside down once again."

Myri felt President Mills' hand on her arm. "What disturbs you so much, Saintess Myri?"

She handed the papers to Captain Fennyal. "That I, a noblewoman, will now be expected to communicate telepathically with laborers and natives. That had I, a noblewoman, married Prince Jahnzel as planned two and a half weeks ago, I would have entered into a sinful dijauntu relationship." She shook her head. "I'll confess that both situations are so bizarre that I can scarcely comprehend them."

Lieutenant Laddan began pacing near the door. "They're inconceivable."

Captain Fennyal also appeared shocked. “Our races always seemed to be going down such completely different paths that I didn’t expect the prophet to give a policy that would apply to all of us at the same time.”

“Your people don’t belong here, but they are here, so any policy the Church makes now has to account for that fact,” President Mills said.

“The Church has, in essence, destroyed the Nobility.” Myri felt more disturbed about the matter than she thought she should.

“And the Aristocracy falls with it,” Lieutenant Laddan said.

“I’m not sure this will cause the cultural rift it could quite yet,” Captain Fennyal said. “Just because something changes officially doesn’t mean hearts and habits automatically change with it.”

“But I thought that your class system is based as much—or even more—on lineage than on use of telepathy,” President Mills said. “Am I wrong?”

“Lineage is what defines a noble or an aristocrat, certainly,” Myri said, “but the way we use telepathy is what actually separates the ranks. This proclamation will redefine our Nation in a way natives will never be able to completely understand.”

After Myri and her advisors asked all of the questions they had and gained some measure of composure, they moved into the Relief Society room and took their places at the front of the group. President Mills asked Captain Fennyal to say a prayer, and then he read the new policy to the group and answered their questions. Most were overjoyed. Some were baffled. More than a few were dismayed.

When the meeting was over, President Mills traveled with Myri to Stonefield to visit the Pierce family, while Captain Fennyal and Lieutenant Laddan remained to moderate the anticipated discussion about the new policy.

Myri tried to exchange pleasantries with President Mills while they traveled, but her mind was too disturbed. He seemed to understand and didn’t push her to communicate. When they arrived, Myri remained aloof from David as they walked with President Mills into the front sunroom to communicate privately. Myri felt David’s concerned gaze on her but couldn’t return it.

After David had invited both Myri and President Mills to sit down, President Mills said, turning to Myri, “Would you like to give him the good news or should I?”

“You do, please. I’m still trying to digest it all.”

President Mills nodded and told David about the new policies regarding Myri’s people and the use of telepathy. When he was done, David leaned toward Myri and said, “It’s exactly what you came to believe, based on what the angel told you. Eternal marriage is the true condition for dijauntu, and allowing it between nobles, and only nobles—with no other restrictions—actually encourages corruption rather than minimizes it.”

Of all the things to bring up now! “I can’t believe that Jahnzel would have corrupted me though dijauntu or vice versa!”

“I didn’t mean to suggest such a possibility. Please don’t be angry.”

“What did you mean, then?”

“I was thinking of your sister and her husband. Didn’t the angel tell you that they had corrupted each other through dijauntu?”

“Yes, he did.” Why did the truth sometimes have to be so terrible?

“The good thing is that after you are sealed, it will be completely moral and right to do dijauntu,” said President Mills. “If you do end up facing the emperor, you can do so with confidence.”

“We’re fortunate dijauntu wasn’t banned altogether,” David said. “Then we would have no choice but to disappear.”

It seemed that David, not Jahnzel, had been Myri’s true potential bondmate after all. How strange life was! “No, you’re right. This is the best you and I could have hoped for.” And yet she still couldn’t fathom the idea of dijauntu with David. Was it because telepathy had only just become part of her relationship with him? Or was it that she really did believe, deep down, that he was inferior to her? Or was there another reason that eluded her?

David sat back in his chair again. “I have to wonder whether this exception to policy will actually make your people more willing to marry natives and mean that the group that goes to Diron will actually be smaller than it would have been otherwise.”

“That’s an interesting observation,” Myri said. “What it tells me is that the group that returns to Diron won’t include everyone, and that actually comforts me. I’ve been very concerned about my people who live in faraway places. The way this stands now, they won’t feel forced to gather to Washington if they don’t want to do so or if they feel it would be unsafe.”

They talked for a little longer, and President Mills stood up. “I would like to speak with your parents, David. Are they here?”

David also arose. “Yes. I’ll take you to them.” He touched Myri’s shoulder. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

\* \* \*

Once Betty and Gene sat down with President Mills in the family room in the basement, he gazed at them in appreciation and, perhaps, a bit of hesitation. “It’s been a very strange day, and I’m afraid that what I have to say to you will make your day even stranger.”

Betty held her breath; Gene frowned, waiting. Betty imagined that he would have liked to have said, “That’s okay; we’re getting used to strange. Just spit it out.” But Gene had too much respect to ever speak that way to someone in President Mills’ position.

President Mills told them about the new policies regarding Saintess Myri’s people. Then he said, “The Church has decided to organize a ward in Washington, D.C. for the Zarrists who will gather there under the governorship of Saintess Myri, and President Morley feels very strongly that the Lord wants you, Gene, to be the bishop of that ward.”

Betty gasped. “You can’t be serious!” And yet she knew that he *was* serious. She felt the sweet peace of the Spirit blossoming in her heart, testifying to her that the call came from the Lord, and she tried to ignore it. She couldn’t face this.

“I am perfectly serious. These Zarrists are zealous in their love of the Lord and ready to be baptized—there is no doubt about that—but they don’t have the experience in the Church that both of you do. The Lord sees that you know and love these people and that you are more than capable of providing the solid leadership and nurturing they need while they prepare to return to their home world.”

“I don’t understand,” Gene said in a low voice. “Wouldn’t the Church normally call someone who already lives in Washington, D.C.?”

"I understand your confusion. You're right—this is not the usual way a calling like this is made. All I can tell you is that President Morley is certain—and passionate—about the matter. If you accept the call, you will choose your counselors from among men who now live in Washington, and you won't be sustained or ordained until you get there."

"How long would the calling last?"

"President Morley doesn't know. For many years, certainly. Perhaps for as long as the Zarrists remain on Earth."

Betty wasn't sure which was worse—the thought that she would have to leave the city that had been her home since birth and go to that crazy place where she had never wanted to stay very long, the reality that she would lose her husband to the calling of bishop to aliens who had been The Enemy only a couple of short months ago, or the recognition that her family really was in as much danger as Prince Jahnzel believed and that they needed to go to Washington, D.C. to be safe.

Gene turned to Betty and gazed at her in that way he had. He knew the call came from the Lord, and he knew that she knew the same, and he knew as well as she did that accepting this assignment would allow them to relocate to Washington, D.C. without the emperor immediately suspecting that David and Myri would try to disappear. The call was right, and they both knew it was right, but he wouldn't accept it unless she agreed.

"I know this is a difficult request," President Mills said with compassion, standing up. "Please take some time to think and pray about it. I'll come back tomorrow for your answer."

Betty couldn't stand the thought of being in limbo, even for a day, and decided right then and there that she was done fighting David's relationship with Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro. She mentally thanked God for this chance of escape and, perhaps, to do some good among these virtuous aliens. She felt the peace of the Spirit and stood up, wiping a tear from her cheek with trembling fingers. "We don't need time to think about it. We already know what the answer will be."

Gene nodded, his expression solemn but relaxed, as if a burden had been lifted. "We accept."

\* \* \*

David returned to the sunroom and sat down on the couch next to Myri. She recognized that she could have a few minutes with David alone and decided to use them to her advantage. She smiled up at David and took his hands. "I have a new proposal to make to you."

"A *new* proposal? That sounds interesting."

"I see that we've made some progress in working out our differences this past week, which gives me hope that we can work out the other differences with sufficient time, but I've come to understand that we haven't had sufficient time yet to do so."

"You don't think we're ready to get married."

"No. I think you and I agree on that fact."

David smiled mischievously. "So what is this new proposal? Are you going to ask me to be your live-in boyfriend?"

His comment was so absurd that Myri couldn't help herself—she burst out laughing. "No," she said after a few moments, shaking her head. "What I would like to do is become formally betrothed with a secret escape clause."

His eyebrows shot up, and he regarded her as if *she* had said something absurd. “A secret escape clause? For *both* of us?”

“If you would like to think of it that way, then yes. Given what you know of my former betrothal to Jahnzel, it should not surprise you that my people consider a formal betrothal almost as great a commitment as the marriage itself.”

David’s surprised expression relaxed into one of thoughtfulness. “So you think that having the formal arrangement would give us some freedom that an informal betrothal would not?”

“Yes. Absolutely. At the very least, you would have a measure of authority among my people. It may also give you more negotiating power among yours.”

“Perhaps.”

“In public, we would be formally betrothed. In private, however, we would continue to work out our differences. We would purchase a boat, and, if at any time we decide it would be better if we don’t marry, you would be free to leave.”

“What would you do?”

“Once we get to Washington and see the situation there, I will devise an escape plan for myself alone. I won’t tell anyone—including you—what it is or who it would involve.”

David nodded. “Understandable.”

“If you do go to Washington with me, you and I would keep the boat in reserve in case we decide it’s time to leave together. At that point, we would be married by our bishop secretly and go, also secretly.”

“And be sealed in a temple in a Light community somewhere else in the world.”

Myri nodded.

David gazed at her for many moments, as if pondering. Finally he said, “I won’t agree until you tell me what reason you have for needing a ‘secret escape clause.’”

Myri had hoped he wouldn’t ask, because she wasn’t sure this wouldn’t destroy her chance with David for good. “There are some questions that are better left unanswered.”

David shook his head, the light in his eyes becoming more demanding, not less. “In some cases that may be true, but in this case, I need to know.”

Myri averted her eyes. “Technically, I can agree to do dijauntu with you after we’re sealed, but I can’t imagine actually doing it.”

“Do you have any idea why?”

The gentleness of his voice gave her courage to look at him again. “I don’t know why. I just can’t. All I can tell you is that, even though I love you almost more than I can express, I can’t imagine having that kind of relationship with you.”

“But you can imagine such a relationship with Prince Jahnzel.”

Discussing this issue was almost more than she could bear. “Yes.” She sprang up and turned her back to him. She held her breath, wondering how he would react.

Many moments later, Myri felt David’s hands on her shoulders. “It’s all right. You didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know.”

She turned to face him. “How could you already know something like that?”

“My mother saw it that day Prince Jahnzel was here and expressed her concern when I asked her about it. From my point of view it doesn’t change anything between us.”

Tears came into Myri’s eyes. “How can it not? I may still love Jahnzel!” There. She had finally admitted it both to herself and to David.



“My own opinion is that you can’t imagine joining minds with me because I’m a ‘savage,’ not because you love Prince Jahnzel. But neither one of us will know that for sure, will we, unless we go to D.C. together and explore the matter.”

“You’re really willing to do that?” David nodded, but he didn’t smile, and that worried Myri. “Even though it would be safer for you to sail away from one of the ports we will visit?”

David finally smiled and drew her into his arms. He whispered into her ear, “I think in this matter it’s in my best interest to compromise.”

\* \* \*

Myri was baptized the next day with the rest of her people who remained in the Light. Several had been as offended by the new policy as Lieutenant Laddan—including her bodyguard Shipman Neemon—and had left the Light with him. Everyone who remained rejoiced that they could be baptized and, at the same time, mourned the loss of those who left, yet they understood. No one comprehended better than Myri why they were troubled, and no one regretted their disappearance more, for both Laddan and Neemon had been her personal associates. She knew that Arulezz would interview them and probe deeply into her life in the Light.

Learning that Gene would also be her new bishop pleased her, but she couldn’t help but have a bittersweet feeling when it came to the Pierce family. Within a twenty-four-hour period, David’s parents and his brothers and their families had made the decision to travel to Washington, D.C. with Myri’s people and had made preparations to leave. Because of lack of space, they were required to leave all but a few of their most precious possessions behind. They left a place where their family had lived for generations, knowing that they might be relocating to Washington for the rest of their mortal lives. Myri’s decision to come into the Light had turned their lives upside down, and she wasn’t sure she would ever be able to forgive herself for causing them such upheaval.

The group left Liberty that evening under cover of darkness and traveled to Miami. They knew they couldn’t conceal themselves completely, but they decided that they would rather be as inconspicuous as possible to those on the ground who might be watching. From Miami they traveled to Mexico City, then to Houston, and then to Dallas. They met no opposition along the way, but Myri dreaded traveling to Denver and Salt Lake City, which were located too close to Teton Colony for her comfort. Fortunately none of her people had taken refuge in temple communities located any closer to Teton Colony than those two communities.

They landed in Salt Lake City, picked up two, and headed in the direction of Las Vegas without any indication of trouble. With every western city they visited without incident, Myri’s relief grew. She almost invited David to travel with her in the aircar when leaving Seattle, but she decided it was still better to travel separately while there was any risk at all that Arulezz might try to contact her or force her to land. By the time they lifted off from Chicago, they had collected thirty-eight citizens of Myri’s nation and had avoided confrontation and contact with anyone outside of their group and the inhabitants of the Light cities they visited.

As Myri traveled further and further away from Teton Colony and Tryamaz Camp, her anxiety dissipated. Apparently her escort really had been large and powerful enough to keep their enemies at bay. Why in the galaxy had she been so worried?

Prior to descending into Toronto, Myri reached into her handbag and removed the compact mirror she carried. When she opened it to check her appearance, she saw a note attached to one of the mirrors that read, "When you're in the air, contact me."

She slammed the compact shut, her heart rate spiking. She dropped the compact back into her handbag and clutched her hands together to keep them from shaking. Obviously when Myri had been conducting business in Chicago, someone had entered the aircar and had exchanged the compact she normally used for the one that was in her handbag now. Myri didn't doubt that Arelada had been put into the compact behind the mirrors and that the case of the compact acted as a safebox. She didn't have to think deeply about the matter to discern that Shipman Neemon had probably been the person who had made the exchange. She felt sick to realize that Jahnzel, Captain Sauvel, and David had been right about her danger after all.

Myri understood that the compact had been designed for complete secrecy and that she didn't have to tell anyone about this critical new development. For a flicker of a moment, she considered keeping it from David. In the end, however, Myri couldn't do it. When she had a few minutes alone with him after landing, she whispered the terrible news into his ear.

He stared at her with wide eyes full of alarm. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"I'm going to have to contact him," she whispered. "What choice do I have?"

David shook his head. "I don't know, but I don't like this at all."

"We still have to go to Boston and New York City. You can still get away."

"And leave you to deal with this alone?"

"He won't know you aren't with me for a long, long time. I won't be in any danger for a while."

"How do you know? Someone—probably Neemon—got into the aircar secretly. He got close enough to see what we did in Chicago. How do we know he won't spy on you in D.C.? How do we know Laddan isn't here in Toronto watching us?"

Myri felt panic rise within her again. "I guess we don't know." David didn't say it, but she knew that he was as dismayed as she was by the fact that even her bodyguards couldn't be trusted. Without David and his family, she really would be alone.

David kissed her cheek. "I have no intention of leaving you. Please don't worry about that."

Myri nodded and gazed up at him. "Thank you."

\* \* \*

Myri wanted to put off contacting Arulezz as long as possible, or at least as long as it would take to completely regain her self-possession, but she knew that any delay would make him suspicious. For that reason, she said a quick prayer and reached out with her thoughts to Arulezz as soon as they were away from Toronto.

*Greetings, Lezz. It appears that when I lost another bodyguard, you gained a courier!*

*A disillusioned courier. He was certain your defection to the Light was complete.*

His tone of thought was light, but Myri perceived question in it. *Our people here would not trust or follow me if I didn't make them believe otherwise. Lieutenant Laddan, however, is more discerning than the others. I don't think he ever completely trusted me.*

*Odd that he would completely trust the Light for so long and not you.*

*The Light is very powerful. Please don't be severe with those who returned to you. Not only have they given you valuable information, they have served me well.*

*I'll take that into consideration as I decide their fates. I do want the names of all the people you gathered on your trip around the continent.*

*Of course he did! Myri suppressed her spasm of horror as well as she could and replied, I didn't get the names of all who came with us.*

*That's all right. Give me what you have, and you can give me more the next time we communicate.*

*Myri gave him the names of those who were alone, not having families who lived in the empire, and communicated, I will only be in the air two more short times before I go under cover again. I won't have time to get the names of everyone before I land in Washington.*

*You won't be in Washington for long. Take the aircar to gather the rest of our people around the world. I'll alert the government leaders to let you travel unmolested.*

*But how could I ever explain that to the government leaders in the Light?*

*Why should you have to? They think they have sufficient force at this time to travel unmolested. Why shouldn't they think they have sufficient force to collect our people from around the world? Simply go with them when they do and allow them to "protect" you as they did on your tour of this continent.*

*I'm relieved to learn that you think gathering our people to Washington, D.C. is a good thing. I wasn't certain about that.*

*Of course it's a good thing. I want to know the name of every one of our citizens who defected to the Light. I also want them all in one place so that I can reckon with them later if I have to.*

*I understand. I'll get the information you need.*

*Do the people in the Light have the ability yet to intercept telepathic transmissions?*

*I don't think so.*

*Then as you travel around the world to gather our people, I'll expect you to also give me the information that David gleans from his contacts in Washington, D.C.*

*Given the fact that he will soon be publicly betrothed to a Zarrist noblewoman, I'm not sure they will ever trust him enough to give him the kind of intelligence you're looking for.*

*If you could get David's family and the leaders of his church in Kansas City to trust you, you can do the same in Washington. I want to communicate with David.*

*That isn't possible. He isn't with me.*

*Why not?*

*He's traveling with his parents. Lieutenant Laddan and the others left before learning that David's father has been assigned to be the bishop, or leader, of the congregation of our people in Washington.*

*How strange!*

*No, not really. Given Eugene Pierce's experience with me, my bodyguards and chaperone, and, for many years, David's Novaunian brother-in-law, it actually makes a good deal of sense. Since no one knows how long this assignment will last and travel is so difficult for them, David's brothers want to live in the same Light city.*

*Then they accept your relationship with David.*

*They all think I'm his perfect Mormon—albeit alien—girl.*

*You make me laugh, Myri! Well done! When do you plan to marry?*

*That's uncertain. We have to remain in the Light for at least a year, long enough to be sealed. David wants to be married soon and then be sealed later, but I can't imagine actually being married that quickly. I don't think our people would easily accept such a wedding that soon. Then again, as time passes, the situation might change.*

*On your flight into Washington, make sure he's with you.*

Myri returned to herself, feeling as if she would vomit. She could only hope that communicating via transmissions instead of spirit touching would enable David to withstand an interrogation that could reveal he was not her bondmate. She was just as horrified by the fact that she and David would now be forced to give Arulezz sensitive information he would never get otherwise. How was it that, despite everything, she and David had landed in the exact position Arulezz had designed for them?

\* \* \*

When Myri explained Arulezz's demands to David in Boston, he was furious. *There is no way you're going to give him anything of value from me while we live in D.C.*

*I don't know how I can avoid it if I want to maintain his trust and save our lives!*

*Leave that to me. I'm actually looking forward to communicating with him now.*

*You're insane.*

*No, actually I'm feeling empowered. The one fact we keep ignoring about dijauntu is that if we really had done it, my power over you would be as great as your power over me. Not only that, but Prince Jahnzal may still be monitoring your transmissions, and the emperor knows it, which will make him cautious. We can get through this without getting ourselves killed quite yet.*

*I hope so!*

*Trust me.*

David did agree to ride with Myri in the aircar out of New York City, and she initiated contact with the emperor shortly before they descended into the Washington, D.C. Light. David felt the emperor's words in his mind: *I've been looking forward to the honor of meeting you for some time.*

*I would be a traitor to my people if I said the same.*

*I understand that I've demanded a great deal from you.*

*You stole my life!*

*No, I gave you an extraordinary woman in exchange for a new, better life.*

*You forced me into slavery.*

*I intend to make you a saint.*

*I'm already a saint—a Latter-day Saint—and an elder in the Holy Priesthood of God. Your title means nothing to me.*

*It means everything to Myri.*

*I'll do many things for Myri, but spitting in the face of God by rejecting His honors for yours is not one of them.*

*You'll change your mind in due time.*

*You seem to be under the delusion that I will, at some point in time, work for you. You might as well give up that dream now. The only way Myri and I will leave the Light is if you send an army large enough to take us by force.*

David closed his mind to a possible response. He squeezed Myri's hand and whispered, "We're safe. For now."

## EPILOGUE: CHOSEN ONE

When Jahnzel saw Varia standing in line with the warriors ready to die, watching him with a pale face and haunted eyes so different from the distant stare she had worn when he had met her in real life, he realized that she had finally given up fighting him. He strode toward her, ignoring Petty Officer Trinaav and everyone else in the control center. As he drew closer, he could feel her spirit tremble.

Something about her felt so terrified and so genuine that Jahnzel couldn't stop himself from saying, "Thank you for being here, Varia. You have no idea how much I want you to be real. How much I *need* you to be real."

"I know . . . Jahnzel." The corners of her mouth twitched as she whispered, and her breathing was so shallow that Jahnzel was afraid she might faint.

Jahnzel's instinct was to embrace her, he was so relieved, but he was afraid she might run from him again and so resisted the temptation. "How long have you known that you were communicating with the real Jahnzel and not just a dream-phantom?"

"I didn't *know* until Saintess Myri Zarr-Vahro arrived in Washington, D.C. with her new betrothed." Varia's lips quivered and her eyes began to glisten. "I am so sorry."

Jahnzel was taken aback by the depth at which Varia seemed to feel his pain. Her reaction intrigued him enough that he could set aside thoughts of Myri for the time being and pursue the matter at hand. "Is that why you stopped running from me?"

Varia nodded. She still appeared tense and terrified.

"I'm sorry I've been making you uncomfortable by pushing you to be friends with me. It didn't occur to me that you were real until just recently."

"Please don't be sorry. It's right for us to be friends, obviously, or we wouldn't be having these dreams together at all."

"I still scare you, though. Why?"

"*You* don't scare me, except when you try to kill yourself. It's your *position* that scares me." Admitting this much seemed to relax her a little.

"Are you afraid I'll arrest you or something?"

"I'm afraid that you'll raise me and that I won't be able to live up to the new demands."

This was a fear so foreign to Jahnzel that he almost didn't believe it, and yet it made sense. She was right to be concerned, and he had no idea how to comfort her on that point. He decided, therefore, to redirect the conversation. "Do you think it's the Light that's giving us these dreams?"

"I don't know. I don't understand how the Light works well enough."

She sounded so confident that she actually had *some* understanding about how the Light worked that Jahnzel had to ask, "What do you think the Light is?"

"A magnification of the planet-spirit somehow."

"Why do you think that?"

"I could feel the essence of the planet-spirit before I even came into the Light."

"That's odd. No one we've interviewed has made the same observation. Do you know anyone else among our people who sensed the same thing when entering the Light?"

"No, but no one I've talked to was on the Divine One's planetary repair team the way I was. Our people in general don't have much experience with planet-spirits, and the savages know nothing about them."

"That much is true. Do you think the visions people are having in the Light are coming from the planet-spirit's memories?" Jahnzel knew enough about planet-spirits to understand that a habitable planet didn't allow humans access to its memories or show what was occurring on its face, but the Light had shown him a vision of Varia praying, just the sort of thing that a planet-spirit would have observed.

"Six months ago, I would have said no. Earth's planet-spirit never communicated an articulated thought, much less showed us anything from her memory, but things are different now. Some of the visions might be coming from the planet-spirit, but our people are having visions of the Visit, and the spirit of this planet wouldn't have that event in her memory."

"It wouldn't be able to put people in an alternate reality either, not even in their dreams."

"I wouldn't think so. The possibility is pretty far-fetched. There are different voices in the Light, though, and most people believe they're coming from angels."

"So you think angels are causing these dreams? Why?"

"When I first came into the Light, the planet-spirit told me that she would be working with the angels presiding over our Nation to help me fulfill my mission. After that, the Blessed Sons came to me in a dream twice."

Why in the galaxy had they been reliving all of the terrible things that had happened to Jahnzel since their meeting in the spaceport when what happened to Varia had been far more interesting and wonderful? "Show me!"

Varia recoiled from him, ever so slightly, her eyebrows gathering into a frown.

"I'm sorry," Jahnzel said. "It was wrong of me to demand something so personal." In a way, though, he wasn't sorry at all. She had seen things about him that he would have preferred to keep private. Was it really too much to ask her to share something personal with him?

The blush, which hadn't completely left her cheeks, deepened. "It isn't that. It's . . . I'm a . . ." She sighed.

She was an environmental technician and he was a prince, and princes didn't even exchange transmitted thoughts with those of the lower ranks unless work required it; they certainly didn't overlap spirits and share deeper thoughts and memories. Jahnzel should have understood her reticence sooner and felt both foolish and frustrated. "This isn't the real world, so real-world protocol doesn't apply here. Besides. The protocol is just a guideline. It isn't law." As he said it, however, he couldn't help but remember how surprised he had been when Myri had offered to show him her visions and how furious and disgusted he had been with the thought that she may have communicated with David Pierce in this familiar way.

"I'm still afraid it wouldn't be proper," Varia whispered.

Technically she was right, and yet Jahnzel still felt no reticence whatsoever. Why was that? "Then tell me what you saw. If you want to."

Varia nodded and repeated her conversation with the planet-spirit. "When Crystal said, 'I will be working with the angels presiding over your nation to help you fulfill your glorious mission,' I thought she must be talking about a mission for the Nation, but then the Blessed Sons appeared to me and told me that I had a particular mission to give you a reason to live." She went on to detail her visions of the Blessed Sons, leaving Jahnzel feeling more amazed than ever.

"Have you communicated with the planet-spirit or the Blessed Sons since then?"

"No."

"Have you tried?"

"From time to time I speak to the planet-spirit, but she doesn't respond."

"Who else have you told about this?"

"No one."

"No one at all? Why not?"

"How could I? The Blessed Sons said a lot about you, and then those dreams started. Over and over again I was forced to live through all the terrible things that have been happening to you. How could I tell anyone about that?"

Jahnzel was glad she hadn't. Varia really had been living these past months with him. What had once been an unnerving prospect felt oddly comforting now. His ancient fathers knew him and were watching over him, which meant that God Himself knew him and was watching over him. "Why do you think the Blessed Sons chose you?"

Varia shook her head. "I don't know, and I've been making myself sick over that question since they spoke to me."

As Jahnzel recalled the dreams and considered everything Varia had told him, hoping to find an answer to his question, an observation jumped into his mind: He had chosen Varia to live before either Earth or the Blessed Sons had spoken to her. Could it be that *he* was the one who had chosen Varia, not the Blessed Sons or even God?

In their dreams, he had chased her around the world. He had refrained from killing Arulezz for her sake. He had insisted she call him Jahnzel. Had he not done any of the things he had done, they wouldn't now be friends; they wouldn't know each other at all. In real life, she would be dead and he probably would be too. Perhaps he really had been the one who had chosen Varia, but chosen her for what? Perhaps neither one of them needed to know that yet. Jahnzel decided it was time that he started helping Varia fulfill her destiny, whatever it was. "You are a remarkable young woman, Varia, and you were right to be afraid of me, because I am going to raise you."

The haunted look returned. "What do you mean?"

"You have no idea what kind of power you have, do you?"

She tensed up again, as if seized by panic, and he knew that she did know and had all along, and that was why she was afraid.

"I don't want to have any kind of power! I didn't ask for this!"

"But you agreed to it somehow, didn't you, when you made the decision to go into the Light."

Her expression was one of such understanding and fear that Jahnzel knew he was right. "I went into the Light only because I had promised you that I would live! I was supposed to die in the spaceport with the others!"

Hearing her say it that way convinced Jahnzel that he really was the one doing the choosing and had been all along. "You're the only mortal on this planet who has communicated with the planet-spirit, and the only person who suspects that the Light is the planet-spirit."

"I know what you want, and I can't do it. How can I tell anyone about this, especially Saintess Myri? I would have to tell her about you, and she would never believe it."

"Don't tell her about your vision of the Blessed Sons or that you and I have been sharing dreams, but do tell her what you know about the Light. Since you were on my father's planetary repair team, she won't think it's *too* odd that you would recognize the Light as the planet-spirit or that the planet-spirit would speak to you. You don't have to



tell her anything else. What you do reveal to her is dangerous information that she will want to be careful with, so if she needs an excuse to keep you close by, the two of you can make public the fact that I saved your life in the spaceport.”

“I can’t talk to her. I never thought it was possible to dislike someone so much, but I’m furious with her for what she’s done to you.”

“A part of me hates her too, but that doesn’t matter. The leaders in the Light need what you know, and she’s the best person to tell.”

“I still can’t do it.”

“Then go to David Pierce. You can trust him. And since he’s a savage, there’s no reason to be afraid of him.”

“But they’re guarded all the time. Someone like me will never get near enough to them.”

“Find a way. Trust me on this, Varia. Saintess Myri wants to know what you know. She *needs* to know what you know. It galls my brother that he can’t control the Light, and if he had any idea that the Light was coming from the planet-spirit, he would do everything in his power to put as strong a bridle on her as he thinks he can get away with. As things stand now, he doesn’t fear the planet-spirit since she’s never been anything but docile, but he will attack the Light cities sooner or later, and our leaders in them need *all* the facts. Surely that’s more important than your fear.”

“How can I argue when you put it that way?”

“You can do this, Varia. You were brave enough to die for the Nation. Here’s your chance to offer your life for it in a different way.”

“You should have let me die.”

He grabbed her hands and squeezed. “There are too few of us left; we can’t throw away lives needlessly. You *must live*, Varia. I’m going to lose too many warriors in this war as it is. Don’t give me another death to mourn. Go now.” He released her hands and waved his own in the direction of the spaceport’s exit. “Tell Saintess Myri what you know about the Light.”

Varia glanced around at the ghosts in the now-dead Washington, D.C. Spaceport, standing at attention as they waited for Jahnzel and Varia to finish their conversation. With a little shake of her head, Varia turned her gaze on Jahnzel. “I’ll do my duty and tell Saintess Myri what I know, Jahnzel. I promise. But you have to promise me that you won’t do anything stupid like kill your brother outside of the law.”

Jahnzel nodded once. “I promise.”

## APPENDICES

### 1. GLOSSARY OF RELIGIOUS TERMS AND DOCTRINES

This glossary exists solely to help readers of *Alien Roads* understand it better. The author has done her best to ensure that all of the following information is accurate, but she is not an official spokesperson for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and acknowledges the fact that other members of the Church may disagree with her on some points. This glossary may only be reproduced and distributed as an appendix to *Alien Roads*. You can find official information about Church beliefs at both [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org) and [comeuntochrist.org](http://comeuntochrist.org).

**Angels:** The Church teaches that messengers from God come in three basic types:

*“Spirits of just men made perfect”:* Disembodied beings that haven’t been resurrected yet but will inherit celestial glory (D&C 129:3).

*Translated beings:* Mortals whose bodies have been changed by God in such a way that they are “sanctified in the flesh” and have become “holy.” Satan can’t tempt them, the “powers of the earth” can’t “hold” them, and they can’t die (3 Nephi 28:38–40).

*Resurrected beings:* Immortal personages with bodies of flesh and bone (D&C 129:1–2).

D&C 130:5 states that “there are no angels who minister to this earth but those who do belong or have belonged to it.” Nevertheless, the author believes that creating the alien angels Zarr and Vahro to minister to their descendants on the earth was less doctrinally controversial than having known angels such as Michael and Gabriel perform the same function in the story.

**Bishop:** Leader of a ward; equivalent of a pastor or rabbi. A bishop, however, does not need a formal education, and his call is temporary, lasting about six years. He is not paid for his work and has a career separate from that of his church service.

**Bishopric:** The bishop and his two counselors.

**Blessing:** When a holder of the Melchizedek Priesthood lays hands on a person’s head and says a special prayer to articulate the will of God to that person.

**The Book of Mormon:** Book of scripture used by the Church that contains the writings of prophets who lived on the American continent from about 2200 B.C. to A.D. 421.

**Born in the covenant:** When a man and a woman are sealed in the temple, the children born to them are “born in the covenant” and are, therefore, entitled to particular blessings from God.

**Brethren:** When capitalized, this term refers to the general authorities of the Church.

**Calling:** A particular job in the Church one is asked to perform on a volunteer basis.

**Celestial Kingdom:** The highest kingdom of glory and place where God the Father and Jesus Christ live. The kingdom to which those who love God with all their hearts and do their best to live all of His commandments will go after the Final Judgment.

**The Church:** In *Alien Roads*, the term “the Church” always means The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Members sometimes refer to the Church as “Zion.”

**Church Discipline:** Sometimes a member of the Church commits such serious sins that he or she must lose privileges for a period of time and go through extensive counseling to facilitate the repentance process. Excommunication is the most serious penalty imposed by the Church, followed by disfellowshipment. Depending on the person’s attitude and type of sin involved, a bishop may put a person on probation and revoke, for a period of time, certain privileges, such as speaking to the congregation, taking the sacrament (an ordinance similar to what other Christians know as “Communion”), and attending the temple.

**City of Enoch:** City founded by the prophet Enoch of the Old Testament. It became so righteous that it was taken into Heaven.

**The Doctrine and Covenants:** Book of scripture used by the Church that contains revelations given by God to the modern prophet Joseph Smith (1805–1844).

**Earth, Creation of:** Latter-day Saints believe that Jesus Christ, in the premortal existence, created the earth under the direction of the Father and that He is the Savior to it (D&C 76:22–24; Moses 1:33). Latter-day Saints, don't, however, claim to know the details about how the creation of the earth occurred. Tempest’s descriptions of her creation and awakening are pure fantasy.

**Earth, Progression of:** The Church teaches that the earth has existed and will exist in several different stages of physical progression. Those stages are:

*Creation:* Garden-of-Eden paradise. This stage ended with the Fall, when both death and reproduction were introduced to the world (2 Nephi 2:19–23; Moses 5:10–11).

*Telestial:* The earth as it is now. This stage will end when Jesus Christ returns to the earth in His glory (D&C 77:12).

*Terrestrial:* The Garden-of-Eden state in which the earth will be during the Millennium. No death as we know it (2 Peter 3:10,13; D&C 101: 23–32).

*Celestial:* The perfect, glorified state (D&C 88:15–20).

**Earth, Spirit of:** In Chapter 20 of *Fall to Eden*, “Cameron Confides,” Sara and Cameron discuss a scripture from the Pearl of Great Price—Moses 7:48: “And it came to pass that Enoch looked upon the earth; and he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which

is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?” Many Latter-day Saints interpret this scripture and others, including D&C 88:25–26, to mean that the earth has a spirit or soul. All expansion of this idea in *Fall to Eden* and *Alien Roads* is fantasy and should not be regarded as doctrine or even serious speculation.

**First Presidency:** The president of the Church (prophet) and his two counselors.

**Jesus Christ, Ministry to the Nephites and Lamanites:** Latter-day Saints teach that Christ visited inhabitants of the American continent after His resurrection. These ancient Americans were, throughout most of their history, divided into two factions, the Nephites and the Lamanites.

**Jesus Christ, Savior to other planets:** Latter-day Saints believe that Jesus Christ, in the premortal existence, created other planets under the direction of the Father and that He is the Savior to them, just as He is to the earth (D&C 76:22–24; Moses 1:33). Latter-day Saints, don’t, however, claim to know anything about those other planets.

**Latter-day Saints:** The term Mormons use to describe themselves. It is often shortened to “Saints.” Members of the Church use the term LDS as an adjective to describe things pertaining to the Church or Mormon culture.

**Mission:** The period of time set aside by members of the Church to forgo all other activities and devote themselves to doing the Lord’s work in a particular part of the world. Missionaries receive a formal call from the president of the Church.

**Mormon:** Nickname given to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by those not belonging to the Church. Members use it also to avoid confusion.

**New Jerusalem:** A holy city, Zion, which will be built by the righteous in the place that is now Independence, Missouri in the U.S.A. It and the original Jerusalem will serve as capital cities on the earth during the Millennium, the thousand-year period of peace following the Second Coming (Isaiah 2:2–4; Ether 13:2–6; D&C 45: 66–71; D&C 57:2).

**Ordination:** When a Priesthood holder lays hands on another man’s head and says a special prayer to confer an office of the priesthood on him.

**Patriarchal Blessing:** A once-in-a-lifetime blessing given by an ordained patriarch and meant to provide individual guidance for a person's life.

**The Pearl of Great Price:** Book of scripture used by the Church containing writings of Moses, Abraham, and Joseph Smith.

**Premortal Existence:** Latter-day Saints believe that every person born on the earth is a beloved spirit child of God and that we lived with Him before birth. This period of time is referred to as the premortal existence or the pre-existence.

**Primary:** Organization responsible for the teaching of children. A president and two counselors direct the Primary organization within a ward under the authority of the bishopric.

**Proper Authority:** Term used to explain receiving an ordination or calling from priesthood leaders who are officially authorized to act on behalf of the Lord for the Church. In *Fall to Eden*, Cameron is called to be the bishop of the Eden Colony Ward by “proper authority.” In his stewardship, he acts for God, and the members of his ward are duty-bound to follow his leadership. Were his father to step forward and claim that God wanted him to be the bishop, he would be doing so without “proper authority” and the colonists would not only be justified in refusing to follow him, but foolish to do so.

**Prophet, President of the Church:** The senior apostle and presiding officer in the Church. The Church teaches that he speaks for God in the same way that ancient prophets such as Noah, Moses, and Elijah did.

**Priesthood:** Authority and power of God given to all worthy men. Men who hold the priesthood are organized into quorums according to the office they hold. Offices include high priest and elder.

**Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:** Council of the Church under the First Presidency. Apostles are called to be special witnesses of Christ to the world and are the equivalent of the apostles who served with Jesus Christ during His ministry on the earth.

**Relief Society:** Organization that oversees the teaching of women and organization of compassionate service by women. A president and two counselors direct the Relief Society organization within a ward under the authority of the bishop.

**Resurrection:** When, after death, the soul/spirit/life force of a person is reunited with his physical body, never to be separated again. Latter-day Saints believe that everyone who was ever born on the earth will eventually be resurrected (Alma 11:40–45).

**Sealing:** An ordinance where families are bound together for eternity. Performed only in the temple.

**Second Coming:** When Jesus Christ comes to Earth in His glory and ushers in the Millennium.

**Setting Apart:** Blessing given to a person who has just received a new calling.

**Stake:** An organization of approximately six to ten wards. Organized by region.

**Temple:** A holy building set apart for performing particular ordinances such as baptism for the dead and eternal marriage.

**Temple Recommend:** A small document signed by a person’s bishop and stake president proclaiming him or her to be worthy to enter the temple. The recommend is presented at the door of the temple when attending.

**Ward:** Congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Organized according to region.

**Zion:** A community that achieves a perfect society through complete dedication to God.

## 2. GLOSSARY OF FANTASY IDEAS AND TERMS

**Arelada:** Clear, slightly luminous crystal that makes telepathy possible.

**Awareness:** The ability to see the inner workings of the physical body with the spirit.

**Awareness monitor:** A device that can tap into the Awareness of any person or object and thus see that person or object from the inside out.

**Ban on space travel:** In *Fall to Eden* and in the early chapters of *Alien Roads*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has counseled its members not to have contact with Zarr and his people or to leave the earth. In reality, the Church has never banned space travel or contact with any particular race or nation, nor is there any indication that it will ever do so in the future.

**Control Colony:** One of the fifteen colonies that Tohmazz Zarr sent to Eden. It was comprised of Zarrist specialists whose job was to bridle the planet-spirit and give aid to the other fourteen colonies, which were comprised of Earth's natives. It and eleven other Eden colonies were destroyed by the planet-spirit in *Fall to Eden*.

**Cooperative Communities:** Gathering places established in the capital cities of the world by the Guardians of Earth's Governments to provide economic support to those individuals and organizations who do not want to do business with the Zarrists.

**Crystal:** The name Earth's planet-spirit calls herself.

**Domies:** Descendants of the followers of Malrezz. They live on Diron in life-support domes.

**Divine Emperor:** Leader of the Holy Nation of the Son of God. Believed by his people to be directly descended from the resurrected Jesus Christ.

**Diron:** The home planet of Tohmazz Zarr and his people. An original planet whose ecosystem was destroyed when it was telepathically bound.

**Eden:** A beautiful, uninhabited planet located near the large Erdean Hyperspace Portal, a position coveted by many nations.

**Empath:** A person who is particularly skilled in interpreting the emotions of another.

**Eslavu:** A person who has been mind-stripped and turned into an automaton controlled by telepathy.

**Federalist:** A person who supports the federalization of Earth's nations under the leadership of the Holy Nation of the Son of God.

**Guardians of Earth's Governments:** Alliance of individuals and organizations that oppose Zarr's plan to form nations of the Earth into one world government by promoting the sovereignty of Earth's nations.

**Gudynea:** Planet that commissioned the terraforming of Eden. Strongest ally of Novaun.

**Holy Nation of the Son of God:** Ruling nation on Diron for many centuries. Thrown out of power by those who refused to accept the Divine Emperor and other nobles as literal descendants of Christ.

**Holy Nation Technologies:** Organization established by Zarr to develop, build, and sell spaceships, synthesizing machines, aircars, and other high-tech items.

**Hyperspace:** A dimension of space that provides shortcuts between star systems. Shortcuts through space can only be accessed by natural “portals.”

**Jesus Christ, Ministry to Novaunians:** Novaunians claim that Jesus Christ appeared to their ancestors in His glorified form and taught them His gospel.

**Jesus Christ, Ministry to Zarrists:** Zarrists claim that when Jesus Christ appeared to their ancestors in His glorified form, he took a wife from among their people and fathered a dynasty of Divine Emperors.

**Malrezz:** Prophet who cursed Diron so that it would no longer yield its arelada. This was done to stop the abhorrent telepathic practices of his fellow Dirons.

**Nationalist:** An individual who believes that Earth’s nations should retain their sovereignty instead of federalizing under the leadership of the Holy Nation of the Son of God.

**Novaun:** Place of Trendaul and Sara’s birth. A “Zion” planet.

**Novaunian Fleet:** Novaun’s space military.

**Librarian:** A Novaunian who has received extensive education to learn how to store huge amounts of information that he or she can then download into the minds of other Novaunians by request.

**The Light:** Mysterious pockets of light that developed around the capital cities of Earth and various other communities just prior to the attack of Earth by two of the Zarrists’ rival fleets. At that time, people either fled from the Light or escaped into it, depending on whether they believed it came from the invaders or from God. The Light protected those communities from the attack.

**Original planet:** A planet God created and peopled. Earth, Novaun, and Diron are all original planets. Eden is not.

**Planet-spirit:** The spirit/soul/life force of a planet. Every physical particle of a planet has a spirit: the trees, the rocks, the blades of grass, and the specks of dust. The planet-spirit supervises all of the other spirits. When the planet-spirit is bound, it is unable to supervise the other spirits and all creation goes into chaos, destroying the ecosystem, as in the case of the planet Diron.



**Rival Fleets:** Diron nations that escaped the planet in spaceships at the same time Zarr's nation did. They hate each other, but in particular, they hate Zarr's nation and have nearly destroyed it. In *Alien Roads*, three separate rival fleets are mentioned as being led by Admirals Jaxzeran, Nexyun, and Sutuzav.

**Shalaun:** Capital city of Novaun and Trendaul and Sara's place of birth.

**Spirit Crystal:** The Zarrists' name for arelada.

**Star Force:** Short for International Star Force, the space military organization Tohmazz Zarr built to protect Earth from invasion.

**Synthesizing Machine:** A machine that builds objects from the atom up. Fed by priming solution made from decomposed waste.

**Telepathic binding:** When a large team of people telepathically seizes a planet-spirit and forces it into submission.

**Telepathic bridling:** When telepathic specialists gain access to a planet's Awareness by way of an Awareness monitor, view its physical systems from the inside out, and counter-manipulate any severe natural phenomenon.

**Telepathy:** Communication from mind to mind and spirit to spirit. Involves transmitting thoughts and touching spirits.

**Telepathy vision:** A mental vision created by telepathy that incorporates all of the human senses and feels as real as the physical world.

**Tempest:** The name Eden's planet-spirit calls herself.

**Temple Communities:** Gathering places for Latter-day Saints near the temples. Many are contained within the boundaries of Cooperative Communities.

**Terraforming:** The process by which a barren planet is made suitable for habitation by humans and animals.

**Tryamazz:** A city Tohmazz Zarr built in western Missouri to be his capital.

**United Interstellar Alliance of Planets or "The Alliance":** Galactic alliance of planets of which Novaun is a member.

**Zarr and Vahro:** Twin brothers who are the forefathers of the Zarrist Nobility. When Jesus Christ ministered to the people of Diron after His resurrection, He healed their mother while she was pregnant with them. They became both political and spiritual leaders among their people. In *Alien Roads*, they are angels who minister to Zarrists who live in the Light.

**Zarrists:** Label by which the citizens of the Holy Nation of the Son of God are known.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Padilla, the mother of seven, was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. She resided more than thirty years in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area and recently moved to Florida. She has been writing novels since age thirteen. As a teenager, she was equally intrigued by prophecies of the Last Days and the television show *Star Trek*. At age seventeen she wrote her first story that combined prophecy with science fiction and even submitted it to a contest. That story remains unpublished (and unpublishable!), but her interest in exploring traditional values and religious themes through speculative fiction remains as strong as ever. Through many years of writing, studying, and reading widely, she has learned how to achieve just the right balance of spirituality and fantasy in her novels to both entertain and inspire.

Mrs. Padilla has given many speeches on the benefits of reading wholesome literature and has compiled resources to help readers in that pursuit on her website **Novaun Novels** at [novels.zerosilver.com](http://novels.zerosilver.com). Her work has also been published in the *Ensign* magazine. She is the author of seven faith-based novels:

### **Heirs of Novaun**

1. *The Double-Edged Choice*
2. *Twin Witness to Betrayal*
3. *Travail of a Traitor*
4. *Bond With a Terrorist*

### **Dominion Over the Earth**

1. *Fall to Eden*
2. *Alien Roads*
3. *Day of Liberation*