

FALL TO EDEN

An Apocalyptic Fantasy

By Katherine Padilla

Book 1 of

DOMINION OVER THE EARTH



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Fall to Eden 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.

DEDICATION

To Steve, who understands the twists and turns of his alien wife's brain better than anyone and will know where all of this wild stuff comes from.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I'd like to thank my friend Amy Merrill, who read this novel as I wrote it and happily submitted to my "price"—filling out pages of detailed questions that helped me understand what worked and what didn't. She spotted several significant problems early on, which saved me a great deal of time and made the novel much better than it would have been otherwise.

I can't neglect to thank my husband Steve, who dragged me kicking and screaming into the Computer Age. Without his support and expertise, publishing my work online would not have been an option.

Last, thanks to Cari Clark, my editor and friend since 1985. Her sharp literary insight helped me hammer this novel into shape, and her attention to detail aided me in buffing it to a satisfactory sheen. If my work has any sophistication at all, it's because of her!

WARNING!

This novel is not typical apocalyptic fiction. It does not attempt to present realistic speculation on the events leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. I haven't consulted scholarly documents that analyze the scriptural accounts of the Last Days, nor have I attempted to dramatize true spiritual experiences of real people. Moreover, I will declare, once and for all, that the wild stuff that happens in *Fall to Eden* is just that—wild stuff. My work may be serious in tone, but it is fantasy. Period.

If you think you would enjoy getting lost in a world inhabited by a twenty-year-old Mormon bishop, a seductively innocent empath, a priggish planet-spirit, and an alien emperor who claims to be a direct descendant of the resurrected Jesus Christ, read on. I've even provided a glossary containing both Mormon and fantasy terms to make your reading experience smoother. If, on the other hand, you consider such radical ideas sacrilegious, this novel is not for you. If you think the great anti-Christ of the Last Days may really turn out to be an alien, you've probably been reading *too much* fantasy and need reading material that is significantly more substantial than my novel. The scriptures would be a good place to start.

Oh, and one other thing. Please don't quote from *Fall to Eden* in church. That kind of notoriety would destroy my credibility as a faithful, doctrinally literate mother in Zion. I've worked hard to cultivate that image, and one has to keep up appearances!

Katherine Padilla
March 2002

VISION OF EARTH

And the Lord called his people ZION, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.

Moses 7:18
The Pearl of Great Price

VISION OF EDEN

And the Lord called his people ZION, because they expressed themselves equally and received equal education, and gained equal edification through regular facilitation with a qualified therapist; and there were no poor or dissatisfied among them because they were all equally employed.

Thesis of *Psychological Keys to Building Zion*
By Benjamin Carroll, Ph.D.

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Part 1: THE LONG-AWAITED DATE

Chapter 1: MESSIAH OR ANTI-CHRIST?

The Divine One stood near the boardroom window-wall, an arm folded across His waist and a hand absently stroking His chin. He seemed oblivious to everything but the severely damaged condition of so many of the seventy-eight ships that remained in His space fleet.

Admiral of the Fleet Harman Sanzanal halted for a moment near the polished wood table, unnerved to see his Master so troubled. In the eighteen years Tohmazz Zarr had held the title of Divine Emperor, Sanzanal had never seen Him present anything but the calmest and most confident of exteriors, no matter how bleak the circumstances seemed.

As Sanzanal moved toward the Divine One, He turned, His luxuriant angel-white curls brushing against the spirit crystals that embellished his purple cape. His eyes, the icy gray of diamonds, studied Sanzanal's face, His spirit touching Sanzanal's as He communicated telepathically. *Is our situation as grave as it appears?*

Far worse, Divine One. Only forty-eight thousand people remain of our Nation. Eleven thousand of those are warriors, and a mere two hundred and eighty-one comprise the Aristocracy. The Nobility has dwindled to sixty-two.

Sanzanal could feel the Divine One's spirit shudder in mortification and indignation. In all three hundred years of exile, the Holy Nation of the Son of God had never been so desperate. With only twenty-one warships, defending themselves against the smallest of the rival fleets might prove fatal. It would be many years, perhaps decades, before the Holy Nation could initiate an attack. How many more centuries would pass before they were finally able to annihilate the infidel fleets and restore their planet to its original glory?

Discerning something of Sanzanal's feelings in their telepathic exchange, the Divine One communicated with passion, *I will secure a planet, and you will have your warriors, and with the aid of the Father, we will not only conquer the infidel fleets, but the galaxy as well. Even the Novaunians will bow to the Son of God incarnate.*

Sanzanal thrilled at his Master's declaration. Tohmazz Zarr was, indeed, the True Seed. *What planet have you discovered that will provide me with these new warriors?*

Earth. A savage planet that is waiting for a Messiah.

* * *

Sara Alexander tore open her letter and read eagerly as she jogged past the dogwood tree, its crimson leaves fluttering in the breeze. She laughed triumphantly as she rounded the corner of the garage into the backyard.

Sara waved her letter at her parents, who were sitting together on the wooden swing in a cluster of tall, thin trees. "Two weeks from Sunday, President Grant will organize the Eden Colony Ward. Of course we will sustain a bishop and his counselors." She was not an apostate, and she would get her parents to admit it if it killed her.

Sara's mother grabbed the letter from Sara's hand, her light brown eyebrows coming together in alarm as she read. Sara reveled in the glory of being right. "You can't now claim the Church won't support the colony." She turned away from her parents slightly and caught the basketball her brother Josh had fired at her, tossing it back and forth between her fingertips.

Her father studied the letter for a moment as if taking a mental photograph, then looked up at Sara, his pale blue gaze delving into her soul in that way it always did, seeming to say, "My

big brain records everything. I've read everything. I know everything. If you don't do what I suggest, you're an idiot."

"You seem to be ignoring the fine print, Sara. In this letter, the First Presidency makes it clear that the Church will not support this new ward and makes a plea to you and all of the other colonists to remain on Earth."

How could they be so dense? Why in the galaxy would the Church organize a ward it had no intention of supporting?

"C'mon, Sara, shoot!"

As Sara shot the basketball at the taller of the two hoops in the backyard, Rebecca and Daniel shot handfuls of black walnuts. Emily knocked more of the small green orbs out of the tree with the handle of a broken hoe.

Sara remembered how much she had once enjoyed climbing the tree and shaking walnuts out of it. She turned to address her parents again. "We're being discouraged from going, not forbidden, and certainly not excommunicated. The Church will change its mind when the Brethren see how successful we are."

"It's unlikely the Brethren will see anything, since they will be here building Zion, on Earth, where they've told us all to stay." Her mother's voice was tight and her dark eyes were fierce, as if she were trying hard not to lose her temper.

Sara could feel her cheeks grow warm. "But we're going to be building Zion, just as the prophet has counseled! We're going to start with a virgin world, beautiful and perfect!" Sara could hear Rebecca behind her, pounding the husks off of the walnuts with a bat, the bat clicking whenever it hit the nut inside the husk. As the husks flew, so did shrieks of delight.

Too Cool rubbed her white face against her father's neck. Her father stroked the cat a little too hard, and she leapt out of his arms with a screech. His eyes were bright with urgency. "Call me paranoid, Sara, but it doesn't take a genius to see that the Church and its allies in the Cooperative Communities are on the verge of withdrawing from Zarr's influence."

"Our meetinghouses are being sold. We're moving to temple communities. BYU has closed its doors—"

"Your point?" Her mother's reference to Brigham Young University annoyed Sara. She had attended classes there for two years and had run on the women's track team before she and all of the other out-of-state students had been sent home. Her initial educational plans had been ruined, and now her parents were trying to talk her out of going to Eden to study journalism with Barbara Thomassen Carroll, one of *The Baltimore Sun's* finest columnists. Sara clenched her teeth and her fists to keep herself in control. She would not let them get to her.

"If you leave," her father said quietly, "you may separate yourself from the blessings of the Church for the rest of your mortal life. You will have a ward organization as long as it lasts, but you will never have a temple. You have no idea what you would be throwing away."

Sara shook her head, as if that gesture would shake away any possibility that she could be moved by the seriousness of her father's concern. Feeling abnormally hot, she removed her BYU track jacket and hung it on the limb of a wild cherry tree. "Don't be ridiculous. In a few years, Earth will have a glorious space fleet and interstellar travel will be easy and inexpensive. Given the Church's determination to establish its presence in every country and put a temple in every capital, it will certainly follow us to Eden. The time will come when even you will want to visit!"

"That is assuming we're willing to travel in ships built by Tohmazz Zarr," her father said.

"The same Tohmazz Zarr the Brethren have been telling us to have no contact with for well over three years!" her mother added, fanning her face with Sara's letter.

Zack climbed on the swing and held a pulp-covered walnut under his mother's nose, his fingers stained yellow-green. "Coconut, Mommy."

Her mother instinctively leaned against her father. "Don't you come near me with that!"

"You know Tohmazz Zarr doesn't build those ships himself. Holy Nation Technologies does, and most of the employees are natives of Earth. That's hardly significant contact."

"Don't be stupid, Sara!" her mother exploded.

"Why are you and Sara fighting, Mommy?"

Matthew yanked the walnut out of Zack's hand. "Give me that!"

"Aaron," her father called. "Come and get Zack. Wipe off his hands and push him in the swing. Please."

Aaron threw the basketball at Sara. She caught it and tossed it in the direction of the hoops. "You know it's impossible to completely avoid contact with them. They're everywhere! Unless you live in a cave."

Sara had heard Tohmazz Zarr speak when he had come to Baltimore more than a year ago, but she wasn't ready to admit it. The prospect of seeing a real live alien, especially one believed by his people to be a descendant of the resurrected Jesus Christ, had been too tantalizing to resist. And the miracles he could do! He healed people of terrible diseases and deformities and made deserts into gardens. The arena in Salt Lake City had been full when she heard Zarr speak there the previous spring. Apparently she wasn't the only member of the Church who was curious.

"What are we supposed to do? Kill them all? That would certainly be the Christian thing to do."

"That's a rationalization, Sara, and you know it."

"It's the truth, Mom, and you know it!" Sara's heart raced, and her entire being felt as if it were on fire. She knew that the Spirit was bearing witness to her of the validity of her words. "They're Christians too!"

"Hardly!" her father gasped. "Their claims are blasphemous! They worship an anti-Christ! Even Christians who aren't members of our church recognize it! Antonio Vaccaro, that Catholic priest from Baltimore, was one of the first to denounce Tohmazz Zarr as an anti-Christ!"

Her father's outburst gratified Sara. It wasn't like him. He was usually so placid. She would win her point yet. "He can hardly be an anti-Christ when millions of former non-Christians now accept Christ as their Savior!"

"The people to whom you're referring are not converts of Christ, but converts of Zarr," her father countered.

"And the Guardians of Earth's Governments is made up of plenty of people who are more believers in the sovereignty of their nations than in God. Some of them are atheists! So why not claim that the United States is the 'great and abominable church'? The 'mother of all harlots'? 'Babylon the great'?"

"Zarr is the enemy, Sara," her mother said in frustration. "Why can't you get that through your head?"

"Tohmazz Zarr is no more the enemy than that priest from Baltimore. Both are serving Christ according to the dictates of their own consciences."

"Please, Sara. Don't be so naïve." There was that big brain gaze again. Her father seemed to be weighing something in his mind.

Her mother gripped his arm as if trying to restrain him, yet she looked as if she were the one determined to throw Sara to the ground and lock her in handcuffs. "There may be some

Zarrists who are honorable and sincere, who really are worshiping God in the best way they know how, but that doesn't change the fact that as a race, they're dangerous to us."

Finally her father said, his voice grave, "There are very few people on this planet who understand how dangerous the Zarrists really are. The Brethren know what they're talking about, Sara. And so do discerning people like Antonio Vaccaro and even some of those atheists you're so quick to condemn."

As if her father were one of the few who did understand how supposedly dangerous the Zarrists were. That was one thing her father couldn't have learned from all of those books at the Library of Congress. "The fact still remains that it's impossible to avoid them."

Her mother's grip on her father's arm loosened. "Did it ever occur to the leader of your colony to find out why, if the Zarrists want the planet colonized, they haven't done it themselves? Or why such a beautiful planet is uninhabited?"

"I'm sure Dr. Carroll has asked all of those questions. He is an amazing leader."

"Only because he has an 'amazing' son!" Josh called as the basketball hit the backboard.

Sara would not allow her brother to destroy her credibility with talk of Cameron Carroll, even if Cameron was on a mission and wouldn't be joining his family on Eden for at least another two years, when the first exchange of colonists would take place. Feeling hotter than ever, Sara slipped her blue hair elastic off of her wrist and twisted her hair into a messy bun. Refusing to acknowledge her brother's taunt, she said to her parents, "Even you can't ignore Dr. Carroll's qualifications."

Sara's mother shot her father a meaningful look and smirked. "Yeah, *Psychological Keys to Building Zion*. That's a real winner." She began folding Sara's letter into a paper airplane.

"It was an excellent book, and so were all of the others."

Sara's father waved his hand in a dismissive way. "Psychobabble mixed with scripture." Too Cool jumped into his lap, trying to regain his attention.

Her mother aimed the airplane letter at the walnut harvesters. "His books rank right up there with *Cain's Sandal Size and Other Vital Gospel Doctrines*."

Sara snatched her letter from her mother's fingertips. Where did she come up with these absurd titles? Did she lie in bed at night and dream them up? What intellectual stimulation! She couldn't help but observe that Barbara Thomassen Carroll created real titles for real books and articles that were read by real people.

"And *What I Learned about the New Testament by Sleeping in a Bed Belonging to the Prophet's Brother*," her father added with a nod.

Sara had never been so irritated by her parents' hobby of dreaming up parodies of book titles. "He has degrees in both business and organizational psychology, and he and his firm have been bringing emotional healing, ethics, and cooperative management to organizations all over the world for years!"

"Hauling in the bucks by working as a consultant for Holy Nation Technologies, you mean," her mother declared.

"While plenty of others with similar credentials have refused to do business with the Zarrists, consecrated their wealth to the Church, and moved into temple communities," her father added.

"But Dr. Carroll is such a powerful influence for good. How can you not see that? And he's been a bishop!"

Her father looked at her pointedly. "Which makes his fall to apostasy all the more tragic."

Sara unfolded her letter and began smoothing it between her fingers. "You have no idea what you're talking about! You're not even a high priest. Dr. Carroll's a great man. Even the

Brethren realize it!” Sometimes she wished her father were more like Dr. Carroll, more polished, more ambitious, more the dynamic spiritual leader.

“Carroll’s personal righteousness or lack of it has nothing to do with why the Church has finally consented to allow the Eden Colony to be organized into a ward.”

“You’re wrong. The Church realizes we are all good members of the Church who want to do our part creating Zion in a unique way.”

“No,” her mother said, the swing creaking as she began to rock, “the Church got tired of Carroll’s nagging and finally decided to give him what he wants.”

How could she make them understand? “Dr. Carroll did not nag. He simply bore witness to the fact that the Lord wants him to lead this Zion colony on Eden.” How could she convince them that the Lord had called her, too, to be a part of this glorious new colony? She had known her destiny lay in space for a year at least. “The prophet, being the awesome spiritual giant he is, recognized the will of the Lord in this matter and made it happen.”

Her mother shook her head. “Joseph Smith nagged the Lord to let Martin Harris take the first one hundred and sixteen pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript—”

“What in the galaxy does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything. You know the story. The Lord finally agreed, the manuscript was stolen, and the prophet lost the ability to translate for some time. If we nag the Lord long and loudly enough, He may just give us what we want.”

“I can’t believe how ignorant you are. I’ll go to Eden if I have to *walk* to the spaceport.”

* * *

Trendaul Alexander hung a handful of shirts and dresses in the closet. Teri, his wife, set a basket of folded clothes on the floor. Instead of tossing her earrings into the jewelry box and collapsing on the bed as she usually did, she carefully removed her earrings and placed them on an earring tree. Trendaul knew she was upset when she actually began putting the clothes away.

Trendaul sat down in the light brown swivel rocker next to the bed and took off his shoes. Worry fogged his mind and confusion paralyzed him. He didn’t know what to do or what to say.

Teri forced two pairs of jeans into an already stuffed drawer. “I can’t believe the Church is actually going to organize those people into a ward.”

Trendaul, too, wondered why the Church planned to take this unprecedented step. He had not been able to think about anything else all evening. Perhaps Sara was correct in her opinion that the Church would eventually follow the colony into space. He couldn’t help but believe, as much as he tried to convince himself otherwise for Sara’s sake, that when the Eden Colony left Earth, they would be separating themselves from Zion forever. “It does complicate matters.”

Teri removed the red claw clip from her hair, the ringlets falling to her shoulders. Her hair color had never been “dirty blond” to Trendaul as it was to his children. In the soft light of their bedroom, her hair looked like gold, and it always moved, mesmerizing him. Teri combed through her hair with her fingers and shook her head. “She wouldn’t go without a ward.”

Sara’s ability to believe she was a devout member of the Church while accepting Zarr’s propaganda sickened Trendaul. “I’m not so sure anymore.” He held his arm out to his wife, hoping she would come to him.

Teri took his hand and allowed him to draw her into his lap. “Then you’re more convinced than ever that Zarr has a telepathic hold on her mind.”

“Yes,” he whispered, laying his head against her neck. How could he, of all people, have allowed this monster to violate his own daughter?

“You’re certain she can fight it?” She didn’t sound certain. Trendaul was relieved he could give her hope on that level at least.

“Absolutely. She just doesn’t want to.” Trendaul couldn’t understand why Sara didn’t want to fight the bond. What was it about Eden that so enamored her? Or was it Benjamin and Barbara Carroll and their accomplished, beautiful family she was in love with?

Teri stroked Trendaul’s hair, ever so gently, almost tentatively. “Perhaps it’s time to give her a reason to want to.”

Trendaul knew what it had cost Teri to say those words. She couldn’t help but be afraid for him and for their family. He looked up and gazed into those brown eyes that had always been so exotic and yet so familiar. “You didn’t want me to ‘give her a reason to want to’ this afternoon.”

“Of course I didn’t. The thought of it scares me to death.”

It terrified Trendaul. In her present state of mind, Sara might tell anyone. “I shouldn’t tell her anything. I still have a mission to finish.”

Teri reached for the dresser and a tissue to blow her nose. “A mission you may never be able to finish anyway.”

Panic gripped Trendaul. “Don’t say that.” What had happened to his compatriots? Why hadn’t anyone contacted him? If he relocated, they might not have time to find him and seven years’ worth of work would be lost. Even so, he dared not wait longer than the end of the year to move his family to a temple community, either the one surrounding the Washington, D.C. Temple or the one supporting the temple in Kansas City, where his wife’s family resided.

Trendaul knew it was only a matter of time before the countries of the Earth united to form the Federation of Earth Nations, with Zarr’s Holy Nation of the Son of God as the presiding nation. Most Earthons believed that submitting to the leadership of this benevolent alien nation, whose knowledge and experience was so much greater than theirs, would enable their planet to take its rightful position in the interstellar community in the least amount of time, gaining them unimaginable wealth, influence, and new technology.

Once the United States became the first nation to give up its sovereignty to join Zarr’s empire-disguised-as-an-innocuous-federation, all of those who shunned the Zarrists would be in danger of being labeled as traitors and be killed . . . or worse. Trendaul wanted to be safe inside a temple community long before that happened.

Teri slid off of Trendaul’s lap. “If you don’t tell Sara about her heritage and she goes to Eden, we’ll both regret it forever.”

Trendaul knew Teri was right. “Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure you want me to do this?”

“We have no other choice.”

“Oh, I can think of a great many choices.”

Teri headed toward the bathroom. “Go now, before I change my mind.”

“She’s probably asleep.”

Teri spun around to face him again, her fists on her hips. “Go! Or I’ll tell her myself!”

Chapter 2: THE LIBRARIAN

Trendaul sat at the top of the steps with his head in his hand at least five minutes before he gained the courage to knock on Sara's bedroom door. "Please, Father," he said under his breath, closing his eyes for an extra moment when he blinked. "Help me."

The door opened slightly, and Sara peered out with a scowl. "If you're here to reprimand me for going to Eden, I'm not interested."

This was going to be a long night, and seminary class would come all too early in the morning. "It isn't that." He tried to add, "Not exactly," but his voice froze.

Sara had inherited his straight black hair and his family's height, but her eyes, the velvety blue of morning glories, had come from Krista. Sara's features, smooth and lively like those of a little girl, softened into an expression so like Krista's that Trendaul's apprehension melted. He could hear Sara's finger scratching the back of the door. "Then what?"

Teri was right. He had to tell her. Krista would have told her. "I have something . . . critical . . . to tell you."

The door squeaked as Sara widened it. She wore nylon shorts and a Kansas City Royals T-shirt sent by her grandparents with the sleeves cut off and the crew collar cut out. Trendaul couldn't refrain from laughing. Sara was such an Orioles fan that to wear the shirt at all, even to bed, probably made her feel like a traitor.

Sara rolled her eyes and threw up her arms. "Stop laughing at my shirt!" She turned and walked to her bed.

Trendaul followed her into the room, closing the door behind him. He sat down on her bed, glancing at the art posters attached to the walls. Krista had chosen the first few posters, and Sara added new ones to the collection every time she visited an area art gallery. Such a visible reminder of Krista gave him strength.

Sara slid under her quilt, which Teri had constructed long ago from the fabric of old jeans, and pulled it to her chin. Thankfully she was smiling. Trendaul knew that if he didn't tell her now, he never would. "Do you remember how Josh, when he was about ten, used to claim that he had been adopted? That he was really from Mars?"

Sara chuckled. "How could I forget something so endearingly silly?"

"It was endearingly silly. And it was also relatively close to being true." He couldn't count how often he and Teri had laughed at the irony.

Sara became very still. "You mean he really was adopted? Does that mean that I—"

"No. Neither one of you were adopted. But Josh was right about one point." Trendaul hoped the tone of his voice wasn't too mischievous. "His father is an alien."

Sara burst out laughing. Trendaul laughed too. He couldn't have delivered that line in a serious tone if someone had held a laser to his back. It really did sound ridiculous.

"I guess now I have an excuse not to listen to you," Sara teased. "I wouldn't want to go against the counsel of the prophet."

As if she needed an excuse! "The prophet has only told us not to have contact with Zarr and his people. He's never said anything about Novaunians."

"Zarrists . . . Novaunians . . . what's the difference?"

All desire for lightheartedness fled. "The primary difference is that Novaunians worship Christ. The Zarrists worship an anti-Christ."

Sara stared at him in astonishment. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Does Mom know?"

“Yes, of course. I told her long before we were married. Your grandparents know too.”

Sara’s gaze found its way to the reproduction of “Young Mother Sewing,” by Mary Cassatt. “And my real mother?”

“She was a Novaunian also.”

Sara looked away, attempting to absorb this new information.

“Coming to Earth, in fact, was your mother’s idea.” Trendaul decided to leave it at that. Sara would ask the questions she wanted answered.

Finally Sara’s gaze met his. “Then I have no Earth blood at all running through my veins.”

“None whatsoever.”

“Why did you wait so long to tell me?”

Trendaul detected strain in her voice. Was she angry? Betrayed? Or simply curious?

“Because I couldn’t take the chance that you might inadvertently tell someone.”

“Which means you’re in a certain amount of danger.”

Trendaul had longed for years to live as a Novaunian openly. “I’m in a considerable amount of danger. If Tohmazz Zarr finds out who I am, he’ll kill me.”

“Oh, that’s ridiculous! He’s no murderer!”

“All right. He’s no murderer. He would try to ‘cleansed’ 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.”

Sara relaxed against the back of the bed and folded her arms. “Are your people at war, then, with Zarr’s people?”

“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.” Or at least he believed they were still at war. A lot could have changed in twenty years. He had no doubt, though, that Zarr and his people were Dirons.

Sara’s eyes shone with fascination. “So what do they supposedly steal?”

“Arelada. The Dirons call it spirit crystal.”

“It’s that strange, slightly luminous crystal they all wear in their clothing and jewelry, isn’t it? Why is it so valuable?”

“It makes telepathy possible. With telepathy, Zarr is able to create mind bonds with people who hear him speak.”

Sara frowned. “What do you mean?”

Trendaul tried to keep his explanation simple. “When Zarr speaks, he uses a telepathic process to expand his spirit to embrace all who are listening. It makes the listeners feel wonderful, as if they’re communicating with God. Through this process, Zarr telepathically gains control of one brain cell. With this bond, the listener then becomes vulnerable to Zarr’s telepathic suggestions.”

Sara shook her head quickly. “But that doesn’t make any sense! If arelada is required for telepathic communication, how can Zarr mind-bond with people like me who don’t have arelada? ”

“Arelada is required to transmit thoughts and to expand one’s spirit. To receive thoughts, however, all a person has to do is open his mind.”

“Have you heard Zarr speak?”

Trendaul could hear the accusation in her voice. “No, I haven’t.” He could have listened to Tohmazz Zarr speak without being affected, and he would have gained much useful information for Novaun by attending a speech, but he refused to live a double standard with his

children. "The process I described is an old one and illegal on most planets." The old Latanzan monarchy had been overthrown many centuries ago for using it on its citizens, and there had been a time, over a thousand years ago, when Gudynean parents had used it to keep their children obedient.

"So what makes you think Zarr uses it?"

"Because it's the only thing I can think of that explains why he has gained such an enormous following among such diverse people in such a short period of time."

"Well, he has *not* used it on me!"

"You did hear him speak," Trendaul said gingerly. If he made her angry now, he might never regain her attention. "Your mother found the base ship key ring."

"All right. I have heard him speak. Who hasn't? He doesn't control my mind."

Trendaul shook his head. Too quickly, perhaps. He wanted too much to pacify her. "No, of course he doesn't. You're no Eslavu who has had her mind drained. If he has created a telepathic bond with you, he has certainly gained significant influence over you, but he can't force you to do anything. You can fight it."

"You think he has, don't you? That's why you're telling me all of this stuff now." The pitch of Sara's voice rose and the color of her cheeks changed from milk-white to pink. "You think you can use this new information to persuade me to stay home. How dare you!"

"Listen to yourself, Sara!" She would hear the truth before she ordered him out of her room. "I tell you that both you and I are of Novaunian race, and instead of asking me why I came to Earth or what kind of planet Novaun is, the only topic you want to discuss is Tohmazz Zarr. What am I supposed to think?"

"Why did you come to Earth?" Sara demanded, as if embarking on an interrogation.

Trendaul didn't like Sara's tone, but he wanted her to know something of himself and Novaun. "To telepathically record Earth's most significant records. My job was to record the obscure material. Your mother recorded documents from the local libraries and the Internet."

He could see that his explanation made sense to her. She and the other children, along with almost everyone else he knew, had always believed he was an employee of the Library of Congress. She rolled her eyes. "Which explains why you always think you know so much."

Trendaul chose to ignore that statement. "On Novaun, people with my particular telepathic skills are called librarians. Your real mother was a librarian also. We studied together."

"Will you ever go back to Novaun?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"I haven't had contact with another Novaunian for many years."

"Can't you just send thought waves to Novaun and tell them you want to go home?"

Trendaul shook his head. "It would take many people to transmit a message over that distance and far more arelada than I possess."

The interrogation act disappeared for a moment. Sara leaned toward him, her eyes widening. "You actually have some arelada? May I see it?"

Trendaul again shook his head. "I put it in a safe box when the Zarrists arrived."

She smirked. "Did Novaun forget about you?"

Trendaul was determined not to let her provoke him. "Not likely."

"Then why doesn't someone come and offer you a ride home?"

"The presence of Tohmazz Zarr's fleet in Earth's space territory makes that more difficult." Still, it wouldn't be impossible. What was keeping his compatriots?

“Why did Novaun send you here secretly? Why didn’t the Novaunians make public contact with Earth twenty years ago?”

“Since Earth is on the verge of passing into terrestrial glory, Novaun doesn’t see a need to ever have dealings with it in any kind of official way.”

After living on Earth for twenty years, Trendaul believed Novaun’s policy was naïve. A race that preferred to stroll along the scenic route to the grocery store could not possibly understand a race that sprinted to the exotic unknown at light speed. Earth would make its mark in space before God took it back into His presence, like an explosion in the night sky on the Fourth of July. And if a significant number of natives became proficient in telepathy, Earth would become especially volatile. Trendaul could only pray that the Novaunian government realized Earth’s potential as a destructive force before too many good Fleet men lost their lives.

“Novaunians know the prophecies?” Sara asked in surprise.

“Yes, of course. The Council of Prophets canonized the Standard Works of the Church several decades ago. The New Testament, in particular, is precious to us.”

“So Novaunians believe that the Savior visited them after His resurrection in the same way He visited the Nephites on the American Continent.”

“Yes, but He *didn’t* take a Novaunian bride and with His perfect, glorified body father a dynasty of so-called divine emperors!” Trendaul shuddered at the thought. Tohmazz Zarr’s claim was as disgusting as it was preposterous, and he couldn’t blame the Dirons for throwing the Zarrists out of power.

“I know the Zarrists have their faults, but you’ll have to admit, they are fascinating. And they have a lot to offer.”

“They offer telepathic slavery. Is that what you want?”

“Zarr and his people have been here for more than three years. If they really are so dangerous, why hasn’t Novaun changed its policy about official contact and warned us?”

Why was she so determined to discredit Novaun? Was that the mind bond as well? “The Brethren, along with perceptive people of other belief systems, have been warning us about Zarr ever since he arrived. If Earthons refuse to listen to the prophet and other leaders in their respective communities, why should they listen to the Novaunians?”

“Why didn’t Novaun stop Zarr and his people from making contact?”

“I doubt Novaun even knew Zarr made contact until well after it happened.”

“Couldn’t Novaun have stationed a fleet here to guard us?”

“Even Novaun has a limit to its resources.”

“Doesn’t Novaun care that this supposedly evil anti-Christ is taking advantage of a planet too primitive to fight back?”

“Novaunians do what they can to help other races, but they can’t be everywhere all the time and they don’t even try. They do take comfort in the knowledge that God will warn His other children of danger in the ways best suited to them. They assume Earthons are smart enough to listen to those warnings.” Trendaul knew Sara would take his statement as a personal attack, but it was the truth.

Sara glared at him. “Obviously, Novaun cares quite a bit less about Earth than Zarr’s Holy Nation does. Novaun only observes, while Zarr and his people work hard to help us into space.”

“Zarr’s motives are far from altruistic, I assure you.”

“And Novaun’s motives seem even less altruistic.”

Trendaul winced to hear Novaun so ignorantly attacked. “How can I make you understand? Novaun is a great Union of over two thousand planets. It’s Zion on a galactic level. Novaun

isn't perfect, but it's achieved a level of righteousness as a society beyond anything you've ever dreamed of."

"Then you're even more of a hypocrite than I thought you were."

What bitter irony! The information Trendaul had hoped would change Sara's mind was making her more determined than ever. He mentally chastised himself for not anticipating that twist.

"You've been telling me for months that I shouldn't go to Eden, and now I find out that you left your home planet—not just any planet, but a Zion planet—when you were about my age and haven't been back since."

"I did not leave Novaun against the counsel of the High Prophet." The argument always seemed to come back to that.

"But you did leave your family, perhaps for the rest of your mortal life. How could you do that?"

"My mission here was only supposed to last ten years. When the convoy came back to Earth ten years ago, your mother wasn't ready to leave her family yet. To be honest, I wasn't ready to leave either. I'm still not sure I want to return to Novaun." As much as he missed his family, he wasn't sure he could give up his freedom, or the temple, or the feeling that Earth needed him far more than Novaun did.

"Why not?"

A true answer to that question would have taken all night, so Trendaul gave his daughter the shortened version. "I like working in the temple too much."

"There aren't any temples on Novaun?"

"On the contrary. Our houses of worship are large and individually designed, and there are sacred rooms in every one of them to do the higher ordinances. Novaunians do live ordinances, but there is no work to do for the dead. It's all been done."

"No way!"

Trendaul nodded. "It's true."

"If Novaun is so righteous, why hasn't it been taken into heaven like the City of Enoch?"

"It will help you to think of the most misquoted scripture in the Church."

"'Unto whom much is given much is required?'"

Trendaul nodded. "Novaun has been given some interesting blessings that haven't been given to Earth. Obviously Novaunians haven't, as a race, done everything that is required of them yet."

"What interesting blessings?"

"First of all, while still in our premortal state, we didn't have a War in Heaven. We had a Great Debate. While one out of three spirits assigned to be born on Earth were cast out of Heaven with Lucifer, only one out of a hundred spirits assigned to be born on Novaun were cast out with the spirit we call Perdition."

Sara opened her mouth to respond but couldn't; she was completely speechless.

"Adam and Eve were commanded to multiply and replenish the earth. Novaun's first parents were commanded to multiply and replenish the galaxy."

Sara finally found her voice. "That's bizarre!"

Trendaul smiled. "You see, I really am an alien."

"If I really am a Novaunian spirit, doesn't that mean my desire to help colonize another planet is natural and right?"

She was too quick, and Trendaul immediately wished he hadn't told her about Novaun's first parents. Then again, perhaps if he had revealed their Novaunian heritage long ago, he

would have satisfied her innate curiosity and she wouldn't have felt a need to seek out Tohmazz Zarr. "Your desire is natural, I'll concede that, but the way you're going about satisfying that desire is wrong."

"In your opinion."

"No. In the Lord's opinion."

"You are not the Lord!"

"No, but the prophet speaks for the Lord, and he has told us all to remain on Earth."

"If he feels so strongly about it, why is he going to organize us into a ward?"

"In my *opinion*, the Church is organizing the Eden Colony into a ward instead of excommunicating its leaders because it wants to give those who go to Eden a chance to repent. Once Eden is cut off from Zion, repentance will be difficult, if not impossible without the official presence of the Church. I can only assume the Church believes most of the colonists will follow Carroll to Eden even if he is excommunicated."

"That's an interesting theory. And very presumptuous."

Her smugness and stupidity hurt him. How could this be his sweet little Sara? "The bishop won't be Benjamin Carroll or any of his cohorts," Trendaul said wryly, "but will be a man who is a true spiritual giant in every sense of the word. He'll have to be." How the Church hoped to find such a man among the colonists, Trendaul had no idea.

Trendaul stood to leave. "I know my opinion doesn't matter much to you, but there it is." She only wanted to argue, and he was sick of it.

Sara's face blanched and tightened, as if she wanted to scream. She stared at him with wide, glistening eyes, then lowered her head and rested her hand against her forehead.

"Goodnight," Trendaul said coolly as he turned and headed toward the door. Expecting her to respond with a disrespectful remark, he was surprised instead to hear a restrained little gasp. He turned toward her again and asked quietly, "What's the matter?"

She shook her head quickly, refusing to answer.

Trendaul couldn't help but feel irritated. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed to respond calmly, "I'd really like to know."

When Sara lifted her head, Trendaul could see that her eyes were filled with tears. "Your opinion does matter to me."

Sara's reply didn't make sense, but Trendaul knew it was sincere. He gazed at her blankly, trying to understand. She averted her eyes in embarrassment.

Several moments passed before he could reconcile Sara's concern about his opinion with her determination to go to Eden against his wishes. He came to the conclusion that Sara's decision to go to Eden had been final for many months. The arguments since then had done nothing to persuade her to change her mind, but they had chipped away at the security she had always felt in his love.

The decision took hold of him with such immediacy that he didn't have time to feel frightened. "I understand why you want to go to Eden." She looked up at him again cautiously as he continued, "I think you're wrong to go, but if it means anything to you, I believe your spiritual state is more one of confusion than apostasy, at least for now."

Sara's eyebrows shot up. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"I guess that's up to you. I can't in any way approve of what you're doing, but I won't fight you anymore." It would be difficult, but she would leave knowing he loved her.

Sara's face softened in shock. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. I can't speak for your mother, but I will talk to her."

Sara almost smiled. "It won't do any good."

"Perhaps she'll surprise you." Trendaul rested his hand on the doorknob. Before he could open the door to leave, he heard Sara speak again, her tone of voice tentative.

"Dad?"

Trendaul turned toward her one more time. "Yes?"

Her face was pale and her eyes were troubled. "If I weren't going to Eden, and you were going back to Novaun, what would I do?"

"I would hope with my whole soul that you would come with me."

"And if I decided to stay here?"

"I would be heartbroken. And yet . . ." Trendaul shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about you. Not very much, anyway. You would have David and the rest of your mother's family to watch out for you."

Sara picked at her quilt. Many moments passed before she asked, "What would someone like me do on Novaun?"

Hope trickled through Trendaul. She was asking questions. She was interested in Novaun. Maybe there was a chance, after all, that she would give up her Eden quest. "If we were to return to Novaun, our first priority would be education, not just yours but that of your mother and your brothers and sisters as well. We would also, undoubtedly, spend a lot of time with my family. My mother, in fact, (and my aunts, and my sisters!) would probably want to introduce you to lots of people your own age." Trendaul smiled, but not too broadly. He didn't want to anger her again. "There would be young men galore. A virtual feast."

Trendaul hoped Sara would laugh, but she cringed instead, as if the suggestion pained her. "A feast of Novaunian men . . . that sounds absurd."

Trendaul chuckled a little, nodding. "The women in my family wouldn't be able to help themselves, you understand. Most young women there are married by the time they're your age."

Her eyes grew huge. "Really?"

"Your mother and I were married when we were twenty, and we weren't completely typical. We had known each other all our lives and could have easily been married a year or two sooner."

"Why weren't you?"

Trendaul shrugged. "We were idiots."

Sara finally laughed. "You mean you couldn't make up your mind!"

Trendaul nodded, feeling a sense of peace he hadn't felt in months. "We were so comfortable together we didn't realize how much we loved each other."

"You really were an idiot!"

Trendaul nodded again and decided to make his exit quickly, while Sara was in a pleasant mood. "Goodnight, sweetie. I love you."

Sara couldn't stop laughing. "I love you too, Dad."

* * *

"What happened?" Teri demanded as soon as Trendaul closed their bedroom door behind him.

"She's going to Eden, or at least she's *planning* to go to Eden. I think there's still a chance she may change her mind, but we have to stop pressuring her. I promised her I wouldn't make any more attempts to persuade her to stay. I told her I would ask you to do the same."

“You can’t be serious. How could she still believe she should go after everything you told her?”

“I actually made it worse. She now believes she’s following in my footsteps.”

“But your coming to Earth wasn’t the same at all.”

“It was the same, in some ways.”

“Not in the important ways.”

“No, but she won’t see that. Teri, we can’t let her leave thinking we hate her. We both have to make a determined effort to be kind to her.”

“Be kind to her? I’d like to strangle her!”

“I know it will be difficult, but we have to do everything in our power to make her last week-and-a-half here as pleasant as possible.”

“So you’re going to let her go. Just like that. Have you lost your—?” Teri stopped herself and regarded him with interest. “So you made this decision. Just like that.”

Of course she was as intrigued as Sara had been amused only minutes before. Both Teri and Sara knew that he never made a decision without agonizing over it for weeks or even months. “It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

“Is it the right thing to do or isn’t it?”

“It is.”

Teri smiled at him with renewed respect. “Then I’ll support you in it.”

Teri’s trust had always amazed Trendaul. Love surged through him and he drew her into his arms. As she pressed closer, caressing his jaw with her lips, he whispered, “I’m going to regret my decision.”

“You always do.”

Chapter 3: DOUBTS AND DREAMS

While Sara was at work at the health club the next day, her bishop called and told her he wanted to meet with her that evening in his office. She went, of course, as she had often in the past several months, but she knew it would be a waste of both her time and the bishop's. Bishop Eric Lanham was a good man who was trying to do the right thing, but he just didn't understand. The two of them simply weren't on the same planet.

During their first interview, while she was in the process of interviewing with Dr. Carroll and other key people, Bishop Lanham had read one of the prophet's recent talks with her and asked, "Do you believe the prophet speaks for the Lord?"

"Yes, I do. He gives us general advice from the Lord that we must adapt to our individual situations by going to the Lord ourselves."

"Our prophet and apostles have warned us repeatedly not to have contact with the Zarrists. Don't you think it would be safer to follow this counsel than not?"

"Of course the Lord, through the Brethren, counsels this. Zarr claims to be Divine, a direct descendant of the resurrected Christ. Most members simply can't handle that kind of attack on their testimonies. I know Zarr's claims are preposterous. For those of us who are strong enough to handle it, there is no danger."

"Which is why you are now a supporter of Zarr."

"You are mistaken. I don't support Zarr. But I do understand that he poses no danger and am not afraid of him."

"What if he really is dangerous? Then wouldn't your lack of fear be misguided?"

"Absolutely."

"He is dangerous, Sara. The Lord has said it Himself through His prophet. I know this is true. True for me, true for you, true for everyone."

The last time Sara had talked with Bishop Lanham, he had presented her with an absurd situation. "You are engaged and feel very strongly that you should be intimate with your fiancé before you marry him. Would this strong feeling be from God?"

"Of course not!"

"Why not?"

"Because sex without marriage is wrong."

"Even if the Lord reveals to you that, in this case, since you will be getting married anyway, it's all right?"

"The Lord wouldn't tell anyone that."

"Why?"

"Because it's never right."

"How do you know?"

"The scriptures say so. The prophets have said so. Common sense says so."

"Then where does this intense feeling come from?"

"A person who thinks she should be intimate with her fiancé before she marries him would be mistaking her own intense desire for intimacy for the Spirit."

"So what the prophet has said about sex transcends any strong personal desires or drives we may have?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

"But what he says about avoiding contact with the Zarrists and remaining on Earth to build up Zion does not?"

"No, because there is nothing inherently wrong with colonizing space."

“There’s nothing inherently wrong with sex either, but the Lord does set some basic boundaries for its practice, just as He has set boundaries for space colonization.”

The bishop was comparing space colonization with sex? Now Sara had heard everything! “I can’t believe we’re having this discussion.”

“Do you understand the comparison or don’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Isn’t it possible, Sara, that you’re mistaking your own strong desire to go to Eden as inspiration?”

No. She and Bishop Lanham were not on the same planet. They weren’t even in the same solar system!

For some odd reason, both of Sara’s parents always insisted on being with her at the stake center when she had an interview with Bishop Lanham. They rarely exchanged more than a few words with the bishop before and after these meetings; they merely sat in the foyer and waited.

This evening was no different. Bishop Lanham, an attorney in his early thirties, stepped into the foyer, dressed in a gray pinstriped suit, his teal tie lying neatly against his starched shirt. He shook hands with Sara and her parents and motioned her into his office.

“I have something interesting to share with you, Sara,” he said pleasantly as he closed the door behind them.

Sara moved a chair closer to the desk and sat down. “What? Have you looked into your crystal ball and seen Parkridge’s victory against Urbana tomorrow night?” She knew as well as he did that Urbana was supposed to win the football game, but she couldn’t resist teasing him.

Bishop Lanham sat down behind his desk. “The Panthers will be Hawk food!”

“I understand the Hawks got a taste of Owl last week.”

“The Hawks *feasted* on Owl last week,” the bishop corrected. “Those Westminster boys didn’t have a chance. Will Josh be conducting the band tomorrow night?”

“Who else?”

“We’ll definitely have to drive over for the game then.” Bishop Lanham removed a sheet of paper from his desk and handed it to Sara.

She took it from him in curiosity, seeing immediately that it was a letter from the First Presidency, a longer letter than she had received in the mail the day before. “Is this why you wanted to see me tonight?”

“It is. I’ve been instructed to read and discuss this letter with you.”

“The Eden Colony is getting a ward, you know,” Sara announced, feeling vindicated.

“I know, but it doesn’t matter. Let’s have a prayer, and then I’ll read and you follow along.”

The letter started by reiterating the prophet’s counsel to shun contact with the Zarrists, remain on Earth, and gather to temple communities under the direction of their respective bishops and stake presidents.

As Bishop Lanham read, Sara couldn’t help but believe that members of the Church would actually be more independent from the Zarrists on Eden. The colonists were obviously following the prophet’s counsel in that regard.

“In Doctrine and Covenants section 101, verses 20 and 22 it says: ‘And, behold, there is none other place appointed than that which I have appointed; neither shall there be any other place appointed than that which I have appointed, for the work of the gathering of my saints—

‘Behold, it is my will, that all they who call on my name, and worship me according to mine everlasting gospel, should gather together, and stand in holy places;’”

Sara wanted to shout: “But we are gathering, to the most beautiful, holy place we know of!” Didn’t the fact that the Lord was organizing a ward there prove it was an official gathering place of some kind?

The bishop went on: “The planet called Eden has not been designated by the Lord as a gathering place and is, therefore, not entitled to the blessings of Zion.”

What blessings? Sara wondered. Protection? Surely the Lord wouldn’t abandon them. They were, after all, doing the best they could to serve him.

“The Lord proclaims in D&C 1:14: ‘And the arm of the Lord shall be revealed; and the day cometh that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be cut off from among the people;’”

Sara knew, without a doubt, that the colonists had every intention of following the prophet and apostles, or would, as long as the prophet didn’t abandon them! Was it possible the prophet had misunderstood Dr. Carroll’s vision? Evidently the Lord hadn’t, otherwise He wouldn’t have directed the prophet to organize the colonists into a ward!

Bishop Lanham concluded reading the letter. “We fear that if you follow through with your plan to establish a colony on Eden, you will be putting yourselves in danger, both physically and spiritually. The Lord needs every one of you to do your part to build Zion here on Earth. We urge you to give up your imprudent quest for a colony on Eden.

“Your brethren of the First Presidency.”

Sara set her copy of the letter on Bishop Lanham’s desk. The letter, from a certain perspective, did counsel the colonists to remain on Earth. The Spirit, however, had strongly manifested to her that her life’s mission lay on Eden. Sara concluded that the Lord had plans for Eden He hadn’t yet revealed to the prophet.

Bishop Lanham looked solemnly up from his copy of the letter. “What are you thinking about right now, Sara?”

“I’m wondering why the prophet would counsel so strongly against going to Eden and yet still organize the colony into a ward.”

“Let me ask you this. Does the Lord approve of divorce?”

“Sometimes.”

“As a general principle.”

“No. The New Testament teaches that clearly enough, and we do believe in eternal marriage.”

“So you and I both agree the Lord would prefer all married couples to live their lives together in such a way that they would never want to divorce.”

Sara nodded thoughtfully.

“If this is the case, why does the Lord allow the Church to recognize divorce?”

“Because we live in such an imperfect world and sometimes divorce, as bad as it is, is better than the alternative.”

“It’s my opinion that the prophet is organizing the Eden Colony Ward because such an action is better than the alternative.”

“Which would be excommunicating Dr. Carroll and allowing the colony to fend for itself?” Sara understood what the bishop was driving at, but going to Eden to create Zion was hardly the same as getting a divorce.

“Would you follow Dr. Carroll to Eden if he were excommunicated?”

Dr. Carroll had put all of his professional and spiritual expertise into planning the Eden community, his whole heart and soul, and for this he would be excommunicated? The mere

thought of it enraged Sara. “This is hardly an issue since Dr. Carroll has *not* been excommunicated!”

“How do you know?”

Sara clenched her fists on the desk in front of her. “The Church does *not* excommunicate righteous men!”

“It isn’t my intention to make you angry, Sara,” Bishop Lanham said gently, leaning toward her a little. “But I do want you to understand that the Church might have taken action against Dr. Carroll that you wouldn’t know about.”

“I can’t help it. I *am* angry.” Feeling guilty for being angry with her bishop, a leader she had been taught her whole life to support and respect, Sara forced herself to breathe deeply and relax her muscles, regaining some of her composure. “I’m sorry. I know you’re trying to help me, but you just don’t understand.”

“Perhaps it would help if I explain the Church’s policy regarding people who have contact with Tohmazz Zarr.”

“Yes,” Sara replied, her anger dissipating. “I would like to know the official policy and how it applies to Dr. Carroll and the Eden Colony.”

“You already know that few, if any, members who have contact with Zarr and his people are excommunicated or even disfellowshipped, even those who are vocal supporters such as Dr. Carroll and his wife. What you may not know, however, is that as stakes are dissolved, the records of those who have not consecrated their wealth and moved into a temple community are sent to Salt Lake. These people may choose to attend services in a temple community, but they are not official members of a ward and will not have callings or be actively fellowshipped.”

What the bishop described made sense. “So a person who doesn’t choose to join a temple community basically cuts himself off from the Church, not the other way around.”

“Precisely. As far as I know, the only exception to this is when a person is in a situation such as your uncle at the Naval Academy.”

Sara nodded that she understood. David had no choice but to live on campus. The Annapolis Stake had been dissolved the previous June, and he and the other LDS midshipmen were assigned to a singles ward in the Silver Spring Stake, the easternmost stake in the Washington, D.C. Temple Community.

“Until our stake is dissolved, I, as a bishop, have been instructed to work with members who are sympathetic to Zarr’s cause to persuade them to see their error. One of the first steps we’re taking with those who are less active, of course, is encouraging them to attend church. As for those who are active, I’m counseled to release them from leadership positions and deny them temple recommends and impose other types of probation.”

“You’re suggesting Dr. Carroll may not have a current temple recommend? That’s absurd!”

“I don’t know what Dr. Carroll’s status is. I’m not his bishop or his stake president. That’s my point. I don’t know and neither do you. Frankly, you can’t assume that even a bishop always knows a ward member’s worthiness; people have been known to lie to their bishops about all kinds of things.”

“Really?” Sara said, stunned. “Why? I mean, what’s the point of being a member of the Church if you’re going to lie?”

“There are people who are more worried about appearing righteous than being righteous. You cannot assume a person is following a correct course just because he or she acts like an active member of the Church, nor can you assume the same if you haven’t heard a public

announcement that he or she has been excommunicated. The Church isn't going to excommunicate every person who may preach false doctrine to you or who would lead you down a wrong path. Ultimately, the Lord expects you to be spiritually discerning and take responsibility for recognizing and rejecting false doctrine and those who preach it on your own."

Sara stared absently over Bishop Lanham's shoulder at the picture of Jesus Christ, twisting one of the buttons on her long black skirt. Lying to the bishop was like lying to the Lord. Did active members of the Church really do that? Some must. Bishop Lanham wouldn't tell her something like that if it weren't true.

"Will you promise to do something for me, Sara?" Bishop Lanham said softly.

Sara focused on the bishop again. His gray-blue eyes gazed at her as if he could see right through her. "I don't know. It depends."

Bishop Lanham tapped Sara's copy of the letter they had read. "Will you commit to study this letter and pray about it?"

Sara nodded. She wanted to read the letter again anyway.

"And if after doing that you feel any doubts about going to Eden at all, will you promise to reconsider your decision?"

Again, Sara nodded. That much was self-evident.

"While you're pondering and praying about this letter, will you promise not to have contact with Dr. Carroll or any other member of the Eden Colony?"

Sara shook her head. "I don't think I can do that."

"Then can you commit to keep yourself from communicating with Dr. Carroll and all other members of the Eden Colony until next Tuesday?"

Sara hesitated. She and her three Eden Internet friends from the Baltimore-Washington area had dinner at Don Pablo's in Columbia every Saturday night, and Dr. Carroll usually joined them. She loved those dinners with her friends and didn't want to miss the one on Saturday.

"This is important, Sara. I believe you need time to think *alone*."

Finally Sara nodded. She could do that much for the bishop.

"Good," the bishop said, sounding relieved. "I'd like to meet with you again next Tuesday evening."

* * *

Sometimes Sara talked to her parents about her meetings on the drive back to Parkridge from Frederick, and sometimes she didn't. That evening she said nothing, preferring to think, and they didn't press her.

The bishop had received the letter they had read, but it had been addressed to her personally. This was detailed counsel directed specifically to her. Could it be that she really was wrong to go to Eden? That she was interpreting her own desires as the Spirit? Was it possible Dr. Carroll had lost his temple recommend or was on some other sort of probation? She didn't like the doubts this particular interview with her bishop had put into her mind.

When Sara and her parents returned home, Sara bade them good night and went to bed. Once in her room, Sara kicked off her shoes, stepped out of her skirt, and sat on her bed, crossing her legs in front of her and leaning her elbows into the sides of her knees. Her mind churned in confusion. She read the letter again and again, looking up the scriptures it referred to and reading entire chapters of the Doctrine and Covenants. *Heavenly Father, I just want to*

have a successful life and do what is right for me, and I can't help but feel Dr. Carroll's Equality of Zion is the perfect answer. Please tell me what to do!

The phone rang and Sara jumped. She grabbed the phone before it could wake anyone up and put it to her ear. "Tony, I can't talk to you."

"You don't have to talk. Just listen."

"I can't even listen. I'll talk to you in a few days. I made a promise to my bishop."

"I talked to my bishop tonight too. That's the problem. I'm having second thoughts."

"Tony, I promised!" She hung up and dropped the phone on her bed, jumping up to put on her shorts and Royals shirt. Thinking about Tony Wright made her wish she hadn't made that promise to the bishop. Tony was as confused as she was, and she had hung up on him. Still, what else could she have done?

Deciding she needed to talk to Tony as much as he seemed to need to talk to her, she picked up the phone again and punched in the number for information. Within a minute, she had Bishop Lanham's number and was punching it frantically into the phone. His wife answered.

"Uh . . ." Sara said, feeling ridiculous, "I need—I mean, may I speak with the bishop? This is Sara. Sara Alexander." Sara winced. How weak! Why in the galaxy was she doing this? She was nothing more than a silly girl who couldn't keep a promise for more than two hours, and the poor man needed to sleep.

Eventually Sara heard Bishop Lanham's voice in her ear. "What can I do for you, Sara?"

"One of my Eden friends called. Apparently he's been talking to his bishop also and is now having second thoughts. He wanted to talk about it, but I hung up on him. I want to talk to him too, but, you know, I promised."

"And you want me to give you permission to call him back." Bishop Lanham sounded amused, in a nice way, and Sara felt more ridiculous than ever.

"I guess. Yes. It was rude of me to hang up on him and he's as confused as I am, so certainly there couldn't be any harm in talking to him."

"Who is this friend of yours?"

"Tony Wright. He's from Gaithersburg, and his family is now in Bethesda. I met him in Dr. Carroll's chat room online several months ago. Tony and I and the other two students from this area, Jordan Tressler and Marc McCabe, have dinner together in Columbia every Saturday evening."

"Do you want to call Jordan and Marc also?"

"No, actually I don't."

"If you talk to Tony tonight, will you encourage him to stay on Earth or go to Eden?"

"Neither. We're both confused. I think we would talk about our confusion."

"And you feel such a discussion would be productive?"

Sara leaned her head into her hand and rubbed her temples with her thumb and middle two fingers. "No. You're right. Such a discussion would just muddle things more."

"Why don't you e-mail Tony and apologize for hanging up on him. Tell him you need time alone to think and that you'll get back to him in a few days."

Sara nodded, even though she knew the bishop couldn't see her. "I could do that."

"Perhaps both of you will decide, on your own, to stay home. After the Eden transport leaves Earth, you can take him to a Navy football game."

Sara laughed a little, releasing her head and looking up at the ceiling. "He's a die-hard University of Maryland fan. I'm not sure he would want to go see the Midshipmen when he could watch or listen to the Terps."

“He’s a student at Maryland, then?”

“Was. He finished his undergraduate degree last spring.”

“I think even a die-hard Maryland fan would get a thrill seeing David Pierce lead the Brigade of Midshipmen onto the field.”

“He probably would,” Sara conceded, “if he knew David.”

“You haven’t introduced this good friend of yours to David?”

The bishop’s tone carried no hint of reprimand, but Sara felt reprimanded all the same. “No,” she said quietly. “I haven’t introduced any of my Eden friends to my family. And I haven’t told my family about my Eden friends.”

“Perhaps you should.”

“Perhaps I will.” Sara felt guilty. Her parents knew she spent time online talking to Dr. Carroll and the other people who were going to Eden, but they didn’t approve. They so disapproved, in fact, that they had blocked Dr. Carroll’s web site, along with all others connected with the Zarrists, on their own computer network. The only way around their stupid ban was to pay for her own wireless Internet service. Her parents didn’t like the fact she kept in contact with the other Eden colonists this way, but there wasn’t much they could do about it short of kicking her out of the house. “Thank you, Bishop. I’m sorry to bother you.”

“Read D&C section 9 before you go to bed tonight, will you, Sara?”

“Well, why not?” Sara replied, feeling tense and mentally exhausted. What was one more section?

“That’s what you get for calling me after nine o’clock,” the bishop teased.

Sara couldn’t help but chuckle, releasing some of the tension she felt. “Thanks. Good night.”

Sara hung up and read section 9, lingering over verses 8 and 9: *But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong . . .*

What was the bishop trying to tell her? That her present confusion was “a stupor of thought?” Perhaps. Then again, how could it be? For months she had known she should go to Eden, known it because the burning in her bosom told her so. Then again, her father would say a mind bond was compelling her, not the Spirit, but he didn’t really know. She was his daughter, after all, intellectually and spiritually strong enough to resist such a bond, even if Tohmazz Zarr had attempted it, which she had a difficult time believing.

What was she supposed to do? The Spirit told her to go to Eden, and the prophet told her not to go. How was she supposed to reconcile these conflicting commands? Was her bishop right? Was this bewilderment she felt a “stupor of thought?” A sign that it really was wrong to go to Eden after all?

Sara forced herself to write a quick e-mail to Tony. She really did wish she could introduce Tony and her other Eden friends to her family. It wasn’t right that her Eden life and her family life were separate. Why did her parents have to be so dense?

And why did David? Her father had promised he wouldn’t fight her decision to go to Eden anymore, but David hadn’t and wouldn’t. They argued about it every time she saw him, and he was formidable. Now and then she believed life would be easier if she could just slip away and not see David again at all, but she couldn’t very well throw away her best friend in the world. She would see him again before she left if she had to take a Sunday afternoon and drive to Annapolis herself.

While Sara was online, she couldn't resist popping into Dr. Carroll's forbidden web site. She wouldn't chat with anyone, of course, but she could look at the family pictures for a few teeny tiny minutes. Her mind was too tired to work anymore and needed time to relax and dream.

The first pictures to greet Sara were recent portraits of Dr. Carroll and his wife. Dr. Carroll's sky-blue eyes exuded intelligence, spirituality, and friendliness, the smoothness of his skin, the fullness of his golden blond hair, and dimple in his right cheek displaying youthfulness, despite his age, which was forty-six. Sister Thomassen Carroll smiled in a self-assured way, her pale-blond hair cut in a pageboy with bangs, her warm pink blouse both business-like and feminine.

Below these portraits was a picture of them with their four children, all with various shades of blond hair and lush golden lashes. The Carrolls held themselves with elegance in their classic clothing. They were a family beautiful enough to grace the pages of the *Ensign* or an advertisement for Deseret Book.

Sara brought up the wedding picture of Dr. Carroll and his wife in front of the Oakland Temple. Dr. Carroll looked so much like Cameron in the wedding picture that she had to catch her breath every time she looked at it. His wife's wedding dress glittered in the sun, her hair long and gently curled under a wreath of white roses. There were childhood pictures of Cameron, Ashley, Brandon, and Adam and photographs of the family's gorgeous estate home in Greenwood, Maryland.

Adam and Brandon posed with their baseball teams. Brandon proudly stood with his parents at his Eagle court of honor. Ashley smiled for her senior picture, her eyes green like her mother's and her chin bearing a cleft like her father's. Her hair, like her mother's, was pale blond and cut in a pageboy. Her style, however, was flatter than her mother's, parted on the side, and angled at the jaw. Ashley had been the valedictorian of her high school graduating class and student body president. She had excelled in debate, drama, and choir, and played both the piano and the flute. Sara sometimes thought Ashley and Josh should have been friends. They were practically the same age and were interested in so many of the same things.

Sara casually moved from Ashley's photos and brief biography to Cameron's, forcing herself to maintain dignified restraint even in her solitude. There was a picture of him with his parents at his Eagle court of honor and one of him in a running suit with dozens of medals hanging from his extended arms and more hanging from his neck. There were prom and homecoming pictures, all with beautiful girls Sara recognized from his stake, and there was a photograph of him with his parents in front of the Columbia stake center, taken the day of his missionary farewell.

She examined the farewell picture more closely than she had the others, as she always did. It was odd. In it, Cameron wore the strangest expression she had ever seen on his face. His mouth curved into the tiniest of smiles, as if he didn't want to smile at all, and his eyes were feverish. He looked trapped. She had seen freedom and euphoria often enough on his face during his sprints that she thought she should be able to recognize the opposite. There was no doubt about it. In the farewell picture he looked caged and haunted, as if he didn't want to go on a mission at all.

Sara clicked on the hyperlink to a copy of one of the many e-mails Cameron had sent to his family from China. Since Cameron had been out well over a year and a half, there were many e-mails, all passionate about the gospel and radiating love for the Chinese people. Sometimes he became discouraged, but basically he was successful in what he was doing and happy.

Sara didn't think the Church would include a young man who was ambivalent about being on a mission in the first group to open up a country. Nor did she think such a young man would be called to be a branch president, with the responsibility of not only directing the branch, but teaching and baptizing converts and then arranging for them to travel to the temple community in Beijing. She believed, in fact, that Cameron was an exceptional missionary.

Not wanting to be disturbed by the farewell photo again, Sara went to Cameron's senior portrait, finally giving herself permission to ogle him. Those exquisite aqua eyes gazed back at her candidly from the photograph in a way they never had in person.

"Why couldn't you have looked my way once, Cameron Carroll?" Sara softly begged the portrait on the screen. "Just once?" Sara sometimes liked to think he was a snob, but she knew he wasn't. In six years, she had never detected a speck of haughtiness in him. She had been forced to accept the bitter fact that there simply wasn't anything about her that captured his interest.

Sara forced her eyes away from Cameron's and thought about Tony Wright, a guy she liked as well as any person she had ever known and who was quite good-looking to boot. Though she and Tony had a natural rapport and communicated often online and on the phone, he had never asked her out and she had never asked him. A part of Sara thought it was because Tony didn't feel any more comfortable introducing her to his family than she felt introducing him to hers. A deeper part of her, though, believed it was because they both intuitively knew they could never be more than friends.

Why that was, Sara didn't know. Perhaps Tony wasn't interested in her in a romantic way. Perhaps, on the other hand, he sensed her heart belonged to someone else and didn't want to get too close. If that was the case, a little encouragement from her could change things between them drastically. For the first time, Sara wondered whether her passion for Cameron was spoiling the possibility of a real love relationship.

Sara hadn't seen Cameron in two years and wouldn't see him again for another two. Tony was available now, a genuine flesh and blood guy, not a dream man. Cameron reminded Sara of candlelight, slow dancing, cotton and silk, BMWs, glamorous women, and classical music. Tony reminded her of campfires, bear hugs, denim and flannel, trucks, dogs (no, *big* dogs), and classic rock. She thought Tony was probably more her type, so why did she keep yearning for Cameron?

Sara's eyes found Cameron's again. Who was she fooling? She couldn't get Cameron out of her mind because he was perfect. Not because of the candlelight and silk, but because he laughed easily and smiled with his eyes. Because he achieved greatness while remaining a good sport. Because he was compassionate and full of faith and able to express his deepest convictions and emotions in a way that felt comfortable to her. Because he had the body of an Olympian and the countenance of an angel.

Sara shut down her laptop. No guy could be that perfect. There had to be something wrong with him. It was his farewell photo, after all, which was the only blemish in an otherwise flawless photo display. Cameron was probably the family lunatic.

Sara had mustered the nerve to ask Dr. Carroll how Cameron was doing only once, the first time they had met, and only because Dr. Carroll had recognized her from the track meets. One of these days she would work up the nerve to ask about him again and would in time, perhaps, learn something deliciously ridiculous about him. She kept hoping Dr. Carroll would say something about him without encouragement from her, anything at all, but he never did.

As Sara set her laptop on her desk and picked up her phone to plug it in and charge, the phone rang. Seeing that it was Dr. Carroll, she tried to ignore it. With every second that passed, however, her discomfort increased until she could do nothing but answer.

Her fingers trembled as they combed her long dark locks off of her forehead. She didn't know whether to panic or be excited. "Yes?" she replied as calmly as she could.

"This is Ben Carroll. I missed you in the chat room this evening. Are you all right?"

Chapter 4: DR. CARROLL'S LITTLE PANTHER

Hearing Dr. Carroll's voice from the phone always awed Sara. He was so in tune with the Spirit that he not only sensed her agitation but also took time to call her. How could this man possibly be an apostate? "I feel a little beat up emotionally, but otherwise I'm fine. Thanks for your concern."

"Of course I'm concerned, Sara. You never miss an evening in the chat room. What's wrong?"

"I spent the evening with my bishop." Sara couldn't help but feel guilty. She might be able to hang up on Tony, but she couldn't hang up on Dr. Carroll. She would just have to cut the conversation short somehow. "I promised him I wouldn't communicate with you or the other colonists until after our next interview, which is Tuesday."

"Why did you make a promise like that?" He sounded surprised.

"I don't know. He caught me off guard, I guess."

"It isn't like my Little Panther to be so acquiescent."

"No, I don't suppose it is." Hearing the nickname "Little Panther" always made Sara smile because only a tall man like Dr. Carroll would think she was little. She still couldn't believe that a man as extraordinary as Dr. Carroll remembered her from high school. When, at their first meeting, she had expressed astonishment at his memory, he had replied, amused, "How could I forget the black-haired girl in black spandex who sprinted with the liveliness and power of a panther?" Sometimes he called her Little Cougar in honor of her former position on the BYU track team, but usually it was Little Panther.

"Your parents must be pleased."

"My parents don't know unless the bishop told them, and I don't think he would do that." Sara felt so demoralized about being on such poor terms with her parents that she couldn't bring herself to talk about the situation with anyone but Dr. Carroll and her four Don Pablo's friends. Tony's situation with his family was actually worse than hers. "The good news is, my father did promise me last night he wouldn't try to talk me out of going to Eden anymore."

"That's wonderful!"

"That's ironic, you mean. He promises, and the next day, I'm mixed up. It's that letter the bishop read. He told me to read section 9. I think he's trying to tell me that this confusion I'm feeling is a 'stupor of thought' and is the Lord's way of telling me I shouldn't go to Eden."

"When you talk to your bishop again, tell him that your 'stupor of thought' was the Lord's way of telling you that *remaining on Earth* is the wrong thing to do."

Dr. Carroll's logic dazzled Sara. Perhaps he was right! She hadn't been confused about a thing until she had read that letter. "Maybe I will. Thanks. You know, I really *must* hang up. I promised!"

"I'm sorry, Sara. I thought you wanted to talk to me."

"I always *love* talking to you, but tonight won't work. I have to go. 'Bye!'"

Sara hung up and turned off the light, collapsing into bed. Her body ached and she was too tired to think, but her mind kept working anyway. The conversations with her bishop played over and over in her head, along with the words of the letter, the counsel of scriptures she had read that evening, and her conversation with Dr. Carroll. She wanted to follow the prophet and take counsel from her bishop, but she kept coming back to the fact that she hadn't felt a second of doubt about going to Eden before reading the letter.

Sara drifted to sleep, eventually finding herself in the blocks on the track of Parkridge High School, wearing an ankle-length black spandex bodysuit. Her hair hung loosely around

her face. Unlike the other girls, she never wore her hair back when she ran. When her hair was free, so was she. The gun fired and she sprinted away. Her start was excellent, and the air was still. She was a headwind barreling down the track, leveling her competition. She was gone! She was *outta* there!

Before Sara had run too many meters, she heard frantic cries from all around her, her coaches, her teammates, and her parents. “You’re going the wrong way, Sara! Turn around *now*! Get back in the race! You’re going the wrong way!”

Sara glanced around in confusion, slowing a little. Certainly she hadn’t been stupid enough to run away from the race! She passed the high jumpers and the long jumpers and saw Dr. Carroll sprinting down the track several meters in front of her, wearing Gladiator-red. He turned slightly to look at her, motioning her to follow him. “Come on, Little Panther! This is a better way! You can do it! Look! You’ve left your competition far behind!” Soothed by the voice in front of her, Sara sprinted harder to catch up with it, the voices of her coaches, teammates and parents fading away.

Sara immediately woke up. She wasn’t sprinting, but her heart was. She felt for the security of the denim quilt, her fingers finding the seams and knots of yarn. She always dreamed of high school after evenings of ogling Cameron’s photos and reading his e-mails. Sara forced herself to breathe deeply in an effort to relax, feeling more confused than ever.

* * *

Sara left her phone off for the next five days and didn’t boot up her computer at all, and as much as it tortured her, she didn’t go to dinner Saturday evening at Don Pablo’s. When she arrived at the stake center to meet with her bishop Tuesday evening, she was relieved that she could tell him she had kept her commitment to keep from communicating with Dr. Carroll and her other Eden friends.

Bishop Lanham invited Sara into his office. They chatted for a few minutes about the game, throwing around comments such as: “The Hawks killed the Panthers!” and “The Hawks ran up the score!” and “The Panthers need to get a defense!” and “The Hawks need to get a conscience!”

Eventually Bishop Lanham brought the discussion to the matter at hand. “Have you come to any new conclusions since we last met?”

“No, actually I haven’t. I appreciate your concern, but I know more strongly than ever that the Lord wants me to go to Eden.”

Surprise came over Bishop Lanham’s face, followed by disappointment. “You’ve been talking to Dr. Carroll.”

Sara knew she had done nothing wrong, that she had kept her commitment, but she felt guilty all the same. “No. I mean yes. I mean, I didn’t *mean* to!”

“I don’t understand.” He watched her carefully from the other side of the desk, his eyes still disappointed, as if he had lost respect for her.

“After I talked to you Thursday night, I e-mailed Tony as you suggested. I went online for a while after that, but I didn’t go into Dr. Carroll’s chat room, as I usually do. Dr. Carroll noticed I wasn’t there and was concerned, so he called me. That’s the only time I talked to him. I haven’t had the phone or the computer on since!”

The bishop frowned. “You didn’t think it was odd that he would call you? Or has he called you before?”

“He calls me every now and then, usually when I have something on my mind.”

“Every now and then? How often is that?”

“Every couple of weeks, I guess. It’s hard to say. It always surprises me.”

“When he calls, how long do you talk?”

Sara shrugged. “It depends. The other night I only talked to him for a few minutes. Usually, though, it’s longer than that.”

“Ten minutes? Thirty minutes? An hour?”

“I don’t think we’ve ever talked longer than an hour and a half.”

“An hour and a half? That’s a long time.”

“Not really. He’s a psychologist, remember?”

“Do the two of you e-mail back and forth?”

Sara nodded. “Every few days.”

“What do you talk about?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The gospel. Books. Current events. His plans for the colony—everything. He has an amazing mind.”

“What did he say the other night, Sara?”

Sara told him everything. “He was right, you know. I didn’t feel one second of doubt about going to Eden before last Thursday evening, and I don’t feel any doubt about it now. Obviously the decision to remain home was causing my ‘stupor of thought.’”

“Why does he call you ‘Little Panther’?”

“Because he says I run like a panther, which, as you know, is Parkridge’s mascot.”

“He saw you run when you were in high school?”

Sara felt her cheeks grow warm. “His son . . . Cameron . . . is my age. He ran track in high school too. Dr. Carroll, amazingly enough, remembers me from the meets.”

Bishop Lanham smiled. “How many state championships did you win?”

“Five.” She would have had six had she not blown it on the 400 her junior year. Cameron was better at the 400 than she was and had won it both his junior and senior years, along with the 100 and 200, making a total of six state titles for him.

“And you think it’s strange that Dr. Carroll would remember you?”

“Well, when you put it that way, perhaps not.”

“The fact that he remembered you doesn’t disturb me. That he would spend so much time with you on the phone and online and give you a provocative pet name like ‘Little Panther’ disturbs me a great deal.”

“He calls me Little Panther, and the guys call me Bubble Babe. So?”

“Bubble Babe?”

“Because I’m careful about what I eat and bring my own bottled water to the restaurant, like someone who lives in a bubble, isolated from the environment. Even Dr. Carroll was astounded when I told them I hadn’t eaten any kind of restaurant food until I was seventeen.”

The bishop leaned back in his chair and waved his hands, smiling. He knew her family too well. “All right, all right, I get it.” His expression of amusement suddenly changed to one of alarm. “Dr. Carroll has dinner with you and your friends in Columbia?”

“Usually. Not always.”

“Does he bring his family?”

“No. We told him he should—after all, he recommended Don Pablo’s to us because it’s his kids’ favorite restaurant—but he says his wife doesn’t want to intrude on our little gathering. I guess she feels it would make it more of a family event than a casual gathering of students.”

“How long has this been going on?”

"Since early last summer." Sara counted to herself. "That would be four months, maybe five."

"And Sister Carroll has never come to one of these dinners with her husband?"

"No, not that I can remember."

"Never?"

"No, never."

"Isn't she one of the colony's leaders? And your mentor?"

Sara nodded.

"And it doesn't strike you as strange that she would never be there?"

Sara shifted her position and folded her arms, feeling annoyed. "Why are you asking me all of these questions?"

"Because your relationship with Dr. Carroll seems overly familiar, and that disturbs me."

Sara stiffened. "What are you driving at?"

The bishop leaned toward Sara, his face grave. "I have an uneasy feeling about this man, Sara. He's calling and e-mailing you regularly and spending every Saturday evening with you and your friends—without his wife. Any one of those things by itself might not bother me, but all of them together add up to a lot of time he's spending with you instead of his family."

Sara gasped. "You're suggesting Dr. Carroll's behavior toward me has been *inappropriate*?"

Bishop Lanham nodded. "My gut feeling is that he's attracted to you and can't resist pursuing it."

How could the bishop suggest such a thing? How could he even think it? "You don't understand anything! He treats me like a daughter! That's what the Eden Colony is all about! Government leaders are concerned about every individual, and every individual has equal access to government leaders!"

"How many students are in the Eden colony, Sara?"

Sara drummed her fingers on her thigh. "A hundred."

"And you think each one of them is getting that kind of personal attention from Dr. Carroll?"

Now that the bishop mentioned it, Sara had to admit to herself that she had never thought about the time she was spending with Dr. Carroll in those terms. "Well, he chats with all of us online, and others would come to dinner with us on Saturday night if they lived in the area. As for phone calls and e-mails, I have no idea."

"Well, I do. He's only one man and a very busy one right now while he's working to get his colony organized. He simply doesn't have time to nurture every one of his students the way he's nurturing you."

"There's no way you can know that."

"Wake up, Sara! He is dangerous to you and in a very personal way."

"Since when does a classy, *married*, former bishop pursue a tomboy who is young enough to be his daughter? You're deranged!"

"You are no tomboy, Sara. You are a beautiful, intense woman capable of attracting all kinds of men, even classy, *married*, former bishops. Get rid of your phone, completely rid of it, and hand your computer over to your parents until the Eden transport leaves Earth. And if Dr. Carroll tries to see you personally in the next week, use that amazing talent of yours and *run* from him!"

Bishop Lanham had a lot of nerve! How *dare* he! Sara sprang out of her chair and leaned over the desk. "What are you, a bishop or a dictator?"

Bishop Lanham didn't flinch. "Fidel Castro, at your service."

What he suggested about Dr. Carroll was absurd, a thought that refused to do so much as plant itself in Sara's mind, much less grow there in any kind of serious way, but he was the bishop. Remorse overwhelmed Sara. She dropped back into her chair. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I should repent."

"In sackcloth and ashes." Sara knew he meant it light-heartedly, but he didn't smile. "I'm worried about you, Sara, a hundred times more than I was when you walked in here this evening. Please stay home and take the scholarship at the University of Maryland."

Sara stroked the wood armrest on her chair, staring at one of the red flowers in her pink knit dress. "You seem sure my family won't move to Kansas City."

"Do you think they will?"

Sara shook her head.

The bishop grimaced a little in empathy. "I know Maryland isn't BYU, but I think you'll have a good experience there."

No one had put it to her quite that way before, and it meant a lot coming from Bishop Lanham, who was a BYU graduate himself. He understood. She thought her mother should understand too, but if she did, she had never said it. "No, it isn't BYU," Sara said under her breath.

"Neither is Eden."

Sara rested her forehead on her hand, unable to say anything for several moments. She felt as if she were being swallowed by darkness. Whether it was confusion, anxiety, or a hidden fear, she didn't know. Finally she looked up at the bishop again and forced herself to smile. "You aren't going to encourage me to go on a mission?" He hadn't done so before, which suggested he knew about Novaun. Sara hoped he did.

The bishop's dark brown eyebrows come together in a queer way. "No," he said carefully. "Your father would never forgive me."

So he did know, and not only did he know, he believed her father would return to Novaun in the near future and therefore wouldn't want her to commit herself to a mission. "My father says most Novaunian women my age are already married," Sara said slowly, painfully.

Bishop Lanham smiled a little. "Perhaps that means Novaunian men are exceptional and irresistible."

It sounded like a joke, and Sara thought she should laugh, but she felt her jaw tremble and her eyes burn instead. She stared at the desk. "I can't imagine myself being married to a Novaunian man." She couldn't help but think of Cameron Carroll and knew she would never see him again if she went to Novaun with her father. He would slip away from her forever and never be anything more than a memory, a dream.

The bishop's voice was gentle and earnest. "You could do no better, Sara, than to marry a man like your father."

Sara felt the truth of Bishop Lanham's words and nodded. Cameron had never been anything more than a girlish fantasy. It was time she got over this silly obsession for good.

"I think if you would give your father a chance, he would tell you things about Novaun that would diminish your fears."

"You're probably right," Sara conceded, meeting the bishop's gaze again, feeling almost composed.

Bishop Lanham arose from his chair. "Why don't you ask him about it right now? You'll have plenty of time to talk on the drive home."

Sara decided to do as Bishop Lanham advised. As she slid into the backseat of the car and strapped herself in, she said breezily, “Dad, I was wondering if you could tell me something about Novaunian men.”

Both of her parents turned and looked at her in surprise. After a moment, her mother laughed and her father grinned, as pleased as Sara had seen him in a long time. What followed were dozens of funny stories about his brothers, his uncles, and his friends from Shalaun. Sara and her mother were still in hysterics when they walked through the front door of their home, and the other kids were jealous that they had missed out on all the fun.

When Sara finally went to her room, she sat on her bed and studied her laptop. She moved to open it several times, but found she couldn’t. Eventually she decided that she had nothing to lose by taking the bishop’s advice. She would have no contact with her Eden friends for the rest of the week, and if on Sunday, she still felt as strongly about going to Eden as she always had, she would be assured it really was the Lord’s will. She would go to the meeting to sustain her new bishop and renew her ties with her Eden friends and nothing would be lost but a few pleasant hours in the chat room and those Don Pablo’s fajitas she so enjoyed.

Sara picked up her laptop and her phone and took them down the hall to her parents’ bedroom. When her mother answered the door, Sara handed the items to her, then turned to go back to her own room, not saying a word.

* * *

The next morning, Sara felt too nervous to eat. All of her younger brothers and sisters had left for school already except three-year-old Zack, who was playing a game on the computer. She squished her cereal with her spoon, wishing she had been able to talk to her mother more over the past months during this quiet morning time.

A basket of clean towels, topped with several boxes of macaroni and cheese, slid through the basement door into the kitchen. After Sara’s mother emerged through the door, Sara blurted out before she could change her mind, “What do you think about going to Novaun, Mom?”

Her mother regarded her in surprise, her features softening in pleasure. She immediately sat down at the old cherry table across from Sara, her eyebrows rising. “You *do* plan to go to work today, don’t you?”

Sara smiled and pushed the bowl of cereal aside. “This can’t be that hard. Do you like the idea of going to Novaun or don’t you?”

“Yes I do. Very much. I’ve known all along, of course, that I would probably be returning to Novaun with your father at some point in time.”

“It seems there is no decision then. Nothing to feel anxious or confused about at all.”

“You have to understand, Sara, the prospect of going to Novaun has always been a future event, always hazy. When I try to visualize our leaving Earth, thoughts of my family and how I will miss them so overwhelm me that I don’t think I’ll be able to leave at all. Then it occurs to me that your father hasn’t seen his family in ten, fifteen, and now twenty years, and I hurt for him more than for myself, and then I think that we *must* go to Novaun. Then in the middle of all this, I realize that your father loves his life here on Earth as much as he misses his family and that he has no idea whether or not he even *wants* to go back. He’s very concerned about my happiness and doesn’t know whether he should take me from my family. Not only that, but his skills are so needed at the temple.”

Sara thought she understood. "I don't suppose there are many people who can do the ordinances in any language and act as a translator when people from all parts of the world come to have their work done."

"No, there aren't. Sometimes I wonder whether we'll leave at all. I need your father to take a strong stand one way or another, and he won't do it." Her mother tossed her hands into the air. "So here I sit in limbo, anxious and confused."

"Sometimes I think Dad can't make a decision to save his life!"

Her mother moaned and gripped her temples with her hands, her eyes seeming to ignite. "Oh, he makes excellent decisions when someone holds a gun to his head! At that point, though, I'm usually the one who wants to kill him! He's going to make me crazy, you know that!"

"Can't you just make the decision for him?"

Her mother leaned on an arm. "In this case, no. His duty to Novaun is something that transcends the desires of either one of us. It's not something I can dictate to him or diminish. In the end, whether we leave or not is a decision only he can make."

"Does Dad have to go back to Novaun?"

Her mother sat up straight and rested her hands on the light blue vinyl tablecloth. "That isn't clear. He has seven years of information he needs to send to Novaun, but whether Novaunian Fleet will actually order him back we won't know until someone comes for him."

"Novaunian Fleet? Is that a space navy? Dad's a military man?"

Her mother nodded. "Through and through. Both his family and your mother's have a long tradition in the Fleet."

Sara looked away, attempting to digest this new information. Just when she was on the verge of deciding it was the most bizarre, incongruent thing she had ever heard, a hot, humid afternoon fifteen years before poured into her memory. She and David were chasing each other around a large cemetery in Gettysburg. Not many minutes passed before she felt her father's hand grip her arm.

She glanced to her right and saw that his other hand was holding David. "You will not run here," her father said solemnly. "Or speak in loud voices. The men buried under your feet died in defense of their homes and our freedom. This is sacred ground."

When he let go of them, David looked around the cemetery, his playful expression softening into one of reverence. He straightened and looked up at her father, nodding once. "I understand."

Sara remembered how, several years later, her father had stood as if paralyzed at the end of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, staring at all of those names of soldiers who had died in the war, tears streaming down his face. Both she and David had been shocked. "I've never seen your father cry before, Sara," David had whispered, deeply disturbed. Her father had reacted in a similar way at Antietam, site of the bloodiest battle of the Civil War, and when they had gone to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, he had been so horrified and full of grief that they had had to leave before they saw much of the museum at all.

Sara met her mother's eyes again, nodding thoughtfully. "I can see it. Did Dad ever go back to the Holocaust Museum?"

"Yes," she whispered. "He spent several days there alone. It was one of the most difficult things he's ever had to do, but he had to see it. Novaunian Fleet needs to know the brutality our race is capable of. He was grateful your mother had never seen it."

So was Sara, and she didn't know why. "I wonder if all Novaunian women are so delicate."

Her mother smiled. "All you have to do is look in the mirror, Sara, to see a Novaunian woman. You were raised here, so you're not as sensitive to the ugliness and violence around you as your mother was, but in many other ways, you are very much like her."

"You speak as if you knew her."

"I do know her, in a way. Your father has telepathically shown me many of his memories of her."

"That didn't make you . . . uncomfortable?"

"You mean jealous?"

Sara nodded.

"Not at all. I knew from the beginning I was getting involved with a man who had been married before. To be honest, had your father not deeply loved your mother, I wouldn't have married him. Because he loved your mother so much and had treated her so well, I knew he would do the same for me."

"That's romantic logic I've never heard before," Sara said, moved by her mother's willingness to confide in her. "But it feels true."

"It is true. Your father may make me crazy sometimes, but he's never disappointed me in the things that matter most."

For the first time in six years, Sara wanted to tell her mother about Cameron and all of the strange feelings she was having. Maybe if she vocalized her predicament, it would disappear.

Trembling, Sara put her fingers to her forehead, staring at the table. "This is going to sound stupid . . ." She slid her fingers into her hair, pulling it. "All my life . . . well, since eighth grade anyway . . . I . . . I've been in . . . love . . . with someone."

Feeling tears flood into her eyes and blood into her cheeks, she gasped and dropped her head to her arms, which were folded on the table. Her mother laid her hand on her shoulder with a gentleness that was almost tentative, as if she weren't sure Sara would want her to touch her. That she would wonder such a thing made Sara feel ashamed, and she lost what little control she had left. The tears flowed and her shoulders shook, and six years' worth of pain erupted. "I've never . . . told anyone . . . because . . . he's never . . . looked . . . at me twice . . . but . . . but . . . I don't want to leave him . . ."

When Sara's sobs faded, she felt lighter than she had in a long time. She jumped out of her chair and went to get tissues from the box on the kitchen counter. After wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, she turned to her mother, who was walking toward her, her face also wet with tears. Sara handed her a tissue. "I feel so silly. I'm too old to have a crush. I haven't even seen him in two years. Tell me I'm being stupid."

Her mother shook her head, pressing the tissue to her cheeks. "I don't know what to tell you, Sara."

Sara moved toward the drawer where the dishcloths were kept. "Don't you want to know who it is?"

Her mother leaned against the butcher-block island. "Is he someone I know?"

Sara soaked the dishcloth with cold water and laid it against her eyelids and cheeks. "No . . . I mean yes . . . I mean, sort of."

"Well?"

Sara draped the dishcloth over the faucet and turned to her mother. "Cameron Carroll." She held out her hands. "There! That wasn't so hard."

Her mother was frowning. Sara wasn't sure telling her about Cameron had been a good idea. She went to the refrigerator to get several bottles of water to take with her to work,

wondering what her mother would say and wondering even more what she would say in response.

As Sara opened the fruit drawer, her mother said, “Cameron’s exceptional, Sara. There’s no doubt about it. But so are you. I don’t believe—not for a moment—that he never gave you a second look.”

Sara closed the fridge door, apple in hand, and looked at her mother in surprise. She wasn’t just saying words she thought a mother should say. She was serious. Sara relaxed, feeling liberated. “Thank you.”

* * *

Sara arrived at work in a thoughtful mood and left the same way late that afternoon. She couldn’t get the things her parents had told her out of her mind. She knew her destiny lay in space. Could it be that Novaun was her destination, not Eden at all? Underlying all of her thoughts were emotions of gratitude to her mother for believing she was exceptional enough to draw a second look from a guy like Cameron Carroll.

Sara took her car keys out of an outside pocket of her backpack and threw the pack over her shoulder. She twirled the keys on her finger and headed to her car, a pathetic eighteen-year-old red Camaro that even her brother didn’t want to drive. As she jogged, someone stepped in front of her.

Startled, Sara looked up. Dr. Carroll stood there, wearing a golden brown suede sports jacket over a bright aqua polo shirt. The shirt set off his eyes and made them appear aqua. He looked so much like Cameron at the moment that Sara’s hands began to sweat and her pulse picked up speed.

Dr. Carroll smiled in a way that suggested he was pleased he had surprised her. “Don’t I get a hello?”

Sara could feel herself smiling, no, beaming like an idiot. She had never seen this man when he didn’t make her feel both outclassed and exhilarated. “Hi! What in the galaxy are you doing here?” Bishop Lanham had told her to run if Dr. Carroll tried to see her personally, but Sara found herself hugging him instead.

Dr. Carroll’s breath warmed her ear as he whispered, “If you wanted me to come to you, all you had to do was ask.”

“I would never presume,” Sara replied, happy and abashed.

Dr. Carroll released Sara and surveyed her at arm’s length, holding her hands. “I can see you’re agitated. Would you like to talk?”

“Please!”

Dr. Carroll put a hand on her back, guiding her toward his Mercedes. “Is there somewhere in town we can get ice cream?”

Sara directed Dr. Carroll to a frozen yogurt shop. Dr. Carroll purchased two sundaes, then sat down across from Sara at one of the small tables.

Dr. Carroll pushed Sara’s sundae across the table to her. “How did the interview with your bishop go last night?”

What should she tell him? “It was strange.”

“What did he say?”

Sara wanted to tell him about Novaun but knew she shouldn’t—she owed that much to her parents at least—and she couldn’t tell him about Bishop Lanham’s ridiculous suspicions. “He counseled me to take the scholarship at Maryland and to talk to my parents.”

Dr. Carroll smiled. "What's so strange about that?"

"Nothing." Sara stared at her sundae, unable to look at Dr. Carroll directly. She couldn't avoid telling him now. "It . . . it bothered him that you would name me 'Little Panther' and call me sometimes." She could feel herself blush.

Sara felt Dr. Carroll place his fingers gently under her chin. Before she knew it, she was gazing into his earnest blue eyes. "And he told you that I'm attracted to you."

Sara nodded, feeling her blush deepen.

"When he told you that, how did it make you feel?"

"I told him that you think of me as a daughter," Sara whispered. "I also told him that he's deranged."

His eyes narrowed a bit, wrinkling the little lines at the corners of his eyes. "How did he respond to that?"

"He told me to stay away from you."

Dr. Carroll's fingers moved to Sara's cheek in a caress. Sara's skin grew warmer than ever under his touch. He leaned a little closer to her, his knees touching hers under the table, compassion smoothing away the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "Why is this topic of conversation making you so uncomfortable?"

"I didn't want to tell you."

Dr. Carroll moved his hand into her hair, stroking it away from her face. "Why not?"

Dr. Carroll's nonchalant reaction to Bishop Lanham's suspicions impressed Sara. A person with less class would have been offended. "I'm embarrassed by my bishop's lack of understanding."

A golden-brown eyebrow lifted. "According to conventional Mormon practice, my relationship with you *is* too affectionate."

The heat in Sara's face felt as if it were spreading into her neck. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to imply . . ."

"This doesn't have to be so difficult, Sara," he said softly. "You can talk to me about anything. Don't you know that?"

"I always thought so," Sara said, and she meant it. Why *was* this topic of conversation so difficult?

Dr. Carroll laid his hands over Sara's. Feeling his warmth, Sara realized her hands were clutching her cup of frozen yogurt. He lifted her cold hands and pressed them against her cheeks, smiling.

The tenderness of the gesture elated Sara. "You are so incredible!" She had almost allowed Bishop Lanham to talk her out of going to Eden. What had she been thinking? "I can't believe how tuned into me you are."

He squeezed her hands, then released them and folded his arms on the table, pushing his sundae toward her a little. "It isn't difficult to tune into a kindred spirit." He seemed to be choosing his words carefully, his eyes never leaving hers.

Sara lowered her hands to the table, so touched she felt as if she were trembling and giddy. "We have become good friends, haven't we?" Who would have ever thought it?

Dr. Carroll nodded, barely. After a moment, he said, "Sara I . . ." He stopped and surveyed her thoughtfully.

Sara laid her hand on his arm. "What is it, Dr. Carroll?"

The corners of his mouth turned up a tiny bit, as if he couldn't quite bring himself to smile. "There's so much I'd like to talk to you about, but sadly, this isn't the time."

Sara couldn't help but be curious. He seemed so serious. She didn't want to press him, but she didn't want him to feel as if she didn't care either. "Perhaps when we get to Eden."

"Perhaps. Are you getting excited?"

Sara smiled and relaxed, dipping her spoon into her frozen yogurt. "I've been excited for months! Or couldn't you tell?"

* * *

Trendaul came home from an unusual day at the temple to find Teri on the verge of laughter and tears. She threw her arms around him and squeezed. "She's softening, Tren! This morning she didn't just talk to me, she *confided* in me, something she's been holding inside for six years. And she cried. She laid her head on the table and sobbed like a baby."

Trendaul pulled away from Teri enough so that he could look at her. "She sobbed? *Sara*?" Could it be possible? Could Sara really be coming back to them?

Trendaul wondered what kind of secret would have come out with so much emotion, but he didn't press Teri for details he knew she wouldn't give. His hope grew as the afternoon waned.

When Sara didn't come home from work at the time she was supposed to, however, a feeling of dread stifled Trendaul's hope. Something was wrong. He called the health club and found out that Sara had left more than an hour before.

After Trendaul put the phone in its cradle on the kitchen desk, he heard the front door slam shut. He and Teri looked at each other anxiously, then stepped into the hall. Sara tossed her backpack into the closet and hung up her jacket. "Where have you been, Sara?" Trendaul asked gently.

Sara straightened and turned to him, her expression cool. "What is this? An interrogation?"

Trendaul glanced at Teri. She watched Sara cautiously. "We were worried about you."

Sara shrugged as she moved toward the stairs. "I don't know why. All I did was go have yogurt with a friend." She disappeared, her feet light on the stairs above him.

"Something happened, Tren."

Trendaul heard the upstairs floorboards squeak in the vicinity of the master bedroom. Teri pushed past him and ran down the hall and up the stairs. Trendaul followed in strides.

Sara came out of the bedroom, carrying her computer and phone, and tried to push past Teri to get to her own bedroom. Teri, though, wouldn't budge. She gripped Sara's shoulders and gazed at her in determination. "Please talk to us, Sara."

Sara tried to shake Teri's hands away. "Get your hands off of me!"

"Not until you tell us who you've been with the last hour."

"You'll just get angry at me! I'm tired of your abuse."

Trendaul stopped on the stair below the landing, consumed by frustration. "It was Barbara Carroll, wasn't it."

Sara's looked at him in astonishment. "No! I haven't met with Sister Carroll more than twice in my life. Dr. Carroll was the one I was with."

Trendaul was certain he hadn't heard Sara correctly. Teri pulled her hands away from Sara's shoulders, staring at her in horror and grief.

"He's the one I know." Sara shook her head, her cheeks flushed and her eyes brilliant. "He's so amazing! He sensed that I was confused and drove all the way over here to talk to me."

Trendaul sagged against the wall. Sara's situation was far worse than he had believed. Benjamin Carroll was doing everything in his power to make sure she didn't change her mind about going to Eden. Trendaul could think of only one thing that would motivate the man to take such a personal interest in his little girl.

Teri gazed at Sara with surprising empathy. "He isn't who he looks like, Sara."

"What . . . do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. *Please* be careful. We know you wouldn't want to get romantically involved with a married man, even unintentionally."

Sara groaned and rolled her eyes. "Not you too!"

Teri wouldn't let it go. "Who, Sara? Who else? The bishop?"

Bishop Lanham had to have a reason for suspecting Benjamin Carroll was pursuing his daughter. What else had happened? *Dear Father*, Trendaul begged, *what am I supposed to do? Why hasn't that man been excommunicated?*

Sara was usually skilled at dealing with men, a talent acquired through summers of being the companion of David and his friends. Despite the difference in their ages, Sara had always been David's equal, and Trendaul had long believed that if Sara could handle David, she could handle any man. David, though, as overbearing as he could be, was as guileless as Sara and so were his friends. Benjamin Carroll was a different breed—a sophisticated hypocrite. The threat from him was too subtle. By the time Sara woke up to what was going on, it might be too late. *Dear Father, how do I save my daughter?*

Sara shook her head at Teri. "You're all wrong! It isn't like that!"

"What is it like?"

Trendaul's first thought was that he should give Benjamin Carroll's bishop a call, then his wife. After that, he would pay a visit to the man himself. Trendaul's second thought, far more compelling than the first, was that he should let it go, that he should let *her* go; she had moved beyond his reach. Trendaul struggled against this thought—it seemed too wrong—and then the third thought came, even more compelling than the other two. The Lord was aware of Sara's danger and had provided an escape for her.

A new vision of Sara's future burst into Trendaul's mind, stunning him with its brilliancy. The solution was so simple Trendaul wanted to laugh at himself for not seeing it sooner. Sara's life on Eden would be turbulent but happy, provided she was sensible enough to make her escape when the opportunity presented itself. All Trendaul could do now was prepare her for what was coming.

Sara glared at Teri. "You can think what you want, but you can't stop me from going to Eden."

Trendaul stepped up to the landing and rested his hand on Sara's arm. "We know." He didn't dare look at Teri, afraid she would be angry with him for giving in so easily. He would explain everything to her later. "There's only one thing I'm afraid we'll have to insist on. We want to be with you Sunday when you sustain your new bishop."

Chapter 5: THE QUEEN OF DANCE MEETS THE KING OF CLASS

David Pierce lifted Sara out of the van and heaved her over his shoulder like a duffel bag, Sara's brothers and sisters cheering him on.

"Go Navy!"

"Go Uncle David!"

"What do you think you're doing, David?" Sara demanded. David and his midshipmen friends Dan, Mike, and Tim had attended church with Sara and her family that morning. She knew they were excited about the Naval Academy's win in the football game the day before, but this was going too far.

"We're taking you to Bancroft Hall, where you will be our guest for a few days."

Before Sara could completely comprehend Tim's statement, she felt David's arm clamp down around her thighs as he strode across the lawn, heading for the street, flanked by Dan, Mike, and Tim. She couldn't go to Annapolis. She was leaving for Eden the next morning.

Sara kicked him again and again, but he didn't flinch. "You can't do this, David! You have no right!" She tried to twist herself out of David's grip. "I'm not a plebe you can order around!" David's arm didn't budge.

"We're not going to let you go to Eden and ruin your life!" Mike said.

"I'll report you to the superintendent!" Sara screamed as she struggled. "You'll all get expelled!"

David chuckled wickedly, tightening his hold on Sara. "And just who will he believe? His brigade commander, or a hysterical girl?"

"You'll be forced to enlist in Star Force and be ordered around by those Federalist worms you so despise!"

"Even your parents will side with me!"

This was absurd! David hadn't become the highest-ranking midshipman by doing things like hiding young civilian women in his quarters. "You are answerable to the Honor Concept, Midshipman Pierce!"

"And if the truth is ever told, it'll be too late for you!" Dan said.

Sara felt sick. David had always been so scrupulous that none of the officers would ever believe he would do something so outrageous. If he wanted to hold her prisoner in Bancroft Hall until the shuttle to the Eden transport left Earth, he could do it, and no one who mattered would ever know.

Off to the side Sara heard her mother say with that familiar tone of command, "Put her down, David. None of us want her to go, but this isn't the way."

"It's just going to have to be the way, Teri, since your husband is too spineless to do what needs to be done!"

A door opened on David's car. Certainly he wouldn't really go through with it. Not David, who would rather die than ever disobey an order or be anything but perfect. Still, Sara couldn't be sure. She said in desperation, "I'll stay home and not go to Eden if you'll go home to Kansas City."

All of a sudden David released his hold on Sara and allowed her to slide off his shoulder and onto her feet. His hazel eyes stared down at her in protest. "You know I can't do that."

Sara knew she had struck a nerve. "I mean it, David. If you go home, I'll stay home." She had no doubt she would be leaving for Eden the next day.

"I have a duty to my brigade and to my country!"

David was scrupulous and exceptionally driven by duty as it was. Sometimes Sara thought the Navy had turned him into a monster. She rolled her eyes. "Well aren't you the perfect poster boy for the Nationalists."

David grabbed Sara's shoulders and gave her a shake. "I *will* do my duty to my brigade."

Sara gave up a smile, finding it impossible to stay angry with him. David might be uptight, but he was sincere. "Of course you will. And I'll go to Eden."

David released Sara's shoulders. "You don't have the commitment to the Eden Colony that I have to the Navy," he said quietly. "You know that if I resign now, I could be sent anywhere. At least here I'm near Teri and your father."

"Until they move to Kansas City." Sara reached into the left pocket of his suit jacket, where he kept pieces of chocolate for young women.

David glanced at Sara's parents thoughtfully, then shook his head. "No. They'll have a house in Kensington soon. Your father is tied to this area for some reason."

Sara longed to discuss all of the new things she had learned about herself and her father with David but knew it was not her place to divulge her father's secret. She popped a piece of chocolate into her mouth, shrugging. "He's probably waiting to get a visit from his long-lost brother, or something."

David looked at her strangely. "What are you talking about? Your father has no family."

"That's what you think. They're just so far away we've never met them. Why don't you ask him about it sometime."

Sara thought about how easily her father talked with all of the midshipmen David brought to their home and how interested he always was in their classes, their cruises, their families, and their traditions. She remembered how fascinated he had been when they had taken a tour of the Naval Academy so many years ago and how David had ignored her that day and had become her father's little shadow. No one in her mother's family had ever understood why David felt so driven to be a naval officer, but now she did. He had been inadvertently influenced in that direction by her father. Sara thought David deserved to know.

David turned again to look at Sara's parents, his curiosity piqued. "Hey, Teri," he called. "I'm spending the night."

* * *

Sara walked past the flagpole at the Washington, D.C. Stake Center in Kensington, Maryland as she approached the door, buoyant with excitement. For the first time she would see the members of the colony as a group and sustain Dr. Carroll as her new bishop. Most satisfying of all, her parents and David were there to witness her triumph. David's classmates had gone back to Annapolis.

As Sara stepped into the foyer, she turned sharply to the left and saw Cameron Carroll standing at the chapel doors with his mother, waiting to greet people as they entered. Sara was so shocked that she couldn't move forward another step.

Cameron couldn't be there. He was in China. What had he done to get sent home from his mission? Was he ill? The camel-brown suit didn't fit him as immaculately as Sara remembered. It was loose, as if he had lost weight. That didn't mean he was ill, though. He hadn't been in training for two years at least, so perhaps it was inevitable that he would now have the svelte body of a runner rather than the muscular body of a sprinter.

Sister Barbara Thomassen Carroll extended her hand to Sara's parents, greeting them graciously. Sara's mind was too distracted to assimilate what was being said, but after a

moment, Cameron abruptly turned his attention from them to her, his eyes immobile with incredulity and his lips parted in horror.

Sara wasn't sure whether all of her dreams were coming true, or all of her nightmares. The great Cameron Carroll recognized her in a significant way, but on recognizing her was reacting with horror, not happiness. Sara averted her gaze, feeling queasy. Why hadn't they come in on the other side of the building? She had to move, but couldn't.

Cameron's golden-brown eyebrows drew together, as if he were puzzled. He raised his hand toward her and moved his finger slightly, as if he were motioning her to approach him. Her hand felt like granite as she lifted it to her heart with a touch. She raised her eyebrows and mouthed the word, "Me?" He nodded once at her, still gazing at her over her mother's shoulder.

Sara slowly walked toward Cameron. As she approached the chapel, she realized the hymn "If You Could Hie to Kolob" was being played on the piano. Sister Carroll took her hand in greeting, still speaking to her father. "So many preparations to make! And my son chooses to hide out in the temple all week."

"I can't think of a better way to prepare to go to Eden," her father observed.

"I think you've seen him more than I have."

Any other time Sara would have been concerned that her father would say something to embarrass her, but Cameron Carroll consumed her attention. Sara couldn't move her eyes away from his. "You . . . you know me?" she whispered. Those long-lashed aqua eyes were even more beautiful than she remembered, especially now that they were fixed on her.

Cameron's flushed face relaxed a little, and he looked as though he were on the verge of smiling. "The queen is puzzled her subject knows her?"

Before Sara could ask Cameron what he meant, Sister Carroll said, squeezing her hand, "It's good to see you again, Sara! We're pleased to welcome you into the Colony."

Sara reluctantly turned her attention to Sister Carroll, aware that Cameron was still staring at her. She was both uncomfortable and dying of curiosity. "I'm thrilled to be here."

Sister Carroll smiled knowingly and laid Sara's hand in Cameron's. Only now did Sara notice Sister Carroll's perfectly manicured hands, with their luxurious gold rings and nails painted creamy apricot to match her blouse. Sara and Cameron shook hands as expected. "I would introduce you to my son Cameron, but it appears you already know each other."

Cameron's hand was hot and trembling. "Actually, this is the first time we've ever met."

"That's interesting," David observed in a tone that said, "I'd better know everything about this guy before the day's over." Sara could almost see him look at her mother with raised eyebrows.

The intensity of emotion Sara felt in Cameron's touch confused her. For the time being he seemed as excited to touch her as he had been horrified to see her only moments before. One thing was certain—seeing her disturbed him. What did it mean? She had never felt so self-conscious. She tried to withdraw her hand, but Cameron's grip tightened.

"I saw Cameron for the first time at a regional dance," Sara said to Sister Carroll, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Sara was always the dance queen," Cameron explained. "At every dance she would ask virtually every guy there to dance at least once at some point in the evening."

"Then you have met," Sister Carroll said, her lips touched with a smile. She glanced toward Sara's mother, her golden-brown brows lifting briefly.

"No," Cameron said carefully, watching Sara's face with curiosity. His voice sounded strained as he said, "When I said virtually, I meant virtually."

“That is interesting,” Sara’s father commented.

Of course, Sara had never asked anyone Cameron was standing around with on any given evening to dance either, but apparently she hadn’t been subtle enough in her exclusion. Cameron had noticed that in four years attending youth dances she had asked every boy in his stake to dance but him.

Sara felt David’s eyes burning a hole in the side of her head. Thankfully he didn’t say anything. Sara wanted to run and hide in the car until the meeting was underway. She would slip in, sit at the back, and sustain the new bishop unnoticed. Eventually, however, she knew she would have to face Cameron Carroll. With this knowledge, she collected her wits and determined to get into the chapel with as much dignity as possible.

“If I was the queen of dance, then Cameron was the king of class,” Sara explained to Sister Carroll. “If I had had more class myself, perhaps I could have worked up the nerve to ask him to dance.”

“Since when did you become such a coward?” David said in disbelief.

Sara shot a glare at David. Then to Sister Carroll’s amazement and Cameron’s shock, she bowed her head to Cameron and kissed his hand. “Forgive me, your majesty. I was concerned at the time that I’d make a complete fool of myself. Obviously my concern was justified.” As she lifted her head she noticed the clip on his aqua tie displaying three Chinese characters; she assumed that they, in some fashion, stood for “CTR” or “Choose the Right.”

When Sara looked at Cameron’s face again, she shrugged slightly and smiled tentatively, begging him with her eyes not to think she was too much of an idiot. The flush in his cheeks deepened, bleeding into the tips of his ears. Had he been anyone but Cameron Carroll, he would have looked ridiculous.

Sara realized that Cameron wasn’t as polished and as sure of himself as she had always believed. His little-boy uneasiness made him seem real and accessible, warming her all over. She squeezed his hand and withdrew hers with a smile. “I’m glad to finally meet you, Cameron.”

Sister Carroll gazed keenly at Sara, directing her words at Sara’s mother. “You have a beautiful daughter, Sister Alexander, and she has quite a bit more savoir-faire than she thinks she does.”

“I always thought so.”

Sara felt her mother’s hand on her back, pushing her toward the chapel. She moved forward in relief. She heard her father behind her say: “You’re a good man, Cameron. I wish things could be different for you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Cameron said, his voice an agonized whisper.

Sara finally awoke to the fact that her father and Cameron had met in the temple the previous week. She didn’t think it was strange—her father was always meeting interesting people in the temple—but it did make her uncomfortable. What had they talked about? Sara wondered how her father would answer Cameron now. Why hadn’t he told Cameron that she was going to Eden too? Did her father still think she would change her mind?

“I don’t know. For some reason I just couldn’t.”

“Perhaps it’s better this way. Thank you for everything, Brother Alexander.”

As Sara entered the chapel she observed, in surprise, that Tony Wright was the one playing “If You Could Hie to Kolob” on the piano. He was wearing a pale gray suit that he had jazzed up with a bright blue shirt, and he had trimmed his light brown beard. The piano was located to the far left of the platform, and there was a real pipe organ.

Before anything else could register, Sara felt a hand on her elbow. She turned to face Cameron Carroll again. He smiled, and Sara thought she would melt right there on the spot. "The king requests a private audience with the queen."

Sara motioned her parents and David to go on without her. They did so with interest as she allowed Cameron to guide her through the overflow area behind the chapel and into the cultural hall.

Once they were standing alone amid rows of empty chairs, Cameron gazed at Sara gravely. "Why are you here, Sara?"

What an odd question! "To sustain a bishop with the other colonists. Why did you think?"

"I don't understand why you're going to Eden at all."

What was he asking? Did he doubt her qualifications? "It's an incredible opportunity. I'm going to study journalism with your mother. She interviewed me herself."

"It doesn't disturb you that the prophet has counseled members of the Church to remain on Earth and have no contact whatsoever with the Zarrists?"

Cameron's question dumbfounded her. He could have been reciting a script written by her father or Bishop Lanham. She tried to tear her eyes away from his but couldn't. He gazed at her probingly, as if he were trying to analyze thoughts and feelings even she didn't realize she possessed yet.

"Well?" Cameron persisted.

Sara surprised herself by saying, "Yes. I guess it does. A little."

"Then why are you here?"

Sara loosened her muscles in an attempt to relax and compose herself. She reminded herself that Nephi had been disturbed when the Spirit had told him to kill Laban. Of course he had been disturbed. But killing Laban had been the right thing to do. "Why are you?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"And you didn't answer mine."

The corner of Cameron's mouth lifted in a wry little smile. "It seems my family needs me."

Sara still wondered why he wasn't in China. "Is that why you came home?"

"Apparently so."

"*Apparently*? Don't you know?"

"I didn't *come* home. I was *called* home."

Cameron was trying to tell her something, and Sara knew she wasn't getting it. "I don't understand."

"You will. Why are you here?"

"Because I believe in your father's vision of Zion."

"My father isn't a prophet."

"But he is a great leader and a righteous man."

"How do you know he's righteous?"

"What an odd thing for you to say!"

"No it isn't. How do you know what's in my father's heart?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Things aren't always what they seem."

"Your father is no hypocrite!"

"Perhaps not, but a well-meaning person can be confused."

Sara didn't like Cameron's attitude. He reminded her too much of her father. "Why don't you just come right out and call your father an apostate? Perhaps our new ward should be called the Eden Colony Ward of Apostates. While you're at it, why don't you go ahead and put

yourself at the top of the list of apostates, since, unless I've misunderstood you, you're planning to go to Eden with the rest of us!"

Cameron stepped away from Sara as if struck. "Don't do this, Sara. Don't go to Eden." Anguish saturated his voice. "*Please.*"

"Obviously you're the one who's the hypocrite!" Sara spun around and strode back into the chapel and toward the pew where her parents and David were sitting near the front of the chapel. Tony looked her way as he finished "If You Could Hie to Kolob" and made a face. He leaned back with his hands in the air, as if he wanted to say, "Ouch! Who bit you? Don't you come near me!" Sara shook her head at him and rolled her eyes. He grinned and began playing a perky "There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today."

"What did Cameron want?" Sara's mother whispered as Sara sat down.

"To tell me I should follow the counsel of the prophet and stay on Earth." Of all the nerve! Cameron wasn't her father. Or her bishop. She barely even knew him.

"And you, of course, berated him," David whispered pleasantly.

"What else could I have done? What a hypocrite!"

"Lower your voice!" her mother said. "And what's wrong with you, anyway? Haven't you noticed? He's crazy about you!"

"No, just crazy!" Cameron really was the family lunatic!

Sara's father leaned forward and whispered, "Cameron isn't a hypocrite, and he isn't crazy. He's a righteous young man who knows that going to Eden is wrong."

Sara did not like her father's implication that Cameron was righteous and she was not. "If he really feels that way, then he should stay here. Obviously he's not only a hypocrite, but a coward who doesn't have the backbone to stand up to his parents."

Sara's mother shook her head in exasperation. "You're the one who's crazy, Sara!"

Sara's father turned and looked thoughtfully at the back of the chapel. Sara followed the line of his vision and saw Cameron in the cultural hall where she had left him, standing by himself with an arm folded over his waist and his face bowed into his hand. Her father said with feeling, "You're wrong about Cameron, Sara. You of all people ought to know what that boy is made of; you've been studying him long enough."

Sara instantly felt ashamed. Her father was right; Cameron was as determined as anyone she had ever known and had never been a coward. Her mother was right also; she really was crazy. She had wanted to know Cameron for six years, and the first time she talked with him she had practically yelled at him! His feelings about Eden surprised her, but they changed nothing. She still loved him, and he liked her too, enough that her criticism had hurt him. What was wrong with her?

Cameron seemed now to be struggling with an enormous burden, and Sara perceived that he was going to Eden out of a sense of duty, not desire. Her anger disappeared. She wondered what was going on inside of his head. Before Sara knew what she was doing, she stood up and wound her way to the cultural hall. When she was standing in front of Cameron, she held out her hand to him and said lightly, "Would you like to dance?"

Cameron looked up at her abruptly, his eyes wary, but he played along. He took her hand and drew her closer. "I was hoping you would ask."

Sara couldn't restrain her curiosity. "If you wanted to dance with me, why didn't *you* ask?"

Cameron shrugged, ever so slightly. "I didn't think you wanted to dance with *me*."

His response astonished Sara. Was he really so modest? Or was he naïve? "How could any girl not want to dance with you?"

Cameron looked from one side to the other, then turned slightly and looked over his shoulder. "I don't see any monsters here. Nothing to frighten anyone."

"You're right, and I don't see any now, but at the time you always seemed so . . ." Sara paused, searching for the right word. "Urbane." She held out the side of her denim skirt with the hand that wasn't holding Cameron's, painfully aware of her bright pink knit shirt and black vinyl shoes purchased at a discount store. She had attempted to buy a suit once but had known she would never wear it when she saw her reflection in the mirror. "And I'm so . . ."

"Beautiful," Cameron said softly, taking her other hand in his.

Cameron's sweet-tempered sincerity charmed Sara. She owed him the truth, as difficult as it was to admit. "I don't think I was afraid of you personally. As far as I can tell, you've never been unkind to anyone. It wasn't that."

She lowered her eyes and her voice. "I think it was that I couldn't bear the thought that you, of all people, would treat me like one of the guys." Talking about her inadequacies was even more painful than she had thought it would be. "I . . . I didn't know to dress . . . or act . . . to make it otherwise."

Sara's eyes followed her hand as Cameron lifted it to his lips. He gazed at her over her knuckles, his eyes earnest. "A servant would treat his beautiful queen as one of the guys? Unthinkable."

He was almost too nice, which made Sara feel more ashamed than ever for the way she had spoken to him before. "Oh, Cameron . . . I'm so sorry for calling you an apostate and a hypocrite. You caught me off guard, but that was no excuse."

Cameron smiled, lowering her hand. "I forgive you. Now will you stay?"

"No. I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

"There's nothing I can say that will persuade you."

"Not a thing. If you don't believe me, ask my parents. You seem to know my father well enough." She looked at him expectantly.

"Yes, I did meet your father last week. And yes, I knew he was your father. And yes, he did know who I was. He remembered me from all of the track meets and assumed you and I were friends. And no, I'm not going to tell you any more about it. Not yet. He did tell me, though, that you placed third in the 200 and seventh in the 100 at the NCAA championships." He released her hands and gave her a thumbs-up. "You're incredible! Congratulations!"

"Thanks! It was an incredible opportunity. It felt strange your not being there too."

"It's enough for me that you were there. I was where I wanted and needed to be. It was thrilling, Sara! China is literally exploding with the Spirit right now! It was a glorious thing to be a part of, and I wouldn't trade my experience for anything."

Sara smiled and nodded, shivering with admiration. "I know." She knew the Beijing Temple had been dedicated a mere month before; the Shanghai Temple would be dedicated that week. "Did you get a chance to go to the temple there before you left?"

"I did. I was able to attend the dedication and go through a session. I attended several sealings also, for people I had baptized early in my mission." Cameron sat down in a folding chair.

Sara automatically sat down next to him. "How long have you been home?"

"I flew into Baltimore on Monday." To Sara's amazement, Cameron took her hand in his again. Could it be true? Was it possible Cameron Carroll wanted her to be more than just a friend?

Cameron's fingers caressed the back of her hand. "Do you mind?" He was so close that Sara could see the perfect purity of the aqua in his eyes. Not one tiny fleck marred the clarity of the color. They were the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen.

Sara smiled and shook her head. He smiled, and she blushed, unable to restrain herself from whispering what was in her heart, "I've missed you so much, Cameron."

"I've missed you too, Sara."

Tony began playing "Love One Another" with embellishments and passion. Realizing that he had just finished played "Love One Another" in the normal way, Sara abruptly turned toward him. He looked right at her and grinned, or appeared to anyway. He was far enough away that she couldn't be sure.

"The pianist seems to be amused that we . . . uh . . . know each other so well," Cameron observed. "He must be a friend of yours."

Sara nodded. "His name is Tony Wright."

"Tony Wright?" Cameron said thoughtfully, looking toward the piano again. "How do you know him?"

Sara explained about the Don Pablo's group and all the time she had spent online talking with the other colonists. "I have a confession to make," she said cautiously. "I've read all of your e-mails."

Cameron appeared puzzled. "E-mails?"

"The e-mails you sent to your family while you were on your mission. They're on your family's web site. Didn't you know?"

"I'd forgotten. I never had time to look at the web site." Cameron gazed at Sara tenderly. "You read all of them?"

Sara nodded. She wasn't ready yet to tell him that she had practically memorized them.

"And you were surprised by my feelings about Eden?"

"The e-mails I read said nothing about Eden." Tony finished "Love One Another" and began playing "I Stand All Amazed."

Cameron shook his head. "It figures my father wouldn't have included *those*." His fingers began trembling as he stroked her hand. "I'm thrilled you would want to read my e-mails. I wish I had known you were interested. I would have written to you directly."

The thought was too wonderful to believe. "Really?"

"You doubt?" Cameron squeezed Sara's hand. "I guess, then, I'd better make my confession. I used to read all of the Carroll County newspapers online, looking for information about you." He reached into a pocket in his pants and brought out his wallet, which required some awkward maneuvering since he didn't want to let go of her while he did it. He opened it and pulled two laminated pictures out of the bill holder and handed them to her.

Sara looked at the two pictures in shock. Both were newspaper pictures of her that had been printed out on the computer. One was her senior picture, and the other was of her after she had finished her state championship run of the 100 as a junior. She handed the pictures back to him, her eyes meeting his again in awe.

Cameron dropped the pictures into his shirt pocket. "Do you still doubt?"

Sara shook her head, barely, feeling as if her life had been turned inside out. A few minutes of unreserved conversation had clarified the status of her relationship with Cameron. They were already more than friends and had been for a long time.

"When I found out I was going to Eden," Cameron said, "I knew I would never see you again. I thought it would be better if I threw the pictures away, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

His feelings, so like hers, inspired her to find her voice. "I finally told my mom. It was my way, I guess, of throwing you out of my heart. It might have worked."

Cameron smiled. "I'm glad it didn't."

A family sat down in the overflow area not far from where Sara and Cameron were sitting. Sara leaned toward Cameron and said in a low voice, "It looks as though our privacy's being invaded. It must be about time to go in."

Cameron glanced at his watch, then tugged on her hand. "You're right," he said reluctantly. "It is time." Once they were on their feet, he held out his arm to her. "Please lead me to the dance floor, fair queen."

Sara took Cameron's arm in delight and walked back into the chapel with him. Tony raised an eyebrow at Sara, cocking his head at Cameron in interest while he finished playing "I Stand All Amazed." As Sara and Cameron sat down in her family's pew, Tony started playing "Choose the Right." Cameron removed the Chinese CTR clip from his tie and held it up for Tony to see, then clipped it onto the neckline of Sara's shirt. Tony smiled, nodding his approval.

Sara wanted to laugh. "Don't tell me you're one of those returned missionaries who supposedly proposes on the first date."

The corner of Cameron's mouth lifted in a mischievous way. "Perhaps we should take a walk to the temple. That way I could do it properly."

A hand rested on Cameron's shoulder from behind. Sara looked up and saw Dr. Carroll standing in the aisle, regarding them curiously.

"Son, I can't tell you how intrigued I am to see you on such friendly terms with one of the brightest of Eden's young stars." Dr. Carroll moved into the pew in front of them, knelt forward, and held his hand out to Sara.

Sara took Dr. Carroll's hand, leaning forward a little. "Good evening, Dr. Carroll."

"Why didn't you tell me, Sara, that you were so well acquainted with Cameron?" Tony finished playing a verse of "Choose the Right" and began playing another.

Sara could scarcely contain her happiness. "Cameron and I seem to have done the impossible. We've become quite well acquainted without ever speaking to each other."

"You had never spoken to each other before today?"

"I didn't think she liked me."

"I didn't think he knew I existed."

Dr. Carroll patted Sara's hand. "You're telling me that had my son not been so bashful, you and I would have had the pleasure of getting to know each other years ago?"

Sara withdrew her hand and relaxed against the pew. "Cameron was always so dazzling. He made *me* bashful."

Dr. Carroll laughed under his breath. "You bashful, Sara? I don't believe it."

Sara turned so that she could face Cameron. "When *did* you realize I existed, Cameron?"

"My first youth dance. You were so beautiful that you dazzled *me*, Sara."

"Why didn't you ask her to dance?"

Cameron turned to his father with a little shrug. "I thought she was seventeen."

"Really?" Sara said in astonishment.

"You were so . . . well, you *looked* seventeen, and it didn't occur to me that a girl barely fourteen would feel so comfortable asking juniors and seniors to dance."

"Oh that was nothing! You have to understand, I've spent my life hanging out with a guy three years older than I am." Sara elbowed David.

Cameron laughed softly; Dr. Carroll chuckled. Tony finished playing “Choose the Right” and searched for another hymn.

“My uncle, Dr. Carroll, David Pierce.” Sara hoped she wouldn’t have to introduce Dr. Carroll to her parents. They were so disgusted with him that she wasn’t sure they could speak to him civilly.

David shook Dr. Carroll’s hand, then elbowed Sara. “I taught Sara everything she’s knows, didn’t I, Sara.”

Sara grunted. “Hardly! I taught you how to run.”

“I taught you how to hit a baseball and skate.”

“I taught you how to shoot baskets and dance.”

Dr. Carroll watched their game with interest. When Tony began playing “Love at Home,” Cameron laughed. He must have thought he was being too loud, because he quickly stopped himself.

“I *didn’t* teach her how to kiss.”

Sara made a face. “Don’t be gross!”

David gave Sara a little shove in Cameron’s direction. “That honor obviously belongs to you, Cameron.”

Sara felt a hand squeeze her shoulder, and heard Dr. Carroll say with a chuckle as he walked away, “I think it’s more likely Little Cougar will be giving lessons to *him*.”

Cameron tensed, his hand involuntarily tightening on Sara’s arm. Nobody said anything for many moments.

David finally broke the silence. “That comment was completely disgusting. He flatters you, Sara, and in the same breath humiliates his son. What kind of father does that?”

“Don’t be absurd, David. It was a joke!”

“Then why aren’t any of us laughing?”

“Dr. Carroll would never intentionally humiliate anyone.”

“You mark my words, moron. That man is a tyrant, and he’s going to grind your face into the dirt. I’m sorry, Cameron. I know he’s your father, and I’m sure it pains you to hear the truth spoken so bluntly, but someone has to pound some sense into Sara.”

Cameron moved closer to Sara to talk to David. “I almost pity my father. I wouldn’t want you to be my enemy.” The wonderful feel and smell of him so overwhelmed Sara that she thought she might hyperventilate. She was surprised to find that Cameron’s hair smelled like plain old dandruff shampoo. His father always smelled expensive.

David leaned a little more toward Cameron, lowering his voice. “Dr. Expert Psychologist obviously knows nothing about how Sara interacts with men, Cameron, so don’t let what he said disturb you.” Tony began playing a new hymn, and David softly sang along: “Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly . . .” David sat back against the pew. “Your pianist friend is merciless, Sara. I like him.”

Before Sara could reply, Cameron pulled her to her feet as he stood. The rumble of voices in the chapel faded as President William Grant of the First Presidency of the Church entered with Presidents Rowe and Damazo of the Washington, D.C. Temple Community presidency. They took their seats on the stand immediately instead of lingering in the aisles to shake hands.

Sara was still amazed a member of the First Presidency of the Church was there in person to organize their new ward. By the time President Grant had come to the pulpit to start the meeting, everyone was seated and silent.

President Grant announced that the opening song would be “I Believe in Christ” and introduced Tony and the chorister, a tall, light-haired guy named Brent Hall. Sara whispered to Cameron, “I met Brent when I was at BYU.”

“Where’s he from?”

“Layton, Utah. He and Tony must have been called into the elders quorum presidency or something. How else would President Grant know them?” She removed a hymnbook from the holder on the pew in front of her.

“Perhaps they’re in the bishopric,” Cameron whispered.

“Yeah, right! Tony’s only twenty-four, and Brent’s twenty-one!” Sara began flipping through the hymnbook to find the song.

“If the Lord can call young men to be prophets, why not members of a bishopric?”

It should have been a joke, but Cameron’s tone was too serious. And he was right. The names of many young prophets came immediately into Sara’s mind. Enoch, Joseph, Samuel, and Daniel. Nephi, Jacob, and Mormon. Joseph Smith. John the Baptist and the Lord himself, who had been far more than a prophet. Sara leaned a little closer to Cameron. “You really think it’s possible Tony could have been called into the bishopric?”

Cameron nodded a little, appearing as disconcerted as she felt. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, then closed it again. He reached out to help Sara hold the hymnbook, a gesture that ended up being nothing more than an excuse to maintain his hold on her hand. The eagerness of his touch sent shivers through Sara and made her light-headed. He certainly wasn’t being bashful tonight! Her eyes followed the words and music of the song, but Cameron’s presence so consumed her that she couldn’t sing more than a few measures. Cameron didn’t sing much either.

After the song, Russ Brodsky gave the opening prayer. Sara didn’t need to hear his name announced to know who he was. He looked just like his video image, with rich olive skin, dark eyes, and curly dark brown hair that fell loosely on his forehead. “Russ is your mother’s other protégé,” Sara whispered to Cameron. “He’s from Chicago.”

“Do you know him?”

“I’ve never met him in person, but I’ve communicated with him online often. Not as often as with Tony, though.”

“Did you and Tony ever go out?”

“No. I’m not sure why, because we get along amazingly well. I guess it never felt right to either one of us.”

When President Grant came to the pulpit again, he said, “Because we as the First Presidency are concerned that nearly all of you have been deceived and truly do not comprehend the danger of your course, we are organizing the Eden Colony Ward. The Eden Colony Ward will not be affiliated with a stake or district but will be under the direct authority of the First Presidency. The ward organization will give you both spiritual and physical protection and will enable you to repent of your rebellion against the Lord’s authorized priesthood leaders.”

Cameron’s arm was still resting against Sara’s, his fingers intertwined with hers, so evidently he wasn’t planning to leave the meeting, despite his reservations about going to Eden. She glanced at him. He appeared to be watching his parents, who were sitting with his sister and two younger brothers to his left and forward a couple of rows.

President Grant’s voice softened. “We do realize that there are a few of you who would remain on Earth were your spouses not determined to go to Eden. Those of you who are in that position know who you are. We realize the difficulties you’re facing and pray the Lord will

comfort you. Aside from you, there is only one adult member of the Eden Colony who has not been deceived and who is not guilty of rebellion, a young man who is blameless in every way. The Lord, in His infinite mercy, has inspired our prophet to personally call this dedicated young man to be your bishop.”

President Grant startled Sara by looking straight at her, or so it seemed. He held out his hand and said affectionately, “Come on up here, Cameron. The time has arrived.”

Chapter 6: THE RELUCTANT BISHOP

Stupefied, Sara turned to Cameron. He regarded at her in a cautious, almost guilty way. He mouthed to her, “Wait for me after the meeting.”

Sara could do nothing but nod as he strode to the pulpit. Never in a million years would she have suspected Cameron Carroll would be made the bishop of the Eden Colony Ward. He was far too young, for one thing, and unmarried. Who had ever heard of a bishop who wasn’t married?

Something inside of her said that if she and Cameron let nature take its course, Cameron wouldn’t remain unmarried for long. She shoved that feeling aside in panic. She loved him to be sure, but they were too young to get married, and they couldn’t come back to be married in the temple for two years at least. And what was wrong with Cameron, anyway? Why hadn’t he known she would be here? Hadn’t he seen a ward list?

Sara felt David rest the side of his hand against her head. His voice quavered as he whispered, “Your bishop can’t keep his eyes off of you.”

Sara turned abruptly toward David, feeling more anxious than ever. The situation was too outrageous. David’s face twitched as he struggled to hold back his laughter. Sara whispered defensively, “I’ll have you know that I’ve been waiting *years* for Cameron to put his eyes on me!” She knew it was a dumb thing to say as soon as she said it, but her mind was blank to everything else.

“I wouldn’t have missed this for the world!” David leaned his head into his hands between his knees, his shoulders shaking.

Sara raised her hand with everyone else when Cameron was presented to be ordained a high priest and then again when he was sustained as bishop of the Eden Colony Ward. During the proceedings Cameron’s face looked haunted, as if he were being sentenced to life in prison.

Sara’s heart pounded so frantically that her entire body felt as if it were throbbing. Why had Cameron been made the bishop? It didn’t seem right. He didn’t want to go to Eden. He thought the colonists were apostates. He was essentially an outsider and could not possibly be effective. Dr. Carroll was the natural leader of the colony. Why hadn’t he been made the bishop? Cameron wouldn’t be any more than his father’s puppet, and the thought of Cameron in that intolerable position outraged Sara as much as anything.

Sara realized she was gritting her teeth and made a conscious effort to relax before she ended up with a headache. She forced herself to look away from Cameron for a moment and observe his parents. What in the galaxy did they think of this twist of circumstance? Sara could see enough of their faces to determine that they were as shocked as she was. Wasn’t that odd. Cameron had received this unprecedented call from the prophet himself and hadn’t told his parents! Maybe she and her father were wrong. Maybe Cameron really was spineless.

Sara shifted her focus to Cameron again and saw that he was gazing pleadingly at her father. Sara couldn’t help but glance at her father. Sara knew that look. It was the look he gave her when she was getting ready to perform or compete, the look that said, “You’ve worked hard for this. You are *awesome*. You will triumph!” Why did it have to be Cameron now and not her?

As much as Sara wanted her father’s approval, when she saw how Cameron blossomed under her father’s gaze, she couldn’t feel envious or even irritated. She wanted nothing more than for Cameron to be happy and to step into his new position with dignity and self-assurance.

When Cameron’s eyes finally rested on Sara, his expression, while not one of happiness, was one of warmth. Cameron’s experiences and callings as a missionary came to her mind, and

she felt as if light were being poured into her body. She knew the Lord wanted Cameron in this position and had prepared him for it.

The feelings of astonishment and panic melted, and Sara smiled at Cameron. He smiled back at her, tentatively at first, but more tenderly as he came to realize she supported the call. His gaze became more loving, more grateful, drawing her into his heart. She couldn't have resisted him if she had wanted to. He didn't take his eyes away from hers the remainder of the time he stood at the pulpit next to President Grant.

By the time it occurred to Sara to wonder whether Tony really had been called into the bishopric, Cameron sat down on the stand next to President Damazo, and President Grant presented Tony's name along with Brent Hall, Russ Brodsky, and eight other young men to be high priests. Tony stood next to the piano, his face pale and solemn. She had never seen him so serious, but after she and everyone else raised their hands to sustain him as Cameron's first counselor, he looked directly at her and winked, the corner of his mouth rising slightly.

Of course Tony had known the moment he had seen her talking with Cameron that she had fallen for her new bishop and didn't know it. No wonder he had been so amused.

David could not sit still. Sara was afraid he might laugh out loud. He whispered to Sara again, almost unable to speak, "What an efficient counselor, providing romantic music for the bishop and his girlfriend to cuddle to!"

"We were *not* cuddling!" David dropped his head between his knees again. Sara leaned forward and whispered into his ear. "We weren't!"

The congregation sustained Brent Hall and Russ Brodsky as members of the bishopric along with two other young men, then an executive secretary and several clerks.

President Grant then asked for all of the high priests of the colony to stand and sustain the six other young men made high priests that evening to be the high priests group leader and his five assistants. When all of the elders in the congregation stood, Sara prepared herself for the unexpected and listened for old men to be sustained into that presidency.

Sara thought she should be disappointed when it became obvious that the elders quorum presidency of the Eden Colony Ward, with its younger men, would look like every other elders quorum presidency in the Church except for the unusual number of counselors. The president, though, unlike all of the other ward leaders just sustained, was a professional in his early thirties, the colony's general physician, a smartly-dressed African American man named Sean Marshall. Sara was relieved that Cameron would have one person to help him, at least, who possessed maturity and had probably served in many Church callings. Dr. Marshall was the one man whose appearance actually fit the position.

Sara glanced around and saw strained faces on the older members of the colony. She couldn't believe the finesse in which Dr. Carroll and the other leaders of the colony had been so effectively shut out of all ward leadership. The situation really was absurd. How would this ward function with mere students counseling and issuing callings to their government leaders and professors? The First Presidency was putting these young men in an impossible position. There was no way it would work.

After all of the sustainings had been completed, President Grant announced that two members of their new bishopric, Jeffrey Winter and Steven Sanchez, would sing "I Need Thee Every Hour," and that following their number, Bishop Carroll would speak. The two men sang with such feeling that Brother Sanchez was in tears by the end of the song.

Brothers Winter and Sanchez sat down in the choir seats near Tony, and Sara watched with anxiety as Cameron came to the microphone. "Your song was beautiful, Brother Sanchez and Brother Winter. Thank you." His hands gripped the pulpit, his eyes glossy with desperation. He

looked as if he were preparing to hurl himself off of a cliff rather than address a few inspiring remarks to his new ward.

“There is no reason any of us should be here. We all know the prophet’s counsel. I’m begging you. Give up your plan to go to Eden. It isn’t too late, even for those of you who have just been called into leadership positions. Please.”

Brother Sanchez arose and moved toward Cameron. “I can’t do it. I’m sorry, Bishop.” Cameron nodded that he understood, stepping forward to shake Brother Sanchez’s hand. “God bless you. Take your family and go home.”

Sara watched as Brother Sanchez walked down the aisle toward his wife and infant daughter. His wife watched him in relief. Sara didn’t think she had ever seen a woman with a baby move so fast as she headed to the back of the chapel and the exit.

Cameron didn’t speak as his eyes rested on every adult in the room. No one spoke; no one stirred.

Finally another young couple left with their three children. Then another family left, and another, followed by several unmarried students. The exodus took Jeffrey Winter, Cameron’s second counselor, two members of the elders quorum presidency, an assistant to the high priests group leader, and a couple of others who had not been given callings. Impatience toward the dropouts seized Sara’s heart. Those people had made a commitment! What specialists would the colony now lack?

When Cameron’s gaze finally found Sara’s, it lingered there for so long that many other members of the colony turned to look at her. If Cameron only knew what going to Eden meant to her, he would not ask her to give it up. She shook her head slightly and mouthed the words, “I can’t.”

A tear glistened on Cameron’s cheek. “Please,” he begged in a whisper.

Many more moments passed, and Dr. Carroll regally arose, his voice friendly but firm: “Son, I believe I speak for the entire colony when I say that despite the gracious concern of our Church leaders, we will move forward with our glorious goal to create Zion on the planet Eden.”

Sara didn’t know what to think of Dr. Carroll’s words. He spoke for her, but he obviously didn’t speak for everyone. She didn’t think it was right that Dr. Carroll had interrupted Cameron’s talk this way. She looked to President Grant to see if he would intervene. President Grant didn’t appear to acknowledge Dr. Carroll’s interruption at all; his eyes were riveted on Cameron.

As Dr. Carroll sat down, Cameron lifted his hand and waved it in the direction of the temple. “If here in the light of the temple you can still choose to follow my father into hell . . .” Cameron stopped speaking and took a tissue from the box on the pulpit. He touched it to his cheeks with shaking hands. “I’m certain that once we get to Eden, most of you will think I’m a pretty poor excuse for a bishop.”

Sara watched Cameron in alarm. She wasn’t sure whether she should be offended by his impertinence or filled with trepidation by his conviction that Eden was an evil place. In the end she decided he was afraid of going to Eden and that his fear was making him hysterical.

“That poor boy,” Sara’s mother whispered. “His parents ought to be shot.”

“Nevertheless,” Cameron continued, “I will do everything in my power to lead the colony in the direction the Lord wants it to go.” He squeezed the tissue he held in his hand again and again. “In 3 Nephi, chapter 20, verse 13 it says, ‘And then shall the remnants, which shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth, be gathered in from the east and from the west, and from the south and from the north; and they shall be brought to the knowledge of the Lord their

God, who hath redeemed them.’ I promise you, those of you who will live to recognize my authority as the Lord’s representative on Eden, that when the time is right, I will lead you back to Zion.”

Cameron closed his talk and sat down, and President Grant came to the pulpit again. “The Eden Colony Ward will be out of contact with the leadership of the Church for a long time. Be assured that the Lord will not permit any of the men called to preside over you to lead you astray.”

Sara shuddered. What a terrible thing to say! Would the Lord really kill Cameron if he messed up? One look at Cameron told her that he believed it. Surely the situation would never arise. She couldn’t believe the Church really would abandon them so heartlessly.

“Bishop Carroll understands the seriousness of his calling and has been directed by the prophet to lead the ward to the New Jerusalem when the Lord commands. He will present you to the First Presidency at that time, and he and your other priesthood leaders will report on their stewardships.

“You must keep in mind that a bishop’s authority is limited. This being the case, you will never have a temple. You will have opportunities to baptize nonmembers, but Eden has not been dedicated for the preaching of the gospel and you will not be permitted to engage in active missionary work. Your bishopric and other ward priesthood leadership will never change. Your sons will not be permitted to receive the Melchizedek priesthood, nor will any of your children be able to receive their patriarchal blessings. It isn’t too late to change your minds.”

Sara still couldn’t accept the possibility that the Church would abandon the colony that way. President Grant believed it at the moment to be sure, but it made no sense. Hearing movement behind her, Sara turned to see others leave, a family and several more students, including another assistant to the high priests group leader and one of Cameron’s clerks.

“To those of you who insist on going to Eden despite our warnings, I implore you to look to your new bishop for spiritual leadership.” He turned slightly and motioned Cameron to the pulpit again. Cameron went to stand next to President Grant, appearing uncomfortable. “Bishop Carroll has faith, maturity, and experience beyond his years. He served for the past eight months as a branch president in the city Xi’an, in China. During that time he and his companion baptized hundreds of people and helped them make arrangements to relocate to the new temple community in Beijing.”

Sara had known that people were joining the Church in China in droves, and although she knew that much of Cameron’s teaching and baptizing had been done in large groups out of doors, he had never mentioned numbers in his e-mails. Hearing of his success this way astounded her.

“During the course of his mission,” President Grant continued, “your bishop has been instrumental in providing the equivalent of a third of a stake to the Beijing Temple Community, which in less than a year, has grown to thirty-eight stakes. He has done phenomenal work and will serve you well if you will let him.”

Cameron gazed at the floor, more uncomfortable than ever. Sara couldn’t believe how modest and self-conscious he was. She loved him all the more for it, yet still felt ashamed that she had never asked him to dance. Rejecting him that way must have hurt him deeply. If only she had known!

The tone of President Grant’s voice softened, “We love you and want you to be successful. May the Lord bless you until we meet again in Zion.”

Cameron said something in President Grant’s ear. President Grant nodded, then turned toward the Carroll family and smiled. “Ashley Carroll? Will you please come up here and lead

the closing song? We'll sing Hymn 152, 'God Be with You Till We Meet Again.' President Sean Marshall will give the benediction."

After Cameron and President Grant sat down, Ashley Carroll came to the platform. She lifted her arm to begin directing the music, her eyes bright with excitement.

"She's exquisite," David whispered.

Sara smiled. David had always liked classy blondes, and Ashley, with her contoured coral-pink dress made of silk and flawless makeup and hair, was as beautiful and as elegantly fashionable as young LDS women came, even if she was a little young for David.

"If you're nice to me, I'll have Cameron introduce you."

After the song and prayer were over, Sara stood up and stretched. It had been the strangest church meeting she had ever attended, the most troubling as well as the most thrilling. She watched Cameron until he looked her way. He pointed to the south foyer, and she nodded in reply.

Once Sara and her family were in the foyer, her father asked, "Well, what do you think of your new bishop, Sara?" His smile was a little too pleased.

"Other than the fact she's in love with him?" David said.

Her mother smiled knowingly. "Other than that."

Sara pursed her lips to keep herself from grinning stupidly, shrugging. "The Lord prepared Cameron for this. I don't doubt that, but it was still a shock."

"It looks like your boyfriend, Sara, is the type of leader who has what it takes to get you insubordinate plebes back into formation," David said.

"Get us insubordinate plebes back into formation? Are you nuts?"

David softly began singing: "Onward, Christian soldiers marching as to war—"

Sara shook her head at him. "You are such a moron!"

"With the cross of Jesus going on before—"

Sara slugged David in the arm.

He didn't flinch, but gazed straight ahead, his eyes "in the boat," and began bending his knees to the beat of the song, as if he were marching. "Christ, the royal master, leads against the foe! Forward into battle, see His banners go . . ." Sara's parents laughed softly.

They were hopeless! Sara turned away from them, toward the doors to the chapel. She saw Cameron pushing his way through the crowd to get to her. Sara watched him eagerly.

When Cameron reached Sara and her family, he moved as close to Sara as he dared, resting his hand briefly on her back. "You and your family will stay for my ordinations, won't you?"

Sara smiled at him and nodded.

"I'm relieved you're not angry with me for not telling you."

"How could I be? You didn't ask for the call. And you did try to tell me."

David tilted his head toward Sara. "You reprimanded your bishop."

"And now he's inviting me to his ordination. I think he's forgiven me."

David chuckled. "That's fortunate for you."

"Fortunate for me, you mean!" Cameron said. He extended his arm toward Sara's parents.

Sara's mother shook Cameron's hand first. "We're more pleased and relieved than we can express."

"Your call was inspired," her father said. "Don't ever doubt it."

Cameron shook the hand of Sara's father gratefully. "You have no idea how much your confidence means to me."

"Did you get to choose your counselors?" David asked.

“Actually, I did. President Morley gave me a list of names to pray about. There were thirty-five. From them, I chose my counselors, clerks, and the elders quorum president and high priests group leader. I didn’t know anything about any of them until tonight.”

“Unfortunately you lost a good portion of your staff,” Sara said.

Cameron shrugged. “I expected to lose a few of them. My own opinion is that some of those men were having doubts about going to Eden to begin with and needed the call to push them into making the final decision to stay home.”

“Seems backward, doesn’t it?” Sara said.

“Maybe not,” her father said. “Not if they were expecting Cameron’s father to be made the bishop.”

“And there’s nothing like an unexpected calling to make a person do some intense soul-searching,” Sara’s mother added.

“Isn’t that the truth,” Cameron said with a sigh. “But for me, anyway, the soul-searching phase is over and the assuming-of-responsibilities phase must begin. I think it’s time for me to face my parents.” He gave Sara’s hand a squeeze. “I’ll see you later. The ordinations for members of the bishopric will be done in the Primary room.”

For some odd reason, Sara felt nervous for Cameron as he went back into the chapel. What in the galaxy would his parents think of his call? Would they be offended he hadn’t told them?

David said, “I like Cameron, Sara. I like him a lot. But I’ll have to admit, I’ve never imagined you with the sensitive, gentle type.”

“He’s perfect for her,” her father said.

David’s words struck Sara as absurd now that she comprehended her own feelings. She had no qualms about setting him straight, especially now that she and Cameron had come to an understanding. “There is no ‘Sara’s type.’ There is only Cameron. There has never been anybody but Cameron. I know it sounds crazy and maybe even abnormal. I don’t why; I only know what is.”

“I may never forgive you for not telling me about this other man in your life.”

“If I had told you I liked Cameron, you would have called him!”

David looked at her pointedly. “Well, somebody certainly should have.” He shook his head. “You sincerely had never spoken to him before tonight?”

“Not once.”

“I can’t believe you only saw him at a few dances a year. You know each other too well.”

“Oh no, you’re right. I’ve seen him far more than that.”

“They should know each other better,” her mother said.

“We assumed they did know each other better,” her father added.

Sara looked at her parents in warning. “Don’t tell him any more yet. You know he’ll harass me forever.”

Her mother drew her hands back. “I wouldn’t dare.” Her father smiled and shook his head.

Sara looked at David. “I think I’ll just let you chew on it awhile.” She took her mother’s arm and led her down the hall quickly to find a bathroom, leaving David with her father to wonder.

“He’s not quite what you thought he was,” her mother said as they walked.

“No, he’s a hundred times more wonderful.”

“He really is sweet, Sara.” Her mother sounded amazed. “And a little shy. I didn’t expect that either. I can understand why he chose cross country and track and not football.”

Sara murmured her agreement. Cameron could never have played football, even though he was big enough to have played in high school at least. He didn't have the personality for it. "I should have asked him to dance."

"Yes you should have, but you didn't. There's no sense beating yourself up about it. You know, though, that your support now will mean everything to him."

"I know," Sara whispered.

Chapter 7: MYSTERY LOVE

A few minutes later Sara and her mother joined her father and David in the Primary room. Sara didn't say much of anything, needing time to think about everything that had happened. After many minutes of silence Sara became aware of soft voices from behind her.

"That is him, Brandon. I know it!"

"Who?" whispered a female voice.

"That dark-haired man in the gray suit," the original voice answered.

"David Pierce!" whispered a third voice. "Brigade commander, first baseman for the Navy, and returned missionary!"

"Don't you know anything, Ashley?"

"Something has definitely been lacking in my education. He's gorgeous! Maybe I should be going to Annapolis instead of Eden."

Sara was dying to turn and see the faces behind the whispers but was afraid they would stop talking if she did. She turned her head, ever so slightly to the left, and saw Cameron's sister and two younger brothers huddled together just inside the door. Brandon was the same height as Ashley and looked even more like his father than Cameron did, with rich golden blond hair and sky-blue eyes. Adam was a head shorter than Ashley and had his mother's features and pale blond hair, his eyes turquoise.

"What's he doing here? He doesn't have to go to Eden," Adam said.

"He's with that girl Cameron sat with," Brandon said. "The one he keeps staring at."

"Do you think David Pierce is her boyfriend?" Adam asked.

"Are you blind, Adam?" said Ashley. "Cameron's her boyfriend. Didn't you see how they were cuddling?"

"No way!" Adam said. "Cameron doesn't have girlfriends, and he doesn't cuddle!"

David whispered in Sara's ear, "You and your bishop were all over each other!"

"Oh, come on, David. We were only holding hands!"

"They were cuddling," Brandon said. "At least as much as a couple can cuddle in the chapel."

"How could they be cuddling when he didn't have his arm around her?" Adam protested.

"He would have gotten around to putting his arm around her had he not been called to the stand," Brandon said. "Ashley's right. Cameron has a girlfriend."

Ashley laughed softly. "He's turned into one of those marriage-hungry returned missionaries. You know, the kind sane girls stay away from!"

David began humming softly: "Families Can be Together Forever."

Sara glared at David sidelong. She was going to *kill* Tony for putting David in this harassing-with-hymns mode!

"Shut up, David!" Sara's mother whispered. "I want to listen!"

"Snoop!"

"You really think he'll marry her?" Adam asked.

"Well, he's certainly in love with her," Ashley replied, "and he *did* give her his CTR tie clip, and you know Cameron. It's not as if he's going to do anything *else* with her!"

David whispered in Sara's ear, "Should we tell them the bishop's bride-to-be likes to dress up as a Klingon Warrior Woman for Halloween?"

"Hsssss . . ."

"She's beautiful, even if she is insane," Brandon said.

"She can't be too insane if she's in love with Cameron," Adam observed.

"You think he met her on his mission?" Brandon asked.

"No," Ashley replied. "He knew her before. She looks familiar. I'll bet that magnificent midshipman is her brother."

Members of the new bishopric and their families trickled into the Primary room. Sara felt David reach into his left pocket for a couple of caramels.

"Cameron's girlfriend is David Pierce's sister? That's cool!"

A piece of candy flew over David's shoulder, hitting Adam in the chest. David said softly out of the side of his mouth, "Say 'Go Navy!'"

Adam hesitated, then said with excitement, "Go Navy!"

Another piece of candy flew across the room, tapping Brandon in the chest. "Say 'Beat Army!'"

"Beat Army!"

This time, David reached into his other pocket and tossed a piece of chocolate, which Ashley caught in her hand. "Say you'll go out with me Saturday night!"

"I'd rather stay in with you tonight!"

David reached into his pockets, removed all of the pieces of candy he had left and tossed them to Ashley. "It's a date!"

Ashley, Brandon, and Adam collected the candy from the floor and moved toward Sara and her family. David stood up as they approached, pulling Sara up with him. Sara's parents followed. David extended his hand to Adam. "I'm honored to meet such a spirited Navy fan, but I'll have to say, it's not fair you know my name but I don't know yours."

"Adam Carroll," the boy replied, sounding awestruck. "This is my brother Brandon and my sister Ashley. She doesn't know anything important."

Ashley's golden blond eyebrows flickered in an amused way that reminded Sara of Cameron's mother.

David pointed at Sara with his thumb. "She knows that Sara Alexander here isn't my girlfriend. That's important."

Adam pondered. "You're right. That is important. Who is Sara then?"

"I'm David's niece. My mother is his sister."

Sara's mother extended her hand to Adam, then Brandon, introducing herself and Sara's father. As she shook Ashley's hand, she asked kindly, "How old are you, Ashley?"

"Almost eighteen. I graduated from high school last June."

"I'm ten," Adam said. "And Brandon's fourteen."

"Did you hear that, David?" Sara's mother said sweetly. "Ashley's seventeen."

Sara also heard the words her mother didn't say: *And you're a grown man of twenty-three.*

David heard the silent words too, because he responded with, "Ashley and I have a date tonight, and I thought she and her brothers could come to the house for root beer and popcorn," in a tone that said, *Don't be such a witch, Teri!*

Ashley and her brothers looked at each other in excitement. "Could we really?" Adam asked.

"Well, it will be late . . ." Sara's mother pointed out in a tone that said, *Don't be such a pervert, David.*

Sara wanted to laugh. Who needed telepathy? Her mother and uncle communicated perfectly well by inflecting their voices in that way they had and making faces at each other. She looked at her father and saw that he hovered on the verge of laughter also. He said, the corners of his mouth twitching, "You can come, but only if you promise to watch the video we have of David and Sara at our wedding reception, throwing cake at each other!"

As Ashley and her brothers enthusiastically agreed to the arrangement, Sara saw Tony come into the room with Marc and Jordan. They were an incongruent sight as always—Tony big and hairy, Jordan little and balding, and Marc covered with freckles and red-haired. Sara quickly excused herself and went to meet them.

When Tony spotted Sara, he laughed.

Marc said, “So Bubble Babe’s got it bad for the bishop.”

“Shall we tell him Bubble Babe’s too afraid of germs to ever kiss him?” Jordan said, grinning.

“I don’t know,” Tony said, shaking his head. “With all the heat that was flowing between those two, they’re probably both completely disinfected!”

“Bubble Babe is in no danger of contamination,” Marc said in an authoritative tone. He was the medical student after all. “Bishops don’t have germs!”

Sara gave them all quick hugs. “This babe would come out of her bubble any day for Cameron Carroll!”

“You know, Sara,” Jordan said, “given the fact that you seem to know Cameron extremely well, I’m wondering why we never heard you mention him.”

“She never did, did she,” Marc said in realization.

“Oh I knew she was secretly in love with him,” Tony said, his smile smug.

“That’s easy enough for you to say now, after you’ve seen us together!” Sara protested.

“You’re hilarious, Sara!” Tony said. “You try to be so covert, and in the process, you reveal yourself completely. Don’t look at me like that! What was I supposed to think? You and Cameron grew up in the same part of the state. You’re both track champions, and on top of all that, you’re members of the Church. You had to know each other.”

“This is true, Sara,” Jordan pointed out.

“The guy goes to China of all places on his mission,” Tony continued to Sara, “one of the most exotic places imaginable, and you never once ask Dr. Carroll anything about him, no friendly interest at all, and you’ve asked me often enough about my experiences in France.”

Sara punched Tony lightly in the arm. “You’re awfully cocky. How did you know I didn’t think Cameron was a big snob?”

“Your dislike of him would have soured you on the whole family and you wouldn’t be going to Eden at all.”

“I’ll bet she read all of Cameron’s e-mails online and didn’t need to ask Dr. Carroll about him,” Marc observed.

“You did, didn’t you, Sara,” Jordan teased. “Come on, admit it!”

“She doesn’t need to,” Tony said. “Look at her face!”

Sara covered her face with her hand. “You guys know me too well. It’s not fair!”

Tony rested his hand on Sara’s arm, his smile fading. “You’ll stay for my ordination too, won’t you?”

Sara lowered her hand and nodded. “Of course.” She surveyed Tony tentatively. “Your parents didn’t come, did they?”

Tony dropped his arm to his side, shaking his head and lowering his eyes.

“I’m really sorry.”

“I know.” Tony lifted his eyes again and gazed over her shoulder. “Your parents are here though. That has to count for something. And I’m assuming the guy you were sitting next to in the chapel is David. He has that midshipman look about him. You know, the short hair and erect posture they all have.”

Sara motioned the guys to follow her. “Come on. I’ll introduce you.”

The members of Sara's family were still conversing with Ashley and her brothers when Sara approached them. They all stopped talking suddenly. Sara's parents appeared amused. The others looked as if they had a secret. "What's going on?" Sara asked.

Adam grinned. "We've been arranging a surprise for you."

Sara turned to David, skeptical. "A surprise?"

David gazed at her conspiratorially. "Yes, a surprise. For the bishop and his bride-to-be."

Sara moaned. Tony, Marc, and Jordan laughed. Before Sara could introduce her Don Pablo's friends to her family, Cameron arrived with his parents, his Uncle Trevor and Aunt Cyndi and their three children, and President Grant. Trevor Carroll had the same golden blond hair as his brother and the same lively blue eyes, but he wasn't as tall, or as lean, and he wore a mustache.

Cyndi and Samantha, the college-aged daughter, were as tall as Trevor was and very thin, with waist-length, wavy hair, Cyndi's ash brown and Samantha's golden blond. Both wore casual knit dresses and sandals with no hose, and their skin was pale and perfect, untouched by makeup. Had they been wearing longer, more elaborate dresses, they would have looked as if they had stepped out of a Shakespearean play, an Arthurian legend, or a Renaissance fair.

As introductions were made, Sara's parents were forced to shake hands with Dr. Carroll. Her father did an excellent job, as always, keeping his face perfectly impassive, but her mother looked as if she wanted to scream.

Cameron introduced Sara to President Grant as his friend from high school, and President Grant shook her hand firmly, surveying her in a kind, but captivated way. He wasn't tall, and Sara was able to look directly into those sagacious brown eyes without moving her head up or down. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Sister Alexander. I understand you did very well in the NCAA championships last spring. Congratulations."

Sara's eyes and mouth widened. It still surprised her when people she had never met recognized her. "Thank you. I did far better than I expected to do. I felt privileged to be there at all."

President Grant patted Cameron's back. "You have a good man here. If he tries to get away, you chase him down!"

Sara grinned. "If he runs from me, I might, for the first time in my life, actually be able to catch him!" Cameron laughed.

When President Grant extended his hand to Sara's father, he said in a heartfelt way, "I can't begin to express what an honor it is to finally meet you, Brother Alexander."

Sara's father frowned slightly, as if he, too, were surprised to be recognized. Sara understood the reason for the recognition immediately. Sara could imagine her father and mother's first bishop calling or writing a member of the First Presidency directly and saying something along the lines of: "I have a young couple with a baby in my ward who claim they're agents from another planet. What am I supposed to do with them?"

Sara watched her father's face soften and knew he understood also. "It's an honor to meet you too, President."

"On behalf of the entire Church, I'd like to thank you for all of the service you've given over the years."

Her father was moved, there was no doubt about it. "It's been my pleasure," he said quietly, with feeling.

"I'm sorry things had to end this way for you."

Her father glanced at Cameron. "Things haven't ended as badly as they could have. I'd like to thank you for that."

President Grant acknowledged with a nod. "Have you told her?"

Trendaul nodded.

"That's good."

Sara turned her head to look at Cameron, wondering what he thought of this unusual exchange. He watched the proceedings, absorbed. Sara caught a glimpse of Dr. Carroll and saw that he was as intrigued as Cameron was. She didn't dare look at David.

President Grant shook her mother's hand, then David's. Eventually the rest of the introductions were made and the business began. As Cameron seated himself to be ordained, David whispered to Sara, "So Cameron's a sprinter too."

"You should see him run, David. He's like a beam of light. He's so beautiful it almost hurts to watch him."

"How many state championships did he win?"

"Six."

"Isn't that interesting! I'll bet he ran cross country and played basketball too."

Sara pursed her lips to keep a straight face. David sounded so pleased with himself for figuring it out—six years too late. "Nothing gets past you, does it, David?"

Dr. Carroll, his brother, and President Grant gathered around Cameron and laid their hands on his head. Dr. Carroll, in a meek, beautiful voice, proceeded to ordain him to be a high priest and gave him the most exquisite blessing Sara had ever heard. Her heart rejoiced as Dr. Carroll detailed the burgeoning of the Zion community on Eden.

"Cameron, because of the wondrous righteousness of your spirit, you have been chosen to be born at this time to fulfill a sacred mission on Eden. Your role will be to lay the foundation of the work there and expand it.

"Just as nature flourishes on Eden, so will the gospel. The initial Zion community you aid in establishing will influence the other fourteen Eden colonies in a miraculous way. Thousands of people will join the Church through your influence, and all fifteen Eden colonies will unite under one government that functions on the firm foundation provided by The Equality of Zion. The Church will organize many stakes, and you will be privileged to see a temple built on that hallowed Eden soil. A peace will reign on Eden unlike anything that has existed on Earth since the Nephites created Zion after the Savior's ministry as a resurrected being, a peace that will continue to blossom as Eden follows Earth into terrestrial glory."

Dr. Carroll continued the blessing by bestowing many spiritual gifts on Cameron and detailing their use and the responsibilities that would go with them as Cameron sought to fulfill his responsibilities.

When the blessing was over, Sara opened her eyes to see Cameron's eyes still closed. Of course he needed a few moments to contemplate everything his father had said. The blessing had been spectacular. President Grant immediately laid his hands on Cameron's head to ordain him to the office of bishop. President Grant's blessing was so short and to the point that it seemed abrupt.

Nevertheless, when the blessing was over, Cameron embraced the member of the First Presidency first. They didn't exchange words, but their eyes met with understanding and affection. After Cameron embraced his mother and father and other family members, he shook the hands of Sara's mother and David. His countenance was grave and brittle. Sara watched him, puzzled. Why wasn't he happy? Hadn't his doubts about going to Eden been resolved with that beautiful blessing from his father?

Cameron's eyes rested on her father's face, which was paler than normal and just as grave as Cameron's was. Cameron's jaw twitched, as if he had almost let slip a gasp. Her father

squeezed Cameron's arm in a gesture of compassion and opened his mouth to say something, but couldn't. Then, most surprising of all, Cameron and her father embraced as if they had known each other their whole lives. It was all very strange. Sara wondered more than ever what had happened between them in the temple the week before.

When Cameron finally took Sara's hand, he smiled. Then, to her delight, he pressed the back of her hand to his lips. "It's been a pleasure, your highness."

As Cameron released Sara's hand, she replied in her best queenly tone, "The pleasure has all been mine." Then she added with a grin, "Congratulations!" She threw her arms around him and embraced him vigorously. She whispered in his ear, "Please be happy, Cameron."

Cameron wrapped his arms around Sara and squeezed tightly, as if he never wanted to let go of her. "You can't imagine how happy I am at this moment."

"I think I can."

"May I call you tonight?"

Sara replied with the number of her cell phone. She would have been thrilled to remain in Cameron's arms all evening, but the time wasn't right. Everyone was staring at them, and she didn't doubt Cameron had many other things to do before he could leave. In the end, they withdrew from the embrace at the same time.

Cameron's face was brighter and more confident than it had been as he turned to Tony and motioned him into the chair. Tony gazed at Cameron reverently. "Would you perform my ordination, Bishop?"

Cameron looked at Tony in surprise. Sara wanted to hug Tony. She had expected him to ask Dr. Carroll, who appeared just as surprised by Tony's request as Cameron was. This was more fitting, however. "I would be honored," Cameron said softly.

Cameron moved to stand behind Tony, and President Grant and both Drs. Carroll gathered around him. David whispered to Sara, "Tony's a downright decent guy. Why haven't you introduced him to me before tonight?"

"Because my Eden friends are evil," she whispered in an exaggerated tone.

Cameron laid his hands on Tony's head and, after ordaining him to be a high priest, gave him a blessing as personal as his own had been public. Cameron, as spokesperson for the Lord, said nothing about future events on Eden other than that Tony would soon find a woman to marry and would yearn to take her to the temple. ". . . By living the commandments and serving your bishop faithfully in your new calling, you will, in due time, be privileged to be sealed to your wife and children in the temple. Your parents and your brothers and sisters will be present at this event and will rejoice with you . . ."

All of the promises made to Tony about an imminent marriage made Sara feel keenly the fact that her relationship with Cameron had the potential to end in marriage. The thought of it overwhelmed her. It was too much too soon. She needed time to ponder everything. Perhaps she shouldn't have agreed to let Cameron call her.

After Cameron had finished the blessing and President Grant had set Tony apart as first counselor in the Eden Colony Ward bishopric, Tony stood up and embraced Cameron first, energetically, and Sara knew that Tony would not only be an excellent counselor to Cameron, but a close friend as well.

A few moments later, Cameron turned toward Sara and looked at her in a solemn, unsure way. He was thinking of the blessing too. Was he as overwhelmed by the prospect of marriage as she was, or was he concerned that all of this talk of marriage would scare her away?

Sara didn't think anything could keep her from Cameron now, even premature talk of marriage, and she couldn't help but smile at Cameron in a reassuring way. She mouthed the words: "I'll talk to you later." He had better call her now!

Cameron smiled and nodded. Ashley took his arm and whispered something in his ear. He pulled away from her abruptly and regarded her in surprise. Ashley raised her eyebrows at him, waiting. He hesitated, then nodded. He glanced at Sara again, his eyes charged with excitement.

Ashley motioned to Brandon and Adam, and they left the room with Sara and her family. Once the door shut behind them, Ashley burst out, "I remember you now, Sara! You're Cameron's sprinter friend, the one who always asked every guy to dance except him!"

Sara stopped in front of the cultural hall door and turned abruptly to face Ashley, mortified. "You knew?"

"Of course I knew. Everyone knew."

"Why didn't you guys push them out on the floor together?" David asked.

"Oh, that would have been horrible!" Sara said. "I wanted to dance with Cameron, but not like that!"

"No one would have dared do that to you, Sara," Ashley assured. "Once one of the guys asked Cameron why he didn't ask you to dance. The guy said, 'You afraid she's going to beat you up, Carroll?'" Ashley spoke in the deepest, manliest voice she could manage. "'Have you seen the muscles on that girl? She could beat me up!'"

Sara followed Ashley into the empty cultural hall, feeling shaken. "What did Cameron say?"

Ashley held the door for Sara, then strolled along next to her. "Cameron glared at him with the strangest glow in his eyes, as if he were a destroying angel. Let me tell you, even I had never seen him look like that, and it was frightening. Everything got really silent all of a sudden, and I had a feeling everyone else was noticing what I was at that moment—Cameron is pretty muscular himself, or was, and he's a guy, and it wasn't likely he was worried about being beat up by you, Sara. And then he said in a voice that was quiet but resolute, 'Do you have a problem with that?'"

"He really is a champion!" Sara's mother burst out in delight.

"Isn't he though?" Sara's father said in satisfaction.

Ashley continued to Sara, "The guy looked like a bug that had been squished, and he said, 'No, Cameron, of course not.' And no one ever said anything to Cameron about you again."

"So the servant was defending his queen's honor even then," David said, impressed.

Ashley slipped her arm through David's. "What a romantic way to put it!"

David gladly moved closer to Ashley. "Cameron was the one who said he was the servant and Sara was his queen."

Ashley slid her other arm through Sara's and squeezed enthusiastically. "I *knew* you looked familiar! Oh this does explain a great deal!"

Sara's embarrassment gave way to exhilaration. She had never felt like such a lady.

"She's Cameron's mystery love, isn't she!" Brandon said in delight.

"I don't think there's much doubt of that, no," Ashley said.

"Wow, that's cool," Adam said. "We finally get to meet Cameron's mystery love."

"I'm such a moron," Ashley said. "I should have guessed."

"We're all morons," David agreed.

Sara felt giddy. "Why did everyone know Cameron was interested in me but me?"

"We didn't know it was you," Brandon said. "Which was why it was a mystery."

"We just knew there was someone," Ashley explained, "because Cameron never took girls out for fun."

What an odd comment. "What do you mean?" Sara asked.

"Well, he did go to enough important dances with beautiful girls to satisfy Mother and Father that he didn't have some kind of social phobia or personality disorder, but that was it."

Sara's mother stifled a giggle. David laughed and patted Ashley's hand. Sara knew she would get teased about this night forever.

"And when we asked him for the name of his mystery love and pictures of her, he got really mad and made us do extra work around the house," Brandon said.

Sara smiled. So Cameron, too, had taken his turn as the family babysitter.

"I think Cameron should have let Mother and Father think he didn't like girls," Adam said with a decisive air, jogging forward to open the door into the north foyer for everyone. "Maybe they would have stayed home more, then."

"No," Brandon lamented as he passed Adam, "they would have just put him in therapy and we still wouldn't have been able to harass him about his mystery love."

"No, you're both wrong," Ashley said. "Mother and Father have thrived professionally because their work has just the right dash of liberal thinking. They would have told everyone about their difficult family situation, delicately of course, and educated America about tolerance. They would have had more speaking engagements than ever."

Ashley's cynicism shocked Sara. "I think you guys are awful. I hope Cameron made you do the bathrooms."

"Why didn't you ever ask Cameron to dance?" Ashley asked.

"Because he was my mystery love and I was a coward."

"You weren't much of a coward back there. I thought you were going to kiss him," Brandon pointed out.

Sara felt mischievous. "I didn't think it would be *proper* to kiss the bishop."

Instead of laughing, the Carroll kids seemed to lose all desire for light-heartedness. They looked at each other with expressions of pain. After several moments of uncomfortable silence, Adam complained, moving away from the door to the cultural hall, "Why didn't Cameron tell us he was going to be the bishop?"

"He probably didn't know how," Ashley said.

"I understand why he didn't say anything to Mother and Father, but why didn't he tell us?" Adam persisted.

"Because he's gone crazy," Brandon said.

"Do you really think so?" Adam said, more troubled than ever.

"You heard his talk. What was that all about? He's never been disrespectful or disobedient to Father in his life."

"I don't think this is the proper time to talk about this," Ashley warned.

"Why not?" Brandon said. "Only Sara is here, and she's almost part of the family!"

"Hardly!" Sara exploded in panic. "Your brother hasn't even taken me out, much less proposed to me!"

"Well when he does," her father interjected, "don't be an idiot—say yes!"

"Oh, Dad . . ." Why did he have to pick now, of all times, to make one of his off-centered comments?

Ashley stopped, and Brandon and Adam simultaneously turned to look at Sara's father. "You're that certain Cameron isn't crazy," Brandon asked earnestly.

“I am,” her father said with equal earnestness. “I have a great deal of admiration for Cameron.”

“I know everyone thought Father would be the bishop,” Adam said, “but I think Cameron is a better choice, don’t you? He doesn’t have so much on his mind.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Ashley said, leading them all to the foyer doors. “He certainly seems to have Sara on his mind.”

Chapter 8: THE KING OF CLASS ENCHANTS THE QUEEN OF DANCE

"I can't believe you live in Parkridge, Sara," Ashley said as she stepped into the parking lot. "That can't be more than twenty minutes from where we used to live, in Greenwood. We were practically neighbors."

"I know," Sara admitted. "I saw Cameron whenever we had a game or a meet against Greenwood."

"What high school did you go to?" Brandon asked in surprise.

"Parkridge. If I lived on the other side of the interstate, I would have gone to school with Cameron."

Ashley rolled her eyes. "I can't believe you two."

Trendaul couldn't believe it either. Sara's feelings for Cameron must have been incredibly intense to have invoked such reticence in her. How different things might have been! He felt like an idiot for not suspecting Sara's passion for Cameron long ago.

"Would that have been a *local* phone call, Sara?" David teased.

Sara nodded sheepishly. "Probably."

Trendaul shared David's amusement, if not his exasperation. Sara's adoration for Cameron had turned her into such a jellyfish that she deserved a little playful harassment. "Cameron was written up on the sports pages of the *Parkridge Gazette* as often as Sara was. That's how local he was."

David's eyebrows shot up. "I'll bet Sara saved every one of those pictures of Cameron from the newspaper."

"She couldn't have cut pictures out of the paper without someone figuring it out," Teri said.

"Oh no," David persisted. "I know Sara. She's determined. I'll bet she carried scissors in her backpack and cut the pictures out of the paper at the grocery store."

"Actually, you're right," Sara admitted.

Ashley shrieked with ecstasy. "No way!" Everyone exploded with laughter, and even Sara couldn't restrain a smile. "Cameron *must* have pictures of her hidden somewhere!"

"We looked everywhere for them," Brandon admitted, still laughing.

"They're in his wallet," Sara admitted. "Hidden in the bill holder. He showed them to me."

David turned to Sara. "You're both pathetic, you know that."

"I told you you'd harass me forever!"

"You deserve it!"

"Well, I say it's about time we got a look at Cameron's mystery love!" Adam chirped. "They'll be engaged before you know it!"

Sara groaned and got into the van, slamming the door. Sara appeared surprised when David opened the door right back up and motioned Ashley, Brandon, and Adam into the van after her. "If you come with us, how will you get home?" she asked.

"Cameron will drive to your house to pick us up," Brandon explained.

Sara gasped. "Really?"

An expression of such delight and anxiety came over Sara's face that Trendaul couldn't restrain himself from suggesting, "I suppose David could take Ashley and her brothers home instead."

"No . . . no, no. I'm just in shock."

Adam slid into the seat next to Sara. "I told you we had arranged a surprise for you."

"He'll call you when he's done," Ashley said, "and you can give him the directions."

David chuckled as he pulled the side doors of the van shut behind him. "I'll bet he already knows where Sara lives."

Ashley and her brothers chatted excitedly with David and Sara during the forty-five minutes it took to drive to Parkridge. Ashley and her brothers seemed abnormally eager to be spending the evening with Trendaul's family. Trendaul had a feeling they were lonely and bored. They really were nice kids. None of them had the snobbish attitude that could have so easily gone with the famous parents, designer clothes, and Greenwood estate home. Obviously the parents had done a few things right.

No, as difficult as it was to admit to himself, the parents had done many things right, which made Trendaul wonder how they could have ended up in a situation so wrong. He believed Dr. Carroll's commitment to the gospel, at least, had once been strong.

His wife, on the other hand, seemed nothing more than a sophisticated parrot. Her writing on family issues combined generic Mormon values with a politically correct philosophy that had appealed to both Marylanders and members of the Church for nearly a decade. Trendaul had never perceived any passion in her work or depth of understanding, only trite ideas dressed up in tantalizing facts and witty language. Who knew what she thought about anything?

Benjamin and Barbara Carroll had loved each other in the beginning of their marriage, Trendaul was certain of it. Trendaul had spent most of the evening studying Benjamin Carroll and was equally certain that he now believed himself in love with Sara. He had watched her a good part of the evening, sometimes in a disturbed way, but usually with fondness, often trying to catch her eye. Sara had been so engrossed with Cameron, however, that she hadn't noticed.

As revolted as Trendaul was by Benjamin Carroll's desire for his daughter, he had to concede that he wasn't the kind of man who had spent his life preying on girls. It didn't look as if he had designs on any of the other young women in the colony yet. Trendaul didn't think, moreover, that he was a man who had been chronically unfaithful to his wife, although Trendaul couldn't believe that he would be pursuing a chaste young woman like Sara now had he not already made adultery a habit.

Of all the women in the Eden Colony, why was Sara the one he had singled out? Trendaul could understand a physical attraction easily enough. Sara was beautiful and vibrant, with a racial reproductive capacity and energy a man like Benjamin Carroll might be able to sense, even if he didn't have the knowledge to correctly identify it.

The emotional attraction Trendaul perceived, however, was more of a mystery. Twenty-six years' difference existed between their ages, and aside from their mutual desire to colonize Eden, they didn't appear to have much in common either in interests or in their basic perspective on life. The only thing that made sense to Trendaul was that Cameron and his father were far more alike in essence than it initially seemed and that both had personalities which were compatible with Sara's.

Could it be that Cameron had inherited more than his appearance from his father? That he was the gentle, deeply spiritual young man he was because his father had been that way not so long ago and had influenced him in that direction? Such a situation would explain how a young man of Cameron's profundity had come from such a family. It would also explain, along with the mother's attitude of graciousness, why Cameron's brothers and sister were so pleasant and lacking in arrogance. Trendaul came to the conclusion that Cameron and his father were, indeed, very much alike and that Sara had probably encouraged Benjamin Carroll unconsciously, responding to him as she would have to Cameron. Perhaps the man's feelings for Sara weren't difficult to understand at all.

Trendaul debated whether he should tell Cameron about his father's behavior toward Sara but eventually decided against it. Perhaps the man would put his feelings for Sara in perspective and leave her alone now that Cameron was in love with her. Not only that, but surely the First Presidency of the Church suspected Benjamin Carroll's problems ran deeper than rebellion. They would have told Cameron what they thought he needed to know. Trendaul had no doubt that learning such a thing about his father would shock and outrage him. If the knowledge came too soon, it might paralyze him also.

If his father's desire for Sara didn't cool, Cameron would discern soon enough what was going on, and Sara would be more likely to believe it herself if what Cameron told her was gleaned from his own observations. Whatever the case, the Brethren had turned Benjamin Carroll over to Cameron to deal with, and they had done it because the Lord knew that Cameron would handle the situation well. Cameron, in fact, might be the only person who had a chance of turning his father around.

How did Ashley and the two younger Carroll boys feel about going to Eden? Perhaps they didn't want to go at all. Ashley could probably choose to remain on Earth, but her younger brothers could not. Trendaul's confusion about why the prophet would authorize the organization of the Eden Colony Ward melted, replaced by gratitude. He now had hope for the Carroll children and all of the other innocents, hope for the colony in general, and especially hope for Sara.

Once Trendaul and crew arrived home, Ashley took one look at Josh and hurled a horrified scream at him: "It's the Dance Clown!"

Josh screamed back at her: "It's the Fancy Fashion Doll!"

"Fancy Fashion Doll!" Ashley exclaimed in outrage as laughter erupted. She whipped her pale gold head around to face Sara. "The Dance Clown is your brother?"

Sara nodded and extended her arm toward Josh as if she were introducing him on stage. "The one and only Josh Alexander."

Josh bowed to Ashley theatrically. "The *Amazing* Josh Alexander is pleased to finally meet the girl with the most intelligent, discerning eyes of any fashion doll he's ever seen."

Ashley involuntarily widened her eyes, her lips parting slightly in surprise. After a moment she smiled, extending her hand to Josh. "I'm Ashley Carroll. My brother Cameron is in love with your sister."

Josh turned knowingly to Sara, cupping his hand around his mouth and speaking to her in a stage whisper, "I guess that means it's okay now to admit you're in love with him too." Josh shook his head at Ashley. "You would not believe all of the abuse I've suffered over the years because of my knowledge of my sister's deep and meaningful crush on Cameron Carroll."

Ashley laughed. Sara glared. "If you had your own love life, Josh, you wouldn't be so concerned about mine!"

Josh threw up his arms in hopelessness. "See what I mean? 'Wherefore the guilty taketh the truth to be hard, for it cutteth them to the very center.'" That comment sent Ashley and her brothers into hysterics.

Trendaul's mind worked quickly. "1 Nephi 16:2."

"Ah ha!" Josh cried, turning toward Trendaul with his arm outstretched and pointing. "It took you three seconds! You're getting slow, old man!"

"Touché!" said David.

Trendaul backed away, clutching his chest as if stabbed. "'Thou hast declared unto us hard things, more than we are able to bear!'"

"1 Nephi 16:1," Josh shot back. Then to Sara he said, "Does Mr. Preppie Pretty Boy know his new girlfriend likes to dress up as a Klingon warrior woman on Halloween?"

"No way!" Ashley gasped.

Sara nodded, grinning. "It's great fun. Josh still dresses up as the Phantom of the Opera and skates around the neighborhood, singing songs from the musical and throwing candy at the kids."

"Cameron likes to dress up as Cal Ripkin," Adam volunteered.

"Good man!" David said in approval.

"Dad does door duty," Josh said. "He used to dress up as a bug-eyed alien until we talked him into being Mr. Spock."

Brandon leaned on Ashley's shoulder, nearly breathless with laughter. "I love you guys," he said in Trendaul and Sara's direction. "You're so weird and cool!"

"We're from Mars," Teri said with a smile.

David waved his hands in an effort to calm everyone, his face solemn. "A question of eternal magnitude is begging to be answered." When David had everyone's attention, he continued, "I don't know about the rest of you, but my evening won't be complete until we've decided which *bizarre* and *disturbing* image is the most hilarious: a Klingon warrior woman with a bishop, a preppie pretty boy, or the clean-cut Orioles Hall of Famer."

Everyone laughed themselves into gasps and tears, Sara most of all.

* * *

Sara spent the evening only half aware of what was going on around her, feeling nervous about what would happen once Cameron arrived. She had already decided that she would go to the front porch for privacy once he called. She also hoped to keep him to herself for a few minutes before he gathered his siblings. At the same time, however, she wondered if she should.

Would the prospect of spending a few minutes alone together make him as uneasy as it did her? Would he be so unnerved that he would go directly into the house? Even if they did sit together on the porch for a few minutes, would someone inside of the house come out? Would his brothers and sister expect to return to their hotel right away? Or should she take him to the backyard, where they could sit in virtual privacy in the swing?

No, she shouldn't even consider that possibility. Cameron wasn't just a boy she had adored in high school—he was her bishop now. He probably wouldn't want to be that alone with her, and they *had* just met. Moreover, anyone finding them alone together in the swing, in the dark, would never believe they were only talking, and she would probably die of embarrassment.

When Cameron called around ten o'clock, Sara left the others as nonchalantly as she could, despite the giggles, and went to her bedroom to get a sweater. Quickly draping the sweater over her arm, she jogged lightly down the stairs and out the front door.

Sara paced as she conversed with Cameron and waited, the time passing so quickly that she forgot she was nervous. The tension returned, however, when Cameron's BMW pulled into the driveway. She felt both hot and cold at the same time and realized that she had forgotten to put on her sweater. She pushed the button to end the call and tossed the phone onto a porch chair, then finally slid into her sweater and casually approached Cameron's car. Whatever happened with Cameron in the next few minutes, she didn't want it to occur under the porch lights only a few yards away from where her parents were sitting.

When Cameron opened the door, Sara stopped walking. As Cameron stepped out of the car and stood up, Sara ran her hand along the hood of Cameron's BMW and said the only thing that she could think of at the moment, "Nice car."

"Thank you. It used to be my father's. He gave it to me when I turned sixteen." Cameron shut the door and walked toward Sara. "Are you all right?" he asked, resting a hand on her arm.

Sara nodded quickly.

"You seem shy all of a sudden."

Sara felt her cheeks grow warm. She didn't know what to say.

"Are you afraid of me again?" His voice was very gentle.

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

He inched closer to her, moving his hand slowly down her arm. "Why?"

Chills shot through Sara. Now that Cameron was there, standing so close to her, she wanted more than ever to be alone with him. "Because I've never been in a situation quite like this before."

The reflection of the stars shimmered in Cameron's eyes. "Neither have I. I've been dreaming about it, though, for six years."

"I have too," Sara whispered. "Maybe that's why I'm so nervous."

Cameron's fingertips grazed the back of her hand. "Perhaps we'll both be more at ease if we go someplace where we can be alone for a while."

Sara felt as if her mouth had been glued shut. All of her reservations seemed trivial at the moment, and she turned and motioned him to follow her into the backyard. Before she had taken too many steps, he caught up to her and slid his arm around her shoulders. They had not quite made it to the backyard when Sara decided to match Cameron's boldness by putting her arm around his waist under his suit jacket.

Cameron immediately stopped and drew Sara into his arms. Without hesitation, she snuggled close, reveling in the feel and smell of him.

"You feel so wonderful, Sara."

Sara laid her cheek against Cameron's, feeling as if she were trembling all over. "So do you. And you smell nice too."

"I like it that you don't wear perfume. You're fresh and natural."

"I didn't expect you to be so down-to-earth."

Cameron pulled away a little so that he could look at her. His features appeared shadowy in the starlight. "Are you disappointed?"

Sara couldn't resist stroking his cheek. "No, relieved. I prefer you to be made of flesh and blood, not fantasies."

Cameron's cheek grew hot under her fingers. His hand quivered as he smoothed her hair away from her face. "I love your honesty, Sara. I always have."

"But how could you? I had never spoken to you."

Cameron kissed the inside of her wrist. "It wasn't what you *said*, it was what you *were*."

"I don't understand." Sara slid her fingers into Cameron's pale golden blond hair. Even in its short missionary cut, it was as soft as it was beautiful.

"You've just always seemed so wild and free, but in an innocent, sweet way. It's as if your spirit is so confident and powerful and honest that it can't be hidden behind style or convention or anything. Am I making any sense at all?"

"Sort of."

He kissed her forehead. "The first time I saw you dance, you were wearing a red dress with big blue flowers on it, and when you spun around, it would flare out just a little. Your hair was

up in kind of a wild style.” He swept her hair up to demonstrate. “The strands of your hair began falling down, but you didn’t notice, because you were so passionate about dancing.” Cameron released tiny strands of her hair, one by one, twirling them around his fingertip, and Sara thought she would melt into the ground. “I had never seen anything so beautiful. You were so perfectly yourself, no posing, no pretension, no nothing but Sara Alexander, my glorious queen.”

Sara widened her eyes at Cameron. She had never dreamed she could have this effect on him, and it both thrilled her and threw her off balance.

Cameron’s features suddenly twisted into an expression of panic. “I’ve made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry. I’m moving too fast. No one who knows me would ever believe it.”

He laughed a little, self-consciously, and Sara realized that he really was as nervous as she was. She wanted to tell him that she was simply paralyzed with happiness, but he didn’t pause for a moment, even to take a breath. “It’s just that I’ve never done this before, and I’ve been waiting for so long, and we have so little time, and I’m babbling. I’m pathetic.”

He finally paused, briefly, to breathe. Sara rested her fingers on his lips and shook her head, smiling. “You’re perfect.”

His mouth fell open under her fingers, and then he laughed, just as nervously as he had before. “Perfectly silly.”

Sara moved her hand to the back of Cameron’s neck to draw him closer. “No, perfectly sweet and real.” She kissed his cheek with all of the fondness she felt. “I told you that I preferred you to be made of flesh and blood, not fantasies.”

Sara felt Cameron’s lips on her neck and shivered. As he kissed his way to her mouth, her senses sprang alive with a ferocity that startled her, and she clasped him even more tightly. Suddenly she didn’t feel too young to get married.

“Oh Sara . . .”

Sara returned his kisses with abandon, having no idea how much time had passed before she managed to say, “You are a . . . very good . . . teacher . . . Cameron Carroll.”

“So are . . . you.” Cameron kissed Sara’s cheek, then whispered in her ear, “I couldn’t wait another minute. We’ve wasted far too many years as it is.”

Sara nodded, feeling his lips on her jaw. “We really were pathetic. We certainly should have danced together.”

Cameron rested his cheek against hers. “And sat together at the track meets while we were waiting for our events.”

“And eaten chili dogs and nachos together at the football games.”

“And argued about which side to sit on.”

“And felt free to cheer for each other’s races.”

“And gone to see the Orioles.”

“*Without* my mom. My family never went to Camden Yards unless the Royals were in town, and my mom always cheered for them. It was so embarrassing!”

“There are two of us and only one of her. We could have out-yelled her. *O*-yeah!”

“*O*-yeah!” Sara repeated the Orioles cheer with enthusiasm. “We should have taken the same flight to Salt Lake when we were freshmen—”

“And played ping pong in the dorm.”

“And written to each other while you were on your mission.”

Cameron pulled away enough so that he could look at her. “You have no idea how much that would have meant to me.”

They kissed tenderly, then clung to each other silently. Cameron cradled Sara against his chest and neck, his cheek against hers and his hands stroking her hair and back, still quivering. Sara held him in exhilaration, savoring every sensation.

Eventually Cameron's hands steadied and he pulled away a little. "Is that a swing I see over there?"

Sara nodded. "That's where I was going to take you until we got . . . distracted." She kissed him again, then took his hand and pulled him toward the swing. They sat down and gazed at each other in the light from the dining room window.

Cameron tilted his head toward the house. "I wonder how long it will be before they find us."

"Not for hours and hours, I hope."

Cameron drew her into his arms. "It'll probably be a lot sooner than that."

Sara laid her head on his neck and wrapped her arms around his waist. "There's always tomorrow."

Cameron stroked her arm. "Unfortunately, that isn't exactly true. My position makes our situation awkward, I'm afraid. In front of the other colonists we'll have to be extremely discreet. And we'll never be able to be completely alone like this again unless . . ."

He couldn't bring himself to say it and neither could Sara, but she understood what he meant. A bishop couldn't go off alone with young women if he wanted to maintain his credibility, and Cameron's credibility with the colonists was uncertain enough as it was. This was as alone as the two of them would ever be unless they decided to get married. Sara laughed a little. "The price I pay to date the bishop."

"I'm sorry, Sara. I wish things could be different."

"You know, this situation really is absurd."

"No kidding."

Sara giggled and squeezed Cameron's waist. "Here I am, cuddling in the dark with my bishop. It really is beyond belief!"

Cameron stopped Sara's laughter with a kiss. "I am always just Cameron to you, sweet queen." He kissed her again, lingeringly.

"You are definitely worth the inconvenience," Sara murmured.

"Am I?" he asked quietly. "You're sure you wouldn't rather spend time with the other single men in the colony instead?"

What was Cameron asking? Was he concerned that she might not be willing to see him exclusively? "Cameron, there has been no one but you for six years. Now that you've kissed me, the mere thought of going out with someone else makes me ill. And if I see you even *look* at another woman, I'll be ill *and* angry."

Cameron kissed Sara's hair. "Oh, you'll never have to worry about that. I haven't seriously noticed another woman since I saw you at that first youth dance."

"That's so hard to believe, Cameron."

"Is it any more difficult to believe than *your* claim? That you haven't wanted anyone but me for six years?"

"When you put it that way, how can I argue?"

* * *

At eleven-thirty Ashley's cell phone rang. She answered it and put it to her ear, saying pleasantly, "Hello, Father . . . yes, Cameron's been here for at least forty-five minutes . . . I can't put him on. He's here but he isn't here . . . we assume he's, uh, stargazing with Sara."

Brandon and Josh snickered. David laughed out loud. Adam leaned toward the phone and said enthusiastically, "Cameron's mystery love is now his mushy love!"

Ashley rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, Father. Don't make me get him! He's absolutely insane about Sara. It would be cruel. Give us another half an hour. Please!" Ashley stood up with a sigh, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with her thumb. "He says he won't hang up until he talks to Cameron. I guess someone had better go find him."

Trendaul glanced at Teri. They both knew why Benjamin Carroll was so determined to speak to Cameron. He wanted to break up the romance. Teri lifted her eyebrows, her smile sly. "Perhaps, David, you can drive Ashley and Brandon and Adam back to Columbia so that Cameron can stay a little longer."

"Excellent idea," David said, nodding.

Ashley looked at David, her eyes lighting up. "Would you really?"

"No problem."

Ashley lifted the phone to her ear again. "Father, we've made other arrangements. David Pierce is going to bring Brandon and Adam and me home." She paused and listened, then said, laughing, "You can't be serious! Why should Cameron have to come home now? . . . But you haven't been waiting up for him for two years! And he's a bishop! Certainly that makes him an adult now and qualifies him to come and go as he pleases . . . I know we all have to get up early tomorrow, but still! He can sleep on the shuttle." Ashley glanced from David to Trendaul to Teri, shaking her head incredulously. "Father, listen, I'll have him call you as soon as I can find him. See you in a little while, okay? 'Bye.'" Ashley turned off the phone and stuffed it into her purse. "I think he needs to go to bed. He's getting crazy!"

"He's just worried about you," Trendaul said, not sure he believed it himself.

"No, he's crazy," Brandon said. "Ashley's curfew has been one o'clock for at least a year."

Ashley nodded. "And Father usually doesn't mind waiting up. He likes to fool around with his web site and hang out in his chat room."

Teri lifted her eyebrows at Trendaul in a way that said, "What a surprise."

Trendaul thought he should be amused that the person Ashley's father wanted to chat with was currently busy with Cameron, but he wasn't; he was disgusted. He was so disgusted, in fact, that he was determined to keep Cameron there as long as Cameron wanted to stay, even though he needed some time to talk with Sara alone. He would send Teri to bed and stay up all night if he had to in order to play chaperon. "David, why don't the four of you go ahead and go. I'll find Cameron."

"Are you going to make Cameron leave?" Adam asked.

Trendaul smiled and shook his head. After they left, he bade Teri and Josh good night, picked up the telephone, and headed outside to find Sara and Cameron. He discovered them in each other's arms in the swing, talking softly and completely unaware of his presence.

The thought of Sara's spending most of the night in the swing with Cameron pleased Trendaul as much as anything could have at the moment. For a few hours they would be nothing more than twenty-year-old kids who were thrilled with each other. It seemed so normal. He almost hated to disturb them.

When Cameron leaned to kiss Sara, Trendaul decided it was time to make his presence known. "Cameron, I'm sorry to intrude, but you need to call your father."

Chapter 9: THE RING AND THE BLESSING

Trendaul didn't get a chance to talk to Sara alone until almost two o'clock. Trendaul followed Sara into her room, protectively carrying the little box that contained the remainder of his arelada. She was smiling and animated, and Trendaul doubted she would get any sleep that night.

She sat down on her bed with a bounce, her eyes gravitating to the box he was holding. "What is that?"

"I'll tell you in a minute." Trendaul sat down on the bed and faced her. He set the box on the bed and removed from his finger a ring of polished white gold, set with an emerald, and held it out to her. "I want you to have this. It's the wedding ring your mother picked out for me after we arrived on Earth. You can give it to Cameron when the time comes."

Sara threw her arms up and shook her head at the ceiling. "Why does everyone want to rush us into marriage!"

Trendaul smiled, for the first time in five days pleased by Sara's innocence. It reminded him of the little girl he remembered. "You claim to prefer the pace of the 1,500-meter run, Sara, but you and Cameron have just come out of the blocks as if you're sprinting the 100."

Sara winced. "We've been shameless, haven't we."

Trendaul laughed softly. "Impeccably so."

Sara shook her head in resignation. "I knew what would happen if I spent any time alone with him. I know we just met, but I couldn't stop myself, and neither could he."

"I don't know why that would surprise you. You've been suppressing your feelings for each other a long time, and you're both very open, fervent kind of people. I'm not sure it could have been any other way between the two of you tonight, and it's for the best. You may not be completely comfortable with the idea of marriage yet, but there's no doubt in my mind where Cameron stands. He wants—and needs—a wife."

"Did he tell you that when you talked with him in the temple?"

"He'll tell you about our time together in the temple when he's ready."

"Somehow, I knew you were going to say that," Sara said thoughtfully.

Trendaul couldn't believe he could feel such peace at a moment he had long dreaded. "Cameron loves the Lord with his whole heart and soul and will treat you as the precious daughter of God you are. Don't throw him away for some silly desire to be a great writer or reluctance to have a baby before you're thirty or whatever." He had never dreamed he would actually *want* his daughter to marry an Earthon man.

"I don't know if I feel ready to get married," Sara said meekly, gazing at her denim quilt.

"Trust me, Sara," Trendaul said gently, "you're more than ready to get married. You're ready to be a mother too." For Sara, marriage would mean a baby nine months from the wedding day. She needed to know, but how could he tell her when the prospect of marriage alone so unsettled her? The last thing Trendaul wanted was for Sara to reject Cameron out of aversion to having a baby right away, especially when he knew that, despite Sara's present discomfort, marriage to Cameron and a baby soon after would delight her.

Sara shrugged, ever so slightly. "I suppose I should be complimented." She brought her bent knees together under her chin and wrapped her arms around them, those velvety blue eyes meeting his in gratitude. "Your saying that means you think of me as an adult."

Trendaul rested a hand on her shoulder. "You are an adult, and I want you to be as happy as an adult as you were as a little girl. That means moving forward and not running away from the very thing that will bring you the most joy and personal growth."

“Which, in your opinion, is Cameron and a baby.”

“If you are still determined to go to Eden, yes. Cameron and many babies.”

“With everything moving so fast between us, how will I know whether or not I love him truly and deeply and am not just infatuated with him?”

That Sara would ask such a question at all proved that at least half of her intelligence remained intact. Trendaul answered, feeling relieved on that point at least, “Think about what it is that attracts you to him. Are you as attracted to his testimony as to the tone of his voice? To his mind as well as to his face? To his kindness as well as his caresses? Does he make you feel comfortable and wonderful about being you? Do you trust him? Is he your best friend?”

Sara gazed at him sadly. “Cameron and I would have been friends. Good friends. I wish I had asked him to dance. As happy as I am that we understand each other now, I feel a little empty, as if I’ve lost a friend or betrayed one.”

Trendaul squeezed Sara’s shoulder and released it. “There’s nothing you can do about the past six years. You have to accept that and look forward to all the years together you have ahead of you.” He smiled. “Your mother and I have been married three times longer than you have known Cameron, and to the people I work with at the temple, we’re still newlyweds.” Trendaul held the ring out to Sara again.

This time she took it, shaking her head and murmuring her thanks as she slid it onto her thumb.

Feeling an urgency he couldn’t contain, Trendaul said, “Once you make the decision to marry, don’t put it off. If you do, Cameron won’t function well in his calling and you will both be miserable. I know you want to be married in the temple, but your decision to go to Eden makes a sealing unrealistic for the time being.”

Sara closed her eyes and held very still, as if thinking deeply. When she opened her eyes again, she said, “I think I understand what you’re saying. On the other hand, I can’t believe it would actually come to that.” She put an arm over her waist and a hand to her mouth, gazing at the bed, perplexed.

Trendaul tapped his box of arelada in frustration. Sara truly believed she could go to Eden and marry Cameron or someone else in the temple. She and Cameron hadn’t been capable of spending a mere evening together without behaving like sweethearts. And she thought she was going to wait two years to get married? Or did she think Eden would get a temple within the next two years?

Zarr’s mind bond hadn’t consumed all of Sara’s intelligence, but it had certainly sapped her common sense. Trendaul took some comfort in the knowledge that the bond would dissolve the farther Sara traveled away from Earth. Once on Eden, perhaps the Lord would have a fighting chance at knocking some sense back into her.

Moments passed and Sara looked up at Trendaul again. “Will you tell me now about your little box?”

“First I need to tell you something about the planet Eden itself.”

“You know something about it?” Sara asked eagerly.

“A little. I know enough to tell you that it is in a strategic position, coveted by more nations than Zarr’s, and that its spirit is probably one that refuses to submit to the dominion of human beings.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because the process of making a planet habitable takes years. It’s very complex, demanding work that takes thousands of specialists and trillions of dollars. No government finishes terraforming a planet only to abandon it. I assume the planet-spirit agreed to be

terraformed initially, then, for some reason, fought being bridled by the maintenance team after the process had been completed. That is extremely unusual.”

Sara was amazed. “The planet’s spirit actually agrees to be terraformed?”

“Yes. Planets with spirits that won’t agree to be terraformed or cannot be tamed are dangerous and are, therefore, left alone. The fact that Eden is uninhabited means there is something seriously wrong with it.”

“What makes you so certain Eden was terraformed? Dr. Carroll believes the Lord preserved Eden as a ‘promised land,’ kind of like the American continent.”

Trendaul wanted to point out that Dr. Carroll was an idiot, but he refrained, with difficulty, and said instead, “What Benjamin Carroll believes is not impossible, perhaps, but it is improbable. Centuries of space exploration have taught the civilized galaxy that only original planets begin with ecosystems suitable for human habitation.”

“Original planets?”

“Planets the Lord Himself actually created and populated.”

“I can’t believe Eden is as awful as you think. We’ll make it work somehow. I know we will.”

“I hope you’re right. Even so, I want you to have this.”

Sara took it from his hands carefully. “It’s your arelada, isn’t it? What am I supposed to do with it?”

“Nothing at the moment. If you open the box, Zarr’s people will detect the arelada and take it from you.”

“But there won’t be any Zarrists in our colony. They’ll be in Control Colony, hundreds of miles away.”

“You won’t get to Eden for three and a half weeks. While you’re on the transport, you mustn’t open the box. Once you get to Eden, wait a week to make sure the transport has left Eden’s system, then take one of the arelada pendants out of the box and wear it under your shirt. Then hide the box under a clump of bushes or something, just in case Control Colony is monitoring for arelada use. That way they will only find what you’re wearing.”

“Why are you giving it to me?”

“Because it will enable you to communicate with Eden’s planet-spirit, should there be a problem. Or at the very least, you will be able to feel the planet-spirit’s current state of emotion.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Continuous earthquakes, violent storms and other unpredictable weather. Any unexplainable natural disasters that might threaten your existence as a colony.”

Sara’s eyebrows shot up. “You can’t be serious!”

Of course she didn’t believe him now. She knew nothing of these things. “Just take the arelada, and, after you’ve been on Eden a week, start practicing with it. I’ve never communicated with a planet-spirit, so I’m not entirely sure how it would work, but I suspect that you will never be able to communicate with Eden unless you *practice*. Developing mind power is a lot like developing muscles. It requires conditioning. You don’t remember, but when you were a baby, both your mother and I communicated telepathically with you often. During the year after your mother died, in fact, when you were with me constantly, I taught you a great deal.”

“You almost make it sound as if I communicated back to you.”

“You did.”

“You actually allowed me to wear arelada?”

"I didn't need to. Arelada emits an energy field, and you were always close enough to me to get the benefits of it."

"Why did we stop communicating that way?"

"Because your mother, Teri, was afraid it would make you unable to relate to your Earthon peers in a normal way. She was right."

"But you think it'll come back to me."

Trendaul nodded; he had no doubt about that. He also had no doubt that Sara would be empathic enough to correctly interpret the emotions she might feel emanating from the planet-spirit. As a child she had been amazingly adept at interpreting his emotions and Krista's as they communicated with her telepathically. Krista, in particular, had believed that Sara's strongest telepathic talent would be empathy.

"This is what you do. Hold the arelada in your hand and try to pour your spirit into it. You will know you are succeeding, because it will make you acutely aware of yourself. I don't know how else to explain it. When you reach that stage, you may be aware of other strong emotion around you. If it is coming from another person, it will be focused and you will be able to identify the person. If it seems to come from everywhere, it's coming from the planet-spirit. The best thing you can do in the beginning is to work with a partner."

"So natives of Earth aren't so different from us physically that they can't use telepathy," Sara observed in surprise.

"Not at all. The only advantage you'll have over the other colonists will be that you've used telepathy before. That, and the fact that you'll be the one with the arelada." Trendaul explained several exercises to her as well as he could, feeling frustrated. Speaking was such an inadequate form of communication. "If your colony does begin experiencing freak weather or other problems, pour your spirit deeply into the arelada and then into the planet itself. Then try to communicate with the planet-spirit and learn what is troubling it."

"How weird. And exciting!"

Trendaul wouldn't have chosen the word "exciting" to describe an experience communicating with an out-of-control planet-spirit. "Terrifying" and "horrifying" were the proper adjectives, but Sara didn't have the education to understand the true situation. What in the galaxy was he doing? How could he let her go into such danger? Perhaps he should have allowed David to take her to Annapolis for a few days. Trendaul immediately expelled that desire. What was he thinking? David was an idiot if he really thought he could get away with holding a young woman prisoner in Bancroft Hall.

Trendaul felt a twinge of sadness as he watched Sara run her finger gingerly over the box of arelada. "If there is anything I regret, Sara, it's that I wasn't able to give you a proper education in telepathy."

"Wouldn't we have had to go to Novaun for that?"

"Yes." He nodded a little, staring past Sara's shoulder. He had never, for an instant, regretted marrying Teri, but his marriage to her had complicated his life in many ways. Had he returned to Novaun and given Sara her Novaunian heritage, he would have denied Teri and the seven children she had borne their rightful Earthon heritage. On the other hand, if he didn't return to Novaun soon, anxiety would consume his parents. No matter what he did, he couldn't give everything he wanted to give to everyone.

"Will you give me a blessing?"

Sara's request didn't surprise Trendaul, and had it come a day earlier, it would have made him uncomfortable. He had been both longing for the opportunity and dreading it, wondering what the Lord would say to Sara, knowing as He did that she had ignored His counsel. She

hadn't changed her mind about Eden, but Trendaul felt confident that she had, at least, begun to turn around. She loved Cameron and believed his call was inspired, and that was as much as Trendaul could expect for now. She was as spiritually ready for a blessing as she had been in months.

Sara scooted to the end of her bed, and Trendaul positioned himself behind her, laying his hands on her head and allowing the words to flow. He was astonished to hear himself say things such as: "Your mother, Krista, watches over you and will go with you to Eden. Don't be afraid of having more children than you may, at present, think is natural. You are of a fertile, resilient, long-lived race and will not only experience excellent health as you bear these beloved spirits, but will rejoice in this unique opportunity the Lord has given to you. You will be blessed to meet your Novaunian family . . ."

Trendaul removed his hands from Sara's head, feeling relieved. What he could not bring himself to tell her about their heritage the Lord could. *Thank you, Father!*

Sara turned to face him, pulling her knees to her chin, gazing at him in amazement and fear. "How . . . how long do Novaunians live?" She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"About two-hundred years."

Her face was white, with bright pink spots on her cheekbones. "Which is why you don't look a day over thirty."

Trendaul nodded slowly.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"I don't know." And he didn't. His parents had not been any older than he was now when he had left. They could have doubled the size of their family in the years he had been gone. "I was number three of eleven when I left."

Sara's hand trembled violently as she put it to her mouth with a little gasp. "How many . . .?"

Sara couldn't force the words out, but Trendaul understood what she wanted to know. "Thirty children seems to be about average for a couple. Your mother was the last of thirty-one."

Sara looked as if she might pass out. Trendaul suddenly remembered Dr. Carroll and his absurd vision of Zion. The thought of Sara and Cameron with thirty children instead of a politically correct two or three or *maybe* four was as hilarious as it was gratifying. He laughed.

Sara hurled her pillow at him. "It isn't funny, Dad. It's sick!"

The pillow stung when it hit Trendaul in the chest. Laughing even more hysterically, he threw it back at her, then sat down on the end of the bed with her, immediately causing the head of the bed to fly up. He jumped off of the bed as the bed set itself back down with a thump. Even Sara's anger didn't have a chance then. She couldn't keep herself from laughing too.

"I'm sorry, Sara. I just couldn't help but think of Benjamin Carroll and his 'sustainable growth' policy regarding childbearing."

Sara suddenly stopped laughing and her eyes became enormous.

"Now, are you *absolutely sure* you still want to go?"

* * *

At four o'clock Trendaul, Teri, and Sara loaded Sara's luggage, along with Daniel and Zack, into the van and headed to the Zarrists' base of operations, leaving the rest of the children to get themselves off to seminary and school. Teri turned the air conditioner on at full blast to

keep herself awake and ended up keeping Trendaul awake also. Sara slept in one of the back seats. As far as Trendaul could tell, David never had come back to the house. He wondered if David would turn up at the spaceport.

When Tohmazz Zarr had first made contact with the United States and asked for permission to meet with the President, he and his entourage had been instructed to land at Andrews Air Force Base in Prince George's County, Maryland. For many months, the government had refused the Zarrists permission to land their spacecraft anywhere other than Andrews. From there, they had flown their aircars to and from various air force bases around the world. The Zarrists were so cooperative with the government and so seemingly harmless that eventually the government allowed them to build their own spaceport on farmland they had purchased in P.G. County.

Now the Zarrists flew their space shuttles between their fleet and the base in P.G. County, and from that base, they flew their aircars into airports and spaceports all over the planet. The Zarrists were working with NASA and other space organizations around the world to build new ships and stations to use both in colonizing Earth's solar system and in defending Earth from enemy invasion. To accommodate the increased space traffic, the Zarrists were building a mammoth new spaceport, along with a city, in western Missouri, east of Independence and just north of Odessa. The city's name was Tryamazz, and its spaceport was supposed to be in operation by the beginning of the year.

At about five-thirty Trendaul and Teri arrived at the P.G. County spaceport. David was already there, waiting with Ashley Carroll and appearing exhausted and miserable.

Cameron met Trendaul and his family immediately, giving Sara a hug. Benjamin Carroll watched Sara and Cameron from his position in line at a check-in station, appearing amused. He seemed so amused, in fact, his stance so arrogant, that apprehension consumed Trendaul. Benjamin Carroll wasn't behaving normally, either like a father interested in his son or a spurned suitor. He looked as if he thought of himself as a conqueror, and there was no justification for it. What was going on in that disturbed mind of his?

Cameron took one of Sara's crates and led her to the place in line where members of his family were standing. Sara and Benjamin Carroll embraced in a natural, affectionate way that made Trendaul's skin crawl. He bit down hard on the inside of his lower lip to keep himself from vocalizing his outrage, within moments tasting blood.

Trendaul felt Teri dig her fingernails into his arm and knew that he would probably cheer if she berated the man right then and there. It was a nightmare, an utter nightmare. How could they stand by and allow this to happen? On the other hand, how could they intervene if they wanted to part with Sara with any degree of affection? If they humiliated and enraged her now, they were as good as throwing her right at this man they so despised.

The man squeezed Sara's hands as they withdrew from each other and smiled radiantly. "I'll have to say, Sara, that you're certainly the loveliest of Cameron's many interesting revelations."

"Thank you, Dr. Carroll," Sara replied, pleased.

"She's also a fabulous return on my investment," Barbara Carroll said to her husband, giving Sara a quick hug. "I select a student, and she turns out to be the one young lady capable of cheering up our unhappy son."

"I'm doing my best," Sara said, smiling at Cameron as they clasped hands.

As Sara and the Carrolls stepped up to one of the many check-in stations, David seized Ashley's shoulders and begged, "Please don't go. You can stay here and go to school."

Ashley's tired green eyes were filled with sadness. She touched David's cheek and shook her head. "It's too late for that."

Trendaul couldn't believe what he was witnessing. David and Ashley had flirted shamelessly all evening, but Trendaul hadn't seen anything to lead him to believe either one of them was interested in anything but a few hours of diversion. What had happened after David and Ashley had left? Surely David didn't really think he could persuade Ashley to remain on Earth. Even if she wanted to stay, Trendaul doubted her parents would allow it at this late date. Was David some kind of masochist?

"You can't go! It's wrong!" David insisted, giving her a little shake.

"I don't have any choice." Ashley gently touched her lips to David's, and he responded reverently.

Teri watched the two impatiently, as if she wanted to shout, "How *dare* you lead that girl on!" Sara was dumbfounded. The elder Carrolls were oblivious to everything but assuring that all of their light blue boxes were properly labeled. Adam and Brandon exchanged annoyed glances. Cameron blushed but couldn't tear his eyes away. Trendaul wasn't certain, but he thought Cameron appeared envious.

After a few moments Ashley and David withdrew from the kiss and gazed at each other desolately. "I'll never forget you, David."

David moved his hands from Ashley's shoulders to her back, pulling her close in a caressing embrace. "Please don't leave me . . ."

Teri shook her head and moaned. Sara looked away in embarrassment. Adam started making gagging noises. Brandon looked right at Trendaul and protested, "It's not our fault our sister's a tramp." Cameron erupted with laughter, and within a second, all of the reluctant witnesses were in hysterics. Trendaul allowed himself to laugh as boisterously as Cameron and did feel a little better afterward.

Eventually Benjamin Carroll took Sara's boxes and presented them for inspection under the "scanners." Of course the Zarrists, who were willing to sell the Earthons all the knowledge they possessed except their telepathic secrets, didn't tell the Earthons that what they called "scanners" were really Awareness monitors, devices used in conjunction with arelada to telepathically examine objects from the inside out. Nor did they tell the Earthons that they used this technology in their "divine" activities of cleansing the minds of criminals, healing people physically, and repairing and rearranging land.

Trendaul wondered where the Zarrists were getting their arelada. Had they found something on Earth to trade with the Senlanans? The Erdeanians? Pearls perhaps? Or chocolate? When would the other Diron fleets show up to collect their share of the spoils? The thought frightened him. The Earthons had no idea what kind of enemies they were making by allying with Zarr.

Once Sara's boxes were labeled and on their way to the shuttle, Benjamin Carroll motioned Sara and his children forward. Ashley reluctantly withdrew from David, kissing him one last time on the cheek, then took her place in the Awareness monitor booth after Adam and Brandon.

Sara hugged David first. "Thanks for being here. I really hope you don't get in trouble."

David kissed Sara's cheek. "Don't worry about it. I prepared for this."

"You always were the ideal Boy Scout." Sara squeezed David one more time and kissed his cheek.

"You have no idea how many hearts you're breaking at the Yard," David said dismally.

“It’s your own fault!” Sara said as she pulled away from David. “You’re the one who keeps introducing me to R.M. mids.”

“You were supposed to fall in love with one of them and stay home!”

Sara laughed at David and groaned at the same time.

Trendaul had worried for years Sara would become serious about one of these young Earthon men and that he would be forced to leave her behind if he decided to return to Novaun. At the same time, though, he had watched her date with interest. Had she grown up in Shalaun on Novaun, surrounded by Fleet families such as his and Krista’s, she would have dated young men similar to the ones she had dated here.

Of course none of it mattered now. Sara had entangled her destiny with Cameron and his troubled family and would now never marry a nice Fleet boy from Shalaun. It was one of the prices Trendaul paid for taking the assignment on Earth to begin with. Had he not been so fond of Cameron and grateful to him for agreeing to be the bishop of the Eden Colony Ward, he might have been angry with Krista for insisting they come to Earth.

Trendaul diverted his attention to Cameron, who waited near the Awareness monitor, his eyes on Sara with love, his fingers drumming his thighs in apprehension. He didn’t like hearing about all of Sara’s midshipmen friends. The warmth Trendaul felt for Cameron increased tenfold, and he knew more strongly than ever that Cameron and Sara would make each other happy, despite the fact that the marriage would mean he would lose Sara to Earth forever. Was this what the Pierces felt when they looked at him?

As Sara embraced Teri, Trendaul approached Cameron and held out his arms. Cameron hugged him tightly, unabashedly. “You’ll never know how much our time together has meant to me.”

Trendaul still marveled at this gift the Lord had given to him. “And you’ll never know what it’s meant to me.”

“I love Sara; you know that now. I’ve loved her since I was fourteen. I won’t let you down.”

Trendaul withdrew, nodding. “I know that too.”

When Trendaul finally hugged Sara, he clutched her to him as if he would never see her again. “Have a good life. Please.” He couldn’t rid himself of a feeling of foreboding. Sara hovered on the edge of a chasm, and Trendaul could do nothing to stop her from diving in.

Part 2: THE COURTSHIP

Chapter 10: TOO MUCH HONESTY

Cameron took Sara's hand and moved her into the scanner booth. "So you've been dating the brigade, have you?" he playfully accused.

He was jealous! That both surprised and pleased Sara. "I've made a lot of friends." Sara noticed Ashley waiting impatiently outside of the booth for them.

"So the only way I was going to get you to stay on Earth was to let you fall in love with a midshipman and break my heart."

Sara wasn't about to tell Cameron that she had been far more inclined to fall in love with Tony Wright than any of David's midshipman friends. She was still surprised that Tony had perceived her feelings for Cameron as long ago as he had. She couldn't help but suspect that he had been interested in her in the beginning, which was why he had been observing her so closely. She was relieved that Tony had never asked her about Cameron. She knew she would have told him everything, and it would have made them closer. She had no doubt that, once Cameron showed up, she would have hurt Tony.

Sara stepped out of the booth into a wide walkway between shuttle gates and their corresponding lobbies. She turned slightly to look at Cameron as he stepped out of the booth behind her. She still grieved that she had hurt him by not asking him to dance. "I would never knowingly break your heart, Cameron."

Cameron rested his hands on her shoulders and moved her forward, speaking softly into her ear, "And I will never break yours."

The depth of Cameron's sincerity woke Sara up to the realization that they were making promises to each other they might not be able to keep. "I think it may be too soon to say such things."

Cameron took her hand in his, smiling, as they began walking. "Do you mean what you say, or don't you?"

"Of course I mean what I say."

"And so do I."

"Perhaps there's such a thing as too much honesty," Sara said in a light-hearted way. "We should pretend to be normal and play meaningless games with each other for a while. You know, flirt."

"I don't think either one of us has the ability to flirt."

Ashley approached them. "I'll teach you to flirt," she said, a hint of bitterness in her voice. "I'm an expert."

Cameron shrugged. "Go for it."

"Right now, Cameron, you're supposed to say something like: 'How many of those midshipmen did you kiss?'"

Sara looked at Cameron meaningfully. After everything that had happened between them the day before, he would, had he been paying any attention at all, already know the answer to that question.

Cameron smiled back at her in a confident way. Of course he knew. "And how should Sara respond to a question like that?"

"First of all, she should never, ever answer that kind of question directly. She should say something like: 'With my mind so full of you right now, how could I possibly remember?'"

Cameron nodded decisively. "That settles it. I'll take forthrightness over flirting any day." He laughed in delight.

Sara wanted to laugh too, but she didn't feel right leaving Ashley out of the joke. "You have to understand, Ashley, that David told Cameron he would have to teach me how to kiss, so you see, Cameron already knows how many midshipmen I kissed."

"It figures," Ashley said with a moan. "Sara, you don't belong here. Go home now, while you still have a chance."

"What exactly happened between you and David last night, anyway?" Sara asked.

"David sat up all night with Ashley talking," Cameron said. They strolled toward the flight gate assigned to the Eleventh Colony, passing members of the International Star Force along with others going to Eden in one of the fifteen colonies.

"Talking," Sara said knowingly, squeezing Cameron's hand.

"Talking," Ashley insisted.

"David is a tyrant," Sara explained. "Don't misunderstand me—I love him to death—but you can't let him get to you."

"He is passionate," Ashley admitted, "and persuasive."

"And he put doubts into your mind about Eden," Cameron said.

Ashley nodded. "It had never occurred to me that going to Eden might be wrong and it should have."

"You're right," Cameron gently chided. "It should have. You could have stayed behind if you had wanted to badly enough."

"I wish . . ." Ashley shook her head. "It hardly matters now what I wish. It isn't too late for you yet, Sara."

"But I don't have someone like David to go home to," Sara teased, losing sight of the rest of the Carroll family in the crowd.

"And you do have Cameron to go to Eden for. I'm not sure he's worth it."

"Whether he's worth it or not is irrelevant. I made the decision to go to Eden months ago, and I made it with the understanding that I wouldn't see Cameron for another two years. The fact that he's going with us after all is a bonus. It doesn't change the essentials."

"Sara, you have to be the most candid person I've ever met," Ashley observed.

"Like a spray of cool water on a muggy summer day," Cameron murmured in agreement.

"You're easily impressed."

"Modest too." Ashley turned and stepped in front of Sara, bringing both Sara and Cameron to a halt. Ashley patted Sara's cheek. "Look at you! You're so honest and real you don't even wear makeup!"

Sara grinned. "That's because my mom said, and this is a direct quote, 'If you ever *dare* cover your gorgeous lashes with mascara I'll make you wear a black cape and plastic fangs to complete the look!'"

Cameron turned to face Sara. "Your mother's right." His voice softened as he caressed Sara's cheek and temple, ever so gently brushing his fingertips over her eyelashes. "To cover those lashes would be a crime."

Feeling Cameron's fingertips on her face was almost more than Sara could bear. She returned Cameron's admiring gaze, breathless and trembling. She could feel her heartbeat pounding through her body, and she knew that if Cameron didn't take her into his arms soon, she would probably explode.

Several moments passed before Sara realized that she was gripping Cameron's bare arm. When she moved her hand, she saw white marks where her fingers had pressed into his skin.

and little indentations left by her nails. She felt herself blush. All he had done was say something kind, and she had responded like a wild animal. So much for being discreet! What in the galaxy was she supposed to say to him now, with Ashley right there? She spun around and began walking again.

Within seconds both Cameron and Ashley caught up to her. Sara felt Cameron rest his hands on her waist. A moment later his arms were around her and he was kissing her neck. "I had no idea you were so prim," he whispered. "I expected you to draw blood!"

Sara smiled and leaned into his arms, tilting her head back and nuzzling up to him, kissing his cheek. "So you prefer a wild animal instead of a discreet young lady."

Cameron kissed her jaw. "I don't see anyone in the colony but Ashley, and we don't have to be discreet around her." He turned Sara around so that he could kiss her lips. Sara returned his kiss eagerly. "I prefer you, my passionate queen," he murmured.

"Oh, you two are hopeless!" Ashley said, finally smiling. "Sara, you should have said: 'So you like wild animals, do you?' And Cameron, you were supposed to say: 'The wilder the better!' And then Sara, you would say: 'I can be as wild as you want me to be!' Boys like it when you're a little suggestive. It makes them crazy!"

Cameron squeezed Sara and released her, taking her hand again. "I'd rather say: 'Sara, I'm wild about you!'"

"I'm wild about you too, Cameron!"

"You're gushing, guys," Ashley said with a chuckle. "It's unsophisticated."

"I've never tried to be sophisticated," Cameron said, more to Sara than to Ashley.

"I guess we really are hopeless!" Sara said.

"Please don't keep Cameron in suspense too long," Ashley said to Sara, far too seriously. "He needs you, and you'll be happy with him."

Sara replied with equal seriousness, "You seem awfully sure Cameron and I aren't just mutually infatuated with each other."

"Infatuated?" Ashley said in surprise. "*You?* Two people so lacking in shallowness that *flirting* is painful? Do you want time to learn his faults? Is that it?"

"Don't do this, Ashley!" Cameron warned.

"Oh, shut up, Cameron! She won't care that you're a slob, and that you yell at everyone when you can't find something you've misplaced because you're such a slob, and that you're always losing or ruining your ties and shirts, because you're such a slob."

"The king of class is a slob?" Sara said dramatically. "Say it isn't so!"

"Ashley's right. I am a slob," Cameron admitted.

"And in a few years he'll be a *fat* slob, because he's addicted to chili dogs. He eats them all the time, which is why he's always ruining his ties."

"I bought some inexpensive ties once, but Mother threw them away before I had a chance to ruin them."

"She threw away perfectly good ties?"

"Oh, that's nothing," Ashley said. "When I gained five pounds, she threw away the box of chocolates my boyfriend gave to me."

"And took away her car."

Sara couldn't believe anyone would throw away clothing that could easily be given to charity. "Stop it! I may be honest, but I'm not gullible!"

"And what would your mother have done if you had gained five pounds?" Ashley shot back as they stopped just short of their flight gate.

"If Sara gained five pounds, it would be all muscle," Cameron said. "She would look more terrific than ever and even *our* mother wouldn't notice the weight difference."

"Cameron's right," Sara said. "And as far as my mom goes, I've heard her claim that after ten pregnancies and seven babies she's earned every extra pound she has and will wear them with dignity. I don't think she would comment if I let myself get out of shape."

"Go home, Sara," Ashley urged, walking away and leaving her alone with Cameron.

"David really got to her."

"I wish she had met him sooner."

"My mom would have discouraged David from getting involved with her. She's too young."

"Technically speaking, your mother would have been right," Cameron said. "But Ashley's never gone out with someone of David's caliber. He's exceptional. The kind of man who commands respect."

"*Commands* is the operative word here."

* * *

Cameron asked Sara to introduce him to some of the colonists, and at first she dreaded the prospect. From her time with the colonists online, she knew that they were, as a rule, opinionated and frank and had no tolerance for leaders they couldn't respect. Sara wasn't sure she could endure witnessing Cameron being criticized by the other colonists or worse, shunned. Her dread, however, quickly disappeared; the various colonists she and Cameron approached that morning received their greetings warmly.

Lisa Marshall, the colony artist and wife of the elders quorum president, gave Cameron a hug. "It's good to meet you, Bishop. Sara, you keep him out of trouble."

Sean Marshall extended his hand to Cameron, then Sara. "Weren't you fortunate, Bishop, to find such a lovely young lady among the colonists!"

Todd Jarrett, the general surgeon, slapped Cameron on the arm in a friendly way. "Eden will be a wonderful place to start a family."

His wife Linda, the obstetrician, smiled in satisfaction and squeezed Sara's hand. "Our reluctant bishop won't be able to help loving Eden if you're there, Sara."

Everyone Sara and Cameron talked to treated them kindly and seemed to be willing to give Cameron a chance. When the time came to finally board the shuttle, Cameron's mother waved at them to join her and the rest of the family.

"Well, son," Dr. Carroll said to Cameron, smiling, "I have a feeling that you're breaking a lot of hearts with your attention to Sara."

"A woman who doesn't know me can't have a heart that's too brittle, at least not with regard to me," Cameron said pleasantly.

"You're ruthless."

"No, he's perceptive and generous," Sara said lightly, "because I'm the only woman in the colony whose heart really would be broken if he chose someone else."

Dr. Carroll's eyebrows shot up. "You just met him last night, Sara."

Sister Carroll shook her head in hopelessness. "Stop teasing them, Ben."

"So they hadn't actually talked to each other," Ashley said. "A technicality."

Sister Carroll nodded. "And what young woman in the colony could possibly have more in common with him than Sara does?"

Dr. Carroll glanced at his wife, his smile fading. “Well, he’ll never know, will he, if he spends all of his time with Sara.”

Sister Carroll rolled her eyes and impatiently waved her hand in her husband’s direction. “Don’t listen to your father, Cameron. He would like to keep you a little boy forever. Now that you’ve completed your mission, a girlfriend is legal. Enjoy yourself!”

Sara smiled up at Cameron. “Did you hear that? We’re legal.”

Cameron drew Sara into his arms. “Now that you’re officially mine, I’d better not neglect you.” He brushed his lips against her forehead.

Dr. Carroll didn’t smile. “If you continue referring to her as if she’s your possession, Cameron, she’s likely to leave you for a more progressive man.”

Sara kissed Cameron’s neck. “Don’t be absurd, Dr. Carroll. Cameron had better think of me as his, because he’s mine—all mine—and the sooner everyone in the colony understands that, the better we’ll all get along!”

Ashley grinned. “It sounds as if you’re both possessed!”

“Happily possessed,” Cameron agreed, keeping his arm around Sara until they boarded the shuttle.

* * *

Sara spent many pleasant moments with Cameron and his family on the shuttle and on the Eden transport once they boarded. The transport had been a community ship for Zarr’s people and so provided the three thousand people destined for Eden with many comforts a military ship would not have provided. Dr. Carroll’s unmarried students lived in dormitories, but all of the families had been provided with large, multi-room cabins. While not in classes to learn about all of the new equipment they would be using once they arrived on Eden, the colonists relaxed in lounges and entertainment rooms, getting to know each other better and sampling the strange new food that came out of the ship’s synthesizing machines.

During the first week on the transport, Dr. Carroll spent many hours with the leaders of Control Colony and with the leaders of their own Eleventh Colony. Cameron kept himself busy with his uncle, a former professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the colony’s team of engineers learning how to operate and program the colony’s synthesizing machines. While he did spend time in meetings with his counselors and other ward leaders, he seemed to be more interested at first in mingling with the colonists and getting to know them. Barbara Carroll put Sara and Russ Brodsky to work interviewing key colonists and writing articles for their first colony newspaper.

Now and then Sara and Cameron found an empty corner somewhere and sat whispering to each other with their heads together and arms intertwined. Sara wanted to know all about Cameron’s mission, and he wanted to know about her two years at BYU and how she had come to be one of the colonists. Cameron wouldn’t, however, tell Sara about his week in the temple with her father or about his meeting with the prophet.

“Not yet,” he said mysteriously.

“When?” she begged.

“After everything else has been said.”

“Didn’t you tell your parents about your interview with the prophet?”

“I gave them an abridged version that wouldn’t begin to satisfy your curiosity. Or my need to confide in you.”

By Thursday, Sara's fear that Cameron wouldn't be capable of uniting with the other colonists had faded. If he believed the colonists were apostates, he refrained from saying it, always treating them with affection and respect, and the colonists themselves treated him with kindness or at least civility.

Just when Sara began thinking Cameron was softening toward The Equality of Zion, he shocked her by refusing to attend the United Hearts Forum his father had called for that evening. He told her his plan when they were leaving the dormitory dining room after dinner.

She stopped abruptly and turned to face him, dropping his hand. "But this is a vital colony meeting! It's where we share our feelings and concerns and become involved with each other and united!"

Cameron backed away from her slightly and leaned against the wall, which had been painted to look like a field by the side of a country road, complete with a rustic split-rail fence. "I don't think it's healthy to share *too* much in a large group like that. A lot of things ought to remain private."

How could Cameron have been raised in his father's home and have such an aversion to group intimacy? "But the forums are the foundation of our new society. You have to participate!"

"And I will participate. In the Colony Assembly. I might actually enjoy being a part of making our new laws." He folded his arms, as if he perceived she didn't wish him to touch her and wanted to assure her he wouldn't try.

"What about the People's Jury?" Sara's voice became loud and anxious. "Don't tell me you don't intend to participate in that either!"

"Actually, I don't. To be honest, I don't like the idea of dealing with law infractions in an open forum—I can't help but think it'll lead to nothing but chaos and injustice—but that's beside the point. Because of my calling, I'm going to know sensitive things about people that I won't be able to tell anyone, let alone make public in an open forum. So you see, it would be wrong for me to be involved in the People's Jury."

Sara forced herself to calm down. She couldn't bear to argue with him. "When you put it that way . . . I suppose you're right. Still, there's nothing keeping you from the United Hearts Forum. What do you have against it, anyway?"

"The United Hearts Forum sounds like a cross between a testimony meeting from a horror movie and a giant group therapy session, and I have no stomach for it."

Had there been a trace of sarcasm in his voice, Sara would have thought he was goading her. He had, however, simply given her an honest answer to her question. She suppressed her urge to fire a retort and said quietly, "I think you would change your mind if you'd just give it a chance."

Cameron shook his head. "I don't think so. I have a feeling this 'vital colony meeting' is going to turn into a 'let's criticize the bishop' meeting. I don't need that."

"You're wrong." Sara turned and strode away, leaving him there alone in the corridor, leaning against his make-believe fence.

Cameron didn't change his mind, and Sara went to the Star Lounge for the forum feeling disturbed and angry with him for being so bullheaded. That evening Dr. Carroll himself led the discussion, even though as governor he would preside primarily over the People's Jury. In the future Second Assistant Ann Eagle, the colony's clinical psychologist, would conduct the United Hearts Forum.

Dr. Eagle and First Assistant Rachel Vance stood with Dr. Carroll in the center of the huge, domed room, answering questions and calling on people to speak. Sara listened as the

colonists, one by one, expressed their hopes for the colony mingled with frustration at the way Cameron and President Grant had influenced so many to drop out. The colony had lost six professionals and ten students on Sunday evening alone. Four more students hadn't shown up Monday morning to get on the shuttle, along with a single parent family, leaving a deficit in the colony of seven professionals—the two physical education specialists, a secondary school teacher, the cosmetologist, the meteorologist, a mechanical engineer, and the dental hygienist.

Now many students would not have mentors in their chosen fields, and many of the professionals would not have students to teach. Dr. Carroll and his assistants spent much of the time reassuring everyone that the colony would function efficiently, despite this initial setback. They asked everyone to be cooperative and flexible while they worked to reorganize.

The colonists were uncomfortable with Cameron's reluctance to be a part of the colony and were afraid he would continue to be a source of conflict. "He *is* a self-righteous rebel, Ben," Sister Vance said, agreeing with the opinion stated in different forms by many of the colonists. With her perfectly tailored burgundy suit and short classic haircut, Sister Vance looked every bit the U.S. Congresswoman she had been.

"He already made it clear that he has no intention of following your leadership," added Dr. Duane Vance, former law professor at Georgetown University and future president of the Eleventh Colony's college.

The more Sara heard, the more troubled she felt. Cameron had been right. The forum really was deteriorating into a "let's criticize the bishop" meeting. Why wasn't Dr. Carroll guiding the discussion into more positive territory?

Finally Barbara Carroll spoke up, her tone one of conviction, "You have nothing to fear from Cameron. He doesn't want to go to Eden, it's true, but he respects his father, and he isn't stupid. He knows he'll get nowhere in his calling if he doesn't work with us."

"Then why isn't he here?" Marc demanded. He was so close to the perimeter of the lounge that he appeared to be surrounded by stars.

"Because he doesn't see the importance of these forums yet," replied Sister Eagle. "But don't worry about it. His mother is right. He just needs a little time." Sister Eagle's straight, reddish blond hair fell loosely on her shoulders, and she was wearing casual slacks, sandals, and a loose cotton blouse. Next to Sister Vance, she almost looked like a hick.

"He's an excellent boy," Dr. Carroll said. "He's intelligent and fanatically virtuous, and so submissive and respectful some people might describe him as docile. He's always been the perfect son—so perfect we hardly knew he was there. He's no threat to what we're doing."

Emptiness shadowed Sara's heart. So perfect they hardly knew he was there? What did that mean? Was Dr. Carroll really referring to Cameron, this young man who had been such a powerful presence in her own life for six years? He was dazzling, like the sun, and impossible to ignore. How could they have hardly known he was there? Sara couldn't decide whether Dr. Carroll was defending Cameron or criticizing him.

Dr. Trevor Carroll agreed with his brother. "What Ben says about Cameron is true. It's not in his nature to be a rebel, and he is intelligent. He'll come around. He has no choice."

"In the meantime, we'll follow him as far as we are able," Dr. Carroll said.

"Just remember, he's here to organize the ward, not to govern the colony," Sister Vance assured.

Did they expect Cameron to be a puppet? Or a performing dog? Sara wanted Cameron to capture the vision of Eden as much as anyone else did, but not at that price. Sara raised her hand. Dr. Carroll motioned to her, smiling. "Go ahead, Sara."

"It disturbs me to hear Cameron described as insignificant. He was called by God to be our spiritual leader, and he will continue to do what he's always done—what he believes is right. He should be respected, not ignored or indulged."

There. She had registered her protest. At least none of them would ever think she didn't admire Cameron enough to speak up for him.

Barbara laughed gently, as did many others, and exchanged glances with Cyndi Carroll, Cameron's aunt and the certified nurse midwife of the colony. "I think it's true love," Barbara said to the group from her gray-blue overstuffed chair near the center of the lounge. Then she looked over at Sara and winked.

Sara felt like an idiot. Maybe she was overreacting. Even though she couldn't believe Dr. Carroll had meant the phrase "we hardly knew he was there" to be taken literally, she couldn't get it out of her mind. What would Cameron have thought had he attended the forum? For a moment she was furious he wasn't there, then, just as suddenly, she was relieved that he hadn't heard his father's comments.

"I feel uncomfortable looking to our new bishop as the colony's spiritual leader just yet," Sister Vance said. "No one can dispute the fact that he was called by the proper authority, but something must be lacking in his ability to receive inspiration if he couldn't even choose counselors who would remain a part of the colony."

"She's right," said Patricia Dixon, the landscape artist.

"Well said," added Scott Ireland, the colony clerk, accompanied by nods and murmurs of agreement.

Sara looked to Tony to defend Cameron, but he said nothing. He met her gaze for a moment, then averted his eyes and stared at the carpet in a pensive way. Disappointment seared through her, burning away a portion of the respect she had felt for Tony. She longed for David. He wouldn't hesitate to stand and defend Cameron against these unjust charges.

Sara sprang out of her chair. "What is this?" she demanded, trying to look into the eyes of as many of the colonists as she could. "Just because things didn't turn out exactly the way you thought they should, you assume our bishop is uninspired? We might as well accuse Dr. Carroll of being uninspired since he's the one who chose those people to be a part of the colony to begin with! I happen to know that Cameron himself wasn't surprised when some of the men dropped out. It's not my place to say more. If you have questions about that issue, why don't you ask him directly instead of criticizing him behind his back?"

"We would ask him about it if he were here!" Brother Vance said.

The Vances were already at the top of Sara's list of people to avoid, and that alone irritated her. She had participated in the passionate online discussions about colony law with them often and had never known either one of them to be so nasty. Of course, during her time online, she had been one of a hundred students who had looked to them as the colony's leaders, not the preferred companion of a bishop they couldn't stand.

Sara turned and glared at Brother Vance. "Cameron's been here for four days! He doesn't need to attend the forum to hear your concerns." She waved her hand at Ryan Farrow. "He has an executive secretary. Make an appointment!"

Brother Vance's pale blue eyes looked like ice. Sara doubted it had ever occurred to him that he should make an appointment with a twenty-year-old or that he was accustomed to being spoken to in such a defiant way by a student. He managed, however, to keep his voice calm. "Perhaps he's spending too much time with his girlfriend to be available to the ward." His face was as smooth as Dr. Carroll's was, but his hair was pure white, giving him an ageless

appearance that was as unnerving as it was striking. Sara wondered whether he had ever been young.

"It isn't right for a bishop to be unmarried," muttered Anita Ireland, the electrical engineer.

"A wife wouldn't get in his way so much," agreed Mike Dixon, the construction specialist.

Sara believed that if she were consuming most of Cameron's time and energy, the colonists would be justified in being upset about it, but as it was, their complaints were ludicrous. She stared down one whiner, then the other. "So a bishop isn't allowed to have a personal life, is that it? And when he does get married, it's okay for him to ignore his wife? Is that what you're saying?" Sara again addressed the colony as a group: "I don't know about any of the rest of you, but I've never heard or read a definition of 'bishop' which included the word 'slave'!"

Sara knew now that Cameron had been right to stay away from the forum. His father thought he was submissive, did he? Cameron was what some people would consider docile, was he? Nothing could be further from the truth! By refusing to attend the forum, Cameron displayed incredible self-assurance and strength of will. He was serving the colonists, but he was doing it on his own terms, and the colonists themselves perceived it. How could his father not see it too? Or did he just not want to admit the truth?

The admiration Sara already felt for Cameron soared, and she knew in a way she had not known before that what she felt for Cameron was deeper than infatuation.

"Sara's claims are legitimate," Dr. Carroll said. "Cameron is not our slave. He does have the right to a personal life, and he has been called by God to be our spiritual leader."

Dr. Carroll slowly moved toward Sara as he spoke. "I feel impressed, however, to acknowledge the fact that Brother Vance's claim is equally legitimate. Our bishop has discarded a prime opportunity to answer your concerns by refusing to attend this forum. Sister Vance's reluctance to accept Cameron as the colony's spiritual leader just yet is also understandable. We all know that it takes more than an ordination to make a man a true spiritual leader. Whether our new bishop rises to the call or not is up to him. My hope is that as a colony, we will give our new bishop the respect he deserves."

Dr. Carroll laid his hand on Sara's shoulder with just enough pressure to encourage her to sit down, which she did. "And if my son can earn the same respect from all of us that he has earned from this young lady, he will be a very loved bishop indeed!" He gave Sara's shoulder an affectionate squeeze.

Most of the colonists laughed, and many of them cheered and applauded. Sara thought Dr. Carroll's words should have mollified her, but she felt more troubled than ever. The colonists seemed so eager to both ignore and indulge her because she was the bishop's girlfriend. Why hadn't any of Cameron's counselors or family members backed her up?

Sara looked at Tony again, wondering what he was thinking. Tony didn't laugh, but looked right at her, not at her eyes, but at something below her face, and she became aware that Dr. Carroll's hand had moved to her back, his thumb nestled in the nape of her neck.

Before Sara could catch Tony's eye, Dr. Carroll whispered in her ear: "Wait for me here after the meeting. I'd like to talk with you alone."

Sara turned toward Dr. Carroll slightly, questioning him with her eyes. He patted her shoulder and straightened, smiling, then moved away from her a few paces and brought the forum to a close.

Chapter 11: A SWEET, SAINTLY GIRL

Many of the colonists lingered in the star lounge after the forum, chatting with each other and embracing Dr. Carroll and Barbara. Sara's feelings toward Dr. Carroll at the moment were not friendly, and she didn't want to talk to him, but walking out on the governor of the colony wasn't an option. She didn't want to talk to anyone until she'd had time to think and so slipped away from the group of students she had been sitting with and went to the perimeter of the lounge to stand alone and gaze at the stars.

Awhile later, Sara felt hands on her shoulders. For an instant she thought the person standing behind her was Cameron and relaxed. Hearing Dr. Carroll's voice instead of Cameron's, her muscles tensed. "This is the first time in over a week we've been alone to talk," he said softly.

Sara turned to face him, at the same time backing away from his touch, still irritated. The more she thought about what had happened in the forum, the more it appeared that Dr. Carroll had been attempting to discredit Cameron, and yet a benevolent man like Dr. Carroll wouldn't do something like that, especially to his own son. What was she supposed to believe? "You've been incredibly busy and so have I."

"Busy encouraging my son to fall in love with you."

He seemed displeased. Sara folded her arms, annoyed and a little hurt by his objection to her relationship with Cameron. "You can't very well disapprove of me, Dr. Carroll. I may not be the elegant woman you envisioned for Cameron, but you did choose me to be a part of your colony."

Dr. Carroll stared down at her. "You know good and well that I don't disapprove of you. And no. I've never envisioned Cameron with a woman of your brilliance and vehemence. Since the sweet, saintly type of girl perfect for Cameron doesn't exist in this colony, I've been forced to change that particular vision."

"You are nothing if not pragmatic," Sara said coolly. She didn't know what annoyed her more—the implication that Cameron didn't want or deserve a passionate, intelligent woman or the possibility that a sweet, more sedate woman really would be more perfect for Cameron than she.

"We're all forced to be pragmatic at times." He surveyed her, pondering. When he spoke again, he seemed less annoyed and more relaxed. "You shouldn't feel you have to defend Cameron. You'll feel more liberated emotionally if, instead of trying to come to Cameron's rescue, you admit you're troubled by his inability to appreciate The Equality of Zion."

"If I'd wanted to liberate my emotions tonight, I would have spent the evening with Cameron instead of attending the forum."

"You aren't troubled by Cameron's point of view?"

"Yes, I am troubled by it, but I believe it would be disloyal of me to discuss it publicly. I certainly would never insult him the way so many did tonight in the forum. It galled me the way everyone took shots at him behind his back, and I don't appreciate the fact that I now seem to have no credibility. I thought the United Hearts Forum was designed to give *everyone* in the colony 'Equal Expression' and be a healing, empowering experience. The opposite happened to me. I don't think I've ever, in my life, been so offended."

Dr. Carroll raised an eyebrow. "You were offended."

It sounded like a challenge. Sara threw up her arms and demanded, "What does it mean to be 'fanatically virtuous,' anyway? Is that supposed to be a compliment or a criticism? And you claimed Cameron was such a perfect son that you 'hardly knew he was there.' What was that

supposed to mean? How could you ‘hardly know’ your magnificent son was there? Are we talking about the same person?”

Dr. Carroll stepped toward Sara. He gripped her wrists, drawing her closer, his voice quiet and calm: “This from you, who never, in six years, even spoke to Cameron?”

Sara refused to allow him to disarm her and she would not apologize for something that had been nothing more than a misunderstanding between her and Cameron. She met Dr. Carroll’s gaze without flinching. “I was not his father. I was simply a girl who was terrified to approach a boy I adored.”

Dr. Carroll’s eyes bore into hers. “Sara Alexander, my Little Panther, was terrified of my son, that gentle boy who wouldn’t step on an ant if he could avoid it?”

Why did he sound so skeptical? Sara relaxed her arms and rotated her wrists, slipping them out of Dr. Carroll’s hands. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“No, Sara. No. Of course not.” Dr. Carroll shook his head. “But I just can’t help but wonder whether you were really as much in love with Cameron as you remember yourself being.”

Sara regarded him in surprise. “You’re suggesting that I’m projecting my current feelings for Cameron into the past? That somehow I’ve convinced myself that I felt something I really didn’t feel?”

“Exactly.”

Sara wanted to laugh but didn’t dare. “Trust me on this one, Dr. Carroll. I’ve been in love with your son for six years.” Was this why he had wanted to talk with her? To discuss her relationship with Cameron?

“You’re not willing to consider the possibility that I may be right?”

“No. Because what you suggest simply isn’t true!” Sara began walking toward the nearest exit, hoping Dr. Carroll would take the hint and let her go.

Dr. Carroll walked beside Sara. “Certainly this . . . passion . . . you felt for Cameron faded from time to time as you had other boyfriends.”

“I’ve never wanted anyone as a boyfriend but Cameron. He and I are the same this way. We’re both each other’s first and only.” Why had she allowed doubts about Cameron’s preferences to trouble her? Cameron hadn’t wanted anyone but her for six years! Wasn’t he the best judge of what kind of woman was perfect for him?

“The young woman who has spent her life with men and loves them as much as they love her, a young woman who has never in her life been afraid of men, never had a boyfriend?”

Sara doubted men loved her as much as he claimed, but it was a nice thing to say, and she softened toward him a little. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, smiling slightly. “There you go, calling me a liar again.”

Dr. Carroll smiled back at her, offering her his arm. “Forgive me, Sara, but it seems a crime against nature that such a beautiful, passionate young woman never had a boyfriend.”

Sara slipped her arm through his and allowed him to draw her close. “That’s a very kind thing for you to say.”

“It’s nothing but the truth.” Dr. Carroll nodded thoughtfully. “This does explain some things about you, though, things that have puzzled me. I wish you had told me about Cameron.”

As they approached the exit, Sara stopped and turned to him, shrugging. “Had we spoken of him more, I probably would have.”

“Have you considered the possibility that Cameron isn’t right for you?”

“Of course I’ve considered it. I think about it all the time.”

“And?”

"I've come to the conclusion that what I feel for Cameron is love, not infatuation. That's as much as I've been able to determine absolutely, and it's enough for one day."

Dr. Carroll's hand lightly cupped Sara's jaw, and he smiled, ever so slightly. "Are you sure, Sara, that Cameron is the man you love?"

Sara frowned. What a strange comment! Dr. Carroll lowered his hand, then turned away from her and left the lounge. Sara watched him, more troubled than ever. He hadn't addressed the issues she had raised at all but had evaded them with unsettling smoothness.

Sara went to the bunkroom she shared with fifteen other girls and climbed to her top bunk, leaning over her knees to think, unable to face Cameron just yet. Erica Rice, Brittany Novak, and Danielle Young came into the bunkroom and, after exchanging greetings with Sara, sat down together on a bed near the door, talking. Not long after that, Sara heard Cameron call from the door, "Sara? Are you in there?"

She couldn't very well lie to him. "Yes," she responded without passion, turning her head so that she could see her roommates. If she stretched forward in just the right way, she could see Cameron's profile at the door.

A minute passed, and she heard Cameron's voice again, beseeching, "Please don't be mad at me, Sara. I'm sorry I couldn't make myself go to that forum."

Danielle gazed sidelong at Sara with mischievous blue eyes. "She's not mad at you, Bishop. But she is in love with you, utterly. She defended you in the forum and got laughed at."

Now Sara had no choice but to tell Cameron everything. She didn't know whether to feel relieved or mortified.

"Really?" Cameron said in amazed delight. "She did that?"

Erica winked at Sara. "Come on in and talk to her. We're all decent." She quickly sat up and playfully exaggerated her point by brushing her black hair into place and primly crossing her dark-skinned legs as she smoothed down her skirt.

"You promise you'll stay?"

Brittany turned to her stomach, her straight blond hair brushing her shoulders as it fell forward and dangled above the bed. "Don't you want to be alone with her?"

Yes, Cameron, say yes! They hadn't been completely alone since the evening they had sat in the swing in Sara's backyard, and even though they both knew they had no choice, their situation was making them both feel tense and desperate.

"Yes! I mean, no. No! I can't. It wouldn't be right."

Brittany chuckled knowingly. "Then we'll be your chaperones for a while."

Danielle giggled. "We promise!"

Erica stood up and went to the door. "Get in here and *talk* to her!" She pulled Cameron into the room by his arm and pointed him toward Sara.

Sara lifted her head and watched Cameron walk past the other bunks in the room. "What happened?" he asked, pulling himself onto her bunk. She moved so that she was sitting beside him, her back facing her roommates, and whispered what had happened and what she had felt, her arm sliding around his waist. This was as alone as they could ever hope to be, and it felt wonderful.

"When all was said and done, I was glad you had stayed away."

Cameron fondled her hair. "I can't begin to tell you how flattered I am that you would defend me the way you did." He kissed her temple.

"I'm still disturbed. They shouldn't have said those things about you in the first place."

"Get used to it, because you're going to hear a lot worse in the future."

"You can't mean that!"

Cameron kissed her again and pulled away slightly. "I didn't accept this calling with any delusions. I knew my job would be difficult."

"Have you considered the possibility that your father's vision of Zion is a good one?"

"I will accept my father's vision as good where it's based on true principles. And no, public group therapy sessions like that ridiculous United Hearts Forum are not part of the Lord's plan for Zion."

Why didn't Cameron's statement anger her? Her father and mother had said the same thing and she had protested. She had, however, argued with her parents before actually experiencing the United Hearts Forum.

"So you intend to fight your father. The colonists fear as much." Why did she feel so numb?

"I only intend to lead the ward, and the colony, in the direction the Lord wants it to go. What remains to be seen is how hard my father fights *me*. Once he comes out of shock at being challenged, that is."

"You've never challenged him before?"

"Not like this. Not publicly. I don't want to now, but I'll do what I have to do."

"I can't believe your father would fight your authority." Or would he? Dr. Carroll's words seemed to shout in Sara's mind: "*We'll follow him as far as we are able.*" And just how far was that?

"I hope you're right." Cameron gazed at the wall in front of them, which had been painted to look like a window with a view of the mountains. He whispered gloomily, "Perhaps you should dump me now and get it over with. Being with me is going to cause you nothing but confusion and heartache, because I'm not going to change."

Shocked, Sara couldn't speak. She knew Cameron's observation was almost correct. She would feel confused and divided in her loyalties until he came to accept his father's vision, which he had just claimed he would never do. Had their relationship so soon reached an impasse? The thought of it desolated her, and she realized that Cameron meant far more to her than his father's vision did. She couldn't change her own beliefs to match his, but she could be his ally in other ways. Hearing the others abuse him would wound her, but denying herself his presence would wound her far more.

Sara drew closer to Cameron, kissing his cheek. "How can you say such things? You are my shining sun, and I love you." Until that moment she had never uttered the three heavenly words she so longed to hear from him. Since the events of the evening had clarified her feelings, the time was right.

Cameron turned to Sara again, his features soft with wonder. "And I love you too, my beautiful queen." They kissed adoringly.

Once they had put their heads together again, Cameron began humming "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam."

Sara whispered playfully, "You'd better watch it, or I'll throw you in the dungeon."

"A sun-BEAM, a sun-BEAM!" Cameron sang in a whisper, bouncing up on "beam," as if he had the hiccups. Sara had a vision of a towheaded boy in Primary springing out of his chair every time he sang, "sun-BEAM!"

This image of Cameron as a child drained Sara of all light-heartedness. She tightened her arms around Cameron's waist and laid her head on his chest. "What did your father mean when he said you were so perfect they hardly knew you were there?"

Cameron combed his fingers slowly through Sara's hair. "I suppose he meant that I was so obedient, trustworthy, and determined to be good that I never caused them any real

inconvenience or distress. I was, I suppose, what might be considered a low maintenance child.”

What Cameron suggested didn’t sound so terrible on the surface, but submerged in his words was something unsettling. “I thought children were supposed to be somewhat inconvenient to their parents,” Sara said.

“I guess that depends on how you define inconvenience. As long as my father doesn’t see me as a threat to what he’s planning to accomplish on Eden, I’m not causing him any inconvenience and my presence here doesn’t matter. In other words, he would hardly know I’m here because he would be able to do whatever he wants as if I weren’t here at all. If he were to begin seeing me as a true threat to what he wants to do on Eden, I would become an inconvenience.”

“He wanted to talk to me alone after the forum. It was the strangest conversation I’ve ever had with him.” Sara sat up and faced Cameron, repeating the conversation back to him verbatim.

The more Sara said, the more severe Cameron’s frown became. When Sara finished reciting the conversation, Cameron said, “That conversation wasn’t just strange, Sara, it was downright bizarre. Why would he be so determined to think you imagined being in love with me in high school?”

“I have no idea.”

“He was *angry* when you suggested he might not approve of you, wasn’t he?” Cameron sounded bewildered.

“Yes. No.” Sara shook her head. “He was hurt. And he was a little angry, I think. And, now that I think about it, he had a right to be. He’s never treated me with anything but kindness and approval. It was wrong of me to think what I thought, to say what I said.”

“I’m not sure that’s true. His comment about your being ‘busy encouraging my son to fall in love with you’ sounded like an accusation. Am I wrong?”

“No. That was the way he said it.”

“It sounds as if instead of disapproving of you as a love interest for me, in reality, he disapproves of *me* as a love interest for *you*.”

“What in the galaxy do you mean?”

Cameron’s bewilderment gave way to wry realization. “He thinks you’re too good for me.”

“That’s absurd! How could he think such a thing about you, his own son? A man both of my parents are *ecstatic* I’ve become involved with?” Sara didn’t want to believe what Cameron suggested, but as she reexamined what Dr. Carroll had said to her, she couldn’t deny that Cameron’s suspicion was valid.

The corner of Cameron’s mouth lifted a little, as if he wanted to smile but couldn’t. “Your parents are nice. And they’re very different from my parents.” Cameron turned from Sara, kneading his forehead in a nervous way. “My father thinks I’m too gentle and docile for a woman of your ‘brilliance and vehemence.’ He referred to me as a boy and you as a woman. That says it all right there.”

Cameron was right. Sara wanted to disregard his belief but couldn’t. She scooted to her knees and wrapped her arm protectively around his neck, resting her free hand on his chin and turning his head so that she could look into his eyes. “You are a *man*, Cameron Carroll, and I love you!”

He caressed her hair away from her face. “What would I do without you?”

Sara touched her lips to his. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have a sweet, saintly girl?”

Sara felt Cameron smile. “You *are* my sweet, saintly girl, Sara.” He returned Sara’s kiss, then tenderly guided her back into a sitting position.

Sara marveled at Cameron’s ability to make her feel like a lady. She loved that feeling, and she loved the gentleness that inspired it. How could anyone criticize Cameron for one of the very qualities that made him so irresistible? “Why would your father think you’re not good enough for me?”

Cameron’s face was still very pale. “Because he has no respect for me. I’ve known that for a long time.”

“How can he not respect you? Especially now after you served such a glorious mission?”

“You want to know what my father thinks about my mission?” Cameron’s tone was a touch bitter. “Do you really?”

Foreboding seized Sara, and she almost shook her head and turned away. “I only want the truth.”

Cameron’s brow wrinkled slightly, as if he wasn’t sure he should tell her anything. Finally he said, taking her hands in his, “He questions the wisdom in the Church’s policy of taking all of those people from their homes and moving them across the country to Beijing.”

“He said that?” Sara said in astonishment.

“Many times. So did my mother.”

Sara knew that Dr. Carroll thought the members of the Guardians of Earth’s Governments were nothing more than alarmists and that they were overreacting to Zarr in their determination to establish their Cooperative Communities in major cities around the world. He believed the world should be united, not fragmented into these little groups that were afraid of major change and desperately hoping their dwindling domestic militaries were secretly planning a coup d’état against their largely Federalist governments. He was, moreover, appalled that the Church would ally with a survivalist group.

Unlike Dr. Carroll, Sara recognized that the Guardians of Earth’s Governments, which included upstanding people of all races, religions, and nationalities, was no fringe group. She thought their mission to provide political and economic support to those individuals and groups who didn’t want to be connected to Zarr’s network of organizations was a worthwhile one. She didn’t completely agree with the Guardians’ agenda, but she did feel they were right to stand up for what they believed.

Besides, she couldn’t help but have a certain amount of respect and admiration for the domestic military organizations, considering David’s position in the Navy, and it always pained her to hear Federalists refer to David and others like him as “the local police” and “Earth cops.”

The Church’s present policy of gathering to temple communities, which were, in many cases, within the Cooperative Communities established by the Guardians, excited Sara. When the New Jerusalem was built in Jackson County, Missouri, it would not be *the* Zion community; it would be the Center Place of *hundreds* of Zion communities all over the world!

Although Sara had never allowed Dr. Carroll to talk her out of her excitement for the new temple communities, she understood why he held the opinions he did. She could not, however, believe he would demoralize Cameron by expressing those same opinions to him. On the other hand, Cameron wouldn’t have made such a claim if it weren’t true. “What would your parents have had you do differently?”

“Nothing, probably. I only did what I was told and it was the right thing to do. Had I refused to do what I was told, I would have been sent home, and my parents know that. My father served a mission himself. I have no doubt he expected me to do what I did; he just doesn’t see much good in it.”

"Maybe that's why I never heard him say anything about you. Parents always like to talk about their missionary children, and I always thought it was strange that he never mentioned you at all."

"You may be right. You have no idea how difficult it was to stand up there next to President Grant and hear him tell everyone what I had done in China, knowing how my parents felt and wondering how many others in the congregation felt the same way."

Sara hugged him. "I've never felt anything but admiration for everything you did in China."

Cameron kissed her hair. "I wish we had written letters to each other while I was on my mission. Of everything we didn't do, I regret that the most."

"I regret all of it." Sara now realized that her greatest transgression in secretly reading Cameron's e-mails online hadn't been that she had invaded his privacy but that she had not written her own letters to him, letters he had so desperately wanted and needed.

"I say these things, and they're true, and I wouldn't have told you had you not asked, but you should know that my parents tried really hard to support me on my mission. They each wrote an e-mail to me every week, and the e-mails were always long and detailed and very interesting. I printed out every single one of them and still carry them around with me. One of my apprehensions in accepting this call, in fact, was that the good feelings that existed between us during that time would disappear and that I would learn things about them I didn't want to know. I wanted to remember them as they were in their e-mails."

"I'm not sure that your parents' opinion about the Church's policy of moving the converts to Beijing means they don't respect you. It's a clash of perspectives, that's all."

"That's just it. They don't respect my perspective."

"Can't they respect you and still disagree with your perspective?"

Cameron smiled sadly. "Neither one of them are you."

Sara shoulders drooped. "It pains me to be reminded of how much we disagree on."

"It pains me too."

"Do you think your father meant to undermine your authority when he said you were fanatically virtuous?"

"Yes. If he had meant what he said in a supportive way, he would have left out any mention of the word 'fanatic.'"

"I'm still wondering what he means by the term 'fanatically virtuous.' Is he saying you're too chaste? Or that you're too righteous? Does he think that achieving holiness is fanatical? Or was it just his way of saying you're *self*-righteous?"

Cameron shook his head. "He doesn't think I'm self-righteous, although it wouldn't surprise me if he encouraged the colonists to believe such a thing about me. He would never say he thinks achieving a state of holiness would be fanatical. He would, instead, quote scriptures and in interpreting them, would redefine holiness in a way that corresponds to his own views. He has, in fact, done that I think. So yes, I think he would look at a truly holy person and say he or she is a fanatic. And yes, I do believe he thinks I'm too chaste."

"Could that ever be a bad thing?"

Cameron grimaced. "I've never known anyone who would think it was a compliment to be thought of as a prude, and perhaps I am a prude. I just don't know how to be any other way."

Sara rested her hands on Cameron's cheeks and gazed into his eyes with all the earnestness she could muster. "What your father thinks doesn't matter, Cameron. I'm the best judge of what kind of man is perfect for me, and I chose you six years ago. I love you."

She kissed Cameron again and again, and he responded vehemently. "I love you too, Sara," he breathed. "I've loved you too much for too long that I couldn't have done this with anyone else. I'm not sure how much virtue had to do with it."

"Why did you wait until tonight to tell me you loved me?"

"Because I wanted you to be sure of your own feelings first. I didn't want to pressure you."

Speaking of love in this serious way made Sara feel she should tell Cameron about Novaun. She glanced toward the front of the bunkroom and her roommates' lively conversation, assuring herself that they had no intention of leaving, at least for the time being. "There's something I've been dying to tell you, Cameron. You can't tell anyone yet, even your parents. It's about my father, and my heritage."

* * *

Sara lay in bed late that night, too enlivened by the evening she had spent with Cameron to sleep. She scrunched the light blue spread in her hand, staring into the darkness and listening to the regular breathing of her roommates. Eventually she relaxed, and just when she thought she might drift to sleep, she heard a sniff and a muffled sob from the bunk below hers.

Sara sat up. Ashley, who had insisted on rooming with the other students instead of her parents, slept in the bunk below Sara's. Was she still upset about David? For all the pain David had caused Ashley, Sara hoped the Air Force Academy killed Navy in the football game that weekend.

Sara slid noiselessly out of her bed and knelt next to Ashley's, folding her arms against Ashley's back. Feeling her touch, Ashley turned toward her. Sara could barely see Ashley in the dim light. "I'm sorry I woke you up," Ashley whispered.

"I wasn't asleep anyway."

"Why not? Are you upset that Mother and Father laughed at you?"

"I don't know anymore. I feel very strange."

"What you did for Cameron was nice. I wish I'd had the nerve to speak up."

"I couldn't help myself."

"I . . . I understand the feeling." Ashley's shoulders shook as she began weeping again.

Sara rested a hand gently on Ashley's shoulder. "I could just strangle David."

Ashley's muscles tensed. "Please . . . *please* don't blame this on him. He's not responsible for . . ." She gasped and pressed her face into her pillow.

Wariness shadowed Sara. Something deeper than David tormented Ashley. Sara drew her hand back and said the first thing that popped into her head. "I'd still like to strangle him." Sara held very still, waiting to hear what Ashley would say.

A minute passed, and Ashley's breathing slowed a little. She lifted her upper body and turned her pillow over. "David did get to me," Ashley admitted, lying back down on her side. "We felt such a connection to each other." Her breathing steadied even more. "I couldn't help thinking that if I had stayed on Earth the question of marriage would have eventually come up."

"But you're so young, and David's old! You live in completely different worlds." David wanted a large family and a stay-at-home wife and was on the verge of completing his education and going to sea, while Ashley hadn't even started her education yet. Marrying him would have meant giving up her ambitions of being a lawyer, a senator, or president of a university. Did Ashley even know enough about herself at "almost eighteen" to make a decision like that?

"I know. The thought of it frightens me as much as it thrills me. But there's something about him . . . I think I would be willing to give up a great deal to be his wife. That's the problem. David would want to be married in the temple, and I'm not worthy."

Sara hoped Ashley was exaggerating. "But you have gone to the temple before, haven't you? To do baptisms for the dead? Didn't you talk things over with your bishop?"

"Yes and no." Ashley hesitated. "Brandon was right, Sara, when he said I'm a tramp. I've never gone all the way, but I have gone too far. My bishop would never have given me a temple recommend, and how would that have looked?"

"You lied?" Sara whispered, astounded.

"It didn't seem like such a big deal at the time." Ashley's whisper was weighted with guilt. "And if I'm completely honest with myself, I have to admit that one of the reasons I didn't tell my bishop was because I wasn't sure I wanted to give up what I was doing."

The very thought of going into the temple unworthily made Sara feel queasy. "So why does it matter now, all of a sudden?" How could anyone think it was no big deal?

"Because David is so honest and good that I wouldn't have been able to hide it from him and he would have ended up hating me."

Ashley understood David better than Sara had expected. David, the ultimate perfectionist, required a lot out of himself and those close to him. On the other hand, David and Ashley truly had connected. Ashley wasn't David's spiritual equal now, but his influence had already expanded her understanding of herself and the gospel in a serious way. As his wife, she might have excelled and been happy. What would have happened had Ashley remained on Earth? They would never know.

"You're not saying anything," Ashley whispered bitterly. "I must have hit pretty close to the mark."

"David is meticulous," Sara admitted. "But perhaps we're both wrong about him."

"No. I don't think so. What's worse is that as much as I want to have something sweet and decent with him, I also want to be with him the way I was with the others. I can't get him out of my mind. I mean, I really can't get him out of my mind. I feel filthy."

"You need to talk to Cameron."

"But he's my brother! I can't talk to him about something like this! It's bad enough having to talk to a real bishop."

"Cameron is a real bishop. He's the only person in the colony with authority from the Savior to set the conditions of repentance for the sort of sin you're talking about. You *have* to talk to him!"

"I just don't know, Sara."

"You just have to force yourself to do it. You know the guilt will torment you until you do. Just *thinking* about that kind of guilt oppresses me."

A thought dropped on Sara out of nowhere. *David's intelligent, talented sister postponed her formal education and sacrificed a career to marry your father and be your mother.* A queer yearning settled into Sara's heart. Her mother had been nineteen when she had married her father, age twenty-four, and they had been, quite literally, from "different worlds."

"Are you all right, Sara?"

"I . . . I'm just feeling a little . . . homesick." Sara quickly climbed back up into her own bed. Leaning over the side, she whispered, "For whatever it's worth, Ashley, I wish you could have had your chance with David."

Chapter 12: TWO OFFERS

Cyndi Carroll approached Sara in the dormitory dining room Friday morning. She led Sara away from the other students and said kindly, "I just wanted to tell you that what you said last night about Cameron was right on target. It made more than just a few of us stop and think."

"I appreciate your saying so," Sara said in a low voice. "I felt as if I had no credibility."

"I know. But don't let any of this bother you too much. Ben and Barbara have never had any real problems with their children, and they have no idea how to handle something as simple as a sincere difference of opinion."

Sara thought Cyndi's observation should relieve her, but the vision of a pale-haired Primary boy exuberantly singing "Jesus wants me for a sun-BEAM!" haunted her. That such a sweet little boy, having been taught in Primary that he should obey his parents and keep himself pure, would grow up to be regarded as a docile prude by the one who had taken him to Primary to begin with seemed incomprehensible and unjust.

"It's a wonder Dr. Carroll ever survived in the business world," Sara said, unable to keep the skepticism out of her voice.

"It's different when it's your own kids."

Despite what Cyndi said, Sara went through the next two days disturbed and thoughtful as she tried to reconcile Dr. Carroll's condescending attitude toward his son with her image of him as a sensitive, loving, righteous man. As hard as she tried, she couldn't make the information she had gleaned on Thursday evening fit with the other facts she had long taken for granted. She decided that she and Cameron had misunderstood everything his father had said and done. That had to be it. There could be no other explanation. Once she reached that conclusion, the feelings of discomfort disappeared.

Sara and Ashley had a permanent invitation to eat with Ashley's parents and the rest of her family in the Carroll apartment. They took advantage of that invitation Sunday morning for breakfast while their roommates ate in the dormitory dining room.

"Good morning Dr. Carroll, Barbara," Sara said cheerfully as she walked with Ashley into the compact dining area. Dr. Carroll, Barbara, Adam, and Brandon were sitting at the ornately carved white table, already eating. Cameron hadn't emerged from his bedroom yet.

Barbara looked up from her computer and smiled. "Good morning, girls."

Dr. Carroll set his fork on his plate and focused his attention on Sara. "It's time, Sara, for you to dispense with this 'Dr. Carroll' nonsense and start calling me 'Ben.'"

Dr. Carroll's request surprised Sara. She said the first thing that came into her mind. "But I'm not even engaged to Cameron, much less married to him."

"Yet," Ashley added.

Sara leaned against the back of the couch and sighed. "Am I the only person in the colony who has doubts about whether Cameron and I will get married?"

Brandon nodded. "Yeah!" He lifted Adam's cup of milk and took several gulps. Adam scowled at him.

"You kids stop badgering Sara and Cameron about marriage," Dr. Carroll said. "They've only been seeing each other a week. Decisions like this take time. Let's not rush them into something they may later regret."

Understanding warmed Sara. Dr. Carroll was concerned that Cameron's relationship with her was moving too fast. That explained why he had expressed so many doubts about her involvement with Cameron. He was a normal father after all.

"I think the thing they regret is that they didn't become friends sooner," Ashley pointed out. "Look at how long it took them to do anything when they were left on their own."

Adam nodded adamantly, reaching for a muffin. "They *need* to be pushed."

Sara chuckled. "You all worry too much. Cameron and I hardly need to be thrown at each other now." Her eyes rested on Cameron's father in appreciation. "And you don't need to worry either, Dr. Carroll. I have no intention of rushing into marriage."

Dr. Carroll squinted at Sara in a chastising way. "It's 'Ben,' Sara."

"Ben," Sara said slowly. She felt awkward addressing the governor of the colony by his first name. It seemed inappropriate. She shook her head quickly. "I'm sorry, Dr. Carroll. I don't think I can do it. It's just too weird."

Ashley, Brandon, and Adam laughed. "Are you going to keep calling him 'Dr. Carroll' when he becomes your father-in-law?" Brandon asked.

Dr. Carroll gazed at Sara fondly. "Your relationship with Cameron, Sara, is irrelevant. You and I know each other well enough, I think, to be on a first-name basis."

Barbara leaned against the back in her chair and looked up. "Drop it, Ben. If she isn't comfortable with it, she isn't comfortable with it."

Ashley gestured toward her mother. "You call Mother 'Barbara.'"

"I guess I do. And so does Russ." And she didn't know Barbara as well as she knew Dr. . . . *Ben*. "Your mother insisted."

Dr. . . . *Ben* widened his eyes at Sara. "So do I. Practice it with me now. Ben. Ben, Ben, Ben, Ben, Ben." He said it in a singsong way.

Sara repeated it with him once, then smiled. "Ben. *Ben*." She nodded, finally feeling comfortable with it. "It feels right."

"Of course it feels right. Because it *is* right!"

"Thanks, Ben."

"Thank *you*, Sara."

A few moments later, Cameron came into the dining room and Sara went to meet him, sliding her arm around his waist and leading him to the table. Adam immediately burst out, "Cameron, why aren't you and Sara engaged yet?"

Cameron's arm tightened around Sara's shoulder. He said mischievously, "Because Sara hasn't proposed to me yet."

Sara regarded Cameron in question. Everyone laughed, but Sara knew Cameron wasn't joking. If she proposed to him, his answer would be 'yes.' She knew it, yet she wondered how he could be so sure so soon.

Cameron kissed her briefly on the lips before she could say something in front of his family she might later regret. She didn't speak, but she couldn't pull her eyes away from Cameron's either. He crinkled his eyes at her in a tentative way, as if to ask, "Would marrying me really be so terrible?"

Sara rose on her toes and cupped her hands around Cameron's ear. "I love you."

Cameron rested his lips on Sara's ear and said softly, "We'll talk after church."

* * *

After breakfast the Carrolls and Sara met the other colonists in the Star Lounge for church. The meeting passed uneventfully until Cameron stood up to present the name of Samantha Carroll to be the young single adult family home evening leader. It was the first calling

Cameron announced that morning, which seemed odd, considering the fact that the ward was barely staffed.

Sara looked around the huge room and saw many of the colony's leaders exchange disgusted glances. Most of the students frowned in bewilderment. Since Ben planned to direct the colony's family home education program, Sara, like the other young adults, wondered what she was supposed to do now.

Barbara groaned softly. Ashley stifled a giggle.

"What's the matter?" Sara whispered to Ashley.

"Father just lost the young adults, and both he and Mother know it."

"Doesn't Samantha believe in what your father's trying to do? Maybe she'll ask him for help."

"Samantha's not going to Eden for The Equality of Zion any more than I am. She only wants to paint pictures of exotic plants and animals and breathe air that isn't toxic. And she's the Queen of Party. She'll plan such awesome family home evening parties that no one will be able to resist them! If Father and Mother are smart, they'll ask *her* for help!"

Sara couldn't restrain herself from looking over at Ben to see his reaction. He happened to be looking in her direction, and when their eyes met, he looked briefly to the dome of stars and shrugged his shoulders slightly, as if to say, "What am I supposed to do?"

Sara couldn't resist. She leaned behind Barbara's chair as well as she was able and whispered to him, "Let's party!"

Barbara groaned again, but Ben's face lit up, the dimple in his cheek deepening as he grinned. Sara was afraid for a moment that he might laugh out loud. She pursed her lips to keep herself from laughing.

Sara sat up and forced herself to focus her attention on Cameron again. Seeing the grave expression on his face, her desire for levity disappeared. The family home evening issue was a major one, and Cameron wasn't comfortable addressing it.

"I realize that most of you are expecting my father and his associates to direct you in an 'innovative' family home evening program they have designed. I feel prompted to discourage you from becoming involved in this effort. The Lord's plan is that fathers and mothers direct the gospel education of their own families. My father, as intelligent and as well educated as he is, does not have spiritual stewardship over your families and therefore cannot know what is best for them. You do! Please be wise and take care of your own families with the Lord's help, and let my parents take care of theirs.

"As for those of you who are young adults . . ." Cameron finally smiled. "You'll love Samantha and her activities. She's the most creative, fun person I've ever known! We will, in the next couple of weeks, be calling a committee to work with her."

As Sara mused over Samantha's call, wondering whether Cameron would participate in a young adult family home evening group, the first notes of the sacrament song, sung a cappella, startled her into realizing that no other calls had been made that day.

Church ended with sacrament meeting. As Sara stood up with the Carrolls to leave, the colonists gathered around Ben.

"What do you think about Samantha's calling, Dr. Carroll?" asked Kevin Krantz, Ben's student.

"What are we supposed to do?" asked Erica Rice.

Samantha said nothing, but she appeared as interested in what Ben would say as everyone else did.

Ben glanced at Sara, the corner of his mouth lifting in a slight smile. "I intend to support our new bishop."

Ben's submissive attitude so shocked Sara that she could do nothing but stare as he left the lounge with Barbara. The colonists trickled by Sara as they headed to the door. When the last colonist exited, Cameron finally approached her. When she felt his fingertips on her back, she turned toward him slightly and said in a low voice, "I didn't know what to expect from your father, but I didn't expect him to support you in such an unequivocal way."

"Neither did I. I think something you said the other night must have gotten to him."

Sara spun around to face him completely. "Do you really think so?" She couldn't help but be skeptical.

Cameron shrugged. "I suppose someone else may have said something to him, but it isn't likely. You're the only one who was willing to speak up for me in the forum. I don't think you realize your own power, Sara."

"But the family home evening issue is a major one. If he really did let it go because of something I said to him, then that isn't just power, Cameron, that's real influence. He's my mentor, not the other way around!"

Cameron led her toward the door. "Obviously he doesn't just like you, he respects you. But you had to believe that already. Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"That's true, I suppose."

"Unless he's up to something."

"Cameron!"

"Well? Which would you rather believe? That you have influence over him or that he's up to something?"

Sara stopped right before they arrived at the door and threw her arms around Cameron. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. I finally get a few minutes alone with the bishop, and I'm going to enjoy them." She drew his face down to hers for a kiss.

Cameron responded enthusiastically. After a minute, he just held her tightly and whispered into her ear, "I was afraid you were angry with me."

"How could I be?"

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you in front of my family."

Sara pulled away enough so that she could look into his eyes. "Don't be sorry. Just tell me how you can be so sure you want to marry me."

Cameron shook his head at her, his gaze a little impatient. "You were supposed to take what I said to Adam as a joke."

"It wasn't a joke."

"You are too perceptive, Sara. You're forcing me to reveal myself too soon."

Sara smiled. "I don't know how I could ever propose marriage to a man who isn't willing to reveal his whole self to me."

Cameron nodded in resignation. "I knew I wanted to marry you the moment I first saw you in the foyer last Sunday evening. The rightness of it took hold of my heart with such power that I felt as if I were literally glowing with love."

Sara couldn't believe it. "You weren't happy to see me; you were horrified!"

"How can I explain how I felt? As soon as I saw you, it was as if the Spirit were putting thoughts into my brain. It told me you were everything I believed you to be, that my love for you was real, and that I would be happy with you. My reaction, of course, was to argue. *She doesn't like me, not at all. She can't be the person I thought she was if she wants to go to Eden.*

Then I became aware of a new, even more extraordinary thought. *She loves you as much as you love her. Wait and see.*”

Cameron’s experience enchanted Sara. She couldn’t resist asking, “What did you believe me to be?”

Cameron gazed past Sara as if remembering events from the past six years, absently stroking her arm. “Lively and outgoing. Friendly. Guileless. Active and energetic. Passionate and bold. Talented. Intelligent. Completely committed to the gospel.” His eyes met hers again, luminous with devotion. “Beautiful to me in every way.”

“But Cameron, how could you know I was committed to the gospel? We never saw each other in church meetings.” Sara had believed the same thing about him even before she had read his e-mails, but she couldn’t pinpoint why.

Cameron shrugged. “You were at everything and knew everyone in your stake, which meant you were active. Along with that, I never heard you say anything that remotely resembled a bad word, even when you were angry. I never in six years saw you wear anything immodest, which still amazes me. Even the clothing you wore to compete in covered you well compared to the things some of the other girls wore, although I’ll have to say, you looked pretty hot in those spandex tights.”

Sara grinned. “So did you!”

“And you never, ever, hung all over boys at the dances or games.”

Sara should have understood sooner. Of course he had noticed that she lived the standards. She had observed the same thing of him. “I’d hang all over you if you’d let me,” Sara said impishly.

“That’s different. I’m going to be your husband. You just don’t know it yet.” He pressed her close again, kissing her cheek, his voice lowering. “I’ve loved you for six years, Sara. I’ve never wanted anyone but you. Why shouldn’t I be sure?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I know,” he whispered, “and I don’t expect you to be. When you’re ready, propose. You know what my answer will be.”

Sara jerked away from him and looked into his eyes. “So you’re proposing.”

“Yes, I guess I am.”

“That has to be the most backward proposal ever!”

Cameron smiled. “I’m a backward guy. I’m just living up to my reputation.”

“You’re not backward!”

“My father thinks I am.”

“Do you really want me to propose to you?”

“Yes. If you can actually bring yourself to propose, we’ll both know you’re certain. Just be prepared at that point to set a date.” His smile faded. “When the time comes, my father may insist on marrying us. I’m not sure what we should do about that.”

“Your father?” Sara said in surprise.

“Tony has the authority to perform the ceremony, but my father is the governor. Even if it isn’t absolutely necessary that he give us his license for it to be legal, asking for it is the courteous thing to do. I know he feels strongly about counseling with all couples getting married, and it may be he wants to officiate at the weddings too. I don’t feel right about that at all. Members of the Church should be married with the religious ceremony if at all possible. If we agree to let him marry us, it may set a precedent and begin a harmful tradition.”

“But I want to be married in the temple.” Sara knew it sounded stupid as soon as she said it and remembered what her father had told her. He had been right, of course. Two years was too

long. She hadn't perceived it then because she had not understood the power of her own passion.

"So do I." Cameron caressed her cheek. "I didn't mean to burden you with my concerns. I'm sorry."

Sara shook her head quickly, as if shaking away her illusions. "I'm feeling bad about not being married in the temple, and you're worried about what kind of civil ceremony we'll have. It seems outrageous and wrong, and I'm such an idiot." The realization that she would not marry Cameron in the temple wrapped around her heart like a black veil.

The corner of Cameron's mouth twitched in a way that would have suggested he was amused had he not been so glum. "Please don't criticize my future wife."

Sara didn't believe he would be so eager to marry her if he knew she was destined to live for two hundred years and have thirty kids. "You shouldn't be so sure. There are important things about me you don't know. Things that bewilder me. Things I'm not sure I believe myself."

"What things?"

"The other night I only told you about the first conversation I had with my father. On the night before we left, he told me more and gave me a blessing." Several people from Fifth Colony came into the lounge in preparation for their own meeting. She couldn't tell him now. "It's too big, Cameron. There isn't time." She wasn't sure whether to feel disappointed or relieved.

Cameron kissed her one last time. "We'll find time later."

* * *

Sara and Cameron never did find time on Sunday to be alone to discuss the blessing Sara's father had given to her. Sara hadn't seen Cameron at all on Monday morning when Kevin Krantz told her that Ben wanted to see her immediately. Kevin led her to the suite where the colony's headquarters were located and motioned to the door of Ben's office. As she entered, her eyes drifted around the blue room with its thick, faux marble columns and wall painting meant to simulate a courtyard at twilight, thinking it odd that an office would be decorated with so much attention to artistic detail.

Ben arose from a gray leather chair and approached her, spreading his arms and looking around in satisfaction. "Welcome to my sanctuary, Sara," he said with a smile. "This is the one room on the ship where a person can enjoy a few minutes of silence and solitude."

"Somehow I doubt you get *too* many minutes of solitude in here."

"No I don't," Ben admitted, "but what I do get, I relish. And now I'm able to share some of that luxury with you."

Sara smiled. "You're very generous." Then, remembering that she hadn't had a chance yet to thank him for compromising on the family home evening issue, she stepped forward and threw her arms around him, squeezing tightly. "Thanks, Ben."

As Sara withdrew, Ben rested his hands on her waist and smiled down at her, his eyes seeming to overflow with joy. "To what do I owe this exuberant expression of appreciation?"

"For supporting Cameron in his decision to call Samantha to direct the young adult family home evening program." Having nowhere else to put her hands, she laid them lightly on Ben's arms. "I know how difficult it must have been for you to take stance you did."

His gaze softened. "It wasn't as difficult as you believe. I was more than happy to do what I could to convince a disgruntled colonist that she does, indeed, still have credibility in the colony."

Despite the discussion Sara had had with Cameron, Ben's revelation surprised her. "So you did listen to what I said."

"Of course I did. Have you ever known me *not* to listen to you?"

Sara smiled and shook her head.

Ben cupped his hands around her face. "You are one of the most intelligent people I know, Sara Alexander, and although we may not always agree on everything, I will *always* listen to what you have to say." He shook his head. "Never doubt it."

"I'm sorry I ever did." She gazed at him, her eyes huge with awe. How in the universe had she managed to engender so much admiration and affection in such a great man?

Ben lowered his arms, his mouth curving into a smile. "Stop looking at me in such amazement. I'm only a man, you know, not an object of worship."

Sara laughed. "And all this time, I thought you were Apollo incarnate!" She waved her hand and glanced around the room. "In a setting like this, who could blame me?"

Laughing with her, Ben took her arm and led her to one of the gray leather office chairs. "Sit down, Sara. We have much to discuss." He sat Sara down and placed his hands on her shoulders, giving them a squeeze.

Sara relaxed into the chair, curious but without anxiety. "Sounds serious."

Ben sat down and rolled his chair closer to hers. "What I have to say to you is serious, but it doesn't have to be bad." He leaned toward Sara a little, his voice lowering. "You know that our physical education directors decided not to join us after hearing Cameron's talk a week ago Sunday."

Sara nodded slowly.

"Frankly, this was a blow. They were the only two specialists I had hired in that discipline, and all three of their students walked out when they did. Now, either the colony gets by with no physical education program, or I have to hire someone to take their place."

Understanding jolted Sara. "You want me to direct the P.E. program."

"I was hoping you would consider it. Understand, Sara, that this would mean you would no longer be a student, but a mentor. As the senior member of your profession, you would sit on the Board of Advisors. When we arrive on Eden, you will get your own home. You won't have to live in the dormitory with the other girls your age."

To go from student to full-fledged status in the colony within a week of leaving Earth seemed almost too good to be true, and yet Sara couldn't immediately accept Ben's offer. "I would have to give up journalism, wouldn't I?"

"You won't have time to continue as Barbara's student, but you will have the freedom to continue writing. You can write whatever you want. If you would like, you can even bring your work to me when it's finished, and I'll help you get it ready for publication."

Sara listened in shock. "You would do that for me?"

"I'm every bit as much of a professional writer as Barbara is."

Sara smiled. "That's not the issue."

"Then you must be doubting my sincerity."

"No, your sanity!"

Ben grinned. "You're an ungrateful young woman!"

Ben's gentle rebuke disarmed Sara. "I'm sorry."

Ben shook his head, still smiling. "Stop being so serious, Little Panther. I'm teasing you."

Sara blushed. She averted her eyes, feeling like an idiot. "I'm *really* sorry."

Sara heard him sigh, then felt his hand over hers on the armrest. "No, Sara, *I'm* sorry for making you uncomfortable." He lightly tapped the back of her hand. "It's just that I expect you to think of yourself as my peer. During these moments, when I realize you don't, it bothers me. It's the difference in our ages, I suppose, and my position in the colony."

Sara looked up at him again. He did seem very troubled and sincere. "You *are* the governor," she said softly.

"And you can be one of the governor's advisors."

Ben's request made sense, but it seemed strange. "I ran track to pay for my education. I've never even considered a career in athletics."

Ben rested his hand on Sara's, squeezing. "You would excel at it."

Sara withdrew her hand from the armrest of her chair and folded her arms. "So I've been told. Many times."

"It might even be something you would like."

"Perhaps, but I don't know. I'm going to need some time to think about it. Do you have other candidates?"

"I won't talk to anyone else until you've given me your decision, but there is another possibility if you decide this career change isn't right for you."

Ben's last few words set something off in Sara. She couldn't restrain herself from blurting, "But Ben, how can it be right for me? How could you and Dr. Eagle have spent so much time helping me find the one career that is perfectly tailored to my life's mission and then, within a few months, ask me to completely change careers? I know the colony is desperate, but I'm baffled."

Ben gazed at Sara thoughtfully for many moments. Finally he smiled, barely. "I'll be frank with you, Sara. Most people have the aptitude to be successful in various careers. Many even get a chance to have more than one career in a lifetime. That's reality. You know that."

Sara nodded, still troubled.

"Then there are a few people who are so brilliant and capable that they can, literally, do anything they want to do. You're one of those people."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to say."

"I urged you toward journalism because it was what you said you wanted."

Sara was stunned. "Then you don't believe what you teach."

"Of course I do. I believe Ann and I have given all of the students in the Eden Colony career counseling that is far more comprehensive than anything they would have received elsewhere."

"Then you didn't urge me toward journalism because you thought it was what the Lord wanted me to do?"

"Yes, I did, but I didn't base that belief on knowledge the Lord revealed to me for you. I based it on the good feelings you obviously felt toward pursuing a career in journalism."

"So you saw your role as helping me understand and feel good about what I already knew to be true, that is, that I should pursue a career in journalism."

"Yes. The Lord would certainly reveal that information to you before He would reveal it to me, and I've always trusted your spiritual discernment."

"So, given your belief that the Lord steered me in the direction of journalism, you now ask me to completely change careers?"

"I believe you're one of those people who can do anything. How do I know that journalism, for you, isn't just a stepping stone to something else?"

“I guess neither one of us would know that, would we?”

Ben shook his head. “No, we wouldn’t. Who can tell about such things? This I do know, Sara. I need a physical education director and you’re the most qualified person in the colony to fill that role. I have to make the offer. And I know that you’ll make the right decision.”

Chapter 13: ONLY ONE ANSWER

That evening, when most of the colony was participating in family home evening, Sara and Cameron sat on the floor in the doorway of Sara's empty dorm room and talked. Every now and then one of the other students would walk by, but, for the most part, Sara and Cameron had the corridor to themselves.

Sara told Cameron about his father's job offer, and his advice was simple: "If you feel good about it, do it; if not, don't."

"But what about the needs of the colony?"

"I think the colony's need will take care of itself. My father said he had another candidate, didn't he?"

Sara nodded.

"Then what are you so worried about? One way or another, the position will get filled."

Sara pulled her knees to her chin. "I've been thinking about it all day, and my inclination is to refuse it."

"Then refuse it."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Of course it's easy for me. It isn't my decision!"

"You're a big help."

"Do you really want me to tell you what to do?"

"No. It's just that I didn't need this thrown at me now. There are too many other things I have to figure out. A lot of it has to do with that blessing my father gave to me."

Cameron scooted closer to Sara, interlocking his knees with hers and taking her hands in his. "I've been dying of suspense ever since we talked after church. What could there have been in the blessing your father gave you that was so terrible?"

Sara forced herself to smile. "It isn't terrible, just confusing." She repeated the blessing to him word for word. He listened carefully, his face intense with concentration.

When she was finished, Cameron asked, impressed, "Do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Repeat conversations and blessings verbatim?"

Sara shrugged. "I suppose."

"You have your father's incredible memory."

"Cameron, *no* one has my father's incredible memory!"

"You do. I'll bet that if you developed it the way he did, you'd be able to recite the scriptures word for word too."

"Actually, reciting scriptures is child's play for my father. Even Josh can do that. It's a game to them."

"You're awesome, Sara. You're a Novaunian librarian in embryo. Your brother is too."

It was a weird thought and probably true. "Aptitude to be a librarian isn't the only thing I inherited from my parents. Apparently it isn't unusual for Novaunian couples to have as many as thirty children, and they live to be two hundred years old!"

A mischievous smile slowly formed on Cameron's lips. "I always knew you were the queen . . . bee."

Sara couldn't believe he would joke about it. She jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "For that, you get stung!"

Cameron melodramatically fell to the side. "How are you going to make all of those royal babies if you incapacitate your consort?"

The audacity of Cameron's comment electrified Sara. She grabbed a handful of his T-shirt and yanked him off of the floor. "*Consort?*" She kissed him as vigorously as she dared, then declared, "I'll have you know that nothing less than a king will satisfy me!"

Cameron kissed her to take her breath away, drawing her into his lap as he sat back down. "Let me be your king, Sara," he whispered.

Sara stroked his face with trembling fingers. "You do understand that we would actually have to keep all of those royal babies we'd make."

"I know," Cameron said his eyes charged with anticipation. "Isn't it wonderful? You've given me a new vision of Eden, one I like very much."

"You actually like the idea of having thirty children?"

Cameron's arms tightened around Sara. "Just because Novaunian women often have as many as thirty children doesn't mean you will. The blessing said only that you shouldn't be afraid of having more children than you might think is natural. It didn't specify a number."

Sara kissed Cameron's cheek. "You know, you're right!" What a relief!

"If you think about it, even fifteen children would seem unnatural to us. Not only that, but a woman in her forties might feel some anxiety about having a child. She might be concerned it would have a birth defect or that she couldn't physically or emotionally cope with raising a child so late in life."

Sara nodded thoughtfully. "This is all true. With me, though, it's different, apparently."

"No kidding! At age fifty, you'll still be young and vibrant with three-quarters of your life yet to go. Sara, you'll have the strength and stamina of a woman in her twenties and, at the same time, years' worth of knowledge and experience! You won't hit middle age until you're a hundred years old! Wow! Under those circumstances, why not have more children?"

"So you think the Lord simply wanted to tell me that I should make decisions regarding my family based on Novaun's reality, not Earth's . . . or Eden's."

Cameron slid the hair elastic out of Sara's hair and gently unraveled the French braid Ashley had put there so carefully that morning. "Yes. But I do think He means for you to have a lot of children."

Was it possible to have a large family and still be a dedicated journalist? Or a physical education director? Under the "Equality of Employment" plan, mothers and fathers took their children to work and brought their work home in a community that blended career and family perfectly. Couples bore only as many children as they wanted and could sustain with their many community responsibilities, so obviously no family would be large and children would be spaced several years apart. How would she feel being the only full-time homemaker with an army of children in a community of professional women with their little companies of two and three children? "That plan doesn't match the Eden ideal very well."

Cameron combed through Sara's hair with his fingers, draping it over her shoulders. "The 'sustainable growth' idea has never made sense to me. We have a whole planet to populate! What would Earth have been like had Adam and Eve decided to have only three children? Or the United States if the colonists and pioneers had stopped at two?"

Sara could not ignore the logic of Cameron's observation. "My mother's ancestors were some of the early settlers of Virginia and Kentucky. It was nothing for those people to have fifteen or twenty children or more."

"And they didn't have synthesizing machines and robots to do most of their work for them! Nor did they live to be two hundred years old!"

"Maybe I have been looking at things the wrong way," Sara admitted. "I'm not sure what I'm afraid of. Come to think of it, my mom was able to do a lot of things she wanted to do, and

there were eight of us. She reads all the time, you know. She sings too and is a wonderful actress.”

“Really? Was she involved in community theater?”

“No, not with practices and performances on Sunday. But she did all kinds of things for our ward and stake, and she liked to help out with school productions when she could.”

“Did she ever work?”

“Cameron, my *father* doesn’t even work!”

“Then you ought to understand better than I do how to live the counsel of the prophets.”

Sara loved the feel of him playing with her hair. She hoped family home evening would last all night. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you would want me to be a stay-at-home mom.”

“What do you have against it, anyway?”

“Nothing. I just thought the Eden ideal would allow me to be a full-time mom and have a career. Look at your mother. She seems to have the best of both worlds.”

“All women who have children are full-time mothers, Sara. Not having a second career just makes it a lot easier to function as one.”

“You don’t think your mother functions well?”

“What I think is irrelevant. Everyone who knows my mother believes she functions well and that is enough for her.”

“What strange things you say sometimes!”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I never doubted my mother’s love for us, and I have no desire to criticize her. She’s doing the best she can with the choices she and my father have made. You’re going to have to trust me on this issue. You are not Barbara Carroll. You wouldn’t be happy living the kind of life she leads. Honestly, I’m not sure my mother herself is happy.”

“Don’t be absurd!”

“If it makes you feel any better, I hope I’m wrong.”

“Do you think she’ll be angry if we have a baby right away?”

“Does it matter?”

“She is my mentor. I feel that by coming here at all I made a commitment to her and to the lifestyle.”

“What do you want?”

Sara closed her eyes, reveling in the luxury of being in Cameron’s arms. “Right now, this moment, I feel . . . I want very much to have your baby.”

Cameron reverently placed his hand on Sara’s abdomen. “I wish you would.”

“My mother was an emotional wreck when she was pregnant, and she was tired all the time. Do you really think you’re ready for that?”

“Your mother is not a Novaunian. Your pregnancies may not be as difficult as hers were, and the blessing did say you would have excellent health. And even if you do have a difficult pregnancy, I’ll do everything I can to make things easier for you.”

“And what about my abnormally long life span? I’ll have my last baby just in time for you to die.”

“You’re not thinking expansively enough, Sara! Just think of it! The earth will pass into terrestrial glory during our lifetime. Everyone’s bodies will be changed. We’ll pray that my resurrection will be deferred to a time that corresponds with yours. It’s a reasonable request. The Lord will grant it, I’m sure of it.”

Sara kissed Cameron’s lips. “It’s such a beautiful dream, Cameron, but I can’t reconcile what I came here to do with the new desires that have developed in my heart in the last week.

How do I know I won't change my mind again in another month? I don't know if I want to be a Novaunian. I certainly don't feel like one."

"I think you're more a Novaunian than you realize. You're definitely your father's daughter, and not just because you have the aptitude to be a librarian."

* * *

Sara thought and prayed about Cameron's proposal and Ben's offer all week. Every now and then she considered discussing Ben's offer with Barbara but never could bring herself to do it. She simply couldn't believe her apprenticeship with Barbara was over, and so there never seemed to be anything of substance to discuss. Finally, on Friday, she met Ben in his office again and gave him her answer.

"While I'm flattered you would offer me this position, I'm going to have to decline it. I'm sorry." Sara's hands tightened on the armrests of her chair as she braced herself for his response.

Ben laid his hand over Sara's, appearing shocked and troubled. "Are you sure about this?"

Sara immediately perceived that he had expected her to accept the offer, and she almost second-guessed her decision and said no. The mere thought of it, though, unsettled her, which gave her the strength to say, "Yes, I'm sure. The P.E. path is not the right one for me."

"Do you have any idea why not?" He seemed displeased.

The question seemed a little too personal, and Sara didn't feel inclined to satisfy Ben's curiosity, even if she had been in possession of an answer. "To tell you the truth, I don't care about the 'why.'"

Ben leaned back in his chair and studied her for many moments. "You have no idea what you've done."

Sara folded her arms, feeling annoyed. "I thought you said you trusted me to make the right decision."

"You're certain that you're sure."

"Yes!"

"I can't hold this position open for you if you change your mind." He added in a low voice: "As much as I would like to."

"If you wanted so badly for me to take this job, why didn't you just order me to do it in the first place?"

Ben regarded her queerly for a moment, then relaxed. "I wouldn't dare!"

"Well?"

"I'll find someone else."

Sara stood up to leave. "Thank you!"

Ben smiled a little as he arose from his chair. "You pick the most exasperating times to put the governor in his place."

"Isn't that what you want?" she asked tentatively. "For me to think of myself as your peer?"

Ben embraced her, chuckling. "Absolutely."

* * *

On Sunday, not long after Sara and Ashley finished dressing for church, Russ asked to speak with Sara alone. To Sara's astonishment, Russ called her to be the Primary president.

“We’ve discussed this calling many times during the past week, and all four of us feel you are the one the Lord wants in this position.”

“But women our age are called to be Primary teachers and pianists, not Primary presidents.”

“And men our age are called to be ward missionaries and basketball coaches, not members of bishoprics.”

“You have a point.”

“Will you accept?”

“What in the galaxy is the Lord thinking?”

Russ smiled knowingly. “He’s thinking you will make an excellent Primary president.”

Sara accepted the calling because she could do nothing else. The colonists gathered in the Star Lounge for their second sacrament meeting as a new ward. This time the presidents of all of the auxiliaries were sustained. Some of the callings, such as Sara’s, surprised everyone. Others, such as Cyndi Carroll as Relief Society president, didn’t surprise anyone.

After sacrament meeting Sara gathered with the other newly called ward leaders in Ben’s office. Sara decided she would wait and be the last to be set apart. Since she and Cameron desired to marry, this blessing would be a particularly intimate experience she had no wish for anyone but Cameron’s family members to witness.

Once all of the other newly called ward leaders had left and only Cameron’s family and the bishopric remained, Cameron laid his hands on Sara’s head, thrilling her. Russ followed suit. “Sara Sekura Avenaunta . . .” Cameron hesitated, then added, as if it were an afterthought, “. . . Alexander.” Understanding blossomed in Sara’s mind. Those strange middle names were her real name, while “Alexander” was the surname her parents had taken when they had arrived on Earth, making it superfluous. Why had she not perceived that fact two weeks ago?

“ . . . I bless you with the ability to appreciate the great trust the Lord has in you by calling you into this position . . . I bless you to be filled with the Spirit, that you will know who in the ward the Lord wishes to serve with you as counselors . . . The Lord loves you and understands your confusion regarding the decision you are pondering. As you pray with your whole soul, He will help you discern the truth and will speak peace to your mind and heart . . .”

When the blessing was over, Cameron laid his hands on Sara’s shoulders, giving them an affectionate squeeze. Sara didn’t move immediately, wanting to enjoy the feelings of rapture created by this three-way communion between her, Cameron and the Lord.

Sara didn’t feel as if her many questions had been answered, but she did feel confident that she could meet the responsibilities of being Primary president, and she knew that the Lord would give her an answer about Cameron and help her become reconciled to her Novaunian heritage. Sara stood up slowly and turned toward Cameron. He smiled radiantly. She hadn’t thought it possible to love someone so much and almost proposed to him at that moment, but as she moved into Cameron’s arms, she caught a glimpse of Barbara smiling and holding hands with Ben, and she remembered why she had come to Eden in the first place. The doubts descended on her again, but she shoved them away, determined to lose herself, for a few moments anyway, in Cameron’s embrace.

* * *

On Monday evening, Cameron and Sara strolled to her dorm doorway while everyone else went to family home evening. When Sara was certain no one was in the corridor, she threw her arms around Cameron and kissed him vigorously. Many minutes later she whispered in his ear,

“You know, the ward’s going to start getting suspicious when they realize the bishop is never at family home evening.”

Cameron pulled away a little and smiled. “You are my family, Sara. Close enough, anyway.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at it.”

Cameron slid to the floor, pulling Sara down with him. “It’s the only way I want to look at it.”

Sara leaned her back against Cameron’s chest and nestled against him as he wrapped his arms around her. “I feel the need to remind you that we aren’t engaged . . . yet.”

Cameron caressed her neck with his lips. “So there’s still hope.”

Sara laughed gently. “Would I be here with you like this if there weren’t?”

“I don’t know . . . you did date the brigade.”

“David ordered those guys to ask me out, I swear!”

Cameron’s lips moved to Sara’s ear. “I have something important to tell you.”

Sara sat up a little and turned to look at him. His expression was very serious. “Well?”

“I spent some time with my father today, and he offered me a job.”

Sara frowned. “He offered you a . . .?”

Cameron laid his fingertips on Sara’s lips, nodding slowly. “He offered me the same job he offered to you. And I accepted it.” The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “It looks as if you may be marrying the colony’s P.E. teacher.”

“But Cameron, what about engineering?”

Cameron shrugged. “After everything that’s happened in the last few weeks, my desire to be a nanoengineer seems pretty trivial.”

Sara turned away. “You make me feel selfish and frivolous.”

Cameron stroked her hair. “You shouldn’t. It obviously wasn’t the right path for you, but it is for me.”

“How can it be?”

“Things will be better this way. It’s been awkward being the bishop and a student. This will give me a profession—a very flexible one. I want to do this, Sara.”

Sara now understood why she had felt so uneasy about taking the P.E. job. It had always been meant for Cameron. With that realization, though, came doubt. Why hadn’t Ben offered the job to Cameron first? As the bishop, Cameron really did need professional status in the colony. That his father had ignored that fact seemed a significant slight.

Cameron covered Sara’s mouth with his hand. “Don’t say it, Sara. It doesn’t matter.”

Sara raised her eyebrows at him.

He smiled complacently. “Yes, I know what you’re thinking because I can read your face.”

Sara pried his hand off of her mouth. “No you can’t!”

“Okay. I can read your mind.”

“It doesn’t bother you that he offered the job to me first?”

“Why should it? You’re better qualified.”

“Only marginally, and only because you went on a mission! Had you not gone to China, you could have had your pick of universities!”

“None of that matters now.”

“It seems wrong that only qualifications, and negligible ones at that, would be considered in a decision like this instead of fundamental talent and need.”

“My father may have had no choice but to offer it to you first. Other colony leaders may have insisted.”

“I suppose that’s possible.”

Sara kept telling herself that what Cameron had suggested was true, that Ben had offered the job to her first only because the Board of Advisors had insisted because of her qualifications. By the end of the evening, Sara had almost convinced herself that there could be no other explanation. She didn’t even mind believing that Ben had approached her first because he didn’t want her to become even more disgruntled than she had been. She could also accept the possibility that Ben wanted Cameron to continue his education in engineering. Engineering would, after all, give Cameron a better income than P.E. once they returned to Earth.

Deep down, however, Sara didn’t believe any of these theories. Her conversations with Ben on the subject were still too vivid in her mind. Ben had offered the position to her first because he wanted her to have it. Had he been able, he would have held it open for her, which led her to believe that someone on the Board of Advisors had been pushing for Cameron all along. Probably his mother, his aunt and uncle, and maybe others. Despite her best efforts, Sara couldn’t rid herself of the unsettling realization that Ben had more respect for her than for his son. With that understanding came an unanswerable question: Why?

Was it because Sara believed in The Equality of Zion and Cameron did not? Could it be that she had been ignoring the truth all this time? That Ben really did believe Cameron was a fanatic and therefore had no respect for him? Could it be that Ben had wanted to keep Cameron in the position of student to minimize his power in the colony? Was Ben really capable of discriminating against his son in such a despicable way? Then again, was the fact that Ben had offered her the position first really so despicable? She *was* better qualified. Perhaps Ben had been afraid he would be accused of favoritism if he offered it to Cameron first.

But that wasn’t it and Sara knew it. Ben had wanted her in the position. Cameron was his second choice. Could there be some other explanation for Ben’s behavior? For the first time in three weeks, the image of Bishop Lanham’s grave face nudged itself into Sara’s mind with his unthinkable suggestion: “*My gut feeling is that he’s attracted to you and can’t resist pursuing it.*” Could Ben be interested in her romantically? It simply wasn’t possible . . . or was it? Ben had a wonderful wife and their marriage seemed normal enough. Ben had always been friendly to be sure, but he was friendly to everyone . . . wasn’t he? He had never made any kind of advance, and they had been alone on several occasions.

Sara went over and over everything that had happened between her and Ben in her mind. Ben’s behavior had been a little strange at times, but never unseemly. Nothing pointed to romantic feelings, and yet the suspicion was one she couldn’t discard. Then it occurred to her that she had never heard Kevin Krantz, Ben’s own student, refer to him as anything but “Dr. Carroll.” She told herself that it meant nothing, that Ben was treating her in such a familiar way because she was his son’s girlfriend, but then she had to acknowledge the fact that Ben was the only person in the colony who had ever expressed disapproval of her relationship with Cameron. Considering his feelings on the subject, it seemed he would prefer to keep a distance between himself and Sara.

Unless he was interested in her himself. No. That was absurd! It couldn’t be. Ben Carroll was a righteous man, a *great* man—not a philanderer. And he had to know that Sara would never consent to such a relationship, even to be with a world-renowned psychologist and the governor of a new colony. Other women might lower their standards for such an important, wealthy man, but not Sara. So it couldn’t be that. Were Ben a philanderer, he would have chosen someone else.

Unless he was trying to seduce her. But a man who would seduce chaste young women would be worse than an ordinary adulterer; he would be a pervert. And that simply wasn’t

possible in Ben Carroll's case. Sara knew it, and yet every time he spoke to her now, she felt a tug of curiosity and a twinge of dread.

Chapter 14: EDEN

Thursday morning, a week and a half after Cameron had accepted the P.E. job and three and a half weeks after leaving Earth, Sara watched eagerly from the porthole as the shuttle approached Eden. Cameron's arm was draped over her seat, with fingers in her hair, and his cheek caressing hers as he watched too. Mammoth glaciers curled around the poles, and immense oceans surrounded two wide, narrow continents that almost touched along the equator. The northern continent looked a little like a giant brown crab.

"The island there between the continents is where Control Colony will be," Ben said from his seat behind Sara. "And we'll be at the northernmost end of that mountain range on the northern continent, near the ocean."

"It all looks so very ordinary," Cameron observed.

Sara refused to let Cameron spoil this awe-filled moment. "Stop being such a pessimist!"

"I'm not being a pessimist. I just think it looks like Earth. Basic, beautiful Earth."

"Eden is Earth as it should look, pristine and unpolluted," Barbara said.

"We'll make it into a paradise," Ben assured.

Sara watched, spellbound, as the coastlines disappeared and the landforms came into focus. From what Sara could see from the porthole, they really were descending into paradise. The shuttle soared over a hilly, heavily wooded country laced with lakes and streams before floating to the ground and landing in a meadow. Sara and Cameron inched to the exit with the other colonists and stepped down into hip-deep grass. Children squealed with delight as they tried to run and ended up falling down.

Sara deeply inhaled the fragrance of fresh grass and wild cherry trees in bloom. No cloud darkened the brilliant blue sky. "It's beautiful! Like Maryland in May."

"A little cool for May," Ashley murmured, gripping her arms with her hands. "I should have worn long sleeves."

Cameron reached into the grass and lifted out a handful of buttercups. "I'm not sure there's anywhere on Earth quite as beautiful as Maryland in May," he said, presenting the flowers to Sara.

Sara took them eagerly. "Except perhaps Maryland in early April, when the fruit trees are in bloom, and the world is a pale green haze."

Ashley rubbed her arms in an attempt to warm up. "Or perhaps Maryland in October, when the world is crimson, yellow, and orange."

Cameron nodded decisively. "That settles it. We're going home."

The grass rustled as Sara and Cameron waded toward the cargo shuttle, where an airtruck was being lowered to the ground, a synthesizing machine the size of a garage strapped to its bed. The driver moved the airtruck out of the way, and the shuttles lifted into the air, taxied into position above the trees, then shot away.

Ben and his brother took their places in the passenger seats of the truck and directed the driver to move it into the forest as everyone followed on foot, picking through the brush and ground cover.

The truck stopped in a smaller clearing than the one they had just left and hissed as the driver lowered it to the ground. Trevor Carroll jumped out of the truck and pressed a button on the side of the synthesizing machine. A large door lifted open, revealing all of the ice blue crates containing the individual belongings of the colonists. Everyone worked to unload the crates and set them out of the way.

Once the synthesizing machine was empty, Trevor Carroll flipped a keyboard attached to the machine into a horizontal position and typed in several commands. Ben motioned the colonists to gather around him and said, "While we're waiting for the unit to assemble the other synthesizing machines, let me show you the areas we staked out six months ago."

They followed him as he wound through several clusters of trees and stopped in a clearing dotted with the most beautiful dogwood trees Sara had ever seen, still partially in bloom, their single pink and white flowers seeming to float on clouds of green. Daisies grew in clumps where the sun shown through the trees, along with buttercups and many other varieties of wildflowers Sara didn't recognize. There were lilacs, azaleas, tulips, and irises in bloom and roses, both wild and domestic, in bud. The spot looked like a large garden.

Everyone's gasps seemed as one. Sara glanced at Cameron, pleased to see that he was as impressed by the sight as everyone else was.

"This beautiful place," Ben enthusiastically began, "will be the center of our colony and is the site we have chosen for our future temple."

"It's perfect!" Sara turned her head toward Cameron again as the colonists applauded and cheered. Cameron's awestruck smile tightened into a determined line. He released Sara's hand and wound his way to his father. Sara watched him, paralyzed with anxiety. What in the galaxy did he intend to do?

"I'm sorry," Cameron said loudly, "to disturb your celebration." His voice softened as the colonists turned to him in curiosity. "But every one of you heard what President Grant said. There will never be a temple here."

Samantha waved her hand at Cameron in a dismissive way. "Stop being such a pessimist, Cameron! We all know you don't want to be here, but you don't have to spoil it for the rest of us!"

Anger stabbed Sara. Why did Cameron have to be such a pessimist? What was wrong with him?

Cameron turned toward Samantha. "I don't mean to be a pessimist, I really don't. And this is a beautiful site, perfect for a temple if there were ever to be one. But I would be doing you a grave disservice if I didn't do everything in my power to dissuade you from believing in this fantasy."

Ben chuckled, shaking his head at Cameron as if he were a misbehaving child. "You're only a bishop, son, not a prophet." Contemptuous chuckles sounded throughout the crowd.

Sara held her breath, waiting to see how Cameron would react, her anger toward him transforming into fierce loyalty. Ben really did think his son was a fanatic and maybe even a fool! That was why he had more respect for her than he did for Cameron and had offered the P.E. job to her first. Sara thought she should be relieved that her other theory had turned out to be unfounded, but discovering that Ben was capable of such discrimination made her more confused and uncomfortable than ever.

Cameron faced his father as if unaware he was an object of ridicule. "My only intention is to relay what the prophet himself has said."

As Cameron moved to rejoin Sara, his mother's voice rang out, cool with challenge: "You seem to be forgetting the blessing your father gave you, Cameron."

Cameron stopped suddenly. Sara watched him in dismay, remembering all of the promises given to him in that blessing and the prophecy concerning Eden and a temple. Perhaps Cameron really was the one in the wrong. Maybe Ben was right to call him down in front of the colony.

Cameron turned his head slowly toward his mother, his features twisting into an expression of grief. "I would rather not talk about that."

"You're the one who brought it up, Cameron," Ben said.

"Many of us were there," Trevor Carroll persisted with a nod. "In declaring there will be no temple on Eden, you are calling your father a liar. You owe us an explanation."

Sara couldn't believe this was happening. Soft yellow petals floated from her fingers as she plucked them from the flowers she held in her hands. No matter what Cameron did or said he couldn't win. How had he ended up in this nightmare? Why had he been called to be the bishop at all? Why had Ben begged the Church to organize the colonists into a ward if he had no intention of respecting the authority of the man called to be the bishop? Why was Cameron so adamant about maintaining his radical point of view?

Cameron answered the challenge carefully. "I don't believe my father is a liar. But . . . if what is promised in a blessing contradicts what those in authority have proclaimed, I can only assume the blessing is uninspired."

Sara dropped the flowerless stems, bewilderment fogging her mind. Ben, a great spiritual leader, did not give uninspired blessings, but Cameron didn't lie, and he had been given authority as a bishop to discern such matters. Shouts of outrage thundered around Sara.

"You would actually accuse your father of giving you an uninspired blessing?" said Dr. Todd Jarrett.

"I didn't *accuse* him of anything."

"What kind of son are you?" said Patricia Dixon.

"He's a parrot for the Church, that's what he is!" said Kevin Krantz.

"Bishop Carroll is not a parrot!" Tony insisted. "He's an inspired leader and he doesn't lie!"

Sara wanted to cheer. Seeing Tony defend Cameron now more than made up for his lack of support at the initial United Hearts Forum.

"Which makes Dr. Carroll an uninspired liar!" Jordan said. "Which makes you a complete idiot for being here at all!"

"Tony is no idiot and you know it, Jordan Tressler!" Sara shouted.

Cameron listened to the proceedings, appalled. Ben wore a self-satisfied little smile. When he turned to confront Cameron, the shouts faded away. "You mean to tell us, Cameron, that every word that comes out of the mouth of one in 'authority' is inspired?"

Sara shivered. What had happened to the sun?

"It doesn't matter," Cameron responded. "Our priesthood leaders act for the Lord in their particular stewardships and we are duty-bound to follow them."

"So we follow them blindly, is that it?"

"No, we follow them alertly, with eyes wide open."

"Even when the counsel makes no sense in our own individual situations?"

"It didn't make much sense for Noah to build the ark, but he did it anyway and saved himself and his family when everyone else died."

Sara was impressed by the way Cameron so deftly untangled himself from his father's word traps and with such dignity too. The wind threw her hair into her face and blew wilting pink and white dogwood blossoms around the grove. She forced her hair away from her eyes, frowning up at the sky, which was rippled with deep gray clouds. Certainly it wouldn't storm. Not today. Where would they go for shelter?

"There you have it," Ben said pleasantly, holding a flattened palm toward Cameron as if presenting him to the colonists. "My son has expressed his opinion. And very well, I might add.

I suggest we humor him for a while, give him time to recognize his determination to live every counsel that comes out of the mouth of a general authority for what it is—hero worship.”

Cyndi Carroll elbowed her way to the front of the crowd. “I can’t stand by and listen to you refer to your son in such a condescending way, Ben!” She shook her head indignantly, holding her long brown hair out of her face. “Not only is he a good man, he’s our bishop.”

Sara listened to all of the murmurs of agreement in surprise and satisfaction. The colonists had followed Ben to Eden, but they couldn’t help but like Cameron, and they did respect the office of bishop.

Ben scrutinized his son. “You are a good man, Cameron,” he admitted, his tone impassive rather than pleased. “And you are our bishop.”

Cameron’s mouth curved into that sad smile Sara had seen him wear so often during the past five days. “It seems, Father, that you made a mistake when you raised me. You took me to Primary, and I actually believed what I was taught there.”

The colonists looked from Cameron to each other, frowning in discomfort and confusion. After a moment Sister Vance stepped forward and waved a thin hand in the direction of a grove of ash trees. “Come. See the rest of our beautiful colony. We’ll build such a glorious city that even our reluctant bishop will never want to leave.”

As the colonists began moving into the ash grove, Tony approached Sara. He smiled tentatively. “Do you respect me again?”

Sara nodded and gave him a hug.

“I’m as confused about all of this as you must be,” he whispered. “Please be merciful.”

She knew she hadn’t been merciful at all. She hadn’t challenged him on his lack of courage after the forum, but she hadn’t conversed with him much since then either. “I’m sorry I ever doubted you.”

As he pulled away from her, he said mournfully, “Is it possible to be Cameron’s supporters, and pathetic ones at that, and not be traitors to Dr. Carroll?”

“I wish I knew.”

“When you figure it out, you tell me,” Tony said as he joined the flow of colonists out of the clearing.

Sara meant to follow Tony with the others, but once everyone was gone, she found that she had not moved an inch, despite the fact that the wind seemed determined to push her over. She and Cameron surveyed each other from their separate positions in the clearing. Then, as if by mutual agreement, they slowly walked toward each other. Cameron stopped when he was about a yard away from Sara. “You’re still here,” he said as if he didn’t believe it.

“It seems I have a dilemma.” Sara stretched her arm to touch Cameron’s hand but couldn’t quite reach it. “I came to Eden because I believe in the father, but I want the son to win.”

“And did I win today?”

“Yes,” Sara whispered, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around his waist.

Cameron shuddered and clutched her fiercely. Cameron didn’t seem to want to speak, and Sara couldn’t. She wished she hadn’t seen this dark side of Ben’s personality, this weakness that drove him to deride his son in public. She wanted to ignore it, to deny that Ben would ever do something so deplorable, but Cameron’s hurt and humiliation made that impossible.

Eventually Sara became aware that she was feeling moisture on her arms and back. Cameron pulled away slightly, tilting his head toward the sky and looking around, puzzled. “How can it be raining? Fifteen minutes ago, there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.”

It was bizarre. “And I thought Maryland storms were abrupt. What are we going to do?”

“Wait it out, I guess.” His arm tightened around her as they hurried into the ash grove after the other colonists, cold wind roaring through the trees and the rain shooting down so hard it stung their skin.

They found the others fluttering around in chaos near the edge of the original clearing, near the giant synthesizing machine. The mothers with infants squeezed into the cab of the truck, and parents of small, shivering children crouched against the synthesizing machine. Rain gushed out of the sky, pooling around the trees.

“We’d better get these kids running,” Sara said in concern, “or they’ll start dropping from hypothermia.”

Cameron grabbed Sara’s hand and ran toward the crowd, yelling, “Hey, boys! Sister Alexander was a BYU track champion! Why don’t you see if you can catch her!”

Sara thumbed her nose at the two twelve-year-olds eyeing her most skeptically and taunted, “Girls are faster than boys!” She ran across the clearing as fast as the long grass would let her, and every boy between the ages of eight and eighteen sprang away after her.

“Come on, girls!” Sara heard Cameron urge. “If Sister Alexander can run circles around those boys, so can you!” By the time Sara passed the synthesizing machine, finishing her first lap around the clearing, fifteen or so girls had joined her.

Cameron led all of the adults who would run in an easy pace around the clearing in the direction opposite to Sara and her group. One of the young dads started the small children playing tag.

After a couple of laps, Sara slowed her pace just enough so that the fastest of the boys and girls could catch up with her.

“You getting tired, Sister Alexander?”

“Who me? Not a chance!”

“I’m going to pass you!”

“I’ll make a deal with you. You keep going as long as I do, and I’ll buy you pizza!”

One of the girls laughed. “Where’re you going to get pizza, Sister Alexander?”

“Maybe we’ll make mud pies instead!”

After Sara had circled the clearing several times, she criss-crossed it, then ran with the wind with her arms out as if she were flying, then led her group in a figure eight. Cameron tried to run his group opposite hers every time, with varying degrees of success. By the time the rain eased thirty minutes later, the two groups of runners had become tangled up with the group playing tag, and everyone was in hysterics.

Once the rain had stopped completely and the sun was again bright in the sky, the colonists, relieved that no one had fallen victim to hypothermia, opened their crates. They took turns wrapping themselves in the few blankets and towels there were and changed into dry clothing, chattering about this first adventure.

Soon cries of children chasing each other echoed in the trees again. Trevor Carroll opened the synthesizing machine, revealing many more synthesizing machines of various sizes stacked inside like a wall of bricks.

“That is so cool!” Sara said, combing her wet black hair and finally feeling warm in a BYU sweatshirt identical to the one Cameron was wearing. She still found it difficult to believe that billions of robots the size of molecules could be created in those machines and programmed to assemble matter from the atom up.

“It is,” Cameron agreed. “And what’s even more impressive is that we didn’t need the Zarrists to learn the technology. We already had it, in its embryo stage, of course.”

"It would have taken us decades, though, perhaps even a century or two to learn on our own what the Zarrists taught us in only a few years."

"Perhaps. But there are two things the Zarrists haven't been able to do yet, as far as I can tell."

"What is that?"

"Build a unit that doesn't require that bulky box. And synthesize chili dogs, of course."

* * *

Cameron worked with his uncle's team to activate the energy fields inside of the synthesizing tanks that would prevent the molecular robots from disassembling their way out of the machines. They then manufactured food, camping gear, and building materials and tools for the colony, as well as robots of various sizes to remove the brush from their camping sites and level the land for their buildings. All of the refuse generated by the camp went into the decomposers to produce priming solution for the synthesizing machines.

The colonists divided into groups and assembled the prefabricated homes on lots that had been staked out six months before. The colony's architects and engineers had worked with the Zarrists to modify the original designs of the homes into styles that would be pleasing to the colonists. The homes slotted together easily, built out of hardy "building boards," which could be synthesized in various sizes, colors, and textures.

None of the colonists believed the bishop should live with his parents or that his counselors should live with the other male students in the dormitory. Since four of the colony's families had chosen to remain on Earth after hearing President Grant speak, four of the original thirty-five lots became available for the members of the bishopric to choose from for their own homes. Since Cameron was the only one of the four with professional status, he received the first choice of lots. He chose the largest one, nearly three acres, which was located in an area that would be near the church building.

After the work was finished that evening, Cameron found Sara and the two of them moved camp chairs under a tree near the women's dormitory to talk.

"You have to tell me what style and color of house I should have made," Cameron said.

Cameron's request surprised Sara. She thought the house for that lot had been chosen months ago. "You don't know what you want?"

"It doesn't matter to me. What would you like?"

As much as she loved Cameron, Sara did not want to lead him into believing they were engaged. "What if I decide not to marry you?"

"And what if you do? Should I have Ashley pick your house out for you? Or my mother?"

Sara shook her head quickly. "Colonial. With white siding, black shutters, and a black roof. We can plant red azaleas in the front."

"Sounds striking. I like it." Cameron nodded. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

Brandon approached them. "Mother wants to know if you're staying with us tonight."

"I guess so," Cameron replied with a shrug. "If you have room."

Sara and Cameron's conversation never moved beyond planning Cameron's house that night because no one would leave them alone. Eventually they separated to sleep, severely disappointed.

The original synthesizing machine worked all night to assemble an aircar and worked all the next day producing building parts to finish the shells of the thirty-three homes, the hospital, and the warehouse that would shelter the colony synthesizing machines. The colonists named

their city Woodland Park, which would be arranged in an irregular hexagon around the dogwood grove. By the end of the day, they had completed the shells for all of the homes and hospital and had slotted together the foundation for the warehouse. They had also erected the communications center and had assembled phones for every member of the colony, along with hospital supplies, lights, and hygiene equipment.

Friday evening, when Sara and Cameron moved their chairs under the tree to talk, Cameron hammered a sign into the ground a few yards away from their chairs that read: "I'm on a date with the most beautiful woman in the universe. Disturb me if you dare!"

Chapter 15: COMPATRIOTS

Tohmazz Zarr stood near the window-wall of his palace suite, his heart expanding with pride as he surveyed his glorious new city. The buildings spread in front of him like terraces amid gardens, sprawling and spacious. He and his people had finally found hope in this expansive land with its unending sky, but paradise still eluded them.

If only his people could draw some of the fertility from this land that surrounded them and burgeon into the great race they were meant to be! Centuries of cramped living space and the subsequent restriction on births had left them virtually barren. His wife had borne him two strong sons, but other noble families had not been so blessed. Upon arriving on Earth, he had counted on the blood of the Earthons to rejuvenate his people and had urged all but those of the highest noble blood to take Earthon spouses.

The babies were coming more rapidly than they would have had his people married within the race, but they weren't coming rapidly enough, especially among the Nobility and Aristocracy. Many young people still could not bring themselves to marry the Earthon savages, and others simply could not overcome the inherent infertility of their race, even with a fertile Earthon partner.

Zarr had long known, deep down, that he needed a young couple of the highest nobility to put the survival of their nation above love and set an example for the others. He had known it and had dreaded it, because only one noble couple could make this sacrifice and bring about the needed results—Jahnzel and his beloved Myri.

Zarr transmitted a thought and turned toward his telepathic transmission recorder to view the image he had ordered. Seventeen-year-old Myri Vahro stood before him as if she were there in person, her infant-ready young body modestly clothed from neck to ankle in a shimmering white silk dress, embroidered with spirit crystal. Pale blond strands of hair coiled around jewels all over her head and ringlets draped her shoulders in a luxurious style reminiscent of the Ancient World.

Zarr sighed. No young Earthon woman could be as beautiful and faithful as Myri or more worthy of his son. No young woman of his own people could be more like a daughter to him, even Myri's sister, the young woman he had married to Arulezz two years before, the young woman who would someday be the Divine Empress. He suspected even Arulezz would have preferred to make Myri his wife instead of Jesalya, had Myri been of age and her heart turned to him. Myri was a queen of nobles, and had she been chosen to be the next Divine Empress, she could have fulfilled the call well. How could he marry her to an Earthon savage? How could he wrench her out of the cherishing embrace of his deserving son? Did rejuvenating the race truly require such a sacrifice?

Zarr sat down in his overstuffed office chair and lovingly ran his finger over the polished mahogany desk in front of him. He had worked hard to get his people so far, and perhaps they had come far enough. Perhaps. He would know they had if his fortified fleet proved strong enough to repel an attack from a rival nation. In the meantime, however, he had no choice but to prepare for the possibility that he would have to push his people to greater consecration by sacrificing his son and Myri.

Zarr had identified nearly a hundred young women suitable for his son. Jahnzel would be heartbroken to give up Myri, but in the end, he would do his duty and be content enough with the Earthon woman he chose. Myri, on the other hand, was more of a problem. She lived in Teton Colony and had not yet mingled with the Earthons. She possessed innocence borne of being sheltered, which was necessary if she was to become a Divine Princess—a Divine

Princess *must* be pure and holy. Since the Earthons didn't, as a rule, appreciate such innocence and holiness, he had not found five unmarried Earthon warriors he believed were capable of treating Myri with the tenderness she both required and deserved.

Zarr transmitted another thought and brought up the image of the one young Earthon warrior he believed *almost* worthy of Myri Vahro, brigade commander of the United States Naval Academy, David Eugene Pierce, standing upright and confident in his white dress uniform. Zarr leaned back in his chair and brought his hand to his chin, gazing at Pierce's image next to Myri's and pondering.

Yes . . . David Pierce would be the perfect consort for Myri and an excellent commander in the fleet. He would, moreover, in marrying Myri, become an example to his peers. Zarr believed that if he could recruit Pierce, he would strike a strong blow at the Nationalists and their irritating practice of encouraging their young people to join the archaic domestic military organizations and law enforcement agencies instead of Star Force.

Zarr didn't think that either the domestic armies or the Guardian-supported United Nations could harm his empire, but they were drawing many of the best potential officers away from Star Force, the patriotic, duty-inspired men and women who were the core of any successful government or military organization. Some of his Star Force recruits possessed true "planet pride" but more had joined Star Force because he had compelled them through the bond. Still others had joined for the monetary security and adventure. Zarr had to entice the idealistic ones somehow, and perhaps David Pierce was the key.

The problem with Pierce, however, had always been that his determination to marry a woman of his own faith was as strong as his nationalism. Zarr had been afraid Pierce might refuse to marry Myri even if she bonded him, and then new information had come.

Zarr transmitted a thought to save the image of Pierce and brought up an image of Pierce's new love interest—Ashley Carroll. He positioned Ashley next to Myri and compared them, hope rising within him. Myri was like a white lily reigning over the early spring snow, and Ashley was like a yellow one bursting through late spring strawberries. Except for that slight difference in complexion, they were so alike they could be sisters. If Myri cut her hair and learned to dress the way American Mormon women did, Pierce would respond to her powerfully; he wouldn't be able to help himself.

Zarr knew that if he wanted Myri to marry David Pierce, he needed to move soon. Once Pierce graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy the following May, he would be free to wed and probably would as soon as he found a young woman who appealed to him. If the young woman didn't happen to be Myri, then Myri would lose her best chance of marrying an Earthon she could love and respect, and the Holy Nation of the Son of God would lose a prime opportunity to strike a blow at the Nationalists and strengthen Star Force.

Despite the gains that would come through a union between Myri and David Pierce, doubt still nagged. He decided to summon Arulezz and get his opinion.

* * *

Trendaul and Teri returned home from the spaceport and waited for Sara to call them and say, "Mom, Dad, I made a mistake. Come and get me. Hurry!" Tuesday morning the news reported that the Eden transport had left Earth's space territory and still Sara hadn't called.

Trendaul entered the house that afternoon to the sound of Teri's heavenly voice from the kitchen harmonizing perfectly with rock pianist Billy Joel as he sang the nostalgic "New York

State of Mind.” The saxophone played a bluesy solo, moving Trendaul to reach into his own memories.

He had come home from work one day early in his marriage to find Teri vigorously mopping the kitchen floor to Queen’s bizarre “Bohemian Rhapsody.” Teri sang and acted out the song as she mopped, while two-year-old Sara held a sponge to the floor with her finger and skipped around it, bobbing her head back and forth. Trendaul had been shocked to realize that his new soul mate wasn’t a Novaunian in disguise—she was an Earthon!

As the Billy Joel song sauntered to a close, Trendaul wound his way through stuffed garbage bags labeled “Charity” on his way to the stereo. He pushed the button to skip forward several songs and turned up the volume for the upbeat “Movin’ Out.”

Trendaul jogged into the dining room. Teri met him at the threshold of the kitchen, smiling weakly. Trendaul declared, imitating the fed-up tone of Anthony from the song, “Let’s go, Mama, we’re movin’ out!”

Tears came to Teri’s eyes, and she quickly wiped them away. “I haven’t been able to listen to anyone but Billy all day.”

Trendaul brushed a golden brown curl away from Teri’s face and kissed her as her hands slid under his suit jacket and she moved comfortably into his arms. “I guess it’s time to sell the gold and close down the accounts.”

“The bishop called earlier. The ward is being dissolved this week.”

“So they’re finally kicking us out.” For over a year they had been meeting in Frederick with the only ward left of what had been a large stake, and that ward had dwindled to the size of a branch as members moved to temple communities or disappeared into Zarr’s network of organizations.

Desperation touched Teri’s eyes. “And that’s not all. Apparently the Church has already started sending home the missionaries.”

That was serious. Trendaul released Teri and moved to the window. He leaned on the lower sash and studied the sky. What was happening out there that he couldn’t see? “So Cameron was coming home whether he went to Eden or not.”

“Apparently so. The bishop has a house for us in Kensington—one of the added advantages of your being a temple worker, I guess. The Lanhams are going to Wheaton, so they won’t be too far away.”

Bishop Lanham had been urging them to move for some time but understood Trendaul’s true status and why they had waited. “When will the house be available?”

“In a couple of weeks.”

Trendaul had never been so grateful to have a concerned bishop. I’m sorry about Kansas City.”

“I know.”

“We may get there sooner than you think.” Trendaul believed life would be easier if he could just move Teri and the children to Kansas City and be done with it. Then again, to make such a choice would mean that he would probably not see his own family again before he died. How could he make such a decision?

“They’ll find us in Kensington, Tren. You’ll see.”

* * *

As David, Josh, and Aaron loaded the last of the boxes into the moving van, Trendaul stood on the front lawn, gazing at the house, remembering his arrival on Earth as he stroked

Too Cool, almost unaware of the interstate highway roaring in the trees a quarter of a mile away.

All of the houses he and Krista had looked at had repelled them, but Krista had liked this little white colonial with its light gray-blue shutters and picturesque view of wooded hills better than any of the others. Even so, Trendaul had tried to persuade her to choose a different house. Not only had he thought living so close to a major highway would be unsettling for both of them, he had known the house would feel insecure to Krista when the thunderstorms came. Sure enough, not a week after they had moved into the house, a thunderstorm had put her into hysterics.

How can these Earthons be so stupid? She hid her head in his lap as the wind howled and the house groaned and shivered. *They build their houses out of wood!*

Trendaul had felt his own muscles tense and heart pound frantically. *We could have purchased the flat one. It was covered with bricks.*

Red bricks! And a gray roof! It was so ugly!

The thunderstorm had passed, and the house had remained standing, becoming beautiful to Trendaul as he learned more about Earth and grew excited about the important work he and his wife were doing there. Krista, however, had sunk into depression, hating Earth more and more each day until finally, it had killed her.

Trendaul thought it ironic that the house Krista had chosen had always been more Teri's than hers. Trendaul remembered the first stormy summer night they had spent together after their wedding. Teri had turned the loveseat around so that they could cuddle together in it and watch the storm out the front window. "Look at the way the lightning dances over the hills," she had said breathlessly.

"Doesn't it frighten you?" he had asked as the house rattled under an explosion of thunder.

She had messed up his hair as if he were a silly child and had said in that cute Kansas twang, "These little Maryland storms are *nothin'* compared to the storms where I grew up."

The sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway nudged Trendaul out of his reverie. He turned and watched a miniature truck jerk to a stop. He surveyed the driver, a man with the black hair and milky fair skin characteristic of the Avenaunta family. A millisecond later, Trendaul realized that the man wasn't just any Avenaunta, he was his older brother Gavaun, a pilot for Novaunian Fleet.

Excitement seized Trendaul, laced with relief. "Gavaun!" he cried, setting Too Cool on the ground and moving to the truck in long strides, almost running.

Gavaun emerged from the truck grinning, his pale blue eyes wide with delight. "And I told Father you had probably forgotten us, you savage!"

Trendaul laughed as they embraced and kissed each other on the cheeks. "Don't be absurd!"

Gavaun motioned to his partner, a tall man not much older than David, with wavy honey blond hair and jade green eyes. "Sharad Quautar, Trendaul. His name will be Quinn while he is here."

"Sharad Quautar?" Trendaul said in disbelief, holding his hand out level with his waist. "Little Sharad Quautar?"

Sharad grinned. "Yes, that was I."

"It's good to see you again, Sharad," Trendaul said, extending his hand.

Sharad shook Trendaul's hand as if he had been greeting people that way his entire life. "It is nice to see you again too, Mr. Alexander." He couldn't seem to resist adding, "You are the only Alexander I have ever looked down to."

Trendaul slapped Sharad on the shoulder, chuckling. “You’d better polish your English, brother. You just insulted me.”

Sharad’s smile faded. “What should I have said?”

““You are the only Alexander I’ve met who isn’t as tall as I am.””

Sharad nodded and pondered.

“And just where are all of these tall Alexanders none of the rest of us have met?” David demanded good-naturedly as he approached, followed by Josh and Aaron.

“One of them is right here,” Trendaul replied, resting his hand affectionately on Gavaun’s shoulder. “My brother, Gavaun Alexander.”

David extended his hand to Gavaun. “David Pierce. Tren’s brother-in-law.”

Gavaun gazed at David with interest as he shook his hand. “Where is your sister? Trendaul’s wife?”

“She left for Kensington with the kids a half hour ago.”

* * *

Once Trendaul was alone with Gavaun in his car, Gavaun said with feeling, “I’m sorry about Krista.”

“So am I,” Trendaul replied in the Novaunian language. They didn’t dare try to communicate telepathically.

“She was so young! What a tragedy.”

“It was horrible.” Trendaul still couldn’t think about what had happened without feeling a stab of nausea. “Infant botulism in a woman age twenty-three.” Even now, he didn’t allow any of his children to eat honey, and he wouldn’t eat anything that he or Teri had not prepared. Teri’s family thought he was fanatical. Her mother had, in fact, suggested once that he get some “help.”

“The incident made the news,” Trendaul continued, “which terrified me for at least a year afterward. Then I met Teri.”

Teri had been visiting his ward that fast Sunday with a roommate from BYU whose family lived in Parkridge. Trendaul could still see the amazed earnestness in her brown eyes when she had said, absently playing with Sara’s hand on the back of the pew, “Your testimony was awesome. Lisa told me you’re a new convert, but you don’t sound like one at all.”

Having been misunderstood for so long, he hardly dared ask, “What do you mean?”

“What *do* you mean?” Lisa asked Teri in surprise.

“A new convert’s testimony is always about the contrast between the old life and the new,” Teri explained to her friend, “but his is different. It permeates him. Can’t you feel it?” Then she refocused that intrigued gaze on Trendaul again. “It’s as if it’s never occurred to you—not for one second of your life—to believe anything else. I would have figured you were born in the covenant, with generations in the Church behind you.”

Trendaul, so overcome with emotion he could barely stammer out a request for her name, had known that this young lady was the miracle for which he had been praying and had loved her from that moment.

“I’m eager to meet your new wife,” Gavaun said.

Trendaul smiled. “New? We’ve been married eighteen years! And I’ve had seven children with her!”

“I assume your children don’t know you’re a Novaunian.”

“No.” Trendaul couldn’t bring himself to tell Gavaun about Sara yet. “Your presence here puts me in a bit of an awkward situation. I’m going to have to tell the older ones, at least, and David.”

“Your revelation will pose less of a risk than you believe. Earth’s Diron benefactors are on the verge of being thrown into chaos, if not destroyed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Admirals Nexyun and Jaxzeran have joined fleets and are on their way to Earth. They should be here in two weeks.”

“Invasion . . .” Trendaul breathed. No wonder the Church had called all of the missionaries home.

Gavaun nodded. “Fleet intelligence doesn’t think that even the combined Diron fleets have the resources to significantly harm Earth itself or the native population, but they certainly have the means to destroy Zarr’s fleet.”

“They must hate Zarr very much to join forces like that.”

“It wouldn’t surprise anyone to see Admirals Nexyun and Jaxzeran turn and fire on each other as soon as they think they’ve eliminated Zarr. Once Zarr’s fleet is destroyed, we’ll have a straight shot out of here.”

“Is that why Novaun waited so long to send you?”

“For the most part. Zarr’s presence here complicated matters, obviously. The timing had to be perfect.”

“What sort of convoy did you come in?”

“Four frigates.”

Trendaul was impressed and relieved. “That’s a lot of fire power.”

“What choice did we have? There are three other agents on Earth besides you. We brought each frigate in separately to avoid detection.”

“Where is your frigate?”

“In the little mountains just west of here. Our fleet is waiting in Vaenan space.”

“The time has finally come,” Trendaul said wryly, “and Teri and I are no closer to knowing what to do than we were ten years ago.”

“Then you only have a couple of days to come to your senses, because we need to be on the frigate before Zarr’s enemies get here.”

“I need more than a couple of days.”

“You don’t have it, Trendaul. If we wait, we could be killed. This area will be hit hard.”

“I’m moving into a temple community, and the temple communities won’t be touched. God will protect them.”

Gavaun laughed. “It’s bad enough you’ve turned into an Earthon, but a pacifist?”

Trendaul couldn’t help but smile. He did sound like a Mautysian pacifist instead of the Shalaunian Fleet man he was. “Seriously, Gavaun. You have to trust me. The Lord will protect His temples and His people. Either go back to the frigate without me, or give me a week to work things out with my wife. We can wait out the invasion at my new house.”

“We may end up trapped in the destruction.”

“It’s a chance I’m willing to take.”

“I’m sure you don’t regret marrying your Earthon woman—such was your need at the time—but it was a gamble.”

Hearing his marriage to Teri referred to as his “need at the time” disturbed Trendaul. It was such an inadequate assessment of what had happened that he couldn’t keep the defensiveness out of his voice. “Teri is a good excuse.”

“That’s an interesting comment.”

“I have an interesting life.” Was it possible for his brother to understand his attachment to Earth in any way at all? “I like it here and feel needed. It’s thrilling to be a part of the preparation for the Second Coming.” The Church, in gathering to temple communities, had only just begun the effort to redeem Zion. How could Trendaul leave Earth now, when there was such significant work to do and so many glorious events to come? “I’m not sure I want to leave.”

“Oh, I understand you, Trendaul *Avenaunta*,” Gavaun said. “And so does Father. Why do you think I’m here? You can make all the excuses you want, but I’m not leaving without you.”

Chapter 16: THE FAMILY FROM MARS

Trendaul parked on the street in front of his new Kensington house, a white brick colonial with black shutters. Teri appeared at the front door as Trendaul scooped Too Cool into his arms and walked around the front of the car. Teri stared at his brother, who was leaning against the passenger door staring at her.

Trendaul chuckled. "Hey, Teri, you're not supposed to be ogling him. I'm the tall, good-looking one."

Both Gavaun and Teri laughed. Teri opened the glass storm door and hurried down the tiny front lawn. Since none of the children followed her, Trendaul assumed she had been successful in settling them down in the master bedroom in front of the new video. "This is wonderful, Tren," Teri said. "They finally came!" She slipped her arm around his waist as his hand found her shoulder.

"Teri," Trendaul said as Gavaun approached them, still gazing at Teri in fascination, "this is my brother, Gavaun . . . Avenaunta. Gavaun, your sister-in-law, Teri . . . Avenaunta."

"I like that, Tren," Teri said merrily as David backed the moving van into the driveway, "but you'd better not let David hear you say it."

"I am glad to finally meet you, Teri," Gavaun said, extending his arm for a hug. Teri responded affectionately. "You must know, all of us have been speculating wildly about you for ten years."

"Tren has been a source of entertainment for my family too," Teri said as she pulled away from Gavaun, "so I guess we're even."

Gavaun appeared surprised. "But he looks like the perfect Earthon, right down to the time calculator on his wrist, the denim on his arms and legs, and that intimidating creature on his shoulder with eyes that match his."

"This clever little creature is Too Cool, my cat."

"He doesn't eat like an Earthon," Teri said as Sharad, David, Aaron, and Josh approached them from their separate vehicles.

Trendaul stroked Too Cool. "They also think I'm a jellyfish."

"No one in my family's ever called you that!" Teri protested.

"Of course they haven't. It's our word, not theirs!"

"Still, Tren, they don't think that at all!"

"They do too!"

"They do what?" David asked.

"Think I'm a jellyfish."

"An *eccentric*, *lazy* jellyfish," David corrected, grinning. "You can't throw a baseball to save your life, and there is that thing, you know, about how such a brilliant man never seems to have a real *job*."

"Oh, but I do have a job, or did," Trendaul said mysteriously. Since he had to tell them anyway, he thought he might as well have a little fun with it. He was amazed at how secure he felt, living so close to the temple.

"He is an alien agent," Gavaun whispered mischievously.

Teri gasped. David looked at her sharply.

Josh laughed. "I always knew you were from Mars, Dad!"

"And your father is brilliant even by Martian standards," Sharad said. "And something of a legend."

"And who might you be?" Teri asked Sharad. "You don't look like a brother."

Sharad moved closer to Teri, extending his hand. "Sharad Quinn. I am a neighbor and close friend of the family." Once Sharad released Teri's hand, his fingers automatically moved to her golden brown curls. "Your hair," he said in awe. "It moves."

Teri gazed sidelong at Trendaul, smiling at him seductively. "What is it with you Martian men and curls?"

Sharad lifted Teri's hair slightly, revealing an earring with three miniature gold cylinders hanging from it. "And those little pipes! What are they?"

"A gift from her eccentric husband," David answered.

"They're supposed to be wind chimes," Aaron said.

Teri opened her tan jacket, revealing the infamous blue T-shirt with its hand-painted oriole drinking from a birdbath. "They go with the shirt."

Sharad looked at Trendaul in question. "Wind chimes?"

"They're metal cylinders that hang from the terrace. They tap each other in the breeze and make chiming sounds."

Gavaun shook his head. "You are demented, Trendaul." He smiled. "And you have no idea how much we have missed you." He addressed Teri: "When we return to Mars, Trendaul will be able to afford to fill your ears with diamonds and other expensive crystal."

Teri's smile disappeared. "This savage prefers pearls."

"That is interesting," Gavaun countered, "since you married a prime piece of crystal."

"Tren would be rather heavy hanging from my ears, I think."

Anxiety seized Trendaul's heart. The decision facing them was too difficult as it was. He didn't need conflict between Gavaun and Teri to confuse things even more. "Gavaun's an older brother," Trendaul explained to Teri. "He can't help but be a bully. Tell him to go unload your truck. That ought to shut him up."

Gavaun nodded once in deference to Teri and smiled charmingly before heading to the truck. Teri watched him warily.

"Do tell us about your Martian family, Tren," David insisted.

"What is there to tell? They're very dull. They don't appreciate the finer things in life. Like wind chime earrings."

* * *

Later that evening, after the three younger children had gone to bed, Trendaul told David, Josh, Aaron, Emily, and Rebecca about Novaun. All were enthralled and asked question after question about Novaun itself and Trendaul's family.

Eventually twelve-year-old Emily asked, "If we do go to Novaun, Dad, could we stop at Eden along the way and pick up Sara?"

Sharad sat forward in the rocking chair and looked from Trendaul to Gavaun, puzzled. "Eden?"

"No, Emily," Trendaul answered sadly. "It's complicated to move a fleet so far out of the way."

"Sara probably wouldn't want to come with us anyway," Josh observed, extending his legs on the box in front of his chair.

"Where is Sara, Trendaul?" Gavaun asked, alarmed. He was sitting next to Teri on the couch. "I just assumed she was out for the evening."

"Emily, Rebecca," Teri said, "it's time for you to go to bed." The girls groaned their protests, but Teri remained firm and they went.

“Eden is the Earthons’ name for an uninhabited planet in the Sustenun System, near the Erdean Portal. Apparently Zarr wants it as a base, because he sponsored a massive settlement there.” Trendaul went on to tell Gavaun and Sharad about how Dr. Benjamin Carroll, a member of the Church, had led one of the colonies there against the counsel of the prophet. “Sara earned herself a place among the colonists and left nearly four weeks ago.”

“You let her go?” Gavaun said, aghast. “No colony has ever survived that planet. We are forbidden to even go into the system!”

“I almost stopped her,” David proclaimed, opening a bag of potato chips.

“You would never have gotten away with it,” Trendaul shot back.

“Sara didn’t know that. I would have had a promise out of her long before we even got to Annapolis.”

Trendaul shook his head at Gavaun. “I can’t begin to tell you the nightmare we’ve lived through this past six months. She was determined and . . .” His muscles tightened, preparing for an attack. “Obviously strongly influenced by Zarr’s cell bond.”

Gavaun sprang off of the couch and yelled down at Trendaul. “Krista’s daughter was put under the influence of a *cell bond*?”

Sharad shook his head at Trendaul, his eyes wide and his face pale. “Neither the Avenauntas nor the Sekuras may ever forgive you, brother.”

Trendaul jumped up from the dining room chair he had brought into the living room and began pacing. “Don’t you think I know that?” he said shrilly. “Don’t you think I tried everything I could think of to keep her safe?” Still, he doubted. There must have been something else he could have done. He should have found a way to keep her home. “What can I say? My daughter is a disobedient, bull-headed idiot!”

David, Josh, and Aaron all nodded their agreement.

“This should never have happened, Trendaul,” Gavaun said. “You should have come home ten years ago.”

Teri jabbed Gavaun’s calf with her finger. “How dare you talk to Trendaul that way!” Gavaun flinched, turned abruptly, and stared down at Teri in shock. “You have no comprehension of what he’s been through! Krista’s death put him way behind in his work, work that was more than recovered by those extra seven years. How was he supposed to know ten years ago that the Zarrists would show up and start mind-zapping Earthons?”

No one said anything for at least a minute. Finally Gavaun sat down in his place on the couch next to Teri and gave her hand a gentle squeeze, his voice soft, “I am sorry, Teri. Not just for my behavior but for Sara.” He turned to Trendaul. “I am sincerely sorry.”

Trendaul sat back down. “I know.”

“Perhaps the situation is not as grave as we believe,” Sharad said to Trendaul. “Maybe you are mistaken about the identity of Eden. To make the assessment you did, you must have looked at some type of star map. Do you still have it?”

Trendaul nodded and went to the kitchen desk. He rummaged through the box of papers sitting there and found the maps he had printed off of Zarr’s web site long ago.

“What’s wrong with Eden, Uncle Gavaun?” Josh asked.

“No one knows. No one has ever survived to tell.”

“It was terraformed by the Gudyneans over a century ago,” Sharad explained. “All we know is that the terradirector of the project was Centynal Nortov. That is significant because we know he directed two other terraforming projects that almost ended in disaster. Apparently he lied to the planet-spirits and made unauthorized agreements.”

“How in the universe could a terradirector think he could get away with something so abominable?” Gavaun asked.

“I do not know, but he did. He was stripped of his status after Braumita, one of his failures.”

“Do you know something about Braumita?” David asked Sharad, captivated.

Trendaul came back into the room in time to see Sharad nod. “Braumita’s planet-spirit agreed to be terraformed only when promised there would be no industrialization. When the colony began industrializing, the planet-spirit sent quakes of anger through the settlements, destroying factories and killing colonists. Fortunately, the maintenance team was able to determine the cause of the planet-spirit’s anger and refocus the planet’s development. To this day Braumita is an agricultural planet.”

“That is so cool,” Aaron said, grabbing the bag of chips from David and sliding to the beige carpet, out of reach.

“You struck arelada with this boy,” Trendaul said to Gavaun, pointing a thumb at Sharad.

Gavaun nodded, taking the star maps from Trendaul. “Librarian specializing in galactic history and government. He is an excellent intelligence officer.”

Sharad didn’t appear to have heard the compliments. He stared thoughtfully at nothing as he rocked, finally saying to no one in particular: “If I were one of those planet-spirits, I would detest liars.”

What an odd comment! Typically only terraformers attempted to understand the minds of planet-spirits; everyone else was too overwhelmed by the prospect—or too terrified. Trendaul glanced at Gavaun in question. Since when did the Fleet begin requiring its intelligence officers to know something about planetary psychology?

Gavaun said lightly, “I detest liars, and I am just a lowly pilot.”

“Maybe Eden thinks all humans are liars,” Aaron volunteered, reaching into the bag of chips.

Sharad stopped rocking and looked down at Aaron. “For your sister’s sake, let us hope not.”

David turned to Trendaul, his face skeptical. “Why don’t the terraformers just force the planet-spirit to do what they want it to do?”

“That would require telepathic binding,” Trendaul explained. “You have to understand, 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, so to speak, 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.”

“But according to the scriptures, mankind is supposed to have dominion over the earth,” David protested. “Are you saying that the scriptures are false? That the planet-spirit is really the one in charge?”

“Not at all,” Teri said. “What the scriptures say about this earth is true. Man has dominion over it because the planet-spirit allows him to have dominion. The same is true for all of the original planets, the ones the Lord Himself created and peopled. It is the sign of a planet worthy of celestial glory.”

David leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers on his mouth, pondering.

Trendaul said, “When the prophet Malrezz cursed Diron so that it would no longer yield its arelada, the Diron, in their anger, bound the planet-spirit in an attempt to force it to release the arelada, which destroyed the ecosystem. The various Diron nations, including Zarr’s, were

forced to flee. Only the followers of Malrezz remained. Their descendants still live on Diron in life-support domes.”

Sharad shook his head. “Surely the Zarrists know something of Sustenun 4. There is no question that it is in a prime location, but even they cannot be desperate enough to attempt a settlement.”

“They may know less of the Alliance than we know of them,” Trendaul pointed out.

“We really do not know much about the Zarrists,” Sharad admitted. “Zarr’s nation is exclusive and virtually impossible to penetrate.”

“They are desperate enough to mix their holy blood with ours,” Teri observed.

Gavaun’s eyebrows shot up. “They are actually marrying Earthons?”

Trendaul nodded. “Their goal has always been more assimilation than domination.”

Gavaun finally looked at the star maps Trendaul had given to him. “These are awful!” he exclaimed. “Could you not procure a hologram at least?”

“Sorry. They’re the best I can do.”

Gavaun studied the maps. “The Zarrists are desperate,” he finally said. “There is no doubt that Sara’s Eden is Sustenun 4.”

“Then we’re just going to have to trust Cameron,” Trendaul said. “And trust Sara to follow his counsel. That’s all there is to it.”

“Cameron?” Gavaun said.

David grunted. “Bishop Carroll, Sara’s high school crush.” He leaned forward and grabbed the bag of chips back from Aaron.

“Bishop Carroll, Sara’s soon-to-be husband,” Trendaul corrected.

David shook a chip at Trendaul. “You know that if I ever see Sara again, I’m going to hide her laptop. Her phone too. If she had dated Cameron like she was supposed to, I would have met Ashley in time to keep her here.”

Sharad looked from David to Trendaul, puzzled. “What is a high school crush?”

“A boy she was infatuated with during the time she was a teenager,” Teri explained. “They finally met the day before they left for Eden.”

“Yeah, and when Cameron finally got here, he and Sara disappeared to do some serious stargazing. We didn’t even get to meet him!” Josh said.

Trendaul nodded at his brother in satisfaction. “It was intense. And gratifying.” His daughter loved the one clear-headed man in the colony, and he loved her. During all of the months of grieving over Sara’s rebellion, he had never dreamed he and Teri would receive such an outstanding blessing, and he would treasure it! “Cameron will be a good husband for her.”

“It’s not fair we never got to meet Cameron!” Aaron protested.

Gavaun smiled. “You seem awfully certain about your prediction, Trendaul.”

“I am. Because in this one thing, she will obey her father!”

Chapter 17: THE FANATIC AND THE CHARISMATIC INTELLECTUAL

The colonists met for church Sunday morning on the hill they had named Ash Auditorium. They sat on camp chairs and tarps under clusters of tall, narrow ash trees that they had stripped of their bottom branches the day before.

Sara would have been content to sit back and immerse herself in the beauty of their outdoor auditorium had she not been so nervous. This was the first week she would conduct Primary, and although her counselors, music director, and Ashley as pianist had been sustained the Sunday before and would be there to help her, she still couldn't relax. Sara smoothed her cobalt blue skirt over her legs, then crossed her legs and smoothed again, picking nervously at the hem. She hadn't even taught Primary before, much less directed it. How in the universe was she going to make this work?

Cameron walked into the grove, wearing a beige suit, his eyes feasting on Sara as he approached her. He took her hands and pulled her to her feet, still staring at her. "Wow, you look hot!" he exclaimed, softly enough so that only Sara and Ashley could hear. "That color is awesome on you."

"Cameron!" Ashley gasped. "You're not supposed to say things like that right before you conduct sacrament meeting!"

"Why not? It's the truth!"

Sara kissed Cameron lightly on the lips. "You be good, or I'll go change."

"Don't you threaten me, or I'll call you up to speak!"

"You do that and I'll put the dress in the decomposer!"

"You do that, and I'll put your Orioles shirt in the decomposer!"

Sara grimaced. "I have a confession to make. I wear a Royals shirt to bed."

"Say it isn't so!" Cameron pounded his chest with his fist. "All these years I've watched you, and only now I find out that under your letter jacket and Orioles shirt lurks a secret passion for the Royals."

"It's hardly a passion!"

Cameron kissed Sara's cheek. "I'm not sure I should marry someone so unfaithful."

Sara laughed softly. "We wouldn't want to tarnish the bishop's reputation."

"You're engaged then?" Ashley said in delight.

"Not until Sara proposes to me," Cameron said contentedly as he walked away, taking his seat at the bottom of the hill with the rest of the bishopric. Two teachers laid a white cloth over the camp table holding the trays of bread and water that had been prepared for the sacrament, and deacons began filling the camp chairs that were arranged in a line facing the sacrament table.

Ben, Barbara, Brandon, and Adam walked into the grove carrying camp chairs and set them up next to Sara and Ashley's. The Carrolls greeted Sara with embraces, as if she were already their daughter-in-law.

"You look absolutely stunning today, Sara," Ben said, smiling.

"Doesn't she?" Barbara agreed as she released Sara.

"Thank you, Ben." Sara hugged him, feeling pleased. "And you too, Barbara."

Ben held Sara affectionately and kissed her cheek. She felt secure in his arms, as if she really were a part of the Carroll family, and she wanted to laugh at herself for all of the silly suspicions that had given her such anxiety during the past week.

As Barbara sat down, she said to her husband with pride, "Cameron looks so distinguished down there! He'll be an apostle someday. You wait."

“Heaven help us!” Ben responded with a smile.

Ashley leaned toward Sara. “There. You have it,” she whispered in a tone of mock authority. “Cameron’s destined to be an apostle. You had better marry him fast!”

Sara couldn’t imagine an apostle coming up to his wife in church and telling her how “hot” she looked. “I loved Cameron when he was a squirrely fourteen-year-old,” she whispered pleasantly. “What do I care whether he’s ever an apostle? Right now I’d prefer a regular returned missionary who could go running with me in the woods!”

“Marry him, stupid, and you can run with him in the woods all you want!”

The colonists finished gathering in the grove, and Cameron came to the makeshift pulpit to begin the meeting. The colonists sang, prayed, and sustained each other into ward positions. To Sara’s relief, most of the Primary teachers were sustained. Then Ben and Barbara were sustained as co-chairs of the activities committee.

Sara glanced around and noticed many expressions of discomfort and disapproval. Most of the colonists still didn’t understand why Ben hadn’t been called to be the bishop, but if he couldn’t be bishop, young men’s president or gospel doctrine teacher would do. But chairman of the activities committee? When Cameron asked for opposing votes, Brother Duane Vance actually raised his hand asked, “Are you sure about those calls, Bishop?”

“Absolutely.”

“But they make no sense.”

Sara couldn’t believe that even Brother Vance would challenge the call. This wasn’t an open forum, after all. This was church!

“Maybe the Lord thinks it’s time for my parents to have a little fun.” Cameron’s tone was one of such innocence that most of the colonists decided the suggestion was reasonable. Despite a few skeptical glances, everyone raised their hands when Cameron presented his parents’ names a second time.

Barbara gripped Sara’s arm. She said softly so that no one else could hear, “You have to work harder on him, Sara!”

Sara tilted her head toward Barbara, thinking her plea sounded absurd. “I’m afraid Cameron’s applying for the position of king, not consort.”

Barbara leaned closer. “I wouldn’t have thought you would be such a pushover, Sara. You had better not let him talk you into having a baby right away, or giving up your career.”

Did Barbara actually *want* Cameron to be a consort instead of a king? “You don’t think I should marry him then?”

“Marry him, by all means, but don’t hesitate to demand your rights. I would hate to see you waste your intelligence and lose your identity. You’re such a rational person, Sara. It’s for you to bring Cameron into the real world, not the other way around! Don’t allow yourself to be swallowed up in his fanaticism. Stand up for yourself!”

As the accompanist began playing “There is a Green Hill Far Away” on an electric piano, Sara turned away from Barbara, feeling shocked and hurt. Ashley held out her miniature hymnbook to share, but Sara could do nothing but stare at the page, the words a blur.

How could Cameron’s parents interpret his orthodox adherence to the gospel as fanaticism? Their opinion made her uncomfortable enough; hearing that opinion stated so bluntly demoralized her. If they believed he was fanatical for being orthodox and she was rational, what did that make her and what did that make them? Not orthodox. But she *was* an orthodox member of the Church. She was! And so were they. They had to be!

The fanaticism concern aside, Barbara had articulated many of Sara’s own anxieties perfectly. Even as questions whirled chaotically in her mind and butterflies fluttered in her

stomach, Sara couldn't help but recall the advice her father had given her the night before she had left Earth: "*Cameron loves the Lord with his whole heart and soul and will treat you as the precious daughter of God you are. Don't throw him away for some silly desire to be a great writer or reluctance to have a baby before you're thirty or whatever.*"

The whirling and fluttering diminished slightly as a realization of supreme irony supplanted every other thought. Her father had warned her not to throw a potential king and priest to God away on shallow ambitions, while Cameron's own mother had warned her not to throw herself and her substantial ambitions away on a consort. Sara's father wanted her to marry Cameron because he knew Cameron would treat her as a queen, while Cameron's mother seemed to want Cameron to marry a selfish woman who would manipulate him, ignore his values, and fight with him. Did Barbara really think Cameron was so insignificant and undeserving of happiness?

Sara imagined what she might say to a possible daughter-in-law. *I've raised my son to love the Lord. He's wonderful and worthy of your sacrifices. You had better love him as much as I do or you might as well find yourself another man!* If Barbara couldn't feel the same way about Cameron, who deserved the esteem more than any young man Sara had ever known, then Sara knew that, as much as she liked Barbara, she didn't want to be the kind of mother she was.

Even as that thought rooted itself in Sara's mind, she tried to pluck it out. Who was she to criticize Barbara? Barbara believed she was protecting Sara by giving her the advice she did. Would Sara perhaps do the same if she believed her son were behaving badly? Considering the circumstances, both Barbara and Ben were showing amazing tolerance toward Cameron; they obviously loved him.

Sara closed her eyes for the sacrament prayer and opened them again to see Cameron nod at the priests. He turned his head and rested his eyes on her, his smile gradually giving way to a frown. He could see she was troubled and was concerned.

She shook her head slightly as if to say, "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." Love for him overwhelmed her. She longed to believe in him completely, to be his eternal queen.

Then Sara remembered that she wouldn't be Cameron's eternal anything for at least two more years. The black veil that had descended on her when learning she and Cameron would have to be married civilly wrapped itself around her heart several more times and squeezed, leaving an ache that wouldn't go away. She took a piece of bread from the sacrament tray, her hand shaking.

How could it feel so right to marry Cameron and at the same time be unable to marry him in the temple? How could she marry Cameron at all without completely believing in him? How could she believe completely in Cameron and not reject his father's vision of Eden? If she rejected Ben's vision of Eden, then what purpose had it served for her to come to Eden at all? Should she have remained on Earth, where she could have married in the temple? If so, did that mean there was someone else for her and that she shouldn't marry Cameron at all? That she should wait and return to Earth permanently in two years? If that was true, then why did the prospect of marrying Cameron feel so right?

On and on the tornado in her mind howled, hopping from one point to another without dissipating, until her head hurt and the ache in her chest settled into her stomach, leaving her queasy.

The sacrament ended, and three speakers spoke on the importance of observing the Sabbath. When Cameron came to the pulpit at the end of the meeting, he said, "I know the next few months will be difficult as we work to establish the colony. A lot needs to be done, and it will be tempting to carry on with the work of the colony on the Sabbath. We must never give in

to that temptation! I feel a great urgency about this issue. So please, after the meeting, enjoy your time resting, studying, and socializing. You've earned it."

Cameron's counsel made sense to Sara. She needed a rest, even if no one else did. She knew, however, that both Ben and Trevor Carroll felt the warehouse needed to be finished as quickly as possible since everybody's lives depended on those synthesizing machines. Instruction on the importance of the Sabbath couldn't have come at a better time.

* * *

After Primary, feeling considerably more relaxed than she had before the meeting, Sara walked with Ashley to the "stage" area of Ash Auditorium to witness her parents be set apart.

Barbara took her place in the chair last. Cameron blessed Barbara and gave her a hug, then gravitated toward Sara. As he slid his arm around her, she heard the rhythmic pounding of a hammer, accompanied by shouts.

Cameron stiffened and released Sara, jerking around to face his father. "You have to stop them!"

"The ox is in the mire, son."

"No it isn't! There's no reason that building can't wait until tomorrow!"

"Cameron, you can't bully people into following your counsel," Trevor Carroll said with a smile.

"You don't understand! They're endangering the colony!"

"Relax, Cameron!" Ben said. "We'll finish it in a couple of hours. Then we'll stop and rest away the day feeling more secure with the knowledge that the machines won't be damaged if there's another storm." He and his brother hurried out of Ash Auditorium in the direction of Construction Clearing.

"Don't do it, Trev!" Cyndi called, striding after the men. "This is one time your brother is wrong and your nephew is right!"

Cameron grabbed Sara's hand, and they ran after Cyndi, arriving at Construction Clearing only moments after the Carroll brothers. "Stop it!" Cameron cried. "You're putting the colony in danger!" The two younger of the five Dixon boys turned toward Cameron, appearing guilty. The others were annoyed.

Mike Dixon shook his hammer at Cameron. "We have our agency, Bishop. Either help or get out of the way!"

Sara couldn't believe what she was witnessing. How could they disobey such a fundamental commandment and expect the Lord to prosper the colony? She faced Ben. "What did you lead us out here to do? Build Zion? Or a stupid commune?"

Ben's features flinched, as if he'd been stung. He waved the builders back to work. "Why are you feeling so hostile, Sara?"

Sara folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not a child, Ben. I'm a concerned citizen. If we don't live the commandments, this colony will be no different from all of the other utopian failures of the past." She was right to speak up, and she hadn't even yelled. Her father would have been pleased with how calmly she was handling this indignation.

Ben held out his palms. "Don't you believe the Lord is a reasonable being?" His tone was kind, but he didn't smile. "That He understands our predicament and where our hearts are on this Sabbath day?"

"You didn't answer her question, Father."

"It just sounds as if the two of you are more concerned about the letter of the law than the spirit of the law."

Did Ben really think she was too dense to see through such a trite rationalization? "My father often wonders why it is that whenever someone talks about the 'spirit of the law' it's always in reference to breaking a rule, not the other way around."

"The same father who disapproved of your coming to Eden in the first place."

Ben might as well have slapped Sara. She had never discussed her parents' disapproval publicly. That Ben would try to manipulate her by using information gleaned from their private discussions and accuse her of being a hypocrite in such an underhanded way outraged her. Perhaps he was correct in his implication that by ignoring the counsel of both her father and the Brethren by coming to Eden she couldn't justifiably criticize anyone for breaking the commandments. Perhaps she really was the most disgusting hypocrite that had ever lived. If so, however, she was determined to be one openly.

"You've all but called me a hypocrite, Ben. Go ahead and swear at me too. You might as well! You're breaking number four, why not number three also?"

"She's just as fanatical as the bishop!" Rick Dixon remarked.

"Maybe that's why they got together," said his brother.

"What a pair!"

"Aren't bishops' wives supposed to be dainty and docile?"

Ben smiled knowingly. "Not this little cougar!" He patted Sara's arm affectionately.

Sara shuddered. She wanted to back away but didn't dare. How could anyone be so gracious and so patronizing at the same time?

Cyndi shook her head in disapproval. "Sara's not the one who's the hypocrite, Ben."

"You always going to have your women speak for you, Bishop?" Mike Dixon demanded.

"What general, having Amazons, wouldn't send them into battle?" Cameron offered his arms to both Sara and his aunt. "Ladies, it's time to retreat. We don't want to be on this battlefield when lightning strikes."

Astonished, Sara took Cameron's arm and allowed him to lead her and Cyndi to the dining hall, the large building in Knowledge Knoll that would eventually be partitioned into classrooms for the college.

Cameron left Cyndi in front of the wooden stairs that led to the doors and led Sara a few paces away from the building, taking her into his arms as he pulled her behind a large tree, kissing her fervently.

"I've been dying for you to do that all morning," Sara murmured, kissing him again.

"Even though I come from such a disturbed family?"

"I don't think your family is disturbed. Just different from what I thought they were."

"Which disturbs you." The observation wasn't an attack, but an attempt to draw her out.

"Well, yes." How could it not? "I don't know what to think of your parents anymore. I came here thinking I knew where they stood on every issue of importance, but now I can't figure out what they believe or what they want because they constantly contradict themselves. Maybe I'm just confused!"

"Actually you're quite perceptive."

"Not perceptive enough to understand them."

"I think you understand them just fine. My own opinion is that they're trying to live two incompatible sets of values. Isn't that what you just told me?"

Sara nodded slowly, attempting to assimilate this new knowledge. "Yes. I guess I did."

"You realize that if we get married, you're stuck with them."

“You mean, they’d be stuck with me. I did berate your father in front of half the colony.”

“You expressed an educated opinion, and you were right to do so.”

“You’re sure you wouldn’t really rather have a dainty, docile wife?”

“I want, and need, a courageous, powerful wife.”

“Powerful?” Sara shook her head. “Right now I feel paralyzed. I can’t marry you unless I completely believe in you, and to do that, I would have to reject your father’s vision of Eden. If I do that, then I have to wonder why I’m here at all.”

“Because you believed in a vision that’s flawed and you’re just now starting to realize it.”

“If what you say is true, then the spirit of rebellion and apostasy really was what brought us here.” The evidence was there, but Sara still didn’t want to believe it; the implications were too horrible. “And it would mean your father isn’t the great spiritual leader I always thought he was.”

“No, Sara, he isn’t.”

“Cameron, do you have any idea how *awful* that would be? What that would mean?” If Cameron truly did speak for the Lord, his father was nothing more than a charismatic intellectual, a spiritually blind one at that. There was no way around it.

“Yes, I do,” Cameron said gently. “I’ve been living with this burden a long time. Why do you think I was so repelled by the prospect of coming here in the first place? Why I tried the day we met to get you to stay home?”

“But I felt so inspired to come! Sometimes I think the Lord inspired me to come to be with you, but I can’t believe He would inspire me to follow a charismatic intellectual just to get me here. The Lord doesn’t deceive people that way.”

“No He doesn’t. I don’t believe the Lord inspired you to come to Eden any more than He inspired my father to lead you here.”

“If that’s true, then how am I ever supposed to trust myself to receive inspiration?”

“Tell me this. Was the urge you felt to come to Eden the same kind of feeling you experienced when I blessed you? Or when you prayed for confirmation on names to submit for Primary callings?”

“No. One was fire and obsession. The other was peace and understanding.” Where was that fire and obsession now? Could what her father believed be true? That Tohmazz Zarr had put a bond on her mind? Why didn’t the bond seem to be working now? Was it too weak to stretch so far into space?

“If you can recognize the difference between those two feelings, you ought to be able to trust yourself from now on.”

“All right. I’m willing to accept, for the moment, that I made a mistake and shouldn’t be here at all. If that’s true, then how can it be so right for me to be here with you?”

“You do feel it’s right to be with me?” Cameron asked tenderly, caressing her cheek.

“I feel such a bond with you, something intimate and magnificent.” Had it really only been four weeks since they had first spoken to each other? So much had happened that it seemed as if three months had passed instead. “I want to marry you more than I’ve ever wanted to do anything, I think, but I can’t resolve this paradox.”

“I’m afraid this is one you’re going to have to work out on your own.”

“Because you don’t understand it yourself or because you don’t want to tell me?”

“Because some knowledge can’t be forced. When the Lord gives it to you, you’ll see there is no paradox at all.” Cameron kissed Sara one last time, then led her into the dining hall, where many of the colonists had already gathered for lunch.

Less than thirty minutes later, the wind picked up and pounded rain against the walls of the building. Thunder blasted and lightning flashed all around them. The builders burst into the hall, drenched.

“The big synthesizing machine’s been struck!”

* * *

Eventually the unexpected Sunday storm passed, and the colonists emerged from their prefabricated shells to find many trees felled and ripped out of the ground. The buildings proved excellent shelter against the high winds, lightning, and falling trees, but the storm had come on so suddenly that many of the colonists had been caught outside. Nine colonists had been severely wounded from trees that had fallen on them as they tried to get to their homes to escape the storm, more than fifty had been scratched and bruised from blowing debris, and twenty-one were found suffering from hypothermia.

Fortunately, none of the colonists had suffered electrocution from a lightning strike, but the large synthesizing machine, along with several of the smaller ones, had been jolted. Trevor Carroll refused to examine the machines until Monday or to allow any of the engineers to do so either, so no one knew how badly they had been damaged.

Cameron’s comment about not wanting to be “on the battlefield when lightning strikes” nagged at Sara all day. A part of her wanted to believe Cameron had simply been repeating a cliché used by zillions of people before him, but another part of her couldn’t help but think Cameron had known something awful would happen if the colonists broke the Sabbath.

Most of the other colonists were uncomfortable too, refusing to do any major clean-up work until the next day. Others, including a couple of the builders, blamed Cameron for the loss of the synthesizing machines, claiming that they could have finished the warehouse in time had Cameron waited to hold sacrament meeting in the afternoon. Of course none of them acknowledged the fact that the colony wouldn’t have had sacrament meeting at all had they waited.

The only thing Ben said was: “It looks as though the ox really was in the mire, son.”

Cameron replied with: “Only because you pushed it in.”

Sara spent most of the afternoon assisting Cyndi in treating the minor wounds, while Cameron visited with the wounded and their families and gave them words of encouragement. Most of those who were hurt wanted Ben to give them one of “his beautiful blessings,” not Cameron, but Cameron did assist in most of them.

After a late dinner that evening, Sara stepped out of the dining hall, hoping the fresh air would help her feel a little less exhausted and grimy. She hadn’t moved far from the building, when she heard one of the doors open and close again. She turned and saw that Ben had stepped out behind her. She wasn’t sure whether to be irritated, relieved, or just plain surprised.

“It’s a beautiful evening, isn’t it?” he said.

“It’s a little muggy, but it’s cooler out here than it is inside.” After their confrontation in Construction Clearing that morning, Sara didn’t know what to say to him, but she knew they needed to talk about what had happened.

He stopped in front of her and pointed his miniature flashlight toward a nearby cluster of trees. “Let’s walk a little. We need to talk.”

Sara felt uncomfortable about walking into the woods with him alone. “I would rather talk here.”

“What I have to say to you is private. It’s about what happened this morning.”

Sara decided to ignore the feeling of uneasiness. The sensation was, after all, just a thorn left over from the groundless suspicions she had foolishly allowed to prick her mind not so long ago. "You're right," she agreed, and she began walking with him. "We do need to talk privately." She wasn't sure she would ever forgive Bishop Lanham and her parents for suggesting that Ben was attracted to her.

The trees, glistening in the light of Eden's three small moons, sprinkled droplets on Sara as a breeze blew through the branches. "What a gorgeous place," she murmured, looking around the moonlit grove.

Ben turned off the flashlight and dropped it into his pocket. Sara gasped. Pearls of light danced all around them as breezes continued to whirl through the grove. "It's enchanting," Ben whispered. "Like something out of a fairy tale."

The raindrops began penetrating the cobalt blue shirt Sara was still wearing, and she shivered. Ben removed his golden brown suit jacket and draped it over Sara's shoulders, then faced her, holding lightly onto the lapels as he gazed down at her. "I'm sorry I announced to the colony this afternoon that your father disapproved of your coming to Eden."

Sara gazed at him gratefully, tears starting in her eyes. She had longed for an apology but hadn't believed he understood her feelings well enough to know how wrong he had been.

Ben moved his hands to her cheeks, his thumbs brushing the tears out of the corners of her eyes. "I'm so, so sorry, Sara. I didn't realize until I thought about it, wondering why you were so angry, that your parents' disapproval was something you hadn't made generally known."

Sara's tears began flowing more freely than ever, and with them went all feelings of guardedness. "They think I'm an apostate. They think we all are, everyone but Cameron. Do you have any idea how much that hurts?"

Sara felt Ben's arms encircle her. She laid her head against his neck and wept as he stroked her hair, comforted by his heartbeat. "I do, Sara," he whispered in grief. "Utterly and completely."

"And David. David, my best friend in the world, was the worst. I wanted to introduce them to you and the others, but I couldn't. It tore me up inside. Like it tore me up today when you used my personal heartache to humiliate me publicly. Can you understand at all?"

"More than you know." He kissed her head. "I'm deeply sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Sara withdrew from him slightly and looked into his eyes. "Of course I forgive you." Remorse overwhelmed her. He would not have attacked her in the first place had he not been provoked. Accusing Ben of developing "a stupid commune" and comparing it to "the utopian failures of the past" was the kind of thing that would hurt him. She had sat too often in Don Pablo's and heard him pour out his dreams for Eden not to know that. "Can you forgive me for calling the colony a 'stupid commune'?"

Ben nodded, gently lifting strands of her hair out from under the collar of his jacket and arranging them on her shoulders.

"I didn't mean it. I mean, I didn't mean to attack the Eden plan or the colony itself. I was sincerely concerned about what effect breaking the Sabbath would have on the colony."

"I understand." His hand found her cheek again, caressing away her tears. He smiled in a tender way, reminding her so much of Cameron that she was suddenly breathless.

"Sara . . ." he said softly, touching the corner of her mouth with his thumb, "Sweet . . . sweet Sara . . . I . . ."

Sticks cracked and shrubby branches rustled as though someone were approaching. Ben released Sara and they both turned in the direction of the noise.

“Cameron!” Sara exclaimed, moving toward him. He was carrying a lantern, and she could see in the dim light that his shirt was soiled and partially unbuttoned. The hair on his forehead and temples was dark with perspiration.

“Good evening, son,” Ben said with a sigh, walking next to Sara.

Time alone with Cameron that evening was a luxury Sara hadn’t dared hope for. “Are you done with everything? Really?”

“For now. Ashley told me you had stepped out for some air and that Father had followed you.”

“Sara and I needed to talk. Alone.”

To Sara’s surprise, Ben sounded annoyed. Now that she thought about it, she realized he had been on the verge of telling her something when Cameron had interrupted him. She wondered what it was. She stopped and turned toward Ben. “Was there something else we needed to discuss?”

Ben glanced at Cameron, hesitating. After a moment, he smiled slightly and shook his head. “No, Sara. Not now.”

“So you’re friends again?” Cameron said lightly, squeezing Sara’s hand. He sounded pleased and relieved.

“We were never not,” Ben said quietly. “At least not from my perspective.”

Sara suddenly felt ashamed for having been so angry with Ben. She stepped forward and threw her arms around his neck and squeezed, kissing his cheek. “Not from mine either,” she said softly into his ear.

Ben returned her hug tightly and kissed her cheek. He whispered with emotion, “Don’t ever stop being my Little Panther.”

Sara shook her head at him and smiled as she withdrew. She began removing his suit jacket to give it back to him, but he stopped her with a shake of his head and a hand on her arm. “I’d like you to keep it until tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Sara said as she slid Ben’s jacket back over her shoulders, its warmth and fatherly smell wrapping around her in a comforting way. She extended her arm to Cameron, drawing him close, and they returned to the dining hall, leaving his father in the grove alone.

Chapter 18: A SIMPLE SOLUTION

After Church let out at noon, Trendaul's family squeezed around their old cherry dining room table for pot roast on paper plates. Matthew and Zack gave up their chairs to Gavaun and Sharad and sat on a box. Trendaul asked Sharad about his family, learning that he had married Nelena Sekura, Krista's niece. Sharad, in turn, began asking Trendaul questions about himself, strange questions that puzzled Trendaul.

"What is your favorite color?"

"Teal."

Sharad gave him a peculiar look. "What is teal?"

Trendaul struggled to keep a straight face. "The color of my car." Both Gavaun and Sharad had commented on the Earthons' "garish transports."

Teri and David and the kids laughed. Gavaun shook his head in resignation. "Why am I not surprised?"

Sharad grinned and tried again. "What is your favorite kind of music?"

"Hymns."

"Please don't ask him to sing!" Emily begged.

"Do not worry! I still have more questions."

Emily appeared mollified, but Trendaul's puzzlement grew. As he wondered where these questions were leading, Sharad fired another one at him. "What is your favorite food?"

"Root beer!" the kids, Teri, and David cried out.

Before Sharad could ask what root beer was, Trendaul turned to Zack and said, "Go get the man a root beer."

Zack jumped up and ran to the refrigerator, dodging boxes. Sharad took the free moment to ask, "Which football team do you like best, brother? The Washington Redskins or the Baltimore Ravens?"

What a question! Trendaul shrugged. "I don't know. Which one has the better halftime show?"

Trendaul's kids laughed themselves into hysterics; Aaron pounded on the table and cried with laughter, Josh gave Trendaul a thumbs-up and cheered, Rebecca fell out of her chair convulsing, and Zack dropped the cans of root beer he was carrying before he could get them to the table. Even Teri couldn't stop laughing.

David shook his head at Teri. "He's pathetic! And you know it!"

"He takes me to see the Royals, so what do I care?"

Trendaul knew David didn't mean any disrespect by what he said. He and the other men in Teri's family liked him, but they had never understood him. He turned to Gavaun and said breezily, "I told you Teri's family thinks I'm a jellyfish."

"You have to understand," David explained to Gavaun and Sharad, "Only a girlie-man doesn't like football. Tren's attitude toward the game is abnormal. It's . . . well . . . it's *un-American*."

"He never was an athlete," Gavaun said with affection.

"I'll only admit to being an alien," Trendaul said to David with a mischievous smile as he went to help Zack pick up the cans of root beer he had dropped.

As Trendaul walked back to the table, Sharad asked, "So what is your favorite sport, brother?"

Trendaul opened a can of root beer and handed it to Sharad. "Track, of course."

Sharad raised his eyebrows. "Of course?"

Teri and David nodded at each other and at Sharad. "Of course!" they said together.

Trendaul motioned everyone into the living room. "Teri, do you know where the track videos are?"

"Actually, I do. I brought the family videos with us in the van." And she hurried out of the room and up the stairs.

Sharad sipped at his can of root beer. His eyes widened, and he looked at Trendaul in surprise. "This is good!"

"Of course it's good."

"Do you have any video of Cameron, Tren?" David asked.

"I don't know."

"We do," Teri called as she walked down the stairs carrying a box of discs. "Sara always wanted me to record all of the sprints."

"Now we know why," David said. "Come on, let's see him."

Trendaul met Teri at the bottom of the stairs and began rummaging through the box. "Not until after my brother watches Sara run in the NCAA championships."

* * *

Watching family videos stopped Sharad's questions, at least for the time being, and entertained everyone. The younger children, especially, were happy to see what Cameron looked like, although Gavaun and Sharad were clearly uncomfortable with the prospect of Sara's marrying an Earthon.

Later that afternoon, after David had gone back to Annapolis, Trendaul managed to get some time alone with Gavaun on the deck. "We have so much to discuss," Trendaul said, leaning on the rail, "that I hardly know where to start."

Gavaun leaned on the rail next to Trendaul. "You could start by telling me why you are so desperate for Sara to marry this Earthon boy."

Gavaun's words surprised Trendaul. Gavaun couldn't help but be interested in Sara, but Trendaul had not thought she would be high on his list of priority subjects. "Did all of the talk about Cameron disturb you so much?"

"No, your desperation disturbs me. I'm afraid it will make it all that much more difficult for you to leave Earth."

So that was it. Gavaun was afraid Sara's situation had tightened Trendaul's ties to Earth. "You're right. I don't want to leave Sara. And I do feel desperate. Sara has gotten herself into an extremely bad situation, and I'm afraid the only way out of it is for her to marry this Earthon boy, Cameron."

Trendaul told Gavaun about Benjamin Carroll and his passion for Sara. Gavaun listened in outrage. After a while, he began pacing. "It's a good thing you are her father and not I. I'm afraid I would have killed him."

"You have no idea how hard it was to watch her go away with that man, knowing what we knew, but you have to believe me. She gave us no choice."

Gavaun shook his head at Trendaul, his gaze full of reproach. "This shouldn't have happened."

Trendaul had expected this reaction and was prepared to counter it in a way that would silence Gavaun on the topic for good. "No, it shouldn't have happened, and it wouldn't have happened had Krista and I remained on Novaun. If you'll remember, I was against this mission

to begin with, so which one of you should I blame? Father? My dead wife? Or you, for telling me I was a jellyfish for wanting to stay behind?"

Gavaun threw his arms up. "You're right. I'm an idiot. So we are all to blame or no one is to blame. Which is it?"

Trendaul shrugged. "It doesn't matter, and I'm not angry, least of all with you, Krista, or Father. To tell you the truth, I'm not even angry at Benjamin Carroll."

"Then you're not human."

"Don't misunderstand me. The man disgusts me and I have no respect for him. I don't, however, feel any desire to hurt him. I just want Sara to be happy, and I know she will be happy if she marries Cameron. He really is a good boy—as good as boys come on any planet—and I will be pleased to call him my son."

Gavaun nodded that he understood, his mood mellowing. "Is there any chance we could permanently relocate Sara and Cameron to Novaun?"

"No. Cameron's mission is to lead the Eden Colony back to Earth, to the New Jerusalem specifically, at some future date. Of all the people in the colony, he must return to Earth and his wife has no choice but to come with him if she wants to remain his wife."

"So Sara either marries this boy and becomes an Earthon, or she becomes the paramour of the boy's father."

Trendaul nodded, feeling queasy. The truth was almost too terrible to face. "As much as I would like to believe Sara would resist Benjamin Carroll on her own, I know it wouldn't happen because it didn't happen. Our bishop almost persuaded her into giving up her Eden quest, and she would have—I'm sure of it—if Benjamin Carroll hadn't come to Parkridge to talk to her in person. She practically worships the man. If her love for Cameron isn't strong enough to get her to reject him, nothing will."

"What a mess."

"It is a mess. The children aren't aware of what was going on between Sara and Benjamin Carroll, and neither is David, and I would rather they didn't know."

"I understand."

"I knew you would."

"When we return to Novaun, we'll petition the government for permission to go into the Sustenun System. It may take a year or two, but you'll find out what happened to Sara far sooner than you will if you remain here. If her colony survives, there may be a great deal we can do to help her and the other colonists."

"If only the decision were that simple."

"It is simple, Trendaul *Avenaunta*," Gavaun said gently. "And it's right. What is it you're so afraid of?"

Trendaul almost smiled. "Are you calling me a jellyfish again?"

Gavaun gazed at Trendaul gravely, shaking his head. "No. I just want you to put your fears behind you and come home."

"I am home."

"Your mission here is over. You don't belong here."

"Using that logic, my wife doesn't belong on Novaun any more than I belong here."

"Novaunians have taken foreign spouses before. You are not as unusual as you think you are."

Frustration welled up inside of Trendaul. "No, I'm not unusual. I'm not unusual at all. Trust me on this one. I have no delusions about being 'unusual.' On Novaun I will be a usual Novaunian man who outlives his usual foreign wife by more than a century!"

Gavaun frowned. "But it will be the same for you and Teri if you remain here. Have you not thought of this? I don't mean to be crass, but for one moment you need to stare reality in the face. You are going to lose Teri while you are still in your prime. The only difference is that on Novaun, you will be surrounded by your family and in a position to take another wife, one of your own age and race. Here you will be a man of a hundred years, more or less, whose friends have all died, forced to either spend the remainder of your life alone or marry a mere child."

The image of middle-aged Benjamin Carroll embracing Sara charged uninvited into Trendaul's mind, revolting him to his core. He felt as if his stomach were turning inside out, and he turned to lean over the side of the deck, just in case his dinner decided to make an exit.

"You're wrong," Trendaul finally said, his voice hoarse. "I would not, and could not, marry a child. Nor would I have to. The Earthons are on the verge of passing into terrestrial glory. The honest and good people who are still living will be caught up to meet the Lord when He comes. Their bodies will be changed so that they won't get hurt or sick or die prematurely. They won't be resurrected and receive their glorified bodies until they're old, and then it will happen instantly. Under those circumstances, why shouldn't Teri live a longer mortal life than normal and be resurrected when my time comes?"

"It sounds, little brother, as if you're trying to pluck a piece of fruit from the Tree of Life."

Trendaul looked at Gavaun sharply, the verses from Genesis and their explanatory chapters in the Book of Mormon pouring into his mind:

"And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden . . . and 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."

So that Adam and Eve and their descendants would not become immortal in their fallen state and be forever unable to repent . . . forever cut off from God's presence . . . forever miserable.

Trendaul was shaken. Maybe he really was trying to find a loophole in the laws of nature. "Do you really think I'm desiring something that is forbidden? That I'm fighting God?"

Gavaun pondered Trendaul's question for many moments. "I think you're afraid of losing Teri, and that's certainly an understandable fear. I believe, in fact, you're so afraid of losing her that you've never been able to admit to yourself what you've known all along—that your duty and desire is to return to Novaun. And so you're consoling yourself with this fantasy you have and are, in the process, paralyzing yourself."

"It's no fantasy, Gavaun," Trendaul said, beginning to feel angry.

"It may not be a fantasy for Sara and her husband, it's true, but for you it is. For completing his mission in an honorable way the Lord may very well reward Cameron with a piece of fruit from the Tree of Life. I doubt, however, that the Lord would look as kindly on a man who chose to forgo his duty and leave his mission unfinished so that he could put himself into a position to steal a piece of that fruit."

Trendaul shook his head quickly, his anger rising. "I just don't think I can leave, Gavaun. I can't lose her. And I can't take her from her home and family and doom her to live the remainder of her brief life among people who will think she's a savage."

"You're not being fair, Trendaul. You're not going home to pacifist countrymen in Mautysia. You're going home to your Fleet comrades in Shalaun, where people are accustomed to seeing an occasional interracial marriage. No one in the family will think she's a savage."

They will accept her and love her because she's your wife, and she will be happy there with you. I have to believe, in fact, that she will be more happy there watching her children grow to maturity in an environment suited to their abilities."

"My children are happy here and glorious! Bright lights on this dark world!"

"That's pride speaking, Trendaul. Pride, pure and simple. It gratifies you that your children are so much more intelligent and talented than other Earthon children."

"It's no sin for a man to be pleased with his children!"

"It is a sin for a man to be proud. Admit it, Trendaul. You don't want to let your children be ordinary."

"Ordinary!" Trendaul exploded. "Ordinary! They wouldn't be ordinary! They would be half Earthon, both physically and culturally. They would start their lives on Novaun far behind their peers and would die prematurely. How can I do that to them when here, they excel and are a strength to the race?"

"The strength of our race has never been in our physical and mental superiority but in our spiritual power, as you well know, unless you've become more of an Earthon than I thought you had."

Trendaul turned away from Gavaun, speechless with rage.

Gavaun rested his hand on Trendaul's shoulder and said softly. "Your children *are* bright, Trendaul. So is your wife. Once you come to Novaun, we'll quickly catch them up."

Trendaul turned and looked Gavaun straight in the eyes. "We aren't going to Novaun."

Gavaun didn't back down. "Oh yes you are. I didn't want to do this, but you've given me no choice. Lieutenant Avenaunta, as your commanding officer I order you to return to Shalaun for debriefing and reassignment."

Trendaul couldn't believe it. "You would use your position in the Fleet to force me to do what Father wants me to do?"

"No. I would use my rank to put a straying soldier back on the path of his duty, and you would do the same. You've *done* the same. You essentially ordered Sara not to go to Eden and she disobeyed, and now she's landed herself in an asteroid belt without any idea yet how precarious her position is."

Heat rose in Trendaul's face, and his heart pounded crazily. He tried to keep his voice calm but was barely able to keep it below a shout. "Don't you pretend that you're acting only as a representative of the Fleet! You said only yesterday: 'Oh, I understand you, Trendaul Avenaunta. And so does Father. Why do you think I'm here?' So don't you pretend you're something other than a representative for our tyrannical family!"

"Listen to yourself, Trendaul! You're castigating the Fleet, your father, your heritage, and me, the only member of the family you've seen in twenty years! Not only that, but you're yelling at me in the Novaunian language for your entire neighborhood to hear. Can this be a good thing?"

Trendaul shook his head as he moved to the deck stairs. He lowered his voice and switched to English, furious at himself for letting down his guard. Who knew what Zarrist spies might be living nearby? "You're twisting my words and misunderstanding my motives. I see no reason to continue this conversation." He jogged down the stairs and left the backyard with a slam of the wooden gate.

"Trendaul, wait!" Gavaun called.

Trendaul heard the gate bump shut behind him and knew Gavaun was following him. He quickened his stride, determined not to communicate.

Gavaun caught up with Trendaul easily and stepped in front of him to stop him. Gavaun placed his hands on Trendaul's shoulders and looked at him intently. Trendaul could only glare.

Gavaun proceeded carefully, in a whisper, still in their native language: "I would rather you not disappear to think until I've told you the real reason I was the one chosen to bring you back to Novaun."

His eyes were so earnest that Trendaul couldn't resist him. "Well?"

"First of all, the order to return to Novaun really does come from the Fleet. There are three others on Earth besides you, with their families, and they too are being ordered back to Shalaun. The Fleet is concerned for your safety and has closed Earth for the time being, perhaps for good."

"Novaun is afraid Earth is on the brink of passing away," Trendaul observed in a monotone.

Gavaun nodded. "And the Zarrists are a very real danger. If they find out who you are, they'll kill you."

Trendaul slumped his shoulders. "I know."

"You've been on Earth twice as long as the others and are the only one with a native wife. Both Colonel Larauna and Father are concerned about you. You know as well as I do that both are seasoned Fleet officers. They've dealt with many men over the years who have married foreign women, and they understand the strong temptation you naturally feel to stay here. If you'll remember, the Fleet won't allow unmarried men to take these deep cover assignments, and married men are required to take their wives."

"How could I forget?" Grief nearly smothered Trendaul as he remembered his beloved Krista and how his life had gone haywire after her death.

"The point is, the Fleet understands your situation. Colonel Larauna believes your position to be so precarious, in fact, that he felt the only two men in the Fleet with any hope of bringing you home were Father and I. Father couldn't leave his command, so—"

"Here you are."

"Here I am." Gavaun lifted one hand off of Trendaul's shoulder and knocked on his forehead. "The one Fleet man who knows how you think. The one who has the ability to get your mind moving down paths that have been overgrown for a while. The one who cares enough about you to want very much for you to come home. The one who has enough nerve to stand up to you."

Trendaul shook Gavaun's hand off of his shoulder, almost smiling. "That nerve of yours is a lot of hot air."

Gavaun nodded knowingly. "Admit it, Trendaul. Had the Fleet sent Sharad with another boy, you would have given them each a can of that root beer you love so much and sent them on their way."

"I don't know that, and neither do you."

"Oh, but I do. And besides, Sharad is only a lieutenant. Had he given you the order to return to Novaun, you would have laughed at him. Admit it!"

Trendaul shrugged and grimaced a little. "You're right. I probably would have laughed at him."

"I'd rather be yelled at than laughed at any day."

Trendaul allowed himself a chuckle. He had never been able to remain angry with Gavaun for long. "Why does Sharad keep asking me silly questions?"

"You fascinate him. He's trying to determine whether you're still a Novaunian or whether you've turned into an Earthon."

Trendaul didn't know whether to be interested in Sharad's observations or irritated with his presumption in making them. "What a strange boy."

"He's a good boy, but he does enjoy getting into the heads of the insane. He's actually quite good at it. When the Fleet lost track of Zarr's fleet, Sharad claimed that Zarr, being the most clever of all the renegade Diron leaders, would naturally come to Earth to build an army out of this blood-thirsty race—that is what he would do if he were Zarr. He's baffled, in fact, that it's taken this long for Admirals Nexyun and Jaxzeran to find Zarr. He didn't think they were such idiots."

"And has Sharad made a pronouncement about me yet?"

"He easily sees what anyone with eyes can see."

"And what is that?"

Gavaun's eyes danced. "We both know the answer to that question, don't we?"

His brother appeared a little too complacent. "You always were cocky," Trendaul said.

Gavaun bowed. "A cocky tyrant!"

Remorse chafed at Trendaul. "I really don't think our family is tyrannical. A little stern, maybe. Staid definitely."

"You only think that because you're a lunatic!"

"Even Krista thought the Avenauntas were stiff."

"Of course she did. She was a flighty Sekura!"

"The Sekuras do produce a lot of pilots."

"While the 'stern' Avenauntas raise navigators. Someone has to keep the Fleet on course."

"At least we aren't Quautars, raising our children to get into the minds of madmen and doublecrossed planet-spirits."

"Actually, the Quautars aren't sure what to do with Sharad. He's more insane than you are and puzzles everyone." Gavaun slapped Trendaul on the back. "The two of you ought to get along well."

Trendaul began walking again, and Gavaun stepped out of the way. Neither one of them felt a need to say anything else. They could entertain themselves with banter all evening, but that wouldn't move Trendaul any closer to a decision about whether to stay or go. Both knew Trendaul had proclaimed he would stay because Gavaun had provoked him, not because he had come to a final decision.

When Trendaul arrived at the foot of the temple parking lot, he gazed up at the six gold spires rising out of gold-flecked white marble. His heart lifted a little, as if the sun had just come out from behind a cloud. He strolled forward, the water from the fountain wavering a little in the breeze. He sat down on a bench across the sidewalk from a garden of pansies and leaned his head into his hands to think and to pray.

Part 3: THE MARRIAGE

Chapter 19: THE DEVOTED KNIGHT

When the colonists awoke the morning after the storm, they learned, to their relief, that no one who had been injured in the storm had died during the night. At lunchtime, however, Trevor Carroll informed them that the large synthesizing machine, as well as four of the smaller ones, had been disabled.

"The primary unit will need to be completely rebuilt and reprogrammed," Trevor Carroll said. "We've already contacted Control Colony, and a team of engineers will be here in about a week to help us."

"What are we supposed to do in the meantime?" asked Mike Dixon.

"We'll use the synthesizing machines we do have to produce the small synthesizers for the homes. Then we can get the wiring and plumbing done too."

Sara felt sick. Days of major construction work would be lost. "Can't we fix the big machine on our own?" she asked Cameron.

"I think so, but even Uncle Trevor doesn't feel completely comfortable with the technology yet. It would take weeks of study and trial and error."

After lunch Cameron left to help move the synthesizing machines into the newly-completed warehouse, while Sara and Ashley walked to Sister Ann Eagle's home, located on Hospital Ridge, to keep the appointments Brittany Novak, Sister Eagle's student, had made with them that morning. Sister Eagle wanted to ascertain whether any of the colonists had been traumatized by the events of the previous day.

"Why do you think she wants to see us?" Ashley said. "We weren't injured."

Sara shrugged. "I did confront your father about breaking the Sabbath, and you were there to hear it. Maybe she wants to ask us about that."

Why in the galaxy the woman thought it was any of her business to delve into what had happened was beyond Sara, especially since she and Ben had worked it out between themselves. Then again, Sara couldn't help but wonder whether she and Ben had come to a resolution at all. They had forgiven each other for being unkind, but they hadn't even come close to discussing the Sabbath issue.

"Should I tell her that I saw Cameron call down the powers of heaven to fry the colony for disobedience? And moan about what a horrible brother I have?"

"Only if you like the idea of being put into therapy permanently!" Sara sat down under a maple tree as Ashley walked toward Sister Eagle's prefab colonial style house, one of the small 400-square-foot units since Sister Eagle was unmarried with no children.

Sara pulled grass out of the ground blade by blade as she waited, folding each piece, stripping it with her thumbnail, then tossing it aside. What was taking Ashley so long? Ashley didn't need a psychologist, she needed a bishop, and the more Sara thought about it, the sillier this afternoon expedition seemed.

What did Sister Eagle want with the two of them anyway? Did she want to help them heal from some non-existent trauma, or did she want to interrogate them? Sara wondered why in the galaxy she had allowed this woman to psychoanalyze her and, with Ben's help, study and interpret her patriarchal blessing. She hadn't even given her patriarchal blessing to Cameron yet to read. Sara stood up and began pacing, digging her fist into her stomach, and feeling as if she might throw up.

Eventually Ashley emerged from the house, appearing bored. "I told her I thought Cameron was a good bishop, and she asked me if I thought my father was a good governor."

"What did you say?"

"I told her my father is an excellent governor. He thinks he's excellent anyway, and since he's the expert, he must be right."

"You're such an idiot!"

"I think she's going to want to talk to me again."

"If so, it's your own fault!"

Sara opened the front door of Sister Eagle's house and entered reluctantly. She would not, could not, discuss anything with this woman. Sister Eagle shook her hand and invited her to sit down, smiling.

"It's good to see you this afternoon, Sara. Have you had a productive morning?"

"I wrote an article and critiqued one of Russ's."

"When will the first colony newspaper be published?"

"Not until all of our equipment is up and running. Early next week, we hope."

"Are you enjoying the work you're doing here?"

"Very much."

"That's good. I sense, however, that the Eden Colony isn't measuring up to your expectations in other ways."

Sara hesitated. If she responded at all, Sister Eagle would continue to question her until she revealed all of her confused feelings about Cameron and being on Eden. She thought Sister Eagle was probably a good psychologist, but she didn't need a psychologist. She had a husband and the Lord. Well, she almost had a husband. Sara stood up. "I would rather not discuss it with you."

"Why not?"

"Please don't take this personally, but it's none of your business."

"You trusted me once."

"I did," Sara conceded, feeling more nauseated than ever. "But a lot has happened since then." How could she have been such an idiot? What kind of fog had she been living in, to confide her hopes and dreams and most intimate blessing to strangers? Admittedly, Ben wasn't a stranger now, but he had been when he had analyzed her patriarchal blessing.

"Do you really believe it's healthy to change so drastically because of a young man?"

Sara responded without thinking, "When the young man in question is the spokesman of the Lord for the colony, then absolutely."

"I perceive that many issues are disturbing you."

"I would like to have my file."

"You may change your mind."

"My file, please!" *Or I may puke on your lap!*

Sister Eagle reached into the file box that was sitting on the floor next to her camp chair, pulled a file from the front, and handed it to Sara. "As long as you repress your feelings, Sara, you will never be at peace."

Feeling relieved, Sara took the folder and walked to the door. Sister Eagle might still have her personal information on a disk somewhere, but Sara felt, for the moment, that her privacy had been restored.

Sara stopped at the door, understanding coming to her all at once. She did believe Cameron was the true spokesman of the Lord for the colony, not his father. No, she didn't merely believe

it; she knew it. Sister Eagle had helped her after all. She turned and smiled at Sister Eagle. "Thank you."

Sister Eagle returned the smile. "Any time."

Sara shut the door behind her and jogged toward Ashley. Her stomach settled a little as she inhaled the fresh air. Sister Eagle's intention really had been to facilitate Sara's emotional healing, not to defuse a potentially disruptive force in the colony. She wasn't a confidant, but she wasn't an enemy either.

"That didn't take very long."

Sara held up the folder. "I decided I don't need counseling."

Ashley gazed at Sara, amazed. "What did you say to her?"

"As little as I could get away with," Sara replied as they began walking back toward Hospital Hollow.

"Aren't you going to look at your file?"

Sara shook her head. "I just don't care enough. It's going into the decomposer."

"You're becoming a real revolutionary!"

"I didn't come to Eden to be a revolutionary."

"Why did you come?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"You're having second thoughts?"

"And third and fourth and fifth thoughts, and they're all tangled up." Sara realized, to her surprise, that Ashley wasn't just a friend, she was a close friend, a sister. Sara wanted her observations and advice. She sat down on the lip of the hollow under a cluster of maple, cherry, and sassafras trees, looking out over the hospital, and waved Ashley down with her.

Sara told Ashley everything. "How can it be wrong to be here and right to marry Cameron? Do you understand my dilemma?"

Ashley brought her knees together under her chin, her eyes delving into Sara's with affectionate impatience. "Of course I understand. If I give you the answer to this puzzle, will you promise to propose to Cameron *tonight*?"

Sara turned toward Ashley and pulled her legs into a crossed position, anticipation swelling in her heart. Could Ashley really have the key that would unlock this mystery? "I promise!"

"You didn't come here for Cameron, Sara. You said so yourself, that day in the spaceport. Cameron came here for you. Anyone with eyes can see it! That's how it can be wrong for you to be here and, at the same time, be right to marry Cameron."

"But that can't be true! Cameron accepted the call before he knew I was part of the colony."

"I know it doesn't completely make sense, but it's true. If you hadn't been a part of the colony, Cameron wouldn't have come. I don't think he would have been called to be the bishop at all."

Sara waved a fly away. "That's absurd! He isn't my own personal bishop. He's here for everyone."

"Of course he's here for everyone. No one doubts that, least of all Cameron. All I'm saying is that your existence in the colony was the motivating force that got him here."

"You don't think he would have come for you and the other members of your family?"

"Not a chance." Ashley relaxed against a cherry tree, her hands moving from her shins to her knees. "As it was, Cameron made it clear a long time ago that he would never come to Eden, even to visit. Mother and Father set up a trust fund for him, to pay for the rest of his

mission and to support him in school after that. He was supposed to get home in January, and we assumed he would go back to BYU. Father's mother left Maryland two years ago to be near our two aunts and their families. They all live in the Provo Temple Community, and Cameron is particularly close to Grandmother."

"Your family must have been shocked when Cameron came home early and told you he was coming to Eden too."

Ashley plucked a white cherry blossom out of her hair and rolled its stem between her thumb and finger. "We were. Especially when it was so obvious he thought death by slow torture would be a more pleasant prospect. Let me tell you, nothing short of that call would have brought him here, and he didn't accept it because he hoped to inspire Father to change. I'm not sure even the Lord could have talked Cameron into believing his presence here would have done any good in that regard."

Sara's mind whirled. "I think I understand what you're trying to say, but I still can't completely accept it. Not enough pieces fit." Sara's spirit reached out to the Lord and begged to understand. *Please take away my confusion. I love Cameron and want to marry him. I can't live like this!* A moment passed and Sara suddenly thought to ask, "Why don't you think Cameron would have been called to be the bishop if I weren't here?"

Ashley held out her hand and let the cherry blossom float away in the breeze. "I don't presume to know the mind of the Lord, but I do know Cameron. If you weren't here, he wouldn't be able to function in that calling."

Sara pulled her knees to her chin and leaned on them. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you were not here, Cameron would be too depressed and unstable to communicate with anyone rationally. The colonists would have thought he was aloof or rude. He might have even isolated himself. He would have alienated everyone."

"That doesn't sound like Cameron."

"Of course it does. He was on the verge of breakdown at the stake center the night he was sustained. You could see that for yourself. Even Brandon said that Cameron had gone crazy. The only thing that got him through that evening was you."

Sara nodded slowly. "And my father." What had Cameron and her father talked about during the week they had spent together in the temple? "Cameron withdraws then, when he's upset?" It was a strange thought.

Ashley twisted her body slightly and stretched her legs toward the hollow. "He either runs or he locks himself in his room and reads. He used to download books by general authorities. He started doing that about the time I went to my first high school dance. I had a date to homecoming with a boy in my chemistry class, and Cameron was really disturbed about it. He showed me all kinds of quotes about how I shouldn't date until I was sixteen and begged me not to go."

"What did you do?"

"I went to the dance. I can see now that it wasn't a good idea, but at the time, I really wanted to go. Father didn't like the idea either and tried to discourage me, but Mother insisted."

Sara couldn't find a comfortable position. She shifted again, kicking a rock over the ledge of the hollow. "Wasn't your father's disapproval enough to stop you?"

"In this situation, no. My mother was adamant, and when she gets in that frame of mind, my father doesn't fight her."

"Did Cameron ever say anything to them about it?"

"Of course he did. He was really upset. He couldn't believe they would let me go on a date when I was only thirteen."

“You were only *thirteen*?”

Ashley nodded. “It wasn’t that Cameron was mad about a double standard between the two of us either, because he didn’t care to date anyway.”

Sara’s own parents would have laughed her out of the house had she even *hinted* at wanting to go out with a boy at age thirteen. No wonder Cameron had been disturbed! “What did they do?”

“Mother explained to him that since I have one of those late birthdays, I would be halfway through my junior year before I went to any school dances with a date if I waited until I was sixteen. That just wasn’t reasonable. The other kids would think I was a prig and a snob, and I deserved to enjoy my time in high school. Ryan was only a freshman also and his parents would take us. I was a good girl and could handle it. Cameron said that there were more important things than a high school dance, and Mother responded with, ‘Try telling that to a teenage girl!’ My father simply shrugged and said, ‘It *is* only a dance, Cameron.’”

Sara gazed out over Hospital Hollow. “So they brushed him off as they always do when they think he’s being fanatical.”

Ashley nodded sadly and moved to sit next to Sara again. “Not long after that, Tohmazz Zarr and his people came. Cameron wouldn’t have anything to do with them, but Mother and Father were thrilled about everything their existence represented. Father was bishop at the time and invited one of Zarr’s people to give a talk to our ward. Cameron was really upset. I know he spoke to Father about it, but he must have gotten the brush off again, because he disappeared into his room for days.”

Sara turned toward Ashley abruptly, her heart tightening in dread. “How long did it take after that talk before your father was released?”

“There were several talks, actually. He was released within a month of the last one. We never heard any of Zarr’s people speak at a Church function again after that.”

Sara turned away, running her hand through her hair. So this great spiritual leader, this former bishop, had been released because he couldn’t follow the counsel of the Church. Sara couldn’t believe that she had allowed herself to be deceived by such a man. And she would still be deceived were it not for Cameron.

A thought came into Sara’s mind that was so awful she almost fought it away without expressing it. She turned toward Ashley again. “Your parents couldn’t go to the temple with Cameron when he received his endowment, could they?”

“No,” Ashley whispered, her shoulders drooping. “Our bishop was the only one who went with him. I think Cameron was too embarrassed to invite anyone else.”

Sara remembered the missionary farewell photograph and finally understood. The black veil that shrouded her heart knotted itself again and again. “I can’t even begin to imagine what kind of nightmare Cameron’s been living.” How insensitive she had been! Cameron had told her he had been living with a great burden, and she hadn’t even asked him about it.

Ashley turned to face Sara again. “Do you understand now why I said there was no way he would have come to Eden for us?”

Sara nodded, barely. Cameron would have thought such an act would be useless. After everything Cameron had experienced with his parents, the calling must have seemed like a curse. Sara didn’t think even Cameron’s sense of duty was strong enough to inspire him to agree to a call like that without protesting. What in the galaxy had the prophet told Cameron that had convinced him his sacrifice would not be in vain?

Ashley gripped Sara's arm. "I know it sounds crazy, but you have to believe me. Cameron came here for you. He's loved you for a long time, and something deep inside of him knew you would be here."

Finally Sara understood. The prophet had told Cameron something about his future wife, something that had given him hope. That was how her presence in the colony had given Cameron the motivation to come to Eden and why Cameron hadn't told her about his meeting with the prophet yet. Not only that, but Cameron had confided everything to her father. No wonder her father had been so certain she would marry Cameron. How had her father and Cameron come into such close contact in such a short length of time? Her father had the kind of personality that inspired trust in people, but it was still bizarre.

Ashley gave Sara a shake. "You have to believe me, Sara! I've heard Cameron call you his queen. He probably thinks of himself as your rescuer, your most devoted knight, and if you don't marry him, I'll think you're the cruelest person who ever lived!"

Sara felt feverish and lightheaded. "When . . . when we met, he . . . said . . ." She gasped. "The queen is . . . puzzled . . . her . . . servant knows her?" She hugged herself fiercely in an attempt to stop herself from shaking.

Ashley wrapped her arms around Sara tightly and said softly, "You can understand now why Cameron never spoke to you or asked you to dance. He had no confidence. His mission changed him a lot in that way, I think. And you. When he's with you, he glows! He's self-assured and glorious! The colonists are already looking to him for leadership. I wonder what Father will do when he wakes up one day and realizes the colony is following Cameron and not him."

Neither Sara nor Ashley moved for a long time. Once Sara felt composed, she sat up stiffly and said, "You've been talking about Cameron's troubles in such a matter-of-fact way, Ashley. These things must have affected you too. How do you feel about all of this?"

"Numb. I'm not happy, I'm not angry, I'm just numb. I think, so what my father's an apostate? Big deal!"

Hearing Ashley call Ben an apostate hurt Sara deeply. She knew it made no sense, given that he had, in a very real way, betrayed her, but coming to an understanding of the truth about his spiritual state didn't diminish the affection she felt for him. She clutched Ashley's arm. "Please don't call your father an apostate! It sounds so severe, so . . . *final*! Whatever he's done, I can't believe he's completely fallen away from the faith."

Ashley shrugged. "I can."

"You're not numb, Ashley," Sara said softly. "You're bitter and cynical."

Ashley folded her arms over her bent knees and laid her head on them, gazing sideways at Sara with tortured green eyes. "I think you may be right."

"You haven't talked to Cameron yet, have you."

"I talk to Cameron all the time."

"You know what I mean."

Ashley sighed. "No, I haven't."

"Talk to him tonight, and I'll give you my Navy shirt."

Ashley sat up abruptly. "That would be so wrong, Sara!"

"I can't wear the shirt anyway. It would remind Cameron of all the midshipmen I went out with."

"How could you go out with all of those midshipmen and never kiss any of them?"

"I didn't like any of them well enough."

"Cameron can't be the first guy you ever kissed."

"No. There was one other, at BYU, but he was more of a friend. I was in the mood to get rid of my obsession with Cameron for good, and I thought a few kisses from someone I liked could be the cure."

Ashley smiled. "It didn't work, obviously!"

"Not at all. I didn't like it."

"Please let me tell that to Cameron when I talk to him. It'll make his day!"

"I'm not so sure about that. He doesn't think I've ever kissed anyone but him."

"That's all the more reason to tell him."

"Why? Because he never had any real competition or because someone else's kisses made me want to throw up?"

"The throwing up part is good."

"I don't care what you tell him about my kissing experience as long as you talk to him!"

* * *

Sara went directly to Construction Clearing after her talk with Ashley and disposed of Sister Eagle's notes in the decomposer. Her head throbbed, and she felt so sick to her stomach she didn't think she could eat. Instead of going to the dining hall, she went to the dormitory, where she unraveled the French braid from her hair, took some ibuprofen, and lay down on her mattress, closing her eyes and pressing her fingertips into her aching temples.

She slipped into a deep sleep. She saw her father everywhere. When she slept, she knew he was near. When she awoke, he was there. He never smiled, but his thoughts stimulated her and his feelings warmed her. *Hello, sweetie. What shall we do today?*

Fly!

All right. When we're finished at the library, we'll go to the park and swing.

When the darkness came, he would press her against his heart and rock, and rock and rock, and embrace her with his sadness. *I miss her too, Daddy.*

I know, sweetie.

The sadness never left, but it changed, becoming charged with panic and desperation. Her father talked to someone else during those times. *Father, what am I going to do? This is no life for my daughter. Please send a convoy for me early. I need a miracle.*

Sara heard voices around her. She opened her eyes, disoriented.

"Are you coming to family home evening, Sara?"

"Huh? No . . . family's not here . . ."

"Leave her alone. She's half asleep."

Sara rolled over, dreaming of her father's smiles. His happiness poured over her like the sunlight from her window. She stretched her arms out to him, and he lifted her out of her crib, hugging her tightly.

I know it was the most idiotic first engagement there ever was, but I didn't know what else to do. She touched my hand, and I ached, wanting to hold her. I don't dare be too alone with her. I think she understands. A little.

Sara remembered being rocked by a different person, someone soft, feeling a warm breeze playing with her hair. *She smelled pretty, Daddy.*

She is pretty, sweetie. And I love her.

Her father's smiles spun away, and Sara strolled up the walk to the temple, her arm snugly intertwined with Cameron's, the dogwood trees crimson in their autumn splendor. The front

doors slid open, and they approached the recommend desk. "I'm sorry, Sister Alexander. You don't have a recommend. You'll have to come back another day."

Cameron kissed her sadly. Speechless, she watched him disappear behind the wall with its panels of stained glass. Nausea pierced her heart. She would never see the beautiful mural at the other end of the bridge now, "The Sheep and the Goats." *I'm a goat . . . I'm a goat . . . I'm a goat . . . Please forgive me, Heavenly Father.*

"Sara. Sara!" She felt a firm hand on her arm, shaking her. She opened her eyes to see the outline of Ashley in the dim light.

Sara gripped Ashley's hand. "Did you talk to Cameron?"

Ashley nodded, smiling. "He wasn't surprised, Sara. Can you believe that? I was afraid for nothing. We prayed together, and read scriptures together, and I get to spend time like that with him every week for a while. I feel like dancing!"

Sara wished she felt like dancing. She smiled, despite her dreary mood, as Ashley pulled her to sitting position. Sara's headache had faded to mere tightness at her temples, but queasiness still gnawed at her chest. "Then dance! Take your music to the dining hall and have a party!"

"Actually, that's an excellent idea. Sara, you promised me you would propose to Cameron tonight. He's waiting for you outside." Ashley reached into one of Sara's crates and removed a brush.

"You didn't tell him I'm going to propose to him, did you?"

"Of course not, stupid!" Ashley said as she brushed Sara's hair. "He's just dying to see you. And worried, too. When you didn't come to dinner, I had to tell him you weren't feeling well." Ashley dropped the brush back into the crate, then rummaged around in it, looking for something else.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for this!" Ashley held up Sara's Navy shirt. "Wear this tonight. It'll remind Cameron of all the guys you didn't kiss and the one guy whose kisses made you want to throw up! I must have spent ten minutes educating him on the fact that only one in a million women would ever be that loyal and pure and that he doesn't appreciate you nearly enough!"

Sara pulled the BYU T-shirt she was wearing over her head and slipped into the Navy shirt. "I've never been sure whether it was loyalty or just plain silliness!" After changing shirts and having her hair brushed, she did feel fresher and more ready to see Cameron.

As Sara walked through the dormitory, passing all of the mattresses on the floor with their jumbled bedcovers, she felt as if she were walking through a wall of glass. The fantasy planet Eden shattered, shards of Ben's vision of Zion crashing on the floor all around her.

She emerged on a planet of shadow, terraformed by a strange foreign government and abandoned for some mysterious reason, a planet that had seemed to throw a tantrum when the colonists broke the Sabbath. What would it do if it heard the Lord's name taken in vain? Or witnessed an immoral act? Did it understand their language? If Sara told the other colonists what she knew, they would think she was crazy! What kind of nightmare was she living in?

Sara paused for a moment in the doorway of the dormitory, gazing at Cameron in the waning light of the sun. He waited for her under their tree. When he saw her, he arose from his camp chair and looked at her with expectation. His eyes lingered over the word "Navy," his mouth unable to contain a smile of possessiveness and awe.

He was luminous in this world of shadow, and love for him overwhelmed her, embellished with gratitude, penetrating to her very bones, it seemed. She yearned to wrap herself around him, body and spirit, and soothe away his loneliness and grief, and suddenly she felt afraid.

All things considered, Cameron had been very reserved with her. He was an emotional person and far more vulnerable than he appeared. Sara had a feeling she had felt only a trickle of his passion, a few droplets he had carefully chosen, not just because he didn't want to force his understanding and will on her, but because he didn't trust himself to let down his guard too much.

When he started seriously confiding in her, that passion would burst out in a gush and she wouldn't be able to stop herself from responding to it with ardor that equaled his. Under those circumstances, how long could they keep their relationship on a wholesome plane? Too many beautiful, secluded places surrounded them. It would be too easy to be intimate. And if that happened prematurely, the colony would lose their bishop and fall into ruin.

Sara pondered the memories she had dreamed that evening of her father. What had seemed to her and her brothers and sisters to be a ridiculous first date, which they loved to tease their parents about, made perfect sense now. Her father had asked their mother to have dinner at his house with him and the missionaries, not so much because being alone with her in the house might have given his neighbors the wrong idea, but because he hadn't trusted himself to be alone with her. When her father had warned her against putting off marrying Cameron once the decision was made, he had spoken with understanding that had come from similar experience. Sara had no doubt he had spoken through inspiration also.

As Sara gazed at Cameron waiting for her in their designated date spot, watching her with such hope and apprehension, she knew what she had to do. The decision to marry had been made. She wasn't going to change her mind and neither would Cameron. Cameron was under a lot of pressure, and she had the power to either intensify it or do a great deal to relieve it. She was done making mistakes. This was one thing she would do right, as insane as it seemed.

Sara sprinted to Cameron and threw herself at him. He received her into his arms eagerly, pressing her close and kissing her again and again. Between kisses she managed to ask, "Will you . . . marry me . . . tomorrow?"

Chapter 20: CAMERON CONFIDES

Cameron withdrew from Sara slightly and gazed down at her in surprise. "Tomorrow?"

"You don't think it's feasible?"

"Actually, I don't. My father will insist on giving us intensive premarital counseling before he will agree to marry us. You know he'll make us talk about all kinds of things. I would rather we discuss as many of those issues as we can think of alone before we have to endure that meeting."

In her eagerness Sara hadn't thought of that. "You're right. Tomorrow's too soon. How long do you think it will take to work everything out?"

"I have no idea. The one good thing, though, is that my father has a lot of confidence in himself as a facilitator. If he believes he's molded us into an effective team, we won't have to wait too long. Not only that, but the colony will accept his decision and support us."

"So do you think a week is feasible? Next Monday, maybe?"

"Perhaps. Are you absolutely sure you want to be married that soon?"

"It's what I want and what you need. Yes, I'm sure."

Cameron's entire body relaxed in a giant shiver of relief. "Thank you, Sara," he whispered, lifting his fingers to her cheek.

"I love you, Cameron. Thank *you* for being my rescuer, my most devoted knight."

Cameron smiled—not the sad smile she had seen on his lips so often but a smile of bliss. "You're most welcome, my beloved queen."

Sara kissed Cameron, then embraced him tightly, speaking softly into his ear, "Will you tell me now about your meeting with the prophet? And what you talked about with my father? It must have been some conversation because my father knew I would marry you. He even gave me his wedding ring from my mother to give to you!"

"Really?" Cameron said in delight, releasing Sara and sitting her down in the camp chair. "He's so awesome!" He moved his own chair as close to her as he could manage and sat down facing her, interlocking his knees with hers and taking her hands in his. "I'm glad it worked out that I was able to talk to him. I needed it and he deserved it."

Sara still felt sick. "He did deserve it. I treated him so cruelly." She bowed her head, unable to meet Cameron's gaze. "I've been such a disrespectful fool, and now I can't even apologize."

Sara felt Cameron's fingers caress her chin, gently lifting her head so that he could look solemnly into her eyes. "Then make your apologies to the Father who is available to you now."

"Do you really think that will be enough?"

"For now. Neither father wants you to torture yourself forever."

"Will it be possible for either one of us to be happy here, Cameron?"

"A month ago, I would have said no. Now . . ." Cameron nodded reflectively. "I think so." His fingers moved from her chin to her cheek and into her hair. He touched his lips to hers softly. "I love you, Sara, and I'm happy. For the first time I believe I can accomplish my mission here, and I'm content."

"But I have no mission here," Sara said ruefully. "I should be home, in Maryland, preparing to move with my family."

"We should both be home in Maryland, but the fact is, my parents made some decisions that affected us both."

"I don't blame your parents. I'll take responsibility for my own mistakes."

"I'm not suggesting you shouldn't, but the fact remains that their actions have influenced us. After I saw you at the stake center that evening, I was really troubled. I couldn't understand how someone like you could have been so influenced by my father. In the couple of hours I slept that night, I had all kinds of strange dreams. In one of them, I was in a beautiful place full of light with all of the people I loved but one. You. So as often as I could, I would slip away and find you with all of the people you loved, and as I remained there with all of your people, I grew to love them as much as you did. Then I would get lonely for my own people and go home. Pretty soon, you would slip away and come to me."

Sara nodded slowly. "And I came to love your people, Ashley and your mother and father, and Adam and Brandon too. I think I understand." She knew that what Cameron believed was true. She had a relationship with Cameron and his family that had begun in the premortal existence.

"When I woke up, I wasn't baffled anymore, just sad at the waste. I understood why you were so drawn to them and they to you, and your presence in the colony made sense. So no, you shouldn't have come and neither should any of the others, but that doesn't mean the Lord doesn't have important things for you to do here. You've already done an incredible thing for Ashley."

Sara stroked the back of Cameron's hand. "And she's done an incredible thing for me. Without her insight, I don't know how long it would have taken me to realize you came to Eden for me."

"We're a strange couple, you see. I came here for you, but you've given me the belief in myself that allows me to *be* here for you and the others. So don't tell me you have no mission on Eden. I don't believe it."

"You do make me feel a little better. How can I possibly stay in despair when someone like you has so much faith in me?"

"I have to have faith in you, Sara. Without you, I'm lost. I've been praying desperately for the haze to lift from your mind. I'm just sorry it's causing you so much pain."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were being selfish."

"I am being selfish," Cameron admitted. "I wanted you to throw off your illusions as much for myself as for you. I can't do what I have to do here without at least one person who completely believes in me. And the prophet did promise me support in the form of a wife."

"Hey you guys!" Ashley called. "Come dance with us!"

Sara leaned back in her chair. "So you are going to have a dance," she said as Ashley, Samantha, and Tony approached them.

"We're going to dance until we pass out!" Samantha said.

"Everyone's restless," Tony agreed. "We need this."

"Maybe we'll come later," Cameron said. "We have a lot to talk about first."

The thought of Ashley, Samantha, and Tony blasting music in the dining hall bothered Sara. "Just promise you won't play any songs that are bad, will you?"

"We wouldn't do that, Sara," Ashley said, hurt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I don't mean *bad* bad. I mean be careful and don't play songs that have even one bad word in them. You know how easy it is to get numb to just one little bad word in a song."

Samantha looked at Sara strangely. "You're afraid we'll have another storm, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"A little," Samantha admitted. "But one bad word in a song is hardly in the same category as breaking the Sabbath."

“And this isn’t Earth,” Sara countered. “We don’t know what the rules are here.”

“We’ll be careful, Sara,” Tony assured. “We promise.”

“We’ll see you guys later,” Cameron said, waving them away. Ashley and Samantha laughed at Cameron’s anxiousness to get rid of them and hurried off with Tony. Once they were gone, Cameron looked at Sara penetratingly. “What haven’t you told me? About Eden?”

Sara told Cameron everything her father had told her. She hadn’t meant to keep it from him, but they had so much to talk about and so little time for private conversations. “What he told me was so farfetched I only half believed it until the storm hit yesterday. Since then, I’ve thought of it almost as much as I’ve thought about you.”

“So you think the planet-spirit may be reacting to our unrighteous behavior.”

“I think it’s a good possibility. The first rain storm came after an argument, and the second came after we broke the Sabbath. Remember in the book of Moses? When Enoch heard the voice of the earth?”

Cameron nodded. “The earth was weary because of all the wickedness and longed to be sanctified.”

“The way I see it, if the earth can perceive wickedness on its face, so can Eden.”

“You were right to be worried about the content of the music Ashley planned to play. I’ve known all along this planet is cursed, but this puts everything in a new light. I need time to think about this.”

“That’s fine, as long as it isn’t now!” Sara tapped the back of Cameron’s hand. “You still haven’t told me about your meeting with the prophet!”

The corner of Cameron’s rose in an impish way. “Maybe we should go dancing instead.”

“This is one time I sincerely don’t want to dance.”

“I know. Neither do I.” Cameron’s face sobered. “He told me the Lord was calling me on another mission, a mission to save my family, and extended this calling to me. I told him there was no way I could do it. In a way I wanted to do it, because I could see it was needed, and I certainly didn’t want to say no to the Lord, but I couldn’t comprehend how I could possibly do any good here.”

“Did you tell him why you felt that way?”

“I told him all kinds of things. Basically, my parents have their own way of thinking. When I do or say something that deviates from that, they ignore me or tell me to grow up. Why should I think that would change?”

“Being a bishop, though, is different from being a little boy in your parents’ home. Your parents may brush you off, but others will listen. Me, for instance.”

Cameron nodded. “President Morley said the same thing. He told me that the colonists were basically good people who were temporarily blind. They just needed a discerning priesthood leader to show them how to get back on track. Some would take direction, and some would not. He didn’t say whether my father would be one who would ever take direction, but he did tell me that he wasn’t willing to give up yet on my father.”

“Is that why your father was never excommunicated?”

“Yes. Apparently his priesthood leaders have never felt good about calling a court on him. The prophet didn’t feel good about it either. He explained that, under the circumstances, any judgment rendered by a stake court could be permanent, at least for this life, since once my father left Earth, he might not live long enough to return to Zion to have his blessings restored.”

“The Church really does mean to abandon the colony then,” Sara said. She still found it difficult to believe.

“No. My presence here is proof that the Church didn’t want to abandon the colony. What has happened, however, is that the colony has, in a literal way, abandoned the Church. And yes, the prophet told me that he believed most of the colonists would follow my father to Eden even if he were excommunicated.”

Sara wondered what she would have done. She truly didn’t know. “I’m relieved it never came to that. Did the prophet say anything else about it?”

“He told me that if the Church didn’t organize a ward here, the colony would either destroy itself or fall into darkness as the descendants of Laman and Lemuel did when they were cut off. Unlike the Lamanites, however, the Eden Colony would never have contact with the Church on Earth again.”

“The prophet seriously doesn’t expect to have any kind of contact with us until you lead the colony back to the New Jerusalem? How can that be?”

“Think about what your father told you, Sara,” Cameron said gently. “He said the Zarrists were pirates, didn’t he?”

Sara nodded. “And that they are enemies to Novaun.”

“Novaun. A galactic Zion of two thousand planets. Think about what the scriptures say about nations that fight against Zion.”

“You’re right. Novaun could crush Earth if it wanted to.” The thought had never occurred to her.

“Probably so, and it’s the only galactic power that you and I know about. Zarr must have other enemies. What happens if a stronger galactic power comes after him and he goes to war? He might completely forget about us. Not only that, but on Earth itself, what if Zarr goes to war against the Church and its allies in the Cooperative Communities? I have to believe that the Temple/Cooperative Communities are destined to become municipalities in a larger Zion community.”

“So do I. I’ve believed that all along. It’s terribly exciting!”

“It is exciting. And considering the prophecies, I don’t think there’s any chance Zarr could wound the Zion municipalities, but such a situation would definitely change things on Earth.”

“And perhaps make it impossible to get back to a temple community. My parents do believe that all of the communities established by the Church and other members of the Guardians of Earth’s Governments are on the verge of isolating themselves.” Why hadn’t she believed them?

“I don’t know the details of how it has happened or will happen, but I do know that we’re stranded.”

“For how long, do you think?”

Cameron shrugged. “If we’re lucky, fifteen or twenty years. It could be as long as fifty. That’s why the presidencies were organized with five counselors instead of two and why most of the men are young.”

It all made a horrible kind of sense. Sara felt the Lord’s mercy on the colony keenly, gratitude overwhelming her. “You’re relieved, then, that your father wasn’t excommunicated or even disfellowshipped.”

“Extremely. At the same time, though, I have to deal with him. I gave my excuses to President Morley, and he listened patiently. Then he said in that kind but very firm way he has, ‘The Lord knows all of that, Cameron, and He still wants you to be the bishop of the Eden Colony Ward. He trusts you and knows you won’t fail him. The task before you will be difficult, but the Lord will help you and your wife will give you strength.’”

Sara squeezed his hands. “What did you say to that?”

"I was stunned, let me tell you. All I could say was a very weak, 'My wife?' He said, 'Yes. Just think of it, on this mission, you can have a wife and children.' I said, and please don't be offended, Sara, 'I don't know how I could possibly fall in love with a woman so dense she would follow my father.'"

Cameron's comment made Sara feel strange, and yet she understood. "I'm not offended, but I am glad you didn't tell me that four weeks ago."

"I may be a fanatic, but I'm not suicidal!"

"So what did the prophet say after that?" Sara asked eagerly.

"He laughed at me and said, 'That won't be a problem. There's a young woman among the colonists whom you will want very much to make your wife. If you don't go to Eden and bring her back to Zion, you will regret it forever.'"

"So you finally agreed to the call."

"Yes. I didn't see much of a choice at that point. I didn't completely believe what the prophet told me, but I *wanted* to believe, and that was enough. I couldn't help but think of you, and I knew that if you were going to Eden, I would accept the calling and go to your rescue without thinking twice about it. I realized that if I was willing to go into hell for a fantasy woman (because I didn't really know you), I ought to be willing to do the same for the real woman who would be my wife."

"It never occurred to you that I really might be going?"

"Not for a second."

"Did President Morley tell you anything else about me?"

"No, but to make matters worse, he did tell me that a bishop should have a wife and that I should get married as soon as I could."

"He was right."

"I know he was right, and I knew it then, but the only thing I could think of at the time was: *The prophet has just given me an impossible mission and now he's telling me that, on top of everything else, I have to date?* To tell you the truth, it sounded like torture."

Sara caressed Cameron's cheek and kissed him. "Yeah, I'd say it's torture!"

Cameron pulled Sara out of her chair and into his lap, pressing her close, returning her kiss with zeal. "*You* can torture me all you like!"

Sara couldn't resist. "Even though I'm dense?"

"The prophet did laugh at me. It is funny, really. I don't think a mere five minutes passed from the time we first spoke to each other before everything was decided between us." He kissed her again and again.

"Why did you hold my hand that evening at the stake center? If I hadn't loved it so much, I would have thought you were shameless!"

"I couldn't exactly help myself. I was already so in love with you that I wasn't about to wait around another six years, or even six days, for you to make the first move, and remember, I had an intense feeling right away that you loved me as much as I loved you. Not only that, but I didn't want to give you a chance to even *look* at any of the other guys in the colony."

"You were a little late in that department since I'd already met quite a few of them, but it hardly mattered! All you have to do is smile at me and I melt. I can't resist you."

"I know. I still have a hard time believing it! Who would have ever thought it?"

Sara slipped out of Cameron's arms and moved her chair so that it was next to his but pointed in the opposite direction. "If you had said 'hi' to me once or even acted like you were aware of me, you would have known!"

"I couldn't have done that. I was too hurt. I tortured myself wondering what you didn't like about me."

Sara sat down facing Cameron, leaning into his arms as well as she could. "That makes no sense. How can you be so modest? You're so gorgeous you had girls falling all over you. Don't you think for a moment that I didn't notice!"

"They weren't you. Even when I was on my mission I couldn't get you out of my mind. After I had been out for a while, I promised myself that when I got home, I would find you, and if you weren't married, I was going to ask you out."

It was such a wonderful thought that Sara could scarcely believe it. "Seriously?"

"Absolutely. You were unfinished business. Somewhere along the line, I realized there was nothing wrong with me, nothing you could have known about anyway, and that the worst thing that could happen if I asked you out would be for you to say no. In that case, I planned to ask you what you didn't like about me. So you see, whether you said yes or no, I would have had resolution."

"I doubt I would have said anything. All I would have had to hear was, 'This is Cameron Carroll,' and I would have passed out in shock!"

"You did look as if you would pass out when you saw me standing there next to my mother."

"I almost turned around and ran. Why didn't you call me, Cameron?"

"Because once I accepted the calling, I knew there could never be anything between us. You were as good as dead to me, and seeing you or even talking to you would have been too painful. Imagine my feelings when I first saw your father in the temple."

"Did the two of you recognize each other right away?"

"Yes. You look so much like him, and he does wear a name tag, and when a time came that I had to tell him my name, he already knew it. That surprised me, and he could see that it did, but he just smiled and sent me off. We didn't get a chance to talk, though, until later. It was really weird. Wherever I went in the temple, he was there."

"That is weird, Cameron."

"He thought so too, because when I saw him in the hall after a session, he smiled at me in a really mischievous way and asked, 'Are you following me, Elder Carroll?' Hearing him call me 'Elder Carroll' felt really good, but I didn't like the idea of being on such formal terms with him, so I asked him to call me 'Cameron.' I knew then that he probably remembered me from all of the track meets, so it only seemed right that I find a way to ask about you."

"That must have been awkward."

"It should have been, but it wasn't. I just asked if you were still running. He told me a little about the things you were doing, and since his shift was over, he offered to buy me lunch."

Sara couldn't stop herself from asking: "He didn't actually eat the cafeteria food, did he?" She couldn't believe that even the temple made her father feel that safe.

"No. But he did have a can of soda. It didn't seem strange, though, because he was so friendly and made me feel comfortable. He asked me questions about my mission and wanted to know how long I had been home. I told him I had spent some time with my grandmother in Utah before returning to Maryland."

"He must have asked you what your plans were. Did you tell him right then and there?"

"I did. It popped right out before I even knew what I was saying. 'My family is going to an accursed planet named Eden, and I've been called on a mission to save them.' He was so shocked I thought he would fall out of the chair."

"Shocked? My father? I wish I could have seen that. Nothing gets to him."

“Well, this did. He stared at me and asked, ‘What do you mean?’ So I told him about my wonderful new calling and expressed my desire to be dead instead. I was so comfortable I felt punchy. I didn’t tell him much more about it at that time, but he did ask if I had told my parents yet. I said no, that I needed a week in the temple before I could even consider facing that challenge. I stood up to leave, thanked him for lunch, and told him I would see him again the next day.”

“That was it?”

“For Day One, yes. On Day Two, it was the same thing all over again. Wherever I went, he was there. Eventually I went up to do sealings. I hadn’t witnessed a sealing in English yet, but I wanted to memorize the words so that I could think of them in the time to come. Still, I was very nervous about it, which was why I hadn’t done any sealings the day before. I was afraid the knowledge that my wife and children wouldn’t be sealed to me for many years, perhaps decades, would weigh too heavily on me and that I would lose it.”

“Did you?”

“I was all right for the first set, sort of, when I was acting as witness and your father was a proxy. Then it was my turn to be a proxy, I started shaking, and then my eyes so filled with tears that I went blind. Before the sealer could complete the ordinance, I had collapsed on the altar, sobbing. It was horrible.”

“Were you able to pull yourself together and finish the sealings?”

Cameron shook his head. “Someone was going to call President Walden, and I heard your father say that he knew me and had some idea of why I was troubled. He would talk to me. He helped me stand up and walked me down the hall and into what looked like a big waiting room.

“He sat me down on a couch and put his arm around me, and I babbled on and on about how I had been born in the covenant and that now my parents had jumped off the edge of a cliff and had taken my brothers and sister with them. My parents hadn’t been with me when I was endowed. My eternal family was falling apart, and now I couldn’t even have my own temple marriage. I went on and on and on.

“Eventually I had no more to say, and I leaned back, drained. That was when your father began telling me the story of Enoch. He recited it as if a copy of the Pearl of Great Price was open on his lap and he was reading it word for word. ‘Why is it that I have found favor in thy sight, and am but a lad, and all the people hate me; for I am slow of speech; wherefore am I thy servant? And the Lord said unto Enoch: Go forth and do as I have commanded thee, and no man shall pierce thee. Open thy mouth, and it shall be filled, and I will give thee utterance, for all flesh is in my hands, and I will do as seemeth me good . . .’

“You are like Enoch,” Sara said softly. “The Lord must have a lot of confidence in you.”

“I know,” Cameron whispered. “When your father was finished telling me the story of Enoch, I felt it. I realized that I might not be a prophet, but I am the Lord’s servant, and He would take care of me. After that, your father began asking me questions, and we were able to discuss my situation rationally.”

“He gave you advice?” Sara said in surprise. “I didn’t think ordinance workers were supposed to do that.”

“No, he really didn’t give me advice, but he did make some observations that made me feel better, particularly with regard to marriage.”

“Actually, my dad’s an expert on marriage. He’s done it twice. Successfully.”

“He told me about both of your mothers. He said he had known his first wife for as long as he could remember. He grew to love her so gradually that he couldn’t pinpoint when exactly it

had happened. When they both realized that neither one of them wanted to see other people, they began discussing marriage. With his second wife, though, it was different.”

“He knew he loved her the first time she spoke to him.”

“He said the situation he was in at the time was bizarre. Not quite as strange as the one I was going into, but bizarre all the same. Now that I know about Novaun, I would disagree with him on that point.”

“His situation at the time was bizarre,” Sara agreed. “He probably didn’t tell you, but he didn’t go anywhere without me.”

“He must have been afraid someone would give you something to eat that would kill you.”

“He was, and he’s still paranoid about it.”

“He said it had never entered his mind that he should get married at that time. Apparently, some of the women in the ward suggested he should date and even introduced him to unmarried women.”

“No way! He never told us that!”

“He was so annoyed by it that he was actually rude a couple of times; the thought of dating was outrageous. If he hadn’t had such a strong feeling about your mother from the beginning, he would never have pursued a relationship with her. The knowledge that he should marry her came to him like a testimony of the gospel comes to a new convert, sudden and thrilling in its intensity. The knowledge that he should marry his first wife came to him like a testimony comes to a life-long member, gradual and powerful in its solidity. He believes that as long as the commitment is there, both methods are equally valid.”

“Perfect analogy for a guy who just got off his mission.”

“I thought so.”

“So he believed you would have a new convert kind of experience with your future wife.”

“He wasn’t certain about it by any means, but he thought it was possible. He believed I should take President Morley at his word. The Lord wanted me to get married as soon as possible and I should have faith that He would give me a wife. We both agreed that I was going into a situation where it would be impossible to date in the usual sense. We also both agreed that I couldn’t be alone with young women at all. In the eyes of the colonists, my position would be dubious enough. I couldn’t do anything that would put even a glimmer of a thought into anyone’s mind that there might be something inappropriate going on. Your father and I also agreed that life with my parents would certainly get more difficult rather than less so. He suggested that finding a wife might be one area of my life that would actually work out well right now.”

“I wonder if he had any idea then that I would be your wife.”

“He knew it when you and I were introduced. So did your mother. I could see it in their eyes. Whether your father knew it or even suspected that day in the temple, though, I have no idea. After our conversation, I was so filled with hope that I actually managed to do some sealings afterwards. I saw your father off and on all week long. On Friday, after his shift was over, we even did an endowment session together.”

“Did you talk about me at all?”

“Except for our greeting on the first day, no. I would have liked to ask him more about you, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. Every now and then I hoped he would invite me to your house for dinner or something, and then I would get to see you.”

“That would have been weird!”

"I'm glad he didn't, because I wouldn't have been able to resist the invitation, and then I would have spent the rest of the week trying to talk you out of going to Eden. By the time we actually got here, you would have hated me."

"If you knew right away you wanted to marry me, why did you try to talk me out of coming?"

"I wouldn't have been able to live with myself had I not tried. After you berated me, I didn't know what to do. My prayer was desperate: *I love Sara, but I can't have a wife who fights me. What am I supposed to do?* The answer was immediate: *Shower her with all of the love you feel, and she'll turn right around.*"

"So that's the real reason you held my hand that evening at the stake center," Sara teased.

"What can I say? The Spirit made me do it." Cameron removed the phone from his belt and began punching buttons.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling my father." He smiled seductively, stroking her arm with his free hand. "I want you, and I want you now!"

Sara would have kissed him had she not been so nervous. She didn't think it was ten o'clock yet. Perhaps she and Cameron could talk to his parents that night.

Cameron didn't waste any time telling his father what he wanted. "Sara and I are engaged. We would like to get married tomorrow." He shrugged at Sara and mouthed the words: "It doesn't hurt to try!"

Cameron pushed the button to end the call with a flourish. "Well, he wants to see us immediately. Says we're in dire need of counseling."

"Did he say it in a, 'Congratulations! Let's work out the details,' tone or a, 'You kids are crazy!' tone?"

Cameron laughed a little. "What do you think?"

"What are we going to say to them?"

"I think it's time we tell them the truth. The complete truth."

Chapter 21: BEN SPEAKS

Cameron persuaded Sara to have some soup and toast at the dining hall. They announced their engagement to cheers and applause, then invited Cameron's mother to walk back to the house with them.

"Your father wants to talk with you alone," Barbara explained.

"Why?"

"I assume he doesn't want distractions."

"That's ridiculous! My own mother can hardly be a distraction! You need to be a part of this too. Come on."

"He's the facilitator, not I."

"We don't need to talk to a facilitator, we need parents, a father and a mother. I want you to come with us." Barbara shook her head and Cameron gave up and left with Sara alone.

"Why wouldn't he want your mother to be there too?" Sara asked.

"Because he wants complete control over the discussion and any decisions that come out of it."

"It's hard for me to believe your mother doesn't see that. I can't believe she puts up with it."

Cameron appeared troubled. "She either doesn't care or she doesn't want Father to think she cares. I wonder why. This isn't like her."

Wariness crept through Sara. Perhaps Ben and Barbara's marriage wasn't as normal as she had always believed. She wondered what Cameron thought about it. "It's strange that your parents wouldn't want to be together at a time like this. They're acting as if they aren't even married. Am I making any sense at all?"

"Perfect sense. They seem disconnected to me too."

Sara hardly dared ask: "Have they always been that way?" Why did this new knowledge bother her?

"No. When I was a child, they were very close; I'm sure of it. Somewhere along the line, though, when I was in high school I think, I became aware that things weren't right. I felt as if I were living in a house built of modeling blocks. From a distance the house was grand and glorious looking, or must have been, because so many people told me how beautiful it was. But I was in the middle of it, and I could see that it was just little plastic blocks, and I was afraid that if it were dropped or tossed this way or that it would break completely apart."

The ache in Sara's chest returned. "You make me ashamed of myself, Cameron. I was as taken in by the block house as anyone. If I hadn't been so awed by it, we would have become friends a long time ago, and maybe you wouldn't have felt so insecure and trapped."

"Your friendship would have meant everything to me," Cameron said softly. "Just as your love means everything to me now. I don't want us to end up disconnected like my parents. I would be desperately lonely and unhappy."

"So would I." Wanting to comfort Cameron a little and cheer him up, Sara darted into his path, turning to face him. He stopped abruptly. She grabbed his arms and looked him straight in the eyes. He gazed back at her in expectation. "I'll have you know right now, Cameron Carroll, that I require a lot more out of you than five minutes of your time before we both fall exhausted into bed at night."

Cameron kissed Sara's lips and said lightly, "And just what precisely does the queen wish the king's marital duties to be?" He kissed her again.

Sara's loosened her grip on Cameron's arms, and he promptly set the lantern on the ground. "I expect you to play with my hair, and hold my hand, and rub my back, and run with me, and talk with me, and read with me, and eat dinner with me. And if being a bishop makes it impossible to ever sleep in on Sunday or take a nap, then we'll simply make Sundays the night we go to bed early. And after we've been married twenty-two years, you'd better be kissing me as if I'm the only woman in the universe you've ever wanted to be with."

Cameron smiled indulgently, his hands finding her waist and drawing her close. "I'll be kissing you like that after we've been married a *hundred* years." He kissed her again, lingeringly.

Cameron's reference to Sara's long life span brought a new concern into Sara's conscious thoughts. When she withdrew from the kiss, she whispered, "It seems wrong not to tell your father about Novaun, but we can't. Not yet."

"That does make things difficult, but I agree."

"Who knows what kind of contact Control Colony has with Earth. If the Zarrists find out about my father, they'll kill him."

"We can't let that happen." Cameron released Sara and picked up the lantern. "Which means you can't tell my father the specific things that were in the blessing your father gave you either. And he will ask."

Sara hadn't thought of that. "You're right." They started up the trail again, hand in hand. "It really bugs me that your father has so much control over whether we get married or not."

"It bugs me too," Cameron admitted.

When Sara and Cameron arrived at the prefab shell outside of Government Grove belonging to Cameron's parents, one of the larger 1000-square-foot units designed in a Victorian style, Ben met them at the door and motioned them into camp chairs. He seated himself in the camp chair facing them, setting the lantern he was carrying on the floor opposite Cameron's.

Ben surveyed Sara and Cameron quizzically. "All right. Let me hear it. What makes the two of you think you know each other well enough to get married tomorrow?"

Cameron gave a complete account of his visit with the prophet, then told his father about the week he had spent in the temple with Sara's father and the strong prompting he had received at the stake center that he should pursue Sara as a wife. Ben interjected a question now and then, but, for the most part, he allowed Cameron to speak without interrupting him.

Eventually Ben turned his attention to Sara. He gazed at her gravely. "A successful marriage requires more than love; it requires mutual values and a similar perspective on life. Do you agree, Sara?"

Sara nodded sorrowfully, holding his gaze. She knew where his question was leading and realized this discussion would be far more difficult than she had expected. Her rejection of his vision of Eden would hurt him, and she wished there were some way they could avoid talking about it.

"Cameron doesn't believe any of us should be here. How do you feel about that?"

"I agree with him," Sara whispered.

"You don't sound as if you're convinced."

"I am convinced, but I'm also grieved. This hasn't been a comfortable truth to come to."

"Have you considered the possibility that you're feeling uncomfortable because your new conclusion is wrong?"

"I'm feeling uncomfortable because I realize I made a huge mistake in coming here. I'm . . . sorry, Ben."

“Why do you believe you made a mistake?”

“Because I came to know that Cameron truly is the Lord’s spokesman for the colony. If that’s true, then none of us should be here.”

The corners of Ben’s mouth lifted just slightly. “So the Lord’s spokesman for the colony told you that you were supposed to be his wife, and you, being the devout young woman you are, agreed to it.”

“No. Cameron would never use his position to pressure me or manipulate me like that. He simply loved me and treated me like a queen, and when I was ready, I proposed to him.”

“*You* proposed to *him*?” Ben’s voice was a touch disdainful.

Sara immediately regretted saying so much. Ben already believed his son was lacking in manliness. “Actually, Cameron told me that he wanted to marry me three weeks ago. We agreed that I would propose when I was ready to set a date.”

“You’re ready after a mere four weeks.”

“I love Cameron and it’s right. I don’t know what else to tell you except that my father knows it’s right also. He even gave me a wedding ring to give to Cameron, along with advice. I can’t believe his meeting in the temple with Cameron was coincidence.”

Sara told Ben more about the conversation she had had with her father the night before leaving for Eden, omitting all reference to Novaun. She also told him about the blessing her father had given to her and how it had inspired her to question the Eden plan for her life.

“What do you think your father meant when he told you to not be afraid of having more children than you may, at present, think is natural? How many children do you think is ‘natural,’ Sara?”

“The feeling I received from my father’s blessing was that I have an exceptionally healthy, fertile body, that marriage for me would mean a baby sooner rather than later, and that I would want to have a large family.”

“How large is large, Sara?”

“If I’m to be honest with myself, I’d have to say I think eight is a natural number since I’m from a family with eight children. Therefore, I have to believe Cameron and I will have at least eight children.”

“Do you agree, Cameron?”

“Yes. I believe we’ll have at least eight children, and that’s fine with me.”

“How long do you intend to wait to have your first child?”

Sara couldn’t tell him that she wasn’t sure the methods Earthons used to prevent pregnancy would even work on her super-fertile Novaunian body and that she had decided she would enjoy Cameron and let the first baby come when it wanted to. “I plan to talk to Cyndi as soon as possible to find out my options.” She did want to talk to Cyndi, but the questions she had in mind were more the ones she would ask her mother if she were available.

“I don’t want to wait too long to have a baby,” Cameron admitted, “but since Sara has to have it, it’s up to her how long we wait.”

“Do you believe it’s wise to have a baby before Sara’s education is complete?”

“Two years is a long time. I don’t believe the Lord wants us to wait that long.”

“What do you think, Sara?”

“I agree with Cameron. And once we do have a baby, he or she will have priority over my education.”

“So you intend to spend less time on your studies so that you can spend more time with your baby.”

“Probably. To tell you the truth, I don’t know how getting married will affect my studies. I don’t expect anything to change for a while. I just want to go into my marriage with the expectation that my home and family will be my primary focus.”

“You want your career to be homemaking, then.”

He sounded skeptical. Sara refused to allow him to rattle her. “Yes. How my marriage will affect my writing life, I don’t know. It’s too soon to tell.”

“That’s an interesting comment coming from a young lady who, only three weeks ago, felt such a desire to become a journalist that she declined an opportunity to obtain full status in the colony.”

“I declined the P.E. offer because I didn’t feel good about it. Perhaps the Lord gave me those feelings of discomfort because He knew being a journalist would allow me to be home with my children more than being the colony’s P.E. director would.” She didn’t dare set herself up for attack by telling him that she believed the Lord had directed her to reject the P.E. offer because the job had been meant for Cameron all along.

Ben tossed a glance in Cameron’s direction, but it seemed perfunctory. His attention still seemed to be riveted on Sara. “How do you feel, Cameron, about Sara’s desire to continue writing after you start having children?”

“To tell you the truth, I can’t imagine her not writing any more than I can imagine her not running, or not dancing, or not having church callings.”

“Even though it will impinge on the time she spends with you and your children?”

“She will hardly be our slave. Homemakers deserve time off to do things they enjoy as much as anyone. I’m counting on her to run with me every day too.”

Sara nodded at Cameron and smiled. How she longed to run with him and explore the forestland that surrounded them! They could go backpacking sometimes too. “We’ll have one of those strollers synthesized. You know, the ones with the huge wheels.”

Cameron grinned at her and nodded.

“How does it make you feel, Sara, that Cameron thinks of journalism as a hobby rather than a profession?”

Sara tensed. “Are you suggesting I would take an activity I enjoy less seriously than one I would perform for status or money?”

“Money and status are hardly issues in The Equality of Zion.”

Of course they weren’t, or they weren’t supposed to be anyway. The Equality of Zion assumed, however, that every adult contributed to the community through active involvement in a profession perfectly tailored to that person. Full-time homemaking didn’t figure into the equation at all and therefore claimed zero status. So much for status not being an issue in The Equality of Zion.

Sara struggled to keep her voice calm. What in the galaxy was she doing here? “All right, then obviously we’re talking about part-time versus full-time community service. In that case, the terms ‘hobby’ and ‘profession’ hardly apply.”

“Most people would disagree. They would say that the more time a person invests in a vocation, the more seriously he or she is likely to take it. So I ask you again, Sara, how does it make you feel that Cameron thinks of journalism as a hobby rather than a profession?”

“Since Cameron and I agree that my primary focus will be homemaking and motherhood, I can hardly find fault with his suggestion that writing is something I would do in my spare time.”

“Spare time? With eight children?”

Was Ben trying to provoke an argument between Cameron and her? Or was he just dense? “My mother does all kinds of things she likes to do.”

“Certainly she’s a busy woman. Where does she find the time?”

“I don’t know. She sets priorities, I guess. One day she may work especially hard to get the laundry done. Another day she may let several baskets of clean clothes stack up in the kitchen while she goes to help with play practice at the school. She and Dad may fold them later, or she may have one of us do it, or she may wait until the next day. On days with good weather, she takes the little ones outside to play and reads, which may mean some other housekeeping project gets put off for another week or two. Sometimes she works in the yard, but usually she pays my younger brothers and sisters to do it instead.”

“It sounds as if your mother makes time for herself by settling for a home that is not as clean and orderly as it might otherwise be.”

“Our house was never immaculate, it’s true, but with ten people going all different directions, I’m not sure having an immaculate house would be possible, even if my mother spent all of her time cleaning. My father would rather have a wife who reads a lot than a perfect house anyway, because he’s read everything and loves to discuss books.”

“Describe for Cameron, Sara, a house that is ‘never immaculate.’”

Perhaps discussing this issue was necessary, as painful as it was. Sara couldn’t look at Cameron. She didn’t doubt he had grown up in a show house. Sometimes she wished she had grown up in a show house, then reality pinched her and she realized she wouldn’t be any more comfortable living in a show house than she would be wearing a suit and dressing up like a business woman. What did Cameron expect of her in this regard? What did she expect of him? What did she expect of herself?

Sara gazed at Cameron’s hand cupped around hers. “Eternal laundry. Eternal modeling blocks. Toys on the floor or in baskets in the living room. Books everywhere. Tape in the carpet or no tape to be found anywhere in the house because little guys have used it all up on their projects. Drawings taped by those same little guys to the wall next to the front door, left there because Mom thinks they’re beautiful.”

Sara watched Cameron stroke her fingers one by one with one of his. “Fingerprints on the computer and TV screens. Lots of noise. A Christmas tree covered with kid-produced ornaments and Christmas cards and letters written by the ten-year-old aspiring writer of the family. Lakes and mud streaks on the kitchen floor and coats piled high in front of the door on snow days since half the kids in the neighborhood have decided to stay for hot chocolate.”

Sara turned her hand over, reveling in the feel of Cameron’s caresses. “My mother is an artistic person, you see, and my father’s an intellectual. Well, maybe ‘intellectual’ isn’t the right word, but I don’t know what else to call him. So, I guess it’s no surprise that in my home, everyone from the littlest to the biggest would find an equal outlet for expression of ideas and creativity, even if it often leaves a mess. And since my parents are both committed to the gospel and worked very hard to teach it to us, the Spirit was always there too, or was when I wasn’t giving them a hard time. If that’s the kind of home you want, Cameron, then it’s something I know how to give you. If you want a show house, we’ll both be miserable.”

Cameron’s fingers moved to the inside of Sara’s arm, trembling. “What you describe is real,” he whispered. “And beautiful. Like you.”

Sara finally lifted her head and looked at him. He returned her gaze lovingly. Who was this man she wanted so much to marry? In many ways he was a stranger. As enchanted as he seemed to be of the vision she placed before him, he had no idea what it meant in practical terms, just as she had no specific understanding of what it would be like being married to a

bishop. There was so much they couldn't possibly know yet, but the one thing Sara did know was that whatever joys and difficulties lay ahead, she wanted to experience them with him.

Ben's voice broke the spell. "Your stepmother is your new role model, then."

Sara looked away from Cameron, surprised. She had expected Ben to direct the discussion to what she and Cameron thought Cameron's role in the marriage should be. Ben seemed to be more interested in her attitudes toward the union than Cameron's. Why? Was he skeptical about her sudden change of heart with regard to the Eden colony? Or was it something else? The suspicion that Ben was interested in her romantically began bubbling into her consciousness again. She shoved it away, struggling to reply with composure: "My mother has always been my role model. So has my father. I just forgot about it for a while."

"For a librarian who grew up in foster homes and an uneducated homemaker, your parents have done quite well for themselves. Still, I was under the impression you aspired to a more challenging, fulfilling life."

Sara couldn't believe Ben's ability to make a condescending comment sound like a compliment. It sounded especially cold following the tender moment she and Cameron had just shared. She almost retorted with an icy remark of her own, but restrained herself. She had no desire to provoke an argument. Since she couldn't think of a single appropriate thing to say, she sat there speechless.

Thankfully, Cameron came to her rescue. "If I could achieve as much as Sara's father, I would think I had accomplished a great deal."

Ben raised an eyebrow at Cameron. "Sara, I believe, has more ambition than you do."

Another condescending compliment. Ben had this type of communication down to an art form. Even so, Sara would not rise to the bait and defend her father by telling Ben that he had read everything of importance that had ever been written, that he knew the scriptures word for word, that he could read and speak in dozens of different languages, and that if he lived what many people would think was a simple life without challenge or status, it was because he chose to do so. Her father himself wouldn't become offended and fire back a list of his accomplishments had Ben attacked him personally. He would aim that serene, self-assured gaze at Ben and smile in that knowing way he had, just like the cat, and say something along the lines of: "Since I desire to be nothing more than a baby factory, Cameron's lack of ambition suits me."

Cameron couldn't help himself. He laughed. "And you wonder, Father, why I want to marry her tomorrow!" He shot Sara that "I want you and I want you now" look. It appeared especially intimate in the dim light.

Sara melted right there on the spot. She hoped Ben didn't intend to make any more difficult remarks. She doubted she would be able to manage much more than a stammer from here on out.

"Are you both certain you want a hasty wedding?" Sara forced her eyes away from Cameron's and again gave her attention to Ben, who watched them keenly. "If you wait another month, after the colony is firmly established, we could give you a far more elegant celebration."

Finally the discussion had arrived at the desired destination. Sara hoped they were almost done. She knew it had to be late, and she was exhausted. "If I can't marry Cameron in the temple, then I'm not going to feel much like celebrating on my wedding day anyway, whether it's tomorrow or a month from now."

"I feel the same way," Cameron agreed. "And I know it sounds insane, but we're both sure and ready to get married now. Neither one of us feels good about putting it off."

Ben addressed his question to Sara: "Have you considered the possibility of breaking off your relationship with Cameron and going back to Earth permanently in two years?"

Go back in two years? Hadn't he believed a word Cameron had told him about his meeting with the prophet? "Yes . . . I have. Or did before Cameron told me that none of us would be leaving in two years."

How could she not have thought about it? Especially in light of her father's blessing and its promise that she would meet her Novaunian family? She had forced herself to consider the possibility that there might be a Novaunian husband in her future and that she should end her relationship with Cameron. "I've thought about it and prayed about it a great deal and have come to the conclusion that it's right to marry Cameron and right to marry him now. A bishop needs a wife."

Ben's face was expressionless. "Do you think the Lord will wait a week, Sara?"

"Is He going to have to?" For a moment, Sara was afraid Ben would refuse to give them permission to marry at all.

"Cameron, I would like to speak with Sara for a few minutes privately."

Ben's request so alarmed Sara that she couldn't respond. She could only think of one reason why he would want to speak with her privately. If he really was attracted to her and wished to pursue a relationship, he would reveal his desire now. Sara was immediately ashamed by the thought. For two weeks she had been trying to ignore these horrible suspicions, with varying degrees of success. Why wouldn't they just go away?

As Cameron arose, he picked up his lantern and looked from his father to Sara, puzzled. "Uh . . . all right."

Sara watched Cameron walk to the door, wanting to ask Cameron to stay but knowing she couldn't do so without putting suspicions into *his* mind. Once the door closed behind Cameron, Sara turned to Ben again. The more she tried to squelch the notion that Ben was attracted to her, the more aware she became that they were completely alone.

His eyes delved into hers in concern. "I really wish you would reconsider this engagement. I don't believe you and Cameron are as compatible as you would like to think you are."

This conversation sounded familiar. "Certainly you're not calling me a liar again?" she said, forcing a smile. Perhaps donning a punch-drunk attitude would relax her and keep the discussion light.

Ben smiled affectionately. "Certainly not, since you're the most honest person I've ever known."

His smile was a little too warm, his compliment a little too profuse. Sara made circles in the air with her hands. "Then what sort of delusion am I suffering from this week, Doctor?"

"*Ben*," he corrected.

Sara shifted in her chair and crossed her legs. "Let me guess," she began extravagantly. "I'm obsessed with Cameron, and my obsession has led me to discard my desire for rational thinking and embrace Cameron's fanaticism."

"No," Ben said gently. "That isn't quite it. You *are* in love, but not with Cameron. Cameron just happens to be in love with you and available."

Sara's alarm sharpened into dread. If Ben believed she was in love with someone other than Cameron, that someone could only be he. The possibility that Ben was attracted to her was bad enough, but he believed she returned his feelings! She somehow managed to speak through her panic. "So you believe I'm transferring my feelings for this other man to Cameron?"

Ben nodded.

Sara laughed nervously. "What you suggest is absurd! There hasn't been anyone but Cameron since I was fourteen!"

Ben hand closed around hers on her thigh. "I'm not talking about a youthful infatuation, Sara. I'm talking about adult love."

Sara felt as if she would suffocate. How had this happened? She wiggled her hand out from under his, hoping he would take the hint. He didn't. With her hand gone, there was nothing between his hand and her thigh.

"Adult passion, Sara, for a man you laugh with, and cry with, and confide in. A man you've known considerably longer than you've known Cameron. A man who knows your heart and your mind and your anxieties. A man whose heart and mind *you* know."

His voice lowered to a whisper, his fingers gingerly beginning to caress her thigh. Chills shot through Sara, and she wasn't sure whether they were from excitement or horror. She knew she should move her leg, but felt paralyzed, wanting to know what he would say next.

"A man whose touches make your heart race, and your skin burn, and your body sweat and tremble. A man you can't admit to yourself you love, because you believe he's forbidden . . ."

Voices began whirling in Sara's head, accompanied by memories of Ben's heart beating against hers as he held her, his fingers stroking her cheeks and making them burn, the smell of his cologne, his thumb resting in the nape of her neck. Everything that had seemed either irritating or innocuous these past weeks suddenly became significant.

"We know you wouldn't want to get romantically involved with a married man, even unintentionally." *If you wanted me to come to you, all you had to do was ask.* "My gut feeling is that he's attracted to you and can't resist pursuing it." *When he told you that, how did it make you feel?* "You are no tomboy, Sara. You are a beautiful, intense woman capable of attracting all kinds of men, even classy, *married*, former bishops." *How could I forget the black-haired girl in black spandex who sprinted with the liveliness and power of a panther?* "I'll have to say, you looked pretty hot in those spandex tights." *Forgive me, Sara, but it seems a crime against nature that such a beautiful, passionate young woman never had a boyfriend.* "I don't want us to end up disconnected like my parents. I would be desperately lonely and unhappy." *Sara . . . sweet, sweet Sara . . .*

Ben's hand had become still, and the look on his face gradually changed, becoming a mirror of the combination of hope and apprehension that had been on Cameron's face earlier that evening as he had waited for her outside of the dormitory. The observation rendered Sara breathless with amazement. Until that moment, she had not perceived how alike Ben and Cameron were, not just in appearance, but in their expressions, mannerisms, and intensely emotional, gentle natures—everything. Realization struck. Ben thought she was so attracted to Cameron because Cameron reminded her of him!

What does this man want from me? He was always so kind to her, so affectionate and patient that she knew what he felt for her was more than physical attraction. *Am I involved with a married man?* Sara didn't know whether she was gazing at him appalled or in awe.

Ben watched her for many moments before he smiled a little. "I've been waiting for the right opportunity to tell you my feelings for some time." He removed his hand from her leg and scooted his chair a little closer, resting his fingers on her arm with a caress. "I love you, Sara."

Sara wits finally returned. She shook her arm, flinging his hand away. "How can you say that, Ben? You have a wife and a family."

The corners of Ben's mouth fell, and his eyes filled with pain. "Barbara and I have been estranged for many years."

Ben and Barbara did seem disconnected, but this was outrageous! “Perhaps you wouldn’t be estranged if you would go home and be a husband to your wife instead of chasing college girls!”

Ben sighed. “I don’t chase college girls, Sara.”

“Oh?” Sara wanted to scream, sob, and throw up at the same time. “So this is why you wanted so much for me to have the P.E. job. It was an excuse to give me a house so that you could visit me there. I can’t believe you would do this to me!” How in the galaxy had she gotten herself into this mess?

Ben laid his hand on her arm again, squeezing. “Please, Sara. Calm down. It isn’t what you think. I want you to be my wife, not my mistress.”

Sara gaped at him. The thought of it seemed preposterous, but it made more sense than any other alternative. Ben was no more a womanizer than Cameron was. It simply wasn’t in him to make love to a woman who wasn’t his wife. Not intentionally anyway.

When Sara didn’t reply, Ben said softly, “Why should that surprise you, Sara? I told you that I love you. What else would I want? Could you really believe I was a philanderer?”

“No,” she whispered, still in shock.

“I didn’t think so. You know me better than that.”

“I know that you already have a wife.”

“I told you that my wife and I are estranged. I’ve been considering divorce for well over a year. Once it’s official, you and I can be married, and then in two years, we can return to Earth and be sealed.”

“Sealed?” Sara yanked her arm away from his hand and shook her head quickly. “Don’t give me that garbage! You must really think I’m an idiot! My father’s a temple worker, remember? And you were a bishop! You *know* that the Church doesn’t so easily grant permission for a man in your situation to be sealed to his second wife. It would take *years* if it happened at all!”

“I know that anything right will work out.”

“You’re insane.”

“Once Barbara learns of my feelings for you and we start the divorce process, the two of you won’t be able to work together. That’s why I wanted you to take the P.E. job.”

“I thought you were a happily married man.”

“I will be once you are my bride.

“You deceived me. You deceived all of us.”

“It was a necessary deception. I knew you would reject me if I moved too quickly, and I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable or shatter that beautiful innocence of yours.”

Sara was as flattered as she was furious. Bishop Lanham’s words shouted in her mind, “*Wake up, Sara! He is dangerous to you, and in a very personal way!*” Feeling a rush of adrenaline, Sara sprang to her feet, and moved to stand behind her chair. “As delighted as I am that a man like you would deign to notice me, I choose to be Cameron’s eternal companion, not your trophy wife.”

“My *trophy* wife?” He appeared hurt. “Is that really what you believe?”

She had no idea what to think about whatever it was that had developed between Ben and her, let alone what to say to him about it, but she had no doubts about her love for Cameron. Urgency pressed her mind with the words, *Marry Cameron now!* She gripped the back of the camp chair. “Will you give Cameron and me license to get married tomorrow or not?”

Ben stared at her. “You’re still determined to go through with this?”

"Yes, of course I am. Cameron's the love of my life. He always has been. Marriage is the next natural step."

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I'm serious. Cameron and I came here tonight to get license to marry, and I'd like to know whether you'll give it to us or not."

"Please reconsider. You need time to think about what I've told you."

"What you've told me changes nothing about my feelings for Cameron."

Ben mouth tightened and his eyes filled with resolution. "Then I'll do better than give you license, I'll marry you myself. Tomorrow afternoon at one o'clock."

Sara hesitated, not knowing whether Cameron would agree to the arrangement. "Cameron and I want Tony Wright to marry us."

Ben shook his head. "You want to sleep with Cameron tomorrow? Fine. Then I'll be the one to perform the ceremony."

Sara tightened her hold on the back of the chair. "I am *not* a tramp!"

Ben's eyes never left her face. "No, you're a woman of high sexual energy attracted to a beautiful boy who's in love with you, and you're too innocent to perceive that hormones are driving you into this silly marriage, not the Spirit."

So she was rushing into marriage with Cameron because she was desperate to sleep with Ben, and Cameron was just the next best man available? Was that what he thought? Ben's belief might have been funny had it not been so disgusting and bizarre.

Sara almost shouted her outrage at him, but refrained. Something in her head continued urging, *Marry Cameron now!* Something in her heart warned her that if she argued with Ben, especially about something as intimate as her future sleeping arrangements, she would soon be making up with him there alone in his house and might not be marrying Cameron at all.

Sara wanted to point out that a governor who would agree to perform a silly marriage was far sillier than the silly bride and groom, but she said instead, with perfect calmness, "All right then, one o'clock it is. Center Park." She turned to leave.

"Not yet, Sara. I have one more condition."

Sara turned to face him again, folding her arms.

"You'll refrain from becoming pregnant for at least three months."

Blood rushed into Sara's cheeks and nausea tore through her chest. This couldn't be happening. How *dare* he? "What Cameron and I decide to do about having a baby is no one's business but ours."

Ben removed the phone from his belt and punched in a number, his gaze never leaving hers. He lifted the phone to his ear and after a moment said, "Cyndi, I have a young lady here who's getting married tomorrow and needs assistance from a certified nurse midwife."

Ben removed the phone from his ear and held it out to Sara. Sara took it by the tip of the antenna, not wanting to touch him. Sara pressed the phone to her ear and forced herself to say, "Cyndi?"

"Sara? What's going on? Is it true? Are you and Cameron getting married tomorrow?"

"Yes. Ben's going to marry us tomorrow at one o'clock. I would have called you myself, but my new father-in-law obviously thinks I'm a moron." She glared at him, and he glared back, his blue eyes flashing. "Either that, or he thinks my fingers are broken."

Cyndi chuckled. "Poor Ben. He thinks he's too young and desirable to be a grandfather yet."

Sara moved the phone away from her mouth and said to Ben, not sure whether her words were motivated by desire for revenge or suicide, "She says you think you're too young and desirable to be a grandfather yet."

Ben held himself perfectly still, but his countenance seemed to pulsate with rage. It served him right! He *would* be her father-in-law and grandfather to her children, and he ought to feel it! Sara was unable to restrain herself from saying to Cyndi, "You know how these hot-blooded young men are. Eventually they settle down and become wonderful grandfathers."

"Ben will *love* being a grandfather when the time comes. You wait. How early is too early tomorrow, Sara?"

"How about ten o'clock?"

"I'll see you then."

Sara pressed the button to end the call, then dropped the phone into the camp chair. "I'll see Cyndi, but I'll make no promises." She turned and walked to the door with as much dignity as she could muster, trying to ignore the feeling that Ben's eyes were hungering over her body.

Once Sara shut the door, she gasped, shuddering again and again, feeling so weak she thought she might faint. Ben was more than twice her age, married, and almost her father-in-law. It wasn't right that he should be in love with her and caressing her thigh and arranging birth control for her. It wasn't right that he thought she was in love with him and was noticing things like her potential sexual energy. She could not face this, but she had to face it. She had ignored the truth for too long already.

How could she tell Cameron what his father had said and done? It would hurt him, disgust him, and possibly even enrage him. Sara considered telling him she couldn't marry him after all rather than subject him to that, but her mind kept screaming, *Marry Cameron now!* His father's behavior would wound him, but her refusal to marry him would lay him to waste.

The light from Cameron's lantern enveloped Sara as he approached. Sara quickly calmed herself. She would have to tell Cameron, but not yet. His mind and body hadn't had a good rest in over two years. She would give him the vacation of his life before she laid this new burden on him.

"What did he want?" Cameron asked, taking Sara's hand.

"He was concerned my feelings for you might not be strong enough for marriage. I assured him they were, and he finally agreed to marry us tomorrow at one o'clock."

Chapter 22: THE SPRINT

After Cameron left Sara at the door of the dorm, she managed to go to the bathroom and kick off her boots before collapsing onto her mattress in the moonlit room, still wearing her jeans and Navy shirt. No one was there, so she assumed they were all still dancing in the dining hall. That was good. It meant she could make some arrangements without waking anyone up.

Sara reached for her phone and searched the directory for Tony's number. When she found it, she hit the dial button and waited. Loud music nearly drowned Tony's curious, "Hello?"

Sara tapped her pillow impatiently. "It's me, Tony. Go outside so that we can hear each other. This is important."

"Sure, Sara. Give me a minute." Sara heard Tony's voice mute and mix with others, and then it was clear. "What do you need?"

"I need you to help me get Cameron away from the colony for a few days."

"You want a honeymoon!"

"Well, yes, of course I do, but this goes beyond desire. Cameron needs this—he needs it desperately—and doesn't know it."

"I hear you. He gets home from China and bam—he's on his way to Eden, and all anyone cares about is that he's the fanatical bishop. It's as if he never even went on a mission. Even his parents give him a hard time. It's unbelievable! They should be bragging about him!"

"Yeah, he really did get gypped."

"He never complains, but it must get to him sometimes. What do you want me to do?"

"Cameron's father is marrying us tomorrow at one o'clock." Sara stopped suddenly. Tony was already disturbed by the way Ben treated Cameron. This new piece of information would probably really offend him. "Please don't ask why. Neither Cameron nor I want it this way, but Ben . . . Dr. Carroll . . . insisted."

Tony didn't speak for several moments. When he did, his voice was low and troubled. "You weren't exaggerating when you said Cameron's need to get away was desperate."

"You just have no idea, Tony."

"I'll make sure he knows that Russ and Brent and I can take care of things while he's gone."

"Thank you. And there's something else I need you to do. After Cameron and I go to his . . . our . . . house after the wedding, get some people together and synthesize backpacking supplies and food for three days. Then you can leave it outside our door that evening or the next morning."

"Will do, babe."

Sara thanked Tony and ended the call, then removed the little album containing newspaper articles and pictures of Cameron from one of her crates and flipped through it under the focused light of a reading lamp, yearning for the simple times she and Cameron had shared as teenagers. As she gazed at his senior picture, imagining his arms around her, her phone rang.

Obviously Cameron was lonely too. She answered the phone, shocked to hear Ben's voice instead of Cameron's. "Sara?"

Sara's chest ached with queasiness. "I have nothing to say to you." She pushed the button to hang up. Before she could turn off the phone, it rang again, and, feeling like a fool, she answered it, knowing she would regret it. "You can't do this, Ben."

"I have to do this, Sara! Please give me a chance to apologize for what happened tonight."

"You have one minute!"

"I'm sorry I made you feel like a tramp. You hurt me, but that was no excuse. I've never for one second believed you were anything but pure and exemplary."

"Really?" Sara said, barely, her eyes and throat burning. She hadn't realized how much his words had hurt her.

"Really. I'm sorry."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, but you upset me, and I needed resolution about the wedding."

"I didn't mean to upset you. I tried, in fact, to treat you with as much sensitivity as I could."

"I know," Sara whispered. He *had* been treating her with delicacy before she had demanded to know whether he would give her and Cameron license to marry.

"It's just that your determination to get married tomorrow caught me completely off guard. You must believe me, Sara. I could never look at you as a mere trophy. You *must* give me a chance to explain."

"Please don't do this, Ben."

"I'd like to talk to you tomorrow, after your appointment with Cyndi. I'll meet you at the hospital. This isn't something that can be discussed over the phone or in the middle of the night when we're both exhausted and volatile."

"I'm not meeting you anywhere. There's simply nothing to discuss. I want to marry Cameron."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said tenderly. "I love you, Sweet Panther."

"You can't say things like that!" Sara said in panic, but it was too late. He had ended the call.

Sara turned off her phone and tossed it and the photo album into one of her crates, prostrating herself on her mattress, too drained to think or even to weep. She drifted to sleep, feeling comforted in the knowledge that Ashley would soon return and occupy the mattress next to hers. Having a friend like Ashley nearby helped her feel secure.

Sara slept deeply but not restfully. She dreamed that Ben had kissed her in the moonlit grove Sunday evening, not just once, but over and over again, prolonged, vehement kisses that filled her with fire and shame. "Sweet, sweet Sara," he whispered between kisses. "Little Panther . . . beautiful Sara . . . sweet, sweet Sara . . ."

Sara tried to push him away, but found herself clutching him closer instead, thrilled and dying for him.

In another dream, she was in his house and they had argued, then apologized, then melted into each other's arms. Ben kissed her lovingly, soothing her with his whispers. "I'm so sorry, Sara . . . I would never hurt you . . . I love you, Sweet Panther . . ."

Then Sara was sitting in the yogurt shop, feeling Ben's warm hands over her icy ones, pressed against her burning cheeks, her body burning . . .

And she was back in the moonlit grove, kissing Ben again, still burning, still intoxicated with desire for him and ashamed.

"Sara . . . Sara!" Ashley called.

"Make him leave me alone!" Sara tried to cry. Or did she scream instead, "Go away! Leave us alone!"

"Sara . . . *Sara!*" Ashley said, even more emphatically than before. The glistening moonlit grove faded and Sara awoke to shakes and sunlight pouring through the windows of the dorm.

"Since when do you get up before I do?" Sara muttered, guilty feelings from the nightmare lingering.

"It's nine o'clock, sleepyhead, and Cameron's here."

Sara's senses suddenly cleared, and she threw off the nightmare, in the process gaining terrible understanding, aching with guilt. That evening in the grove, Ben would have tried to kiss her had Cameron not come when he did. After everything that had happened with Cameron during the past four weeks, she didn't think she would have allowed Ben to kiss her, but what if Cameron hadn't come to Eden? She would have kissed Ben and a part of her would have loved it—she had no doubt of it. He might have even persuaded her to marry him, despite the fact that there was no way such a marriage could ever have been what she truly wanted.

"Didn't you hear me, Sara?" Ashley persisted. "Cameron's here!"

"Cameron's here . . ." Sara repeated, as if she didn't completely believe it. "Cameron's here." The guilt melted, replaced by joy. Cameron was here, and they were getting married today. She had no reason to feel guilty for mistakes she had never made.

Sara quickly changed and brushed her hair, then met Cameron at the door. He was already wearing his camel-brown suit. He led her to their date tree, then reached into his suit pocket and brought out a small black box.

Sara gingerly touched the lid. "It can't possibly be what it appears to be."

Cameron smiled in satisfaction as he opened the box and displayed the diamond engagement ring with its accompanying wedding band. "Why not?"

Sara gazed at the rings, entranced. They weren't elaborate, nor were they plain; they were classic and perfect. "They're beautiful!"

"Do you like them? Really?"

"Very much. Where did you get them? I didn't think we were using the synthesizing machines for this sort of thing yet."

"We aren't. I bought the rings before we came. I sold my BMW to get the money." Cameron removed the engagement ring from the box and carefully slipped it on the ring finger of Sara's left hand; it was a little loose. "Since the buyer was someone I knew, we arranged it so that I could continue to use the car until I left. I gave him a good deal."

Sara might have laughed had she not felt so ill. "The prophet told you to get married as soon as possible, so you figured you'd better come to Eden prepared!"

Cameron closed the ring box and put it back into his pocket. "I wrote vows for both of us too." He took folded sheets of paper out of his other pocket. "I hope you don't care, but it's been on my mind since my meeting with the prophet. We have no idea, really, what my father could make us agree to if we left it to him."

Being married this way felt so wrong, but there wasn't a thing either she or Cameron could do about it. "I never even thought of that."

"I took it all out of the scriptures, and it's similar to the ceremony I'll perform for the other colonists who get married."

"Can't we just repeat the words of the basic ceremony?"

"I'm not comfortable with that. It may not be a sealing ceremony, but I still don't like the idea of tampering with it. Under the circumstances, this is the best way." Cameron unfolded the papers and presented them to Sara.

Sara waved the papers away, shaking her head. "I'm sure whatever you've come up with is fine."

Cameron refolded the papers and slid them back into his pocket. "Are you sure you still want to go through with this?"

Sara kissed him lightly. "I'm sure."

Cameron withdrew from the kiss, smiling. "You get your things packed and ready to go, and I'll have Brandon and Adam take your trunks to our house. We'll start inviting everyone to the wedding. We aren't going to give my father a chance to change his mind."

* * *

Sara managed to eat some crackers and drink something similar to apple juice at the dining hall that morning, but it didn't make her feel any better. Had Ben been present, she didn't think she could have eaten anything at all.

No one had expected to be attending a wedding that day. Some were shocked, some were bewildered, and some were amused. After Cameron made the announcement, Ashley said to Sara, marveling, "I expected you to propose to him, not pounce on him!"

Sara couldn't help but smile. "I can't restrain myself. Your brother's irresistible, the prize of my life."

"Leave it to a couple of sprinters to race fast and furiously into marriage!"

"Let's just hope we both make it to the finish line before we collapse."

* * *

After breakfast Cameron walked with Sara to the little hospital office Cyndi temporarily shared with the physicians with plans to visit the wounded while Sara met with Cyndi. They arrived without incident, and Sara finished talking with Cyndi an hour later, her mini backpack stuffed and some of her anxieties calmed. She wondered how long it would be before she began visiting Cyndi for prenatal care. She knew the time was close, but the thought still seemed strange.

Cameron met Sara outside Cyndi's office to walk her back to the dormitory to shower and change. When she saw him, she embraced him tightly, whispering compassionately into his ear, "It's tragic you have no one like Cyndi you can talk to."

"I have you, who talked to Cyndi, and I have half a trunk of books about marriage in my office."

Sara withdrew from Cameron slightly, her eyes widening. "Half a trunk?"

"I had to have instruction books to go with the ring and the calling."

"You really are prepared!"

Cameron offered his arm to Sara as they began walking. "I asked my grandmother to give me some titles of books about marriage and parenting, because I knew anything she recommended would be good. She gave me a couple of them from her own library, and I bought the rest. When I told your father what she had recommended, he agreed that her choices were excellent and gave me a list for at least fifty more!"

Sara moaned, slipping her arm through Cameron's. "It figures!"

"Your father really is a walking library, Sara. He's incredible. Some of those books he recommended have been out of print for years! When I left the temple on Saturday, I found a box in my car with many of the books he had recommended and about twenty discs he had recorded himself."

Gratitude warmed Sara. "He really is incredible. It was so nice of him to do that for you."

"He did it for you too."

"I really wish he could be here."

"So do I. I wonder how he gets what's in his mind onto computer disc."

"He's had a particular laptop computer for as long as I can remember that no one touches, even my mom. Maybe he has everything recorded in there."

"A computer that records thoughts?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"That's so incredible!"

Sara saw Cameron's father first, approaching them from the direction of Center Park. He was dressed in his nicest jeans and a sky-blue polo shirt. Everything about him looked immaculate and anxious. He didn't appear at all pleased that Cameron was with her.

Sara's heart raced and her hands began to sweat. She couldn't deny it. On some level, she really did love him. Memories of the dreams poured over her, thrilling and infuriating her.

Sara blushed. Ben watched her with compassion, appearing a little relieved. She tried to avert her eyes but couldn't. How dare he awaken these feelings in her! He was a married man and she wanted to marry his son! He had no right to do this to her or to his family!

"Good morning, Father," Cameron said cheerfully. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it? Perfect for a wedding!"

Ben smirked. He looked as though he wanted to say, "Cameron, you poor fool," but instead he said, "It is a beautiful day. Your mother's feeling left out of these arrangements, son, and wants to talk to you." He motioned in the direction of their home beyond Government Grove. "Why don't you go to her now, and I'll walk Sara back to the dorm."

Sara couldn't believe how smooth Ben was. She scowled at him, folding her left arm across her waist and resting her hand on Cameron's arm with a squeeze, as if to reinforce her hold on him.

"Actually, Father, my understanding is that Mother and Ashley are waiting at the dorm for Sara now with plans to help her get ready for the wedding, so it appears I'm already heading in the right direction."

Ben's eyes rested uncomfortably on Sara's diamond ring, then rose again and looked directly into her eyes. "You're not looking well, Sara," he said quietly. "You don't have to do this."

Sara didn't want to talk to Ben at all, but she knew that only she could speak the desires of her heart in a convincing way. "I *want* to do this."

Ben gazed at her gravely. "Are you absolutely sure?"

Sara met Ben's gaze with as much solemnity as she could muster. "I've never been more sure about anything in my life."

Ben stroked his chin with his left hand, and Sara was shocked to see that he wasn't wearing his wedding ring. His sky-blue eyes shimmered in an abnormal way. "I'm afraid I feel inclined to postpone the wedding until you're feeling better."

Seeing Ben so hurt immobilized Sara with grief. How could she reject him? How could she not? Anger stabbed her. How could he put her in this hopeless position? *Please, Heavenly Father, tell me what to say!* Moments passed, and she heard herself speak with mildness, yet assuredness, "One way or another, Cameron and I are getting married today. You've already given your permission; Cyndi will vouch for that. The only question is, will you be the one to marry us or will Tony?"

Ben dropped his eyes, pondering. When he finally looked at Sara again, he said, "If you're still determined, *I'll* be the one who will marry you today. I'll see you in Temple Park at one o'clock."

Feeling dazed, Sara watched Ben walk away. She wondered what would have happened had Cameron not been with her. Once Ben was gone, Cameron turned to Sara, his face pale and solemn. "My father wasn't wearing his wedding ring."

"Maybe all of those books my father gave to you aren't just for us."

"I just hope it isn't too late for them."

"So do I."

* * *

Ashley and Barbara were waiting for Sara at the dormitory as Cameron had promised, both perfectly polished in their Sunday clothes and sitting in camp chairs near her mattress. Seeing Barbara brought new anxieties. Barbara should have been part of the discussion the night before. What did she think about the suddenness of the wedding? What had Ben told her? How could she face Barbara after everything that had happened?

When Ashley saw Sara, she jumped up and hurried toward her, slipping her arm under hers and directing her to her mother. "We've packed most of your things. I hope you don't mind, but we didn't think you would want to deal with it."

"No," Sara said in relief. It was one less thing to think about. "Thank you."

Barbara stood and reached for Sara's hand, her expression queer. "Let me see this diamond of yours."

Sara held out her left hand, feeling uncomfortable. How was she supposed to explain the ring to Barbara? "Cameron surprised me with it this morning."

"It's lovely," Barbara said, releasing Sara's hand. Her eyes filled with tears, and she averted them, embarrassed. "Obviously the young man who calls himself my son has excellent taste."

Barbara's discomposure alarmed Sara. She was usually so elegant and poised. Sara didn't know what to say. "He learned it from you, I think."

Ashley, too, appeared troubled by Barbara's discomfort. She looked at Sara helplessly and shrugged.

Barbara quickly wiped away her tears. "Please excuse me, Sara. I'm not prepared for this."

"I'm sorry it has to be this way, Barbara," Sara said with feeling. "It's just that everything is strange here. Cameron really does need to be married."

Barbara nodded. Once she managed to look at Sara directly again, she tried to smile. "I do understand. I thought it was odd to begin with that the Church would call a young unmarried man to such a position."

"We all did," Sara agreed.

Barbara squeezed Sara's arm in a familiar way. "I had a good feeling about you and Cameron when you were introduced, and I felt it even more strongly when he blessed you. Perhaps that is what is so unsettling. We should have known about you long ago, but instead, you appear out of nowhere and instantly step into this intimate role Cameron has been so meticulously preparing for you, preparations he has concealed from us as effectively as he once concealed you. My mind and emotions are reeling. I am tempted to shake Cameron and demand, 'Who are you and what have you done with my son?'"

"He hasn't changed that much, Mother," Ashley said gently. "And he really didn't *conceal* Sara from us when he was in high school. Adam and Brandon and I could see that he was hopelessly in love with someone, but since he and Sara had never even said 'hi' to each other, he had nothing to tell us."

"Then tell me why it was that you three could see it so plainly and I, his mother, could not."

Ashley shook her head. "I don't know."

Sara had never dreamed that Cameron's inability to communicate with her in high school had disturbed Barbara to such an extent, and she adored Barbara for it, all the more because her perspective was so different from that of her husband. "Sometimes brothers and sisters see things parents don't. Every now and then my brother Josh made cracks about Cameron. The night Ashley and Brandon and Adam came to my house, Josh bragged that he was the only one in the family who had figured it out."

Ashley grinned. "We did have fun harassing you."

"It still breaks my heart to think my extraordinary son was so shy that he couldn't even say 'hello' to a young woman he liked."

"Really, Barbara, Cameron is no more shy than you ever thought he was," Sara assured. "Neither one of us are. We were both insecure around each other to be sure, but it was more misunderstanding that prevented us from speaking to each other than anything else."

"Still, I can't help but think that if I had known enough to give him any encouragement in that direction at all, he would have brought you home to us a long time ago."

"It breaks my heart too," Ashley whispered.

"And now this same distressingly insecure son is showing shocking initiative by giving his fiancée a diamond he should not possess and insisting he will get married today, after only a month of courtship. I can't help it. I'm baffled."

"You should go and talk to Cameron about it right now, *alone*," Sara embraced Barbara. "Please. Cameron needs it as much as you do, believe me."

Barbara held Sara affectionately for several moments, then pulled away with a nod. "I will. But not now." She looked at her watch. "The two of you are supposed to be getting married in an hour and a half, and we need to get you ready! You're absolutely certain you want to do this today?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It was my idea."

"Cameron sincerely did not push you into this?"

Sara shook her head. "He wouldn't do that. He's never been anything but a perfect gentleman."

Barbara's face relaxed in relief.

"Mother brought a dress you can wear if you would like," Ashley said, motioning to a clothing bag laid out on Sara's mattress. "It's beautiful, but I told her you would choose another, so don't make me a liar."

Barbara lifted a short-sleeved, tea-length dress covered with creamy white lace out of the bag and held it up for Sara to inspect. It looked like something Barbara might have worn to a wedding or an elegant luncheon.

Sara ran her fingers gingerly over the lace. It had the feel of silk. "It's gorgeous. I've never worn anything this beautiful in my life!"

"It will do for a wedding dress, I think," Barbara said with satisfaction.

Sara nodded and murmured her agreement, then looked at Ashley in question. She wore an expression of satisfaction identical to that of her mother except that her green eyes sparkled knowingly, as if she and Sara shared a secret. She lifted the lid of one of Sara's trunks, revealing Sara's cobalt blue knit skirt and shirt lying neatly folded on top of the other items.

"You cleaned it?" Sara burst out in delight. The synthesizing technology made cleaning and repairing clothing easy, but fifty girls had only one such cleaning machine to share for the

time being, and Sara hadn't wanted to hassle with cleaning the blue dress when she had two other outfits that were already clean.

"Of course. It's my wedding present to my brother. What do you think he would want? An elegant bride or a hot bride?"

All Sara could think of was Cameron dressed in white and lying prostrate on the temple altar, sobbing because he wouldn't be able to have his own temple marriage for many years, perhaps decades, his reflection echoing eternally in the sealing room mirrors. "He wants a temple bride," Sara said barely, her voice shaking, the nauseated ache in her chest feeling as if it would explode.

Sara ran to the little bathroom and leaned over one of the toilets, gulping air. Nothing came.

Eventually Sara felt Ashley kneel against her back and rest her hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Sara."

"You have nothing to be sorry about." She forced herself to sit up. "Oh why can't I just throw up? Maybe these horrible feelings would be released with everything else."

"Perhaps it would be better if you get married another day," Barbara said tentatively. "It wouldn't hurt to give yourself time to adjust to the idea of having a civil wedding."

What Barbara suggested made sense, but Sara's mind and spirit continued shouting, *Marry Cameron now!* "If we could wait a little longer, I probably would, but we can't." Sara reached for a tissue to blow her nose, catching a glimpse of the diamond ring Cameron had given to her. She gazed at it, reminded of Cameron's love for her and hers for him and how much they needed each other now. "There'll be time enough to adjust after the wedding."

With Ashley's help, Sara stood up and waved the other two women out of the bathroom so that she could take a shower. "I'll bring you a towel and shampoo," Ashley said before shutting the door.

"My Royals shirt and sweatpants too."

Ashley smiled. "Of course!"

Sara emerged from her shower ten minutes later, refreshed. After she slipped into her Royals shirt and sweatpants, Barbara and Ashley sat her down in a camp chair and began combing and blow drying her hair. She so loved the feel of them working with her hair that she almost allowed them to curl the ends. She had only curled her hair once or twice in her life, however, and didn't want to present herself to her groom looking like someone she wasn't.

In the end, Sara did choose to wear the cobalt blue dress, as Ashley had known she would, and Sara relented and allowed Ashley to tell her mother the significance of that particular outfit.

The corner of Barbara's mouth lifted a little. "Why didn't you just tell me about the dress to begin with, Ashley? I wouldn't have even bothered with the other one!"

Sara looked at herself in the one little mirror they had and was pleased. "Cameron likes this on me so well I really ought to have other outfits like it synthesized."

"You should," Ashley insisted. "Bright blue-red and deep green and even black. You would *really* look chic in black."

"Chic?" It was word Sara would never have thought to describe herself.

"Cameron says hot, and I say chic." Ashley's face was adamant in the mirror next to Sara's. Ashley gripped Sara's shoulders from behind, as if she wanted to shake her. "Look at yourself! You are *chic*. We'll have to have lapis earrings made to go with this dress."

"Lapis?"

"It's a deep blue mineral, the same color as this dress and your eyes."

“That would be better than these silver studs,” Sara admitted.

Barbara moved Sara’s hair to the side and tucked the dress tag under the fabric where it belonged. “And we’ll have malachite ones made to go with the green dress and onyx to go with the black.”

Sara remembered her father’s ring. “Speaking of jewelry,” she said, breaking away from Ashley, “I need to dig Cameron’s wedding ring out of my box before Brandon and Adam get here.”

“You have a wedding ring for Cameron?” Barbara responded in astonishment as Sara knelt next to one of her crates of belongings.

“The night before we came, my father gave me his wedding ring from my mother to give to Cameron.” Sara carefully delved into the crate, reaching into the bottom right-hand corner, where she had put both of her parents’ wedding rings and the box of arelada. “He spent a lot of time with Cameron in the temple and knew that as long as I wasn’t too dense to see how perfect Cameron and I were for each other that we would be getting married soon.”

Ashley wrapped the mirror in a blanket and set it next to her mother’s dress bag. “He did tell you not to be an idiot and that you should say yes when Cameron proposed. I thought he was joking!”

Sara brought out the little box containing the rings and rearranged everything else back on top of the case of arelada. “He definitely wasn’t joking.”

Barbara took the ring box out of Sara’s hand and opened it. “It sounds as if there is even more of a story here than I thought.”

“I’ll tell you what I can of it after Brandon and Adam come for my stuff.” How different everything might have been had Barbara heard the whole story the night before with her husband!

“What beautiful rings, Sara!” Ashley said. She touched the ring that had belonged to Sara’s mother. “Was this your mother’s ring? Why don’t you wear it?”

Her mother’s ring was beautiful, a diamond set in white gold, surrounded by tiny diamonds and emeralds. Her father had given it to Sara on her eighteenth birthday. “I like to look at it, but it’s always seemed like sacrilege to actually wear it.”

Barbara took the ring out of the box and held it out to Sara. “I have a feeling your mother would want you to wear it, especially today.”

Sara held her right hand out to Barbara, smiling at her tenderly. “Would you do the honor, Mother Number Three?”

Barbara returned Sara’s smile with equal tenderness. “I’d be delighted, Daughter Number Two.”

Chapter 23: THE FINAL METERS OF THE RACE

Brandon and Adam showed up at the dormitory about twelve-thirty to pick up Sara's trunks. Having nothing else to do inside, Sara, Barbara, and Ashley moved their chairs outside to talk and wait for Cameron, who was supposed to walk them to Center Park at twelve-fifty. After Brandon and Adam disappeared into the woods, Sara told Barbara and Ashley what the prophet had told Cameron about his future wife and what some of his feelings had been at the time.

"So I was *right*," Ashley said to Sara in satisfaction.

"Utterly and completely," Sara agreed. "The wife in Cameron's mind was me, even though it had never occurred to him that I might actually be a part of the colony. When he first saw me at the stake center, he knew I really was the one. He's certain my parents knew it too."

Sara went on to tell them about the time Cameron had spent with her father in the temple and what her father had told him about her two mothers. "So you see, it really isn't strange at all that Cameron would buy a wedding set for me or that my father would give me a wedding ring to give to him."

Barbara chuckled. "It sounds as if they ganged up on you, Sara."

"If Sara wasn't so crazy about Cameron, she might think the same thing!" Ashley observed.

"What would Sara think?" Cameron asked as he approached them, carrying a bouquet of wild flowers.

Sara jumped up to meet him. "That you and my dad conspired to make me your wife."

Cameron presented the flowers to Sara, smiling. "We don't *have* to get married today."

Sara handed her flowers to Ashley and threw her arms around Cameron. "Conspire away, sweet king," she murmured, kissing him. Cameron wrapped his arms around her, pressing her close, returning her kisses with zeal.

"Stop it, you two!" Ashley said, sliding her free hand between them in an attempt to pry them apart. How Ashley had come to be in that position at all, Sara had no idea. "Save it for the honeymoon."

Cameron pulled away from Sara slightly, his face alive with anticipation. "You are *so beautiful*!"

Ashley shoved the flowers at Sara, shooting her a knowing look. "Mother and I are happy you're thrilled with your bride, Cameron, but you really must stop drooling all over her. You're embarrassing us!"

Barbara stood up. "Stop teasing your brother, Ashley. He's sweet." She folded the camp chair she had been using and tucked it under her arm. Ashley did the same.

Sara slid a hand under Cameron's arm, and Cameron tipped his head over his shoulder and said to Barbara, "I'm sure Father was the same way on your wedding day."

Cameron's comment surprised and impressed Sara. It was penetrating and bold and yet completely innocuous. Barbara didn't respond immediately. When she did, her voice was soft. "Actually, he was."

Cameron appeared pleased. "That isn't hard to believe, Mother, since after twenty-two years of marriage you're still drop-dead gorgeous!"

Sara too felt something close to relief. Ben had been in love with Barbara when he married her. Certainly he still felt something for her. Perhaps there was a chance their marriage would survive after all.

"Do you really believe that, Cameron?" Barbara asked, her voice quavering.

Cameron stopped abruptly and turned to face his mother. Sara turned too. Tears shone in Barbara's eyes. "Of course I do, Mother," Cameron assured. "Have I ever lied to you in my life?"

Barbara shook her head, forcing herself to smile. "I'm sorry. This has been an emotional day for me." She waved them forward with both hands.

Dread seized Sara as she turned and began walking again with Cameron. She felt as if she were picking at the bandage covering a mortal wound and that any moment, the bandage would fall off and the wound would be exposed in all of its ugliness, a wound she didn't want to admit existed, much less see.

As they approached Center Park, Sara heard classical music being played on the electric keyboard, Debussy's "Claire de Lune." Sara turned to Cameron in surprise. "It's beautiful, Cameron. Was this your idea?"

Cameron smiled knowingly, turning to face Ashley and his mother. "Who else would have been planning a wedding for the past month?"

Barbara hugged Cameron as well as she could while holding a folded chair and kissed his cheek. "You didn't *have* to do this alone."

Cameron gazed at Barbara solemnly. "But I did, Mother. If I had asked you for help, I would have had to tell you everything, and it just wouldn't have been right to tell you before I told Sara."

Barbara gently pounded Cameron's chest. "Fortunately for you, I do understand."

"I told her what I could," Sara conceded, wondering more than ever why Barbara hadn't insisted on being a part of the conversation the night before. She obviously wanted to know what had been discussed.

Cameron glanced at Sara. "That's good." His gaze returned to his mother. "I really wish you had been with us last night."

Barbara hesitated. "Did he interrogate you?"

"To put it mildly."

"I knew he would, and I was equally certain that I wouldn't be able to endure it."

"If Sara and I could endure it, certainly you could have!"

Barbara shook her head. "You know that your father and I have not seen eye to eye on your relationship with Sara. We would have argued, and nothing would have been accomplished."

Cameron gently squeezed his mother's arm. "Thanks for your support."

Barbara smiled softly. "I may not be completely prepared for this, but I'm happy about it. I really am."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"Don't worry about me. Concern yourself with your bride." Barbara looked Sara's way in understanding and affection. "She's more disturbed by what's happening here than I am."

Ashley hugged Cameron and whispered something in his ear that Sara couldn't hear, then backed away. "We still plan to give you and Sara a party."

"Just not today," Cameron warned. "If anyone disturbs us before tomorrow, it had better be because someone died."

Ashley's mouth quivered as if she were on the verge of laughing. "Don't have a cow! We'll wait a week or two, and no one will die." She gave Sara and Cameron a little wave, then headed into Center Park with her mother.

When they were gone, Cameron smiled at Sara nervously. "Are you ready?"

Sara nodded quickly, a rush of excitement submerging the dread. "I love you."

Cameron kissed her gently. "I love you too." Music by Debussy ended, and "Love One Another" began playing. "That's our cue," Cameron said, leading Sara into the clearing. She saw immediately that Tony was the one at the piano and was pleased.

Ben stood near a cluster of dogwood trees near the piano, his hair an even richer gold than normal in the few rays of sun that escaped through the branches, his face unsmiling but dignified. Sara relaxed. Ben didn't want her to marry Cameron, but he didn't intend to protest the union publicly. In the brightness of the afternoon, with the beauties of Eden so tangible around them, Ben didn't seem like a threat at all.

The colonists, scattered around the clearing among the ornamental trees, flowering shrubs, and clumps of wildflowers, arose from their camp chairs and watched in delight as Sara and Cameron strolled to their position in front of Ben. As they came closer to Ben, Sara became aware that his gaze was too ardent, too concentrated on her personally. And he was wearing his wedding ring again. So either he hadn't discussed divorce with Barbara yet, or they had decided to keep this information from the colony for the time being. Either way, Sara felt as if she had been deceived.

The brightness and beauty of the afternoon seemed to fade away, and nausea seeped into Sara's chest again. Ben's eyes swept over her, meeting hers again in possessiveness and penetration. She felt naked under his gaze, as if he knew what she had been dreaming about him, and she glared at him, gripping Cameron's arm even more tightly. Ben pressed his lips together in a way that suggested he was struggling not to shout his displeasure.

The nausea surged more violently through Sara, and she leaned against Cameron, her arm finding his waist, feeling weak and almost unable to stand. She wondered if Cameron would notice his father's attention to her. She glanced at Cameron and saw that he was gazing at her in concern. "We don't have to do this today, Sara."

Sara drew closer to him and whispered in his ear, "I need you now, Cameron. This lack of privacy is killing me."

Cameron nodded. "I need you too."

The music stopped and Ben said loudly, "Welcome Family and Friends to the wedding of my son Cameron Benjamin Carroll to the lovely Sara Sekura Avenaunta Alexander. You may all be seated. We'll begin with a prayer."

Sara bowed her head and closed her eyes, Ben's flowery phrases flowing around her and sometimes stinging. "... We're so grateful for this unique opportunity we have to build Zion on this beautiful planet. We're thankful for the intimate ties we've formed and the values we share ..."

Sara knew Ben was directing his words specifically to her, even now urging her to reconsider her decision to marry Cameron. Had she not loved Cameron so much and known without a doubt that the Lord wanted her to marry him, she couldn't have gone through with it.

"We ask thee to bless this couple with fertility and the wisdom to use this priceless gift appropriately, always remembering that children will be more likely to be a source of joy if they are invited into a family with discretion and intelligence."

Sara thought she felt movement under her feet. Was she fainting? Her eyes flew open. No. She glanced around the clearing as well as she could and saw that everything was as it should be.

That Ben would ask the Lord to bless her and Cameron with fertility irritated Sara. Ben certainly hadn't acted as if he wanted them to be fertile when he had demanded she refrain from becoming pregnant and then dialed Cyndi's number! A part of Sara wanted to become pregnant right away just to spite Ben, but she knew that spite was no reason to have a baby.

On and on the prayer went, and Sara had to shift her weight from one foot to the other to keep her legs from going numb. She had a feeling Ben had decided to give an abnormally long prayer as a way to stall the wedding. Sara's arm dropped from Cameron's waist to his side, then clutched his elbow. Cameron himself shifted his position. Just when Sara thought she would be forced to sit down right there on the ground, Ben ended the prayer.

"Cameron, Sara," Ben said, looking from one to the other, "This is truly a momentous moment in time, not just for you, but for the colony. Think of it! Your marriage is the first to be solemnized in the colony. This wedding will be the first vital statistic of any kind recorded in the colony's official documents. Your children will be among the first native-born Edenites."

Sara would not, could not look Ben in the eyes. She studied his feet, holding the bouquet of flowers close to her face, hoping the scent would keep her attentive enough to prevent her from embarrassing herself.

"As the first married couple of your generation, you will undoubtedly be looked to as role models by your peers. It is, therefore, critical that as you humbly accept these roles, you do everything in your power to live the ideals of The Equality of Zion, thereby encouraging happiness and unity."

Nausea boiled within Sara more fiercely than ever. Ben knew that Cameron didn't believe in The Equality of Zion. Was this his way of reminding her that she and Cameron really didn't agree on much at all? That their desire to marry was motivated more by hormones than the Spirit or even love? It was awful enough that she and Cameron couldn't be married in the temple, but Ben's disgruntled attitude made what could have been a beautiful wedding into torture.

"From this day forward, you will be an inseparable team, moving forward with love, determination to excel, and a desire for equality in all aspects of your life. In everything you do together, seek for consensus, the supreme state in which all of your decisions are the result of compromise stemming from tolerance for the other's ideas and desires."

Sara again felt movement in the ground, but this time, it persisted. Everything around her was a surreal blur. What in the galaxy was happening?

"An earthquake!" someone shouted.

"An earthquake?"

"Here?"

Sara immediately understood. Ben had said, "From this day forward, you will be an inseparable team, moving forward with love . . ." The planet knew every bit as well as she did that Ben didn't believe Sara loved Cameron. Ben had deliberately made a claim he didn't believe was true—had essentially lied—and Eden wouldn't stand for it.

Suddenly concerned that Ben would say something else idiotic and that another earthquake might just end the wedding right then and there, Sara turned to him again, hissing, "Finish it!" It wasn't until she heard her voice in stereo, however, that she realized Cameron was demanding the same thing and in the same tone of voice.

Ben held his hands out to Sara and Cameron. "Now that is consensus!" Everyone laughed.

Eventually Ben proceeded to the next part of the ceremony. "Cameron and Sara have chosen to write their own vows, which they have taken primarily from Genesis, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians."

Ben directed his next words to Sara and Cameron. "Please face each other and take each other by the right hand."

Turning toward Sara, Cameron removed two half-sheets of paper from his suit pocket and gave one of them to Sara, smiling as he took her hand. She unfolded her paper, gazing at him lovingly.

“Now, Sara, go ahead and state your vows. Speak loudly and slowly so that everyone can hear you.”

Sara’s paper shook in her trembling hand as she looked down at it and began to read:

“I, Sara Sekura Avenaunta Alexander, agree, before God and these witnesses, to take you, Cameron Benjamin Carroll, as my lawfully wedded husband, with a promise to revere you, my own husband, as the Lord.

“I promise to bind my heart to yours in charity, always remembering that charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

“Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

“Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in truth;

“Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

“Charity never faileth.”

Sara relaxed, the nausea diminishing a little. The passages of scripture were so perfect for the situation. She did need to go into this marriage with an attitude of charity, not just toward Cameron, but toward his family, especially his father. She glanced up at Cameron in appreciation. He watched her face with expectation and appeared relieved that she was pleased.

“You, Cameron, are now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. I shall leave my father and my mother, and shall cleave unto you and no other for the remainder of my mortal life, with a promise to keep myself worthy to be sealed to you in the temple in the due time of the Lord.”

Sara folded her paper. In coming to Eden, she had, in a literal way, left her parents forever. She didn’t know how it would work or what exactly it meant, but she did understand that her father would receive his eternal inheritance with the Novaunians, while she, once she was sealed to Cameron in the temple, would receive her inheritance with Cameron and Earth. How much had it cost her father to give her his wedding ring and encourage her to marry this Earthman?

Even as those unsettling thoughts entered Sara’s mind, she knew that in this decision, she was pleasing her father. Her father didn’t just approve of Cameron, he loved him and believed he was worth the cost. Sara smiled at Cameron, her spirit glowing with gratitude to the Lord. Cameron was wonderful and well worth the cost, and despite the sorrow and other strange emotions of the past two days, she felt blessed.

Cameron smiled at Sara and, receiving the go-ahead from his father, began stating his vows. He held his paper, but he didn’t look at it, preferring instead to rest his eyes on her.

“I, Cameron Benjamin Carroll, agree, before God and these witnesses, to take you, Sara Sekura Avenaunta Alexander, as my lawfully wedded wife, with a promise to love you, my wife, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it.”

Cameron went on to recite the verses from 1 Corinthians regarding charity, and finished his vows in the same way that Sara had. “You, Sara, are now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. I shall leave my father and my mother, and shall cleave unto you and no other for the remainder of my mortal life, with a promise to keep myself worthy to be sealed to you in the temple in the due time of the Lord.”

Ben’s voice had never sounded so beautiful as when he proclaimed, “As governor of the Eleventh Eden Colony, I pronounce you husband and wife.”

The ceremony hadn't been a sealing, but Sara felt as though binding herself to Cameron until death was incredibly significant all the same. She inhaled deeply, attempting to fight back the nausea. Now that she and Cameron were married, she felt she could handle anything. Why, then, did she still feel so ill and uneasy?

"You may now share your first kiss as a married couple."

Sara moved the flowers Cameron had given her into her right hand, then lobbed them in the direction of a large group of her roommates. As her roommates sprang out of their chairs with gasps of delight, Sara melted into Cameron's arms. He gave her a kiss to die for, and Sara couldn't help but be thrilled, despite her feelings of uneasiness.

Sara and Cameron withdrew from the kiss to cheers and applause. Ben announced without enthusiasm, "Eleventh Colony, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Cameron Carroll!" Then to Sara and Cameron he said, "Go ahead and exchange rings. Then we'll sign the papers. It looks as if your Uncle Trevor has already signed, your mother also."

Sara motioned to Ashley, who quickly supplied the wedding ring that had belonged to Sara's father, then backed away a little. Sara slipped the ring on Cameron's finger, showing him the one from her mother that matched. It fit his finger perfectly.

After Cameron slid the ring he had for Sara onto her finger, his father extended his arms to Cameron for an embrace. "Congratulations, son," he said, kissing Cameron's cheek and patting his back. "She really is an extraordinary young woman, precious and beautiful."

Sara stiffened. What should have been an innocent compliment sounded sinister. "Thank you, Father," Cameron said, then turned and motioned to his mother and brothers, inviting them to join him.

Cameron embraced Ashley as Ben held out his arms to Sara. He wore the same sad little smile she had seen so often on Cameron's face. "Welcome to the family, Sara."

Sara froze. Ben didn't think of her in a fatherly sort of way, yet everyone would think it odd if she didn't embrace him. What in the galaxy was she supposed to do? Her chest ached ominously. If she let him give her a quick hug, that would be the end of that, and what should be a private matter would remain that way.

At the moment Sara decided she would allow the embrace, she realized she couldn't do it. After what had passed between her and Ben, it wasn't possible. Sara finally opted to extend her hand to Ben. She forced herself to smile. "Thank you . . . Father."

Ben stared at Sara as if she had stabbed him. She watched him in agony, unable to move. Ben's eyebrows rose, and then he shifted his gaze to the audience. He chuckled mischievously as he took Sara's hand. "My beautiful new daughter wants to shake hands, as if I'm nothing more to her now than her stuffy old professor." Everyone laughed.

Sara's mouth dropped open in mortification. How could he do this to her? To Cameron? Before Sara knew what was happening, Ben was pulling determinedly on her hand and drawing her into his arms. She might have struggled had she not been so shocked. He dropped her hand and placed his hand dangerously low on her back, pressing his body against hers. He kissed her cheek, whispering with emotion, "Please stop fighting it, Sara."

With this kind of full-body contact, it was impossible for Sara not to feel his excitement. Why was everyone laughing? Couldn't they see that he was hugging her in a way no virtuous father would ever hug a daughter? No. They were too far away. Even Cameron was occupied embracing his little brothers and had no idea what his father was doing. Sara shuddered and shuddered again. She was going to throw up. She shoved Ben away and ran.

Chapter 24: THE FINISH LINE

Sara didn't get any farther than the back of the cluster of dogwood trees before she collapsed to the ground, violently expelling what little she had in her stomach. Moments later, she felt Cameron's hands pull her hair out of her face. Sara heaved again, and again.

Sara gasped and then spit several times, finally leaning against Cameron, shivering uncontrollably. As Cameron carefully wiped her mouth and nose with tissues, Sara said weakly, "You sob all over the temple altar and I puke in the bushes. We're quite a pathetic pair, you know."

"A legally and lawfully wedded pathetic pair."

Sara stood up, feeling more relieved than anything. She now knew, without a doubt, that she wasn't physically attracted to Ben Carroll. The potential was certainly there and might have developed had Cameron not come to Eden, but Cameron was with her and they were married. What might have been simply didn't matter. The dreams truly had been nothing more than dreams.

Sara longed to throw her arms around Cameron but didn't dare. "I must look disgusting," she moaned. "Do I have little red dots on my face?" A rash of red dots *always* appeared when she was sick to her stomach.

Cameron removed his jacket and helped Sara into it, fastening the buttons. "You could never look disgusting. You are as beautiful as ever, red dots and all."

The jacket's warmth soothed away Sara's shivers and partially covered the wet spot on her shirt, helping her regain some of her dignity. With her dignity came outrage. How could she have ever thought that vile man was righteous? He sure had a lot of nerve!

Cameron walked Sara toward a shady spot under a different tree. "You wait here for a few minutes while I get the documents."

"Thank you." She had no desire to face anyone in the colony just yet.

Moments after Cameron disappeared behind the trees, Ben emerged from behind the same trees and strode toward her. Knowing Cameron would soon return and that this encounter with Ben would be brief, Sara braced herself for the confrontation.

Ben stopped about a yard away. "You don't have to go through with this, Sara. It isn't too late to call it off. We can stand in front of the colony right now and void your marriage to Cameron. We'll all look a little foolish to be sure, but no one will be scandalized."

Sara shook her head with all the adamancy she could muster. "I have no intention of calling it off. Cameron went to get the documents."

"Please reconsider. Were this marriage truly the right step for you, don't you think you would be feeling better about it?"

The situation was beyond belief. Sara would have laughed had she not been so exhausted. Ben thought she was ill because her subconscious was telling her that she didn't want to marry Cameron! "I'm feeling fine about the marriage. It's your advances that have made me ill."

Ben smiled a little. "You're not making any sense, Sara. We've known each other for many months, and the physical chemistry between us has never made you uncomfortable."

Sara folded her arms and glared at him. "Then obviously there's been a misunderstanding. Apparently the thing I regarded as simple affection you regarded as physical chemistry. Forgive me for being ignorant, but it doesn't seem right that you would court me without my knowledge and without giving me all of the facts!"

"I would be more than happy to give you the facts, Sara, if you would let me."

"You should be talking to Cameron, not to me."

The corner of his mouth rose in contempt. "How in the world could a puritanical boy even comprehend my marital problems, much less provide any sympathy or support?"

Relieved to see Cameron approaching them with the marriage documents, Sara declared, "That *man* is your bishop." She moved past Ben and didn't look back. "And he may not have any practical experience with marriage yet, but he obviously knows quite a bit more about how to treat a woman than you do. You could learn a lot from him."

Sara heard Ben follow her. "How can you say that, Sara, after everything I've done for you?" He sounded offended.

She smiled at Cameron and said through her teeth, "You should be doing things for your wife, not for me. Go home to Barbara, Father, and leave me alone!"

Cameron handed the clipboard containing the documents to Sara and looked at his father in question. "I was concerned about Sara," Ben responded as Sara quickly signed the marriage certificates.

"I think Sara will be fine once I take her home. Uncle Trevor will be here in a few minutes with the aircar."

Sara handed the clipboard and pen to Ben and waited for him to sign, pleased that Cameron had insisted on recording their marriage the old-fashioned way. Once she and Cameron had that certificate, nothing Ben said or did could separate them.

Ben held the pen a half-inch from the paper, hesitating. His turbulent blue eyes gripped Sara's, begging her to change her mind.

"Please, Father," Sara said softly. "I'm tired and want to go home."

Ben signed. Sara immediately took her copy of the certificate and handed it to Cameron.

A few minutes later, Trevor Carroll whooshed into the clearing with an aircar. "Our limo has arrived," Cameron said. He helped Sara into the backseat and slid in next to her, drawing her close. Sara relaxed in Cameron's arms and laid her head against his neck, refusing to look at Ben.

The aircar glided away over the trees to the accompaniment of whoops and whistles from the other colonists. Within five minutes, Cameron was carrying Sara over the threshold of their little home. It was one of the medium-sized models, 800 square feet, and like the other buildings in the colony so far, it had no inner walls other than those that enclosed the bathroom and the master bedroom.

Cameron pushed Sara's trunks out of the way with his foot as he stepped into the house. "Sorry about that. I did tell Brandon and Adam that they were allowed to take your boxes into the bedroom."

"If I or any of my brothers or sisters had ever taken bags of groceries all the way into the kitchen and actually set them out of the way, my mom would have died of shock."

"Would you like a tour?"

"Please!"

Cameron pointed her to the left. "That's our baby's room."

Sara had believed she wanted to have a baby right away, but these new developments with Cameron's father had smothered her desire. She had no idea what to do and knew she needed to decide before Cameron began kissing her and the heat of the moment made the decision for her. After several moments, Sara said without enthusiasm, "I could be pregnant tomorrow." She yearned to talk to her father. She was grateful for the general information he had given to her, despite the fact that she had not wanted it at the time, but now she needed specifics. Ten minutes alone with him and she would have her answers.

Cameron kissed her gingerly, then smiled, ever so slightly. "Don't worry about it. This isn't a decision to make with a cloudy mind and an empty stomach. You can eat, then take a nap, then eat again, and then we'll decide what to do."

He told her they would have to wait for several more hours, all the while looking at her like that! Sara couldn't help but feel this was a new form of torture. "I'm not sure I want to wait that long."

Cameron's smile broadened. "I'm certain I don't want to wait at all, but I'm also certain I want you to be completely present at such a momentous event." Before she could reply, he spun her around and pointed her to the right. "And that is our living room."

"And a very spacious living room it is!" Sara said, feeling more relaxed already.

Cameron walked across the empty living room area, deeper into the house, and stopped at a door. "And this is the bishop's temporary office." Sara opened the door and peeked in. The office contained a camp table, which she assumed Cameron used as a desk, and on it rested a set of brown leather scriptures and a laptop computer. There were also three camp chairs and many crates, most of them opened, full of church books and supplies. There was a door to the outside on the far side of the office. Cameron had already hung his collection of pictures on the walls, which included photographs of the Washington, D.C. and Oakland, California temples, two Boy Scout posters, and several quotes in Chinese calligraphy. Sara wondered if they were scriptures.

"Could we move the calligraphy to the living room?" Sara asked.

"Sure, if you'd like."

"This is a nice room," Sara said, tapping the door shut with the tip of her shoe. "You're privileged, I think. Most of us were only allowed to bring two crates containing our personal belongings, and no other unit I've seen has an office like this attached."

Cameron shrugged. "The colonists by and large respect the office of bishop, and I do need a place where I can meet with people privately. Once we get a meetinghouse we can make this room into whatever we want. A combination exercise room and office maybe. Gotta have a place where my wife can pump weights and write."

Sara kissed Cameron's cheek. "I like that plan!"

Cameron moved a few steps into the far right corner of the house. A small camp table stood there with two camp chairs, the only furniture Sara had seen so far other than the table and chairs in the bishop's office. "And this area will be our kitchen, and that is our teeny tiny bathroom, and there, next to the bathroom door, is our one precious electrical outlet."

Sharing a bathroom and an outlet with only one other person would be luxury. "It's wonderful, Cameron," Sara said with feeling. "It still amazes me that we're all living as well as we are when we've been here less than a week."

Eventually Sara knew they would get their own synthesizing machine for producing food, another for producing small non-food items, and still another for cleaning and repairing clothing. The synthesizing machines produced water, recycled waste materials, and generated energy to be stored in the home's batteries, thereby providing power for the house. Once the synthesizing machines and batteries were all in place the home could be completely wired and plumbed. After the basic work was done, they would begin getting real furniture and other luxuries.

"I hope we can get the big synthesizing machine fixed soon so that we can get everything up to standard." Cameron moved to the left and into the master bedroom through an open door. Both windows were open, making it breezy and bright, the shimmering green leaves of the trees surrounding the house making the room come alive. Cameron's mattress was a queen-

sized one and neatly made with its white sheets and blankets. Cameron's trunks rested against the left wall, and a lantern stood on the simulated wood floor next to another set of brown leather scriptures.

"It's all so beautiful, Cameron," Sara said softly as he gently set her down on the mattress. She thought about the baby's room, the queen-sized bed, the white siding and black shutters, and the size of the house, which, considering Cameron's unmarried status upon their arrival on Eden, should have been much smaller. "I feel as if this entire house was created with me in mind and that you didn't intend to put any of yourself in it at all, and yet, in creating it completely for me, you've put your whole self into it in a way that it's radiating both you and me. Does that make sense?"

Cameron nodded. "This is your house, utterly and completely. You belong here with me. It's the natural order of things."

"We're alone, Cameron. Can you believe it? We're actually *alone*!"

Cameron knelt over his trunks. "Not for long, babe. Mother said she would bring some soup for you. I have some fruit and sandwiches, but I don't think you're ready for that yet." He handed her a present wrapped in gold paper.

Sara took the present from him in surprise. "Do you want me to open it now?"

"Absolutely."

He watched her intensely, his smile a little too mischievous. What in the galaxy was it? Sara tore the paper off the box and opened it to find a red silk robe, exquisitely embroidered with dragons. She uncovered matching slippers as she lifted the robe out of the box. "Cameron, it's exquisite! Thank you!"

"In Asia, it's called a 'happy coat.' It will make me *very* happy to see it on you."

Sara ran her fingers over the embroidery, chuckling. "You certainly weren't planning to marry a 'sweet, saintly girl' when you purchased this!"

"I guess that all depends on how you define 'sweet and saintly.'"

"Do you have one too?"

"Of course. But mine is gold." Cameron moved toward the door. "Change out of those filthy clothes, and I'll see if I can find your toothbrush and pillow."

Cameron shut the door to the bedroom behind him, leaving Sara more amazed than ever at what a gentleman he was. She laid Cameron's suit jacket on top of one of his trunks, then slipped out of her shoes, hose, and dress and into her new Chinese 'happy coat,' reveling in the luxurious feel of it against her skin as she wrapped it around herself. Finally she took off her earrings and put them in one of her shoes.

Once Cameron returned, carrying one of her trunks and the pillow with the toothbrush and toothpaste lying on top, Sara forced herself out of bed and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth and clean herself up. By the time she was finished, Barbara had arrived with the promised soup and crackers.

Barbara knocked on the door and said loudly, "Room service!"

Cameron and Sara laughed. Cameron opened the door for his mother and motioned to the table and Sara. Barbara set the tray in front of Sara, then embraced her.

"Thank you, Mother," Sara said.

"Any time, and I mean that," Barbara said as she withdrew. "Call me when you need something to eat, and I'll bring it to you. I forbid you to rejoin the colony until Friday, or maybe even Saturday."

"We couldn't possibly stay away that long!" Cameron protested.

"Of course you could. Your wife needs you now more than the colony does."

Cameron rested his gaze on Sara, stunned and overjoyed, then embraced his mother tightly. She laughed at him and slipped away.

Sara ate slowly, feeling strength seep back into her body. Cameron took off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt, then stepped out of his shoes. "Four days, Sara. Can you believe it?"

"Are you sure we're not dreaming?"

Cameron wrapped his arms around Sara's shoulders and kissed her neck. "You feel too real to be anything but a dream-come-true, Sara Carroll."

Sara leaned against him, rubbing her cheek against his. "I love you, Cameron."

"I love you too." Cameron positioned the other camp chair so that it was right next to hers and sat down, caressing her arm as she ate. When Sara finished eating, Cameron led her to the bed and lay down next to her. He rubbed her head, her neck, and her shoulders, kissing her hair and murmuring his love to her until she floated into a peaceful, exhausted sleep.

* * *

The next thing Sara knew, she was sitting on a couch made of white satin, embroidered with gold threads in intricate designs. She had to be dreaming. There was no other explanation. The Eden experience had been a nightmare, nothing more, and now she would rest in this quiet place until she woke up under her mom's denim quilt surrounded by her mother's art posters.

Something was missing, however, an important piece of herself she wasn't willing to give up. She glimpsed the red silk robe sleeve draped over her elbow and the diamond rings on her left hand and knew. Cameron. Sara sat up a little straighter, looking around for Cameron. Certainly she hadn't dreamed him too. No. Cameron was real. And if Cameron was real, so were Eden and its impossible governor.

Sara didn't see Cameron, but she did see two figures approaching her from a distance, emanating light. She knew them immediately. Astonished and overjoyed, she sprang off of the couch and sprinted to them.

The woman wore her light brown hair in intricate braids, woven with strands of diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires. A faceted stone, set in silver, hung from a chain on her forehead and radiated light in the colors of the rainbow. Diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires embellished her long-sleeved white satin gown under sheer drapes of white silk. The young man at her side wore a short-sleeved shirt with a standing collar and a half-vest that fell to his knees, his clothing intricately embroidered with gold thread and rubies. Two pairs of lapis-blue eyes gazed out of the beautiful faces with delight that equaled Sara's.

Mother! Sara cried with her mind. She stopped in front of the woman. She wanted to hug her, but something inside of her told her it wasn't possible. *I can't believe I'm face to face with you. I just can't believe it! And you're so beautiful. You look like a Greek goddess!*

Her mother laughed merrily. *A Greek goddess? Maybe in my nightmares! I'm a Novaunian woman, nothing more, nothing less.*

Sara turned to the young man who had her father's face and build and her mother's deep blue eyes and light, ash brown hair. *And you! I knew I would have had another little brother, but I don't know your name.* Her mother had been eighteen weeks' pregnant when she died. *Dad never named you.*

No, but Mother did. I'm Jaunel, Sara. His mouth pulled into a grin that reminded her of Aaron. *Congratulations! I like Cameron. He's almost as funny as Father is.*

Sara nodded, smiling. *But not as funny as Josh.*

No one is as funny as Josh. He's insane! And he's not the only brother who could see a long time ago that you were in love with Cameron.

Josh would claim that you've been viewing me from an unfair advantage and would still take credit for being the only one in the family who figured it out!

And he would be right. Disappointment filled Jaunel's eyes. *There is so much to communicate, but I can't stay. You and Mother have much to discuss. Farewell for now!* He blew Sara a kiss and walked quickly away.

Sara turned to her mother, whose laughter had faded into a bittersweet smile. *You are so beautiful, Sara. And so grown up. I know this has been a difficult day for you, but in my eyes and in the eyes of your husband, you are a perfect bride.*

I'm so glad you're here, Sara burst out in relief. *There's so much about myself I need to know.* Suddenly afraid her mother would disappear as quickly as Jaunel had, she asked, *Is my body really as fertile as I believe it is? What should I do about having a baby?*

Her mother began strolling, and Sara walked alongside her. *Short of sterilization, there is nothing you can do at the moment to prevent yourself from becoming pregnant. When you are intimate with your husband, you will conceive.*

Sara felt the truth of her mother's words, but she didn't feel a sense of relief yet. What had she gotten herself into? Was she completely out of her mind? *I'm not sure that's the answer I wanted.*

Her mother chuckled, but not unkindly. *Your anxieties are natural but unfounded. Conceiving and bearing a child will bring you such joy you will wonder why it ever occurred to you to worry about it.*

So I should just relax and enjoy my husband. It was what Sara had decided to do and what she had felt was right. Why had she second-guessed herself? Why hadn't she been able to disregard Ben's intrusion into this private area of her life?

Yes, and you will enjoy him. Provided you can dispose of your fears, this should not be a difficult adjustment for you. Your mind is fighting the inevitability of this next step in your life, but your spirit is literally on fire with the desire and readiness for motherhood.

Her mother's information astounded Sara. *So Ben was right. From an Earthon point of view, I really am a woman of "high sexual energy."* They arrived at the glimmering white couch where Sara had awakened and sat down.

You are a normal Novaunian woman, with a body that has been superbly programmed for both fertility and intimate pleasures and a spirit on fire to put that body to use. These desires and the ability to satisfy them are typically stronger in Novaunians than they are in Earthons. They are blessings the Lord has bestowed on our race for both living the law of chastity and for abiding by the command to multiply and replenish the galaxy.

Really? Sara communicated in wonder. *That is so incredible!*

Yes, it is.

How exactly am I designed differently from Earthon women?

Structurally you're perfect and chemically you're potent. Your cycle is an enhanced version of that of an Earthon woman—you ovulate more often and when fertilization takes place, the chemical changes in your body will begin immediately to prevent another conception.

That's bizarre! And amazing! It's hard to believe such fertility could really be normal.

Her mother laughed gently. *You're of a race of Eves, Sara, a model of perfect physical womanhood. But this should be no surprise to you. You have known for some time that, in a physical way, you are gifted.*

Sara nodded thoughtfully. *I suppose you're right. I have known.* She hesitated. *I know it was right to marry Cameron, but it would seem we are grossly mismatched.* Then again, Cameron was as close to physical perfection in a man as Sara had ever seen. Still, his body was not programmed to live for two hundred years unless his parents were Novaunians incognito.

No, not really, her mother assured. *Cameron is a man of great faith, imagination, and vision, what he would call "expansive thinking." If he were not such a man, he would not have been called to be the Eden Colony's bishop. I don't claim to understand the Earthons in great depth, but I do know that the Lord blesses them as He does us as they live the laws, either in this life or the next. By marrying you, Cameron will receive many of these higher blessings in this life. By the same token, in marrying him, you will receive many of the blessings that will come to the Earthons before they come to us.*

Really? Like what?

Your resurrection and eternal kingdom. Novaun will not pass into terrestrial glory for another thousand years.

Perhaps this was one of the reasons her father hesitated to return to Novaun. After living on the verge of the Second Coming for so long, it was only natural he would want to remain on Earth and see it through. *Then those really are great blessings.*

Her mother nodded. *In many ways you already have the spirit of an Earthon.* She smiled. *This desire you have to sprint through life is definitely an Earthon quality, or at least it is a quality possessed by this generation of Earthons. The current generation of Novaunians dislikes sprinting. Their life race is far too long and the scenery surrounding them too beautiful. They prefer to stroll.*

Her mother's vivid images felt like ones her father would have appreciated. She marveled at how like her father's mind her mother's was and yet didn't. This was the way it was supposed to be. Feeling the rapport that existed between her parents even after such a long separation gave Sara comfort. She and Cameron possessed their own unique rapport, and now that they were married, it would blossom. *It seems I married correctly in even more ways than I thought.*

And believe me, Sara, as time passes, you will grow more aware of the many blessings the Lord has given to you. Her tone of thought was wistful. *You will want to have a large family, just as your father hinted at in the blessing he gave to you. This desire will not seem natural to your Earthon friends, but it will feel natural to you. There will come a time when the mere thought of stopping at ten or fifteen will fill you with grief.*

Sara realized that she and her mother were communicating with emotions as well as thoughts. She could feel her mother's sorrow at not being able to have more children and something else. Guilt? Frustration? Regret? She longed to wrap her arms around her mother and comfort her as she mourned. She didn't know what to communicate.

Sara's mother shook her head, barely. *Please don't feel you have to communicate. This is something we need to discuss. Out of loyalty to me, there are things your father would not have told you, even if you had pressed him. But I want you to know, because I want you to be better than I was. The reality is, my inability to have more children as a mortal woman is one of the prices I'm paying for my mistake.*

What? For eating honey? It wasn't your fault you died. It was just one of those things.

No, Sara. My mistake was insisting your father and I go to Earth to begin with.

Sara didn't like the thought that her mother had made a mistake that had ended her life prematurely. *But Dad explained this to me. He said you didn't come to Earth against the counsel of the "High Prophet."*

Her mother sighed. *It wasn't the counsel of the High Prophet I rebelled against. That much is true. I did, however, rebel against the counsel of your father. He felt very strongly that we should not go and we argued about it for months. I really wanted to go and thought he was just afraid. His father thought we should go too. Between the two of us, your father didn't have a chance.*

You and I are alike, then. The discovery filled Sara with grief. Poor Dad.

Her mother nodded sadly. *Once we arrived on Earth, I made your father's life even more difficult. Life was so corrupt and primitive there that I hated it. I realized my mistake right away but it was too late. I was trapped there for ten years, but instead of working to move forward, I withdrew into myself and became depressed. I was alone with you during the day and didn't have much contact with the people around me.*

Since your father and I could not transfer our memberships in our Order to memberships in the Church we had to join the Church upon our arrival. We couldn't tell anyone but our bishop our true status. The women in the ward tried to reach out to me, but they believed I was a new convert. It was an innocent belief, but it irritated me. I felt grossly misunderstood and couldn't warm to them.

What was worse, your father adapted well to our new life and grew to love Earth. It was an irony I couldn't accept; it made me feel incredibly inadequate. So deeper and deeper I sank into depression. I have no doubt that my emotional state weakened my health. Perhaps if I had been happy, I would have been strong enough physically to fight the illness.

As much as Sara wanted her mother to be alive, she wasn't sure how she felt about the prospect of never having known her Earth family. And we would all be on Novaun together now and I would never have known my mom—Teri—or my grandparents in Kansas City, or David and my other uncles and their families.

No, and you would probably be married now to a nice Fleet boy from Shalaun instead of your sweet returned missionary from Greenwood.

Peace poured over Sara. Your decisions have affected us all, she admitted, but I don't seem to have suffered much. My life on Earth was happy.

And your life on Eden will be happy too, despite the fact you should have remained on Earth with your father and Teri. That is the beauty of the Atonement. You repent, accept the consequences of what you have done, and move on, and by the Lord's miraculous power, life's tangles work themselves out.

Sara nodded, feeling a determination to ascend out of her confusion and self-condemnation and look forward to a future of joy with Cameron and their zillions of children. I will work to be happy on Eden. I promise.

Sara's mother smiled. And you and Cameron can give me lots of beautiful grandchildren.

Surely, though, I don't have to have thirty children in thirty years? Or do we Novaunians not have a way to put space between our children?

Her mother laughed. Thirty children in thirty years would be too much for the healthiest of Novaunian women! Don't worry about it. There is no reason to kill yourself in this effort. After you have a baby, as long as you're breast-feeding several times a day, you won't become pregnant. If you don't choose to breast-feed or want a longer break between pregnancies, you can keep yourself from ovulating through telepathy.

Her mother telepathically gave her images of what needed to be done. Sara understood instantly. I would need arelada.

You have arelada, her mother reminded.

Dad told me to wait a week to use it.

*He was right to give you that advice, but the danger that concerned him does not exist.
So I can use it now?*

Yes. If you choose, you may try using it to prevent yourself from becoming pregnant, although you should not put too much confidence in its effectiveness yet; you are, after all, very new at this. You should certainly begin the exercises your father explained to you. And there are divine laws governing telepathy as there are divine laws governing sexuality.

Her mother related the divine laws of telepathy to her instantly, and Sara understood their purpose. *How will I know when I should try communicating with the planet-spirit?*

You will know. Sara's mother stood up, as if she were preparing to leave. *The arelada your father gave to you is more important than you realize. You should wear one of the necklaces everywhere you go and practice as often as possible. And before the day is over, hide the extra stones.*

Where?

Away from your house but still on your property. Just don't forget where you put them!

Sara didn't want her mother to go, and yet she wanted to feel Cameron's arms around her again. *I love you, Mother. Thank you.*

I love you too, sweetie. Her mother blew her a kiss, the jewels in her hair and clothing glittering in the light as she backed away from the couch.

* * *

Sara awoke abruptly. A breeze swept over her face with the scent of pine. She could feel Cameron's arms snugly encircling her waist, his face cradled in the curve of her neck, his breath warm against her skin. Judging by his even breathing and lack of movement, Sara assumed he was asleep.

Sara lay motionless, enjoying the serenity of awaking in Cameron's arms and treasuring the memory of the meeting she had just had with her mother. Somehow her mother had communicated with her in her dreams. She had never imagined the answer to her prayers would come in such a glorious way, and she directed her thoughts to heaven in thanks.

She wished her father were near so that she could tell him about it, and yet she knew that if her father were near, she would not have needed her mother. Thinking of her father reminded her of how cruelly she had treated him and her stepmother, and she knew that she did not deserve the spiritual manifestation she had received and that it had come more as an answer to Cameron's prayers than hers.

Even as she criticized herself, she could almost feel her mother's thoughts again, reprimanding her: *Didn't you assimilate a thought I just communicated to you?*

Sara breathed deeply. *Stop it Sara!* she ordered herself. *Stop it right now!* What person in the galaxy wasn't worthy to get counsel from his or her own mother?

A pang of hunger tore through her, then tore again. Sara carefully rolled out of Cameron's arms and onto the floor. She would eat before he awoke, then come back to bed and surprise him. She stood up, tightened the sash on her new robe, and went into the kitchen to find the sandwiches Cameron had told her about.

After wolfing down three sandwiches, two pieces of fruit, and two quarts of water, Sara drifted into the baby's room. She floated around the area, hugging herself, her imagination constructing a crib, a rocking chair, and cat-like cries coming from . . . what? A boy or a girl? Would his or her hair be pale gold like Cameron's or black like hers? Or something in between?

Eventually Sara noticed Cameron leaning against the wall that separated the master bedroom from the kitchen/bathroom area, his arms folded across his chest, his shirt sleeves dangling unbuttoned on his stomach, his air one of tranquility.

Seeing Cameron so relaxed and at peace filled Sara's heart with joy, and Sara knew more strongly than ever that marrying Cameron that day had been the right thing to do and that she didn't want to wait to become pregnant. "We're going to have a baby," she bubbled. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Chapter 25: PRECARIOUS POSITION

Tohmazz Zarr invited his sons and Admiral Harman Sanzanal into his suite. Admiral Sanzanal bowed. *Request permission to communicate, Divine One.*

Granted.

My spies have confirmed our suspicions. Nexyun and Jaxzeran have joined forces and are preparing to attack. They should be here in ten days.

Zarr focused on Jahnzel, his young but brilliant Prince of Defense. *Are we ready?*

Jahnzel shook his head slowly, his brown curls brushing his shoulders. *No, sir. I advise you to take cover in Teton Colony.*

* * *

Tuesday after his shift at the temple, Trendaul did an endowment session and spent time in the celestial room, silently begging God to tell him what to do. When he left the temple late that afternoon, he still had no answer. Reluctant to return home and face Gavaun just yet, Trendaul sat down on a bench and gazed at the visitors' center, only half-aware of the people coming and going from the temple.

Hours later, or so it seemed, Trendaul heard words in his native language: "I've come to bring you home, brother."

Trendaul looked up and saw Sharad. "What was that?"

"You have visitors—Eric and Natalie Lanham and their children. Teri was going to send Josh, but I told her that I would enjoy the walk."

As Trendaul moved away from the temple with Sharad, lurid curiosity drove him to ask, "Well? Let me have it. If you were Trendaul Avenaunta, Novaunian expatriate, what would you do? Would you remain on Earth or return to Novaun?"

Sharad hesitated. He hadn't expected this question.

Trendaul glanced at Sharad as they walked, pleased he had thrown the boy off guard. "Go on," he urged. "I'd really like to know."

Sharad thought about Trendaul's question for many moments. Finally he said, slowly, carefully, "If I were Trendaul Avenaunta, Novaunian patriot and devoted husband to an Earthon woman, I would return to Novaun alone to be debriefed, thus fulfilling my duty, with the intention of coming back to live the rest of my life on Earth. I would, in fact, agree to return to Novaun only on the condition that Gavaun would bring me back, even though I know Novaunian Fleet has closed Earth indefinitely."

"Interesting theory," Trendaul said, not about to admit to Sharad that he had been considering this alternative.

"Once I arrived in Shalaun, however, and spent time with my family, I would realize how inane my fears had been and would want to stay. As soon as possible, then, I would return to Earth with the intention of bringing my wife and children back to Novaun, but as I and my brother entered Earth's atmosphere, we would be shot down or vaporized as an enemy vessel. My parents would lose their two eldest sons, the Fleet would lose two valuable officers, and my children would lose their father. This would especially hurt Sara; she needs my help and doesn't know it, and now I will never be able to give it to her. My wife would not only lose me, she would lose her peace of mind, because she would never know what had happened. She's always been secure in my love, it's true, but a tiny part of her mind would wonder whether I had decided to remain on Novaun without her."

Sharad's vision unnerved Trendaul, and he couldn't bring himself to speak for a least a minute. Dry leaves crunched on the sidewalk as he walked, and his breath was frosty. When Trendaul finally spoke, he asked, "Am I really so lacking in common sense?"

"I'm not sure. I do believe your mind is a maze, and I don't think God ever meant life to be as complicated as you seem to like to make it. Remember the strait gate and narrow way?"

"You and Gavaun amaze me," Trendaul said. "You both employ shock tactics to get me on that frigate, but the dark images you're using to jolt me are so different!" Why should he listen to either one of them?

"I didn't intend what I said to be a shock tactic. The prospect of your remaining on Earth fills my heart with fear. Your position is precarious, brother. I believe that if you stay, you will soon die."

Trendaul's first urge was to laugh, but he restrained himself; Sharad was too serious. "I have easily avoided the Zarrists for three years, and now I'm living in Zion! Certainly I'm safer now than I was a month ago."

Sharad shook his head. "Your temple communities may provide safety to the average person who is unwilling to submit to Zarr's new world order, but they aren't fortified well enough yet to protect someone like you."

Trendaul's desire to laugh disappeared. "I've been too careless since you and Gavaun arrived," he muttered. "That has to stop."

"A decision to be more careful isn't going to be enough."

Sharad's certainty puzzled Trendaul. "What do you mean?"

"Zarr already knows about you; I'm sure of it. He sees you without seeing you."

"You believe he is aware of me personally but doesn't yet perceive the fact that I'm a Novaunian agent? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yes. I began believing this after we watched the video of Sara's races. You have put yourself in a great deal of danger by allowing her to lead a public life."

Trendaul didn't want to take the time to point out that Sara's publicity had begun *before* the Zarrists had arrived. Had he forced her to stop competing, his decision would have created far more publicity than it would have stopped. "Certainly, though, Zarr doesn't care about a collegiate sprinter!"

"Perhaps not, but what if he does? She's young and athletic and therefore a potential warrior. Her brilliance would make her a good officer in his space fleet. My understanding is that the Earthons have women fighting in their military organizations. Am I correct?"

Trendaul nodded, feeling troubled.

"And what about David? The leader of a brigade of naval officer candidates? If I were Zarr, I would want him. Wouldn't you?"

Sharad's observation made sense—too much sense. Could Zarr have his eye on David? The idea was ominous! "Yes. Of course I would. David would be an outstanding addition to any military organization." Trendaul couldn't believe he had been so blind. "I should have seen this on my own."

"David has received publicity too, then?"

"He has. It started when he was a freshman, when he resigned to serve a mission after an outstanding baseball season as well as an excellent academic year. Now that he's the brigade commander, he has a higher profile than Sara ever did."

"Then Zarr and his admirals know about him. Guaranteed. And unless his intelligence officers are complete imbeciles, they know of your existence too. One way or another, brother, your time on Earth is almost over."

Trendaul felt numb. “Gavaun doesn’t believe Zarr will be much of a threat to anyone after the invasion.”

“Of course he doesn’t. He has the typical Fleet attitude that Earth will pass away too soon to ever be a significant galactic power. What do you believe?”

Trendaul suddenly felt cold. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets. “That the typical Fleet attitude is naïve.”

Sharad nodded slowly. “I feel it too. Clear into my bones. But I’ll be the first to admit that my feeling is a mere hunch. Yours comes from a deep understanding of the Earthons.”

“I think you’re very perceptive . . . or paranoid.”

Sharad chuckled. “All intelligence officers are perceptive *and* paranoid. If we weren’t, we would be mere librarians.”

Trendaul couldn’t help but laugh. A woman jogged by, which ended Trendaul and Sharad’s conversation. After the woman passed, Trendaul couldn’t bring himself to speak, despite the fact that the streets of Kensington were uncharacteristically deserted. He felt unsafe in a way he hadn’t since Krista’s death and knew, deep in his heart, that Sharad’s fears for him were justified.

* * *

Trendaul turned off the light and dropped into bed, his body exhausted but his mind alive in a feverish way. He drew Teri close as she cuddled up to him under the comforter. “What are we going to do?” he asked, feeling desperate.

Teri’s voice was strained. “Your brother would tell you that your duty is to go back to Novaun.”

“What if he’s right?” Trendaul still couldn’t bring himself to tell Teri that Gavaun had ordered him to return to Novaun.

“Maybe he is, but I still don’t like his attitude. He won’t even consider the possibility that remaining on Earth is the right thing to do. If he had his way, you would have no choices at all.”

“Do you think staying on Earth is the right thing to do?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. But I do want it to be an option.”

“My brother thinks we should have returned to Novaun ten years ago.”

Teri kissed him. “You made a decision ten years ago that allowed me to remain with my family a little longer. I’ll always be grateful for that.”

“I believed at the time that it was the right decision.”

“Then you have to keep believing it! If you second-guess that decision now, you’ll just confuse matters more.”

“I am *very* confused, Teri. In remaining here, I finished my work and you gained time with your family, but we lost Sara. Was what we gained worth the price we paid? I can’t believe it was. How can I *not* second-guess the decision I made?”

Teri held him tightly. “I can’t believe we’ve lost Sara. I can’t. Saturday evening you said we should have faith in Cameron. Well, maybe it’s time we started having some faith in Sara. And in ourselves as parents.”

“Do you really think we did the right thing in keeping her heritage from her?”

“What choice did we have? We didn’t do it only for your safety, but for Sara’s social assimilation. It was the only way to give her a childhood anywhere close to being normal.”

Trendaul stroked Teri's hair, winding her curls around his fingers. "She would have had a normal childhood on Novaun, with her own people."

"No she wouldn't have. After spending ten years here, she wouldn't have been a normal Novaunian child."

"You're right," Trendaul admitted. "She wouldn't have been. Or at least that is what I've been telling myself for the past ten years to console myself for staying here. At the moment, I feel very selfish."

"Tren, when you and Krista came to Earth, you changed your life forever. Sara's too. The two of you had to become Earthons to survive. You should never feel guilty or selfish that you identify yourself as much as an Earthon as a Novaunian and are happy here."

He kissed her hair. "I am happy here, Teri."

"I know," she said softly. "And you feel free."

"In a way I never did on Novaun, it's true."

"I think I understand your feelings better now than I did. Is Gavaun very much like your father?"

"Very much, and to tell you the truth, his attitude annoys me too. I didn't realize how domineering my father was and how tense my life on Novaun had been until I came here. Still, Sara is an awfully high price to pay for my freedom."

"Sara was happy here too. Don't ever doubt it. Had we told her of her heritage, we then couldn't have allowed her to excel at anything or do anything, really, and she would have felt frustrated and restless."

"And trapped," Trendaul agreed. He couldn't count the number of times he and Teri had discussed this problem over the years. Aside from the issue of publicity, he had always felt uncomfortable about allowing Sara to compete in athletics. He suspected that her superior Novaunian body had given her an unfair advantage, and yet he had never been certain. Sara was fast, but she had competed against plenty of young Earthon women who were faster than she was. Trendaul believed that learning of the inherent physical superiority of her race would have troubled Sara. She might have refused to participate in athletics at all. So instead of complete truth (and complete honesty) Trendaul and Teri had given Sara a childhood of freedom.

"And who knows? Sara may do a better job of blending the Earthon and Novaunian halves of her identity than you have."

"Perhaps. But in the end, Sara will be an Earthon. If we stay here, Cameron will bring her back to us. If we go to Novaun, we will be separated by a thousand years."

"A thousand years isn't an eternity."

"No, but it's still a tremendous gulf. One I can't fathom. I have a difficult time measuring my life in eternal terms when I have so many years as a mortal still ahead of me."

"That's funny. Since you became an ordinance worker in the temple, I measure my life in eternal terms more now than ever."

"And that's as it should be." Where was his faith?

"If we stay here, you will lose your parents and other family members, at least for this life. Your father may be a tyrant, but you still love him."

Trendaul sighed. "Yes I do, and Gavaun means well too. I think things would be different with my father if I were to return. *I'm* different—more confident. Life would be more relaxed and pleasant I think."

"Maturity is a wonderful thing," Teri murmured.

“I would like to see my family again, and Novaun. It’s beautiful, you know, like the Garden of Eden.”

He felt Teri smile against the corner of his mouth. “So you’ve shown me. I have no doubt I would be as happy on Novaun as you’ve been on Earth.”

“But if we go to Novaun, I may lose you.”

“I’d be fine. You’d see. The possibility excites me as much as it frightens me.”

“Krista felt the same way about coming to Earth. And homesickness killed her.”

“I’m not Krista.”

Trendaul clung to his wife and kissed her ardently. “I can’t lose you too, Teri.”

Chapter 26: THE CARD

Sara awoke in Cameron's arms the morning after the wedding to a loud knock on the door. "That's probably Tony," she said. "He's supposed to be bringing backpacking gear."

Cameron lifted himself on his arms a little and stroked the hair away from her face. "I don't care who it is." He kissed her savoringly. Sara lost herself in the kiss, realizing she didn't care either.

Eventually hunger drove Sara and Cameron out of bed. They helped each other into their robes and went outside to see what Tony had left for them. They found two loaded backpacks sitting on a tarp with a plate of muffins and a bottle of juice. They sat down on the tarp and ate, passing the juice back and forth between them as they peeked into the backpacks to see what they had.

Cameron removed a card from the larger of the backpacks, the one with the tent, and read:

Cameron and Sara,

Please enjoy this gift from the colony. Everyone wants you to get away for a few days and have a real vacation. We'll take care of things while you're gone.

Tony, Russ, and Brent

Excitement shot through Sara. Tony had really come through! "Isn't this is wonderful, Cameron? We actually get to go exploring!"

Cameron caressed Sara's knee. "Are you feeling up to it?"

Sara nodded quickly, smiling. She had never felt better in her life.

Cameron stood up, drawing Sara up with him. "Then I guess we'd better get going."

They showered and dressed and headed into the forest with a compass and a handheld computer to record their bearings. Before they left, Sara slipped her box of arelada into her backpack. At mid-day, they stopped by a lake with a waterfall and went swimming in the cold, clear water, then stretched their towels out under the willow trees and lay together in contentment, dozing. When they awoke, they realized that they didn't have any inclination to explore and decided to remain where they were for the night.

Cameron sat up, his hand still on Sara's shoulder. "Let's go find some wood. It may get cold after the sun goes down."

Sara rolled to her side and patted Cameron's leg. "You go. It'll give me a few minutes alone to try the arelada." Cameron had literally been clinging to her for twenty-four hours; she didn't think they had been physically disconnected in all that time. She had known all along that Cameron was an intensely emotional person, but she still hadn't been prepared for this insatiable desire he had to touch her. She loved the attention, but her senses were so saturated with him that she was afraid she would never be able to get the arelada to work unless she found a few minutes alone.

Cameron drew Sara into his arms, kissing her. "Please, Sara. Don't make me go by myself. After we start the fire, you can lay your head in my lap and try the arelada. I promise I won't talk to you or distract you."

Sara kissed him again and pulled away a little, smiling, unable to tell him that his very presence was a distraction. He was so devoted to her, and she couldn't resist him. "All right, sweet king. Your command is my desire." She had never in her life felt so beautiful and loved.

Cameron laughed, a happy, carefree sound, and pulled Sara to her feet. He held her and whispered passionately into her ear, “And your desire is my command, sweet queen.”

Sara shivered with excitement and kissed him again, clasping him so close that Cameron ended up having to pry himself away from her. With arms around each other, they headed into the forest to look for wood. After they started a fire, they pitched their tent, and then dropped to the ground together next to the backpacks. Cameron turned away from Sara slightly to search through his pack for something to eat, while Sara rummaged through her backpack, looking for her box of arelada. Before she could put her hands on the box, her fingers rested on a stiff piece of paper. Puzzled, she dislodged it from the other items. She didn’t need to remove it from the backpack to see that it was a white envelope with her name on it. Recognizing the handwriting to be Ben’s, she immediately shoved the card in its place deep in her pack, knowing she would never be able to explain it to Cameron.

Her heart pounding fiercely, Sara groped for the box of arelada and found it quickly, her astonishment giving way to indignation. For twenty-four hours she had allowed herself to forget about Ben Carroll. She hadn’t thought about him once, and now he was again intruding in her relationship with Cameron and forcing her to confront the fact that sooner or later, she would have to tell Cameron what had happened.

Sara had no idea how she was going to tell him. Cameron was starving for intimacy—physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. He had been famished for so long that the hunger pangs had become second nature to him. Even now, he had no idea how impoverished he was. Being dismissed as a fanatical, puritanical, docile little boy by his father had wounded Cameron far more than he realized, and the more Sara thought about it, the angrier she became. How could Sara withdraw the feast just when Cameron was starting to experience the joys of satiety?

Feeling Cameron’s warmth move from her thigh to her hip, Sara realized that Cameron was shifting his position. He knelt behind her and slid his arms around her waist. Sara leaned against him and kissed his cheek, struggling to relax. She would *not* allow that stupid card to ruin her honeymoon! Cameron rubbed his face in her hair. “Sara, sweetheart, what’s the matter? You seem tense. Are you upset with me?”

Sara turned so that she could wrap her arms around him. “No, of course not.” She pulled him to the ground and kissed him again and again.

Eventually Sara became aware that he was studying her. Cameron traced her features with his finger. “Something’s wrong. Please tell me what it is.”

Sara’s throat ached. She couldn’t lie to him, but she couldn’t tell him either. She shook her head slightly.

“Please, Sara,” he whispered, hurt. “You should be able to tell me anything.”

“Not this. Not now. Please trust me.”

He nodded slowly, obviously crushed.

Sara’s fingers trembled against his cheek. “Please don’t be hurt, Cameron.”

“How can I not be hurt? My wife won’t confide in me.”

Sara resigned herself to the inevitable. Their respite was over. She had to tell him, and yet she still had no idea how. “Something happened, Cameron, and when I tell you, everything will change.”

Cameron frowned. “Everything? What do you mean by everything?”

“Our life. Everything. Everything but the thing that is the most important—the fact that we’re together. Nothing can separate us now—*nothing*. Not even this. But everything will change.”

The muscles in Cameron’s face relaxed. “And you don’t want everything to change—yet.”

Sara tried to smile. He was beginning to understand. "Call me selfish, but I want to have a honeymoon first."

Cameron kissed her. "Then we'll enjoy a few more hours together, and then you can change our life after we've settled in for the night and have no energy left for anything but whispering."

Sara almost laughed. "Fair enough."

Cameron smiled. "You'd just better not fall asleep!" He reached for the box of arelada and handed it to Sara. Sara backed away from him a little and set it on the ground between them, then lifted herself on one arm and unlatched the box, lifting the lid. For the moment, her curiosity about the arelada submerged her anxiety.

Lined with white velvet, the box held two pendants on long silver chains. Silver settings displayed quarter-sized, faceted pieces of arelada. On one, diamonds surrounded the arelada in a symmetrical design, rendering the silver setting almost unnoticeable. On the other, diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires surrounded the arelada in an intricate design that Sara recognized. "In my dream, my mother wore a jewel exactly like this one on her forehead," she said as she handed the necklace to Cameron.

"It's beautiful. And very unusual."

Sara closed the box, which still held seven extra stones that had been cut to fit the silver settings. She sat up and held her father's pendant up to the light. The late afternoon sun shone through the open back of the setting and cast rainbows on the grass.

Sara stared into the crystal, with its elusive luminosity, trying to imagine it on her father's forehead. She dressed him in the same shimmering white suit Jaunel had worn, with its short sleeves, standing collar, and half-vest that fell to the knee. She mentally embroidered her father's suit, however, with silver thread instead of the gold that had been in Jaunel's vest, adding diamonds to the embroidery in a symmetrical design.

Sara examined the image she had created. The suit seemed right, but she still couldn't visualize the jewel on his forehead. She placed the chain over her head and let the pendant drop to her heart. Was this the way her father had worn his arelada while he was working at the Library of Congress? Against his skin? Under his clothing and out of sight? Probably. He wouldn't have worn the arelada this way on Novaun, however. He would have worn it in the same fashion as her mother—on his forehead—but without the elaborate braided hairstyle to hold the shorter chain in place.

What would a Novaunian man use to hold a piece of faceted arelada on his forehead? A tighter chain? A piece of silver elastic? A thin circlet of silver? A white headband, perhaps? Sara tried each idea, liking the white headband the best. It looked the most comfortable and, at the same time, the best able to hold a jewel of that size without falling off. Sara conjured up a complete image of her father, tingling with awe. This was no bug-eyed alien. He looked like a prince or an angel.

Sara placed her father between her mother and Jaunel in her mental picture and tried to imagine herself standing next to her mother, wearing the same style of clothing. Unable to stretch her imagination that far, the vision shattered. Athletic shoes wouldn't match her mother's jewel-studded gown, and the mere thought of all those braids pulling her hair made Sara's head hurt. She wondered if she would ever feel like a Novaunian.

Sara felt Cameron sit up. "What do you see, Sara?"

Sara caressed his waist. "Nothing much. I'm just trying to imagine what my father would look like wearing this jewel."

"Why don't you try to see our baby?"

Sara nodded. "That would be thrilling, wouldn't it?" She crossed her legs and made herself comfortable, then pulled the arelada pendant from beneath her shirt and held it in her palm, staring at it. As her father had instructed, she tried to pour herself into the arelada. Gradually the land surrounding her seemed to come alive, and as it did, the movement of water became audible in the trees behind her, every blade of grass became individual and identifiable under her legs, and the scent of honeysuckle and pine nearly overpowered her.

When Sara was again staring at the arelada in her hand, she attempted to pour herself into it more intensely. Immediately she felt Cameron and his gentle but powerful personality, his spirit emanating such sincerity and determination to embrace the Infinite that he seemed to explode with heat and light. Her spirit instinctively sprinted toward her husband and seized him, her whole essence begging to be burned.

Cameron's light escaped her spiritual grip in quavering, colorful bursts, and within moments, she heard him laugh. "I surrender! Take my body too. I insist!"

She turned abruptly toward him, her fingers curling around the arelada, as if to maintain the telepathic connection, but she was too new at this. Her new Awareness dissipated. She rested her hand on Cameron's chest and gave him a little shove. "If you don't stop making noise, I'll never get a look at our baby."

"All right, all right. I'll shut up."

Sara poured herself into the arelada again and looked inside of herself as her mother had taught her to do. She reached deeper and deeper, focusing her thoughts, until she saw them: two tiny balls of cells. One had implanted itself in the lining of her uterus; the other hadn't quite moved into position to implant yet.

Twins! The realization astonished Sara. She tried to move in closer to the embryos, to study them more closely. Sure enough, there really were two of them. She wasn't imagining things. She withdrew from herself, the astonishment fading. Twins. Of course. She and Cameron should have considered this possibility, and yet, she was glad they hadn't. Realizing the potential for twins might have made them anxious and restrained. So instead of one baby, there would be two. Twins!

"Well?" Cameron said impatiently. "Are we going to be parents?"

Sara released the pendant, allowing it to dangle. She chuckled. "I'll say!"

"What did you see?"

"Two perfect embryos."

Cameron's mouth dropped open. "Two?"

Sara nodded, amazed she could be so delighted about this new development. "We're having twins. Fraternal twins."

Cameron looked away, putting his hand to his forehead and rubbing. "Twins," he muttered. He didn't sound happy. After pondering for many moments, Cameron looked at Sara again, understanding. "Of course. We're a couple of idiots. After what your mother told you, we should have foreseen this."

"I'm very, *very* glad we didn't."

"Where in the world are we going to put *two* babies?"

"Is that all you're worried about? That's an easy problem to deal with! We can use portable cribs instead of full-size ones. If we need to, we can put one crib in the extra bedroom and one in the living room."

"In the *living* room?" Cameron sounded appalled.

"Sure. Why not? Babies don't care where they sleep. After Zack was born, he slept in a portable crib in the dining room for a couple of months."

“Your baby brother slept in the *dining* room?”

“My mother wasn’t about to put him in the same room with Daniel and Matthew until he could sleep through the night.”

“Adam slept in Mother and Father’s room when he was a baby.”

“My mom can’t sleep with a baby in her room. She says she wakes up at every little noise. It makes her crazy.”

“Still, Sara, putting one of the babies in the living room would be pathetic. I wonder how soon we could get a new house. I suppose we’ll have to wait until all of the buildings in the colony are synthesized and put up.”

Cameron was more spoiled than Sara had believed. “Relax, Cameron!” She couldn’t restrain herself from giggling. “I promise I won’t tell the babies what a pathetic home they’re coming to. I know it’s going to kill you, but you can’t tell them either. They’ll never know. *Trust me!*”

Cameron finally smiled. “You’re so exotic and awesome, Sara. You blow my mind!” He offered the feminine necklace to her. “It’s my turn to try, but I can’t wear this one. I’ll feel like a fool.”

“Picky, picky.” Sara took her mother’s necklace from him and put it around her neck, then gave him the one her father had used.

“What do I do?”

She explained the telepathic process as well as she could, adding, “We have to be careful, though, to only overlap spirits somewhat, not completely join them.”

Sara suddenly felt Cameron’s essence enfold her. She reached her spirit out to him and felt him melt into her and her into him, their thoughts, emotions, and sensations merging. The deeper the bond became, the deeper Sara wanted to go. He was her husband, and despite her mother’s warnings, it didn’t seem right that she couldn’t have all of him.

Cameron stopped Sara’s telepathic delving with a mental exclamation: *Wow! You’re dazzling! A diamond shooting fireworks!*

Sara shifted to her knees and flung herself at him, knocking him over. *And you are so, so hot!* They kissed again and again, so acutely aware of each other that they could hardly bear the intensity of emotion flaming between them.

We’re supposed to be learning how to use the arelada and here I am, attacking you, Sara thought.

Isn’t marriage great?

It’s a good thing we are married. We could have really gotten ourselves into trouble!

Cameron rolled Sara to her back and moved just enough so that he could gaze at her and play with her hair. *No kidding. I had no idea telepathy would be this overpowering!*

Neither did I. I wonder if Novaunians ever get anything done.

They certainly don’t communicate with everyone this way.

I don’t know. No. My mother and I weren’t this aware of each other, and in the few memories I have of my father and I communicating telepathically, he didn’t reach this deeply. Sara thought about Cameron’s father and realized that she didn’t dare communicate with him like this.

Cameron immediately assimilated the outrage Sara felt when she thought about his father. His spirit threw off sparks of alarm. *What did my father do to you?*

The first thing that came to Sara’s mind was the awful wedding embrace, and before she could stifle the memory, Cameron experienced what had happened as if he were she. He sat up, aghast, his spirit seeming to explode with rage.

Sara watched him in consternation. She had wanted to tell him gently, not like this. Unable to endure his anger, she tried to withdraw her spirit, shooting sharp pains through them both. Cameron's spirit wrapped around hers tightly, begging her not to pull away again.

I'm so sorry, Cameron.

Cameron drew Sara into his lap. *He did this to you, and you're sorry?* He held her tightly, protectively.

What he did was more of an affront to you than to me. Either the rage was diminishing a little, or Sara was becoming acclimated to it. She relaxed a little, soothed by his heartbeat and warmed by his spirit, which seemed to engulf her. As much as she had fought telling him, she couldn't help but feel relieved.

What else has happened, Sara? His spirit was tense with urgency. *I want to know everything. Start from the beginning.*

Sara nodded and allowed the images and conversations to flow. Once they began pouring from her mind, she wasn't sure she could shut them off, even if she wanted to. The e-mails, the dinners at Don Pablo's, the phone calls, her discussion with Bishop Lanham, the confrontation with her parents . . . everything came out.

Your father knew about this and he didn't tell me? Hysteria stormed through their spirits. *He watched you hug my father in the spaceport and said nothing?*

Sara scratched and gripped at Cameron's shirt, now and then tapping his chest and sometimes his cheek. *He didn't confront your father, but he did do something. He told me to marry you, and he gave me a ring. And he and Mom went to the stake center with me, and when I got so angry with you, they told me I was crazy and wrong and made me feel guilty. If they hadn't been there to put me back into the blocks after that false start, I might still think you were a coward and a fanatic.*

All right . . . all right . . . Cameron inhaled deeply, as if he were trying to calm himself. *Your father didn't tell me about this because he wanted our love to develop without this black cloud hanging over us, I suppose. I can accept that. Your parents must really loathe my father.*

"Loathe" may not be a strong enough word.

So this is why my father didn't approve of me as a love interest for you.

Sara nodded, and the images began gushing forth again, ending with the encounter after the wedding. Once she had showed him everything, she felt purged. She was so at ease, in fact, that she felt as if she might float away.

Cameron smoothed Sara's hair away from her face. *I wish you had told me as soon as the first suspicion entered your mind. I would never have left you alone with him Monday night.* Guilt seized him. *I shouldn't have anyway. It was naïve and stupid. I won't make that mistake again.*

Had you not left me alone with him, he may have refused to marry us.

Then I would have had Tony perform the ceremony. I would have preferred that anyway.

Do you think Tony would have done it without your father's license?

Absolutely. He wouldn't have stood for this.

But you couldn't have told him anything before Monday night, because your father hadn't done anything yet.

Are you kidding? He's been after you for months! You just didn't see it, but I see it and Tony would have also.

I've known Tony almost as long as I've known your father, and he didn't see it.

That's because he was only with you at Don Pablo's. Had he known about all of the e-mails and phone calls, it would have been obvious to him too.

Sara moaned. *How could I have been so stupid?*

Why didn't you tell me, Sara?

I couldn't. You've been under so much pressure. I wanted to give you a vacation.

It's been eating away at you, though. What kind of vacation has that been for you?

I didn't think about him at all until . . .

Cameron abruptly pushed her out of his lap and jerked his head in the direction of the backpack. *You didn't open it?*

Sara reached for the backpack, shaking her head. *I didn't dare.* She took the card out of the pack and returned to Cameron's lap. She studied the envelope for many moments before she removed the card.

Cameron squeezed her. *You were right when you said that everything would change.*

Maybe we should just put it away and forget about it for now.

It's too late for that.

You're curious, aren't you?

I can't deal with this if I don't have all of the facts.

Sara nodded. The nightmare was ending for her but just beginning for Cameron. She opened the card and began reading in her mind while Cameron mentally followed along:

My beloved Sara,

I'm so sorry I upset you. Had I been able to reveal my feelings to you in the gentle way I intended, the way it would have happened had Cameron not come to Eden, you would have no reason to doubt my good intentions. I always meant to give you "the facts" about my marital status. I tried many times, but the facts are so tied up with my feelings that I couldn't give you one without the other. To tell you anything, I had to tell you everything, and you weren't ready to hear it. I'm still not certain you're ready to hear it, but circumstances have forced me to move with far more speed than I had ever intended.

I need you to understand, Sara, that my marriage was dead long before I met you. My wife and I are estranged in every way. I've been considering divorce for some time, but I've never been able to bring myself to take that final step. I suppose it's because I've been reluctant to throw my family into chaos. My commitment to Barbara provides all six of us with a certain amount of stability. I'm now ready to trade that stability for a new, more honest existence, as unstable as it may feel to the other members of my family for a time, but I'm terrified of trading the old stability, as dishonest as it is, for chaos that may be indefinite.

In the middle of all this, I met you and fell in love. You are so resplendent, open, and real that I couldn't help myself. You are everything I have ever wanted in a wife. I would prefer to pursue you as an unmarried man, but that isn't the way it's working out. I know the Church disapproves of this approach, and I can't say that I believe it's the best way to do things, but I seem to have found myself in this difficult situation without any clear view of how to manage it. It's just always seemed that if I expressed my desire to get a divorce and my plans to marry you at the same time, it would make the break quick, comprehensible, and less chaotic for everyone involved—death by a bullet to the head instead of slow torture.

You accused me of wanting you to be my "trophy wife." I'm deeply troubled that you would think this, and it makes me wonder if I've ever treated you as an object. If I have,

I'm sorry. Please tell me what I did so that I can avoid doing it in the future. I could not bear to have another trophy wife; the thought of it sickens me.

Yes, I married my trophy wife the first time around. I know that sounds cruel, but it's the truth. Barbara is a perfect fashion doll—a chameleon fashion doll. She adapts herself to everyone's idea of perfection. She dresses perfectly. She keeps a perfect house. She does just enough to appear to be the perfect wife and the perfect mother, but her interpretations of those roles fluctuate, depending on who she's with. She's an expert at playacting the perfect journalist, the perfect member of the Church, the perfect colonist. She's such a superb actress she should be on the stage. Whenever I tell her I'm unhappy, she simply slips into a different version of the perfect wife in an attempt to console me, but it's never the real Barbara. I have no idea who the real Barbara is. She's the perfect everything except the perfect companion. Sincerely, Sara, I think she would be relieved if I asked for a divorce.

I love you, Sara. I want to give you the best of everything I have. Yes, I still want you to be my wife. And yes, it hurts me that you're spending this time with Cameron. It's hurting me even more than I thought it would. But if this is what it takes to convince you that he is not right for you, so be it. I am always here for you.

Lovingly,
Ben

As Sara began reading the letter, her first thoughts were ones of irritation and confusion. Although “the facts” did answer some of the questions she had, she didn't need that information, so what was the point? Cameron felt the same way. The grim details about his parents' marriage disturbed him, but the fact that his father would so easily give such private information to Sara disturbed him even more. Sara felt like a voyeur; Cameron was embarrassed for his mother, especially since he knew that much of what his father had said about her was true.

Then they got to the last paragraph and understood: Ben was giving Sara private details about his marriage because he still believed he would marry her. A man would never give this kind of information to a daughter-in-law, but he would give it to a woman he intended to marry, especially if he thought it would make her more sympathetic to his situation.

Sara and Cameron looked at each other, thunderstruck.

He expects me to ask him to annul our marriage.

That's why he insisted on being the one to perform the ceremony.

And told me not to get pregnant.

Cameron's humiliation swelled through them both. *He would have you throw away everything we have, as if it's nothing, and then throw me away too and take my place.*

Sara could scarcely imagine anything so repellent. She tried to enlarge her spirit to encircle him, but his agony was so consuming that it sucked the energy right out of her. Little by little her telepathic connection with Cameron dissolved, and she dropped her head on his neck, exhausted.

Cameron rocked Sara, his hands hot on her skin and his breathing erratic.

“Please don't fight it, Cameron,” Sara whispered, unable to suppress her own urge to weep. Cameron dropped his forehead on Sara's, his muscles relaxing and the sobs erupting.

“I love you,” Sara said passionately as his tears dropped on her face, mixing with her own. Cameron gasped. “Do you, Sara?” he asked in a little-boy tone. “Do you really?”

"I'm yours forever, Cameron. Forever and ever. There is no one else. There never has been and never will be." She kissed Cameron again and again, tasting his tears. "I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you."

Eventually Cameron's sobs faded, and he began fondling her face with his lips, kissing her eyes, nose, temples, and throat. "I love you, Sara," he whispered, "You are my strength and my hope. Without you, I would die."

* * *

Late that night, when neither Sara nor Cameron had energy to do anything but whisper, they lay in zipped-together sleeping bags under the stars and made plans to confront his father.

"We have to do it tomorrow," Cameron said softly. "I'd like to give him a day to think about things before we rejoin the colony."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'll go to the dining hall with the excuse that we're dying for some fresh food, and I'll get into a conversation with Tony or someone and make my father think that I won't be home for a while. He won't be able to resist the opportunity to speak to you alone."

"Are you crazy? You can't leave me alone in that house with him!"

"But you'll only be alone for a few minutes, because I'll follow him back. He won't know it, but I'll be standing at the door, listening to everything he says."

Sara wasn't sure whether she should be shocked or delighted. "It sounds like entrapment!"

"It *is* entrapment."

"Are you sure that's . . . well . . . *right*?"

"You've been telling him for weeks that you choose me and he still refuses to believe you. Even the act of marrying me hasn't convinced him of his error. We have to do something drastic. We have to shock him into accepting our marriage."

"We may make him so angry that he'll never come to you for spiritual help."

"As things stand now, he has such contempt for me in this position that he'll never come to me anyway. I have nothing to lose with this approach."

"I suppose you're right."

"And it may be that he'll be more inclined to come to me once he's aware that I already know a lot about what's been going on."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Keep him talking, and when the time is right, I'll come into the house. I doubt he's even considered the possibility that you would tell me what's been going on. When he finds out just how extensively you've confided in me, he'll be forced to admit to himself that *I'm* your true mate."

Cameron's plan struck Sara as brilliant. "I think this will work," she said, relieved. "And it'll all happen in the privacy of our own home. I can't bear the thought that anyone else might find out about this."

"Neither can I. If my parents decide to divorce, everyone will know something's wrong. I hope, though, that the colonists never learn about my father's feelings for you."

"What a scandal that would cause!"

"No kidding. You did the right thing when you agreed to let my father marry us. Had we done it any other way, the situation would have become incredibly more complicated."

Sara laughed softly. "You didn't think so a few hours ago."

“That was when I was the enraged husband,” Cameron said comfortably. “Now I’m the dutiful son trying to save my family from humiliation.” He kissed her forehead.

“When do you get to become the calm, compassionate bishop?”

“I don’t know. It’s not hard to feel compassion for you and my mother, but for my father?” Cameron shook his head. “Frankly, what he’s done disgusts me so much that I don’t *want* to have compassion for him. He’s not the only one who will need a day to think before we rejoin the colony.”

Chapter 27: THE TRAP

The next morning, Thursday, Sara and Cameron hiked back to their house. They wore the arelada necklaces and communicated telepathically the entire way. When Cameron left to get lunch, his thoughts drifted away from Sara until nothing remained. For the first time since the wedding, she was alone, and she was not entirely comfortable with the feeling. She felt as if a part of herself were gone.

Knowing she needed to do something to keep herself from going crazy, Sara moved Cameron's Chinese calligraphy from his office into the living room, along with his picture of the Washington, D.C. Temple. She was in the middle of hanging the first of her mother's art posters in their bedroom when she heard a loud knock at the door.

Panic gripped her. She had almost hoped that Ben wouldn't come. She made her way slowly to the door, thinking he would leave if she took too long. He knocked again. When Sara opened the door and saw Ben standing there, she immediately realized that she couldn't go through with Cameron's plan. She couldn't invite Ben into the house and be there alone with him, even for a few minutes. Cameron would have to confront him on the trail. Sara slammed the door shut and leaned against it with her back.

"I need to talk to you, Sara," he said through the door.

"Then come back when my husband is here." Sara held her breath, waiting to find out what he would do.

Within moments she heard his voice at the open window in the babies' area. "And just what would Cameron do if he found me alone here with you? Absolutely nothing. He's so naïve it wouldn't occur to him to question it."

Ben wouldn't think Cameron was naïve once he realized that he had walked into a trap Cameron had set for him. Sara turned and saw Ben framed by the open window.

His features softened. "Did you get my card?"

"I did."

"And?"

"You were wrong to tell me those things."

"You asked for the facts."

"No, I told you that I didn't appreciate being deceived."

"I'm sorry I deceived you, Sara. You have no idea what a relief it is now that you know how I feel."

"What are you doing here?"

"I had to assure myself that you no longer hate me."

"I never did."

"Then come over here and talk with me."

"I'd rather not."

"Why? What are you afraid of?" Ben stepped on the windowsill and propelled himself into the house.

Even though the situation was playing out exactly as Cameron had predicted and Sara knew he would return in a few minutes, the nausea returned. "Please don't do this, Father."

"I am *not* your father."

"Yes you are, for all practical purposes."

Ben leaned against the windowsill. "Your brand of daughterly love is an interesting one. Is this the sort of relationship you have with your own father?" His voice was very gentle.

"No. Of course not." Sara positioned herself near the window in the living room area so that she could see when Cameron returned. The breeze felt refreshing. "My father has never made advances."

"I was referring to your feelings and actions, not mine."

"I've never regarded you as anything more than a mentor and father figure."

"If you still believe that, you're not being honest with yourself."

Sara had a feeling that she would have fallen into a romantic relationship with Ben had Cameron not come to Eden, but she wasn't about to admit it to Ben. "I don't pretend to understand exactly what has happened between us, but I do apologize if I ever did or said anything to lead you into believing there can be something between us that can never be." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Cameron walking up the trail, carrying a small, bulging duffel bag. He was being careful not to make any noise. She immediately relaxed, the queasiness diminishing.

Ben shook his head quickly and leaned toward Sara, speaking softly and expressively. "You have no reason to regret or feel ashamed, because you never consciously did anything to encourage me. The fact that your love developed so innocently, so spontaneously, makes it all the more genuine and beautiful. I won't allow you to rationalize it away, Sara. Please do me the honor of at least considering my offer of marriage."

Sara couldn't believe his brazenness. "I'm already married, Ben!"

"A technicality." He seemed pleased that she had called him "Ben."

Sara threw up her arms in exasperation. "What do I have to say or do to convince you that I truly do want to be married to Cameron?"

"There is *nothing* you can say or do to convince me that your love for Cameron truly is stronger than your love for me. Your *countenance* is the thing speaks to me, Sara. You're transparent and pure, like some exotic human crystal, luminous with passion. You're incapable of disguising anything, and you can't live a lie. All I have to do is look at you to know that the luminosity has *not* become a white hot flame but is, instead, in the process of being extinguished."

Cameron reached the door just in time to hear his father's last few words. He pursed his lips to keep from laughing. Sara was too angry to be amused by Ben's stupidity. "If my countenance seems confused, it's because you're here right now, trying to convince me I don't love my husband."

"Consider this, Sara. If Cameron were truly your soul mate and you were as offended by my interest as you claim you are, you would have told him what was going on. He would know just by looking at you that something was wrong, and you wouldn't be able to keep it from him."

Cameron shot Sara a look of warning and shook his head.

As difficult as it was, Sara did as Cameron wished and refrained from revealing that she *had* told him. "How can you have such little regard for your son's feelings? Are you really that heartless?"

Ben's eyebrows shot up, the muscles in his face tensing. "Cameron shows up out of the blue and tries to take my colony and my bride, and I'm supposed to feel charitable toward him?"

Ben had a streak of vindictiveness in him that Sara had never seen in Cameron. She understood that the way Ben had treated Cameron over the past month was probably not the way he had treated him over the past twenty years, but she also felt a need to remind him of his

obligations. “He’s your son! Your eldest child, *born in the covenant*. And I will *never* be your bride!”

“You’ll change your mind when you realize how incapable he is of satisfying your passionate desires.”

Ben’s comment landed on Cameron like a blow. He seemed to wilt, his eyes charged with anguish and outrage. Sara felt violated. Ben was trespassing on her intimate life, and she would not tolerate it. “Do you, a *high priest*, really think you can abandon your family and attempt to destroy my marriage without bringing the wrath of God down on your head? Are you really that arrogant?”

“Is it arrogance or sin for an unhappy man to seek marriage with a woman he knows loves him?”

“You have a wonderful wife. If you’re unhappy, it’s your own fault.”

“Oh yes, it’s my fault that Barbara has never warmed to me, never been honest, never been the woman I thought I married.” He gazed at Sara with incredulous earnestness. “Do you think I *wanted* this to happen? That I took Barbara to the temple with the idea that I would divorce her twenty-two years later?”

Sara opened her mouth, then closed it again, not knowing what to say.

“Of course I didn’t. I was in love with her. Insanely. I expected it to last forever; I really did. Is it my fault she never felt the passion for me I felt for her?”

Sara couldn’t allow Ben’s assertion to pass without defending Barbara. “Are you so sure about that? You said yourself that you don’t know the real Barbara. How do you know she *doesn’t* feel passion for you?”

“Because she has no desire for intimacy in the physical sense. This is one aspect of being a perfect wife she’s never been able to fake. Oh, she’s always made herself available to me. She’s certainly perfect in that sense. In the beginning she even acted interested. It may be she’s even taken pleasure in it, but it’s never given her any *joy*.”

Sara felt extremely uncomfortable, wishing she could withdraw the question. “You shouldn’t tell me this. It isn’t right.” And it certainly wasn’t something Cameron should hear!

“Physical responsiveness is something a woman can fake.” Ben touched his heart and shook his head. “True passion, however, is something that can’t be faked. I’m not sure there was ever a time she really *wanted* me.”

Sara would not listen to this. She turned and strode toward her bedroom.

“Oh no, Sara.” Within seconds she felt him grip her arms from behind. “You asked for this and you will hear it.”

Sara struggled to get away from him, shaking her head. “You’re going to regret it.”

He tightened his hold on her, and she wondered whether Cameron would intervene. “I need to tell you this, Sara. You need to *know* this. You need to know something of the rejection I’ve always felt and the guilt that comes afterwards when I realize I’ve done something to her she didn’t want. After years of this, the rejection and guilt become more painful than celibacy, and the little intimacy that does exist fades away. It’s been more than a year since I’ve made love to my wife. I want you to know this because I don’t ever want you to feel as if you were, in any way, the cause of my problems with Barbara.”

Sara froze. Ben’s revelation did relieve her as much as it horrified her. She didn’t think she could bear being his *femme fatale* any more than she could bear being one of many young women he had seduced, were he a bona fide adulterer. Empathy for Barbara forced her to ask, “How can Barbara exist this way any more than you can? I would feel ugly and unloved.”

He released his hold on her arms and laid his hands gently on her shoulders. He was so close Sara could feel his breath on the back of her head. "You aren't like her. I think the real Barbara is relieved."

Sara still couldn't bring herself to face him. "I can't believe it doesn't hurt her that you aren't interested in her anymore."

"If it bothered her, she would initiate things. I've given her plenty of opportunities, believe me. She gets upset only when I fail to show her enough affection in public. In fact, the only thing that does seem to generate passion in her is when one of us says or does something that disturbs the appearance of perfection she wants our family to have."

Sara felt the truth of this statement. Cameron and Ashley had said essentially the same thing. On the other hand, Barbara, one of the most beautiful, polished women Sara had ever seen, did feel insecure about her appearance.

Sara finally turned and looked up at Ben, backing into the kitchen. His expression was one of such grief that Sara knew he still had feelings for his wife, and that gave her hope. "You should tell Barbara everything you told me, and then tell her *about* me. That would generate discussion if nothing else does. *Make* her sit down and *talk* to you! Then both of you talk to Cameron. I can't believe Barbara thinks you're so worthless that she wouldn't be willing to try to work things out if she knew what's at stake."

"I knew you were too kind-hearted and just to condemn me if you knew the truth."

"I know that I've only heard your side of the story."

"And you will never know Barbara's. Neither will I. She won't even yell at me, much less confide me."

Sara couldn't help but be irritated by how closed his mind was toward reconciliation with his wife, and she felt polluted, as if he had manipulated her into that intimate discussion so that she would feel sorry for him. "So you expect me now to throw myself into your arms, ditch Cameron, and then we live the rest of our lives together in bliss? Is that it?"

"Not exactly." He waved and looked around the tiny house. "I may be disgusted by this fling you're having with Cameron, but I have no delusions. I think that once the infatuation fever runs its course, you'll be ready to act on your true feelings. To do that, you need to know exactly where I stand."

"So you agreed to marry me to Cameron to hurry my recovery along."

"You were so determined. I knew that trying to prevent you from marrying would have been like throwing gasoline on the flame."

"I can't believe you aren't disturbed by what an annulment in a month might do to Cameron and me spiritually."

"You both went into the marriage with the right intent. If you end it now, I can't believe the Lord would look at it as breaking the law of chastity."

"That's your opinion, but in reality, you have no authority from God to make a judgment in this matter. Only Cameron does, and if he loses his purity, his judgment will be skewed. Does it mean so little to you to have a bishop who truly does speak for God?"

"I would rather have a humble bishop, one who realizes he isn't infallible."

"Then open your eyes and see your son for what he is!"

"Cameron will be a better bishop once he realizes he's just as human as the rest of us."

"A better bishop? Just how do you define 'better'?"

"One more in tune to the needs of the colony."

"You mean one who doesn't fight you so much."

"Cameron, himself, will be happier if he relaxes and accepts The Equality of Zion."

"I think I understand you now. What you really want is for your son to be your puppet, and it galls you that he refuses to fill that role for you."

"I just want Cameron to come out of his fantasy world and see the truth."

Sara gazed at Ben thoughtfully. "Actually, I think what really galls you is that you weren't made the bishop to begin with. I think that the real reason you agreed to marry Cameron and me was because you knew that this 'fling' would paralyze him in his calling. That he would lose both spiritual power and support from the other colonists. Then they would begin to look to you again as their spiritual leader."

Ben's eyes widened, as if he were stunned. "How could you suggest such a thing, Sara? You know me better than that!"

"And I can't believe you're still claiming innocence," Sara was surprised by the words that were coming out of her mouth. "You're too shrewd. You had to have considered the ramifications. Maybe you really are an apostate."

Hurt seeped into those shocked blue eyes. "You could really believe I would fight the Church?"

"Yes. It's bad enough that you would be willing to set your *son* up for such humiliation, but to do it to your *bishop*? If that isn't fighting the Church, I don't know what is."

"Cameron will be less hurt and more able to function effectively in *all* parts of his life if he loses you now than if he comes to the realization in ten, fifteen, or twenty years that he's married to a woman who feels no passion for him."

"Don't you *dare* try to excuse yourself by saying Cameron would be better off if you stole his wife." Sara couldn't believe how calm she sounded. "He's already so hurt he'll probably never completely get over it. You're the one who's living in a fantasy world, Ben Carroll. In the real world, sons are injured and embittered when their fathers stomp on them. You're fortunate Cameron doesn't hate you." She flung a hand at the door. "Get out of my house." Sara turned and opened her bedroom door. Cameron could deal with his father now. Her patience was gone.

"He knows?" Ben whispered, appalled.

Sara couldn't resist turning to face him again. "If you're so innocent of any wrongdoing, why should you care that Cameron knows? One way or another, he would have to be told, wouldn't he?"

He stared at her, baffled, as if a boulder had dropped on his head and he hadn't figured it out yet, much less determined where it had come from. "I just didn't think—"

"What? That I wouldn't have told him already because he isn't my 'soul mate'?"

Ben gaped at her.

To Sara's relief, Cameron finally came into the house, appearing pale and shaken. "It was as you said, Father," Cameron said, closing the door and leaning against it, as if forbidding his father to leave just yet. "Sara is completely transparent. She tried to keep it from me long enough so that we could have a relaxed honeymoon, but I could tell something was wrong and that it had to do with you. She told me everything yesterday."

Ben spun around to face Cameron. "You've been standing at the door?"

Cameron nodded slowly, setting the duffel bag on the floor.

"You . . . heard? Everything?"

"I heard enough." Cameron removed the card Ben had given to Sara from his pocket and waved it at his father. "After I read this, I had a feeling you would try to see Sara if I made you think I wouldn't be back for a while. I couldn't resist the opportunity to find out what you were

up to, and Sara wanted to make it clear to you, once and for all, that she will never regard you as anything more than her father-in-law.”

“You deceived me.”

“And this little jaunt you made up here today to see Sara wasn’t meant to deceive *me*?”

Ben finally found his wits. “How do you know Sara *isn’t* in love with me and that you aren’t just an utter fool?” He didn’t sound as confident as he had before Cameron had revealed his presence.

Cameron laughed gently. “I’m the one on my honeymoon. It appears you’re the one who’s the fool.”

Ben could not muster a response. He moved toward the door, as if determined to escape.

“Not yet, Father,” Cameron said softly. “Not until you’ve heard what I have to say.”

Ben backed away from Cameron a little and turned around, unable to face him any longer. When he saw Sara still standing in the kitchen, he quickly averted his eyes and turned toward the babies’ room window. Sara would have moved to the window to block his escape in that direction, but she believed he had too much self-possession to bolt now. Ben was mortified to be sure, but he was no coward.

Sara was right. Ben halted and stared out the window.

Satisfied that his father was listening, Cameron spoke again: “This card you sent to Sara with the camping gear puzzles me. I don’t believe the excuse you gave Sara to explain why you aren’t already divorced. You aren’t a coward, and only a coward would put off divorce for so long for the reason you gave. So I keep asking myself: If my father is so unhappy in his marriage, why didn’t he divorce my mother a long time ago?”

Cameron shifted his position a little and returned the card to his shirt pocket. “I would like to believe you’ve put it off for so long because, despite all you’ve told Sara, you still love my mother and don’t really want to divorce her. I wouldn’t even mind believing that you were hoping your attention to Sara would spark some passion in your wife and that things would improve between the two of you. Those reasons are a little too comfortable, though, a little too easy.

“That’s why I’m wondering if the real reason you didn’t get a divorce is because you knew it would kill the Eden Colony. You figured you could deceive my mother and secretly seduce Sara long enough to get everyone here, and then you could step forward and do what you wanted to do all along. The only glitch in that scenario is that I can’t believe the colonists are any more likely to stand for such a scandal now than they would have been six months ago. You are, as Sara said earlier, a shrewd man. I can’t believe you wouldn’t have foreseen the possibility for mutiny had your plans come to fruition.

“Which leads me to my last speculation, the only one that makes complete sense. I can’t help but wonder whether you meant to marry Sara at all. I have a feeling you just told yourself that to give yourself an excuse to get close to her. You never had any real intention of giving up your marriage to my mother and the appearance of respectability it gives you. What you really want from Sara is an affair.”

Sara gasped. Ben lunged toward Cameron, grabbed him by his collar, and threw him against the wall. Ben said in a low, threatening voice, “You may be Sara’s husband, but you are still my son, and I will not tolerate disrespect from you.”

Cameron gazed at Ben in that penetrating way he had, utterly fearless. A destroying angel couldn’t have appeared as glorious and as terrifying as Cameron did at that moment. “You have three days to tell Mother what’s been going on. If you don’t do it, I will.”

Ben released Cameron and strode out the door. When he was gone, Sara jogged over to Cameron and threw her arms around him, her spirit leaping out to merge with his. He held her tightly. *I've never, in my life, spoken to my father that way.*

I didn't know you had it in you to be so brutal.

Was I too brutal?

No. Actually, I was more brutal than you were.

He needed to hear it.

It's odd, but he accuses you of thinking you're infallible, when he's the one who thinks he's infallible.

Well, I think we've finally managed to give him some new thoughts.

He really believed I loved him.

My father thinks the universe revolves around him.

Sara looked up at Cameron, feeling troubled. *No, Cameron. It was more than that. He was so certain. He wouldn't have come up here today and told me the things he did had he not been absolutely positive I was in love with him and not you.*

What are you trying to say?

That I must have led him on. There's no other explanation.

Cameron shook his head. *Whatever you did, it was unconscious. You didn't lead him on; he encouraged you—even manipulated you.*

Maybe I really was in love with him and didn't know it.

Cameron laid his hands on Sara's shoulders and squeezed them reassuringly. *I don't believe that for a moment. When my father explained everything to you in that letter, he made it sound as if his love for you just kind of happened after the two of you spent so many evenings at the restaurant together.*

You don't think so?

No, I don't. I think he noticed you right away and liked you. He liked you a lot. Then he used his position to get close to you. There were times when you wanted to hang up on him or walk out on him and didn't because he was the governor of the colony. You should feel deceived and betrayed, not guilty.

Sara felt the nausea rise in her chest again. *I let myself become involved with a married man.*

Cameron shook his head vigorously, his eyes flashing with indignation. *No! A leader whom you trusted manipulated you into friendship by letting you think he thought of you as a daughter.*

That was what I believed.

Cameron gave Sara a little shake. *Of course you did! Because you don't love him in a romantic way and never did! You love him as a father. I can certainly see it, and I imagine everyone else in the colony has seen it too. If you had flirted with him and led him on, don't you think someone would have noticed?*

Cameron's passionate observations made Sara feel a little better. *I hadn't thought of that.*

Trust me, Sara. I would have noticed, even if no one else had.

I still don't know. He was so certain.

My father is incredibly attracted to you and he saw what he wanted to see. You're a victim, Sara.

I'm a victim. It was a humiliating realization, but not nearly as terrible as the alternative.

Cameron nodded.

And your mother too.

Cameron's hands relaxed on Sara's shoulders. *Yes, my mother too. Despite the things my father said.*

Do you think he'll tell her about me?

I doubt it. It doesn't sound as if they've been talking about anything of importance for years.

What do you think was his real reason for not getting a divorce?

I don't know.

Sara nuzzled up to Cameron's neck again and allowed him to draw her close. *Well, at least he doesn't have any misconceptions about my feelings anymore.*

Cameron began stroking her hair. *Let's hope not.*

Sara hesitated. *He was willing to marry me, despite his disgust for the so-called fling I'm having with you.*

I'm not sure he ever truly meant to marry you.

I'm not either, but if he did, he must really love me. The realization filled Sara with as much pity as amazement.

Chapter 28: A WOLF OR A RABID DOG?

That night Sara slept deeply but not peacefully. The confrontation with Ben charged through her mind again and again, laced with the memories of all of her encounters with him. In her dreams she began seeing everything in a new way, and when she became aware that morning had come, she no longer felt angry or betrayed, just full of empathy for his pain.

Sara reached out to Cameron with her arm and her thoughts, but he wasn't there. Jarred by his absence, Sara opened her eyes completely and sat up. She heard Cameron's voice outside of the bedroom door, mingled with that of a woman, and understood. Cameron had probably called his mother and asked her to bring them breakfast.

Sara slipped into her robe, then reached under her pillow and Cameron's for the arelada necklaces. Cameron's wasn't where it was supposed to be, so she assumed he had it. She dropped her own into her pocket. She quickly combed her fingers through her hair, and opened her bedroom door to find Ashley there instead of Barbara. Ashley was very upset. "Don't you dare blow me off, Cameron!"

Cameron motioned his sister into one of the camp chairs. He had showered and shaved, but he was wearing his robe. "You know I wouldn't blow you off, Ashley, but because of my calling, there really isn't much I can say to you about the situation."

"So there is a 'situation.' Well, Sara's not the bishop. She can tell me what's going on." Ashley directed her attention to Sara. "You would never brush me off, would you, Sara?"

Sara tried to be cheerful. "Not if I could help it."

Ashley raised her eyebrows at Cameron, vindicated. "You see, Sara's too honest to ever play games with me."

"So am I, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm duty-bound to keep certain things confidential." Cameron sounded annoyed. He moved toward Sara and took her into his arms, communicating telepathically, *She saw the wedding hug.*

What in the galaxy were they going to tell her? Sara looked at Cameron in question, and he responded with an air of warning, *You eat, I'll talk.*

"But he's my father!" Ashley exclaimed.

"He's also a member of my ward. Do you want me to tell him all of *your* problems? You are, after all, his daughter!"

Ashley's cheeks colored. "No, of course not. I'm sorry, Cameron."

Sara sat down at the table in front of a tray of food, more than happy to let Cameron be the one to deal with difficulties caused by his father from now on. The smell of the eggs made her stomach growl. "Thanks for the breakfast, Ashley."

"It was nothing, really. I was looking for an excuse to come up here." Ashley's voice quavered. "Sara, did my father make a pass at you or not?"

Before Sara could answer, Cameron said, "I don't think you need either one of us to answer that question for you, Ashley."

"All right. Maybe I don't. Maybe I just want you to tell me I didn't see what I saw. Maybe I want you to tell me I'm crazy to even consider the possibility that Father would give Sara such a . . ." Ashley waved her hands, her eyes darting around the room, searching for the correct word. ". . . such an *erotic* hug."

As Sara began eating a bagel, Cameron moved into position behind her and played with her hair. "Are you crazy?"

Ashley shook her head quickly. "No. But I am baffled. Why would he do something like that?"

Cameron's hands moved to Sara's neck and began lightly kneading. "Why does any man hug a woman that way?"

"Father isn't any man! He's in love with Mother!"

"Is he?"

"Isn't he?"

"What do you think?"

"After what I saw the other day, I don't know anymore."

"Neither do I," Cameron admitted.

"But what he did was so obscene! I don't think a *toothpick* could have separated their bodies! He's never hugged *me* that way!" Ashley gasped, attempting to catch her breath. "And Sara isn't any woman! Even if, for some outrageous reason, Father is the sort of man to pursue a woman other than Mother, why in the world, Cameron, would he choose Sara? Your *wife*?"

"Sara became my wife a few days ago; my girlfriend a mere month ago. Father and Sara have been closely associated with each other for some time. They know each other quite a bit better than you or I or Mother ever suspected."

Ashley looked at Sara in alarm. "Is what he says true?"

Sara nodded slowly. "When we were still on Earth, we talked online every night with many of the other colonists and often e-mailed each other. He met Tony and Jordan and Marc and me at Don Pablo's on Saturday nights, and he called me sometimes."

Ashley looked up at Cameron again. "So he might consider his claim on her more valid than yours, is that what you're saying?"

"Something like that."

A thought rooted itself in Sara's mind, and she knew that both Ashley and Cameron needed to hear it. Sara set the last bite of bagel on her plate. "When your father married Cameron and me, he didn't view it as marrying a suitable LDS girl to his son. He was giving a pet boy to his Little Panther, hoping to pacify her. The boy could have been anyone. That the boy happened to be his own son was a tragic twist of circumstance, nothing more, nothing less."

"So he really is a wolf," Ashley said with disgust.

"No, not a wolf, a rabid dog. He's in a lot of pain and can't see beyond it at the moment. It's made him reckless. He's poisoning everyone close to him, and when he finally realizes it, he'll feel terrible and beg for treatment. In the meantime, neither you nor Cameron should take anything that has happened personally."

Cameron's hands became still on her shoulders. "You sound very sure."

"I *am* sure. I *know* him." Cameron patted her shoulder thoughtfully, then squeezed. He wanted to believe her. She turned to him and said softly, "Whatever mistakes your father has made, you can be sure they were motivated by desperation, not malice and not depravity."

Ashley moaned. "That may all be true, but what do these 'mistakes' mean for our family? For Mother?"

Sara turned to face Ashley again. Before she could respond, Cameron said, resuming the neck massage, "Why don't you ask him about it?" Sara tipped her head back so that Cameron could rub her head too.

"I don't know if I have the nerve."

"All you have to say is: 'Father, when you embraced Sara at the wedding, it looked as if you wanted her to know that you're attracted to her. Why would you do that?'"

“He’ll brush me off. Tell me I’m imagining things.”

“So what if he does?”

“Then I’ll say, ‘I’m not blind, Father, and I’m not a child. How can you do something like this to Sara? To Cameron? To Mother? Don’t any of us mean anything to you anymore?’”

“I think it would be good for him to hear you say that.”

“You know I won’t get a straight answer out of him,” Ashley said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Cameron said. “He needs to hear what you have to say.”

“But I want answers!”

“I think you’ll get your answers soon enough, Ashley.”

“Just how far gone is he?”

“All I can tell you is that the situation is probably not as bad as you suspect in some ways. In other ways, though, I’m certain it’s far worse.”

Ashley stood up. “I wish I could say you’ve made me feel better.”

“How do you think I feel?”

“I’m sorry, Cameron.” Ashley hugged him tightly, then shook her head at Sara sympathetically. “He did make several comments about your beauty. You don’t seem conscious of it, Sara, but you’re beautiful. Like Snow White. But you’re also incredibly intelligent and real—no shallow fairy tale princess. I guess when it gets right down to it I’m not surprised you would be the one my father would fall for. I’m just kind of sorry I helped my mother make you into a ‘hot bride.’” Ashley’s eyes filled with tears. “It’s rather ironic . . . you know?”

“I’m not sorry you made her into a hot bride,” Cameron said, attempting to be pleasant. “After all, the groom’s the one who’s supposed to matter, isn’t he?”

“Absolutely. Would you like me to bring lunch too?”

Cameron shook his head. “We may hike out again. But dinner would be nice. You can tell us how your talk with Father went.”

Ashley turned toward the door. “We’ll see.”

After she left, Sara communicated, *She doesn’t sound as if she thinks it will go well.*

Cameron kissed Sara and sat down at the little table. *I really wish she hadn’t seen what happened.*

So do I. I think you’re right, though, that she should say something to him about it. It’s going to kill him when he finds out that she knows, but he needs to wake up and start getting a realistic view of how his actions are affecting all of us.

The table jiggled as Cameron moved his chair closer to it. *I don’t know, Sara. I’m not sure he cares how much he’s hurting anyone but you.* He extended his legs and wrapped them around hers.

Sara slid a plate of scrambled eggs toward Cameron. *Oh, but he does. If he’s not acting like it, it’s because he’s convinced himself that those who should be hurt can’t be for some reason.*

As Sara lifted her cup of juice to her lips, Cameron reached for a fork. *What do you mean? Well, first of all, he doesn’t believe your mother loves him.*

Then he’s blind. That can’t be true. Cameron stabbed a large chunk of egg.

It doesn’t matter. It’s what he thinks. Obviously, then, if he doesn’t believe she loves him, he doesn’t believe he can hurt her by pursuing me.

Cameron nodded slowly as he ate. *That does make a strange sort of sense.*

Now take that one step further. He’s been married for twenty-two years to a woman he doesn’t believe loves him. It’s made him lonely to the point of desperation. He is seriously unhappy. He knows firsthand the nightmare of being trapped in a marriage with no passion.

Cameron set his fork on his plate and shook his head. *I can't believe their marriage was always that bad! In fact, I know it wasn't. When I was a child, they were devoted to each other. I remember smiles and hugs and happiness.*

Sara finished drinking her juice and set the cup on the table. *I'm sure you're right. It doesn't matter. Your father thinks that your mother never loved him and that he's trapped in a marriage with no passion.*

What are you trying to say?

That in his twisted way, he really did see you as a younger version of himself marrying a woman who couldn't feel passion for you because she was in love with him and had been for months.

Boy, that is twisted.

Do you understand what I'm getting at?

I think so. You believe that my father was basically honest in everything he told you.

Sara nodded. *He really did think you would be better off not being married to me because if you continued in the marriage, you would end up unhappy.*

Cameron took a drink, then reached for his bagel. *Which brings us back to your original theory, that he didn't believe he could hurt me by pursuing you. He thought that giving me long-term happiness was worth inflicting short-term pain.*

Right, and as far as the other colonists go, they've always trusted him before, so why wouldn't they trust him when he announces his plans to divorce your mother and remarry?

I'm not sure I can believe my father's that naïve.

Your father's relationship with the other colonists is far different from yours. He has surrounded himself with people he respects and who respect him. It has never entered his head that they might reject him for a decision to divorce your mother. In his mind, he is justified, so they, as intelligent people, will obviously recognize that. It doesn't even occur to him that they would be disturbed by the fact that I'm so much younger than he is. He sees me as his equal and expects them to see me the way he does.

You may have a point, Cameron admitted.

Sara wiped a dab of cream cheese off of Cameron's cheek and let him lick it from her finger. *Your father may not be the righteous man he once was, but he is still a good man and would never intentionally hurt anyone, least of all the members of his family.*

The cruel things he's said to me have seemed intentional.

That evening you were sustained as bishop, you became his rival, both in colony leadership and in your relationship with me. He's incredibly jealous of you. He's been ignoring the fact that you're his son, but it smacked him in the face when I told him how hurt you were by what he had done. He was horrified.

He finally realized that I'm the one you love.

No, it was more than that. It bothered him that you knew everything.

That still doesn't explain all the years of treating me like a fanatic and a freak for wanting to live the gospel. Cameron popped the last bit of bagel into his mouth.

Your father's been heading in the wrong direction ever since the Zarrists showed up on Earth. Since then you've been a constant reminder of what he's turning away from. Of what he once was.

So his treatment of me may be more a reflection of how he feels about the Church than how he feels about me.

No. Deep down, he loves the Church and wants to keep his covenants, including his marriage to your mother. I think that turning his back on those things is causing him a lot of

mental turmoil. His unkind treatment of you is more a reflection of what he thinks of himself than what he thinks of either you or the Church.

You're either delusional, or you really do know him well.

Sara looked away from Cameron. *I know him too well. No wonder he was so certain I was in love with him. I really was on the brink of having an affair with a married man.* The realization made her feel queasy with guilt.

Sara heard Cameron crumple his cup in his hand and drop it on his plate. *Stop it, Sara. Stop it right now! None of this is your fault!*

Sara rubbed her forehead and muttered, "It isn't right that I should know him so well."

"Well, you do, and maybe at this point that isn't a bad thing. You can use that understanding to help me. I don't feel as if I know him at all."

Hearing Cameron's voice rendered force to his words. Perhaps he was right. If her understanding of Ben could help Cameron in any way, maybe it wasn't altogether shameful.

Sara felt Cameron's hands on hers and finally looked up at him again. He was gazing at her, troubled. "I'm serious, Sara. As hard as I try, I can't think of my father as anything but an apostate and an adulterer."

Sara forced herself to relax. "I don't think he's an adulterer."

"Maybe not in the complete physical sense, but at heart he is."

Sara nodded slowly. After everything that had happened, how could she disagree with him?

"Sara, I need help."

Sara attempted to smile. *The situation really is absurd. You don't know him any better than he knows you, and yet you should, because you're incredibly alike.*

Cameron appeared shocked. *How so?*

In intelligence and temperament, in your expressions and deeply held convictions—everything.

So if I want to understand my father and feel compassion for him, I should simply put myself in his place.

Sara nodded. Cameron really did want to feel compassion for his father and forgive him. That was good. He wouldn't be capable of aiding him spiritually if he couldn't. *You could start by remembering how hurt you were the other day when I wouldn't tell you what was bothering me. Now compound that feeling over twenty-two years, and you will get an idea of what your father is feeling right now.*

He did say that my mother wouldn't yell at him or confide in him.

Had I not told you what your father had done, what would our relationship be like in twenty-two years?

Twenty-two years of being shut out of your heart? I would probably think I had done something wrong and that you wished you had never married me.

And it wouldn't matter that the thing I was keeping from you had nothing to do with you.

I can't even comprehend such torture. Do you really think my mother is shutting him out somehow?

All I know is that he believes it.

Cameron drummed his fingers on the table, staring thoughtfully.

And consider this. The planet didn't detect any lies.

Cameron focused on Sara again. *That may not mean much. We've only been here a week. The planet may not have enough information to make a judgment like that.*

True. Then again, it does seem to be sensitive to lying, and not just lying, but any misrepresentation of a person's true feelings. Two things are certain—your father is basically honest and your mother has been fundamentally what your father claims she is for at least a week.

Cameron wasn't sure what that meant, but he didn't like the possibilities. He didn't want to believe that his mother was in any way responsible for the problems in her marriage. It was so much easier to put all of the blame on one person and none on the other, especially since his father's outrageous actions made him the obvious person on whom to fix fault. *What a mess.*

* * *

When Ashley brought dinner to Sara and Cameron that evening, her eyes were bloodshot and dismal, as if she had spent the day crying. "What happened?" Cameron demanded, taking the tray of food from her hands.

"He completely ignored me. I got him alone on the way to lunch and said exactly what you told me to say. He walked away and hasn't so much as looked at me all day."

Sara suddenly wasn't sure that she knew what was going on in Ben's mind. She turned toward Cameron. "That isn't so bad . . . is it? He didn't talk to her, but at least he didn't lie about what happened."

Cameron appeared thoughtful as he set the tray on the table. "Did he seem angry, Ashley?"

"Angry?" Ashley shrugged. "Who knows? His expression was completely blank, both before I spoke to him and after. He was like a robot."

"He's in shock," Sara said softly. Cameron nodded slowly. After Ashley left, Sara touched Cameron's thoughts with her own. *We must have gotten through to him. What do you think he'll do now?*

I guess we'll find out tomorrow, when we see him. If he sincerely loves you and is as decent as you think he is, he'll be humble, docile, and on the road to repentance. If not, he'll declare war.

Chapter 29: MYSTERY LIGHT

Late Saturday afternoon Sharad met Trendaul as he came out of the temple. “We just received some important news. You need to come straight home.”

“What’s going on?”

Sharad began walking, his back to the temple. “The president of your country announced that a large fleet of enemy ships is approaching Earth. He’s advising everyone to go underground and prepare for invasion.”

“So it’s beginning.” Trendaul looked one last time at the temple. A haze had descended on it, veiling the lights and giving it a misty, surreal appearance. It almost seemed to glow.

“Yes. And Earth will never be the same again.”

Trendaul turned away from the temple and walked beside Sharad. Although he felt no closer to a decision, he did feel a little more relaxed. Or was he simply numb? “If we survive this invasion, I suppose Gavaun will be pushing to leave in a few days.”

“As soon as Nexyun and Jaxzeran are on their way.”

As Sharad repeated several of the news reports he had heard, Trendaul watched the sun, a deep red-orange ball, sink in the hazy sky. The light behind the sun seemed brighter than it should have been, casting an eerie glow over the trees. Odd.

The sun had sunk behind the trees by the time Trendaul and Sharad turned into Trendaul’s driveway, but the sky was brighter than ever. Trendaul stopped and looked around, puzzled. Something wasn’t right. In every direction he looked, the sky was whitening instead of darkening.

“What’s happening?” Sharad asked.

Trendaul couldn’t force his gaze away from the sky. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Hearing the front door open, Trendaul turned and saw Teri. “What are you two doing out—?” She looked up abruptly. “What’s happening? Are we being invaded already?”

“No,” Sharad responded. “Warships use lasers and projectiles. The light would be concentrated.”

Peace poured through Trendaul with such intensity that he felt giddy, as if the Lord Himself were embracing him with His arms and His love. “The light comes from God. It’s to protect us from the invasion.” He was safe. He was safe! Sharad was wrong!

“How extraordinary,” Sharad breathed.

Understanding and amazement softened Teri’s face. “Do you really think so, Tren?” She walked across the lawn to him and slipped her arm around his waist. Gavaun and the kids followed her out of the house, their faces tilted heavenward.

Trendaul heard a storm door crash open and turned to see what house the sound had come from. Across the street and down a house, a blond-haired man in his thirties emerged with a woman who had an arm over her head, as if trying to protect it from blows. Both carried wiggling, barking blanket bundles. The man glanced fearfully at the sky before he got into the car in the driveway closest to the street. The woman didn’t look up once as she ran to the other side of the car.

The couple from across the street hadn’t reached the next intersection when the front door to the house next to Trendaul’s was thrown open. Out came a couple with three teenage children. They, too, appeared anxious and afraid. Before the man could get into his vehicle and drive away with his family, Sharad jogged across the lawn and took hold of his arm. “What is the matter, sir? Where are you going in such a hurry?”

“The aliens have us in their sights,” the man said frantically. “We have to get out while there’s still a chance! What are you waiting for?” He broke free of Sharad’s grip and jumped into his truck. Within seconds, it was gone.

“That was weird,” Teri said. Trendaul looked around. The light in the sky was whiter than ever, illuminating the details of every tree branch and reflecting brilliantly off of cars and house windows.

Doors began opening up and down the street. Trendaul’s neighbors flowed into their cars and into the traffic jam that appeared to be developing a couple of streets down. Trendaul discerned a few of the comments, his awe growing. “We’re being invaded! . . . The aliens are burning us with their strange light! . . . They can read our minds! . . . They mean to kill us with terror!”

Trendaul and his family told as many as they could that the light was from God and was there to protect them and that they would be far safer if they would go back into their houses. The terrified people refused to believe the terrible light was from God, however, and continued the exodus at a frenetic pace.

Eventually all of the families who wanted to go were gone, and the only families left were ones like Trendaul’s, baffled witnesses to a bizarre phenomenon.

“Why were they so terrified, Dad?” Aaron asked.

“I have to believe it’s because they perceive God as a source of punishment, not protection.”

“Because of their sins?”

“Perhaps. It can be a horrifying thing to have all of the hidden corners of your soul suddenly illuminated and shoved into your face.”

“Especially when you think all of your secret thoughts are running non-stop on an alien ship’s video screens!” Josh said with a chuckle.

“It’s the stuff of nightmares,” Teri agreed.

“Those poor people,” Gavaun said. “Where will they go?”

“There is no place for them to go,” Sharad said sadly. “Many of them will die.”

“Well, not all of our neighbors are doomed to watch the invasion from their cars. Let’s find out what they think of all this.” Teri began walking toward one of the families that remained. Trendaul immediately followed her, the rest of his family close behind.

Within minutes, all of the remaining families had gathered and were chattering about what had happened. One of the families was Jewish and native to Montgomery County, another was Hispanic, another was from Pakistan, and the other was from Hong Kong. Their political beliefs were as diverse as their religious ones, and Trendaul was a little surprised to learn that the Chinese family considered themselves Federalists and liked many of the things Tohmazz Zarr was doing. As far as any of them could ascertain, the only thing they had in common was that they all believed the new light had come from God to protect them from the imminent invasion.

By the time everyone had separated to take cover, the light had become so intense that the neighborhood appeared to be shimmering with it. Had Trendaul and his family spent the night in their bedrooms, sleep would have been difficult. Instead, they slept in sleeping bags on the basement floor. The children dropped off one by one to the various voices of men and women reporting the news.

Apparently pockets of “mystery light” had popped up all over the world, blanketing, for the most part, the Cooperative Communities established by the Guardians of Earth’s Governments. In the Washington, D.C. area, the light covered southern Montgomery County

and much of the District of Columbia, including the museums and monuments downtown. The light had descended on other world capitals as well.

Chaos ignited as people either struggled to flee from it or escape into it, depending on whether they thought the light was from the enemy aliens or from God. A small percentage of the population rejected both theories, believing instead that the “mystery light” was some sort of exotic natural phenomenon. They flocked to the light in order to study it. Some were satisfied with a mere glimpse; others considered it the most beautiful thing they had ever seen and disappeared into it.

The world at large thought the “mystery light” proved what everyone had believed all along—that the Guardians of Earth’s Governments had always been made up of rebels, extremists, and idiots. After all, what intelligent person would move *into* a ground-zero city such as Washington, D.C. for refuge? Had the Guardians any sense, they would have gathered to the mountains!

As Trendaul’s family watched a news report about the “mystery light,” Sharad turned to Trendaul and gazed at him in a penetrating way. “It appears that this light from heaven drives away the cowards. A truly brave person, one who is determined to come into the light despite the terror it holds, could easily get close to any of us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Teri demanded.

Fear stabbed Trendaul. Again, Sharad made sense. Maybe the light from God couldn’t completely protect him. “I don’t want to talk about this now.” All he needed was for Sharad to upset Teri with talk of David’s danger.

“Well I do!” Teri said. “Why do you think one of Zarr’s people might want to get close to us, Sharad? Or are you just trying to scare us into going to Novaun?”

“I would never do that.” Sharad glanced at Trendaul. “Do you want to tell her, or should I?”

Trendaul’s eyes flitted around the room; all five of his younger children were asleep. “You can, but softly!”

As Sharad detailed his concerns to Teri, Trendaul’s mind convulsed. Was he in danger or wasn’t he? What was his duty to Novaun and the Avenauntas? What was Teri’s duty to the Pierces? How could he take her away from David now? How could he remain if his days on Earth really were numbered? Wouldn’t his duty, then, be to keep himself alive so that he could take care of his wife and children?

As Teri listened to Sharad’s speculations, her expression changed from one of skepticism to alarm. She turned in perplexity to Trendaul. “If we go, I may lose my brother. If we stay, I may lose you. What are we supposed to do?”

“Take David with us,” Gavaun said urgently. “Both he and Trendaul will be safe on Novaun.”

“David would refuse to go!” Teri said, her tone touched with hysteria.

“Teri’s right,” Trendaul agreed. “David wouldn’t go.”

“Then it’s even more imperative that you leave with us as soon as we can get away,” Sharad said. “If Zarr decides he wants David, he may use all of you as leverage against him.”

“Oh . . .” Teri moaned, pressing her forehead against Trendaul’s shoulder.

“I still think we should take him with us,” Gavaun said. “The two of you will just have to convince him somehow.”

“I’m not even convinced myself that returning to Novaun is the right thing to do,” Trendaul admitted.

“You cannot be serious!” Gavaun said, far too loudly.

Teri nodded quickly, her eyes glowing with a strange light. “Oh, he’s serious. He wants to go, and he wants to stay; he needs to go and he needs to stay. He really can’t make up his mind, so it’s time I did it for him.”

Trendaul listened to his wife, stunned. As long as he had known her, she had never made a decision for him, and for a flash of a second he was furious.

“Gavaun, Sharad, you have my permission to tie him up and carry him to the frigate if he refuses to go any other way, but you have to promise me we won’t leave until I’ve had a chance to warn my brother.”

* * *

As Trendaul lay in the sleeping bags he and Teri had zipped together, his emotions bounced from anger to bafflement to panic to humiliation. He wanted to draw Teri close as he always did, but she seemed like such a stranger at the moment that he wasn’t sure she would want him to touch her.

After many minutes, Teri whispered in frustration, “You’re angry.”

Trendaul tentatively rested his hand on her arm. “I guess I am. A little.”

“Maybe I was wrong to say what I said, but I’m frightened.”

Of course she was frightened. He was in danger and so was her brother. Returning to Novaun was the logical thing to do. Why, then, couldn’t he feel good about it? Was it wrong to go home for some reason, or was Gavaun right? Was his fear of losing Teri paralyzing him? Why couldn’t he make this decision? “I’m sorry your husband is such a jellyfish.”

“If you decide to stand up to your brother and tell him, in no uncertain terms, that you will remain on Earth—and *feel good about it*—I’ll support you.”

“Even though the possibility frightens you?”

“I’m willing to accept the illogical, terrifying path if it’s the *right* one.”

“I don’t feel good about either path. That’s the problem.”

“Then it seems to me that the best alternative is to follow the logical path, the one to Novaun.”

“What about David?”

“David has it in his mind that he’ll be alive when the Savior comes. You know how determined he is to defend the Constitution and be a part of saving this nation.”

Trendaul smiled to himself. “I know.” David’s hero had always been the passionate and brilliant Book of Mormon general Captain Moroni. David would be a modern-day Captain Moroni and hold up the Constitution as the Title of Liberty or die trying. Trendaul could not see him going to Novaun. Trendaul couldn’t see him falling to pressure from Zarr either, despite Sharad’s concern, but who knew? One thing was certain—if Zarr was aware of David and wanted him, he was aware of David’s zeal and would use a recruiting tactic strong enough to counter it.

Teri reached for Trendaul’s hand. “David won’t go to Novaun. Period. And as a marked man, Tren, you’re powerless to help him, so it makes no sense to stay here for him. The best we can do is warn him about what may be coming.”

Trendaul finally pulled Teri close. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe once we begin seriously preparing to go to Novaun, the correctness of that decision will become obvious.”

“You’ll either get a good feeling about it, or you’ll get such a bad feeling that you’ll have no qualms about sending your brother and Sharad on their way without us.”

* * *

The next several days crept by in panic as people all over Earth prepared for doom to crash down on them. Air and rail travel stopped. Ships on the high seas prepared to wait out the storm. Drivers and pedestrians clogged the roads as they tried to flee the “mystery light.” People raided grocery stores and left them bare. They hurt each other in their frenzy and filled the hospitals. They preached in the streets, urging faith in God or prophesying the death of civilization, while the International Star Force prepared to meet the attack.

Admirals Nexyun and Jaxzeran charged into Earth’s space territory with their fleets late Thursday afternoon. Trendaul couldn’t muster any pity for Zarr as he watched pieces of the battle on television. One by one, Nexyun and Jaxzeran destroyed Zarr’s warships as they advanced on his fleet, and then the impossible happened. A passenger ship fired on Jaxzeran’s flagship and obliterated it. Zarr’s remaining auxiliary ships surrounded Nexyun and Jaxzeran’s fleets in a sphere formation and fired.

“Zarr armed his entire fleet!” Gavaun said in astonishment.

Sharad couldn’t believe it either. “Who would have thought he could get so much strength from this primitive planet in only three years?”

Fear pressed on Trendaul. This Zarr-Earth alliance was destined to produce a fierce galactic power unlike any Novaun and the rest of the civilized galaxy had ever seen. He prayed Novaunian Fleet was ready. “Zarr is shrewd and desperate, and the Earthons are bonded and bullheaded.”

“Let us hope Nexyun is bullheaded enough to continue fighting, despite his losses and Jaxzeran’s death, or we may be stranded,” Gavaun muttered.

Nexyun’s forces and the remains of Jaxzeran’s fleet did continue to fight and Zarr’s fleet dwindled. An hour into the battle, the news blinked off, leaving a sinister crackle on Trendaul’s television set. “They’re destroying the satellites,” he said quietly.

Gavaun nodded in relief. “Before the night is over, they will finish off Zarr’s fleet and turn on Earth.”

Part 4: THE SEPARATION

Chapter 30: BEN'S BELOVED

Sara and Cameron walked hand-in-hand to the dining hall Saturday morning, their spirits caressing. Sara could feel Cameron's apprehension, which mirrored her own. Neither had spoken with Cameron's father since Thursday afternoon, when he had run humiliated out of their house, and that discouraged them. Sara had half-expected Ben to call her and apologize for the way he had treated her. Cameron had hoped his father would call him. They had considered waiting until later in the morning to eat breakfast, in hope of avoiding Cameron's father altogether, but had decided they wanted to get this meeting over with as soon as possible.

The trails were empty that morning, which puzzled Sara. *I wonder where everyone is. Certainly not every single person in the colony is at breakfast.*

Perhaps they've planned something.

You mean a party?

Cameron nodded. *It would be like my mother to do something like that. My father too . . . under different circumstances.*

Sara's body tensed. *Oh great. That's all we need this morning.*

Cameron stopped and pulled Sara into his arms. *Please don't be upset. Look at it this way. My father will be on his best behavior.*

Sara gazed into Cameron's earnest eyes and nodded. *You're probably right.*

Cameron squeezed Sara and released her, then began leading her down the trail again. *We're probably worried for nothing.*

Sara laughed nervously. *Keep dreaming.*

They didn't meet a single person on their way to the dining hall. When they finally gained the courage to open the door, they both knew they would find something out of the ordinary on the other side. As they entered the huge room, cheers, applause, and flying rice and confetti greeted them.

"Surprise!" the colonists cried.

"It's about time you came back, Bubble Babe!" Jordan called.

"Hey, she's not Bubble Babe, anymore," Tony said loudly, "she's the bishop's babe!" Everyone laughed.

Sara glanced around the room, stunned and touched. She couldn't help but rest her eyes on Ben, who stood at the front of the group next to Barbara. Sara wanted to avert her eyes, more for his sake than her own, but she couldn't. He smiled at her tenderly and motioned to the arrangement of furniture that was positioned against the wall. "For the newly-weds."

Sara wanted to laugh with relief. Ben finally understood that Cameron was the man she loved and wanted as a husband. Sara could feel Cameron's astonishment. A party would have been a nice show of acceptance, but furniture for their home was a real peace offering.

Still dazed, Cameron slipped his arm around Sara and led her to the collection of furniture to see what was there. Ashley, Brandon, and Adam jogged ahead of them. Sara heard chairs move and knew that several of the colonists were following. "Look at this, Cameron," Adam said with excitement. "You get your own synthesizing machines now. You and Sara won't have to eat here all the time anymore."

Brandon sat down in the small blue leather recliner and extended the leg piece. "The recliner was my idea. I knew you two would like it better than a love seat."

Cameron smiled. "Thanks, Brandon."

Ashley patted the stack of teal and china-blue linens that were neatly folded on the little round oak table, directing her words to Sara. "Mother and I chose a color scheme to match the porcelain that Cameron brought back from China." She didn't smile.

"He did show the porcelain to you, didn't he, Sara?" Adam asked.

Sara glanced at Cameron. His spirit convulsed, as if he were on the verge of laughing. "No, Adam," Sara said, sharing Cameron's amusement. "We didn't quite get around to that."

Ashley motioned to the miniature china cabinet. "And now you'll have someplace to put the porcelain when you unpack it." Her eyes gravitated toward her father, narrowing a little in skepticism.

Cameron turned toward Ben. "I can't believe you did this."

Ben tilted his head toward Barbara. "It was your mother's idea."

Cameron embraced his mother tightly. "Thank you."

When he released her, Barbara said, smiling radiantly. "You deserve it."

Cameron then stepped to the side and embraced his father, telepathically drifting from Sara. She wasn't sure whether he wanted privacy or whether he simply wasn't capable of communicating in a meaningful way with more than one person at the same time yet. She guessed the latter. Telepathy was too intimate and intense, and there were, for the time being, too many distractions. Cameron held his father a couple of seconds longer than he had held his mother, whispering something in his ear that Sara couldn't hear. When Cameron released him, Ben stared at him, pale and shaken.

Sara took the opportunity to give Barbara a hug. "Thank you, Mother. It's all so beautiful."

"It was the least we could do."

When she released her, she looked at Ben again and saw that he was studying Cameron, his golden brown brows drawn together in a frown. It was almost as if he were asking himself: "If I was wrong about Sara, what else have I been wrong about?"

"Why won't you hug Father, Sara?" Adam whispered to Sara. "Are you mad at him?"

Sara moved toward Cameron. "No, not at all."

"I doubt anyone could make Sara angry this morning," Barbara said, amused.

Cameron faced the colonists and said, his voice soft with gratitude, "Thank you, all of you, for whatever you did to contribute to this wonderful gift." He waved his hands toward the buffet table. "Now get your breakfast. Please!"

Many of the colonists laughed. "Not before the bride and groom!" Sean Marshall said.

Cameron grinned and stretched his hand toward Sara. "If you insist!"

Before Cameron could take Sara's hand to lead her to the buffet table, Barbara squeezed her arm and whispered into her ear, "Your father-in-law went to a great deal of effort for you. If you don't hug him, you'll hurt his feelings."

Sara suspected Barbara was more concerned about appearing to be a happy, affectionate family in front of the colonists than Ben's feelings. "Father understands. Now if you would excuse us, we'd like to get some breakfast."

Barbara's grip on Sara's arm tightened. Barbara pulled her a little in one direction and pushed her a little in another, and within a couple of moments, Sara found herself standing so close to Ben that she was almost touching him. If she didn't embrace him now, everyone in the colony would notice and know something wasn't right, especially since she had refrained from hugging him at the wedding and had been, up until that time, on such affectionate terms with him. Obviously Barbara assumed Sara would go ahead and hug Ben rather than call attention to herself.

Sara had never lived in a grand and glorious house built of modeling blocks and didn't intend to move into one now, but before she could wrench her arm out of Barbara's hold and jog over to the buffet table, Ben withdrew his gaze from Cameron and frowned at her. He turned his head slightly and took in Barbara. When he ascertained what was happening, something inside of him snapped.

Ben focused on Barbara, his eyes fierce and his mouth a straight line.

Sara couldn't believe this was happening. "Please, Father, don't do it," she begged.

Ben ignored Sara's warning and extended his arm to her, inviting her to hug him.

Sara didn't move. She knew that Ben would not be showcasing her refusal to hug him were he not enraged at Barbara, but this was not the way to respond and it certainly wasn't the place!

"Go ahead," Barbara urged.

Hugging Ben was not an option, and running away from him would generate more curiosity than less. Unable to see any other alternatives, Sara softly said, "No." Perhaps the awkward moment would pass quietly and she and Cameron could get their breakfast without having to answer questions.

"What's the matter with you, Sara?" Barbara whispered in desperation. "Do you want us all to look like fools?"

"If you would just let go of my arm, Barbara," Sara whispered in the most pleasant tone she could muster, "no one will notice anything out of the ordinary."

"It's too late for that," Barbara said.

Sara glanced around and saw that everyone was staring at her and Ben, waiting and wondering. Barbara was right. It was too late. Her tactic hadn't worked. Sara could almost feel the toy-block house crash down around her and thought its fall should make her feel like cheering. She felt, however, surprisingly lacerated and out of balance instead, as if the ground had turned into a mound of jelly and glass.

Ben gazed at Sara in desolation and respect, lowering his arm. "Sara doesn't want to hug me," he said to Barbara in a tense voice. "I understand that and accept it. She *told* you that I understand and accept it. Would it have been too much to ask for you to respect her wishes without making a scene?"

"I'm not the one making a scene!" Barbara whispered through her teeth. She was trying to smile. "Sara, give your father-in-law a hug. I'm sure he's sorry for whatever he did to annoy you."

Ben extended his arm to Sara again, mouthing the words, "I *am* sorry, Sara. Sincerely."

"I know," Sara said as softly as she could manage.

"I was a fool not to believe you."

"Yes, you were, but your apology changes nothing. I won't hug you."

Ben lowered his arm. "I'd be disappointed in you if you did." Barbara groaned a little in mortification. Ben headed to a table, shaking his head.

"What's going on?" Brandon whispered to Ashley. His voice seemed to blare in the silent room. "I thought Father and Sara liked each other."

"Oh, Father likes Sara, all right," Ashley said in disgust. "Guaranteed."

"You make it sound as if it's wrong for Father to like Sara," Adam said.

"He likes her quite a bit too much. That's the problem."

"He does?" Brandon replied in disbelief.

Barbara released Sara's arm and turned abruptly to Brandon. "Of course your father likes Sara a lot. So do I."

Sara immediately grabbed Cameron's hand and yanked him toward the buffet table. She was glad in a way that the Carrolls were finally communicating, but she was exasperated they hadn't been capable of doing it in the privacy of their own home. Now the entire colony would get involved with their problems, and that would make what was already a painful situation into a nightmare.

"That wasn't what Ashley meant, Mother," Brandon said curiously. "Was it?"

"Of course that's what she meant. There was nothing else she could have meant. Was there, Ashley?" Barbara whispered, her tone firm.

"Of course not, Mother," Ashley said sweetly. The volume of her voice was normal, as if she wanted to invite everyone in the colony to listen to her family's dispute, but her voice quivered with outrage. "Because it isn't possible that the great Benjamin Carroll would be lusting after his son's wife!"

The colony laughed. Of course no one believed it. Sara wouldn't have believed it either had it not happened to her personally. She tried to act as if she didn't care what was being said as she maneuvered around the camp tables, dragging Cameron behind her.

Trevor Carroll laughed as much as anyone. "Where in the world did you get a crazy idea like that, Ashley?" he asked.

"From my father himself. After the wedding, when Sara offered to shake hands, he gave her an incredibly erotic hug." The room became silent again. Sara stopped in front of the buffet table, stroking Cameron's arm as he came up beside her. She reached for a plate, her hand shaking.

"Define 'erotic hug,'" Barbara demanded.

"He pressed his whole body against hers. Let me tell you, from Sara's perspective, there couldn't have been much left to the imagination."

Sara suddenly felt flustered. She gazed at the plate in her hand, wondering what to do next. Trembling, she lifted her fingers to her temple.

"So your father gave Sara an 'erotic hug' in front of the entire colony which none of us witnessed," Barbara said skeptically.

Sara felt Cameron's hand on her back. "Let me do it for you," he whispered. Sara nodded and handed him her plate.

"I was close to them. You weren't. And it happened fast."

"What you suggest is preposterous, Ashley," Trevor said. "Your father would never do something like that. You must be mistaken."

"I'm not so sure about that, Trev," Cyndi said. "You know your brother has a strange relationship with Sara."

"He *did* call you late Monday night to make an appointment for Sara," Trevor conceded.

"And that's about as strange as it gets. Sara herself wasn't happy about it, and if she refused to embrace him on that basis alone, I would understand. I, for one, want to know what else Ben's been up to, and I think the colony would like to know too."

Tony slammed his fist down on his table. Startled, Sara turned to look at him. "So would I!" Tony stood up. "Ashley wasn't the only witness to the erotic hug. Since I was at the piano, I was close enough to see it too."

"You did?" Trevor said, troubled. He looked over at Ben, pondering. Ben looked from speaker to speaker, listening to the proceedings impassively.

Tony nodded. "Ashley wasn't exaggerating. It was a full-body press. The sort of hug a man gives a woman when he intends to get *very* friendly."

Sara was relieved to see that many of the colonists, obviously uncomfortable with where this discussion was going, were gathering around the breakfast table and quickly loading their plates, whispering to their children that they were going to take their food outside and have a picnic.

Trevor raised his eyebrows at Tony. "So you're saying he made a pass at her."

Both Tony and Ashley nodded vigorously. "It was a pass, all right," Tony said.

"Absolutely," Ashley added, taking her mother's arm and sitting down with her on Sara and Cameron's new couch. She said a few words to Barbara that Sara couldn't hear. She appeared indignant, yet filled with compassion, as if she believed that she was revealing information her mother was entitled to know. Sara wished Ben had been courageous enough to explain the situation to Barbara himself.

Cyndi stood up and approached Sara, smiling at her kindly. "Just be honest with us, Sara. Did Ben hug you in the way Ashley and Tony claim?"

Sara glanced at Ben, then across the room at Barbara, who appeared as impassive as Ben did. Sara had no idea what to say. She couldn't make what happened public and damage Ben's reputation and humiliate Barbara. At the same time, however, she couldn't lie and say it was nothing. Even if she knew how to lie, she couldn't risk offending the planet-spirit, and she certainly didn't want to say anything that would make Ashley and Tony look like fools, especially since they were right. Several possible responses flew through Sara's mind, but all of them were inane. Unless she lied outright, everyone would assume the worst.

"Well?" Cyndi asked.

Sara hesitated, then forced herself to smile. "I understand your concern, but this isn't the time or the place to discuss my relationship with Ben Carroll." She slipped her arm under Cameron's, allowing him to move her as he walked away from the buffet table, carrying two plates of food. Brandon followed with two cups of milk, Adam with a plate of fruit.

"Thanks, you two," Cameron whispered to his brothers. Sara almost reached out to Cameron with her thoughts to get his advice, then decided against it. She could not take the chance that she would lose her focus.

Cyndi walked beside Sara. "We just want the truth."

Sara shook her head. She couldn't bring herself to talk about it. Cameron set the plates on an empty table near where his father was sitting and sat Sara down in an empty chair. Brandon and Adam set the drinks and plate of fruit on the satiny white tablecloth, then headed back toward the buffet table. Sara removed an orange section from the plate of fruit. Cameron sat down cater-corner from her, his knee gently sliding under hers beneath the table.

Brother and Sister Vance walked over to the Carroll tables and stood behind Ben. Brother Vance motioned to Sara and spoke to Cyndi. "She's a pretty little girl. Ben Carroll is a mere mortal man, unlike that would-be-prophet son of his. A mere mortal man hugging a pretty little girl can get carried away. Even if it happened, it proves nothing."

Sara tingled with desire to run out of the room. She gripped the bottom of her chair, fighting the urge, knowing that if she did run away, the colonists would know without a doubt she was nothing more than a silly little girl. A sophisticated man like Ben Carroll, of course, would never fall for a silly little girl, so they would have proof that the 'wedding hug' had been nothing more than the delusion of a naïve child and her silly young friends. Maybe running out of the room was an option after all.

"You didn't want to embrace Ben at all after the wedding," Cyndi said. "Why? What did Ben do to make you uncomfortable *before* the wedding hug?"

Leave it to a perceptive woman like Cyndi to ignore the ambiguous wedding hug and charge right into the territory that mattered. Sara tapped on the bottom of her chair, irritated that she had been forced into this impossible position. She understood the colonists' concern, but Ben was not a pervert or sexual predator. He was a desperately lonely man with an intolerable marriage who had made a mistake, and there was no way she was going to allow these uninformed people to use her testimony to condemn him!

"Well?" Sister Eagle pressed.

Tony shook his finger at Ben. "He's been after her for months."

"What makes you think Dr. Carroll has been after Sara for months?" asked Russ Brodsky, appearing as disturbed as Tony was.

"The intent way he looks at her. The way he talks to her. The unconscious, doting way he touches her."

"That means nothing," Sister Vance said. "Ben Carroll is a very kind, demonstrative man."

"No. It's more than that. I spent nearly every Saturday night with Sara and Dr. Carroll for four months. I *know*. I just feel like an idiot for not seeing it sooner."

"You should feel like an idiot, Tony," Marc said, "because you saw *nothing*. I was with you all of those Saturday nights, and I *know*."

Tony turned to Sara, his eyes demanding vindication. Sara glared at him, feeling as if she had been backed into a corner.

Tony shook his head at Sara. "You can't just sit there and act as if nothing happened. When Dr. Carroll made a pass at you, he betrayed all of us."

Sara was *not* going to allow anyone to blame this mess on her! She replied as calmly as she could, "My father-in-law makes me uncomfortable. I don't care to hug him. That doesn't mean I want to *prosecute* him. Or hurt his family. Where is your *compassion*?"

"If our governor did make a pass at you," said Kevin Krantz, "why would you want to defend him?"

Sara worked hard to keep her voice low and calm. "It isn't what you think. Please leave me alone."

"Oh, come on, Sara!" Brittany Novak exploded. "People with Dr. Carroll's kind of power ought to be held accountable for their offenses!"

Kevin looked at Sara pointedly. "She's trying to protect him."

"Maybe she *wanted* him to make a pass at her!" said Rick Dixon.

"No way!" Samantha said.

"She did run from him," Jordan pointed out.

Ashley looked at them all as if they were idiots. "And barfed her guts out!"

Russ rested his hand on Kevin's shoulder and squeezed, directing his gaze at Sara. "If Kevin here had made a pass at you, you would have slugged him, and we would have laughed, and that would have been the end of that. Dr. Carroll's different, though, and you know it."

Sara did know it, and she knew that if a different young woman were in her position right now, she would be as outraged as everyone else was. Ben had been a part of analyzing their patriarchal blessings, after all, and was supposed to be a spiritual leader. That he had made a pass at a student, especially one he had just married to his son, really was sickening. She had no resources left to defend Ben, but she could make one more plea for Barbara. "Have you no concern for his family?"

"Since when did the Carrolls become the only people in the colony to be immune from scrutiny?" asked Brent Hall.

"What? Are we supposed to treat them like some kind of royalty?" asked Erica Rice.

“We’re all brothers and sisters,” Sister Eagle said, with just enough reproach to make some of the students squirm, “and we should act like it.”

“Did my father try to get you to sleep with him, Sara?” Ashley burst out.

Sara shook her head adamantly. “No. Your father isn’t that kind of man, Ashley. He would never do that.”

“Let us be the judge of what kind of man he is, Sara,” Tony said. “Give us the facts.” Russ and several others sitting near Tony nodded.

Cyndi motioned toward Ben. “I’ve known Ben and Barbara and their kids a long time. They’re either perfect or they’re experts at covering up their family’s flaws. If you can’t bring yourself to tell us the truth right now, Sara, today, we’ll never hear it.”

“We have a right to know it,” Sister Marshall declared.

“You don’t have a choice, Sara,” Sister Vance said. “Cyndi may want to know what her brother-in-law is up to, but some of the rest of us would like to know what *you’re* up to.”

“What’s that supposed to mean,” Tony demanded.

Sister Vance turned to Tony. “I don’t believe Sara is as innocent as you and the Carroll family think she is. She’s bold, she’s aggressive, and she’s very clever. Admirable traits, but hardly those of an ingenue. We know the bishop’s in love with her. You claim our governor made a pass at her. I think it’s interesting that she’s romantically connected with the two most powerful men in the colony.”

“You’re suggesting Sara seduced Cameron and Uncle Ben to put herself forward in the colony?” Samantha said in disbelief.

Cyndi laughed. “Rachel, you’re crazy!”

“There isn’t an ambitious bone in Sara’s body!” Ashley protested.

“Enough!” Ben said loudly, standing up. When everyone was looking at him in silence, he said, “It astonishes me that you can spend so much time speculating about my actions and motives and never once stop to actually *ask me* what I did to make Sara uncomfortable or what my intentions toward her have been.”

All of the colonists who remained watched Ben in anticipation and disbelief as he walked to the front of the group, not far where Barbara and Ashley sat on Cameron and Sara’s new couch. He turned to face the colony. “First, I want to apologize to my family. What I’m about to say is going to shock you and make you furious at me. Cameron is already shocked and disgusted, and he has a right to be. I’m sorry. I didn’t want it to be this way.”

Ben turned to look at his wife. “I underestimated you, Barbara.” His voice was filled with compassion. “I didn’t expect you to push so hard on the hug issue. I’m sorry I reacted badly and brought this to the attention of the colony. I would rather have told you this privately. I really am sorry.”

Barbara gazed at Ben in bewilderment. “You aren’t actually going to respond to these ridiculous accusations are you?”

“Yes, I am. The colony deserves to know the truth.” Ben shifted his focus to Trevor and Cyndi’s table and waved a hand in Cyndi’s direction. “Cyndi, you’re right. Barbara and I have always been superb at covering up our family’s imperfections. There is, in fact, a severe imperfection we’ve somehow managed to cover up for some time now. Barbara and I have been estranged for a couple of years at least.”

As Adam and Brandon sat down at Sara’s table with their plates of food, Adam frowned at Brandon and whispered, “What does ‘estranged’ mean?”

“It means that they live in the same house but hardly ever talk. They’re hardly ever together, like roommates instead of husband and wife.”

Adam nodded thoughtfully. "I guess they are estranged, then, aren't they?"

Sara couldn't believe what she was hearing. Ben and Barbara's estrangement had been a part of Brandon and Adam's life for so long that it didn't occur to them to be shocked or even bitter. Adam didn't even know what a loving marriage was. The situation was too tragic, too horrible. Sara pushed her plates away and stuffed her napkin into her cup in an effort to distract herself and maintain her composure.

"This doesn't sound like you, Ben," Trevor said. "Why would you live like that for so long? Why haven't you and Barbara made an effort to spend time together and talk through your difficulties?"

"I'm not going to discuss details, but this I will say: the estrangement *has* existed too long. I don't know Barbara's feelings about the matter, but for me, it's been unbearable. I've been considering divorce for well over a year. I'm not sure why I haven't done it yet. Perhaps I've been reluctant to break my covenants and throw my family into chaos. Perhaps I can't bear the thought of losing Barbara. Or perhaps I'm simply a coward."

Barbara nodded at Ben, her expression one of chilling calmness. "If you've felt that way for this long, then you really are a coward."

"Do you and Mother really not want to be together anymore?" Adam asked in confusion.

Ben shrugged a little, helplessly. "I don't know, Adam. I really don't. What I do know is that we *aren't* together, and that has been extremely difficult for me. During this difficult time of separation from your mother, I met Sara. We communicated often online, and after she returned to Maryland from BYU last June, I saw her nearly every week at Don Pablo's with Tony and Jordan and Marc. Through these contacts, I grew to love her, and I was certain she was in love with me also."

Sara wasn't surprised to hear murmurs of condemnation float around the room, and she wondered whether Cameron would respond or whether he would let his father handle it. For the moment Cameron seemed satisfied to eat his last muffin in silence, his brows in a thoughtful frown.

Ben's voice overpowered the murmurs. "Sara is *not* a tramp! She never sought my attention. On Earth we never dated. I did surprise her by showing up at her place of employment a couple of days before we left, and we had ice cream together. Since we left Earth, I *have* looked for opportunities to talk with her alone, but we've never kissed or had any other similar physical contact. The most intimate physical contact we've had was the wedding hug, and I was the one who initiated that. I was angry with her for addressing me as 'Father' and reacted without thinking. The only explanation I can give is that I wanted to force her to admit her feelings for me."

"What feelings?" Tony demanded. "Sara has no feelings of passion for you! You've deceived yourself!"

"She loves Cameron," Ashley insisted.

"She *is* in love with Cameron," Ben said, his voice tight with pain. "But she feels a deep affection for me too. The feelings that developed in her were completely spontaneous, which made them all the more precious to me. The relationship that developed so quickly between her and Cameron both tormented and elated me." He gave Tony a conciliatory nod. "I deceived myself into thinking she was transferring her feelings for me to Cameron since he's so much like me in some ways and is young and unmarried and, from her perspective, available."

"You're such an idiot, Ben," Cyndi said with an impatient little laugh. "Sara was transferring her feelings, all right. It was her feelings for Cameron she was transferring to you, not the other way around!"

"Amen!" Ashley said. Tony and Samantha nodded their agreement.

Ben glanced at the ceiling, nodding. "You're probably right," he said cynically. "The thought had never occurred to me. I really am an idiot."

"An idiot and a pervert!" Russ exclaimed in outrage.

"Ben, she's a child!" Brother Vance said, as outraged as Russ was.

Sara expected Ben to cringe or at least grimace, but he didn't. He aimed that determined gaze at Brother Vance and declared, "No, Duane, she's a woman. A young one to be sure, but a woman all the same—an extraordinary one."

Brother Vance shook his head. "No, Ben. She's a child. I daresay she's not even twenty-one years old!"

Sara had been so certain the Vances despised her. To hear Brother Vance defend her in this way astonished her. She shook her head weakly. "In February."

"Good grief, Ben!" Sister Eagle exclaimed, moving to stand near Barbara. "What were you thinking? If a man your age were to pursue your twenty-year-old daughter, even you would be having violent thoughts right now!"

Ben glanced in an uncomfortable way at Ashley. "You're right," he admitted. He then looked at Sara. "And yet, I stand by my assertion that Sara's not a child but a woman, an extraordinary one. I'll even go one step further and say she's downright unusual." He shook his head. "She's not a typical twenty-year-old."

Hearing the doors open, Sara turned and saw that the families who had left to have a breakfast picnic were returning, wet and wind-blown.

"What were your intentions toward Sara?" Trevor asked.

"I wanted to marry her, of course."

Barbara crossed her legs and folded her arms, her expression unreadable. "You want to be married to Sara instead of me."

Ben turned toward Barbara. "Yes, I do. I've gone so far as to propose to her. I'm sorry."

Brandon sat forward in his chair. "You want to *marry Sara*?"

"But she's *Cameron's* wife," Adam protested. "And you and Mother were married for eternity."

Russ threw up his arms, his cheeks flushed and his dark eyes wide and angry. "So our governor is a liar, an idiot, a pervert, and a covenant breaker."

Ashley sprang up and yelled at her father, "You want to ditch Mother and steal your son's wife, and in the meantime, you pursue Sara and make her so depressed and sick that she pukes at her wedding? You disgust me!"

"I won't make excuses for myself," Ben said quietly, "nor do I ask for your forgiveness and acceptance. My only intention at the moment is to tell the truth, whatever the consequences."

"You aren't going to live with us anymore, are you," Brandon said.

"No. I think it would be better if I found new living arrangements for a while. Maybe in time, your mother and I can work things out."

"It's too late for that Ben," Barbara said, "and you know it. We've been estranged for too long. It's time to make it official."

"You can't mean that!" Samantha cried. "You love each other! Certainly you can at least *try* to be happy together again." She leaned over the table, putting her head in her hands, her shoulders trembling.

Cyndi rested her hand on Samantha's back. "Samantha's right. A divorce right now would be too drastic. You should try counseling first."

“Or talk to each other, at least,” Trevor agreed, still appearing puzzled by the entire situation.

Barbara shook her head. “It’s over. Dead. No amount of counseling is going to bring it back to life.”

Something died in Ben at that moment. The desperate light went out in his eyes, and everything about him seemed to go limp, and Sara came to understand what Ben did not understand himself. The real reason he hadn’t sought a divorce earlier was because he couldn’t bear the thought that he might be right about Barbara, that she felt no passion for him and wouldn’t care if they separated for good. As long as she consented to playact the wife role, the possibility existed that, underneath all the illusion, she really did care, which provided the stability Ben required.

The attention of everyone in the colony appeared to be riveted on Barbara, the expressions incredulous. Some of them looked from Barbara to Ben, then back to Barbara again, and Sara knew they were beginning to comprehend the true situation. They expected her to be shocked and hurt or at least for her to act as if she weren’t hurt in a dignified fashion, not becoming hysterical but fighting away tears. They expected her to yell at him and throw him out of her house, if not for her own sake, for that of her children. They expected her to call Sara a tramp and refuse to work with her anymore.

None of them believed a woman who truly loved her husband could walk out of her marriage with such icy indifference, and they could grasp the possibility that this cold-hearted, cold-blooded woman had frozen Ben out of his marriage. Ben’s actions toward his family had been anything but admirable, but they were beginning to be understandable, whereas Barbara’s attitude toward their beloved governor was incomprehensible.

“Barbara,” Sister Eagle said softly, “why don’t you want to talk to Ben?”

“We have nothing left to say to each other.”

Sara wiped her perspiring hands on her jeans, thinking impatiently that Ben and Barbara probably had a couple of years to catch up on.

“You don’t want to tell him how angry you are at what he’s done?”

“I’m not angry. It really was inevitable.”

Sara scratched at her pants, then folded her arms together and scratched at them, her heart beginning to race.

“It doesn’t make you angry that he’s hurt Cameron by pursuing Sara?”

“Ben hasn’t hurt Cameron nearly as much as he’s hurt himself.”

Sara dropped her hands to her sides and clenched them, pounding away at her thighs. She knew she should keep her mouth shut, but she couldn’t stand this. “You can’t refuse to talk to Ben, Barbara! You can’t!” She waved her arm at Ben. “Can’t you see what it’s doing to him?” She shook her head. “You can’t be as indifferent as you act. Don’t you see? All you have to do is show him you care, just a little, and he’ll come back to you!”

“Come back to what, Sara? Separation? Why would either one of us want that?”

“Neither one of you do want it; that’s the point!” Sara jumped up and leaned on the table, looking over Brandon’s head at Barbara. “*Please* believe me, Barbara. If you have any spark of passion left for him, you have to let him see it! He needs you to yell at him, to really rant and rave and tell him how horrible he is!”

“Stop it, Sara,” Ben begged. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I do know what I’m doing, Ben,” Sara insisted. “I do. She can’t not love you! She can’t not care! It isn’t possible. She’s pretending.” Sara faced Barbara again, her eyes blurring and

her lips beginning to quiver. "He just wants a glimpse of the real Barbara. That can't be too much to ask, can it?"

Barbara looked at her blankly. "I don't understand."

"You do understand, I know you do." The pitch of Sara's voice rose until it was almost shrill. She was becoming hysterical. She knew it and hated it but couldn't stop the flow of emotion. "He needs to see a tear, Barbara! Just a tiny tear on your cheek." Sara wiped away her own tears with trembling fingers.

"Please, Sara," Ben gasped. "Stop it!"

"No, Ben!" she wailed. "I won't let her do this to you!"

Sara's vision cleared enough that she could see there were no tears on Barbara's face. Her eyes, disturbingly dry, regarded Sara curiously. "Your decision to marry Cameron may have been too hasty, Sara. You should have given Ben a chance. He would have been thrilled with you and treated you like a queen. You might have been happy with him."

"I can't believe you would say that," Sara said, her voice quavering and tears spilling off of her jaw and onto her neck. "He's your husband. How can you think that? How?" Her voice broke and her shoulders began convulsing. "Please, Barbara. Let him see your eyes glisten. Just a little glisten. Please . . ."

No one in the room spoke. Sara knew they were all staring at her, even though she couldn't see them clearly. She heard a little choke from Ben's direction and saw his trim form waver through her tears. She wiped her eyes again and caught a glimpse of his hand shaking against his temple, his face wet. He staggered.

"Oh!" Sara moaned as she pushed away from the table, afraid he might fall. She felt Cameron's arm wind around her knee to keep her from moving.

"Father really is in love with you," Brandon said to Sara in shock.

Sara looked down at Brandon, attempting to blink away her tears. She could barely speak coherently. "I never . . . meant . . . for this to . . . happen."

Sara lifted her head and watched Trevor Carroll stand up and put his arms around Ben. Ben leaned on his brother and wept, piercing Sara's heart.

The urge to run out of the room seized Sara again, only this time it refused to be denied. She broke free of Cameron's hold and sprang toward the door.

Chapter 31: MAN ENOUGH

When Sara burst through the doors, a gust of wind sprayed her with rain and swept confetti into the air. She shot into the storm, energized by the cold raindrops stinging her skin. As she sprinted, puddles formed around her feet and muddy water, mixed with dead leaves, splashed onto her clothing. When thunder exploded, Sara screamed, not in fear but in release, and she didn't stop screaming until she opened the door to her house and dropped to the floor. She leaned her arms over her knees and her face on her arms, panting and shivering and dripping all over the simulated wood.

Within moments, Sara heard the door open and squishing sounds near her and knew Cameron had followed her home. She heard soggy items of clothing drop to the floor and then felt Cameron pull her to her feet and begin peeling off her clothing. He pulled her away from the pile of wet clothes and puddles of water, dried her with towels, and then twisted one of the towels around her head like a turban. He led her into their room, wrapped her robe around her, and helped her into her slippers before he guided her into bed and bundled her in her mother's denim quilt.

Sara gazed at Cameron gratefully. "I was hysterical," she whispered.

Cameron smiled just a little, slipping into his robe and lying down next to her. "Sara Carroll is hysterical." He tapped her lips gently with his finger before she could tell him that she had never been hysterical before. "Cameron Carroll is fanatical. Chant it with me now." His voice took on a singsong quality and he waved his hand slightly, as if he were directing a choir. "Sara Carroll is hysterical; Cameron Carroll is fanatical."

Sara picked up the chant. "Sara Carroll is hysterical; Cameron Carroll is fanatical . . ." It did have a nice rhythm to it. She smiled at him and threw part of the quilt over him, drawing him into her cocoon, and then they laughed, and then it thundered again and she instinctively nuzzled up to him.

"You didn't say anything when everyone went crazy. Why not?"

Cameron's lips caressed Sara's forehead. "I wouldn't presume to speak for either you or my father."

"What did you say to him when the two of you embraced?"

"I told him that I love him, despite everything."

"It really shook him up."

"Obviously you were right about him all along. He really does love you. Nothing else would have driven him to make a fool of himself in front of the colony when Sister Vance began questioning your motives."

"And then I made him look more like a fool than ever. Maybe someday I'll learn to keep my mouth shut."

"Actually, I think you made him look like *less* of a fool, and you completely shot down the notion that he's a pervert."

"Yeah, and in the same whack shot down the idea that I'm any kind of victim. Not that I want to be thought of as a victim, but I don't want them to think I'm a tramp either."

"I think—I *hope*—they saw you for what you are—a woman with deep feelings of affection and concern for my father. Your show of passion legitimized the relationship, made the idea of a loving, equal marriage between the two of you imaginable."

"And you think that's a *good* thing?"

"It certainly made what my father's done more understandable to *me*."

Sara felt sick. “If you and the other colonists can now visualize your father and me together as husband and wife, then your father obviously saw the same thing, compounded over a period of months!”

“That’s not what I meant to say. I merely think that your outburst makes his actions almost understandable and therefore a little easier to forgive, that’s all.”

“If his actions are now more understandable, it’s because we can all see now *why* he believed I was in love with him. It was because I was *acting* as if I was in love with him.”

“Of course you were acting as if you love him, Sara. You *do* love him. As a father!”

Sara relaxed, gratitude trickling into her heart. Cameron had to be right. “I love you so much, Cameron. Can’t we just stay here forever? Where life is safe and perfect?”

“This is forever, Beloved Queen,” Cameron whispered with emotion. “The place that’s always safe and beautiful, no matter what else happens.”

“I wonder if your parents ever had this.”

“I think so.”

“Do you think your father will talk to your uncle about his marital problems?”

“I hope so. He needs to unburden himself, and Uncle Trevor will encourage him to talk to me.”

“Will he, do you think?”

“I do, and he needs to. I’m more worried about my mother.”

Just thinking about Barbara’s behavior sent a stab of anger through Sara. She sat up a little and folded her arms on Cameron’s chest. The towel on her head fell off, and she tossed it to the floor. “How could she be so indifferent to what happened?” Sara shivered and realized she was still cold.

Cameron pulled Sara back under the quilt and held her tightly. “She isn’t. She’s adopting this attitude of indifference to protect herself.”

“I was so sure of that too, but she was so calm and icy. I’m beginning to wonder now. Could anyone be such a supreme actor?”

“Appearing polished and perfect is what she’s done best for well over twenty years. If you ever again doubt my mother’s current state of emotion, just think of this—she didn’t come to Eden to divorce my father.”

“You’re saying that if she didn’t want to be with your father, she would have stayed on Earth.” Sara wondered why she had never considered the likelihood of this possibility, why Ben himself seemed to be ignoring it.

“Exactly. No one from her family came to Eden with us. She’s from California, you know. Monterey. Most of her family lives in the Oakland Temple Community, and that’s where I think she would have gone had she and my father divorced. If not, she had her job with *The Sun* and her beautiful home, and Father would have left her well provided for. She doesn’t have the comforts here she had on Earth and won’t for some time. No, Sara. My mother is very hurt. If she didn’t love my father, she wouldn’t be here.”

“Then why won’t she let him see that she’s hurt? If he thought she loved him like that, things would be different between them, I know they would be.”

“I agree. I have no doubt he still loves her too, which is the reason he’d never discussed divorce with her before today. I think they’re like we used to be, crazy about each other but full of misunderstanding and for some silly reason unable to talk to each other.”

“That’s a strange thought and very hopeful.”

"Of course, their situation is far more complicated than ours was and I think they're just as likely to divorce as not, but it's something to start with. For *me* to start with. You really do need to stay out of it."

"I know. I suppose I need to stay completely away from your father. What am I supposed to do about your mother? She's not going to be willing to talk to me about what happened, but how can we have a civil relationship if we don't work it out?"

"You're just going to have to manage it somehow. You'll get nowhere if you initiate a discussion about what happened between you and my father. If you try, you'll end up feeling miserable."

"So around your mother, I'm supposed to act as if nothing happened. That feels so wrong."

"You have no choice." Cameron's phone rang, and he rolled away from Sara and reached to the floor next to the bed to answer it. He sat up with the phone to his ear.

"Who is it?" Sara asked.

"Tony." Cameron directed his words into the phone. "I can't hear you . . . Too many people are shouting . . . Are you still there?" He shook his head in frustration. "Say again?"

A moment later, he lowered the phone and punched in a number. "Tony, what's going on?" He put a hand over his free ear, straining to listen. Eventually he said, "I'll be there as soon as I can."

As soon as Cameron ended the call, Sara asked, "What's going on?"

The phone went limp in Cameron's hand. "The others are having some kind of huge argument. Russ is in the middle of it. That's all I could get from Tony."

Thunder crashed, vibrating the house. Sara gazed at Cameron wide-eyed. "Russ? In the middle of an argument?"

"He was really upset by what my father did."

Sara nodded, beginning to understand. Russ was astute and aggressive, a journalist through and through. He would learn the truth if it killed him. "He wouldn't have let it go. He probably pressed your father until he confessed that he had married us with the intention of later annulling the marriage."

"You're probably right. No wonder the colony's gone crazy."

Sara hadn't come to Eden to be governed by a man who would conduct the affairs of his family and the colony in such an underhanded, autocratic way and neither had any of the others. She had enough insight into Ben's heart and felt enough affection for him to be willing to give him another chance. Others wouldn't be so tolerant. "You were right when you said dealing with law infractions in open forum would lead to nothing but chaos and injustice."

"And what my father did was worse than break the law. He set himself up as *the* law and then didn't live up to the colonists' faith in him."

"So in denouncing him, they're trashing the only law the colony now possesses."

"And are turning into a mob." Cameron swung his feet over the side of the mattress and reached for his clothes. "I need to get down there."

"No!" Sara said. "It's too dangerous!"

"Someone has to calm them down and stop the storm!"

"You'll be no good to the colony if you get electrocuted or a tree drops on you! Think about how many people were hurt in the last storm!"

"They have no idea their argument and the storm are connected."

"I disagree. Many of the colonists thought the storm on Sunday was connected to our breaking the Sabbath. We talked to Tony and Samantha and Ashley about it Monday night, remember? When they invited us to their dance."

Cameron slumped his shoulders. "I can't just sit here and do nothing!"

Sara scooted over to Cameron on her knees and wrapped her arms around him, kissing his head. "Tony's sharp. He can handle it, and we can pray."

"We can pray," Cameron agreed with decisiveness.

"And then we can get ready to go."

* * *

When the storm had diminished into mere rain, Cameron and Sara slipped into their rain ponchos and headed down the trail to the dining hall. Halfway to Center Park, they met Tony.

"What's going on?" Cameron immediately asked.

Tony turned and walked toward Center Park with Sara and Cameron. "Russ and Brent and a group of about thirty students are demanding that your father resign as governor of the colony and that Sister Vance take his place."

"My father refused, I hope," Cameron said.

"He did, and so did Sister Vance. Your father seemed to have no qualms about admitting he had done some questionable things, but he felt resigning would be premature. Sister Vance has no desire to step into your father's place and said she would continue to look to him for leadership."

"What did you say to get them to stop arguing?" Sara asked.

"I told them I thought the storm had come because we were fighting and that no decision of any kind should be made until we had a statement from our bishop."

"Oh, great," Cameron said, grimacing.

"When it became clear the argument was going nowhere and that we were going nowhere until the storm let up, they finally agreed."

"So they're all there waiting for Cameron," Sara said. "What fun!"

"Oh, it gets even better, Sara. Russ and several of the others are questioning whether your marriage to Cameron is valid."

"You can't be serious!"

"Because of what you said to Cameron's mother, some are concerned that you really are in love with Dr. Carroll instead of Cameron and that you'll want an annulment after all. Others, including Russ, have been disturbed all along about how suddenly you were married, and still others think it was wrong Dr. Carroll performed the ceremony instead of me, especially now."

Sara still couldn't believe it. "But they acted as if they were happy about our marriage. They gave us a party. Or tried to, anyway. There were presents, and centerpieces, and a wedding cake!"

Tony shrugged. "That stuff's tradition."

"It was all a big lie, you mean!"

"No it wasn't. Not like the lies your father-in-law's been feeding us!"

Cameron stopped abruptly. "You go on to the dining hall, Tony. Sara and I need to get a few things from the house. Tell everyone we'll be there in a few minutes."

"Will do." Tony shook his head at Sara, smiling slightly. "Here I thought I knew you inside and out, and then you go and do something outrageous like fall in love with Dr. Carroll without my knowledge."

Sara moaned. "I'm really *not* in love with Ben Carroll, Tony!"

"You don't love him in the same way you do Cameron—I'll grant you that—but you do love him. I'm just glad I never fell in love with you myself. Wouldn't that have been a mess! You're one complicated chick!"

"Coward," Cameron teased.

"You'd better keep an eye on her, Cameron," Tony said looking over his shoulder with a grin as he jogged away from them. "She's trouble!"

After a few moments, Tony curved around a tree and disappeared from Sara's sight. *How much are we going to tell them, Cameron?* she asked as they turned and hurried back up the trail to their house.

I'm not sure. I think we'll start, though, by giving them a little of our history together. We have to convince them that our marriage is real and right. My credibility and your reputation appear to be hanging on that detail.

Sara let Cameron go ahead of her as the trail narrowed. *No one seemed to have a problem with our marriage before today.*

Obviously there were a few who did have a problem with it, and that was before you blew up at my mother.

I really messed things up! A breeze blew through the trees and sprayed water on Sara's face.

No, Sara, my father messed things up. I think we can put things back in order well enough if we address the colonists' concerns and answer their questions in a forthright way. And we can't hold back about Novaun either. I'm sorry, Sara.

Sara's muscles tensed in panic. *Certainly there's another way.*

Unfortunately there isn't. The information your father gave to you about Novaun may be necessary to the colony's survival.

But we don't know that for sure yet. Can't we wait until we do?

By then it may be too late.

What about my family?

We're just going to have to leave your family in the hands of the Lord.

Sara reached for Cameron's hand as the trail opened up in front of them. *Do we have to tell them that we have arelada in our possession too? I feel really uncomfortable with that.*

My father's underhanded behavior was what got us into this predicament to begin with. If we do anything that even hints of being underhanded, the colonists will eat us alive.

But if we tell them we're practicing with it, they may think we're up to something sinister. I couldn't believe it when Sister Vance suggested that I was using you and your father to gain power in the colony!

They extended their arms and jogged on either side of a puddle. *I don't know, Sara. Some of them are already afraid you're doing something sinister. If you refrain from telling them about the arelada and they later find out you have it, they'll have proof that you're keeping secrets and will have no qualms about accusing you of sedition. What little trust they have in me will disappear, and the colony will fall into chaos.*

So no matter what we do, we can't win.

It looks that way, although there is one thing we can do to put off discussion of the arelada, at least for now.

Sara understood immediately and agreed. *We can leave the necklaces at home.*

When Sara and Cameron got back to their house, Sara tucked the photo album dedicated to Cameron's articles and pictures under her poncho. Cameron put the two pictures of Sara he had carried for years into the pocket in his shirt and carried Sara's two scrapbooks.

Sara and Cameron hurried back down the trail as quickly as they could manage. When they entered the dining hall, the room became silent. Everyone focused on them, waiting. For the moment, Cameron was the acknowledged leader of the colony, and that was a strange feeling. Ben had finally acquired a strong advocate and merciful judge in Cameron, which was ironic, considering the fact that Ben's actions had been more of an affront to Cameron than anyone but Barbara and Sara herself.

Cameron and Sara set the items they had brought with them on a camp table and laid out their ponchos on two others. Sara sat down in an empty camp chair, and Cameron stepped away from the tables to address the colony.

"Obviously, you're all shocked by the things you've learned about my father this morning."

Murmurs from the colonists sparked, and a few shouts erupted. "He's a liar!"

"He's not fit to be the governor!"

"We *won't* have a leader who uses his position for his own selfish purposes!"

"That's what we came here to get *away* from!"

Cameron held his hand out in a "stop" gesture. Amazingly, the room became quiet again. He said in a soft, calm voice, "Whatever we do here today, we can't shout, and we can't argue. When we do, the planet reacts and sends storms. Do we all agree on that?"

Judging by the faces of the colonists, most of them did agree, even though they were bewildered and, in some cases, skeptical. Brother Vance said, "I'll accept the possibility that the storm was caused by our argument for now, but certainly there is some other, more rational explanation for what's been happening."

"This phenomenon does have a rational explanation, which I'll get to," Cameron replied. "For now, though, let me see if I understand correctly what's going on. Some of you want my father to resign as governor." Many of the colonists nodded vigorously.

"The primary reason for this is because my father married Sara and me with the intention of later annulling the marriage." Cameron received more nods in reply. "Some of you are concerned that Sara really is in love with my father and wants her marriage to me annulled."

Sara cheeks grew hot. Too many colonists responded in the affirmative. Had she really been that passionate? Or did they think she was more likely to truly love the man she had known longer? Or was it simply that they felt a devotion to Ben they had never felt for Cameron and subsequently believed Ben was the one Sara would prefer?

"Others of you are concerned that my marriage to Sara may be invalid, and still others are disturbed by the haste in which Sara and I were married. Are there any concerns I've missed?"

Russ stood up. "Many of us would feel more comfortable with your marriage, Bishop, if you and Sara would agree to let Tony perform the ceremony here in front of the colony today."

Sara widened her eyes at Cameron in alarm. What in the galaxy would he say to that? If they agreed to Russ's request, what would they be saying to the colony? That they weren't, at present, really married?

Cameron didn't hesitate for a moment. He shook his head. "Either the ceremony Tuesday was valid or it was not. Since Sara and I have been living together for the past five days, I think the suggestion that we may not really be married is outrageous and disgusting."

"Surely though, Cameron, it wouldn't hurt to go ahead and have the ceremony," Brent Hall pointed out. "It would make everyone feel easier about your marriage."

Cameron again shook his head. "A few years down the road, such an action would raise questions about the validity of the first ceremony and would, in the process, lead to the belief that Sara and I entered our marriage unchaste. I won't allow that."

“Why did you agree to let your father marry you in the first place, Cameron?” Russ asked.

“He insisted, and we were afraid he would contest the marriage if we had Tony perform the ceremony without his license.”

“But having Tony perform the ceremony would have been the *right* way to do it,” Russ protested.

“No, being married in the temple would have been the right way to do it.”

Russ sighed. “I’m sorry, Cameron.”

“Let me put your mind to rest, Russ,” Cameron said gently. “Consider this. On Earth, the Lord doesn’t require a bishop to perform all of the marriages that will only be for this life. He recognizes marriages performed by all kinds of people: priests, rabbis, ministers, judges, and even ship captains. For the Lord to recognize a man and woman living together as being married, the marriage must be *legal* and *lawful*.”

Sara was relieved to see most of the colonists nod or at least appear thoughtful. They agreed with this concept.

“Sara and I did everything we could to insure that our marriage would be recognized by colony law. Everyone was there to witness it, we documented it, and my father was and still is the governor of the colony. As far as I can tell, my father is the equivalent of a judge. The marriage was entered into legally, so it is valid.”

“And you, Sara, have no plans to ask for an annulment,” Sister Vance said.

Sara stood up and moved to Cameron’s side, her arm slipping around his waist and his around her shoulders. She shook her head with all the adamancy she could muster. “There will be no annulment. A potential annulment has never been anything but a fantasy of my father-in-law. I am, in fact, pregnant.”

Sara expected laughter, but instead received gapes of astonishment. Sara wondered whether they were surprised she would allow herself to become pregnant so soon or whether they were shocked by her audacity in making such a claim so soon. Cyndi actually ventured to comment. “Oh come now, Sara, you can’t possibly know that yet.”

“Actually, I can. Ben said it himself. I’m unusual, although he has no idea yet just how unusual I really am. It so happens that I’m biologically programmed for exceptional fertility, which means that marriage, for me, means a baby right away.”

Cameron nodded. “We both knew this going into the marriage.”

Ben looked from Sara to Cameron, appearing uneasy. “What in the world are you two talking about?”

Cameron looked down at Sara, hesitating. Sara smiled at him reassuringly. Now that the time had come, it didn’t seem so difficult. She said softly, “Do we want to tell them now? Or should we wait and discuss more important matters first?”

“I think this is the most important matter we have to discuss today.” Cameron directed his words to the colonists. “Sara and I have so much to say we hardly know where to start, especially since it’s all tied together and so closely connected to the colony’s concerns.”

“First of all,” Sara said to the colony, “I don’t expect you to take my word about the pregnancy. I’ll have a blood test today and you’ll have proof.”

“It’s only been four days,” said Sister Jarrett. “Even a blood test wouldn’t provide conclusive evidence this early.”

From what her mother had told her, Sara knew that such a test would, indeed, show that her body was already undergoing chemical changes. Sara smiled confidently. “Give one to me, and you’ll see.”

"All right," Cyndi conceded. "You can have your blood test. If it's negative, you can have another one in a week."

"I want to lay this silly matter of an annulment to rest for good," Sara said.

The colonists glanced at each other and nodded. "That sounds reasonable enough," said Brother Marshall.

"I'll accept a pregnancy as proof that you have no intention of asking for an annulment," Sister Marshall agreed.

"Good," Sara said, pleased. "Then we can move on to the reason I can be so certain about my exceptional fertility. As it turns out, a week and a half before we left Earth, my father told me that he, my natural mother, and I are originally from a planet called Novaun."

"You're an alien?" Adam burst out in delight.

"No way!" said Samantha.

"No wonder your family's so weird!" Brandon said in satisfaction.

Sara nodded. "I always knew my family was strange, but I was as surprised as you are to find out I really am an alien. I had no idea. My parents left Novaun twenty years ago and went to Earth to telepathically record Earth's most significant documents. When I was growing up, I believed my father was an employee of the Library of Congress. In reality, however, he's an agent for a space navy called Novaunian Fleet and was at the Library of Congress recording information to send back to Novaun. My mother died when I was a baby of infant botulism, which, for an adult Earth woman, would be virtually impossible, but for a woman from another planet, not surprising at all. As long as I can remember, my father's been paranoid about what he, I, and my brothers and sisters eat."

"Which is why you're such a Bubble Babe!" Marc said.

"Exactly!"

"And I just thought she was weird," Jordan said with a smile. Tony leaned back in his chair and laughed and laughed.

"Oh, it gets better, Tony," Sara said. "Novaunians live for two hundred years, and married Novaunian women have, on average, thirty children apiece."

Tony stopped laughing suddenly. "You're not serious."

"She's serious," Cameron said.

Sara gazed at Tony solemnly, doing everything in her power to avoid looking at Ben. "I didn't believe it either, at first. Or I should say, I didn't want to believe it, but it's the truth. You met my parents. How old do you think my father looks?"

Tony shrugged, appearing perplexed. "It didn't occur to me to speculate. You're twenty, so he must be at least forty."

Barbara looked at Sara queerly. "He looks as if he's in his late twenties. I'll have to admit, I did wonder about that when I met him. Your stepmother, though, looks as if she's about forty."

Sara nodded slowly. "My mom ages and my dad doesn't. He's forty-four and she's thirty-nine. It'll be the same for me. I'll be a century old before I look the age my mom is now."

"You really are one complicated chick, Sara," Tony said.

Sara smiled and nodded, rolling her eyes. She caught a glimpse of Ben and saw that he was as hurt as he was baffled. "Why didn't you and Cameron tell me about this?"

"I wanted to tell you about Novaun that day at the yogurt shop, but it wasn't my secret to tell. You have to understand, my family is in a great deal of danger."

Ben shook his head. "I wouldn't have told anyone. Didn't you know that?"

"Of course I knew that, or thought I did, but I couldn't take the chance. My father is so concerned about my family's safety that he didn't even tell me! When I left, David didn't know either, and it nearly killed me not to tell him. I told Cameron because we wanted to get married and he had to know what he was getting into."

"Sara had qualms about announcing it today this way," Cameron said, "but I persuaded her that this was a matter we could no longer keep to ourselves. Sara will explain why."

Sara went on to tell the colonists everything her father had told her about Novaun, the Zarrists, terraformed planets, and arelada. Their questions were the same hers had been. "Why did Novaun send your father to Earth secretly? Why didn't the Novaunians make public contact with Earth twenty years ago? If Zarr and his people really are so dangerous, why hasn't Novaun changed its policy about official contact and warned us? Doesn't Novaun care that this supposedly evil anti-Christ is taking advantage of a planet too primitive to fight back?"

One question, however, dominated: "If Eden is so dangerous, why aren't the Zarrists aware of it? Why would they want to put a settlement here?"

Sara had no idea how to answer that question. "My father told me only that Eden is in a strategic position. He didn't give his opinion as to why the Zarrists would ignore the danger and put colonies here."

"The Zarrists aren't stupid," Trevor said. "It makes no sense that they would take such a risk."

"I know it doesn't," Sara agreed, "but without more information, it's useless to speculate on their motives."

Sara answered as many questions as she could. Eventually someone asked whether she had any arelada in her possession, and she was forced to tell them that her father had given her his arelada and why.

"Have you tried to communicate with the planet-spirit yet?" Ben asked.

"No, I'm only just beginning to learn how to use the arelada. It may be some time before I'm strong enough to communicate with the planet-spirit."

"Where is the arelada now?" asked Sister Eagle.

Russ's eyebrows rose. "May we see it?"

Sara shook his head. "Not yet. We left it at home."

"We'll give you a demonstration after we've learned more about it," Cameron said. "Give us a week or two."

Some of the colonists appeared skeptical; most were surprised. "Then you're learning how to use it too, Cameron?" Barbara asked.

Cameron nodded. "Sara and I are learning together."

Rick Dixon shot up his hand. "How do you know that the *Novaunians* aren't the evil aliens, Bishop?"

"Yeah," said Marc, grinning. "How do we know that Sara's not the one who's doing the mind zapping?"

"Because if she had, you wouldn't know it, and it wouldn't occur to you to ask," Cameron said pleasantly.

The question had been asked only half seriously, but everyone was curious and concerned that there might be some truth in Rick and Marc's observations.

Sara forced herself to remain calm. "My father believes Zarr has a bond on my mind too. Obviously, if I didn't know enough to keep myself from being bonded, I wouldn't begin to know how to bond another person. Besides, my parents took me to earth when I was a baby, and I grew up there." She presented her scrapbooks for examination. "My entire life is in these

books. As you can see, in the newborn photos, the backgrounds are hazy. By the time this six-month photo was taken, however, I was wearing Earth-style clothing, and the background is obviously the house I grew up in. Ashley, Brandon, and Adam can tell you that since they've been there."

Ashley stepped forward and looked more closely at the photos and nodded. "It's the same house, all right."

"I only lived a few months on Novaun," Sara concluded. "I don't have the telepathic education my father does. My father is brilliant. I mean, he's brilliant in a way that not one of you has ever seen, and I recognize the fact that everyone here was at the top of his or her class or profession back on Earth. My father has a photographic memory accelerated a thousand times; I don't know how else to explain it."

"What precisely does he do to make you think that, Sara?" Ben asked, his curiosity piqued.

"He reads and speaks in dozens of different languages, and he's read everything, literally everything. If you read a paragraph to him out of a book of stature—according to his own standards of stature, of course—he'll not only quote the entire book back to you, he'll start quoting all of the books and articles in the bibliography. Then he'll quote the books of *commentary* about that book, and then he'll give you his own opinion, which is always thoughtful and educated."

"I've heard him quote the scriptures that way," Cameron said.

"He does," Brandon said. "And so does Sara's brother. Ashley and Adam and I can vouch for that."

"And her brother remembers music," Ashley said with excitement. "All you have to do is hum a few measures of a song, and he can play it on the piano from memory."

"He's awesome," Adam agreed.

"There's no way Sara's father is an 'evil alien,'" Cameron said. "With his mind, he could have done anything on Earth he wanted to do and been wealthy and influential, but he chose to live an obscure life and use his talents working full time in the temple."

"That means nothing," Russ said. "Spies are supposed to be inconspicuous."

Sara looked at Russ in surprise. He was right, and she had no idea how to respond. Thankfully, Cameron came to her rescue. "If what you say is true, then Sara's father isn't a typical spy. He may be living an inconspicuous life, but he has never required Sara to do the same. She's been written up in newspapers all over the Baltimore-D.C. area since she placed third in the 100 at state as a sophomore."

"She's been on television," Jordan said to Russ, "and is an All-American."

"She's one fast Bubble Babe," Marc added.

"All right," Russ said with a little nod. "I can accept the possibility that Sara's father had more choices than one might initially believe."

"When Sara and I were still in high school, I read all of those newspaper articles about her." Cameron held up the two photos he had of Sara. "I've carried these pictures of her in my wallet for years. The dates are there too. These pictures should resolve any doubts anyone may have about how long I've loved Sara. As for Sara, she compiled this album of *my* pictures and articles." He held up the little album. "I hope this lays to rest any notions that Sara contrived to get close to my father and then me to put herself forward in the colony."

Ben immediately took the album from Cameron and began gingerly turning the pages, looking at everything.

Sara felt that she needed to add, "I hope it also makes it clear that as fond as I am of Ben, Cameron is the one I want to be with, the one I've *always* wanted to be with."

"I don't know, Sara," Samantha said, trying to keep a straight face. "I'm not sure Cameron's man enough for you. Thirty kids! I mean, come on!"

"Hey, the Carroll men have it where it counts," Trevor said. Cyndi laughed.

"Only Cameron's insane enough to *want* to be man enough for her," Tony said, smiling.

"You're really not going to have thirty kids, are you, Cameron?" Brandon said with concern.

"I have no idea. We'll take them one at a time, I suppose, and see what happens."

Sara nearly laughed. She hoped they really would have their children one at a time—after their twins were born!

Ben looked up from the photo album at Sara, his eyebrows raised. "It's complete and meticulous."

"I prefer to think of it as obsessive," Sara said lightly.

Ben grunted and shook his head, as if he believed he were the biggest fool in the universe. He handed the book to Barbara to examine. "It looks like a labor of love."

Sara felt Cameron's arms encircle her waist from behind. He rested a hand on her abdomen in acknowledgment of their babies, thrilling her. She leaned against him and kissed his cheek as he kissed her jaw. "It was," she murmured contentedly.

Cameron released Sara and addressed the colony again. "As you can see, Sara and I have a lot in common and have loved each other for a long time. To you the wedding seemed sudden; to us, it was years in coming. We chose to be married immediately after we became engaged because we wanted privacy more than a fancy wedding."

"When did you learn about your father's feelings for Sara?" Russ asked.

"The day after the wedding, when Sara told me. She, herself, didn't know how he felt about her until late Monday night, after we told him about our engagement."

Tony nodded thoughtfully. "So you've had a few days to think about it and come to some sort of resolution."

"Yes, I have, but it hasn't been easy. I've spent many hours in thought and prayer. Aside from my mother and Sara, not one of you could feel more outraged or betrayed by my father's behavior than I do. I want to see justice done, but I also want us, as a colony and as a ward, to forgive my father and be merciful to him as he works to repent."

"Do you think he's fit to govern the colony or not?" asked Brent.

"Yes I do, within certain boundaries." Cameron held out his hand in a stop position in an effort to keep anyone from immediately protesting. "My understanding is that most of you, if not all of you, came to Eden believing my father would be a combination governor/spiritual leader, kind of along the lines of King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon."

The colonists grumbled their agreement and dissatisfaction. Sara thought King Benjamin was a good comparison. Cameron looked at his father in a peculiar way, and Sara immediately perceived why he did, that the names were the same. How odd!

Cameron shook his head. "That is a strange coincidence, isn't it? I think we can all agree that my father is no King Benjamin, and personally, I think it's better he isn't. In leading you here against the counsel of the Brethren and in pursuing Sara, he has committed serious sins; to follow him as a spiritual leader would be foolishness. As for the governorship, the colony needs a manager, and I don't know of anyone better qualified for that position than my father. Obviously he should not have unlimited power, and I think the best way to prevent further misconduct is to draft a colony constitution and then decide on a way to enforce it."

The colonists as a whole appeared satisfied with this suggestion. Sister Vance nodded. "That's the best idea I've heard all morning, Bishop."

“Thank you,” Cameron said, pleased. “My suggestion is that you and your students and your husband and his students work together right now to write a document based on the United States Constitution and traditional law.”

The Vances looked at each other, as if conferring, and nodded. Sister Vance said, “Then when it’s finished, we can go over the particulars in Colony Assembly.”

“We don’t need a traditional constitution,” Sister Eagle protested. “The Equality of Zion provides an excellent framework for colony law, or has everyone forgotten why we came to Eden in the first place?” The colonists looked at each other, frowning.

“The Equality of Zion is more a lifestyle than law,” Cameron said.

“The bishop’s right,” Brother Vance said with a nod. “The Equality of Zion provides a framework for colony lifestyle and government and has its place, but what we need now is law.”

“And we aren’t going to get it through team building sessions,” Cameron said. “A shared leadership approach may be effective in some situations, but not here. We don’t have time, and too much is at stake. We can, however, incorporate some of the tenets of The Equality of Zion into our constitution. In particular, I’d like to see the colony keep its environmental focus.”

Sister Eagle shook her head. “I’m sorry, Bishop. But falling back on traditional law isn’t right. Cooperative government will work if given half a chance.”

Cyndi turned her head toward Sister Eagle. “Cooperative government, with all its supposed supremacy, didn’t work very well in the case of Cameron’s marriage to Sara. Tuesday, when Ben was the governor you all came here believing he was, no one contested the marriage. Everyone, in fact, seemed happy enough with it. Now today, half the colony wants the ceremony performed again. If the colony had established laws regarding marriage, none of this would have happened.”

“Solid marriage law, with a reasonable waiting period perhaps, certainly would have taken the pressure off of Cameron and Sara,” Barbara said. “Had they not been afraid that Ben would withdraw his consent, they might have felt they could wait a few weeks to get married.”

“I’m not suggesting we don’t establish colony laws regarding marriage,” Sister Eagle said. “I think our laws should be more strict than they ever were in the United States.”

“I think we all liked the idea that Dr. Carroll would give us premarital counseling,” Tony said. “Until today. I still think it would be a good idea to counsel with the bishop, but to tell you the truth, the mere thought that one person could arbitrarily decide whether I can get married or not and when makes my blood boil.”

“It’s wrong that Sara and Cameron had to depend on my father’s whim on whether they could get married or not,” Ashley said. “And it was wrong they had to depend so heavily on the colony’s approval too.”

Sister Eagle shook her head quickly, as if she were annoyed. “It isn’t law I’m objecting to. It’s the method the bishop’s suggesting we use to make the laws. We came here to do something different, something better, and I can’t advocate throwing away our ideals just because we happen to be in a difficult situation.”

“I’d like to point out that the planet doesn’t care one iota what laws we may come up with through consensus,” Sara said. “It seems obsessively concerned that we live the commandments, and we either learn to live with its requirements or we destroy ourselves. To tell you the truth, I don’t think cooperative government has a chance here. We’re living in a dictatorship.”

“It does appear the planet accepts Cameron and Sara’s marriage,” Samantha said.

“They *are* still here,” Brittany Novak agreed. Murmurs of relief and realization sounded through the room, laced with chuckles.

“That is presuming the planet really is reacting to our unrighteous behavior,” Brother Vance said.

“We really don’t know that for sure yet,” Sister Eagle agreed.

“It did allow Ben to make a pass at Sara,” Brother Marshall observed.

“Ben embraced Sara without her consent,” Brother Vance said. “I’m not convinced that act was a sexual advance.”

Cameron waved his hands and shook his head. “Whether the embrace was a pass or not has no bearing on this discussion. I suggest that to be on the safe side, we proceed with the assumption that the planet will react if it witnesses an unseemly act and formulate our laws accordingly.”

Sara was relieved to see the colonists silently nod their agreement. The last thing she wanted was for the colonists to resume discussion of that embrace.

“Tony and Brent, I’d like the two of you to sit down together right now and draft a list of bylaws based on the Ten Commandments. Be thorough. We want these laws to keep us, as a colony, from offending the planet-spirit and becoming planet food. We know it reacts to anger and arguing, Sabbath breaking, and lying, and not just blatant lying. Any misrepresentation of a person’s true opinion offends it.”

Cameron went on to briefly explain that his father had misrepresented his true feelings during the wedding, which had caused the tremors they had felt that day. “The planet can’t read our thoughts; only God can do that. But it obviously does understand our language. We need to be very careful in everything we say and do until we have more information.” Cameron held out his hand toward his father. “Father, I think it’s time for you to lead the rest of us in ascertaining the extent of the storm’s damage.”

Ben regarded Cameron with new respect and arose. “Will do, Bishop.”

Chapter 32: UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

After having her blood drawn, Sara emerged from the hospital's laboratory in the sunny, mild afternoon and headed to the men's dormitory, which had been destroyed by the fall of two mammoth maple trees. When she arrived, she found most of the other colonists salvaging what they could.

Sara located Ben easily. He was quickly and energetically hanging clotheslines around the perimeter of the meadow, his beautiful golden hair rippling slightly in the breeze. She smiled at the sight. This was the Ben Carroll she had followed to Eden—intense, involved, and aware.

Sara watched Ben for a few more moments, then ran over to him and voiced her new concern. "We need to tell the other colonies what we suspect about the planet-spirit and warn them."

Ben finished tightening a long piece of rope around a tree with a taut-line hitch, then turned to Sara. "You're right. If we're having problems, they probably are too."

Jordan flung a blanket over the new clothesline and straightened it. "Haven't you heard, Sara? We can't make contact with Control Colony. Apparently our equipment was damaged in the storm, although even Sister Ireland doesn't know how yet."

"Oh, great!" Sara took a towel from the pile of soaked items, wrung it out, and hung it on the line.

Ben began stringing another line. "Anita and her team will figure it out soon enough. I'll get in touch with Control Colony as soon as they do."

"When are the engineers supposed to come fix the primary machine?" Sara asked, reaching for another towel. The wedding and subsequent honeymoon had made her oblivious to basic colony concerns.

Ben jogged away from her with the rope, toward another tree. "They should be arriving tonight," he called, pulling the rope taut and wrapping the end around the trunk.

"It's a good thing, too," Jordan said, hanging another blanket, "since more than forty of us are now without a home."

Sara was still working with Jordan when Cyndi, the doctors, and the lab technician arrived and called everyone together to announce the results of her blood test.

"Where's Cameron, Sara?" Cyndi asked.

"At the Dixons'. Their house was flooded."

"Do you want to run get him before we announce the results?"

"That isn't necessary. He already knows the test will be positive."

Many of the colonists laughed. Some moaned good-naturedly. Cyndi glanced at Dr. Linda Jarrett. Sister Jarrett regarded Sara as if she were a freak.

"The test was positive," Sister Jarrett announced. "There's no doubt whatsoever that Sara is pregnant."

Sara held out her arms and bowed. "You see, I really am an alien!" Cheers and applause sounded around her.

"Vindicated!" Ashley hugged Sara tightly. "I'm going to be an aunt!" Sara nodded happily.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Sister Eagle said. "You said earlier, Linda, that it's too early to get a conclusive result. How can you be so certain about this?"

"Her hCG level is quite high. She's pregnant."

"How high?" asked Sister Vance.

"High. She's pregnant! I'm under no obligation to tell you anything else."

Something about the test disturbed Sister Jarrett. Sara considered asking her about it privately but decided that such an approach would make the other colonists more skeptical than they already were. "What else is there to tell?"

Cyndi cautioned Sara with her eyes. "We should discuss this privately, Sara."

"Just what does she have to hide?" Jordan demanded.

"Nothing," Sara declared. "Go ahead, Sister Jarrett."

Sister Jarrett hesitated. "Are you sure you want me to say more?"

What could possibly be so terrible? "Yes, please!"

"Your levels are *too* high."

"Which probably means you're having more than one baby," Cyndi explained.

Sara laughed in relief. "That's right. I'm having twins! I saw the babies telepathically."

"You didn't tell us that before," Ben said, shocked.

"There was no reason to."

Cyndi smiled. "Congratulations, Sara." She hugged Sara, and then Sara received several more hugs from her former roommates and even Barbara, who didn't seem either excited or upset that she would soon be a grandmother of twins.

Samantha finally gave Sara a push and ordered, "Go tell Cameron. Now!" Sara laughed and darted away.

Sara did tell Cameron and received an enthusiastic kiss from him and a peculiar look from Russ before she went back to work cleaning up. She didn't think anything more about the strange glances, attributing them all to the fact that everyone was beginning to realize she really was an alien.

Early in the evening, however, when everyone stopped working and gathered for dinner, Sister Eagle presented a new possibility for Sara's peculiar test result. "I can't believe how gullible everyone is. If Sara's hCG levels were too high today, it's because she was pregnant before she was married."

Sara gaped at Sister Eagle, certain her heart had stopped. Cameron laughed.

Brother Vance nodded. "That would explain things, wouldn't it?"

"The haste in which she became engaged and was then married," Sister Vance observed. "The reason she was ill the day of her wedding."

Sara felt blood rush into her cheeks. She should have known this would happen. How *dare* they?

Cameron waved his hand dismissively. "You're completely out of line. Sara and I were never even alone together before we were married."

Sister Eagle shook her head at Cameron pityingly. "Excuse me for saying this, Bishop, but you're such a fool. You know nothing about this girl and what men she may have been with."

Sara could see that Cameron was bursting to tell Sister Eagle that she was the one who was the fool, but he was the bishop and that wasn't allowed, so Sara said it herself. "Sister Eagle, if you think your bishop is gullible enough to marry a woman he doesn't know better than *that*, then you're the one who's the fool."

"She's probably been sleeping with Dr. Carroll," said Rick Dixon.

"Which was why he was so angry at her after the wedding," Kevin Krantz said. "He didn't want to share her." Many others grunted and nodded their agreement. Sara couldn't believe Ben's own student would suggest such a thing.

"You're sick!" Ashley cried.

"And you're a moron!" said Erica Rice.

"Stop it right now!" Cyndi ordered.

“Why else would your father have agreed to marry them so quickly?” Erica pressed. “He was trying to cover up his sins! And Sara was looking for an easy marriage!”

Sara put a finger to her temple. “Pssst . . . Where have your brain cells gone? If Ben Carroll and I were lovers, I would have hugged him this morning and none of you would have known a thing!”

“The two of you had a wedding hug to explain to Cameron and Ashley and Tony,” Russ countered.

Sara shook her head vigorously. “At the wedding I wouldn’t have offered Ben my hand or called him Father. I would have embraced him as normal, and there wouldn’t have been anything to explain!”

“How do we know calling Dr. Carroll ‘Father’ wasn’t your way of breaking up with him?” said Brent Hall.

“I said, stop this right now!” Cyndi yelled. When all of the murmurs of doubt and speculation ceased, she said in a calmer tone, “I gave Sara an examination Tuesday morning. There is no possible way she could have been pregnant. I believe she’s having twins as she says she is, and I have no doubt the babies are Cameron’s.”

“Why would you cover for this little tramp, Cyndi?” Sister Eagle asked.

Cyndi turned toward Sister Eagle, incredulous. “You’re calling me a liar?”

“You do have a soft spot for this girl,” Brother Vance said.

Cyndi threw her arms up. “Why do you want so badly to discredit Sara?”

“Yes, Ann,” Ben said, folding his arms over his waist, “why are you so determined to discredit Sara?”

“Because she corrupted you.”

“We will *not* stand by and allow her to gain any more power in the colony than she has already gained,” Sister Vance said.

“Do you know what I think?” Ben said. “I think you’re terrified that Sara, and Cameron, may actually be telling the truth, that Eden is a dangerous planet and that we made a serious mistake in coming here at all.”

“Do you think we made a mistake, Ben?” Trevor asked.

Ben nodded. “Yes. I do.”

“If you really believe that, Dr. Carroll,” Jordan said, “then Sara *has* corrupted you.”

“No. Sara has not corrupted me. She has enlightened me. As long as I’ve known her, she’s never been anything but perfectly honest in everything she says and does. If she says it, she believes it.”

“Is her baby yours or not, Dr. Carroll?” Russ demanded.

Marc shot Sara an accusatory look. “It can’t possibly be Cameron’s.” He glanced over at Tony in a suspicious way. Jordan couldn’t resist throwing his own questioning glances in Sara and Tony’s direction.

Ben stared Russ down. “I refuse to respond to such ridiculous speculations. But I will say this. If we want to survive on this unstable planet, we will lay down our pride right now and unite behind our bishop, and we will open our minds to the irrational and impossible. And speaking of the impossible, Control Colony seems to have disappeared.”

“What do you mean, it disappeared?” Tony asked, shaking his head at Marc and Jordan, his expression one of disgust.

“We’ve been trying all day to make contact, and there’s no response.”

“You’re sure there isn’t something wrong with the equipment?” Trevor asked.

“Certain.”

“What time are the engineers due to arrive?” Cameron asked.

“At eight o’clock. Until then, let’s finish eating in peace and have no more slander, or Eden may send another storm that will destroy the engineers’ transport before it can get here!”

Thunder crashed, and the colonists groaned in unison. Some slammed fists down on tables, some jumped up to close the windows, and others shook their heads in suspicion and frustration at Sara and Ben. Most of the colonists sincerely believed that there was more going on between the two of them than either she or Ben had admitted. People she had thought were her friends now thought she was a liar and a tramp, and even Ben’s closest associates were turning on him! Sara knew that she shouldn’t let their ignorant assumptions bother her, but she couldn’t help it—she was angry and hurt.

Before anyone could say anything, Ben held out his hands in an attempt to calm everyone down. “Shhhhh . . . no one say a word . . . if we’re completely silent, it ought to stop soon enough.”

The sordid speculation did stop for the moment, but Sara had lost her appetite. She pushed her plate away and sat down in Cameron’s lap, laying her head on his. He kissed her neck and held her tightly until the storm passed about ten minutes later.

When the storm was over, Cameron whispered, “I’m going to corner Russ, and then I’m going to help my father move. We’re going to set up a tent for him on Trevor and Cyndi’s property.”

Sara pulled away from Cameron a little and tried to smile. “Forgive me if I pass on that one.”

Cameron did smile. “I think the colony would demand you pass on that one. Ashley may need some help, though.”

Sara shook her head. “I can’t face your mother right now.” She was relieved that Barbara had agreed to let Ashley move back home and had rejected Sister Eagle’s offer to stay with her a while. Sara was afraid that witch would have poisoned Barbara against her for good. “I think I’ll just go home.”

Cameron squeezed Sara. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. Uncle Trevor wants to bring our furniture to us after we’re done helping my father.”

Sara stood up. She quickly disposed of her leftover food and eating utensils in the decomposer and left without speaking to anyone. The colonists could make all of the crass comments they wanted, but she didn’t have to remain to hear them.

Once home, Sara slipped into her swimsuit, draped her old robe and a towel around her shoulders, and hauled the filthy clothing that was still on the living room floor to the stream on her property. She rinsed the clothing out in the clear water, hung it on limbs to dry, then waded farther into the stream to a spot where the water had swelled because of the storms. The day before, it had covered her kneecaps while standing. Now it flowed around her hips, numbing her skin with its coldness.

The air smelled of honeysuckle and pine, and the water reflected the stars and trees as it wound away from her and out of sight through the forest. She wasn’t sure even Center Park was so beautiful, and she spent a half an hour, at least, wading in the stream and relaxing on its bank, hoping Cameron would come home soon and join her.

Sara eventually realized Cameron would not come and, in disappointment, donned her robe and went back to the house. She was in the middle of combing her hair when Cameron slipped into the room from his office, startling her.

Cameron quickly closed the door behind him and fell against it, gazing at her with a longing sigh. "I only have a minute," he said in regret. "Would you be willing to tell my father about the dream you had of your mother?"

"I don't know." What a strange request! Sara looked tentatively at the door. "Is he here?"

Cameron nodded once. "I think that hearing your mother's story would give him hope."

Sara hadn't thought of that. Still, the conversation between her and her mother had been so personal. Then again, Cameron had asked because he believed it was what his father needed right now. Ben did have enough confidence in her sincerity that he would believe the dream, every word of it.

Sara finally nodded at Cameron. "Let me go change."

"I *insist* you go change!"

Once Cameron disappeared into his office, Sara went to the bedroom to throw on some clean clothes. A few minutes later, she knocked lightly on the office door. Cameron opened the door, and Sara stepped into the room. Ben sat in one of the camp chairs, his head in his hand. Hearing her enter, he lifted his head and looked at her, his eyes desolate and dull.

Seeing Ben so pale and debilitated grieved Sara. She couldn't smile. "Did the engineers make it?"

He shook his head.

"Have you heard from them?"

"No." Ben gazed at her earnestly. "I want you to know, Sara, that I apologized to Cameron for trying to steal his wife. And I meant it. I feel as King David must have felt, when Nathan accused him of stealing Uriah's 'little ewe lamb.'"

Sara didn't know what to say, so she merely nodded her acknowledgment. Cameron touched her arm and then her back in a caressing way, guiding her into a chair positioned on the other side of the table from his father's chair. Cameron moved so that he was standing behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Sara instinctively leaned her head against him, craving his closeness, and Cameron rubbed her neck lovingly.

Ben watched them, his eyes filling with tears. "I'm more sorry than I can express."

Cameron brushed Sara's hair away from her face and kissed the top of her head. "Father knows why you're here, so you can go ahead, whenever you're ready."

Sara wanted to give the dream to Ben telepathically, but she wasn't sure how to do it while editing out the more personal parts concerning her fertility. She went ahead and did the best she could by speaking, ending with what her mother had told her about repentance: "That is the beauty of the Atonement. You repent, accept the consequences of what you have done, and move on, and by the Lord's miraculous power, life's tangles work themselves out."

Many moments of silence passed before Ben said, his tone wry, "How is it your father made two successful marriages and I've been unable to make one?"

Sara stood up. "I don't think there's any easy answer to that one."

"Actually, I think there might be," Ben said in a tone of self-reproach. "Your father loves both of your mothers unconditionally. It's been a long time since I've been able to love my wife that way."

"You love Sara that way," Cameron pointed out.

Ben looked at Sara uneasily. Sara nodded slowly. "It would have been so easy for you to discredit me, to make the colonists think I'm a liar and a tramp or a silly little girl, but you didn't."

"Don't let what the others said disturb you, Sara. I betrayed you all, and many of them can't accept it. Some of them are frightened and disillusioned, and they don't know you the way I do. They need time."

"They wouldn't have known you had betrayed them. Not yet, anyway. You believe in me and gave up your reputation for me, and that's about as unconditional as it gets."

Cameron nodded. "If you can do that for Sara, you can do it for Mother too."

"Whether I can love your mother that way again or not is the question, isn't it? And even if I can, it may be too late."

Sara knew she needed to leave. She kissed Cameron lightly and moved toward the door. "Sara," Ben said. Sara turned toward him again. His eyes were a little brighter than they had been when she had entered the room. "Thank you."

Sara nodded at him and smiled, then left him alone with Cameron. Trevor and several other men arrived about thirty minutes later with the new furniture and other presents. They assembled the furniture and left, promising to return Monday to wire the house and install the synthesizing machines. Sara spent the rest of the evening rearranging the furniture and putting everything away. When she was finished, she surveyed her home, thinking it was beautiful, not just because she liked how it looked, but because it represented Ben's acceptance of her marriage to Cameron.

Around ten o'clock, Sara sat down at the little oak desk, which she had positioned in front of the window in the babies' area, and booted up her laptop. She wrote in her journal until she was so tired she could do nothing more than stare at the screen, and still Cameron didn't come. She finally collapsed into bed, more lonely than she thought she would be. She drifted to sleep telling herself over and over that life wouldn't always be this hectic and praying that her disappointment would go away. She had married Cameron to be a support to him, not a burden.

Sara awoke when Cameron lay down beside her at around one o'clock, sliding his arelada necklace under his pillow. "Good morning, Sweet King," she whispered groggily, trying to smile.

Sara could feel his body tremble. *I love you, Sara. Do you know that?*

Sara kissed him, disturbed to taste his tears. *Of course I do.* She touched his cheek. *And I love you too.*

Cameron returned her kiss ardently, kissing her again and again, clutching her to himself as he wept.

* * *

As Sara and Cameron lay in tranquility together during the earliest hours of the morning, the earthquakes began. They weren't severe earthquakes, but they were frequent, several occurring every hour.

Cameron had drifted to sleep in Sara's arms when she heard loud knocks at the door and shouts for Cameron. She pushed Cameron away and grabbed her robe, putting it on as she went to the door, Cameron stumbling out of bed behind her.

Russ, Brent, Marc, and about ten other students met Sara at the door, their angry faces suddenly anxious in the light of their lanterns. "You're here," Brittany Novak said in surprise.

"Of course I'm here! Where else would I be?" Everyone seemed to be staring at her exotic red robe, the expressions ranging from slight discomfort to utter embarrassment. Sara suddenly felt self-conscious, as if something private had been unveiled.

Sara felt Cameron encircle her waist from behind and rest his chin on her shoulder. "What's this about, Russ? Brent?"

"We felt the earthquakes and were afraid . . ." Russ averted his eyes, unable to look at Cameron directly.

"We were afraid Sara might have slipped out to be with your father," Marc finished.

"What is wrong with you people!" Sara said, breaking away from Cameron and going back to their room.

"I think we need to have a little chat," Sara heard Cameron say in an exasperated tone. "Everyone come in and have a seat."

Leaving the bedroom door open, Sara sat down on the bed, sliding her feet into the silk slippers that went with the robe.

Sara watched Cameron turn a dining chair around and sit down facing the living room and babies' room area. "I'm sorry there aren't enough chairs to go around," he said. "Some of you will just have to sit on the floor." He shot that destroying-angel look at Russ, then at Brent, and Sara was suddenly glad she wasn't one of them. Sara had a feeling Cameron would give the two of them the chastisement of their lives after this discussion was finished.

There was a rustling noise as everyone sat down. Danielle Young said anxiously, "We're sorry, Bishop. After the second earthquake, we all just went a little crazy."

"Why didn't you go knock on my father's tent?"

"The Vances and Sister Eagle went to check on your father," Russ admitted.

"I see." Cameron pulled his gold silk robe more tightly around his body and folded his arms, stretching his legs and crossing them at the ankles. "Let's establish a few facts. First of all, was I or was I not called to be the bishop of the Eden Colony Ward by proper authority?"

"You were," Brent said. "Obviously."

Cameron nodded once. "Obviously." He held out his hands. "Do we all agree on that?" Cameron nodded again, several times. "We agree. And we agree that President Grant himself was called by proper authority and that he speaks for God according to his stewardship?"

Sara heard murmurs of agreement. Russ said, "If he wasn't called by proper authority, there's no Church."

"This is true." Cameron glanced at Sara sidelong. "He wasn't an alien disguised as President Grant, was he?" Sara grinned and quickly covered her mouth. The others laughed.

Cameron flickered his eyebrows at Sara, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly. "No? So you don't think President Grant was under the influence of an alien or in any other way insane?" Sara heard a few murmurs of "no" amidst the laughter. "All right," Cameron said. "Now for the million-dollar question: Who, of those of you present for my ordination, remember what President Grant said to Sara?"

No one responded right away, and Sara knew that Russ, Brent, and Marc, at least had been there. Cameron was a genius. Sara knew that President Grant's comment to her had probably come as a result of his personal opinion, not direct revelation. The others undoubtedly believed that too, but it didn't matter. The opinion of a member of the First Presidency was worth a great deal. If President Grant's comments didn't vindicate her, nothing would.

"Well?" Cameron urged.

"He congratulated her on how well she did at the NCAA championships." The voice belonged to Russ.

"And then he told her you were a good man," Brent said, his voice becoming excited as he realized the significance of the conversation. "And then he told her that if you tried to get away, she was supposed to chase you down!"

"He said that? Really?" Danielle said.

"He did," Marc agreed.

"Then Sara couldn't possibly have been sleeping with Dr. Carroll," Brittany deduced. "If she had, President Grant would have had a bad feeling about her and never would have encouraged her in the bishop's direction."

"Hey, Sara!" Erica Rice called. "Get out of bed and come tell us what President Grant said to you!"

Sara did get out of bed, but instead of meekly facing her accusers, she slammed the door. She turned and leaned against the door, listening to the muffled voices.

"She's angry," said a female voice. Sara believed it belonged to Erica.

"Can you blame her?" Cameron's voice was easy to identify. "You rush up here in the middle of the night, expecting her to be off somewhere with my father, and then you expect her to accommodate you."

"It's in her own best interest to repeat her conversation with President Grant," said another female voice, Brittany probably.

"She's already told you more than she ever dreamed she would, and still you accuse her of being a liar and a tramp."

"Even twins don't completely explain her high hCG level." Unsurprisingly, the skeptical voice was Marc's. "Sara! Get out here right now and explain your alien chemistry!"

Sara had known Marc for months! He, of everyone out there, was supposed to be her friend! And here he was, a medical "professional" disclosing more information about the pregnancy test than she had authorized. Sara wished she hadn't opened herself up to such scrutiny at all. She should have taken Cyndi's advice and discussed the details of the test with her and Dr. Jarrett privately.

"No one comes into my house and demands anything!"

Sara didn't hear any voices for at least a minute. Finally Cameron said in a more subdued tone, "Sara obviously has no intention of speaking with any of you right now; I insist you leave her alone. Now. Do any of you have any other concerns that can be discussed in a rational manner?"

"Doesn't it bother you, Bishop, that Sara is in love with your father?" Danielle asked.

"Sara cares about my father; she is not in love with him," Cameron corrected. "And no. It doesn't bother me that Sara loves my father any more than it bothers her that I love her father."

"But she's attracted to him!" said Rick Dixon. Sara would know that whiny voice anywhere. "That much is obvious!"

"Sara's feelings for my father are strictly those of a daughter. She doesn't regard him as a potential husband, and certainly not as a lover. My father, himself, understands this now and has stopped pursuing Sara."

"How can you be so sure about that?" The voice was too muffled for Sara to determine beyond a doubt who was speaking, but she believed it was Brent. "How can you be so sure Sara won't respond to him if he starts pursuing her again?"

"Aside from the fact that Sara's in love with me, I'm certain my father won't pursue Sara anymore because he loves her unconditionally. He sincerely wants her to be happy and knows she'll be happier with me than with him."

"I can't accept that." The voice belonged to the young man who had spoken before. "How could a person truly love the object of his marital unfaithfulness? It's a contradiction that selfless love could come out of sin."

"That's true. At the same time, though, you have to recognize the fact that my father, in ending his pursuit of Sara and confessing everything to the colony, has taken a major step toward repentance."

"You're suggesting, then, that the unconditional nature of his love for Sara is arising more from his repentance than from his unfaithfulness, that he really didn't love her in an unconditional way before he confessed everything."

"Almost. The act of *stopping the pursuit* is what unleashed the unconditional love and gave my father the strength to confess. While there is no doubt that my father was wrong to pursue a romantic relationship with Sara, one good thing did come out of it. My father sincerely wanted Sara to be his companion and partner."

"Yeah, right!" Marc protested. "What he wants is his 'Little Panther' in bed!"

"It *is* hard to believe, Cameron, that someone like your father could want someone as young and unsophisticated as Sara as a real wife." Russ's voice, with its touch of skepticism, wasn't difficult to identify either.

"As opposed to what?" said Danielle. "A *fake* wife?"

"A trophy wife."

"Sara would never let herself become a trophy wife," said Brittany.

"Dr. Carroll must like it that she's unsophisticated," said a male voice Sara didn't recognize.

"Do you think she's listening?" a female voice asked.

Russ laughed wholeheartedly. It was actually a gratifying sound. "Absolutely!"

"His wife seems *too* sophisticated," said another male voice.

"That's the bishop's mother you're talking about," Erica reprimanded.

"So it's wrong to offend me by saying my mother's too sophisticated, but it's all right to accuse my wife of sleeping with my father?" Cameron sounded *very* offended.

"It *does* sound ridiculous."

"And sick."

"We're all nuts." Cameron's guests laughed nervously.

Eventually Brittany asked, "How could Sara not have known your father was attracted to her?"

"No American woman is that innocent and unsophisticated," said Erica.

Sara vowed to herself that she would keep her mouth shut from now on. She needed to develop a little sophistication, if for no other reason than self-preservation. Shouting at Barbara had caused her nothing but trouble.

"You have to remember, Sara is more a Novaunian than she is an Earthon and completely unaware of it. Her father's the same way. He's oblivious to his own uniqueness in a way that feels, well, *alien*."

Cameron's observation shocked Sara and she almost stepped out of the bedroom and asked him to explain what he meant.

"So you think Sara's artlessness stems more from her alien mind and heritage than a lack of worldly experience?" The voice belonged to Russ. He sounded intrigued.

"Yes, I do. She's completely unconscious of the electrifying effect she has on men, and so is her father. If he had perceived it, he would have locked her up or taught her to be more guarded. But no. She has the open, uninhibited nature of a five-year-old, the body of an Olympian, the mind of a prodigy, and the virtue of an angel. She's utterly strange. Strange and wonderful. And not only does her father not see it, he expects her to be this way, as if that's the

way he raised her, as if he taught her the skills he knew she would need to survive on Novaun, not Earth.”

“He meant to take her back to Novaun, then?” Marc said.

“I think so.”

“I don’t know, Bishop,” said Erica. “Sara may be unsophisticated, but she isn’t stupid. She should have known there was something wrong in her relationship with your father.”

“None of the rest of you realized my father was attracted to Sara until this morning,” Cameron reminded. “So in that sense, you’re all saps. Are you sure it’s really Sara you’re accusing of corrupt behavior and not yourselves? For allowing yourselves to be led by Tohmazz Zarr and my father and then betrayed by them?”

Cameron’s suggestion must have hit pretty close to the mark, because no one spoke. Finally Cameron said, “I know it seems strange that my father would want Sara as a true partner and companion. I had a hard time accepting that fact also, but it’s the truth. He respects her and trusts her. When she gives him advice, he listens.

“She’s said many things to him over the past week, and a lot of it he didn’t want to hear, but he *did* hear it. It’s because of this, along with the fact that Sara cares about him and believes in his goodness despite the serious nature of his mistakes, that my father was willing to do some soul-searching and can, therefore, now admit he was wrong to lead us all here. That is a major step for him. A *necessary* step both for him and the colony. You should be *thrilled* circumstances have brought him to that point so quickly. I am!”

Sara felt odd. If Ben had changed his attitude so quickly and so drastically because of her influence, what would have happened had she realized her error sooner and insisted on staying home? Even as she formulated the question in her mind, she knew the answer. Ben Carroll would not have left Earth without her; he loved her too much. As she pondered, she became acutely aware of her own power. She had facilitated one man in making a terrible mistake and had inspired another man with the confidence necessary to undo that mistake. What did power like this make her? A queen or a femme fatale?

The ground rumbled. Sara shifted and leaned against the door with her side, still straining to hear what was being said. When the tremor passed, Danielle asked anxiously, “What do you think is causing the earthquakes, Bishop?”

“Obviously not Sara stepping out with my father.”

“We’re sorry, Cameron.” Russ sounded truly contrite. Others murmured their apologies also.

“Russ and Brent,” Cameron said, “I’d like a few minutes with you alone. The rest of you try to get some sleep.”

Sara went back to the bed and dropped herself onto it, stretching as she did. What in the galaxy was causing these nighttime earthquakes? She was too exhausted to attack the problem in any kind of rational way. At least the tremors weren’t severe. It was almost as if the planet merely wanted to warn the colony something was wrong, not do real damage.

The bedroom door opened and Cameron came in. He knelt down next to the bed and smoothed the hair out of her face.

Sara asked immediately, “Do you think I need to be more guarded?”

Cameron smiled in that sad way he had. “I hoped you were listening.”

“Well?”

“With my father and other men, yes. Absolutely. With me, never. Never ever! I love the way you are.” Cameron kissed her. “I have a couple of counselors to set straight, and then I’m going to go for a walk. Don’t wait up for me.”

Cameron's face was so grave in the moonlight coming through the window, his eyes so glassy, that Sara knew immediately what he suspected. Sadness nearly suffocated her. "It's your mother, isn't it?"

Cameron pressed his fingers against Sara's lips. "We can't discuss this."

Cameron kissed her again, then stood up and left. Sara watched him go, visions of Barbara alone in bed, finally releasing her grief in noiseless weeping, thinking no one would know or care. What could Cameron possibly do about it? Did he plan to go to her door, or maybe to her window? Or did he think he would walk right into her room uninvited? Was it even right for him to invade her privacy that way, despite the fact that the earthquakes posed a threat to the colony?

Sara's throat burned and tears dribbled onto her pillow. The events of the day pounded through her mind over and over again, and as hard as she tried, she couldn't refrain from putting herself in Barbara's place. Had Cameron announced that he was in love with another woman, Sara would be devastated, humiliated, and furious. How would the grief be compounded had she been married to Cameron as long as Barbara had been married to Ben?

Eventually Sara heard male voices outside the house. Once they faded, she sobbed, making the noise Barbara, with her lack of complete solitude, would never allow herself to make. Weeping for Barbara made Sara feel heartbroken and ashamed for the contribution she had made to Barbara's unhappiness.

Sara *wanted* to wish she had never met Ben Carroll, but couldn't. She couldn't imagine life without him any more than she could imagine life without Cameron, and that realization made her feel worse than ever.

Chapter 33: TEMPEST

Sara dragged herself to breakfast with Cameron the next morning. No one in the colony seemed to have slept the night before. Even Barbara, with her perfectly pressed cotton dress and immaculate hair, looked pale and drained. Her eyes weren't red and puffy, though, and Sara couldn't help but wonder how she managed to look so elegant and unperturbed. Sara's own eyelids were swollen and red spots had appeared on her face.

"The synthesizing machines look as if they've been bolted to the walls and to the tables," Ashley observed. "I wonder why."

"Didn't you feel the earthquakes last night?" Sara said as she punched in her selection.

"There were earthquakes last night?" Brandon said in surprise, removing his tray of food from a synthesizing machine.

Erica Rice nodded. "Half the colony was here. Your father had Brother Dixon and his team bolt all of the synthesizing machines to the walls and floors."

"What caused them?" Ashley asked.

"No one knows," Samantha said, removing her tray. She, Ashley, and Brandon followed Sara and Cameron to the Carroll tables, speculating on possible causes of the earthquakes.

Once most of the colonists had seated themselves with their trays of food, Ben arrived with Trevor and Cyndi and their family. He appeared as calm and as elegant as Barbara did, even though Sara was certain Ben, in his anxiety for the colony and turmoil of spirit, hadn't slept at all.

After breakfast, the colonists trudged to Ash Auditorium for church, and the remainder of the day passed in a quiet way. Late Sunday night, however, the earthquakes began again. On Monday morning, only half the colonists showed up for breakfast at the usual time. To those who were there, Ben announced, "Control Colony still isn't answering our transmissions, nor have the engineers arrived to repair the synthesizing machine. I'm afraid something is seriously wrong."

"Have you made contact with any of the other colonies?" Cameron asked.

"Only two, Third and Fourteenth. They're having the same problems we are—inexplicable storms and earthquakes. They, too, have been unable to contact Control Colony and have begged us to investigate. Since lightning destroyed both primary synthesizing machines before vehicles could be constructed, they're stranded."

"Who are you taking with you?" Trevor asked.

Ben turned to Barbara with a kind smile. "Barbara, if she thinks she can bear a few days alone with me."

Everyone looked at Barbara for her answer. Her expression remained unreadable. "I would rather stay here."

"Please, Barbara," Ben said softly. "I'll be your captive. You can berate me all you want, and no one will ever know."

"Just no screaming and yelling," Trevor said pleasantly. "We want you to make it back safely."

Barbara stood up and walked with icy dignity out the door, passing Ben without a glance in his direction. Cameron followed her.

Once Barbara and Cameron were gone, Ben said with a sigh, turning to the Vances, "Duane, I guess you're going with me." Brother Vance nodded. "Rachel, I trust you'll have a constitution ready for colony ratification when I return. Trevor, we may never see an engineer from Control Colony. It's up to you and your team to get the primary machine working again."

Ben gave instructions to several others as he moved toward the synthesizing machines. He removed a sandwich and headed back out the door.

An earthquake suddenly shook the building. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked helplessly around at each other. Sara suspected Cameron had tried to encourage his mother to talk and that she had insisted she was fine. What was Cameron going to do?

The earthquake ended a few seconds later, and speculations flew. "How do we know the planet isn't just nuts?" Tony said.

"Maybe it hates humans," Adam said, "and is trying to scare us away."

"Maybe it's just unstable and the earthquakes mean nothing at all."

The speculating continued as the colonists began separating for the work of the day. Thankfully, no one accused Sara of unseemly behavior this time. Cyndi walked with Sara to the decomposer and dropped her utensils into the tank. "Are you feeling all right?"

Sara shrugged. "Well enough."

"Why don't you go back to bed?"

"I couldn't do that! There's too much to do."

"You look exhausted."

"It's been a rough couple of nights for everyone. I'm no more exhausted than anyone else is."

Cyndi smiled knowingly. "Not many of the others have your excuse."

"Everything that happened Saturday did get to me," Sara admitted. "My emotions have been really brittle. I've never been this sensitive about things."

Cyndi's smile broadened. "You're pregnant, remember?"

Understanding illuminated Sara's mind. "I'm pregnant."

Cyndi nodded. "You're supposed to be tired and emotional."

"But I'm a Novaunian. It should be different for me."

Cyndi held the dining hall door open for Sara. "And it is. Your body chemistry is changing far more rapidly than an Earth woman's would."

Sara nodded as she jogged down the stairs, feeling ridiculous. She should have suspected. "My hCG level *is* abnormally high."

"What else do you know about your reproductive system?"

"Not much."

"I'll keep you company on your way home, and you can tell me what you know."

As they walked, Sara told Cyndi the things her father had told her and then described how her mother had come to her in a dream to give her more explicit details. Cyndi listened, enthralled. "As you were maturing, how could you not know your cycle was different? Or did your parents never allow you to attend the customary health classes in school?"

"My cycle isn't that different. I menstruate every four weeks on the dot; I even know what time it will start. It lasts for one day, and it's gone."

Cyndi's eyebrows rose in amazement. "And I'll bet you know what time it will stop."

Sara nodded. "I knew I was a little strange, but I always attributed it to having a perfectly healthy body."

"I'm sorry, Sara, but it seems criminal to me that your father didn't reveal your racial heritage to you sooner. Why do you think he waited so long? And why didn't he give you the 'explicit details' himself?"

Sara smiled. "You obviously don't know my father!"

"I'm surprised you aren't annoyed with him."

Sara shrugged. "My father's probably been meaning to tell me everything for years. I don't doubt he had a dozen reasons for doing so and a dozen reasons for waiting. I'm sure the alternatives fought inside of his big brain and paralyzed him, so in the end, he did nothing until I backed him into a corner. That's Dad. Besides. He couldn't have told me everything my mother did. Some of it simply couldn't be vocalized, and Dad hasn't been able to use telepathy since the Zarrists came."

As Sara opened the door to her house, Cyndi said, "You may be of a fertile and resilient race, Sara, but you're still a mortal woman. Don't push yourself too hard. If you pay attention, you'll understand soon enough what you can handle."

"And what I can't. I really don't want to turn into a witch, Cyndi."

Cyndi followed Sara into the house. "The best way to keep yourself from becoming a witch is to get plenty of sleep!" She waved toward Sara's bedroom. "Good night!"

Sara did as Cyndi suggested and went into her room. She dropped herself onto her bed and lay down, kicking off her boots. "Good night," she said wearily.

Cyndi's face became serious. "After you wake up, when your mind is fresh, you should use your father's arelada and make contact with the planet-spirit. Here. Alone. Where you can relax and not have to perform for the colony."

Sara picked at the yarn on her quilt, feeling troubled. "You think Control Colony's dead, then?"

"I think it's a good possibility."

* * *

Sara did sleep, and when she awoke several hours later, she decided to take Cyndi's advice and try to make contact with the planet-spirit. Feeling invigorated, she brushed her hair, then jogged around her house and into the little clearing where she and Cameron had hidden the box of arelada. She sat down on the tender grass and pulled her mother's arelada pendant from under her shirt and held it in her hand, hoping that being outdoors would help her feel a connection to the planet and make it easier.

Hearing leaves rustling nearby, she turned and saw Cameron approaching, his hair white in the sun. Seeing the tray of sandwiches, fruit, and water in his hands, her stomach growled.

Cameron carefully sat down and laid the tray on the grass in the shade of the sassafras tree. "Were you able to make contact with the planet-spirit?"

Sara shook her head. "There wasn't time."

"When you're ready to try again, I can help you." Cameron handed Sara a sandwich half.

Sara's stomach growled again as she smelled the ham, cheese, lettuce and pickles in her sandwich. She bit into it, nodding. After she had swallowed what was in her mouth, she said, "Together we should be stronger. Hopefully it won't take too long."

They ate and talked, and when the time came to try communicating with the planet-spirit, Cameron went to the house to get his arelada necklace. When he returned to the clearing, Sara suddenly felt his essence enfold her. She reached her spirit out to him and felt him melt into her and her into him, their thoughts, emotions, and sensations merging. When they both felt ready, they flowed into the ground, probing for foreign emotion. Fury, frustration, and, oddly enough, loneliness sprang forth and grabbed them. Sara was surprised by how easy it was to make contact.

Feeling as if she and Cameron would be swallowed, Sara, in terror, tried to withdraw. Eden's spirit clung to them, though, a feeling of urgency coloring the fury.

It wants to communicate, Cameron thought in surprise.

She *wants to communicate*, Sara corrected. She didn't know how she knew Eden was female, but she did. The realization that Eden wanted to communicate gave Sara courage. Pulling Cameron's spirit along with hers, she dove into the fury, attempting to open her Awareness even further.

As Sara spread herself into Eden's spirit, the fury became understandable, even inevitable. Of course Eden hated the colonists; the colonists were lice. Lice had invaded Sara's hair in sixth grade, so she knew what Eden was feeling. Sara remembered the unbearable itching, the smelly pesticide shampoo, and the sores on her scalp. The harder the bugs bit, the more she had scratched. Her mother had combed debris out of her hair, and then she had spent hours under the fluorescent light in the kitchen scraping the nits off of the hair shafts with tweezers. Then had come the vacuuming, and the sterilizing of brushes and combs, and the second application of pesticide shampoo. Combing and combing, scraping and scraping. Sara had been so frustrated that she had almost asked her mother to shave her head. Anything to get rid of those indestructible bugs!

The frustration pressing down on Sara shocked her by forming words she could understand: *Mortals are filthy creatures. They commit whoredoms, they intoxicate themselves, they fight, they blaspheme, and they lie and try to bridle me.*

Mortals had tried to bridle Eden's spirit? Sara's father had said that a planet-spirit that refused to be "bridled" was dangerous and therefore left alone. Now she wished that she had asked him what he meant. *Not all mortals do those things. Not all are filthy.*

Those who are not filthy are stupid. All but you, Stormy-Empath-Mortal, and your husband, Bishop-Mortal.

The other mortals aren't stupid, Sara replied.

They simply don't understand, Cameron communicated, finishing Sara's thought. *You need to give them time.*

They aren't used to thinking of a planet as an intelligent being with opinions that must be respected.

Eden's fury and frustration cooled. She felt almost rational. *I will give them time. A little time. You must teach them, Stormy-Empath-Mortal, and be their ruler.*

Panic surged through Sara, interlaced by Cameron's astonishment. *Their ruler? What do you mean?*

I appoint you as the leader of the mortals.

But Ben Carroll is the leader of the group of mortals I live with, Sara protested. *He's made some mistakes, but he's a very good leader.*

Eden's frustration began rising again. *Wounded-Mortal-Who-Thinks-He's-In-Charge does not rule you; you rule him.*

Ben Carroll has taken some of my advice. That doesn't mean I rule him.

Eden's tone of thought was insistent. *You are clear, awake, and guileless. He is full of shadows, weary, and weak. You will take his place.*

But my husband is a bishop, a very busy man, and I'm pregnant with twins! I can't be the governor! And what in the galaxy was she going to do about being Primary president? How could she possibly manage this new responsibility?

Let me be the leader, Cameron communicated.

Sara knew Cameron was trying to protect her, but she didn't think it would be any less stressful to their marriage for Cameron to take the job as governor than it would be for her to take it. The job of governor belonged to Ben Carroll and that was that.

Tempest refused to consider Cameron's suggestion. *You are not the telepathic communicator and empath, Bishop-Mortal.*

I can learn. Cameron *did* believe it would be less stressful to their marriage if he became the governor. He would not be bearing and breast-feeding thirty babies. Not only that, but the thought of Sara working so closely with his father, who would logically continue to manage the colony under her leadership, filled Cameron with dread.

Tempest's spirit swelled with anger and fear. *You are a man.*

I am not the man you fear.

I am Tempest! The planet persisted, her tone of thought becoming frenetic. *She is Stormy-Empath-Mortal, a compatible spirit! She comprehends me, and I comprehend her! I will not tolerate any other leader!*

We have no choice, Cameron, Sara thought in resignation.

The colonists will eat us alive!

Then I will eat them! Tempest proclaimed.

No! You can't do that! Sara communicated. *He didn't mean it literally. He meant that the other humans will be angry with us when we tell them what you want. Many of them won't accept my leadership.*

Bring them to me with their thoughts, and I will explain my demands.

I don't know how to join their thoughts with yours. I'm just beginning to learn how to communicate telepathically.

You must act as a channel, Stormy-Empath-Mortal. The images of what needed to be done flowed into Sara and Cameron's minds.

Sara's first thought was that it would probably take a month of practice to be able to do what Tempest wanted. Her second thought was that the colonists would never agree to communicate with her that way, much less with Tempest.

I will help you practice, Stormy-Empath-Mortal. It would please me to communicate with you.

It wanted to be friends! That was too weird. *Some of them may refuse to join their thoughts with mine. And yours.*

The mortals who do not accept your leadership will die.

Just when Sara was certain she was communicating with a giant homicidal maniac and wondering how Tempest could believe they were spiritually compatible, she remembered the lice. The other colonists had no idea how close they were to becoming hair debris. *What other mortals have you killed? What did you do to Control Colony?*

Zarr-Mortals touched my spirit with their machines in an attempt to rearrange life on my face. When I resisted, they tried to constrain me. Fury rose in Tempest again. *Mortals will not command me! I will not be bridled! I buried the Zarr-Mortals deep in the sea.*

Horror submerged Sara. *And the other colonies?*

Earth-Mortals are whoremongers and liars, who fight amongst themselves and profane the Lord's name. They contaminate me. Some I swallowed. Others I covered with snow or rocks. The rest I destroyed with electricity.

Tempest showed images of the destruction to Sara. The island where Control Colony had established its base had, indeed, fallen into the sea, and most of the other colonies had experienced severe storms, earthquakes, avalanches, and fires. As terrible as this scene was, however, Sara could see that most of the colonies had a few survivors. The two colonies Ben had communicated with earlier in the day had fared about as well as Eleventh Colony had.

Please don't kill anyone else, Sara begged. Give me time to gather the other humans to this place.

I will try to be patient, Governor-Mortal.

Please address me as Governor Carroll, Tempest, and my husband as Bishop Carroll. And you must stop the earthquakes in our colony. They're upsetting everyone and causing arguments.

Tempest didn't understand. *Wounded-Mortal-Who-Hides-Behind-Lies makes you angry too, Governor Carroll.*

This is true, but I'm trying not to be angry.

My mother is very hurt, Tempest. She needs to grieve.

Her lies torment me. You must stop them, Bishop Carroll.

Tempest's commission troubled Cameron. He had no idea how to get his mother to be honest about her feelings. He was struggling against years of illusion and its underlying pain. Barbara wasn't going to let go of it without a fight. Cameron was concerned that forced public revelation might unhinge her mentally. *I'm doing the best I can, Tempest. I want my mother to stop her lies as much as you do.*

Cameron's response didn't satisfy Tempest. Sara added: *He'll explain your request to her. I'm sure she'll do what she has to do to stop the earthquakes.* Barbara would probably force herself to stop weeping when she was alone also. Sara couldn't bear the thought of Barbara in pain and unable to display her grief in any way, but at least the colony would be safe.

Cameron agreed that his mother would choose to restrain all of her emotion rather than reveal herself publicly. The realization pained him as much as it did Sara, but he knew as well as she did that his mother would be more comfortable with that arrangement. *Governor Carroll and I will contact my father now, and then I will find my mother and insist she talk to me alone. Will that be enough to stop the earthquakes?*

For the present. Tempest withdrew her spirit, leaving Sara and Cameron in privacy.

Sara turned to the side and rested her arm on Cameron's chest, her hand shaking and her head spinning. *What in the galaxy are we going to do?*

Cameron sat up, bringing Sara up with him. He dropped the arelada pendant beneath his shirt. *Whatever it takes to keep from becoming hair debris.*

Chapter 34: ALIVE UNDER THE LIGHT

Outrage, mingled with mortification, squeezed Tohmazz Zarr's heart as his aircar lurched to avoid being hit by a piece of his fleet. The aircar lurched again, violently, then vaporized a large bulkhead falling in its direct path.

We should return to Teton Colony, Father, and wait for Jahnzel, Arulezz communicated, gripping his black leather seat with one hand and the wine-red wall with the other. *The airways will be safer in a day or two.*

Mention of Jahnzel filled Zarr with fury. On the brink of annihilation, Jahnzel's flagship and three other warships had been forced to separate and retreat into the narrowest, deepest canyons of Earth, leaving the planet naked to enemy attack. *Three years we spent rebuilding our fleet into a force to be feared by the largest of the rival nations! Three years we spent turning these Earth savages into space warriors! And now it's gone. Destroyed because those infidels Nexyun and Jaxzeran conspired against me!*

They will pay, Arulezz declared.

I will see what damage they have done to my city, and then I will close my fists around these Earthons and wield them like clubs.

And what of the Nationalists, sir?

Our empire is in ruins. Our goal for the time being must be to keep our followers from running to the communities of the Nationalists for refuge.

We need to get spies into the Guardian communities to learn the secret of their new light technology.

Then we need to recruit something other than cowards! His own people had run from the satanic light along with the savages!

Send Myri Vahro, sir. She is brave and faithful. With the help of God, she will bring the Mormon David Pierce to you, along with other Nationalists and the secret of the mystery light.

Zarr gazed out the window at the green-dotted brown flatlands below. Arulezz was right. The survival of their race required Jahnzel and Myri to give each other up for Earthon mates, yet as desperate as the situation was, he didn't think he could take that sweet girl from his son and marry her to a savage, even a virtuous savage like David Pierce.

Father, look!

Zarr leaned toward his son 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,* Zarr commanded his driver.

As their aircar came closer to the light, Arulezz gasped. *It's completely untouched!*

Zarr couldn't believe it. The Mormon community stood clean and intact under the light while the rest of the greater Kansas City area lay filthy and crumbled amidst the fire and smoke. *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.

For the first time in three years, fear of the Nationalists crept into Zarr's consciousness. *Then we will crush them.*

Arulezz turned abruptly away from the window, the spirit crystal pendant he wore around his neck tapping against the gold buttons on his gray suit jacket. *But we need them, Father! We need their brilliance and passion. And we need their genes, their blood, and their fertility.*

Zarr shook his head. Finally he was seeing the situation clearly. *The Nationalists are our enemies. If we try to assimilate any of them, they will destroy us from within.*

Arulezz turned back to the window and didn't respond. Zarr watched his son thoughtfully. With his short black hair and American-style suit, he almost looked like an Earthon. The spirit crystal hanging from his neck and the purple brocade sash tied around his waist were, in fact, the only things he still wore that displayed his race and rank. Part of Zarr worried that his son had become too much an Earthon and that his people would lose too much of their racial identity under his reign. Another part of Zarr, however, praised God that He had sent him an heir not only capable of saving their people through assimilation, but willing.

The aircar lurched again, then dove to the side. Within minutes it descended rapidly and rested on the ground in what had been a Tryamazs park. Zarr'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 Zarr's nostrils, and ashes whirled around his head. Dust from rock and building board stretched in front of his feet, and charred heaps of debris surrounded him. Nexyun and Jaxzeran's fleets hadn't been content to merely vaporize Tryamazs; they had done their best to mutilate it. His beautiful city lay in rubble, and the Mormon city survived under the strange light.

Zarr seized the spirit crystal dangling over his heart, his outrage and mortification erupting through his Awareness and into the web of bonds extending from his mind: *Kill Mormons! Destroy the Nationalists! Gather to Zarr, your Divine Emperor!*

* * *

Teri spent all day Friday on the telephone, trying to reach her parents or any of her brothers, especially David, but the lines and airwaves were dead or jammed.

Finally, on Saturday morning, she gave up and slammed the cell phone down on the table in frustration, supporting her head with her hand. She shook her head quickly. "Sunday I told David to get out of Annapolis, but he wouldn't listen to me!"

"Of course he didn't," Trendaul said gently, running his fingers into her hair. "That would have been desertion. David would never abandon his brigade, especially at a time like this."

Teri leaned her head against Trendaul's waist. "I can't stand this."

"Why don't you and the kids start packing? It'll give you something to do."

"Maybe you're right. What should we take?"

"Daypacks with several changes of clothing and a few emergency supplies."

"That's not much."

"We won't have much room. You can take a few small mementos, but leave all of the photos and genealogy. And music. It's all right here." Trendaul pointed to his head.

Teri smiled a little, finally, as she stood up. "Of course."

"Mom, Dad, listen!" Josh called from the living room.

Trendaul turned and watched his son rotate the volume knob on the portable radio. The sound crackled, then cleared, and the voices of two news reporters sounded in the room. A local station was back on the air!

"Finally!" Teri exclaimed, lunging toward the radio. The rest of the family gathered into the living room and listened as the newscasters detailed the destruction in the Baltimore-Washington area. One was in a helicopter and the other was in a station based in D.C.

Andrews Air Force Base and the Prince George's County spaceport had been destroyed. The Baltimore-Washington corridor had been so severely damaged that Interstate 95 and all of the other highways running parallel to it were impassable by automobile. The Washington, D.C. suburbs in Northern Virginia and Prince George's County, Maryland had been reduced to

rumble. Baltimore, Columbia, and Annapolis were on fire. Southern Montgomery County and most of Washington, D.C. were still covered by a bright force field of light.

"We may be alive under the Light," the newscaster from the helicopter said, "but we aren't safe yet. Survivors on the outside are angry and desperate. They are gathering on the borders of the Light in mobs. One of the largest mobs is gathered just outside the Light on Randolph Road. Some of the people are throwing rocks into the Light at the Mormon church building there."

"Why are they targeting the Mormons?" asked the newscaster from the station, baffled.

"I don't know. Our community is made up of people from all types of religious backgrounds, and there are many places of worship in this district. It makes no sense that these people would single out the Mormons."

"Oh, it makes perfect sense," Teri said, her voice low with horror.

Trendaul, Gavaun, Sharad, and Josh turned away from the radio and directed their attention to Teri.

Teri's face was a queer combination of triumph and sorrow. "Tohmazz Zarr must have come out of wherever he was hiding and seen his beautiful new city in Missouri in ruins, and then he saw the Kansas City Temple Community alive under the Light. People of many different religions may be living there, but it was established by the Church and Zarr knows it."

"Of course . . ." Josh said under his breath.

Terrible realization seized Trendaul's heart. "So now Zarr's taking out his rage towards the Church through the mind bond."

No one could speak for the horror. The seconds passed, and Trendaul again became aware of the radio newscaster. ". . . are pulling people out of their homes and beating them. With sticks and rocks and bats. Montgomery County police officers from inside of the Light are going to the rescue, but there aren't enough of them." The newscaster's voice grew in dismay with every observation. "It appears several police officers have already been beaten to the ground."

"Are any of the survivors venturing into the Light?"

"They don't appear to be yet. But police backup is coming. We're descending on the mob in an attempt to break it up. A few are running, but not enough. There is nothing else we can do for now."

"It is a good thing you left your other house when you did," Gavaun said to Trendaul.

The mere thought of how narrow their escape had been made Trendaul sweat. "We would have left months ago had you gotten here sooner!"

"We would not have been much help to you had we been vaporized by one of Zarr's warships," Gavaun reminded in a calm voice.

"I know . . . I know . . . It's just that what's happening is so awful. So unbelievable."

"Who are the people who are being pulled out of their homes, brother?" Sharad asked.

Trendaul's voice lowered to a whisper. "We know many people who didn't want to consecrate their goods to the Church but did want the fellowship of the temple community. Some of them moved to homes inside the borders; others moved as close as they could manage. I understand there were also some who owned homes close to the border and didn't believe they needed to sell."

Teri's lips trembled. "They're idiots. You would think they would have been wise enough to come into the Light when it appeared!"

Trendaul knew that Teri wasn't talking about the border Mormons at all, but David. He didn't want to upset her any more than she already was, but he was tired of hearing her second-

guess David's decision to remain in Annapolis. "David isn't an idiot. Nor is he a coward. And only a coward would abandon his unit at a time of trouble."

"Amen!" Gavaun and Sharad said simultaneously.

Teri folded her arms, then unfolded them and scratched the couch cushion, then folded her arms again and crossed her legs. "What's going to happen to him, Tren?"

Trendaul shook his head slowly, taking her into his arms. "I don't know."

Teri rested her head under Trendaul's chin. "How in the world is he going to get back here? It's over thirty miles to Annapolis, and if I-95 is gone, Highway 50 probably is too."

"There are other ways," Trendaul said.

"Other ways! The back ways north cross the B-W corridor, and the back ways south go too close to the demolished spaceport!"

Trendaul kissed Teri's forehead. "There *are* other ways. All-terrain trucks. Helicopters. Boats. The Naval Academy sits on the Severn River, remember? Right on the Bay." Trendaul tried to keep his voice steady in an attempt to mask his fear. David had received too much publicity; too many people would recognize him as the Mormon brigade commander. He was in serious trouble and there wasn't a thing they could do for him but pray.

Teri nodded quickly. "Yes, of course. Boats."

Gavaun and Sharad looked at each other in a meaningful way. A moment later, Gavaun focused on Trendaul. "It would be too dangerous to take your family out of here in an automobile. Sharad and I will bring the frigate to you."

Trendaul nodded. "You had better leave now before Zarr shows up to investigate his D.C. spaceport. He may have armed his aircars. An aircar might not be capable of destroying a frigate, but I'll bet it could give it a good sting."

"Is your spaceship armed, Uncle Gavaun?" asked Emily.

Sharad stood up and moved toward the stairs, grinning. "Does a bird have wings?"

Gavaun jumped up and followed Sharad, chuckling with satisfaction. "I have enough firepower to put a meter-wide hole in the hull of any spacecraft that sets its sights on me. I could *vaporize* an aircar."

A few minutes later, Gavaun and Sharad reappeared on the stairs with their shoulder bags. Gavaun unfolded a map and laid it on the table. "Do you have any suggestions, Trendaul?"

Trendaul and Teri both moved to the table, but Teri was the one who leaned over the map and traced Interstate 495 to I-270 to I-70 in Frederick. Her hands and voice regained their customary calm as she forced herself to think of something other than David. "495 is part of the temple community all the way to the American Legion Bridge, so it should be okay. Since the Virginia suburbs are toast, though, 66 is out. The radio said nothing about problems on 270, so it's probably all right. If not, you might be able to detour on 355. When you get to Frederick, get on 70 and take it to Hagerstown and get on 81. That will take you right into Virginia."

"That sounds easy enough," Sharad said as he folded the map.

Teri looked up at Aaron. "Why don't you go get the gasoline can we use for the mower and put it into the back of their truck. That way they'll have extra fuel in case they're forced to take a detour." Aaron nodded and hurried to the door to the garage.

As Sharad slipped the map into an outside pocket on his bag, Gavaun reached into his own bag and pulled out a pistol and a laser communicator. He presented the items to Trendaul. "You may need these. We will keep in touch."

Trendaul accepted the communicator gratefully and tucked it into his shirt pocket. He waved his hand at Gavaun, refusing the pistol. "You'll need that more than I will."

"Do you even know how to use one of those guns, Dad?" Josh asked in disbelief.

Trendaul gave Josh his best “you’re an idiot” look and left it at that. Sharad quickly explained, chuckling, “In Novaunian Fleet, Josh, even librarians are required to learn how to use laser pistols.”

Gavaun slapped Trendaul’s back. “That was twenty years ago, though, and now my brother is a pacifist!”

Trendaul smiled. “I think I’ll buy a house in Mautysia and change my name to Jualaz.”

Sharad exploded with laughter. “The Mautysians would not want you! You are a Fleet murderer and an Earthon savage, so they would probably think you are doubly corrupt!”

“And a spy for the Fleet to boot. Sounds like fun!”

Gavaun rolled his eyes at Trendaul as he walked to the front door. “You are insane.” He stopped and turned soberly toward Teri. “I cannot make promises, but with the frigate, Sharad and I may be able to help David get to safety.”

Hope lit Teri’s face. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Gavaun wagged a finger at the communicator in Trendaul’s pocket. “Just keep us informed.”

Trendaul saluted Gavaun by brushing his fingertips over an imaginary piece of arelada on his forehead and then sweeping his palm toward him and bowing his head slightly as if he were tipping a hat. “Bring back Paradise, Major Avenaunta.”

Gavaun returned the salute, wearing an affectionate little smile. “Guard Novaun’s knowledge well, *Minon* Librarian.”

When Gavaun and Sharad were gone, Emily asked, “What does the word ‘minon’ mean, Dad?”

“Brother in humanity.”

Josh gazed at Trendaul thoughtfully. “Is that what Mr. Sharad means to say when he calls you ‘brother’?”

Trendaul nodded. “It’s a respectful, friendly form of address without being too familiar. *Minon* Librarian is my official title both among civilians and in the Fleet.”

“So we really are going to Novaun?” Josh asked.

Again, Trendaul nodded. Why did he still feel so apathetic? “And we may have to leave at a moment’s notice. All of you need to select a few of your most precious mementos to take with you, along with several changes of clothing. We need to collect everything in this room now.”

“Emily, you help Zack, and Rebecca, you help Daniel,” Teri said.

The children eagerly ran off to their bedrooms while Trendaul and Teri trudged up the stairs behind them with their portable radio. Still not convinced they were really leaving Earth for good and not attached to any of the material items he possessed, Trendaul could not muster the desire to collect any mementos and only packed a few changes of clothing.

Aside from the wedding ring Teri had given to him, he had bequeathed all of his treasures to Sara but one—the urn containing Krista’s ashes. Ordering the cremation had nearly torn Trendaul’s heart out, but he had known Krista would not want to be buried on Earth. Now that the time had come to go, he was relieved he had made the decision he had. Retrieving her body and taking it back to Novaun would have been difficult, if not impossible.

Teri easily located Krista’s urn and set it on the floor next to the shoulder bag she and Trendaul would take to Novaun. After that, she spent two hours reminiscing over every item in her memento box, knowing she would have to leave it all behind and be satisfied with only her journal, a notebook of homemade cards from the kids, and the string of pearls she had inherited

from her grandmother. By the time Teri had finished placing the items she would keep into the bag, new information came about Annapolis.

"The Naval Academy is under attack. An hour ago mobs broke through the gates and killed the guards. Many of the midshipmen, officers, and staff were able to escape on yard patrol craft, and it appears they are heading to Norfolk. The rest of the survivors have taken refuge in Bancroft Hall. National Guard units are now mustering at the D.C. Armory under the direction of the Vice President. The first companies are already on their way."

Teri turned toward Trendaul, stunned. "How could this have happened? I figured they would run into hostile people on their way to D.C., but right there in the Yard? Annapolis loves the midshipmen! How could this have happened?"

Terror shook Trendaul out of his peaceful dreams of a future on Earth with Teri and forced him to acknowledge reality for the nightmare it was. He had known the mind bonds were strong, but he had never dreamed they would compel so many Earthons to behave in such a violent way toward young people they appeared to like and respect. If citizens of the greater Annapolis area could so easily murder their beloved midshipmen, what would they do to Novaunians? Or any other race they considered their enemy?

Trendaul gazed with determination into Teri's dismayed eyes. "I have to warn my people." The peace for which he had been praying finally gushed through him, taking the edge off of his terror. He was, at last, ready to give up his futile quest to steal a piece of fruit from the Tree of Life.

Teri nodded slowly. She knew better than anyone that his many years on Earth, coupled with his marriage to her, had given him comprehension of her race unmatched by any other Novaunian. No one was in such a unique position to warn Novaunians of their danger and actually succeed in putting them on their guard.

Trendaul reached out and caressed his wife's lovely face with his finger. His time with her would be so brief. In a few years she would be gone, and his Novaunian genes would force him to go on another century without her. How could he do it? How could he not? "My beautiful Earthon . . . do you have any idea how much I love you?"

She smiled a little and nodded. "I love you too . . . my awesome alien."

Trendaul lowered his hand. "We'd better get going."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "To Novaun? Now? How?"

"No. To the D.C. Armory. Let's round up the kids."

Chapter 35: DAZZLED

Sara wanted to put off telling Ben and the others about Tempest's demands as long as possible and was, therefore, relieved when Ben and Brother Vance decided to continue their journey to Control Colony, despite Cameron's plea that they return. They wanted to see for themselves that the colony was gone and planned to check on Eighth Colony, one of the agricultural settlements, on the way back.

Cameron spoke privately with his mother and the earthquakes stopped. The next two days passed in such peace that Sara almost convinced herself that the communication with Tempest had been nothing more than a nightmare. An underlying feeling of apprehension, however, permeated everything she did. Feeling several tremors early Wednesday morning, Sara knew that she had to prepare to present Tempest's demands to the other colonists.

Tempest had told Sara how to act as a telepathic channel between minds, but Sara could not bring herself to communicate with Tempest again and ask her to help her practice. She simply couldn't repeat that horror unless there truly was no other choice. She had to practice with someone, though, and decided to recruit Ashley. Since Ashley's mentor was Brother Vance, Ashley had plenty of free time.

Sara and Ashley practiced with Cameron three times a day—morning, noon, and evening. Along with the exercises her father had told her to use, Sara touched her spirit to Cameron's and attempted to relay Cameron's thoughts to Ashley. The technique was as difficult as Sara had anticipated, but she persevered, knowing that it was the only way she could convince the other colonists that their survival was contingent on her becoming the governor of the colony.

Between practice sessions, Sara ate and slept, having little contact with the colonists. She had no desire to hear any more disgusting speculations, and she worried that the others would grill her about her telepathic abilities. Someone would suspect she had tried to contact the planet-spirit; that was inevitable. Sooner or later she would get asked about it, and she wanted to avoid that question for the time being.

More than anything, however, Sara preferred to stay completely away from Barbara, knowing that her presence could do nothing but increase Barbara's pain. As it was, Barbara's emotional state was very brittle, and she was unable to completely keep herself from weeping in private. Every now and then the ground trembled, and Sara had a feeling the quakes would be stronger and more frequent were she and Barbara forced to see each other every day.

By Friday evening, Sara could finally relay Cameron's thoughts to Ashley. Saturday morning, she practiced again and again, and although the transfer of thought was still rough, she felt confident that she and Cameron could telepathically relay Tempest's demands to the colony.

After lunch on Saturday, Sara settled into Cameron's office to look through all of the pictures and other Church materials he had brought with him, hoping to come up with an idea for a lesson she could give to the children on Sunday. A couple of hours later, just when Sara was beginning to get clear ideas about what she should present, Cameron came in, shattering her concentration.

Sara looked up at him and smiled. "Go away. I won't get anything done with you here. I won't *want* to get anything done with you here!" Spending the last week with Cameron without Ben in the way had been a huge relief. She almost hoped Ben never came back.

Cameron didn't return her smile. He moved slowly to a chair and sat down. "It doesn't matter. You don't have to teach tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"We're only having sacrament Meeting. Then after church, while everyone is gathered, my father will resign as governor."

"So you told him. How did he take it?"

"He was expecting it."

"That's hard to believe!"

"No, not really. You're the one with the arelada and the ability to use it. If the planet-spirit agreed to communicate its will through anyone, it would be you. That's the logical conclusion, and my father isn't stupid."

"No, he's nowhere near being stupid."

"He thinks you'll be an excellent governor."

"He does?" The thought astounded Sara.

"Of course he does! You're incredibly intelligent, courageous, and powerful, Sara. You're capable of doing anything you set your mind to do."

"Anything but be a full-time mom to our babies."

Cameron gazed solemnly into Sara's eyes. "My father gave me some new ideas. You'll have a staff to do the work of the colony, and with Tempest's vision and your own telepathic abilities, you ought to be able to keep track of everything without leaving the babies much."

"You're right." This new observation overwhelmed Sara with joy. Of course! Tempest somehow saw everything that occurred on her surface and could telepathically give this information to Sara in seconds. "Why didn't we think of that?"

"Because we were too busy worrying."

"So I'll be the galaxy's first governor who is also a full-time homemaker. How bizarre!"

"How do you know you're the first? Novaunian women may do this sort of thing all the time. We're entering new realms here. Not only that, but since no one but Tempest can throw you out of office, you can set up any type of schedule you want."

"Your father said that?"

"He did."

Sara laughed. "So he thinks I should be more of an autocrat than he ever was!"

"He just expects you to rise up and act like the queen you are. He did agree to continue as the colony's manager. For now, until we can make other arrangements, I'll be your assistant and liaison between the two of you."

Happiness warmed Sara. "He's giving us advice, Cameron. Good advice. Your father is actually starting to act like a father!"

"What a relief!"

"No kidding!"

"How would you like to go out with me tonight and dance off some of your tension?"

"Go dancing?"

Cameron nodded. "Ashley, Mother, and Samantha are in the middle of planning a wedding party for us and the couple I'm going to marry this evening."

"Who in the galaxy is getting married tonight?"

"One of the couples my father and Brother Vance brought back with them from Eighth Colony. They've been living together for more than a year. Father explained the situation and told them they would have to live apart until they were married, and they decided they would prefer to be married right away. Actually, they *demand*ed to be married today. After what happened to their colony—it was destroyed by tornadoes—they said they wouldn't spend even one night apart. If the other two decide to get married, they would rather wait to have Reverend Becker from Third Colony perform the ceremony."

Third Colony was an experiment in religious integration and, along with Reverend Becker, had a priest, a rabbi, and even a Zen Buddhist master. The colonists of Third Colony had come to Eden knowing they would have to work particularly hard to get along, so perhaps it was no surprise their colony was one of the three that had not been destroyed. "When did your father get back?"

"A couple of hours ago."

"Their colony is dead, and they want to have a party?"

"They only want to be married. My father wants to give them a real wedding, and not just a quick formality to get out of the way as soon as possible. The party is his way of making them feel welcome in the colony."

"That makes sense, I guess."

"They were more open to the idea of a wedding celebration once they learned we had just been married and hadn't had a party yet."

"But we did have a party. Sort of."

"No we didn't, not really, and I think a lot of people feel bad about that."

"Still, Cameron, a dance? It sounds a little *too* festive."

"That came about because of Ashley. She said a wedding party for you and me must include a dance. Period. She didn't care who had died, and she claimed you and I wouldn't care one iota who had died either once the music started playing."

"That does sound like Ashley. And she's probably right."

Cameron's mouth twitched, as if he were trying not to laugh. "The new bride and groom like to dance too. As for the wedding ceremony, they've never been able to decide whether they will be married by a priest or a rabbi and now figure a Mormon bishop is a reasonable compromise."

"Your first wedding, and you're marrying a Catholic to a Jew?" Cameron nodded, unable to restrain his laughter any longer. Sara laughed herself into hysterics.

* * *

Sara and Cameron met the rest of the colony in Center Park later that afternoon for the wedding. Cameron introduced Sara to the bride and groom right away. Brian, dark-skinned and big, was wearing Tony's gray suit, his shoulder-length, tiny black braids pulled back into a hair elastic, and Deb was wearing Barbara's cream-colored lace dress, her straight brown hair loose around her face. They were earthy and talkative, and Sara liked them immediately.

"Have either one of you been to a Mormon wedding before?" Sara asked. They shook their heads. "That's good. You won't know if Cameron makes a mistake!"

Brian and Deb laughed. Cameron smiled and gazed sidelong at Sara. "It's wonderful to have such a supportive wife."

"I still can't believe we're going to be married by a Mormon bishop," Deb said in an ambivalent tone. "My mother will probably haunt us."

Brian waved his hand in a dismissive way. "She'll never find us in this miserable place."

Sara had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Cameron did laugh. He squeezed Sara's waist knowingly. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather wait for the rabbi?"

Deb and Brian did go ahead with the ceremony, and when it was over, Russ took some pictures of them, and then a couple of them with Sara and Cameron, and then a few of Sara and Cameron with Cameron's family. Considering the mess Cameron's family was in at the

moment, Sara wondered what she and Cameron would recall when they looked at these photographs in future years. Would they remember their wedding as the catalyst that dissolved Cameron's family for good or put it on the road to healing?

While the brides and grooms were posing for photographs, the rest of the colony headed to the dining hall for dinner. When Sara and Cameron and the others finally arrived, everyone cheered. Sara looked around the room in awe. Garlands of flowers were draped along the ceiling, and the tables had been moved to the perimeter of the large room and were covered with the same white tablecloths that had been on them the morning of the wedding breakfast that had turned into an impeachment. New vases had been synthesized and stood on the tables, each holding a bouquet of roses and lilacs. "Cameron, it's so beautiful!" Cameron murmured his agreement.

"It is beautiful," Deb whispered, her voice quavering. "It feels like a real wedding."

"That was the idea," Ben said, smiling.

Deb looked over her shoulder and smiled at Ben. "Thanks, Governor Carroll."

"Don't thank me. Thank my wife. She was the brain behind this miracle." Ben reached for a vase and removed a red rose. He handed it to Barbara, smiling tenderly. "It is beautiful, Barbara, like you. As always, your taste is exquisite."

Sara watched the exchange with interest. Certainly Barbara wouldn't snub Ben after such a sweet compliment. She didn't. She frowned, ever so slightly, then nodded once, the corner of her mouth lifting a little. She took the rose and averted her eyes, allowing Brandon and Adam to lead her to a table. Sara exhaled and relaxed. Barbara was softening. Everything would be fine. She sat down at a table with Cameron, Deb, and Brian, feeling more light-hearted than she had in days.

The colonists talked amongst themselves as they ate, but with the destruction of Control Colony and Eighth Colony, the mood was subdued, not joyous in the usual wedding way. The atmosphere of the party picked up, however, when Sara and Cameron began dancing. Ashley had been right, of course. Once the music started, neither Sara nor Cameron could resist it.

They started with swing and were awkward together at first, but they quickly got the hang of it and began trying difficult acrobatic moves they had both longed to do for years but couldn't since they had never found partners with quickness, strength, and flexibility to match their own. Sara was glad she had put on a spandex bodysuit under her most casual knit dress and had brought athletic shoes to change into. She could never dance in the silk dresses and high-heeled shoes Barbara and Ashley wore.

Cameron's aggressive, athletic style thrilled Sara even more than she had thought it would, and her vigor increased as the evening progressed, electrifying everyone else on the dance floor, especially Cameron. As much as Sara loved to dance, she had never known it could be this sublime and abandoned herself to the beat, now and then hearing comments whirl around the floor with her.

"They light up the room!"

"If they run the way they dance, it's no wonder they're both champions."

"Where do they get their energy?"

"She's downright wild."

"Not a typical bishop's wife."

"He's not a typical bishop."

"They're just kids! They're *supposed* to be energetic and a little rowdy."

"He's far better for her than Dr. Carroll."

"Do you think she really does love the bishop?"

“Of course she does! Look at the dreamy way she gazes at him.”

The colonists’ observations gratified Sara. She and Cameron *were* right for each other, and it was about time that everyone else in the colony realized it!

When the music slowed, Sara held Cameron close as they floated around the room. Cameron wound a wisp of Sara’s hair around his finger. “You are even more dazzling than the first time I saw you, Sara Carroll.”

“So are you. I love you, Cameron Carroll.”

Eventually the ballad ended and a floor-pounding hip-hop began. Sara danced with more exuberance than ever, matching her moves to Cameron’s. Brian began matching his moves to theirs, and they to his. He was terrific! Before long, they were competing. Sara kept going after Cameron dropped out, and when the song ended, the colonists continued clapping the beat, getting faster and faster, yelling their support for one or the other.

Sara’s opalescent claw clip dropped to the floor and her hair fell down and flew around her face. Sara bounced and bounced, and could do no more. She stumbled and fell against Brian, gasping for breath. Cheers erupted around them. Brian grabbed Sara’s elbows and stood her back up. “Hey, girl, you’re incredible!”

Sara combed her hair out of her eyes with her fingers. “Thanks! So are you.” Sara turned her head slightly and found herself looking directly at Ben. He applauded as vigorously as anyone, the corners of his mouth curved upward, his eyes wide and clinging to her in an intense way that reminded her of Cameron.

Ben appeared enraptured, dazzled, and Sara instantly realized that he had been watching her in this engrossed way all evening. Sara felt her muscles go limp and her smile fade. She was certain her face was the color of the rose Ben had given Barbara earlier. She tried to look away, but couldn’t. Neither could he. Infuriated at herself and him, she scowled.

Ben winced a little, lifting his shoulders in a slight shrug and turning his palms toward her in an apologetic way. He mouthed the words: “You’re beautiful, and I love you. I can’t help myself.”

Sara shook her head at him and turned away, more angry than ever and feeling violated. What had she wanted? Expected? For him to be so ashamed by his feelings and behavior that he would blush, avert his eyes, and run out of the room? He loved her. A mere ten days had passed since he had last proposed to her. Of course he desired her in the way Cameron did. Ben Carroll was no awkward teenage boy who would slink away from a difficult situation; he was a man who was used to being in command—self-assured, outgoing, and bold. To deny his feelings for Sara at that moment would be to lie about who he was.

Feeling Cameron’s hand on her waist, Sara looked up at him. He handed the claw clip to her. “Are you all right?”

Sara couldn’t muster more than a whisper. “I’m tired and don’t want to dance anymore. I’d like to go home as soon as we can get away.”

Cameron nodded and put his arm around her, leading her away from Brian and the dance floor. “Let’s get something to drink.”

Sara put her arm around Cameron and leaned her head against his neck. Hoping to become invisible, she tried not to look at anyone. Barbara’s face, however, was impossible to ignore. She glared at Sara, her eyes black and boiling and her mouth a tight line.

Sara felt as if she had been thrust into a nightmare. She had assumed, had *hoped* Barbara was hurt. She had even been prepared to be the object of Barbara’s anger and jealousy. She had never dreamed, though, that Barbara hated her. Sara tried to tell herself that she was imagining

things, but Barbara's enraged stare destroyed all of the rationalizations. Barbara loathed her. Barbara detested the very sight of her. Barbara wished she had never been born.

Sara forced herself to look away, her chest aching with an expectation of disaster. Barbara should be depressed, yes. She should be indignant, furious. But she shouldn't hate her. Not in this unrestrained way. Not with such depth and passion. No. Hate like that didn't come into being in a mere week.

Sara suddenly felt as if she had been hurled against a brick wall by a turbulent power she couldn't control and then battered by an opposing force too mysterious and complex to understand. She leaned against Cameron, her body trembling and her mind fogging. "Take me home *now*."

Cameron didn't hesitate. He turned her around and walked her toward the door, stopping along the way to get his suit jacket and Sara's dress shoes. He said his good-byes to everyone, and Sara waved, trying to smile.

Sara didn't speak on the way home, needing time to think before she told Cameron what had happened. When she finally did, she was wearing her silk robe and sitting on her bed hunched over her knees, her arms hugging her calves. "If the colony decides to give us another wedding party, just shoot me!"

Cameron paced in front of their bed, his eyes appearing fierce in the moonlight. "My father had no right to do what he did to you tonight. He should have been dancing with my mother, not leering at you."

"He wasn't exactly leering, and your mother probably refused to dance with him."

"Then he should have gone back to Uncle Trevor's and taken a cold shower!"

Sara shuddered and laid her head on her knees. "I'm not sure I can ever dance again."

"Well, I won't stand for that. Next time there's a dance, I'll post guards outside the doors and windows if necessary to keep him out!"

"I still don't know if I'll be able to do it."

"I've had it with him. I hope my mother throws him out for good."

"You can't mean that!"

Cameron sat down on the bed next to Sara's legs. She heard him sigh. "I do mean it . . . for the moment."

Sara moved her chin to her knees and gazed at her hands crossed over her shins. Her mother's diamond ring glistened, reminding her of the day Barbara had placed it on her finger. "I believed your mother felt affection for me, even loved me, but it was all a lie." Why shouldn't she be surprised Barbara had deceived her? Barbara was a master of illusion, after all.

Cameron caressed Sara's leg. "She's hurt, Sara. This anger she's feeling for you now will pass."

Sara shook her head. "The hate I saw in her eyes was too comprehensive, too ingrained. It's been building for a long time, I think."

"Are you suggesting my mother's known all along that my father's in love with you?" He sounded shocked.

"Yes, I guess I am. Nothing else would explain what I saw."

"But it makes no sense."

Sara lifted her head and looked at Cameron's troubled face. "Oh, but it does. Your mother is astute and observant. For years she's been paid a lot of money to be astute and observant. Think about it. She saw before we were even introduced that we were acquainted and attracted to each other. Later, on the day of our wedding, she felt abnormally irritated with herself for not seeing years ago that you were in love with me. She also understood, better than anyone, how

upset I was the day of the wedding. Then when we told them all about Novaun, she admitted to being surprised about how young my father looks.”

Cameron nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right. I spent a week with your father, and it never occurred to me that he looks younger than he ought to.”

“Your mother has lived with your father for twenty-two years. She knows him.” Sara recalled the disturbing things Ben had told her about his marriage. “And she’s as aware as he is that their relationship isn’t what it ought to be. If you think about it, it makes no sense that she *wouldn’t* have seen it.”

“She didn’t spend any time with the two of you before we got here though, did she? How could she possibly have known?”

“She’s a journalist, Cameron! She knows how to dig for information. If she suspected your father was being unfaithful—and she undoubtedly did—she probably read his e-mails. That would have been easy. She did chat with us sometimes online from her own computer and could have also come into the chat room in the evenings using false identities. People do that all the time, and since only half of us used video, it’s a real possibility. Those of us who spent time in the chat room always had interested non-colonists stopping in to talk to us. And as far as Don Pablo’s goes, there were others who were there every Saturday night the way we were. Maybe one of them was an investigator she had hired.”

“If what you believe is true, then her determination to have you hug my father last Saturday morning was all a big show.”

Sara nodded slowly. “Except for the coldness and lack of anger, she behaved exactly as we expected her to act.” Ben had told her that Barbara was a supreme actress. “The manipulation was so subtle none of us recognized it. She knew my refusal to hug your father would make the colonists curious and that they would demand answers about my relationship with him, especially since it had happened before, at the wedding. Exposing your father’s behavior toward me to the colony was probably her way of punishing him.”

“And it also gave her a chance to kick him out of her house without sending him straight to you.”

“If you think about it, the timing was perfect.”

“Except for the fact that putting our family under such scrutiny must have been excruciating to her. It’s hard for me to believe she would do something like that intentionally.”

“The hate and rage I saw in her eyes tonight might have driven her to such a desperate action.”

“Then again, maybe you didn’t see what you thought you saw and my mother didn’t suspect a thing.”

Sara shook her head. “No, Cameron. I don’t claim to understand what exactly is truth and what exactly is illusion, but she knew. I have no doubt of it.”

“Why in the world wouldn’t my mother have just *asked* my father months ago what was going on between the two of you?”

“Maybe she did and he brushed her off. He’s an expert at that.”

Cameron gazed past Sara’s shoulder, pondering. “That almost makes sense. He may have been attracted to you a long time before he actually admitted it to himself. If he couldn’t admit it to himself, he certainly wouldn’t have admitted it to her.”

“The one thing that *doesn’t* make sense is the fact she’s here. Why didn’t she divorce your father earlier and move on with her life? What would drive her to destroy her own life just to keep your father away from me?”

“She loves him, Sara, and she believes in what he’s doing here with the Eden colony. Maybe she thought his attraction to you would blow over and was willing to wait it out.”

“That would be pathetic. A woman with any self-respect at all would have confronted him.”

“I don’t think my mother has the self-esteem she leads people to believe she does.”

“What in the galaxy do you mean?”

“Something, or a lack of something, saps her passion and drives her to build a grand and glorious house of modeling blocks instead of a real life.”

“Still, Cameron, it’s inconceivable that your mother would have such little self-respect that she would allow your father to pursue me without telling him how much it upsets her.”

“Even if she did tell him how she feels, would he believe her?”

Sara shook her head slowly. “Perhaps not.” The situation was too convoluted and sad. How in the galaxy had two people so in love with each other made such a mess of their marriage?

Cameron wrapped his arms around Sara, his head dropping to her shoulder. “How do I deal with this, Sara? What am I going to do?”

A loud pounding sounded at the front door. Cameron released Sara and stood up. “I’ll get rid of him.”

Sara lay down and pulled her mother’s denim quilt to her chin. Surprisingly enough, Cameron did return in less than a minute.

“Was it your father?”

Cameron nodded. “I told him I was too angry to talk with him now and that you need me more than he does tonight.”

“Did he apologize?”

“Profusely.” Cameron grunted. “He poisons you and tosses my family in the trash, and he’s sorry.” He shook his head and rolled his eyes.

A part of Sara was as angry and disgusted as Cameron was. A part of her pitied Ben. “He probably really is sorry.”

“I’m sure he is.” Cameron stretched out beside Sara and held her close as she drifted to sleep. Sara seemed to have only closed her eyes when she felt Tempest shake the ground in rage.

Chapter 36: FEMME FATALE

"I think it's time to contact Tempest again," Cameron whispered.

"I think you're right," Sara said groggily.

Cameron leaned over his trunk, reaching for his clothes, as Sara slid her hand under her pillow, groping for her arelada. Once she had it in her hand, she lay back down. This time she would attempt to make contact with Tempest alone. Eventually she would have to do this without Cameron. She might as well start now.

Sara became aware of herself, then melted into the ground, falling deeper and deeper into Tempest's indignation. No words charged into her mind this time, only a vision.

Ben pounded on the covering that had been lowered over one of Barbara's bedroom windows. Sara had no idea how she could see him so clearly in the dim light of the moons. "Barbara, *please* talk to me!"

Inside the dark room, Barbara stood with her back against the window covering, her head tilted back and her fingers splayed against the wall. She shook her head quickly. "Leave me alone," she said loudly, frigidly.

Sara felt like a voyeur. This was a private conversation, and she could not, would not watch it. She wrenched away from Tempest. Tempest responded by shoving her into a magnified version of the vision she was witnessing, a scene so refined she could discern the beads of sweat on Ben's forehead and the quivering of Barbara's muscles under her thin robe of peach silk.

"I promise I won't touch you. I just want to talk."

Barbara gasped and hugged herself, and her gown trembled as her shoulders began moving up and down. She begged under her breath: "Why won't you touch me, Ben? Am I so old and repulsive?" For Ben's ears she said, "There's nothing to say. Go away."

This conversation was too intimate, too horrible, and Sara couldn't bear it. She closed her eyes and ears in an attempt to shut the scene out, but she wasn't assimilating any of it through her normal senses. It continued to play in her mind and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Ben pummeled the wall of the house, his shirt little by little coming untucked. "I will *not* go away! We have *years* of things to say!"

Inside the house, Ashley laid her ear against Barbara's bedroom door.

"Can you hear anything, Ashley?" Adam asked.

Ashley shook her head, a few of her pale blond hair strands sticking to the door. "Only what she says to Father."

Brandon squeezed next to Ashley and pressed his ear against the door, his sky-blue eyes wide and solemn. "Do you think she's all right?" he whispered.

Ashley turned and leaned against the door, crossing her wrists against her body and clutching her arms in a way that made her look like Barbara's twin. "I have no idea. She won't talk to me."

"Why won't she talk to Father?" Adam asked. "It's not as if he's trying to kiss her or anything. He just wants to talk."

Ashley dropped her hands to her waist, fiddling with the slippery violet robe she was wearing. "Maybe that's the problem. If my husband didn't want to kiss me, I wouldn't want to talk to him either!"

Brandon stepped away from the door and faced Ashley. "If he doesn't want to kiss her, it's because she won't talk to him. A guy doesn't have a wife just to *look* at her!"

Ashley's eyebrows flickered, her upper lip rising cynically. "Most men care more about how a woman looks than what she says. Trust me."

"How would you know anything about men like Father? The only decent guy you ever liked was David Pierce. You stayed up all night talking to him, so obviously he was interested in more than your looks!"

Ashley's shoulders sagged. She squeezed her eyes closed, the muscles in her face convulsing. "David isn't most guys."

"Neither is Father!"

Ben's voice sounded muffled. "Open the window, Barbara. Please!" Ashley moaned and leaned her head against the wall.

Sara watched Ben rub his bruised hand with the hand that was unhurt. "*Sweetheart*, talk to me!"

The muscles in Barbara's face tightened. "I am *not* your sweetheart!"

Ben's face smoothed. He laid his cheek and hands flat against the window covering. "That's it, honey," he said, his voice touched with hope. "Yell at me. Really let me have it. Berate me until you're hoarse!"

Barbara shook her head weakly and whispered, "And then what, Ben? Will you ever stop ogling your hot-blooded little sprinter, that *siren*, that *infuriatingly* innocent nymphet you've wanted in your bed instead of me for the past *five years*?"

Outrage burned through Sara. Five years? Ben had been ogling her since she was *fifteen*? Watching her, a mere *child*, in such an intent way that Barbara had become jealous? She had known Ben had noticed her, even thought she was attractive, but this was another thing entirely. No wonder Barbara hated her. Sara shuddered, then shuddered again and found she couldn't stop shuddering. She really was his femme fatale. She screamed at Ben but couldn't hear her voice.

Barbara's eyes flew open, charged with fury, and she dug her fingernails into her arms. "He just wants a glimpse of the real Barbara," she said in a mocking way. "All you have to do is show him you care, and he'll come back to you." She accidentally punctured a hole in her robe with her fingernail. Realizing what she had done, she tore the robe off, ripped it in half, and flung the pieces across the room. "What a patronizing little tramp!"

Ben rotated his head and pressed his forehead against the window cover. His mouth trembled and his tears dropped through the air, glistening, and slid down the toes of his boots. "Don't ignore me, Barbara. Please don't ignore me. It's killing me. Please."

Barbara rolled her eyes. "*I shouldn't ignore you?*" Through the window cover she said with a calmness that amazed Sara, "I don't love you anymore, Ben. I want a divorce. Leave me alone."

When the ground shook, Barbara tilted her head back and glared around the room. "Witch!" she hissed in that passionate sub-voice. "Big fat prig!" Tempest quaked again. "Frustrated busybody! Lunatic!" Tempest shook the colony so hard Sara thought she could hear her roar. "*Leave me alone* you overgrown piece of filth!"

Stop it, Tempest! Sara begged. *Please! You're destroying my colony! I'll make Barbara stop somehow!*

Tempest did halt the earthquakes, and Sara, consumed by relief, tried to withdraw. Tempest, however, held her tightly, still enraged.

Ben hurled his unhurt fist against the wall again and again, his sleeves beginning to droop in the rain that was beginning to fall. "Why won't you talk to me? Why do I put up with this garbage from you?"

Inside the house, Ashley strode to the door, her gown rippling around her. "I'm tired of this. He has no right to yell at Mother that way. He has no right to be here at all!"

"He's her husband and our father," Brandon argued. "He's *supposed* to be here with us. He *does* have a right!"

Ashley spun around and stared at Brandon. "He *lost* the right when he started chasing Sara."

"But he's sorry he chased Sara," said Adam.

"No he isn't," Ashley said. "He's sorry he upset Sara, and I think he's even sorry he tried to steal Cameron's wife, but he isn't sorry he was unfaithful to Mother."

"Yes he is," Adam persisted. "He said so. Before he told the colony what he had done, he told Mother he was sorry."

Ashley shook her head vigorously. "He said he was sorry that he was forced to tell her things publicly. He never said he was sorry for treating her in such a horrible way, and that's the biggest thing he should be sorry about!"

Adam's eyes filled with tears. "Why doesn't he feel sorry about being mean to Mother?"

"Because she's mean to him!" Brandon said. "He likes Sara because she's exciting, and she loves him, and she's *nice* to him. When he feels bad, she does too. Mother isn't nice to him at all. She won't even talk to him."

Ashley's eyebrows shot up. "It sounds as if you have a crush on Sara!"

Brandon blushed. "Don't be a moron!"

"Don't be a fool!"

Adam wiped his eyes and then his nose on his pajama sleeve. "Why won't Mother talk to Father, Ashley?"

"I don't *know*!" Ashley said, her voice becoming shrill. "But she must have a good reason. It's her choice. Not ours, and not his."

"If Sara stopped talking to Cameron and being nice to him and looking at him in that mushy way she does, he'd be yelling at her and pounding on her window, just as Father's doing to Mother," Brandon said.

"Sara would never do that to Cameron."

"Then Sara must be a better wife than Mother is," Brandon persisted. "I don't blame Father for wanting to be with her. When I get married, I want a wife like Sara."

"That's not fair," Ashley said. "You're not looking at it from Mother's side at all! You have no idea what she's going through."

"You know I'm right."

"You're disgusting!"

"Why doesn't Mother look at Father in the mushy way Sara looks at Cameron?" Adam asked.

"Because they're old, I suppose. Who knows? I don't *know*!"

"Uncle Trevor and Aunt Cyndi are as old as Mother and Father," Brandon pointed out, "and they've always been mushy."

"And she's mad at him for making her come to Eden," Adam said.

Brandon nodded. "You know it's true, Ashley."

Ashley threw her hands to the sides of her head, her eyes widening, and the corners of her mouth tightening. "All right! It's true! Mother and Father are completely messed up! Our family is completely messed up! We're all in the toilet and there's nothing we can do about it!"

Ben kicked the house and shouted at Barbara. "Why did you marry me if you didn't love me?"

Barbara didn't hesitate. "I thought you would be an apostle someday." She shook her head, her spring-green eyes glossy and wide with incredulity. Tempest shivered, sending a tiny tremor through the ground.

Ben sprang away from the wall as if burned. Sara had not thought Barbara could be so cruel, yet Ben deserved it. He was such an idiot.

"No, Ben, I never loved you. That's why I worked you through school. And had your babies. And moved to Maryland for you." Barbara moved to her mattress and dropped herself into a sitting position, hugging her waist with her arms and doubling over her legs in silent sobs.

Thunder shook the house. Ashley stormed out the door and stopped near Ben. Brandon and Adam jogged after her. "Get off of our property. Now!"

Ben turned and faced Ashley, stunned. "This isn't your concern, Ashley," he said quietly. "Go back into the house."

"I will *not* go back into the house. Not until you're gone."

"I just want to talk to her. I don't think that's too much to ask."

"It's *not* too much to ask, Ashley!" Brandon said.

Ashley ignored Brandon and shouted at Ben. "Mother plans a beautiful party because you ask her to, and then you spend the evening *drooling* all over Cameron's wife! *His* wife! Only his! *Always* his! Sara has always been his! And then you have the *gall* to come up here demanding to talk to Mother. Obviously she's had it with you. *I've* had it with you." Ashley extended her arm toward the trail to Trevor and Cyndi's house. "Get off of our property!"

Brandon shook his head vigorously, rain water dripping down his face. "No! Mother should talk to you! You should walk in there right now and talk to her! Break down the door if you have to! I'll help you."

Adam nodded. "Then you should kiss her. Ashley says she wouldn't talk to her husband unless he kissed her first."

Ben regarded his children in astonishment.

Ashley shook her head and rolled her eyes at Adam. "That wasn't *quite* what I said."

"You do want to kiss her, don't you, Father?" Adam asked.

Ben looked at Adam queerly, then nodded. "But it doesn't matter," he said, barely, tucking his drenched shirt back into his pants in an absentminded way. Lightning lit the clearing, and then thunder crashed. "It would be wrong for me to kiss your mother now, to force her to do anything she doesn't want to do. It's wrong to treat any woman with such disrespect. Haven't I taught you boys better than that?"

None of them knew what to say. Ben put his fingers to his temples. Finally he said, wiping the water from his face. "You boys take care of your mother and treat her like a queen. She loves you more than you can imagine. She may not need me anymore, but she does need you." With that, he walked toward the trail, dazed.

Tempest wrenched Sara out of the vision and withdrew with the order: *You're their ruler. Fix it!*

Sara became aware of warmth near her hip and an arm around her waist. She opened her eyes and saw Cameron gazing down at her, his cheeks flushed and his eyes wide with anxiety. "Did Tempest hurt you?"

"I . . . I don't think so."

Cameron lifted his fingers and grazed Sara's cheek. "You aren't my father's femme fatale, Sara."

Sara gripped Cameron's arm, feeling shaken. "Why do you say that?"

"When you were communicating with Tempest, you yelled, 'You're a pervert, Ben Carroll, a louse! I will *not* be your femme fatale!'"

"Tempest showed me . . . things." Sara couldn't give Cameron the details. She wouldn't invade Barbara's privacy if she could avoid it, and Cameron was already counseling with all of the other members of his family and undoubtedly knew more about their spiritual and emotional states than she did. "I learned that your father has been watching me since I was fifteen and that your mother was aware of it even then."

"So you were right. My mother has known all along."

Sara nodded and pulled herself to sitting position. "I can't tell you more. You have to keep your confidences, and I have to keep mine." *For the moment*. Already a plan was forming in her mind. She would do what she had to do to keep them all alive.

Cameron placed his hands on her cheeks, his eyes delving earnestly into hers. "You are *not* his femme fatale! Please *trust* me! He's responsible for his bad decisions. None of this is your fault!"

Cameron was right. Something deep inside of Sara screamed that he was right. She was Ben's victim, not his partner in pseudo-adultery. "Your father loves me so much it's almost impossible to think of him as my molester." And yet she must force herself to regard him that way or she would never completely pull herself out of his power.

"I know," Cameron whispered. "But you must. You're innocent."

Self-reproach surged through her. "*Infuriatingly* innocent."

"No, just innocent. Innocent of any wrongdoing in your relationship with my father."

"Are you speaking to me now as my husband or my bishop?" Sara still hadn't figured out how to distinguish between Cameron's two roles in her life, and she wasn't sure Cameron himself yet knew how to deal with her as both wife and ward member.

"Your bishop."

"So I'm innocent because I'm a Novaunian."

Cameron smiled a little. "Consider yourself culturally challenged."

"Your father didn't know I was this way any more than I did."

"Oh yes he did. *Absolutely*. He didn't know you were culturally different, but he did know you were young enough to be his daughter, and he knew you were uncommonly innocent. It was one of the reasons he was so attracted to you from the beginning."

And why Barbara hated her. Sara recalled her conversations with Bishop Lanham and wished she had trusted him more, not just as a bishop but as a man with experience in the world. "I think it's time for me to stop thinking of myself as a tomboy and start acting like a woman. You need to go get your father. Now."

"What are you going to do?"

"If I tell you, you'll be partly responsible, which wouldn't be right at all. In this case there must be a complete separation of church and state."

Cameron regarded her curiously, then stood up with a mischievous smile. "Your desire is my command, my governor and queen."

"And your command is my desire, my bishop and king."

Chapter 37: GOVERNOR AND QUEEN

Cameron left and Sara dressed herself in the only outfit she owned that possessed any speck of sophistication, a black skirt with a black cashmere sweater and black shoes. She pulled some of the hair away from her face in a black hair elastic, leaving a few strands to dangle in her face. She wished she had actually purchased the crimson suit she had tried on so many months before. It would have been perfect for this interview.

Sara slid the arelada necklace over her head and dropped it under her sweater. Then she reconsidered and removed the pendant from under her sweater, allowing it to shimmer against the cashmere for all to see. From now on, she would be a Novaunian woman openly and confidently.

Once Sara was satisfied with her appearance, she pulled two of the four dining chairs away from the little round table and positioned them facing each other with just enough space between them so that she and Ben wouldn't be too close to each other or too distant. She placed another chair cater-corner to the others for Cameron to sit in.

Sara knew that she should not meet with Ben alone and that Cameron would, literally, be their chaperon, but she didn't want Cameron to stand behind her, to *appear* to be her protector or, for that matter, the interviewer. She could not lean completely on Cameron without sapping his strength and jeopardizing his mission. To be a strong wife she had to be a strong governor, and to be a strong governor, the colonists had to perceive her as an entity of power in her own right, not a puppet-leader utterly dependent on her husband.

Sara finally sat down, praying for strength and wisdom. As she begged the Lord for help, her phone rang. She jogged into her room, still praying, and picked her phone up from off the floor. Seeing it was Cameron, she answered quickly: "What's wrong?"

"Sara, I won't be back with my father for a little while yet."

Panic stabbed Sara. "What happened?"

"This last little storm blew two trees down on my father's tent."

"Is he all right?"

"His shoulder's bruised, but other than that, he's fine. The tree that hit him was the smaller of the two. The tent's destroyed, though. It's a mess. I'm going to help him get the rest of his stuff to Uncle Trevor's."

Sara decided right then and there that all of the mature trees located within a fifty-foot radius of tents or buildings were coming down on Monday. The buildings had, so far, been safe from the impact of the smaller mature trees, but Sara wasn't going to take any more chances. Only the seedlings and other young trees would remain as long as they stayed small. Everyone would mourn the defilement of nature and complain about the inadequacy of the shade as the summer heat and humidity blanketed them, but what was heat compared to Tempest's temper?

Cameron ended the call, and Sara, suddenly anxious to know what damage the recent earthquakes had done, which had been more intense than any the colony had yet experienced, immediately made contact with Tempest again. *Please, Tempest, give me an overview of my colony.*

Certainly, Governor Carroll. As Tempest's vision scanned the colony, Sara felt as if she were floating. Lanterns began blinking on all over the colony, and people began coming out of their homes. They appeared frantic. Sara followed their movement, her anxiety growing. Finally, her telepathic sight rested on Hospital Hollow, and she saw that the back of the hollow had collapsed into the hospital, taking all five houses on Hospital Ridge with it.

Oh no. Please, no. Sara immediately withdrew, terrified, and telepathically reached out to Cameron with an image of what was now Hospital Slide. *I'll meet you there in a few minutes. Perhaps with Tempest's help, I'll be able to locate the survivors.*

Sara threw off her dressy clothing and jumped into a pair of dirty jeans, boots, and a Frederick Keys T-shirt. She grabbed a flashlight, all of the blankets she could carry, and Cameron's arelada necklace, then ran across the colony to the pile of building boards, trees, rocks, and bodies that had been Hospital Hollow.

Ben was already there, directing the rescue effort. No, *Cameron's father* was there. Sara couldn't, wouldn't allow him to be "Ben" to her any longer. Sara immediately gave Cameron his necklace. Then to the astonishment of everyone, she easily located the bodies. As they were retrieved, Cameron's telepathic touch determined whether they were dead or alive by sensing whether their spirits were still connected to their bodies or not, and they were laid out in one group or the other. Tony and Russ gave blessings to the survivors as quickly as they could be pulled out of the rubble and laid on blankets in Center Park. Marc and the other medical students scavenged as many medical supplies as they could to treat the wounded under the direction of Cyndi and a nurse practitioner that lived with her teacher husband on Knowledge Knoll.

Dr. Linda Jarrett, the gynecologist, and her husband, the general surgeon, were dead, along with their three children. Dr. Sean Marshall, the general physician and elders quorum president, was unconscious. His wife, Lisa, and one of his daughters were dead, and his other two children were bruised, but otherwise fine. The anesthesiologist and pharmacist and their children had been wounded but would survive, as had the pediatrician and his wife, the lab technician, and their children, and Dr. Ann Eagle.

To protect the bodies of the dead, the colonists constructed a temporary morgue in Center Park out of some of the building boards that were still intact. They moved the wounded to the dining hall.

When the work was done, everyone remaining in Center Park began asking Sara and Cameron questions about their telepathic abilities. Cameron's father immediately intervened. "Please don't harass Cameron and Sara. We're all exhausted, and discussion now wouldn't benefit any of us."

"But another earthquake may just kill us all!"

"We need to figure out what's going on!"

Cameron's father shook his head. "I can't imagine that anyone's going to be causing mischief at this time of the morning, so we might as well go home and get some sleep. We'll have a United Hearts forum after church, and everyone will get a chance to air his or her concerns. Cameron and Sara will answer your questions then."

The colonists agreed, but no one was satisfied and everyone was frightened and filled with grief. Barbara, who had spent the last two hours helping Cyndi treat the wounded, appeared more shocked and dismayed than anyone else did. Her eyes were swollen from crying, as were the eyes of many others, and she appeared disoriented and fragile, as if she could faint any moment.

Sara wished she could pull Barbara aside and assure her that the earthquakes had been Tempest's fault, not hers. Yes, Barbara was living behind a façade, she had lied to Ben about her feelings, and she had foolishly argued with an unstable planet-spirit and had provoked a temper tantrum, but she wasn't behaving this way out of malice. She was an extremely reserved person in a tremendous amount of pain, living with a group of people who demanded a level of openness she couldn't endure. Sara believed she was entitled to some measure of privacy. The

least she could do for her was to provide some confidential relief and protect her as much as possible from the colony's scrutiny.

Sara reached out to Cameron with her thoughts. *I still need to talk to your father. Give me ten minutes' head start, and then get him away from the others with the excuse that you're going to loan him a suit for church.*

Sara, it's three o'clock in the morning!

I'm sorry, Cameron. But this can't wait. I have to meet with him before the forum, and there's no other time.

I understand. Cameron then announced that church would be postponed until one o'clock the next afternoon.

Before Sara left she located Ashley and touched her with her thoughts. *I'm worried about your mother, Ashley. Please sleep in her room with her tonight, if she'll let you, and don't leave your house for anything!*

Ashley nodded, then shrugged and held out her hands helplessly. She was worried too and would do what she could.

Sara jogged as fast as she could to her house. She didn't have the energy to change back into her black clothing, but she did manage to at least wash her hands and face and brush her hair. She sat down in her chair and leaned over her thighs, so exhausted that her head felt detached from the rest of her body and reality seemed distant and blurred. She didn't have to wait for more than a couple of minutes for Cameron to return with his father.

Sara stood up as Cameron took his father's rain poncho and laid it with his own on the floor next to the door. His father approached her, appearing haggard. "I'm so sorry, Sara, for the way I treated you at the dance."

Sara extended a hand toward the chair facing her, not allowing herself to so much as glance at Cameron as he dropped himself into the chair she had provided for him.

Cameron's father sat down as she did and leaned toward her. "I can't bear the thought that I made you uncomfortable. I'm sorry."

Sara held her hand forward in a "stop" position and shook her head. "I don't want any more apologies from you."

Cameron's father sat back in his chair, his eyebrows coming together in alarm. Before he could reply, Sara said, "It isn't that I don't believe you're sincere, it's simply that I want you out of my life. I *need* you to be out of my life, and you need me to be out of yours."

His eyes narrowed a little in wariness. "Is that why you brought me here? To officially throw me out of your life?" He sounded bitter and surprised.

"Not entirely, but it's a good place to start. It's the *easy* place to start." Rejecting him in this way seemed heartless after everything he had just experienced, but Sara had no choice. Perhaps her exhausted remoteness would help her speak with the needed dispassion and make it easier. "As you know, Tempest, the planet-spirit, requires me to become the governor of the colony."

Cameron's father nodded slightly, in acquiescence.

Sara softened her tone. "I never wanted this job, *your* job, Father. I hope you never doubt that."

He shook his head. "I don't. I'll support you in any way I can."

Sara nodded slowly, her throat beginning to burn. "Now we come to the point." She swallowed hard, forcing away her tears. She couldn't break down now. "Cameron told me that the two of you arranged for you to continue as colony manager with him acting as my liaison."

He nodded.

"I think you'll agree that this arrangement would put Cameron under a great deal of stress, especially considering the tremendous spiritual needs of the colonists right now."

Again, Cameron's father nodded.

"I don't feel right about it at all, and yet I can't work with you. For the sake of Cameron's sanity and mine, and the health of our marriage, I'm going to do away with the need for a liaison altogether and find a different colony manager."

"You're firing me."

Sara nodded, feeling relieved. This much was done. She couldn't resist a glance at Cameron and saw that he was surprised and delighted. "Since we're going to have to relocate the surviving colonies to Woodland Park for safety reasons, two governors will be looking for work. One of them can be the colony manager, and the other can supervise the affairs of the colony in some other capacity."

Cameron's father rubbed his temples, his head bowed. "You have . . . ascertained the situation . . . correctly," he said, his voice barely audible. "You'll have more professional staff than . . . you'll know what to do with . . . and giving the qualified people from the other colonies important positions will . . . smooth the transition."

He understood, but he was devastated. Sara gritted her teeth in an effort to stop her lips from trembling. "If Ashley agrees, I want to make her my personal assistant. I'd like you to train her in the duties of governor, and she will train me."

His fingers froze on his temple, and his shoulders drooped. "That may not work. My relationship with Ashley is extremely tense right now."

"Then this will give you a prime opportunity to patch things up with her."

His hands fell to his sides and he lifted his head, nodding in resignation.

"After we finish relocating the other colonies to Woodland Park, I don't care what place you make for yourself in the colony as long as your job doesn't ever put you in contact with me."

Cameron's father stood up, his face more haggard than ever. "Will do, Governor."

Sara pressed her fingers against her thighs hard, in an effort to stop her hands from shaking. "We're not finished yet, Father. Please sit down."

He did resume his seat, appearing puzzled. He lifted an eyebrow at her, waiting.

"Now for the more complicated item of business. As far as I can tell, the only reason Tempest didn't completely destroy this colony by earthquake tonight is because I held her at bay. I can't hold her back much longer though. To put it simply, she's demanding that I put an end to the lies that are causing her agony."

"You know, then, what's causing the earthquakes?"

"I do, but it's a delicate matter, and you're the key."

"I'm the one causing the earthquakes?" He frowned at her, uncomprehending.

"Yes you are, in a way, which is why I'm now forced to issue you an ultimatum. After we're done here, you need to find a private place to ponder and pray and make a decision. You need to decide whether you want to become Barbara's husband again, immediately, and in every sense of the word—and I mean *every* sense of the word—or whether you would prefer to divorce her now and begin seriously looking for a new wife. And I mean *seriously* look for a new wife. No dilly-dallying around. You individually spend time with each and every one of the single women in the colony if you have to and find yourself a wife."

"This is hardly an issue. Barbara won't even talk to me. The idea that she would immediately allow me to be her husband again—in every sense of the word—is preposterous."

Sara shook her head. "You're jumping ahead. All I require you to do now is decide which course of action you *want*. Let's assume, for the moment, that Barbara loves you desperately, that she's deeply hurt and feels . . . ugly and unloved . . . and that if you approach her in the right way, she will take you back." He understood and appeared uncomfortable with her reference to their discussion the last time he had proposed to her. "You have until twelve-thirty to decide what you *want*. We can meet briefly before church to finalize the matter."

He shook his head and waved his hand. "I don't need more time in prayer and agony to come to an understanding of my own desire. I want my wife back."

"Are you sure? You wouldn't feel dishonest going back to her? Considering the fact that you are in love with someone else and claimed, not so long ago, that your marriage was dead?"

"I claimed the marriage was dead and I believed it. I still believe it. I never, however, claimed I didn't love Barbara. Obviously that was a piece of information I wanted to avoid giving to you. So no. I don't feel going back to Barbara would be dishonest."

So he had proposed to her knowing he was still in love with his wife. That was interesting. It had been a rotten thing to do to her, but it gave her hope for Barbara. Sara wondered whether he would have been so forthcoming had weariness not destroyed all of his personal barriers, and she was almost pleased that circumstances had forced her to conduct this meeting at such an outrageous hour.

"So if I'm understanding you correctly, had Barbara told you a few months ago that she wanted to take a week off and go to Jamaica, just the two of you, you would have responded with, 'I'll book the flight today.'"

"No, I would have said, 'Bring me the phone!'" His eyes widened, as if he were surprised at how immediate and unequivocal his answer had been.

Sara nodded slowly. "That being the case, I can, *almost* in good conscience, give you some information that will boost your confidence and, at the same time, make you feel like the most abusive husband who ever lived."

"I already feel like the most abusive husband who ever lived."

"Then what I'm going to show you is *really* going to make you feel crummy. You have to understand that I didn't want to see this. I tried to shut it out, but Tempest forced it on me. In showing this to you, I'm invading your wife's privacy. She would be mortified if she knew anyone had seen this, which means you have to keep it to yourself. I don't even feel right showing this to Cameron. I believe that you, on the other hand, need to see it. It will help you know what approach to take with her, and if she does agree to take you back, you can play it back in your mind every time you wonder whether she feels passion for you."

Cameron's father stared at Sara as if he had seen a ghost. "You have *proof* that she loves me? *Passionately*?"

"I do."

"Then she *lied* to me." He sounded surprised and offended.

Sara nodded. "Yes, she did."

"*Barbara* is the one causing the earthquakes?"

"Now you understand why I'm forced to interfere in your private life this way."

Ben nodded, troubled. "Show me."

Sara expanded her spirit and touched his, pouring the entire vision of what she had seen into his mind. She even included the end part, where Ashley had ordered him off of their property, not because he needed to know what had happened but because she wanted him to know exactly what she had seen of him.

In the exchange her father-in-law's grief thrashed her spirit, an agonizing sensation but unavoidable. Everything in him revolted at what he was assimilating; like Sara, he could scarcely bear it. Barbara's fury and desolation clawed away all of his rationalizations, leaving his spirit naked and mangled with shame.

The vision dissipated, and Cameron's father sank down in his chair and put his hand over his eyes, as if he wanted to disappear. "She tried to tell me," he whispered.

He looked as if he wanted to talk but didn't dare, so Sara asked in an attempt to draw him out, "Why didn't you listen?"

"I thought she was joking."

"What did she say?"

"When we were alone, she always referred to you as my 'little girlfriend.'"

Cameron leaned toward his father, gaping. "Why in the world would Mother ever say something like that, even as a joke?"

Cameron's father lowered his hand to his thigh, but he still couldn't look at either Sara or Cameron directly. "It started at one of the first track meets. I was admiring Sara's talent and spirit, and your mother informed me that she was a member of the Church from Parkridge and that, like you, she was a freshman running varsity. She believed a vigorous, determined girl like Sara would be the kind of girl you would like and that when the two of you turned sixteen, you should go out."

"Really?" Cameron looked from his father to Sara, his eyes widening even more.

His father nodded slowly, picking at his jeans, his gaze still averted. "I'm ashamed to say I told her I thought Sara would eat you alive." There seemed to be no blood in his face at all. "She told me I was a poor excuse for a father and accused me of having a crush on Sara, and I told her that she was either married to a pervert or utterly pathetic for being jealous of a fifteen-year-old child. That's when she started calling her my 'little girlfriend.'"

So he had brushed Barbara off, just as Sara had suspected. To ever take his wife's observation seriously would have been to admit he had been infatuated with a fifteen-year-old girl, and so in his pride, he had opted to remain unconscious.

Cameron shot a glance at Sara, his brows flickering knowingly, then asked his father, "If Mother believed you were attracted to Sara, why do you think she chose Sara to be her protégée?"

"I handed Sara's application to her and made the comment that if all of the students we selected were as exceptional as Sara, the colony would be an incredible success. I told her that if she didn't feel Sara qualified in the journalism department, I would find another place for her."

Sara thought she should feel deceived and betrayed but couldn't muster any emotion at all. She was completely numb. "So instead of rejecting my application, which is probably what she would have preferred to do, she agreed to take me as her protégée, knowing such a course would give her influence over me she wouldn't have if I entered the colony in a different profession."

"It looks that way, doesn't it. I'm sorry, Sara."

Sara waved her hands and shook her head at him. She truly didn't want any more of his apologies.

He nodded weakly, in acknowledgement. "I know, I know. You simply want me out of your life."

Sara stood up. The time had come to end the interview. "As soon as possible, contrive to be alone with your wife somehow and tell her what you want. If she agrees to give you another

chance, let her take the lead in discussing your difficulties. Set no conditions. Just love her with all the power you have in you and make her happy so that Tempest leaves us all alone! If, on the other hand, she persists in her desire for a divorce, you'll give one to her. Monday morning we'll draw up the documents. You'll stop harassing her and start looking for another wife."

He finally looked up. "Who would want to marry me, Sara?"

The question startled Sara. "Most of the single women in the colony, I imagine."

"I didn't invite foolish women into the colony, and any woman inclined to marry a pervert and failure like me would be a fool." His voice was tinged with hysteria.

"You're being too hard on yourself," Sara said quietly. "Besides. You have a wife. A wife who loves you, despite everything."

"Just because she loves me doesn't mean she can tolerate me."

"You won't know until you ask. Barbara, herself, may not know immediately what she can live with. If she wants time to think about it, that's all right. As long as the earthquakes stop, she can have the time she needs. Good luck and good night."

Sara turned away and headed to her bedroom. As she put her hand on the doorknob, Cameron's father said, "You're an eerie woman, Sara."

Sara couldn't help but smile. She turned and faced him one more time.

He couldn't return her smile, but his face relaxed a little.

Sara shook her head slightly. "No, I'm not an *eerie* woman, I'm a *Novaunian* woman."

"Heaven help us all when your Novaunian powers reach their zenith of development!"

Cameron twisted around in his chair so that he could look at Sara. "She's cool! And she's mine!" He pressed his fingers to his lips, then held them up to her, his eyebrows lifting seductively.

Sara's dignity dissolved. She lunged forward and threw her arms around Cameron, hugging him tightly and kissing his cheek. "I may be cool, but you're hot!"

Cameron's father stood up. "You two are heartless."

"Perfectly heartless," Sara said, beginning to feel punchy, kissing Cameron again as his father walked to the door. Perhaps ending the interview on a more relaxed note was better than maintaining the air of formality. She was, after all, a member of Ben Carroll's family now. She couldn't completely throw him out of her life and she didn't want to.

Cameron wiggled away from Sara just enough to regain a little of his own dignity. "You don't have to leave yet, Father. We can talk for a few minutes if you'd like."

Cameron's father picked up his poncho, shaking his head. "I need time to think, and it isn't right that I keep imposing on the bishop during the hours he should be spending with his bride."

Not expecting such a level of deference from her father-in-law, Sara's mouth fell open. "Thank you!"

Cameron stood up. "Wait a minute, then. Let me get a suit for you."

His father nodded his acknowledgement to Cameron, at the same time gazing at Sara sadly. "You shouldn't thank me for anything, Sara. I've done nothing but make your life a nightmare."

The tears Sara had been fighting so hard to hold back finally came. "That isn't true," she whispered.

He pressed a finger to his lips, then extended his arm toward her, holding up his finger as if to press it to her lips. "Don't argue with me, Little Panther. It is true."

Sara's lips trembled so violently she could barely speak. "I don't want it to be true."

His eyes glistened. "I know you said that you don't want to hear this, but I truly am sorry about what happened at the dance. I don't mean to make excuses for myself, but I want you to

know that I wasn't so much 'drooling' all over you as I was reveling in my own liberation. Watching you dance with my son, I realized that the Sara I love has always been the Sara-who's-in-love-with-Cameron and that I probably wouldn't even recognize a Sara-who's-in-love-with-Ben."

Cameron emerged from the room with a suit bag and handed it to his father. "An interesting paradox."

His father nodded. "And now that my mind has grasped the truth of it, I believe my heart is finally free to go back to where it belongs."

Chapter 38: RESCUE OF THE BRIGADE

Trendaul and Teri drove into Washington, D.C. on Connecticut Avenue, unsettled by the silence of the half-abandoned city. As they made their way east toward the D.C. Armory, they began seeing that the majority of people remaining in the District had arrived at the Armory before they had and were joining, where possible, the many rescue efforts going forth under the direction of the Vice President of the United States. According to the news reports, the President himself had left in terror of the Light on Saturday night and had not returned.

Citizens who possessed four-wheel drive vehicles or weapons of any kind were organized to provide backup for the local police and fire departments as they rescued civilian victims of the smaller mobs. Those who had served in the armed forces were sent with the National Guard to aid the larger groups who were under attack at the many military installations in the D.C. area. Those who had medical skills were sent to the nearby health campus to help treat the wounded civilians as they were brought into the Light. Those, such as Trendaul and Teri, who were either waiting to find out about loved ones or who had offered to take in refugees, were sent to Robert F. Kennedy Stadium to wait in one of the huge parking lots.

Trendaul found a place to park with a good view of the Anacostia River and the Whitney Young Bridge. When the National Guard trucks returned with the Brigade of Midshipmen, they would come from that direction. The water shone so brightly in the Light through the bare trees and shrubs that it looked like molten silver.

Trendaul jumped out of the van and stretched and allowed his children to do the same. Matthew, Daniel, and Zack chased each other around the parked cars, inviting other children to join them, their warm breath like bouquets of tiny crystals in the brilliant Light.

Trendaul lifted a pair of binoculars to his eyes. On the other side of the river, survivors of the invasion gathered in the park. It seemed strange that these people wouldn't simply cross the bridge and take refuge in the Light.

The communicator in Trendaul's shirt pocket vibrated against his chest. Relieved, he removed it from his pocket and spoke into it, activating the speaker to allow Teri to hear also. "Gavaun! Are you all right?" He spoke in English, hoping Gavaun would follow his lead.

"We made it, Trendaul, finally," Gavaun replied, also in English. "The first fifty miles out of Washington, D.C. were difficult, and we had to detour off of the main highway in several places, but this area was not touched. We are traveling at full-speed now and are nearing the turn-off. We should be back in Washington, D.C. before sundown. Do you have any new information about David?"

Trendaul told Gavaun everything he knew about David's situation and described their location. "We are in the parking lot of a round athletic stadium that sits on the western shore of Washington, D.C.'s secondary river. To the north is a large park. To the east is the border of the Light and a bridge that is still intact. To the south is the secondary river, which curves northeast. To the west are the monuments. David's school is located east and a little north, on the bay."

The sound of helicopters arriving from the southwest drowned Trendaul's words. "They must be coming from the Pentagon!" someone cried.

The helicopters landed in the vicinity of the Armory and then headed south again before Trendaul spoke again to Gavaun. "It appears rescue helicopters have been sent to various places around the metro area. Watch yourself. They may be armed. These are our friends, but they may perceive you to be the enemy."

"Acknowledged, Trendaul. I'll be careful not to vaporize anyone."

“The Earthons need these air transports! Try not to even disable any of them if you don’t have to.”

“I understand. Gavaun out.”

After ending communication with his brother, Trendaul turned in the direction of the Armory, wondering whether the flight tracking systems of the Earthons were accessible and working. He considered approaching the Vice President himself to let him know Gavaun was coming and who he was, but decided against it. The Vice President and his aides might think he was a Zarrist spy and hold him there. Gavaun was in a craft far superior to anything the Earthons could put in the air at the moment and could take care of himself.

Trendaul turned toward his wife. She was pacing in front of the van. Trendaul quickly located all his children and kept them in his line of sight. As the parking lot filled up, he called them closer. All he needed was to lose one of his kids right now in this zoo!

Teri slipped back into the van and turned on the radio. Trendaul took her place pacing in front of the van. Thirty minutes later, his muscles aching with tension and his eyes weary from being pierced by the brightness of the river, Trendaul heard from Gavaun again. “We are in the air, Trendaul. What is your status?”

“We are still waiting in the parking lot of the round athletic stadium with a zillion other people who have the same idea. It’s a mess. We still haven’t heard any word about the status of David’s brigade.”

The minutes crept by before Gavaun spoke again: “We can see the primary river now.”

Trendaul thought he should feel relieved but didn’t. The attack on the Naval Academy had begun hours before. Whether David was alive or dead had probably already been decided. “Have you had any sign of an air transport that might belong to Zarr?”

“Yes. An armed and shielded aircar is heading in your direction carrying three people.”

“Will you get here before it does?”

“It will be close. We are now flying above a group of five helicopters that appear to be coming from due east. They are beginning to descend in the northwest quarter of the Light.”

Trendaul’s mind raced. The northwest quarter of the Light. That was where he now lived. What was over there? He suddenly remembered. Bethesda. The Naval Hospital. That had to be it. “Could the place where they are landing be a hospital?”

“That is a good possibility.”

“Yes,” Sharad said. “It must be a hospital. Many of the helicopter’s occupants are wounded.”

“Those transports may have come from the Naval Academy. That’s a good sign.” Trendaul gazed out over the river, glad he had brought the binoculars. Without them he would be blind.

“Is there enough parking space left for a safe landing?”

“Plenty.”

The survivors on the other side of the river turned toward the northwest. Trendaul turned to follow their line of vision, tilting his head back to watch the sky. Which air transport did the people see? Zarr’s aircar or Gavaun’s frigate?

Silence descended over the crowd surrounding Trendaul, seconds later cut by Gavaun’s voice: “The armed aircar is flying straight toward you from the northwest.”

Trendaul didn’t need the binoculars to see the aircar, a sleek, wine-red vehicle bearing Zarr’s symbol, an angel with wings spread, holding aloft a crystal sword with both hands. He could hear the survivors on the other side of the river cheer.

“What’s that alien monster doing here?” someone demanded.

“Is that Tohmazz Zarr, Dad?”

Before Trendaul could answer his daughter, National Guard trucks began appearing on East Capitol Street on the other side of the bridge.

"It's the midshipmen!" a man shouted.

"Finally!" Cheers and applause erupted.

"Gavaun," Trendaul shouted into the communicator, "how close are you?"

"Not close enough for an accurate shot. Your protective Light is in the way."

Zarr's aircar swooped down on East Capitol Street, firing its lasers, once, then twice, cutting through two trucks and vaporizing a third. The people around Trendaul cried out in horror.

"Someone needs to shoot him down!"

"With what?"

Machine gun fire sounded from the caravan. The aircar retreated a little to avoid being hit by a bullet.

"What are bullets against lasers?"

"They're sitting ducks!"

Trendaul held the communicator an inch away from his mouth. "Shoot down that aircar, Gavaun! Shoot it down now!"

A laser blast from Zarr's aircar vaporized another truck. As the aircar rotated and glided toward the bridge, Gavaun's frigate appeared over the river, opalescent and shaped like a mukaul bird, its laser beam surging toward the aircar like a tunnel of light. As the laser beam merged with the aircar, one of the occupants ejected, a figure dressed in gray. Zarr's aircar glowed and then vanished in steam.

Trendaul's fingers relaxed on the communicator. "Thank you, Father!" Everyone around Trendaul stood paralyzed and silent in astonishment and awe. "Gavaun, that was beautiful!"

"Any time, Trendaul."

Feeling a hand slide under his arm, Trendaul turned. Teri stood there, her eyes wide and dazed-looking. "Can it be true? Gavaun actually shot down Tohmazz Zarr?"

Trendaul nodded. "It looks that way." The crowd burst into cheers. Gavaun waggled his frigate at the crowd as they waved at him and applauded. "What do you know about the person who ejected?" Trendaul asked his brother. "Was that Zarr himself?"

"Sharad is enlarging the image now through the telepathic transmission recorder." Gavaun's craft descended toward East Capitol Street and hovered there between the caravan and the mob.

"Trendaul," Sharad said, "it looks as though the person who ejected was Tohmazz Zarr's son, Arulezz."

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes, but he is going to escape unless we dive down to get him now." Sharad's voice sounded urgent. He was itching to hunt down Zarr's son. "The crowd has already engulfed him. By the time I sort out the telepathic signatures, he will be gone."

"We were not sent to Earth to eliminate the Zarrists," Gavaun declared.

Sharad didn't argue. Neither did Trendaul. As much as he wanted the Zarrists incapacitated and banished from Earth, he knew Gavaun was right. They didn't have time to hunt the Zarrists. Killing Arulezz or taking him into custody would change nothing. If Arulezz disappeared, the Zarrists would simply follow the other son, Jahnzel, or someone else.

"What now?" Teri asked shrilly. "Zarr may be dead, but so are many midshipmen!"

Trendaul regarded her for a moment, pondering, then spoke into the communicator again. "I'm going to go tell the government leader who you are and let you talk to him. He may need

your help in other places. Trendaul out.” He slipped the communicator into his pocket. “Gavaun will provide air cover for the caravan. I’m going to head over to the Armory and talk to the Vice President. You wait here for the midshipmen. Those who are unhurt will be here in a few minutes, and if David isn’t with them, someone is bound to know what happened to him.”

Teri nodded. Trendaul gathered his children, put them into the van, and assigned Josh to keep them entertained and away from Teri. By the time he began moving away from the van, the trucks carrying the midshipmen were beginning to cross the bridge.

Trendaul walked briskly to the Armory and gained entrance easily by holding up his communicator to display its insignia—the white mukaul bird on a silver circle. Anxious to acquire information on the alien spacecraft that had given aid, the Vice President spoke with Trendaul immediately. Trendaul gave the communicator to him and put him in contact with Gavaun. Trendaul left the Armory assuming Gavaun and Sharad would be busy with the rescue effort for most of the night.

Darkness had descended on the other side of the river by the time Trendaul returned to the RFK Stadium parking lot. He wound his way through the onlookers, midshipmen, and rumpled men and women wearing blue and gold ribbons or strips of fabric on their arms. He assumed these were Annapolis residents who had aided the midshipmen instead of joining the mob. Seeing these valiant people gave him hope. Surely David was still alive somewhere!

Trendaul asked every midshipman he passed for information about David. Everyone’s story was different.

“He left on a YP for Norfolk.”

“No he didn’t! I saw him run when the harbor was torched!”

“Mr. Pierce would never have left the Yard while it was still under attack.”

“He was beaten up by plebes.”

“Some of our classmates went crazy.”

“They were worse than the mob!”

“All of the Mormon strippers were badly hurt.”

“He’s dead.”

“He’s unconscious.”

Trendaul finally spotted one of David’s friends, Lisa Shafer, and pushed his way to her. Lisa’s deep blue uniform was torn and smelled of smoke and sweat, and her dark brown hair was falling out of her French braid under her hat. “Mr. Alexander!” she said. “I’m glad I found you! David was taken to Bethesda.”

Trendaul didn’t know whether to be relieved David was alive or dismayed he was severely wounded. “What happened?”

“Before the mob came, he was cornered by a group of plebes and beaten with bats.”

“Is he conscious?”

“In and out. He’s in a lot of pain and can’t walk, but he’s very much alive. I saw the medics put him into the helicopter.”

“Thanks,” Trendaul said quickly as he broke into a run.

Chapter 39: REBELS

Late Sunday morning, after Cameron had gone into his office for bishopric meeting, Sara cut a circle out of one of her socks with the tiny scissors from her mending kit and sewed it onto her underwear at her hip, creating a pocket to hold a piece of arelada. She had had nightmares about the possibility of someone, in protest to her as the new governor, yanking the arelada necklace from her neck, running off with it, and putting it into one of the decomposers. Even though logic assured her that she could outrun anyone in the colony except Cameron, the thought of being without arelada at the forum made Sara feel naked and blind. She wouldn't take any chances.

She tucked a piece of arelada into the pocket and sewed it in tightly. They would have to strip her to get to it, and if they were willing to do that, it wouldn't matter if they took it. At that point Tempest would have the colony for dinner.

Sara returned her needle, thread, and scissors to her mending kit and put it back into the top drawer of her dresser, then went to work getting dressed, her mind calculating all of the potential problems she might encounter at the forum. Was it possible the colonists would, like Cameron's father, accept her as the governor without protesting? As much as Sara longed for an uneventful transfer of office, she couldn't believe the colonists would accept the change without rebelling.

The spirit of rebellion had brought them to Eden, after all. All of the colonists but Cameron and the two couples from Eighth Colony were, fundamentally, rebels. Sara didn't think the spirit of repentance had taken hold of them to such a degree that they would be willing to meekly face the consequences of their mistake.

Still, the colonists, although they were rebels, were basically pacifists. If they decided she was an evil alien who had telepathically bewitched their governor, what would they do about it? Even if they had firearms, Sara doubted they would know how to use them, and she couldn't imagine any of them having the stomach to beat her up. Besides, if they tried something like that, she could outrun them all.

The colonists' only weapon, really, would be some sort of drug, but that presumed someone had been suspicious enough and had thought far enough ahead to prepare a syringe and then had concocted a plan to get close enough to her to use it. With most of the medical staff wounded or dead and the hospital destroyed, this scenario didn't seem likely.

No, the biggest danger facing them was that the forum would end up in a violent argument and that Tempest would send a storm or earthquake worse than anything they had faced yet and kill them all. Her father-in-law would have his most complex facilitating job ever, and the forums that had taken place in the colony thus far didn't encourage Sara. The spontaneous breakfast forum had almost ended with the consensus that her father-in-law should be thrown out of office, and the only consensus that had come out of the ship forum had been that the colony was unhappy with their bishop.

Of course, a meeting geared to criticizing the bishop was doomed to fail. Sara had felt it even then. Now that Cameron's father was behind him one hundred percent, things would be different. Perhaps today the colony would finally experience exquisite group management worthy of the world-class facilitator Cameron's father had been on Earth.

Hearing a knock at the door, Sara went to open it and found Ashley. "I need to talk to Cameron," she said, rushing into the house.

"He isn't here. Well, not really."

Ashley turned toward the door to Cameron's office. "Is he in a meeting?"

Sara nodded.

Ashley moved toward the office door. "Mother didn't come out of her room at all this morning. I offered to bring her breakfast, and she said she was feeling ill. This isn't like her at all. I'm worried, Sara."

Sara tapped her fingers on the back of a chair. "Your mother never gets ill?"

"Well, yes, she does sometimes, but she doesn't hide, and she never misses church." Ashley lifted her fist to knock on the door, then hesitated and abruptly turned to face Sara. "Would you communicate with him?"

Sara nodded and touched her mind to Cameron's, quickly explaining the situation.

Cameron pondered for many moments. *Tell Ashley to go to church and let Mother be alone for a little while.*

Perhaps she does need some time to herself. Sara tried to relax, even though she was anxious and perplexed. If Barbara didn't come out of her house, how was Cameron's father ever going to get her alone to talk to her? As Sara walked with Ashley to Ash Auditorium, she told herself over and over that Barbara had to come out of her house sometime and that chances were she would make it to church.

Barbara didn't make it to church, which worried Cameron's father more than it did anyone. He pulled Ashley aside and talked with her for several minutes. His concern appeared so genuine that even Ashley couldn't remain angry with him.

Cameron's father left, and Ashley sat down next to Sara in front of Marc and Jordan and several other students as the colonists began singing "I Know that My Redeemer Lives." Ashley whispered, "I wish I could hate him, but I can't."

"I understand the feeling," Sara murmured.

Cameron's father didn't return until the deacons were walking their sacrament trays back to the front of the congregation. His eyes were bloodshot and the skin around his eyes was inflamed. He shook his head slightly at Sara before sitting down in a camp chair next to Brandon and putting his head into his hands.

Sara's heart, already racing, began to hurt. This wasn't the way things were supposed to happen. Barbara was supposed to give Ben—no, *Cameron's father*—another chance and, in time, they would work things out and live happily ever after. She wasn't supposed to reject him and leave him with nothing. Ben—no, no, no! *Cameron's father*—had made mistakes, serious mistakes, but he was a good man and didn't deserve to be completely forsaken. This wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all!

The ache in Sara's heart spread into her throat and burned through her cheeks. *Please, Heavenly Father! Soften Barbara's heart! Inspire her to change her mind! He doesn't deserve this! Please!* Sara leaned forward, forcing herself to breathe deeply, afraid for a moment that she might hyperventilate.

Cameron began speaking, with difficulty, and Sara could only imagine what he was thinking, having to stand in front of the ward and carry on with the meeting while she and his father were in meltdown. "I've chosen as our theme today repentance . . . and the Atonement."

Sara felt Ashley move closer to her and put her arm around her in comfort, and then she felt Brandon do the same. She couldn't feel his arm on her back, since it was over Ashley's, but she could feel his hand resting securely on her shoulder. The sweetness of the gesture soothed her, and, at the same time, filled her with wonder. Were all of the Carroll men in love with her? Why? What had she done to deserve this blessing? Or was it a curse?

Cameron continued: "Russ Brodsky, Brent Hall, and Tony Wright will address us. I've asked each one of them to present a scripture relating to the Atonement and then illuminate it with personal testimony. Brother Brodsky."

Feeling her father-in-law's suffering more than ever, Sara reached out with her thoughts to Cameron's brother. *Thank you for your concern, Brandon, but I'll be all right. Your father needs you now more than I do.* As if to emphasize her recovery, she sat up.

Brandon looked at Sara in amazement, then moved his chair closer to his father's and put his arm around him. Adam followed Brandon's example, only he encircled his father's waist with his arms and laid his head on his back.

Russ came forward, carrying his scriptures. When he glanced toward the Carroll family, his already solemn expression became grave. "I feel . . . unworthy . . . to stand before you." He paused and pondered. "The Lord called me into this position to serve you, all of you, and I feel I've betrayed that trust with all of my suspicions and accusations and demands. I guess I was feeling rather superior because of this calling and thought I had a right." He shook his head and grimaced. "I know. I'm scum."

A few people laughed. Sara, however, did not. Russ didn't mean what he said as a joke. Russ tended to take himself far too seriously and didn't have the sense of humor Cameron and Tony did.

"When things started going wrong, I was angry and wanted to blame someone, and the easiest person to blame was Dr. Carroll. I didn't care that his family would be hurt in the process, and that was deplorable. I began realizing it the night the earthquakes started, when certain ones of us ran up to Bishop Carroll's house so eager to accuse his wife of . . . well, it doesn't matter.

"The bishop was offended." Russ dropped his gaze to the ground, his voice lowering, almost as if he were speaking to himself. "Of course he was offended." He lifted his eyes and his voice again. "He was firm with us, but extraordinarily forbearing, far more forbearing than I would have been in the same circumstances, and I'm thankful for that. He truly is inspired. He was so confident in Sara's character too, and as I thought about it, I realized that I had confidence in Sara too. Sara and I have been friends for many months, and I knew that she and I had come for many of the same reasons and that she probably felt as betrayed in some ways as I did." He finally rested his eyes on Sara. "I'm sorry, Sara, I really am."

Sara smiled at him and nodded once, then glanced at his partner in crime, Brent Hall. Brent looked at Russ, then looked away, then looked again, drumming his fingers on his thighs. He covered his face with his hands, then rubbed his temples. Sara almost felt sorry for him. This was his first talk to the ward as a member of the bishopric, and the poor guy was terrified.

Russ shifted his eyes to Cameron's father. "I'm sorry, Dr. Carroll, for all of my sordid speculations and accusations. I asked for the truth, and when you gave it to me, I called you a liar. You and your family deserve better than that. I think I hurt your wife more than anyone, something I never thought I could do; I admire her more than I can express, and I wish she were here so I could tell her. Please accept my apology."

Cameron's father lifted his head and formed a steeple with his hands against his nose, nodding his acknowledgement to Russ.

"It's been difficult for me to accept the fact that I made a bad decision in coming here and that I have only myself to blame because of it. In Alma 34, Amulek says: 'Behold, I say unto you, that I do know that Christ shall come among the children of men, to take upon him the transgressions of his people, and that he shall atone for the sins of the world . . . for . . . there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are

hardened; yea, all are fallen . . .’ He didn’t say that just the wicked were fallen; he said that *all* were fallen, and that includes me.”

Russ talked more about the Atonement and expressed his gratitude to the Savior. After closing his talk, Russ resumed his seat and Brent took his place, appearing so pale and so shaky that Sara was afraid he might pass out.

“If Russ is scum,” Brent said in a weak voice, “then I’m . . . carrion.”

Most of the colonists laughed, and even Sara couldn’t restrain a smile. Cameron’s father sat up, chuckling, and gave both of his sons hugs and kisses on the cheek.

Brent’s eyes rolled upward and the corners of his mouth drooped even more. He wasn’t amused; he was in agony. The laughter died, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

Finally, Brent began speaking again. “I feel like Paul when he said to the Romans, ‘O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ He also said that ‘the wages for sin is death.’”

This was too weird! Sara looked at Cameron. Brent was beginning his talk in a morbid way generally unheard-of in sacrament meeting. Then again, both Russ and Brent had behaved in an unseemly, rebellious way that was inexcusable for counselors to a bishop. They *should* feel guilty. Had Cameron foreseen this? Cameron gazed at the back of Brent’s head with a peculiar lack of expression, and that was the strangest thing of all.

“I . . . I can’t go on in this wretched way.” Brent glanced over his shoulder at Cameron, then glanced at Sara before his eyes flitted over the rest of the congregation. “There are some who believe our bishop and our governor have been bewitched by a telepathic alien and are . . . fallen.”

Nobody murmured; nobody moved. Frustration engulfed Sara. How in the galaxy was she supposed to overcome this delusion?

“I, myself, have . . . vacillated. I confess, I thought Dr. Carroll and Sara had . . . uh . . .” Brent waved his hands and screwed up his face, as if searching for the least offensive phrase. Sara felt her cheeks grow hot. “. . . had had an affair, I really did, until the bishop, when we were all at his house, reminded us that President Grant had encouraged the bishop and Sara’s . . . relationship. This relieved me because I knew that President Grant had been called by proper authority and that if anyone would know Sara was unworthy of our bishop, he would.”

Sara felt Ashley grip her arm. “Did all of this good stuff happen the night the earthquakes started?” she whispered.

Sara nodded. “Cameron was brilliant,” she replied out of the corner of her mouth, her lips barely moving.

“I wish I had been there! After the meeting, you’d better tell me everything!”

Brent ran his fingers through his hair with one hand, then with the other. “Then . . . uh . . . then later, someone suggested President Grant had been bewitched by . . . Sara’s father.”

Sara checked a gasp. Of course certain people might believe such a thing, but it was still astonishing. Even if her father had the ability to gain telepathic influence over President Grant or President Morley, for that matter, why in the galaxy would he want to?

“I couldn’t believe this possibility at first because . . . because if President Grant was bewitched, then the Church is a sham. President Morley and his counselors are called by God to lead us all and will not lead us astray. End of discussion. I thought I believed that—I was certain I believed that—until someone informed me that I couldn’t possibly believe what I claimed to believe. If I truly believed President Morley was called by God and could never lead

members of the Church astray, I wouldn't have come to Eden at all, so no, I didn't believe President Grant was immune to being negatively influenced by a telepathic alien."

What twisted reasoning! What sick person had planted such destructive thoughts into Brent's mind? Could Brent's "someone" be one of the Vances? Probably not. Brother Vance had been gone most of the week and was, even now, traveling home from Eighth Colony with Ryan Farrow and the remaining survivors.

Sara glanced at Sister Vance. She appeared as puzzled as Sara felt, so Brent's "someone" probably wasn't her. Sara's eyes then moved to Sister Eagle. She sat forward in her camp chair, her eyes on Brent in an intense and alert way. She didn't appear angry about what he was saying, though, or anxious. Perhaps she was Brent's "someone." Perhaps not.

"I am ashamed to say that I believed this . . . logic . . . until today, when the bishop asked me to speak. I didn't know what he knew . . . about what I'd done . . . but I knew the Lord knew, and that He had inspired the bishop to ask me to speak."

Brandon leaned close to Sara. "What's he talking about? What's he done?"

Sara shook his head. "I don't know."

"He's been talking about more people than just himself. Could there be a plot against you? Are you in danger?"

Sara abruptly turned to Brandon. A conspiracy? Already? Why hadn't she considered that possibility? Just when she thought she should reach out to Tempest and see if her expanded vision of the colony would give her information about what was going on, she heard movement behind her and felt Brandon tense and hurl himself out of his chair.

"Sara, watch out!" Brent cried.

Sara turned just in time to see Brandon collapse to the grass and Marc gaping down at him, holding a hypodermic syringe that appeared empty.

Sara sprang out of her chair, appalled that anyone would do something so awful in church, and annoyed with herself for not suspecting it. More than anything, however, she was disgusted with Marc. "What did you give to him?" she demanded as everyone began gathering around her.

Brandon's father quickly knelt down and stretched Brandon out, laying his head on top of the suit jacket Trevor handed to him.

"A tranquilizer," Marc answered automatically, still staring down at Brandon. He looked up at Sara. "I didn't mean to stick *him*!"

"Well, that much is obvious," Ashley said.

"He jumped in the way!"

"You meant to stick Sara," Ashley pressed. "Why?"

"He isn't hurt. He'll just sleep for a few hours."

Sara's mind worked quickly. Ashley and Cameron and their father could handle this. She had to get away before Marc's confederates surrounded her. She felt someone bump against her. Before anything could register, she felt metal against her neck and heard a snip. She grabbed at her necklace, but wasn't quick enough. It was gone.

Sara turned around just in time to see Jordan backing away from her. Sara hurled her thoughts at Cameron. *Jordan stole my necklace! Get it back, and I'll contact Tempest!*

As Sara wormed her way to the edge of the clearing, she saw Cameron reach to his neck for his necklace, then look around the clearing frantically. Sara realized in alarm that Cameron's arelada had been stolen also! *The decomposer, Cameron!*

As Cameron turned to sprint out of the clearing, many men moved to surround him. Sara felt hands on her arms as she reached out to Tempest. *Please show me the conspirators,*

Tempest. In the same instant, wanting the entire colony to witness what she saw, Sara expanded her spirit and embraced the colony, hoping they would instinctively open their minds and receive the vision with her.

Scenes from Tempest's memory poured forth, laced with her wrath, wrenching open every mind Sara touched, filling the colonists with horror. Sara's astonishment deepened with every meeting she witnessed, where plans were made to tranquilize her and then put her in isolation, take what arelada she had on her body, and then search her house for the rest. Sister Vance would be the governor, Sister Eagle the first assistant, and Brent Hall would lead the ward since Sara had telepathically bewitched Cameron, Tony, and even Russ.

The vision dissipated, and Sara was again aware of her surroundings. The men who had been holding onto her were now merely staring at her in amazement and fear. *Why didn't you tell me about this, Tempest?*

You take great pains to avoid communicating with me, Governor Carroll.

Shock and outrage erupted. "Governor Carroll?" The colonists simultaneously spun around and confronted Sara, their faces fierce.

"We were right!"

"She does control Dr. Carroll's mind!"

"And the bishop's!"

"She did want to be the governor!"

Tempest's demands crushed the colonists' protests. *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.*

"We have no choice," Cameron's father explained. "Sara doesn't want this any more than anyone else does. I intended to resign in our meeting after church.

"You knew the planet's desire and you didn't tell me?" Sister Vance exclaimed.

"You've been Sara's enemy since we got here, so no. I decided to wait. I was afraid you would organize the colonists against her. It appears I was right!"

"You were dead right!"

"We won't follow this alien witch!"

Idiot mortals! Tempest's spirit swelled in exasperation, flinging a telepathic jolt through the colonists that shook them off their balance and knocked them against each other or to the ground. Their hands flew to their heads. Some screamed. Most sobbed.

No! Sara begged, terrified Tempest would open the ground and devour them all. *Don't kill us, please! Let me explain it to them, and they'll cooperate! Please, Tempest!*

Tempest calmed herself, grudgingly. *They're your enemies, Governor Carroll. Why do you care whether they live or die?*

The thought that three-quarters of the colony had been involved for the past week in planning a revolution frightened Sara almost as much as the realization that Marc had almost succeeded with his tranquilizer. *Why did you put up with such plots, Tempest?* That the colony had survived the conspiracy against her at all was a miracle. *Why didn't you kill my enemies days ago?*

Tempest's frustration surged through the colonists. *An immortal commanded me to be still about the conspiracy.*

An immortal? Sara communicated in awe. *You mean an angel?*

A messenger from God. He informed me that God, Himself, would deal with the plotter in the bishopric. With that declaration, Tempest withdrew.

Of course! President Grant had promised the colony that the Lord would not allow any of the men called to preside over them to lead them astray. Sara had understood the promise to mean that the Lord would kill Cameron or the others if they tried. In this case, the Lord had simply inspired Cameron to ask the members of the bishopric to speak on the subject of the Atonement, rattling Brent's conscience and unraveling the conspiracy. The Lord's promise to the colony through President Grant, had, instead of killing Brent, saved him and, in the process, all of them!

Everyone in the colony turned to Brent, who fell to his knees, wailing, pressing his forehead into the grass. "I'm sorry, Dear Father! Please forgive me! I was confused and wrong! I'm not ready to face thee yet! Please give me another chance! I won't let thee down!"

Sara glanced around the clearing, looking for Cameron. Not finding him, she reached out to Tony with her thoughts: *Cameron went to retrieve our arelada. That makes Brent your problem.* She couldn't resist adding mischievously, *Ha, ha.*

Tony shot Sara an unhappy look, then slid his hand under Brent's arm and pulled him to his feet, rolling his eyes. "If the Lord wanted you dead, Brent, He would have zapped you by now. He's already given you another chance, so don't foul it up. Now why don't you take your place at the front of the congregation and finish your testimony."

Brent nodded at Tony, dazed, and mechanically moved to the bottom of the slope. As Brent walked away, Samantha said, "It doesn't seem right that the Lord would send an angel to save Brent and not the innocent people who died in the earthquake this morning."

Tony gazed at Samantha gravely. "The Lord promised us that he wouldn't allow any of the men He called to preside in the ward to lead us in the wrong direction, and He kept that promise. We don't know what promises He's made to the planet-spirit."

Everyone looked at Sara. She shrugged. "All I know is that Tempest is an intelligent, independent spirit. She chooses to do what she does, just as we do. I suppose if the Lord intervened every time she threw a temper tantrum, she would have no choices at all and would no longer be independent."

Many of the colonists nodded. Most appeared thoughtful and seemed to accept Tony and Sara's observations well enough. After several moments of contemplation, Tony said, "Let's finish church." The colonists silently resumed their seats.

Sara returned to her seat in front of Brandon, who was still sleeping peacefully on the ground behind his family's chairs. She shook her head at Ashley and Adam and their father. "Who would have thought Brandon would end up being my bodyguard?"

Ashley smiled. "When he wakes up, he'll be delighted that he was the hero of the day."

"You're probably right." Sara directed her attention to Brent, who appeared just as shaky as before but not nearly as miserable.

"Paul said, 'The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' I'm grateful for my Savior and pray that we all will live worthy of His gifts."

Brent closed his talk and sat down, and Tony arose and went to the piano. "I refer you to Psalm 23 and Isaiah 53."

Sara watched Tony in delight as he began playing the piano and singing "The Lord is My Shepherd" in his comforting bass voice. Sara closed her eyes, reveling in the beauty gushing forth from Tony's fingers and throat, feeling peace permeate her spirit. By the time the song was over, Sara felt considerably more relaxed and ready to face the colonists in the United Hearts Forum.

Cameron came back into the clearing with Jordan and Erica Rice as Tony was finishing his hymn. Jordan and Erica exchanged shocked glances, then slowly sat down in the back of the

congregation, looking around in discomfort. Cameron's eyes found Sara. When their gazes locked, he shook his head. He had not arrived at the decomposer in time. The beautiful necklaces had become priming solution for the synthesizing machines.

Sara quickly told Cameron what had happened after he had left in pursuit of Jordan and Erica. Cameron nodded slowly, then pointed his thumb in Jordan and Erica's direction.

You want me to show them too?

Cameron nodded.

Sara did as Cameron asked and gave Jordan and Erica a vision of what had happened after they had bolted with the arelada necklaces. They assimilated it all in dismay.

Tony returned to his chair, and Cameron walked to the pulpit. To Sara's surprise, Cameron didn't end the meeting, but expressed his love for the Savior and invited everyone in the congregation to bear their testimonies. The adult colonists came to the pulpit one by one, beginning with Trevor Carroll and including all four of the refugees from Eighth Colony, who thanked God for sparing their lives and Eleventh Colony for taking them in.

Two hours passed before a break came in the testimonies. Sara and everyone else looked around the congregation, wondering who hadn't spoken yet. Sara's eyes finally settled on Cameron's father, and she realized he was the only adult member of the colony who had not gone to the pulpit. Sara quickly looked away, not wanting to do anything that would draw attention to him and make obvious what she now knew, that Cameron had prohibited him from speaking in church.

Cameron immediately stood up to end the meeting, but even his promptness could not conceal from the rest of the colony his father's fallen position and save him from humiliation. Cameron's father bent forward and held his face in his hands, as if shrinking from the attention, as innocent as it was. Sniffling, rustling for tissues, and even soft weeping erupted around Sara, breaking the silence. A blanket of sadness had descended on the colony, penetrating with such pervasiveness Sara feared it would never completely go away.

When church was over, Cameron immediately walked over to Sara, reached into one of his suit pockets, and pulled out her arelada necklace and handed it to her. Sara took the necklace from him, astonished. "But I thought it was gone forever."

Cameron shook his head. "Any non-living thing that can be decomposed in the machines can be recomposed. Almost everything, anyway. There's something strange about the arelada that doesn't allow it to be synthesized, so the necklaces are intact, but the arelada in them doesn't work."

Sara slid the necklace over her head and embraced Cameron. "Thank you for saving what you could."

Once the United Hearts Forum began, there was little left to be said. After Sara told the colonists what few plans she had for the colony, someone asked what was causing the earthquakes.

"Why does the planet want to kill us?" asked Kevin Krantz.

"Tempest must have told you why she's sending earthquakes," said Patricia Dixon.

Sara felt she had no choice now but to tell them. "Barbara Carroll is far more hurt by everything that has happened than she will admit. Tempest perceives her façade of indifference as a lie."

"The planet killed seven people because of *that*?" Brent said.

"Barbara only wants to maintain her self-respect!" said Anita Ireland.

No one else wanted to believe it either. Sister Eagle actually dared ask: "Do you think Tempest is insane?"

“It hardly matters,” Sara replied. “She’s in charge, and the sooner we learn to deal with it, the safer we’ll be. The situation with my mother-in-law is extremely delicate. I don’t, for a moment, consider her responsible for the earthquakes—that distinction goes completely to Tempest—but she is a danger, perhaps the greatest danger that faces the colony right now. Cameron and I and my father-in-law are working to fix this problem. Barbara’s an extremely reserved person, so I beg you—don’t press me for details and don’t press *her*. I don’t want to invade her privacy any more than I would want to invade yours if you were in her predicament.”

“Oh, I knew she was hurt,” Ashley muttered to herself. Then facing her father, she demanded, “How could you do this to her?” Not waiting for an answer, she strode out of Ash Auditorium in the direction of Government Grove and her house beyond.

As Sara watched Ashley hurry out of the clearing, she became aware of dark clouds gathering beyond Government Grove. The ground rumbled, and the colonists looked at each other in panic.

Sara immediately opened her mind to Tempest. The planet-spirit nearly swallowed her in her rage, smacking her with a vision of Barbara in a gorgeous clearing, encircled by fountains and fountains of roses in bloom, red, pink, yellow, and white blossoms of the domestic varieties intermingled with wild white ones. Barbara screamed names at Tempest and dared her to strike her down.

Dismay overwhelmed Sara, charged with self-reproach. She should have suspected Barbara would rather die than dig out from under the rubble of her beautiful toy house. *Stop it, Tempest. Stop it! I’ll go to her now and put an end to this!*

This is your last chance, Governor Carroll. You silence her or I will!

Once free of Tempest, Sara threw her thoughts at Cameron and his father as she dashed out of the clearing. *Barbara’s suicidal! Come on! I’ll take you to her!*

Chapter 40: CHAMPIONS

When Sara, Cameron, and his father were well into Center Park and out of earshot from Ash Auditorium, Cameron's father shouted from many yards behind her, "What's going on, Sara?"

Sara gave both him and Cameron the telepathic glimpse of Barbara that Tempest had given to her. The backs of her slip-on dress shoes flapped against her heels as she ran.

"How could I have let this happen?" Cameron moaned, increasing his pace.

"Slow down, Cameron! Your father can't keep up and we have at least a mile to go!"

"I shouldn't have left her alone." Cameron did slow his pace a little.

Sara slowed her pace considerably, purposely maintaining a five-yard distance between herself and Cameron so that he couldn't get too far ahead. She was necessary to this race since she was the guide, but Cameron's father was the critical person and it accomplished nothing to outrun him. "There was nothing you could have done. She refused your help."

Cameron glanced over his shoulder, directing his words to his father. "What happened when you checked on her before church?"

"Nothing," Cameron's father said, his breathing labored. "I talked to her through her bedroom door, and she wouldn't answer me. I thought she was rejecting me."

"She was already gone," Sara observed, hurdling a clump of daisies.

"Why didn't you open the door and go in?" Cameron asked.

"Against my conscience, I tried. It was locked. It didn't occur to me that she might have left the house."

"She must have climbed out the window," Sara theorized. "I wonder if she left a note."

When they arrived at the path through Government Grove, they met Ashley. "There's nothing you can do here, honey," her father said, panting. He slowed to a walk, appearing grateful for the rest. "She isn't at home. You would do better to return to Ash Auditorium and sit with Brandon."

"Where is she? What's going on?"

The ground shook; Sara thought her heart would stop.

"Come on, Father!" Cameron urged from the trail. "We don't have much time! Sorry, Ashley!"

"*Father!*" Ashley insisted in frustration.

"Your mother's in trouble," Cameron's father called over his shoulder as he began running again. "The fewer people involved in this the better."

When they arrived at the house, they found that the master bedroom window was, as Sara had suspected, closed but unlocked, as if Barbara had hastily slid it shut from the outside. Cameron took off his suit jacket and tie, then stretched his leg and stepped on the windowsill, propelling himself into the room.

"You don't have time to look for a note," Sara said, heading into the forest behind the house on the widest path. "Come on!"

"If there's a note, it's important," Cameron called from inside of the house. "I want to know as much about Mother's state of mind as possible before we get there."

Cameron's father paced in front of the window, putting his hand to his forehead and rubbing, then slapping his thighs, over and over again. "I can't believe I let this happen," he muttered. "I can't believe I know my own wife so little. I can't *believe* I let this happen! How in the *world* can I know my wife so little?"

Watching him made Sara jumpy. Hearing the front door open, Sara sprang away to meet Cameron. He closed the door and read from the stationery he held in his hand:

To My Beloved Family,

Ben, when I told you I didn't love you, I lied and brought this catastrophe on the colony. Because of me, seven people are dead. I can't live with the guilt anymore, nor can I expose my pain to the colony. I just can't do it. It's difficult enough to reveal my love for you, which is as strong as it ever was, but I feel that, considering the tragic circumstances surrounding my lie, you need to know. I can't, however, face you. I've been the most disgusting of hypocrites for as long as I've known you, and the only face I have left is the one I can't bear to look at myself. I am brokenhearted and exhausted and can't go on.

I tried so hard to be the wife you wanted, but our relationship could go nowhere. I've believed this all along, but I hung on to it as long as I could, in desperation, hoping beyond hope I was wrong. I wasn't wrong. You've always longed for a wildflower, and I've never been anything more than a weed trying to pass herself off as a rose. I've tortured myself for years wondering why you ever wanted to marry me at all.

Ashley, please don't be angry with your father. Sara is a perfect morning glory, and your father's love for her is a natural thing. She's the kind of woman he should have married in the first place. He's your father and a good man, and he deserves your respect. Never forget that.

Brandon and Adam, I realize you don't understand why I refuse to talk to your father. You must trust me on this issue. I would talk to him if I thought it would change things, but that would be a fool's hope. Deep down, your father realizes this too, or he never would have thought seriously about making Sara his wife. Our marriage was broken before it began and cannot be repaired. This fact, however, in no way changes my feelings for you. You, Ashley, and Cameron are the best things that have ever come from me, and I love you.

Cameron, you are a discerning young man, and I recognize that your pains to get me to talk about my difficulties have come from concern. I love and appreciate you. Understand, however, that there are things a woman simply can't discuss with her son.

Sara, I know you think I hate you, and when I think of you with my husband, I do hate you. Sometimes the hate is so strong I believe it's flowing through my veins instead of blood. I could so much more tolerate this terrible feeling if I felt justified. Often I've wished you had flirted with Ben and pursued him so that I could hate you without feeling guilty. You have done nothing, though—you are simply what he wanted all along, everything I can never be. For this reason, his attraction to you was as spontaneous as yours was to him, and that's the most unbearable thing of all.

I do want you to know, Sara, that when I am able to separate you from my husband in my mind, I don't dislike you. I may not be able to love you, but I can accept you as a wife to my son. Just as I knew my husband wanted a wildflower, I knew my son wanted a champion like himself, and you, Sara, are a true champion.

Please, my family, don't worry about the state of my soul in the afterlife. It is in prison I have lived the majority of my life, and it is to prison I go. This self-imposed execution (for a capital crime) will change nothing.

By the time Cameron finished reading the letter, his hands were shaking so badly and his eyes were so red and drowning in tears that it was a wonder he could read at all. Sara had never heard anything so horrible and felt nauseated with anxiety and grief.

Cameron's father sobbed uninhibitedly, so distraught he could not even reach into his suit pocket for a tissue. "I . . . I treated her . . . like dirt . . . and she . . . wants to take all of . . . the blame. I can't bear it."

Feeling droplets of rain blow against her skin, Sara shivered and forced herself to look at the sky, which was black and reeling. "We have to go," she whispered.

Cameron nodded and quickly folded the letter and put it in his pocket. He reached into his father's suit jacket for some tissues and handed them to him. "We don't have a lot of time, Father. She isn't dead yet."

The ground quaked. Sara didn't dare open her mind to Tempest again, terrified she would be engulfed and lose her ability to move. She ran through the vibration in the direction Barbara had taken.

Lacking a defined trail, Barbara had forged a path through the forest following patches of ground where undergrowth was sparse. Sara poured herself into her arelada, her awareness of the life surrounding her becoming so intense she could telepathically feel every blade of grass, every blossom, every leaf. This awareness enabled her to perceive the fastest route to Barbara.

The sounds and scents of the forest whirled around Sara as she jogged ahead of Cameron and his father, sometimes able to run. Sara never looked back, moving as fast as the forest would allow her to go, so concentrated on the vision Tempest had given to her that her mind was blank to everything else. When she finally arrived at the clearing with its pretty little lake, the scent of roses nearly overpowered her, reminding her of either a wedding reception or a funeral.

Hearing sticks crack as Cameron and his father ran into the clearing, Sara released her awareness and pointed them in the direction of Barbara. The wind howled around them, whipping the tree branches back and forth and churning the lake. The long rose branches bounced wildly, pricking Sara's skin as she ran past them.

Barbara stood under a tall oak tree with her fists against her sides, begging the sky in a hoarse, exasperated voice, "Strike me down, you insane witch! What are you waiting for? Murderer! You hear that? You think you're so righteous, but you're a murderer!"

Tempest shook the ground violently. Barbara seemed to vibrate as she screamed, "A cold-blooded murderer! You're filthier than I am!"

"Barbara, stop it!" Sara yelled. "We love you and don't want you to die!"

Barbara jerked her head up, her eyes gripping Sara's in mortification. The ground stopped moving, and Barbara returned her attention to the sky, crying frantically, "You're the vilest of sinners and unworthy to ever stand in the presence of God!"

As Sara sprinted toward her, Barbara moved to the side, dodging her. "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—"

Just as Sara got close enough to Barbara to grab her and somehow shut her up, her father-in-law lunged forward and seized Barbara from the side, an arm around her waist and a hand pressed against her mouth.

Thunder crashed, and an instant later, a bolt of lightning struck the oak tree that Barbara had been standing under only moments before. Hearing a loud creaking sound, Sara sprang toward the middle of the clearing, shouting for her father-in-law to follow. He lifted his wife and ran, just missing being hit by a large falling limb.

“Tempest!” Sara cried. “Stop it! Give us a chance to calm her down!” Tempest’s thundering protests settled into a grumble.

Barbara twisted and writhed in her husband’s arms, struggling to free herself, her screams muffled against his hand. “I’m sorry I’m forced to restrain you, sweetheart,” he said softly. “If it were up to me, I would encourage you to howl and scream until you’ve released every tear and every spark of anger you’ve been holding in all of these years.”

Observing blood dripping from her father-in-law’s hand, Sara winced. Barbara had bitten him, and hard. Tempest grumbled again, warningly. Barbara continued attempting to wrench away, but her husband didn’t flinch. “You’re right to be enraged. I’ve neglected you, ignored you, and betrayed you, and I’m astounded you put up with it so long. Why did you?”

Barbara stopped struggling and went limp, trembling. She squeezed her eyes shut, tears spilling out and falling down her husband’s hand, mixing with the blood. Several moments passed, and he tentatively uncovered her mouth and reached into his suit pocket for a wad of tissues without relaxing his hold on her waist. “Well?”

“My husband, the bishop,” she said in a raspy voice, “*drooling* all over this little girl!” She waved her hand at Sara. “Infatuated and oblivious.”

“So you put up with it because you thought I was more a deluded fool than a philanderer.” His calmness amazed Sara.

“As far as I could tell, your relationship with Sara was all in your mind—a sick fantasy.”

“As far as you could tell? You haven’t witnessed any of my meetings with Sara in the past year. Did you hire an investigator to find out what I was up to?”

“I did.” Barbara moved back and forth again in an effort to wriggle out of her husband’s arms, without success. “I didn’t want to confront you until I understood the situation.”

“Why not? Why didn’t you ask me about it months ago?”

Barbara combed her wind-blown blond strands away from her face. “I’ve been pointing out the attraction to you for years and you’ve treated me like an idiot. I wanted evidence that would convince even you.”

“What did the investigator tell you?”

“That you were friendly to Sara but had made no advances to her or any other woman. She informed me that Sara appeared to have no idea you were attracted to her and seemed more likely to fall in love with Tony Wright than with you.”

“So you decided to hang on a little longer.”

“What choice did I have? If I had divorced you, I would have thrown you right at her. You’re an attractive, affluent, and articulate man. I knew that even the most strong-willed of women would have a difficult time resisting you, and Sara is, in so many ways, still a girl. She was destined to marry a young returned missionary like Tony Wright, not a divorced man old enough to be her father.”

“It sounds as if you meant to protect Sara from me.”

“A part of me did feel compelled to protect her,” Barbara admitted, “but I resented the feeling and couldn’t bring myself to intervene in any kind of major way. I was counting on her husband to do that, if it needed to be done. I hoped for some time that she would marry Tony Wright. I knew that if her marriage didn’t cool your passion for her, nothing would. And then, lo and behold! A miracle of miracles occurs! Cameron comes home and we learn she’s been in love with him all along!”

Barbara laughed scornfully. “Sara would soon marry, all right. She would marry your son.” Her laughter became hysterical. “My son! Your rival!” Her laughter stopped suddenly, and she glared at Cameron. “My timid son, who should have claimed her *years* ago!”

Sara recalled Barbara's strange behavior the morning of her wedding day and understood. Of course Barbara was angry with Cameron for not revealing his feelings sooner. Had he done so, how different things might have been for them all!

Cameron finally spoke, his tone as gentle as Sara had ever heard it: "How do we know, Mother, that my fear of Sara and hers of me wasn't given to us by the Lord? To keep Sara away from our family and shield her from Father? How do we know it wasn't His way of protecting our whole family?"

Barbara regarded Cameron queerly, her anger fading. She recognized the merit of Cameron's observation. What Cameron believed could be true. Sara had been barely able to deal with his father's passion as it was. As a teenager she would have been far more vulnerable, and Cameron had not acquired the maturity or independence at that time to cope with it either.

"He may be right," Cameron's father admitted to Barbara. "I have no idea what would have happened had Sara spent time with us while she and Cameron were in high school. I do know that Cameron's feelings for Sara didn't prevent me from pursuing her even after they were married. I actually deceived myself into thinking I was doing Cameron a favor."

"You made a pass at Sara after you married her to your son!" Barbara struggled to get away from her husband again, but he held her tightly. "Get your hands off of me, you pervert!"

The ground trembled and Sara's muscles tensed, adrenaline surging through her. The storm had dispersed for the moment, but Tempest wasn't satisfied yet.

"You witnessed the wedding hug, then," Cameron's father said quietly.

"Wedding hug?" Barbara rolled her eyes. "Let's call a spade a spade. It was a pass!" She back-kicked him in the shin and twisted to get away, but he didn't budge. Tempest shook again.

"Please, Tempest," Sara implored under her breath. "Give us more time!"

Cameron's father nodded, his face wrinkling in pain. "It was a pass."

"After that, I wanted to do more than throw you out of my house—I wanted to ruin you." Barbara's eyes ignited with fury again. This time she directed her glare at Sara. "I expected you to reject him. I *required* you to reject him. But no! You not only displayed your love to him, you displayed it to the entire colony and made the two of you a couple and me the pathetic discarded wife!"

"I'm sorry, Barbara," Sara said weakly. "I made a mistake. I should have kept my mouth shut. But you must believe me—I care for him as a father, not as a husband. I'm in love with Cameron and always have been."

Barbara's head drooped in hopelessness and her eyes filled with tears again. She seemed to have lost the energy to maintain her rage. "If what you say is true, then your daughterly love is stronger than my wifely love, because you defended him when I wanted to ruin him. No wonder he finds you so irresistible."

"I don't think any of us believe you really wanted to ruin him," Sara said. "You were hurt and angry and you reacted. Would it please you to learn that the planet-spirit requires me to be the governor now? That because of what has occurred between your husband and me I can't even allow him to continue as the colony's manager?"

Barbara lifted her head and looked up at Sara again, her eyes wide and aghast. "Is that true? You are now the governor?"

"Yes, Mother, it's true," Cameron said solemnly. "Sara is the governor and Father is unemployed. As far as his career is concerned, he really is ruined."

Barbara pursed her lips, then put her hand to her mouth, her shoulders shaking and her tears flowing without restraint.

Sara finally allowed herself to relax. Barbara wouldn't be fighting with Tempest or anyone else for a while. She glanced at the sky and noticed that instead of a reeling black, it was now a swirling gray. Even Tempest appeared satisfied that Barbara's mood had mellowed.

Cameron's father dropped his blood-soaked wad of tissues and reached into his pocket for more and handed them to Barbara. As she dabbed her tears away and wiped her nose, Cameron's father slid his fingers into her hair, which had become still as the wind had died. He kissed her temple, then her jaw. "I love you, Barbara," he said softly, "and I'm so sorry for the deplorable way I've treated you."

Barbara struggled against her husband's arms again, grimacing, her hand dropping from her mouth to his hand, trying to pry it off of her waist. "Please don't, Ben. I'm begging you. I can't bear it."

Cameron's father combed his fingers through her hair, then ran them over her cheek and mouth.

Barbara leaned her head against his throat, her eyes seeming to roll up inside of her head.

"Please, sweetheart, I want to be your husband again. In every way. Please forgive me and let me come home."

Barbara's eyes flew open and her face quivered. She parted her lips and looked around the clearing helplessly, breathlessly. She shook her head quickly. "Please, Ben, let me keep a little dignity. Don't ask me to be second best. I can't do it anymore."

"You have never been second best!" His hand moved to her shoulder. "You were mistaken when you said I wanted a wildflower. I've always wanted a rose, a luxurious red rose with multitudes of soft, perfect petals that I could lose myself in. I married the sweetest, most elegant rose I could find, but when I married her, she was still only a bud, closed up tightly."

Cameron's father held his fist in front of Barbara's face to demonstrate. "As the years went by, I did everything I could think of to nurture my rose and encourage her to bloom, but she never did, and I couldn't understand why. I was frustrated and hurt and didn't know what to do." Barbara listened, paralyzed.

"I began believing that I had never been the right gardener for this rose I so desired and became enchanted by a wild morning glory. She was a young, vigorous plant so wide-open and so seemingly willing to proliferate under my touch that I believed I would be happier being her gardener. I eventually realized, however, that the morning glory had never grown for me. She grew for a gardener who had never wanted a rose at all, a man who longed to run and climb all over creation with the morning glory. I knew then that had I married the morning glory, I would have tried to make her more like the rose. A morning glory, though, can never be like a rose, and instead of proliferating under my care, she would have wilted."

Cameron's father moved his hand to Barbara's cheek again, and into her hair. "I do love you, Barbara. You have always been my first choice. Had I had any inkling of how hurt you were, and how much you've always loved me, none of this would have happened. If I were engaged to Sara right now, I would call it off. Unless I had actually married her, I would have ditched her. I wouldn't have thought twice about it, and that makes me as ashamed as anything."

Barbara shook her head, her eyes dripping. "I believe you're sincere, Ben, but what you say simply isn't true. You love her too much; she's become too much a part of you. If she wanted you, you wouldn't be able to bring yourself to reject her."

Ben dropped his free hand to Barbara's waist and squeezed tightly with both arms. "You're wrong, Barbara. Had I truly wanted her instead of you, I would have divorced you and pursued

her as an unmarried man. I've known for some time that my position with Sara would be considerably stronger if I divorced you, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

He kissed Barbara's neck, and her head fell to the side just a little, as if she were hoping he would kiss her again. He did. "I made a lot of excuses to Sara to explain why I wasn't already divorced. I think I even believed them, but the truth is, I didn't leave you because I wanted to remain married to you. Not because of our covenants (although they're important) and not because of the children (although they're important too), but because I love you and wanted to put off breaking with you for as long as I could."

Barbara seemed to stiffen, her face tightening. Sara was afraid she might erupt with anger again. "Had you had sex with her, you wouldn't be capable of giving her up."

Cameron's father froze and contemplated Barbara's conclusion for nearly a minute. Sara held her breath, wondering what he would say. When he finally spoke, he said carefully, "I won't say that I never would have done it. I realize now how vulnerable I've been and how easily it could have happened, at least from my end. If I had made love to Sara before I married her, I would have killed her innocence, the very thing I love about her. I could not have lived with my own guilt, and I could not have lived with the corpse she would have become. No, had I gone that far with Sara or anyone else, I would have crawled back to you on my belly and begged for mercy."

Barbara wilted in her husband's arms and put her hand to her forehead, trembling uncontrollably. "It can never work, Ben."

Sara watched Barbara, perplexed. What should have given her hope appeared to desolate her instead.

"Of course it will work, Barbara!" Cameron's father insisted. "We love each other and are *right* for each other! If we want it to work badly enough, it will work!"

Tears streamed down Barbara's arm. She could barely speak. "No, Ben. I love you, but I can never bloom for you; all of my petals are gone. And everything you've told me doesn't change the fact that you still love Sara. In a few years or even months, you'll realize how dissatisfied you are—again—and we'll be right back where we started."

Cameron's father turned Barbara around in his arms and gripped her shoulders, gazing down at her. "You aren't making any sense, sweetheart. What is it you aren't telling me?"

Barbara refused to look at him. Still holding her face in her hand, she shook her head.

"Tell him, Mother," Cameron said firmly.

Barbara lifted her head and jerked it around, staring at Cameron in terror. "You know?"

Cameron nodded slowly. "I do. And I love and respect you now as much as I ever did."

"Then you can't possibly know."

"Yes, I do; the Spirit has given it to me. Please trust me, Mother. It won't matter to him either, but you do need to tell him. If you don't, you're right. Nothing will change."

Barbara shook her head. "I can't do it."

"Yes, you can. You must."

"You're asking the impossible."

"No, I'm not."

Barbara's features convulsed. "He's always been so honest and pure, he will *hate* me."

"He *loves* you. He wants to know. *Trust* me!"

Barbara gazed at Cameron for many moments, pondering. She turned and studied her husband, who was watching her and Cameron in helpless anxiety, not daring to speak.

This conversation was beginning to sound too familiar, and a suspicion planted itself in Sara's mind. She couldn't comprehend the agony Barbara must have lived in for well over

twenty-two years. She wanted to put her arms around her and assure her that it didn't matter, that they all loved her regardless of what she had done, but she knew it was time to leave the three of them alone.

As Sara began walking away, Barbara called to her. "Please, Sara. Come back."

Sara halted and looked at Barbara over her shoulder. "Are you sure?"

Barbara nodded, barely. "You've become so entangled in our problems that it's fitting you should hear this too."

Sara returned to her place beside Cameron. Barbara turned and finally faced her husband. "I hardly know where to begin."

"It's okay, honey," he assured, tenderly taking her hands in his. "Cameron's right. Whatever it is, I want to hear it."

Barbara's eyes brimmed with tears again, and her lips quavered. "How do I say this? You didn't marry a rosebud; you married a corpse. I had a lover before you. My innocence was gone long before we ever met."

He frowned. "There was someone before me? Someone you loved?"

Barbara nodded weakly.

"Not someone who . . . ?"

"No," she whispered. "No man ever laid a hand on me without my consent."

He looked down at her hands, stunned, then raised his head and gazed at her again, nodding, his face coming alive, as if understanding were pouring into him all at once. "It was Jason Lane, wasn't it?"

Barbara's eyes expanded, and she nodded dumbly.

"How old were you? Seventeen?"

Again, Barbara nodded. "How . . . ?"

"How long did you go with him? A year? Two years?"

"Nearly a year and a half," Barbara whispered.

"I thought so. Your parents have photos of the two of you and told me about him when I asked, and I did have to ask. You have no prom or homecoming photos of the two of you, no mementos of him at all, nor have you ever breathed a word about him. I'll admit, I've often wondered if you were still in love with him, if you would have rather married him instead of me."

"No!" Barbara exploded. "No, no, no, no, no!" She shook her head quickly. "Oh, no! Jason had some good qualities, but he never possessed your sweetness and gentleness. No. *No*. I never loved him as I do you. Never."

He raised his eyebrows in a tentative way. "Never?"

"No, never." Barbara lowered her eyes. "It happened the summer after my junior year, right before he went away to college. We were asking for it, begging for it, really, but when it finally happened, it was completely unplanned. Unplanned and . . . horrible."

Barbara withdrew her hands from her husband's and crossed her arms over her body, gripping her shoulders, her words gushing out in less than a whisper. "I wanted it undone as soon as it happened, and so did he. He left me that day, and I never saw him again. I called him and even tried seeing him, not to repeat what we had done, but to try and make sense of it and decide what to do."

Barbara shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut, tears flowing down her face. "He refused . . . to acknowledge me . . . at all, as if I . . . had some kind of . . . terrible disease, as if . . . I had . . . contaminated him. I was so terrified. I worried that I might be pregnant, but . . . I couldn't talk about it with . . . a soul."

Cameron's father wrapped his arms around his wife and held her tightly, laying his head on top of hers. "It's all right, sweetheart . . . it's all right . . ."

"No, it isn't all right." Her normal voice sounded loud, almost harsh. "I've lied to you. I've lied to everyone." She lowered her voice again. "I just didn't know what else to do. When it happened, I felt an urge to tell my father, who was also my bishop at the time, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It would have broken his heart. Perhaps if Jason and I had gone to him together, I could have done it, but alone, no. I had nightmares that Jason would tell him, but apparently he never did, because my father never said a word."

Barbara allowed her arms to dangle at her sides, as if she were afraid to touch her husband, but she nestled her head under his neck, unable to completely resist him. "A year later, after I had gone away to school, I heard that Jason had left for a mission, so I thought everything would be all right. I determined to put it out of my mind and go on with my life. There came a time when I had almost convinced myself it had never happened at all, that it had been nothing more than a nightmare. This was the state I was in when I met you. When I went through the temple, though, it all came back, like a scorching fire. I felt guilty and filthy, but by then, it was too late. I loved you too much to give you up, and I couldn't possibly tell you and take the chance that you would see what I really was and be disgusted with me. The rejection would have killed me, literally. I simply couldn't live through that again."

Cameron's father stroked Barbara's hair and back. "So you never told anyone."

"No one at all."

"Why didn't you tell one of our bishops?"

"I was afraid he would require me to tell you. I thought I could almost bear anyone's knowing but you. I tried to be the best wife, mother, and person I could be, but it was never good enough and I knew it. Then Sara sprinted into our lives and you began drifting away from me. I thought my experience with Jason had been awful, but this was torture. I knew God was punishing me for my sins, but still, I was so angry. Angry at you for being too good for me, angry at Sara for being everything I was not, and more than anything, angry at myself for making such a mess of my life. When we lost our temple recommends, I was relieved."

Cameron's father backed away from Barbara a little and cupped his hands around her face. "Dear Barbara, the Lord wasn't punishing you. He wants you to throw yourself into His arms and let Him heal you. You were punishing yourself and *I* was punishing you. I was completely and utterly wrong to harbor an attraction for Sara. You were *right* to feel betrayed. I am so sorry! If you can never forgive me, I'll understand, but I love you and am begging you to give me another chance."

Barbara stared at him blankly. "I . . . I don't understand."

Her husband took her in his arms again and held her tightly. "Sweetheart, it's time to let it go. You made a mistake, a long, long time ago. Now that you've finally opened up to me and I understand what you've been going through, things will be so much better between us, you'll see. My passion for Sara won't go away overnight and neither will your rage, but we'll get there. I wish you had trusted me sooner. Please let me be your husband again."

Barbara gazed up at him in shock. "Then it doesn't matter?"

"How can you even ask that after the way I've treated you?"

"It really doesn't matter?"

He shook his head. "No!"

"It never would have mattered?"

He shook his head again. "No!" He shrugged a little. "Perhaps I should tell you I really don't know, that I have no idea how the twenty-four-year-old version of myself would have

reacted. Perhaps that's true, and yet, I don't remember myself ever being of such an unmerciful state of mind that I would have rejected you for a mistake that happened years before you came into my life."

Barbara's face seemed to fill with light. "Am I dreaming?"

He smiled. "You are a dream." He touched his lips to hers and she responded voraciously, finally wrapping her arms around him and clutching him close.

They kissed again and again, becoming so impassioned Sara suddenly felt an urge to leave. She looked at Cameron and saw that he was blushing. He lifted his eyebrows at her as if to ask, "What are we supposed to do now?"

Sara couldn't restrain a smile. She turned to walk away, motioning to him. *Relax, Cameron! This is what we want. Your father has a phone and we aren't too far out. When they're ready for me to guide them back, he'll call you.*

Cameron nodded in relief. He took her hand and they sprinted together into the forest as the sun unveiled itself from behind the clouds.

Chapter 41: ANCHORS AWEIGH

Teri spent the next week at the hospital by David's bedside, while Trendaul made arrangements to take David to Kansas City in the frigate. David had a concussion, several fractured ribs, a fractured hip, a fractured arm, and five leg fractures. He would be months recovering and could not continue his education even if the Vice President of the United States authorized the reorganization of the Naval Academy under the Light. The least Trendaul could do for David was take him to his family before he returned to Novaun.

After three days of searching, Trendaul finally found a physician originally from Omaha who was willing to make the trip to Kansas City to supervise David's care in the frigate. Gavaun and Sharad had already taken Trendaul's children to Kansas City to spend a few days with Teri's family, who were all safe under the Light.

Many days passed before David gained the strength and desire to talk about what had happened. When he did, tears filled his hazel eyes and dribbled down his bruised temple. "What . . . happened . . . to . . . my . . . school?"

Teri rested a trembling hand on David's bed and leaned closer. "Most of the mids got out—nearly three thousand of them. They were brave and honorable, and the rescue was spectacular."

David's eyes were bewildered in his swollen face. "There were plebes . . . with bats . . . why? I'm hard but . . . always fair. I'm . . . no flamer."

David felt betrayed and it was no surprise. Trendaul watched Teri reach for a tissue and gently dry David's eyes. "Only a few of the midshipmen became violent," she said. "Only a few."

"It was the mind bond, David," Trendaul explained. "Tryamaz and the greater Kansas City area lie in ruin. Only the temple community survives under the Light."

"It's gone? . . . Royals Stadium? Kemper . . . Arena? Our old house?"

"Yes, David. It's gone," Teri said with surprising dispassion. "Gavaun and Sharad saw it when they took the kids to Mom and Dad."

"We suspect Zarr observed the destruction from his aircar and became so angry that he ordered those bonded to him to kill members of the Church."

"But . . . how? The Federalists all go . . . to Star Force."

"The world has turned upside down," Trendaul said. "Many Federalists have taken refuge in the Guardian communities—which are still under the Light, by the way—and just as many Nationalists have been urged to violence through Zarr's bond."

"I think . . . I understand. Maybe it's better Sara . . . and her friends . . . went to Eden after all."

David's observation startled Trendaul and made him uncomfortable. "Perhaps you're right."

* * *

Alone in his bedroom after his shower Monday morning, nearly two weeks after the invasion, Trendaul began dressing in the Fleet uniform Gavaun had given to him. Dressing in the clothing of his people felt odd after so long but strangely rejuvenating, as if he were awaking from a twenty-year dream and the sunlight of a beautiful new day was pouring into his window.

He slipped into the shimmering white slacks, then eased into the matching white tunic with its silver and diamond-trimmed half-vest and buttons made of diamonds. White socks and polished white shoes came next. Finally he reverently unfolded the white headband and placed it on his head, thrilling at the feel of the arelada mukaul bird, faceted to display his status as Guild librarian, resting against his forehead.

He went to the full-length mirror and gazed at himself for some time, not in an attempt to perfect his appearance but to digest it. Trendaul Alexander was gone forever, and in his place stood Lieutenant Avenaunta of Novaunian Fleet, the real Trendaul. How long would it take him to get used to this change?

Feeling Too Cool rub against his legs, Trendaul knelt to pick her up. She nuzzled up to his face, purring. Trendaul looked at his reflection again and chuckled. Some things wouldn't change at all. As long as he had Too Cool, he would never look like a typical Novaunian. "Come on, little lady," he cooed, "it's time to go home."

Trendaul carried Too Cool downstairs and ate breakfast with Gavaun and Sharad, who were, like him, wearing their Fleet dress uniforms. Eventually they gathered the few belongings they had and stepped into the cool December air, leaving the front door unlocked. Another family would make use of this house and the possessions he and Teri had brought from Parkridge. Trendaul drove the van to a grocery store parking lot, where the frigate was located, and left the keys in the ignition.

Within minutes the frigate descended into the military medical complex in Bethesda. Trendaul saw the Brigade of Midshipmen there, standing at attention in their companies. Affection warmed him. What was left of the brigade in D.C. had come to see David off. The mids had even gone to the trouble to scrounge for uniforms and do it right. That was nice.

As Trendaul emerged from the frigate with Gavaun and Sharad, he heard voices yell in unison: "Go Trendaul! Go Novaunian Fleet!"

Trendaul looked around, astounded. The Vice President of the United States stood near the brigade with several high-ranking naval officers and a few other dignitaries. The Naval Academy Drum and Bugle Corps began playing "Anchors Aweigh" and the midshipmen sang:

Anchors Aweigh, my boys, Anchors Aweigh.
Farewell to foreign shores, we sail at break of day-ay-ay-ay.
Through our last night on shore, drink to the foam,
Until we meet once more. Here's wishing you a happy voyage home.

Trendaul's throat tightened, emotion nearly overwhelming him. He loved these kids and felt a kinship with them he had never been able to acknowledge—until now. He smiled, reverently touching his fingers to the mukaul bird on his forehead and then stretching forth his hand and bowing his head, as if expanding his spirit to them. "Thank you."

The Vice President and his entourage approached Trendaul, Gavaun, and Sharad. The Vice President's brown eyes were lined with weariness and worry, but he was smiling. "On behalf of the United States of America, in appreciation for the part you played in saving the lives of thousands of United States citizens, I would like to present each one of you with a Legion of Merit medal."

The Vice President explained a little about the history of the Legion of Merit medal before he presented the awards to them and shook their hands. Trendaul accepted the medal, feeling honored. When the Vice President finally withdrew, Trendaul held up his arm and yelled, "Go Navy!"

“Go Navy!” echoed the brigade.
Trendaul couldn’t restrain himself from singing the most triumphant verse from “Anchors Aweigh”:

Stand, Navy, out to sea,

The mids joined him, booming:

Fight our battle cry;
We’ll never change our course, So vicious foe steer shy-y-y-y.
Roll out the TNT, Anchors Aweigh. Sail on to victory
And sink their bones to Davy Jones, hooray!

Mike Warren and Tim Artzer stepped out of ranks carrying a cooler, which they set on the ground at Trendaul’s feet. “We can’t give you a medal,” Mike said, “but we would like to have one last drink with you.” He lifted the lid, revealing cans of root beer in ice. Trendaul laughed.

Tim removed a can, the corners of his mouth twitching mischievously. He shook the can vigorously, then tossed it to Trendaul. Trendaul opened it and watched with delight as the foam spurted from the can and ran down his fingers. Sharad opened his can eagerly, and even Gavaun took a few sips from his.

Trendaul had downed his last drop when David’s gurney appeared with a team of medics, accompanied by the doctor from Omaha. The brigade again sang “Anchors Aweigh,” replacing “foreign shores” with “college joys” and finishing with the third verse, which they had not sung for Trendaul:

Blue of the Seven Seas; Gold of God’s great sun
Let these our colors be Till all of time be done-n-n-ne,
By Severn shore we learn Navy’s stern call:
Faith, courage, service true, with honor, over honor, over all.

Trendaul listened, touched and sad. He knew David was thankful to be alive and amazed that his mental functions seemed to still be intact, despite the blows to his head, but he was heartbroken. He had not studied at the Naval Academy for three and a half years only to be beaten up by crazed underclassmen and then discharged before graduation and his commissioning.

The Vice President thanked David for his service and presented him with a certificate of honorable discharge from the Navy, and then David’s company formed an arch of swords to honor him as he was carried to the frigate and loaded into it. Since David’s right arm was broken, he couldn’t salute, but his lips moved with the song, and when everything was silent again, he did manage to say: “You guys are the best. Keep your eyes in the boat . . . and in the Light.”

Trendaul repeated David’s last command loudly enough so that everyone could hear. “Yes, sir!” the midshipmen chorused as Trendaul held up his empty can of root beer to them in farewell.

* * *

Arulezz Zarr looked away from the telepathic vision image of David Pierce and focused his gaze on Jahnzel's appalled face. *Do you believe me now?*

"I can't believe Father would have required this of Myri and me," Jahnzel muttered.

Arulezz rested a hand on his brother's shoulder and squeezed. *Father didn't want to do this, it's true, and neither do I. In the end, though, Father would have required whatever God had directed.*

Jahnzel grunted, transmitting a thought to dissipate the image of his rival. *Father was no more divine than you are.*

Arulezz had come too close to death to harbor any delusions about possessing the blood of God in his veins. Only instinct had moved his finger to the manual eject button in time when his father's telepathic command had been ineffective, and his father's "divine" blood certainly hadn't saved him from being vaporized.

Arulezz knew, though, that if his people ever learned their noble families didn't possess the blood of God to give them physical protection beyond that of regular mortals, they would also begin doubting that their Divine Emperors had a unique conduit to God's will. What little remained of their nation would fall into chaos. With the capture of Earth's capital cities by the Nationalists and their mysterious light shields, the Earthon nations had fallen and anarchy reigned. What the planet needed now was order, and the Holy Nation could not provide that order and thereby insure their survival on this primitive planet if they were in confusion. Arulezz could not allow Jahnzel's observation to stand, no matter how true it was. *What you communicate is blasphemy.*

Jahnzel waved a hand. *I won't voice my opinions to the Nation and you know it.*

Arulezz gave Jahnzel's shoulder a mild slap and sat down in his father's black leather chair. *Even now, when your Divine Emperor directs you to give Myri to another man?*

I don't care how desperate we are, Lezz, this is wrong. I would rather return to Diron and live with the Malrezzites under the domes before I would give my beloved to a savage!

A savage with tremendous potential, especially now that we know his brother-in-law is a Novaunian. Arulezz still had a difficult time believing a Novaunian frigate had come out of nowhere and vaporized the Imperial aircar. A part of him was still quaking in terror.

At the same time, however, he couldn't believe his good fortune. Witnesses in Washington, D.C. had managed to see the face of the Novaunian ship's pilot during one of the rescues. In analyzing the images from the telepathic transmission recorder, Arulezz had known immediately the face was familiar. Many days had passed before he had made the connection—the pilot was closely related to Trendaul Alexander, probably a brother.

The Novaunian frigate had made three trips to Kansas City before leaving Earth, undoubtedly to return to Novaun. Arulezz suspected that one of those trips to Kansas City had been to move David Pierce, who, according to reports, had been wounded in Annapolis and transported to the military hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. Pierce would be physically and emotionally weak for many weeks, perhaps months. Myri would never have a better opportunity to bond his mind and his heart.

Pierce will be an excellent consort for Myri and an effective spy.

What if the man doesn't recover completely? What if you send her into that Mormon city to bond an invalid?

I'm willing to take that chance.

Jahnzel grabbed the telepathic transmission recorder and leaned over it, his emerald-green eyes feverish and bulging. *Pierce and his people hate us! He will never love Myri enough, but*

Myri will give her whole heart to him because she will believe God chose him for her. And she will suffer in this incompatible marriage every day of her life. You can't require this of her.

Arulezz slammed his fist down on the desk. "We have no choice, Jahn, and you know it!" Their nation was on the brink of extinction, and his most pressing concern was that David Pierce would never love Myri enough? What was the matter with him? *Most of our best warriors died with you; the mind bonds died with Father. It will take years for me to rebond the Earthons. I need an army to establish order, and the only hope we have of rebuilding Star Force is to recruit military leaders from the Nationalists. We need David Pierce, and Myri is the only hope we have for getting him!*

Jahnzel tapped his fingers on the transmission recorder, his expression one of disgust. *Why can't you consider the possibility that going to the domes is the right thing to do? That if our blood isn't divine, perhaps Malrezz was a true prophet and not a servant of Satan? That if the domies are flourishing and we are dying, maybe they are God's chosen people instead of us?*

That is treason!

Jahnzel's shoulders drooped. *No, that is honest inquiry. I am confused, Lezz, very confused, and I feel sick in my soul. What we're doing here abhors me! I wish you would make going to the domes an option.*

You're hysterical.

The domies are, at least, Dirons like us. Wouldn't it make more sense to join with them than with these Earthon strangers?

And how do you plan to transport three thousand people all the way to Diron in three warships, Jahn? Are you insane?

You've forgotten about the Eden transport. It returned a few days ago. We'll go in it.

You're serious, aren't you?

Yes, I am. We've been in exile too long, and there are too many peculiar things happening on this planet, things that unnerve me. We don't belong here.

Where was his dignity? His pride? *I will never desecrate our father's memory by groveling to the Malrezzites, and I can't have a Prince of Defense who is a blasphemous, babbling fool. Too much is at stake. Take your flagship and go.*

Jahnzel turned away from Arulezz, his thoughts wrapped in agony. *Whatever we do, we must be united. I won't abandon our people.*

Arulezz leaned back in his chair, relieved. He didn't want to lose his brother or his Prince of Defense. *Then you agree to take an Earthon wife?*

Jahnzel threw up his hands, his face twisted with frustration. *Why not? We're desperate; I know that as well as anyone. And once you present your plan to Myri, she will refuse to have anything to do with me. You are, after all, the Divine Emperor.*

APPENDICES

1. THE EDEN PLAN

An Eden citizen is Expressive and Empathic, Educated, Ethical, and Enterprising.

THE EQUALITY OF ZION

Equal Expression

United Hearts Forum, a public forum to express feelings and address colony concerns as a group.

All government executive meetings open to public.

All government leaders equally accessible to individuals in colony.

No censorship of media.

Equal Education

Individualized education and career counseling tailored to life mission.

Colony directed family home education program, using team building techniques, group therapy, and progressive educational techniques.

All material published or produced in colony made available to everyone over the Internet.

Equal Edification

Psychotherapy and analyzation of patriarchal blessing to determine life mission.

Every individual meets with therapist on regular basis for personal emotional health.

Equal Employment

All adult colonists contribute to community and, in turn, receive all goods needed from synthesizing machines.

Work and home environment equally blended.

Fathers and mothers equal in career education, opportunities, and child rearing.

Sustainable growth; “family planning” counseling and items available to all married colonists so that no couple has more children than they feel they can support with all of their community responsibilities.

Team building activities at all levels; cooperative management.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

Governor’s Council

Governor

Oversees the colony; liaison with Control Colony; oversees Board of Advisors and colony development. Presides at People’s Jury.

First Assistant

Oversees colony in governor’s absence; presides at Colony Assembly.

Second Assistant

Oversees emotional well-being of colony. Chief psychologist. Presides at United Hearts Forum.

Colony Clerk

Acts as secretary, recorder, treasurer to colony.

Citizens’ Council

Board of Advisors

Overseen by the governor. Advisors were selected by Benjamin Carroll, Rachel Vance, and Ann Eagle before arrival on Eden. Senior members of colony professions manage their professions in colony and act as advisors to the governor.

Colony Assembly

Lawmaking body of the colony. This assembly is to be conducted in open forum while colony is small and seeks to make laws by consensus. Participants in forum can be divided into their professional families to discuss issues in smaller units. As population of colony increases, village mayors will serve in this assembly to represent the desires of those in their villages. First assistant to the governor acts as “lawmaker.”

People’s Jury

Judicial body of the colony. Infractions in colony are to be dealt with in open forum. When colony is small, problems are handled on colony level. When a judgment is needed, members of forum ask questions and then make judgment by consensus without the defendant present. The governor acts as judge to pass sentence. As population grows, problems are handled in open forum on the local level, either in neighborhoods or villages. On colony level,

representatives from villages form the People's Jury. This forum works in the same way as the local forums do and can be viewed by entire colony. Governor is the "judge."

United Hearts Forum

This is a large group therapy-type forum intended to allow citizens to voice concerns, share feelings and experiences with the intent of deepening connection between citizens and uniting them. Second assistant to the governor acts as "facilitator."

2. GLOSSARY OF RELIGIOUS TERMS AND DOCTRINES

This glossary exists solely to help readers of *Fall to Eden* understand it better. The author has done her best to insure 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 *Fall to Eden*. You can find official information about Church beliefs at both churchofjesuschrist.org and comeuntochrist.org.

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 *Fall to Eden*, 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.

Contact with Spirit World: Latter-day Saints believe mortals can have contact with people who have died, but this is considered a rare and sacred occurrence. The scene where Sara communicates with her birth mother in a dream is more fantasy than reality.

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, Progression of: The Church teaches that the earth has existed and will exist in several different stages of physical progression. Those stages are:

1. *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.)
2. *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.)
3. *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.)
4. *Celestial:* The perfect, glorified state. (D&C 88:15-20.)

Earth, Spirit of: In Chapter 20, “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* 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 the 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 the story, 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.

Seminary: A class LDS teenagers attend for four years, where they study the scriptures. In areas like Washington, D.C., this class is held early in the morning on weekdays, before school.

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.

3. 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 the story, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Parkridge and Greenwood: Fictional towns in central Maryland.

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.

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 Zarr is building to protect Earth from invasion.

Synthesizing Machine: A machine that builds objects from the atom up. Fed by priming solution made from decomposed waste.

Telepathy: Communication from mind to mind and spirit to spirit. Involves transmitting thoughts and touching spirits.

Telepathic binding: When a large team of people telepathically seizes a planet-spirit and forces it into submission.

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.

Tryamaz: A city 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.

Zarrists: Label by which the citizens of the Holy Nation of the Son of God are known.

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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 web site **Novaun Novels** at 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*