

HEIRS OF NOVAUN Book 4

BOND WITH A TERRORIST

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Bond With a Terrorist 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

In memory of my father, Glenn E. Hedrick, Jr.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: A GOLD BOX FILLED WITH DISCS.....	1
PART 1: A CHANGE OF HEART.....	1
CHAPTER 1: A JOB OFFER.....	1
CHAPTER 2: A QUESTIONABLE MEMORY.....	6
CHAPTER 3: BOND OF HERITAGE.....	11
CHAPTER 4: THE ULTIMATE SON OF ABOMINATION.....	21
CHAPTER 5: A NEW UNDERSTANDING.....	29
CHAPTER 6: DISILLUSIONED.....	35
CHAPTER 7: DIFFERING VIEWS?.....	42
CHAPTER 8: DIFFICULT QUESTIONS.....	48
CHAPTER 9: A RATIONAL PASSION.....	54
CHAPTER 10: DECISION.....	65
PART 2: END OF EXILE.....	71
CHAPTER 11: A CERTIFIED NOVAUNIAN.....	71
CHAPTER 12: AN UNUSUAL TRIBUTE.....	77
CHAPTER 13: A NEW FAMILY.....	80
CHAPTER 14: THE RING AND THE THREAT.....	88
CHAPTER 15: FRACTURED RAINBOWS.....	93
CHAPTER 16: THANK-YOU CARD FROM GOD.....	98
CHAPTER 17: PLEA FOR SEPARATION.....	106
CHAPTER 18: AN UNBELIEVABLE DESTINATION.....	109
CHAPTER 19: AN IMPOSSIBLE VERDICT.....	115
CHAPTER 20: PENALTY AND PRIZE.....	124
PART 3: TRAITORS ON TRIAL.....	131
CHAPTER 21: FALSE SPIRIT.....	131
CHAPTER 22: NOBLEMAN AND HEIR.....	141
CHAPTER 23: DETHRONED.....	150
CHAPTER 24: RELEASE.....	156
CHAPTER 25: REINCARNATION OF AN ENEMY.....	160
CHAPTER 26: REPERCUSSIONS.....	166
CHAPTER 27: A SATISFACTORY HUSBAND.....	172
EPILOGUE: ONE FOREVER.....	174

Prologue: A GOLD BOX FILLED WITH DISCS

Aulanora Nalaurev carried the commudisc that had just arrived into her bedroom, her hands trembling and her throat burning. The return address read, “B. Nalaurev, Box 287, Fleet Post at Shalaun.”

A commudisc from Braysel came every two weeks, and every one was as difficult as the one before. She slid the disc out of its envelope and sat down on the edge of her bed in despair, staring at the disc in her hand for a minute, then clenching her fist to hide it from her view the next, then opening it again.

Aulanora stared at the disc for fifteen minutes, fighting the urge to slip the disc into the telepathic transmission recorder and assimilate its contents, her emotions in chaos. Why was her son in the Fleet? How could he kill other human beings? What had she done wrong? How could he live with himself? How could she live without him? Would it be so wrong to see his image for just a moment? To feel his thoughts and emotions?

She went to her dresser and picked up the little picture that always lay there, a child’s drawing of a yellow-haired woman with a ball. The sky was a thick blue line at the top of the piece of paper, the sun was a bright orange ball, and behind the woman were blue waves. The misspelled words on the paper read: “Mama, I love you because you make me sweet rolls and nut cookies and play ball with me on the beach. Braysel.”

The burning in Aulanora’s throat rose into her mouth, and tears blurred her vision, leaving the picture a blue, orange, yellow, and white blob in her hand. She set the picture back down on the dresser and gingerly placed the commudisc in the velvet-lined gold jewelry box with all of the other un-assimilated discs.

Part 1: A CHANGE OF HEART

Chapter 1: A JOB OFFER

Colonel Sharad Quautar communicated with Ton as usual at the Palm Pavilion, proceeding with unusual care. *King is being extremely cautious in his effort to destroy you. His agents have made no attempt yet to harm you. I believe that he plans to have you shot at his trial.*

The colonel's suggestion was logical in some ways, ludicrous in others. Ton could feel no fear because he didn't believe King planned to have him shot at a trial he might never attend, a trial that might never occur. *I've thought about this a lot. It makes sense to me that King would want to display his power that way, but there are too many variables. What if King never goes to trial? Even if he does, how does he know I'll be there?*

The plan does seem shallow in some ways, but right now, it makes more sense than anything. It gives us something to plan for.

Ton's spirit cringed with foreboding. What was coming? Even the colonel couldn't know for sure.

You'll wear a protective force field vest under your clothing, which will repel neurodarts and diffuse laser beams, Colonel Quautar explained.

Ton dropped his napkin onto his plate. *And if the assassin aims for my head?*

My greatest fear. There will be no way to secretly protect your head, and a direct hit to the head on high power would mean instant death. Your only hope in such a circumstance will be if I observe the assassin in time and am able to push you out of the way of the shot. The colonel placed a hand on his shoulder with a squeeze. *This is a dangerous business. Are you sure you want to go through with it?*

I don't have much choice.

The colonel raised his eyebrows. *There may be more choices than you think.*

I don't understand.

What do you want to do?

Why didn't the colonel just communicate what he was thinking? Why did he always have to play these stupid games? *I just want to be done with this.*

When you're done with this, where do you want to live?

Ton always hated this question. There were so many possibilities, yet nothing appealed to him. More than anything, he just didn't want to think about it. *I don't know. Let me think about it some more,* he communicated wearily, knowing he wouldn't think about it at all anytime in the near future.

Ton progressed through his days thinking as little of the future as he could and working to understand himself and deal with his past. He still communicated with Counselor Shauna Brunel, although his sessions were now only twice a week. Session after session, he relived the events and feelings of his past.

Counselor Brunel had green eyes and white hair that she usually wore in a French braid. She was pleasant and professional, a perceptive questioner, and Ton had always felt comfortable with her. He was so anxious to put his life in order that he was completely honest with her and with himself and did everything she told him to do.

For years, Ton had not been able to come to terms with the destruction of Adrian and Angela's marriage, Angela's false accusations that Adrian had beaten her, and Adrian's

subsequent refusal to communicate with him for three years. Ton had never wanted to confront his feelings on what had happened and had successfully avoided thinking about the events of that afternoon most of his adult life. Counselor Brunel led him into the pain again and forced him to express his feelings about what had happened.

Why were you so disturbed that Angela and Adrian's marriage broke up?

Because I wanted it to work.

Why did you want so badly for it to work?

Because I wanted Adrian to be happy.

Did you ever think Adrian would be happy with Angela?

Ton thought about that question for many minutes. No, he finally answered.

Why not?

Because Angela had always liked men with money, and Adrian didn't have much money.

Maybe she loved Adrian enough to overlook the fact that he didn't have much money.

That was what I wanted to believe when they got married.

What did you believe?

That Angela was the way she had always been.

If you so doubted Adrian would be happy, then why did it disturb you so much to be proved right? Naturally you would have felt sorry for Adrian and been disappointed that things didn't work out the way he wanted them to, but you were too skeptical about the marriage in the first place to be overly disturbed or disillusioned.

Ton had to admit that the counselor's observation was logical.

Was there a reason other than Adrian's happiness that made you want so badly for the marriage to work?

Ton nodded bitterly. *I wanted my mother to know Adrian and see that a poor man from the neighborhood could be a good husband and a worthwhile person.*

Adrian found your sister with another man. The fault for the break-up appears to have lain with her. It seems to me that Adrian proved his worthiness.

My mother didn't think so.

Were you really so surprised that she wasn't convinced?

Ton shook his head.

Why not?

Because she didn't want to accept him, and not enough time had passed.

So you were upset because the marriage ended prematurely, before Adrian had a chance to prove himself to your mother.

Ton nodded.

Why, Ton, would that disturb you so much now, six years later?

Ton experienced a sinking feeling of degradation, and he wanted to turn and run out of the office rather than face the truth. He gripped the armrests of his chair so hard his hands hurt. *It doesn't.*

Then what does disturb you?

Ton stared at the floor. *I don't think Angela was lying.*

Why don't you think Angela was lying?

Because Angela wasn't a liar and because . . . because Adrian kept saying, "I'm so sorry, Ton, I'm so sor . . ." Ton released the armrests and dropped his head into his hands,

unable to continue. There was no way he could express the disillusionment, the loss of respect for Adrian, and his own subsequent feelings of worthlessness and despair.

Counselor Brunel's spirit brushed his in compassion. *Why did Adrian's weakness make you feel worthless?*

Because I'm like Adrian. Because Adrian failed.

How did Adrian fail, Ton?

He failed to be different.

Different from whom?

The other boys in the neighborhood. Mamma was right.

Adrian may not be perfect, Ton, but he is different. What sort of education did he have to acquire to become a teacher?

Three years of advanced school.

How many of the other boys and girls who grew up in your neighborhood went to advanced school?

I don't know. Jacquae and me, and there was another girl, Sandra.

And you don't think graduating from advanced school made Adrian different?

I always thought it did. I was wrong. Ton forced himself to sit up and look at the counselor again. If an educated person can't be decent and moral, who can be?

Anyone who wants to be badly enough. The rich, the poor, the educated, the illiterate, the powerful, the laborers. Whether a person is moral has little to do with what his external circumstances in life are or even what other internal qualities he may possess. For example, a person may be honest, but he may not be humble; he may be patient, but not kind; he may be intelligent, but not moral.

So what you're telling me is that determining a person's sense of morality by his level of education is kind of like determining a person's ability to practice neuromedicine by his knowledge of botany.

Exactly.

How do you learn morality? And what makes one person's morality right and another person's morality wrong? Who decides?

A sense of morality comes from parents, religious training, and from conscience. A person will know in his heart if what he is doing is right. He just has to have the courage and the humility to look for the answers and the self-discipline to live them once he finds them.

It still doesn't make sense to me, Ton admitted.

Counselor Brunel smiled. *I think Adrian is different, and I also think that in many ways he's an idealistic, moral person. Not only that, but a person can change tremendously in six years. Do you think Adrian wanted to change?*

Ton fingered the corner of his mustache. After many moments of reflecting, he nodded.

What did he communicate or do that makes you believe he wanted to change?

He was just so shaken up, and he was more hurt and ashamed than angry at Angela. And when I saw him again, he was different. Kind of relaxed and relieved, but solemn and mature—just different.

Do you think he was happy?

Yes, I think so. He was married to a woman named Sliata, and they had a child.

Ton left Counselor Brunel that day, still puzzling over the issue of morality. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't understand it. Where did morality come from? From religion? But where did religion come from? If it really was from God, then why were there so many different religions? And why were there religions like Zarrism whose purpose it seemed was to demean and manipulate and exploit? Were religions creations of God that were corrupted by man over time, or were they mere creations of man? Or were they both? Could there be an uncorrupted religion? By the same token, could a religion created by man ever teach morality?

Parents could teach morality, it was true, but where did the parents learn it? If parents never learned morality or taught it to their children, then what hope did the children have? What hope did civilization have? Over time civilization, losing more and more moral consciousness with every generation, would deteriorate into chaos and corruption.

If it was true that a person learned morality from his conscience, then what was the origin of conscience? Was it passed from one generation to the next genetically? If it was, how? Why hadn't the evil genes multiplied with each new generation until they had consumed humanity completely? If the source of conscience was genetic, how could he, an Earthon who had been born on the other side of the galaxy, share any values with the Novaunians at all?

Why did he feel so emphatically that human life should be preserved, that it was wrong to hurt people, to lie, to steal, to cheat, and to murder; that it was wrong for a man to strike his wife, to be unfaithful to her, or to abandon her and his children? Where had he learned these things? He certainly hadn't learned them from his parents. Had he learned them from Earth's culture? Why then did he know that Zarrism, one of the sources of Earth's culture, was exploitative and wrong? Where had he obtained a conscience that was so different from that of his mother and sisters? Or had he? Did he have the same conscience and just use it differently?

Ton decided that he would study the religious development and various philosophical creeds of different planets and cultures in an attempt to understand the concept of morality. He began spending forty-five minutes in study every night of the hour he normally spent assimilating InterMind news. He didn't tell anyone of his new pursuit. He understood something of the Novaunian philosophy and knew that Novaunians attributed the source of conscience to God. Perhaps they were right; perhaps they were not. He knew he would not be able to make a comprehensive study with too much persuasion from one point of view. He wanted to form his own conclusions and decided not to direct any more questions on the subject to Counselor Brunel.

Lren Tervel finished his apprenticeship with Dr. Hovaus and, after New Year's Day, started his new job on the General Network in northern Palensea. The conflict between Ausha and Lren had made everyone who worked with them tense, and no one was disappointed to see Lren leave.

Occasionally Ausha asked Ton where he wanted to work after they certified, a question Ton always evaded. Before lunch one day in Ton's office, Ausha pressed a commudisc into Ton's hand.

Ton glanced at the disc in curiosity. *What's this?*

Ausha's eyes shown with excitement. *It's from my father. An application for position as neurophysician at his clinic. He doesn't want our partnership to be dissolved, and he believes you would work with him and Faurney as well as you work with me.*

Ton stared at Ausha. A research position with an authority in neuromedicine like Dr. Vumen Ferudant seemed like a magnificent dream, almost too magnificent to be real. It was the position for which he had been working his whole career. How could he not be ecstatic about it? On the other hand, how could he even consider it?

Is there enough work for both of us?

They have more work than they can handle right now and are referring much of what comes their way to other specialists. Father plans to hire a fourth specialist, and he would like it to be you. Ausha squeezed Ton's arm. I know you weren't expecting this, but please consider it. I can't bear the thought of going back to Dinevlea without you.

Ton couldn't bear it either. He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything. He gazed at her in tenderness and confusion, wanting to tell her everything but knowing he couldn't.

Ausha communicated hopefully, as if in answer to his thoughts, *You have to come. We're partners.*

Chapter 2: A QUESTIONABLE MEMORY

Paul sat across the kitchen table from his grandfather, his grandmother having just left for the day to go shopping in Jastray with Maranda Vundaun. His grandfather had communicated little that morning and seemed not only preoccupied, but disturbed. His manner was so unusual that Paul couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Paul, his grandfather finally communicated, pushing his plate aside. There's something I want to communicate with you about, and I'm not sure how to do it.

Several things raced through Paul's mind at once, and he found himself growing anxious. Was Grandfather ill? Had Colonel Quautar's people found Sanel? Had Deia been in an accident? Had she lost the baby? Paul suddenly felt angry at Sanel and what he had done to Deia. He missed her more than ever now that he wasn't allowed to communicate telepathically with her anymore.

Patan perceived Paul's agitation and patted his arm. *No, no one's hurt. It's nothing like that.* He withdrew his hand, his gaze tentative. *I want you to be the Doshyr heir.*

Paul couldn't have been more astounded if his mother and father had miraculously walked through the door. During the nine months he had lived on Novaun, virtually no one he had met in Menaura had let him forget that he had been born to be the Doshyr heir, no one but his grandfather. They had discussed the possibility once during Paul's first days on Novaun, and his grandfather had never mentioned the subject again. To have him now communicate his desire so bluntly bewildered Paul.

It's very difficult for me to ask you to do this because you haven't been on Novaun long and I know you're not completely comfortable with your life here yet. I've thought about this a great deal and discussed it with Uncle Cherl and Saum, and we all agree that you should be the heir. We all feel you would be an excellent high patriarch when the time comes. It's what they believe is right, and it's what I want—I want it very much. I know this is a shock, but please consider it; seriously consider it. I'll give you as much time as you need—months or even a year if you need it.

On one hand, Paul was flattered; on the other hand, his grandfather's request filled him with apprehension. What answer could he give? His grandfather had asked him only to consider it. How could he refuse? He nodded slightly. *I'll consider it.*

His grandfather's countenance suddenly filled with joy, and Paul knew that his grandfather was sincere in his desire and that he believed him capable. For a fraction of a second, Paul himself almost believed he was capable.

* * *

Deia Zaurvau awoke Third Day morning of the third week in First Month, her feelings mixed. On one hand, she was excited about the prospect of seeing Paul. She hadn't seen him since her visit to Menaura, and since her home was secured under mind shield, she had been forced to correspond with him by commudisc instead of through direct telepathic communication. On the other hand, she knew they wouldn't be able to mentally put aside the reason they were getting together in the first place—their mother had died a year ago that day.

Teren left for work, and Deia set the breakfast dishes in the synthesizing machine to be cleaned. Paul arrived only a few minutes later. She embraced him, tears coming to her

eyes. "Thanks for coming. I don't think I could have made it through this day without you."

"I don't think I could have either," Paul whispered.

Deia withdrew and gently wiped her eyes. "I don't think she would want us to weep. Our lives are exactly the way she would want them to be. Sort of."

Paul allowed Deia to lead him into the living room. "Are they?"

Deia seated herself on the couch and motioned Paul into the lone red armchair. "Is your life really so bad?"

"No, it's not bad, just confusing." Paul leaned on one arm and stared at the floor. "Grandfather asked me to be the Doshyr heir."

Deia thought Paul should feel honored, but she didn't dare tell him that. "What did you tell him?"

"That I would consider it. What else could I do?" Paul sat up and recounted the conversation he had had with their grandfather. "I'm still in shock. It makes me feel good that Grandfather has that kind of confidence in me, but, at the same time, I don't know if I could ever cope with having that kind of responsibility. More than anything, I don't know if I'll ever feel like a Novaunian."

"It's only been nine and a half months, Paul."

"Nine and a half months seems to have been long enough for you."

Deia shook her head quickly. "No, not really."

"You don't feel like a Novaunian yet?"

"I do in some ways. In other ways, I may never." Deia thoughtfully stroked the red linen armrest. "But I don't think that matters."

"Maybe it doesn't matter in your life, but it does in mine. I don't know how I can be the Doshyr heir if I don't feel like a Novaunian. Deia, I don't even feel like a Doshyr!"

"Grandfather doesn't seem to care about that."

"That's true," Paul admitted. "He doesn't."

"What do you want to do?"

"Honestly? I don't know." He looked at Deia's stomach with interest. "You're starting to look pregnant. Have you felt the baby move yet?"

"No, but I have seen her move on the Awareness monitor."

"Her?"

"Yes! Our baby is a girl. We're naming her Michelle Rose."

* * *

Paul remained in Shalaun five more days, spending Seventh Day evening with Ton and Ausha and their friends at a Coalition social, having a wild and enjoyable time with young people who didn't know him and didn't care whether he would ever be the Doshyr heir. Once Paul left, Deia was dumped back into her lonely routine.

If Deia handled her confinement well, it was only because she was so lacking of energy that she didn't want to go anywhere anyway. Colonel Quautar allowed her very few excursions away from her home other than Devotional, and those she was allowed were always under guard. Even her physician saw her in her home. She was depressed and irritable at times, which was difficult for Teren, but in concern for her emotional well-

being, he didn't go anywhere she couldn't go except school, work, and an occasional shopping trip.

Deia spent her days doing a little housework, playing a little piano, and spending a lot of time sleeping and studying for her elementary school certification exam. Twice a week a tutor came and gave her formal training in telepathy. She was progressing, but she still felt telepathically weak. Teren and Deia's friends and family members spent many evenings at their home, and on the evenings they were alone, they studied the Novaunian cultural arts together, an exciting topic for Deia and a relatively unfamiliar one for Teren.

Sometimes Deia reached into her memory in an attempt to discover who had bound her mind to his and was never successful. One day when she was feeling more energetic than normal, she decided to conduct her search in earnest. She sat at the piano and played minuets in an attempt to put herself into her childhood and clear her mind of other thoughts. Event after event from her childhood with Lena, Paul, and Sanel flowed through her consciousness, but she saw and felt nothing that even remotely resembled a violation of her mind.

Where was it? How had it happened? Who had done it? As illogical and impossible as it seemed, Deia believed Sanel was the person who had captured a cell in her brain and that he had simply taught one of his agents how to manipulate the bond. Deia went over and over every event in her childhood in Tryamazt that had involved anyone other than Sanel, Lena, or Paul and found nothing.

She played for hours, her back aching and her hairline wet with perspiration as she reached further and further into her memory. It had to be there somewhere, perhaps before Sanel had taken her to Earth. She remembered her mother's sadness, her father's broad shoulders, and playing with Mara. She remembered lying with Paul on a different floor, in a different house, with Mara shaking toys in her face, and she remembered Evelayna's wispy blond hair and her Aunt Tashaura's smiles.

She felt large hands lift her from the floor, hands like her father's. She looked curiously into peculiar eyes that didn't belong to her father, feeling confused. She kicked her legs and whimpered. She wanted her father, not this strange person.

"Shhh . . . shhh . . ." the stranger whispered with a smile. *It's all right. I'm your Uncle Jovem.* He held her close and rocked her, soothing her with his whispers. She smiled and cooed. She felt warmth around her head, and then it was gone. A moment later, the strange man who was so like her father put her back on the floor next to Paul, and she watched his feet move across the carpet as he walked out of the room.

Deia awoke to her present surroundings as if awaking from a dream, her elbows on the piano and her face in her hands. Everything around her seemed so silent. Even her heart felt silent, silent with emptiness. Uncle Jovem had done it gently in his own home, there in the presence of his wife, daughter, and children of the brother who had loved him, and no one had ever known.

Deia reached out to Teren for comfort but was prevented from doing so by the mind shield that was protecting her and holding her captive. She slowly arose and trudged to the couch. She lay very still, staring at the white velvet upholstery, feeling polluted, her heart convulsing in loneliness.

Teren returned home hours later and found her still lying on the couch. He knelt down beside her and caressed her, and she clasped him and pulled him close.

* * *

Two evenings later, after Deia had numbed herself somewhat to what she had remembered, Colonel Quautar came to her home to discuss the situation with her and Teren as they were finishing dinner. Deia told the colonel about her efforts to remember when a cell in her brain had been captured, then detailed her memory of her Uncle Jovem.

Colonel Quautar folded his arms on the polished wood table. *I have no doubt of the accuracy of your memory, Deia, but what you remember about that moment in your uncle's home may not be when you lost control of that cell in your brain. There's no way your uncle could have manipulated that bond without being here. It has to be someone else.*

Deia stood up and began stacking dishes. *Theoretically, yes, but there's no way you can really know. My uncle worked with Earth's Ex-men and Eslavu for seventeen years and was certainly able to develop new methods of mind control. He's already developed a way to do the impossible—lie about his essence. What is so preposterous about his being able to figure out a way for another person to manipulate that bond?*

Teren arose and picked up his plate. *You have to admit, she has a point.*

The colonel gazed at Deia thoughtfully. *You do have a point, but I'm still skeptical.*

Deia took Teren's plate and headed into the kitchen. *I know that Sanel supposedly has to touch his spirit to mine to manipulate the bond, but could he do it through another person with whom he has a telepathic bond?* She set the dishes on the marble countertop and dampened a clean dishtowel. *Could he manipulate Aunt Tashaura's bond and cause her to manipulate my bond? Could he manipulate my bond and by so doing use the dijauntu bond that exists between Teren and me to try and manipulate Teren?*

Deia returned to the tiny dining area just in time to see both Teren and the colonel nod. Teren took the damp dishtowel from her hand. *One mind can always be used as a channel for another, and one bond can always be a channel for another bond. Even so, to manipulate a bond, spirits have to touch.*

King could use Tashaura's mind to manipulate yours, but to do so he has to touch his mind to hers, which still means he needs to be on Novaun, the colonel explained.

Deia sat back down at the table as Teren quickly wiped it. *But perhaps he is here.*

The colonel shook his head. *He isn't here. I know where he is.*

You do? Deia communicated in surprise. *Then why hasn't he been apprehended?*

Teren took the towel into the kitchen and slapped his hands together over the recycling tank. *Because he's on the Sovereign with an entire fleet to protect him.*

Deia had no doubt that Teren was right and was satisfied that Sanel was not on Novaun. *I know that Sanel never did a dijauntu bond with Aunt Tashaura. Could he have a dijauntu bond with someone? That person would know everything about him, would in a sense be him. Wouldn't that person be able to manipulate the bond?*

Teren returned to his chair. *No, because the dijauntu partner would only be him in memory, not in spirit. To manipulate a bond, spirits have to touch.*

But they do touch, always, in that thread that binds them, Deia communicated.

The colonel shook his head. *It isn't enough.*

Theoretically, Deia communicated pointedly.

Theoretically, anything is possible, the colonel admitted.

Teren took Deia's hand across the little table. *Have you been able to trace the bond, minion?*

Yes, but it hasn't done any good. The thread leads us only to space.

Well, then that proves it, Deia communicated. My bond goes into space and Sanel is in space. What more do you want?

That doesn't prove anything, Deia, the colonel communicated.

Perhaps not, but you have to admit, it does make sense.

The colonel's face was solemn with concern. *What is it that's worrying you?*

Deia sighed. *I'm not sure. Maybe I'm just afraid that you're going to find this mysterious agent and that it won't matter, that I'll be Sanel's slave forever.*

You aren't your uncle's slave, the colonel assured.

Aren't I? He's a tiny step away from controlling my mind, and he most certainly controls my life.

Chapter 3: BOND OF HERITAGE

Braysel took the commudisc he had just received from Miaundea out of the telepathic transmission recorder and threw it down on his bunk. Why did she have to work in Mautysia? Why did she always have to tell him how wonderful the people there were? Why did she always have to tell him things about his history that even he didn't know? He was sick of it. He couldn't wait to marry her and get her away from Novaun. Then she could study Gudyneans or Latanzans or Manoureans or whomever and would stop nagging him with her grand ideas about getting the Isolationists and Fleet supporters to understand each other.

Braysel didn't receive another commudisc from Miaundea for another five days. He slipped the disc into the telepathic transmission recorder, and her image materialized in front of him. She had recorded the disc sitting in a chair, and Braysel seated himself in a chair facing her, touching her hands as he always did and imagining she could actually feel his hands on hers. The minute he looked at her face, he knew something was wrong.

Her face was pale, her yellow-green eyes glistening. *Hello, Bray. I just received your last commudisc and . . .* She stared at her lap for a moment, then looked back up at him, heartbroken.

Braysel couldn't bear to see her so hurt. What had happened? He waited for her to continue, holding his breath in dread.

I feel that something's wrong between us, and I don't know what it is. She paused again, the same painful kind of pause as before. *You've just been so . . . cold and distant. At first I thought you were having problems with work. Please communicate with me soon and tell me what's bothering you. I don't want it to be like this.*

Miaundea's image faded, leaving Braysel shocked and humbled. His first instinct was to communicate with her immediately and tell her that nothing was wrong, but he quickly stopped himself. Cold and distant? Had he really treated her that way? But how could he have? His feelings for her certainly weren't cold and distant. On the other hand, Miaundea was sincerely hurt. Either she was being abnormally sensitive or something really was wrong.

Braysel didn't like what she was doing in Mautysia, it was true, but he wasn't irritated with Miaundea personally, or at least he didn't think he was. Could his dislike of her work be affecting his relationship with her? The possibility made him feel more ashamed than ever. Perhaps the only way to make things right with Miaundea was to somehow force himself to feel comfortable with her work in Mautysia.

Braysel slept little that night. The one thing he had to admit was that Miaundea's plan to give their children their pacifist heritage was a good one. One way or another they would get it, and Braysel certainly didn't want them to get it from members of his family. Why, however, did she have to work to change all of Novaun? All of the Union? Even as Braysel asked himself those questions, he couldn't help but ask himself the same question in reverse—why shouldn't she?

Was Miaundea's plan to help the Fleet supporters and Isolationists understand each other a good one or not? Was it the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do? Braysel couldn't make himself believe that what Miaundea was doing was wrong. Perhaps her plan was not completely realistic, but something about it felt right. Understanding between the

two factions would make Novaun more unified and that was a very good thing—that was the *right* thing. So why did he feel so threatened by this good, right thing?

Braysel eventually drifted to sleep, his mind still churning with questions and self-reproach. When he awoke in the morning, he understood his inability to support Miaundea's work. Deep down he believed that if he accepted pacifism in any way he would undermine the Fleet.

It was what his parents felt, only in reverse. They could not accept the Fleet in any way because that acceptance would undermine the Isolationist Movement. Intellectually, Braysel had known the ideologies weren't so different and that a person could, theoretically at least, believe in both—Miaundea had helped him understand that—but in his heart, he still hadn't accepted it.

What would he communicate to Miaundea? He understood what his problem was, but he didn't know how to fix it. After work, dinner, and a hard workout at the gym, he finally knew what he had to do. Once he was alone in his compartment, he transmitted his thoughts to a relay, who in turn transmitted his thoughts to Novaun and Miaundea.

Angel . . . I'm so sorry I hurt you.

Bray? Are you all right? Are you angry with me?

No. I'm not angry with you. I'm just a selfish idiot. He poured his feelings out to her. *Miaundea, I need to feel good about my heritage. I want you to teach me pacifism.*

How can I teach you anything about pacifism?

I need you to teach me everything about pacifism.

But you know far more than I do.

What I know is warped and you have such a fresh perspective on it. Please, Miaundea.

Well, when you put it that way . . . yes. Yes, of course I'll do it.

* * *

In the months that passed, Miaundea saw Braysel's sister Mauya once in a while, but when they met, they never discussed Braysel. For this reason, Miaundea was surprised when Mauya asked her to lunch with one surprising purpose in mind—*We need to communicate about Bray.*

Miaundea met Mauya at a quaint little restaurant in the theater district. Mauya, as glamorous as ever, was wearing a soft, cream-colored body suit trimmed with rubies and onyx, her lips bright with red gloss, her wavy gold hair pulled away from her face with a band of red, black, and purple silk. Once they had ordered, Mauya came directly to the point: *You have to persuade Bray to quit the Fleet.*

I can't do that.

Mauya shook her head adamantly. *No Miaundea, you don't understand. Bray has no choice. He will never be accepted back into the family if he doesn't quit the Fleet.*

I can't do it. I have no right to ask him to do something he wouldn't feel good about.

You have no right? Of course you have the right! This is serious, Miaundea. This is your future we're discussing, your future, not just Bray's. The future of your children. Grandfather hasn't changed his position one iota. He will not perform a marriage for Bray or allow him contact with the family if he doesn't repent.

Foreboding filled Miaundea's heart. Braysel's grandfather was requiring repentance, nothing less. Miaundea didn't think that quitting the Fleet would be enough. She had no doubt that Braysel would be required to admit that joining the Fleet had been wrong and sever all ties to his Fleet past. His parents didn't like the fact that her father was a Fleet officer. Would total repentance require that he sever all ties to her? Or would it require that she embrace the pacifist ideology? Miaundea thought that either possibility was likely.

When I agreed to marry Bray, I knew what I was getting into. I'll marry him with or without his family. Miaundea felt as if marrying him without his family would be easier.

Mauya stared at her in disbelief. *I'm sorry, Miaundea; I don't mean to offend you, but you are extremely naïve, and I don't mean about the whole financial side of things, but about the marriage relationship itself. Bray is my brother, and I love him dearly, but do you really think that a man who would put the Fleet above his family won't eventually do the same thing to you and to your children? How can you marry into a situation like that?*

Mauya's assertions pierced deeply, not because they were new, but because they were so astute. Many people Miaundea knew had at different times suggested the same thing, and Miaundea couldn't deny that she had thought about it herself. More than anything, this entire attitude made her angry because these people hadn't the slightest comprehension of what Braysel was going through. They didn't know how much he loved his family and how much pain the separation caused him. Miaundea was confident in Braysel's commitment to her. Why did people keep attacking her for something they didn't understand?

Mauya perceived something of Miaundea's anger and loyalty to Braysel in the exchange. *I'm sorry, Miaundea.* She sighed in frustration. *I'm just worried about you two. And what's going on between Bray and the family is just so wrong, so utterly wrong.*

Braysel's entire situation baffled Miaundea. She had believed for some time that, in the eternal scheme of things, Braysel was somehow a catalyst to bring the Isolationists and Fleet supporters together, but how? The course Braysel was following seemed to be doing the opposite.

Miaundea and Mauya's food arrived, but neither one of them could bring themselves to eat yet. Finally Miaundea communicated, *I agree that it's wrong. But I don't have any solutions. My father told me that I should let Bray work out his family business on his own. I'm thinking more and more that it's some of the best advice he's ever given me.*

Mauya relaxed and gazed at Miaundea affectionately. *You're the best thing that's ever happened to Bray. I just wish Mother and Father agreed with me.*

What exactly do they think of me?

I'm not sure they know themselves. I know they don't entirely approve of you.

How can they? Miaundea communicated humorously. *My father is a Fleet officer.*

But that seems such a little thing. You would think they would be relieved that you're a Novaunian.

Miaundea wasn't comfortable with Mauya's comment. She frowned, taking a bite of her sandwich. *Relieved that I'm a Novaunian?*

Well, yes. It would have been so easy for him to marry a girl of a different race.

Yes, I guess it would have been, Miaundea communicated, feeling disturbed and not sure why.

* * *

Braysel expanded his spirit to encompass every fiber of his armed shuttle. His spirit flowed through the metal, the circuits, the electromatrixes, the lasers, and the engine like blood, making the ship's body one with his. As navigator Mykal Vandur, telepathy scientist Trevaun Surkel, and engineer Wilyl Faumtren expanded their spirits and overlapped each other's and Braysel's, Braysel could feel that their nervousness and anticipation was as intense as his own. After months of thought control exercises, flight simulation, maneuvering exercises in the armed shuttle, and practice in the VisionRun lanes moving themselves with the spirit dimension formula, they were finally getting to use the formula in flight.

The four executed their separate parts of the spirit dimension formula as they had done so many times before, carrying it through with a speed and precision that came only through countless hours of practice. A surge of living energy engulfed the craft and pressed down, everything in their field of vision seeming to sink away and, at the same time, advance toward them, every hint of sound sucked into nothingness.

Braysel's mind was blank except for the coordinates of the shuttle's destination, but his spirit reveled in the rapture and excitement it felt in the combined spirit energy of his companions. Everything around them changed to an opalescent blur, and in an instant, the craft traveled from the airlock to its projected coordinates two thousand meters from the *Glautel Monsa*. The four gazed in wonder through the canopy at the curve of the *Glautel Monsa*'s white wing and the hundreds of airlocks that led to launching and landing tubes, when suddenly, they felt their bodies again. Mykal whooped in excitement, and the other three followed with vigorous cheers.

The weeks that followed brought stringent flight control exercises. Braysel and his crew spent hours in the armed shuttle, their minds blank except for the spirit dimension formula and the repeated coordinates given them by the Command Center. The Command Center formulated fight paths that took them as far as thirty light-years away from the *Glautel Monsa*, directing them to move about the test area with increasing precision and speed. Then came days flying with one other ship of their squadron, then the weeks of flight coordination with the entire squadron.

Braysel and the other pilots, navigators, engineers, and telepathy scientists that composed the flight crews of the two new squadrons spent many hours brainstorming new design ideas for a compact two-man crew fighter that would be energized by the spirit dimension formula. Braysel, as young as he was compared to most of the other men involved in the flight testing, was the only one who possessed equal knowledge in the fields of piloting, navigation, engineering, and telepathy science. He was anxious to have a new craft designed and contributed many creative ideas which Colonel Sedel, the engineer directing the project, found useful.

As much as Braysel enjoyed his work, he was anxious and depressed much of the time. He continued to send a commudisc to Maurek every two weeks, and Maurek still refused to reply. Braysel had known it would take awhile for Maurek to feel comfortable with his betrothal to Miaundea, but half a year was a long time. Braysel had almost given up hope that he and Maurek would ever be friends again.

Braysel lived for commudiscs from Miaundea. Every commudisc she sent contained hours of information on the history and culture revolving around Novaunian pacifism, along with her observations. She was excited about all she was learning, and her

excitement was beginning to move Braysel to appreciation. He had never felt such understanding and support from anyone, yet he couldn't help but think that Miaundea was the cause of his current dilemma. Had he not met Miaundea, he wouldn't have had to betray Maurek. Had he not become betrothed to Miaundea, he wouldn't have ever had to worry about how he was going to provide her with a family and an honorable marriage.

Braysel corresponded regularly with Mauya and sent commudiscs to his parents often, telling them what he could of his life without mentioning his work, but he never received any type of reply. He bitterly realized that they probably disposed of the discs as soon as they received them, without assimilating so much as a thought.

He anguished for Miaundea, but the prospect of an extended leave filled him with anxiety. He believed it was still a year away, but what could he possibly accomplish in a year that he hadn't moved a millimeter toward accomplishing in half a year? His situation seemed more and more hopeless, and he couldn't help but feel frustrated and trapped.

After work one day, Braysel received a small package from Miaundea. He took it back to his cabin and eagerly opened it. Inside the small box was a commudisc and an exotic ring carved out of green jade with the word "beloved" engraved on the inside of the band. Breathless with anticipation, Braysel quickly inserted the commudisc in his telepathic transmission recorder. Miaundea's image materialized in front of him, vivid and beautiful.

Emotions of love and emptiness immediately overwhelmed Braysel. Her eyes were intense with yearning. *I miss you, Bray.*

I miss you too, angel, he whispered.

Braysel lost himself for thirty minutes in Miaundea's communication, then sat in front of his own telepathic transmission recorder and formulated his reply. He spent much of the evening praying, begging God to inspire his parents to accept him back into the family. He fell asleep feeling serene, as if everything would eventually work out. After all, hadn't Miaundea agreed to marry him? Hadn't her father approved the marriage? Weren't those two things, in themselves, miracles?

Braysel dreamed strange, graphic dreams of soaring through space in a new fighter, at the same time mentally seeing every process that made the fighter function, only there were no electromatrixes or engines, but instead, an artificial brain.

Braysel awoke and sat up in bed abruptly, overwhelmed with excitement. That was it! The artificial brain!

He and his colleagues had been perplexed by how they could construct a craft to function with the spirit dimension formula without the necessary four people. They had decided that such a craft would need a device that would store spirit energy and would use the stored spirit energy to produce new spirit energy to work in conjunction with the spirit transformation formula emitted by the pilot and his navigator, thus eliminating the need for the two crew members presently needed to execute the spirit energy formula.

Scientists had, in the past decade, made advances in harnessing spirit energy for medical and commercial use. Much work had been done to develop ways to incorporate the spirit energy in space flight, but Novaunian engineers had encountered the same problem those on the *Glautel Monsa* now faced—how to construct a device that would store and produce spirit energy.

Braysel's grandfather had already designed an artificial brain that was powered by spirit energy. His grandfather had not discovered a way to produce spirit energy, but he had found a way to store it and to make it work with the Awareness monitor.

The power generators and matrixes in Braysel's dream were almost identical to the artificial brain his grandfather had engineered. The spirit energy generators of his dreams not only stored spirit energy and allowed it to interface with the Awarenesses of the men in the flight crew as the artificial brain interfaced with an Awareness image produced by an Awareness monitor, they produced new spirit energy!

The formulas were all there in his mind, and he had no doubt they would work. It all was so simple. Why hadn't anyone thought of it before? His mental image of the spirit energy generator was as vivid as if he had already built it. He immediately transmitted a thought to activate his telepathic transmission recorder and poured his new knowledge into the machine. Then he telepathically turned on the lights, sprang out of bed, and awoke Wilyl.

I know how to do it, Wilyl! I know! It came to me in a dream! I know how to build a spirit energy generator!

Wilyl awoke with a start and sat up, his light brown hair disheveled, his gray eyes wide with vigor. *You aren't serious.*

Of course I'm serious! It's based on the same principles as the artificial brain!

* * *

Miaundea stepped noiselessly up the walk to the Avenaunta home thirty minutes before dawn. Maurek had not come home on leave once since her betrothal to Braysel, and Miaundea knew that he still hadn't replied to any of Braysel's commudiscs. She had been heartbroken for Maurek in the beginning, but five months had passed and she was on the verge of exasperation.

She thought that if she could communicate with Maurek and explain to him what had happened, she might be able to soften him a little. She had enlisted the help of Maurek's mother, and finally, after four weeks, his mother had been able to persuade him to come home.

Mineste Avenaunta met Miaundea at the door and gazed down at her with sad blue eyes. Miaundea was instantly alarmed. *What's the matter?*

He's changed. He's cynical, and there's a harshness about him I've never seen before. He may refuse to communicate with you.

I have to try. Miaundea turned and walked down the quiet hall to Maurek's bedroom, her emotions a tangle of anticipation, anxiousness, and dread. Miaundea knew Maurek's mother didn't understand why she wanted to communicate with Maurek in this way, but it didn't seem to bother her and she didn't ask any questions. Miaundea carefully pushed open Maurek's door and slipped into his room.

Maurek lay in bed under a blue quilt, the starlight pouring through his window and illuminating his face. In his sleep he didn't appear cynical or harsh, just exhausted and desolate. Miaundea hesitated there for a moment, unable to breathe. What would he do? What would he communicate? Suddenly she wasn't sure this was a good idea. Was this the way Maurek had felt when he had invaded her bedroom?

Not seeing a chair, she knelt down next to his bed. Hearing movement near him, Maurek opened his eyes and turned toward the noise. Miaundea froze. She hadn't expected Maurek to be such a light sleeper, to discover her presence so soon.

Maurek sat up abruptly and scowled down at her. *What are you doing here?*

I . . . I wanted to communicate with you.

I have nothing to communicate with you. He lay back down, nestled himself into a comfortable position, and closed his eyes.

Miaundea hadn't known what to expect, but she hadn't believed he would ignore her. She reached out with her thoughts: *Please don't be this way, Maurek.* But he had closed his mind to her communications.

She stood up. "You make me sick, Maurek. Bray didn't pursue me; I pursued him. We didn't mean to fall in love; it just happened. It nearly killed Bray when he realized how much you would be hurt. Now here you are, so proud, and so bitter that you can't think of anyone but yourself. You don't care one iota that Bray is despondent, thinking you hate him, that he misses you desperately, and that he needs your support. Some friend you are." Maurek didn't so much as flutter an eyelash in reply.

Miaundea remained there a minute longer, gradually gaining control of her anger. "I was so thrilled, Maurek, when we started trying to understand each other. I wanted us to be friends, and I believed at the time that I had made my feelings about you perfectly clear. I never imagined you would place such conditions on our friendship."

Miaundea lingered there another moment, waiting for Maurek to open his eyes and communicate with her, but he didn't. Finally she turned and left, communicating nothing to Maurek's mother on the way out.

Miaundea took an airbus back to Mautysia that morning, worked her shift at the restaurant as a hostess, then took an airbus back to Shalaun that evening. She went to Devotional with her family the next morning, and as she had anticipated, Maurek was there. She tried many times to get him to look at her, but he avoided even that.

Miaundea's family sat in the holy room several rows in front of Maurek and his family. Miaundea couldn't concentrate on the service. It was as if she could feel Maurek's stare bore through her head. Was he angry? Or was he still deliriously attracted to her? She wasn't sure which possibility disturbed her more.

Finally, when the service was over, Miaundea turned and smiled at Maurek weakly. His face was pale, but his features had relaxed and his icy blue eyes had become soft with love. After a moment, Maurek self-consciously averted his gaze, and Miaundea knew that he wasn't ready to communicate with her yet. Still, she felt progress had been made, and she left the house of worship feeling relieved.

The days passed, and Miaundea didn't worry about Maurek anymore. He would accept the situation eventually, and Miaundea had no doubt that he still considered Braysel his friend. Miaundea told Braysel about her meeting with Maurek and tried to assure him that everything would be all right, but Braysel remained skeptical.

When Miaundea had first moved to Mautysia, her work had been physically demanding, but exciting. She spent her early afternoons working as a hostess in a restaurant downtown and her evenings working in the backstage crew at one of the city's minor theaters. She met many types of people from different pacifist countries and planets in the Union and was learning a great deal. Nearly everyone she met was unsure of her motives for being in Mautysia and treated her as an oddity, but they were helpful and kind. She was frank about her involvement with Braysel, and although people sometimes made critical comments, most respected her honesty and sincerity enough to remain silent.

Miaundea's attitude began changing, however, after her discussion with Mauya about Braysel's situation. As hard as she tried, Miaundea couldn't forget Mauya's relief that

Miaundea was of Novaunian race. That a pacifist would be less offended by marriage to a strong Fleet supporter than by marriage to a person of another race suggested that even if they didn't think interracial marriage was a sin, it repelled them.

What if Braysel had married a woman of another race? Would that have been such a terrible thing? Despite the potential discrepancy between lifespans, Miaundea couldn't make herself feel that such a marriage would have been wrong, not if the woman shared Braysel's values and religion. Mauya, however, obviously believed it would be wrong, and that nagged at Miaundea until she could think about little else.

Why did Mauya think marrying outside of the race was wrong, and how far did her reluctance go? Did she feel it was only wrong if one married a person who was not a Novaunian citizen? Or did she feel it was wrong for a Novaunian citizen of complete Novaunian race such as Braysel or Teren to marry a Novaunian citizen of mixed race such as Ausha Ferudant?

When Miaundea saw Mauya again, she almost asked her but didn't dare, feeling as if she might lose control and communicate something that would offend her. The possibility that Mauya or any other person of pacifist heritage would consider it wrong for Braysel to marry someone like Ausha made Miaundea feel queasy with disgust and humiliation.

The weeks flew by, and Miaundea noticed every remark that possessed even a hint of racism. *I never thought Bray Nalaurev would actually convince a Novaunian woman to marry him . . . You know the Earthon doctor? Do you know anyone who's actually gone to him for treatment? How could he be qualified to practice Novaunian medicine after only a year? . . . You spent two years studying a primitive planet's culture? Why?*

Miaundea slowly began realizing that Mauya wasn't the only person of pacifist heritage who was concerned about keeping the race pure. Once Miaundea began looking for evidences of it, she found it everywhere, even among pacifists who were not native Verzaunians. Perhaps Ausha and the other Coalition officers had been right. Perhaps the pacifists really were racists. Then again, did aversion to interracial marriage mean they were racists? Or did it mean they understood the enormous difficulties inherent in a marriage between two such different people and were simply cautious?

Miaundea was too troubled to let the matter rest. She invited all of her roommates out to breakfast one Eighth Day morning and, after they had all ordered, asked, *I'm just curious. Let's pretend you meet a man at the Shamunja one evening and he asks you to dance. You like each other and dance several dances, and in that time, you find out that he's from the planet Bristaun. He asks you for an engagement. Would you go?*

Nanci's turquoise eyes sparkled impishly. *What does he look like?*

He's gorgeous! Not only that, but he's charming and very kind. What would you do?

Nanci shook her head. *I don't know. That's a hard one.*

The waiter set a glass of milk in front of Miaundea. *Why would that be a difficult decision? You like him, and it's only an engagement.*

I'll have to agree with Nanci, Jere communicated, receiving a glass of juice from the waiter. *On one hand, it's only an engagement, but on the other hand, what if you really started liking him? What if the relationship started getting serious?* Jere was nearly twenty-five, a history teacher and pacifist activist from Narquasa.

So what if it does? Miaundea asked. *He's a good man, he's a Novaunian, and he shares your values.*

But he isn't a Novaunian, Nanci communicated. Not really. He might be just as much Gudynean as Novaunian.

They really did have a problem with interracial marriage. *Why would it matter that he's part Gudynean?*

Tausha shook her head quickly. *I don't think it would matter so much to me. If I liked him, I would certainly go on an engagement with him. Perhaps I would marry him. I don't know.*

Nanci set her glass down quickly, astounded. *What would your parents think?* Nanci, the only native Mautysian, was the youngest of the group, an art student who still depended heavily on her family for financial support. Miaundea wasn't surprised that her first concern was how her parents would react.

Oh, I don't know. I don't think they would be thrilled about it, but I don't think they would oppose it. It wouldn't be like he was from Gudynea itself or anything—it's only Bristaun, after all, not a planet on the other side of the galaxy.

Tausha was from Systrina. Perhaps pacifists from other planets in the Union were in general less xenophobic than their home world counterparts. The possibility was worth exploring. *What's wrong with marrying a person with Gudynean blood? Many Gudyneans share our religious beliefs.*

Nanci shook her head quickly. *It just wouldn't be right.*

Why?

Because Novaun is for Novaunians and Gudynea is for Gudyneans—we have a certain obligation to Novaun and our posterity to keep the race pure.

Jere frowned at Miaundea. *You don't think so?*

To tell you the truth, I'd never thought about it before.

So you would go on an engagement with the man from Bristaun? Tausha asked.

Miaundea shrugged. *Before I met Bray, sure.*

Jere's golden eyebrows shot up. *Would you actually marry him?*

Yes, I think so.

Nanci grimaced. *Even though you would outlive him by half a century?*

I'm betrothed to a Fleet man. He may die in battle while still in his prime. Does that mean I shouldn't marry him?

Tausha's mouth quivered, as if she were struggling not to laugh. *Well, none of us would marry a Fleet man!*

Nanci did laugh. *And we certainly wouldn't marry Braysel Nalaurev!*

Miaundea knew they were teasing her and laughed with them. When the laughter died, she asked, *So what do you think about the existence of Bristaun, Jeltar, and Dinevlea? Do you consider them Novaunian planets?*

How can you not? Nanci communicated, stretching her neck and peering in the direction of the kitchen. *They're part of the Union.*

Miaundea glanced toward the kitchen and saw that their food was coming. *That's not what I mean.*

Jere unfolded her embroidered white napkin and set it in her lap. *Well, I think it's a crime that Novaun ever cooperated with Gudynea on a colonizing venture to begin with. Both groups lost major portions of their heritages when they began to intermarry. What happened to those six planets was that they ended up creating worlds that are neither Novaunian nor Gudynean.*

Miaundea unfolded her own napkin. *I'm not sure that's true. I know several people from Bristaun and Dinevlea, and they all think of themselves as Novaunians. Not only that, but they act like Novaunians.*

And you really think that's right? Tausha communicated. *Here you have people of Gudynean ancestry who have no ties to their Gudynean heritage. That's just as wrong as a person born half Novaunian who has been smothered by the Gudynean part of his heritage such that he knows nothing of his Novaunian heritage.*

Nanci and Tausha nodded in agreement as the waiter began serving them.

Dinevlea, Bristaun, and Jeltar have had nearly a thousand years to develop their own unique race, history, and culture, Jere communicated. *Personally, I've always felt that they ought to join with Roysa, Lylenta, and Dretundel to form their own union.*

A union of six planets? So close to the Dirons? Then Miaundea remembered that the Isolationists didn't think of such things.

Jere ground pepper over her eggs. *Why not? They would be politically independent, which would probably suit their purposes better, and they could maintain an alliance with our Union or the Gudynean Federation or both, whatever they wanted.*

Miaundea left her roommates later that morning, disturbed. No wonder Ausha and so many of the other Coalition members were such zealots. She understood, but oddly enough, she believed that some of those people, Ausha included, were too sensitive about the issue and too bitter and blind with their own prejudices.

Miaundea communicated telepathically with Braysel the next evening and told him everything. Braysel communicated, uncomprehending, *I don't understand why you're so troubled. What did they communicate that was so wrong? It is important to preserve our race and heritage. How can you find fault with that?*

Realization crushed Miaundea's heart. Braysel believed as they did! He really was one of them! Miaundea was so outraged that she ended the communication abruptly. Braysel tried to resume the communication, but she ignored him. How could he feel that way? How?

Chapter 4: THE ULTIMATE SON OF ABOMINATION

Once Counselor Brunel encouraged Ton to confront the truth about Adrian, she encouraged him to confront the truth about his father. Ton had never been able to accept the fact that his father had abandoned him, his sister, and their mother when he was a small child. He had never wanted to believe that both of his parents could hate him so much, and he had never wanted to believe his mother's hate for his father was justified.

Why do you want so badly to believe that your father had given your mother no cause to be bitter?

Because I don't want her to have had a reason to hate me.

What does your mother and father's relationship have to do with you?

My mother always told me that I was just like my father.

Ton, you're not your father!

The counselor encouraged Ton to reach back into his memory for remembrances of his father, but all that was there was a shadowy figure, a forbidding presence and nothing else; no face and no feel, nothing but violence. As Ton probed deeper into his memory, he realized, crestfallen, that his father had never once shown a tender feeling toward him, and he realized with grief that his father had battered his mother.

After stripping away layers of painful memories and exposing doubts, weaknesses, fears, and truths, Counselor Brunel determined that the root of Ton's problems was that he subconsciously believed everything his mother had always told him and his sisters, that his father and all of the poor boys in his neighborhood were cruel, immoral, only good for sex, and worthless, that since he was a poor boy from the neighborhood and like his father, he was worthless too.

I believe, Ton, that much of your insatiable drive to succeed in your work as a physician comes from your desire to prove your mother wrong, that it is a way of fighting back, your own effort to prove to yourself and everyone else that you're a worthwhile person. I also believe that you subconsciously choose women you disdain, women much like your mother, to be your lovers, partly to punish yourself for being worthless, partly to exercise control over these women you find so threatening, and partly because women like your mother are women who are familiar, women you understand.

Ton felt somewhat relieved with these new understandings about himself, but more than anything, he felt uncomfortable. Did he really have such a poor opinion of himself? It seemed a ridiculous problem and yet one virtually impossible to fix.

Counselor Brunel perceived Ton's discomfort in their telepathic touching. She smiled. *It's all right to feel uncomfortable. Those feelings will help motivate you to change.*

What do you want me to do?

Tell me about the people you admire.

Ton frowned. He had no idea what the people he admired had to do with him and his problem. *I don't understand.*

Just give the names of some of the people you admire.

Ton shrugged slightly. *Colonel Quautar, Ausha, Adrian, Dr. Hovaus, Bryaun and Danal, Teren and Deia.*

What I want you to do before you see me again next week is to think about those people and specific qualities in them you admire. Then I want you to make a list of qualities you feel make a valuable person.

Ton was thoughtful in his effort to compile a list and thorough. He came up with fifteen qualities he believed made a valuable person: intellect/genius, the ability to make decisions and carry through with them, tenderness, frankness/honesty, expertise/talent/excellence, the ability to think independently, the ability to keep commitments, beauty/attractiveness, cleanliness, self-confidence, being in the state of personal progress, creativity, self-control, caring more about people than things, and caring more about rightness than the opinions of others.

Ton presented his list to Counselor Brunel four days later when he saw her again. She read the list quickly, then looked at him in amazement. *I'm impressed, Ton. Every quality you've chosen is a positive one, and nearly every one is an internal quality. Your personal values are well placed.*

Ton was pleased but surprised. This was the first time anyone had ever told him his values were worthy. Usually people told him he was a son of Abomination or Eslavu trash, comments that suggested his values were anything but worthy. *Then my list is all right?*

There is no right or wrong about the list—it's simply a statement of your own opinion on what makes a valuable person. It so happens that your opinion closely parallels what really does make a person valuable. If that were not the case, then we would have to work on your opinion. She looked at him pointedly. *You have every one of those qualities yourself.*

The counselor's comment was such a blatant lie that Ton couldn't help but feel irritated. *Don't do this, please. I didn't come here to be flattered.*

Counselor Brunel chuckled. *I didn't suggest that you had perfected each one of these qualities in yourself, only that you possess them.*

I don't understand, Ton communicated wearily. And he didn't. If there was anything he had learned in these sessions, it was how little he understood about himself and life in general.

Well, one of the qualities you put on your list is that a person should be in the state of personal progress. What does that mean?

That we should always be progressing in some way, not stagnating, not settling for mediocrity in any sense.

Has a person who is in the state of progression reached his ultimate goal yet?

Ton comprehended her point at last. *No . . . progression means one is working toward a goal, not that he has accomplished it yet. A person who has accomplished the ultimate goals would be more in a state of perfection than progression.*

Does a person have to be perfect at something to be good at it?

In some things, yes. In my profession, definitely yes.

To be a practicing neurophysician, you have to do some things perfectly. Does that mean you're a perfect neurophysician? Do you know everything there is to know about neuromedicine?

No, of course not. Not even close.

Are you a good neurophysician?

Yes. Otherwise I wouldn't be allowed in the operating room.

The same principle applies to every quality you've listed. You possess some of those qualities in more strength than others, but you possess all of them. The counselor addressed each quality one by one and gave Ton specific examples on where those qualities existed in him, and Ton was startled to realize that she was right in every case.

The counselor then helped him make a plan to work on those qualities he felt were lacking in his character, and he left the session that day feeling overwhelmingly good about himself.

Ton saw Counselor Brunel later in the week, and they discussed human value in terms of Ton's work as a physician.

What criteria, Ton, do you and your colleagues use to determine what people to treat in the emergency room?

We do what we can to treat everyone, but we always give treatment to the life-threatening cases first.

Are the people you treat people you have met before?

Very rarely.

Do you ever know anything about these people at all?

During the moment of crisis, no. We usually learn a little about them after we treat them, before only if we need the information for treatment.

What you're telling me then is that every injured person who is brought into the emergency room deserves treatment because he is a living human being and as such is very valuable.

Ton nodded.

Why do you think that every human being is valuable?

Ton considered the counselor's question for at least a minute. Finally he admitted in perplexity, *I don't know.*

But you do feel human life is valuable.

Yes, very much so.

Let me give you two reasons—every human being has the potential to influence his world for good; every human being is unique. Along with these two things, there are two truths that apply to every human being—every human being is responsible for his own happiness; every human being can control only himself and what he personally does. You will feel good about yourself if you can apply these four things to your own life.

After working to define the value of a human being, Ton and Counselor Brunel spent many sessions examining the people in Ton's life and in his past as whole human beings. They discussed his mother, Angela, Jacquae, Adrian, many of his former lovers, Colonel Quautar, Dr. Hovaus, Miaundea, Teren, Deia, Paul, and Ausha.

Ton became angry at first with the way some of these people had wronged him. The counselor told him that it was all right to be angry but reminded him that he could not control what others did to him, that he could only control himself, and that he was responsible for his own happiness. Once Ton finally began believing what the counselor told him, he was able to look at the people in his life with a new perspective, begin developing empathy, and begin forgiving. He began seeing them as real people with strengths and weaknesses, people who, themselves, had insecurities and pain with which to deal.

The more Ton progressed in understanding himself and building his self-concept, the more comfortable he felt in other areas of his life. He didn't fear King so much, and he didn't feel angry or disgusted with Miaundea anymore. Not feeling insecure or threatened in the least by the possibility of seeing her again, he began spending more First Days and holidays with the Quautars, always taking Ausha with him and usually Danal too. He never did see Miaundea at her parents' home, and he didn't miss her.

The desire to have sex tormented him at times, but oddly enough, he never thought of Miaundea anymore when he thought of sex. He didn't think of anyone. The women of his past had disappeared into a remote pit of blackness, and the shadowy companion of his future seemed unreachable. This physical hunger without an object on which to focus his desire was one of the strangest, most frustrating sensations Ton had ever felt, and he did everything in his power to avoid the feeling. His Novaunian friends lived contentedly with their long-term continence, and he was determined to do so also. He kept himself busy, and when he felt those urges awaking within him, he forced himself to think about other things. He never reached a level of complete repose, but he came close enough to feel comfortable with himself and his lifestyle.

Once Ton had discussed with Ausha his conflicting feelings for her and had learned that she held him in the elevated status of "partner" for life as well as for work, he had begun feeling more comfortable with her than ever. His failure to be aroused by her didn't bother him anymore, and he was able to enjoy her companionship more fully not being overly concerned about sex. They confided in each other about nearly everything, so much so, that Ton felt less and less need to communicate with Counselor Brunel as the weeks flew by. His sessions dwindled to once a week, then to every two weeks.

One thing Ton never discussed with Ausha was his treason, as much as he wanted to, and Ausha never asked him about it. She felt his fear at times and in a superficial way knew that the fear was justified, but Ton knew that she couldn't internalize this fact, if for no other reason than because he did not appear to be in danger.

Ton tried not to let himself think about Ausha's suggestion that he apply for a job working with her father, but there were times when he couldn't help it. He could not bear the thought of being separated from Ausha, and he really wanted the position. Dinevlea was where he wanted to be and felt he belonged.

Ton knew he couldn't remain on Novaun or go work for Ausha's father, but he still refused to think about where he wanted to go when he left Novaun, despite Colonel Quautar's threats to make the decision himself and make all of the arrangements without telling him anything. Intellectually Ton knew he had to make plans, but emotionally he couldn't do it.

He grew increasingly more satisfied with his life as time passed, despite his danger, and Novaun became a refuge of freedom, vitality, and rationality instead of the prison of self-denial, boredom, and fanaticism it had been. Ton wouldn't decide where he wanted to go because he didn't want to leave.

Occasionally Ton caught a glimpse of Daniel Stewart, but seeing him did nothing but inspire curiosity. Stewart had done nothing to try and harm him, and Ton wondered what his role in King's plan was. Since King had not been apprehended and no one knew when he would be apprehended, Ton was able to blanket himself with a feeling of security. As far as anyone knew, apprehending King could take another five years. The only problem with that plan was that Deia would remain a prisoner in her home that much longer.

Colonel Quautar continued his unscheduled appearances at the Pavilion to give Ton information. One evening at the beginning of Third Month, Colonel Quautar came to the Pavilion with an unusual request.

The colonel greeted Ton and his friends and sat down at the table. *What's your work schedule like in four weekends?*

That Seventh Day is the Day of Ancestors, isn't it?

The colonel nodded. *Will you be able to come?*

I should be able to. The clinic will be closed that day, and I'll be on emergency room stand-by that weekend, unless someone goes out of town unexpectedly and I end up working the entire shift.

When you come, I'd like you to tell us something about your ancestors.

But I don't know anything about any of my ancestors.

It doesn't have to be about your family, the colonel communicated. Tell us something about your people.

My people? Ton communicated, bewildered.

Your countrymen; the people in your history.

Ton had studied Earth history since he had arrived on Novaun, but he had learned about nations and events, not people, and not even much culture. He had studied various ancient religions of Earth, but he had no idea how to apply what he had learned to his ancestors. *But I don't know anything about the people in my history, at least not anything that would interest Novaunians.*

What interests you will interest us. If you haven't found anything interesting in your history, it's only because you haven't looked hard enough. You have five weeks. That ought to be plenty of time.

The colonel communicated with Ton and the others at his table for another fifteen minutes. After he left, Ton communicated with his friends, feeling helpless, *I'm going to the Quautars' for the Day of Ancestors, and the colonel expects me to tell about the people in my history. What sort of information is appropriate for a presentation like that?*

Anything that means something to you, Bryaun answered. Tauna nodded in agreement.

You could start by researching the city or country you were born in, Danal suggested. *You could try to find information about outstanding physicians or scientists.*

That might actually be interesting, Ton admitted.

Ausha backed her chair away from the table and arose. *Danal and I will help you. There must be thousands of hours of information about Earth.*

There were indeed thousands of hours of Earth history, most of it compiled by anthropologists and librarians during the twenty-year period immediately preceding the anarchy of the Dark Years, although some of it had been compiled during the twenty-year period following the Day of Liberation.

Ton, Ausha, and Danal spent all of the evenings they weren't working that week in study. Ton was fascinated to learn that many of the old relics he had seen in Italy, the region of the Mediterranean State where his surname had originated, were remnants of the great Roman Empire. He assimilated information about the Dark Ages and the subsequent re-awakening of culture that had begun in Italy, and he was excited to learn that Italy had been the center of the civilized world for many centuries and that many of Earth's great artists and thinkers had been Italian.

Ausha and Danal were no less excited than Ton. They concentrated on finding medical information and were able to find a great deal. Ausha was the one who discovered the information about a man named Camillo Golgi, an Italian anatomist who had developed a special stain that would color only an occasional nerve cell in brain tissue but color it completely, a scientific find of great importance at the time since the nerve cells in the brain, being transparent, were difficult to study.

Danal was the one who found the information about an ancient structure that was still standing, Rome's historic Santo Spirito Hospital, first constructed in 1198 A.D., then rebuilt nearly three centuries later. The interesting thing about the Santo Spirito Hospital was that the walls were covered with priceless frescoes.

Have you ever been there? Danal asked Ton.

Actually, I have seen the Santo Spirito. There isn't another hospital like it in the galaxy.

Ton assimilated biographical information on important Italians from all periods in Earth's history, and he became more and more amazed that many of these people held personal values in common with the Novaunians. During his two-month study of religion and philosophy, he had discovered many similarities in the religious and ethical beliefs of different galactic cultures, enough that he had decided there was something that bound all humanity together and that the something was God. Discovering so many common values between the people in his history, the Novaunians, and himself made him feel more certain than ever that there was a God and that He was the source of morality.

After collecting hours of information about Italy, Ton knew that he could no longer put off searching for information on Baltimore and the man who had provoked the Divine Emperor to pour his wrath down upon it—Antonio Vaccaro, the ultimate “son of Abomination.”

Ton learned that Vaccaro had been a priest in the Roman Catholic Church, a solemn, intense man who had given powerful speeches analyzing the teachings and methods of Jesus Christ and the great prophets of the past and comparing them to those of Tohmazz Zarr. Vaccaro declared that Zarr did not teach the doctrines of God the ancient prophets had taught and that he used the same methods of teaching that false prophets had used since the beginning of time. Vaccaro petitioned the people to ask God themselves if Zarr was a messiah and was known by his declaration: “Zarr isn't a messiah! There is only one Messiah! Zarr is the anti-Christ!”

Before the Dark Years, Vaccaro and others who didn't believe that the nations of Earth should federalize under Zarr's Holy Nation led a worldwide protest of millions of people who called themselves Nationalists. Then two enemy Diron nations attacked Earth, destroying the original Tryamazz and plunging Earth into the Dark Years. Tohmazz Zarr died, and the majority of those original Nationalists gathered to communities under light shields and eventually became the Nations of Zion.

Antonio Vaccaro and many other Nationalist leaders, however, chose not to gather to the refuge communities and continued their fight against the new Divine Emperor of the Zarrist nation, Arulezz Zarr. Vaccaro gained sixty-five thousand followers in North America alone, and worldwide, he and the others recruited nearly a million. Zarr's followers, however, numbered in the billions.

On the Day of Liberation, twenty-one years before Ton did his research, Arulezz Zarr finally gained enough support to declare himself Divine Emperor of the entire Earth. As the coronation ceremony ended in the rebuilt Tryamazz, Antonio Vaccaro and thirty-seven other Nationalist leaders were marched into Liberation Court for their execution. As they stood in front of Arulezz Zarr and listened to him give an account of their “crimes,” Nationalists who had assumed key positions in Star Force attacked the warriors guarding Vaccaro and the other Nationalist leaders and gave the cry for the Nationalists to arise and overthrow the Zarrists.

This “Liberation Coup” lasted a mere three hours before it ended in tragedy for the Nationalists. Antonio Vaccaro and the eleven other Nationalist leaders who had not been killed in the coup were put in front of a firing squad in Liberation Court and executed, while their followers and members of their families were declared “Abominations” by the Divine Emperor and made Eslavu.

After learning the truth about Antonio Vaccaro on Seventh Day evening, Ton asked Ausha and Danal, *How do you think that virtually an entire planet could have been deceived by two Diron men?*

The planet was in chaos at the time. The people wanted a savior, Danal speculated.

And telepathic communication was something they knew nothing about, Ausha pointed out. *Telepathic communication is extremely intimate, second only in intensity to communication with God. If the majority of Earthons at the time did not know the overwhelming peace that comes from communicating with God, how could they possibly know enough to detect the fraud? The spiritual touching of telepathy felt so wonderful to them that many believed they were communicating with God.*

How do you know that the God you believe in isn’t another Tohmazz Zarr? Ton didn’t ask the question to challenge them; he sincerely wanted to know.

We know by faith, Danal answered.

Ton sat forward in his recliner. *Many Earthons have faith that Tohmazz Zarr was a god and that their Divine Emperor speaks for God. What makes their faith wrong and yours right?*

Truth, Ausha answered. *Not only truth that we’ve been taught, but truth that we love and live.*

Ton looked from one to the other in frustration. How could he hold a rational discussion with them? They communicated in circles.

Ausha smiled slightly, as if she knew what Ton was thinking. *You know within your heart that what the Zarrists teach is false. You’ve felt the manipulation and seen the mental slavery. How could those evil things ever be the by-products of truth?*

Ausha was right, of course. Ton had always known that the Divine Emperor used the Zarrist religion to maintain power over Earth’s inhabitants. He had also seen the technological, cultural, and social advances of Novaun. He had seen the great power of intelligence, independent thinking, and peace and knew that on Novaun, freedom wasn’t just an idea, it was a vibrant existence. Certainly the Novaunians were in possession of some form of natural truth.

Ton decided that Ausha and Danal weren’t communicating in circles any more than they ever did. They were simply explaining the situation as they understood it and as they felt best able to explain it to someone who hadn’t the experience to look at it from their perspective.

Ton stood up and moved toward the French doors. *Some of them saw the sham, though. And they were the ones who fought him.*

There just weren’t enough who understood, Danal communicated.

Ton gazed at the stars, missing Earth a little. *Why didn’t Novaun stop him?*

Ausha joined Ton at the window. *Even if Novaun had sent people to try and stop him, what could they have done that Vaccaro and all of the others didn’t do? There were millions of Earthons who knew Zarr was a fraud, and they couldn’t stop him.*

God is supposed to be all-powerful. Couldn't He destroy the Zarrist government? Why doesn't He save Earth from the Zarrists?

He could and we believe that He will, but then what? God can't teach people who don't want to be taught, and even He can't save people who don't want to be saved, Danal communicated.

A part of Ton was glad he had escaped the Zarrist regime, and another part of him regretted that he could never be an instrument in changing Earth.

Ausha felt his emotions in their telepathic touching and understood their nature. *You lived twenty-one years among the Earthons. How do you know that, in some small way, you weren't a part of a movement toward change?*

Ton closed the drapes. *I guess I don't.*

Ton went through the next two days deep in study and thought. He felt bound to Antonio Vaccaro and many other people in his past, bound by a common history and a similar ideology, and yet there were so many holes. By late Second Day afternoon, he had decided it was time to fill one of the biggest holes. He left the clinic after seeing his last patient and went directly to Colonel Quautar's house, determined to learn anything he could about his father.

Chapter 5: A NEW UNDERSTANDING

What's bothering you, Ton? the colonel asked as they sat down in the colonel's office.

This Day of Ancestors study has really got me to thinking. Ton drummed his fingers on the armrest of his leather chair. *Do you know anything about my father?*

Yes, I do.

Ton froze.

Your father's name was Marco Luciani, but he used the name "Marc." He was born and raised in New York City.

This new information astounded Ton. Then he wasn't a boy from the neighborhood?

No. He's from an affluent family. He met and married your mother, a native of Baltimore, while he was attending Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. The Dark Years descended several months before graduation, and the needs of the time forced him into work in a city clinic as a physician's assistant. It isn't clear what exactly happened after that, but it looks as though your mother's assessment of the situation is probably the correct one.

That he was a Zarrist spy working in Antonio Vaccaro's organization? And that he left when he learned the city would be seized?

Yes. We do know that after he left Baltimore, he relocated to Tryamaz, assumed the name Michael Dupree, and did his residency in neurosurgery at Tryamaz University Medical Center. He lives alone, is an advisor to the Divine Emperor, and is quite wealthy.

"Michael Dupree!" Ton gasped.

I thought you might know who he is.

Ton was still in shock. *I've studied his research; the man is a genius. You're certain he's my father?*

Colonel Quautar nodded slowly, twisting his body slightly and pulling a disc storage notebook from a shelf. He flipped through the discs, removed one from its case, and inserted it into the telepathic transmission recorder.

Within seconds, both Ton and the colonel were assimilating the image of a young man wearing an Earthon graduation robe and cap, with black hair, black eyes, olive skin, and a thick black mustache, a young man who could have easily been Ton's twin.

That's him?

This is Marco Luciani at age twenty-one, when he graduated from college. And I have a few more stills of him after he assumed the name Michael Dupree.

Colonel Quautar telepathically commanded the recorder to run through several more images of Ton's father. After assuming the name Michael Dupree, he had lightened his hair and shaved off his mustache, but the facial features were the same.

Ton sat there in a daze. Had he grown up as Michael Dupree's acknowledged son, he would have had the money to obtain whatever medical education he desired. He would have had the money to live and practice medicine anywhere on Earth he chose. He would have had a famous father and a certain amount of prestige. And even with all of those privileges, he would have grown up in a home of violence.

Michael Dupree, gifted Earth physician, had battered his wife and children and had finally abandoned them, and for the first time in his life, Ton understood his mother's bitterness. She had never been bitter that her husband had physically abused her. She had been bitter because her successful, ambitious husband had left her poor in the slums.

Ton thought he should be angry and disillusioned, or at least disgusted, but he wasn't. The values of his parents and his sisters were so mutated and foreign to his own that Ton could scarcely comprehend them. None of what had happened felt real enough to make any difference, and he felt as if he were assimilating a piece of fiction instead of a piece of his life. He pitied the members of his family, and, at the same time, he wanted to laugh at them.

Ton felt Colonel Quautar's hand on his arm. *Does it disturb you?*

Ton looked into the colonel's compassionate green eyes. *No. I finally understand.*

You don't regret growing up poor without a father?

I'm glad he left. He's a son of Abomination, and we were better off without him. Ton gazed at the colonel thoughtfully. *My mother was right about many things. I am a lot like my father. But I'm very different from him too. Perhaps if I hadn't had to struggle for so long and do things on my own, I would never have realized that.*

The colonel squeezed Ton's arm. *You're a fine young man, Ton. You're one of the best examples of determination I've ever seen. You've accomplished a great deal in your young life, and you have every reason to feel very good about yourself.*

Ton smiled at the colonel in appreciation. He reflected on his life and wondered, yet again, how an abandoned kid from the slums had ended up in a place like Novaun. He suddenly realized that none of it had been by accident—the way Adrian had taken him as a protégé, his training in Star Force, and his friendship with Teren, Deia, Ausha, and all the others. Something deep inside of him, yet far outside and above him, had led him to Novaun.

Colonel Quautar returned the disc to the notebook. *Have you decided where you want to live after you leave Novaun?*

Ton shook his head.

The colonel quickly returned the disc notebook to the shelf. *I've been waiting for a decision for half a year. What's the problem?*

Nothing, Ton communicated weakly.

Do you need suggestions?

I don't know. Let me think about it.

There must be somewhere you want to go, something you want to do. I can't believe you haven't thought about it at all.

How could Ton answer? Why did he have to give up his identity and go to a non-Novaunian planet to be safe? Once King and the agents he had on Novaun were dead, wouldn't the threat to his life be gone? Did Earth want him dead too? Possibly. If Earth did want him dead, why? He couldn't think of a single reason that wouldn't apply to Teren, Paul, and Deia also, and even Deia's life wasn't in danger at present. So why did Colonel Quautar insist that he had to go to another planet under a new identity and the guise of death to be safe?

Realization struck. Colonel Quautar had never told him that he had to go to a non-Novaunian planet under a new identity to be safe, never. Colonel Quautar gave him information and asked him where he wanted to go, nothing more, nothing less. Colonel Quautar just assumed he would be happier living on a non-Novaunian planet and had never considered any other possibility, or had he? Ton remembered the colonel telling him once, *There may be more choices than you think.* What had he meant by that?

Forget about King for a minute, the colonel communicated. If you could do anything, what would it be?

Ton hesitated. I want to apply for a job on Dinevlea with Ausha's father. I think he would hire me.

Colonel Quautar gazed at Ton keenly, and Ton realized that his answer was the one the colonel had expected. Why didn't you just tell me that months ago?

I thought I had to come up with a non-Novaunian planet. Ton tugged restlessly at his mustache. If you knew all along that I wanted to go to Dinevlea, why didn't you just tell me that it was a possibility?

Because it isn't a possibility.

The colonel's ambiguity exasperated Ton. Why don't you make this easier for both of us! You pick my future home!

The colonel smiled. I don't think I need to.

Why can't I go to Dinevlea? It's only King who wants me dead, not Earth's government. Once he's apprehended and the spies who are here are captured, I'll be safe. You can't tell me that Earth is going to waste men and resources on me after King is dead!

Ton, you offended hundreds of thousands of Earthons when you wore your Star Force uniform to Mautysia. I have Earth broadcasts that you haven't seen, broadcasts of thousands of people, Star Force warriors in particular, who are demanding you be returned to Earth for punishment. As long as there is an Earthon alive who remembers your name, you will be in a certain amount of danger. Dinevlea, being a border planet, is much more open to outsiders than Novaun, including Earthons.

Dinevlea isn't that open. I was on Latanza III for several months and wanted to visit a Novaunian planet. My application for a visa to Dinevlea was rejected twice!

And had you remained on Latanza III longer, your application may have eventually been accepted. There is free travel between Dinevlea and several of its non-Novaunian neighbors, and had you been a citizen of Latanza III, your first application probably would have been accepted. I wouldn't be surprised if Dr. Ferudant has many patients who aren't Novaunian at all. I believe, as you do, that you would be very comfortable on Dinevlea, but you can never go there, ever. Not even to visit.

Ton couldn't help but feel extremely disappointed.

There is another, comparable possibility that would be acceptable.

A comparable possibility? Ton felt the disappointment melt away, replaced by happiness and hope. I can stay here? Really?

If that's what you want. It would definitely be your safest option. There would be no reason to fake your death, so we'll make sure you're nowhere near that courtroom when King goes on trial. You are, however, still in a great deal of danger. I'm certain there will, at some point in time, be an attempt on your life. As soon as you make a definite decision, we can apprehend Stewart, learn whatever we can from him, and attempt to force any other spy who's here to make a move, then capture him too, but I can't give you any guarantees.

Do you really think you'll be able to learn something from Stewart?

Yes, of course. We'll find out why he's here and how he got here—that will be easy.

How? I can't picture you people using mind torture to gain information. It doesn't strike me as being quite moral.

We have a far more effective method of interrogation than mind torture. We use a combination of spirit massage with electrical impulses to key parts of the brain to basically relax the information out of them. They feel so wonderful they can't wait to tell us everything. Pain is a difficult thing to fight, but so is pleasure.

Ton laughed. *You mean you intoxicate them.*

More or less. It's a very sophisticated intoxication and has no side effects.

You can actually tell me this?

The colonel shrugged. *Everyone knows about the method, but no other planet has been able to develop it to the same level we have. Nobody does it as well as we do, and only the strongest minds are capable of resisting.*

Perhaps Stewart is one of those strong minds.

Perhaps, but I doubt it. My guess is that he's a religious fanatic, bound to the Divine Emperor's mind. He probably knows very little other than what his mission is.

Ton leaned forward slightly. *What does your gift of prophecy tell you about me?*

Colonel Quautar's eyebrows lifted in interest. *My gift of prophecy?*

Yes. Bray and Maurek told me that Novaunian military leaders have the gift of prophecy. I know you do. You understand me too well. You know too much about Bray's future, and you knew before Miaundea met him that he would be her husband. What does God tell you about me? Am I going to live through this?

The colonel gazed at Ton, tapping his fingers against his mouth.

Well, am I?

The colonel hesitated. *I don't know.* He lowered his hand and absently stroked his armrest. *I've spent countless hours in study, meditation, and prayer, trying to find out what's coming and what I need to do to protect you. I've never been able to learn anything specific, and it baffles me. I know there will be an attempt on your life, an attempt you may not survive. I know that the measures we're taking to protect you are the right ones, but I also know that they won't be enough. I assume that whether you live or die is going to depend on you.*

Depend on me? Are you finally going to give me a weapon?

No. Not yet at least. It won't depend on a weapon or on your skill in fighting—it will depend on you. The colonel placed his fingers gently on Ton's heart.

Can't God tell you what I need to do?

It doesn't work that way. He's already told me what I need to know in order to do what I need to do. Anything else, He'll tell to you. But He won't tell you unless you ask.

Ton didn't like where this discussion was leading. *You mean . . . pray?*

The colonel nodded slowly.

I could never do that.

Why not?

I just couldn't. I don't know how.

Colonel Quautar slid out of his chair to the floor and his knees, putting his hand on Ton's shoulder and gently pushing him down with him. Ton knelt on the white rug facing the colonel, feeling a sense of anticipation mingled with curiosity.

Colonel Quautar nudged Ton's spirit with his, inviting him to overlap spirits with him. *Just address Him and communicate what's in your heart.*

Ton gratefully accepted Colonel Quautar's help, expanding his spirit to merge with his, allowing their thoughts to become one.

As Ton had gradually come to believe that God was the source of morality, he had come to be troubled by two questions. He wanted to know whether God knew him and if He had given the Novaunians their religion.

The colonel was delighted to learn about Ton's study. His spirit reached upward and outward, pulling Ton's along with it. *Go on, Ton.*

Ton could feel the colonel's affection and admiration, and that gave him confidence. *God, do you know me?*

Even as Ton asked the question, he realized he already knew the answer. Of course God knew him. He had led him to Novaun and had given him a comfortable, productive life. The answer to the first question, moreover, answered the second. He was happy on Novaun and knew that the Novaunians were in possession of natural truth. He was, therefore, satisfied that the Novaunian religion had come from God.

A feeling of joy surged through Ton, so palpable it was almost overwhelming. He didn't feel words in his mind, but he understood that God wanted him to join the Novaunians' religious order, that He would help him understand the things he learned, and that He didn't expect him to understand everything at once.

Ton didn't know how all of this information had been communicated to him, but he knew it all the same. He could think of nothing more to ask, so he remained there on his knees, stretching his spirit out to God with an emphatic *Thank you!*

Many minutes passed and the extraordinary sensation gradually faded, leaving a warm feeling of well-being. The colonel withdrew his spirit, leaving Ton alone in his contemplation.

Eventually Ton lifted his head and focused on the colonel. *What do I do now? Is it possible for you to give me the Covenant?*

Yes it is, and I would be honored. Colonel Quautar slowly stood up and pulled Ton up with him. *Who is the presiding taurnel of the assembly you attend?*

His name is Raul Blorsten.

In the next couple of days, you need to communicate with him. He'll tell you what you need to do, and he'll probably want to give you several preparatory interviews.

Ton nodded and moved toward the door with the colonel. He halted there for a moment. *Colonel?*

The colonel put his arm around Ton, squeezing his shoulder. *It's "Sharad," Ton. I'd like you to call me "Sharad."*

Ton turned toward Sharad and smiled. After what had just happened, it did feel right. *Thank you. Sharad.*

Now what is it you want to ask?

What will happen to me if King is never apprehended and keeps sending assassins?

He'll be apprehended, the colonel assured. *It's just a matter of time. Even if by some remote chance he isn't, the Divine Emperor will have him killed.*

Why? asked Ton in fascination.

When it's all over, I'll tell you.

So I can continue living on Novaun. You're absolutely sure about that.

Yes. If you'd like, I'll go ahead and begin the proceedings to make you a citizen and to create a new family organization in your name. What you need to do is start looking for a job. It will be easier for me to protect you if you work in Shalaun, but if there's nothing available here that interests you, go ahead and apply with other clinics on the planet.

*And you'll arrest Stewart?
It will be done tonight.*

Chapter 6: DISILLUSIONED

As Ton walked with Sharad from his office to the kitchen, he asked, *Have you decided whether or not I can go to Bryaun and Tauna's wedding?* Bryaun and Tauna were being married in Amaria in five weeks, and even Ausha's family was coming from Dinevlea to attend.

*You may go, as long as you don't mind my coming with you as your bodyguard.
I guess I should feel honored to have such a high-ranking bodyguard.*

As Ton walked around the long bar that divided the kitchen from the living room, he was immediately surprised to see Miaundea sitting in a chair in front of the French doors, communicating with her mother and Sharauna. She was as beautiful as ever, but different. Her hair was wavy instead of teased, and she wore it parted in the middle with two narrow jeweled braids hanging at each side of her face. Something was different about her face too, something Ton couldn't define. Gone was that idealistic zeal that had compelled her to go to Mautysia to live and work, replaced by indifference.

Ton thought that by now he should feel comfortable seeing her, but he wasn't. Too much had passed between them. She was far more than an acquaintance but much less than a friend, and Ton didn't know how to deal with her. He thought about the four and a half months he had tried to seduce her and suddenly felt ashamed. For the first time since he had known Miaundea, he understood what torment he had put her through. She had been trying to live her religion, a religion that was from God. Ton had pressured her relentlessly, and the remorse he now felt, knowing that she had been right all along to refuse him, was unfathomable. He wished he didn't have to face her.

Miaundea turned and looked at him. She tried to remain calm, but her expression was one of discomfort, which made him feel even worse. Maybe if he had treated her decently to begin with, she wouldn't feel so uneasy with him. A moment passed, and she said in English, smiling shyly, "It's good to see you, Ton."

Ton forced himself to smile. *Are you back for good?*

Miaundea regarded him in surprise, then replied telepathically, *No. I still have eight weeks.* She smiled slightly. *Sharauna wants to know if you're bringing Dr. Navtur with you on the Day of Ancestors.*

Sharauna flushed and glared at Miaundea.

Ton looked over at Sharauna, amused. *Danal? Yes, he and Ausha are both coming with me.*

Please, Ton. Don't tell him I wanted to know. You weren't even supposed to know. Sharauna glared again at Miaundea.

Miaundea smiled at Sharauna knowingly. *Perhaps Ton can make a suggestion to Dr. Navtur in your favor.*

I don't want him to communicate anything to Dr. Navtur!

It's Danal, Sharauna! Call him Danal. And don't worry. I won't communicate anything to embarrass you. I can be very sly when it comes to this sort of thing. Still, if you like Danal, you should let him know. Even if he's interested in you, he probably wouldn't do anything about it. He's very tentative when it comes to women and hardly ever goes on engagements.

Sharauna's eyes suddenly filled with compassion. *Why not?*

Half a year ago or so, his fiancée decided she would rather marry someone else. He's had a really difficult time getting over it.

That's awful!

Ton walked toward the door. *I'd better be going. See you all later.* To his surprise, Miaundea arose and walked with him. He realized that her hair and countenance weren't the only things about her that had changed. Her dress was different too, and it wasn't only that it was new. The color was bright and the style was contoured, but it covered her back completely and fell several centimeters below her knees instead of several centimeters above them. She was soft and congenial, unpretentious, and far less erotic.

Once they were on the front porch, Anenka barked happily when she saw Ton and pawed at his leg. Ton reached down and patted Anenka's head. He wished Miaundea would leave him alone and go back into the house, but she didn't. His only consolation was that she seemed to be as uncomfortable as he was.

Is that Anenka?

Ton nodded, trying to think of something to communicate. After a moment he asked, *Are you enjoying Mautysia?*

Yes I am, very much. I've met a lot of interesting people and made some good friends.

Do you see Bray's family much?

I see Mauya and Raunel. Miaundea leaned against a marble column. *You're so different, Ton. I don't know what it is, but you've really changed. And I've never known you to be so comfortable with telepathy.*

Ton shrugged. *I'm on Novaun, and telepathy is the language of Novaun. I've worked very hard to become comfortable with it.*

How much longer do you have before you finish your apprenticeship with Dr. Hovaus?

A little more than half a year.

Do you have a job yet?

Ton shook his head.

Miaundea gazed at him solemnly. *There's something I want to discuss with you about finding a job. I'm not sure how to tell you this . . .* She hesitated, her expression uneasy.

Ton thought it strange Miaundea would want to communicate with him about a career decision, and the fact that she was uneasy about it was downright perplexing. He frowned and waited for her to continue.

I know that Mautysia is the center of medical research on Novaun. I don't know whether you've applied for a job with one of the clinics there or whether you've even considered it, but I feel I need to warn you. If you go to work in Mautysia, the people there will be friendly and hospitable, but they will never accept you. Not completely. Not in the same way people have accepted you here in Shalaun.

Ton wished he could tell her that he didn't understand, but he did. *They are racists, aren't they.*

Miaundea sighed and sat down on the bench next to a white planter full of flowers. *I think "racist" is too strong a term. Or maybe it isn't, I don't know. I can, however, describe their attitude. They claim brotherhood with all humanity and pray for people all over the galaxy, but they don't know anything about the people they pray for beyond a few basic facts, and they don't want to know. They don't think they believe that they're better than other people, but, at the same time, they don't believe they will benefit by*

understanding other races and cultures. And it's not only that. They are very concerned about keeping the race pure. I don't think a Verzaunian man would ever marry a woman with the same racial background as Ausha Ferudant, not even Bray.

Miaundea was completely serious, but Ton couldn't help but laugh. *That's not a problem. Ausha would never marry a pacifist from any planet, not in a million years! As for Bray, he isn't planning to marry a Dinevlean woman.* He gazed at her pointedly. *And if I remember correctly, you didn't want a man who was perfect.*

Miaundea should have been amused, but she wasn't. She communicated nothing, and Ton finally understood the change that had taken place in her during the four and a half months she had lived in Mautysia. She had gone to Mautysia to understand the virtue of the pacifists and their position, but in the process she had seen unexpected weaknesses and had been disillusioned.

This attitude of theirs really disturbs you, doesn't it?

Yes it does, very much.

This wouldn't have anything to do with pride, would it? You did, after all, quit the Coalition over that very issue.

Ausha told you about that? Miaundea communicated, abashed.

Ton nodded. *I don't mean to criticize you or anything. You've known all along that there are flaws in the pacifist position. Perhaps you're making too much of this.*

No. This isn't only about pride. One of the reasons I'm an anthropologist is because I believe we can learn a lot from other cultures and that they can learn a lot from us. And I have learned a lot from people of other cultures, especially you.

Ton's good humor suddenly disappeared. *So all I am to you is a learning experience, is that it? An Earthon specimen that was an interesting study?*

Don't you start this again!

You never believed you could need someone like me, ever. You're as much a racist as the Mautysians.

Maybe that was true before, but I understand things differently now. You helped me see myself in a different way, as painful as it was. I really did need you, Ton. It was just that I needed you more as a reflector than a man. If that offends you, I'm sorry. But it is the truth.

Ton didn't communicate anything for several moments. When he finally he did, he took care to be gentle. *Then stop being disillusioned. Just help them understand. Help all of us understand. I think Novaun needs you, Miaundea.*

Miaundea shoved her hair over her ear. *It's just that their attitude is so intolerable! I know why they have it; they've isolated themselves too much. But still, I can't stand it!*

So, what are you going to do about it?

There isn't anything I can do about it other than what I originally planned to do—publish a dissertation and work to help Isolationists and Fleet supporters understand each other.

What about in your dealings with Bray's family?

However difficult it may be for me on some points, it will always be more difficult for Bray. I suppose we'll both just deal with his family the best we can.

Ton stood there in silence, the guilt he felt for previously exerting such sexual pressure on Miaundea still nagging at him.

A minute passed, and Miaundea communicated, staring at the porch floor, *I really had hoped that we could someday feel comfortable with each other.*

I don't know if that's possible. Too much has happened.

Maybe we could start from the beginning. Miaundea stood up and smiled weakly, taking his hand with hers and shaking it. *Hello. My name is Miaundea Quautar. What's yours?*

Ton pressed her hand with his, shaking his head. *Don't do this, Miaundea.*

She looked as sick as he felt, but she continued in her little charade. *I'm from Shalaun*

Please, Miaundea. Don't. I need to tell you something.

Miaundea tried to pull her hand away from his, but he wasn't ready to let go. Color rose into her cheeks, and Ton suddenly understood the reason for her uneasiness. She was still attracted to him. He instantly dropped her hand and backed away from her in alarm.

Miaundea put her hand to her forehead and bowed her head in embarrassment. *I feel ridiculous. I thought the last time I saw you that it was gone for good, but I guess some feelings never completely go away.*

Miaundea's feelings disturbed Ton tremendously. *I don't understand.*

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, Miaundea replied, hurt. *I suppose when you look at me, the only thing you feel is disgust. I don't blame you, really.*

No. Not disgust. Just not what I felt before. Miaundea, you belong to another man. That's what I don't understand.

Miaundea's eyes finally lifted to look into Ton's again. *I don't know if I understand completely either. I do know that my feelings for Bray are as strong as they ever were.*

Ton still felt a need to relieve himself of his guilt. *I'm sorry about everything, Miaundea. I don't think we would feel so awkward with each other if I hadn't pressured you with such selfishness and determination. I wish I could tell you that I didn't know any better, but I think that in some ways I did. I'm sorry. I hope someday you can forgive me.*

Miaundea gazed at him in surprise and tenderness. *I forgave you a long time ago, Ton. And I'm sorry I led you into believing I wanted something I didn't. It was difficult for me to look closely at myself and realize that I had brought a lot of it on myself with my clothing and my attitude.*

Ton gestured toward her dress. *Is that the reason for the change?*

The corner of Miaundea's mouth lifted slightly. *I thought you would notice.*

Ton shrugged. *I notice things like that.*

I know. But it wasn't only because of you that I changed the way I dress. Her tone of thought was reflective and sad. *There was someone else who also made me see the need.*

The Quautars' transport pod booth opened, and Ausha stepped out. Ton watched her in relief. Anenka rubbed against Ton's legs as she trotted to Ausha. Ausha knelt down on the walk, embraced Anenka, and let her lick her face. *Did he know anything?*

He did, but you'll never believe it.

Ausha looked up at him suddenly and frowned. *Are you all right?* She arose and walked toward Ton and Miaundea.

I'm not sure. Ton stepped forward to meet Ausha, slipping his arm around her waist and kissing her cheek.

Ausha kissed his cheek, then gazed at him for a moment in communication. *It's Miaundea, isn't it. You two haven't been arguing, have you?*

No. She's been perfectly friendly.

Ton noticed that Miaundea was watching Ausha in curiosity tinged with irritation. *Hello, Ausha, she communicated coolly. That's a stunning outfit.*

Ausha grinned, then burst out laughing, her eyes sparkling with delight. Her arm went around Ton's waist, and she pulled him close. *Thank you very much, but you really ought to address your compliment to my wardrobe consultant.*

Miaundea frowned. *Your wardrobe consultant?*

Ausha nodded and laughed again.

Miaundea stared at Ton in shock. *You?*

Ton nodded, amused. *I have to look at her all day, and nothing offends me more than to see a beautiful woman in clothes that belong on a cadaver.*

Ausha's eyebrows shot up. *That's an interesting comparison Ton, since cadavers don't wear any clothes.*

If they did, they'd wear those old dresses of yours!

I can't believe you're letting him get away with a comment like that, Miaundea communicated to Ausha, completely serious.

Ausha shrugged. *It doesn't bother me. Ton did me a service. I'm grateful to him.*

Ton looked at Miaundea knowingly. *Ausha's always known that fancy embellishments and silks aren't right for her. She's just never known how to put together a wardrobe that reflects her personality.* He gently pounded her head with his fist. *She has no patience and no imagination.*

Ausha grinned. *I don't need an imagination, Ton. Yours is copious enough for both of us.*

Ton turned Ausha around, and gave her a light push toward the neighborhood landing platform. *See you later, Miaundea.* He glanced at her over his shoulder as he and Ausha walked away, Anenka trotting in front of them.

As they walked, Ton communicated to Ausha in exasperation, *You are never going to believe this. Miaundea is still attracted to me.*

What makes you think that?

Ton telepathically began showing her his conversation with Miaundea. He had barely started when Ausha burst out in surprise, *Sharauna likes Danal? That's wonderful! I think he likes her too.*

We're not discussing Sharauna and Danal, we're discussing Miaundea and me!

I'm sorry, Ton. Go on.

Ton resumed showing Ausha his conversation with Miaundea. Once he was finished, Ausha communicated thoughtfully, *I don't think you should be surprised that she still finds you attractive. You are attractive, and she once thought she was in love with you.*

But she's engaged to marry someone else!

That doesn't mean she can completely shut images of other men out of her life. She certainly shouldn't entertain those thoughts. If she started flirting with you or tried to spend any kind of personal time with you, then you should be disturbed and probably skeptical, but all you felt in her was a tiny spark of excitement. If you hadn't been communicating with her telepathically, you probably wouldn't have even known.

So you think I'm making too much of this.

Yes, I do. Forget about it. I can guarantee you, she will. All she has to do is go home and put a commudisc from Bray into the telepathic transmission recorder. I doubt she'll think about you all evening.

You're probably right about that. Ton shook his head in hopelessness as they slid into the car. *I just don't know what to do about her, Ausha. I'm not attracted to her anymore, but I can't seem to treat her like a regular person. I'm not angry at her either, but when I communicate with her I still feel so awkward.*

Don't do anything about her. When you see her, communicate with her in a courteous, honest way. The uncomfortable feelings are bound to fade with time.

In time . . . Ton communicated glumly.

Now who's being impatient! It's only been half a year. Something would be wrong with both of you if you didn't feel a little uncomfortable with each other.

Really?

Really. Ausha clutched Ton's arm. *Don't keep me in suspense! What did Colonel Quautar tell you about your father?*

Well, he's alive. Amazingly enough, he's a famous neurosurgeon. He goes by the name Michael Dupree. Ton proceeded to tell her everything Colonel Quautar had told him. Ausha assimilated it all in fascination.

Ton drove to the pier and parked his car. He and Ausha got out and walked into an informal seafood restaurant where they sometimes ate, leaving Anenka sitting outside the door. *It's so wonderful, Ausha. I finally understand.*

Your mother was right about a lot of things, wasn't she?

She really was. I know now why she never tried to get a divorce. She either didn't know where he was, or she was hoping he would eventually come back.

They sat down at a table next to a window and ordered. *You know what I wish more than anything? I wish I could go back to Earth and talk with my mother, really talk with her, for an hour or two, or maybe for an entire evening. I want just once to look at her through the eyes of an adult, and not a child. I doubt things would ever be different; I don't think she could ever feel any affection for me. But I want to be able to understand her better and feel just a little affection for her. I want to know her as a person.*

Ausha gazed at him in admiration. *You wish you could take care of her, don't you?*

Yes I do, kind of. I could afford to help her out at least. That's ridiculous, isn't it?

No it isn't. She's your mother.

It wouldn't matter anyway, not now.

Why not?

Because I'm a traitor and a disgrace. Ton couldn't help but feel a little sad. *She would never acknowledge me now, not even to take my money. I'm sure she wishes more than ever that I had never been born.*

Ausha's spirit embraced Ton's with compassion. Ton knew she wanted to tell him that what he believed wasn't true, but she knew as well as he did that it was.

The waiter brought their salads. As he walked away, Ton skewered a slice of pepper with his fork and communicated, *I have something good to tell you.*

Ausha's eyebrows rose in interest.

I'm going to join the Order.

Ton, that's wonderful! How did it happen?

Their food arrived, and Ton told Ausha about his discussion with Colonel Quautar, leaving out the parts about his dangerous situation. *He told me to communicate what was in my heart and kind of pushed me down to the floor. I felt extremely awkward and a little scared, and I don't think I could have done it, but he knelt there with me. I could feel his essence reaching out to something I couldn't understand, and that was when I really wanted to communicate with God and believed it was possible.* Ton described the experience he'd had praying as well as he could.

Ausha's spirit clutched Ton's with joy. *Ton, you have no idea how intensely I've wanted this, how vehemently I've prayed for it every day since that afternoon in the office when we communicated about death. You were so terrified to die and so in despair, and I knew what you wanted and needed, and I wished I could just pour everything I understood into you and make you feel better, but I couldn't because you wouldn't have believed me.*

There's still a lot I don't understand.

Ausha smiled. *There's still a lot the rest of us don't understand either. That's what makes life exciting, you know. There's always something new to learn, some new way to progress.*

Ton hesitated. *What exactly did you ask God when you prayed for me?*

Ausha's gaze was earnest and soft with affection. *I asked Him to help you understand that life has meaning and to help you be happy. I also asked Him to take away your fear and to help you know that you have friends who really care about you.*

If I ever doubted it before, I don't doubt it now.

Chapter 7: DIFFERING VIEWS?

Miaundea watched Ton and Ausha walk to the neighborhood landing platform in a daze. Ausha smiled and waved to her as she and Ton walked away, and Miaundea regained enough of her senses to lift her hand and flutter her fingers a little. She finally turned and walked back into the house, disturbed.

What was going on between Ton and Ausha? Ausha had been wearing her new outfits not long after Miaundea had stopped seeing Ton and had become betrothed to Braysel. Miaundea had been so concerned about whether Ton was bitter, and Ton had been all over the city with Ausha choosing her clothes!

Miaundea recalled her conversation with Ausha at the Coalition meeting. Ausha had told her that her “friend” had put together some outfits for her in exchange for some decorating. That made sense—Ton’s apartment had been lifeless and empty—but a man and woman had to be exceptionally good friends before either one of them would even think of making an arrangement like that.

Miaundea went to the kitchen, where her mother and father were preparing dinner. Sharauna had disappeared. Miaundea leaned over the bar. *Ausha Ferudant just came and left again with Ton. What’s going on between those two?*

Her mother’s knife clicked against the countertop, producing a pile of chopped vegetables. *Do I detect a bit of jealousy?*

Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know why it irritates me to see them so friendly. If it were anyone but Ausha, I probably wouldn’t even notice.

What do you have against Ausha? her father asked, squeezing a few drops of auyvalnut oil into a frying pan.

Nothing really.

Except that she’s known Ton nearly as long as you have. Her father scooped the chopped onions off the countertop and tossed them into the pan.

Miaundea felt peculiar. She understood what her father was getting at, but that wasn’t quite it. She had never cared much for Ausha, and she had been acquainted with her months before she had met Ton.

Her mother stopped chopping and looked up. *You are jealous of Ausha, aren’t you? And have been for a long time. Why?*

Miaundea felt as if her mother’s acute perception were seizing a garbled emotion in her essence, yanking it out, and defining it in the process. Miaundea answered without thinking, *Because everyone likes her—all the men like her.*

And now Ton likes her, her father communicated in understanding.

Miaundea nodded. She felt humiliated to realize that the reason Ausha wouldn’t tell her anything about Ton that day at the Coalition meeting was because she knew everything, and Ton wouldn’t have told her everything had he not felt close to her for a considerable length of time.

Miaundea felt sick to remember how Ausha had leaned on Ton that First Day he had brought her with him to the house and how tenderly Ton had treated her. Miaundea remembered in further mortification her conversation with Ton in the lounge at the Doshyr estate the night of Teren and Deia’s wedding party and how disturbed he had been that Ausha’s brother had died. Ton had probably never met Ausha’s brother, but his feelings for her had been intense enough at that point that he had felt her grief.

Whatever is going on between Ton and Ausha has been going on for a long time, a lot longer than I ever realized, Miaundea reluctantly observed.

Her mother swept the vegetables she had just chopped to the side. *Ton and Ausha love each other; that's what's going on between them. I'm not sure they realize it, though.*

Miaundea knew her mother was right. Ton did love Ausha, and Ausha had always been the one he loved. Miaundea felt angry, humiliated, and more jealous of Ausha than ever. What was it about Ausha? Why were men so insane about her? Why had Ton always preferred her? Even as jealousy poured over Miaundea, she wondered why she should care so much. She glared at the counter, infuriated with herself.

Her father communicated gently, as if in answer to her thoughts, *Ausha's an interesting young lady. She's very empathic, and she has a phenomenal ability to make anyone she's with feel comfortable and good about himself. Ton has desperately needed someone like that in his life, and perhaps that's one of the things that attracted him to her. It isn't just that, though. Ton has many interests and values in common with Ausha, and his temperament blends well with hers. They just have that unique kind of rapport that tends to move people to love each other.*

Her father's observations melted some of Miaundea's jealousy, and she suddenly felt overwhelmed by relief that nothing had happened between Ton and her. The relief was so great that within moments it had smothered every other feeling.

Miaundea went to the cupboard for a stack of plates. *Do you think Ton would ever ask her to marry him?*

I hope he does, her mother communicated. *I think they would do well together. I believe Ausha will be happier if she marries another physician, and Ton needs a wife.*

Her father's expression was one of assurance. *I predict that within a month we'll get an announcement.*

Miaundea walked around the bar and began setting the table. *Really? Do you really think she would marry him?*

I suppose there's a chance she would refuse him, her father replied, *but I don't think it's likely. She admires him a great deal.*

But what about all of his liquors and those awful taffuaos he smokes? They seem to get along well, but do you think that, under the circumstances, she ought to marry him?

Her mother chuckled knowingly. Her father communicated, *Ton hasn't had a taff or a drink in months, so I hardly think that would affect Ausha's decision on the matter.*

Miaundea set the final glass on the table and spun around to face her parents. *You mean he quit?*

Her father nodded. *And can you blame him? He could only smoke and drink in his apartment, and not within six hours of working or driving. It really was in his best interest to give it up completely.*

He'll never join the Order.

Oh, I'm certain he will, her father contradicted with a smile.

He really has changed. Miaundea had known that Ton was different, but she had never dreamed he had changed so drastically, and it unsettled her. She couldn't help but think about what could have been, until she realized that, regardless of the circumstances, Ton would never have wanted to marry her. He had felt affection for her, but the affection he felt for Ausha had always been greater. Miaundea knew also that she had offended him in many ways and that he had never respected her enough to give her the status of wife.

She also had to admit to herself that she had never loved Ton enough to overlook the fact that she would probably outlive him by a century.

He's had to change, just to cope, her father explained. *He's had a very traumatic year.*

Do you have any regrets? her mother asked.

Miaundea smiled barely and shook her head. *No regrets. Just . . . thoughts.*

Miaundea ate dinner with her family that evening, then went to her Shalaun apartment to spend the night, preoccupied with the pacifists' race problems and what she had learned in her encounter with Ton.

Was Ton right? Was she really making too much of the pacifists' racist tendencies? Novaunian pacifists weren't marrying Gudyneans or Kavellans—so what? Miaundea was the first to admit that an interracial marriage would have unique challenges, and it wasn't as if the Isolationists advocated violating anyone's civil rights or anything like that. But then again, all three of her roommates had favored the notion of the six dually colonized planets forming their own union.

People weren't getting hurt by these attitudes, or were they? Miaundea had no doubt that Ausha and her counterparts believed that the Isolationists had protested the Latanzan War because they were racists. Miaundea knew, however, that this belief was false. The Isolationists had protested Novaun's involvement in the Latanzan War because they believed it was wrong for any Novaunian to kill—the protest had been nothing more or less than that. Perhaps she really was making too much of this.

Still, it bothered her that Braysel would agree with his countrymen on this, of all issues. On the other hand, if Braysel held this opinion, perhaps it had some merit. Then again, Ton had reminded her that she hadn't expected to find a husband who was perfect. Was Braysel really so imperfect for holding this opinion, or was she so arrogant that her opinion always had to be right? As far as the racial issue was concerned, who was really right and who was really wrong? Miaundea couldn't help but think the pacifists were wrong in their attitudes, but, at the same time, the whole issue confused her.

Miaundea had ended telepathic communication with Braysel abruptly two days before and hadn't communicated with him since. She knew that he was probably frantic and that she should communicate with him, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it—not yet.

She felt especially uncomfortable now after her encounter with Ton and the emotions of attraction and jealousy it had inspired. She did not love Ton, at least not to the same degree she loved Braysel, but how could Braysel ever learn of her feelings and not be hurt? How could she get rid of these awful feelings? How could she make herself accept Ton's involvement with Ausha?

Miaundea felt queer when she thought of Ausha, especially in light of what her father had told her. Miaundea thought it odd that her father hadn't once mentioned Ausha's beauty in his observation, but, then again, he was old enough to be Ausha's father and probably didn't notice things like that. Miaundea believed men must look at Ausha and consider her beautiful, but was it her beauty that attracted them to her so irresistibly? Or was it that she was so comfortable to be with, as her father had suggested?

The thought of it overwhelmed Miaundea with realization of her own weaknesses. People loved Ausha because she was so warm and eager to know them. People disliked Miaundea because she was cold, haughty, and distant—Ton disliked her because she was cold, haughty, and distant. Miaundea's heart clenched in self-pity. *Ausha, the soft effusive healer; Miaundea the hard ice queen of Auyval Beach . . .*

Miaundea felt the district relay touch her mind and was suddenly filled with dread. The person who wanted to communicate with her was Braysel. What would she communicate? She tentatively opened her mind and received his transmission.

Do you still hate me? Since their spirits weren't touching she couldn't feel his emotions, but he formulated his thoughts with such heaviness and care that she knew he was in agony.

Miaundea stacked her bed pillows and propped herself up. *No, of course not Bray. I never did.*

If it makes you feel any better, I don't think Dinevlea, Bristaun, and Jeltar ought to be kicked out of the Union.

Miaundea nearly laughed. It was almost a joke, and she did begin feeling better. *Maybe Novaun and all of those insane pacifists ought to be kicked out of the Union.*

Sometimes I do wish someone would give us all a good kick.

I'm sorry I behaved intolerably and that I refused to communicate with you the other night. I think your countrymen are good people, and I also think I may be going insane.

I've been thinking a lot about this, Miaundea, and I sincerely don't understand why you're upset. I don't think our opinions on this subject are as different as you seem to think they are. The only difference between the Isolationists and Fleet supporters on this issue is that Fleet supporters are less insulated than the Isolationists (naturally) and therefore enter into and see interracial marriages occasionally. Very occasionally.

Braysel's observation surprised Miaundea. He really had led a sheltered life. If she told him that it wasn't uncommon in Shalaun to see marriages between native Novaunians and young people from Dinevlea, Bristaun, and Jeltar he probably wouldn't believe her. *Do you think interracial marriage is a sin?*

No, and I don't know anyone else who does either. But I do think it's unwise, and even downright risky. Tell me you disagree.

Actually, you're right. I don't completely disagree.

From a Novaunian man's point of view, in fact, it would be an extremely stupid move.

Why is that?

Because by law, the wife and her family are responsible for the primary nurturing of any children that come from the union.

Miaundea felt silly. *I hadn't thought of that.*

Of course you hadn't. You're not a man! Trust me on this one. Novaunian men are as careful in their choice of wives as Novaunian women are in their choice of husbands, and I know from my own experience how careful women are.

So in your opinion, the heritage issue is more important than the lifespan one.

Absolutely, but the lifespan factor is huge. I don't want to marry a woman I'll outlive by decades or maybe even a century. Such a course would limit the number of children I would have and shorten their lives.

It seems to me that people who truly believe in eternal marriage and family should not be so concerned about a few decades in this mortal life.

That's an easy thing to think when you're young, before the consequences of such a choice take their toll. The thought of contracting a marriage like that repels me.

Have you ever been attracted to a woman of another race?

Attraction and marriage aren't necessarily the same thing, but no. I never have.

Did he think she was bizarre for at one time being so attracted to Ton? Miaundea couldn't stop herself from communicating, *So you have no comprehension whatsoever how I could've been attracted to Ton.*

That's not entirely true. I know him and I know you, and I have some idea of what attracted the two of you to each other.

But you think it would have been "unwise" for me to marry him had it ever come to that.

Yes, and so do you!

That much is true, Miaundea admitted. Oddly, she didn't find herself growing angry. Braysel was the way he was and his pacifist countrymen were the way they were, and she could do nothing but accept it. She was, however, intensely curious. We're discussing a real person here, Bray. A person with feelings and a right to happiness. He's one Earthon among millions of Novaunians. If he can't marry a Novaunian woman, then what sort of woman should he marry?

He should leave. He wants to anyway.

Miaundea thought about how Ton had double-crossed Sanel King. What if he can't leave? What if my father thinks it's too dangerous and won't let him? Besides that, you haven't seen him in half a year. What if he wants to stay?

Then he should go to one of the interracial planets in the Union like Dinevlea.

Braysel had no idea how close to the mark he really was. Ton would probably marry Ausha, just the sort of woman Braysel felt was appropriate for him to marry, but there was so much Braysel hadn't considered. What if he can't even do that? My parents believe that Ton will marry Ausha Ferudant, the Dinevlean woman you met at their home—

Then why are we discussing this? It doesn't seem to be an issue.

It is an issue, Bray. You have a pure-blooded Earthon man marrying a woman who is part Novaunian and part Gudynean and who knows what else. What if they decide to live on Novaun? Legally, there's nothing to stop them—Ausha is a Novaunian citizen! Ton may be too, soon. They will have children, children who will be a mixture of at least three different races.

Miaundea thought about Ton and his black eyes and the dark, olive cast to his skin and how no one would ever mistake him for a racial Novaunian. She also thought about Ausha and the way her brown eyes pointed upward at the corners, a distinct Gudynean feature, and how the bone structure of her face was so different from that of the average person of Novaunian race. Racially, those children will be only a fraction Novaunian, and they won't even look Novaunian. Who are they supposed to marry?

They can go back to Dinevlea and find mates.

Why? Because Dinevleans are an inferior race and therefore acceptable?

No, not inferior, just mixed.

So Dinevlea, Jeltar, and Bristaun now become the dumping ground for all racially mixed Novaunians? I can't believe you, Bray!

"Dumping ground" is too harsh, Miaundea.

That's what you're advocating!

No it isn't. What's so wrong about a Dinevlean woman and her children living on Dinevlea or marrying other Dinevleans?

But you don't think it's wrong for her to marry an Earthon man, even though she will outlive him by at least half a century.

I can't imagine a Novaunian woman from any planet marrying Ton, even if he was destined to live two hundred years!

He's changed, Bray, and my father says he plans to join the Order.

Now that's an interesting development. Do really think Ausha will marry him?

I don't know her well enough to speculate. My parents think she will, though, and are hoping for it, and it's obvious he loves her.

Your parents are hoping for it? Really? Braysel's tone of thought was one of shock.

Yes, they are. Very much. They think Ton needs a wife and that Ausha's perfect for him.

Braysel didn't respond for so long that Miaundea was afraid he might have withdrawn from the conversation completely. *Bray? Are you still there?*

Yes, angel, of course.

What's the matter?

No one I've ever known would so want a Novaunian woman to marry a man like Ton. Are your parents typical Tavoneans? Or are they as unconventional as I'm beginning to think they are?

Miaundea laughed. *I imagine all of Ton and Ausha's friends and colleagues will be happy about a marriage between them, so in that regard, my parents are typical. What makes them unconventional is their approval of my betrothal to you!*

Chapter 8: DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Ton's days passed with work, an interview with President Blorsten, study of religious doctrine, and more study of Earth history in preparation for Day of Ancestors. First Day afternoon at the Quautars' home for lunch, a week following Ton's decision to join the Order, Ton found a minute to communicate with Sharad privately on the deck. *Did you learn anything from Daniel Stewart?*

Not much.

Not much? Ton leaned against the rail and folded his arms. *Then you must have learned something.*

I don't think it would interest you. Sharad shook his head as if the possibility were inconceivable.

What! Ton demanded.

Sharad smirked. *I learned that the man's name is Carl Landis and that the Divine Emperor or someone else does have control of a cell in his brain.*

Then it wasn't really Daniel Stewart.

Sharad took a bite of one of the cookies he was holding. *Not unless Daniel Stewart was really Carl Landis.*

What else did he tell you?

That King's plan was exactly what I thought it was, at least in part.

Panic rose within Ton. *You mean he really was planning to have me shot at his trial?*

Yes. King sent Landis here to torture you and to shoot you at the trial. He gave me all the details about how this was to be accomplished, and he also told me that he was not supposed to actually kill you, just hurt you badly enough that you would almost die. Apparently the plan was to shoot you indirectly in the head at low power.

An indirect shot? And just what is indirect?

To the ear or cheek instead of the forehead or temple. Sharad formed a pistol with his finger and thumb and pressed it against Ton's head.

Ton stepped from Sharad slightly, unnerved. *And that wasn't supposed to kill me?*

No, not on low power. But it probably would have put you in the hospital for a month.

And I almost agreed to do it?

You aren't going to do it. Sharad offered him a cookie.

Ton waved the cookie away. *Why in the galaxy wasn't he supposed to kill me?*

Because there were two major parts to King's plan. By having you shot at his trial, he not only tortures you, he laughs at Novaun for protecting you. He obviously wants to actually kill you in some other way.

Ton wondered what could be worse than being shot in the head. *Did this Landis guy tell you how?*

No, and I didn't think he would. King didn't tell him the second part of the plan.

So there definitely is another agent.

Yes. The other agent is the one who manipulated Deia's mind in Launarda. Landis is the agent who followed you to Mautysia and sent a holodisc of your day there to an Earthon agent on some other planet. Sharad popped the last bit of cookie into his mouth.

Following me to Mautysia and sending a holodisc off the planet seem like careless things to do. Why wasn't he worried about getting caught?

Sharad brushed cookie crumbs off his half-vest. *Because he was counting on getting caught.*

I can't handle this.

Sharad grinned. *Just think of it as a game.*

It isn't a game!

Oh, but it is. While we're trying to outguess and maneuver King, he's trying to outguess and maneuver us. King obviously suspected you would confide in us and that we would protect you. He also assumed we would try to get you off the planet by faking your death. He knows he will go to trial, and he knows we know he will go to trial. He sees an opportunity to humiliate Novaun and in the process give us an opportunity to fake your death. He sent Landis here, knowing we would probably find him and put him under surveillance and yet still allow him into the courtroom with a weapon so that we could fake your death. We've been playing into King's hands while he's been playing into ours. But none of this really matters.

Which means that King's second plan is the plan.

Exactly. What we need to do now is find the other agent.

How did Landis get on the planet?

He came in a coffin that originally belonged to a Fleet sergeant who died in the Senlana campaign.

* * *

The next morning Ton went to Counselor Brunel's office for his scheduled session. After Ton told her about his plan to join the Order and gave her the new information he had learned about his father, the counselor asked, *How long have you lived on Novaun, Ton?*

Almost a year.

Have you considered the possibility of eventually getting married?

Ton stared at her, baffled. *Get married? Me?*

Yes, get married.

I don't intend to ever get married.

So you intend to remain celibate.

Well . . . no.

Then it seems to me you have a problem.

The counselor's observation troubled Ton. He planned to remain on Novaun and join the Order, but as long as he did, a physical relationship with a woman was impossible unless he took a wife. How could he believe in the Novaunian religion and not believe in marriage? How could his desires be so conflicting? What did he really want?

Those placid green eyes studied his face. *What is it about marriage, Ton, that you so dislike?*

Ton had no difficulty answering that question. *I would get bored being with the same person all the time. I don't want a woman to control me, and I'm not about to give a woman that kind of opportunity to betray me.*

A woman doesn't need to be married to you to betray you.

Ton considered the counselor's observation and realized she was right. Miaundea had betrayed him, and she had not been his wife. As much as Miaundea had hurt him, however,

he couldn't begin to fathom how much more hurt he would have been had she been his wife and he had discovered she was sleeping with Braysel or any other man. *Marriage is different*, Ton finally replied. *It's supposed to be forever.*

And you don't think you could be with one woman forever and not get bored?

No.

You spend a great deal of time with Ausha. In fact, you and Ausha spend more time together than most married couples I know. Do you ever get bored with her?

No.

Why not?

Ton frowned. Why didn't he get bored with Ausha? It was a valid question he had never asked himself. *I don't know. She's an interesting person, and she's comfortable to be with and fun. But it isn't just that. Sometimes we don't do or communicate anything, but I still need to be with her, I guess because I need to feel her support and affection. I could never be bored with Ausha.*

Do you trust her?

If I can't trust my partner, I'm in trouble and so are my patients.

Forget about work for a minute. Do you trust her in life? Would she ever lie to you or betray a confidence?

Ton shook his head. *Never. I trust Ausha completely.*

Once Ausha gets married, do you think she will ever try to control her husband or leave him?

Ton couldn't answer. He felt uneasy discussing the subject of Ausha getting married.

Why does that question make you uncomfortable?

Ton couldn't help but feel irritated. Sometimes he wished the counselor weren't so empathic, and more than anything, he didn't want to discuss marriage.

The counselor smiled knowingly. *It's my job to ask you difficult questions.*

Ton sighed. *I don't want Ausha to get married—ever.*

Why? Don't you think she would like to be married?

Ton couldn't lie to himself or to the counselor. *Because if she gets married, she won't want to spend as much time with me as she does now.*

Does it bother you when she goes on engagements?

She doesn't go on engagements.

Doesn't that seem odd?

No. *This idiot named Andrel asked her to marry him several months ago, and she's been very careful since. She hasn't met anyone recently she wants to go on an engagement with.*

Has it ever occurred to you that she may be turning down invitations because she wants to be with you instead of someone else?

I would like to think that's the reason, Ton admitted.

You don't want Ausha to get married, but how do you think Ausha will feel when you find a woman you want as a lover and companion?

The counselor's question upset Ton so much that he couldn't answer.

A minute passed, and Counselor Brunel communicated, *What disturbs you, Ton?*

Ton couldn't deny what he felt, as perplexing as those feelings were. *I don't want to be with anyone but Ausha.*

You don't want to have a lover?

Ton communicated in despair, *I want Ausha to be my lover.* He shook his head. *But it could never happen. We don't excite each other.*

How could you possibly want Ausha to be your lover if she doesn't excite you?

I don't know. But I do.

Perhaps you are attracted to her but have a moral objection to making her your lover that is stronger than the attraction.

Ton considered the counselor's suggestion. *I don't know. I never had any kind of moral objection to making love to Miaundea.*

A psychological objection then.

Ton wasn't sure he understood. *Ausha thinks I'm afraid that becoming lovers would change our close friendship and make it something shallow and ugly. Is that what you mean by a psychological objection?*

Exactly. Is she right? Do you think being intimate with her would undermine your friendship?

Undermine it? It would destroy it!

Why?

Because we wouldn't be able to respect each other anymore.

Why?

She could never respect me because she would perceive me as someone with no morals or self-control, and I could never respect her because she would be no different from any of the other women I've been with.

Women with no morals or self-control?

Ton nodded slowly.

Do you think you would have lost respect for Miaundea if she had agreed to be intimate with you?

I'm not sure. A person can't lose respect for someone if he doesn't have it already, and I never had complete respect for Miaundea.

Why?

Because of her haughty attitude.

But you do have complete respect for Ausha.

Yes.

Why?

I don't know for sure. I just do. She has never done anything that would cause me to lose respect for her, personally or professionally.

If you could name one thing about Ausha that makes her different from all the other women you've ever known, what would it be?

Ton stroked his mustache as he pondered. Finally he replied, *She sincerely considers me her equal. She asks for my opinions on things; she believes I'm personally and professionally capable; she trusts me and thinks highly enough of me to confide in me; and she needs me as much as I need her, in work and in life. I don't know how else to explain it.*

Ton reflected for several moments. *It's really strange, because there's no way I could have known all of those things when I met her, but I understood her attitude right away, and I knew that I wanted her respect. I knew before we even communicated that she was different.*

But she must have known before she met you that she would have to treat you as an equal if the two of you were to develop a productive partnership.

That's true, but it was more than that. It wasn't that she felt forced. It had never occurred to her that I would be anything but an equal.

How do you know?

It was the way she looked at me. This new revelation excited Ton. He had been so disturbed by that look at the time and had wondered what it meant. Now he knew. When I met her, I thought she was utterly gorgeous, and my first thought was that I wanted to make love to her. She knew it, too. But the way she looked at me was so strange. She wasn't embarrassed or scornful or even naïve. Nor was she accepting or teasing or worshipful. Just appreciative, nothing more and nothing less.

The counselor smiled. She was flattered by your interest.

Ton nodded, feeling pleased. I think maybe she was. She respected me too much even then to tease me or to show disdain or disgust, and yet she couldn't give me any kind of approval. She reacted in the only way she could. That was it, though. It was that look that established respect and set the limits.

So there was a moment when you first saw Ausha that you were very attracted to her.

Ton nodded. Yes.

It isn't her you object to then, and it never has been. It's the thought of an exploitative, sordid affair with her that repels you.

I can't imagine having any kind of affair with her!

If you and Ausha were to begin feeling a mutual physical attraction, would you consider marrying her?

Marry Ausha? Share his life and his bed with her forever? It was a possibility that had never even occurred to Ton, yet he couldn't comprehend living without her. Unbelievably, he wasn't uncomfortable with the thought of making love to her if he could have her forever, but something about the thought of marrying her still made him feel uneasy. I don't know.

She would excite you and at the same time never bore or betray you. Why don't you know?

I'm not sure I would want to take the chance that I might do something despicable.

Despicable?

That I might strike her or be unfaithful to her.

So you doubt your own ability to make a marriage work.

Ton nodded weakly.

Counselor Brunel gazed at him perceptively. The problem then is with you, not the institution of marriage.

Ton averted his eyes, feeling more uncomfortable than ever.

How many hours during the last year have you spent with Ausha?

I don't know. Thousands.

Does she ever make you angry?

Sometimes.

Have you ever struck her?

No.

Why not?

Because it would be wrong and I don't want to hurt her. Besides, she would never let me get away with it.

You and Ausha have found positive ways to deal with disagreement and anger. What makes you think marriage would change that aspect of your relationship?

Ton tapped his fingers on the armrest of his chair. The counselor had a point. *Perhaps it wouldn't.*

And why does the thought of being unfaithful to her disturb you so much when our discussion of a companion other than her disturbs you even more? Ton, she isn't your lover, nor is she in any way legally bound to you, and yet you can't even be unfaithful to her in your mind!

Ton could think of nothing to reply. He was completely perplexed.

The counselor leaned toward Ton and squeezed his arm. *A successful marriage isn't just a legal commitment. It's a commitment of the heart and the mind. It's sharing and companionship, an intimate partnership. You've already committed a huge part of yourself to Ausha. Maybe it's time you search within yourself and try to find out why.*

Ton nodded. He left Counselor Brunel that morning, confused. The idea of marrying Ausha pleased him in many ways, but he couldn't give it any serious consideration. She was going to Dinevelea in seven months to work for her father, and Ton was staying on Novaun. Ton wasn't certain he would even be alive in seven months. His dangerous situation made the issue of marriage complex enough, but there were other important issues that complicated it even more—children, dijauntu, and more importantly, Ausha's feelings for him. He strode across the walk to the Clinic of Neuromedicine, feeling apprehensive and a little depressed.

Ton went to his office and briefly studied two new cases, then went to the lounge to meet Dr. Hovaus and Ausha for lunch and conference. Ausha arrived shortly after he did, fresh and cheerful.

She affectionately squeezed his shoulder and sat down next to him. *It must have been quite a session today. You look exhausted.*

Ton shrugged and nodded slightly, uncomfortably aware of her passionate dark eyes, full voluptuous lips, and soft curvaceous shape. He wanted to reach out and touch those lips, but he didn't dare. He realized in resignation that he would never be able to look at her in the same sexless way again.

Ton forced himself to smile. *Did you bring me a curnad?*

Ausha reached into her lunch bag, pulled out two pieces of fruit with fuzzy pale yellow skin, and handed one of them to Ton.

Dr. Hovaus arrived a few minutes later, and Ton was forced to concentrate on his work until after he saw his last patient late that afternoon.

Chapter 9: A RATIONAL PASSION

Ton walked with Ausha to the Pavilion for dinner after work late that afternoon, their spirits slightly overlapping as they always did outside of work, even when they weren't communicating telepathically. He still felt confused about a lot of things, but he couldn't be depressed. Her spiritual touches elated him in a way they never had before, and his happiness stirred her to greater animation. Ausha enthusiastically recounted portions of the lecture he had missed that morning, humorously mimicking the professor who had given the lecture, and Ton laughed and laughed.

They arrived at the Pavilion several minutes later. They sat down next to each other at their regular table, across from Bryaun and his partner, and ordered. As they waited for their food, Ton grew increasingly more tantalized by the thought of marrying Ausha. He couldn't bear the memories of all the desolate years he had lived before she had come into his life, nor could he bear thoughts of how empty and forlorn his life would be without her.

He remembered all those evenings they had parted at her door in loneliness, wanting to remain together but knowing they had to make time for sleep. What would it be like to always go home in the evening with Ausha? To a home that wasn't just his, but theirs together? To a bed that wasn't just his, but theirs together? He would awake in the morning and always have her there with him. His heart throbbed with excitement.

Ton and Ausha's food arrived and so did several more people they knew, including Tauna. Everyone laughed and joked and ate, and Ton's excitement increased, along with his curiosity. Could Ausha ever feel passion for him? As he finished his meal, he thought back to the time when he had asked Ausha if she had ever thought about the possibility of their being lovers.

Do you . . . think I'm . . . attractive?

Her smile had been radiant. *Yes, very.*

Then how could it not have occurred to you?

I don't know. I guess it just never seemed to be an issue. I don't ever intend to be intimate with a man who isn't my husband, and between your thinking I'm as exciting as a crushed frontal lobe, and your very resolute claims that you never intend to get married, and your not being of my religion, I figure the odds of the question ever arising are at least ten thousand to one. I guess it just isn't in my nature to want something I know I can never have.

Ton realized that every one of Ausha's reasons for not being interested in him in a physical way had been based on his feelings and personal situation, not hers, and he suddenly felt overwhelmed by hope. How would she feel if he started showing an interest in making their relationship a romantic one? He had no legitimate reason to expect her reaction to be negative.

Ton had a number of plausible reasons to maintain restraint, but none of them could overcome his curiosity or his desire to be with Ausha forever. Before he realized what he was doing, he rested his hand on hers under the table, his fingers hot and trembling.

He sat paralyzed for two unbearable seconds, wondering what she would do. She turned her hand and gently traced his fingers and the lines on his palm, moving her arm to a comfortable position under his. He could feel a flicker of anticipation in her, but she didn't look at him or smile or communicate puzzlement or surprise— nothing. It was as if she didn't realize they were holding hands.

Ton was thrilled she was holding his hand, but he was perplexed that she didn't realize it. His relationship with Ausha outside of work was demonstrative, but fondling hands under the table was more of a romantic thing and not something they had ever done. How could she not know something was different? How could she not feel the excitement in him? It wasn't like Ausha to respond only with her emotions and not her mind.

Finally, after many minutes, Ton understood. Ausha didn't notice they were holding hands because she instinctively felt this form of expressing affection was as natural as any of the other forms of expression they used. What did it mean? Did she think caressing hands under the table was a mere expression of friendship? Or did she think, as he did, that holding hands was a prelude to a more passionate union? If so, did that mean she felt a romantic relationship between them would be as natural as their friendship? Could a woman as rational as Ausha make a transition from friendship to passion with so little thought and effort? Perhaps Ausha was so rational that she was capable of feeling passion for a man only after a long friendship, or maybe the emotion she felt for him was already deeper than friendship. How would he know? Was he going to have to be bold and kiss her on the lips?

At least five minutes passed, and Ausha's fingers began moving up and down Ton's arm in long, savoring strokes. He could feel the anticipation rise in her as their spirits touched, and his cheeks grew warm.

He sat there in exhilaration. Her feelings for him were definitely more intense than friendship. He thought he should be shocked, but he wasn't. Being with Ausha in this way felt too natural and right. He communicated nothing to anybody, wanting only to enjoy these new sensations.

Ausha pressed closer to him, and Ton responded by caressing her knee as well as her hand, her skin smooth and soft under his fingers. Her rapture stabbed through them both, and Ton thought he would die of excitement.

This dual passion flaming between their spirits was a sensation unlike anything he had ever experienced, and Ton felt as if he were the one being seduced. Being seduced by a Novaunian woman and her telepathic pleasures! What irony! What supreme, blissful irony! How much more intense would the flame be when they kissed? When they made love? He finally understood why the Novaunians' desire for the dijauntu was so strong, and he longed to experience that incomprehensible level of ecstasy with Ausha. He had indeed found paradise.

Finally, she noticed. He felt her shoulder move behind his as she turned abruptly to look at him. She gazed at him in question, her cheeks flushed. He suddenly felt foolish, half expecting her to be furious at him. Everything had happened so fast. Her expression of question melted into one of pleasure, and the corners of her mouth curved up a little, as if she wanted to laugh. Then she glanced at Bryaun and Tauna and each of the other five people who were communicating animatedly around the table, as if trying to reassure herself that no one had noticed. No one had.

Ausha stood up, casually drawing Ton up with her. Her manner was as friendly and as affectionate as usual, but her emotions were convulsing in an unrelenting urge to hold him. Ton felt a rush of anticipation.

What are you two doing tonight? Bryaun asked.

Ton and Ausha looked at each other, neither knowing what to tell him. A moment later Ton replied, *We're taking Anenka for a walk.*

We'll see you all later! Ausha pulled Ton away from the table before anyone had time to follow them or make other suggestions for the evening.

Ton's mind worked quickly as he and Ausha wound their way around the tables of the Pavilion toward the stairs that led to the sidewalk, trying to determine a way he could be with her alone in a private place very quickly. There were too many people on the walk, and it was still too light to find an isolated doorway or park bench somewhere. Even so, they were too near the Academy. No matter which direction they chose to walk, they were likely to encounter someone they knew and be forced to stop and communicate for a while. More than anything, he didn't want to walk back to the clinic where his car was parked and meet up with any of the other physicians or medical specialists who worked there. After a minute of consideration, Ton did the only thing that came to his mind. He telepathically hailed a taxi.

Ton and Ausha telepathically authorized their banks to pay the restaurant, then stepped lightly down the shallow stairs that wound through the tropical garden to the street. They stood at the foot of the stairs for a moment in the soft glow of the early evening sun. Ton gingerly touched Ausha's lips with his finger. She smiled at him lovingly, her lips parting slightly and coming together again on his fingertip in a tiny kiss.

An aircar slid to a stop in front of them. Ton's fingers grazed Ausha's cheek and neck as they moved to her back and pushed her gently toward the taxi. She slipped into the aircar, her eyes huge with eagerness and delight. She took his hands and drew him close as he slid into the seat next to her, and the taxi lifted into the air.

Ausha stroked Ton's face and hair, gazing at him adoringly. *Give me your diagnosis, Dr. Luciani. Is this gut animal passion?*

Oh no, Dr. Ferudant, Ton replied with a shake of his head, his hand trembling as he ran it up her back and into her hair to remove the onyx comb. The comb fell to the seat, and her hair fell to her shoulders. *Gut animal passion doesn't even come close to comparing to this.*

Ausha snuggled closer to Ton. *How did it happen? One minute I was communicating with Launi and Dane, then the next minute I was dying for you. I don't understand.*

I'm not sure I do either. All I did was hold your hand.

Ausha was more curious than ever. *Why did you hold my hand?*

Ton pounded the top of her head gently with his fist. *Why do you have to analyze everything? Why can't you just enjoy yourself?*

Ausha smiled and kissed the inside of his arm. *I am enjoying myself.*

Ton hesitated. *These feelings . . . they don't disturb you?*

No, of course not. Do I feel disturbed? Now who's doing the analyzing!

There's something strange in you I can't define.

Maybe it's just that I'm amazed. I never thought there could ever be such passion between us. I never dared want it; I never even dared think it. But it feels so comfortable and right. I can't be disturbed. I can't even be surprised.

Ton rested his fingers on Ausha's jaw. *You're so beautiful, Ausha. You're just so beautiful.* He finally understood what he was feeling and why Ausha had always been different and precious, why he had always wanted more from her than a mere affair. He reverently caressed her cheek. *I love you. I think I've always loved you. You mean more to me than anything in this universe.*

Ausha's face glowed with happiness. *I love you too, Ton.* They reached deeper into each other's spirits. Their lips touched together in a caress and clung, then parted slightly and came together again longingly.

"Ahhhh . . . Ton, you feel so nice," Ausha gasped between kisses, clasping him close. *You feel so, so nice . . .!*

Ausha's vehemence thrilled Ton. She poured her whole essence into every kiss, and Ton could feel that she wasn't driven to such energetic demonstrations by an urge to satisfy a physical craving, but by a need to express emotion too intense to contain. Ton had never been the recipient of such uninhibited passion, nor had he ever felt so valued.

Ton had never imagined mere kissing could be so pleasurable, or that he could ever be in such control of himself. As intense as his feelings were for Ausha, he was careful not to kiss her too intimately or touch her in a way that would offend her, and he felt gratified that he could physically enjoy a woman without feeling that insatiable urge to immediately make love. There would be time for that later, or at least he hoped there would be. He wanted more than ever to marry her, to be her lover forever.

How would he accomplish it though? He had her love, but there was so much about him she didn't know, and he suddenly felt guilty.

Ausha's puzzlement surged through them both. *What's wrong?*

Ton pressed his cheek against hers and squeezed her tightly, the fingers of one hand still in her hair. *I'm being very unfair to you. There are too many things you don't know about me.*

Then maybe there are things you'd better tell me.

Ton pulled away enough so that he could look at her and nodded slowly. *There are things I've wanted to tell you for a long time, but I couldn't.*

You mean, like you won't be going to Dinevlea to work for my father?

Ton looked at her in surprise.

Ausha smoothed his mustache with her finger. *I didn't want to believe that you wouldn't be able to work for my father, and I kept telling myself that you would find a way to go to Dinevlea with me. Deep down, though, I've known for a while that it wouldn't happen. Dinevlea isn't safe for you, is it?*

Ton was more surprised than ever. *How did you know?*

Because it would be an excellent position, perfect for your interests and skills, an opportunity of a lifetime. You like living in Shalaun, but you've lived in too many places to be too attached to it. You'd be a fool not to at least communicate with my father. Either you have a better opportunity somewhere else, which you would have already told me about, or Dinevlea isn't safe.

Ton nodded slowly. *If I could go anywhere, Ausha, I'd go to Dinevlea and work with you and your father. I already discussed it with Colonel Quautar, and he told me no. He told me I can never go there, not even to visit. Everything in my life is uncertain right now. Sanel King has spies here who are doing their best to torture me and who will try to kill me.*

Ausha couldn't repress a spasm of terror.

Ton brushed her hair away from her face. *Now you see? That's one of the reasons I couldn't tell you anything before. I knew you would worry.*

I worry because I care about you. She kissed him gently.

I know. Ton cradled her face in his hands. Please don't be afraid, Ausha. I need your courage, not your fear.

Ausha nodded weakly. Colonel Quautar won't let anyone kill you . . . will he?

He's doing his best to protect me, but the situation is very complex.

Ton communicated nothing more as the taxi slid to a stop at Trasyna Point Park, and Ausha asked nothing. Ton reached behind Ausha to pick up the onyx comb, then took her hand and gently pulled her out of the taxi with him. Ausha took the comb from Ton and dropped it into her lunch bag and out of the way. His arm found her shoulders and her arm found his waist, and they started slowly through the park to the marble path that skirted the bay shore and would take them to Trasyna Point.

You have to understand, Ton finally communicated. None of it happened the way it seemed. That's why it's only me King wants and not Paul or Deia or Teren. On the Sovereign of the Stars, there was this Department of Internal Investigation agent named Daniel Stewart. He approached me two weeks before the Sovereign put into port at Earth and told me he had a way I could make three hundred and fifty thousand dollars and acquire a research position on Erdean.

I was extremely skeptical, but I acted interested. He told me all about Teren and Deia and Paul and explained that my job would be to manipulate them into each other's favor and into King's trap. I would telepathically give Stewart the spirit dimension formula in the armed shuttle, and he and his agents would use my mind as a channel through which they would kill Teren. The proposition tantalized me. Outwitting a foreign agent sounded like supreme fun, but outwitting the D.I.I. and Sanel King himself was the opportunity of a lifetime. I couldn't refuse.

Ausha stopped and stared at him in astounded realization. You double-crossed them!

Ton nodded triumphantly. It was so perfect, so ridiculously perfect. I couldn't accept the job and kill this boy agent, of course. That would have gone against every human feeling in me. But I could accept it and ruin King's plans. All I had to do was go with Teren when the time came. There was no way King or Stewart could know my true plan until it was too late. It was absolutely perfect!

I just can't believe it, Ausha communicated as they began walking again. It was you who ruined King, not Teren. No wonder he wants you dead. You know, if you weren't in so much danger, it would be hilarious! She couldn't restrain herself from laughing, but laughing made her feel guilty.

Ton chuckled. Don't feel bad for laughing! It is hilarious. I laughed inside for months and months. I still want to laugh sometimes when I think about it.

You have to tell me everything, Ton. Everything you thought, everything you felt. I want to know everything!

They walked along the shore, and Ton let her telepathically see and feel everything. He started with his meeting with Stewart, then progressed to his separate meetings with Paul, then Teren, then finally Deia. He showed her all the conversations he had had with the three, let her feel his thoughts as he had made his manipulative plans, showed her the conversations he had had with Daniel Stewart, and finally showed her the conversation he had had with King. Ausha assimilated it all, captivated.

Ton let Ausha experience the escape from the *Sovereign*, the triumph he had felt for outwitting King and Stewart, and the ecstasy of the spirit dimension formula, just as he had felt it.

It was living energy—life. It flowed around us and through us. Feeling that was worth any sacrifice. Even knowing what I know now, I would do it again in a minute.

They sat down on a marble bench at one side of Trasyna Point and looked out over the bay and the darkening sky, still communicating intently. Ton told her about his arrival on Novaun, his excitement, his triumph, and his meeting with Colonel Quautar.

I knew right away that this man was shrewd. He was too perceptive and he made me very uncomfortable, but I liked him.

Ton telepathically showed Ausha his entire first interview with Colonel Quautar, and when he was done, she asked him in puzzlement, *Why did you lie? Why didn't you just tell him that you had double-crossed King?*

Because I was afraid he wouldn't believe me and would think I was a spy. Ton wound one of Ausha's curls around his finger.

You certainly were paranoid!

I had good reason to be paranoid. My reasons for coming to Novaun were too improbable not to arouse suspicion.

So did he ever think you were a spy?

I'm sure he considered the possibility, but he knew I had been the Sovereign plant before I left Dignitary Island. I didn't know he knew it though. It wasn't until the day I went with Bray to Mautysia that I told the colonel my problem. He had known all along.

Ausha couldn't believe it. You waited nearly half a year?

You have to understand. Up until that time, I was more afraid of Colonel Quautar than I was of King. I was certain Colonel Quautar would think I was a spy and would banish me from the planet if he learned the truth, and I believed that the one place King could never get to me was on Novaun. It wasn't until the night of Teren and Deia's wedding that I realized King had an agent here. When I went back to my room at the Doshyr mansion that night, there was a strange odor, an Erdean perfume called Froquenza mixed with osalaem smoke. I found a taffuao stub in the bathroom sink.

Ausha's emotions were charged with horror. Did Colonel Quautar find the spy?

Yes and no. I'll get to that. I was terrified, to say the least. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between myself and the spy, so I took the first flight out of Jastray that morning. The week that followed was the worst of my life. I knew King wanted me dead, and I thought Colonel Quautar would think the spy in my room that night was working with me. I couldn't figure out why the Divine Emperor didn't just give King to the Novaunians, and I had nightmares every night about dying. I was always with Miaundea, and I was always shot in the back. Sometimes it was Miaundea who shot me, other times it was a shadowy figure I couldn't discern. It was horrible.

Ausha kissed Ton's cheek. That was why you were so despairing and so terrified that day in the office.

Ton rested his forehead against hers, deeply inhaling the earthy scent of her hair. *I didn't want to tell you anything that day. I had never confided in anyone before, not like that, but you were so gentle and understanding and sad, and you seemed to need to communicate as much as I did. It all kind of melted out of me, and I did feel a little better afterward. Then two days after that, I went to Mautysia. After I got back to Shalaun, Colonel Quautar summoned me to his home office and berated me until I was sure I'd go into shock.*

He telepathically gave her the entire interview, then went on to tell her about seeing a man who looked like Daniel Stewart, about the seemingly non-existence female spy in Launarda, about the Earth broadcast that had been planted on the medical history disc Ausha had given him for his birthday, and about the way he had learned that Deia had been the woman in his room that night in Launarda.

Ausha already knew, as everyone else did, that King controlled a cell in Deia's brain, but she was astounded to learn that Deia had been the spy in Ton's room. *I can't understand how Teren couldn't have immediately been suspicious. He had to have known something was strange.*

Not necessarily. Whoever telepathically persuaded Deia to enter my room that night put a block on her memory, or suggested she forget what she had done. Deia and Teren hadn't been married much more than a month when Colonel Quautar discovered the controlled cell. Would dijauntu immediately penetrate such a deep memory? And such an obscure one?

Probably not, but that's not what I mean. Osalaem has a distinctive odor. Wouldn't Teren have smelled it on her?

Teren told me that after they left the party, he waited thirty minutes for her in the lounge downstairs while she went to shower and change her clothes.

Ausha pulled away a little, nodding thoughtfully. *I guess washing and changing would've taken care of that smell, and she probably didn't actually smoke the taffuao. Ausha gazed at the bay, which was sparkling under the stars, and shook her head. Something still isn't right about the whole thing. Someone had to have smelled the osalaem on the dress. Who had the dress cleaned? Didn't Teren and Deia leave Launarda immediately for their wedding trip?*

Ton slid his fingers into her hair and caressed the back of her head. *There are laundry facilities there at the mansion. Colonel Quautar believes Deia herself put her dress in the machine to be cleaned.*

Does she have any idea at all who it is that controls a cell in her brain?

She's convinced it's King. She even claims to remember when it happened.

But that's impossible. He certainly isn't on Novaun.

Theoretically it's impossible. But King could have developed a way to let an agent tap into the bond.

Ausha shook her head in pity. *Poor Deia.*

The worst thing about it is that none of us can tell her anything. She can't leave her home, except on rare occasions and under guard, and all she knows is that someone controls a cell in her brain and has tried to manipulate the bond. It's been hard on Teren too. Ton sighed. I feel awful sometimes, because I know that it's only because of me that she's confined.

Ausha reached for Ton's free hand and squeezed. *If Deia knew your danger, she would continue to do what she's doing now with no hesitation and no regrets. Does Teren know that you were the plant on the Sovereign?*

Ton nodded, lifting the back of her hand to his lips. *I never wanted him to know, but Colonel Quautar had to tell him. It was difficult for him at first and very awkward for me. We discussed it not long after he found out. Ironically enough, it's made us better friends. He understands me better, and I don't feel like I'm hiding something from him.*

Ton went on to show Ausha all of the conversations he had had with Colonel Quautar over the past four months, how the colonel had decided that King's plan was to kill him at King's trial and in the process humiliate Novaun, and how the colonel had planned to fake his death to get him off the planet safely.

You don't really have to go through with it, do you? Ausha demanded in panic. *You could just as easily be killed in that courtroom as escape. I know you can't go to Dinevlea, but can't you stay here? Please, Ton. Please stay here.*

Ton's arm tightened around her. *Oh no, no no no . . . Colonel Quautar and I decided at first that I would leave Novaun under the guise of death, but that isn't what I'm going to do. He told me I can remain on Novaun. He's already submitted my applications for citizenship and a new family organization in my name, and he also had the Daniel Stewart look-alike arrested.*

He showed her his discussions with Colonel Quautar on the subject, but Ausha was not completely relieved. *Does Colonel Quautar have any idea at all who the second spy might be?*

If he does, he's not telling me. It's only a matter of time before the spy reveals himself. All I can do is wait.

Ton slowly moved his hand to Ausha's cheek. He thought for a moment that he should ask her if she could still love him, but he already knew the answer. Her spirit clung to his with emotion as intense as his, and her fingers caressed his arms and waist possessively. In giving her his secret, he had given her himself. There was virtually nothing now about him she didn't know. Instead of rejecting him, she drew him deep into her heart, sealing the bond between them.

Their lips came together trembling. Ausha twisted her body and lifted herself slightly on her knees so that she could press closer, and Ton eagerly pulled her into his lap, his spirit gushing around her with all the love he felt.

Ausha gingerly stroked Ton's hair away from his forehead. *I love you, Dr. Luciani.*

Ton smiled. *I love you too, Dr. Ferudant.*

I'm still amazed, Ton. I can't believe this is real. I still want to know why you held my hand.

Ton hesitated. How could he tell her what his feelings had been in the Pavilion without discussing marriage? He had no doubt he wanted to marry Ausha, but he couldn't propose to her yet. Although he felt confident in her love and knew that she was just as likely to accept him as refuse him, he also knew that there was no way she could be certain about anything yet. He wanted to give her plenty of time to ponder his situation and decide what she could and couldn't live with. Still, he couldn't hide anything from her, and perhaps it was better that she understood how serious his intentions were.

It all started this morning when I went to see Counselor Brunel. I told her what I had learned about my father and that I was planning to join the Order. After that, she asked me if I had ever considered the possibility of getting married. Ton shrugged slightly. Of course I told her no.

Ausha gazed at him knowingly. *And she probably then asked you if you plan to remain celibate for the rest of your life.*

Ton nodded. *That's exactly what she asked.*

Ausha chuckled. *Marriage and celibacy—what nightmarish topics. It's no wonder you came to lunch today exhausted!*

Ton nodded again, grimacing slightly. *And she was brutal. She made me think about a lot of things, though.* Ton telepathically gave Ausha the interview and the feelings it inspired. *The questions she asked made me feel very strange. I couldn't comprehend not being with you, but I couldn't visualize us as lovers either. When she asked me what I would think about marrying you though, everything changed, and I began understanding my feelings.*

Ton gently ran his fingers over her face and into her hair. She was so warm and beautiful, like a garden of creamy white roses framed by a sunrise, and he couldn't stop touching her. *I've always been attracted to you, Ausha, from the second I first saw you. I couldn't think of you in any kind of physical way because you were too extraordinary. I didn't want to taint you, and I think I always wanted more from you than an affair. I still can't think of you as a mere lover, but as my wife—that's different. All day, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I couldn't stop wondering if you could ever be attracted to me in that way. I was confused about a lot of things, and I thought it would be better if I didn't think about marriage at all, considering my situation, but I just couldn't stop thinking about it. I didn't plan to hold your hand; it just happened.*

Ausha assimilated it all, more amazed than ever. *You sweet, devoted man. How can I be anything but insane about you?*

Ton looked at her strangely. *Sweet?*

Ausha smiled at him in understanding. *Yes, sweet. But I promise I won't tell anyone.* She caressed his cheek. *When we first met, I was flattered that you found me attractive. And I did turn down engagements because I wanted to be with you instead of someone else.*

Ausha's confession overjoyed Ton. *Really?*

Ausha nodded. *I've never liked being with anyone the way I like being with you, and there's never been anyone who's understood me so well or who's been so willing to let me be me. I really do need you, Ton.*

They kissed lovingly several times, and Ton communicated, *I want to marry you, Ausha. I don't mean this as a proposal, but is there any chance you would consider it? I'll have to live on Novaun for the rest of my life, if I live, and I want to wait a few years to have children, and when I do feel ready, we won't be able to have as many as other Novaunian couples do. I want—*

Ton suddenly frowned, realization searing through him and overwhelming him with depression. He tried to push Ausha off of his lap, but her arms tightened around him in alarm. *I'm not going anywhere, Dr. Luciani, not until you tell me what's wrong.*

Ton couldn't look at her. *Our getting married, that's what's wrong. I can never be the man you want and need.*

I don't understand, Ton. You're my best friend. I've needed you and wanted to be with you most of the time I've known you. How can you think that?

Ton wasn't consoled. *Friendship and marriage are two completely different things.* He shrugged and shook his head. *I'm sorry I even brought it up.*

Ton gripped Ausha's arms and pushed her off of his lap, leaving her standing in front of him in bewilderment.

I'm not sorry you brought it up, Ausha communicated in determination. *I'm not sorry at all. I love you. I want to be with you. I like the idea of marrying you and I want to discuss it.*

Ton finally looked at her, feeling miserable. *All right. We'll discuss it. If you marry me, you'll never get to live near your family. For your safety and for mine, Colonel Quautar probably won't even let you visit Dinevlea.*

Ausha didn't for one second move her eyes away from Ton's. *Point one. I would have to live on Novaun, away from my family. I've lived away from Dinevlea for nearly three years. Most of the men I've met in the last three years haven't been from Dinevlea. I knew when I left Dinevlea that the possibility was very great that I would fall in love with someone who was not from Dinevlea and who would never want to live there. I'm a realist and I'm very flexible. I would like to live near my family if it's possible, but I can't comprehend making that a major issue in who I decide to marry, not when I've lived very happily away from my family for three years.*

You'll never be able to work with your father and Faurney, Ton countered.

My father doesn't direct the only clinic of neuromedicine in this Union. Now for point two. For my safety and yours, Colonel Quautar would probably not let me visit Dinevlea. Double-crossing Sanel King has put you in a very complicated situation. I understand that and have, to a degree, for a long time. I didn't know the details, but I knew you were terrified of the Earthons, and I knew that your fear was justified. That knowledge didn't change anything then, and it doesn't change anything now. I wanted to be with you then, and I want to be with you now. If we do decide to get married and I can't visit my family, my family can visit us here. I only see them about once a year anyway.

Ton dared her with his eyes. *We'll never be able to do the dijauntu.*

That was a blow. Ausha couldn't help but be disturbed. Ton knew that dijauntu was an important element in Novaunian marriages and that he might as well have told her they would never be able to have sex. She looked away from him, unable to reply.

Ton communicated slowly, *It's very strange. You know everything about me, and yet I can't give you my mind in that way. When we were at the Pavilion, sitting there together and feeling each other's excitement, I wanted to do dijauntu with you as much as I wanted to make love to you. But I realize now that it could never happen. There's been a lot of ugliness in my life, ugliness I don't want in any way to be a part of our relationship or a part of you.*

Ton, I don't care about what you've done, I care about what you are.

Ausha, if we do dijauntu, you're going to learn every detail about the things I've done. You know a lot, but believe me, what you know is only a tiny bit.

Ausha shook her head adamantly. *I can't believe it, Ton. I can't believe that there isn't any way you can't put all of those things behind you for good. There has to be a way. I just can't believe that anyone is doomed to remember his sins forever, not when he's tried so hard to change. It goes against the whole principle of repentance.*

Ton gazed at Ausha wistfully. For so long he had wanted to know what made the Novaunians so determined to live pure lives, and now he knew. It was the religious dedication coupled with telepathy, the dijauntu in particular. Ton wasn't sure whether their desire to have a telepathic culture inspired them to commit themselves more completely to God or whether their ability to commit themselves to God and live pure lives enabled them to be so successful with telepathy. He did know that they couldn't get away with vice and hypocrisy if they wanted to keep their telepathic culture. He, Paul, and Jacquae had laughed at Teren on the *Sovereign* when he had explained it, and Teren had been right all along.

Maybe this is one thing I understand better than you do. There are things in this life that you can't fix, no matter how much you want to. My treason is a perfect example. I did what I did, and I have to live with it. I can regret what I did, I can wish it never happened, or I can repent, whatever. But I can't change the fact that King has sent assassins after me. I can't change the fact that I will be in a certain amount of danger for the rest of my life. I can't change the fact that I can never go back to Earth, that I can never leave this planet unless I want to live under a new identity.

By the same token, I can't change the fact that I've done a lot of vulgar things in my life. There are certain things I don't want to forget because I don't want to repeat mistakes I and people I've known have made, but there are things I want to forget and can't. I've changed the way I live, and I've changed my desires, and I've buried those memories deep in my mind in places I don't ever go, but they're too powerful. Sometimes they just burst into my head again without warning. It just wasn't that long ago when that was my life.

Ausha shifted her weight from one leg to the other and back again, nervously scratching at her dress and twisting strands of her hair, her eyes aglow with desperation. Maybe you can communicate with someone who's been married awhile, your counselor or Colonel Quautar. Perhaps there's a way to subdue those memories so that they won't matter.

Ton watched Ausha in surprise. You want to marry me as much as I want to marry you, don't you.

Ausha knelt down at Ton's knees and cupped Ton's hands around her face, gently kissing the insides of his wrists. She nodded. I don't want to rush into anything, and I think it would be better if we waited a week or two to make a final decision, but right now, this minute, despite everything, I want very much to marry you.

Ausha's immediate positive response confused Ton. How can you know so quickly it's what you want?

How can you?

We've been together a long time. I know you.

And I know you.

Ton shook his head. You didn't really know me until tonight.

That's not true. I didn't know all of the details of your situation, but I knew you. The only new thing I've learned about you tonight is that you feel devotion to me at a level I had never imagined. It's that kind of feeling that makes me willing to accept such an unusual situation.

Ton's hands moved from Ausha's face to her arms and pulled her back into his lap. I'll do everything in my power to make myself able to do dijauntu with you. That's all I can promise.

Ausha wrapped her arms around Ton and embraced him tightly. And that's enough.

Even if it takes years?

Even if it takes forever.

Chapter 10: DECISION

Ton and Ausha remained at Trasyna Point a little longer, then took a taxi back to the clinic to get Ton's car. Ton took Ausha home, but instead of going back to his apartment, he went to Colonel Quautar's house. No one in the family was home. It was still early, so Ton sat down on the front porch and waited.

Sharad and Nelena and the younger children arrived forty-five minutes later and invited Ton to come in with them. The children ran off to play while Sharad, Nelena, Ton, and Jaun communicated for a while and had tea. Sharauna came in with a friend, and Nelena went to put the children to bed. Sharad motioned Ton to the deck.

Ton came directly to the point. *I want to marry Ausha.*

Sharad smiled. *I'm glad. I think you two will be happy together. Have you discussed it with her yet?*

Ton nodded. *But there's a problem.*

The dijauntu, Sharad communicated in understanding.

Ton leaned over the rail. *A part of me wants to do dijauntu with her, but I can't. You know better than anyone why.* He noticed Colonel Avenaunta and his wife on the beach access, walking arm-in-arm. *You blocked the spirit dimension formula from my mind. Can you block the memories too?*

Sharad leaned forward on the rail next to Ton. *No. The mind block only works on short-term memory and only on certain types of information. We can't block an experience you've had—something that has become a part of you—even if it happened yesterday.* He waved to the Avenauntas, and they waved back.

What am I going to do? Ton asked in despair.

What you're doing now. Continue to purify your life.

Will there ever come a time when those memories won't matter?

Perhaps, but only if you want it badly enough. The memories will always be there, but you can diminish them by burying them deep in your mind and never letting them out.

That's impossible.

Impossible now, but not later, not if you work very hard to live cleanly and to keep those details of your past life out of your conscious mind. I suggest that you have formal training in telepathy. You'll learn mind control techniques that will help you. When the time comes that the person you were a year ago is a complete stranger to you and you've gone years without any of those vulgar thoughts coming into your mind, then you may be safe trying the Awareness joining with Ausha. It may take many more years before you will feel comfortable giving her what you can of your mind in a dijauntu union.

Years? Ton had told Ausha it might take years, but having Sharad affirm it so explicitly was torture.

Many, many years. As it is, you're going to have to be extremely careful in what you tell her and in what you do. There's no reason she needs to ever know any details of your intimacies with other women. Along with that, you're going to have to be very careful in your lovemaking not to do anything that would offend her. This is critical, because there may be things that, because of your upbringing and experience, may seem perfectly natural to you but that would seem perverse to her.

Ton turned toward Sharad, bewildered. *What can and can't we do?*

Lust, manipulation, and depravity are just as wrong after marriage as before. You should certainly enjoy each other, but respect is paramount.

Ton shook his head in frustration. *I'm not going to know what to do.*

That's nonsense. Just show Ausha the same gentleness and respect you've always shown her and you'll be fine.

Ton watched Nelena walk back into the living room. *There's something I don't understand. How can anyone have the complete purity of mind necessary to do the dijauntu? You haven't done anything immoral, but you've traveled the galaxy. You've been exposed to ugliness. How do you keep those images from interfering with the relationship you have with your wife? Ton couldn't help but think of his recent encounter with Miaundea. And what if she sees a man she thinks is attractive? She wouldn't be able to keep that from you. Wouldn't it make you crazy?*

There are certain things in your spouse you learn to ignore, and there are certain things in yourself you work hard to put out of your mind. Achieving purity of mind is difficult under any circumstances, but believe me, the ecstasy of the dijauntu makes it worth the effort. Have you and Ausha made a definite decision yet?

No, although it's what we both want as of today. Things happened too fast, and we want to be sure. We aren't telling anyone yet. Ton hesitated. *You don't think it's wrong for us to get married if we can't do the dijauntu?*

Of course not. Your marriage will be fine without it. You certainly wouldn't be the first Novaunian couple to have a marriage that doesn't include the dijauntu.

I thought all Novaunian marriages included dijauntu.

First marriages nearly always do, but second marriages never do. Even without the dijauntu, people who lose their spouses and marry again have very successful marriages.

I'd never thought of that.

Immediately after you become formally betrothed, there are things I want to discuss with her about your situation. She does know about your problem with King, doesn't she?

Ton nodded. *She knows everything.*

Have you thought at all about a date for the wedding?

Not really. Ausha's parents are coming to Novaun in four weeks, so it makes sense to get married then. Is it possible to have it done that soon? From a legal point of view, that is.

It's more than possible, and I would advise it. You're together a great deal of the time, neither one of you have family here, you live alone, and in four weeks she will be living alone. It would be too easy for you to get into a compromising situation.

What a strange thing to have to worry about!

And if you do choose to wait, I'm going to have to insist you get a roommate—of my choosing.

You mean a chaperon. Ton wasn't offended; he just couldn't comprehend it.

Sharad straightened and turned to face the house, grinning. *You're very perceptive.*

You don't trust me.

To put it bluntly—no.

Now Ton was offended. *Why don't I just move in with you?*

If you would prefer.

Ton scowled and shook his head. *I don't need a chaperon.*

Seriously Ton, I know your intentions are pure, but old habits are hard to break. I'm responsible for you, and I have a certain obligation to Ausha and her family. To be honest, I wouldn't trust any of my own children in a situation like this.

I can't decide whether you Novaunians are tyrannical or just plain paranoid!

We just know when to be careful. Sharad began moving toward the French doors. *Do you feel ready?*

Oddly enough, I do. Ausha and I are practically married already. Ton briefly told Sharad about his session with Counselor Brunel that morning and how it had led to his discussion with Ausha about marriage. Sharad assimilated it all in interest and affection.

As the days passed, Ton didn't change his mind about wanting to marry Ausha, and in their moments alone, Ausha was as passionate as she had been the evening they had first declared their love. They didn't, however, demonstrate their feelings when they were with others, and except for Ton's conversation with Sharad, neither one of them revealed their new status to anyone.

Fifth Day evening a week and a half later, after a grueling weekend in the emergency room and the three lethargic days that always followed, Ton and Ausha made it to the Pavilion for dinner, awake and halfway energetic. Everyone at their table was discussing the festivities for the upcoming Day of Ancestors, in particular the Coalition dance that would be held two evenings before the holiday.

You ought to ask someone to the dance, Danal, Ausha suggested, caressing Ton's hand under the table.

Danal lifted his fork to his mouth, appearing uncomfortable. *I don't think so.*

Ton squeezed Ausha's hand knowingly. *Sharauna Quautar's quite pretty. Why don't you ask her?*

Danal set his fork down in surprise. *Sharauna? Isn't she a little young?*

She's eighteen, Ton answered.

That's what I thought, Danal communicated in disappointment.

What's the problem? She's of age.

But she's still so young!

So? Do you like her or not?

Danal stared at his plate. *Do you think she would go with me?*

Do you think I would have suggested her if I didn't think she would go with you?

Danal lifted his eyes and smiled. *No.*

Then ask her. Personally, I think she likes you.

Do you really?

Ton nodded.

Get some confidence, Danal! blurted Launi, a primary physician who worked in the overnight clinic. *If you like this girl, ask her to the dance.*

Tauna nodded. *Ask her.*

Ausha's eyes flickered mysteriously. *You have to ask someone, Danal. Ton and I are going together this time.*

Ecstasy gripped Ton. Ausha's public acknowledgement of their relationship could mean only one thing—she was ready to start planning their wedding.

So? You and Ton always go together.

No Danal, you don't understand. Ausha pressed closer to Ton and draped her arm across his shoulders, kissing his cheek. *Ton and I are going together.*

Then to Ton privately she communicated, *I haven't changed my mind.*

Neither have I.

Shall we tell them?

Not yet. I want to announce it in a special way.

They kissed gently, much to everyone's delight, then both turned and stared at Danal in amusement. *Are you comprehending yet, Danal?* Ton asked.

Danal grinned. *What's she going to be, Ton, your wife or your mistress?*

Actually, Ausha communicated provocatively, I'm his love slave.

Ton felt a rush of anticipation. He wondered if Ausha knew how she was torturing him and decided she knew good and well what she was doing.

Bryaun smacked Danal in the arm. *Can you believe it? Ausha's finally going out with someone decent!* Everyone laughed, Ausha most of all.

Once Ton and Ausha left the restaurant, Ausha communicated, *I need to tell my parents.*

Ton felt uneasy. *Do you think they'll approve?*

Honestly? I have no idea.

Ausha's reply troubled Ton. *So you think there's a possibility they won't.*

I'm sure they'll be uncomfortable about certain things—they're only human. Whatever their opinion, though, I'm certain they'll support it. If I were eighteen and we'd met only a month or two ago, things would be different.

They drove to their neighborhood in communication silence. Ton parked his car, then communicated, *I'll go get Anenka and meet you at the park.*

Don't worry, Ausha assured. They slid out of the car and went to their separate apartments.

Ton waited at the park for forty-five minutes before Ausha arrived. Ton stood up to meet her, and they held each other and kissed as Anenka barked at their feet. They withdrew, laughing. Ausha knelt down next to Anenka and hugged her. *Poor Anenka isn't sure she wants to share. She scratched Anenka behind the ear. I'm sorry you can't have all of him anymore, but what can I do? I love him as much as you do.*

Ausha released Anenka and sat down on the marble bench with Ton, and Anenka ran off to chase birds. Ton looked at her questioningly. *So?*

They're anxious to meet you.

Is that good or bad?

You are so paranoid!

How can I not be paranoid? I've never dealt with a woman's parents before. The closest I ever came to that was Colonel Quautar, and he told me that he would escort me back to the Sovereign of the Stars personally if Miaundea so much as looked at me in any kind of intimate way.

You weren't trying to marry Miaundea.

And your parents never dreamed you would one day tell them that you wanted to marry an Earthon, an Earthon whose life is in so much danger that he can never leave Novaun.

Actually, I don't think they were all that surprised.

How could they not be surprised?

Ausha shrugged. *I've known you a long time, and I've told them a lot about you. They weren't surprised, but they weren't expecting it either. I didn't tell them about your*

problem with King, but I did tell them that you're in danger from the Earthons and that you can never go to Dinevlea. They're disappointed and a little uncomfortable, but they accept it. They insist we get married when they come to Novaun in three weeks.

They insist?

Ausha smiled. They told me that if we aren't married by the time they're scheduled to leave Novaun, Mother will remain here as my chaperone!

This chaperone business was just too much. You're serious, aren't you?

Yes I am. I assured them we would get married while they're here.

They don't trust me, do they. As much as Sharad's lack of trust irritated Ton, he understood. The Ferudants had no reason not to trust him, and it hurt.

You don't understand. I'm the one they don't trust.

How can they not trust you?

They do trust me, under normal circumstances. But living alone without any family on the planet and working very closely with the man to whom I'm betrothed is anything but a normal circumstance. They're right, you know. It would be foolish to put it off, and I don't want to anyway.

Ton kissed her temple. Neither do I. He pulled Ausha into his lap.

She threw her arms around him and squeezed. I just can't believe it! It's all too wonderful to be true!

Ton rested his cheek against hers. Is three weeks enough time to plan the kind of wedding you want?

Yes, I think so. All we need to do really is have our physical exams, schedule our interviews, reserve the house of worship, find someone to marry us, invite all of our friends, and make an appointment with a judge for the contract negotiation.

Won't your grandfather marry us?

He could, but it's the tarnen of the groom's family who traditionally performs the ceremony. Since you don't have a family or an official tarnen, you can choose anyone you'd like.

You wouldn't mind if I chose someone other than your grandfather?

Of course not. It's your right.

Dr. Hovaus is a tarnen, isn't he?

Ausha withdrew a little, her eyes charged with excitement. Ton, that's a wonderful idea! Let's ask him!

But what about the party after the wedding? And your dress? We won't have time to plan anything extravagant.

I never wanted to have a formal celebration. I want it to be casual and friendly. Why don't we have it at the Pavilion?

The Pavilion? That would be casual. You really want to have it there?

Sure. The food is excellent and there's always a lot of it. Nearly everyone we know has dinner there at least once in a while, and those who won't be able to come to the wedding can stop by after work. We'll have a buffet, and everyone who comes that night will eat for free. It would be fun and exceptionally easy. We wouldn't have to do anything but arrange for the buffet and show up.

Ton nodded. I like that idea. It would be fun.

What should I wear?

You don't know what you want to wear?

You're the wardrobe consultant!

What do Novaunian brides wear?

Ausha wrinkled her nose. *Silks and satins and lace, and lots of colorful gems. I don't think a beach dress with exotic accessories will be appropriate.*

Ton thoughtfully stroked the nape of her neck. *No, but we could take one of your swimsuit dresses to a dressmaker and have a new one made from the design out of a glazed fabric. Instead of gems, you could wear flowers.*

Flowers! Ton, that will be perfect! But my mother will die. They kissed again, blissfully.

Part 2: END OF EXILE

Chapter 11: A CERTIFIED NOVAUNIAN

Ton spent the next morning with Colonel Quautar and a judge completing the proceedings to make him a Novaunian citizen and to establish a family organization in his name. Ton did not hesitate to reject the option to legally change his name. He had been born Ton Luciani and would remain Ton Luciani until he died. To reject his name would be to reject his heritage, and that he couldn't do.

Ton left the judge's office a Novaunian citizen. To celebrate, he went shopping for rings. Novaunians didn't wear wedding rings, but Ton didn't think he would feel completely married without them. He found a wide gold band embellished with tiny diamonds for himself and a gold diamond ring for Ausha that he would give to her on First Day after Devotional when they announced their betrothal.

When First Day arrived three days later, Ton went to Devotional with his friends, nervous and excited to take the Covenant. He had disdained the concept of religion for so long that the thought of committing to a religion still seemed strange to him, but he sincerely wanted it and felt he was ready.

Ton had invited all of his friends to be with him as he took the Covenant. All of the Quautars were there, along with Dr. Hovaus and his wife, Counselor Brunel and her husband, Teren and Deia, all of Teren's sisters and their families, many co-workers, and friends from the Pavilion and Coalition. Extra chairs were brought in to accommodate the many there who were not a part of Ton's congregation.

Devotional began with a hymn and a prayer. Then Raul Blorsten called Ton up to the pulpit and put his arm around him. *Ton has been with us for six and a half months, and during that time, I've watched him as he's gradually become more comfortable with us and our way of worship. He's worked very hard to get to the point he's at today, and I know that all of you admire him as much as I do. Taurnel Sharad Quautar will perform the ordinance.* President Blorsten patted Ton's shoulder slightly, then left the pulpit to take his seat.

Ton stepped down and met Sharad at the gold ordinance mat that was lying on the floor in front of the podium. Sharad dipped one of his forefingers into a standing vessel of nuayem oil, touched it to the forefinger of his other hand, then knelt down with Ton on the mat facing him. Sharad placed his fingers on Ton's temples and Ton placed his hands on Sharad's wrists. They overlapped spirits partially, and Sharad reached out in spirit to Ausha, the first person in the front row, and she reached out to Bryaun, who was sitting next to her. One by one, everyone in the congregation joined the telepathic chain until the circle came to its completion at Ton.

The combined concern and affection Ton felt from all present was overwhelming. The telepathic chain symbolized the eternal family of God, and Ton truly felt a part of that family. Sharad communicated, *Ton Marc Luciani, by authority of God, I put you under covenant to obey God and pronounce you clean of sin.*

Joy washed over Ton, and he felt pure and relieved of all guilt for the things he had done wrong. Ton waited for the second part of the prayer, the prophecy, in anticipation. He had wanted so long for Sharad to give him specific prophecy concerning his life, and now the time had finally come.

God is pleased with you and the changes you have made in your life. Know that you are His son and that He loves you more than you can comprehend.

The prayer images penetrated Ton's heart with force, and God's love submerged him, brimming into the telepathic chain, and Ton truly felt as if he were the son of a glorious Eternal King. Ton's friends rejoiced with him, the love swelling their spirits and making the telepathic chain so vibrant it was almost touchable.

He is always near, Sharad continued, and He desires to help you in everything you do. Be humble, full of love, and pray always, and He will carry you through the black mazes of your life. Sharad paused, as if waiting for something. Finally he concluded, *Amen.* Sharad removed his hands from Ton's temples, and the telepathic chain dissolved.

The intense love lingered in Ton's heart, so much so that he couldn't be disappointed that the prayer had not contained the specific prophecy for which he had hoped. As they stood up, Sharad rested his hand on Ton's back and communicated soberly, as if in answer to his thoughts, *I was hoping for some additional insight also, but that was all God wanted to tell you right now.*

Ton nodded slowly. *I know.* He turned and gazed at Ausha lovingly, and she smiled. Ton and Sharad resumed their seats in the congregation, and President Blorsten again came to the pulpit. *Ton, would you come back up here and express a few of your thoughts?*

Ton hadn't expected this. What could he communicate?

President Blorsten motioned Ton back up to the pulpit. Ton hesitated. President Blorsten explained to the congregation, *Ton didn't know I was going to do this.* Then to Ton he communicated, *Just tell us what you're feeling. It doesn't need to take more than a minute.*

Ton arose and walked tentatively to the pulpit as President Blorsten went back to his seat. Ton stood there for a moment, pondering. The faces of his friends were all beaming, and he suddenly knew what he wanted to tell them. He began slowly, *I feel . . . overwhelmed. I want all of you to know how much I value your friendship. There are so many of you I love and admire. I especially want to thank . . .* The emotion he felt was so intense he could hardly continue. His throat burned. *I want to thank Ausha Ferudant for helping me see who I really am and Sharad Quautar . . . for helping me understand what it means to be a father.*

Ton stood there for many moments, communicating nothing. Finally he continued, *I know the Eternal Father is real, and I'm grateful to all of you for giving me the freedom to change.*

* * *

After Devotional, Ausha and her roommate held a lunch at their apartment in Ton's honor. Miaundea and her family were among the select friends who had been invited.

Miaundea found Ton alone for a moment while Ausha set out the food. *Congratulations, Ton. I'm very happy for you.*

I'm glad you could come, Miaundea, Ton communicated earnestly.

I'm flattered that you would include me in your invitation to my family.

I just knew you wouldn't believe it unless you saw it.

The thought of his being a member of the Order had been incomprehensible, but Miaundea had seen him take the Covenant and had felt his conviction; she had no choice

but to believe it. *I do not doubt your sincerity, Ton. I don't want to offend you, but it still seems strange. It's going to take me awhile to get used to it.*

You and me both, Ton communicated good-naturedly.

You and Ausha have become awfully cozy. I remember your telling me once that she wasn't even an "amorous aspiration."

Ausha's too extraordinary to ever be a mere amorous aspiration, Ton communicated with a smile, turning to walk to the kitchen bar and Ausha.

Miaundea wasn't sure whether or not she should be insulted. She watched Ton slip his arms around Ausha from behind and kiss her neck, feeling irritated and yearning for Braysel.

Ausha's roommate stepped out from behind the bar. *We're glad you could all be with us today.* Everyone immediately stopped communicating, and Ton and Ausha kissed, then walked out from behind the bar with arms around each other. *Since Ton's the guest of honor, we'd like him to ask someone to give the prayer, then he can be the first in line for lunch.*

Everyone looked at Ton and waited. Ton smiled radiantly. *I'm not ready to eat quite yet.* He gazed down at Ausha, his arm tightening around her. *I have a present for Ausha.*

He brought a small, velvet-covered box out of a pocket in his suit jacket, and she accepted it in surprise and delight. Miaundea heard Deia gasp in excitement.

Ausha released Ton and opened the box, carefully removing a diamond ring. She gazed at it for several moments, her face soft with awe. *It's beautiful, Ton.*

Ton took the ring from her and slid it on the proper finger. *It's an engagement ring. It's what an Earthon man gives the woman he loves when they become betrothed.*

Ausha threw her arms around Ton and kissed him. All of their friends whistled and cheered. Bryaun Traus pounded his fist against his chest and said loudly, "Well give me a cardiac arrest! The man who swore he would never in eternity get married is planning to marry the woman he once claimed was as exciting as a crushed frontal lobe!" Everyone laughed, especially Ton and Ausha.

He can't help himself, Ausha communicated, smiling. *I seduced him.* Then she looked at Ton again, holding up the hand with the diamond ring on it. *I love it, Ton, but what am I supposed to do with it in surgery?*

Ton grinned and reached into his jacket pocket again, pulling out a feminine gold chain. *See? I can be as practical as you.*

Ausha took the chain out of his hand and laughed, hugging him tightly. A moment later, she withdrew and fastened the chain around her neck. *You're all invited to the wedding. It's two weeks from Sixth Day at the seventeenth hour, here in Shalaun at our house of worship. Afterward we're having a party at the Pavilion, so you don't need to dress up too much.*

So soon? Ausha's roommate communicated in shock.

Here in Shalaun? another friend communicated, in equal surprise.

Kevan nodded in satisfaction. *That's the way to do it. Quick and simple.*

Miaundea couldn't believe it. Ton was going to marry Ausha in two and a half weeks. In the three weeks that had passed since she had seen Ton, she had thought she had grown accustomed to the idea of his being involved with Ausha, but this was too much. She felt queasy with humiliation.

Ausha nodded solemnly at her friends. *It isn't safe for Ton to go to Dinevlea, so we're getting married the week my parents come to Novaun.*

Bryaun scrutinized Ausha. *This means you won't be working for your father.*

No.

Does he know yet?

Yes, he does.

Where are you going to live? Danal asked, changing the subject in that diplomatic way he had.

My apartment, Ton answered.

It's bigger, Ausha added, looking at Danal gratefully, *and it has a better view. Now let's eat!*

* * *

Ton and Ausha spent the rest of the week making further preparations for their wedding and for the Day of Ancestors. The week was filled with parties, plays, parades, and festivities in anticipation of Novaun's most celebrated holiday. Creation Day had been lavish with its presents, parties, and flower statues all over the city, but it had been nothing compared to this. The walks of Shalaun were ablaze with colored lights, sparkling decorations, and historical paraphernalia, and they were ringing with bells and music. Publicly, the Novaunians celebrated the calling of the original twelve high patriarchs of the Great Houses. Privately, they celebrated their own ancestors by telling stories out of the past, presenting plays and concerts in their families, and dressing in costume.

Fifth Day evening Ton and Ausha went to the Day of Ancestors dance held by the Coalition, and to the surprise of everyone, Danal took Sharauna Quautar. Sixth Day night, the eve of the holiday, Shalaun was filled with costumed celebrators singing and dancing on the walks until dawn.

Ton's friends celebrated in the city with everyone else, but Colonel Quautar had forbidden Ton to go anywhere near the celebration, feeling it would be unsafe. Only Ausha remained with Ton that night. They and Kevan and Alysia went in costume to Teren and Deia's to play games and watch the fireworks from the backyard.

Deia and Alysia both dressed as their mothers; Paul dressed as his father; Kevan dressed as an ancient Tavonean ancestor; Teren dressed as a great, great grandfather who had been a colonel; Ausha dressed in the colony garb of her Novaunian foremother who had been one of the first Dinevlean settlers; and Ton dressed up as Antonio Vaccaro, wearing a high-collared black suit and a large, ornate, ruby-studded crucifix on a thick gold chain around his neck.

When Ton and Ausha arrived at Teren and Deia's home, Paul met them at the door. Ton and Paul greeted each other with enthusiastic slaps on the arms.

"You son of Abomination!" Paul exclaimed. "You, of all people, getting married!" Paul glanced knowingly at Ausha. *You must be some kind of extraordinary lady, getting this son of Abomination to marry you. How in the universe did you accomplish this miracle?*

Ton accomplished his own miracle, Ausha communicated solemnly.

Paul nodded that he understood and smiled at Ton in admiration.

What are you doing here? Ton asked. *Aren't you supposed to be in Menaura celebrating the Great House Doshyr?*

Paul grunted. *That's precisely why I'm here.*

* * *

Ton and Ausha left Teren and Deia's late that night and went to their apartments and slept until noon Seventh Day, then spent the remainder of the Day of Ancestors at the Quautars', feasting, laughing, and playing more games. The only member of the family who did not show up for any of the festivities was Miaundea. Ton learned later in the day that she was spending the holiday with one of her roommates on the planet Systrina.

That evening the family gathered in the living room. Members of the family told stories and performed skits, and eventually, Ton and Danal and Ausha were asked to tell about their ancestors. Ton told Antonio Vaccaro's story.

Following Ton's presentation, Nelena handed Ton a package wrapped in shiny gold paper. Ton took the gift, looking at her in puzzlement. *I don't understand.*

Sharauna couldn't suppress her excitement. *You will. Open it!*

Ton tore the paper off the box, removed its lid, and lifted out a shimmering green tapestry with tiny onyx beads embroidering the words:

The Family
LUCIANI

Established 6273

30 Third Month

by Ton Marc Luciani

of

Baltimore, North American State, Earth

Along the edges of the tapestry were ruby, gold, and onyx beads of various sizes embroidered in an ornate Earth style.

Ton stared at the tapestry in awe. Establishing himself as a family had been a legal necessity, nothing more, nothing less, but seeing his name as the founder of a family, the first of many who would yet be born with his name and his blood, he began comprehending the significance of it. He and Ausha would provide the moral framework for their new family and would, by the way they lived and raised their children, influence generations of their family to come. He had never felt so powerful or so humble.

Ausha touched the tapestry, her fingers brushing the word LUCIANI. *It's beautiful.* Ton could feel in her emotions that she didn't just mean the tapestry, she meant the family it represented.

Ton looked at Nelena in gratitude. *Thank you very much. Did you make this?*

Nelena smiled. *Yes, but all of my daughters helped me.*

Even Miaundea? Ton communicated in surprise.

Nelena nodded. *She did the large Luciani.*

Sharauna giggled. *It was the biggest and the easiest. Miaundea isn't good at the delicate work.*

Ton laughed. *It's a good thing she's not here to kill you.*

She wouldn't be angry. She knows she's not as good at this as the rest of us, and she also knows that she's a far better seamstress than the rest of us. Sharauna's sisters nodded in agreement.

I did your name, Dr. Luciani, little Druisa communicated enthusiastically. She pointed to her younger sister. *And Lynda did the date.*

Ton wanted to ask Sharauna, Saulystia, and Dauna which parts of the tapestry they had embroidered, but before he could, both he and Ausha felt the thoughts of the emergency room dispatcher charge into their minds with orders to go to the emergency room immediately and with information on the patient they would be treating.

They stood up abruptly. *We have to go,* Ausha communicated quickly.

Thanks for everything, Ton communicated, putting the tapestry back in its box and shoving it under his arm.

What is it? Danal asked.

An eight-year-old boy has a broken neck, Ausha answered as she and Ton rushed to the front door.

Chapter 12: AN UNUSUAL TRIBUTE

Braysel's colleagues were thrilled about Braysel's spirit energy generator design, and the engineering team was working to build one. Discovering the key to designing a spirit energy generator had made Braysel think more often about his grandfather and the work he did developing new telepathic medical technology. He missed his grandfather more than anyone else in his family other than his parents. Braysel had spent hours and hours with his grandfather in his laboratory and in the clinic where new ideas and inventions were tested, and he was humbled to realize that without his grandfather's teachings he would never have known enough to come anywhere close to designing a spirit energy generator.

Braysel planned to present a tribute to his grandfather in the assembly of his brotherhood group, the fifty men with whom he attended Devotional, on the Day of Ancestors, and he was apprehensive about it. His grandfather, being the leader of the Isolationism Movement, was not popular among the men in the Fleet, and by many, was not even respected. Braysel was not so worried that he would lose respect among his colleagues by supporting his grandfather in many of the things he did, but he was worried that they would think his new ideas combining the Fleet and Isolationist ideologies were so ludicrous that they wouldn't take him seriously.

Braysel told himself over and over that there was no more shame in being proud of his pacifist heritage among his Fleet colleagues than there was in being proud of the Fleet among members of his family, that if Miaundea, a colonel's daughter, could live and work in Mautysia, he could do something as simple as tell his friends and colleagues about his grandfather. He thought often of Miaundea and the bold way she had communicated with his parents, and that recollection gave him courage.

Why was he so nervous? He had never found it difficult to be publicly frank about his unpopular opinions. Maybe he didn't believe the combined ideology as strongly as Miaundea did yet, or maybe he still felt too threatened by pacifism. But why shouldn't he feel threatened by it? It was what had always stood in the way of him, his family, and the Fleet.

The Day of Ancestors was an important holiday among Fleet men on duty away from their home planets, but its celebration was much more dignified and low-key than on Novaun and its worlds. Many of the men took leave to be with their families, and those who remained on duty intermingled feasting and celebrating with work. On the eve of the Day of Ancestors, two squadrons of fighters performed a laser display, and a group of the more creative men performed a program of music and short plays, along with a costume parade that wound through the corridors of the *Glautel Monsa*, entertaining the men on duty.

Braysel enjoyed the laser display, the program, and the parade, but he ached to be with Miaundea and his family in Mautysia, where holidays were magical and celebrated in lavishness and luxury. Braysel spent the morning in fierce VisionRun competition with Mykal and Wilyl, several other men in his squadron, and a number of the flight technicians with whom they worked, then spent a riotous afternoon and evening in one of the *Glautel Monsa's* many lounges with his brotherhood group, eating, playing games, performing humorous skits, and exchanging ridiculous little gifts. Later in the evening, the men telepathically took each other to their home worlds and into their pasts.

The men in Braysel's brotherhood group were from numerous Novaunian planets, and Braysel was fascinated to learn something of their homes and their histories. When it was Braysel's turn, he telepathically took his colleague-brothers to Mautysia and told them a little about the long history and tradition of both the Great House Jualaz and the Nalaurev family.

My grandfather, Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev, is from a long line of scientists and engineers. He, however, decided early in his life that he wanted to be a physician, believing that healing people was one of the noblest things he could do to serve his fellow Novaunians. He worked many years in the clinic with patients, growing more and more intrigued with the use of mind power in medical treatment. He put the great engineering genius he had inherited to work and established his own research center to develop new telepathic medical technology. He and his group of medical scientists discovered the spirit energy formula fourteen years ago and began incorporating it into the new and existing medical technology. One of his most important accomplishments was to take the sophisticated artificial brain device developed by a Dinevlean neurophysician and construct it to work by spirit energy alone. His work didn't improve the artificial brain much, but through it, the spirit energy storage matrix was invented, which has had tremendous impact on the medical field in other areas.

My grandfather is an assured, determined, and deeply religious man. He believes earnestly that the power of God can perform miracles in our lives. He has seen miracles of healing in his work as a physician, and he has felt God's influence as he has worked to develop new technology. He and other members of my family believe that through faith and the power of God, the Novaunian people can accomplish anything they wish to accomplish that is right, even peace with the other powers of the galaxy. In my grandfather's own lifetime, the Latanzan War ended many months sooner than our generals believed it would end.

I grew up being extremely disturbed that members of my family protested the Latanzan War, even after our own planets were invaded. What I didn't understand was that they and their pacifist counterparts didn't only protest, they spent many, many hours in prayer, petitioning God to bring a quick end to the war and to the suffering of all of the people involved. I didn't understand until recently, after I studied the Latanzan War in depth, just how miraculous our victory there was, and I know, just as they do, that it was the power of God that brought that war to an end so quickly.

I've always known that God is with the Fleet, but now I know that God is with the Isolationists too and that all of us could learn a lot from each other if we would stop feeling threatened long enough to make an attempt to understand each other. I admire my grandfather a great deal for all of the work he's done over the years to give life and to support peace.

Braysel ended his presentation feeling relieved. He felt deeply everything he had communicated, maybe too deeply. If he felt any kind of emotional feedback from his colleagues, it was curiosity. They didn't understand why he was a Fleet officer and not a pacifist like the other members of his family. Then again, how could he expect any of these men to understand the complexities of his life? He had only known them for a little more than half a year. Still, he had felt none of the support or empathy his other colleagues had received as they had given their stories. They didn't understand the ideology and practice

of pacifism, and they didn't want to understand it. They certainly didn't want to give the Isolationists part of the credit for bringing the Latanzan War to its miraculous end.

Braysel went through the next few days working, as usual. No one commented on his presentation or asked him any questions about why he was in the Fleet or felt the way he did, not even his friends. He missed Maurek more than ever. Maurek didn't understand a lot of things, but he was interested.

Several days later, while Braysel was eating lunch alone in the lounge, Lieutenant Franz Marquyt, a member of his brotherhood group he didn't know very well, sat down across from him, wearing a serious, almost disturbed expression. They exchanged greetings, and several minutes passed before Franz asked, *Do you really believe that what the Isolationists are doing is good?*

Braysel regarded him in surprise. After a moment he communicated in sincerity, *Yes, I do.*

Chapter 13: A NEW FAMILY

Ton awaited his wedding day in anticipation and impatience. He had chosen Ausha to be his wife, and he couldn't tolerate having to wait for it to come to pass, even if the wait was only two and a half weeks. He was half afraid King's assassin would kill him before he and Ausha could experience wedded bliss, which made him far more impatient than he might have been.

Amazingly, Ausha remained calm throughout all of the preparations. Ton could only assume she didn't feel pressure to do anything she didn't want to do. He was relieved in many ways that they weren't going to be married on Dinevlea, where Ausha's plans for a friendly, casual wedding would undoubtedly clash with her mother's elegant expectations.

Ton dreaded meeting Ausha's parents. He didn't want their mere acceptance, he wanted their approval and affection, and he was afraid that the unusual circumstances of his life would make it difficult for them to regard him with any warmth.

Second Day evening the week of the weddings, Ton and Ausha waited at the spaceport in Shalaun with Bryaun and Tauna for both the Ferudant and Traus families to arrive from Dinevlea. Bryaun's four younger brothers bounded through the flight gate and into the lobby first. After them came several business men, then a young man with curly dark brown hair. Ton recognized him from Ausha's telepathic descriptions as her brother Faurney.

When Faurney spotted Ausha, he stepped back as if pushed, his hands flying to his face to cover his eyes. *What are you trying to do to me, Dr. Ferudant? Blind me? My poor eyes can't take all that color!*

Ausha laughed and ran to him, embracing him vigorously. They kissed each other's cheeks, and Ausha took his hand and led him to Ton. *Ton, this is Faurney. Faurney, Ton.*

Ton extended his hand, and Faurney took it, but instead of shaking Ton's hand, Faurney pulled Ton closer and embraced him warmly. *Glad to finally meet you, Ton.* Ton was surprised by this familiarity, but it put him a little more at ease.

Faurney gave Ton an affectionate slap on the back, then withdrew. He motioned to Ausha's off-white swimsuit dress and the colorful waist scarves, turquoise and malachite necklaces, and huge malachite barrette she was wearing. *You're the one who did this to her, Ton?*

Ton nodded in satisfaction. *She's gorgeous, isn't she?*

She really is, Faurney agreed. Then turning, he took the hand of a pretty, petite woman with short brown hair and brown eyes and presented her to Ton. *Sinde, my wife.*

Sinde smiled at Ton and pressed his hand. *Hello Ton. It's so good to finally meet you. We feel as if we know you already.*

Ton turned abruptly toward Ausha.

Don't look at me like that! Of course they feel as if they know you. I've told them all about you. How could I not? Nearly everything I've done in the past year has involved you in some way.

Ton knew he shouldn't be surprised that Ausha had told her family so much about him over the past year, but he was. Ton had spent his life involved with women who were ashamed to admit their association with him to anyone, and he couldn't help but still marvel at how comfortable Ausha was with him and their relationship. It had never

occurred to Ausha to keep any part of their friendship a secret from her family, even in its early stages.

Ausha slipped her arms around Ton's waist and kissed his neck, enveloping him with emotions of understanding and reassurance. *They can't help but like you. I told you they would.* Ton smiled and kissed her gently.

Ausha pulled away from Ton and embraced Sinda. Sinda communicated fervently, *We're so happy for you, Ausha.*

You're just amazed a man was actually able to persuade me to marry him!

Sinda laughed. Faurney communicated good-naturedly, *Three proposals and no husband does look suspicious.*

Ton couldn't help but be amused. *Which is why I never actually proposed to her.*

He didn't dare! Ausha communicated, laughing. She pulled Ton toward her parents, who were stepping out of the flight corridor. Dr. Ferudant's gray-green eyes were lively, his hair silver and curly, and his step light and energetic, and Mineste Saunyra Ferudant was as elegant as Ausha had described her, with intelligent brown eyes, deep auburn hair, and the same tiny chin as Ausha. Of all the Novaunian couples Ton had met, the Ferudants, being Dinevleans and having married when they were a century old, actually looked too old for their children.

Ausha hugged her mother, then her father, then communicated, her face soft with love, *Mother, Father, this is Ton.*

Ton smiled and shook their hands. *I'm glad to meet you.* He struggled to suppress his nervousness but was only slightly successful.

Neither one of them pulled him close for an embrace the way Faurney had, and he could tell that the handshakes surprised them. He could only assume they hadn't expected him to seem quite so foreign, which only served to make him more uncomfortable.

Mineste Saunyra Ferudant smiled politely. *Hello Ton. We've assimilated a lot of good things about you.*

Indeed we have, Dr. Ferudant communicated in a friendly way. *We're looking forward to the time we'll have with you and Ausha this week.*

So are we, Ausha communicated happily.

Ausha's parents were trying to be nice, but Ton could feel their uneasiness and worry. They were supporting the marriage, but they weren't happy about it. As much as Ton had expected their discomfort, he was still very hurt and communicated little as Ausha introduced him to brothers and sisters from Dr. Ferudant's first marriage, her grandparents, a few uncles and aunts, several cousins, and members of Bryaun's family.

After all of the introductions were made and the luggage was collected from the lobby's baggage chute, everyone moved through the spaceport toward the exit. Dr. Ferudant must have felt Ton's hurt, because as everyone loaded into taxis, he suggested that he and Ton ride together in Ton's car.

I'm sorry we aren't making this easy for you, Ton, Dr. Ferudant apologized once they were on their way. *It's nothing personal, I assure you. We have no doubt you love Ausha and are well suited for her. We weren't surprised by your decision to marry, but we were shocked to learn that leaving Novaun for any reason would put your life in danger and that Ausha herself would be unable to leave Novaun. We're concerned for your safety, as well as Ausha's.*

Dr. Ferudant's honesty made Ton feel a little better. *I appreciate your candor. I wish I could reassure you, but I can't. My situation is very complex. My reason tells me I have no business getting married, but my emotions won't let me stop wanting it. Still, I wouldn't have considered it, but Ausha assures me she can live with the difficulties.*

What exactly are the difficulties?

Ton knew that Colonel Quautar would prefer to give the details to Dr. Ferudant in his own way, but Ton couldn't deny this man anything. *Do you know anything about how I came to live on Novaun?*

A little. Private Zaurvau needed three people to help him energize an armed shuttle with the spirit dimension formula. You and the Doshyr twins were the three he chose.

The part of that story that very few people know is that I had been hired by one of Sanel King's agents to manipulate Teren to his death. Ton went on to give Dr. Ferudant all the information he could in the short amount of time they had, including his reasons for accepting the job as the *Sovereign* plant, his reasons for coming to Novaun, his encounters with agents since he had arrived, and the measures Colonel Quautar was taking to insure his safety and Ausha's.

Dr. Ferudant was deeply disturbed, but he understood enough to realize that the marriage changed nothing. Ausha's intimate friendship with Ton had made her a potential target long ago, and whether she married him or not, she would be devastated if something happened to him.

Have you explained everything to Ausha?

She knows everything I know, but I did try to keep it from her as long as I could. She sensed it though, and when I told her, she wasn't surprised. Once we made the final decision to marry, Colonel Quautar discussed the situation with her personally. I believe he intends to discuss it with you too.

Dr. Ferudant nodded. *That's good. There are some things I want to ask him.*

Ton didn't communicate for several moments. When he did, it was with earnestness: *I wish more than anything that Ausha and I could go to Dinevlea to live after we finish our apprenticeship. I wanted to go to Dinevlea with Ausha before the thought of marrying her ever entered my mind. I even discussed the possibility with Colonel Quautar, but he told me it was impossible.*

Dr. Ferudant's thoughts were wrapped in regret. *I really had hoped you would give it consideration. The clinic could really use you. I could really use you. Are you sure there isn't a way you could move to Dinevlea in a few years? After all of your trouble is over?*

Ton shook his head sadly. *My trouble will never be completely over.*

Ton and Dr. Ferudant met the rest of the party at the hotel. After everyone had found their rooms and freshened up, they went to dinner. The Ferudant and Traus families were loud and lively, but even with all of their good-natured celebration, there existed an underlying feeling of grief. One important Ferudant was missing—Jaunel. With nearly everyone in the families being in the medical field on some level, they discussed medicine more than they discussed anything. Ton couldn't help but like them, and Ausha's parents gained such affection for Ton by the end of the evening that Ton wondered why he had been so apprehensive about meeting them.

Ton and Ausha had to work all the next day and were scheduled to work in the emergency room that night. Dr. Ferudant, however, took Ausha's place on the shift so that she could spend the evening with her mother. Ton and Dr. Ferudant worked well together

and developed such a rapport that Ton went home the next morning depressed. He wanted more than ever to work with Ausha's father on Dinevlea, and the frustration of never being in a position to accomplish that desire was intense.

Fourth Day afternoon Ton spent with a judge, Ausha, Ausha's father and uncle, and Colonel Quautar, negotiating a marriage contract. The Ferudant family organization wanted to give an endowment of five thousand gold coins to the Luciani organization, and Ton refused.

It's customary, Ton, Ausha's uncle communicated in surprise, and being such a new family organization, you need it.

I don't need it. My existing twenty thousand is perfectly adequate, and I intend to add to it.

Even Ausha was surprised by Ton's refusal to accept the endowment. *Just consider it a wedding gift.*

It isn't a wedding gift. It's an endowment given under contract. Then to the judge Ton communicated, I understand the Novaunian tradition in this matter. I just can't live with it. I'm marrying Ausha because I love her, not because I'm looking for any kind of financial increase. I would feel like a scoundrel if I accepted that money.

The Ferudant men laughed gently.

The money is as much for Ausha as for you, the judge reminded.

I know that. It may seem ridiculous to you, but I can't change how I feel. I can't accept that money.

"You're not being ridiculous, Ton," Sharad declared. He turned toward the judge, his face solemn. *This isn't an issue of pride or even an issue of a difference in traditions. It goes much deeper than that. It has to do with how Ton perceives himself and what he thinks marriage should be. He cannot morally or psychologically in any way marry for money, and I think it would be a mistake to go against his desires in this matter.*

Ton communicated, *I can't accept the endowment, but since my family is so new, I would like to request a clause be added that insures support from the Ferudant organization for Ausha and any children we have if I die prematurely.*

Ausha's uncle nodded. *That's a reasonable request.*

The contract negotiations proceeded without any other problems. They finished early in the afternoon, which provided an opportunity for Dr. Ferudant to communicate with Colonel Quautar privately and gave Ton and Ausha some time alone together. That evening Ton and Ausha, Ausha's parents, and Faurney and his wife had dinner at Dr. Hovaus's home, and the following day they spent seeing the sights in Shalaun.

Sixth Day, the day of the wedding, was one of preparation and excitement. The men spent the morning moving the rest of Ausha's belongings either into storage or into the apartment she and Ton would share, while Ausha finished organizing her new home with the help of her mother, Sinde, and her grandmothers. That afternoon everyone dressed for the wedding and met at the house of worship at the sixteenth hour.

Ausha's dress was simple and made of chintz, gathered just below her waist and falling to mid-calf. Her hair was down, a circlet of orange and red flowers resting on the crown of her head, and she wore a small corsage at the point of her neckline and tiny red, orange, and purple flowers pinned to the gather line of her dress. The flowers and style of dress were perfect for her, and even her mother was pleased.

Ton wore a suit that coordinated, a white silk shirt under a white half vest with ruby trim, a long red sash at his waist, and sharply creased black slacks. The women in Ausha's family considered being married in black something close to sacrilege and were not at all happy. Neither Ton nor Ausha, however, could imagine his wearing all white and considered the controversy entertaining, especially since it was too late to change.

Ton had been so adamant from the beginning of planning the wedding that Deia would play the piano as guests arrived and then again as they departed, that he had hired people to move Deia's piano from her home to the house of worship and had even arranged for a woman from Latanza III to come and tune it. He was delighted to arrive at the house of worship that afternoon and find Deia already there playing passionate pieces composed by Phillip Moreau. She was huge, only a month away from delivering her baby, and elegantly dressed in a red silk gown, wearing red lipstick and nail polish, her dark hair up in an elaborate Earth style, studded with rubies. The ruby and gold vase that Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce had given her as a wedding present sat on the piano, filled with exotic red salyumalas.

Teren and Sharad were there with her, and to Ton's surprise, so were Paul, Patan, and Evelayna Doshyr. "What are you doing here, Paul? Where do you get all this money and time off that you can go flitting halfway around the planet every two weeks?"

Paul grinned and pointed a thumb at his grandfather. "He wanted to come, and I had to see it to believe it. Congratulations."

"I appreciate that, and I'm glad you could come." Ton went on to greet Patan and Evelayna and introduce them to Ausha and the members of her family. Paul shook hands with the men and kissed the hands of the women. Encountering other cultures was nothing new to the Dinevleans, but feeling such an acute Earthon presence on Novaun was strange and fascinating to them, and they were as intrigued by Paul and Deia as they were by Ton.

Dr. Hovaus arrived forty-five minutes before the ceremony was scheduled to begin and spent fifteen minutes counseling Ton and Ausha in one of the house of worship's small meeting rooms on how the ceremony would proceed. After he was finished, he and Ton and Ausha went to the foyer to form a reception line with Ausha's parents and Sharad to greet guests as they arrived.

* * *

Miaundea went to Ton's wedding with her mother, her younger brothers and sisters, and Danal Navtur. She had spent many hours during the past two and a half weeks in thought and prayer, struggling to feel at peace with Ton and Ausha's marriage. She had made a little progress, but not enough. When she saw Ton, though, with his smiles and radiant eyes, all of the feelings of humiliation disappeared. She saw in her mind a vivid picture of the cold dark eyes and cynical sneer of the Ton she had met a year before and couldn't help but rejoice in the marvelous change that had taken place in his life. Ausha had been his friend and support throughout his entire year of change. That they would grow to love each other was really no surprise, and for once, Miaundea didn't feel personally affronted by Ausha's presence in Ton's life.

Danal embraced Ton and Ausha and was introduced to Ausha's parents, then smiled sweetly at Sharauna and led her by the hand into the holy room. Miaundea looked playfully

from her father to Ton. *Well, Ton, since my father has claimed you as his son, I guess I'm safe in claiming you as my brother.*

Ton regarded her queerly. *I don't know. I don't think I could ever think of you as a sister, Miaundea.*

Miaundea laughed and reached to kiss his cheek. *It's good to know that there are some constants in this life. Congratulations. I know you and Ausha will be happy.*

Ton seemed to be taken aback by the sincerity of Miaundea's affection. He squeezed her arm lightly in reply. *Thank you, Miaundea.*

Miaundea pressed Ausha's hand and gazed at her in approval. *You look beautiful today, Ausha. Was this Ton's idea?*

Ausha smiled her thanks. *Of course.*

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At the seventeenth hour, Ton and Ausha re-entered the holy room, which was filled to capacity, and took their seats in the luxurious white velvet chairs in front of the pulpit as Deia played the last dramatic bars of "Rhapsody of the Heart."

Dr. Hovaus stood and took a standing position to the side and front of Ton and Ausha and communicated in a friendly way with the guests about the year he had spent working with Ton and Ausha and how delighted he was that they were being married. He then counseled them for fifteen minutes on specific ways they could make their marriage fulfilling, touching on elements of their partnership that had been successful, but concentrating on issues they hadn't yet faced.

Once he was finished he invited counsel from any married person in attendance. Ausha's Grandfather Ferudant stood and gave his counsel, followed by Sharad, whose thoughts were few. Ton had spent hours over the past two weeks asking Sharad questions about marriage, and he wondered if Sharad had run out of things to tell him.

After several other guests gave their brief counsel, Dr. Hovaus stood up again and stepped onto the gold mat next to the vessel of nuayem oil. Ton and Ausha took their places in front of him, and the three joined hands. Dr. Hovaus began the telepathic chain with Ton, and it flowed through the room until it ended with the link between Dr. Hovaus and Ausha.

Ton could feel the emotion build as each person in the room took his or her place in the chain. Many of the married couples in the chain were joined in dijauntu as a way of reaffirming their own commitment, and although Ton could not feel any thoughts, he could feel the deep passion and it nearly overwhelmed him physically. He felt giddy and a little faint and had to change his position slightly to keep from falling. Finally, after many moments, Ton began feeling comfortable with this intense level of emotion and reached out to the others in the chain in gratitude and celebration.

Dr. Hovaus placed his fingers on their foreheads and communicated, *By authority of the Eternal Father, I ordain you, Ton Luciani, to the role of taurnel and you, Lataushla Ferudant, to the role of taurjra in the eternal family of God, our Father. In doing so, I put you, Ton, and you, Lataushla, under covenant to commit yourselves to God and each other for this life and forever. By continuing in righteousness and committing yourselves to each other, God promises to bless you abundantly in this life and accept you into His eternal family in Paradise.*

He turned first to Ausha. *Lataushla, do you accept this covenant?*

Ausha's eyes were warm with tenderness. *Yes.*

Dr. Hovaus then turned to Ton. *Ton, do you accept this covenant?*

Ton had never imagined he could share such deep feelings with a woman. He smiled at Ausha lovingly. *Yes.*

Dr. Hovaus took the forefinger of Ton's right hand and dipped it in the nuayem oil. Ton touched the forefinger of his right hand to the forefinger of his left hand, then held up his hands to Ausha's, wetting her forefingers with the oil from his. They touched their wet forefingers to each other's temples, the nuayem oil warming their bodies.

Dr. Hovaus continued with the ceremony: *Now you are privileged to enter into the most holy and intimate of all human relationships, the dijauntu. Repeat after me: Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.*

Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.

Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.

Dr. Hovaus took Ton's right hand and Ausha's left and joined them as he inserted the arelada triangles into their temples. *These sacred triangles represent the Eternal Triangle, with God at the top point and Man and Woman at the base points. Wear them and remember the covenants you have made here today.*

Dr. Hovaus took Ton and Ausha's hands and turned them toward their guests as he withdrew from the telepathic chain. *I present to you Dr. Luciani and his wife Dr. Luciani!*

Ton immediately took Ausha into his arms and gave her the kiss he had always wanted to give her but had never dared. Feeling that only so much kissing was appropriate for public display, he pulled away after a moment, leaving Ausha wide-eyed and breathless. His mouth curved into a wicked little smile, and hers automatically curved into one to match. Then she threw her arms around him and kissed him more vigorously than he had kissed her, much to his delight. Everyone laughed. Several of Ton and Ausha's friends took the opportunity to quickly leave the holy room before everyone else.

Ton picked Ausha up and carried her to their taxi. He set her gently on the seat, sliding in next to her and drawing her close as the aircar lifted into the air.

Ausha wrapped her arms around him in a fervent embrace, her hands trembling as they fondled his face and hair. *I wish we didn't have to go to the Pavilion right now. I think I would rather go home.*

You sure you want to go home? We could still get a room at the Hotel Shalaun.

Right now? Are you serious?

Of course I'm serious. We'll go get a room right now.

Ausha pulled away slightly, not sure whether to be shocked or delighted. *Would it be right to keep everyone waiting that long?*

Who communicated anything about waiting? It only takes a few minutes to get a room.

Oh, you mean reserve a room for tonight.

Well, yes. What did you think I meant?

Ausha flushed and smacked his arm. *Stop playing games with me!*

Do you want to get a room or not?

I thought we had already decided this. I want to go home.

We can't go home yet. It's too soon. You're not ready.

I'm not ready?

Ton smiled complacently and shook his head. *The timing in these things has to be just right. You aren't ready.*

And just when will I be ready?

When you start begging.

Get that smirk off your face! You're making me crazy!

That's my intention.

You have everything all perfectly planned, don't you.

Of course. Why do you think I ordered us a taxi? You think I want to be driving when I can be generating a little heat with my bride?

Chapter 14: THE RING AND THE THREAT

The guests emptied the house of worship in minutes and followed Ton and Ausha through the city with the windows in their aircars cracked, whistling, cheering, and blowing on noisemakers.

Bryaun and Tauna, Faurney and Sinde, and many others arrived at the Pavilion before Ton and Ausha and met them at the shallow stairs that connected the restaurant with the street, cheering and throwing flower petals.

Your flowers are looking smashed, Ausha, Danal observed with a chuckle.

She came at me like a wild animal, Ton communicated facetiously. *Then she tells me that we can't go home, but have to come here. What a tease!*

Ausha's eyebrows shot up in good-natured outrage. *I'm the tease? You're the one who's the tease!*

The guests left presents on a table as they arrived, then helped themselves to the buffet. Ausha's father didn't make the traditional toast with nuayem punch until nearly an hour later, after everyone had finished their meals.

Following the toast, Ton and Ausha began opening presents. Ton and Ausha had been living independently long enough that they already had everything they needed to supply a home, so their friends had been forced to be creative in choosing gifts. Ton and Ausha received more money than anything, but they also received many plant pots, vases, and recipes. Bryaun, Tauna, and Danal gave them two huge baskets of pre-packaged food since Ton never had any food in his apartment, and Dane gave them identical tea mugs that read: "I want to drink your cerebrospinal fluid." Ton and Ausha nearly died laughing and drank from their new mugs the rest of the evening.

As night gradually darkened the restaurant and the light globes on the tables increased in brilliance, Bryaun began curiously fingering the light globe on his table. He took it apart, in the process blocking the light for several moments.

What's going on? Faurney demanded. *What are you trying to do to our light?*

There's something stuck behind the glass. Couldn't you see the shadow?

Everyone at table stopped communicating and watched Bryaun as he separated the globe from its power plate. He set the globe on the table and removed what looked like a wide-banded ring wrapped in tape. Words were written on the tape in bold red letters that Bryaun did not recognize. He carefully peeled off the tape, uncovering a shiny gold ring set with a large ruby.

What is it, Bryaun? Tauna asked.

A ring of some kind. But look at the engravings! These characters aren't Novaunian.

Paul watched the exchange from his table next to Bryaun's. He reached out his hand to Bryaun, frowning. *Let me see that.*

Bryaun turned his chair toward Paul and handed the ring to him. *Do you know what those engravings mean?*

Paul studied the ring with increasing puzzlement. *It's a class ring from Earth,* he finally communicated.

From Earth? Bryaun communicated in surprise. *Now that's strange.*

What's a class ring? Evelayna asked.

Students buy them as keepsakes, to remind them of their schools.

Teren grabbed the ring from Paul and studied at it in urgency.

Who does it belong to, Teren? Deia asked, as puzzled as everyone else.

Teren shook his head, pushing away from the table. *I don't know.*

Bryaun handed the piece of tape that had come on the ring to Paul. *Maybe this will help.*

Teren stood up in alarm. *There was something else?*

Paul read the words that were written on the tape: "You think you've beaten me, you arrogant fool." His words faded into a whisper. "The bout isn't over until both fencers are dead."

Paul and Deia turned to each other in horror. Teren and Miaundea looked in horror at Ton.

What does it mean? Bryaun and Faurney asked simultaneously.

It's a death threat, Paul replied, his face bloodless. *Who could it be for?*

Teren forced his gaze away from Ton and took the ring and tape out of Paul's hand. No one at the two tables dared communicate as they watched Teren walk around several tables to Colonel Quautar and hand the two items to him.

* * *

Ton saw the ring as Teren handed it to Sharad and was suddenly seized with panic. He reached out and snatched it away from Sharad and studied it. He immediately recognized the ruby and the engravings. He stared at the ring, paralyzed with terror. It was Adrian's class ring, the ring he never took off his finger.

Within moments, the Pavilion was silent.

Give the ring to me, Ton, Sharad communicated gently.

Ton stared at the ring, unable to speak. Sharad reached slowly to take the ring out of Ton's hand, but Ton tightened his hold on it.

Ausha gripped Ton's arm. *What is it?* When he didn't answer, she asked Sharad, *What is it? Tell me what it is!*

I'm not sure, Sharad answered.

It's a graduation ring from Earth, Teren communicated. *The initials on the inside of the band are A.P.*

Adrian . . . Ausha whispered in realization and sorrow. She embraced Ton with feelings of hope. *The ring may be a very good copy. King has no reason to hurt Adrian. He's probably fine.*

Ton looked up. *Is what she suggests possible?*

Teren's face was grave, and Ton knew that he believed the worst. Sharad shook his head slowly. *No, Ton. I don't think so. King does not make empty threats.*

Can't you send someone to Earth to find out?

No. Any agent I send to Earth on a mission to learn Adrian's status will not come back. In a few years I'll have someone check on it.

Ton leaned his head into his hand. Sharad and Ausha slipped their arms through Ton's, and together they lifted him to standing position.

It's time to go home, Ton, Ausha soothed.

Sharad addressed the guests en masse: *He'll be all right. Party's over.*

Sharad took Ton and Ausha to their apartment. Ton could not discuss what had happened, and Sharad didn't press him. Sharad left a few minutes later, cautioning Ton to remain in his apartment that night and to keep all of the doors and windows locked.

Once Sharad was gone, Ausha removed the flowers from her dress and hair, then knelt down between Ton's legs and attempted to encircle his waist with her arms. Ton gripped her shoulders and gently pushed her away.

Ausha stroked his knee as if it were her own private treasure. *Please don't shut me out, Ton. Please.*

Ton gazed at her tenderly, laying his hand on hers. *I don't want to. But I can't have you when I'm feeling this way.*

Why not?

Because I feel so out of control. I don't want to use you the way I used all the others.

I'm begging, Ausha communicated in a pleading tone of thought.

Ton couldn't help but smile. *You don't beg very well.*

You won't let me get close enough to beg properly.

Ton sighed. *This isn't at all the way I planned it. I wanted to make it perfect for you.*

Ton, it will be what it will be. Ausha's hand moved slowly up his leg to his waist as she snuggled closer. This time he didn't resist her.

* * *

The guests watched Ton somberly as Colonel Quautar and Ausha led him to a taxi. Only after they were gone did anyone begin discussing what had happened.

Bryaun shook his head at Faurney. *When Ausha communicated that it would be dangerous for Ton to go to Dinevlea, I only half believed it.*

I never quite believed it either, Faurney admitted.

Do you have any idea what kind of trouble he's in?

It has to do with his treason. I don't know any more than that.

Ausha must have told you something.

She hasn't told me any more than she's told you. Father and Mother know what's going on, though; I'm sure of it. Faurney glanced in his parents' direction. *All the same, I don't think it's a good idea to tell anyone that there was a death threat wrapped around that ring.*

Bryaun shook his head slowly. *No. I think you're right.*

Faurney quickly communicated to the others sitting at his table and Paul's that they should remain silent about the death threat, and everyone agreed.

* * *

Deia communicated privately to Paul, worried yet full of understanding, *Sanel wants to kill Ton, doesn't he. Why? Why would Sanel want Ton and not us and Teren?*

I'm not sure.

Then you have some idea.

I don't think Ton was supposed to come with us to Novaun.

Deia pondered Paul's observation many moments before she understood. *You mean he was the Sovereign plant?*

It looks that way.

Oh no. No wonder Sanel wants him dead.

He isn't dead yet, Deia.

He might as well be. When has Sanel ever failed?

He failed with us and Teren.

Only because Ton saved us! It isn't fair. Ton doesn't deserve any of this. Deia tried to refrain from crying, but couldn't. Her vision blurred, and tears began streaming down her cheeks. She was grateful for the darkness.

We can't let ourselves worry about Ton, Deia. Colonel Quautar seems to have everything under control.

That's why I'm being confined, isn't it? Colonel Quautar must believe I'm a danger to Ton.

I don't know anything about that.

Evelayna pressed Deia's hand in concern. *What's the matter?*

Deia quickly wiped away her tears. *Nothing . . . nothing. I'm fine.* She felt Teren's hands on her shoulders and turned to look up at his solemn face.

Let's go home, Deia. Lieutenant Nunen is waiting for us at the stairs. Deia nodded quickly and allowed Teren to help her out of the chair.

Who does the ring belong to, Teren? Miaundea asked.

Someone Ton knew on Earth named Adrian. Both Ausha and your father seemed to know who he is.

Several people asked Teren what had happened, and Teren gave them simple, evasive answers, not wanting to terrify anyone. All the guests, however, had seen enough to know that Ton was in serious trouble of some kind. Everyone left the Pavilion feeling apprehensive and sad.

Paul went home with Teren and Deia. They sat in the living room with every light on and discussed what had happened. Both Paul and Deia asked Teren if Ton really had been the plant on the *Sovereign*. Teren admitted that he had been, but told them little else about Ton's situation. Finally, very late, they all went to bed.

Deia had lain in bed twenty minutes, unable to sleep, when she felt Paul's mind touch hers from the next room. *Deia, I'm so confused. You have to help me decide what to do.*

Deia knew immediately that Paul was referring to the Doshyr heirship. *Perhaps you should stop looking at it as an either-or decision. Think of a few other things you could do or would like to do, then consider the heirship as one option out of many.*

I don't know. I just don't know.

You feel it's your duty to be the heir, don't you, Deia communicated in surprise.

Yes I do, kind of.

Then what is there to consider? Just do it.

I'm not sure I want to do it.

Then you had better decide just what it is you do want to do.

* * *

Miaundea went back to her apartment in Shalaun that night, feeling uneasy. Ton was in far more danger than she had ever believed, and she felt guilty that she had never realized it. Her father had told her that he had had a traumatic year, and it was no wonder.

Just how many incidents like this one with the ring had Ton experienced over the past year?

The ring had been planted with such premeditated ruthlessness too. Miaundea had no doubt that the spy had intended to devastate Ton's wedding night—what a monstrously brilliant way to torment him. King and his spy understood Ton too well. Miaundea shuddered. The realization that one of King's spies was on Novaun and after Ton was terrifying. What an awful end to a beautiful wedding. Miaundea hoped with all her essence that Ton would be all right.

Ton and Ausha's wedding had been simple but very nice, and that encouraged Miaundea. She had always assumed she would have a big wedding with all of her family and friends, but she couldn't imagine it now. If Braysel didn't reconcile with his family, the day of their wedding would possibly be one of the saddest, most humiliating days of Braysel's life. Miaundea didn't think a large celebration would be appropriate under those circumstances, and she knew that Braysel would not be able to bear one.

Even if he did reconcile with his family, all of his relatives were staunch pacifists. Miaundea couldn't comprehend getting Braysel's staunch pacifist relatives and her staunch Fleet friends and relatives together for any kind of celebration without having a catastrophe. She had discussed the situation with her mother, and they both agreed that whatever happened, the wedding should include only the immediate families and a few close friends. Instead of a reception, they would go to a restaurant for dinner and dancing.

Miaundea went to her closet and gingerly removed her wedding dress and laid it on her bed. The dress would fall just below her knees, white with just a touch of pink, the hemline and V-shaped neckline embroidered with tiny lilcryens. The dress was beautiful, but it wasn't the long, multi-layered gown embellished with emeralds, diamonds, and lots of gold that she had always wanted. Such a gown, however, would be too extravagant and cumbersome for the celebration she was planning.

Braysel sometimes asked her what plans she was making for the wedding, and she never told him anything specific. Neither Braysel nor his family ever did anything in a small way, and Miaundea didn't doubt he expected some kind of pageant that would celebrate his acceptance back into his family as much as their getting married. He wasn't ready to learn that what he had in mind was fantasy.

Miaundea lay down on her bed and reverently ran her fingers over her wedding dress, yearning for Braysel and wishing she had been the one being married that day.

Chapter 15: FRACTURED RAINBOWS

Ton lay in bed early the next morning, exhausted but unable to sleep, the first pale light of dawn beginning to peer through the cracks of his window blinds. He turned, leaned on his elbow, and gazed at Ausha. Her red-brown curls were strewn all over her shoulders and pillow, and her face was relaxed and at peace, her lips curved ever so slightly in a smile of contentment. Ton had seen Ausha in all different situations and never stopped marveling at how beautiful she was, even when she was angry, weary, or grimy after a surgery. In all the ways he had seen her, he liked her in this state of tranquil satiety the best.

He touched her hair with his finger, being careful not to disturb her. The power of their passion awed him. He wanted to savor it, to revel in it, to exult in it, but his chance for celebration had been destroyed. Instead they cleaved to each other in desperation, wondering how much time together they would have.

Ton carefully got out of bed, slipped into his robe, and walked to the window. He separated the blinds with his fingers and looked out at the city. A mist hung over it, diffusing the sliver of sun that shone on the horizon and the lights that remained on, giving the whole scene a magical glow. Ton moved the room's chair closer to the window and sat down. He lifted the blinds a little and leaned his elbows on the window ledge.

Shalaun seemed so placid, so beautiful—his home. For weeks he had wanted to believe his life was in its morning stage, carrying a promise of warmth and excitement. He realized in despair that it had all been an illusion. Even if King didn't manage to kill him, how could things ever be the same? How could he live not knowing whether Adrian was dead or alive? How could he live believing Adrian had been murdered? And why? To satisfy the demands of a game of arrogance between two fools? Why did Adrian have to be the one to pay?

Ton felt Ausha's fingers slide under his robe and caress his shoulders, her spirit burning through his with relish, longing, and terror she could not suppress. Ton closed his eyes and leaned his head against her neck. That Adrian might have been murdered was bad enough; that Adrian's ring had been found on the night of his wedding was intolerable. Ton had no doubt that King's agent knew how much he had anticipated his wedding night and had sadistically planted the ring in the perfect place and at the perfect time to spoil his intimate celebration with Ausha. What would be the perfect place and time for his assassination?

Ausha let her hands fall to Ton's chest, squeezing him tightly, her cheek pressing lovingly against his. Neither found it necessary to communicate in formulated thought. Ausha wanted to tell Ton that their wedding night hadn't been ruined, but she felt that in a very real way it had been. She wanted to tell him that Adrian was alive, but she knew as well as Ton that he probably wasn't. She wanted to tell him that he would live through any assassination attempt, but she wasn't sure he would. Ton wanted to tell her not to be afraid of what was coming, but he was as afraid as she was. What Ton didn't want Ausha to know was that the thing that most terrified him was that King's agent would kill her instead of him, but he knew that she already knew. They understood each other and comforted each other in spirit, and that was all that needed to be communicated.

Many minutes later, Ton turned his chair slightly and pulled Ausha into his lap. *It's a beautiful morning, isn't it?* she finally communicated.

Ton nodded, clasping her tighter and nuzzling up to her neck. Ausha lifted the chain that hung around her neck and carefully removed the ovoid necklace Ton had given her for her birthday. She held it up to the light and watched in fascination as the fractured rainbows danced around the room in the misty orange glow. *It looks a little different every morning.*

Ton turned his head away from Ausha and watched the rainbows, squinting slightly. *What a cruel thing to see on the morning after our wedding. Is this what our marriage is going to be? Fractured rainbows?*

Funny. It never occurred to me to look at it like that. After they had watched the rainbows a little longer, Ausha communicated, *The rainbows may be fractured, but they're still beautiful.* She slipped the chain back around her neck. *Would you like some breakfast?*

"Hmmm . . ." he murmured. *That would be nice.*

She slid off his legs, and he stood up to go with her to the kitchen. Ausha laughed a little and pushed him back into the chair as he stood, kissing him. *No, you stay here. I'll bring it to you.*

Ton relaxed back into his chair in surprise and near contentment, thinking how gratifying it was waking up with Ausha like this in the morning. He watched her intently as she walked out of the bedroom, then slowly stood up and went to his dresser, where Adrian's ring lay. He slipped it on his finger and gazed at it, memories of Adrian nudging into his conscious thoughts. He lay down in his bed and rested his hand on Ausha's pillow, still staring at Adrian's ring, the memories whirling in his head. The aroma of eggs, cinnamon muffins, and brewed zaulyem tea floated into the room, and Ton drifted into an exhausted sleep.

* * *

Later in the day, Ton sat on the edge of the bed, his face in his hands, while Ausha quickly laced her slippers over her calves. *I can't do it, Ausha. I can't see anyone right now. You're going to have to go without me.*

Ausha didn't communicate immediately. Whether Ton would be able to make himself go to Bryaun and Tauna's wedding and all of the festivities surrounding it was the uncommunicated question that had been hanging between them all day. Finally Ausha proceeded, with extreme care, *Why exactly don't you want to see anyone?*

I don't want a lot of stupid questions, and I don't want a lot of . . . Ton sighed desolately. *Regrets.*

Regrets from whom?

From your family.

Ton, my parents have grown to love you. They're very concerned about you, I'm sure of that, but they aren't regretting the marriage any more than I am.

Ton shook his head. *There's no way you can know that. I can't face them.*

Ausha knelt down between Ton's legs and wrapped her arms around his waist. He absently stroked her hair as she laid her head on his chest. *This is going to be excruciating for you, Ton, but it's Bryaun's wedding. If it were anything less important, things would be different. And you can't hide from my parents forever.*

Ton sagged his shoulders. *No, I don't suppose I can.*

You don't have to communicate anything to anyone. I'll be with you every moment, and Colonel Quautar can answer all the stupid questions for you. He'll probably want to be the one to do it anyway.

You promise you won't leave me alone for one second?

Promise.

Sharad arrived fifteen minutes later to escort Ton and Ausha to the airbus depot downtown, where they would meet the Ferudant and Traus families and travel to Amaria. *Are you going to make it?* Sharad asked Ton.

Are you still going to let me go?

It's up to you.

Have you had any success tracing the spy who planted that ring?

It's being investigated. That's all I'm going to tell you for now.

Did you discuss any of this with my parents? Ausha asked.

Yes, I did. I told them about the ring and threat. They're hoping, as I am, that this incident will provide us some clue that will help us find King's agent.

Ton hesitated. *Do they seem . . . angry?*

No. Just worried. Ton, some of your friends may ask you what's going on. Don't tell them anything—nothing at all. Ton nodded.

Ton, Ausha, and Sharad went to Amaria as they had planned, and Ton did have to endure a lot of questions. Sharad kept close to him during the entire two days of festivities, answering all of the questions with, *Ton's treason has put him in a certain amount of danger from the Earthons. The ring Bryaun found at the Pavilion belonged to someone Ton knew on Earth. Don't ask Ton anything about it because he can't tell you anything.*

Members of Ausha's family treated Ton with compassion and affection and, to Ton's relief, didn't ask any questions. Ton didn't communicate much to anyone, and everyone seemed to understand. He went through the two days in a daze, often just sitting and staring at Ausha's hand, which always lay in his. Ausha's family left Second Day morning, leaving Ton feeling a little disappointed but, at the same time, grateful he would have Ausha to himself.

After the Ferudants left, Ton and Ausha picked Anenka up from the kennel where they had been boarding her since the night before their wedding. Anenka was ecstatic to see them but not happy about coming home to find that Ausha had taken her place in Ton's bed. She exasperated Ton and Ausha the first night with her whimpers and whines, and they finally resorted to putting her in her own room to sleep. She disliked sleeping in her room so much that the second night she resigned herself to sleeping at the foot of Ton and Ausha's bed without complaint.

Third Day came, and Ton and Ausha went back to work. Ton had a difficult time concentrating on his work, tormented by guilt and anxiety over what had happened to Adrian and terrified King's agent would kill Ausha too. Ausha, although she too was afraid of what was coming, was the more emotionally stable of the two and acted as primary surgeon in most of their cases.

As the weeks trudged by, Ton went over and over the escape from the *Sovereign* in his head. Had he not come to Novaun, Adrian would have lived, but Teren would have died and Paul and Deia would have remained under their uncle's control. Perhaps he could have refused Daniel Stewart's offer and then gone with Teren in the armed shuttle anyway. Stewart, however, would have simply found another plant, and perhaps Ton would have

been transferred away from the *Sovereign*. Teren would have died anyway. The whole *Sovereign* escape had been a no-win situation, and Ton felt there was nothing he could have done that wouldn't have ended in tragedy. Sometimes Ton felt he was the source of all the tragedy, but more, he felt King was the source, and every time he thought about it, his anger toward King increased.

Ton often prayed that God would allow both him and Ausha to live and have a normal life, but those prayers did nothing to comfort him. Finally, when he could bear the confused, chaotic feelings no longer, he began praying in earnest. Sharad had told him that God would tell him what to do to protect himself. Certainly God would know that, and He would also know whether Adrian was still alive.

Ton spent hour after hour in prayer, day after day, pouring out his fears and begging to know whether Adrian was still alive. He implored God to take away his terror, to tell him how he could protect himself, and to let Ausha and him live, and the more he prayed, the more vivid the feeling came that he should give up his anger.

Finally, one night after Ausha had already gone to sleep, Ton reached his spirit out to God in utter helplessness. *I can't live with it anymore. Please release me. Help me give up my anger.* He remained awake for some time longer, thinking and waiting for some kind of answer, finally drifting to sleep feeling numb.

Ton awoke the next morning to Ausha's semi-conscious caresses. He held her tightly, feeling strangely at peace. He somehow knew that he would be with Ausha for a very long time and that everything would be all right. He didn't feel angry anymore, and he knew also, as firmly as he knew Ausha was lying next to him, that Adrian was dead. He mourned, and yet he didn't, because he felt Adrian very near, closer than he had been in a long time.

Ton felt Adrian's presence in the room so strongly that he released Ausha, sat up, and began speaking softly in English, "I'm sorry for what happened, Adrian. I didn't mean for it to end like this. Can you speak to me? Please communicate with me. It's been so long since I've seen you." Ton paused for many minutes, waiting for some sort of response from Adrian, but none came. He still felt Adrian's presence, so he continued by telling him all about King and the *Sovereign* and his new life on Novaun. He talked for over thirty minutes, and finally, when he could think of nothing else to tell his friend, he said, "I miss you."

The room remained silent, and Ton still received no formulated response, but emotions of affection and familiarity engulfed him, carrying with them an impression that was only a shadow of a whisper . . . *I'm often with you . . .*

Ton sat there for many minutes, overwhelmed by joy. He knew that Adrian understood and didn't blame him, and that, for the moment, was the greatest gift of all. Finally Ton stood up and went to his dresser. He picked up Adrian's ring and slipped it on his finger, where it would remain for the rest of his life. Ton turned to walk back to his bed and saw Ausha gazing at him with a peculiar expression.

Who were you talking to? she asked.

Adrian.

He was here?

Couldn't you feel him?

Ausha shook her head, still gazing at him with that peculiar expression.

I don't know how to explain it, but he was here. Ton grinned, almost laughing. Either I'm completely insane, or everything is going to be all right.

Chapter 16: THANK-YOU CARD FROM GOD

Braysel had been on the *Glautel Monsa* for nine and a half months, when Colonel Gristenla called all of the pilots, navigators, telepathy scientists, and engineers of the two new squadrons together after work and gave them the startling news.

For most of you, your work here is finished. Those of you who are telepathy scientists and engineers are being reassigned to the Defense Research Center in Shalaun to work with engineers there to develop our new craft. Pilots, you will each command and train a new squadron; navigators, you will assist the pilot to whom you have been assigned on this tour. You each have two months of extended leave if you want it before you report to your new assignments; contact my librarian for your orders. Promotion exercises will be day after tomorrow at 0900.

Braysel left the conference, stunned. Several realizations assaulted him at once. He would no longer be involved with the development of the spirit energy generator and the new spacecraft. He would see Miaundea again within days. Within weeks they would be married. His parents had not moved one millimeter toward accepting him. His grandfather would not perform a wedding ceremony for him. What was he going to do? How could he and Miaundea get married under the circumstances? If they didn't get married now, when would they get married?

He went to dinner, then back to his cabin to be alone, his feelings of panic growing more intense by the minute. He was at an impasse; there was no way out of this horrible problem. He prayed in despair, *Eternal Father, I don't know what to do. You have to tell me what to do.*

Receiving nothing that felt like an answer, he prayed again, then again. For an hour he hurled his desperate supplications at God, finally giving up and slipping into Awareness trance to relieve himself of his headache. He lay there for a while, then stood up in resignation and began to pack, trying to work out the problem in his mind.

What exactly were his options? He could marry Miaundea without his family's support. From a legal perspective, was that possible? He didn't think it was. One way or another, the law would require that a marriage contract be drafted between his family and Miaundea's. He could not marry Miaundea without his family's support unless he legally severed his ties with his family and formed a new family organization. To get married within two months, he had no choice but to either form a new family organization or quit the Fleet and receive his family's support.

His other options were to simply wait to get married until his family accepted him or to call off the marriage altogether and continue on in the Fleet as he had for the past four and a half years. Even as the possibility occurred to him, he knew it was ridiculous. He could not call off the marriage. He loved Miaundea and needed her more than she could comprehend. Emotionally, he could not go back to Novaun for an extended period of time and not marry her. It simply wasn't possible.

The only option that made sense was to quit the Fleet and go back to Novaun for good, but how could he do it? The Fleet wasn't a mere vocation; it was a mission. Not only did he love what he did, he was needed. How could he leave it when there was still so much to do?

Perhaps his only real option was to go back to Novaun with the faith that a miracle would occur. God could work miracles. Couldn't He inspire his parents to do the right

thing? To accept him and his mission in the Fleet? Hadn't He already promised him that his parents would accept him? *Please, God, tell me what to do. I can't go on like this anymore.*

After Braysel had packed everything he could, he went to the VisionRun courts and lost himself in the game. He dragged himself back to his cabin late and collapsed into bed, his mind foggy with exhaustion.

Braysel dreamed that he went to the ship's post office the next day and received a card-sized envelope made of the finest cream-colored vellum. His name was printed on the envelope in black ink, but there was no return address. Puzzled, he opened the envelope and removed the card. On it were the words "Thank You" written in elegant script, surrounded by an intricate gold leaf border. Braysel had never seen such a beautiful thank-you card.

Braysel opened the card, the black letters seeming to sink into the vellum and stand out at the same time. "Thank you for your years of service. Your mission in the Fleet is over. It's time for you to go home. Lovingly, Your Father."

The words crashed down on Braysel in one demolishing blow. He could feel the blood rise into his cheeks. He clenched his fist so hard it hurt, the blood vessels standing out on his arm. "No . . . ! NO!" He began pacing, unable to stop staring at the card. *You told me everything would be all right, that my family would finally accept me!*

The size of the script suddenly appeared larger. "Thank you for your years of service. Your mission in the Fleet is over. It's time for you to go home."

How can I quit now? The Fleet needs me! I have a commitment!

The words on the card faded, replaced by new ones in bold black letters. "GO HOME, GO HOME, GO HOME!"

"No!" Braysel shouted in agony. *I can't do it. There's nothing else for me. The Fleet is my life!*

The words on the card faded again, and new ones appeared. "I never required you to give your life to the Fleet—I required you to give it to me." Braysel dropped himself onto his bed, desolate. He had no choice but to quit the Fleet.

Braysel awoke and sat up with a start. The room was black and there was no thank-you card from God in his hand, but the intense feeling that he should quit the Fleet and go home remained. He lay back down, his emotions in chaos. He went over what seemed like every day in his past, asking himself what he could have done differently. Had it been right to join the Fleet? Yes. Had it been right to be so disrespectful to his parents? No. Had it been right to disregard his heritage? No. Had it been right to seek a job in the Fleet that involved combat? He didn't know.

Perhaps things could have been different. Perhaps if he had gone to his parents in humility and explained his confused feelings, they would have accepted his joining the Fleet as long as he did not have a job that involved combat. Still, Braysel couldn't comprehend even that. No, he didn't think his parents would have permitted him to join the Fleet under any circumstances. To them, the Fleet was an organization of murder.

Just what had his mission been? Had he felt so compelled to join the Fleet so that he could design the spirit energy generator? Had he rejected his family for a stupid spirit energy generator? A spirit energy generator that was classified information and now belonged to the Fleet? An extraordinary accomplishment that he would never be able to put on a résumé? Just what had been his purpose in the Fleet?

Braysel eventually slipped back into sleep. He awoke the next morning feeling ill. Wyl was cheerful and happy about getting leave and a promotion. Braysel wished he didn't have to look at him or assimilate his annoying comments.

Braysel went to Colonel Gristenla's office and communicated bluntly, *I came to resign.*

The colonel laughed. *Resign?*

I'm serious. I came to resign.

Colonel Gristenla motioned Braysel into a chair, and Braysel seated himself on its edge, too agitated to allow himself too much comfort. The colonel frowned. *Are you sure about this?*

My family disowned me for joining the Fleet. I want to get married. I don't have any choice. Is there any way I can get out of my commitment?

I understand your problem, Braysel, but this is awfully sudden. What brought this on?

It's time. I can't explain it any better than that. I need to be with my family now.

Colonel Gristenla sighed. *I'll see what I can do.*

Braysel nodded and stood up to leave. Colonel Gristenla communicated with him later in the day and told him that, given his unique family situation, he had been honorably released from all commitment to the Fleet.

Braysel spent the day alone on the observation deck, feeling empty. He almost wished he had been forced to keep his two-year commitment. Instead, he had been discharged within hours. The work of the Fleet would go on now as if he had never been a part of it at all. So much for being needed in the Fleet.

The next morning, Fourth Day, Braysel went to the promotion exercises to receive two commendations and his official release, watching heartbroken as the other men in his squadron received their promotions. Following the ceremony, he, Wyl, Mykal, and several other men from the two squadrons boarded the transport to Novaun.

Once Braysel was on his way and the *Glaute Monsa* and his work there were far behind him, he pondered what this trip to Novaun really meant. He was going home for good. He would be able to have dinner with his parents and brothers and sisters again, spend the evening with them on the patio communicating, go to Devotional with them again on First Day, work with his grandfather and Kara again at the Institute. God had finally released him. He could go home with no hesitation and no regrets. The closer he came to Novaun, the more his anticipation increased.

Braysel arrived in Shalaun late that evening. Since Miaundea had moved back to Shalaun five weeks before, he went directly to her apartment, bursting with excitement.

* * *

"Bray!" Miaundea shrieked, throwing her arms around him and embracing him tightly.

Braysel stroked Miaundea's face as if he couldn't believe he was actually touching her, his lips trembling as he pressed them hungrily down on hers. They kissed again and again, reveling in the feel of each other. Finally they just held each other tightly, their cheeks lightly caressing.

I can't believe you're here, Bray. How long do you have?

Forever, angel. I'm home for good. I quit.

Miaundea pulled away from him abruptly. *You quit?*

Braysel suddenly appeared uncomfortable. *Are you angry?*

No . . . no. It's just . . . so sudden. Why? She tugged on his hand and led him to the couch.

All of the men in my squadron and another were being reassigned, and we all got two months of leave. He told her about receiving the thank-you card from God in his dream. *The feeling I received was too powerful to deny. What else could I have done?*

Miaundea kissed him softly. *You did the right thing. Have you communicated with your parents yet?*

No. I want us to go together, tonight. Suddenly Braysel frowned. *What's the matter, Miaundea? Why are you afraid?*

I don't know exactly. But I do think you should see your parents alone.

I just got here, Miaundea! How can you send me all the way to Mautysia by myself?

Miaundea's feelings of dread surged through them both. *I don't want you to leave. I just think it would be better if you go alone, that's all.*

Braysel seized Miaundea's shoulders and stared down at her. *What's the matter? You tell me, right now.*

Miaundea evaded his gaze. *I guess I'm not sure things will be as you think they will be.*

I don't understand what you mean.

Miaundea shook her head quickly, still unable to look at him. She couldn't bring herself to tell him the extent of her fears, that his grandfather might require far more from him than merely quitting the Fleet. She couldn't tell him, not when he was so excited about seeing his family.

Are you afraid they will forbid me to marry you, is that it?

Miaundea was relieved in a way that he had only touched on her fears, not exposed them completely. She lifted her eyes to look solemnly into his. *I guess I am afraid of that.*

Braysel drew her into his arms again. *Don't worry. Everything will be all right.* They held each other a little longer before Braysel went to the bathroom to change into civilian clothes.

When Braysel returned, Miaundea grinned. *They're still going to hate the beard.*

Well, they're just going to have to live with it. He moved closer to her, running his hands seductively from her neck, to her cheeks, and into her hair, kissing her savoringly. *Come with me?*

Miaundea felt a rush of excitement. She nodded quickly.

Bring a big purse and a change of clothes. I'm sure Mother won't mind if you stay the night.

* * *

Braysel and Miaundea hurried to the airbus depot downtown and took the next airbus to Mautysia. Braysel communicated the entire way about his family, and Miaundea assimilated it all without communicating much of anything, desperately hoping his parents would be as accepting as he thought they would be.

The lights from the house shone brightly as the taxi approached it, the Gulf shimmering in the moonlight. The taxi stopped and they slipped out, holding hands. Braysel walked her eagerly up to the front door and opened it.

Miaundea hesitated. *Are you sure we should just walk in like this?*

Why not? This is my home too.

I don't think it's a good idea, Bray.

Braysel gripped Miaundea's arm and pulled her into the foyer. *I'll tell you what. We'll compromise. We'll wait right here until someone comes.*

Suddenly Braysel's little brother Danal, age seven, raced down the stairs several meters in front of them, screaming and in his pajamas. Nymon, age nine, ran close behind. Miaundea and Braysel felt a telepathic jolt from the direction of the dining room, *Boys! Settle down!*

Danal and Nymon immediately noticed Braysel and Miaundea by the door. Their screaming stopped at once. They weren't sure whether to be ecstatic or skeptical. Braysel grinned and approached them. *Hello, you two. You've grown so much I hardly recognize you.*

Are you home to stay, Braysel? Nymon asked hopefully.

Braysel nodded. *I sure am.*

"That's great!" Danal cried, leaping toward Braysel and punching him in the arm.

Nymon hurled himself at Braysel, sliding over the slick floor in his socks. He shoved his hand at Braysel. *Arm wrestle?*

Braysel growled and grabbed Nymon's hand. They struggled for a minute before Braysel pushed down hard, nearly twisting Nymon's arm off and knocking him to the floor. Nymon burst out in giggles.

"Mother! Father! Braysel's home!" Danal called out, grabbing Braysel's waist and squeezing him hard.

"For good!" Nymon loudly added, still giggling.

Immediately Braysel's mother appeared from the kitchen, and his father appeared from the living room. Another brother and two sisters seemed to appear from nowhere.

Braysel's mother looked at him, her green eyes full of hope. The muscles in her face, however, were tight with doubt. *What's going on?*

Braysel beamed. *I'm home. For good. I quit.*

His mother's eyes filled with tears, and her lips trembled. *You quit?*

The expression on his father's face was still one of doubt. He motioned to the front door. *We'll discuss this outside.*

Bewildered, Braysel put his hand on Miaundea's waist and guided her out the door. His parents followed, sternly giving instructions to his brothers and sister to stay where they were.

Once they were in the front courtyard, Braysel's father asked, *Why, Braysel? Why did you quit?*

Miaundea felt an awful sinking in her chest. She had been right. Things weren't as Braysel had thought they would be. Miaundea tightened her hold on Braysel's arm and stared at the ground, wishing she had never come.

I miss you. I want to come home.

His mother too was skeptical. *It's been nearly five years, Braysel. Five years! After a lifetime of telling us that you belong in the Fleet? One evening you just decide you miss us and want to come home?*

I do miss you. And I want to get married.

So that's what this is all about, his father communicated bitterly. His tone of thought was so like Braysel's at that moment that Miaundea glanced up at him. Braysel and his father had the same build, the same face, the same eyes, and even the same expressions and mannerisms. The only thing that wasn't the same was the hair color. Miaundea knew that as much as Braysel resembled his father, he was even more like his grandfather Jeldaun in appearance and personality. How had Braysel ended up with such different ideology?

No, you don't understand. It isn't just that. It was time to quit. My mission in the Fleet is over.

All of the blood drained from his mother's face. *Your mission in the Fleet?*

What exactly was this mission in the Fleet? his father asked.

I'm not sure. Something I was supposed to do. All I know is that it's done.

His mother shook her head quickly. *No. This won't do at all. How dare you presume to burst in here with your Fleet past and your Fleet bride and expect to continue your life with us as if the last five years had never happened? It's not acceptable. Not at all.*

Horror twisted Braysel's features. *I quit, Mother. What else can I do?*

His father shook his head sadly. *Don't you understand, Braysel? Nothing has changed. You haven't changed.*

But I have changed! I quit! I'm sorry for all of those years I treated you with such disrespect. Miaundea is teaching me pacifism. I have changed.

His parents both gazed at him with such grave, despairing faces that Miaundea knew Braysel hadn't changed nearly enough.

You want me to repent joining the Fleet? I can't do that. It wasn't wrong.

It was wrong, Braysel. Eternally wrong, his father communicated.

Braysel's eyes filled with tears. *You can't do this. You can't send me away forever. Please . . . You have to let me come home. I can't change what I feel. You told me before that I could keep my ideals. Please . . .*

That was five years ago, his father replied. *Before you were conditioned by the Fleet, before you established Fleet ties, before you spilt human blood. We want to have you back, more than anything in this universe, but until you're ready to repent, we can't allow it.*

I guess then this . . . is good-bye forever. Braysel turned and leaned on Miaundea, letting her lead him out of the courtyard to the walk. Neither communicated anything as they trudged toward the landing platform in the dark. They reached it minutes later, and Braysel collapsed to the ground with a choke, his body shaking uncontrollably.

Miaundea cradled his head to her throat and stroked him, attempting to solace him in spirit, her tears soaking his hair. The taxi arrived five minutes later, and they both composed themselves enough to get in it.

They took an airbus back to Shalaun, communicating nothing until they were halfway there. *Why did they send me away?* Braysel communicated in perplexity and grief. *For months I've felt at peace because I knew they would accept me. Then I had to quit the Fleet, and now this. Why?*

Miaundea was as perplexed as Braysel. *I don't know.*

What else can I do?

I don't know that there's anything else you can do. If they don't accept you, they don't accept you. You can't change their feelings and ideology any more than they can change yours.

Was it wrong for me to join the Fleet in the first place?

What do you think?
I know it was the right thing to do. I did a lot of other things wrong, though.
But you've worked hard to repent of those other things. You have to stop torturing yourself.

Why would God give me the assurance that my family would accept me?
Apparently they will in time.

I quit the Fleet! If not now, when?
I don't know. Maybe in the next life.

Braysel's emptiness engulfed them both. *This life will be an awfully lonely one without my family.*

Neither communicated for many minutes. When Braysel finally did, it was with numbness, *I guess I'll rejoin the Fleet.*

I guess so.

What do you want to do?

You mean about getting married?

Braysel nodded weakly.

I think we need to communicate with a judge and learn our options.

I can't believe you still want to marry me.

I can't believe you would ever think otherwise. I love you, Bray.

Braysel squeezed her tightly. *I love you too, angel.*

Would you rather be alone tonight, or with someone?

I want to be with you. Braysel's lips sauntered yearningly over Miaundea's neck, sending such agonizing thrills through her that she could hardly breathe.

Miaundea couldn't bear to spend another night without him, especially now. Perhaps they could sleep together on her couch, or maybe they could spend the night on the beach. To send him away would be cruel, yet she felt an intense sense of warning, as if anything short of total separation would lead to complete disaster. She suddenly felt apprehensive about being with Braysel in that airbus alone. She tore herself away from him and seated herself in the seat across from his.

He gazed imploringly at her, his eyes glazed and his lips trembling. He seized her arms, stroking them and tugging. "Come back," he whispered.

She ached to hold him, but she knew that if she went to him now, she would not be able to keep from giving herself to him completely. Never, not even during her turbulent days with Ton, had she felt such intense desire. Braysel loved her, Braysel wanted her, Braysel planned to spend forever with her. It was almost right. Almost. And in this volatile, vulnerable state, even Braysel was capable of doing something he knew would be wrong. He was more a danger to her than Ton had ever been. How odd life was.

Miaundea felt herself slide toward him, wanting desperately to touch her lips to his. "Bray . . ." she said painfully, in an attempt to push him away with the sound of her voice.

Braysel suddenly recoiled and stared at her coldly. *Why are you marrying me, Miaundea, if you don't trust me?*

Miaundea felt queasy. She had never dreamed she would offend him with her desire to be careful. She felt as if she were reliving a nightmare. How could she handle this without hurting him more than she already had?

I'm not Ton Luciani, Miaundea.

Braysel's icy accusation struck Miaundea as funny, and she suddenly felt an urge to laugh. *It's a good thing. He's a married man!*

Braysel looked at her strangely for a moment, then smiled.

Miaundea grinned. *The only woman Ton cares to proposition these days is Ausha. He poses about as much threat to my virtue as Kevan! I want us to be careful Bray, but I really don't want you to treat me as though I'm your sister!*

Braysel gazed at her gently. *Then get back over here. I promise I won't attack you if you promise you won't attack me.*

I don't think I should be making promises I might not be able to keep.

Braysel groaned and rolled his eyes, then moved to the seat next to Miaundea's, drawing her into his arms, his lacerated spirit permeating hers with love. Miaundea held him tightly, her spirit swelling around his in comfort, wanting more than ever to be his wife.

Chapter 17: PLEA FOR SEPARATION

The next day Braysel and Miaundea went to the Planetary Courthouse downtown to get legal counseling. They communicated with one of the many judges in their district who were employed by the planetary government to handle routine civil cases, a judge who had officiated in many marriage contract negotiations and formations of new family organizations.

The judge sat in front of a large window, the sapphires in her light brown hair glinting in the sunshine. *You cannot receive license to marry without a contract between the Quautar and Nalaurev organizations, and in that contract, one of the organizations must agree to assume financial responsibility for you, your children, and your descendants. Almost always, of course, the groom's organization assumes this responsibility, but it is possible to get a clause added that will insure support from the bride's organization.*

Braysel sat on the edge of his silk-padded chair. *That is completely out of the question. I won't do it, and my grandfather will never allow it. He won't give Miaundea and me financial support, but he will insist on being responsible for our children.*

Miaundea leaned toward the judge. *But technically, we could receive our license to marry if the Nalaurev organization assumes responsibility for our children and descendants and the Quautar organization assumes responsibility for Braysel and me.*

Yes, and from what you tell me about your situation, I believe both families would agree to the terms. The question is, can you live with those terms?

Braysel stiffened. *Absolutely not. If they refuse me, they don't get my children.*

Then I suggest you sue your family for support. You have made a considerable effort toward reconciliation by quitting the Fleet. I have no doubt that the court's decision would be in your favor.

Braysel rested his elbow on the arm of his chair and his head against his hand. *What exactly would that mean?*

It means that they would be under legal obligation to give you reasonable financial support and also give you and your children the necessary religious ordinances.

Would they be forced to allow Bray to attend family gatherings? Miaundea asked.

That could be one of the terms of the suit, yes, but the court may deny you that privilege.

Braysel rubbed his temples with his fingers and thumb. *Could I then deny them access to my children?*

If you denied them access to your children, then they could later sue you for visitation rights. If they were legally under obligation to support your children, then they would probably win their suit. You could make it difficult for them by moving to a planet on the other side of the Union, but as long as you are a resident of the Union, you would have to allow your parents to see your children.

The judge sighed. *I'll be frank with you, Minon Nalaurev. You're either going to have to move out of the Union, or you're going to have to allow your parents and grandparents to see your children.*

Braysel sprang out of his chair and began pacing. *This is intolerable. If they refuse me, they don't get my children. I want to form my own independent family organization.*

Miaundea nodded her agreement. *Is it possible?* she asked the judge.

I don't know. This sort of separation has never been done before. New family organizations are only formed when an existing organization is too large and needs to be divided or when a resident alien establishes citizenship.

Miaundea looked knowingly at Braysel. *Like Ton.*

If you're sure you want the separation—

I'm absolutely sure.

—then I'll have my secretary go ahead and file the application for you. Since this is an extremely irregular case, you'll have to appear before the Civil Council, where you will give your side of the story and your grandfather will give his. What you'll need to do is organize a presentation. You will tell the Council that your family disowned you four and a half years ago, detail your efforts to reconcile, and explain why your present situation in the Jeldaun Nalaurev organization is intolerable. I suggest you find at least three people who know you well who will communicate the same thing. It will be better if you have them testify in person, but a recorded testimony will also be acceptable. A court date will be set—probably in a week or two—and your grandfather will be given a summons. I strongly suggest that you make no move to rejoin the Fleet until the matter is settled. Do you have any more questions?

Braysel and Miaundea looked at each other, then shook their heads. The judge stood to show them to the door. *As soon as I learn anything about your case, I'll contact you.*

* * *

As Braysel jogged down the stairs to the walk with Miaundea, he asked, *Who am I going to get to be witnesses?*

I don't know. I suppose I'm too close to the situation to be a good witness. I think you need a couple of your good friends.

Miaundea, I don't have any good friends.

You have at least one good friend.

Maurek won't even communicate with me! There's no way he's going to do this.

You won't know unless you ask. I think he will.

I guess all he could do is tell me no. I suppose I could get Wilyl. He could tell about how I gave a presentation on my grandfather on the Day of Ancestors.

Where is Wilyl now?

On leave in Karajaun. I suppose I could afford to pay his shuttle fare to Shalaun.

As Braysel and Miaundea waited for a taxi to take them to Auyval Beach, Braysel felt Mauya's thoughts charge into his. *I just found out what happened, Bray. I can't believe they would do that to you, not after you quit the Fleet. It's intolerable, utterly intolerable!*

Do they know you feel that way? Braysel communicated, surprised by Mauya's adamant support.

Of course they know. Everyone knows. And I'm not the only one. Shaun is outraged, and so is Kara. Cristena, Saum, Jaunel, and I have already issued a formal complaint to the Nalaurev organization. We're just not sure it will do any good. Unfortunately, Grandfather agrees with Mother and Father.

I just got done communicating with a judge. Braysel proceeded to tell Mauya everything the judge had told him.

I'll be a witness for you.

Mauya's offer astounded Braysel. *You will?*

Of course I will. You've got to legally get out of the family. There's no way you're going to be able to live with their demands, and there isn't any reason you should have to.

What about you? They may just kick you out of the family!

If they do, they do. I think they're about ready to anyway. But I can't stand by and watch them slaughter your life this way. It isn't right.

Is there any way you can come to Shalaun today? I need you here, Mauya.

I'll be there as soon as I can, and I'll see if Kara and Shaun are free.

Mauya arrived in Shalaun two hours later with Kara and Shaun Jualaz. They went out to dinner with Braysel and Miaundea, and then they all gathered at Miaundea's apartment to communicate. Shaun and Kara were as unhappy about the situation as Mauya, and both offered to be witnesses.

Braysel communicated with Wilyl the next day about acting as a witness, and Wilyl agreed. Braysel also sent a commudisc to Maurek and began working on his presentation.

The judge communicated with Braysel that afternoon. *Minon Nalaurev, your court date will be on Fourth Day, 12 Seventh Month, at the ninth hour, in Courtroom 3. Expect to be in court for at least two hours to present your case. After both cases have been presented, the presiding judge will dismiss the court for a period of time to decide the matter, one to three hours. Be prepared to then return to the courtroom at that time for the decision. Do you have any questions?*

Do I go directly into the courtroom at the ninth hour, or do I wait somewhere else?

There is a lobby outside the courtroom, and you'll wait there until the presiding judge summons you.

Will you be there?

No. If you have any questions at that time, the members of the Council will answer them. They will also ask you whatever questions they need to decide your case.

Will I present my case first, or will my grandfather?

Since you're the one bringing the case before the Council, you will go first. Your grandfather will then be able to respond to your claims. Once your grandfather has given his presentation and whatever witnesses he brings have given theirs, the presiding judge will ask you if you want to respond to anything that was communicated.

If I have any questions between now and then, do I communicate with you or someone else?

Me.

All right. I think those are all the questions I have for now. Thank you.

Braysel ended his communication with the judge, feeling tense. He wouldn't appear before the Council for thirteen days. He thought he should feel glad he wasn't being forced to wait for three months, but thirteen days still seemed a long time to dangle in the dark on the edge of a cliff, not knowing where he would land or how hard.

Chapter 18: AN UNBELIEVABLE DESTINATION

Ton didn't worry anymore about what King planned for him. He simply waited and worked with Ausha and an accountant to come up with a short-term budget for their basic living expenses and a long-term budget for major expenses the Luciani organization would incur as it gained members. Then he and Ausha decided what portion of their income should come from investments and made a plan for purchasing stock. After two weeks of planning and research, Ton and Ausha were able to determine a salary to propose to prospective employers.

Once Ton and Ausha decided what their salary should be, they concentrated on finding jobs. From the time Ton and Ausha had become betrothed, they had both felt confident they could acquire positions at the Fleet clinic in Shalaun. The Fleet clinic had interesting work and more of it than the personnel there could handle.

Finally, after Ton and Ausha had been married for nearly two months, they submitted their applications to the Fleet clinic and had an interview with the director of neuromedicine. The director was anxious to have them work at the clinic, but after an hour of discussion, Ton and Ausha weren't anxious about it at all.

I haven't worked nine years for status to continue working every fourth First Day in the emergency room, Ausha communicated as they slipped into their car.

Ton too felt uncomfortable with the prospect of working on First Day. He felt a need to have all of his Sabbaths be ones of worship. *I don't want to do First Day emergency room duty anymore either.*

I just don't feel good about this at all. And it isn't just because of the First Day work. It's because of all the work they have—the way they do things.

You're afraid I'll start spending all my time at work again, aren't you?

Well, I don't think Dr. Blautel would restrict your hours the way Dr. Hovaus did. Yes, I am afraid that work will take over your life again. But it isn't just that. I don't want to have to work full-time if I don't want to.

Ausha had made it clear before their wedding that while they were raising their children, she planned to do no more than be his primary advisor and occasional surgical assistant. This was the first time, however, that she had suggested reducing her hours before the children came.

Ton couldn't resist a glance at Ausha, despite the fact that he was driving. *You don't want to work full-time?*

Ausha stared out her window. *I don't know. I do know that I want the option to work part-time.*

Why? What would you do?

Have a bigger garden, do work for the Coalition, take care of our home. Ausha leaned closer to him and slid her arm under his. *Our home isn't what I want it to be. It isn't what we need it to be. I want it to be a place we want to be, not just a place we sleep. I want it to be more like the home my mother made for our family. A home needs a mother.*

Ton was completely bewildered now. *But you aren't a mother yet.*

Yes I am. All women are mothers. Womanhood, motherhood—they're the same thing, or at least they should be. How can I explain it? Motherhood isn't just about having children, it's about the qualities of creating and loving and inspiring growth. To be all it can be, a home needs a mother.

Ton shrugged. *I think our home is just fine.*

Ausha caressed his hand. *That's only because you've never had a home.* She lightly kissed his cheek. *I want to give that to you. I guess I think you're worth it.*

Neither communicated anything for several minutes. Ton stopped the car in its parking place on the walk next to the clinic where they worked. Ton didn't need to be a genius to perceive what Ausha really wanted. Deia had delivered Michelle a mere three weeks before, a tiny, dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty that Ausha loved to hold when they went to Teren and Deia's to visit. *You want to have a baby, don't you?*

Ausha pulled away from him in surprise. *Well, yes, I do, very much . . . when you're ready.*

Ton couldn't look at her. *I can't yet.* Ausha couldn't mask her disappointment. *I'm sorry, Ausha.*

A minute passed. Neither Ton nor Ausha moved to get out of the car. Finally Ausha asked, *What are we going to do, Ton? We have a serious problem. If we don't take the positions at the Fleet clinic, where are we going to work?*

Ton shrugged and finally turned to look at Ausha. *I guess we could go to Palensea and work with Lren.*

Don't even joke about it!

I'm not joking, Ausha. Unless we want to work as primary physicians, we have four choices: the Fleet clinic here in Shalaun, the clinic on the General Network in Palensea, the General clinic in Arkashaun, or the Academy research clinic in Mautysia. Now what do you suggest?

Ausha shook her head, perplexed. *If only the Academy research clinic wasn't in Mautysia!*

But it is in Mautysia. Ausha, we have a choice between interesting work and inhumane hours, boring work and Lren, boring work and pacifists, or interesting work and pacifists.

Ausha laughed bitterly. *Doesn't seem like much of a choice!* She drummed her fingers on his knee. *The clinic in Mautysia has been working to expand for at least five years now. There are probably positions. And it's the Union's center of medical research. The work would be incredible.*

Could you live there?

I don't know. Ausha studied Ton's face. *You wouldn't have a problem with living there, would you.*

Only if you were unhappy. I don't agree with the pacifists' point of view, but I could live with them. I could certainly work with them.

Ausha hesitated. *I guess it wouldn't hurt to communicate with them. They may not offer us jobs anyway.*

They may not.

And the hours may be just as bad as the Fleet clinic.

They may be.

Ton and Ausha both knew, however, that there would be no emergency room duty at a research clinic. If the research clinic in Mautysia was anything at all like the research clinic Ausha's father directed, then they knew they would probably have their choice of hours and would only work a First Day when there was an emergency. Whereas the clinic Ausha's father directed concentrated on brain stem repair, the clinic in Mautysia

concentrated on total brain reconstruction. The Fleet clinic didn't come close to offering that kind of tantalizing work, and Ton and Ausha couldn't help but be intensely interested, despite their reservations about living in Mautysia.

Ton and Ausha immediately sent their applications to the clinic in Mautysia and waited for a reply. The director contacted them the next day, informed them that three members of his staff were ready to retire, that the clinic was working to expand, and that there were many positions available. He asked them to come to Mautysia for an interview as soon as they could manage it, and they scheduled the interview for Sixth Day afternoon that week.

After scheduling the interview, Ton went into Ausha's office to find her glassy-eyed and trembling. He pulled up a chair and took her hands in his. *Will you be all right?*

I don't know. I keep waiting to find out that there is no job in Mautysia, or that whatever jobs they have for us are unacceptable, but instead we find out that there are plenty of perfect jobs. I want to feel wrong about this, but I can't.

Neither can I.

How can we live there? They're racists! I won't be able to bear them, and they'll never accept us.

You don't know that.

Yes I do.

You've never lived there. You've never lived among any pacifists. You don't really know what they're like.

Even Miaundea told you not to go to Mautysia, that you would never be completely accepted.

Yes, she did. But you have to remember. Miaundea went to Mautysia expecting the best. She saw some stupid little things that disturbed her and became disillusioned. Not only that, but she has that whole problem with Bray and his family clouding her perspective. Look at the situation as it really is. Miaundea lived there for at least six months, and they were perfectly friendly to her.

As Ton communicated, he realized that he hadn't seen Miaundea since his wedding. Perhaps she was still living in Mautysia. Between work and not feeling up to socializing for so long, he hadn't been to the Quautars' for a while.

She even told me, Ton continued, *that she had made some good friends. If the Mautysians can be friendly and accepting of Miaundea, a Fleet officer's daughter and the fiancée of that terror Bray Nalaurev, then we shouldn't have much of a problem at all.*

You do have a point, Ausha admitted. *And I guess they haven't actually offered us jobs yet.*

Ton and Ausha traveled to Mautysia to their interview with an escort provided by Colonel Quautar. They didn't have to work that Seventh Day, so they decided they would make a little vacation out of the trip by staying overnight in Mautysia Sixth Day and spending the day there Seventh Day.

Ton and Ausha were not only offered positions, but were treated with the utmost courtesy and respect. The director of the clinic, his assistant, and their wives even took them to a luxurious restaurant downtown for dinner. Ton and Ausha went back to their hotel late that night feeling overwhelmed.

It appears they're anxious to have us, Ton communicated.

And they seem perfectly friendly. We didn't even get too many strange looks in the restaurant.

I don't suppose Shalaun is too far away.

No. You're right. We wouldn't have to spend all of our time in Mautysia.

We wouldn't have to stay here forever.

You really want this, don't you.

Yes I do, Ton admitted.

Ausha sighed. So do I . . . I think. Do you suppose we could look at homes before we decide for sure?

Whatever you want.

Ton and Ausha spent the next morning looking at houses in several neighborhoods near the hospital and clinic. They found a moderately sized three-bedroom house that had several fruit trees, a fenced yard with plenty of room for Anenka and a garden, and a huge bay window in the living room with a spectacular view of the Gulf of Verzaun. Built in to the home were lots of little nooks and ledges perfect for holding plants and two huge, exquisitely carved planters on either side of the bay window. Ausha couldn't help but fall in love with it. It was the perfect house—too perfect.

Everything is working out too well, Ausha communicated after she and Ton ordered lunch. I keep feeling as if this is where we're supposed to be.

Just not where you want to be.

I don't know about that anymore. I do know that I'm willing to give it a try.

* * *

Miaundea's parents weren't surprised that Braysel had quit the Fleet, but they were stunned that his parents had rejected him again. They thought the whole thing was very sad, and they believed Braysel had no choice but to legally withdraw from his family. They insisted that Miaundea live with them and that Braysel take residence in her apartment until the wedding.

First Day afternoon, four days after Braysel had returned to Novaun, Ton and Ausha joined the Quautars for their traditional lunch after Devotional. Danal was there too, as usual, with Sharauna. Miaundea hadn't seen Ton since his wedding, and she often wondered how he was coping with everything. When she saw him, he looked so happy and relaxed that she would never have believed he knew about the spy King had put on Novaun to terrorize him.

Ton seemed surprised to see Braysel. *When did you get back?*

A few days ago.

How long do you have?

I don't know. It depends on a lot of things. Braysel smiled knowingly at Ausha. *It appears your status has changed considerably since we last met.*

It most certainly has, Ausha communicated with a smile, her sidelong gaze at Ton mischievous.

Ton squeezed Ausha's waist and kissed her forehead. Thankfully Miaundea didn't feel angry or even jealous, just uncomfortable.

Braysel motioned Ton into the chair next to his. *This is so strange. I never thought I would ever see this.*

Ton chuckled as he sat down and drew Ausha into his lap. *What? That I would get married? Or that a Novaunian woman would have me?*

Both.

Well, it's quite a coincidence you're here today, because I've got some news you're really not going to believe.

Ausha moaned good-naturedly and leaned her chin against Ton's forehead. *We can't tell them. This is too much.*

Miaundea stiffened. *Are you expecting?* She couldn't picture Ton and Ausha with a baby.

Ton Luciani a father? Kevan communicated. *That really is a stretch.* Danal and Miaundea's brothers-in-law laughed, and even Ton was amused.

Ausha didn't appear amused. *It isn't that,* she assured with a shake of her head.

Miaundea's father walked into the living room. *You took the positions in Mautysia, didn't you?*

Miaundea was shocked. *You're going to work in Mautysia?*

Ton and Ausha nodded. *We even put down a deposit on a home,* Ausha communicated. *Can you believe it?*

Braysel laughed. *Good for you!*

Miaundea still couldn't believe it. *Why in the universe would you want to live in Mautysia?*

Real simple, Ton replied. *That's where the work is.*

Danal was even more shocked than Miaundea. *What was wrong with the Fleet clinic?*

Ausha turned toward Danal. *Too much pressure. A weekend every month in the emergency room.*

That is rough, Danal agreed. *But Mautysia?*

Ton shrugged. *It was either that or Palensea to work with Lren.*

I guess you would choose pacifists over Lren, Danal communicated with a nod.

Who's Lren? Miaundea asked.

Ausha's former partner, Danal answered. *Neither he nor Ausha can tolerate each other. Ausha, you can't be happy about this.*

I wasn't at first, but I think it'll be all right. The clinic is extraordinary, and the work will be incredible. Everyone we met there was wonderful. The director and assistant director even took us to dinner with their wives. They weren't at all what I expected. And our future home sits up on the mountain a little and has a beautiful view of the Gulf. It's just gorgeous. I'm actually kind of excited.

Braysel's eyes glowed with ecstasy. *This is wonderful! I can't wait to see how this works out.*

Miaundea slapped Braysel's arm. *You can't be serious! You can't really want them to go there!*

Braysel grabbed Miaundea's hand and kissed it to prevent her from slapping him again. He winked at her in an impish way. *Isn't that what we closed-minded Verzaunians need? To be more exposed to people of other races and nationalities?*

Miaundea couldn't help but smile. *I'm just concerned about Ton and Ausha.*

The Mautysian doctors hired them didn't they? And even after that nasty little jaunt Ton took with me to Mautysia last year!

Ton laughed in Braysel's direction. *I'm not sure the Mautysians even realized I was there. You're the one they can't tolerate!*

Dauna and Saulystia summoned everyone over to the buffet, and after Jaun gave the prayer, they all began to fill their plates. Miaundea pulled Ausha to the side and communicated uneasily, *I'm glad you're here today. I've been thinking about things for a long time.* She looked at Ausha tentatively. *I'd like to rejoin the Coalition.*

Ausha appeared surprised. *Are you even going to be here?*

Actually, I'm not sure yet. It looks as though I may end up with you in Mautysia.

Bray quit the Fleet, didn't he?

Miaundea nodded and told Ausha a little about Braysel's situation.

So you must not think the Council will give Bray the separation he wants.

We can't even speculate. A separation like this has never been done before. I don't know why, but I keep getting this feeling that, one way or another, we're going to end up in Mautysia.

Ausha surprised Miaundea with an embrace. *I hope everything works out. Welcome back. We have a lot of work to do. It won't be easy to recruit new members from Verzaun.*

* * *

Two days before Braysel's court date, as he was turning off the water in the shower in Miaundea's apartment, he felt familiar thoughts touch his mind from the front door, *You've got a lot of nerve, taking residence with your fiancée before the wedding. Do your parents know?*

Braysel couldn't believe it. The thoughts belonged to Maurek! *I've murdered a few Earthons; so what if I've conquered a few women. It's what they expect.* Braysel stepped out of the shower without turning on the dryer. He slipped into his underwear so fast that he nearly tripped and smashed his face on the vanity. He hurried to the door, leaving puddles wherever he stepped.

Braysel opened the door, and Maurek smiled when he saw him. *If Miaundea saw all that water on the floor, she'd murder you.*

I'm sorry about everything, Maurek. Thank you for coming.

Maurek shrugged and walked into the room. *I kept expecting to find out you and Miaundea had called it off. It was, after all so . . . sudden. Then I could feel triumphant that you had been wrong. When I got your commudisc telling me you had quit the Fleet, I knew you and Miaundea wouldn't be calling it off.*

Braysel stared at the floor to avoid looking at Maurek. *This is a nasty situation, and it hasn't been easy for her. Sometimes I wonder why she doesn't call it off. I'm glad she hasn't though. I don't know what I would do without her.*

Did you really have to quit?

Braysel nodded and told Maurek about the dream. *I just wish quitting the Fleet had done some good. Maybe it still will, I don't know.* Braysel smacked Maurek's arm, smiling. *I haven't beaten you in the Run for a long time.*

Maurek grunted good-naturedly. *You aren't capable of beating me fairly.*

You up to establishing proof?

Don't you have plans with Miaundea?

She has to work.

Maurek's mouth curved into a brutal smile. *Prepare to die, Nalarev.*

Chapter 19: AN IMPOSSIBLE VERDICT

Braysel sat in a lobby with Miaundea, Maurek, and Wilyl at the courthouse on the day he was scheduled to appear before Novaun's Civil Council of Judges, dreading the arrival of his grandfather. Braysel was angry that his family had forced him to such extreme action, yet he felt ashamed, as if he were the most vicious of traitors. He did not want to see his grandfather.

Braysel stood up when Mauya, Kara, and Shaun arrived and went to the door to meet them. Shaun, as urbane as ever with his mustache and pale blond hair combed back from his forehead in the popular Verzaunian style, wore an immaculately tailored black suit with an exotic touch—a cummerbund ornately embellished with diamonds. Mauya wore her hair in a braided chignon, and Kara wore hers in a tight French braid. Both women appeared dignified and severe, so unlike themselves, that Braysel laughed.

You three are quite a sight. Braysel shook his head at Mauya and Kara. *You two look as if you're on your way to a funeral, and you . . .* He rolled his eyes at Shaun. *You look as if you're ready for a night in the city—almost.*

Shaun smiled. *You don't like the diamonds?*

I've never seen a black cummerbund with diamonds.

Crystal felt adventurous, Kara explained.

Shaun chuckled. *Crystal is an adventure.*

Miaundea, Maurek, and Wilyl stood when Braysel approached with his relatives. Miaundea laughed when she saw Shaun and communicated to Braysel, *We have to get one of those cummerbunds for Ton!*

Braysel nodded and made introductions. Maurek touched fingers to Mauya, then to Shaun, communicating with warmth and sincerity, *Bray and I have been friends for years. It's good to finally meet some of his family. I just . . .* As Maurek and Kara touched fingers, their eyes lingered for a moment on each other, then averted in sudden shyness. Maurek continued, his thoughts confused, *I . . . just wish it . . . could've been under . . . happier circumstances.*

Kara blushed and quickly pulled her hands away from Maurek's, looking to the floor. Braysel thought he should be delighted that Maurek and Kara found each other attractive, but nausea knotted his stomach instead.

I'm glad to meet you too, I think, Mauya communicated to Maurek and Wilyl, uncomfortable with being so close to two Fleet officers in uniform.

Shaun smiled. *Well, it isn't every day we get to join forces with men in the Fleet. This is definitely going to be interesting.*

Everyone laughed, even Wilyl, who was feeling awkward at being introduced to members of Braysel's pacifist family. Once the laughter died, Mauya pulled Braysel away from the group and communicated, *Mother and Father are coming too. I thought you'd better know.*

I can't face them. I wish I didn't have to do this.

Mauya squeezed Braysel's arm and kissed his cheek. *You shouldn't have to. But you do. So do it well, all right?* Braysel nodded quickly and walked back to the group.

A few minutes later Braysel's grandfather arrived with his mother and father. Braysel tried to keep from looking at them, but couldn't. His mother was dressed in unadorned pale

gray, her long gold hair coiled at the nape of her neck in a tight chignon. Her face was chalky, sickly. She stared at the floor to avoid looking at Braysel.

Braysel's father, who, like Mauya, Shaun, and Kara, was dressed in black mourning clothes, didn't look at him at all, but glared at Mauya. Braysel glanced at Mauya and saw that she was gazing indignantly at their father, wearing a "you drove me to it" expression. Braysel felt worse than ever. The last thing he wanted was for angry feelings to exist between Mauya and their parents.

Braysel's grandfather ignored the group completely, his manner so aloof it seemed affected. His angular face appeared more gaunt than normal, his thin body frail, his deep-set hazel eyes lacking their usual ironic glint. Braysel had never seen him look so old. His grandfather and parents seated themselves in another part of the lobby.

At the ninth hour, the court ushers opened the doors to the courtroom, and Braysel and all of the others entered. One usher directed Braysel and his party to the seats at one side of the room, and the other usher directed his grandfather and his parents to the seats on the other.

The court staff was already there, the members of the mind analyzing team at their long desk to the right of the room and the librarian to the left. Once Braysel and the others had been directed to their seats, one of the ushers communicated in a telepathic sweep of the room, *All arise*.

Braysel and the others remained standing, and all of the court staff arose. The thirteen members of Novaun's Civil Council of Judges entered the room from a door behind the court librarian and took their positions, all wearing shimmering, gold-trimmed white robes with arelada brooches at their throats.

Braysel had this sinking feeling that a Council of old people would side with his grandfather, and he was relieved to see that three of the judges appeared to be under the age of one hundred. He kept telling himself that these men and women had been elected to represent all Novaunian citizens, young and old. What did he have to worry about? He tried not to be nervous, and he didn't dare look at his parents.

The presiding judge, a small, white-haired man who looked the age of Braysel's grandparents, sat down in his box and communicated, *I declare this court in session. You may now be seated. The Civil Council of Judges has convened to decide whether Braysel Nalaurev may withdraw from the Jeldaun Nalaurev Family Organization of Verzaun and form a new family organization in his name. Judge Haurenqual, will you please offer the prayer.*

After Judge Haurenqual gave the prayer, the presiding judge continued, *Minon Braysel Nalaurev, please present your reasons for wanting to legally withdraw from the Jeldaun Nalaurev family organization.*

Braysel stood and stepped down to the podium that stood in front of the panel of judges. As he stepped into the box, the floor glowed around his feet as the telepathic transmissions analyzer was activated.

Braysel detailed his family situation. He ended his presentation by communicating, *They want more than I can possibly give. I want control over my life, and I want to be able to teach my children whatever ideology I please without strong influence from members of my family. They think I'm a murderer and an apostate, and I don't know how they could see my children and not convey that belief to them. It would put confusion in their lives*

that I won't stand for. I'm an honorable citizen, and I've given four and a half years of my life to Novaun in Fleet service. I won't be chased out of the Union like a criminal.

Do you have any witnesses, Minon Nalaurev?

Yes. My first witness is Lieutenant Maurek Avenaunta.

Braysel sat down, and Maurek took his place at the podium. *Braysel and I have been close friends for four and a half years, and he's told me a lot about his problem with his family. I think the one thing that most people who know Bray don't understand is how difficult it was for him in a lot of ways to join the Fleet. I lived with him for two years, and I know how he agonized for his family. I also know how much he loves the Fleet and believes in its mission.*

Maurek went on to explain the depth of Braysel's ideology and his commitment to the principles he believed in and gave excerpts of discussions they had had in telepathy vision. *Bray's parents have told him that they will not allow him contact with the family if he doesn't repent joining the Fleet. Bray will never be capable of doing that because he believes deeply that what the Fleet is doing is good and right. To not be allowed contact with his family for something he cannot change and at the same time be forced to be legally bound to that family for the rest of his life would be degrading and unendurable.*

Maurek reseated himself, and Braysel stood back up. *My next witness is Captain Wyllyl Faumtren.*

Wyllyl tentatively went to the podium. *I met Bray ten months ago when we were assigned as roommates. I not only lived with him, but I also worked very closely with him during that time. Bray never communicated much about his family to me, but on the Day of Ancestors, he gave a tribute to his grandfather, Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev. Wyllyl then reiterated in telepathy vision the presentation Braysel had given about his grandfather on the Day of Ancestors.*

Braysel wanted to glance at his grandfather to see his reaction, but couldn't make himself do it. He wanted to see that Wyllyl's comments were somehow softening his grandfather; he didn't think could bear to see the frozen dignity that was undoubtedly there instead.

I'll have to admit, I'd never had any respect for Dr. Nalaurev and the way he always attacks the Fleet, but after Bray's presentation that day, I felt I might have been wrong about some of my opinions. I remember feeling that Bray really respects his grandfather, and I wondered why he had joined the Fleet to begin with. I really didn't wonder for long though, because I knew that Bray was perfect for the Fleet. He's superb at what he does, and he loves it. We worked together on a project that was, quite literally, the opportunity of a lifetime. When the project was over, we were all promoted and given new assignments having to do with the project we had participated in. All I know is that Bray must really love his family and believe that quitting the Fleet was right, because otherwise, he wouldn't have quit and passed up the promotion and the promise of more very tantalizing work.

Wyllyl sat down in relief, and Braysel stood back up at the podium. *My next witness is my sister, Mauya Dylestum. Mauya didn't look at their parents as she approached the podium, and neither did Braysel, but he could almost feel their glares.*

This is very difficult for me, because I feel such a conflict of interest. I've felt for years that Bray was wrong to join the Fleet, not so much because I feel the Fleet is bad, because I'm not sure it is, but because I thought it was an extremely disrespectful thing to do. I

didn't think anything could be worth hurting Mother and Father that way. I agree with my parents that the Fleet has changed Bray, that he has experiences he will never forget and that he has also made some strong ties with people he's worked with in the Fleet or people he's met because of his Fleet associations. After all, he does plan to marry a woman who has strong ties to the Fleet.

What I don't think my parents understand is that Bray has changed in other ways too, and I don't think they believe it or understand it because they haven't been in contact with him the way I've been. He still believes in the Fleet, but he's also gained a real respect for our heritage, respect he never had before. I feel that if he had to join the Fleet to gain that respect—and I think he did—then it was a good thing. I don't think Mother and Father realize how different things would be with Bray if they let him come home, how much better they would be than they were before he joined the Fleet.

The Fleet has always meant a lot to Bray, and for him to quit and make such an effort to compromise shows that he really does want to come home and make things work, and I think it's awful that my parents, instead of welcoming him home and commending him for the great efforts he's made to compromise, rejected him again and told him he must repent. That is too harsh. I want Bray to come home, and I know he wants to come home, but even if he did, he wouldn't be accepted. Everyone would harass him about the fact that he had been in the Fleet, and they would continue to tell him that he's a murderer and needs to repent.

How could anyone live with that? If they won't have contact with him, then it isn't right that he should be legally bound to them. After all, what will happen when Grandfather marries one of Bray's children? What will happen when it's time to form the telepathic chain? Will Grandfather refuse to allow Bray to participate in the chain when it involves one of Bray's own children? To do so would be mortifying. If Grandfather did allow it, it would be hypocritical. The way I see it, Bray has no choice but to become independent. She stepped down.

Shaun and Kara then took their turns at the podium. Kara communicated, Bray and I are the same age, and we always had a mutual interest in telepathy science. We were very close growing up and worked together at his grandfather's research institute during our youth. I always tried to persuade Bray not to join the Fleet, but he was determined, no matter what the cost. I know that quitting the Fleet had to have been difficult for Bray. I understand why his family disowned him for joining the Fleet, and it does make sense, although I never really thought it was right. He isn't part of the Fleet anymore, and they have no legitimate reason for throwing him out of the family forever like a piece of garbage. If he isn't allowed to be a physical member of the family, then he shouldn't have to be a legal member either.

Shaun communicated, I too was very close to Bray growing up. Unlike Kara and Mauya, however, I believe deeply in the ideals of our heritage. I think the Fleet is wrong, and I think Bray was wrong to be a part of it. I do know, however, how important joining the Fleet was to Bray and how deeply he believes that its mission is a righteous one. I don't agree with Braysel's ideology, but I do respect his right to hold it, and I don't believe he is, or ever was, a murderer, even if he has killed men in battle, contrary to the belief of many members of my family and Bray's. The official doctrine of the Order is, after all, that killing in defense of our planet and our Union does not make one a murderer. Bray quit the Fleet out of respect for his family, but instead of being shown

respect for the tremendous compromise he made, he's slapped in the face. His family's unwillingness to compromise puts him in an unbearable situation, both legally and emotionally.

Braysel went to the podium again. *I have no more witnesses.*

The presiding judge looked at Braysel's grandfather. *Minon Jeldaun Nalaurev, please come to the podium and present your side of the case, along with what you believe Braysel's legal status should be.*

Braysel's grandfather did not even glance at Braysel as he went to the podium and told the panel all about the conflict that had arisen in the family as a result of Braysel's ideology and desire to join the Fleet. *This is not simply an issue of ideology; this is an issue of morality. Human life is at stake. The existence of the Fleet is an abomination. What Braysel did was wrong, and the family simply cannot in any way condone it. To allow him back into the family, as if the last four and a half years never happened, would be condoning what he did. We had hoped he would repent joining the Fleet and come home, but obviously this is not going to happen.*

Braysel's future children are innocent in this matter, and we intend them to have full family status; this is their right. We want Braysel to remain a legal member of the family for the sake of his children. As far as the marriage contract is concerned, the Nalaurev organization will not accept the endowment that is customarily given by the bride's organization. In turn, we will request that the bride's organization guarantee Braysel and his wife support. We will allow Braysel to earn his living any way he wishes. Since he never wanted to quit the Fleet in the first place, I assume he will rejoin and earn his living that way. We will guarantee support of Braysel's children and descendants.

Before Braysel's grandfather stepped down, the presiding judge asked, *Do you have any witnesses?*

Yes. One. My grandson Trynenuin Nalaurev, Braysel's father.

Braysel leaned on his knees and covered his face with his hands as his grandfather sat down and his father went to the podium. His father explained the situation as he perceived it, and Braysel could feel that he was offended and deeply hurt. His father ended his presentation by communicating, *Aulanora and I work very hard to teach our children values and to provide them a home with love and without conflict. We certainly have our little conflicts, as I assume every family does, but Braysel's attitude over the years has brought conflict into our home more severe than we can tolerate. He is the second of eight children, and he has the potential to be a tremendous influence. He has already, quite obviously, been an influence on his sister Mauya. We have five children still living at home and plan to have more. Unless Braysel repents or sincerely wants to repent, we cannot allow him the opportunity to influence his younger brothers and sister.*

The presiding judge communicated, *Braysel, do you have anything else you wish to add?*

Braysel shook his head, feeling ill. The whole situation was so utterly wrong. *No. Then this court is adjourned for two hours.*

* * *

Once everyone had returned to the courtroom after the break, the presiding judge gave the Council's decision. *Quite frankly, this is one of the most ridiculous cases that has ever come before this Council.*

Braysel felt as if he would suffocate. The most ridiculous case that had ever come before the Civil Council? This dilemma that had caused him a lifetime of turmoil was a ridiculous case? How could that be? What did the judge mean?

Not one of us has ever witnessed such brazen disrespect and such blatant fanaticism. If this session has not been a complete waste of time, then it will only be because the decision will prevent other situations such as this from occurring.

The family organization is the foundation of Novaunian society. It is every individual's protection, guaranteeing financial and service support. It is the community's protection, guaranteeing orderly conduct from citizens without a lot of disinterested, costly interference from the government. Every family owes its members support, and every family member owes his or her family respect. No Novaunian family can disown one of its citizen members, and no Novaunian citizen can withdraw from his family.

Minon Braysel Nalaurev, your request to form an independent family organization is denied. You are guaranteed full status in the Jeldaun Nalaurev organization under the following terms: You will not rejoin the Fleet, and you, your wife, your children, and your first generation grandchildren will not work in any defense-related occupations or participate in any political activities that support or promote the Fleet. You will not in any way publicly or privately defame your parents, your grandparents, or any family members who share their pacifist values. You will allow your children association with their grandparents. If you try to rejoin the Fleet, your application will be denied and you will be imprisoned for no less than two years. Any other violation of these terms will result in the offender's receiving a one-year suspension of voting rights and giving no less than sixty hours of community service per violation.

Braysel's horror grew with every pronouncement. How could he live with those terms? How could the Council do this to him?

Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev, your family organization must honor Braysel's status under the following terms: Neither you nor any member of the Nalaurev organization may publicly or privately defame Braysel in any way. You will provide Braysel, his wife, and his descendants reasonable financial support. The official policy of the Order is that participation in the Fleet does not make one unworthy to be a member of the Order or to receive ordinances. You will provide Braysel, his wife, and his descendants all of the necessary ordinances, determining worthiness without considering Braysel's former involvement in the Fleet. You will allow Braysel and his wife to attend family functions. Any violation in these terms will result in a fine to the family of no less than ten thousand gold coins per violation.

The expression on the presiding judge's face softened, and he looked at Braysel, then at his parents and grandfather. *He wants to come home . . . you want him to come home. Work it out. Court dismissed.*

All arise.

The Council's decision astounded everyone. Braysel was stuck with his family, and they were stuck with him, and neither he nor they were happy about it. Braysel knew that technically he had gained a great deal and that his family had lost a great deal, but he still felt like the loser. They were being forced to show in all outward appearances that they

accepted him, but Braysel knew that inwardly they never would. There were too many differences, too many wounds. He didn't think he could ever be a real part of that family again. How could he bring Miaundea into such an awful situation?

After the members of the Council left the room, Miaundea stroked Braysel's shoulder and lovingly kissed his cheek. *It'll be all right, Bray. We'll manage.*

Braysel turned his head and gazed at her gratefully. *You're such an angel.*

Miaundea smiled. *So are you.*

Braysel arose, drawing Miaundea up with him. *Angel-rebel, you mean.*

Miaundea shrugged a little. *Still an angel.*

Braysel kissed her lightly on the lips, then turned his head to see Maurek standing near him. *I'm sorry, Bray.*

Wilyl approached, stopping near Maurek. *So am I. I really wish things could be different for you.*

I know, Braysel replied. *Thanks for coming, Wilyl.*

Well, I'd better be off. Wilyl affectionately slapped Braysel's arm. *See you around, Captain Nalaurev.*

See you around, Captain Faumtren.

Shaun, Mauya, and Kara watched Braysel with sad, confused faces. They knew better than anyone how difficult it would be for Braysel to ever acquire true family status.

Braysel turned and met his grandfather face to face. His grandfather communicated icily, *The president of your bride's family organization may contact me when it's time to negotiate the contract. Don't even consider asking me to perform the ceremony.* The ice melted a little, and Braysel could feel his grandfather's grief. *It's something I simply cannot do.*

With that, his grandfather turned and walked toward the door. Braysel locked gazes for a moment with his father, then his mother, as they walked past him toward the door. Both were outraged and bitterly hurt, and Braysel wished more than ever that he could make himself be a pacifist.

Shaun rested his hand on Braysel's arm. *Are you going to appeal it, Bray?*

Braysel shook his head. *I have no doubt the Union Civil Council would come to a similar decision. Grandfather must not be planning to appeal it either, because he's ready to negotiate a wedding contract with Miaundea's uncle. No, I'm done with this, at least for now.*

What are you going to do? Kara asked.

I don't know. Braysel began walking toward the lobby, and the others walked with him.

Mauya slid her arm through Braysel's. *Perhaps this isn't as bad as it seems. Mother and Father love you. That's never changed. And they want sincerely to do the right thing. If you're always around, being kind and interested and behaving yourself, I can't help but think that they'll accept you in time.*

How much time? And just what am I going to do in the meantime? How could I bear being with them all the time and being ignored?

Mauya shook her head. *I don't know. But if anyone can bear it, you can.*

* * *

That evening after Maurek, Mauya, and Kara had gone home after an afternoon of surfing, Braysel and Miaundea walked along the beach and communicated.

Braysel put his arm around Miaundea and pulled her close. *What am I going to do? My whole life has been the Fleet. I don't know how to do anything else.*

Miaundea slid her hand across his back, letting it rest on his waist. *What were you planning to do when you quit?*

I thought I would work for my grandfather at the Institute. Obviously that's impossible now.

Perhaps not. If you're qualified for the work there, he might hire you despite everything that's happened.

He wouldn't. It doesn't matter anyway, because I'm not going to ask him.

Maybe you can go school and learn how to do something else.

Braysel kicked a clump of wet sand. *In what field? In both engineering and telepathy science I've already done the most fascinating work that could ever be done.*

Braysel told Miaundea all about his mission testing the spirit dimension formula in flight and how he had designed a spirit energy generator. The information was classified, but she would know soon enough, and Braysel needed to communicate with her about it.

Miaundea turned slightly and waved to someone she knew. *Your grandfather would die if he ever found out what you had done with his artificial brain device.*

That might actually be sufficient grounds for murder.

It doesn't bother you at all?

Not one bit. Braysel released Miaundea and knelt down to pick up some shells. *When the spirit energy generator is declassified, my grandfather will be more than happy to make his own modifications to it and use it to design new medical equipment.*

Was it even legal to take his design?

Braysel hurled a shell into the waves. *Of course it was legal. It's in the best interest of medical patients that medical information and technology is publicly owned. My grandfather's spirit energy storing device isn't patented—the Fleet has as much right to it as anyone else.* Braysel threw another shell and another. *I've done so many things in the Fleet, but it's all classified. I could do so much with that spirit energy generator design if I owned it instead of the Fleet—it would revolutionize telepathic engineering at all levels.*

But you never would own it, Bray. If you had designed the spirit energy generator for your grandfather or for any civilian company, the government would have seized it for Union security reasons.

You're probably right. I doubt that either the spirit dimension formula or the spirit energy generator will be declassified for at least a decade, probably two. In the meantime, I can't do any defense related work at all. As far as civilian companies are concerned, I don't have either the experience or the education I need to even design a stupid aircar! Even if I could design aircars, I can't imagine a more dull way to spend my life.

You could fly shuttles.

Braysel sighed. *I could, but I think I need to be in Mautysia with my family. To try and make it work.* He turned to Miaundea again. Her hair and dress flowed around her in the breeze. She looked beautiful against the sunset.

I was afraid you'd decide to do that.

Braysel couldn't tell whether she was on the verge of laughing or weeping. *You don't want to live in Mautysia at all, do you.*

Do you?

No, I guess you're right, not really. Not under the present circumstances.

Neither one of us do. But we will, because it's the only thing we can do. I guess I feel the same way about it that Mauya does.

In what way?

That your parents love you, and that if you make yourself a regular presence in their life, they can't help but accept you in time.

It's kind of strange the way things worked out. I could have remained in the Fleet. I would have applied for a new family organization, but the decision of the Council would have been the same. I would have been forced to quit. I guess I'm kind of glad I did it on my own. Braysel took Miaundea into his arms again. What do you want to do about the wedding?

Do it as soon as we can. I already have a dress, and my mother and I have already discussed it. I thought we could get married in the early evening and invite just our immediate families and a few close friends. After the wedding, we'll go to a restaurant with everyone for dinner and dancing. My father hates the idea because he hates to dance, but he'll just have to live with it.

Braysel was surprised and relieved that Miaundea wasn't planning a larger celebration. I really like that idea, Miaundea. I think it will work out just fine.

Yes it will, and so will everything else. You're being too hard on yourself occupation-wise. You're brilliant, and I can't believe it would take you long to get status as a telepathic systems engineer. Your experience has to count for something, and that does seem to be your particular talent. Miaundea pressed close, stretching and touching her lips to his.

Braysel returned her kiss yearningly. I hope you're right.

Chapter 20: PENALTY AND PRIZE

Braysel took Miaundea's advice and decided to work toward status as a telepathic systems engineer. He communicated with a counselor at the Mautysia Academy of Science and learned that an advanced degree in telepathic systems engineering required three years of specialized schooling. Since Braysel already possessed considerable experience and knowledge, the counselor believed he could finish in only two years. Braysel registered for the next term, and since the family organization normally paid for schooling, he communicated briefly with his grandfather to let him know that the Academy would soon be contacting him about payment. For better or for worse, Braysel was going to get what he deserved and make his presence felt in the family.

Braysel easily found a job as a telepathic systems technician, installing and servicing telepathic transmission recorders five afternoons a week. He had the experience and training to receive status as a telepathic systems technician had he wished to work in that specialty indefinitely, but the thought of servicing telepathic transmission recorders for the rest of his life repulsed him. Since he was still officially a student, he was forced to work for the wages the company set, which, to Braysel's dismay, were humiliatingly low.

Braysel and Miaundea found a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Mautysia that was part of a larger house and figured Braysel's job would provide just enough money to pay rent and apartment expenses, buy food, and pay for the basic living expenses such as local taxi service and InterMind. Braysel and Miaundea pooled their savings and decided to use some of it for a wedding suit for Braysel and a short vacation to Amaria after their wedding, then save the rest of it to use during the next two years for clothing, unusual expenses, and an occasional night out.

Miaundea was grateful everything was working out so well; Braysel found the entire situation degrading. Had he gained the approval of his family or remained a Fleet officer, he could have continued doing work that interested him and provided Miaundea with a comfortable lifestyle. That he couldn't do either both angered and depressed him.

You are so spoiled, Miaundea chided good-naturedly.

Being spoiled is better than being poor!

Stop your whining or go ask your grandfather for a job!

That order always shut Braysel up, but it never eased his humiliation.

Miaundea quit her job at the Novaunian Intelligence Agency without experiencing any feeling of regret. She had realized when she and Braysel had become betrothed that her days at the Agency were numbered. Miaundea had not needed the Civil Council to force her to quit her job. She would have quit anyway out of respect to Braysel's family, provided Braysel remained a legal member of the Nalaurev organization. Had Braysel remained a part of the Fleet, she would have made her home on a planet somewhere closer to his assignment. Once she and Braysel were married and settled into their apartment in Mautysia, Miaundea planned to finish her dissertation on her combined Fleet/Pacifist ideology and then submit it to the Board of Novaunian Academies. She hoped that within six months she would be lecturing to groups all over Novaun.

Miaundea's uncle and Braysel's grandfather negotiated the marriage contract a week after Braysel had gone before the Civil Council, and Braysel and Miaundea planned to marry two days later, late Sixth Day afternoon in Auyval Beach. Braysel extended invitations to his parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and Shaun and Kara, but

Mauya told him that only she and Raunel, Shaun and his wife, and Kara were coming. That his parents wouldn't come to his wedding hurt Braysel deeply, and he hoped they would change their minds at the last minute.

Braysel didn't just want his parents to be at the wedding, he needed his father. He knew that sometime before the wedding, the bride and groom communicated with their parents about things they would need to know for their wedding night. Braysel understood the basics, but he still felt ignorant. He thought he should know what to do, but he didn't, and there was no one he felt comfortable asking. He had an awful feeling that he would ruin his wedding night the way he had ruined everything else. It wasn't right that his father wouldn't do this for him. It wasn't right that his grandfather wouldn't perform the ceremony. So much just wasn't right at all.

The morning of the wedding, as Braysel was packing his belongings in his duffel bag, he felt Mauya telepathically hail him from the front door. He went to open the door in surprise. *I didn't think you were coming until this afternoon. Where's everyone else?*

Mauya stared at Braysel in shock. *You shaved off your beard!*

Braysel shrugged. *I figured it would remind everyone of things I would rather not remind them of.*

Smart move. Mauya walked into Miaundea's almost bare apartment and seated herself gracefully on one of the remaining dining chairs.

You never did tell me where your husband and the others are.

They'll be here this afternoon.

Have Mother and Father changed their minds about coming?

Mauya shook her head. *I'm sorry, Bray.* She looked at him tentatively. *Actually, that's one of the reasons I'm here. There are things you need to know.*

Braysel sat down in the other chair that remained, feeling more embarrassed and humiliated than ever. He rested his elbows on his thighs and covered his face with his hands. He appreciated Mauya's concern, but she was his little sister, not his father.

Mauya's thoughts were full of grief. *I know it should be Father, and I told him so, but he refused to come.*

He probably assumes I'm already experienced, Braysel communicated bitterly.

No, it isn't that. I think it's that he feels so betrayed and as if there is no closeness between the two of you.

I suppose that's true.

So perhaps it's better that it is I. Mauya rested her hand on his shoulder. *I worry about you, Bray. Most things you and Miaundea will learn together, but there are some things you really do need to be told.*

Braysel sat up and gazed at her in relief. *I'm so glad you're here, Mauya.*

Braysel communicated with Mauya for a while, then ate a leisurely lunch with her downtown. Later that afternoon they went to meet Raunel, Shaun, Shaun's wife Crystal, and Kara at the airbus depot. Both were astounded to see their brother Haunal there with the others.

"Haunal!" Braysel threw his arms around his brother. *I can't believe you actually came!*

What made you change your mind? Mauya asked in equal amazement.

Haunal smiled and affectionately slapped Braysel's back. *It's your wedding. What could I do?*

Candesla must be irate, Mauya observed.

Haunal shrugged at Mauya, then looked at Braysel knowingly. *Just don't expect to be invited to my house any time too soon.*

Braysel telepathically hailed a taxi, and he and the others took it to Auyval Beach and the house of worship Miaundea had attended with her family all her life. Once everyone had arrived and introductions had been made, Miaundea's grandfather Jaunel Quautar, a tall man with jade green eyes and white hair who was well over one hundred and fifty, motioned Miaundea and Braysel into the holy room.

Miaundea and Braysel took their seats in the white velvet chairs in front of the pulpit, and Miaundea's grandfather told them how the ceremony would proceed. On one hand, Braysel marveled at how well things were going and was happy. Miaundea would be his wife, and many members of his family were there to support him. On the other hand, he couldn't stop yearning for his parents' support and thinking about what should have been. He assimilated everything Miaundea's grandfather communicated, slowly losing the ability to think clearly, the wound in his heart deepening.

Eventually Miaundea's grandfather invited everyone else into the holy room. He stood in front of Braysel and Miaundea and counseled them on ways they could make their marriage fulfilling. Feeling Braysel's extreme discomfort, he kept his counsel brief and didn't ask for the traditional counsel from other married people in attendance. Braysel felt worse and worse as the ceremony progressed, and he was relieved Miaundea's grandfather was sliding over the trivialities and just getting it over with.

Braysel watched Miaundea's face. She tried to appear happy, but she was in just as much pain as he was. She hurt for him, and although she had known all along what difficulties marrying him would bring, she was disappointed and a little angry that her wedding felt like a funeral.

Miaundea's grandfather stepped onto the gold mat next to the vessel of nuayem oil. Braysel and Miaundea took their places in front of him, and the three joined hands. Braysel held his breath, dreading what was next. Miaundea's grandfather touched his mind to his to start the telepathic chain. Braysel's throat burned so intensely it ached. He didn't want to let everyone there feel his agony. He reached tentatively out to Miaundea's father, staring at the gold mat, his vision blurring. He heard a little choke from Kara and his sister breathing loudly and erratically, as if she were trying to keep herself from weeping.

Miaundea's grandfather released Braysel's hand, and Braysel looked up. Miaundea's grandfather placed his fingers on their foreheads and continued with the ceremony. The telepathic chain didn't dissolve until the arelada triangles had been inserted into Braysel and Miaundea's temples.

Once it was finished, Miaundea's grandfather smirked. *Miaundea, give your husband a kiss.*

Miaundea smiled radiantly and threw her arms around Braysel's neck. Braysel clasped her, his mouth meeting hers with energy. Emotions of happiness and support poured over them from members of both families. Braysel was pleased, and more than anything, relieved.

Miaundea's grandfather didn't communicate anything else to the two; he just embraced them both vigorously. After everyone else had given Braysel and Miaundea their hugs and congratulations, they all loaded into taxis and went downtown to Rouseal's for dinner and dancing.

They toasted with nuayem punch, ate, and then those who wished, danced. Those who didn't want to dance watched Raunel and Mauya, who naturally put everyone else on the dance floor to shame. Braysel and Miaundea danced nearly every dance for three hours, both feeling much better about everything now that the ceremony was over and wanting to celebrate.

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Maurek watched the dancing for a while after dinner was over, dying to dance with Kara but afraid she would turn him down if he asked. He watched her when she wasn't looking, completely enthralled. With her long, crimped, golden blond hair, tall willowy shape, and intelligent blue eyes, she was the most beautiful woman Maurek had ever seen. Even Miaundea couldn't compare. And it wasn't only that Kara was beautiful. She was vigorous and at the same time very feminine, and he enjoyed communicating with her. Finally Maurek stood up and sat down in the chair next to hers. *Would you like to dance, Kara?*

Kara smiled at him in surprise and nodded quickly. Maurek led her to the floor and took her into dancing position, thrilled to be touching her.

Kara seemed to relax. *Why does it bother you so much that I'm a pacifist?*

Maurek was taken aback. He wondered if bluntness was something that ran in Bray's family. Finally he gained enough of his reason to communicate, *Why do you ask that?*

I'm not sure. I just want to know.

She waited for his answer impatiently, her emotions tight with anxiety and excitement. He felt she was asking because she wanted his approval, not because she wanted to criticize him, so it wasn't difficult to answer: *Because I'm afraid you disapprove of me because I'm a Fleet officer.*

Kara smiled and shook her head. *I don't disapprove of you.* She regarded him tentatively. *My pacifist beliefs don't bother you?*

Maurek shrugged. *If you don't disapprove of me, then you must not be a very good pacifist.*

Kara laughed. *No, you're right. I've never been a very good pacifist.*

It doesn't make you uncomfortable at all that I'm a Fleet officer?

It does, Kara admitted. *But you're not at all the way I imagined a Fleet officer would be.*

Maurek was really interested now. *And just what did you expect a Fleet officer to be like?*

I'm not sure. Just not like you.

Or like Bray?

Bray is just Bray. He's in a class all by himself.

I'm surprised you didn't turn me down when I asked you to dance.

And I was sitting there wishing you would. I thought that after the other day and the great time we had surfing, it would be natural for us to dance, but I was suddenly afraid you didn't approve of me. Otherwise I would have asked you.

Maurek drew her closer in ecstasy, touching his cheek to hers. *I approve of you completely.*

Maurek and Kara continued communicating, becoming so lost in each other that they remained together dance after dance. Two hours had passed, and Maurek suddenly became afraid that Bray and Miaundea would leave, and then Kara would leave, and that would be the end of that. As a song was ending, Maurek released Kara slightly. *Let's go for a walk.*

Rouseal's was located on the roof of one of Shalaun's tallest office buildings and opened into a large garden that overlooked the city. Maurek led Kara by the hand into the garden and over to the rail. Since the night was foggy, there wasn't much of a view. He turned to face her, taking her other hand in his. *I want to see you again.*

Kara pressed the backs of his hands to her lips, pulling him a little closer. *I want to see you again too.*

Maurek moved his hands from her mouth to her cheeks, gazing at her as if he could keep her there with him forever with his eyes. If only he could be sure they would sometime in the future recapture the magic of this evening. Then he wouldn't have felt such sorrow knowing she would soon have to leave.

Kara held Maurek's gaze, her eyes reflecting the sorrow in his. She shook her head slightly. *I can't bear for it to end.*

Maurek wanted to kiss her so badly he could hardly breathe, but he had never kissed a woman before and didn't know if he dared. Perceiving his shyness, Kara leaned toward him just slightly, her fingers lovingly caressing his cheek. Her excitement invigorated him and gave him courage. He slowly lowered his face to hers and brushed her lips with his, barely, exulting in their soft responsiveness. They kissed again and again, clasping each other closer.

Finally, after many minutes had passed, Maurek released Kara barely and looked down at her, laughing a little. *Your parents are going to hate me.*

Kara smiled. *They won't hate you.*

They will.

They won't like what you do, but they'll like you.

I have leave in two weeks. I'll be back Fourth Day morning.

I'll take the day off and show you around Mautysia.

I'd like that.

Maurek and Kara lingered by the garden rail a little longer before strolling back into the restaurant, deciding together that it wouldn't be a good idea to tell anyone about their mutual interest until they had seen each other a few more times.

Several dances later, Braysel and Miaundea left, and the party began dispersing.

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Once Kara and her cousins left the restaurant, the reprimands started to fly.

Haunal hailed a taxi. *I can't believe you, Kara. You and that Fleet man? Are you crazy?*

We were only dancing. What's your problem?

Mauya's eyes flickered fiercely in the misty light. *Oh yes. You were only dancing. For a mere two hours. Close. And enjoying yourself immensely.*

Shaun shook his head. *Your parents will be outraged! And rightly so. Kara, you're completely out of your mind!*

Raunel waved his hand. *Leave her alone. She just danced with the man. It's not as though she's going to see him again.*

Are you? Mauya asked.

Are you going to see him again, Kara? Haunal echoed.

Kara shrugged. *Maybe I will; maybe I won't.*

Shaun gaped at her as if he had seen something hideous. *You are going to see him again. You've already made plans. When?*

Kara turned her back to them and met the taxi as it came to a stop on the walk. *It's none of your business. And besides, I don't know why you all are so upset. Maurek isn't a monster. He's nice, and he's Bray's good friend. Doesn't that count for something?*

Mauya quickly caught up with Kara. *He's a Fleet officer!*

And so was Bray.

Haunal followed Kara and Mauya into the taxi. *Mention Bray, and you're really going to score points with the family.*

Well, Maurek isn't anything like Bray. Nothing at all. He has a gentleness about him that Bray's never had, and he isn't nearly so reckless. And being in the Fleet isn't what he is, the way it's always been for Bray. It's just what he does. It isn't as if he's out killing people. He's an astronomer!

Crystal sat down across from Kara, shaking her head sadly. *Maurek is nice, and maybe he is only an astronomer, but face it, Kara. Your family is never going to go for it. They're all crazy. They don't recognize reason.*

Kara laughed. Shaun's eyebrows shot up at Crystal in disbelief.

Don't look at me like that, darling, Crystal communicated sweetly. *They are crazy. I love them to death, but they're still insane!*

Shaun groaned and shook his head. Raunel agreed that the Jualaz clan really was crazy, and Mauya and Haunal decided that none of them would tell anyone in either family about Kara's romance with Maurek, that it would be over before anyone found out on their own, because by the time Kara saw Maurek again, she would have naturally come to her senses.

* * *

In a luxurious hotel room not far from Rouseal's, very late the night of her wedding, Miaundea lay in bed, half asleep, half awake, feeling strangely alone. She couldn't feel Bray's arms cradling her close or his spirit warming hers or the erratic throbbing of their dual heartbeat, and she wondered if she had dreamed of falling asleep in his arms. Uncomplicated but not easy, intense but not wild, expressive but not romantic—nothing had been as she had imagined it would be, and yet she was fulfilled instead of disappointed. How could she have dreamed such impassioned, perfect intimacy?

Miaundea awoke a little more, knowing without a doubt that her night with Bray had not been a dream. She reached across the bed to find him and realized she really was alone. The spot on the bed where he had lain was still warm.

She sat up, shoving her hair over her ear. Her first thought was that he was in the bathroom, but she could perceive no movement there. She looked around the room in puzzlement, her eyes finally resting on a peculiar glow through the balcony drapes.

Suddenly she felt Bray's spirit swell around hers and move her out of the bed. She gasped in astonishment and delight, the dark room becoming velvety, then immediately returning to normal. He had moved her with the spirit dimension formula! She slipped into her robe and walked to the French doors, wondering if she had awakened by accident or as a result of Bray's spiritual prodding.

Miaundea opened one of the doors and stepped onto the balcony, immediately seeing the source of the light, a white candle sitting on the table in a gold holder, surrounded by bowls containing food—crunchy bread sticks, water chestnuts, and shellfish.

Bray sat near the table in a marble chaise longue, looking luxurious in his gold silk robe. He smiled. *Come join me for supper in the fog. I'm sorry I couldn't get you another starlit night.*

Miaundea grinned, excited about this romantic ceremony commemorating the night they had fallen in love. She sat down on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck, their spirits burning through each other. *You, a pilot, can't give me a starlit night?*

The foggy sky and city lights faded, replaced by a black void shimmering with stars. Bray pulled away from Miaundea slightly and smiled. *Is that better?*

Much. She kissed him. *Take me for a ride, Captain Nalaurev.* In an instant, they were together in a simulated fighter, soaring through a vision of the galaxy.

Part 3: TRAITORS ON TRIAL

Chapter 21: FALSE SPIRIT

Seventh Day morning, nearly three weeks after Ton and Ausha had shocked their friends by telling them they had accepted positions in Mautysia and had purchased a home, they awoke to the sound of a low growl, then a yip, then a deafening wail. Startled, Ton and Ausha sat up. Anenka was writhing at the foot of the bed, howling in agony.

Ausha crawled to her frantically, stroked her, and expanded her spirit around her in comfort. Ausha recoiled from Anenka as if pushed away and cried out in horror, "Ton! Her mind is being raped! Help me fight it off!"

Ton overlapped his spirit with Ausha's, and they charged at the attacker, but as they did, the attacker withdrew at an astounding speed. They expanded their spirits to chase the attacker's in hope of finding his location, but they weren't strong enough to expand that far and finally had to withdraw.

When Ausha touched her spirit to Anenka's and felt no life, she sobbed. Ton stared at Anenka's dead body, aghast. Ton leaned over and stroked her, hugging her to him and burying his face in her golden fur, his body shaking in grief.

Ton and Ausha remained at the foot of the bed with Anenka for a very long time. Ausha's sobs gradually faded, and Ton finally sat up. *We need to bury her*, he communicated numbly.

Ausha nodded quickly. *But where?*

Maybe Deia will let us bury her with her roses.

How can we tell Deia what happened? Today's their anniversary!

We don't have to tell her how she died. Ton stroked Anenka's body lovingly, his eyes burning. *I want her to be with the roses.*

They carefully wrapped Anenka's body in a blanket, dressed, and took her to Teren and Deia's house. Teren had taken the day off and was the one to invite them in. Deia told Ton that he could bury Anenka anywhere on the property he wanted.

Ausha, being the only one of the three who possessed intimate knowledge of the soil, knelt on the ground in the bed of roses under the front window and ran her hands lovingly over the spot where Anenka would be buried, reaching into the soil with her spirit and, through its Awareness, telepathically loosening it. She then stood and easily removed the soil from the ground with a shovel, forming a hole. Ton laid Anenka's body in the hole, and Ausha filled it in, leaving the roses as Anenka's only monument.

Ton communicated with Colonel Quautar on his way to work with Ausha and told him what had happened. The colonel visited them in their apartment that evening.

There is some good in this terrible incident, the colonel communicated as Ton led him into the living room. *King's agent meant Anenka's death to be a warning. I believe he's going to try a mind rape.*

Ton sat down in his recliner. *And that's supposed to be good news?*

Yes, it is good news. You have the ring with the alarm button, and you have Ausha and other people around you who can immediately get help. Just don't try to fight it off by yourself.

Why in the galaxy would I try to do that?

The colonel's tone of thought was uneasy. *Just don't.*

Ausha ran the water in the kitchen, filling a large clay vase. *Have you found any information at all on who planted Adrian's ring at the Pavilion?*

It was just like the incident in Menaura. We found no evidence whatsoever.

None? Ton communicated in disbelief.

The colonel shook his head. *But we did learn something about the agent from what we didn't find. We questioned all of the employees at the Pavilion, and none of them saw anyone they didn't know come into the Pavilion that day or three days before it.*

Ausha set the vase on the dining room table with a thump. *Which means it's someone we know, someone who's with us all the time! Someone who was at both weddings!*

No, not necessarily, the colonel communicated. *It's a possibility, but I don't think it's likely. But it's either that or the agent is living and working in complete secrecy.*

You mean sneaking around at night and smuggling himself from Menaura to Tavon in a luggage compartment? Ton asked.

Basically, yes. The one thing we do know is that the agent is not moving about Shalaun in the open in disguise. He's someone we know and working in the open, or he's living and working in secrecy. The colonel leaned forward in his chair. *Has anyone you know asked you anything at all about Adrian's ring or the investigation?*

No. No one at all. You took care of that problem in Amaria.

If anyone does ask, I want to know.

Ton nodded.

Ausha placed flowers in the vase one at a time. *There's something I don't understand, minion. How can an agent live here in hiding for a year and not arouse suspicion? This person has to eat, after all, and shower, and go to the bathroom, and have a place to live. How can someone function in this society without a bank account? No one uses cash on any kind of regular basis, and landlords need references. Wouldn't a landlord get suspicious if a tenant paid his rent in cash every month? Wouldn't a cashier at the market wonder about a person who always buys his groceries in cash?*

Yes, you're right. For all practical purposes, it is impossible to hide for any period of time on this planet, especially in a time such as this when security is extremely tight. All I can tell you is that I'm as baffled about it as you are. My people have searched every closet and corner in this building, the ones surrounding it, and many other buildings in the city and have found no evidence of someone hiding. We have also questioned merchants about customers who pay in cash. We've staked out parks and public rest rooms, questioned landlords, and investigated everyone who comes in contact with Ton in any way and everyone those people come in contact with in an attempt to find this agent or other agents that may be aiding him. We haven't found anything. When we apprehended the man posing as Daniel Stewart, we found a small network of spies who had helped him establish himself. Even they didn't know anything.

This was the first Colonel Quautar had told Ton about spies who had helped Daniel Stewart. *Could one of those spies you recently captured be the one?*

No. All were in prison when you found Adrian's ring at the Pavilion.

Ausha removed a flower from the table and inserted it into the middle of the bouquet. *Perhaps there's another network of spies helping King's agent.*

That's an unlikely possibility, but the most logical. If there's any evidence to find, we'll find it. The colonel stood up. *There's just one other thing. I found out today that King is under arrest on Earth. We should have him week after next.*

Ausha turned abruptly away from her flowers. *He's been found?*
How? Ton asked.
I'll tell you how when it's all over.

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The citizens of Novaun knew that the alleged Jovem Doshyr was being returned to Novaun a week before the Earthons actually arrived, and they could communicate about nothing else. Some wondered how the extradition had been accomplished; others were worried that the Prosecuting Committee of the Criminal Council of Judges would not be able to prove that Sanel King really was Jovem Doshyr or that Jovem Doshyr had indeed killed his niece; still others were concerned that the Sanel King the Earthons were bringing to Novaun would be an imposter.

Day by day, more information trickled to the Novaunian public from many interstellar press organizations. Soon everyone knew that Sanel King had conspired with Saint Kravim and Admiral Laddan to telepathically assassinate Prince Jahnzel, the Divine Emperor's brother and former Director of Defense. Saint Kravim, Admiral Laddan, and their staff had been executed, and Admiral David Vahro-Pierce was now Earth's Director of Defense. How the Divine Emperor had learned about the assassination, however, was still a mystery, but many Novaunians believed that the Novaunian Intelligence Agency had been behind it.

Everyone knew that the Earthons' convoy would arrive at the Fleet Base in Shalaun the day before Sanel King was scheduled to stand before Novaun's Criminal Council, but only the commander of Novaunian Fleet, the President of the Intelligence Committee, and an armed guard of Internal Security Fleet officers actually witnessed that event. Sanel King was escorted to a prison cell on the base and placed under armed guard and mind shield.

Paul, Evelayna, Patan and Yaulanda Doshyr arrived in Shalaun the evening before the trial and went directly to Deia and Teren's house to see the baby. Paul communicated eagerly with Teren and Deia as soon as he saw them. *The Earthons have arrived. Guess who's heading the delegation.*

Teren and Deia shook their heads in bewilderment.

Admiral David Vahro-Pierce.

Greg's father? Are you serious? Deia slipped her arm under Paul's and led him into the house.

Of course I'm serious. He's Director of Defense, so it's fitting it would be he. That's not the amazing part, though. Guess who's with him.

Teren carefully handed the baby to Yaulanda. *Certainly not his son.*

Yes, Greg. Paul pulled the white blanket away from the baby's face and stroked her cheek. *The report indicated that Admiral David Vahro-Pierce had arrived with Saintess Myri Vahro-Pierce, Saint Gregory Vahro-Pierce, and Saintess Francesca Vahro-Pierce and that they're now on Dignitary Island.*

Oh, this just makes me sick! Deia communicated. *I want to go to the trial! It isn't fair!*

Don't communicate about this former boyfriend too enthusiastically, Deia, Yaulanda communicated with a smile. You'll hurt your husband's feelings.

Teren shot a mischievous look at Deia. *You know, Saint Vahro-Pierce was just never respectable enough. After all, respectable girls don't fall in love with noblemen; they fall in love with spies!* Everyone laughed, Deia most heartily of all.

The next day Shalaun practically shut down as thousands gathered outside the Planetary Courthouse to await the arrival of Sanel King, the Earthon delegation, Brys and Eauva Vundaun, and all others who would attend the trial or participate in it. Novaunians all over the Union telepathically connected to InterMind News and waited anxiously for any information on the trial.

Deia couldn't wait for Sanel's execution and what she knew would be her release from telepathic bondage, despite Colonel Quautar's skepticism. Paul couldn't wait to see Sanel in custody and stripped of his power. Evelayna couldn't wait to see her father in the flesh. Patan and Yaulanda couldn't wait to get it all over with. Since Deia could not assimilate any InterMind news, she made Paul and Evelayna promise to tell her every detail that night after it was over.

Paul, his grandparents, aunts, and Evelayna traveled from their hotel to the Planetary Courthouse with a Fleet escort. Their aircars came to a stop behind the building on the fifth floor landing platform. Four Internal Security officers met them as they entered the building, and the Doshyrs relinquished all of the arelada they were wearing. Then Paul and the other members of his family stepped behind a sensor screen to be checked for hidden weapons and arelada. After that, an Internal Security officer led them to the main courtroom, and once there, an officer who was acting as court usher directed them to the seats of honor at the center front of the audience section.

On the floor below the audience benches, the prosecuting judge and the defending judge sat in their separate seat sections, both with telepathic transmission recorders. Unlike the Civil Council, the Criminal Council had both a Prosecuting Committee and a Defending Committee, each composed of four elected judges and a staff of hired investigators. Paul doubted the defending judge would present much of a case. The evidence against Jovem Doshyr was so overpowering that the only conceivable way Sanel would be acquitted was if the defending judge could prove that Sanel was not Jovem Doshyr.

The Internal Security officers continued to escort people into the courtroom. Those who were somehow involved in the trial and their families had received permits to attend, and then the remaining permits had been given to members of the public on a first come, first served basis.

Every now and then Paul glanced around the room to see if the Earthons had arrived, wanting to see Greg Pierce again but, at the same time, uneasy about it. Greg was one link to a world Paul still longed for sometimes, and he had been a friend. Greg was, however, also a link to the most degrading period of Paul's life, which brought back memories Paul didn't want brought back. Not only that, but Paul couldn't keep himself from wondering if Greg was still a friend.

Admiral David Vahro-Pierce and Saintess Myri Vahro-Pierce and their delegation arrived well before the trial was scheduled to start and were seated together to one side of the audience section. Greg's father, dark-haired and gray-eyed, wore his white Star Force dress uniform with its red brocade sash. Paul assumed the traditional ceremonial sword and the unusual sword-shaped arelada pendant the admiral usually wore had been left at the entrance with the security team. Greg's mother wore a mauve suit and pearls, her flaxen hair up in a French twist.

Greg entered behind his parents, wearing his white Star Force dress uniform bearing the insignia of lieutenant commander. His wavy blond hair was the same, but Paul was surprised to see that his mustache was gone.

Greg glanced around the courtroom as if he were looking for someone, and Paul suddenly didn't feel uneasy anymore. Greg expected him to be there and was looking for him. Their gazes finally met in recognition and pleasure. Greg's eyes moved away from Paul's for a moment and darted around. Then they rested on Paul's again in disappointment and question.

Paul realized immediately that Greg wanted to know where Deia was. He hadn't expected Greg to be disappointed not to see Deia, yet he wasn't surprised. Paul communicated telepathically, startling Greg, who hadn't expected to actually communicate in the courtroom, *Deia was dying to come, but she couldn't.*

Isn't she testifying?

No.

Why couldn't she come?

All I can tell you is that being in the same room with our uncle would put her in danger. She wishes she could see you, however, and gave me strict orders to send you her greetings and also her thanks for the vase you sent to her.

Greg appeared pleased. *You knew I would be here?*

I found out last night when I assimilated the news. I can't believe your father allowed you to come.

My father never "allows" anything. It suited his purpose for me to be here, so I'm here. I'll tell you why later. I'm not unhappy about it, though. I wanted to come.

How much has your father told you about the trial?

Not a lot, but there are many details I know that you probably don't.

You know something about how the Divine Emperor learned about Prince Jahnzel's assassination?

I was there.

There?

In my uncle's office.

Paul was astounded, but before he could ask Greg any more questions, officers escorted Brys and Eauva Vundaun into the courtroom and seated them in the chairs behind the prosecuting team.

Who are they? Greg asked Paul.

Eauva Vundaun, my father's sister, and her husband Brys. They're the primary witnesses.

Once Brys and Eauva were seated, officers escorted Sanel into the room. Everyone stared at Sanel as the officers led him to his seat behind the defending team, the room ominously still. Paul's heart pounded frantically, his face becoming hot. Sanel looked no different whatsoever. He wore one of the suits Lena had designed and sewn for him—burgundy with an intricately embroidered gold waist sash—and he carried himself with his usual elegance and authority. The only thing missing was the arelada that typically hung on his chest from a gold chain.

Paul couldn't make himself stop thinking about the last time he had seen Sanel, the night before he and Deia had shipped out to the *Sovereign*. Paul could almost feel Sanel's mind clamp down on his, his evil stare stabbing through him. Paul had expected to see

Sanel again and feel triumphant, but all he could feel was the old fear and resentment. He slid his fingers behind his collar and adjusted it, inhaling slowly and deeply in an attempt to pull himself together. Evelayna's fingernails dug into the inside of Paul's arm, and he wondered what was in her mind at that moment.

An usher communicated in a telepathic sweep of the room, *All arise*. The thirteen judges of the Criminal Council entered from their offices, and at least fifty Internal Security officers took standing positions around the perimeter of the room. The presiding judge took his seat. *This court is now in session. You will now be seated. The Criminal Council of Judges has convened to try Jovem Doshyr of the Patan Doshyr Family Organization of Menaura for crimes against Novaun. No one will leave this room until this court is adjourned. Any unauthorized communication will result in a five thousand gold coins fine to the offender's family organization. Judge Rentaun, please give the prayer.*

After the prayer had been given, the presiding judge communicated again, *The planet Novaun presumes that Earth resident Sanel King is in actuality Jovem Doshyr of Menaura. Mr. King, please take the stand.*

Sanel walked to the front of the courtroom and seated himself in the primary witness box next to the judge's elevated box. Six judges on the Criminal Council sat to Sanel's left; six sat to the right of the judge and secondary witness box. As Sanel stepped into the box, its sides glowed around him as the telepathic transmissions analyzer was activated.

Mr. King, please give your full name and place of birth.

Sanel Tem King. New London, planet Nirvana, of the Empire of Earth.

The presiding judge looked to the mind analyzing team. *Is Mr. King telling the truth?*

The telepathy scientist answered, *Yes, he is.*

Yes. His thoughts and essence are in perfect harmony, answered the court empath.

Do Mr. King's thought patterns match those of Jovem Doshyr?

The telepathy scientist answered, *No, they do not.*

The presiding judge addressed the prosecuting judge, *Judge Zemtraun, please approach the podium*. The prosecuting judge arose and went to the podium that faced the presiding judge and the witness stands. The presiding judge continued, *The mind analyzing team has determined that Mr. King is not Jovem Doshyr. Do you have evidence to dispute the findings of the court mind analyzing team?*

Yes, I do.

Please present that evidence now. Mr. King, you may step down.

The prosecuting judge communicated to the Council, *I will prove that Sanel King possesses the ability to lie about his essence and that he is using it now to hide his true identity. A witness will also testify to his knowledge that Sanel King is indeed Jovem Doshyr. I call Brys Vundaun to the stand.*

Vundaun stood up and took his seat in the witness stand. After the mind analyzing team had verified Brys's identity, the prosecuting judge communicated, *Minon Vundaun, please tell the Council what you know about Mr. King's ability to lie about his essence.*

Brys glanced at his wife, then stared at his lap. Paul had always believed Brys had lied to Eauva about many things, and now, seeing Brys's face, he knew it for sure.

Sanel King possesses the ability to lie about his essence. I know, because he taught me how to do it. Brys then went on to show his first meeting with Sanel on the subject in telepathy vision.

Sanel was sitting in a luxurious hotel room on Gudynea twelve years before. He leaned toward the invisible Brys, his eyes glowing with animation. *Before you return to Novaun, you need to learn the technique for lying. You have no choice.*

Brys communicated, annoyed, *I had a glass of wine tonight at the reception. What is the problem? No one will ever know.*

Eauva will know.

I'll bury it deep. Even Eauva won't know.

Perhaps you can hide a drink from Eauva, but perhaps you can't. What then?

I'll smooth it over with her somehow.

Sanel threw his hands up with anger. *You are a fool! Trying to hide the fact that you had a drink will lead Eauva to distrust you, and if she distrusts you, she may feel inclined to tell our father about our conspiracy.*

You're paranoid.

Sanel relaxed a little. *Yes I am paranoid. That's why I have what I have and am still alive.* He gazed at Brys in amusement, leaning back against the couch. *You really are a fool.* He chuckled. *Perhaps you can hide a couple of drinks. But what about the next one, and the one after that? And just how are you going to explain to Eauva the feelings Atalia inspired in you tonight?*

Shock and fear choked Brys, but he struggled not to let it show. *You don't know anything.*

Sanel laughed. *Admirable try, Brys, but your feelings give you away. I saw the way you watched her with your eyes.* His eyes flickered temptingly. *You can have it all, Brys. On Novaun you can be the perfect pious husband they all expect you to be, and everywhere else you can be whatever you want to be, have whatever you want to have, and no one will ever know.* No one.

Brys sprang to his feet and stared down at Sanel, his thoughts charging at Sanel in rage: *All I want is for you to get out of my life!*

You can be a victim, or you can be a conqueror. You choose.

I refuse to ever be like you.

But you are already like me. With you it's a weakness for women and drink. For me, it's a weakness for luxury and power. Either way, it all ends up the same. Can you honestly tell me that you will never have another drink as long as you live? Brys didn't answer. *Of course you can't. Sit down.* Sanel waved Brys back into his chair; Brys sat back down numbly. *Now. It's ridiculously simple. All you have to do is project a false spirit.*

The telepathic images faded, leaving Paul feeling miserable. He thought that a year and a half should be enough time to put it all behind him, but he couldn't, not completely. He knew that had he not come to Novaun with Teren, his fate would have been the same as Brys Vundaun's.

Brys communicated to the Council, *King taught me how to lie about my essence that night.*

Did you ever use this ability? asked the prosecuting judge.

Yes.

Often?

When I was on Novaun, constantly.

Why?

Because for twelve years, my lifestyle away from Novaun was not anywhere near as pure as it was here. I was tired of being the victim. For my treasonous work on Novaun, I demanded compensation, and King was more than willing to give it to me in a very big way. I didn't want anyone to be suspicious, especially my wife. King was right. If Eauva had distrusted me for any reason, she would have gone immediately to her father and told him about the conspiracy.

Paul couldn't pull his eyes away from his Aunt Eauva. She was leaning forward, and even from where Paul sat, he could see that her shoulders were shaking. Eauva certainly hadn't been innocent in the matter, but she didn't deserve this.

Was anyone ever suspicious? the prosecuting judge asked Brys.

Never. Not one person ever suspected a thing. Not even those closest to me.

Then the technique Mr. King gave you for lying about your essence is an effective one.

Yes, very.

Effective enough to fool our mind analyzing team?

Yes. That's what it's meant to do.

When you lie about your essence, can you change your thought pattern?

I can give the false spirit any thought pattern I want. I never had a reason to fake my identity, so the thought pattern of the false spirit was always my own.

Are you lying about your essence now?

No.

The prosecuting judge communicated to the presiding judge, *Minon Vundaun has given the director of Internal Security Colonel Kustyn Avenaunta the technique for lying about one's essence, and I have it on this disc. May I approach the bench?*

You may.

The prosecuting judge stepped from behind the podium, walked to the presiding judge's box, gave him the disc, then walked back to the podium and again took his place. Once the prosecuting judge was behind the podium, the presiding judge communicated, *Judge Zemtraun, please proceed.*

The prosecuting judge communicated, *With the technique for lying about one's essence that Minon Vundaun has given the Defense Research Center, telepathy scientists and engineers there have been able to develop a device to detect it. Will Major Lerel Sonaul please take the secondary witness stand.*

A man in Fleet dress uniform, carrying an odd device in his hands, approached the secondary witness box to the left of the presiding judge and sat down. Once Major Sonaul's identity was verified, the prosecuting judge communicated, *Major Sonaul, please explain to the Council how this device works.*

By telepathically activating an internal switch, this device reveals a person who is lying about his essence by showing the false spirit. I cannot explain precisely how the device shows the false spirit, because the details of its technology are classified.

Please activate the device now.

Nearly everyone in the room gasped. Paul felt himself swooped into the spirit dimension. He gazed at the device in Major Sonaul's hand, amazed. How in the galaxy could a machine put an entire roomful of people in the spirit dimension? Paul didn't think that even twenty telepathy scientists using the spirit dimension formula could have done it. What kind of technology had the Fleet developed? Was it some sort of spirit energy generator? The possibility filled Paul with excitement.

The prosecuting judge communicated, *Will the Council please take note. Minon Vundaun's image appears clear and defined. There is only one of him, as there is only one of everyone else. Major Sonaul, please deactivate the device.*

Paul felt himself drift back to the physical dimension.

Minon Vundaun, the prosecuting judge communicated, Please execute the technique for lying about your essence using a different thought pattern than your own. Then he addressed the telepathic technician at the mind-analyzing desk, Mineste Nestu, does Minon Vundaun's current thought pattern match his previous one?

No, minion, it does not.

Is Minon Vundaun presently lying about his essence?

According to my readings, no.

The prosecuting judge then addressed the court empath, *Mineste Yountel, is Minon Vundaun lying about his essence?*

No.

Major Sonaul, please activate the device again. Once more, everyone in the courtroom was swept into the spirit dimension, only this time, there were two identical figures in Brys Vundaun's chair, overlapping in the middle. Paul wanted to yell out in ecstasy. Once Sanel took the stand and was forced to drop his false spirit, there would be no doubt whatsoever that he was, indeed, Jovem Doshyr.

Will the Council please observe, the prosecuting judge continued. There are two images of Brys Vundaun sitting at the witness stand right now, one the false spirit he produced to lie about his essence. Major Sonaul, you may now deactivate the device. Minon Vundaun, please step down. Then, addressing the presiding judge, he communicated, I ask that Mr. Sanel King take the stand again and submit to Major Sonaul's test.

Granted. Mr. King, please take the stand. Sanel again went to the witness box and sat down. Major Sonaul, please activate the device. He did, and there was only one image of Sanel in the witness box. The presiding judge continued, Major Sonaul, is Mr. King projecting a false spirit?

He is not.

Mr. King, please state your full name and place of birth.

Sanel Tem King, New London, planet Nirvana of the Empire of Earth.

The presiding judge looked to the mind analyzing team. *Is Mr. King telling the truth?*

No, he is not.

No, his thoughts and essence contradict each other severely.

Do the thought patterns of Mr. King match those of Jovem Doshyr?

Yes, they do. This man is Jovem Doshyr of the Patan Doshyr Family Organization of Menaure.

Major Sonaul, you may deactivate the machine and step down. Please take a seat with the mind analyzing team in case we need you again. The presiding judge communicated to Sanel, Mr. King, you may now step down.

As Sanel and Major Sonaul took their seats, the prosecuting judge communicated, *I call Brys Vundaun to the stand. Once Brys had again taken the seat in the witness box and had been scanned by Major Sonaul's device to make sure he was not lying about his essence, the prosecuting judge asked, Is Mr. Sanel King really Jovem Doshyr?*

Yes, he is.

How do you know?

Because at our first meeting after he left Novaun, he told me. He really had no choice. I walked into the room that evening, and there was this man I had never seen before. The hotel suite appeared before everyone in the courtroom as Brys related the event in telepathy vision.

Sanel watched the invisible Brys in amusement as Brys walked into the room. So your fear is greater than your honor. I knew it would be.

Who are you? Brys demanded.

You, an educated Novaunian, and a telepathic imbecile!

Brys concentrated on the thought patterns. Jovem . . . he finally communicated, astounded.

Resurrected in all my glory.

You mean exhumed in all your hideousness.

These days I'm known as Sanel King.

I will always think of you as Jovem Doshyr the murderer.

Sanel smirked, more amused than ever. As you wish, Minon Traitor.

The image faded, and the presiding judge asked the mind analyzing team, Is Minon Vundaun's memory real?

Yes, it is. And our scan shows that the thought patterns generated by the Sanel King in Minon Vundaun's memory belongs to Jovem Doshyr.

I have nothing else, the prosecuting judge communicated to the Council. Then he returned to his seat.

Judge Kosen, please approach the podium, the presiding judge communicated to the defending judge. She did, and the presiding judge asked, *Are you satisfied with the evidence presented by the Prosecuting Committee?*

Yes, minion, I am. The Defending Committee concedes that Sanel King is indeed Jovem Doshyr of Menaura.

Chapter 22: NOBLEMAN AND HEIR

The Novaunians' system of justice was simple and straightforward. Either a person was guilty of a crime or he was not. Either a witness was lying or he was not. Either there was enough evidence to convict a person of a crime or there was not.

Jovem Doshyr was charged with one count of premeditated murder, specifically, the murder of Mara Doshyr; one count of telepathic assault, the mind rape of Mara Doshyr; one count of treason, attempting to sell prime arelada territory to Vaenan investors; and two counts of blackmail and extortion, coercing Eauva Doshyr and Brys Vundaun to work for him.

The Doshyr and Vumaul family organizations had decided not to prosecute Jovem for abducting Lanuvael Doshyr and her children from Latanza, knowing that such a course would lead the Defending Committee to present evidence that would suggest Lanuvael had taken the twins to Earth by her own choice. Deia would be forced to testify, and sordid details of Lanuvael's sixteen and a half years with Jovem would be dredged up and made public.

Witness after witness took the stand and testified to the events that had occurred the day Jenan Doshyr had prevented the Vaenan investors from leaving Taruel with the document of sale for prime arelada territory in Menaura. Jenan's testimony was presented on disc, and all the Internal Security officers who had been involved in apprehending Jovem gave their testimonies.

The court took an hour recess, and lunch was brought into the courtroom for all who were there. When court resumed that afternoon, Cherl Doshyr told the Council about finding Mara dead in her bed, and two medical examiners testified that Mara had died from mind rape. Eauva Doshyr then told her story. First, she recounted her experience with Brys and Jovem in Mautysia. After that, she showed the Council in telepathy vision what had happened the night she and Brys had dug Jovem out of his grave.

Eauva sat on the top of Jovem's coffin, surrounded by the mounds of dirt she and Brys had removed from Jovem's grave, aching and exhausted. *What if he's really dead?*

Brys's face was dirty under the dim glow of light on his spelunking helmet. *He won't be.*

How will we know?

I don't know.

Brys stood up and laboriously climbed the rope he had tied to a nearby tree, the loose dirt caving in around him and sliding to the top of the coffin. He pulled himself out of the grave, then pulled Eauva away from the coffin a little using the rope that was looped around her waist. Eauva twisted her body and lay down on the slope with her head toward the coffin, brushed as much of the dirt off the top of the coffin as she could, then carefully lifted the coffin lid, the light from her helmet bobbing up and down on the coffin every time she moved. Jovem lay there appearing as dead as he had at his funeral.

He isn't moving, Brys. And he doesn't appear to be breathing. What do we do?

See if his heart is beating.

Are you crazy?

Just do it!

Brys lowered Eauva a little deeper into the grave, and she felt Jovem's neck for a pulse. Feeling nothing, she squeamishly removed Jovem's hands from his chest and laid her head on his heart.

Do you hear anything?

No. I think he's really dead. She didn't know whether to be afraid or relieved. A moment later, she felt a cold hand grip the back of her neck. She wanted to scream but didn't dare in case someone would hear and discover her there. She tried to lift her head, but her head wouldn't budge.

He is still alive! Brys communicated, aghast.

Let go of me, Jovem. Please! Eauva felt Jovem's hand release her neck. She twisted again so that she was almost in a standing position. *Pull me up, Brys. Now!*

The rope tugged on Eauva's waist, and within seconds, she felt herself floating upward. Once she was at the top, she quickly removed the rope, and she and Brys sat on the edge of the grave watching in morbid curiosity as Jovem arose from the dead.

Minutes passed, and Jovem opened his eyes. Many more minutes passed, and he sat up. He tilted his head upward and smiled at them. *Greetings from Paradise.*

That a murderer would have the gall to suggest he had returned from Paradise infuriated Eauva. *How could you do it, Jovem? How could you murder Mara? An innocent baby!*

Jovem rubbed his legs hard to regain circulation. *I killed Mara to provide myself insurance. I wanted to assure you and Brys that I mean everything I communicate. After all, what good are threats if they produce no fear?*

Eauva felt as if she would vomit. Jovem's declaration could only mean one thing. He wanted them to do something else for him.

Brys hurled a clump of dirt at Jovem. *We won't do anything else for you! Nothing!*

Oh, but you will. I still have the precious disc, and let me remind you that you are now accessories to treason and murder. You won't have much of a wedding celebration in prison, now, will you? Jovem extended his arm toward them. *Throw me the rope.*

Brys tossed Jovem the rope, and Jovem used it to climb out of the grave. Within minutes he stood before them, his expression severe, the pale light of their headlamps glinting in his eyes. His spirit expanded and clamped down on them. Eauva resisted with all her energy, but nothing she did could diminish the intensity of Jovem's telepathic attack. She gasped, feeling as if a knife were being twisted inside of her head.

Brys, you will join my father's sales team. You should be selling to non-Union planets within three years. Exactly three years from this date, you will meet me in the city Herzent on Latanza III, in Suite 38 of the Rose Inn at the twentieth hour. Do you understand? Brys nodded, his eyes huge with terror and his face tense with agony.

Eauva, you will become a judge and seek position with Father as a proxy-counselor. Do you understand?

Eauva nodded, wishing desperately Jovem would release his hold on her mind.

If you don't do as I want or if anyone ever finds out about our conspiracy—I mean anyone—then one of you will die. Do you understand?

They both nodded. Jovem released his hold on their minds, and they collapsed to their knees. *Good enough.* And he turned and walked toward the trees.

How are you getting off Novaun? Brys asked.

I have arrangements, Jovem answered without looking around, and within minutes, he was gone.

The images of the Doshyr estate graveyard faded, and Eauva continued with her story. *After Jovem left, we lived in constant fear for months that someone would find out what we had done. Time passed, however, and nothing happened, so we began feeling more at ease with the situation. We got married and went on with our life, doing our best to forget about what had happened. I began judge training, and my father hired Brys and made him a salesman.*

Then, two years after Mara had been murdered and a year after we had been married, we received a photograph in the mail of Jenan and Lana's twins at the age they would have been had they not died. We knew then that Jovem had arranged the fire on Latanza to abduct the twins and that Lana was probably dead. We were terrified. Not only did Jovem somehow obtain our address, he had obtained the information that Jenan and Lana would be on Latanza and where. The only thing we could think of was that he had installed electronic monitoring devices in Jenan and Lana's home and in my parents' home, and that he had agents on Novaun working for him. We felt powerless against Jovem again, wondering what all he knew about us and knowing we couldn't tell anyone about the possibility of monitoring devices without revealing everything. In our minds, Brys had no choice but to meet Jovem on Latanza III as planned.

Eauva went on to detail everything about her and Brys's involvement with Jovem over the years, at least those things that she knew or thought she knew. After she finished her account, the court adjourned for the day.

Paul rode back to the hotel with his grandparents, Evelayna, and his aunts. As he waited in the hall for everyone to get ready for dinner, his grandmother slipped out of her room, smiling. *We just received communication from the First Lady. You've been invited to dinner at the High Judge's mansion tonight.*

Paul knew that his grandparents had already been invited but had declined, unable to bear discussion and speculation on the trial. Paul frowned. *Why?*

Apparently Admiral Vahro-Pierce requested it. Since you're already acquainted with his son, he thought you might be good company for him.

Paul was surprised, but pleased. He went back into his room and changed into a clean suit, communicating with Evelayna in the next room and asking her to tell Deia why he wouldn't be to her home until late.

Many Novaunian dignitaries attended the dinner at the High Judge's mansion to extend their hospitality to Earth's new Director of Defense. Paul sat next to Greg at the long crystal banquet table, and through most of dinner, the two discussed the same thing everyone else in the room discussed—the trial. Although Greg's parents and sister sat near them, they were occupied with other conversation, so Greg and Paul were able to talk without being disturbed. Paul wasn't sure they wouldn't be overheard, however, so even though he was dying to ask Greg about his visit to the Divine Emperor, he didn't.

Greg was especially interested in Paul's new family—how Paul liked his relatives and how they had reacted when he and Deia had appeared again on Novaun after so many years.

"It was really strange for a long time. We didn't remember any of them, and they seemed to think of us as ghosts from the past. It's still awkward for me sometimes."

"Do you like it here?"

Paul hesitated. He wasn't sure how to answer that question because he wasn't sure he liked living on Novaun. Finally he shrugged a little and said, "Yes and no. I think I would like it far better had I not been born to be the Doshyr heir."

Greg set his fork and knife on his plate and turned his head to look at Paul directly. He nodded slightly, his expression thoughtful, almost grave, and full of understanding. "I know what you mean."

Greg was also heir to a position of great power. He did know what Paul meant; Paul knew he did. Paul was pleased in a way, yet something about Greg's comment troubled him. Something more than a superficial understanding and friendly concern lay behind those words. Did Greg sometimes wish he wasn't expected to be a great Star Force admiral? Why? Wasn't that what Greg had always wanted?

Greg turned away from Paul and lifted his fork again, smoothly changing the direction of the conversation. "You haven't told me much about the other half of your 'we.' What's Deia doing these days? Does she live in Menaura with you?"

Paul felt uneasy discussing Deia. He wasn't sure how much Greg really wanted to know. "No . . . no. She doesn't live in Menaura. She lives here in Shalaun."

"You mean she and her *husband* live here in Shalaun. You don't need to be so bashful about mentioning Myke, or whatever-his-name-is. I know good and well she married him."

Paul relaxed. "Of course you do."

"Why didn't he come to the trial?"

"Because Deia couldn't, and he wanted to stay with her. I'm supposed to go over there tonight and give them all the details. Deia's so anxious she's probably already waiting by the door!"

Greg stared at his almost-empty plate. "Why is she in danger from your uncle and you aren't?"

Greg was more than just curious, he was concerned, and Paul understood for the first time just how intense Greg's feelings for Deia had been, perhaps still were. Paul felt pleased in a way, but also sad. "My uncle controls a cell in her brain, or at least we think it's our uncle. She's in her home under mind shield—she can't even assimilate InterMind."

Greg turned his head abruptly and stared at Paul, his face bloodless. "That son of Abomination."

"It's a miserable situation, but we hope it's almost over. After Aunt Eauva's testimony today, I have no doubt Sanel will be convicted for murdering Mara. That conviction alone will guarantee his execution. Once he's dead, the bond will be gone." Paul smiled slightly. "Despite everything, Deia's doing all right. She's happy. She just had a baby, a little girl she and Teren named Michelle."

"A baby? But she's so . . . so . . . *young*."

"That was what I thought too, but it's what they wanted. My mother was only nineteen when she had Mara. That's typical here."

"Is she still playing the piano at all?"

"Yes, but not in the same way. She has a beautiful piano in her home, and she plays all the time there. She's even done some composing. I think Novaunians would like piano music, but she can't give concerts because there aren't facilities for it. Instead of orchestras, Novaun has mind choruses. Teren's been working to persuade Shalaun's major concert hall to buy a grand piano so that she can perform there, but it won't happen for a while."

Dessert arrived a little later, and Paul and Greg had a pleasant time discussing Earth's recent Olympics and fencing. After a robot cleared Paul and Greg's dessert plates, Paul felt pressure against his thigh. Assuming it was Greg's knee or the corner of Greg's chair, Paul ignored it. After a moment the pressure became three short, firm pushes, and Paul finally realized that Greg was pressing something against his leg, something he wanted him to take.

Baffled, Paul casually reached under the table and felt for Greg's finger, within moments finding it holding a piece of paper that was folded into a tiny square against his leg. Paul took the paper, and Greg moved his hand away. Paul slipped the piece of paper into his pocket and turned his head to look at Greg, frowning.

Greg tilted his head back slightly, glancing in his father's direction, and Paul finally understood. Greg wanted to communicate something to Paul that he didn't want his father to know about, and this was his way of doing it.

"How long are you going to be on Novaun?" Paul asked.

"I'm not sure. My father says he has business that may keep us here as long as two weeks."

The High Judge and his wife arose and led the party into a spacious lounge for entertainment provided by a mind chorus and several vocalists. Paul didn't get to communicate with Greg much after that, and he went through the rest of the evening bursting to read the mysterious letter.

Paul didn't arrive at Teren and Deia's that night until the twenty-third hour. Deia answered the door immediately. Her eyes were huge with excitement mingled with irritation. She clutched his hand and pulled him into the living room. "What in the galaxy took you so long?"

"I went to the High Judge's Mansion. Didn't Evelyana tell you?"

Deia pushed Paul into a chair. "Of course she told us. Paul, you were there for nearly four hours! What happened? Did you get to speak much to Greg?"

"I spoke with him all through dinner. He seemed disappointed you weren't at the trial, and he asked about you."

"He did?"

"You didn't think he would?"

"I wasn't sure."

Paul didn't think telling her that Greg still loved her would serve any useful purpose, but he wanted her to understand that Greg's feelings for her had always been sincere. "He's very concerned about you; he always was. Of course he asked."

Deia smiled softly. "How is he?"

Paul shrugged slightly. "Different. And yet very much the same."

Deia frowned. "Different? How?"

"I'm not sure exactly. It's something about his manner." Paul thought about telling them about the letter, but he knew he would have to read it to them if he told them about it, and he felt uneasy about that. He didn't think Greg would want Teren to read his private correspondence. "He's still sure of himself, but solemn. Maybe more mature. Something."

"You mean not so arrogant," Teren volunteered, his expression knowing.

Paul looked at Teren pointedly for a moment, then shrugged. "Not so arrogant," he admitted.

Paul telepathically showed Deia and Teren pieces of his conversation with Greg, both at the trial and at dinner, leaving out all mention of the secret letter and the fact that he had told Greg about Deia's problem. He had no desire to be chastised by paranoid spy Teren for revealing sensitive information to The Enemy.

Evelayna had already given Deia and Teren the details of the trial, so Paul didn't stay long. When he finally returned to his hotel room, he took the piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and began to read. The paper was filled with tiny words written in Greg's neat, precise print. Paul couldn't believe there was so much.

Paul,

I know this will seem odd to you, but there are things I must tell you that I can't in any other way. My father told me to resume my friendship with you and begin correspondence. My father believes that learning about Novaun and its telepathic abilities will increase his own power and intends me to spy on Novaun and your family's arelada business through you. I want no part of it, but if I tell him that, he won't allow me to correspond with you at all.

My father is a manipulative, immoral man, and he makes my life more and more unbearable as time goes on. All he cares about is increasing his own position of power, and he expects me to be the same way. I can't be like him, but I'm afraid that I'll have to be in order to survive. Even now, there is no one I can trust but you and Francesca—no one.

Earth did not turn King over to Novaun for so long because my uncle (the Divine Emperor) didn't know where he was. King was hiding on the *Sovereign*, and my father knew all along. He also suspected that King had conspired with Kravim and Laddan and Dr. Zedrul, my uncle's personal physician, to telepathically murder Prince Jahnzel. My father planned to give King's whereabouts to my uncle, expecting King to then implicate his co-conspirators, supposing Kravim's staff would be fired, which would then give my father the seniority to become Director of Defense.

The day my father told me his plans, he was summoned to one of the shuttle bays on the ship, and I went with him. A shuttle had just arrived with two dead bodies in its cargo hold. The bodies were already in bags by the time we arrived, but apparently a note to my father had been pinned to one of them. The SP gave my father the note, and when he read it he was disturbed. He told me it was just an idle threat.

Months later, I found out that King still hadn't been apprehended, and I asked my father about it. He told me that these things "take time," and I suspected King was blackmailing him somehow. Then, three months after we had gone to Earth for the Day of Liberation, my father told me that his mother had died and that we were going back to Earth for the funeral. I was shocked, to say the least, because I've never met any of my father's family, but the thought of finally getting to see the inside of a Zion community excited me. The morning after we arrived, we took a car to the Palace instead of to Zion, and I began realizing that we had come to Earth to tell my uncle that King was hiding on the *Sovereign*. I mentioned my observation to my father and asked him why I was there too, and he said simply that it would not have been safe for me to remain on the *Invincible*. I remembered the bodies and the note, and I realized that King had blackmailed my father by threatening my life!

I don't know why my father picked that particular moment to tell my uncle about King's whereabouts, but he did. We met my mother in the Palace lobby, which was also a shock. I wouldn't have been surprised to see a Novaunian agent, a Zionite, or even an Earthborn terrorist, but my mother? We went immediately to speak to my uncle. My father presented the theory that Kravim, Laddan, and King had telepathically murdered Prince Jahnzel, and that they had persuaded Dr. Zedrul to allow them to mask the evidence on the postmortem scan by convincing him that Prince Jahnzel had been the mastermind behind Liberation Coup. I know that sounds improbable, but it isn't, really. Rumors that Prince Jahnzel intended to overthrow my uncle and claim the emperorship have been floating around for years, and my uncle, in his loyalty to his brother, has publicly and privately denied them all. Dr. Zedrul undoubtedly thought that my uncle was being deceived and that the only way to protect him and save our nation was to enter into Kravim, Laddan, and King's conspiracy.

My mother displayed the postmortem scan of Prince Jahnzel's head and gave evidence to support the claim that Kravim, Laddan, and King had telepathically manipulated Prince Jahnzel's stroke—it was fascinating. I had no idea that my mother knew so much about human anatomy. When I asked her about it later, she told me that all high priestesses receive extensive medical training. They use this knowledge when they heal people.

My parents convinced my uncle that Kravim, Laddan, and King conspired to murder Prince Jahnzel, and although he barely showed it, he was enraged. Within days, Kravim, Laddan, King, and Zedrul were apprehended, and Kravim's staff was fired. My father was made Director of Defense and began appointing people to his staff.

About a week later, my uncle held a huge banquet for the members of his new Defense staff and their families. My parents, Francesca, and I all went. After dinner, my aunt and uncle took us to a balcony that overlooks Liberation Court, and we watched as a squad of Ex-men led Kravim, Laddan, Zedrul, all the members of their staffs, and all of their families—old people, children, everyone—to an open area below the balcony. Then came the entertainment for the evening. The Ex-men surrounded the group and fired. Within just a couple of minutes, all of those hundreds of people were dead. Just like that. It was the most revolting, terrifying thing I've ever experienced. Francesca was on the verge of sobbing and screaming at the same time—what kind of monster would slaughter hundreds of innocent people and make a sixteen-year-old girl watch? I wake up nearly every night with nightmares. It will haunt me forever. I will never forget.

I can't help wondering what my father has done that will get us all killed, and if my uncle ever finds out about this letter, then I'll probably be the one who gets us all killed. I'm outraged that my uncle would have ordered all those innocent people murdered. It isn't right, and what's worse, my father and all the others watched with such heartless nonchalance, as if it were the most natural, expected thing in the universe.

I don't want this life, but I'm powerless to leave it. I know nothing but Star Force, and without my family, what will I have? You're my only friend who isn't corrupt, and I'm relieved my father has given me permission to correspond with you. Please

write, but don't tell me anything of consequence about your family, your government, or your culture. Don't, however, make things too vague. As long as my father believes your letters hold some promise of valuable information, he will continue allowing me to write to you. Perhaps he will even let me travel your way with him again sometime. You can send discs to:

Lord Rohneld Hezhon
37299 Senzelto Place
Trenaaer, Romms
Latanza III

Please give my affection to Deia. I hope both of you are happy with your new Novaunian life.

Greg

With each word Paul read, his puzzlement grew. He had never heard any rumors that Prince Jahnzel had been the mastermind behind Liberation Coup—nothing at all. He had never even read speculations of the kind in any of the underground publications of the Earthborns. Whatever these rumors were, the Divine Emperor had done a good job of containing them within the Imperial Family.

The Divine Emperor's silence on the subject led Paul to believe that the rumors about Prince Jahnzel might be true and that the Divine Emperor himself could have been in on Kravim, Laddan, and King's conspiracy. Kravim, Laddan, and King do the deed and take the blame, Divine Emperor Arulezz remains the loyal brother, and Prince Jahnzel retains his legendary reputation as the most loyal of the Divine Emperor's supporters. Even now, the average Earthon couldn't get enough of Prince Jahnzel. They named their children after him, told stories about him, and held him up as an example of the perfect Earthon. Were Earthons to begin believing these rumors that Prince Jahnzel had organized Liberation Coup, they might decide to follow his example and revolt.

The Divine Emperor was shrewd—there was no doubt about it—which led Paul to another question: Why in the galaxy had he appointed a Zionite as Director of Defense? Given the fact that the Nationalists/Zionites had put themselves in position to initiate Liberation Coup by joining Star Force and rising to key positions, the Divine Emperor had to understand how dangerous a man like David Pierce would be as Director of Defense.

Why did a confirmed Zionite take the position at all unless he was a spy for Zion? Was that why he had married a Zarrist noblewoman? Why did this Zionite play the part of a power-hungry aristocrat to his son and then refuse, year after year, to take the title of a nobleman? Why had Greg's parents taken such pains to bring Prince Jahnzel's murderers to justice? Had it been to put David Pierce in the position of Director of Defense, or did the Pierces have some other connection to Prince Jahnzel? Had David Pierce been one of the organizers of that original coup?

Something was very wrong in Greg's family, and the more Paul thought about it, the more it seemed that Greg's position was far more dangerous than he now realized. Paul could see only one solution, maybe two.

Paul empathized with Greg, yet intensely appreciated his own freedom. He really did have a choice in what he wanted to do with his life, and he *would* choose. For so long, everything had been so foggy; now everything was so clear. Deia was his only real family, and he wanted to be near her. Menaura was just too far away. He had lived in Menaura for over a year and couldn't attach himself to it. He certainly didn't have the deep love and commitment for Menaura that was necessary for a Doshyr heir. He felt more comfortable in a large, diverse city like Shalaun than in a small mining town like Launarda.

Paul was comfortable with the family business, but he wanted the excitement and challenge of having his own business. Before he had come to Novaun, he had planned to market his mother's dress and jewelry designs. His mother had designed many pieces over the years that Novaunians had never seen, and Paul thought he could market them easily. He also wanted to provide Novaunians with other clothing alternatives. Miaundea's designs inspired him, and Ausha Luciani's wardrobe proved to him that there were other Novaunians who wanted something different. He believed that with the right combination of his mother's designs, imports, and innovative designers like Miaundea, he could build an interesting and successful business.

The Doshyr heirship would pass to his Uncle Cherl, then to his cousin Saum. They had spent much of their lives preparing for it and would do a far better job of it than he ever would. Now that he was rejecting it for good, they would even be able to enjoy it, not worrying that they were taking something that belonged to someone else.

The more Paul thought about it, the more his excitement and relief grew. He wanted something other than the heirship, and for the first time in months, he felt as if that were acceptable. Paul would tell his grandfather his decision once they returned to Launarda—no hesitation, no guilt, and no regrets.

Chapter 23: DETHRONED

Paul arrived at the courthouse the next day and looked for Greg. When Greg finally arrived, he communicated immediately with Paul, *Did you show the letter to Deia?*

No. She wouldn't be able to keep it from Teren, and Teren would tell Colonel Quautar.

Greg didn't need to be told Colonel Quautar's position to understand that he was a person he didn't want to know about the letter. *Once a spy, always a spy?* he communicated in amusement.

Definitely.

Then it's good you didn't let her read it.

I've been thinking a lot about your letter. I have some questions, in fact.

What do you want to know?

Have you ever considered the possibility that your relationship with your father isn't comfortable because he's not sure whether you're his friend or enemy?

Greg sat down next to his sister. *What do you mean?*

He's a Zionite and you're a Zarrist nobleman. The Zionites and Zarrists may have a treaty, but they've never been friends.

My father was born a Zionite, yes, but he isn't one now.

How do you know?

My uncle never would have allowed him to be a Star Force officer, much less appointed him to be Director of Defense.

If your father has completely given up his heritage and is as immoral and power-obsessed as you believe, then why did he never take the title of saint?

Greg frowned. *That's a good question. It does seem inconsistent, doesn't it?*

It makes no sense at all, unless your uncle refused to grant him the title.

No, my uncle teases Father about it, and Mother never discusses it, so I know it's Father's choice. Greg couldn't refrain from glancing in his father's direction. *Do you really think my father still considers himself a Zionite?* Admiral Pierce caught Greg's glance and began watching the invisible conversation with interest.

I think it's a good possibility. This I do know: My brother-in-law the spy expanded his spirit into the bulkheads of the Sovereign and learned that they're filled with monitoring devices. That's why your father had to tell you that lie about his mother's death to get you to Earth. He didn't want anyone to know what he was really up to, and his enemies would have known. I have a feeling, in fact, that this assignment he gave you to learn what you can from me about Novaun's secrets was another smoke screen for the monitoring devices. He wanted you to communicate with me because he knows I'll tell you the truth about Zion.

Greg's tone of thought was one of surprise and curiosity. *And what is the truth about Zion?*

That it's where you want to be. Paul smiled knowingly at the admiral and received a friendly nod in reply. *Talk to him about it tonight. Without your mother and sister. But you have to do it before you leave Novaun. Once you're back in the Fleet, you'll both be prisoners to the monitoring devices again.*

Internal Security officers escorted Brys and Eauva Vundaun into the courtroom, then Sanel. The judges on the Criminal Council entered the room and took their seats, and court

resumed with testimony from three Internal Security officers concerning the electronic monitoring devices they had found in Jenan and Lana's former home, Patan and Yaulanda's home, and Patan's office at the mansion. Two more officers testified to the fact that the devices found were representative of monitoring devices used by Earth's Foreign Intelligence Agency twenty years before.

The existence of the monitoring devices, the prosecuting judge communicated, proves that it would have been easy for Jovem Doshyr to learn that Jenan, Lanuvael, and the twins would be on Latanza and where. I call Minon Brys Vundaun to the stand.

Brys Vundaun went to the witness box and gave the details of his involvement with Sanel King/Jovem Doshyr. The majority of his testimony revolved around what Sanel's plans had been for Paul and Deia.

The scene around Paul once again changed to that of the hotel suite on Latanza III where Brys and Sanel had first met.

What have you done with Jenan's twins, Jovem?

My name is Sanel.

What have you done with them?

That is no concern to you at this point.

Where is Lana? Did you kill her too?

Her whereabouts are of no concern to you either.

The scene faded, and Brys explained, *I wasn't able to learn anything about the fate of Lana and the twins that day. I assumed Lana was dead and that Jovem intended to send the twins back to Novaun at a future date to work for him. Jovem told me nothing more about it for years. Now and then I asked, but still, he told me nothing. As time passed, I was almost able to make myself forget about the picture of the twins Eauva and I had received that day. Finally, on 32-9-6271, nearly two years ago, I found out what Jovem had planned for the twins. We met at my home on Ontellia as we had arranged.*

Sanel was sitting in a spacious living room, receiving long-stemmed crystal glasses from a voluptuous woman wearing a revealing servant's dress. Sanel set the glasses on the coffee table and filled them with mineral water.

You're in a charming mood, Brys observed.

Sanel almost smiled. *There's much to celebrate today.* He raised his glass for a toast. *To the Doshyr heir.*

Brys wondered for a moment why they were toasting the Doshyr heir, then remembered the photograph he and Eauva had received so long ago. He touched his glass to Sanel's. *Which Doshyr heir are we toasting? Cherl or Braudan?*

Sanel chuckled. *You are perceptive, Brys.* He took a sip from his glass of water. *Braudan and his sister have just celebrated their eighteenth birthday and are now legal adults.*

And Lana? Brys ventured.

Lana is my loving wife.

Brys didn't think anything could shock him anymore, but learning that Lana was still alive as Jovem's wife did. *You stole your brother's wife?*

Sanel's eyes shone in a gloating way. *Jenan never deserved her, and now he will never have her again. He won't want her. She is entirely mine.*

Brys had always wondered why Jovem never seemed interested in women. Now he knew. He was obsessed with Lana and always had been. Brys trembled with disgust and indignation. *Lana would have been better off if you had murdered her too!*

I would never allow any harm to come to Lana. Among other things, I needed her to raise the young heir as a Novaunian.

You could have raised him yourself.

I tried; he thinks I'm a son of Abomination.

You are.

It doesn't matter; I have no time for children. Lana has, as usual, far exceeded my expectations. Braudan has developed Earthon tastes, but is, at the same time, uniquely Novaunian; he's perfect. He will easily fool my father and everyone else.

Curiosity finally swallowed Brys's indignation. What do you plan to do with the girl?

Her dream is to be a famous concert pianist. I've arranged for the great Maestro Phillip Moreau to take her on tour as his protégée, and in time, I hope to marry her to a nobleman.

If she's anything like Lana, that shouldn't be difficult.

She's very much like Lana, though not quite as elegant and not nearly as sharp in mind, but she'll be more than adequate for an Earthon. The girl thinks she's free to do whatever she wishes. It's all too easy. The twins are exceptionally close. Braudan will do whatever I tell him to do to keep his sister alive and safe.

Paul assimilated it all, feeling queasy. Even the great maestro had sold out. He was relieved Deia wasn't at the trial. Learning that it had been their uncle's influence, not her talent, that had inspired Phillip Moreau to accept her as his protégée would devastate her.

Sanel continued his explanation to Brys in the telepathy vision testimony: *And by the time he makes his appearance on Novaun, he will be so morally corrupt that he will never feel as if he can live honestly among the Novaunians, much less want to.*

Paul's cheeks burned with humiliation. Memories of Jacquae assaulted him. He wondered now if Sanel had hired her to seduce him. The possibility outraged him. How many other prostitutes would have had to leave their spiritual stains before Sanel would have considered him sufficiently corrupt?

The living room on Ontellia remained vivid in telepathy vision as Brys finished his account. *How much do you plan to pay me to take your precious Doshyr heir to Novaun?*

Two million dollars.

Fair enough. What exactly do you want me to do?

In another eight months to a year, he should be ready to make his debut.

And just what in the galaxy kind of exotic story will I and this future Doshyr heir give to the unsuspecting citizens of Novaun?

Sanel smiled in satisfaction. *There will be no need for an exotic story; that's the beauty of it. Lana left Latanza after the fire with the twins and went into hiding. She chose Earth because it was unstable and therefore an excellent cover. She met me, Sanel King, shortly after her arrival and married me. She asked me to use my influence to cover her trail. I, in turn, gave her and her children new identities. The years passed, and when Braudan became an adult and asked me about his parents, I gave him the story I just gave to you and cautioned him against discussing it with his mother and upsetting her. I encouraged him to make a trip to Latanza to learn more about what had happened to his parents. He then contacted the Novaunian Embassy on Latanza and Trent Brunaul.*

Brys nodded. *And Minon Brunaul, of course, would contact me. He poured himself more mineral water. There's only one problem I see in your plan—Lana. Once Novaun learns of her whereabouts from Braudan, what's stopping the Fleet from sending a team to rescue her? Or members of her family from stopping by Earth for a visit? Once she comes in contact with another Novaunian, she will tell him that you are her supposedly dead brother-in-law and we'll both end up in front of a firing squad.*

Sanel shook his head. *You have nothing to fear from Lana. She will no more tell the Novaunians the truth than you will. She didn't choose me, it's true, and she has every reason to hate me, but I please her far more than her Novaunian sensibilities will ever allow her to admit. For that reason, she, like Braudan, will never feel as if she can live honestly among the Novaunians again.*

How can you be so sure of that?

Because I keep her telepathically close. She doesn't have a thought I'm not aware of.

So Jovem hadn't exacted submission from Lana by force; he had won it by devoting himself to her in his twisted way and showering her with luxury and affection. Brys was disgusted but convinced. *I have to hand it to you. Your plan is brilliant.*

Sanel chuckled. *Nothing less than brilliant will fool Fleet intelligence.*

The scene dissipated, and the presiding judge asked Brys, *Did Minon Doshyr ever tell you anything else about the fire on Latanza and his brother's death?*

No.

Did he ever tell you about his plan to put the twins on the Sovereign of the Stars?

No. He never told me anything I didn't need to know.

The presiding judge, several judges on the Council, and both the prosecuting and defending judges directed questions to Brys until they felt his testimony was complete. Once Brys stepped down, the defending and prosecuting judges gave their final remarks. The presiding judge then adjourned the court until the fifteenth hour that afternoon, when everyone would gather again to learn the Council's verdict.

Once Sanel and Brys and Eauva had been escorted out of the room and general communication was permitted, Greg's thoughts charged into Paul's. *It's a good thing Deia wasn't here.*

It may not matter. The press is giving the trial extensive coverage. She's bound to find out sooner or later.

If she ever does, you tell her that she's every bit as good as that Prescott fellow who performed with the great maestro at the Palace. Every bit!

Stanley Prescott?

Yes. Do you know him?

He was the star of the European Conservatory and a good friend of Deia's. She'll be happy for him. You saw Phillip Moreau perform at the Palace?

Yes. Although I believe "Rhapsody of the Heart" should now be titled "Requiem for the Massacred."

Paul was stunned. He performed at the Palace that night?

Who else could have provided such beautiful accompaniment to my uncle's display of power? You tell Deia that the audience she plays to now is far worthier of her art than the audience of despots she would have played to at Court. Far worthier!

Paul watched Greg leave the courtroom with his family, hoping with all his essence that he would never have to tell Deia anything.

* * *

When the court reconvened that afternoon, the presiding judge seated himself, then communicated, *I call this court to order. Minon Jovem Doshyr, please arise.*

Sanel stood up, and everyone in the courtroom waited in grave stillness.

Minon Doshyr, the Criminal Council of Judges finds you not guilty of the charge of blackmail and extortion in the case of Brys Vundaun. The Council finds you guilty of premeditated murder of Mara Doshyr, telepathic assault of Mara Doshyr, treason, and blackmail and extortion in the case of Eauva Doshyr. Your sentence for the murder of Mara Doshyr is death by firing squad. I declare sentences for all other crimes superfluous.

The presiding judge looked to the defending judge. *Judge Kosen, please approach the podium.* Once she did, the presiding judge communicated, *Are there any extenuating circumstances that would justify a lighter sentence?*

No, sir. The Defending Committee accepts the verdict and sentence as is.

You may sit down. Once the defending judge had seated herself, the presiding judge communicated, *Minon Doshyr, your execution will take place this evening at the nineteenth hour. Court adjourned.*

Internal Security officers gathered around Sanel. Paul watched him turn toward the spectators, feeling an uneasiness that bordered on dread. Sanel sneered defiantly, his eyes glinting with such amusement that Paul couldn't help but believe that Sanel considered the entire trial a farce. Then again, he was a supreme actor. Was this lofty attitude a façade he had donned to hide his fear and maintain his dignity?

As Sanel began moving up the aisle, that mocking gaze rested on Paul. At that moment, Paul knew that Sanel intended to speak to him and was suddenly petrified. Before Paul could even begin to speculate on what Sanel would say, Sanel asked in the Novaunian language, "Do the Doshyrs know that their precious heir was intimate with Ton Luciani's sist—"

Before Sanel could complete the word "sister," one of the Security officers slapped a piece of tape over his mouth. The tape came too late, however, to save Paul from mortification. He felt his cheeks grow hot, and yet he knew that he couldn't lean forward and hide with his head in his hands. No, he would not reward Sanel with such an obvious show of shame.

Paul watched in agony as the officers led Sanel out of the courtroom. When he was gone, his grandfather put his arm around him and squeezed him affectionately. Paul knew his grandfather meant the gesture to comfort him, but it only made him feel more condemned. How could his grandfather possibly want him to be the Doshyr heir now? Even as Paul asked himself that question, he wondered why he cared.

When telepathic communication was finally allowed, his grandfather's thoughts gripped him. *It doesn't matter, Paul. It never did.*

Paul watched the judges as they filed out of the room, unable to bring himself to look at his grandfather. *How did you know?*

I didn't know the details, but I did know that you had come from an unwholesome environment and that you were troubled by guilt. The sin is gone, Paul. Let the guilt go too.

Paul could feel that his grandfather was sincere and finally looked at him. *Just because it doesn't matter to you doesn't mean it won't matter to others.*

His grandfather motioned around the courtroom. *If that's the case, then where are your accusers?*

Paul was startled to see that everyone was leaving as if nothing unusual had happened. No one even looked his way. *Maybe you're right.* He finally began to relax.

His grandfather stood up. *It didn't matter to anyone but Jovem. Doesn't it gratify you that his last piece of ammunition was a dud?*

Paul finally smiled. *Yes, as a matter of fact, it does!*

His grandfather slapped his back. *Come on. Let's get out of here.*

Chapter 24: RELEASE

Following the trial, Paul went directly to Teren and Deia's. Deia anxiously met Paul at the door. "Is there a verdict yet?"

Paul embraced Deia in triumph. "Guilty. The execution will take place tonight at the nineteenth hour."

"Can he appeal it?" Deia asked.

Paul shook his head. "Not unless he has a legitimate reason for believing the Council treated him unfairly. Believe me, the Council treated him more than fairly. If he did make a request for an appeal, the judges on the Union Criminal Council would laugh themselves to death! There is no way they would agree to retry the case." Paul walked into the living room with Deia and sat down, giving her and Teren the entire trial in telepathy vision, gracefully skipping over Sanel's assertion that he had arranged for Deia to be Phillip Moreau's protégée.

Deia pounded her fists on her thighs in excitement. "It's over. It's finally over!" Outraged cries suddenly sounded from another part of the house. "In less than four hours, I'll be free!" She jumped up and hurried to the kitchen. "I can't believe it! Tonight we'll have to celebrate! Go somewhere really nice."

Teren went to get Michelle as Deia quickly prepared a bottle for her. Paul asked, "Will Colonel Quautar be over tonight to test you for the mind bond?"

"He'd better be!"

Michelle's cries stopped, and a moment later Teren appeared with her in his arms, her fuzzy dark head nuzzled to his neck as she chomped on his knuckle. By the time Teren and Michelle reached the kitchen, Deia had a bottle ready.

"Did you get to communicate with Greg at all?" Deia gently took Michelle and cuddled her in her arms, touching the bottle's nipple to Michelle's lips. Michelle accepted it gratefully, the bottle buzzing as she gulped the milk.

"Not much."

"What about Eauva?" Teren said as he and Deia walked back into the living room and sat down together on the couch. "Will she be able to go back to Launarda with you?" He caressed the baby's tiny leg, then Deia's arm.

Paul grimaced. "Probably."

Deia gazed at him knowingly. "It would be strange."

"Too strange. I know it's petty, but I don't want to be anywhere near her. I'm thinking about taking another flight back."

"Has anyone communicated with Aunt Eauva?" Deia asked. "How is she taking it all?"

"All I know is that they all spent the evening with her last night. They're over there now, in fact. Grandfather is submitting the application for her release." Paul leaned toward Deia in anticipation. "I'm glad they're all there. There's something I need to tell you."

Deia raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I'm moving to Shalaun as soon as I can arrange it."

"Shalaun?" she said in surprise.

Paul nodded. "I'm going to try to find a job in retail. Once I earn enough money, I'm going to start my own import business." He detailed his entire plan to them, the type of merchandise he would sell, the appearance of his first store, and the methods he would use

to advertise. Deia assimilated it all in amazement. Teren drummed his fingers on the back of the couch, obviously annoyed.

"I like Shalaun. It's far more exciting than Launarda. And I want to live near you." Teren stood up and began pacing in front of the window.

Deia smiled weakly. "That's terrific, Paul."

Paul hadn't expected Teren to be thrilled about his plan to move to Shalaun, but he had thought Deia would be a little more pleased. That she wasn't troubled him. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I have an odd feeling about this. I would love to be able to see you more, and it seems like a wonderful idea, but . . ." She shrugged helplessly. "Have you told Grandfather yet?"

Paul shook his head, feeling more uncomfortable than ever. "He and Grandmother are having a difficult time dealing with the trial. I want to wait and tell him when we get back to Launarda." He glanced at Teren, who was staring out the window, then continued with assurance, "He won't mind, Deia. He doesn't expect me to be the heir. Going into business for myself is what I want."

"Then why are you feeling so uneasy?"

"Only because you're feeling uneasy!"

Deia sighed. "I'm sorry, Paul."

"Just don't tell anyone yet. I want to be the one who tells Grandfather."

* * *

Teren opened the door for Colonel Quautar and the telepathy scientist Major Austaun at the twentieth hour that evening.

Deia pushed past Teren to the door. *Just the person I've been waiting all day to see!* She bounced into the living room and motioned to the others to follow.

Don't get your hopes up, Deia, Colonel Quautar cautioned. More than likely, it's someone other than your uncle who controls that cell in your brain.

I know, I know. Theoretically it couldn't be Sanel. Minon, it was Sanel. He is dead, isn't he?

I've never known you to be so crass, Deia, Paul teased.

We've been keeping company with Ton too long, Teren communicated with a smile.

Well he is, isn't he? Deia demanded.

Yes, he is. The execution took place an hour ago. I was a witness. You have my solemn testimony to the fact.

Deia sat down, and Major Austaun activated the Awareness monitor so that the beam glowed on her head. Colonel Quautar, Major Austaun, and Teren overlapped spirits and executed the spirit dimension formula, fading from Paul and Deia's sight. Visible to Teren was the dijauntu bond between Deia's head and his. The thin black line leading to nowhere was gone.

Teren reappeared and immediately grabbed Deia's shoulders and shook her with excitement. *It's gone! You're free!*

* * *

The morning after returning to Launarda, Paul went running with Adaum Vundaun as he usually did. He made it home just as his grandparents were finishing breakfast. He decided it was time to tell his grandfather that he would not be the Doshyr heir.

Paul gazed down at his grandfather solemnly. *I need to communicate with you. Alone.*

His grandfather stood up and gestured Paul to his office. Once they were there, Paul hesitated. Now that it was time, he wasn't sure what to communicate. This would be more difficult than he had believed.

I've made my decision about the heirship. Paul finally communicated, feeling peculiar.

The muscles in his grandfather's face relaxed, and his gray-blue eyes shimmered with hope. His grandfather didn't expect it, but he wanted it very much and had confidence in him.

Paul had always liked and admired this man who claimed to be his grandfather, but for the first time since his arrival on Novaun, he felt a bond with him, something deep and sweet. Paul realized his heart wasn't in Menaura yet, but his life was. He knew then that he would be the Doshyr heir. He wanted to do it for his grandfather, and that was a good enough reason for the time being.

Happiness permeated Paul's heart, and he felt very free. *I would be honored to be the Doshyr heir.*

His grandfather couldn't contain his emotions of joy and surprise. *Are you sure?*

Paul smiled and nodded. *Yes. Very.*

His grandfather embraced him tenderly, his spirit swelling around him with such intense love that Paul felt physically weak, as if he would float away in a ray of rapture. His grandfather's thoughts melted into Paul's with gratitude and understanding. *Thank you.*

* * *

Nearly two weeks later, Paul received a letter from Greg that had been posted from Dignitary Island. Paul bounded up the stairs to his room and opened it, hoping to find out that Greg and his father had come to an understanding. Paul was disappointed to find that this letter was much shorter than the first one had been.

Paul,

I couldn't leave Novaun without thanking you for suggesting I talk to my father about my concerns. You were right about him in almost every respect. Yes, he is a Zionite at heart, but he claims he hasn't had any contact with Zion in twenty years and I believe him, so *officially*, he really is a Zarrist. He told me so many unbelievable things—disturbing, wonderful, and terrifying things. I could never write it all in a letter like this, even if I had a whole day to do it, so I won't even try.

I will tell you one thing, though. I'm sure you remember the unusual sword-shaped arelada pendant my father always wears. It turns out that he inherited the original crystal sword from Prince Jahnzel. Apparently Prince Jahnzel taught my father to fence, and they were the closest of friends. Now my father will take Prince Jahnzel's place on the piste, and I'll take my father's, and we'll be friends instead of enemies under treaty.

Thank you again for the part you played in giving me a father, thereby restoring my faith in the goodness and valor of both races that make me who I am.

Greg

Paul finished the letter, breathless with astonishment and horror in the realization that he had been correct in his assessment—Prince Jahnzel really had been the mastermind behind Liberation Coup, and David Pierce had been his executive officer! Paul read the letter again and again and could come to no other conclusion.

Paul had never heard Admiral Pierce's arelada pendant referred to as the "crystal sword." It was a term Greg would not have used unless he had been referring to *the* crystal sword, the Earthons' symbol for God's justice. The Earthons' flag was a wine-red banner picturing an angel with wings spread, holding aloft the crystal sword with both hands, representing Earth's role as executioner of evil in the galaxy. As Earth's Highest Elder, Arulezz Zarr's son Vrenyen Zarr now stood in the role of the Nation's Executioner and even displayed a real crystal sword at high events. Before his death, Prince Jahnzel had been the Highest Elder and official Executioner. No doubt he had donned the sword-shaped arelada pendant as a symbol of that role and the coup he was organizing to execute God's justice on his despot brother and had bequeathed the pendant to David Pierce as a way of passing the role of Executioner to him. He simply wouldn't have given David Pierce the pendant had Pierce not been his executive officer.

Greg's unusual description of his father's fencing friendship with Prince Jahnzel led Paul to guess that the two had used fencing practice and tournaments as a vehicle for secretly communicating information to their co-conspirators and that Greg and his father planned to continue the tradition. Greg's statement that he and his father would now be allies instead of "enemies under treaty" referred directly to his discussion with Paul in the courtroom, when Paul had reminded him that the "Zionites and Zarrists may have a treaty, but they've never been friends." Obviously Greg planned to become a Zionite like his father and wield the crystal sword himself. Paul didn't think he would ever look at fencing in the same way again.

Aching with anxiety for his friend and the dangerous path he had chosen, Paul set Greg's letter on his desk and bowed his head. *Dear God, let them succeed this time. Please let them succeed.*

Chapter 25: REINCARNATION OF AN ENEMY

A week and a half following King's execution, the Earthons left Novaun and Colonel Quautar allowed Ton and Ausha to go back to work and resume their life with the warning, *King is dead, but he still has an agent here, an agent with mind powers that are exquisitely sophisticated, sophisticated enough to manipulate the telepathic bond between Deia and her uncle. Be vigilant.*

The weeks passed without event. Ton and Ausha studied for the exam they were required to pass for certification and began packing their belongings in anticipation of their move to Mautysia. Except for the painful absence of Anenka, everything seemed normal. King had been convicted and executed, Brys Vundaun had been sent back to Manoure for his execution, Eauva Vundaun had been released from prison and had gone back to Launarda, and Deia was free from the telepathic bond that had posed such a danger to both her and Ton. There seemed no reason to fear.

Eighth Day morning on the last day of Ninth Month, Ausha slipped into an old dress and went to the balcony to work in her garden, and Ton dragged himself into the shower. He and Ausha would meet Teren and Deia in a couple of hours and travel to Menaura for Paul and Deia's birthday celebration and the ceremony that would consecrate Paul as the official heir to the Doshyr High Patriarchate.

As Ton basked in the steamy hot water, he felt a familiar spiritual presence clamp ruthlessly down on his head. Astounded that King's agent was actually someone he knew, he gasped and threw his hands to his head, resisting with all his essence, the pain sharp and intense. Who was it? The presence was so familiar, yet he couldn't identify it.

The attacker communicated, *You are no mental match for me, Ton. You will suffer as that son of Abomination Adrian suffered, and in the end, I will telepathically castrate you as I did him.*

"Jacquae?" Ton breathed in astonishment, the water still pouring over his body. He believed she would gladly kill him for being a traitor, but he couldn't believe that even she was morally capable of killing Adrian, much less in possession of the telepathic ability that would have been necessary. She was goading him as she always did.

Ton laughed, despite the pain she was inflicting on him. *You telepathically castrate me?* He laughed again, mustering all his strength and hurling it in the direction of her thoughts, eliminating the pain on his head. He transmitted a thought to turn off the shower. *Shouldn't King have sent someone more qualified? Maybe you should have come to my door with an immobilizer. Then you might have actually accomplished something.*

Jacquae's spirit convulsed in amusement. *King sent the most qualified—he sent himself. You haven't changed one iota, Ton. Always the arrogant intellectual, the disdainful superior mind, the presumptuous telepathic talent. Oh, but they think you've changed, you've lied so well.*

Ton assimilated Jacquae's accusations, puzzlement gradually overcoming his amusement. How could King have sent himself? King was dead!

You are such a hypocrite, Ton. Getting married just to have sex. I didn't know that even you were so depraved. Is Ausha as good as Tevaronia? What about Stacia? Is she as good as Rebecca? As Mishela? Gabrielle?

Ton's shame increased with each name. Memories of his encounters with those girls assaulted him; he remembered every detail of their faces, their bodies, their disdain. He tried to force it all out of his mind, but couldn't. His stomach churned with nausea.

How does Ausha feel when you tell her about all the adventures you've had with other women?

Ton shuddered in disgust and outrage. *Return as Eslavu!*

The pain clamped down on Ton's head again, more severely than ever. Ton cried out in agony and crashed to his knees, the muscles in his legs cramping.

Such beautiful justice. Now you have an entire planet of decent girls like Deia. Tell me, Ton. Does a decent girl like Ausha make a good whore?

Ton's body shook with rage. *The only whore on this planet is you! How much did King pay you to become an assassin? How many times did you sleep with him? He's nothing now. Wouldn't Admiral Vahro-Pierce be more in line with your taste? Or maybe Greg. He'd really be a thrill. Too bad he always thought you were an ugly daughter of Abomination.*

Jacquae released her hold on Ton's mind, then stabbed again in fury. Ton pressed his head against the wall of the shower, anything to alleviate some of the pain. Only King could wield such power. Somehow he really had sent himself to Novaun with Jacquae.

I will suffocate you as I suffocated Adrian. Right there in his bed—writhing and gasping—with no idea that you, his little protégé, was to blame.

Ton wanted to strangle Jacquae, squeeze the life out of her, hear her scream in anguish and terror. *You will pay, Jacquae, you will pay!* His spirit lashed out at her in attack.

Jacquae laughed and pushed his spirit away effortlessly. *His wife found him the way your wife will find you—dead and disfigured.*

Finally Ton understood. King had given his mind to Jacquae in dijauntu. She wasn't King in spirit, but she was in knowledge and mental ability. Ton could hardly comprehend something so revolting or hilarious. *The great Sanel King gave his mind to a piece of Eslavu trash like you?*

You betrayed Earth and made a fool out of him, then ran for cover like a coward. He thought it was only just that you meet him mind to mind and find out just who is the master and who is the novice.

Ton shoved his mind into hers, nearly pushing her away. Neither Jacquae nor that son of Abomination Sanel King would defeat him in a battle of the minds! Novice indeed!

That's the way to fight Ton! You aren't a little dog! You aren't a telepathic weakling like Deia who can't even tell when her spirit's been touched!

Jacquae's spirit swelled around Ton's body and tightened in an attempt to overlap his. Ton resisted vehemently, perspiration dripping from his face along with the water from his hair. She wouldn't gain control of one shred of his spirit—not one shred!

Jacquae's spirit clenched his even harder, trying to penetrate Ton's wall of resistance. Ton struggled against the pressure until he was breathless, feeling as if his body were being crushed.

So much for your supreme telepathic ability, Jacquae jeered.

Ton resisted in frustration, his strength diminishing little by little, humiliated that Jacquae and King would have the last laugh. The wall of the shower tilted, then blurred, and Ton thought he would faint.

Panic seized him. The pain was putting too much strain on his body and lowering his blood pressure. How could he fight Jacquae if he went into shock? Then he remembered the alarm ring. What in the universe was he doing? He had Ausha, his friends, his life. Why was he fighting Jacquae at all? He pressed his right hand down on his left in search of the ring, but couldn't find it. He realized in horror that he had left it on the vanity with his other rings before getting into the shower.

Little tough to make me pay when I'm holding the lien against your life!

Ton crawled out of the shower, the pain fogging his mind. The room swam. Ton tried to focus on the vanity, but couldn't. He couldn't speak, he couldn't transmit, and he could barely think, but still he managed to resist, knowing that once Jacquae overlapped spirits with him in a deep enough bond, she would feel his formulated thoughts and would learn about the alarm ring. He moved one knee closer to the vanity, his pulse racing, barely able to breathe.

Perhaps I'll strip your mind before I kill you. But then again, why should I? Your puny little mind has nothing I would ever want.

Ton placed one pale hand in front of the other, dragging his knees along the marble, trembling and feeling as if he would vomit.

What's the matter, Ton? Are you in too much pain to insult me? Or in too much awe?

A familiar ache intensified in Ton's chest and throat, and he lost the fluids in his stomach, still crawling toward the vanity. He had to get to the ring before shock claimed his consciousness.

He grabbed the rug and pulled himself a little closer, finally making it to the toilet. He clutched the toilet, gradually pulling himself to the vanity, everything in the room lurching to one side, then the other. He held on tightly to keep from falling, then reached up for the ring and grabbed it.

Jacquae's spirit pushed harder, finally forcing its way into his. Large invisible needles seemed to pierce every square millimeter of Ton's body, creating the sensation that his blood vessels were exploding. Still he resisted, but his waning strength couldn't drive her back.

Ton tried to open the top of the ring, but it wouldn't move. He frantically lifted the ring to his face and did his best to focus, seeing in dismay that the stone was a ruby, not arelada. He had grabbed Adrian's ring by accident!

Realizing in terror that Jacquae would know about the alarm ring within seconds, Ton reached to the top of the vanity again, the bath lounge darkening as he began losing consciousness.

You are such a baby! You can't resist me for a mere five minutes!

Jacquae's taunt galled Ton and gave him strength enough to fight off unconsciousness. His hand closed around the alarm ring.

Jacquae's spirit slowly overcame Ton's. He could feel her ecstasy. She hadn't reached the level of shared thought yet, so she still had to transmit, *Didn't the Novaunians teach you anything? Or are you just a complete moron? Are you this incompetent in the operating room?*

Ton opened the top of the alarm ring and pushed. A second later he felt a torrent of minds meld with his and submerge Jacquae's. Jacquae had not expected Ton to ask for help and was too astounded to resist. The army of combined Novaunian minds surged along Jacquae's spirit and in an instant found the location of her body. Within seconds, the

sheer weight of the combined Novaunian minds had fatally crushed hers as a typhoon-driven wave crushes a lone person standing in the surf.

Being released from Jacquae's spirit did not bring Ton release from the pain. His chest felt as if it would burst, the tightness moving into his armpits, and he quickly transmitted a plea for help, *Cardiac arrest . . .* His blood pressure plunged again, and everything went black.

* * *

The first thing Ton saw when he awoke was a large green blob. A hand tightly held his under the blanket that covered him, and a familiar spirit warmed him. Gradually his vision cleared, and he saw Ausha's beautiful eyes gaze at him in worry from above her scrub mask. Ton's body ached, and he felt too weak to move, the pain in his chest less intense than before.

Ausha stroked his arm with a gloved hand, her eyes glazed with relief. *Thank goodness you're all right!*

Ton found it difficult to formulate his thoughts. *Am . . . I?* He noticed that he was in the hospital's intensive care unit.

Your blood pressure is almost at its normal level, and your heart rhythm is beginning to stabilize, Ausha communicated. *You're going to be fine.*

How . . . long?

Seven hours. I've been here with you the entire time, worried out of my mind!

Ton laboriously reached his free hand toward Ausha's face, his fingers feeling under the mask and caressing her cheek. *It's over.*

* * *

Once Ton gained enough strength to communicate, he told Ausha what had happened, and she told Colonel Quautar. The colonel didn't communicate with Ton, however, until the next day, after Ton had been moved to a private room.

When Ton saw the colonel enter his room, he immediately asked, *Were you able to find Jacquae's body?*

Colonel Avenaunta's men found it in a warehouse storage closet. I was able to identify her from Teren's telepathy vision descriptions of his time on the Sovereign.

She wasn't in disguise?

No. Except for her lighter skin and eye color, nothing about her had changed.

Is Ton going to have to identify her? Ausha asked.

The colonel's mouth pulled into a wicked little smile. *No, but since he is her closest living relative, he may want to supervise her burial.*

Ton was sorry in a way that Jacquae had ended her life as another one of King's many pawns, but more than anything, he was angry with himself for allowing her to bait him. He had believed himself beyond such pettiness. *You aren't going to make me do that, are you?*

Don't you want to?

No!

That's too bad. I was counting on you to give the eulogy. Tell all your friends what a loving, loyal sister she was.

Ton laughed so hard he started to cough, and Ausha shot the colonel a glare of reprimand.

The colonel smirked at Ausha. *Since your wife thinks I'm bad for your health, I guess I'll just have to leave.* He turned to walk out of the room.

"No!" Ausha exclaimed. *You can't leave yet!*

Ausha's not my doctor. Come back here! You have to tell us how Jacquae accomplished everything she did without drawing any kind of suspicion.

The colonel positioned a chair next to Ton's bed and sat down. *Our scans show that Jacquae's physical age doesn't coincide with her date of birth. The figures show that she's a year younger than she should be. From that, we're assuming she spent the major part of her time on Novaun in that warehouse closet in suspended animation.*

Ton was amazed. It was so simple. Why hadn't anyone thought of it before? King had obviously possessed the ability to suspend his body functions to simulate death. It made sense that he would teach this ability to an agent who would not mingle in Novaunian society, thus eliminating the need for food and a place to take care of hygiene.

Ausha nodded, as amazed as Ton. *Of course. Just like King.*

Exactly like King, the colonel communicated with a nod. *We believe she came out of suspended animation four times—first, to manipulate King's bond with Deia in Launarda; second, to plant Adrian's ring at the Pavilion; third, to kill Anenka; and finally, to kill you.*

How was she able to manipulate the bond between Deia and her uncle? Ausha asked.

We may never know. I don't know whether it was the dijauntu bond that existed between her and King that somehow enabled her to manipulate Deia's bond, or whether it was her intimacy with the workings of King's mind. Perhaps it was a little of both.

How did she know when to come out of suspended animation? Ton asked.

She was able to spy on us through this little device. Colonel Quautar held out his palm, where rested a tiny brown screw. *She planted it in a table at the Pavilion. The only thing we can figure is that it absorbed all of the thought transmissions within a certain radius and forwarded them into her mind along a spiritual bond that connected to a sensor the medical examiner found surgically implanted in her brain. Since this little device doesn't transmit in the same way an electromatrix device does, we were unable to detect it. We found it by tracing the telepathic thread produced by the sensor we found in her brain. Without the spirit dimension formula and the access it gives us to the spirit dimension, we would never have found the monitoring device or figured out how it worked.*

Then she knew everything that passed between us at the Pavilion, Ton felt extremely uncomfortable with this new knowledge.

Everything. The colonel gazed at Ton in concern. *Are you going to be all right?*

I think so. I'm still in shock.

The colonel rested his hand on Ton's arm. *You handled yourself well. I'm relieved, even if you aren't yet.*

I am. But I can't stop thinking about what could have been, what almost was. Jacquae expected me to be too proud to ask for help. She was almost right. It was almost too late when I finally remembered the ring. A year ago, I'm not sure I would have pushed the button, even if I had remembered it.

That hardly matters now, does it? the colonel communicated gently.

Ton shook his head quickly. *I guess it doesn't.*
How safe are we now? Is it really over? Ausha asked.
It's over. It still isn't safe for either one of you to leave the planet, but on Novaun itself, you are free to go anywhere you wish.
What about Colonel Avenaunta's agents? Ton asked hopefully.
They won't be necessary anymore either.
Can you believe it? Ton communicated to Ausha in delight. *We're finally going to get some privacy!*

Chapter 26: REPERCUSSIONS

Once Braysel and Miaundea moved to Mautysia, they found that life there wasn't nearly as unpleasant as they had anticipated. Braysel's job was dull but tolerable, and he enjoyed school. Their apartment was comfortable, they had enough money and friends, and although Mautysians in general didn't usually regard them with any warmth, they were treated, at least, with a level of civility. They could have managed without much difficulty had it not been for Braysel's harrowing position in his family.

Braysel and Miaundea didn't attend any Jualaz or Nalaurev family functions for three months after their wedding, and when they finally did, they were shunned as they had known they would be by all but those who had attended their wedding. Braysel and Miaundea mingled with the members of Braysel's extended family as if mingling with actors on a stage performing a play in which Braysel and Miaundea had no role. No one communicated with them or even looked at them. It was a degrading, depressing experience they repeated over and over until finally, on a First Day afternoon a year after they had been married, Braysel's mother looked directly at Braysel and smiled.

Braysel lived for the next smile and the next and rejoiced when his father finally responded to his communications. He wasn't anywhere near being part of the family yet, but they were softening a tiny bit, and that gave him hope.

Miaundea's dissertation had been accepted by the Novaunian Board of Academies, but the ideas she had presented in it had not been accepted by the general Novaunian population or the intelligentsia. She lectured from time to time, but her audiences were small. Now and then she found support, and that kept her going. The Home World Chapter of the Young Adult Coalition for the Integration of Novaunian Cultures elected her to the position of president. She spent the bulk of her time managing the affairs of the organization and had even managed to recruit a few Mautysians, Kara included.

Miaundea's work in the Coalition put her in contact with Ausha on a regular basis, and they often spent hours together deep in communication, finding they had much in common. Miaundea's unlikely friendship with Ausha was one of the bright points of her life, and she regretted the year and a half of friendship they had lost because of her stupid jealousy.

Miaundea returned home one Eighth Day morning from a Coalition executive board meeting in Shalaun to find Braysel in a heated discussion with Maurek and Kara.

Braysel stood in front of the couch where Maurek and Kara were seated, shaking his hands at them in exasperation. *You know who they'll blame for this—me.*

Of course they'll blame you, Bray, Kara communicated in vexation, *because it's your fault! All your fault! If you hadn't joined the Fleet, you would never have met Maurek and neither would I!* She rolled her eyes in hopelessness.

They'll never accept me now. How can you do this to me?

Stop being so selfish! Kara communicated.

Miaundea moved toward a chair that faced the couch. *What's going on?*

Maurek's face was alive with happiness. *Kara and I are going to be married.*

Miaundea hugged them both. *Congratulations! That's wonderful!*

Bray doesn't think so, Kara accused.

How can I be happy about this? It will never work. You're both crazy!

Miaundea sank into her chair, amused. *Stop whining, Bray. You can't be surprised. They've been seeing each other for a year and a half.*

Just wait until her parents find out. They'll be outraged! They'll never accept it.

Miaundea turned to Maurek and Kara in concern. *You haven't told them yet?*

Maurek shook his head. *We thought Bray should learn it from us first.* He laughed a little. *We knew he would take it hard.*

Sit down, Bray, Kara communicated wearily. Braysel remained standing, scowling down at them. *Don't you think we've agonized over this decision? Two months ago we decided we wouldn't see each other or even communicate, but we couldn't do it. We want to be together. Can't you understand that?*

Kara's parents won't be happy about it, but they will accept it. I've never communicated or done anything to antagonize them, and as hard as they try, they can't help but like me. Maurek took Kara's hand. *My tour is over in two months. I'm quitting the Fleet.*

Braysel dropped himself into the only remaining chair. *You're quitting?*

It came down to a decision between Kara and the Fleet. I can live without the Fleet. I can't live without Kara.

What will you do? Braysel asked. *Surely you won't live in Mautysia.*

No. Not a chance in eternity.

Kara's squeezed Maurek's hand, her eyes bright with excitement. *Tell them, Maurek.*

Maurek's face mirrored Kara's excitement. *We just accepted positions on a deep space exploration vessel, the Raus Vraganaul. We'll be in space three years. When we return to Novaun, my experience on the Raus Vraganaul will enable me to get a job as a research astronomer anywhere I want.*

Braysel's irritation faded. *It's something you've always wanted to do.*

Maurek nodded. Kara explained, *We're hoping to eventually settle in Amaria. It's fairly neutral politically and is Maurek's ancestral home. Plus, it's close to both families. And I'll be able to continue working at the Institute if I want.*

Have you set a date yet? Miaundea asked.

No, Kara replied. *We want to wait until we communicate with my parents to begin making specific plans. We're leaving in three months, though, so it'll have to be before then.*

Braysel finally smiled, but Miaundea could tell he was in despair. *Congratulations.*

* * *

Kara's parents had been dreading a wedding announcement from Kara and Maurek for some time and weren't surprised when their fears were finally realized. They didn't, however, want to risk the humiliation of having to appear before the Civil Council and accepted the betrothal as Kara and Maurek had known they would. The rest of the family didn't accept it so gracefully, and for the first time in a year and a half, they vented their anger on Braysel.

It wasn't enough that you broke the hearts of your parents by joining the Fleet, you had to bring the Fleet home with you!

Kara wouldn't be marrying a Fleet man if you had done the right thing to begin with!

First you corrupt Mauya, and now you corrupt Kara!

Kara is practically a Fleet supporter, and it's all your fault!

Kara's boys will probably grow up and become Fleet officers like their father! How can you live with that on your conscience?

Braysel absorbed their blows without protesting once, sinking deeper and deeper into despair. Miaundea couldn't bear it and would have defended him had he allowed it.

You can't communicate anything, Miaundea. I've spent my life fighting them, and it never did any good. You just have to take it.

I can't take it! What they're doing to you is wrong! Their criticism of the Fleet is wrong! The way they're torturing Kara and Maurek is wrong! Kara and Maurek don't deserve this; you don't deserve this.

I do deserve it, Miaundea. They knew this would happen. That's why my family disowned me. They didn't want the Fleet element in their lives. That's why they insisted I repent. They knew that if I didn't, I would bring the Fleet home with me, and I did. I couldn't help it.

You can't blame yourself. What you did wasn't wrong.

I know that, and you know that, but until they know that, they will continue to make our life miserable.

Braysel's parents did not communicate one thought of criticism, but their chilling manner chastised Braysel in a way nothing else could.

Maurek and Kara were married as planned in a private ceremony that included only their immediate families and close friends. Braysel and Miaundea attended and were surprised that cordiality actually existed between Kara's parents and Maurek's. The wedding was beautiful and tranquil, and Braysel and Miaundea went home feeling that Maurek and Kara would manage well.

The First Day afternoon following the wedding, Braysel and Miaundea ate dinner with Braysel's immediate family in his parents' home. Braysel's parents never actually invited them to dinner, but they allowed them to come since the decision of the Civil Council gave them no choice.

The finality of Kara's decision to marry Maurek hung over them that day, and no one communicated much of anything. Finally, as they were finishing dinner, Braysel's mother broke the silence and communicated, *I hope you're pleased with yourself, Braysel. Of all the fine men Kara could have married, she chose a Fleet officer.*

Braysel stared at his plate in shame, itching to retaliate.

Miaundea couldn't endure it any longer. She threw down her napkin and communicated indignantly, *I've known Maurek all my life, and he's one of the best men any of you will ever know. He loves Kara with all his essence, and he'll always treat her with tenderness and respect. I'm sick of the way everyone in this family belittles him. I'm not going to sit here and assimilate this.* She stood up abruptly and left the table, followed by Braysel, who communicated nothing.

Miaundea refused to go with Braysel to any family gatherings for three months, then finally relented so that she could be with Braysel when he announced to his family that they were expecting a baby.

The birth of their first child, Jeldaun Braunen, softened Braysel's parents and grandparents more than anything else had. Their communication became more liberal, but relations remained strained. Still, Braysel and Miaundea were never invited to any family function but had to rely on Shaun and Mauya to tell them where they were supposed to be and when.

Braysel finally finished school and received status as a telepathic systems engineer. He went to work for a company in Mautysia that engineered new telepathic transmission recorders, and he and Miaundea moved to a larger home.

The years passed and their family grew, but Braysel's standing in the family remained the same. Braysel disliked his occupation and longed to be in the Fleet again or at least work in some sort of defense-related occupation. The futility of his desire discouraged him, and the combination of that and his family problems made him moody and tense. The frustration of Miaundea's life was that Braysel refused to ask his grandfather for a job at the Institute.

You would love that work, and he would hire you in a minute!

I can't do it.

Why?

Because he doesn't want me.

How will you know unless you ask?

Braysel shook his head in desolation. *Because if he did, he would ask me.*

Miaundea sighed. *I give up. I can't live like this anymore. I can't live with your dissatisfaction; I can't live with Mautysia; I can't live with your family.*

I'm sorry Miaundea, Braysel communicated, more despondent than ever. *I'm sorry I can't give you the life you want and deserve.*

It's time to stop being sorry! It's time to give it up and leave!

Maybe you're right, Braysel communicated, pondering. *Maybe it's time to just give it up.*

We've been working hard at this for ten years now, and it's gotten us nowhere. We can live on another planet, somewhere on the other side of the Union where we won't have to deal with any of this anymore. You can get a job developing medical technology. If you want, we can go to a Gudynean planet and you can do whatever you want. We can start all over again.

Braysel gazed at her tenderly. *You would really be willing to do that?*

I'm begging you, Bray. We have to get out of here.

Braysel nodded slowly. *You're right. We've done all we can do. It's time to accept the fact that we will never be a part of this family.*

Braysel went to Shalaun the next day and inquired at the Interstellar Employment Agency about jobs available outside the Union. Over the following months, he went on several interviews, finally finding a job with a robotics research and development firm on Gudynea.

Braysel and Miaundea stopped all contact with Braysel's family, and to Miaundea's relief, Braysel finally became a happy, relaxed person.

* * *

Two days before Braysel and Miaundea were scheduled to leave Novaun for good, while they were in the middle of packing the remainder of their belongings, they felt a telepathic summons from Braysel's Grandfather Jeldaun.

Braysel and Miaundea gaped at each other, stunned. *He's never come here before,* Miaundea communicated.

What in the universe could he want?

You let him in.

No, you.

Go to the door, Bray!

What will I communicate?

You'll think of something.

Please, Miaundea!

They felt the summons again. They glanced at each other in instant decision, then went to the door together.

When Braysel and Miaundea opened the door, they saw Braysel's grandfather there alone, appearing agitated.

Braysel tried to smile. *Grandfather, it's so good to see you. What brings you here this evening?*

Miaundea motioned him into the living room. *We're sorry there's no place to sit.*

Braysel's grandfather looked around the room, obviously disturbed. Braysel drummed his fingers on his thighs as he waited for his grandfather to explain his purpose for being there.

Braysel's grandfather finally communicated, *I understand you're taking a position on Gudynea.*

Braysel nodded, unable to bring himself to reply. Miaundea took his hand in hers in an effort to stop him from fidgeting.

When are you leaving?

Day after tomorrow.

Braysel's grandfather hesitated. *Why, Braysel?*

Braysel gazed directly into his grandfather's eyes, for once feeling no shame, no anger, no regret. *Because I don't belong here. I never have.*

That isn't true, Braysel, his grandfather communicated with a shake of his head, his thoughts laden with grief.

It is true, Grandfather. But that's all right. I've finally accepted it. It's time to move on.

Braysel's grandfather shrugged slightly. *I've rather missed having you around. I was hoping I might be able to persuade you to stay.*

Miaundea stared at Braysel's grandfather, astounded. Braysel shook his head in resolve. *That would be impossible.*

I'd like you to come work with me at the Institute. I'm growing weary with all of the responsibility, and I need someone who will eventually replace me, someone who has the skill and the vision to make the Institute better than I ever could. I want that person to be you.

Braysel was shocked and deeply moved. *I'm flattered.*

Will you do it?

I don't know. Braysel turned to Miaundea, baffled.

Miaundea appeared as perplexed as he felt. Finally, he communicated to his grandfather, *I'll never be a pacifist.*

I know.

There is the issue of salary.

His grandfather smiled. *You have status. I'll pay you whatever you want.*

Miaundea moved closer to Braysel, squeezing his hand in support. *I guess we'd better start unpacking.*

Braysel threw his arms around his grandfather, overwhelmed with joy. *When do I start?*

Chapter 27: A SATISFACTORY HUSBAND

Ton drove home from taking the children to Miaundea and Bray's, apprehensive about Ausha. She was ready to deliver their fourth child, two weeks overdue, her contractions five minutes apart, and all she could do was rush around the house like a mad woman, washing dishes, preparing food, and harvesting vegetables from her garden.

Relax, Ausha. You're going to wear yourself out.

I have a zillion things to do before I go to the hospital.

It'll all be here when you get home.

I know. That's why I'm doing it now!

It's time to go.

They're only five minutes apart. We have plenty of time.

Ton had finally given up and taken their ecstatic children to their much-anticipated overnight party with their friends. He felt sincerely sorry for Bray and Miaundea.

Ton looked forward to delivering this baby as he had delivered all of the others under the supervision of the physician who had given Ausha her prenatal care, but he dreaded the imploring request Ausha would make that night, the request she had made only three times in their twelve years of married life: *I want you to help.*

Ton knew how Ausha yearned for dijauntu. He yearned for it himself, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Even though he had lived a chaste life for all these years, he couldn't forget certain things. He thought that if they had been able to move to Dinevlea, it all would have eventually slipped away, but living in Mautysia he was forced to confront a persistent reminder of the person he had once been—Miaundea.

Ton loved Ausha and had no desire for Miaundea, but her presence sparked all kinds of memories. Friendliness existed between them and perhaps even affection, but he treated her in a detached way, burdened with an intense feeling of warning whenever they became too friendly or were together alone. He never discussed his feeling with Miaundea, but she understood and was never hurt by his coolness, which made him wonder if she had experienced the same feeling herself.

Ton marveled that Ausha would sacrifice dijauntu to be his companion, and the longer he lived with her, the more he appreciated her presence in his life. He often thought of Paul and knew, although he had never been told, that Paul had not been able to find a wife for so many years because of his unwillingness to do dijauntu. Paul had had at least two serious love relationships that had ended without any explanation. Finally, only four months before at age thirty-two, he had married little Helauna Vundaun, who had grown into a vivacious, beautiful young woman who adored him.

Ton was grateful he hadn't had to wait that long to find a woman who would love him enough, and over the years he had become more and more certain that Ausha had been a gift from God, his own precious miracle. The last thing in the universe he wanted was to destroy his relationship with her, and he was terrified dijauntu would do just that.

Ton parked the car on their landing platform and hurried to the door. Ausha met him there, her hairline wet with perspiration and her eyes glazed with weariness, her hand gripping a small suitcase. She smiled. *It's time.*

Then let's go. Ton took the suitcase and carefully led Ausha to the car.

Before Ausha seated herself in the car, she gazed up at Ton, her face soft with love. *I want you to help.*

Ton rested his fingers gently on her cheek, shaking his head sadly. *I can't. It's going to take forever.*

Ausha couldn't hide the disappointment she felt.

Don't ask me about it again.

And she never did.

Epilogue: ONE FOREVER

Leaning on his grandson Trynenuin for support, one hundred and ninety-seven-year-old Jeldaun Nalaurev stood up again and stepped onto the gold mat next to the vessel of nuayem oil. He gazed out over those in attendance at the wedding, thinking it was a strange sight. His children were there, along with their children, mingled with members of the Jualaz clan. Seated on the other side of the large holy room were Colonel Sharad Quautar and the members of his family, along with Major Teren Zaurvau and his wife and their children. Ton and Ausha Luciani and Ausha's family from Dinevlea were there also. Jeldaun was beginning to get used to the idea that this odd assortment of people would be bound in a way that day, but he still thought it was strange.

The groom, Jeldaun's grandson Jeldaun Braunen, Braysel's son, took his place in front of him with his bride, Melisa Luciani. The three joined hands, and Jeldaun initiated the telepathic chain.

Jeldaun had been uncomfortable with this union; everyone had been. Even the Lucianis weren't happy about it, someone had told him. Jeldaun and the other members of his family, however, had worked hard over the months to rid themselves of those feelings, not wanting to ruin the telepathic chain with strained emotions and determined to help Melisa feel good about her new position in the family.

Jeldaun placed his fingers on Jeldaun Braunen and Melisa's foreheads and communicated, *By authority of the Eternal Father, I ordain you, Jeldaun Braunen Nalaurev, to the role of taurnel and you, Melisa Rose Luciani, to the role of taurjra in the eternal family of God, our Father. In doing so, I put you, Jeldaun, and you, Melisa, under covenant to commit yourselves to God and each other for this life and forever. By continuing in righteousness and committing yourselves to each other, God promises to bless you abundantly in this life and accept you into His eternal family in Paradise. Melisa, do you accept this covenant?*

Melisa gazed at Jeldaun Braunen with ardent green eyes. *Yes.*

Jeldaun thought that she really was a beautiful girl in an exotic sort of way, with her curly black hair, full lips, and rich olive skin. Dr. Ton Luciani often claimed in satisfaction that, except for the curls, she was the exact image of his mother.

Jeldaun turned to his grandson. *Jeldaun, do you accept this covenant?*

Jeldaun Braunen smiled at Melisa rapturously. *Yes.*

Jeldaun dipped Jeldaun Braunen's right forefinger in the nuayem oil. Jeldaun Braunen touched the forefinger of his right hand to the forefinger of his left hand, then held up his hands to Melisa's, wetting her forefingers with the oil from his. Their fingers felt for each other's temples as Jeldaun proceeded with the ceremony: *Now you are privileged to enter into the most holy and intimate of all human relationships, the dijauntu. Repeat after me: Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.*

Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.

Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.

Jeldaun took Jeldaun Braunen's right hand and Melisa's left and joined them as he inserted the arelada triangles into their temples. *These sacred triangles represent the Eternal Triangle, with God at the top point and Man and Woman at the base points. Wear them and remember the covenants you have made here today.*

As everyone withdrew from the telepathic chain, Jeldaun took Jeldaun Braunen and Melisa's hands again and turned them toward their guests, communicating with a smile, *I present to you Mautysia's newest family, Jeldaun and Melisa Nalaurev!*

Jeldaun gave Melisa a squeeze. *Welcome to the family, Melisa.*

Melisa affectionately kissed his cheek, her eyes sparkling with happiness. *Thank you, minion.*

You may address me as Grandfather now.

All right, Grandfather. Then she released him and tightly embraced her new husband.

Melisa was an upstanding, gifted girl, a physician like her parents. There had been no reason not to accept the union. She and Jeldaun Braunen had been the closest of friends throughout their childhood and youth. Their decision to marry had been inevitable. Jeldaun had resigned himself to the fact that much of what had happened in his family had been inevitable.

What was becoming of Novaun?

* * *

Katherine Padilla, the mother of seven, was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. She resided more than thirty years in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area and recently moved to Florida. She has been writing novels since age thirteen. As a teenager, she was equally intrigued by prophecies of the Last Days and the television show *Star Trek*. At age seventeen she wrote her first story that combined prophecy with science fiction and even submitted it to a contest. That story remains unpublished (and unpublishable!), but her interest in exploring traditional values and religious themes through speculative fiction remains as strong as ever. Through many years of writing, studying, and reading widely, she has learned how to achieve just the right balance of spirituality and fantasy in her novels to both entertain and inspire.

Mrs. Padilla has given many speeches on the benefits of reading wholesome literature and has compiled resources to help readers in that pursuit on her website **Novaun Novels** at novels.zerosilver.com. 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*