

**HEIRS OF NOVAUN Book 1**

**THE DOUBLE-EDGED CHOICE**  
*A Futuristic Fantasy*

Katherine Padilla



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

## DEDICATION

*To my mother, Mary Hedrick Carter*

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## Prologue: ABDUCTED?

Daniel Zarek watched the woman from his peripheral vision as he waited to be seated. She sat alone in a sunny booth at the back of the restaurant, wearing a burgundy suit, her black hair pulled away from her beautiful face in an elegant knot at the nape of her neck. She slowly took a bite of salad, then sipped from her glass of water.

As the hostess led Daniel to a table, he took a better look at the dark-haired woman. She really was Lanuvael Vumaul Doshyr—she had to be. Despite the plain Earthon clothing and simple hairstyle, she looked very much like the images he had assimilated on InterMind sixteen and a half years before when she and her twin children had disappeared from the knowledge of Novaun.

Daniel's excitement grew as he approached her, along with his anxiety. Communicating with her would put his mission at risk, but he had to take the chance. In no other way would he learn whether she was on Earth by choice or whether she and her children had been abducted. The answer to that question would tell him whether her children were a danger to Novaun or not.

The hostess seated Daniel in a booth that adjoined Lanuvael's, separated only by narrow oak poles. He removed his hat and coat and set them aside as a waitress promptly arrived at his table. "I just need to warm up a bit," he said. "A cup of hot cocoa will be fine."

"Yes, sir," the waitress said cheerfully, hurrying away from his table.

Daniel didn't attempt to communicate with Lanuvael until the waitress returned and set a mug of hot chocolate on the table in front of him. He expanded his spirit and pressed it against Lanuvael's, inviting her to communicate in a way that couldn't be detected by the monitoring devices the Earthons used to record voices and thought transmissions.

Lanuvael did expand her spirit to partially overlap his, and he allowed his thoughts to flow into her mind. *Mineste Doshyr, I'm here to help—*

*No one can help me!* Her thoughts stabbed through him, icy with shock and terror. *You have no idea how completely you've compromised yourself, just by seeking for the information necessary to identify me. Get on the next flight away from Earth going anywhere, or you won't make it off Earth at all!* Then she wrenched her spirit away from his and refused to communicate more.

Understanding and dread crept through Daniel as he finished his drink. She knew that he was a Novaunian agent and was concerned for his safety, which meant she was still loyal. She had, however, refused to communicate with him in this secure way, which could only mean that even her thoughts were not her own and that the man who appeared to be her husband was really her captor. When the man returned home from work that afternoon and required her to give him the thoughts and events of the day, Daniel's identity would be unmasked.

Daniel arose, slid into his coat and hat, and walked to the front of the restaurant as casually as he could manage. Lanuvael had not exaggerated her danger or his. Daniel paid his bill and left the restaurant, nearly running.

A squad of Executioners waited for him outside the door.

## Part 1: EARTH

### Chapter 1: COVER BLOWN

*19th Year of the Divine Emperor  
Friday, February 2*

Myke Zarek entered his apartment, weary from a long day at work. He extended his arm to set his laptop by the door and nearly dropped it, grasping it again desperately and pushing it against the wall with a slam. He remained stooped there a moment, breathing slowly and forcing himself to relax. He straightened, slipped out of his coat and hung it in the closet, then walked through the tiny, sparsely furnished living area toward the kitchenette.

Myke's father had not been home for several days. Normally this wouldn't be unusual, but they planned to leave Earth for Novaun soon. No matter how hard Myke tried to tell himself that his father was simply finishing business and would be home at any moment, he couldn't rid himself of the fear that something terrible had happened.

Myke opened the small refrigerator and took out the milk. He removed the lid and drank the milk straight from the container, gulping so hard his chest hurt. As he drank, he felt his father's spirit touch his, relaying a telepathic transmission in code. Feeling a rush of panic, and at the same time relief, he quickly set the empty milk container on the counter, relaxed, and prepared to receive the message. Since this communication was weak, it required extreme concentration to receive it.

*Get out! Cover blown. Royal twins key.* The message was wrapped in emotions of love, confidence, and farewell. Then it was gone from understood existence with his father's being.

Immediately realizing that the authorities would trace the telepathic message to his apartment, Myke rushed into the bedroom and stuffed several changes of clothes, his wallet of computer discs, and a few toiletries into a leather shoulder bag. Within minutes he was moving with the crowds of people down the sidewalk away from his apartment building, watching for Executioners.

Myke pulled the fur collar up over the scarf around his neck to block the frosty air and hide his face, his mind traveling backward in time several years and remembering Tavon, the country that was his home. He could almost feel the warm rain on his cheeks and the beach's white sand between his toes.

A gust of icy wind shattered the nostalgic images. He shivered. There were no seas near Tryamaz, and the rain that fell there was usually cold.

Located in what was once Missouri in the United States, Tryamaz was the capital city of Earth's massive empire. Earth's "Divine" Emperor, Arulezz Zarr, depended heavily on arelada crystal to maintain telepathic control over Earth's billions of subjects, but it was a raw mineral that was not native to Earth. It was mined on several planets, primarily Novaun. Officially, Earth was at peace with the United Interstellar Alliance of Planets. It owned several arelada mines, companies, and a substantial amount of prime territory on arelada-producing planets other than Novaun. Unofficially, Earth wanted control of the arelada trade and was planning to conquer the Alliance to gain it.

Myke and his father had acquired proof that Earth was preparing to attack several primary arelada sources in twelve Earth weeks, and they had collected many specific details that would aid in repelling the attack. Myke's knowledge of Earth's plans was the Alliance's only hope—that and the spirit dimension formula.

Myke nearly dove into the back seat of a taxi that drove up beside him. "Spaceport," he said quickly. The door made a whirring noise as it slid shut. He leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes. Why had his father died? They had been so close to returning to Novaun. Two years, and nothing had happened. Why now? Why? Myke had known since they had begun training for this mission that one or both of them might be killed. He had never worried much about his own life, but he had always been afraid that his father's life would be taken. He had tried again and again to bury the fear, to harden himself against possible loss, but he had never been successful.

A tear trickled down Myke's cheek, but he quickly wiped it away. "Oh, God, help me," he breathed. He leaned forward and covered his face with his hands in an attempt to smother the emotion.

Once Myke composed himself, he sat back up and stared out the window for the duration of the trip, analyzing his situation and determining how to proceed. Communication to Novaun had been forbidden. Even if Novaun would allow it, Myke knew that he wouldn't be able to obtain the help he would need to telepathically transmit a message over that distance, because he and his father had not been in contact with any other agents since they had arrived on Earth, and nine months had passed since they had received contact from a courier from Novaun.

Even so, Earth's authorities would be aware of any unauthorized communication. He couldn't steal a ship, because it would never get past the two Star Force fleets he knew were now sitting in Earth's space territory. A hired vessel wouldn't get past the fleets either, so he decided his best option was to use his standing reservation on a commercial flight to Nustydun in the Gudynean Federation, where he would catch a connecting flight to Dinevlea, then on to Novaun.

The sound of air being released signaled to Myke that he had arrived at the spaceport. He quickly paid the driver, then hurried to the ticketing section.

"I have a standing reservation on a flight to Nustydun," Myke explained to the man at the ticketing counter, removing the scarf from his mouth slightly. "I would like to get on the next flight out of here. My name is Lon Brown. Here's my passport."

The man quickly accessed Lon Brown's file on the computer. "Everything checks out. Next flight is at seven thirty-five." He handed Myke a boarding pass. "Flight 1215, Gate 27K."

"Don't you have anything sooner?"

"No."

"Oh well. I guess that will have to do." Myke took the boarding pass and left the ticketing counter, then strode through several lobbies of the huge complex with people waiting for flights to different systems, looking for the gate with his flight number.

Once he found the right gate, he began searching for a place where he could hide until his flight was ready to leave. As he walked, he brushed past a door that read in bold print: "Men." Of course! What better place? He entered the restroom and found an empty stall where he could wait.

The next three hours passed slowly for Myke. He couldn't stop wondering how his father had died. Perhaps it was better he didn't know. What would he tell his sisters when he saw them? If he ever saw them again. Novaun was so far away. He breathed nervously. Everything depended on him.

Myke glanced at the interplanetary time calculator on his wrist. Seeing that only fifteen more minutes remained until his flight would leave, he stood up and stretched his stiff muscles. He took a deep breath and stepped out of the stall, then exited the men's room and rushed toward the lobby where those traveling to Nustydun awaited their flights.

Suddenly he halted. Noticing two Executioners approaching a ticketing counter ahead of where he stood, he slipped into an adjoining lobby. He stood quietly by the lobby's entrance as one of the Executioners began speaking to the ticketing counter personnel. The Executioners both possessed muscular builds under black uniforms with red trim, and arelada crystals that had been cut into diamond-shaped prisms hung on gold chains around their necks.

"We're looking for a boy, nineteen years old," one of the Ex-men said. Myke leaned toward the voices and listened more intently.

"He has brown hair, blue eyes, and is of an average height and build. He's traveling under the name Lon Brown. Here's a photo of him." Fear overwhelmed Myke. The Ex-men would soon have the entire spaceport watching for him. "He's an extremely dangerous criminal. If you see anyone that fits this description, notify us immediately."

"Yes sir," a woman's voice quavered.

Myke heard terror in the ticket attendant's voice. Was she afraid of encountering him, or was she terrified of the Executioners? Myke guessed the latter. He glanced over his shoulder, then hurried to his flight gate.

Once he arrived at his flight gate, he approached the view window and watched workers prepare a large shuttle for flight. The night sky was spitting snow that appeared iridescent against the backdrop of colorful lights. Evidently the craft was the one he would take to the Gudynean transport ship orbiting Earth, for it was almost ready.

"Flight 1215 to Nustydun is now boarding. Repeat . . ."

Myke jumped in surprise at the booming voice. He looked cautiously around the lobby. Not noticing any Executioners, he hurried to the gate.

Holding his breath in anticipation, he waited in line to board the spaceship. Centimeter by centimeter, the line crept as boarding passes were checked and people stepped into the entrance corridor. Only one more person needed to have his boarding pass examined before Myke would undergo the same procedure. His lips trembled and his eyelids dropped shut. Home was so close . . . so close . . .

As he presented his boarding pass to be examined, a hand gripped his shoulder. He felt himself being forced to turn and face two Executioners. Dismayed, he quickly evaluated his situation. Maybe they would think they had made a mistake and would let him go.

"Let's see some I.D."

Myke replied in his most polite tone of voice, "Sirs, you are holding up the line. Please allow me to board my flight in peace." He reached inside his coat for his passport.

One of the Ex-men eyed Myke quizzically. He pulled the hat off his head and the scarf away from his mouth. "It's him!"



Myke instantly slammed his laptop into the head of one of the Executioners, catching him completely by surprise. The Ex-man collapsed, unconscious.

Even as the other Executioner reached for his weapon, Myke slammed his laptop against his head and knee-kicked him in the groin. The Executioner moaned and doubled, and Myke executed a powerful blow to the back of his neck as his computer tumbled to the floor.

Myke knelt and grabbed the Executioners' immobilizers, then yanked the arelada from their necks. He sprang up and pointed one of the pistols threateningly at the crowd that had gathered around the commotion. As the crowd backed away from him, he slowly moved away from it. Then he turned and sprinted toward the spaceport's main terminal, scanning for an exit.

As he ran he saw the two Executioners he had seen earlier bounding toward him at an angle from his right. He halted, aimed his pistol at one of the Ex-men, fired, and ran for cover. A neurodart shot out of his weapon and penetrated the Ex-man's heart. The other Ex-man was only momentarily surprised by the effectiveness of the distant shot as his companion dropped to the floor. Just as Myke was about to duck behind a ticketing counter, the Ex-man fired his immobilizer.

Myke shrieked as the neurodart penetrated his right shoulder. Hot pain seared rapidly through the nerve network of his upper back, inflaming nerves and jamming the neuronal transmissions of the nearby nerves it didn't touch, temporarily paralyzing the muscles in the affected area. Before he had a chance to feel the molecular robots in his spine, his mind fogged, then blackened.

## Chapter 2: DRAFTED

*Friday, February 2, 19 Y.D.E.*

Deia Sheldon adjusted the diamond and emerald necklace around her neck as she stood backstage of a Tryamaz concert hall, waiting for the curtain to rise. Of all the concerts she had played, this one was the most important. Her teacher had arranged it, publicized it, and invited Phillip Moreau, Earth's finest pianist-composer, to attend. Phillip Moreau didn't often teach, but he had been so impressed by Deia's recent publicity and the recordings her teacher had sent to him that he was considering taking her on tour as his protégée. He would make his final decision that night after hearing her perform.

Deia watched in anticipation as the members of the orchestra took their positions and tuned their instruments. She and the orchestra represented Divine Empress Jesalya School of the Arts, the prestigious intermediate school she had attended for the past four years. The orchestra had gained a modest level of fame throughout the world, and this was the last concert the senior musicians would give before they separated. Many members of the orchestra had already received full-time positions in the finest symphony orchestras on Earth, and others planned to attend highly accredited advanced schools of music for more extensive training. Deia's dream was to become a member of the Divine Emperor's Court, a position already achieved by Phillip Moreau, a position greatly desired by musicians all over the galaxy.

Maestro Bruce Leonard, the guest conductor, stood next to Deia. He quickly adjusted the long blue brocade sash of his black tuxedo as the red velvet curtain slowly rose. He patted Deia on the shoulder. "Good luck!" he whispered.

Deia again adjusted her necklace, then walked onto the stage and proceeded to the black concert grand piano, her green taffeta gown rustling as she walked. The maestro followed her onto the stage and took his position in front of the orchestra.

Deia sat down at the piano and waited for the maestro to give her the cue to begin. Out of the corner of her eye, she captured a glance of her twin brother Paul, her Aunt Lena, and her Uncle Sanel sitting in their usual seats on the front row. She welcomed their expressions of encouragement, for the concerto she was about to play was the Second Piano Concerto of pre-Day of Liberation composer Sergei Rachmaninoff, and it had not been performed by anyone on Earth for many years. Deia had always been fascinated by pre-Day of Liberation music, and this concerto had always been one of her favorites.

The maestro lifted his hands, and the members of the orchestra lifted their instruments to playing positions. He turned toward Deia and motioned for her to start. Her fingers softly touched the keys as she began the introduction. The power of the introduction grew as she entered the first movement and was joined by the orchestra.

During the next thirty-five minutes, Deia focused on the music, her fingers floating over the keyboard with confidence. The music flowed through her body, moving her spirit with a passion that only it could, and as it moved her, she soared to greater heights of expression.

Deia ran her fingers up and down the keyboard in her solo preceding the finale. The anticipation grew as the music trickled from low notes to high, retarding to a rest. Then she and the orchestra joined again and entered full-force into the finale. The finale progressed

to its powerful concluding measures, and the conductor dramatically brought the concerto to a close.

Deia felt drained but knew she had done well. The audience applauded vigorously as the orchestra stood and the maestro bowed. Deia arose and stepped to the front of the piano, bowing slightly, and as she did, the sound of applauding intensified as everyone in the concert hall stood. Deia had never experienced such a feeling of elation. They wanted an encore! She glanced over at the maestro, who simply nodded and smiled.

She resumed her seat at the piano and began playing a piece by Claude Debussy. It was romantic and beautiful, representative of her own time, yet reminiscent of a bygone century. She completed the piece and again took her bow as the curtain lowered, the enthusiasm of the audience no less than it had been after the first piece she had played.

Once the curtain had completely lowered, she removed a handkerchief from the little pocket her Aunt Lena had designed into her gown and used it to wipe the perspiration from her forehead. Members of the orchestra clustered around her, overflowing with praise, and she praised them just as enthusiastically. Finally she slipped away and went to her individual dressing room.

Paul met Deia at the door, already wearing his coat over his black tuxedo. "You were terrific! That was by far your best performance ever! You are supreme!"

"Was he here?"

Paul put his hand on Deia's back and led her into the room. "I didn't see him come in, but that doesn't mean anything. He might have come in just as the performance started."

"Oh, I hope!" Deia proceeded toward the closet to get her coat. She halted for a moment. "Do you think I'll ever be good enough for the Divine Emperor's Court?"

Paul had lost his animation and appeared tired. "I don't know why you would want to be."

Deia felt hurt. "Just because you don't agree with his politics . . . It's still a great honor."

"I know," Paul said with a sigh. "I'm sorry. I know how much it means to you. I guess I'm just a little preoccupied."

Deia frowned. Paul hadn't been himself for the last couple of weeks, but she, in anticipation of her concert, hadn't noticed until now. Any other time she would have felt terrible for being so unobservant, but she was still too delirious over her chance to study with Phillip Moreau to feel too sorry. Before she could ask Paul what was wrong, a knock sounded at the door. "Come in!" she called.

Rachael, Deia's piano teacher, rushed into the room. "You make me so proud!" She embraced Deia. "I hate having to lose you."

"Was he here?"

Deia's teacher nodded quickly. "He certainly was. I don't know whether he'll take you or not yet, but I'm going to speak with him later tonight. Things are looking very promising!"

"Call me as soon as you find out anything." Deia squeezed her teacher's wrinkled fingers. "Oh, I'm so excited!"

Rachael patted Deia's hand. "I know. I'll call you as soon as I speak with him."

After her teacher left, Deia turned to Paul. "Did you hear that? He'll take me, I just know it!"

"That's wonderful, Deia." He didn't smile.

Another knock sounded at the door. Deia laughed. "Come in!" This time one of the cellists entered the room. "Oh hello, Jeff!"

"Deia, you were supreme!"

"So were you."

Jeff nodded confidently. "I guess we all did well, didn't we? Anyway, Deia, everyone's meeting at Antonio's in half an hour. Will you be there?"

Before Deia could respond, she felt Paul's thoughts enter her mind. *Not tonight.*

*But, Paul, Antonio's Lasagna sounds so good.*

*Not tonight, Deia. We'll go to Antonio's another time.*

"I'm afraid I'll have to pass, Jeff. I'm exhausted."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Everyone will miss you, but I'm sure they'll understand."

"I'll see you later."

After Jeff left the room, Deia turned to Paul. "What is this all about?"

Paul shook his head, a peculiar light in his gray-blue eyes. "Not here. Let's go." He held Deia's white mink coat as she slipped into it. She picked up her purse and followed Paul silently out the door.

Deia shivered as they stepped outside. Paul held his arm out for her. "It looks slick." She took his arm and held tightly as he led her to their silver aircar. They slid into the back seat, grateful it was already warm. Paul leaned forward. "Home," he said to the chauffeur.

The aircar rose into the air and whisked them through Tryamaz. Paul leaned his head back and closed his eyes, while Deia stared out the window, mesmerized by the falling snow and twinkling lights of the city.

In minutes the aircar came to a stop in the landing bay attached to Paul and Deia's penthouse apartment. As they entered their home, the lights came on. "I wonder where Lena and Sanel are," Deia said. "I thought they would be home by now."

"They went to supper." Paul helped Deia out of her coat and hung it in the closet.

Deia stepped out of her green high-heeled shoes, letting her feet sink into the plush, creamy white carpet, then seated herself gracefully on the crimson velvet couch. She removed her necklace and carefully set it on the coffee table, then quickly removed the diamond and emerald-studded pins from her hair, shaking out the curls. Paul removed his coat and wandered over to the piano. He stared out the window-wall, his dark brown hair appearing black against the falling snow that was glowing in the light emanating from the Divine Emperor's Palace and Liberation Court.

Deia stretched her arms and leaned her head against the back of the couch. "So . . . what's wrong?"

"Hmmm? Oh . . ." Paul closed the drapes. "There really isn't any easy way to tell you this."

Deia stared at the floral carvings on the coffee table. "Go on."

"We've been drafted."

Deia sat up straight and turned abruptly toward her brother. "We've been *what*?"

"We have to report to the Star Force Institute of Science on Monday, and after a day of orientation, we'll be shuttled to the fleet base ship *Sovereign of the Stars*."

Deia waved her hands. "Oh no. Not me. I have other plans."

"And I don't?"

"How long have you known about this?"

“A few weeks—”

“And you didn’t tell me!”

Paul approached the couch and sat down next to Deia. “No. Lena and I thought it would be better to wait until after graduation and your concert.”

“Lena? You mean she knows about this too? Does Sanel know?”

Paul grunted. “Oh yes, Sanel knows about it.”

“Can’t he get us out of it?”

“He says he has no control over the recruiting board. It’s under Admiral Laddan.”

“Just what kind of fools does he think we are? There isn’t a person on that recruiting board who wouldn’t jump off the top of the Council’s office building if our dear uncle told him to.”

Paul nodded in grim agreement. “That doesn’t change anything for us though.”

“Military service . . .” Deia grimaced. “Just what exactly are we going to do on this spaceship?”

“I’ll study to be an electrical engineer, and you’ll study to be a neurosurgeon.”

Deia couldn’t help but laugh. “You have to be joking.”

“I wish I were. My training is supposed to last for three years. Yours will last for seven.”

“Seven years? I have to be on that spaceship for *seven years*!”

“Well, no. You may not spend the entire seven years on this particular spaceship, but all together it’ll be seven years. I guess it takes a long time to become a neurosurgeon.”

Deia shook her head quickly. “This just isn’t right. I can represent our culture to billions of people all over the galaxy! What possible use could I be to the government in Star Force? The very idea is ridiculous!”

Paul folded his arms over his chest and stared sulkily at his lap.

Deia scrutinized him. “You know something about this, don’t you.”

“How should I know why the government wants us in Star Force?”

“But you have an idea.”

“All I know is that too many things are wrong.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the Science Corps is completely bourgeois. The government doesn’t draft aristocrats. Aristocrats buy appointments to Star Force’s officer training program. Nobles don’t even have to buy their appointments. They’re automatically accepted even if they’re imbeciles!”

Deia was surprised to feel relieved. “I guess, then, that our situation could be worse. I’d much rather be a neurosurgeon than a military officer.”

Paul’s eyes shone with hysteria. “You won’t feel that way when we’re ostracized by the people who are supposed to be our friends and, at the same time, despised by the people we’re forced to work with.”

Deia knew that she should feel alarmed by Paul’s observation, but for the moment, the career implications far outweighed the social ones. “All right, so people like us train to become officers, not—” She stopped, searching for the right word.

“Certified professionals,” Paul said.

“All right, so we should be training to be officers, not ‘certified professionals.’ What else is wrong with our wonderful new situation?”

"I've never known anyone who's gone into the Science Corps, but as for officer training, all applicants are heavily tested for compatibility with space travel. Everyone accepted into the program spends February and March after graduation in orientation and basic training at the Officers Academy before being assigned to a ship. Not only that, but all of my friends received notice of their appointments six months ago!"

"Paul, that is strange."

"It's Sanel. He's behind this, I just know it. That son of Abomination is manipulating our lives again."

"But why? He knows our talents. He knows that Star Force isn't a good fit for either one of us. Not only that, but this is the man who nearly had a heart attack when I went out with the chauffeur. Wouldn't it make him look bad if we joined the bourgeoisie? It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe not, but it makes more sense than anything else."

Deia's voice quavered. "You're probably right." A tear spilled from one of her eyes. Paul quickly brought his anger under control and drew Deia into his arms.

Somewhat later they heard a sound at the door. Deia released her hold on Paul and quickly dabbed her face with her handkerchief. They stood up as Lena and Sanel entered the apartment. Lena and Sanel were the most beautiful couple Deia had ever seen, especially wearing the formal clothing Lena had designed and the jewelry she had crafted. Sanel's black hair was fashionably slicked back over his ears, and an arelada crystal set in an intricately carved pendant hung on a gold chain from around his neck. Lena's soft black hair was swept up in an elaborate style and studded with diamonds set in white gold. Both Lena and Sanel were youthfully lean and had perfect facial features and fair, unlined skin, as if they were twenty-five instead of thirty-nine and forty-five.

Sanel helped Lena out of her coat and smiled slightly at Deia. "Superb, Deia. Absolutely superb."

Deia bowed her head slightly. "Thank you, sir."

Once out of her coat, Lena broke away from Sanel and stepped down into the living room. Deia gazed affectionately at her aunt as she walked toward her. She was the epitome of talent and refinement, and Deia had always longed to be like her. "You were wonderful tonight. You dazzled them all!"

Deia embraced Lena. "Funny, it doesn't matter much anymore. I've wasted my entire life working for something I can never have."

"You haven't wasted your life! You have an extraordinary talent, and you don't have to be part of the Divine Emperor's Court to use it. You've already gained a level of skill that most people can never dream of obtaining, and yes, a level of fame too."

Lena released Deia when Sanel approached them. Sanel gently cupped his hand around Lena's jaw, caressing her cheek with his thumb. "Don't be long, darling."

Lena smiled and rested her hand on his. "Of course not."

After Sanel was gone, Deia embraced Lena again, tightly. "I'm going to miss you so much . . ."

Lena's voice was barely audible. "I'm going to miss you too."

Deia gasped, then leaned her face against her aunt's neck and wept.

### Chapter 3: THE SET-UP

Myke slowly regained consciousness in a small room, still wearing his coat. He immediately became aware that his shoulder was burning, and with that awareness came memories of his fight with the Executioners and his father's death. He squeezed his eyes shut, telling himself over and over, *Control . . . control . . . keep control . . . you still have a mission to finish . . .*

Several moments later, he carefully lifted himself to sitting position and surveyed the room. The floor was covered with gray office carpet, the walls were painted light blue, and the brown leather divan on which he was sitting was the only piece of furniture in the room. He glanced at his time calculator and discovered that he had been asleep all night.

Feeling nauseated, he lay back down. Why couldn't his father have listened? Why couldn't he have agreed to leave Earth sooner? He had always been too stubborn, too meticulous, too concerned about people they didn't even know. He would still be alive had they left two months before on the night the spirit dimension formula had been discovered.

Myke had been lying in his bed, listening to classical music on his laptop, when he had felt an emphatic, *Teren! Get in here!*

Myke sat up in bed with a start. His father had not called him "Teren," even telepathically, for over two years. He stood up and ran into the unfurnished room next door where his father conducted his telepathic experiments. His father was standing on the other side of the room, his lips dry and trembling, his naturally pale face flushed, and his light blue eyes glazed and feverish. The indentation in his chin seemed even deeper in the soft yellow light.

Myke only had to look at him to know. "You found it." For decades his father and other telepathy scientists all over the galaxy had been searching for the formula that would allow instantaneous movement from place to place by the power of thought. Could the search really be over?

Myke's father nodded, slow but vigorous nods. They overlapped spirits partially, their thoughts flowing back and forth between them. *I saw it! It was just for a second, but I saw the spirit dimension!*

*It exists. It really exists!* Then it came. The rush. The delirium of sharing in a discovery.

Myke's father motioned Myke to move closer. *I could see it, but I couldn't get there. It isn't as we believed; the spirit energy formula must work separately from the transforming formula, but still in conjunction with it, the neuronal transmissions of both formulas fitting together in just the right pattern.*

Myke understood in an instant. To transform their physical bodies temporarily into spirit matter and get to the spirit dimension, two people had to overlap spirits and execute the spirit energy formula and the spirit transforming formula simultaneously in the proper sequence.

Myke mentally executed the spirit energy formula and his father followed with the transforming formula. A burst of vital energy swelled around them, and the room became an unreal, misty, opalescent glow. Myke's father formed images of the kitchen in his mind, but nothing happened. Myke reached his arms forward and attempted to walk toward the door, but his fingers instead touched an undefined barrier. The misty opalescence dissipated around them, and they were again standing in his father's laboratory.

His father's eyes were intense with passion. *We're almost there; we're almost there!* They executed the two formulas again and again, but it wasn't until the eleventh time that they found the proper combination.

Spirit energy swelled around them again, and they stood in a lucid glow. The items in the room appeared in their natural colors, not in shimmering opalescence, but velvety and amazingly more defined than reality. His father appeared so real that Myke was certain he could touch him. He did, and his hand went right through his father's chest. Everything in the room was sharper than a hologram, yet just as intangible.

Myke's father formed an image of the kitchen in his mind, and in an instant, they were standing in the kitchen. The glow dissipated, and Myke's father clutched Myke's arm in excitement as they returned to the physical dimension. *If only your mother could be here. If only your mother could be alive to be a part of this! She waited so long, hoped with me so intensely.*

For a moment, Myke was stunned that his mother had even known. No one else had. Then he felt ashamed and embarrassed for being so naïve. Of course she had known! How could she not have?

*We have to leave, Father, tonight. This discovery makes us twice as vulnerable, and we need to return to Novaun with it immediately. It's of no use to us here.*

His father's face was grave. *We can't leave yet. Our mission isn't finished.*

*But it is! No one in Fleet Command would want us to stay under the circumstances!*

*You don't understand. I have new information. This doesn't concern only Novaun anymore. There are people who could be in danger.*

*Who?*

*I can't tell you that yet. This information is extremely volatile. I'm concerned about your safety.*

*We need to leave!*

*Earth will never have the spirit dimension formula from us—no one here will ever know we have it. It won't hurt to stay a little longer.*

*But these other people . . . certainly someone else could be sent to help them.*

*Certainly, but not without specific information that we can give them if only we remain a little longer. These people may be in considerable danger. I don't know yet. If they aren't, then they are a considerable danger to us. If we return now, we may cause a delay that will do irreparable damage. Trust me, Teren.*

Myke had trusted his father then, but now he wished he had been more persistent in his efforts to persuade him to leave Earth. Helping these people surely couldn't have been as important as his father's remaining alive. If they were so potentially dangerous to Novaun, then he and his father should have returned immediately to Novaun with the information. Myke assumed the royal twins to whom his father had referred in his message would be Earth's primary tool in its attempt to gain control of Novaun's arelada. Were they also part of a conspiracy to destroy these people he and his father had remained on Earth to help? Or were they treacherous people his father had believed in the beginning needed help? It didn't really matter. His father was dead instead of alive.

Myke put his fingers to his throbbing temples and closed his eyes. The Earthons had tried to break into his subconscious, but the mental barriers he had placed there had prevented them from succeeding. He breathed slowly, deeply, attempting to alleviate some



of the headache's intensity. He had to think. He and his father had been so careful in their testing of the experimental formula. How could anyone have known what they were doing?

They had tried the formula once with a car late at night to see if it would move a vehicle, knowing that traveling any great distance on the spirit dimension without a vehicle would be too dangerous until the formula was developed and perfected. They had not been able to get the car to move one millimeter. How could the authorities have learned anything from that failed experiment?

Myke's father had decided that moving a vehicle would require two extra people. All of the testing they had done in their apartment using telepathy vision flight simulation had supported this theory, and after extensive testing, they had determined that a four-seat armed shuttle was the smallest existing space vessel capable of incorporating the spirit dimension formula without drastically increasing its arelada load and thus disrupting its delicate balance of weight and rendering it otherwise inoperable.

The only way the Department of Internal Investigation could have discovered their private tests was by electronically monitoring their apartment for thought wave transmissions, but the D.I.I. had to have had a reason for suspecting them of being foreign agents. The only thing Myke could think of was that either he or his father had unknowingly done something to draw suspicion from a neighbor or a colleague. He supposed his father had been arrested and put under mind torture, but why hadn't he been arrested with his father? It didn't make sense.

Myke became conscious of how his father had died with severity. Mind torture. Of all ways to die, mind torture was the most painful, the most degrading, the most dreaded by all agents.

Before he could dwell any further on the way his father had died, he started at the sound of the door sliding open. He sat up as quickly as his body would let him. Two Star Guards wearing the gray uniforms of Star Force's warrior ranks entered the room. One of the guards motioned to the exit. "Come with us."

Myke stood up and walked slowly to the door, analyzing his strange situation. Why in the galaxy was Star Force involved in this? He picked up his bag and laptop and stepped out of the room into a corridor, two more guards waiting for him there. As the guards escorted him through the building, he came to the conclusion that it was a Star Force installation, a very large one. The guards eventually stopped at a door that said "Personnel."

Myke's heart tightened in alarm. What was going on? One of the guards pushed a button to open the door, then led Myke through a large office room, missing most of its staff because of the Sabbath, to an individual office at the back.

The guards halted outside the door, and their spokesman said, "Lieutenant Reymas will see you now."

Myke hesitated. The whole thing felt like a set-up. Realizing, however, there was nothing he could do but play along, he took a step into the office and examined it skeptically.

On one wall hung a huge imitation of the famous painting "Sunset Over Tryamaz," and on another hung a large portrait of the youthful Prince Jahnzel, the Divine Emperor's brother and Director of Defense before dying of a stroke at the unusual age of thirty-two. On the wall behind the lieutenant's desk hung an Earthon flag--a wine-red banner picturing

an angel with wings spread, holding aloft a crystal sword with both hands. A bronze statue of Tohmazz Zarr stood in a corner.

The lieutenant was sitting at a huge oak desk, studying his computer screen. He was very slim, almost what Myke would consider emaciated, and his red hair clashed with his navy blue shirt. "Sit down, Zarek," he said without looking away from the monitor.

Myke seated himself in one of the black leather chairs facing the lieutenant's desk. Several minutes passed before the lieutenant turned and looked at him. "I've run across a few young people who've been upset about being drafted, but you're the first one who's dared try to leave the planet. Did you really think you could get away with it?"

"Drafted? You must be mistaken. I was never—"

Lieutenant Reymas leaned back in his chair, his contemptuous green eyes studying Myke's face. "You were supposed to register with this office by 1700 yesterday so that we could be sure you received your orders. When we didn't hear from you, we went to your home. When we didn't find you there, we went looking. And, well, the rest you know."

Myke's eyes narrowed. "Why all the muscle?"

"Let's just say that was our insurance policy."

Myke glared at the lieutenant. "And just what does Star Force want with me?"

"You will be going aboard the fleet base ship *Sovereign of the Stars* Monday evening. You will train there for the next three years to be an operations engineer."

"I'm already an engineer, and my experience is with speed craft design, not base ship operation."

The lieutenant scanned his screen. "You attended Tryamaz Intermediate School of Technology, where you spent your senior year on a co-op program with Briggs Spacecraft Development. You graduated with a perfect 100. grade average. You were then hired on at Briggs full-time as an associate design engineer, which is where you've been for the last year." He turned his head slightly to face Myke again. "You'll have no trouble making the switch."

"Now for the reason I summoned you. Because of your conduct, you've been put on restriction."

"Restriction from what?"

"You will not be allowed shore leave until your superiors on the ship decide otherwise."

Myke studied the lieutenant's mocking face. Earth's Department of Internal Investigation was setting him up; there was no doubt about it. Earth desperately wanted the spirit dimension formula, and since he was the only person in the universe who knew it, the authorities weren't about to allow him to die under torture until they obtained it from him. And just how much did they assume about the formula? Did they realize he would need help if he wanted to use it to escape?

Of course they did! He had practically shouted that information to them when he had tried to leave Earth on a commercial flight instead of using the formula. Fortunately, however, they didn't know how many helpers he would need. Their surveillance devices would have intercepted the telepathic transmissions between his father and him, but most of the formula's experimentation had been done through spirit expansion and telepathy vision, two processes that could only be penetrated by sophisticated Awareness monitoring devices. If the Earthons had attempted to use Awareness monitors to tap into their communication, he and his father would have detected it immediately. The D.I.I.'s

engineering consultants could estimate the number of helpers he would need to use the formula, but there was no way they could know for sure.

“You’ll be escorted to one of the men’s dormitories, and you’ll stay there until tomorrow, when you’ll attend orientation and be prepared to board the ship. Your dorm assignment is Payne Hall 712. You are dismissed.”

As Myke walked with the guards to the car that was waiting outside to take him to the dormitory section of what he now presumed was the Star Force Institute of Science, he pondered his situation. How long had the D.I.I. been conducting surveillance on his father and him? Several days? A week? Several weeks? They hadn’t suspected a thing—alarming evidence of the D.I.I.’s competence. Even so, Myke felt some comfort in the knowledge that he and his father had always taken the precaution of not discussing their work or ties to Novaun unless it was necessary, so the D.I.I. still didn’t have much specific information.

Myke reconstructed the events that had occurred on the day he had last seen his father. They had left together at the usual time that morning. His father had taken the attaché case he used to hold his various disguises, hoping to make contact with a person who would give him the final piece of information he had been seeking during the past several months, undoubtedly information about the “royal twins.” Had his father’s potential informant been the one to betray him? Had his father made contact at all?

Obviously the D.I.I. had had no intention of arresting him with his father, but why his father instead of him? They must have known that a specialist of his father’s caliber wouldn’t break under torture. Perhaps the only thing they had wanted was the transmission, which led to another question: Why had his father allowed himself to be tortured for three whole days? Though the transmission had been weak, his father’s arelada couldn’t have been exhausted; both he and his father had replaced their eye contacts only two weeks before. That the Earthons had confiscated the contacts seemed even less likely. The contacts had been constructed of microscopic particles of arelada, interwoven with cells from the fibrous tunics of his father’s own eyes. Novaunian engineers had even found a way to disguise the arelada particles so that they would not be detectable to the most advanced sensing devices, including Awareness monitors. Not only that, but if the Earthons had confiscated his father’s contacts, wouldn’t they have taken his also?

Myke decided instead that his father had, indeed, made contact with his informant and that he had learned something of such vital importance that he had clung to every second of his life just in case a chance to escape with that information presented itself. Myke slipped into the back seat of the car. Instead of seeing the seat in front of him, he saw his father in a white room on the floor writhing and clasp his head, moaning but never, in the dignity of a Novaunian Fleet officer, screaming. He shuddered and closed his eyes. *Control, Myke, control.*

Once he forced himself to think again about his predicament, he realized he was a much better target for a set-up than his father would have been. Star Force drafted nineteen-year-olds all the time but rarely drafted middle-aged men. And where better to operate a set-up than in the controlled environment of a base ship? Myke had to give Earth’s authorities credit. They were going about this with a great deal of cunning. They weren’t about to make things too easy for him, such as train him to be a communications specialist or a pilot, but they were going to give him just enough freedom to make him think he had a chance.

He knew his only hope would be to find three others who would be willing to leave the ship with him. Using the spirit dimension formula was the only way he would get a spacecraft safely past the *Sovereign's* escort. He also knew that finding those people would be next to impossible; everyone he would meet might be an informer for the D.I.I. agent opposing him.

Discovering the primary informers, finding suitable helpers, and learning their prices would take time, and he had only eight weeks to return to Novaun if the Alliance had any hope of gathering its forces in time to ward off the impending attacks.

The transport stopped in front of a building Myke assumed was Payne Hall. Myke slowly got out of the transport, and the guards escorted him to the building and left him at the door. He walked through the spacious lounge to the elevator, the building empty and ominously silent. Where were all of these new cadets? After only a minute, he remembered that it was the Sabbath and that they were probably all at Worship.

He located his room on the seventh floor and looked out the window for a way to the ground. What he found instead were two guards standing directly under his window and four others in various places on the grounds. Finally resigning himself to the fact that escape from the dormitory was impossible, he decided to go back to the main floor and get something to eat.

Within an hour, the cadets began returning to the dormitory in groups of ten and twenty. Myke sat in the lounge and listened carefully to their conversations. The cadets were baffled. Why were they being sent to the *Sovereign of the Stars* so soon? Why weren't they going to receive the customary two-month basic training at the Institute? They speculated, questioned, complained, and seemed unable to discuss anything else.

Myke pondered this new information. Bringing the *Sovereign of the Stars* back to Earth two months ahead of schedule could not have been easy to arrange. Putting so many new cadets on the *Sovereign* two months early without the required basic training was enough to drastically change the *Sovereign's* training program for years. Those orders could only have come from Admiral of the Fleet Laddan himself. Myke felt overwhelmed by despair. How could he fight the entire Department of Defense? How?

## Chapter 4: BUGGED

Deia trudged into the kitchen Sunday morning in her robe, her head aching and her face swollen. She punched a button on the synthesizing machine. By the time her milk was ready, she heard Paul enter the apartment. She wondered where he had gone so early.

"Hello, Deia!" Paul said cheerfully. "How are you feeling?"

"Kind of numb."

Paul sat down on the overstuffed sofa in the adjoining family room. "Make me a bagel, will you?"

"Sure." Deia punched several buttons and in seconds, removed a hot bagel covered with cream cheese and raisins from the synthesizing machine.

Deia sipped from her glass of milk as she entered the family room. "Where have you been? What's that in your hand?" She sat down beside Paul and handed him the bagel mess.

"I've been out."

Deia snatched the item from Paul's hand and examined it. It was a computer disc in a plain white sleeve. "What is it? Why isn't it labeled?"

Paul began eating his bagel and didn't answer. Deia looked at him skeptically for a few moments, then stood up, walked over to the computer, booted it up, and quickly inserted the disc into the drive. The logotype *Star of Freedom* appeared on the screen.

Deia spun around in her chair and faced her brother. "Paul, are you completely insane? Sanel will kill you if he finds this!"

Paul didn't appear worried. "Oh, he won't do anything he hasn't done already. Besides, I'm getting so sick of all the biased garbage we get in the news. I want some real news, from a source that the government doesn't control." His eyes shone defiantly. "From a source like the *Star of Freedom*."

Deia shook her head. "You have to get rid of it, Paul."

Paul smiled sweetly at Deia and set his plate on the floor. "Not until I read it." He stood up and removed the disc from the computer, then stuffed the last piece of bagel into his mouth and hurried out of the room.

Several minutes later, Lena entered the kitchen, wearing slippers, slacks, and a sweater, her hair draped softly on her shoulders. "Are you feeling any better this morning?" she asked Deia as she removed an orange from the bowl of fruit on the counter.

"Maybe a little."

Lena smiled sympathetically. "It'll take time."

"Well, I have plenty of that, don't I?" Deia sat down at the computer. She finished her milk as the logotype *Tryamaz Times* appeared on the viewing screen, followed by a list of headlines.

After several minutes of reading, she said in amazement, "Lena! You should see this!"

Lena walked into the family room, frowning. "What?" Paul bounded down the stairs in the back of the penthouse.

Deia spun around in her chair to face her aunt. "Friday night, right before my concert, a nineteen-year-old Diron spy was captured at the spaceport as he tried to leave the planet. Apparently, he was working here with his father, who was recently executed.

Can you believe it? What amazes me is that they *captured* him. I don't think I've ever heard of Ex-men capturing spies. They always shoot them."

Before Lena could reply, Paul appeared behind her, dressed in his white fencing jacket and knickers and carrying a face mask and sabre. He immediately responded to Deia's comment, "Not when a spy has something our government wants, they don't."

"Oh, Paul, I didn't even think of that. I wonder what it is."

Paul pushed past Lena into the family room. He placed his free hand on Deia's shoulder from behind and whispered mysteriously into her ear, "Maybe he has a secret formula for producing synthetic arelada, or maybe the D.I.I. is hoping to get from him all the names of Diron agents working in Tryamaz. This nineteen-year-old kid may be the genius behind an entire network of spies."

Deia jerked away from Paul and turned to face him. "Come on, Paul! Be serious! What do you think it is, really? A new weapon?"

Paul shrugged and straightened. "How should I know? If you're so curious, ask Sanel."

Deia hesitated, then said to Lena, "Paul's been talking to the Earthborns again."

Lena's gaze at Paul gravely. "If your uncle finds out—"

"I know, I know. If Sanel finds out, he'll kill me." Paul stepped away from Deia and sliced the air with his sabre. "Well, I'm not afraid of that son of Abomination," he said loudly. "Do you hear that, Sanel?" He looked around the room. "I'm not afraid of you!"

Deia watched Paul in horror. "What's this all about?" Certainly Paul knew that Sanel had already left for work.

"Do you want to know how he knows about everything we do? He has us bugged. Do you hear me? *Bugged*. It's taken me eighteen years to figure it out, and I'm sick of it! I'm sick of him!"

Deia felt as if she had been punched in her stomach. "Spying on us?"

Lena said calmly, "Paul, I implore you. Control your temper. Your uncle is an extremely dangerous man."

"Well, so am I!" Paul made a thrusting motion in the air with his sword. He lowered his sabre and muttered, "Now my game is going to be off."

"Be back by eleven o'clock. I want to take both of you to lunch," Lena said.

"All right," Paul replied as he left the room.

Deia stood up and moved toward her aunt. "I'm worried about him, Lena."

Lena's eyes were full of sorrow. "So am I." She gently put her arm around Deia and squeezed her. "Where would you like to go for lunch?"

Deia's mood brightened a little. "Antonio's."

"I should have known." Lena patted Deia's shoulder. "Why don't you call Rachael?"

"I can't face anyone right now, especially Rachael. Can't you call her?"

"I could, but I won't. You have to work this out yourself. And besides, she'll want to talk to you, not me."

"I guess you're right." Deia walked slowly to the holophone chairs that were positioned at a right angle to the couch and sat down. She folded her arms and stared at the control panel on the carved oak table between the chairs. Hesitating, she reached over and pushed the button that would automatically put her in contact with Rachael, but before she could hear her teacher's familiar voice or see her life-like image in the other chair, she quickly pushed another button that would stop the communication. She couldn't do it.

Suddenly the phone buzzed. Deia jumped in surprise. Her hand reached for the phone's control panel, then pulled back. She took a deep breath and quickly pushed the receiving button before she could change her mind again.

"Hello?" Deia frantically reached again for the panel and pressed the "audio only" button. She had no desire for anyone to see her in her present condition.

Rachael's image slowly materialized in the other chair. "Hello, Deia! I tried to reach you yesterday to give you the news! Mr. Moreau said he would be happy to have you as his protégée!"

Deia opened her mouth to speak but nothing would come.

"Deia, are you still there? I thought you would be thrilled."

"I . . . I would be but—I can't accept his offer."

"Why not?" Rachael asked in alarm.

"Paul and I have been drafted. We have to leave Monday."

"This is a tragedy. Can't your uncle get you out of it?"

"I suppose he could, but he won't."

Rachael was silent for several moments. "Well, if it's what the government feels is best, then it probably is."

"Yes, of course." Deia pushed the button to end the communication and turned angrily toward Lena. "How can she say that? How can she even think it?"

Lena sat down on the couch. "What a person says doesn't always reflect what he or she is thinking."

Deia softened a little. "She did say she thought it was a tragedy, didn't she?"

Lena nodded, her lips curving into a proud little smile. "Congratulations."

Deia shrugged and shook her head. "As if it makes any difference."

Lena leaned forward, her eyes solemn and resolute. "It does make a difference. Being accepted as a student by one of the finest musicians in the galaxy is a great accomplishment. It's an accomplishment no one can ever take from you."

"It's just so unfair! To have this opportunity snatched away for such a stupid reason! It isn't right. And Star Force. It had to be Star Force. I don't want to be a neurosurgeon. I don't want to go into space. I can't live with this."

Lena could do nothing but gaze at Deia in grief.

"Paul thinks Sanel arranged for us to be drafted," Deia said abruptly.

"Then Paul is either perceptive—or paranoid."

"Is he right?"

"Does it matter?"

Deia was too upset to tolerate Lena's customary crypticness. "Yes, it does."

"You know your uncle. What do you think?"

Deia immediately understood that Lena was pushing her to come to a specific conclusion. She wasn't going to give Deia the answer, because she wanted her to think it through and figure it out on her own.

Lena leaned forward and patted Deia's arm. "Why don't you get ready to go?"

\* \* \*

Lena took Paul and Deia's hands across the table. "Before you leave, there are a few things I want to talk to you about."

“What about Sanel?” Deia whispered.

Lena raised an eyebrow. “You’ve never worried about his listening to our conversations before.”

Deia relaxed and squeezed Lena’s hand. “You’re right. I’m sorry I interrupted.”

Lena gazed at them tenderly. “You’ll both have some very important decisions to make soon.”

Paul frowned. “What decisions?”

“Shhhh,” Lena said. “Let me finish. When making these decisions, I want you to remember three things. First, always do what you feel in your hearts to be right. Second, don’t allow yourselves to live in fear.”

“But Lena, you talk as though we’ll never see you again!” Deia said. “There’ll be leaves, we’ll—” she stopped at Lena’s commanding stare.

“Third,” Lena continued, “and perhaps this one is the most important. Remember that no matter what anyone tries to do to you, you are in control of your lives, your beings.”

Paul and Deia looked at each other, then at Lena in confusion. Then they both started to speak at once. “What decisions . . . ? What kind of fear . . . ? Why is Sanel bugging us?”

Lena released their hands and looked away from the table. “It looks as though our antipasto is coming.”

As the waitress set their antipasto plate in the middle of the table, Paul studied Lena’s expression, seeking for any clue that would help him solve this mystery, but she remained impassive. He and Deia were going to be involved in something serious; Lena wouldn’t have acted so strangely otherwise. But she had been afraid to tell them more. Or was it fear? Perhaps she couldn’t tell them more and still remain in control of the situation, and for some odd reason, Paul felt that Lena was in control.

“Why did Sanel arrange for us to be drafted?” Deia asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“You must have some idea,” Deia persisted.

“I believe he sees this as a way to increase your dependence on him.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do about it?”

Lena shook her head. “Nothing at the moment.”

Paul slowly ate a piece of cheese. Since Lena didn’t seem to be concerned at the moment that Sanel was monitoring their conversations, Paul decided to venture into forbidden subject matter. “Since Deia and I are going away, will you tell us about our parents?”

Lena gazed at Paul and Deia thoughtfully. “Perhaps I can satisfy your curiosity somewhat by saying that you will learn about your parents soon . . . very soon.”

“But why don’t you and Sanel ever talk about them?” Deia asked. “We’ve never understood that. After all, our mother was your sister. And what about our grandparents and the rest of our family?”

“So many questions, so many answers. The whole thing was very tragic, which is why I don’t talk about it.”

Paul was tired of hearing that weak excuse. “You’ve been telling us that for years, and frankly, I don’t think it’s the only reason.”

“I know you don’t, and you’re right, but for now, that explanation will have to suffice.”



"Can't you tell us something?" Deia pleaded.

Lena hesitated. "Well . . . all right. Your father was a landowner and an industrialist, and an extremely good administrator. He was very dedicated to his family and was honorable in everything he did."

"And our mother?" Paul asked, reaching for an olive.

Lena breathed a short sigh. "Your mother . . . your mother was very devoted to your father, and his devotion to her was no less. They were very much in love and were married young. They adored you two and always wanted the very best for you." Her hand trembled as she reached for a piece of bread. "Are you satisfied now?"

"Not really," Paul admitted, "but at least they seem a little more real to me than they did."

Deia nodded in agreement.

Paul had another question, but he wasn't sure how to word it. After a moment of thought, he asked, "Why did you marry Sanel?"

Lena flinched, her eyes widening a bit, as if the question startled her.

"She married him because she loved him!" Deia declared.

"I already know what you think, Deia, and you're wrong. I want to hear it from Lena herself." Paul had been arguing with Deia about this issue for years. He looked at Lena pointedly. "Well?"

Blood rose in Lena's cheeks. "I can't answer your question."

"Do you love Sanel, Lena?" Deia asked softly.

Lena opened her mouth to speak, but made no sound. Finally she averted her eyes and shook her head once. The movement was so slight it was barely discernible.

Deia had been claiming all along that Lena must love Sanel or she would have left him long ago. Why else would someone like Lena stay with such a horrible man? Paul, on the other hand, had known for as long as he could remember that Lena didn't love Sanel. He didn't know how he knew—he just knew. Paul could see that Lena was in pain, but for Deia's benefit, he couldn't stop himself from asking, "Why don't you leave him?"

The red in Lena's cheeks deepened, and she still wouldn't look at them. "Because I can't."

Paul had told Deia many times that Lena couldn't leave because Sanel would hunt her down and bring her back. A man like Sanel might not be capable of real love, but he desired Lena—Paul had no doubt of that—and she made him look good. Still, Paul had to ask, "But there's always a choice . . . isn't there? You just said—"

"No, Paul," Lena said firmly, finally lifting her head. "I assured you that *you and Deia* are in control of your lives and beings." She shook her head slowly. "I lost control of my life a long time ago, and the part of my being that is still mine is so small it's almost insignificant. I might as well be Eslavu."

Lena's comment so shocked Paul that he couldn't speak. Neither could Deia. Paul hadn't known what kind of answer Lena would give, but he hadn't expected that.

Lena forced herself to smile. "Look. Our pasta is coming."

## Chapter 5: MIND ASSAULT

Later that evening after packing, Deia found Paul in the family room, starting a fire in the fireplace. "Dinner's almost ready," he said. "Do you want to go get Lena? Miriam said we're eating in the dining room tonight."

"All right." Deia ran through the apartment and up the stairs to Lena and Sanel's bedroom. "Lena! It's time for dinner!" She knocked on the door, then stood there for several minutes, waiting for an answer. None came. Puzzled, she knocked again. "Lena, did you hear me? Are you all right?"

Still failing to receive an answer, Deia opened the door and walked as quietly as she could into Lena's room. The green satin drapes were still open, revealing the misty glow of city lights against a starless night sky. Deia turned on the light and saw that Lena was still lying in bed. Deia knelt quietly next to the bed. "Lena," she said softly, gently shaking her, "it's time for dinner."

Deia's heart filled with alarm when she received no response of any kind. She shook Lena vigorously. "Lena! Lena! Wake up! *Wake up!*" She pulled the bedspread from Lena's body and turned her to her back. Lena's face was sickly white. The hollows of her eyes appeared bruised, and her lips had an odd glazed look.

Deia's lips trembled. "No . . . Oh no . . ." She laid her head on Lena's breast. Her aunt wasn't breathing, and there was no heartbeat. "Paul!" she screamed.

A minute later Paul ran into the room. "What's the matter?"

"She's dead." Deia clutched Lena's body and laid her head against Lena's neck, tears blurring her vision.

Many minutes passed before Deia felt Paul pry her away from Lena. "Why?" Deia choked. "Why!"

Deia heard another person come into the room. "What's wrong?" exclaimed Miriam, the housekeeper.

"She's dead," Paul said.

"Dead? How can that be?"

Paul pulled away from Deia slightly and gazed down at Miriam in bewilderment. "What are we supposed to do now?"

Miriam moved to Lena's bedside. "Perhaps she can be resuscitated." A minute passed before Miriam lovingly covered Lena's body with the bed sheet. When she turned to face Paul and Deia again, her eyes were brimming with tears. "You need to call your uncle."

"Yes, of course," Paul said in relief. He released Deia and hurried out the door.

Miriam led Deia to a chair and helped her sit down. Deia sat very still, her body tense and her heart breaking, breathing shallowly, staring, but not focusing on any object. As she stared she captured a glimpse of something shimmering below the sheet that was covering Lena's body. Her eyes snapped back into focus as she tried to discover what was sparkling. She released Miriam's hand, then slipped out of her chair and knelt on the floor near Lena, gingerly lifting the sheet a little to uncover the sparkling object.

"What are you doing, Deia?" Miriam asked gently.

Deia discovered that the item in question was Lena's mysterious little heart-shaped locket. "Lena was holding her locket when she died. I wonder why."

"She wore that locket all the time. It must have meant a lot to her."

Deia tried to remove the necklace from Lena's hand but couldn't; Lena's grip on the chain was too tight. Deia cupped the locket in her hand, running her finger over the polished silver and solitary diamond, overwhelmed by curiosity. As children she and Paul had often begged Lena to open the locket for them and reveal its contents, but Lena had always refused.

With feelings of anticipation mixed with dread, Deia opened the little heart. Sadness immediately overpowered every other emotion. Inside the locket were photographs of Lena and Sanel that had been mutilated with scratches and drops of blood. Deia wiped away her tears before they could obscure her vision and brought the locket closer so that she could see it better. Stuck in the photograph of Lena, at her forehead, glistened a slightly luminous sliver of crystal that Deia recognized as arelada.

Deia had seen Sanel and other government officials wear arelada, along with members of the Nobility of course, but this was the first time she had ever been this close to it. Sanel kept his arelada in a safe, and although Lena designed and constructed all of Sanel's pendants, she didn't handle the actual arelada. The only way Lena could have procured the sliver in the locket was to have secretly cut a chip from one of Sanel's jewels while he was wearing it. The shard was tiny enough to fit under a fingernail, and not only did Lena have the tools, she was close enough to Sanel to have accomplished such a theft. That had to be what Lena had done, but why?

Suspecting Lena had used the sliver of arelada to scratch up Sanel's photo, Deia lifted Lena's hand and discovered that there were, indeed, cuts and bloodstains on her forefinger and thumb. She kissed the back of Lena's hand and closed the locket, letting it dangle again at the side of the bed.

As Deia replaced the sheet covering Lena's body and stood up, Paul trudged into the room. "Well, he'll be here in a few minutes."

Deia went back to her seat next to Miriam. "How did he take it?"

"He didn't believe me." Paul sat down on the floor and leaned his head against Deia's knees.

Many minutes of silence passed before Sanel entered the room. Deia and Miriam immediately stood up. When Paul didn't stand, either because he was too engrossed in his own thoughts to notice that Sanel had arrived or whether he was intentionally showing disrespect, Deia tapped him with her foot. Paul abruptly arose and remained as silent and as immobile as decorum required.

Sanel didn't acknowledge Deia and the others at all, but strode immediately to where Lena lay on the bed. He pulled away the sheet and stared at her for a long time. Eventually he said, his voice hoarse, "Leave me."

Deia wasn't sure at first whether she had heard her uncle correctly. She looked at Paul and Miriam, frowning. Before any of them could move or say anything, Sanel spun around, his face pale and his features twisted with anger and agony. "Leave me!"

Deia hurried out of the room with Paul and Miriam. To take her mind off of what had happened, Deia helped Miriam put away all of the dinner food and dishes. Paul sat in the family room with his head in his hands until a team of people from Internal Investigation showed up and he was forced to direct them to Sanel and Lena's bedroom.

Once Lena's body had been taken out of the apartment in a bag, Sanel finally turned his attention to Paul, Deia, and Miriam. All three bowed slightly as he approached them. He nodded curtly at Miriam. "You are dismissed."

Miriam hesitated, gazing compassionately at Paul and Deia. After a moment, she said, her voice stiff with repressed indignation, "Yes, sir." She turned and left the room.

"I'll sleep in the guest room tonight," Sanel said. "I don't wish to be disturbed by anyone or anything."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir."

Sanel moved toward the stairs, making it clear the conversation was over. Paul and Deia looked at each other in astonishment, then followed him up the stairs. "What about the funeral?" Paul asked.

Sanel stopped. "I'm afraid your aunt's death doesn't change anything for you two. You still have to report for duty tomorrow morning."

Deia was stunned. "Can't they just ship us out a few days late?"

Sanel shook his head. "The *Sovereign* leaves port on Tuesday."

Deia turned away from Sanel and stormed to her room.

\* \* \*

Once Deia was gone, Paul erupted. "You son of Abomination! You could get us a late pass if you wanted to!"

Sanel grabbed the collar of Paul's shirt and slammed him against the wall, causing several of the framed photographs hanging there to fall to the floor. "No one uses that tone with me."

Paul glared at him, undaunted. Sanel stared back at Paul, a touch of mockery in his eyes. Paul was immediately overcome by a feeling of foreboding, and he suddenly didn't feel so courageous. Sanel didn't speak. Paul shuddered. A feeling of warmth blanketed his head, the same one that accompanied the Divine Emperor's telepathic messages to the population at large. That strange warmth made him feel dizzy, as it always did. He blinked several times as he tried to shake away the dizziness, but as he did, he felt the warmth clamp down on his head with severity. Paul gasped, the foreboding becoming fear as the pressure on his mind became pain.

Once Paul realized that Sanel was trying to break into his mind, his body tightened in outrage. He quickly rid himself of his fear and mustered all of his strength. He gritted his teeth and scowled at his uncle as the pain rose to an agonizing level of intensity. The minutes dragged. Paul closed his eyes and trembled uncontrollably, his face wet with perspiration.

Suddenly the pain shot to an even more excruciating level of intensity, and the pressure nearly crushed Paul's head. He threw his hands over his mouth to muffle his screams, and he would have doubled to the floor had Sanel's strong arm allowed it. Several minutes later, the pressure on Paul's head disappeared.

Sanel looked at Paul in contempt. "You are no match for me, son of Jenan," he said, a loathing emphasis on the word "Jenan." He roughly released his hold on Paul's shirt, turned, and went into his office.

Paul's hands flew to his temples. The pressure was gone, but the pain remained. Jenan . . . that was his father's name. Finally, he knew his name! But why did Sanel hate him so much? Paul closed his eyes and tried not to think. Thinking only made his head hurt more. He was too weary even to be angry.

Paul knelt down and picked up one of the shattered frames, one containing a recent photograph of him with Deia, Lena, and Sanel. He gazed at it desolately. This one he would take with him to the *Sovereign of the Stars*. After a moment, he chose one of the pictures that still had its frame intact, an older one, and took them both to his bedroom.

Paul sat down on his bed, enveloped in sorrow. Eventually he took the old picture out of its frame, then slid the back off the broken frame to remove the picture he wanted to keep. Astonished, he instead found a medallion made of thin, clear crystal, inlaid with diamonds and gold in a design that appeared to be some sort of insignia. Had the crystal been luminous, he would have assumed it was arelada. The craftsmanship of the piece was superb, but it was so unusual that Paul assumed it was of alien origin. After studying the medallion for several minutes, he gently laid it aside and looked again at the frame.

To his surprise he found a second photograph, a portrait of a man and woman sitting very close together on a delicately carved marble bench in an exotic garden. They were both very young and appeared to be happy, perhaps excited about something. Their clothes were unlike anything Paul had ever seen. The woman was dressed in an exquisite gown of white silk, intricately embroidered with tiny diamonds and sapphires, and she was wearing a dainty diamond tiara on her head, its front piece set with white, opalescent stones and crafted in the shape of a swan. Her hair was long, black, and slightly curly, and her eyes were dark blue. The man's apparel was also white and embroidered with precious stones, and the crystal medallion glowed with arelada's peculiar luminosity on his chest. The man had lustrous, light blond hair, a strong build, and familiar gray-blue eyes—eyes that looked back at Paul every time he looked in the mirror or at his sister's face.

Paul compared the two pictures. The young woman in the second picture was Lena, he was sure of it. Everything was the same—the eye color, the hair color, the shape of the body, the expression. She looked too much like Lena to be anyone but her. Even sisters didn't look that much alike unless they were identical twins.

Revelation struck. The man with the gray-blue eyes was his father, and Lena was his mother! The resemblance between the young woman in the picture and Deia was startling. As he looked again at the recent portrait, he realized that the resemblance between Deia and Lena had always existed. He wondered why he had never noticed it before.

He gazed at the second photo again. Was this man really his father? A feeling of longing overwhelmed Paul. He wished more than anything that he could have known him. Lena's love for him had never died, even after years of separation. Paul had sensed strong emotion in Lena at lunch when she had talked about his parents' devotion to each other, but he had not been able to identify it at the time. Lena had always spoken of tragedy, which led Paul to believe his father had died a violent death.

So many questions remained unanswered. Why had he and Deia grown up on Earth when it appeared their parents were from another planet? Why had Lena pretended to be their aunt when she was really their mother? What he wondered most, however, was who Sanel really was and what his hold had been on Lena.

Paul quickly put the photograph and crystal medallion into the new frame behind the recent portrait, wondering whether he should tell Deia about his discovery. Deciding to wait for a while and attempt to make sense of everything first, he tucked the framed photograph into one of his suitcases.

\* \* \*

Deia lay restlessly in bed that night, unable to sleep, feelings of grief, fear, anger, and bitterness battling within her. She wished the awful hurt would disappear, at least long enough so that she could sleep and forget for a while.

She sighed in frustration as she slipped out of bed. She put on her robe and walked quietly to the kitchen, hoping a cup of hot cocoa would help her relax. As she entered the kitchen, she noticed Paul sitting in the darkened family room on the floor in front of a blazing fire.

Deia gazed at him affectionately. It was so like Paul to brood in front of the fire. He rarely communicated to anyone his feelings or allowed them to be released in any way. He just hardened himself on the outside, while his heartaches, disappointments, and frustrations boiled within him, only to be released on occasion in the form of extreme anger. Deia doubted he had ever cried, and by the same token, she knew he rarely demonstrated affection to anyone but her and Lena.

Deia quietly prepared a cup of hot chocolate. If Paul was aware of her presence, he didn't acknowledge it. She walked lightly across the parquet floor of the family room and seated herself in front of Paul at a slight angle, reaching out to him with her thoughts. *Would you like a sip?*

As Paul's fingers curled around the cup, Deia received his thoughts: *I guess you couldn't sleep either.*

*No.*

The room was silent except for the crackling of the fire and the sound of Paul sipping hot chocolate from the cup. Deia watched the shadows of the flames flicker on Paul's face as the minutes passed. He pressed the cup to her lips so that she could drink. She drew a little cocoa into her mouth and allowed it to slide gently down her throat. It warmed her and made her feel more at ease. *Rachael called today and told me that Phillip Moreau offered to take me on tour with him as his protégée.*

Paul gazed at her compassionately. *Why didn't you say something?*

*I guess I didn't want any more pity. Funny, it seems kind of trivial now. I would never look at another piano again if I thought it would bring Lena back.*

Paul's mood was reflective. *Lena was a wonderful person. I've been thinking a lot about her, the way she was. You know, she gave us everything, her life.*

*Which is why we always loved her so much.* A tear trickled down Deia's cheek.

Paul nodded slowly. *I feel so empty, as if a part of me died too. I'm sure going to miss her.*

Deia tenderly laid her hand on Paul's arm. *I guess all we have left in the universe is each other.*

Paul leaned forward and kissed Deia's forehead. *And that's a lot.*

Just when Deia thought her sorrow had reached its peak, she saw that there were tears in Paul's eyes. Then her heart ached with his grief as well as her own. She slipped her arms around him, and they held each other and cried until the fire died and only embers remained.

## Part 2: THE SOVEREIGN

### Chapter 6: A NEW FRIEND

The dorm room was dark and silent except for the sound of breathing and the occasional outpouring of warm air from the room's heating unit. Myke lay motionless on the thin mattress under several scratchy blankets, unable to sleep. His shoulder was on fire and his head felt as though someone had sliced it open with a laser, but these were small hurts compared to the anguish in his heart.

Tears burned in his eyes as they spilled drop by drop down his temples. His father had been killed under the barbaric mind torture of the Executioners. He knew about the mental atrocities Earthons imposed on their prisoners, the sifting, squeezing, and shredding of the yielding mind, and although a strong mind could resist, resisting guaranteed an even more excruciating torment that eventually ended in death. As hard as Myke tried, he couldn't force from his mind the horrifying picture of his father in a little white room, contorted with agony as the Executioners tried to break his mind to take possession of the spirit dimension formula.

Myke squeezed his eyes shut and covered his face with his hands as he prayed. *Eternal Father, help me be strong . . . I must be strong . . . Help me know what to do . . .* Praying helped comfort him a little, and he was able to find some solace in the realization that his father was with his mother and that they were at peace, excitedly sharing in the discovery of the spirit dimension formula.

This faith, however, did nothing to ease the loneliness that had become such an overpowering part of his life on Earth. Adjusting to Earth's culture had been challenging in the beginning, and working with people with whom he had little in common had never been easy. There had been no friends except for his father, only strange people who wanted to destroy him.

Fear suddenly overcame him. What if he didn't make it back to Novaun? What would happen to Novaun and all the other planets in the galaxy that loved freedom? Perhaps other agents had uncovered much of the same information he and his father had uncovered, perhaps not. The Alliance forces would repel the surprise attacks the best it could and would, perhaps, be victorious, but how many people would have to die in the process?

Myke slipped into an uneasy sleep, but the grief, loneliness, and fear continued to battle within him. As he slept, he relived the night his father had discovered the spirit dimension formula, only in his nightmare he screamed at his father, begging him to let them go home. His father acted as though he didn't hear him, talking on and on about all of the people on Earth he was going to help. The Grieg piano concerto Myke had listened to that night played in the background, becoming louder and louder as he screamed, soon becoming so loud he couldn't hear his father's voice. In only a second, his father was lying face down in a white room, moaning and convulsing, and Myke was still screaming at him and begging him to let them go home, the piano concerto drowning all of his words.

Next, he beheld his brother-in-law Rayel leading his squadron of fighters to the home fleet. All of the pilots were anticipating being grounded for a time so that they could rest from their duties in war. Then out of nowhere, a squadron of Earthon fighters blinked into existence and fired laser beams at Rayel's squadron, vaporizing the ships before the

Novaunian pilots could comprehend what was happening. *Rayel! Rayel! No!* Myke screamed in his mind.

Then he was overlooking Rayel and Lauria's marble house in Shalaun, Tavon's capital city and the center of government on Novaun. Lauria was sitting in her living room sobbing, and Ketina, Alysia, and Ranela were attempting to comfort her while they cried too. Lauria's two little boys and little girl were tugging on her dress, wanting to know where their father and grandfather were, but Lauria just shook her head and told them that Father and Grandfather were never coming home. Then she looked up at him, her eyes full of anger. *Teren! Teren! Rayel wouldn't have died if you had come home! Father wouldn't have died if you had made him come home! It's all your fault! It's all your fault!*

Myke saw thousands of Earthon fighters descend on Shalaun and heard laser fire. The house where he had spent his childhood exploded. Shalaunians screamed and ran for cover as laser beams and projectiles showered the city and buildings fell all around them. Twin vultures wearing crowns circled the reeking planet, laughing and laughing and laughing . . .

The scene instantly changed to an Earthon base ship flight deck, where he was sprinting for an armed shuttle. Executioners by the hundreds appeared on all sides of him, and as he ran, they fell dead around him and on top of him. He struggled through them, pushing, kicking, and throwing them aside until his body was erupting with cramps. Then a blond-haired Executioner appeared several meters in front of him, holding an immobilizer determinedly at his head . . .

Myke sat up in bed with a jerk. He was panting and dripping sweat, and his head hurt so badly he felt dizzy. His eyes tried to penetrate the darkness of the room. He was still alive! And nothing had changed.

*I'm much too paranoid*, he told himself. He limply lay back and tried to relax, realizing there was good reason to be paranoid. The Earthon authorities wanted the spirit dimension formula and would stop at nothing to get it. They had already killed his father, and he would be next.

*No! I won't be next! I'm a competent agent! I worked on Earth for two years without getting caught! (But they didn't know who I was, then.) And they still don't! They underestimate me! I'm as good a marksman as any of their Executioners . . . my mind power is stronger than all of theirs . . . and I'm smarter than they are! (If I'm so smart, why did I get caught?) Yes, I am smarter, and I'll beat them at their own game! They'll never have me or the spirit dimension formula! Alysia . . . Lauria . . . Ketina . . . Ranela . . . I'm coming home!*

\* \* \*

Myke wiped his hands, wet with perspiration, on his royal blue Star Force uniform, his heart pounding with reverence and dread as he gazed out the porthole of the shuttle. There it was, a base ship in the Firestar class. One of the four Terrors of the Universe. The *Sovereign of the Stars*.

The *Sovereign* was two hulls, a cylindrical inner hull and a cylindrical outer hull that was connected to the inner by a network of transport pod tubes. Each fighter and armed shuttle was attached by one of its wings like a knife to one of the flat launching pads that



were connected to the outer hull. The ship reminded Myke of the ancient spiked clubs he had seen in the Tryamazs Museum of Warfare.

Myke imagined the *Sovereign* in battle, a giant, lidless, bloodshot eye, the inner hull the pupil, the outer hull, its fighters discharged, the iris, and the laser blasts shooting from the empty launching pads the blood vessels. No enemy dared approach that monstrous eye. No frigate could be stolen from it. Myke closed his eyes in an attempt to shut out the foreboding vision. Without the spirit dimension formula, there could be no escape.

Myke's shuttle slowly approached one of three shuttle bays at the front of the ship, passing at least twelve other shuttles that were on their way back to Tryamazs. Several minutes later, his shuttle slid to a stop in a landing tube, then taxied forward several meters into the huge bay area.

Once Myke disembarked, he hurried to the shuttle bay exit, carrying his new laptop, an exact replica of the one he had used to fight the Ex-men at the spaceport. Once in the passageway, he pulled himself to one side of the door and removed the handheld computer from his pocket as members of the ship's crew brushed past him. He brought up a map of the ship and studied it. Once he was confident he could find his compartment, he turned off the handheld and walked to the nearest transport pod. He put his mind into Divided Focus and expanded his spirit into the bulkheads to search for monitoring devices, being careful to use a gentle touch so that any mind guards who might be protecting the devices would not detect him.

As he suspected, holorecorders and listening devices had been built into the bulkheads all over the ship. Those that were not already in use had been programmed to activate when he drew near. The devices he encountered weren't protected by mind guards, which was typical. The Earthons discouraged spies from attempting to telepathically manipulate their monitoring devices by installing thousands of them in one small space and using mind guards only in high security areas.

Only agents possessing the most sophisticated telepathic skills and arelada technology, combined with an intimate knowledge of the devices themselves, could deceive that many devices at once. Myke's exceptional vision abilities and talent for engineering had given him an aptitude for this kind of task that had amazed his father and his commanding officer. Myke felt some comfort in the knowledge that, whatever the Earthons might have deduced about him, they would not suspect he possessed such powerful telepathic abilities. Then again, did it matter? The ability to deceive monitoring devices wouldn't protect him from being deceived himself.

Myke stepped out of the pod into a narrow passageway that was only wide enough for two to walk abreast, with a tiled deck, low overhead, and pale blue bulkheads. He felt no desire to go to his compartment. He knew his new roommates would probably already be there, and he didn't want to meet them yet. Actually, he didn't want them to meet him yet. He was so tired of being "Myke Zarek." The background he had been given was basically a set of detailed statistics that had not only allowed him to move about freely on Earth, but had enabled him to obtain the security clearance he had needed to work at Briggs. Until now, however, there had never been a need to develop "Myke Zarek" into a real person with feelings, desires, enjoyments, and true life experiences.

Besides that, "Myke Zarek" was aloof, unfeeling, and manipulative, and although his assignment on Earth had necessitated he adopt this character, he knew continuing in it on the *Sovereign of the Stars* would not work to his advantage. He would have to be friends

with these people if they were to trust him, and he wasn't sure how to do that as "Myke Zarek." Moreover, he didn't want to become personally involved with the Earthons, and he wished there were a way he could escape without getting close to anyone.

Myke tried to be optimistic. Perhaps the young people he would meet wouldn't be unbearable. He kept reminding himself that it was Earth's government that was corrupt, not necessarily the people themselves. Yes, they had a strange value system, and yes, he sometimes found it difficult not to get provoked when their conversation involved religion or politics, but overall, most of the Earthons he knew were pleasant and their culture in general did have some intriguing qualities. If those with whom he associated were primarily resisters of the Divine Emperor's telepathic communications, as he anticipated, then he didn't doubt he was in for some surprises.

Myke walked leisurely to the cadet lounge, where he hoped to relax and study the information he had received about the ship. Most of the cadets were probably in their compartments unpacking instead of socializing in the lounge, and he was glad. Peace would be nice. He withdrew his spirit from the bulkheads, relaxing his mind back into Blind State as he slipped quietly into the lounge, unnoticed by the few who were there.

Myke halted and listened in wonder to a beautiful piano concerto being skillfully played. His eyes followed the music to a baby grand piano in the corner. Then they flew over the piano and rested on the young woman who was playing. He watched her in fascination. She was beautiful! And so talented. Something about the elegant, self-assured way she moved told Myke that she was an aristocrat, and he wondered how she had ended up in the Science Corps. Although she was obviously a novice, he didn't remember seeing her in orientation. She was, however, strangely familiar.

Suddenly, she banged on the keys, then covered her face with her hands. Her action jolted Myke back to reality, and all of his reservations about the Earthons and his ability to make them believe in him vanished. He wound through the navy blue furniture of the lounge to the piano, completely forgetting his previous plan.

Myke stopped in front of the piano. "Please don't stop. You play so beautifully."

The girl carefully wiped her face with her fingers to avoid smearing her makeup. "Thank you."

Even before he noticed the "D. Sheldon" on the identification badge that was clipped to her front pocket, Myke realized why she seemed so familiar. "You're Deia Sheldon, aren't you? I read an article about you in the news not too long ago. The critics feel like you're the most promising new talent of the decade. After hearing you play, I'd have to agree."

Deia appeared amazed. "You have a good memory. That article was written months ago."

Myke smiled. "I guess I do." He pointed to the bench. "Do you mind?"

She shook her head.

Myke set his laptop on the deck next to the piano and seated himself next to Deia. Then they both turned and looked at each other in a surveying way. Deia's loveliness captivated Myke. She appeared remarkably poised, her exquisite long fingers curling around her bent knees. Her skin was smooth, flawless, and fair; her dark brown hair fell in soft curls around her delicate face, and black brows and lush black lashes topped the most gorgeous blue eyes he had ever seen. Although the royal blue jumpsuit she was wearing was probably not the most flattering article of clothing she owned, he saw that her shape

was slender, curving in all the right places. Her expression seemed to indicate approval, perhaps interest.

"You know, you're even prettier in person than you were in your picture." Myke brushed a remaining tear from her cheek. "Yes, even though you've been crying."

Deia tilted her head forward slightly and smiled shyly. "You're sweet."

"I can't believe no one's told you that before."

"Oh, they have. It's just that no one has ever meant it so much." She squeezed his hand in a friendly way. "What's your first name?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Myke, and I'm from Tryamaz.".

"So am I! But I guess you already know that. Where in the city did you live?"

"On 53rd Street, Southside. What about you?"

"On Palace Avenue, across from Liberation Court."

So she was an aristocrat. Myke wondered more than ever why she was on the *Sovereign* but decided not to ask her about it yet—not directly, anyway. "I've never known anyone who could afford to live anywhere near Palace Avenue."

"What did you do in Tryamaz, Myke? Go to school?" She sounded genuinely interested.

"No, I worked as a spacecraft design engineer for a government contractor. I started with the company two years ago during my senior year at TIST on a co-op program. Then I was given full-time status after I graduated."

"This ship is the place for you then."

"Not really. I never wanted to specialize in hyperdrive engineering—my experience and training is designing sub-space speed craft, like fighters and armed shuttles." Myke's gaze floated around the lounge. "I don't know much about base ships yet, and it sounds like what I'll mainly be doing is engine maintenance." He wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"So they drafted you too," Deia said grimly.

Myke nodded. "They told me that they need someone with my background, so I guess my next few years will be spent learning all about the *Sovereign*. And I imagine they'll fill me with a lot of military garbage too."

"You sound just like my brother. He hates the idea of being in the military. Having to answer to anyone really makes him angry."

"Your brother was drafted too?" That really was strange. "When did the government start drafting aristocrats into the Science Corps?"

Deia's lips trembled. "It doesn't. At least that's what Paul claims." Her eyes became shiny with tears. She opened them wide in an attempt to keep the tears from falling. "I had a chance to study with Phillip Moreau. He was at my concert. But that night I found out I had been drafted."

"That's quite an opportunity. Did anyone tell you why you were drafted?"

Deia shook her head quickly. "No . . . I just couldn't believe it! All I've ever wanted to be is a pianist. I've been studying my *whole life*!" She gasped, then continued in a gush, "Then last night . . . my aunt died . . . She was so young, so young and beautiful . . . she was like our mother . . . Oh, we loved her so much . . ." Deia closed her eyes.

Her anguish permeated Myke's heart. Gently, compassionately, he took her into his arms.

A minute later, she pulled away from him, laughing nervously. "Here I am telling you all of my problems, and I barely know you."

“That’s all right.” Myke hesitated, then proceeded carefully: “Perhaps I can understand just a little. My mother was killed several years ago in a boating accident. For a long time I hurt so badly that I wished I could die too.”

“Did the pain ever go away?”

“No. But it did fade some with time. I think the hardest thing for me was simply accepting the fact that death is a part of life.”

Deia nodded slowly. “I know what you mean, about accepting death that is. I’ve had to accept it my whole life, and it’s always been so difficult. My real parents died when I was very young. I don’t even remember them. Why did Lena have to die too?”

Myke shook his head and remained silent. Speaking of death caused him to feel the loss of his father more acutely. Deia reached for him again and clung to him, and he held her head against his neck and stroked her hair as she cried softly. He closed his eyes, trying to alleviate some of his own grief. His arms tightened around her. Having her there was so comforting.

They held each other in silence, even after Deia had stopped crying. Eventually Deia withdrew. “I could tell something was bothering you,” she said softly, her eyes sincere and full of concern. “Are you feeling any better?”

Myke nodded once and smiled at her with his eyes, amazed by her perception. “Will you play something for me?”

“Certainly. What would you like?”

“How about Chopin?”

“He’s one of my favorites too.” She rested her fingers on the keys and played a nocturne. When she was finished, she laid her hands on her thighs and stared at the keys.

Myke’s fingers grazed the back of her hand. “I could listen to you play all night, but it’s almost curfew. C’mon, I’ll walk you back to your compartment.”

## Chapter 7: ROOMMATES

"This has to be a joke," Paul moaned as he entered his room with Connor Carey, the small, blond-haired Australian he and Deia had met on the shuttle. "My bedroom at home was twice as big as this, and I was the only one who used it!"

Two sets of metal bunk beds were built into the pale blue walls on either side of the entrance, and each bed contained a shelf at its head and two drawers under its mattress. A small oval table for studying was positioned with four swivel chairs between the two sets of bunks, allowing only slight space on either side for movement. On the far wall were four lockers and the entrance to the bathroom.

"You're on a ship now, men," greeted their roommate as he folded his duffel bag and put it into one of his drawers. "This isn't a 'bedroom'; it's a 'compartment.'" Although their roommate was kneeling, Paul could see that he was wearing the uniform of a cadet mentor—royal blue slacks, light blue dress shirt, and royal blue tie. As he stood and turned to face Paul and Connor, Paul noticed that he was medium height, thin, and olive-skinned, with black hair, dark, dramatic facial features, and a thick mustache. "Dr. Luciani," he introduced himself, pronouncing his name with distinct Italian intonations.

"Paul Sheldon."

"Connor Carey."

A smile—actually it was more of a smirk—appeared on Dr. Luciani's face. "The cadet compartments aren't that bad." His Italian accent had disappeared, replaced by one that was distinctly American. "The warrior ranks sleep forty to a compartment." From the way Dr. Luciani drew out some of his vowels, Paul guessed he was from somewhere in the Northeast.

"How long have you been here?" Connor asked.

"Two years."

"Do you like it?" Paul had a difficult time believing that anyone could actually like living on a starship.

"One place is about the same as the next."

Connor walked to the back of the room to get his duffel bag. "Who's our other roommate?"

"The name is Myke Zarek. Hasn't checked in yet, but he's another novice."

Connor motioned to the long leather bag that held Paul's fencing gear. "Looks as though you're a serious competitor."

"I certainly am. Do you fence?"

"No, but I love to watch."

"Well, you'll get plenty of competition here," Dr. Luciani said to Paul. "All of the command cadets are supreme, and they're the first ones to let you know it."

"I don't understand," Connor said, looking from Dr. Luciani to Paul. "They're going to train a swordsman to be an engineer! I guess our leaders can see things we can't."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Paul said. "Anyone who would take a metal blade against immobilizers is an idiot."

"Well, if you're any good," Dr. Luciani said to Paul, "the other pro-cadets will love you. We and the com-cadets have the biggest fencing rivalry in the fleet."

"What are com-cadets?" Connor asked.

"The officer candidates, I imagine," Paul replied.

Dr. Luciani grunted. “Supposedly they’re cadets who are hand-picked personally by Commodore Jenkins to train for warship command, but actually, they’re a bunch of haughty aristocrats whose officer parents bought them their appointments.”

Paul tensed. What would they think of him when they found out that he was an aristocrat? Deciding that silence was the best approach for now, he opened his duffel bag and began carefully laying his new Star Force clothing in a drawer. All of his civilian clothing had been confiscated at orientation that morning.

“Well, the com-cadets won’t know what hit them after Paul shows them a few of his moves,” Connor said.

Paul heard something that sounded like paper unrolling and turned to see what was making the noise. He watched Connor unroll a small poster of Kent Diamond. A satin brocade band was tied around the musician’s head, and he was wearing a purple tuxedo, the top few buttons of his white satin shirt undone, revealing an exotic diamond neck chain.

Connor placed pieces of mounting putty on the corners of the poster and attached it to the inside of his locker, then stood back and examined it to make sure it wasn’t crooked. “Ahhhh . . . Kent Diamond . . . a revolutionary . . . and the finest trumpeter Earth’s ever seen!”

“No one will argue with that,” Paul said. “Do you play?”

Connor nodded, lifting his trumpet case to the table.

“I don’t know what the excitement is all about,” Dr. Luciani said as he removed a taffuao from the shelf on his bed and lit it. “Laser technology can give you just as good a sound as that son of Abomination Kent Diamond.”

“You’re wrong!” Connor waved a hand in the air. “No technology, no matter how sophisticated, can give you the same *feeling* or *emotion*! He whipped his trumpet out of its case and quickly attached the mouthpiece. He put his instrument to his lips and played some high jazz runs.

Dr. Luciani’s eyes widened. “Put a cork in that thing, will you? Curfew’s in less than an hour! You wake anyone up, we’ll all be put on report.”

Connor held his trumpet out, bowed, and slipped it back into its case.

Paul was thoughtful. “There will always be classical artists like my sister—she’s a concert pianist you know—but I like this personalized trend in popular music. Connor’s right. The music does have more feeling.”

“Okay, okay,” Dr. Luciani said, lifting the taff to his lips. “I’m convinced!”

“Just wait until you hear Deia play,” Paul said proudly. “If you’ve never liked classical music, you’ll like it after you hear her. She’s supreme! Is there a piano on the ship?”

Dr. Luciani blew out a gust of purple smoke. “Yeah, several. There’s one in the lounge.”

“Is she really that good?” Connor asked.

“The great maestro Phillip Moreau thinks so. She had a chance to be his protégée.”

“Phillip Moreau’s protégée! Why is she here?”

“She was drafted.”

Connor shook his head. “That’s tragic!”

“Forgive me for sounding uncouth, but who’s Phillip Moreau?” Dr. Luciani asked.

“Only the greatest composer Earth has had in centuries,” Paul answered.

"The truest artist of our time," Connor said thoughtfully.

Dr. Luciani knelt in front of a small liquor cabinet at the foot of his bed. "Would either one of you like some wine?"

Connor hesitated. "Do you have any beer?"

Dr. Luciani nodded and poured some beer into a glass. He handed the glass to Connor. "My sister can get you in touch with a band if you're interested. She's on the social committee."

"I'll definitely speak with her." Connor turned to Paul. "Does Deia play jazz?"

"She can play anything, and she has a nice voice. She's never had time to be in a band, but she might be interested now."

"What do you want, Paul?" Dr. Luciani asked.

Paul knelt down beside Dr. Luciani and looked at his choices. "You have some good brands. How did you find them here?"

"Didn't. Real thing's too expensive here, and I've never been able to get used to that synthesized garbage. I buy my wine in the Mediterranean State, where I can get it at a reasonable price."

"Is that home?" Connor asked.

Dr. Luciani shook his head. "No, my home is Star Force. Southern Europe is my playground."

Paul stood up. "I'll have some sherry."

Dr. Luciani poured some sherry for himself and Paul. "Enjoy it while you can. Every few weeks Admiral Pierce makes an appearance, and when he does, no one dares to even take a sip."

Paul had heard of Admiral Pierce, but he had never seen him. "Do you mean Admiral Vahro-Pierce, husband of Saintess Myri Vahro-Pierce?"

"The one and only. He's over all the fleets in this sector."

"But drinking in our compartments off-duty isn't against regulations . . . is it?" Connor said uneasily.

"Not technically, but Admiral Pierce is very old-fashioned. Claims drinking and osalaem smoking are bad for discipline and won't allow either on his base ship. If he gets a whiff of alcohol or osalaem, he'll give you a stiff fine."

Paul held up his glass. "Then let's enjoy."

\* \* \*

"What field are you training for here?" Myke asked Deia as he walked her to her compartment.

"They want to make me into a neurosurgeon. I could have done worse, I guess. I've always done well in biology, so I suppose that will help."

"That's good. What did they assign to your brother?"

"Electrical engineering."

"How does he feel about that?"

"I don't think he knows. Right now he's more concerned about overcoming his spaceship phobia."

"Spaceship phobia?"

"Small, tight places make him crazy!"

“Poor guy.”

“Oh, I suppose he’ll live. He was as upset as I was that we were drafted, and for many reasons more valid than that one.”

“You and your brother are close, aren’t you?”

“Most of the time. Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“Three older sisters.”

Deia’s eyes widened. “Three? And all sisters? They must treat you like a prince!”

“I’ve never really thought about it in that way, but I guess they do.”

Deia stopped in front of a compartment and examined the number on the door. “I guess this is it. It wasn’t as difficult to find as I thought it would be.”

Myke touched Deia’s arm. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I’d like that.”

“I’ll just look for you at the piano.”

Deia smiled and disappeared through the door.

Myke turned and walked to his compartment. Despite everything, he was happy, at least for the moment. He marveled at how instantly he had connected with Deia on such an intimate level. He had never imagined he would be able to communicate so well with an Earthon girl. He knew they would be good friends, and his intuition told him he could trust her. Perhaps Earthon young people weren’t all that different from Novaunian young people.

As he walked, he realized that he could be himself and still be “Myke Zarek.” Whether from Shalaun or Tryamaz, he was the same person inside, and fortunately, his superiors had given him an Earthon background that was similar in a few respects to his own. Still, he would have to be careful. Everything he did would have to make sense. His roommates especially would not be easy to deceive. People couldn’t help but learn a lot about each other when they shared close quarters. He also knew that he couldn’t afford to get too close to anyone, for the D.I.I. agent observing him would use any friendship he made against him.

Myke halted in front of compartment B4-PC87. He hesitated, fearing that meeting his roommates would ruin his good mood. Finally he unclasped his badge from his front pocket and slid it through the scanner.

As he stepped into the compartment, his nose was immediately sensitive to the lingering smell of osalaem smoke and liquor. What rotten luck! Drinking he could tolerate, but osalaem smoking was another issue entirely. The living compartments and the commons were the only areas of the ship where cadets were allowed to smoke, so he knew that asking his roommates not to smoke would make them irritable. He also knew that he would be sick if he had to be around it very often. Either way, he couldn’t win.

Only one of his roommates was there. He was already dressed for bed, and he was carefully hanging fencing clothes and weapons in one of the lockers. He had the bearing of an aristocrat, and Myke wondered if this was Deia’s brother.

Myke replaced his identification badge as he walked to the back of the compartment. “Where is everybody?” The lavatory door was open, but no one appeared to be in there.

Myke’s roommate turned abruptly, revealing eyes that were the same dusky blue as Deia’s. “Oh, hello! You must be my bunkmate. Connor’s in the bathroom—excuse me,



*lavatory*—and Dr. Luciani’s having a drink with the guys next door. I guess he’s the resident mentor for them also.”

Myke extended his hand. “Myke Zarek. You must be Deia’s brother.”

“That’s right, I’m Paul,” he said, shaking Myke’s hand. “You’ve met Deia already?”

“She was playing Rachmaninoff in the lounge. I was so impressed that I had to meet her. She’s quite a lady.”

Paul studied Myke’s face. “That she is.”

Paul appeared almost suspicious, and Myke wasn’t sure whether to laugh or change the subject. Before he could speak, the resident mentor emerged from the lavatory, holding a bottle of wine in one hand and carrying four glasses by their stems with the other. Myke watched the resident mentor in morbid fascination. Not only did the Earthons allow drinking alcohol on their ships, here was a cadet leader giving it to his subordinates! Even the Vaenans, the exporters of osalaem, refused to tolerate such lack of discipline on their ships. It was utterly bizarre.

The resident mentor lifted his eyebrows conspiratorially at Myke, then addressed Paul, “Looks like Zarek here is hot for your sister.”

Myke laughed. A frail-looking young man emerged from the lavatory, grinning. “So am I. She’s supremel!”

Paul was not amused. “If any of you lay a finger on my sister, you’re dead.”

The resident mentor chuckled. “Your protectiveness is very *sweet*, and it’s very *gallant*, but do you honestly believe your sister’s liaisons are any of your business? Grow up, Sheldon!”

“My sister is a lady, and she does not have *liaisons*,” Paul said icily.

“I haven’t met a girl yet, no matter how cool and proper the exterior, who, enticed just right, won’t come begging.”

The little guy gasped in delight at the resident mentor’s brazenness. Paul exploded in outrage, “You son of Abomination! Don’t you even go near her! The last thing she needs right now is to have to battle off an Eslavu degenerate who’s just looking for a cheap thrill!”

The resident mentor grinned wickedly. “I could put you on report for disrespect to a superior, Sheldon, or I could merely inform you that I have no choice but to ‘get near’ your sister since she’s my novice.”

The little guy laughed. Paul’s eyes and mouth widened in horror. Myke pursed his lips to keep from smiling. Paul obviously had no sense of humor, and Myke couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for him.

Paul’s tormenter extended his hand toward Myke, not taking his eyes away from Paul. “I’m Dr. Luciani, resident mentor and neurosurgeon. Nice to meet you, Zarek.”

## Chapter 8: A SHOCK

Approximately thirty pro-cadets were already assembled in the gymnasium awaiting their orders when Paul arrived the next morning. Since the current novices had not received the usual two months of basic training at the Institute, ten hours of physical fitness and combat training a week were required for each during the entire first two terms.

Noticing Myke in the group, Paul wound through the other cadets to join him. Several minutes later, the cadets came to attention as Master Warrior Jivad entered the gymnasium.

Jivad quickly called roll and read a list of assignments. It sounded to Paul as though several advanced cadets, both command and professional, would test the novices in various forms of hand-to-hand combat to determine potential and levels of experience. Paul and Myke were assigned to a group of ten under Cadet Luciani and Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce.

As Paul and Myke hurried with the other novices to the locker rooms, Myke whispered to Paul, "I didn't see Dr. Luciani in here. You think he's the one who's supposed to test us? I don't know what you think, but he doesn't seem like the warrior type to me."

"No, he doesn't. But he did mention last night before you came in that he has a sister here. It might be she."

The novices required fifteen minutes to check out their gym clothes, have lockers assigned, suit up, and assemble back in the gymnasium in their separate groups. Paul leaned against the wall and Myke plopped to the floor as they waited with the other eight novices in their group for their trainers.

Several minutes later, an impishly cute young woman clad in royal blue gym clothes and carrying a handheld computer rushed toward the group. As she ran, all the novices in the group heard a baritone voice yell at her, "Hey, Luciani! You're going to help *me* train? You pro-cadets don't know anything about combat!"

The girl halted, then spun around and glared at the muscularly built com-cadet who had come up behind her. "Go sit on your sabre, Pierce." The girl turned back around and approached the group of novices.

"A little cranky today, aren't you love?" Pierce said as he caught up to her.

"Don't push it, Pierce, *darling*."

"It's Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce to you, babe."

Paul looked down at Myke, amused. "She's Dr. Luciani's sister? That's one cranky family!"

Myke stood up in one fluid motion. "The perfect sword-shrew!"

Paul laughed. Star Force women were reputed to be crude, overbearing, ruthless, and ugly, the butt of more "sword-shrew" jokes than there were women in Star Force.

Paul's laughter slowly subsided, and he turned and watched Jacquae Luciani curiously as she began to speak. He would have considered her olive complexion and square-shaped face becoming had she not been frowning. Her black hair was pulled back, the front strands curled under on her shoulders, and high-arched brows topped a pair of condescending dark eyes. She was medium height, and her slender, straight figure was toned to perfection, every centimeter of her frame radiating independence, excitement, and aggressiveness.

"I am Advanced Cadet Luciani." She motioned to her partner. "This is Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce. We are combat specialists—"

Pierce snickered at Luciani's reference to herself as a "specialist," and Paul suddenly felt sorry for her. With a nobleman as a partner, she had no recourse against these attacks on her credibility.

"Specialists among the cadets," Luciani continued. "Today we'll test your abilities so that you can be placed in the appropriate classes. First, you must get your gear." She motioned to the novices to follow her and Pierce into the storage compartment that adjoined the gymnasium.

Pierce and Luciani began handing out body pads and head guards to the novices. As Luciani handed pads to Paul, her hand accidentally brushed his, and she looked up at him. Her expression softened a little, her eyes lingering on him in interest and her mouth curving into a flirtatious little smile. Paul watched her attentively as she moved to the next novice. This was one sword-shrew who wasn't ugly at all.

\* \* \*

Deia entered the lecture room after lunch, feeling overwhelmed. She had taken several general biology classes in intermediate school, but none of them had prepared her for this. She hoped her daily shifts in sickbay would be less grueling than her classes, or at least less tedious. She placed her laptop on a desk and dropped herself into a chair. Her head already hurt.

As Deia waited with the other medical novices for the upperclassmen who would be their mentors, she suddenly had the oddest feeling that someone was looking at her. She turned to face a strikingly handsome young man with black hair and a mustache. He was wearing the uniform of a cadet mentor under a lab coat and was studying her unabashedly, one arm folded across his waist and the other holding his hand to his chin. His extraordinary magnetism lured her into staring back at him for several seconds without saying anything.

"You look more like an actress than a cadet," he said abruptly.

Deia looked at him skeptically. "Aren't you a smooth one." She smiled coolly. "Actually, you aren't too far from right. I'm really a concert pianist in disguise." Realizing what she had just said and to whom, her hand flew to her mouth. She could get put on report for addressing a mentor in such a way.

The young man laughed and extended his hand. "Dr. Luciani, Cadet Sheldon. I'm your brother's resident mentor and your professional mentor."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Luciani. You caught me off-guard."

"I had no idea I was addressing a noblewoman," Dr. Luciani said pleasantly.

Deia relaxed and smiled. "I'm no more a noblewoman than I am an actress."

"But you are an aristocrat. It's written all over you."

Deia's wariness returned. "Am I supposed to take that as a compliment?"

"If you'd like."

Deia could not stand to let him get away with such a cryptic answer, even if he was her mentor. "Perhaps, Dr. Luciani, you can tell me what bourgeois men, in general, think of aristocratic women."

"I wouldn't know." Dr. Luciani smiled mysteriously. "I'm not bourgeois."

Dr. Luciani's response surprised Deia. "What are you, then?"

He chuckled. "A poor son of Abomination from Baltimore, disguised as a neurosurgeon."

Deia laughed. The Divine Emperor had ordered Baltimore burned to the ground during the Dark Years for being the home and headquarters of one of the original "sons of Abomination," Antonio Vaccaro. Only slum rabble and outcasts lived there now. That this sharp, articulate Star Force doctor could have come from such a place seemed preposterous. "You either have a sick sense of humor, Dr. Luciani, or you've done very well for yourself."

"Actually, you're right on both accounts. So you see, Saintess Deia, there are far worse things than being a Star Force neurosurgeon."

Deia nodded slowly, feeling warm all over. He was right. Her situation could be far worse than it was. She decided that she was going to like working with Dr. Luciani.

\* \* \*

Deia entered the huge pro-cadet commons with Dr. Luciani immediately following her shift in sickbay. Dr. Luciani had spent the afternoon giving her a tour of the *Sovereign's* medical facilities. Starting tomorrow, she would spend thirty hours a week following him around as he performed his duties and doing menial tasks. Unfortunately, he often worked at night, and even after those shifts, she was required to be in class the next morning—on time. Deia had no idea how she would manage those sickbay shifts along with fifteen hours a week in the classroom and laboratory *and* ten hours of combat training.

Deia massaged her neck, sliding her fingers into her hair to loosen her French braid a little. "How long have you been on the *Sovereign of the Stars*, Dr. Luciani?" she asked as they stepped in line for the food synthesizers.

"Two years. I'll be certified in another two."

"Where did you spend your first three years?"

"On the *Prince Jahnzel*."

Deia smiled. "Perhaps I shouldn't be saying this, but you don't look old enough to be a mentor."

Dr. Luciani moved forward a little with the line. "I'm not, really. I joined Star Force when I was sixteen."

Deia was surprised and impressed. "How did you manage that?"

Dr. Luciani shrugged as he motioned Deia toward the synthesizing machine to get her meal. "I have a good memory."

As Deia stepped out of line with her tray, she noticed Connor and Myke sitting at one of the long white tables. When Myke saw her, he motioned for her to join them. Anticipation energized her as she approached Myke. She didn't think he was striking in his appearance—definitely not one who would be noticed in a crowd—but he was handsome in a pleasant way, with a lean physique and ruddy cheeks. His shiny brown hair was slightly tousled, and his vivid blue eyes were friendly. His air of serene self-assurance particularly appealed to her.

Deia slid onto the bench next to Connor. "Hello!" She lifted her cup of milk to her lips and took a sip.

"How're you doing?" Myke asked.

"This had to be one of the worst days of my life. Do you know what they made me do? I had to let some guy beat me up so I could show them how well I can fight. And then I had to shoot a light gun at some stupid holograms of Diron soldiers."

Connor laughed. "We're in Star Force, remember?"

"Just be glad you're getting your basic training here instead of at the Institute," Dr. Luciani said as he sat down next to Deia.

Deia turned to Dr. Luciani in surprise. She hadn't expected a mentor to sit with lowly novices. Then again, maybe it was required, at least for a while. He was, after all, required to help the novices that were assigned to him make the transition from civilian to military life. She regarded Dr. Luciani skeptically. "Do you really think it would be worse?"

Dr. Luciani dipped his spoon into his bowl of clam chowder. "A hundred times worse. That's all you do for two months!"

"Why *are* we doing it here?" Connor asked. "The order I got six months ago said I would be at the Institute for two months."

"Who knows?" Dr. Luciani replied. "Leaves were cut short too. Probably some admiral wanted a fleet escort to his new assignment or some other ridiculous reason." He reached for his glass of water and said softly to Deia, "Be happy you're not in officers' training with the rest of the aristocrats. They have to march."

"March?"

"Yeah, they march, and they have to report for formation three times a day, and a novice isn't allowed to speak to an upperclassmen unless directly addressed."

"That does sound awful," Deia agreed. She turned away from Dr. Luciani and began eating her salad. She wanted to talk to Myke, but he seemed content to eat in silence. Finally she leaned toward him a little and said, "I guess you know that Paul is my brother."

Myke nodded. "I knew as soon as I saw him. You two sure do look a lot alike."

"We ought to, we're twins!"

Myke's fork fell from his fingers. He stared at her. "Twins?"

Deia quickly took another bite of salad, feeling uncomfortable. Why would the fact that she and Paul were twins disturb him? What had happened to the relaxed, open young man she had met the evening before? Hoping to change the subject, Deia asked, "How did your day go, Myke?"

Myke smiled, but it appeared forced. "Like I expected."

"That bad," she said grimly.

Myke nodded, his gaze shifting from Deia to something behind her. "Now how do you like that!" he said in surprise. "Paul's with the sword-shrew!"

Dr. Luciani turned and chuckled. "A man who has truly assessed my sister's character."

Deia twisted her body and saw Paul stepping out of line with a black-haired young woman at his side. Her hair was pulled back, the front strands curled under on her shoulders. High-arched brows topped a pair of lively dark eyes. The girl joked with the cadets she saw and made sure Paul was introduced to each one of them.

"He sure doesn't waste any time does he?" Connor observed.

Dr. Luciani grunted. "You mean that *she* doesn't waste any time. Figures she would go for Paul."

Deia shrugged. "All the girls like Paul."

Once Paul and the girl arrived at the table, Paul sat down next to Myke, and the girl sat down next to Deia. "I know you! I tripped over you this morning on my way out!"

Deia frowned.

"Your cot was by the door."

"Oh!" Deia said in realization. "You're Jacquae."

Jacquae nodded. "And you're?"

"Deia Sheldon."

Jacquae looked over at Myke in elation. "Hey, Zarek, you gave Pierce a good fight!"

Myke shook his head and looked at Jacquae strangely. "No way. He killed me!"

"But you were the only one who gave him even a decent showing, enough of a showing to make him angry."

"This Pierce sounds like a real animal," Deia commented.

"I wouldn't go that far," Myke said.

"I would," Dr. Luciani said. "Everyone's either too afraid to beat him," he looked pointedly at Jacquae, "or too incompetent."

Jacquae glanced at Dr. Luciani with eyes full of contempt. "And Ton doesn't have the slightest idea what he's talking about. Pierce is an excellent fencer and deserves to be the champion, as much as I hate to admit it."

"Paul's a fencer," Dr. Luciani said. "And an aristocrat—"

"I know! We're planning to spar after dinner. Maybe the pro-cadets will finally get a champion!"

Paul appeared uneasy. Deia suspected that he was uncomfortable because these bourgeois cadets now realized he was an aristocrat. "I wouldn't get your hopes up," Paul said.

Deia couldn't believe what she was hearing. Paul had never had such a diffident attitude toward a potential fencing opponent. "Why is everyone so intimidated by this Pierce person?"

"*Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce*," Dr. Luciani corrected. "The son of the Admiral."

"Ohhh," Deia said, finally understanding.

"I'm surprised that you and Paul don't already know him," Myke said.

Deia couldn't refrain from laughing. "Saintess Myri Vahro-Pierce is the Divine Empress's sister!" She shook her head quickly. "We didn't move in *that* circle, although I imagine my uncle would have killed for such a privilege!"

"Who's your uncle?" Myke asked.

Paul straightened and said in mock respect, "Sanel King, Second Assistant to Saint Kravim of the Council of Elders." He relaxed a bit and the tone of his voice returned to normal. "Our aunt's husband. They're our guardians."

Noticing Myke's surprise, Deia asked, "Have you heard of him?"

"No," Myke answered immediately. "It just sounds like he has a very important position."

"I'll say," Dr. Luciani said as he pushed his empty bowl toward the middle of the table. "Defense has always been the Council's most powerful Office."

"Did you ever get to meet Saint Kravim?" Connor asked eagerly. "Does your uncle know the Divine Emperor?"

"We *have* met Saint Kravim," Deia said. "Paul went to school with his daughter. I don't know whether Sanel knows the Divine Emperor, but he might. Paul and I have never met him, but we were presented to the Divine Empress on our Day of Awakening."

"Whew . . ." Connor said, shaking his head.

"What exactly does your uncle do?" Jacquae asked. "Is he Admiral Laddan's counselor or something?"

Paul leaned forward, his eyes mysterious. "Sanel directs the area of defense that no one knows much about."

Dr. Luciani looked at Paul penetratingly. "You mean—"

Paul nodded. "Intelligence. The Foreign Intelligence Agency, the Department of Internal Investigation, and the Department of Assassins are all under him."

Deia shuddered. "I think he must have once been an Ex-man himself. He just has that feel about him."

Paul nodded. "And he may not be an Executioner, but I imagine he's done some of the dirty work in his time." He pointed to his head. "His mind power is staggering, and as Deia said, he has the feel of a murderer."

"When you're talking about spies, the term's *execution*, not *murder*," Connor said.

"And is completely honorable," Jacquae agreed.

"Well, you wouldn't feel that way if you were standing at the other end of an Ex-man's immobilizer!" Paul exploded.

"Paul," Deia warned, "not *now*."

Paul's face was tense, and his eyes were defiant. "Yes, *now*. Maybe someone can tell me why a citizen who commits a criminal offense against another person or property goes and stands before a judge—the offense could even be murder—and then someone who writes an article for a news disc that is not approved by the government, someone who has done absolutely nothing wrong, is accused of being a spy and is shot down in the street by an Executioner and is given no chance to defend himself!"

Paul paused for a moment to catch his breath. He didn't care that everyone in their section of the commons was staring at him. "Now somebody tell me that it's *fair*, that it's *honorable*, that Executioners can murder people in the streets or rape their minds because they're emissaries of God. If they're really emissaries of God, then I want no part of God."

Many moments of awkward silence passed. Finally Paul relaxed and put his crumpled napkin, plastic eating utensils, and cup on his empty dinner tray. "Well, I'm done." He stood up and said to Jacquae, "I'm going to go down to the weight room for a while. Meet me at the gym in an hour."

"Sure," Jacquae said in discomfort.

After Paul left, Dr. Luciani said to Deia, "Is he always like that?"

Deia nodded slowly. "Lately."

"Well, if you want my opinion," Connor said, "he's insane. And I'm surprised he's alive."

"That's what I tell him, but he's too stubborn to listen."

Dr. Luciani stood up with his empty tray. "I'm going to the lounge to examine the new female bodies," he said to Myke and Connor. "Want to come?"

"Need you ask?" Connor said with a little laugh, standing up.

Myke shook his head. "I need to unpack."

Jacquae shot a caustic look at Dr. Luciani. "Have you dishonored Deia yet with a drink invitation?"

"Of course not. Nice girls like Deia aren't any better for my reputation than poor men are for yours."

Jacquae rolled her eyes and shook her head in disgust.

Dr. Luciani and Connor walked away from the table, and Jacquae said to Deia in a low voice, "He never sees women formally. One drink and it's straight to his office. Can you possibly imagine anything so vulgar? And Tev. Tev will never admit it, but she's one of his regulars!"

Deia had no idea what to say.

Jacquae smiled, ever so slightly. "What are your plans for tonight?"

Deia quickly composed herself. "After I unpack, I have to go to the ship exchange to get some mailing discs. Most of my friends at home don't even know I'm here! There just wasn't time to tell anybody. It sounds as if it will be a boring evening, doesn't it?"

"Mmmm, maybe not," Myke said. "I have to go down there tonight too. I left in . . . kind of a hurry, so there are a few things I forgot to pack. I'll meet you at your compartment in an hour and we can go together. Is that okay?"

"Of course!"

Myke stood up and quickly finished the rest of his juice. "Great!" he said, picking up his tray. "I'll see you later, then."



## Chapter 9: ROYAL TWINS?

As Myke left the commons, he analyzed the things he had just learned. Paul and Deia's relationship to Sanel King disturbed him, and he wished he had masked his astonishment better at the moment of revelation. Granted, they both appeared to be antagonistic toward their uncle, but how could he trust either one of them under the circumstances? Even more puzzling was Paul's attitude toward the government, and Myke sensed that Deia's attitude was similar, even if she wasn't vocal about it. He thought it strange that young people with their background would be so antagonistic. He felt that, in Paul's case anyway, it was probably an act.

Paul and Deia's entire situation perplexed him. Not only were they King's niece and nephew, they were *twins*. Myke doubted they were the royal twins to whom his father had referred in his message—the chances of that had to be astronomical—and even if it was possible, he couldn't think of any reason they would be living on a warship. He thought it more likely that the D.I.I. had broken his father's code and had put the twins on the *Sovereign* in close proximity to him to confuse him. That explained why they weren't training to be officers with the other aristocrats. One of them, at least, was probably an informer.

The thought of Deia as an informer upset Myke. She seemed to be such a sweet girl, so caring and honest. Logically, however, there were too many reasons not to trust her. He clenched his fists at his sides and tried to be callous. He couldn't allow his feelings to cloud his reason.

Now that these twins Paul and Deia had so conveniently become his associates, he felt increased urgency to solve the royal twin puzzle. The only Earthons that were considered "royal" by the majority of the population were those few individuals who had come to Earth with the exiled Diron monarch Tohmazz Zarr as members of his ruling class, along with the children of those conquering nobles. The Zarrists as a race were infertile. Even their strategy of intermarrying with selected natives hadn't done much to increase their ranks, and their religion forbade them to use artificial methods. Myke doubted there had been any twins born into that group for at least a century, and even if any existed, he didn't think they could do anything with regard to Novaun that would significantly benefit Earth.

No . . . Earth wanted control of Novaun's arelada, and it planned to get it from the inside. The only people on Novaun his father would consider "royal" were probably the first families of the twelve Great Houses. Technically the Great House Vumaul was the only ruling monarchy left on Novaun and so could be considered "royal." The island country it ruled, Amaria, was the birthplace of Novaunian civilization and was the most mineral-rich country of Novaun, Novaun being the most mineral-rich planet in the galaxy, but Amaria didn't have arelada. Several of the other Great Houses, although they had not technically been royalty for about two thousand years, did control Novaun's arelada. Myke decided that his father's "royal" twins were most likely associated with one of those Houses.

Myke considered the ways in which Earth might use twins of a Great House to its advantage. He knew that each Great House high patriarch had a seat on the High Council of Judges, Novaun's supreme governing body, but often a member of his family represented him, so perhaps Earth hoped to gain control of someone who occasionally sat

on the Council. A spy on the High Council of Judges, however, wouldn't have to come from a Great House, so another possibility was that Earth wanted to sabotage the arelada mining and business ventures of a specific Great House somehow and gain control over its arelada subtly instead of by force. Myke didn't know anything about the Great Houses' business practices, so he hadn't the faintest idea of how successful Earth could be in this kind of operation. The only other possibility he could think of was that Earth planned to kidnap twin children for ransom.

The kidnapping option didn't settle well with Myke. None of the Great Houses had ever been known to submit to blackmail, and he didn't doubt Earth knew it. All the other possibilities necessitated that someone close to the high patriarch of a Great House sell out, which didn't seem likely either, because Novaunians were similar to Earthons in that they just didn't sell out. They were very patriotic to Novaun and especially loyal to each other, and the Great Houses in particular were known to be extremely loyal. Myke had a very bad feeling about the whole thing. If Earth succeeded in its plans, whatever they were, then the seeds of distrust would be planted among Novaunians, and that might well destroy their culture even if Earth's acquisition of a portion of their arelada didn't.

Myke realized there wasn't much he could do about the royal twin problem except return to Novaun with what he knew. His father, no doubt, had had his reasons for being so secretive about the twins, but Myke still wished he had more information. He hoped researchers on Novaun would be able to discover the identity of the twins and what Earth's plans for them were.

Myke nearly froze as he walked. That overwhelming fear that he would never get home alive had returned. His new cadet friends were unlike any Earthons he had ever met. Their political loyalties were as diverse as their values. He knew that each one of them, although potentially a suitable helper, was treacherous in some way. How could he ever hope to make sense out of all the confusing signals they were hurling at him? He clutched his shoulder and massaged it. The invisible wound still burned, a constant reminder of his vulnerability.

Myke forced himself to relax. There was an informer or two among the many, but there were also those who, by whatever means, could be enticed to go to Novaun. He just needed to approach them before his D.I.I. opponent did, and he needed to approach them with the right enticements.

Once in his compartment, Myke immediately set his laptop on the table and opened a music file, putting his mind into Divided Focus and expanding his spirit into the holorecorders hidden throughout the compartment and also into the transmitter that was in his name tag, telepathically manipulating the devices to record him lying down on his bed to read. Myke assumed a mind guard had not yet been placed on the monitoring devices in his compartment because the D.I.I. wanted either to give him a false sense of security or to assess his telepathic abilities. Myke was, therefore, determined to use as many non-telepathic methods to avoid the surveillance as he could. He was tempted to destroy the devices but didn't dare, not wanting to invite the D.I.I. or anyone else who might be watching to kill him too soon.

Myke quickly searched the compartment for information that would help him understand his roommates. He looked first through Dr. Luciani's belongings. There were no mementos, no posters, and no photographs of anything, not even his family. Myke looked next for his disc wallet and was astounded to find five wallets, all stuffed with

medical, scientific, and political publications in a least two dozen different languages. There was also a collection of pornography, a large supply of Vaenan taffuaos, and a fine collection of wine, all Earthon Mediterranean, which wasn't surprising since it was considered the best in the galaxy.

Connor didn't have as many belongings as Dr. Luciani did. There was his poster of Kent Diamond and his trumpet, along with a tiny photograph of himself and two younger boys Myke assumed were his brothers. His disc wallet contained all kinds of software that he had written himself; computer texts and periodicals; games; lots of music, both audio and text; and several volumes of the Sacred Writings of Tohmazz Zarr. His laptop was an expensive one with a large memory, a fine stereo system, and a projector that could show holograms at life-size.

Paul had an exhaustive supply of fencing gear, including several foils, a sabre, and an épée. His wallet was filled with discs on many different subjects, none predominating, and there was also a large selection of music, both classical and popular, and a few family holodiscs. There were several bottles of expensive cologne and also several pieces of luxurious jewelry, including diamond cuff links.

Myke picked up the family portrait that was sitting on Paul's shelf, a recent picture of Paul, Deia, and, he presumed, their uncle and aunt. Their Aunt Lena looked like an older version of Deia, and Myke imagined Deia would look like her aunt when she was a few years older, more mature but still breathtakingly beautiful. Myke was struck by the sadness in the older woman's eyes, a sadness he hoped would never cloud Deia's.

Myke frowned. There seemed to be something strange about the photograph, but he couldn't determine what it was. He examined it again and still found nothing, so he reluctantly set it back on Paul's shelf.

Myke dismantled his laptop, disposed of the three monitoring devices he found there in the commode, then put his computer back together and ran a diagnostic check, at the same time taking his mind from Divided Focus into complete Awareness and expanding his spirit into the computer. All of the binary code flashed before one of his spirit eyes as his mind decompiled it in search of hidden hostile programs.

After a few minutes of searching, Myke found a clever program designed to duplicate every piece of information his computer processed and transmit it to another computer, presumably one belonging to the D.I.I. agent opposing him. Still using Awareness, Myke telepathically adjusted the code to dismantle the D.I.I. agent's spy program.

Once he finished that, he withdrew his spirit from his laptop, put his mind back into Divided Focus, and logged onto the *Sovereign's* computer network. Myke could have telepathically joined with any of the ship's computers as easily as he had with his own, but unlike the monitoring devices, the ship's computer network was undoubtedly guarded by strong minds who would crush his if he made an attempt to join with it. For that reason, he was forced to acquire the information he desired manually. Since the *Sovereign's* personnel file had the same type of security controls built into it as many of the classified files he had broken into on Earth, he was able to access it rapidly and, for the time being anyway, secretly.

Since Paul and Deia troubled him the most, he would start with them. He brought up Deia's file first. Everything she had done in her life was there. There were school records, family statistics, everything. Myke was most interested in Deia's family background,

especially since she had said that her aunt and uncle had raised them and that their parents had died when she was very young. Her aunt's relationship to King also needed to be explored.

The file said that her parents were John and Deborah Sheldon, both Star Force pilots who had been killed in a Diron raid, Earth Date: October 21, 2 Y.D.E., eleven months after the twins' birth. Their guardian after their parents had died had been Lena Sheldon, mother's sister, and she had married Sanel King on July 13, 3 Y.D.E. The file listed their aunt dead as of February 4, 19 Y.D.E., the cause of death cardiac arrest. Myke's eyes scanned the file to the end where religious and government loyalties were recorded. It said: "Worship attendance—regular. Known resister."

Myke couldn't help but feel relieved. As the Divine Emperor telepathically communicated to Earth's citizens en masse and people opened their minds to accept this communication, he took control of a cell in each of their brains, gaining a grip on their minds difficult to break. Only a small percentage of Earthons possessed telepathic skills refined enough to detect it, and even fewer possessed the skill to resist it. That Deia had the strength to resist the Divine Emperor's mind trap said that her mind and will were free.

Myke leaned back in his chair. He still felt Paul and Deia's family background was strange. How had someone like Lena ever come into contact with someone like Sanel King? Not only that, but Paul and Deia's parents, both Star Force pilots aboard the battleship *Majestic*, had been killed in a Diron raid when the twins were just infants. *Both* had been killed. Where were Paul and Deia during that time? Myke wished he had access to Earth's personnel directory so that he could study its information on the King and Sheldon families.

Myke quickly accessed Paul's file to obtain the political information. It read: "Worship attendance—regular. Known resister. Associated with Earthborns." Mention of the Earthborns, the most widely known and violent of Earth's few underground organizations, surprised Myke. If Paul really had been associated with them on Earth, then Connor was right; he was lucky he was alive. The government liked to use resisters of the Divine Emperor's communication as leaders because of their strong mind power, but there were enough of those who weren't involved with the underground who were much safer. Then a thought occurred to him. They wanted Paul alive. If he really was being honest about his political loyalties, then he would have been an Ex-man's target long ago—unless the government wanted to use him for something.

Next he opened Jacquae's file. "Worship attendance—occasional. Known resister." Dr. Luciani's file: "Worship attendance—holidays only. Known resister." Connor's file: "Worship attendance—perfect. Known resister."

Myke wasn't surprised that Dr. Luciani was a resister. His eyes were astute, and his mien was assured and utterly lacking in submission and fear. Apparently Jacquae wasn't religious either. And Connor, by all appearances, was very religious and patriotic, the most typical Earthon of the group, but he was also known by the government as a resister of the Divine Emperor's communication. Perhaps this information was correct. Appearances were often deceiving, and Connor could easily be the type of person who was driven by fear.

Myke realized that the records on his cadet associates may or may not have been correct on all accounts, something he would learn as he lived with them a little longer. And

discovering whether they possessed the mind power to be resisters would be easy enough for him to do when the time was right.

He quickly checked his own file and discovered the same information he had put there two years before, along with new data concerning his schooling and work at Briggs. His father was listed as a communications specialist for the Office of Defense, his death not acknowledged. Did the D.I.I. not want his commanding officers on the *Sovereign* to know his true status? Was the D.I.I. that concerned he would be killed prematurely? Or was the D.I.I. withholding the updated information in an attempt to make him think that his *Sovereign* superiors weren't watching him?

Myke exited the file and turned off the computer, completing his telepathic manipulation of the watching devices in the compartment by adjusting them to holograph him get up from his bed, turn off his handheld computer, and turn off the music. He withdrew his spirit from the bulkheads of the compartment as he withdrew his hand from the computer, then slipped back into Blind State and began unpacking.

Myke quickly put his personal belongings into his drawers and went to the locker to hang up his clothes. Hearing noise at the compartment door, he turned and saw Paul.

Paul glanced at the bag on the deck by Myke's feet, then at Myke, puzzled. "That bag is all you brought with you from Earth?"

Myke shrugged, setting the bag into the locker. "That and my computer."

"That bag's only big enough for a few tiny things. Even Connor brought more than you did. How do you expect to survive?"

Myke studied Paul's face. "I would've brought more if I'd had more time. The fact of the matter is, the minute I found out I was drafted, I grabbed a few things and rushed to the spaceport to leave Earth." He shook his head, grimacing. "The last thing in this universe I ever wanted to do was be in the military. I was delayed at the spaceport though, so the SPs caught up with me."

Paul's eyes grew huge. "Where were you going to go? I don't want to be a warrior either, but another planet? You wouldn't have known anyone, and what about the language?"

"I have relatives on Vaena." Myke closed the locker door. "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this confidential. After your outburst in the commons, I figured you'd understand, but I really doubt any of the others would." He turned and walked toward the door.

"Of course," Paul replied uneasily. "Where are you going?"

Myke stopped and faced Paul again. "To meet Deia. We're going down to the ship exchange."

"Oh."

Myke didn't miss the skepticism in Paul's eyes. "See you later," Myke said as he turned and walked out of the compartment. In minutes, he was walking with Deia to the transport pod.

"How'd your day go?"

Deia moaned. "You don't know what kind of danger you've put yourself in asking that!"

Myke smiled knowingly. "I think I do."

"It was horrible. I just don't know how I'm going to manage everything. My classes are going to be so difficult. I don't doubt I can do well if I want to, but my heart just isn't

in it.” She stopped and gripped his arm. “Do you think that if I failed all of my classes they would let me go back to Earth?”

“Not a chance! They’d kick you out of the Science Corps, and you’d probably end up cleaning fighters!”

Deia removed her hand from his arm. “I guess you’re right. Myke, I’m not meant to be here. I don’t fit. What am I going to do?”

“You do what you have to do. You survive.” They started walking again. “And you’ll fit in soon enough.”

“I don’t want to fit in completely! I don’t think I’ll ever have a warrior mentality, and I don’t want to have one.”

“Good. I don’t think I’d like you as much as I do if you did.”

Deia looked up at Myke, smiling as they stepped into a transport pod booth. “Every time I talk to you, you make me feel so much better. Where have you been all my life?”

“You say that, but it’s a good thing we didn’t know each other before now. I know your uncle wouldn’t have approved of me.”

“You’re probably right.”

“What was Paul planning to do before you were drafted?”

“He was going to go to advanced school in Tryamaz.”

“What was he going to study?”

“Business and economics. His plan was to graduate, then become Lena’s manager. She designed and made all of our formalwear and jewelry and some of our everyday clothing also, but she never sold any of it. Paul planned to market Lena’s designs for her, and he intended to make a fortune so that we could break free from Sanel’s control forever.”

“That sure fits,” Myke said as they stepped out of the transport pod.

Deia nodded. “Paul’s so funny. He hates Sanel with all the strength of his soul, but he’s like him in many ways, even though he doesn’t realize it.”

“But your uncle isn’t your favorite person either, and yet, you don’t seem to be so hostile. Why would that be? Was he particularly cruel to Paul?”

“Sanel’s always treated us both the same—in a very cool and formal way. He does have a way of controlling our lives that makes us both crazy, but he’s never struck us or even yelled at us. And he worshiped Lena.” Deia shook her head. “No. Paul hates Sanel because he has a sixth sense about him that I don’t have.”

Deia’s observation surprised Myke. “What do you mean?”

“He knows things he shouldn’t know—terrible things—and he’s always right.”

“Like what?”

“Just . . . things.”

Myke knew then that he had pressed a little too hard and that it was time to change the topic of conversation before Deia became suspicious of his questions. Fortunately they were only a few meters away from the ship exchange. He smiled and extended his arm toward the entrance. “Looks like we’re here. Let’s hurry and get what we need so that we can enjoy the rest of the evening.”

## Chapter 10: THE BOUT

Myke arrived at Deia's compartment two evenings later at 1830 to take her to the fencing bout Jacquae had arranged between Paul and Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce.

Paul had asked Jacquae to go to the Star Room with him after the bout, and Jacquae had suggested Myke and Deia go with them. Myke had accepted, not wanting to hurt Deia's feelings by refusing. As much as he enjoyed being with Deia, he felt apprehensive about seeing her formally. He was afraid he might become too attached to her.

Myke buzzed Deia's compartment and attempted to relax, telling himself over and over that seeing her formally just this once wouldn't do any harm.

A minute later, Deia breathlessly arrived at the door, wearing her Science Corps dress suit, a light blue tunic and skirt. "Hi! Come on in. I'm not quite ready. It's been hectic here. Maurena received her orders two hours ago and just left."

As Myke walked with Deia into her compartment, he couldn't stop staring at her. He hadn't seen her hair in any other style than the French braid since the first night he had met her, but now her hair was swept up in an elaborate style, with dainty dark ringlets framing her beautiful face.

They stopped by the table. "You look very lovely tonight, Deia," Myke said softly, still oblivious to everything but her.

"Thank you! And you look very handsome." She gently touched his cheek. "You have beautiful eyes."

"I've never had a girl tell me I'm handsome before," Myke admitted, "but it means a lot coming from you."

Deia reached into one of her drawers and removed a bottle of perfume. "I'm glad." She quickly dabbed some of the fragrance on her neck and slipped into her shoes.

"Are you ready now?"

Deia nodded.

Myke took Deia's hand in his and led her to the door. "I suppose your roommates are already there."

Deia nodded as Myke led her to the door. "Jacquae's helping Paul warm up, and Tevaronia and Kristina went to watch. They're all quite taken with Paul."

"Watch out! Your compartment just might turn into a battle ground!"

"I certainly hope not," Deia said as they walked down the passageway toward the commons. "There's nothing more vicious in this universe than girls fighting for the same guy! And the crazy thing is, it wouldn't matter with Paul, because as much as all the girls like him, he likes all the girls. He never lets any one girl get too close, but the girls who like him never give up trying." She shook her head. "I don't think it would be much of a competition anyway. He likes Jacquae, I can tell!"

"The sword-shrew?"

"Don't you notice how he flirts with her? He's always been a flirt, but he's been giving Jacquae special treatment. That's unusual for Paul."

When Myke and Deia arrived at the commons, they noticed that many of the tables were folded and leaning against the bulkheads and that a fencing strip had been attached to the deck in the middle of the room.

"I never imagined so many would be here!" Deia said.

"I suppose any bout that could give the pro-cadets a champion would draw a lot of people," Myke said. "No wonder Jacquae wanted to have it here. I don't think there'd be enough room at the gym."

"You're probably right."

Myke and Deia quickly walked to the strip and joined Dr. Luciani and Connor. Connor was overflowing with anticipation for the bout. Dr. Luciani didn't care to say much to anyone, preferring to concentrate on Paul and Jacquae, who were sparring lightly in the corner.

Ten minutes before the bout was scheduled to start, Paul slipped into his Star Force sweat suit and walked with Jacquae to the strip, where she briefed him on things he might expect from Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce and would undoubtedly expect from Dr. Luciani as the referee.

By 1855, the commons was crowded with hundreds of cadets. Most were sitting and standing on the remaining tables, but many were standing around the strip, pressing forward as closely as Dr. Luciani would allow. Dr. Luciani was already in his position at the center of the strip, and his two com-cadet judges were already in their places to his right and left.

"Is Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce here yet?" Deia asked Myke. "I don't even know who he is!"

"I haven't seen him yet."

"Oh, you'll know when he gets here," Dr. Luciani interrupted. "He has quite an entrance. It's all a part of the psych-out, you know."

At exactly 1859, about fifty com-cadets, dressed in fencing clothes and carrying their foils, pushed through one of the entrances of the commons and formed two lines between the entrance and the strip. Everyone suddenly became silent as the com-cadets held their foils up to form a bridge. Then they and all of the com-cadets in the audience cheered as Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce ran under the arch of swords to the strip. He halted when he was one step away from the strip and held up both of his arms. All of the com-cadets yelled, "Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce for Command!"

If the com-cadets were energetic in their support of Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce, the pro-cadets were even more enthusiastic in their support of Paul. They gathered around Paul in several circles and held their foils up toward the center. Then they yelled, "Paul for the pro-cadets!" They continued yelling and screaming wildly as they scattered. Paul ran over to the strip.

Deia looked at Myke in excitement. "This is going to be great!" Then she lifted her arms and cheered for Paul with the pro-cadets.

Paul took off his sweats and handed them to Jacquae, and Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce removed his sweats and gave them to another com-cadet. Both fencers were then handed their foils and masks before they proceeded to their positions behind the on-guard lines on the strip.

Dr. Luciani turned on the tiny microphone that was pinned to his uniform and said in a loud voice, "The bout will now begin! On my right is a pro-cadet and competent fencer, the challenger, Novice Cadet Paul Sheldon!" All the pro-cadets cheered.

"And on my left is the current cadet champion, com-cadet, and future Director of Defense, Saint Cadet Gregory Vahro-Pierce!" The com-cadets chanted: "Pierce . . . Pierce . . . Pierce . . ."



Pierce danced around in his position, flashing his bewitching smile, his arms in the air and his gray-green eyes shining with exuberance.

Deia watched the proceedings in curiosity and awe. She leaned toward Myke. "Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce certainly does have charisma. It's no wonder everyone's so intimidated by him."

"And Paul looks so cool!"

"And he will until the bout is over," Deia said. "He's strong, quick, and precise, but still, his game is primarily psychological. If this nobleman is as good as everyone says he is, then it will be a good fight."

"Quiet!" Dr. Luciani yelled. When everyone became silent again, he continued: "I want no screaming or yelling or name calling. You may clap for a well-executed move." Then he said with a smirk, "Anyone who violates these rules will be personally thrown out by Jacquae!" Everyone laughed, and Jacquae, who was now standing with Myke, Deia, and Connor, bowed.

Dr. Luciani held out both of his hands and motioned for the two fencers to approach him. When they were standing in front of him, he quickly used a tiny cylindrical device to check for tampering in their electromatrix foils and sensor jackets. Satisfied that everything was in order, he nodded that they could return to the strip.

Paul and Pierce stepped behind the on-guard lines on the strip and took stiff positions facing each other, swords directed diagonally toward the deck.

Dr. Luciani said loudly, "Salute!"

The fencers extended their blades toward each other, then swept their hilts to their chins, repeating the motion several times as they turned their bodies to salute the audience and Dr. Luciani.

"Mask on!"

Paul and Pierce quickly slipped their masks into place.

Dr. Luciani extended his arms with palms down, "On!"

The fencers swept their blades toward each other.

"Guard!"

Legs shifted, knees bent, and free arm lifted into an arc. To Myke, it all seemed so formal and foreign—and fascinating.

Dr. Luciani looked from Paul to Pierce, then asked, turning his palms toward the fencers, "Are you ready?" He received one nod of the head from each in reply.

"Fence!"

Paul and Pierce moved aggressively and gracefully with every attack and parry as they tested each other's defenses for weakness. After several seconds of swordplay, Pierce sharply beat Paul's blade with his, then instantly lunged and thrust the tip of his foil into the target area below Paul's armpit, setting off a beeping sound.

Dr. Luciani's voice could be heard all through the commons: "Halt!" Paul and Pierce immediately stopped fencing.

As Dr. Luciani briefly reconstructed the last several movements and received the judges' votes on whether the hit was valid, almost everyone clapped enthusiastically. Deia clapped with everyone else, shaking her head in amazement. "That was a beautiful attack! Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce is a worthy opponent for Paul."

Myke nodded in agreement but didn't speak. Since he didn't know much about fencing, he didn't want to say anything that would make himself appear stupid.

Only a minute later, Dr. Luciani declared the hit valid. The scorer, who was standing across from Dr. Luciani on the opposite side of the strip with a handheld computer, then said loudly, "The score is now 1-0 in favor of Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce." Again, Dr. Luciani gave the command to fence.

After only moments of fencing, Paul parried an attack, delayed a second, then thrust his blade at Pierce and hit him in the target area.

"Halt!" Again, Dr. Luciani took the vote from the judge nearest Pierce, and the hit was determined valid. The scorer marked it and announced that the score was now 1-1.

The fencing resumed again, Pierce scoring the next hit, Paul the two after that. After almost nine minutes of actual fencing time had passed, with brief rests at three-minute intervals, the score was tied, 14-14.

The spectators watched in anticipation as Paul and Pierce vigorously fenced for the deciding touch of the bout. Deia clutched Myke's arm. "Oh come on, Paul, come on!"

Paul executed a feint attack, leading Pierce into making a circular parry. Then he gracefully lunged, the point of his blade moving in a circular motion to bend on Pierce's chest. Deia gasped and began clapping. "Excellent, Paul, excellent!"

Even as Dr. Luciani declared the hit valid and Paul the victor, the pro-cadets exploded with excitement. As most of the pro-cadets scurried to mob Paul, Dr. Luciani quickly and loudly said, "Hold on! They still have to salute and shake!"

Paul and Pierce took off their masks, their faces glistening and hair drenched with sweat, but both wearing expressions of elation. They enthusiastically saluted and shook hands, then handed off their weapons and masks.

"You were lucky this time, Sheldon!" Pierce said. "Next time you'll be shish kebab!"

"Which wouldn't surprise me a bit!" Paul exclaimed. Then to the astonishment of everyone, they patted each other's backs and gushed with compliments to each other.

Murmurs of confusion and surprise rumbled through the commons. Then the fencers' enthusiasm ignited excitement among all the cadets, and everyone in the commons cheered, com-cadets and pro-cadets alike, all thrilled they had witnessed such an outstanding bout.

"Well, how do you like that?" Jacquae said. "Pierce doesn't even mind that he got beat! They're going to be friends! That's disgusting."

"They both fought an excellent game, and they know it," Dr. Luciani said. "And I've never seen two fencers so evenly matched."

A com-cadet rushed up to Dr. Luciani and quickly removed the microphone from his uniform. The com-cadet pinned it on his own uniform and yelled, "With such outstanding warriors as Vahro-Pierce and Sheldon, Earth's enemies don't have a chance for salvation!" Everyone shouted in agreement.

Paul and Pierce took the com-cadet's lead and held up their arms, clasping hands. "Earth will conquer!" Pierce yelled. Everyone repeated the cry with deafening energy.

"Our enemies will die!" Paul cried in turn. Again, everyone repeated Paul's words.

"Long live the Divine Emperor!" Pierce yelled. Everyone repeated these words, then stomped their feet and cheered hysterically.

Myke thought the whole thing was frightening. He made some token gestures at clapping but didn't yell. Deia didn't yell either, and she appeared to be as disturbed as he was. What struck Myke the most, however, was that Paul had cheered energetically on the

first two cheers, but had frowned and hesitated on the last one, finally deciding not to cheer at all.

The com-cadet threw up his fist and cried, "Onward Earthon Soldiers!" Then all the cadets began singing Earth's favorite battle hymn:

Onward, Earthon soldiers!  
Marching on to war,  
With the sword of God  
Going on before.

Zarr, our royal master,  
Leads against the foe;  
Forward into battle,  
See our banners go!

Onward, Earthon soldiers,  
Marching on to war,  
With the sword of God  
Going on before.

Everyone cheered vigorously, then began dispersing. As Connor and Jacquae ran over to the strip to congratulate Paul, Deia's hand tightened on Myke's arm. "Why do they have to do that?" She shuddered. "It's just horrible, as if everyone really wants to go to war. I just want to go home."

Myke unconsciously put his arms around Deia and held her tightly. "So do I," he whispered.

Several moments of anxious silence passed. "Are you all right?" Deia asked.

Myke wished he could tell her about the terrible fear, about the foreboding nightmares, and about the burning pain in his shoulder. "I'm fine, really," he answered instead.

Deia laid her head against Myke's neck and held him lovingly. "I'm always here for you," she whispered with emotion.

Her caresses gradually sent Myke's fear back to its lurking place in his subconscious, but he found himself clinging to her more tightly than ever. He suddenly became aware of her warmth and the soft feel of her, and an electrifying excitement, an anticipation, surged through him. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the embrace, not remembering another moment of such exhilaration.

## Chapter 11: A CLASSY LADY

Deia completed playing Chopin's "Heroic" Polonaise, and Myke, who was sitting on the piano bench with her, clapped and whistled and cried, "Bravo!" Three other enthusiastic voices immediately joined his. He and Deia looked up and saw Paul, Jacquae, and Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce approaching the piano.

Paul and Jacquae, like Myke and Deia, were in their dress uniforms. Pierce smelled of expensive cologne, his wavy blond hair meticulously styled as usual.

"It sure took you long enough!" Myke said to Paul and Jacquae as he took Deia's hand and helped her off the bench.

"It certainly did. I'm starving!"

Paul didn't appear concerned. He turned to Pierce. "Greg, you already know Myke." Greg nodded once and looked at Myke with a peculiar expression, and Myke was immediately uneasy. What had been an insignificant practice fight to Myke—not worth participating in, much less remembering—had unsettled Pierce as much as Jacquae claimed. Myke hoped the only thing troubling him was hurt pride.

Paul held his hand out toward Deia. "This is my sister Deia. And Deia, this is Greg Pierce."

Delight immediately replaced the wariness in Pierce's eyes. He took Deia's hand in his and kissed it. "You're even more beautiful than I expected from what Paul told me, and I can't believe I haven't seen you before now."

Deia laughed a little and gave a brief curtsy. "That's hardly surprising since Paul and I are pro-cadets! But thank you for your kind words anyway."

Pierce squeezed her hand and drew her closer, his face becoming solemn. "I'm going to get you and Paul out of this bourgeois sewer and into the officers' training program where you belong."

Deia's smile faded, and her countenance seemed to tense. "Thank you for your concern, Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce, but until you really are Director of Defense, I don't think that even you will have the power to counteract our uncle's wishes."

Pierce patted Deia's hand, his eyes glowing with amusement. "It's 'Greg,' Deia. And your uncle doesn't have to know anything about it. My father will transfer you like that." He snapped his fingers.

Paul's eyes widened in hope; Deia's widened in dread. She shook her head quickly. "I don't want to march."

Pierce laughed. "You'll get used to it. Besides. It'll be temporary. My mother's coming in for the holidays, and after she hears you play, she'll petition *my* uncle for your discharge."

Pierce's reference to the Divine Emperor brought blood into Deia's cheeks. "Thank you . . . Greg," she said softly, bowing her head slightly.

Pierce squeezed Deia's hand and released it. "It's the least I can do for my beautiful prodigy. You'll save a dance for me tomorrow night, won't you?"

"I didn't know com-cadets were invited," Deia replied in a low voice.

"If you agree now to dance with me, I'm invited."

Deia raised her eyebrows. "If I invite you to the pro-cadets' dance, I could be put on report for fraternization." Myke couldn't tell whether Deia was teasing Pierce or reprimanding him.

Pierce chuckled. "I'll take that as a 'yes.' Until tomorrow then." Pierce snapped his hand to his forehead in a salute to Paul. Paul saluted back and they both laughed.

After Pierce walked away, Deia blurted, "He sure has a lot of gall! Flirting like that when I'm with someone formally! I almost wish *he* would get put on report for fraternization!"

Paul smiled. "Well, you know that won't happen, so you might as well relax and flirt back."

"You should be flattered!" Jacquae said. "You're the only pro-cadet I've ever seen him flirt with, and this is the first time he's made an appearance in our lounge."

"Despite all the unkind words Jacquae has for Greg, she really doesn't think he's all that terrible," Paul said to Deia and Myke. "And to tell you the truth, he isn't. But now on to more serious business—dinner!"

The four strolled down the passageway, laughing and discussing the bout. They headed to a transport pod and took it to deck A2, the section of the *Sovereign* where fleet personnel went for formal entertainment, the only area of the ship where civilian guests were allowed.

A few minutes later, the four arrived at the Star Room, which was located at the front of the vessel, directly under the bridge and above the three shuttle bays. Its huge window-wall was the single best view of the universe available on the ship, unless one received the rare opportunity to visit the bridge. The view and a quality Earthon cuisine gave the restaurant its popularity. Paul, Jacquae, Myke, and Deia stepped into a foyer with gilded bulkheads and approached the reservation counter, the chandelier crystals tinkling above their heads. "I have a reservation for four under the name Sheldon," Paul told the headwaiter.

The headwaiter, a shipman first class in the warrior ranks' deep gray dress uniform, quickly typed the name "Sheldon" on his computer keyboard. "Follow me," he said as he stepped away from the counter.

Once they were seated, a cocktail waitress, shipman second class, approached the table. "Would you like something to drink?"

"A bottle of your best champagne!" Paul said. He turned and looked at Deia and Myke in question. Both shook their heads. Paul looked up again at the waitress. "We'll have only two glasses with the bottle."

"What's the matter with you two!" Jacquae said to Myke and Deia after the waitress walked away from their table. "Even Ton doesn't have the quality of champagne you'll get here! Why do you think he demanded a bottle for officiating the bout?"

Myke wanted to laugh. The Earthons had an obsession with chemicals that scorned common sense. He couldn't believe Jacquae could be so concerned about something so trivial. "Sorry to disappoint you, Jacquae, but I don't drink. I couldn't care less about the quality of the Star Room's champagne!"

Deia said to Myke, looking at Paul sidelong with an amused expression, "It was always a big joke when we went out to eat with Lena. Paul always wanted wine, and she always said no."

"Now don't you try and make me feel guilty, because it won't work!"

Deia smiled sweetly at Paul. "Who said anything about guilt?"

Myke decided this was a good time to ask the question that had been in his mind since he had learned Dr. Luciani would be officiating the bout. "It seems a little strange to me, Jacquae, that your brother would be a fencing referee. How did that come about?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but however it started, he's superb at it. He sees everything and has a photographic memory. He's the only unofficial referee that both the pro-cadets and the com-cadets will accept."

"Does he ever actually fence?" Paul asked.

"Yeah, he gets down to the gym a couple times a week."

Deia shook her head. "I can't see it."

Jacquae shrugged. "Everyone in Star Force fences. We're required to stay in shape, and fencing's the most enjoyable way to do it."

"I don't fence," Deia said.

"You will."

The waitress arrived with two tall tulip glasses and a bottle of champagne in ice. She removed the bottle from the ice, gently removed the cork, and poured some of the beverage into a glass for Paul to sample. Paul sipped from his glass, then nodded. The waitress poured more of the champagne into Paul's glass and filled Jacquae's. A little later a different waitress came with menus.

"Mmmm . . . everything looks so good!" Jacquae exclaimed as she studied her menu. "I don't know if I'll be able to decide!"

"Do you like shrimp?" Paul asked. "The shrimp platter looks good."

Jacquae handed her menu to Paul. "Let's go for that, then."

"What would you like, Deia?" Paul asked.

Deia closed her menu. "Do you know what I would really like? A big plate of spaghetti!"

Myke and Jacquae laughed, and Paul rolled his eyes. "Only you would come to the Star Room and order spaghetti, Deia! But it isn't on the menu!"

"I've desperately wanted some good spaghetti since I arrived here. That synthesized food tastes like plastic!"

"Antonio's pasta has spoiled you!" Then Paul said to Myke and Jacquae, "Deia's a pasta lover. I don't know how she's ever managed to keep her figure."

Deia looked at Myke, who was sitting quite close to her. "What are you going to have?"

"The prime rib."

Deia smiled radiantly at Myke. "I'll have a steak too, then. Filet mignon." She handed her menu to Myke, who set it with his at the front of the table. Then their hands found each other's under the table.

After the food arrived, the four ate slowly as they continued talking and laughing. When they were done, Deia managed to talk the waitress into finding her some fresh strawberry ice cream for dessert. After a considerable wait, the waitress finally brought Deia a half-liter of Earth's finest strawberry ice cream, which she and Myke devoured straight from the container.

Paul poured more champagne for himself and Jacquae. "Tell us about Baltimore," he suggested, returning Jacquae's glass to her. "I've never been there myself."

"Don't you know?" Jacquae said merrily. "It's the sin-city of North America! That's the only reason Ton claims he's from there."

Myke chuckled. "And I thought it was Tryamaz!"

"No, Tryamaz may be full of hypocrites, but Baltimore's the home of the honest sinners. The pious community has all but moved out, as you can well imagine!" Jacquae twisted her face into a mock frown and shook her head. "It's so very sad." She finished her glass of champagne in one gulp and refilled it.

Paul shot Jacquae a silly look, clinking glasses with her. "Hear, hear! To Jacquae, the queen of the sentimentalists!"

The corners of Jacquae's mouth quivered, as if she were about to burst out laughing. "You three would like my neighborhood. It's a real old, trashy place. Somehow it survived the Dark Years. We lived in a tiny apartment in the city. Mamma's two German shepherds stay on the balcony. I should've fed Ton to them when we were home. He's so ungrateful. He only visited Mamma once the whole time he was in Baltimore—rented a room downtown for a couple days, then off to Europe with that son of Abomination Adrian. He's never forgiven me for being stationed on the *Sovereign* with him, you know." She poured herself another glass of champagne and took a sip. "He detests me. I remind him of the old neighborhood, and he doesn't like that."

"Why did you decide to be an engineer?" Myke asked.

Jacquae sighed dramatically. "As much as Ton's always wanted to be a doctor, I've always wanted to be an engineer. I guess you have to have big dreams to pull yourself out of a dump like that; at least that's what Mamma used to say." She sipped again at her champagne, then held up her glass. "Hear, hear! To me! The queen of the sentimentalists!"

"Hear, hear!" Paul exclaimed.

"I think you two have had enough," Deia said. "You have class tomorrow, remember?"

"Deia, Deia, Deia . . . relax!" Paul said. He held up the bottle and swished the remaining champagne around in the bottom. "We still have a little more. Here, have some! Forget everything for a while and have some fun!"

\* \* \*

Myke and Deia barely spoke as they walked back to the cadet section of the ship. Deia replayed Paul's actions at the restaurant over and over in her mind. The more she thought about all the ridiculous things he had said and done, the more disturbed she became.

Myke suddenly asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Deia said gloomily.

"You aren't a very good liar."

"I guess not." Deia stopped abruptly and turned to face Myke. "Do you think we did the right thing, leaving Paul and Jacquae up there? I hope they don't decide to drink another bottle of champagne."

"I think they'll be okay. As long as they don't have another bottle, they'll make it back without any problems. And I don't think they will since they have class tomorrow."

"I suppose you're right. Myke, I'm worried about Paul. It isn't like him to drink so much. He's never been one to have more than a small glass of wine, maybe two, at a party. He must be awfully depressed. I just wish he would talk to me instead of drink."

"He's taking Lena's death a lot harder than he lets on, isn't he?"

Deia nodded sadly. "He's absolutely devastated that she died, but he won't talk about it. Last night we talked for a long time, but when I asked him how he's managing, he just said, 'We're talking about you, not me.'"

"I figured you were his confidante."

"Oh, I am. He's always talked to me more than he's talked to anyone, even Lena. But that isn't very often. Most people he doesn't trust enough, but I think with Lena and me it's always been that he feels he has to be the strong one and that admitting his frustrations somehow makes him weak." Deia sighed. "Who knows what kind of pain he's carrying around."

Myke smiled. "The more I get to know you and Paul, the more amazed I am at how different you are."

Deia allowed herself to smile back at Myke. "Isn't that the truth. Sometimes I wonder if we're from different planets."

Myke gently traced the outline of Deia's mouth with his finger. "It's nice to see you smile again." He put his arm around her shoulders, and they leaned against the bulkhead. He said thoughtfully, "Just be there when he needs you. That's really all you can do. The rest is up to him."

"I know. But still, it tears me up to see him in pain. I just wish he wouldn't be so stubborn!" Deia forced herself to smile. "I'm sorry to be so glum."

Myke took Deia's hand in his again. "C'mon, let's walk."

They walked for an hour or so, sometimes talking, sometimes simply strolling. They ended up at Deia's compartment about ten minutes before curfew.

Deia leaned against the bulkhead. "This has been such a wonderful evening. I hate for it to end."

"It has been a nice evening, hasn't it? You know, I really enjoy being with you, Deia. You're interesting and a lot of fun. And I'll have to admit, being seen with a girl like you is good for my reputation." He caressed her cheek with his finger. "None of the guys I know can, as hard as they try, figure out why a beautiful, classy lady like you would even speak to a guy like me."

Deia lifted her hand to touch Myke's. "Beautiful? Classy?" She laughed a little. "Those words I always reserved for Lena, and I guess if I'm at all that way it's only because I don't know anything different." She looked at Myke thoughtfully. "And you believe in yourself too much to be fooled by what the guys say or to let them bother you. And more than anyone else, even Paul, you understand the way I am about these things, I think."

Myke smiled and nodded once. He understood completely.

Deia gazed at him tenderly as he brushed her hair away from her forehead and cheeks and gently stroked it. He was so different from any young man she had ever known. He was kind and affectionate, yet assured and forceful in personality, an unusual combination of traits, but one she found fascinating. Moreover, he was fun to be with and very handsome, and they were so comfortable together. She wished she could spend every moment of every day with him.

He cradled her head in his hands, returning her gaze with equal tenderness and passion. After a moment, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. It was a simple kiss, but it was so full of feeling that it left Deia breathless.

"Thank you for such a wonderful evening," Deia whispered.



As Myke lowered his hands, he delicately ran his fingers over her jaw, savoring every touch. “Thank *you*. I’ll see you tomorrow at breakfast.”

Deia turned and slipped her name tag into the door slot. “Good night!” she said as she slipped into her compartment.

As the door slid shut behind her, she saw that Jacquae was leaning against Tevaronia’s upper berth, gushing with the details of her evening with Paul. Kristina, a willowy black girl, was lying on her lower bunk, reading from her handheld computer.

“So . . . how’d it go?” Tevaronia asked in excitement when Deia entered the compartment.

Kristina sat up and leaned forward so that she could see Deia. “Mmmm, lady! You look as though you’ve been dancing on some star in another universe!”

“I have been!” Deia walked over to her bunk, stepped out of her shoes, and started removing her jewelry.

“Whoa!” Tevaronia exclaimed. “It must be love! Tell us all about it!”

Jacquae giggled. “Did he kiss you? I’m just dying to know if he’s a good kisser!”

Deia smiled. “Sort of. He kissed me on the cheek right before I came in.” She removed the blue waist sash and quickly unfastened the silver buttons on her tunic.

“On the cheek?” Kristina said in amazement. “I’ve never had a guy do that before. They always go straight for the mouth, and half the time I would rather they didn’t!”

“Oh, but Myke’s kiss was worth a thousand times more than all the other kisses I’ve had on the lips. I’ve never had a kiss with so much emotion, never.”

“Oooh, how romantic!” Tevaronia said.

Jacquae grinned impishly. “He likes you an awfully lot, doesn’t he!”

Deia gracefully slipped into fatigues. “Ohhh . . . I think he might.”

“Oh, Tev and Krissy,” Jacquae said, “she’s just being modest! You should’ve seen the way he looked at her all during dinner. I don’t think I’ve ever in my life seen a guy so crazy about a girl!”

Deia lay down on her bed. “He’s so affectionate, and when I’m with him, he makes me feel like a princess!”

“Wouldn’t it be nice!” Kristina said. “I haven’t seen any real affection since I left Earth.”

“Deia, you are a lucky girl!” Tevaronia bubbled. “Myke sounds like he’s sensitive—so rare in the military—and he’s so adorable!—I’d definitely rank him among the best-looking of the new cadets—and such a personality! Those blue, blue eyes, and he always looks like he’s up to something, boy, I just could’ve died when he came into the lounge last night in his gym clothes—I mean, he stuck out like a shuttle in a squadron of fighters!”

“Well, what do you expect?” Jacquae said, still giggling. “He grew up in Hawaii. You know those people don’t have any sense of culture—”

“Don’t let his appearance fool you,” Kristina began on a more serious note. “He’s brilliant. Probably the most brilliant engineer among the cadets.”

Deia sat up in her bed, interested. “How would you know that?”

Kristina shrugged. “I thought he looked familiar, so I approached him last night about it. I found out we graduated in the same class at TIST. I didn’t know him then, probably just remember him from seeing him in the halls or something. Anyway, he told me that he spent his senior year with Briggs Spacecraft Development on a co-op program, then became full-time as soon as he graduated. He worked on engine design for fighters.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Deia asked.

“Let me finish! Briggs develops spacecraft for the military and such, and it’s very picky about who it hires—everyone in a technical field on Earth knows that. The company gives a few advanced school scholarships and job opportunities to some intermediate school students, but you nearly have to be a genius for them to be interested in you. And he worked there for two years, so they must have been impressed.” Then she added with a grin, “But brains or no brains, he doesn’t have bad looking legs!”

“Oooh . . . I like his legs,” Deia cooed.

“I’ll tell you whose legs I’d like to see,” Tevaronia said in excitement. “Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce’s. Boy, is that guy built!”

Jacquae shrugged. “They’re not that great.”

Deia’s eyes widened. “How would you know?”

“I got stuck testing new cadets with him.”

“You know,” Tevaronia continued, lighting a taffuao, “fencers always have the *very best* legs, and it’s a shame they have to wear those stupid knickers and we never get to see them in action!”

Jacquae kicked one of her legs high in the air. “Take a good look, ladies! The legs of a fencer!”

## Chapter 12: THE DANCE

The commons was a rumble of voices and laughter under a supernova of brassy rock when Myke arrived at the cadet welcome dance at 2010 the next evening. He couldn't believe no one was dancing.

He scanned the smoke-tinged room and finally saw Dr. Luciani and Connor standing near the food table, also wearing their dress uniforms. Jacquae and Kristina were nearby, rearranging some of the food on the buffet table.

"Hey Myke! Where's Deia?" Connor said as Myke approached him. "I thought couples were supposed to come together!"

"You'll never give up, will you? She's coming with Paul."

Dr. Luciani looked at Myke knowingly. "Just because she's coming with Paul doesn't mean she'll leave with him. If you'd like, we'll even stay out of our compartment for a while so that you two can pick up where you left off last night. And we won't even charge you . . . this time." He and Connor chuckled lustfully.

"You're reading this thing between Deia and me all wrong. We're just friends. And besides, nothing happened last night."

"You were with one of the most beautiful girls in this sector of the galaxy, a girl, which I might add, is crazy about you, and nothing happened?" Connor shook his head. "I'm no fool."

"Come on, Zarek," Dr. Luciani said. "At least tell us if she's a good kisser. With Deia, I doubt you'd know any more than that yet."

"Nothing happened!"

Dr. Luciani looked at Myke skeptically. "If Deia didn't kiss you, it's only because you didn't give her a chance. You did try, didn't you?"

Myke shook his head. "I told you, we're just friends."

Connor groaned. "You didn't even try? Where in the galaxy is your drive?" He looked at Myke uneasily. "You do like girls . . . don't you?"

Myke laughed. "I love girls!"

A few moments later, Jacquae joined Dr. Luciani, Connor, and Myke, her makeup applied exotically, her hair up, and wearing earrings that looked like real pearls. She reached for the bottle of Star Room champagne that was sitting on the table in a bucket of ice and opened it with a corkscrew that was lying nearby. Dr. Luciani and Connor reached for the goblets that were sitting on the table with the champagne.

Jacquae poured champagne for herself, Connor, and Dr. Luciani, then they all, including Myke with a cup of punch, held their glasses up for a toast. "To the band!" Jacquae said. "May someone compliment them and dance!"

Suddenly the four heard a familiar voice from behind them exclaim, "What's wrong with this party? Why isn't anyone dancing?" They all turned to see Paul and Deia approaching them from an entrance behind the buffet table.

Dr. Luciani set his drink on the table and lit a taff. "These things are always slow to get started."

"Not where I'm from!" Paul said. He faced Deia, took her hand in his, and kissed it. "May I have the first dance with the *Sovereign's* loveliest lady?"

Deia smiled modestly. "How can I refuse?"

Paul held out his arm for Deia. "Let's show these people how to dance!" Deia looked back at her friends and smiled as Paul led her to the middle of the dance floor near the laptop that was rhythmically projecting laser beams of various colors.

The next song was just starting, and it was a slow, flowing jazz number. Paul and Deia were both wonderful dancers, especially Paul, and they were perfect partners for each other. They moved gracefully, Paul occasionally spinning Deia and sometimes dipping her. When the number was over, everyone in the commons clapped and cheered.

The next number was rock with a Latin feel, heavy on percussion. When the number began, Paul let out a yell of excitement, and Deia laughed and uninhibitedly shook her head. Then they started dancing again, clapping with the beat and moving energetically across the floor, coordinating their movements. This time they were joined by several other couples.

"They really can dance, can't they?" Connor said.

"Probably learned at all those high-class parties they go to," Jacquae said as she sipped her champagne.

Myke loved watching Deia. She was so elegant and expressive, and he was amazed at how every time he saw her, she was more beautiful than before.

Connor shook his head. "You know, guys like Paul have always made me sick. He has everything! Style, looks, athletic ability, brains, women, and for most of his life anyway, money. Why couldn't it have been me?"

As the dance ended, Jacquae elbowed Myke. "Why don't you ask Deia to dance?"

Myke shook his head. "Not right now."

"Well, if Myke isn't going to ask her to dance, I will," Connor said, holding his glass out to be refilled. "Dr. Luciani, pour me some more champagne." Dr. Luciani picked up the champagne bottle and poured a little more into the glass. Connor drank it in one gulp and hurried to the dance floor.

A minute later, Connor returned, appearing disappointed. "I tell you, I have all the luck. Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce beat me to her."

Dr. Luciani shrugged. "I could have told you he'd make a play for her."

"Just look at how he's trying to dance close and she's pushing him away!" Connor said. "She's going to have a broken arm by the time the dance's over!"

Myke watched Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce and Deia curiously, thinking they were an attractive couple. They were both poised and refined, and they danced well together. Moreover, Pierce appeared to be interested in her.

"I should've known Pierce would like Deia," Jacquae said resentfully. "She's just his type, quite a prize. He's such a haughty son of Abomination."

When the song was over, Pierce walked Deia to the buffet table. He approached Jacquae, wearing a bold smile. "Would the sword-shrew like to dance?" Everyone standing nearby burst into laughter.

Jacquae glared at Myke. "I'm going to get you for that."

Myke shot her a look that said, "I dare you!"

Pierce held out his arm for Jacquae. "Well, come on, babe!"

"Do I have to?"

"Yes," Pierce said firmly and without hesitation.

Jacquae smiled seductively at Pierce as she took his arm and walked with him to the dance floor. Tevaronia approached the buffet table, nodded a greeting to everyone, and poured herself a glass of champagne.

"I sure never thought I'd see those two dance together," Myke said.

"Haven't you heard?" Dr. Luciani said. "They're supposed to be having an affair. Secretly of course. Pierce would never publicly defile himself with a piece of Eslavu trash like my sister."

"Pierce and Jacquae?" Connor blurted. "Never in a million years!"

Tevaronia shrugged. "That's been the big news on the grapevine for months."

Deia shook her head. "Now I've heard everything." She looked at Dr. Luciani doubtfully. "Do you think it's true?"

Dr. Luciani lit another taffuao. "How should I know? Neither one of them tells me anything." He paused, taking a draw on his taff. "Personally, I don't think there's ever been anything more than an attraction on Jacquae's end and an amusement on Pierce's. Jacquae always goes for the aristocrats. Haven't you noticed how quickly she started working on Paul? What I don't understand is why the aristocrats always go for her—she has a body like a taff."

"I think you overlook some of your sister's admirable qualities," Connor said in amusement.

"Maybe so." Dr. Luciani set his empty glass on the table and handed his partially smoked taff to Tevaronia, who immediately put it to her lips for a draw. Dr. Luciani turned to Deia and smiled flirtatiously. "Well, kid," he said, "how about a dance with your mentor?"

Deia grinned. "Promise you'll be good?"

"Promise!"

After Deia danced with Dr. Luciani, she danced with Connor, then ended up dancing exclusively with Pierce. Paul was enjoying dancing with a different girl every dance. He was popular with all the girls—they were standing together in a group, waiting for their chances to dance with him—and on a few fast numbers he danced with two or three at a time. Dr. Luciani and Connor danced occasionally with girls who appeared interesting, Dr. Luciani dancing slow numbers only. Myke didn't dance at all and was content just to watch. Dr. Luciani and Connor tried to persuade Myke to rescue Deia from Pierce. He always said he would, but he never did.

Two hours passed, and the revelry became louder and more uninhibited as the cadets became more intoxicated. Since the following day was designated for Worship, all the cadets but a few upperclassmen and mentors who worked rotating shifts had it free. Curfew was always lifted on Friday, so everyone assumed the band would be playing well into the night.

Dr. Luciani was filling a plate at the buffet table, Connor was on the dance floor, and Myke was standing alone when Pierce walked Deia to the buffet table after a dance. As Pierce began filling a plate, Deia slipped away from him and approached Myke. As the next number began, Deia held her hand out to Myke and smiled. "Would you like to dance?"

Myke was abashed. "I—I don't know how to dance."

Deia couldn't contain her astonishment. "But I thought everyb—" She took his hand. "Come on. This is an easy one to learn on. All you have to do is feel the music and move!"

Myke followed Deia reluctantly onto the dance floor, where an energetic song with a heavy rock beat was just starting. Deia immediately started moving with the music, and she motioned for Myke to dance with her. Myke looked at her skeptically, then glanced at others to see what they were doing. Then he slowly began moving his feet and arms to the beat.

After several moments of dancing, Myke said loudly, "This is fun!"

Deia smiled. "Now see what you've been missing?"

Myke nodded and continued dancing. He enjoyed it so much that he started getting bolder in the moves he tried. He ended up dancing with such coordination and with such a unique style, that many of the other cadets gathered around him to watch.

Myke loved every second of it. Once he noticed the attention he was getting, he started playing comedian. He strutted, clapped, and winked at the girls as everyone laughed.

Myke decided that this moment in the spotlight provided an excellent opportunity to get a feel for the loyalties of his cadet peers and to learn whether his superiors on the *Sovereign* knew he was a spy. Seized by an irresistible urge to see just how many cadets he could offend, he pushed his long sleeves slowly, provocatively, up to his elbows, unbuttoned his tunic a bit at the neck, and removed his waist sash.

Dr. Luciani, Connor, and Jacquae were laughing so hard they were crying; Paul's mouth was open in astonishment; and Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce was watching the entire proceedings with skepticism and disgust. Myke was disappointed to see that only a few of the cadets shared Pierce's disgust. Were the cadets that irreverent? Or were they just too intoxicated to care that their sacred uniform was being desecrated?

Myke twirled the sash over his head and swaggered with the beat of the music to his friends. He brushed the sash over Kristina's face and winked. Kristina smiled back and fluttered her eyelashes.

Deia was laughing and still dancing as Myke moved to Jacquae. He shot her an alluring look, then slipped the sash around her neck. Jacquae smirked, then grabbed him by the head and gave him a passionate kiss.

Myke's eyes widened, and he waved his arms helplessly in the air as Jacquae kissed him. Everyone watching laughed even harder. Once Myke managed to pry himself away from Jacquae, he smiled at her knowingly. "That'll be a hundred dollars!"

"A hundred dollars?"

"You didn't think you'd get it for free, did you?" Myke danced back over to Deia, took her hand, and spun her around a few times, and they laughed and danced together for the last few seconds of the song. When the song was over, everyone in the commons clapped, whistled, and cheered as Myke bowed.

Myke put his arm around Deia and pushed her quickly toward an exit. "I need some air!"

Once they were in the passageway, Deia looked at Myke and giggled. "And you said you didn't know how to dance!"

"That's the first time I've ever done that, honest!" Myke said, his breathing slowly returning to normal.

"Oddly enough, I believe you! I guess you just have natural rhythm."

"Did I embarrass you?"

Deia shook her head. "I think I had just as much fun as you did!"

When Myke and Deia walked back into the commons, a dance had just ended and a new one with a slow, romantic beat was beginning.

"Would you like to dance this one too?" Myke asked.

Deia took his arm. "I would love to."

Myke led Deia deep onto the dance floor, turned, and awkwardly placed his right hand on her waist and took her right hand with his left. Not knowing what else to do, he moved in rhythmic steps to the beat in a small circle. Deia politely refrained from commenting on Myke's lack of experience on the dance floor, and she let him lead.

During the first minute or so of the song, they talked lightly as they danced, and Myke relaxed. They moved closer together and their conversation dwindled; they were content simply to gaze at each other, oblivious to all the other activity around them.

As they continued moving with the music, their awareness of each other intensified. They simultaneously dropped hands, Deia's arms encircling Myke's neck and Myke's arms tightening around her waist as they pressed even closer to each other and snuggled their heads together.

Myke and Deia swayed romantically with the music, their movements natural and effortless. The trumpeter played with such skill and emotion that Myke felt as if he had been transported to a foreign existence where his dreams were meeting reality in a moment of pure ecstasy. The scent of Deia's perfume was invigorating, and he felt feverish and giddy. He could feel her breathing, and he could even feel her heart beating, or at least he imagined he could. He felt his lips caressing her neck, then heard her sigh. She gently stroked his hair and pressed even closer.

Myke released Deia slightly, reached up and touched her hair with his hand, and gazed at her lovingly. Her eyes were half open as she gazed back at him, her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were trembling. At that moment he would have kissed her, but the music stopped and the spell was broken.

Myke suddenly felt sick. He abruptly released Deia and quickly walked her back to the edge of the dance floor, not saying a word. Deia was immediately asked to dance by someone she didn't know, so she didn't see Myke bypass their friends and leave the commons.

Once Myke left the dance, he walked briskly down the passageway toward his compartment, then began to run. His body ached and he felt as though he were on fire. He couldn't spend another moment with *her* in the same room.

In only a minute, he was standing in front of his compartment door and inserting his name tag into the slot. After the door slid open, he rushed to the lavatory, turned on one of the sink faucets, and splashed the icy water on his face. He leaned on the sink, panting and his face dripping, and stared at himself in the mirror.

*You've been a complete fool,* he silently told his reflection. *Stupid! Idiot! Your mission is in enough danger as it is!*

Myke now realized that his friendship with Deia, with all of its spiritual intimacy, was just as much an intense emotional and physical fascination, and he felt incredibly naïve for not realizing it sooner. Even more maddening was that his feelings for Deia had caused him to lose such control of himself. He should never have seen her formally, and he never, ever, should have danced with her. He should have put a stop to the whole thing long before that explosion on the dance floor. He sighed in despair. He had never wanted to put a stop to it. He loved her—it was as simple as that.

He leaned back and dropped to the deck, laughing bitterly to himself. What a time to be in love! And who was this girl, anyway? She seemed so sincere, but then they always did. He had been warned about this.

And what if she were sincere? Her involvement with him would put her in danger just as surely as his father had been killed by the Executioners, and the very thought of someone hurting her in any way because of him made him feel terrible. Everyone in the commons had seen them dance, and every person they knew was aware of the relationship. How could he have been so stupid?

He was going to have to hurt her, and that was going to be painful for both of them. She was what she appeared to be, he felt it in his heart, but he needed more time to observe her and the others. He had to be sure. He just wished he had never let it go this far. Perhaps there was still a chance to undo what had already been done.

He slowly stood and walked into the compartment's main room. He changed out of his uniform and hung it in his locker, then dressed for bed. He lay down on his bunk and closed his eyes.

A little later, Myke heard the door buzz. His eyes flew open and his heart nearly sprang out of his chest. It was *her*. She probably felt as miserable as he did. He gritted his teeth and lay totally still. If he didn't answer, she would probably go back to the dance. Maybe she and Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce would get together after all. The thought of it revolted him.

Myke relaxed after a few minutes had passed and he was sure she had left. He lay there, depressed, for hours, unable to sleep. Very late, probably about 0200 or 0300, Paul, Jacquae, and Connor stumbled into the compartment, laughing and acting silly. All three of them were slightly drunk, Paul a little more than Connor and Jacquae.

"Hey Myke!" Paul roared. "You missed one great party!" He sat down on one of the chairs and pulled Jacquae to his lap. They kissed several times, very sensually.

"Oh, Myke," Connor began, "your beloved Deia was looking for you. Think she left early too. So sad . . ."

Myke turned and stared at the bulkhead. He hoped none of them would make any smart remarks, at least not yet. Fortunately they didn't. They continued joking and laughing for another hour or so before Jacquae left and Paul and Connor collapsed into their beds.



## Chapter 13: REJECTION

Daniel Stewart removed a cup of coffee from his suite's synthesizing machine and lazily sat down on his couch with his handheld computer. He had been on the *Sovereign of the Stars* for a week, sent there on special assignment by Sanel King himself. Stewart smiled in satisfaction. His record as an agent with the Department of Internal Investigation was impressive, and obviously the Defense Office was aware of his unique talents. If anyone could complete this assignment, he could, and completion of the assignment would make him a rich man.

As Stewart read the news, he felt telepathic communication enter his mind. *I'm ready to report.*

Stewart sipped from his cup of coffee as he transmitted his thoughts to one of the cadets he had hired to help him. *Your progress appears to have been better than that of your competitors.*

The thoughts were triumphant, *Yes, he does prefer me, overwhelmingly so.*

*Good . . . very good. Strip him of his virginity, and the \$2000 is yours.*

*He's a sweet, naïve child, but he has moral reservations and he isn't stupid. It may take some time.*

*You have six weeks. All I require is that you sleep with him once. After that, you can do what you want with him.*

\* \* \*

Deia didn't sleep for more than a few hours that night, and when she awoke, she was still tense and agitated, and her sheets were damp with sweat. She slid out of bed and quickly changed her sheets, being careful not to wake her roommates. After a long shower, she slowly dressed and stood in front of the tiny lavatory mirror, wiping away the steam with the back of her arm.

She ran her fingers through her hair and examined her features. What was it about her he didn't like? Did he prefer lighter hair or darker skin? Green eyes? Brown eyes? Was she too thin? Not thin enough? What? Or had he been offended when she asked him to dance? Maybe he didn't like girls to be aggressive.

No. He had told her she was lovely, beautiful, classy, and even fun. His hand trembled when he touched her. His cheeks became redder, and when she held him, he seemed so hungry for affection—desperate even. She had been so certain he had kissed her neck when they danced. Had she been imagining things? No. Surely not. He had gazed at her as if he had never seen another girl in his life, and had the song not ended, they would have kissed for real.

Deia pressed a towel against her face, removing the beads of moisture. She combed her hair, dried it, and applied her makeup, while every minute she had spent with Myke replayed itself in her mind over and over. She tested every theory she could think of against the things he had said and done, but she kept coming back to the belief that a relationship of passion and significance was beginning to develop between them. Certainly he felt it too. So why in the galaxy had he run out on her like that?

Deia went to breakfast, hoping Myke would be there alone so that she could talk to him. He wasn't there, and neither were any of his roommates. After thirty minutes, she

gave up and went to the lounge to play the piano. He didn't show up for another hour, and when he did, he floated around the room talking to people. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, willing him to come to her. After a while he left without glancing in her direction.

Astonished and mortified, Deia struggled to continue playing as if nothing were wrong, but she couldn't keep her hands from shaking. Her vision blurred and the keys wavered, turning into black and white swirls under her fingers. She gritted her teeth and blinked away her tears and played the day away. When she finally arose to go to dinner, her legs tingled and her arms were like jelly and the tears still felt as if they were stuck in her eyes.

Deia sat down next to Connor, across from Myke, her heart pounding fiercely. "Hello, Myke. What have you been doing today?"

Myke shrugged. "This and that."

"Do you have to work this evening, Deia?" Connor asked.

"No. Dr. Luciani's off. What a relief!"

Deia continued chatting with Connor, trying to draw Myke into the conversation. Myke said little and avoided looking at her. Eventually he left. Paul showed up a few minutes later and sat down across from Deia with Jacquae. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Deia crumpled her napkin, then smoothed it out between her fingers. "Nothing."

"Oh come on, Deia. You look as though you're getting ready to scream at me."

Deia began tearing her napkin into strips. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Are you upset Myke ran out on you last night?" Jacquae asked in concern.

"I just don't understand it," Deia erupted. "I thought Myke and I had something going. Then last night he disappeared, and today he's been trying his best to avoid me. Do you think I've been misreading him?"

Paul shrugged. "I suppose it's possible, but I think it's unlikely. You two have been extremely friendly this whole week, and you seemed awfully intimate when you danced."

Jacquae nodded. "If you misread him, then the rest of us did too."

"But he's been colder than a winter day. What do you suppose is wrong?"

Paul shrugged. "Who knows with him?"

"Well, I think he's crazy!" Connor interrupted. "To think he's giving up a chance for a beautiful girl like you. If there wasn't so much competition, I'd go for you myself!"

Deia couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, Connor."

"Why don't you go talk to him about it," Paul gently suggested.

Deia stared at her plate for several silent moments. Then she threw her napkin strips down and strode to the door.

\* \* \*

Myke lay in a corner of the lounge on the deck since there were no empty couches, his eyes closed and his fingers interlaced behind his head. Feeling movement, he opened his eyes and saw Deia sitting next to him.

"May I talk to you?" Her eyes were strangely glassy and her cheeks were flushed.

"Sure." Myke sat up and faced her, his muscles tensing.

Deia took a deep breath. "I really don't know where to begin." She averted her gaze and stared at the deck for a moment, then looked up, directly into Myke's eyes.

She was so beautiful, and Myke both longed to hear what she had to say and dreaded it. “Deia . . . don’t.”

Panic filled her eyes. “Please don’t shut me out, Myke. Please let me—”

Myke pressed his fingers against her lips, shaking his head adamantly. “What happened between us last night should never have happened. This last week should never have happened.”

She removed his hand from her mouth and held it. “How can you say that?”

Myke tried to pull his hand away from hers but she gripped him so tightly her fingernails dug into his skin. “I never . . . meant . . . to lead you on.” He breathed deeply and continued in a rush, “What I’ve done to you makes me sick, and I’m more sorry than I can say, but I don’t want to get involved.”

A tear spilled from Deia’s eye, which was more than Myke could bear. He shifted his gaze away from hers and focused on other items in the lounge.

“Is there someone else?”

Myke pursed his lips and looked at her again. Telling her he had a girlfriend back on Earth would be an easy way to get out of this mess, but he couldn’t lie to her that way. He shook his head slowly. “There isn’t anyone else.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

Myke ached with desire to draw her into his arms. Instead he said, “Deia, you have to trust me. It’s better for both of us if we don’t get involved. But I’d like us to still be friends.”

Deia’s lips moved, but her voice was barely audible. “We were never meant to be just friends.”

Myke gazed at Deia longingly. He pulled his hand away from hers abruptly and mumbled, “I’ve got to go.” He sprang to his feet and hurried out of the lounge.

\* \* \*

Myke burst into the compartment and opened his locker without saying a word to anyone. He grabbed his athletic bag and hurried out the door.

“That was strange,” Jacquae said after Myke left.

Dr. Luciani shrugged. “He must’ve dumped her. Otherwise they’d be in a corner somewhere *really* getting to know each other. I guess he’s not as crazy about her as we all thought.”

Connor shook his head. “I don’t know. I still think he likes her. I wonder what his problem is.”

“My feelings exactly,” Paul said thoughtfully. “You know, if it were anyone but Myke, I’d say Greg Pierce scared him off.”

Dr. Luciani and Connor looked at Paul curiously.

Paul shrugged. “You know how Greg is. He’s interested in Deia, and most guys would be scared off simply by that kind of competition. Any others would be scared off by the threat of his physical strength, but not Myke. He doesn’t scare.”

Dr. Luciani and Connor still appeared puzzled, so Paul continued, “The first day we were here, Myke had to fight Greg in combat training. You remember that, Jacquae.”

Jacquae nodded.

“Well, Myke isn’t a little guy, and he’s in excellent shape, but Greg is bigger, and he has the training. Any guy in his right mind would have been petrified, but not Myke. There was absolutely no fear—only extraordinary self-assurance. Didn’t it seem that way to you, Jacquae?”

“It sure did, and it did to everyone else too. Myke gave Pierce a good fight as far as new cadets go, and Pierce definitely gave the all-around better showing, but it seemed to me and everyone else that Myke had just played with him.”

Paul nodded. “Exactly. And when the fight was over, Myke wasn’t even sweating. I felt at that moment that he could have killed Greg if he had wanted to, literally, or at least could have given him a fight to remember. Greg felt it too, I could tell, and it didn’t make him too happy.”

“Furious is more the word,” Jacquae said. “If there’s one thing Pierce can’t tolerate, it’s to be humiliated. I think he would’ve accepted the whole thing better if Myke had at least given it his best.”

Dr. Luciani laughed sadistically. “Sounds like our man of surprises found the perfect cure for Pierce’s inflated ego.”

Jacquae’s lips curved into a mischievous smile. “I’m rooting for a rematch. To see an *engineer* shame the cadets’ most supreme combatant—especially when it’s Pierce—that would be the ultimate!” Everyone laughed in agreement.

Paul jumped down from his berth and headed for the door. “Where’re you going?” Connor asked.

“Lounge,” Paul replied with as much nonchalance as he could muster.

Paul found Deia in the lounge at the piano, poignantly playing the Adagio of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata. When she was done, she laid her hands gently on her thighs and looked sadly up at Paul.

“Would you like to go for a walk?” Paul asked.

Deia nodded quickly and stood up.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Paul asked once they had left the lounge.

Deia bowed her head. “He doesn’t want to get involved.”

“Did he say why?”

“No. He just said it would be better for both of us this way.” She sighed. “I just want him to hold me.”

They stopped, and Paul looked down at Deia in concern. “I’ve never seen you like this before. Why is Myke so different from all the others?”

“I wish I knew. I was thinking earlier that maybe with everything that’s happened to me in the last week I just needed someone. He’s been sweet about everything and he really understands, and he’s tried so hard to cheer me up.”

“He’s done a good job of it too. Until last night.”

“Yes, he has. But as I was thinking about it, I realized that even if I had met him in Tryamaz at some other time, I would feel the same way about him as I do now. We understand each other so well, most of the time, and we talk so comfortably together. And he’s interesting and a lot of fun, and I really care about him. I wish I could spend all of my time with him.”

“It sounds as though you’re in love with him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! We just met!”

“All right, then you’re in lust.”

“Paul!”

“Which is it, Deia, love or lust?”

“Do you really think I’m in love with him?”

“Yes, I do.”

They walked in silence for many minutes. When Deia finally spoke again, she said, “I wish Lena were here. It isn’t fair that she died. I still need her.”

“Even if she hadn’t died, you would still be here, or you’d be traveling around the galaxy with Phillip Moreau, so she still wouldn’t be in much of a position to help you.”

“I guess you’re right, as usual.” Deia paused thoughtfully. “You know, Paul, it’s so difficult for me to believe that Lena didn’t love Sanel.”

Paul grunted. “That’s not hard for *me* to believe.”

“I know, I know. You hate him, so how could anyone love him?”

“Deia, she shook her head when you asked her! And she said that she ‘might as well be Eslavu’!”

“I *know*, but still, it makes no sense that she *never* felt anything for him.”

“You can’t actually believe she lied!”

“No, of course not. It’s just that Lena always used to talk about love and marriage as if she were acquainted with both.”

“I think I know what you mean. And do you want to know what else I think? I think that even though Myke says he doesn’t want to get involved, he really does, and that he’s as much in love with you as you are with him.”

Deia started to speak, but Paul stopped her with a look. “I’ve been watching him. Now don’t you glare at me like that! When a guy starts paying attention to you, I pay attention to him! Anyway, that first night I met him, I knew he was smitten, and as time went on, it became even more obvious, just in the way he looks at you and talks about you.”

“I know his feelings for me are as strong as mine are for him—I could tell when I talked to him. That’s what’s so confusing.”

“I just thought of something. Your relationship with Myke has the potential of becoming serious. What do you suppose would happen if it did?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Say you do become seriously involved. Where does it lead? Are you going to be his lover, sneaking around and stealing moments of privacy where you can find them, not knowing when or how it will end? Now Deia, that just isn’t your style, and I’m certain it isn’t his either. I don’t know Myke that well, but he seems like the type who would want to get married, and we all know very well that cadets aren’t allowed to get married. It’s my guess that this is the reason he doesn’t want to get involved.”

“Do you really think so?”

“It’s either that or he’s terminally ill!”

“Well, we know it isn’t that, or he wouldn’t be here at all!” Deia shook her head. “It just makes me so angry that any of us even have to be here. Myke doesn’t want to be here any more than we do, and if we could be on Earth right now, we wouldn’t have all these problems.”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

“Have you ever thought about falling in love?”

“We’re talking about you, not me, remember?”

“No, really, Paul. Have you ever wondered what it would be like or thought about the type of girl you would like to love?”

Paul shrugged. “I suppose I’ve thought about it at times, but not much. I doubt any girl would ever fall in love with me.”

“That’s an awful thing to say about yourself, and very untrue!”

“No it isn’t. Girls don’t really like me. They’re just in love with my image. Frankly, I don’t know if there is much more there.”

“But Paul, there is!”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my sister.”

“It’s because I’m your sister that I can say that. I have seen you at your very best and your very worst, and yet I love you. I couldn’t care less about your silly ‘image.’ You just can’t be so afraid of showing people who you really are.”

Paul stopped walking and looked gravely down at Deia. “But not everyone cares as much about my feelings or who I am as you do. The universe is full of vultures, Deia.”

“Maybe. But you’ll always have me, whether you like it or not. And I’ll always need you.” Deia put her arms around him, squeezed him tightly, and whispered, “You are the best brother and friend I could ever have.”

## Chapter 14: STUDIES

“Deia, the Mazzjazz needs a pianist, and Trev specifically requested you. You just have to join the band!” Connor pleaded.

“Mazzjazz . . .” Paul said thoughtfully. “Do you suppose they’re any relation to the Tryamaz Jaz?”

“Probably,” Deia said, “but it doesn’t matter. I don’t have time to be in a band right now. But Connor, if the band can find someone who plays, that person is welcome to use my keyboard.”

Myke sat across from Connor at dinner that evening, next to Kristina and across from Deia, barely listening to the conversation. Everyone but Dr. Luciani was there: Paul and Deia, Connor, Jacquae, Kristina, and Tevaronia. Even Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce was there, sitting with Paul. As they conversed, Myke reached out with his spirit and gently touched their spirits with his, testing their powers of resistance.

Pierce leaned forward and looked down the table at Deia. “I don’t know what could be so important that none of us ever get to see you.”

“I just spent all afternoon in sickbay!”

“And she’s a dedicated student,” Tevaronia said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone who studies so much.”

Connor frowned slightly as Myke’s spirit touched his. *Good . . . very strong. Resister, but much too afraid to ever let anyone know. Kristina: resister. Tevaronia: flightiness an act . . . resister.*

“Don’t laugh at me! My classes are extremely difficult, and I’m having a horrible time trying to understand everything.”

“Why don’t you take a break tonight?” Connor suggested. “Play for us in the lounge.”

“Connor’s right, Deia,” Paul said. “You have to take a break sometime. I’ve really missed hearing you play.”

*Paul: resister, extremely strong mind power. Jacquae: same as Paul. Pierce: resister. Of course; he’ll be one of Earth’s greatest leaders in a few years. Deia: resister.* Myke felt troubled about Deia, however. Her mind power was strong, but she had resisted with such desperation that he concluded she wasn’t aware of her mind’s potential.

“But I have an anatomy exam tomorrow. I’m meeting Dr. Luciani in his compartment as soon as he gets out of a meeting, and he’s going to help me study.”

“Ton’s helping you study again?” Jacquae said.

Tevaronia smiled knowingly. “Well, we all know what he wants from you.”

Deia frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, come on, Deia!” Kristina blurted. “Even you aren’t that naïve! Ton never studies with anyone, especially novices. Even when they’re his own!”

Deia’s face tensed and her eyes flashed. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe he’s just helping a friend?”

Tevaronia shook her head emphatically. “No. Not Ton. Never.”

“Ton doesn’t know how to be a friend,” Kristina said. “He doesn’t care about anyone but himself, and he might as well be a machine for all the compassion or consideration he ever shows to anyone. Ask anyone on this ship who’s known him for a while.”

"Face it, Deia," Jacquae said. "He's a user, and the sooner you come to terms with that fact, the better off you'll be."

Jacquae, Tevaronia, and Kristina's comments about Dr. Luciani disturbed Myke, but before he could speak, Deia exploded, "He isn't a machine! Or an Eslavu! And I wish you all would quit saying he is! It's awfully nice of him to take more time with me than what's required, and he does it only because we're friends. He's a wonderful person, but none of you would even know because you never give him a chance!"

Deia stood up abruptly, grabbed her plate, and stormed over to the trash recycling bins to dispose of her plastic utensils and paper napkins, then left the commons.

Tevaronia shook her head sadly. "Boy, she is really naïve." Everyone agreed but Myke.

"I'll have to agree with Deia," he said. "You were a little hard on Dr. Luciani, I think."

Paul looked at Myke in surprise. "How could you, of all people, say that?"

Myke shrugged. "What kind of person would I be if I couldn't take a little teasing? Besides, Dr. Luciani may be opinionated and outspoken, but he's really not such a bad guy."

Tevaronia shook her head at Myke in incredulous amazement. "You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. You may be even more naïve than Deia."

Myke shrugged. "Perhaps."

\* \* \*

Myke entered his compartment later that evening after spending an hour and a half at the gym, then another hour playing games in the commons with Connor. Deia was sitting at the table with Dr. Luciani, laughing and talking with him. They both appeared exhausted. Myke recalled that Dr. Luciani, and therefore Deia, had been on duty in sickbay the night before. Deia turned off her handheld computer and turned toward the door as Myke walked into the compartment.

"Sorry if I'm disturbing you," Myke said.

"Oh, no!" Deia said. "I've had enough of Dr. Luciani's quizzing. I think he's been harder on me than my instructor ever would be."

Dr. Luciani pulled himself up from his slouched position in his chair and took a bite from his sandwich. "Well, kid," he said to Deia, "you'll do just fine, as long as you take a break. Myke, why don't you take her to the lounge and force her to sit at that piano for a while."

Myke walked over to the table. "I wish I could, but I have some reading to do. Deia's beautiful piano playing is much too distracting."

Deia looked anxiously at Dr. Luciani. "Do you really think I'll do all right?"

Dr. Luciani's expression was one of seriousness, touched with concern. "You know the material. You'll do fine as long as you concentrate."

Panic immediately replaced the anxiousness on Deia's face. "But that's the problem!" she said shrilly. "What am I going to do, Dr. Luciani? What am I going to do?"

"Relax . . ." Dr. Luciani soothed.

Deia put her palms over her temples and shook her head. "I can't, I can't!" Then after a moment, she inhaled and exhaled very slowly. Eventually she stood up and



stretched. “Ohhh, my brain is jelly, so I don’t suppose it would do any good to study anymore, anyway. You come to the lounge in a little while, Myke, all right?” Myke nodded that he would. Deia picked up her handheld and left the compartment.

“She isn’t doing well in her classes, is she,” Myke said when Deia was gone.

Dr. Luciani shook his head slowly. “The schedule’s too much for her. And it’s a shame. She really is a bright girl.”

All of Myke’s muscles started for the door to overtake Deia and be with her in her suffering, but they were quickly restrained, sending his body and spirit into a state of chaos. He seized his handheld and lay down on his bed as casually as he could manage.

Dr. Luciani quickly ate the rest of his sandwich and hurried out of the compartment. Once Myke relaxed, he finished his required reading quickly. When he was done, he stared at the screen without really seeing it and contemplated his immediate situation. Unfortunately he was nowhere near determining which cadets he had met in the past twelve days he could trust. Coming to a final decision would require quite a bit more observation.

During the past several days, Myke had devoted his energies to becoming acquainted with as many of the *Sovereign*’s cadets as possible. He had come to know several from his classes, a few guys at the gym, and had concentrated particularly on getting to know his roommates, their friends, and Deia’s roommates. His time was limited, however, and he felt there was much about his cadets friends he still didn’t know. He had found no opportunity since his first day of classes to look at the ship’s personnel files, and he had found few chances to study the information he had received in orientation about the ship.

Myke thought for a moment about those whose powers of resistance he had tested that day. He had tested several in his classes, several at the gym, several random cadets in the commons with whom he was not acquainted, and of course, his roommates and their friends. He concluded that the percentage of cadets who were resisters of the Divine Emperor’s communication was small and that he had already met most of them.

Myke didn’t think that Star Force, under normal circumstances, would have assigned the majority of cadet resisters to the same two compartments, but Myke felt certain, having received no reproach or reprimand of any kind for his exhibition at the dance, that his *Sovereign* superiors knew what he was and were cooperating with the D.I.I. Even if they weren’t, any competent D.I.I. agent would consider it simple to break into the quartermaster’s computer files and rearrange the compartment assignments anyway he wished.

Myke thought about Paul and Deia, the mysterious twins, potentially his greatest allies or his greatest enemies. Either they were doing the obvious thing, working for their uncle, or they were completely sincere and were simply a ruse to lure him into trusting someone else. But which? Even if they were sincere, their uncle might later buy them with promises of discharge and resumption of their former lifestyle in Tryamaz. Morbid realization struck. They were so emotionally bound to each other that they were each other’s highest price.

Connor was also a primary candidate for a plant. He was always friendly, but only as much as any well-bred person would be when sharing his living quarters. And since he was new, no one really knew what his true character was. Even so, Myke felt that the D.I.I.’s bargaining power with Connor was fear, and if that was the case, he could be an informer and still be living up to his present character. But would he go to Novaun? Perhaps. He had

grown up in Melbourne, Australian State, the son of a businessman. He was from an upper-middle class family with three children and had been taught from his youth to be a good citizen. (Typical.) He had joined Star Force to see the stars, as he had explained, but Myke sensed rebellion in his action and a desire to be independent. He might be enticed to go to Novaun by money, or better, his desire to be forever free of his fear of being discovered as a resister.

Then there was Jacquae. She was in a unique situation, able to get close to him from several angles, all subtle: 1. Dr. Luciani was her brother. 2. She was Deia's roommate. 3. She and Paul had been spending more and more time together. Myke didn't doubt he could buy her with money, but he couldn't give her the one thing that might mean more to her—power.

Tevaronia: daughter of a former Star Force nurse and a Star Force lieutenant commander. The planet Shangri-La was her original home, but she had lived in several places throughout the Empire, a veteran of Star Force life. Although Myke had no idea how strong her religious beliefs were, her ties to Earth were strong. Even so, Myke felt it in his best interest to keep her in mind. Money would probably be her price.

Kristina: from Tryamaz, both parents intermediate school teachers. A brilliant girl who possessed an analytical mind and was serious in nature. She, like Tevaronia, was close enough to be a plant, but she might be persuaded to go to Novaun by the knowledge of the true nature of Earth's government and its plans for the galaxy. Either that or money.

Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce: Pierce was a resister, but Myke knew he would never go to Novaun under any circumstances. In fact, Myke was certain Pierce would do his patriotic duty and shoot him if ever even approached. For this reason Myke assumed he was not a plant.

None of the guys from the gym were resisters, so they weren't possibilities either way. From his classes, however, there were several who were basically the same breed as Connor.

Last, Myke considered Dr. Luciani. Dr. Luciani was an enigma. What could Myke or a D.I.I. agent use to buy him? It seemed that his career was the most important thing to him, something he already possessed, but was there more? He didn't seem concerned about much of anything—his family, money, power, how people regarded him, or even a discharge. Myke hadn't tested him for resistance yet. He sensed his mind power was extremely strong, perhaps refined enough to detect Myke as the tester. If Dr. Luciani's mind power were that strong, then he would be a perfect choice for a helper, but would he go? His life was Star Force, and of all of Myke's friends, he would have the most difficult time adjusting to Novaun's culture. Perhaps he would go if the price were right, but what in the universe was his price?

Myke thought again about Deia. She was the one friend he really wanted to take with him, but even if she would go, he wasn't sure she was capable of using the spirit dimension formula. Her mind power was strong enough, and he sensed that she had known to resist the Divine Emperor's communication from her "Day of Awakening" or tenth birthday and that through resisting had gained considerable strength, but he also sensed that she resisted without being able to see the communication trap working on her mind. Helping her refine her Awareness wouldn't be difficult and it probably wouldn't take long, but how could he do it without her or anyone else questioning his motives?

Even if the opportunity did arise, Myke wasn't sure it would be in his best interest to get that close to her. He knew that he would grow to love her even more deeply than he already did, which would make him more vulnerable and might cloud his judgment. At present, the only way he could keep his head clear was to spend a lot of time at the gym and even more time away from her.

As Myke lay in bed, he stared up at Paul's pale blue berth, and Deia's image slipped into his mind, as it often did, and he remembered everything she had ever said to him, everything about her, her smile, her touch, her voice. He could almost feel her silky dark curls under his fingers and smell the delicate scent of her perfume. He pursed his lips and quickly shattered the image, his heart and body aching.

Those first few days after the dance had been pure agony. The only way he had kept himself from breaking down and expressing his feelings to her was by avoiding her whenever possible. He was finally to the point where he could be friendly without worrying about losing control, but he still kept his distance.

Nobody had said anything about what had happened except Dr. Luciani and Connor, of course, and he had dealt with them easily enough by ignoring them. Finally they had given up for lack of interest. Although no one else had said anything, he had received so many strange looks from Deia's roommates that he wondered what she had told them.

As for Deia herself, she seemed indifferent—except for an occasional love-filled glance when no one was looking, glances he always avoided—and it was rumored that she was interested in Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce.

Myke turned off his handheld and laid it on his chest, reaching deep into his mind to seal the nerve impulses from his shoulder to his brain. His spirit was almost devoured by the burning pain, so he quickly withdrew from the trance. He closed his eyes and rubbed his shoulder, wishing he could make the painful burning disappear and that Deia could be there with him, comforting him with her caresses.

A few moments later, he set his handheld on his bed, slowly stood up, and headed toward the door, hoping Deia would still be playing in the lounge.

## Chapter 15: THE ZIONITE

The next evening, after spending some time at the gym, Myke entered his compartment to find Dr. Luciani sitting impatiently on the table and Paul and Jacquae, just back from fencing and still dressed in their white jackets and knickers, hanging Paul's foil and mask in his locker.

Moments later, Deia and Connor entered the compartment. "Hey, Dr. Luciani," Connor said, "I found her."

Dr. Luciani slid off the table and stepped toward Deia. "I just spoke to Dr. Addams, and he's finally given his approval!"

"Dr. Luciani, that's wonderful!"

"We start tomorrow."

"We?"

"Yes! That's the best thing about it. You won't assist me in surgery yet, of course, but you will help me generate the new tissue in the lab."

"Let us in on the secret," Jacquae demanded, approaching the table. "What in the universe are you two talking about?"

"Dr. Addams is finally going to let Himes and Irwin and me help him with his research."

"What is this research you're so anxious to be involved in?" Myke asked.

"Currently there's a lot of research being done on the use of mind power in healing. The idea is that mind energy can actually stimulate the body's power to regenerate itself. Scientists, including Dr. Addams, have made progress in stimulating cell division in laboratory samples of blood, skin, organ tissue, and such with thought transmissions, but they're still searching for the key, the telepathic formula, that would provide the intensity of mind power necessary to regenerate on a full-scale basis."

All doubt about Dr. Luciani's telepathic abilities disappeared, and Myke felt a rush of excitement. The spirit energy formula was the formula Dr. Luciani's supervisor was working to develop. It had been discovered thirteen years before by a group of Novaunian physicians. Novaun possessed telepathic medical skills and technology that Dr. Luciani had never even dreamed existed. Could those skills and that technology be his price?

Myke was interested to find out what else Dr. Luciani knew about the spirit energy formula, so he asked, "What kind of full-scale regeneration?"

"We've already had great success in using the patient's regenerated nerve tissue in reconstructing the nerves that are injured and destroyed by neurodarts. We can use thought transmissions in combination with our synthetic nerve tissue to create new nerve tissue, a method that allows recovery of more function and sensation than using the synthetic nerve tissue by itself. With the brain energy formula to regenerate on a full-scale basis, we wouldn't have to use synthetic nerve tissue at all.

"As for brain surgery, the possible applications are endless. Now we can replace damaged sections of the brain with the combination tissue, but often the body rejects the tissue it perceives as foreign and the patient wakes up non-functioning. With more intense mind power, we could take healthy brain cells and use them to produce new brain tissue, perhaps eventually even an entire new brain, all with the patient's own tissue. Our recovery rate in all types of reconstruction operations would increase drastically."

Connor shook his head in awe. "I don't know much about medicine, but research like that sounds exciting!" Dr. Luciani nodded in reply.

Paul closed his locker door and approached the group. "I've read about it too. That key you're referring to is labeled 'the mind energy formula,' but I've never heard of it being used for medical purposes. Only military."

Connor hoisted himself onto his bunk. "What would the military want with something like that?"

"The military has an obsession with perverting scientific finds that would be extraordinarily beneficial to mankind and turning them into weapons," Dr. Luciani said.

Paul leaned against Connor's bed and looked up at him. "The idea behind the mind energy formula is that the energy produced by the brain, right now in the form of thought transmissions, could be intensified and concentrated to such an extent that it could move or heat objects."

Connor still appeared puzzled, so Dr. Luciani continued with the explanation, "When you transmit your thoughts to someone, you look inside of yourself and alter the highest brain mechanism, which is the neuronal process in your higher brain-stem that corresponds with the action of your mind, or in other words, the process that makes thought and consciousness possible. The mind energy formula would simply be a much more complicated formula that would utilize the neuron action of the entire brain and would allow the energy that is already there to be released."

Paul nodded. "Exactly. And the military's primary interest in it is as a fuel source. It's a proven fact that mind power working directly with arelada is the fastest source of power in the universe, demonstrated, of course, by the speed of interstellar communication. Well, the theory behind the mind energy formula as a fuel source is that it would enable a spaceship, such as a fighter, to actually travel in a thought wave. Therefore, a ship or a person would travel instantaneously, just by thinking."

Connor nodded, his face radiating understanding and fascination.

Their primitiveness repelled Myke. How could they be so confused about such a simple theory?

"Whew . . ." Jacquae breathed, as fascinated with the whole idea as Connor. "Modern hyperspace travel would become completely obsolete, not to mention our current methods of warfare!"

"It would change everything," Paul said, "which is why it's the hottest research topic in the galaxy right now." He looked over at Dr. Luciani. "And it'll be interesting to see who discovers it first, the medical scientists or the military scientists. But we can all be certain of one thing. If the military discovers it first, the medical community will probably be the last to learn about it, and if the medical community discovers it first, the military will grab it and classify it so fast that we can all be guaranteed that none of us will ever know anything about it!" Everyone nodded in agreement, everyone but Deia.

Deia had remained silent and uneasy during the entire discussion. "Dr. Luciani," she said weakly, "I'm not qualified to help you."

"What kind of a stupid idea is that? Of course you're qualified."

"You don't understand. My mind power isn't strong enough."

"That's nonsense," Dr. Luciani said. "I agree that your mind power isn't very refined yet, but it's strong enough and it'll increase. Trust me."

Myke listened to the entire conversation curiously, finding it revealing, and he realized that this was the opportunity for which he had been waiting. Their opinion of him would change drastically, but it was time. "If you'd like," he said to Deia, "I can help you increase your mind power abilities. I learned a lot from my father, who was a telepathy scientist."

"You're a Zionite!" Jacquae blurted in amazement.

"That's why you don't drink or make love to women!" Connor echoed, in equal amazement.

Dr. Luciani slowly nodded. "That does explain a lot about you."

Myke struggled to keep his expression innocent. He laughed a little. "Yes, I guess it does!" Technically a person with his background wouldn't be a true Zionite, but the average Earthon didn't know the difference between communications experts cultivated by the Divine Emperor and true citizens of the Nations of Zion.

"What do you mean, he *was* a telepathy scientist?" Deia asked.

Myke's eyes probed her for several seconds; then he glanced at the others, knowing he would have to be careful not to reveal too much. "My father's dead."

Deia appeared hurt. "When? . . . How? . . . I mean, why didn't you tell me?"

"My father was executed shortly before I was drafted. That's not the sort of thing I like to talk about." He forced his gaze away from Deia and observed the faces of his other friends. The expressions were basically the same—all combinations of shock, confusion, and revulsion. They were reacting in the way Myke had expected they would, but unfortunately, no one seemed more or less surprised than anyone else.

Several moments of uneasy silence passed. Finally Dr. Luciani asked the question they all wanted answered, "Why?"

Myke slowly shook his head. "I wish I knew. All I was told was that he committed criminal acts against the government. When I received word about what had happened, I . . . just couldn't believe it." He sighed. "I suspect he was killed under mind torture."

Paul was wearing the most horrified expression Myke had ever seen. "Mind torture?" Myke nodded slowly.

"You don't have any idea at all what he did?" Jacquae asked.

"Well, I've been thinking a lot about it, and I've only been able to come up with one thing." Myke rested his gaze on each face. "You see, my father worked for the government, doing classified work. The only thing that makes any sense to me is that they thought he was talking to foreign agents."

"You mean selling out to the highest bidder!" Connor said angrily.

"No! Never! Now stop looking at me like that! My father would never have sold out to any spy Eslavu! If he ever talked to any, it was only because he didn't know what they were." Myke looked around the compartment frantically. "There are spies all over Earth, but you'd never know, because they're trained, and they act just like us! I know—they tell you these things when you work with classified material like I did. No," he said, shaking his head quickly, "my father never believed in Zarrism as a religion—most communications people don't—but he did believe Tohmazz Zarr helped make Earth a planet to be proud of and a galactic force to be reckoned with, and he was very loyal. He would never have sold out."

“Paul, did you hear that?” Deia exclaimed, her voice almost a scream. “They just thought he was talking to spies! If they would have ever found out who you used to talk to . . . Paul, it could have been you!”

Everyone looked at Paul questioningly, but he simply shook his head, his face tense and ashen, finally realizing the magnitude of his own crimes against the government.

Sensing uneasiness in his friends, Myke said, “Please don’t let what I’ve told you about my father change the way you think of me. I had nothing to do with any of it, obviously, or else I’d be dead too.”

“Obviously,” Dr. Luciani said.

Jacquae patted Myke on the back. “You have my sympathy.”

Connor smiled. “Mine too.”

“And Dr. Luciani,” Deia began, “I’ll stop whining about my telepathic ineptitude if Myke will help me as he said he would.” She looked at Myke expectantly.

Myke nodded and smiled at Deia.

Paul moved toward his bunk and lifted himself onto it. “There are just a couple of things I would like to know. Did your father ever do any research on the mind energy formula, and were Dr. Luciani and I right in what we said about it?” Paul extended his hand and helped Jacquae onto his bunk.

Myke hesitated. With so many people in the compartment, tricking the monitors was out of the question. No doubt the D.I.I. suspected he was a Novaunian, but they couldn’t know for sure. Any information he gave the other cadets would help the D.I.I. identify his race beyond all doubt. Still, he might gain more from such a discussion than he would lose. In conversing so freely about such sensitive subjects, the others would reveal things about themselves they never would otherwise.

Myke decided to be bold and answer their questions. He leaned against the compartment door in preparation for a long discussion. He wasn’t comfortable, but he was standing in the only place that would give him a full view of all five of his companions. “First of all, the term ‘the mind energy formula’ was coined to explain the concept to a general audience. The correct term is ‘spirit dimension formula.’ And no, Paul, you weren’t quite right. The regenerative energy Dr. Luciani was talking about is *part* of the spirit dimension formula; it is not *the* spirit dimension formula.”

Dr. Luciani moved from the table to his bunk and motioned to Deia to sit down next to him. “What do you mean?”

“The spirit dimension formula is a way to travel in the spirit dimension, and to do that, a physical object has to be temporarily transformed into complete spirit matter. Fully developed, this ability would enable travel without regard to physical matter. A person could walk through walls, move about on a planet in a storm without getting hurt or wet or blown off course, or travel through space without life support. The regenerative or ‘brain’ energy would be necessary to facilitate the transformation and to move about in the spirit dimension, but the actual transformation from dual physical/spiritual matter to complete spirit matter is something entirely different. The spirit dimension formula would include both the energy and the transformation.”

Dr. Luciani’s face was alive with understanding and awe; Paul still appeared puzzled. “If a person could move in this spirit dimension, does that mean he would be able to see and communicate with the dead?”

Myke was taken aback. He hadn't expected this question, as valid as it was. Technically, a traveler on the spirit dimension should be able to see the dead, but neither he nor his father ever had. "I don't know."

Deia was eager to ask questions. "There's something I'd like to know, about arelada. How exactly does it work? That's always puzzled me."

Myke thought about Deia's question for a moment. "Well," he finally said, relieved no one had asked him any more about death and its relationship to the spirit dimension, "basically arelada does two things; it acts as a transmitter, and it makes Awareness possible. I could explain the mechanics of its transmitting capabilities easily enough, but it's complicated. It's enough to know that it's an excellent transmitter. Scientists have even been able to produce a crystal that will transmit like the arelada does, so that's not terribly impressive. The arelada's Awareness capabilities, however, are unique and have never been reproduced in any way."

"That makes sense enough," Deia said, "but I still don't understand what exactly this Awareness is."

"Like Dr. Luciani explained it, it's a method of looking inside of yourself. The brain is the body's computer, so to speak, and it comes with some basic programming at birth, then from that time on, it's further programmed by the mind through that wonderful process called learning. Awareness is simply the capability of actually seeing the workings of the physical body, including the brain organ, with the spirit body. When a person uses arelada to communicate telepathically, he focuses on his Awareness, alters the neuron action of the brain in the correct formula, and sends his thoughts to someone else, using the arelada as a transmitter. I know that sounds complicated, but telepathy becomes an easy, natural process once you get used to it."

Connor leaned back on his elbows. "That's fascinating!"

"So the arelada would be of little value if it lacked one quality or the other," Paul observed. "The transmitting would do little good without the Awareness, and vice versa."

Myke nodded. "That's true when you're talking about telepathy, but the Awareness can also allow a person to see beyond the workings of the brain, beyond the workings of the physical and spirit bodies, and deep into the mind. You use the eyes of your spirit body to look backward or inward instead of forward and outward in the normal fashion. So the Awareness could be desirable, even without the transmitting capability, especially in terms of memory capacity."

"There's still something I don't understand," Deia said. "Paul and I communicate by telepathy all the time, but we've never used arelada. How can that be?"

"Arelada is essential for telepathic communication, but you don't have to be wearing it to get some of the benefits from it. Just having a lot of it nearby will give you partial Awareness and the ability to transmit to someone, say, a meter or two away. For example, you could use telepathy quite well on this ship without ever seeing it, because of the large stores of arelada in communications and up on the flight decks in the pilots' helmets. And when you're on Earth, there's always a large store near, regardless of where you are, so that it's readily available to government officials and communications people to use to relay communications to all parts of the world. Then, of course, the largest store is in Hawaii, since all of Earth's space transmissions are received and ultimately sent from there."

"And what makes the Awareness work?" Deia asked.



“You’ve just asked the question scientists have been trying to answer for centuries! How the arelada causes Awareness is one of the mysteries of the universe!”

Dr. Luciani looked at Myke in disbelief. “They don’t have any ideas at all?”

Myke shrugged. “Oh, they have a theory, but that’s all it is, a theory. The arelada is a mineral composed of silicon, carbon, oxygen, and two elements that are found only on planets that produce arelada, telogen and vaulogen, and scientists think that it’s the unusual combination of these five elements that produces the energy field that causes Awareness. Now telogen and vaulogen are very unusual elements themselves, because they just don’t combine molecularly, except in three things: arelada, nuayemsia, and nuayem. Nuayemsia is a thick, dark red liquid that is found in the ground, and nuayem is a green plant. Both are found only on arelada-producing planets.”

“I’ve read about nuayem,” Paul said. “It’s the most powerful hallucinogenic drug known in the galaxy, and it’s illegal on most planets. And isn’t nuayemsia worthless?”

Myke nodded. Most nuayemsia was worthless, but Novaun’s nuayemsia contained a unique chemical called arlundenol and was a spiritual magnifier to some people, a spiritual torment to others. It was illegal in the Citizens’ Union of Novaun to sell nuayemsia to anyone but Novaunian citizens who were married, which was why Myke’s friends didn’t know anything about it.

“So they think there might be a relationship between the arelada, nuayemsia and nuayem,” Deia said.

“They’re certain of the relationship. They just aren’t certain of the process. Decayed nuayem eventually forms arelada, and decayed animals that once fed on the nuayem plant eventually become nuayemsia. Scientists have tried to combine the vaulogen and telogen in laboratories with the purpose of creating a synthetic arelada, but some really strange things happen when telogen and vaulogen are forced together like that, and nothing even close to Awareness comes of it. They think that the arelada is formed extremely slowly over a long period of time, and that it is the slow combining of the telogen and vaulogen with silicon, carbon, and oxygen that gives it its Awareness capabilities.”

“Have they ever tested nuayem and nuayemsia for their Awareness capabilities?” Dr. Luciani queried.

“Yes, but they’ve found that nuayem is simply a hallucinogen like they always thought. Nuayemsia doesn’t have Awareness qualities either.”

“So how much arelada is there available in the galaxy, really?” Jacquae asked. “I know it loses its energy with extensive use, and by the nature of its creation, it seems like we’d run out of it after a while.”

“Oh, there’s no danger of running out of it, at least not for a while. Shortages occur sometimes, but that’s mostly when the demand exceeds the rate at which it can be produced. New mines are discovered all the time on planets that produce it. Even so, some planets have more arelada than others, and the quality of it varies from planet to planet, so there’s more of a demand from some planets than others.”

“That must cause all kinds of problems,” Deia commented. “Every planet certainly wants its share of the wealth.”

“So true. In fact, many of the arelada-producing planets want to form a joint corporation so that they can control the price as they please. Obviously Earth doesn’t favor that idea, because the price stays down when the arelada producers are in competition with each other.”

"So is there much of a chance of that happening?" Paul asked.

Myke shook his head. "They've been wanting to do that for years, but they've never been able to, because of Gudynea and Novaun."

"I've never heard much about Gudynea's arelada, but aren't the Novaunians the major producers?" Jacquae asked. "It seems to me that they'd be the first to favor a move like that."

"Not necessarily," Myke said. "Novaun produces twice as much arelada as all the other arelada-producing planets combined, and its arelada is by far the cheapest and superior in quality. While Novaun controls the market, it has more control over how arelada is used."

"Myke's right," Dr. Luciani said caustically. "Those Novaunians don't need to raise their prices. They're plenty rich enough as it is, and they just want to make sure everyone knows who's in charge. They're a bunch of elitists."

"And we're not?" Paul said, his voice full of laughter.

Dr. Luciani shook his head. "No. Novaun's elitism is different. Ask anyone who's been in Star Force a few years." Everyone looked at Dr. Luciani curiously, so he continued, "After my tour on the *Prince Jahnzel*, I did a short internship on Latanza III. Latanza III is practically on the border of Novaunian space. The Novaunian planets Dinevlea and Bristaun are its closest neighbors, but did I ever see Dinevlea or Bristaun or any other Novaunian planet? No! And you want to know why? They don't let any outsiders on their planets, no one at all. And I've heard they won't even let people on to conduct business. It's all done on their moons. Now if that's not elitism, I don't know what is!"

Jacquae appeared thoughtful. "When you live on Earth, you don't really find out much about any planets, except government propaganda, but that changes when you join Star Force. Even so, Novaun's always been the big mystery planet, even to people in Star Force. Everyone knows that it's rich and has a lot of arelada, and that the Novaunians were the first into space, but that's really about all. I know that they travel some, like we do, but I don't know anyone who's ever met one, or maybe some of us on this ship, anyway, would know something about them."

"There is one thing we know about them, though," Dr. Luciani said, "that she forgot to mention and that everyone always wonders about, and that is that there are no women on their warships."

"I think I'd die," Connor said.

"And it's also rumored, all through Star Force," Jacquae said mysteriously, "that on Novaun and all of its worlds, no one speaks."

"You mean total telepathy?" Paul said in surprise.

Dr. Luciani nodded. "That's the rumor."

Deia shuddered. "I think that would make me insane!" Everyone agreed. Deia said to Myke, "All this talk about arelada is extremely fascinating, and there's more I'd like to know. When was it first discovered?"

"You're just full of questions, aren't you!" Myke said playfully.

"Stop teasing me! I've always wondered about arelada, but no one's ever told me anything!"

Everyone else in the compartment appeared just as anxious for information as Deia, except perhaps Dr. Luciani, who never became excited about anything unless it had something to do with medicine.

"It's been around since the beginning of time," Myke replied, "but until two thousand years ago, only its Awareness properties were known. In fact, arelada means *awareness* in the ancient Novaunian tongue. The customs on different planets varied as to how the people regarded arelada. On some planets it had religious significance, but on most, it was used in sorcery. The Novaunians discovered its transmitting quality first and developed telepathic communication. It wasn't for at least another two hundred and fifty years that Gudynea became capable of interstellar space travel and so learned from the Novaunians about arelada's many uses. The other planets that produce arelada entered space in their own time, and they learned the secrets of arelada as they did."

Connor sat up in amazement. "Your father told you all of this?"

Myke nodded. "Everything I've told you is common knowledge in the communications community."

"I can't believe you won't get in trouble for telling us these things," Paul said skeptically.

Myke looked at Paul in surprise. "With whom?"

"Other Zionites! Don't you take an oath or something?"

"Well, yes, citizens of Zion who work for the government are under treaty and are restricted in what they can say, but I'm not one of them."

"What are you, then?" asked Dr. Luciani.

"Merely the son of a telepathy scientist. A true Zionite comes from one of the hundreds of communities that isolated themselves with light shields at the beginning of the Dark Years. They fill about seventy-five percent of the communications jobs on Earth itself. The other twenty-five percent, plus those of us who go into space, are just regular Earthons."

"How do the Zionites travel between their cities and communicate? Do they use the mind energy—I mean, the spirit dimension formula?" Paul asked.

"No one knows how they travel and communicate," Myke replied. "That's another mystery of the universe!" In actuality, Myke's father had believed that the Zionites had discovered the spirit dimension and were using a technology that allowed them to travel on it by disassembling their bodies and then reassembling them at the destination point. If the Zionites his father had worked with knew how it was done, they didn't discuss it, and his father had never probed for the information, not wanting to blow his cover.

"Most people believe they travel by the power of Satan," Connor said.

Dr. Luciani moaned and twisted his body so that he could look up at Connor. "Certainly you don't believe that garbage!"

Connor shrugged. "I don't know what to believe."

"Myke, you must know *something* about the real Zionites," Deia said.

"All I know is that the Nations of Zion harbor followers of many different religions, and that the Zionites don't marry outsiders. They also spend a lot of time copying old records."

"Well, that's interesting," Dr. Luciani began, "because Admiral Pierce is a Zionite and he obviously married an outsider."

"No way!" Deia gasped. "The Vahro-Pierces aren't Zionites!"

"Of course they aren't. Admiral Pierce is the Zionite—just him."

"What makes you think that?" Myke asked, intrigued.

"Everybody knows it. The man isn't a nobleman, which can only mean one thing—that he refused the title when he married Saintess Myri Vahro. He doesn't drink anything stronger than root beer, and he doesn't have mistresses. He's as straight as they come. You'd like him, Myke."

Connor looked at Myke penetratingly. "Why are Zionites so adamant about remaining celibate until they marry when even most priestesses don't think it's necessary? After all, the Sacred Writings say that sex without love is a sin, and we all know that it's more than possible to be in love with someone you're not married to."

None of them were ready to hear that the religion of Zarr was ambiguous on the topic of sexuality because Zarr had wanted to encourage moral degeneracy as a way to keep his new Earthon subjects telepathically weak. His friends would be shocked to learn that the Divine Emperor had long been afraid that his own communications specialists would ally with the Zionites, and that he was more afraid of the Nations of Zion than all foreign powers combined. The only reason Earth had a treaty with Zion at all was because the government desperately needed people with their refined telepathic skills.

Myke answered Connor's question simply: "The person who is able to develop the most refined telepathic powers is the person who is most in control of both his body and his spirit. Reserving sexual expression for marriage is an exercise of self-control and a statement of respect for the other person and for the next generation."

"Why does it matter?" Jacquae asked with intense interest.

"The most powerful person is the one who can control the power. Telepathic power comes from a delicate combination of the brain and the mind working together, and to channel that power, one needs a lucid brain and a pure mind. A lucid brain is maintained by keeping our bodies healthy and free of poisons, and a pure mind is maintained by being in harmony with natural laws, which include respecting ourselves and others.

"The reason this purity of mind is so important is because telepathy is extremely intimate. It is impossible for a person who uses telepathy frequently to hide from others, and most of all from himself. Those he associates with will become acutely aware of him and his motives, and he will become acutely aware of them and even more acutely aware of himself. If a person is not at peace with himself, the combination of these two things will drive him mad. The survivors will either make the necessary changes in their lives and their hearts so that they can live in peace, or they will do the exact opposite and kill all feeling within themselves. Some will refuse to use telepathy altogether. The weak ones will either end up in mental institutions or will commit suicide."

Dr. Luciani, Jacquae, and Paul laughed. Deia and Connor gazed at Myke doubtfully.

"You think I'm being melodramatic?" Myke shook his head. "It's happened too many times."

"Tell us about the *dijauntu*," Jacquae eagerly requested.

Connor rolled his eyes. "It figures a girl would ask about that!"

Myke hesitated, trying to decide how much he should tell them about the *dijauntu*. Earthons were fascinated with the idea of the *dijauntu*, but they didn't know much about it and had many misconceptions. Finally he said, "It's simply an intimate relationship enjoyed by some married people that involves the joining of minds."

Deia's eyes were wide with wonder. "Is it true that once you do the dijauntu with someone, you can never do it with anyone else?"

Myke nodded. "From what I understand, it isn't just knowing the other person; it is, to a degree, being the other person. Most also believe that there is an actual binding of minds, like an invisible thread between them, that can never be broken, except in death. I happen to believe that, at least to some extent, because there have been many cases of people who have developed severe psychological problems because they did it carelessly with someone, then tried it again with someone else. The dijauntu must never be done, except between a man and woman who are extremely committed to each other and who truly believe in marriage."

"Why anyone would even want to do it, I'll never know," Paul said, shaking his head. Dr. Luciani agreed completely.

"Oh, I don't know," Jacquae said. "I think it sounds awfully romantic, and it seems like it would be a wonderful form of sharing. I think I'd like my marriage to be that open and close."

Connor shook his head. "I just can't see you in maternity clothes, Jacquae."

"Now wait a minute. I was talking about marriage. I didn't say anything about children!"

"But that's the reason you get married," Connor said, "or haven't you heard? It's your Earthon duty to have children, you know, future warriors."

"I just wish people would start waking up to reality," Dr. Luciani said intolerantly. "The whole idea of marriage is far-fetched and romantic, a fantasy, an illusion. Nothing lasts forever, especially not a relationship, and to believe otherwise simply makes you vulnerable."

Connor was shocked. "Marriage is a desirable, honorable institution."

Dr. Luciani stood up and addressed Connor directly. "You and your Zarrist propaganda. You said yourself that the reason people get married is to have kids, to do their *duty*. And believe me, the marriages I've seen are not based in your so-called 'love,' but in duty. And what results is enslavement and stagnation."

Myke shook his head. "I totally disagree. No one ever said that marriage is easy, that you don't have to work at any relationship. But those that do achieve an intimacy that can only be found in marriage, and that intimacy binds the whole family together and makes life a lot more bearable and worthwhile."

Deia nodded. "And if two people don't believe their love can last forever, what's the use of trying? That's why the constant commitment is so important. It doesn't enslave you, it just makes you freer to give your whole self to the other person, because you know that no matter what happens, that person will always be there."

"No. I don't believe it," Dr. Luciani said. "You're talking ideals, not reality. People still get married and stay together because it's their duty."

Myke didn't comment this time. How could he argue? He didn't doubt Earthon couples loved each other in their own eccentric way, but the Earthon marriages he had seen seemed to be, as Dr. Luciani had said, based more in duty than in genuine love.

Dr. Luciani continued: "Well, I think we should just throw away all the duty. The only thing that would be required of people is that they give their seed. Then they could follow their careers and ambitions as they please, and we could develop our future warriors

in the labs. We have the scientific capabilities, just look at Telchon. That's the way it's done there."

"Yeah, and those Telchonians are the most corrupt people in the galaxy and almost as low as Eslavu!" Jacquae exclaimed. "Talk about the scum of the universe! We ought to go blow up their planet and be rid of them for good."

"Listen to you," Dr. Luciani said scornfully. "Star Force keeps the Telchonian entertainment business alive, and you know it! At least I'm honest in the way I conduct my life. All of you are hypocrites, and you're the worst one of all, Jacquae!"

"If Mamma could hear you now, she'd feed you to the dogs!" Jacquae said.

"And my aunt, if she were still alive, would throw you off of our aircar landing platform!" Paul said.

Dr. Luciani didn't address Paul at all, only Jacquae. His face tightened with indignation, his dark eyes glaring with a disdain that didn't quite succeed in hiding his suffering. "She should've fed *me* to my *dead* dogs? You need radical brain therapy!"

"They were Mamma's dogs!" Jacquae insisted with passion.

"They certainly never thought so! She never fed them! She never even went near them! You can just return as Eslavu, Jacquae, and so can Mamma!"

Jacquae jumped down from Paul's bunk and faced Dr. Luciani. "That's a dreadful thing to say about our mother, the only person in this universe who even loves you! And you don't even deserve that!"

"Loves me?" Dr. Luciani said, his tone high-pitched and cynical. "*Loves me!* Mamma hates me. I remind her too much of my father!"

"You son of Abomination. You're a disgrace to Earth and to the family."

"You have the gall to stand there and preach morality at me? *You?*" Dr. Luciani laughed, a very bitter laugh. "And if you want to talk about disgrace, let's talk about Mamma, or better, our sister the adulteress!"

"Ton Luciani . . . man of the universe . . ." Jacquae said sarcastically. "A romantic fool who can't throw away his delusions about his precious Adrian."

"That liar! That *liar!* You always side with that daughter of Abomination, and so does Mamma, and why shouldn't you? You're all alike! Hypocrites! Whores! Get out of my compartment, Jacquae. I don't want to see your face! Either one of them!"

Jacquae's smack was instantaneous and powerful.

Dr. Luciani's hand shot forward, tightened around Jacquae's neck, and threw her against Paul and Myke's set of bunks, causing her to wince. Everyone else sat frozen in shock.

Jacquae's eyes narrowed, and she said through her teeth, "Hurt me, be prepared to be castrated."

Dr. Luciani glared at her with the savage resolution of an injured wild animal. "You strike me again, I'll kill you. Then I'll send your bloody remains back to Mamma and Angela in a gift-wrapped box."

Jacquae stared back at her brother, her eyes round with terror.

Dr. Luciani released Jacquae's neck and gave her a shove. "Get out of here, slut."

Contempt immediately replaced the terror on Jacquae's face. "Return as Eslavu!" Then she spun around and stormed out of the compartment. Paul followed her.

Dr. Luciani violently twisted the handle on his liquor cabinet. "I just hate American women."

“Uh . . . I think I’ll go to the commons,” Connor said in discomfort as he slid off of his bed and headed for the door.

Myke and Deia glanced at each other. “If you’d like, Deia,” Myke began as he stood up, “we can start the mind power exercises tonight.”

Deia nodded and arose. “We’ll see you later, Dr. Luciani,” she said cheerfully, looking back at him as she followed Myke toward the door.

Dr. Luciani smiled weakly at Deia. “Sure, kid.”

## Chapter 16: MIND GAMES

"Poor Dr. Luciani," Deia said after she and Myke had left the men's compartment. "He doesn't really want to believe those things he said. Not deep down."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. I guess it's just a feeling I have about him." She looked up at Myke, her eyes full of compassion. "I know he has his faults, but he isn't as awful as everyone says he is."

"Dr. Luciani's lucky to have a friend who believes in him the way you do."

"You always say such nice things."

Myke didn't look at Deia or reply. They walked together to the lounge without saying anything.

"There's just too much activity in here," Myke said after they stepped into the lounge. "There ought to be somewhere else we could go that would be quieter."

"We could try the commons," Deia suggested. "It's large enough. We ought to be able to find a somewhat quiet spot, anyway."

Myke nodded. "Let's try it."

Once they arrived at the commons, they found a fairly deserted spot in the middle of the room and seated themselves side-by-side on one of the long tables with their feet resting on the bench.

Deia hesitated. "I haven't seen much of you lately. Do you suppose we could just talk for a while and work on my mind power a little later? I've really missed talking to you."

Myke stared at his lap. He had been afraid that was what she would want to do. He lifted his head and gazed at a group of cadets who were laughing and talking in another part of the commons. "I suppose we could do that," he said, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. "What would you like to talk about?"

"Oh, I don't know." Deia leaned forward with her elbows on her thighs and her chin resting in her cupped hands. "I guess there's a lot to talk about. A lot's happened during the last week or so."

Myke nodded slowly. "Connor joined the Mazzjazz, and I guess you were right about Paul liking Jacquae."

Deia nodded. "They seem happy together. Paul's become good friends with Greg Pierce, too. I'm glad about that."

"Pierce isn't such a bad sort of guy, I guess."

"I suppose he's all right. He and Paul have a lot in common. They like to do the same types of things. You know how it is. And Paul needs a good friend." Deia removed her hands from her chin, lowered them a bit, and stared at them.

An uneasy silence lingered for a minute or two. Deia turned her head so that she was looking at Myke. "Myke?" Her tone was soft and questioning.

"Hmmm?"

"Why didn't you tell me in the beginning that your father had died?"

Myke shrugged.

"You kept it hidden so well, and I just feel terrible that I carried on so. You must be hurting horribly. I think if Lena had been executed, it would have killed me. But you tried so hard to cheer me up, and I honestly don't know where you found the strength."



Myke finally looked at her directly. "I guess if I could make you smile or laugh or forget about things for a while, it made me feel better too." He looked away from her again. "All the emotion is gone now, though, and all that's left is a big hole."

Deia rested her hand on his arm. "You've been awfully brave." Myke's entire body instinctively tensed. Deia pulled her hand away abruptly, and Myke could see out of the corner of his eye that she was hurt, and that made him feel sick.

"I'm just a good actor." Then he looked at her again, forcing himself to smile.

Deia's eyes were glassy, but she kept her composure. "You and your father were really close, weren't you?"

Myke nodded.

"What was he like? Do you look like him at all?"

"Oh . . . I suppose a little. He was a few centimeters taller than me, and his build was about the same, although he was stronger through the shoulders, much better built for swimming, and until just recently, I could never beat him." Myke smiled as he remembered. "His coloring was all around lighter than mine, and his hair was kind of gold—I have my mother's hair and eyes and complexion."

"What kind of person was he?"

Myke leaned back on his arms and looked up at the bland white overhead. "He was the type of person who likes everyone. He was always very cordial, even with people he didn't know, but not in a pushy sort of way." He smiled again, feeling all the grief and tension melt away, if only for a moment.

"It sounds as though you're a lot like him."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"He was a telepathy scientist, so he must have been brilliant."

"He was. And he and my mother both felt very strongly about education. My mother herself was as brilliant as my father in her own area of expertise. She was a teacher."

"Really? What did she teach?"

Myke's mother had taught young children mind power development, the foundation of Novaunian education, but Myke couldn't very well tell Deia that. "She taught grammar school. She was the most wonderful, caring person that ever lived. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do for anyone. And everyone loved her, especially us, but no one ever loved her nearly as much as Father did—" He stopped short, nearly overcome with emotion. He smiled weakly at Deia. "I've always been much too emotional. I guess I'm just a sentimental fool."

"I think you're wonderful."

Those beautiful blue eyes were so sincere and full of love, and Myke longed to tell her everything about himself, Novaun, and his family. And he wanted to know her, everything about her, everything that was her.

Myke turned abruptly away from Deia and slapped his hands on his thighs. "Well, shall we get started?"

Deia smiled. "Certainly."

"I thought I'd first help you refine your Awareness as much as is possible without actually wearing arelada, and then I'll teach you about spirit expansion."

Deia suddenly appeared troubled. "Something just occurred to me. I was wondering—" she stopped and looked at Myke thoughtfully. "You said that arelada can intensify Awareness to the point that you can see everything that is happening in your brain."

Myke nodded. "That's right."

"Then someone who knows a lot about the physiology of the brain could manipulate its processes to say . . . make his arm move without moving it in the normal way, or perhaps make himself deaf."

Myke nodded again. "That's true. We'll be doing some of that, in fact."

"Then," Deia continued slowly, "it wouldn't be illogical to conclude that the same person could stop the functioning of his heart or lungs . . . could turn himself off, so to speak."

"You mean suicide. Yes, that would be possible."

"Hmmm . . ." Deia turned away from Myke and stared straight ahead, obviously disturbed.

Myke frowned. Why would that upset her? "Deia, are you okay?"

Deia turned to face Myke again. "Yes, I'm fine."

Myke hesitated for a moment and studied her face. Then he nodded once and said, "Shall we continue?"

"I have another question. Is it really true that no one can enter my mind if I don't permit it? I've never been sure about that. You said yourself that your father was probably killed under mind torture, so they must have broken into his mind."

"Nooooo . . . they never got into my father's mind, that you can be sure of. His mind power was extremely strong, strong enough to resist many minds working on his alone. Now someone who isn't as strong might not be able to resist, then the Executioners could do all kinds of terrible things. But the way I understand it, resisting itself brings with it a tormenting kind of pain, and even the strongest of minds can't fight back forever. What usually happens is that they die resisting. Those people, like my father, may lose their lives, but they never lose something that's even more important, the sanctity of their minds. That's why the term 'rape' is so appropriate—I think Paul referred to it as that once—having someone force himself into your mind is a very literal form of rape, and that's absolutely, morally wrong. That's why it's so important that you resist. And you can, but the most important thing is that you have confidence in yourself."

Deia looked at Myke wide-eyed. "I've never had anyone explain it in quite that way before. It's rather frightening, but I feel as if I understand things a lot better now. But there is one more thing I would like to know. How do they do it? How do they break into someone's mind?"

"They use a technique called spirit expansion, which I'll teach you."

Deia appeared alarmed.

Myke shook his head. "There are many other uses for the spirit expansion besides breaking into other people's minds. It is simply a process of expanding your spirit past the bounds of your physical body. You don't actually leave your body, you just expand past it. This is what is referred to as 'reaching out with your mind.' Now a mind rape occurs in three parts. First, the person initiating the attack would expand his spirit and join completely with yours. Second, he would take control of your Awareness. Third, he would make your Awareness part of his and then would have the ability to look into your mind just as deeply as he wanted. Does that make sense to you?"

Deia nodded. "There's one thing, though, I don't understand. What you said about breaking into someone's mind sounds very much like what you said earlier about the dijauntu, that is, that they both involve joining minds. Are they the same thing? And if they

are, how can a person who breaks into someone else's mind ever break into the mind of still another without having mental problems?"

"That's a logical question, I suppose, but no, they aren't even close to being the same thing. The first step is the same. There must be a joining of spirit, and it must be a complete joining between the two persons involved. Realize, now, that the terms *mind* and *spirit*, although they are often used interchangeably, technically refer to two separate things. The mind is the personality, thoughts, feelings, and essence of a person and is a part of the spirit. The spirit is simply a body fashioned after our physical bodies but made of a more refined matter, which is why it isn't visible to our eyes. It's the other half of our beings, and without it, we couldn't live. It's what makes us sentient. Basically, the mind is to our spirit bodies what the brain is to our physical bodies.

"The difference between a mind rape and the dijauntu is in the second step. In the dijauntu, the man and woman voluntarily give each other their separate Awarenesses, then they are free to explore each other's minds as they wish. In a mind rape, the assailant takes control of the victim's Awareness and subsequently his mind. When the assailant takes control of the victim's Awareness, he does so without giving his own Awareness to the victim. By surrendering his Awareness and mind to his attacker, the victim becomes telepathically bound to the attacker and will be unable to break that bond, but since the attacker never surrenders his Awareness and mind to the victim, he is not telepathically bound and can break into as many minds as he wishes without suffering the same consequences. Do you understand the difference?"

Deia nodded, her eyes glowing with fascination.

"This technique can be used for other things too. For example, people who aren't afraid of the intimacy of telepathic communication and who use it a lot, communicate by a technique that combines transmitting their thoughts with the spirit expansion. As that person transmits his thoughts to the other person, he simultaneously expands his spirit and touches the spirit of the other person. He can transmit thoughts, images, and feelings, and at the same time, feel the emotions of the other person. If those communicating actually overlap spirits, they can feel the essences of each other as well as the emotions."

"What does 'essence' mean?"

"It's what the person really is, not what he thinks he is or what he may pretend to be. It's impossible to lie about what it is you really are, and that's the main thing that makes telepathy so frightening to so many people. It's too easy to live behind a façade. You'll understand what I mean better when we practice spirit expansion, but first, you need to refine your Awareness."

"All right, so what do I need to do?"

Myke slipped off the table-top and onto one of the benches. "Lie down."

"Right here on the table?"

Myke nodded.

"But I'll feel silly!"

"No one's even watching! Now come on!"

Deia turned and lay down on the table. "Now what do you want me to do?" Before Myke could answer, she tugged at her hair. "This stupid knot is horribly uncomfortable when I'm lying like this. Do you mind if I take it out?"

"No, of course not."

Deia sat up again and quickly removed the pins from her hair, put them on the bench next to Myke, and shook her head. Then she lay back down.

"Is that better?" Myke asked in amusement.

Deia nodded and smiled.

"Okay, what I want you to do is close your eyes and relax."

After a few minutes of silence had passed, Deia said, "If I relax too much more, I'll fall asleep!"

Myke groaned and shook his head good-naturedly.

"I'm sorry. I'm relaxed, honestly."

"Then I want you to focus on your Awareness and make note of your brain functions in this relaxed position. Now, move the big toe on your right foot and notice the change in your brain functions. Can you see it?"

"No."

"Okay, then do it again, and this time, concentrate really hard. You should be able to see this without the arelada if you concentrate hard enough." He gave her several minutes, then asked, "Did it work that time?"

Deia pursed her lips and shook her head.

"All right. Relax . . . focus on your Awareness, concentrate. Don't be afraid; look deep. See the blood movement, the collections of cell bodies, the electrical impulses. Note the relationships. With arelada, you would be able to see every neuron and every neuron's axon. Try to see the neurons now. Try really hard." He allowed several minutes to pass, then said, "Now, slowly bend your elbow, then lower it and focus, then repeat the process again and again, until you see the change."

Ten minutes passed, and Deia exclaimed, "I saw it! I really did! But it was just a flash."

"Good! Now keep doing it until you can see the entire sequence."

"But it's so tiring! Myke, you're a taskmaster!"

"If you really want to get good at this, you're going to have to work at it! Sorry."

Deia continued for another fifteen minutes, then put her fingers to her temples. "Every time, I see more and more, but I just can't seem to capture the entire process. Ohhhh . . . my head hurts."

"Then we'll stop for tonight. Believe it or not, you'll be able to reiterate that sequence yourself in a week or two, and you'll be able to move your arm and other parts of your body entirely by using your Awareness."

Deia sat up. "Really?"

"Mmmm, hmmm. Then we'll work on memory."

"How long should it take to make me strong if we do it every day I don't work?"

"You're already strong! You just don't realize it yet." Myke shrugged. "A half hour a day and a lot of hard work on your part . . . we'd probably get done in a month. What time would be best for you?"

"It doesn't matter to me."

"Well, the gym's off-limits after 2000, so I'd rather we didn't work together before then. How about here at 2130? Things start to quiet down about then, but it's not too late."

Deia slipped off the table and picked up her hairpins. "That sounds great."

## Chapter 17: ATTACK ON THE FLEET

Myke was lying on his bed reading, when he heard the door buzz. Dr. Luciani, the only other person in the compartment, moved quickly to answer it. “Oh hi, kid,” Dr. Luciani said when he saw Deia in the doorway. “What’s up?”

“I’m looking for Myke.” She immediately noticed Myke on his bed and began walking toward him. “Myke, I just came to tell you that I won’t be able to do the mind games tonight. I’m seeing someone formally, and I just didn’t think to tell you sooner.”

Myke used all of his self-control to hide his disappointment. He rolled over and sat up. “I guess we’ll get together tomorrow, then.”

Deia nodded and smiled.

Dr. Luciani raised his eyebrows. “Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce?”

“Mmmm, hmmm. We’re going to the holodome on B7.” Deia turned and walked toward the door. All of a sudden she spun back around and said in excitement, “I forgot to tell you! I’m giving a recital in the A2 theater on Liberation Eve! That will be for *five hundred* people! And that’s not even counting those who will be watching the transmission in the holodomies. Commander Bernstein himself asked me! Isn’t that wonderful!”

“You were *asked*?” Dr. Luciani said. “Since when are any of us ever *asked* to do any job?”

“He didn’t exactly ask, but the request didn’t sound like an order either. But who cares about that? I would never refuse an opportunity like this!”

“That’s right. There wouldn’t be more brass at that recital if you invited the Tryamaz Jaz,” Dr. Luciani said. “I don’t know what your recitals and concerts have been like before, but this one will probably be the most prestigious one you’ve ever played.”

“I know! Can you imagine that? It’s ironic, isn’t it?”

“Are you going to be paid?” Myke asked.

Deia nodded. “I’ll get a bonus next time I’m paid. I also made reservations for you two, Paul, Connor, and my roommates. With the lottery being the farce that it is, I doubted any of you would be picked.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Dr. Luciani responded. “It’s hard enough to get a reservation with only seventy-five seats available for cadets, and then those are always grabbed immediately by the people with connections or enough cash for a bribe.”

Deia grinned mischievously. “Well, despite the enormous odds, I reserved seats for all of you!”

“How’d you manage that?” Myke asked in amazement.

“Oh, I simply paid for all the reservations, plus some.”

Myke glanced at Dr. Luciani in astonishment, then burst into laughter.

“You bribed someone in the ticket office! *You*?” Dr. Luciani gasped.

Deia smiled slyly. “Of course. How else was I supposed to get your seats?”

Myke was laughing so hard he could barely breathe. Once he gained some measure of control, he asked with as much innocence as he could muster, “Are you taking bets for the Day of Liberation fencing tournament too?” That comment sent Dr. Luciani into hysterics.

“Myke!” she protested.

Myke and Dr. Luciani looked at each other and laughed even harder.

"Well, of all the ungrateful . . .!" Deia teased. Then she straightened, managing to maintain her dignity. "I don't understand why you're so amused. I just happen to be a woman who knows how to get what she wants."

Once the laughter subsided, Myke said, "Thanks for getting us seats, Deia."

"Yeah, Deia, thanks."

"Well, I'd better get going. I'll see you two later."

After Deia left, Myke said, "It's good to see Deia in such high spirits."

"It sure is," Dr. Luciani agreed.

The compartment intercom buzzed, and Dr. Luciani turned and walked to the table, leaned over, and pushed a button. "Cadet Mentor T. Luciani here."

"Dr. Luciani, report to the armed shuttle deck immediately," said a female voice.

"Acknowledged." Dr. Luciani pushed another button to turn off the intercom.

"What's going on?"

"I'm being shipped out. Trouble in the fleet, and it must be big trouble—I'm not even on stand-by." A green light next to the intercom began flashing, signaling "fleet alert."

"See you tomorrow, I hope," Dr. Luciani said on his way to the door.

"Sure." As soon as Dr. Luciani was gone, Myke quickly expanded his spirit into the bulkheads of the compartment to manipulate the holorecorders. He set his laptop on the table, inserted a Kent Diamond disc, and telepathically searched for new hidden programs the D.I.I. agent might have planted. He found a spy program exactly like the one he had found before and disassembled it, then accessed the ship's computer network to discover the reason for the alert and position of the fleet. A fleet alert would be the perfect time to escape. Chances were, he could get past the fleet alone in a frigate without any problems. No one would probably even realize he had left.

Myke learned that several of the fleet's outer ships had been attacked by Diron ships. Diron, once a planet rich in arelada, had been the birthplace of a society that had become addicted to telepathy vision fantasy. Because of this abuse of telepathy, the prophet Malrezz had, many centuries before, cursed the planet to withhold its arelada. Enraged, the addicts attempted to telepathically force the planet to release its arelada and, in the process, destroyed their ecosystem. The followers of Malrezz watched the death of their planet from life-support domes. Those who remained of the other nations escaped in spaceships. Left with nothing to trade, valueless currency, and a desire for arelada that was as insatiable as ever, the Dirons turned to theft.

Little remained of those original Diron nations but deteriorating fleets that warred with each other and terrorized the Alliance. The planets on the outer edge of the region protected by the Alliance were constantly under siege. Since the Zarrists had such a great interest in arelada and had long been at war with the other Diron nations, Earth's military had been a strong force in holding the Dirons at bay. At present, the *Sovereign* was stationed on the border of Diron space, practically in the middle of nowhere.

Becoming more excited by the second, Myke quickly searched the flight record for an available frigate. After a minute of searching, he slumped down in his chair in disappointment. All forty-seven frigates had been discharged. Since frigates were the only ships harbored by the *Sovereign* that were capable of hyperdrive, he was out of luck. A fighter or armed shuttle would get him to Erdean, but Erdean was a strong ally of Earth's. Myke knew that without a passport he would be apprehended immediately after arriving.

Myke quickly exited the ship's computer, but he left his equipment out so that the music could continue playing. He withdrew his spirit from the bulkheads, stood up, and began pacing, musing over everything that had happened during the four weeks he had been on the *Sovereign*.

Fortunately his classes were easy, leaving him more time to socialize with his cadet peers and formulate a plan to escape from the *Sovereign*. He still spent most of his time at the gym. He liked to run with Paul, generally when Pierce wasn't with him, and he was taking fencing lessons with Connor and many of the other pro-cadets. He often sparred with Paul, Jacquae, Connor, and sometimes even Dr. Luciani.

Myke enjoyed fencing and he learned quickly, but those first two weeks had been difficult. Footwork and lunging were learned first in fencing, and even though he was in good physical condition, he had quickly discovered muscles in his legs that he had never known were there. He soon understood why the late Prince Jahnzel had immediately fallen in love with fencing and had ordered all of his warriors to learn it, propelling it to its current status as Earth's most popular sport. Fencing was not only equally accessible to both men and women, both young and old, and athletes both small and large, it was good for developing concentration and quick reflexes, and best of all, it didn't take much space.

Myke sometimes played games with Connor too, something he thoroughly enjoyed. He felt more comfortable with Connor than with any of his other roommates, and surprisingly, they had a lot in common. As far as roommates went, even Dr. Luciani wasn't difficult to live with. Myke enjoyed his sharp mind and wit, and he was even considerate about smoking. Myke had made it clear from the beginning that he didn't like breathing osalaem smoke, so they had compromised. Dr. Luciani wouldn't smoke while Myke was in the compartment unless he asked, and Myke wouldn't spend all of his time in the compartment. So far that agreement had kept problems from arising.

Paul, however, was a different matter. Myke considered himself an easygoing person, but Paul was really starting to annoy him. He spent too much time in the lavatory in the mornings, and he was extremely irritable. Furthermore, when he wasn't irritable, he sulked, constantly. Dr. Luciani and Connor had lost patience with him and were attempting to have him assigned to another compartment.

Myke had never met a more difficult person to get close to than Paul, because Paul never talked about anything personal. Myke suspected that he was unstable and disturbed by something more than his aunt's death. Paul was usually good-natured in public, but Myke knew that Deia was worried about him. He wouldn't even admit to her that he was depressed, and he was drinking more and more lately. No one had seen him get completely drunk yet, and Myke hoped they never would. He had a feeling Paul would be a violent drunk. Even Dr. Luciani kept his liquor cabinet locked as a precaution. He didn't mind sharing his wine and liquor, but he abhorred guzzlers.

Myke felt it possible that Paul had already been bought with threats on Deia's life and that those threats were the cause of his distress. He wished he knew more about Paul and Deia's background. Every time he talked with Deia about her family, however, she talked only about Paul and Lena and Sanel, which led him to believe she didn't know much about her parents or other relatives. He was beginning to consider the possibility that Paul and Deia were his father's royal twins, but he had only suspicions and no proof.

Myke's thoughts shifted exclusively to Deia. He always thought about her, and he lived for that half hour a day they worked on mind power development together. She was

progressing amazingly well, mastering her Awareness of body functions in less than two weeks and Awareness and memory in the next two. The two weeks of memory practice had consisted mainly of transmitting words, phrases, paragraphs, mathematical problems, and pictures of objects back and forth between them. Deia would never have become a concert pianist of caliber without possessing an excellent memory to begin with, but as easy as it was for her to remember complex combinations of sounds, her ability to recall sights in detail was limited.

Myke had transmitted a detailed likeness of an apple to her, and she had transmitted it back to him, omitting a tiny blemish, and when he had told her that she hadn't done it right, she had become angry. "What is one tiny blemish?" she had said. "That just isn't too important, if you ask me!"

Myke had countered with, "And maybe next time you play a Beethoven sonata, you should just leave out a section."

"All right! All right! I understand." She had worked hard for two more days before she could transmit the picture of the apple to him correctly.

The exercises had improved Deia's memory to such an extent that she had cut her study time in half while significantly improving her grades in all of her classes, leaving her more time for piano. She usually played jazz for everyone in the lounge during the early hours, then after most of the cadets left at about 2200, she played classical pieces. Myke loved to lie on a couch in the lounge and listen to her play, and he liked to think she was playing just for him.

As much as Myke hated seeing Deia with Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce, he knew that their involvement was the best thing that could have happened as far as his mission was concerned. Everyone was too enthralled with Deia and Pierce as a couple to remember that Deia had once shown an interest in him. Myke had a feeling, however, that the cadets were more enthralled with Deia and Pierce than Deia and Pierce were with each other. Their relationship was very formal and proper, and Myke doubted they had ever experienced a moment of passion like the one he and Deia had shared during their dance together. When he gazed into Deia's eyes and saw the longing, he couldn't help but feel the passion was still there.

All that passion . . . Myke still couldn't decide whether Deia was sincere. She seemed to be, but he couldn't be sure. He knew that the mind power development exercises would lead the D.I.I. agent watching him into thinking he planned to use her to help him leave the ship, but he felt that having observation focused on her left him more leeway in working with the others. As long as no one knew he loved her or believed she loved him, he didn't worry about her safety.

Myke contemplated his puzzling situation. The more he came to know the other cadets, the more hopeless his task seemed. Even the resisters appeared to be loyal to Earth, and he was beginning to doubt he could buy any of them. Even Paul, who hated the government, was loyal to Earth. Myke knew that at least one of his friends was a plant, and he didn't doubt most of the others would betray him, regardless of friendship, given the opportunity. The word "spy" was all they needed to hear.

Despite everything, he was going to get a chance to escape; he could feel it. He knew that he was putting off the decision of choosing helpers, but he also knew that the success of his mission depended on his reading the people he had come to know and the entire situation with complete accuracy. It wasn't time yet, but it would be soon.



## Chapter 18: LOVE GAMES

“To give you a feel for the spirit expansion, I’m going to expand and surround you. You’ll have to resist, but you’ll be able to feel me, and that’s what I want,” Myke said.

Deia nodded once. “I’m ready.”

Several seconds had passed when Deia gasped, “Oh . . . I can feel you! It’s so strange . . . my head is spinning and my whole body feels warm.”

“Good. That’s the way it’s supposed to feel.”

“You’re gone now . . . I can feel.” She smiled mysteriously. “The sensation was so odd and yet so wonderful, I almost hated to resist. That’s silly, isn’t it?”

Myke smiled and shook his head. “No, not really.” He didn’t elaborate further, but continued with the next phase of the lesson, “I’m going to transmit the expansion formula to you, and then you’re going to do the same thing to me, only not to the same degree, because you won’t be capable of that for a while.”

Even as Myke spoke, his thoughts slipped into Deia’s mind with the spirit expansion formula. In less than a second, Deia nodded that she had received it. Myke slid off the table and motioned for her to do the same. Then he faced her and positioned her at arm’s length.

“Now put that formula in motion and reach out as far as you can. Try to touch my spirit with yours. It’ll be difficult, but you’ll know when you’ve succeeded, because you’ll be able to feel me resist.”

Several minutes passed. Deia’s eyelids dropped shut, and she perspired freely. “Ohhhh . . .” she moaned. “I feel as though I’m going to faint.” She swooned and Myke caught her in his arms before she fell. In moments her eyelids fluttered open, and Myke led her back to the table, where he helped her sit down.

“Breathe, Deia, breathe . . . And don’t feel bad. I told you it would be difficult.”

Deia took deep breaths, her head drooping a little. Once she regained her composure, she turned to Myke and smiled weakly. “It’s too bad we don’t have any arelada. It makes things so much easier.”

“You just want the easy way out! Anyway, if you can become strong without it, you’ll be all that much stronger with it. You’ve already seen that working with Dr. Luciani.”

Deia nodded. “Shall we try it again?”

“Do you feel up to it?”

She stood up. “Yes, I think so.” This time she endured a few minutes longer, but she still wasn’t able to touch Myke’s mind with hers before she became too dizzy to stand.

“I think you’ve had enough for tonight,” Myke said. “You’ll probably be able to do it tomorrow, and then we’ll work on increasing distance.”

“That sounds difficult.” Deia gracefully lay down on the table, interlacing her fingers behind her head and bending her knee.

Myke smiled, sitting down on the bench and folding his arms next to Deia’s shoulder. “It will be at first, but it really won’t take you very long to get used to it. It just takes practice.”

Deia rolled to her side and looked thoughtfully into Myke’s eyes. “You know, Myke, you just amaze me.”

She was so close that Myke could feel her breath on his face and see every strand of dark brown hair, every eyelash, every tiny line in her soft, red lips. He had an

overwhelming desire at that moment to kiss her, and he thought he was going to die of heat exhaustion right there on the spot. It was all he could do to force a reply, “Why?”

“Oh, just the way you are, especially that you know so much about telepathy.”

Myke shrugged. “That’s not really too impressive, considering the fact that my father was a telepathy scientist.”

“Hmmm, I guess not. But how many of us have fathers who were telepathy scientists?”

Myke poured all the love and yearning he felt for Deia into a prolonged gaze. She gazed back at him, her blue eyes searching, but no less full of adoration and desire. She slowly, hesitantly lifted her hand and caressed his cheek with her fingers, and although her gentle touch was almost too much for Myke to bear, he didn’t resist, but closed his eyes and enjoyed the precious moment of expression while he could. A second later, he opened his eyes again and quickly turned away before he lost all control.

Deia didn’t say anything, and if she was surprised by his reactions, she didn’t acknowledge it. She simply rolled to her back and stared at the overhead.

Several minutes of comfortable silence passed. Deia didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave, and Myke was glad. He enjoyed being with her when none of the others were around, and those times were rare.

Myke leaned forward again and folded his arms on the table. “Deia, how are things going for you? I mean, really.”

“I ask myself that all the time.”

Myke remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

“Oh, lately I’ve really been missing Tryamaz and my friends. I miss all of the cultural events—life on this ship is just too restrictive and boring, and it seems as though the longer we’re here, the more boring it gets.” She turned her head toward Myke. “But then I guess you know as much about that as I do.”

Myke nodded.

Deia turned her head to stare at the overhead again. “But most of all, I miss Lena.” A tear rolled into her hair. “I don’t think I’ll ever get over it, walking into her room that day and finding her dead.” She pursed her lips and waited for several moments before continuing. “As much as I didn’t want to come here, I think maybe it was a good thing. Being in a new place with new people and new situations has, perhaps, helped me accept her death more quickly than I would have if Paul and I had continued living in that penthouse without her.”

Deia was thoughtful for a minute. “Aside from that, things really aren’t going that badly. I’ve made many new friends here, and it’s funny, you seem to get to know more about people when you live with them, and I think that, aside from all of the problems and frustrations, people become a lot closer in a place like this than they do at home, and I think I like that.”

Myke nodded in agreement. “How’re you coming in your classes? Is medicine becoming any more appealing?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m finally doing well in my classes, but I’m still not horribly thrilled. I do like working with Dr. Luciani, though, especially when I get to help him in the lab. It’s fascinating to watch neurons reproduce themselves under the power of our minds.” She sat up, crossed her legs on the table, and looked down at Myke in excitement. “You know, Dr. Luciani has been terrific. I just don’t know how I would have done any of

this without him, or you, and I think that if I didn't want my music career so badly, I would like the idea of being a doctor!"

"Well, isn't that a switch? I wonder if Dr. Luciani realizes what a miracle worker he is."

"I'm not sure, but I think he might!"

"What would you have done if you hadn't been drafted? I know you wanted to study with the great maestro, but did you ever think about what you wanted to do after that?"

"Oh, I had all kinds of wonderful plans for my life. It was always my dream to become a member of the Divine Emperor's Court."

"The finest artists in the galaxy!" Myke said dramatically.

"Yes . . . I wanted to be officially recognized by the Divine Emperor for my talent, and I wanted everyone to know that I was good enough to play for him and good enough to represent Earth throughout the galaxy. Phillip Moreau has always been my idol, I guess because he represents what I want to become, and oh, how he plays! I've always thought that if I could learn just a little from him, perhaps I could become a master in my own right. I'm not sure how long I would have studied with him, probably a year or two, and I would have gained a great deal of recognition by performing with him throughout the galaxy." She leaned back a little and stretched her arms and legs. "There's just something about performing, Myke. My energy, the energy of the music itself, and the energy and enthusiasm of the thousands of people who watch. When they all combine, there is a real power, and there isn't anything like it in the entire universe."

"You really miss it, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." Deia struggled to smile. "Then I was going to go back to Tryamaz and perhaps play with the Tryamaz Philharmonic—I didn't want to travel my entire life. I knew I would miss Paul and Lena too much to do it for very long. And I hoped that when I was twenty-five or so that I would fall in love and get married."

Myke grinned. "To someone extraordinarily handsome and rich."

"Naturally," Deia said, lifting her eyebrows and returning Myke's grin. "Then I planned to perform just occasionally, because I've always believed that when I have a family, I will spend the majority of my time with my husband and children. I hoped that Paul would get married too, and that we would all live happily ever after together!"

"You had quite a plan, didn't you?"

"It's funny, because when I think about it now, it seems kind of silly that I planned everything so specifically. In the last few weeks I've come to realize that life has a way of throwing you surprises, and I really doubt it all would have been so easy, even if I hadn't been drafted."

"You're probably right about that."

Deia looked at Myke thoughtfully. "And what were you going to do?"

"Oh, I would've continued working for Briggs—I really enjoyed what I was doing there—and I would've gone to advanced school in a year or so to get my degree so that I could be a full engineer instead of just an associate. I really doubt I would've stayed with Briggs for very long after that. I'm just not comfortable in Tryamaz." He carefully watched Deia's face for reaction. "I would really like to go back to Hawaii in a few years and get married and have a house near the beach and maybe a boat or two. You know, work five days a week and spend the rest of the time with my friends and family, kind of a leisurely sort of life. Star Force can't keep me here forever."

Deia gazed at him, uncomprehending, as if she had never considered his desiring a life other than that of a Tryamazzan spacecraft engineer. “But where would you work?”

Myke shrugged. “There are small government contractors all over, not to mention commercial developers. I’m sure there are positions for spacecraft engineers in Honolulu, although I probably wouldn’t make as much. The way I see it, though, what’s the use of having a lot of money if you can’t live the way you want?”

Deia seemed to understand, and although she wasn’t displeased, she appeared disconcerted. “Well,” she finally said, “I think I’ll go to the lounge. I’m really in the mood for playing tonight. I’m especially in the mood for the ‘Rhapsody.’” She gazed at him tenderly. “Will you come with me?” Myke nodded and stood up as she slipped off the table.

Not many other cadets were in the lounge, which was typical during the hour before curfew, and Myke was glad. That meant he could have the couch next to the piano all to himself.

He lay on the couch, his eyes closed and his hands behind his head, absorbing the music. Deia always played beautifully, but tonight she played especially well. Her emotion and expression in the music was unsurpassed, and Myke wondered whether she could ever love him, Pierce, or any other man as much as she loved music.

Deia finished playing Moreau’s “Rhapsody of the Heart” ten minutes before curfew. Myke walked her back to her compartment, happy he was able to have the last hour of the evening with her without Pierce showing up and spoiling it as he usually did.

He walked back to his own compartment, his spirits higher than they had been for a long time. As he entered, he almost collided with Pierce, who was just leaving. Pierce didn’t so much as give him a civil smile, only a skeptical glance. Myke’s lips curved into a triumphant little smile. That a man in Pierce’s position would feel so threatened by him, for whatever reason, pleased him immensely.

Connor was lying on his top bunk, all ready for bed, and Paul was putting away his laptop and returning several discs to his storage wallet. Since Dr. Luciani wasn’t there and hadn’t been seen by anyone all day, Myke assumed he was still on emergency duty in the fleet somewhere.

After exchanging greetings with Paul and Connor, Myke quickly dressed for bed. A little later, hearing a sound at the door, they all turned and saw Dr. Luciani trudge into the compartment, his shoulders slumped and his face haggard.

“What in the universe happened to you?” Connor asked.

“Surprise attack on our outer ships . . .” he breathed, collapsing onto his bed. “Battleship *Endurance*, completely gutted . . . *Challenge*, damaged beyond repair . . . the cruiser *Fearless*, almost captured . . . three destroyers blown to another universe—”

Myke sat down on his bed. “Were you able to get everyone out?”

Dr. Luciani slowly shook his head. “Last count, fifty were dead, over two hundred injured.” He sighed. “No matter how many times I have to do that, I’ll never get used to it.”

Myke, Paul, and Connor glanced at each other; then Myke asked Dr. Luciani, “Do you have any idea why? What provoked them?”

“They think it came because while a convoy from our fleet escorted a Erdeanian arelada shipment to Manoure, it successfully thwarted an attack from Diron forces. Destroyed one of their ships, in fact. Vengeful people, those Diron. Admiral Beaumont

has already sent out a task-force to counter-attack, so it's rumored, although I have no idea what'll be hit."

Paul moved toward Dr. Luciani's liquor cabinet. "Would you like a drink?"

"Yeah, scotch. Make it a double. Here's the key." Dr. Luciani removed the key card from his ring and tossed it to Paul.

Paul poured Dr. Luciani a drink, walked over to where he lay, and handed it to him, then sat down in one of the chairs.

"This will sure make for a depressing holiday celebration," Connor said glumly.

"Oh, I don't know about depressing," Dr. Luciani said. "But it will be frenzied, you can count on that. Why, I'll bet they'll be fighting to join up on Earth and in the colonies when old Arulezz and all of his lackeys rave about those who were lost to add their blood to those billions of others who have died so that we could be sanctified from our sins."

His voice was full of bitterness. "Then our great admirals will sit in their opulent suites, sipping champagne and casually ordering more pawns to their deaths. And what's worse, all of those fools go to it so willingly. Our leaders have romanticized war so much that everyone feels honored to rush to a hero's death. I'd like to see the great Arulezz himself fly a fighter into battle, or Saint Kravim man a battleship's weaponry, or even our dearly beloved Commodore Hansen carry an immobilizer against Diron marines. Then maybe they would see that war is a waste, a disgusting waste." He smiled wryly. "I am in a mood. Myke, do you mind if I smoke?"

Myke shook his head.

Paul, Connor, and Myke were silent and thoughtful as Dr. Luciani lit a taffuao. He drew on it several times, deeply inhaling the dusty, pale purple smoke to get the full affect of the osalaem's tranquilizing qualities. He appeared considerably more relaxed when he said, "Some think this attack might be the calm before the storm, others think it might be the storm before the calm."

Connor frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"It's rumored that the Dirons are all but extinct and that representatives of those peaceful factions that remain are at the negotiating table right now with Earth and the Interstellar Alliance of Planets," Myke volunteered.

"Good," Paul said hopefully. "Then we can all go home."

Dr. Luciani shook his head. "I don't think so. Maybe our problems with the Dirons are almost over for the most part, but we won't be going home. There's a strange feeling in the fleet that I can't explain, almost a suppressed excitement. Maybe there's nothing to it, I don't know, but I smell blood, and it stinks."

\* \* \*

Nearly two weeks after the attack on the Fleet, Deia completed the mind power development lessons with Myke. After her final lesson was over, she sat with him in a corner of the lounge while she waited for Greg to escort her to the Kent Diamond concert that was due to be shown in the holodome on B7. Deia had struggled to keep her sadness in check while she and Myke had done their telepathic exercises that night, with only partial success. Her feelings would have been humiliating, but Myke was more depressed than she was.

"You know, Myke, I'm really going to miss doing the mind games with you. I guess it's helped us become even better friends, and I'm afraid that now we won't have so much time together."

"You're probably right about that, but you're plenty strong now, and you really don't need any more of my help."

"I know. You'll still come listen to me play in the evenings, though, won't you?"

"You know I'm your most devoted fan. That'll never change. Have you decided what to play for your recital yet?"

"Yes. I finally have!"

"Well, are you going to let me in on the secret?"

Mention of the concert cheered Deia up a little. "I was planning to surprise you."

"Ah, c'mon . . ."

"All right. But you have to promise not to tell anyone. It has to be something of a surprise, at least to the others. For Paul, Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Sonata. He loves Beethoven, especially that one, and it doesn't surprise me—that sonata is *him*. Then for you, Chopin's Ballade No. 1. —I know how much you like that one. Then for everyone, Moreau's 'Rhapsody of the Heart.' I've never played Moreau in concert—Rachael always said that it isn't a good idea to play a composer's works while he's still alive because you can never play them well enough—but I think the others will hide the piano bench if I don't play it!"

"You'll do beautifully! But anyway, I think you're right." Myke hesitated. "It's not for Pierce?"

The pain on Myke's face astonished Deia. He really was jealous of Greg. All these weeks Myke had been so exasperatingly nonchalant. She gave a little shrug with one of her shoulders. "Yes, I suppose it's for Greg. Moreau is his favorite composer." She couldn't bring herself to say anything else about Greg. "Hopefully I'll play the 'Rhapsody' well enough and they'll want an encore. That will be 'Liberation March.'"

"Extremely appropriate."

"That's what I think, although I believe the 'Rhapsody' is just about as patriotic. There are a few who would like to make it our national anthem!"

"It'd be a little tough to sing to, don't you think?"

"Yes it would be!" Deia jumped up and held out her hands to Myke. "Come to the commons with me and have some ice cream. We can celebrate my graduation from your telepathy class! Teacher and student."

"I don't know if that's a good idea. Won't Pierce be here soon to take you to the concert?"

"Yes, but there's still plenty of time. Besides, what could Greg say about an innocent little ice cream?"

"Plenty! He despises me!"

Myke's observation troubled Deia. "He doesn't *despise* you." She gave up on the ice cream and knelt in front of Myke.

Myke chuckled. "Oh yes he does."

Deia leaned toward him, whispering, "You're going to think this is crazy, but he believes you're a spy for my uncle." She had been longing for weeks to know what Myke would think of Greg's idea and was glad to finally have an excuse to bring it up.

Myke laughed. "What makes him think that?"

"He says you're experienced in hand-to-hand combat but that you don't fight like someone who came out of a military intermediate school. He's convinced you're D.I.I."

"So what do you think of Pierce's speculation?"

"I told him you weren't creepy enough to be a D.I.I. agent. I have a sixth sense about those cockroaches."

"What did he say to that?"

"He told me to be extremely cautious around you. It bugs him that you weren't reprimanded for the striptease you did the night of the dance. As far as he's concerned, that's proof you're not a normal cadet. I explained that things are different here in the Science Corps—more casual."

"Has he had any success getting you and Paul transferred into the officers' training program?"

Deia shook her head, feeling more relieved about Greg's failure than she cared to admit. She was beginning to feel comfortable as Dr. Luciani's novice and wasn't sure she wanted to be a com-cadet, even temporarily. "That's another thing that disturbs him. His father has orders from the Defense Office that neither Paul nor I can be moved—surprise, surprise. He has no doubt that Sanel's up to something, and he's really concerned."

Blood rose in Myke's cheeks, and he turned away. "You two are getting serious, aren't you?" His voice sounded strained.

Deia nodded slowly. "I'm very fond of him. I wouldn't see so much of him if I weren't." She hesitated, then tentatively cupped her hand around his cheek, inviting him to look at her again.

He did face her again, and something about his gaze told her that he would draw her into his lap and end this ridiculous game they had been playing for a month and a half. When, instead, he removed her hand from his cheek and set it on her knee, she averted her eyes, mortified.

"So what does Pierce think of this rumor that his father's a Zionite?"

Deia hadn't thought another rejection could hurt her again, but she was hurt, deeply, and angry. She struggled to keep her voice calm. "It's no rumor. It's true. Or it *was* true. After the first Day of Liberation, Greg's father severed all ties to Zion. Greg's never met his father's family."

"Sounds like you and Pierce have a lot in common."

"I'd never thought about it that way, but I suppose you're right." Deia finally mustered the courage to look at him again. "Do you think that *my* parents could have been Zionites?" She wondered why the thought had never occurred to either her or Paul.

The corner of Myke's mouth rose, as if he were trying to smile. "If so, then maybe Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce is the *real* spy for your family."

Greg entered the lounge at that moment and looked around for Deia. When he found her, he smiled and moved toward her, never taking his eyes from her face. He was so gorgeous and so focused on her, and she liked him as well as anyone she had ever known. Why in the galaxy did she keep making a fool of herself over Myke?

Deia jumped up and went to meet Greg, happier to see him than she had ever been and relieved the telepathy lessons were over and that Myke could now drift out of her life. She slipped her arm around Greg's waist and received a kiss, marveling at its sweetness.

## Chapter 19: RHAPSODY OF THE HEART

*March 31, 19 Y.D.E.*

*Day Six of Festival of the Lights, or Liberation Eve (Memorial Day)*

Myke, Paul, Connor, Jacquae, Kristina, Tevaronia, and Dr. Luciani were all gathered in the men's compartment at 1730 that night, getting ready to go to Deia's recital, which was scheduled to start at 1800.

The door buzzed, and Connor answered it. Deia was there, her hair swept up in an elaborate style, with some strands wound around pearl hairpieces and others hanging in curly wisps around her neck.

Dr. Luciani whistled as Deia entered the compartment. "My, you're gorgeous! Eighteen going on twenty-five!"

Tevaronia shook her head in awe. "Deia, you have absolutely the most beautiful jewelry I've ever seen!"

"Thank you!" Deia turned to Paul and asked anxiously, "You got the roses didn't you? And did you find a crystal vase at the exchange? The entertainment office said that I have to furnish my own props. Can you believe it?"

"I can believe it. And don't worry, I found a vase, and I gave it to Shipman Graham down at the Earth Room. She said she would do the arrangement and deliver it personally to the theater. It should already be there."

"I want everything to be perfect. Well, at least I don't have to worry about the flowers anymore. Thank you, Paul."

"Have you met Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce's parents yet?" Jacquae asked eagerly.

Deia shook her head. "I haven't seen him today at all. I've been too busy with everything else. I do know that he went to meet his mother and Francesca at the shuttle bay at 1500, and his father's probably just arriving. Greg won't see him until the recital."

"I want to see this Francesca!" Dr. Luciani said. "I've heard she's beautiful."

Jacquae rolled her eyes. "She's far too young for you, Ton."

"Oh, I don't know. I've known some fifteen-year-olds who're much more supremely endowed than some twenty-year-olds I know." Dr. Luciani raised his eyebrows and shot a pointed look at Jacquae.

Jacquae's eyes narrowed and her cheeks reddened. "Have you no shame at all?"

"Since when do age and innocence have anything to do with each other? Why should they?" Dr. Luciani made a meaningless gesture in the air with his hand. "It's that old double standard on rules of propriety again. That's all life is, a double standard, hypocrisy. So what else is new? Besides, Pierce's temper will explode to my death if I so much as speak to his sister." He grinned lustfully. "But I enjoy a beautiful girl as much as the next guy, and even Pierce can't stop me from looking at her!"

"Well, she'd better not be too beautiful," Jacquae said.

"You're just jealous because Paul's her escort for dinner tonight!" Myke teased.

"And for good reason!" Jacquae said. "If she's as beautiful as her brother is handsome, then I'm in a lot of trouble!" She, Deia, Kristina, and Tevaronia all grinned at each other and exchanged knowing glances.

Paul smiled and put his arm around Jacquae. "You don't have anything to worry about." Then he laughed. "Talk about jealousy! Greg says his father will want the first



dance in the Galactic Room with Deia tonight, and he doesn't think that's fair!" Dr. Luciani, Connor, and Myke chuckled in satisfaction.

"Boy, I never even thought of that!" Tevaronia exclaimed. "I mean, Pierce is one thing, but his father's a four-star admiral! I think if it was me, I'd just die!"

"That's why it's Deia, and not you!" Kristina said, laughing.

"Oh, Deia! Just imagine! You're going to get to dance with an admiral!" Jacquae said. "Just whatever you do, don't step on his feet!"

Deia groaned. "Give me some credit, please! I'm a much better dancer than that!"

"Leave Deia alone!" Paul said in amusement. "You're going to make her so nervous she won't be able to play, much less eat or dance!"

Dr. Luciani tilted his head toward Deia. "I'm just wondering if we're going to get an announcement in the near future. You might be using the money you're making tonight to buy a wedding dress."

"Deia couldn't get a decent gown of any kind for that," Paul said. "She wouldn't even be able to buy the shoes."

"Yeah, don't you know anything, Ton?" Jacquae said in annoyance. "What she's making tonight might buy her a dress mass-produced for a shop, but it wouldn't be nearly enough to hire a fine Tryamazzer designer."

Dr. Luciani threw his arms up in hopelessness. "Well, pardon me, Saintess Jacquae!" Connor and Myke laughed.

"Stop it!" Deia said. "You're all talking as if we've already set a date, when the fact of the matter is, we've never even discussed becoming engaged!"

Dr. Luciani regarded Deia knowingly. "Oh, you will after tonight. Pierce's not about to let you get away, not if his parents approve of you. Face it Deia, you're one classy lady, and marrying you would be the best move of his career. Let's not forget your uncle's position in the Defense Office, and on top of that, I'll bet you could throw a supreme party."

"You're disgusting," Jacquae said.

"I'll say," Tevaronia said, even more disgusted than Jacquae. Deia didn't get angry with Dr. Luciani, nor did she reply.

Dr. Luciani looked at Tevaronia calculatingly, not for a moment missing Deia's lack of reaction. "Well that's odd, Tev. Usually you're begging me to be disgusting."

"In your dreams!"

Dr. Luciani's mouth curved into an amused little smile. "No, in my office two nights ago. You have an incredibly limited memory."

Tevaronia's face tightened, her cheeks igniting red and her eyes stabbing at Dr. Luciani in rage. "Well never again, I can assure you!"

"Yeah, and how many times have I heard that in the last year." He exploded with laughter.

Myke listened, appalled. He would have considered Dr. Luciani cruel if he hadn't been so revolted by Tevaronia and thought her deserving of Dr. Luciani's censure. She indulged herself and him in private, then condemned him in public. Myke could hardly comprehend something so degrading. He wondered why Dr. Luciani tolerated it at all.

Dr. Luciani revelled in Tevaronia's discomfort. He motioned to Tevaronia, then to Deia. "Mercenary Woman Number One, meet Mercenary Woman Number Two." Then to Deia, "Mercenary Woman Number Two, I applaud you. Who really cares about having a

marriage based on love and mutual giving of one's self, you know, that 'ideal' marriage, anyway? Once you announce your engagement, you'll have a discharge in a matter of weeks, leaving you free to go anywhere in the galaxy to pursue your music career. And I'll just bet your uncle will turn the funds back on, and you'll have an entire life of diamonds and mink coats and limousines. If you're going to sell yourself, that's the way to do it. Look at this pathetic creature over here." He motioned to Tevaronia, his smile cynical.

"I'm pathetic! *You're* the one who's pathetic, with your scrawny little body and perverse demands!"

"She sells herself so cheaply," Dr. Luciani continued, ignoring Tevaronia's insults. "A glass of fine champagne, an hour of pleasure."

Myke's eyes penetrated Dr. Luciani's with perception and affection. *And she's not the only one who sells herself so cheaply*, he communicated telepathically. Dr. Luciani looked at him peculiarly, almost frowning. He understood completely, and as Myke touched his spirit to his, he could feel in him surprise, and oddly enough, appreciation.

Dr. Luciani continued without missing a beat, "No, I admire you, Mercenary Woman Number Two." Again, Deia didn't reply.

"That was cruel and unfair," Paul said angrily. "You know nothing about the lifestyle Deia would lead! And you also know nothing about how Deia and Greg feel about each other!"

Dr. Luciani's eyebrows shot up at Paul's inability to believe Deia could be so coldly dedicated to an ambition. "I don't mean to sound cruel, but Deia and I are friends and I feel I can speak frankly with her. And as far as you're concerned, Sheldon, it's about time you grew up and started facing reality."

"Enough of this!" Deia said with a smile. "My recital starts in twenty minutes, and I have to get going! I'll see you all in a little while!"

Deia's cheerfulness broke the uncomfortable silence in the compartment. Several minutes after she left, the group moved toward the door and then proceeded to deck A2. As they walked, Jacquae, Tevaronia, and Kristina chatted uninhibitedly; Dr. Luciani and Connor talked quietly together; Paul walked along, quiet and still disturbed; and Myke walked with him, not caring to converse either.

Myke, like Dr. Luciani, had long suspected Pierce regarded Deia more as a potential business partner than as a real companion, and he had always been worried that Deia was too naïve to realize it and that she would get hurt. No chance. Deia was a sweet, lovely girl, but she had learned long ago how to play all of those high-society games of power with guys like Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce. Even so, Myke considered her indifference to Pierce's intentions and her calculating pursuit of an ambition distasteful, and for a moment, he angrily felt she and Pierce deserved each other. Was her music career so important to her that she would marry someone she didn't really love, especially when she was already in love with someone else?

Then again, he didn't know for sure that she was in love with him and not Pierce. A girl who was capable of playing a game with Pierce, an expert at games, was definitely capable of playing a game to frame him. But would a girl who was pretending to be in love with him have shown such indifference to Dr. Luciani's accusations? He doubted it. And would a girl who was manipulating him have given up on him so easily in the beginning? He doubted that too. A girl of Deia's nature who truly cared for him would have done exactly what she had done. She would have expressed her feelings, her desire to become

involved, and her hurt at his indifference, then she would have accepted his decision and hoped he would change his mind. All of these things led him to believe with even more certainty that Deia was the person she appeared to be.

Myke felt a bit relieved. He still wasn't certain about Deia or any of the others, but at least there seemed to be a chance that Deia was honest. During the last couple of weeks, Myke had feared that all of his friends had been in on the set-up from the start and that his only hope of returning to Novaun would be to steal a frigate and try to make it back alone. He knew that the odds of making hyperspace before being destroyed by the fleet would be close to astronomical, but at least he would die trying. And being blown up in a frigate would be much quicker and less painful than mind torture, which he knew would be his fate if he didn't make a move soon.

But there was still a chance! He had already ruled out all of his friends but four as possible helpers, for various reasons. Connor and Tevaronia were resisters, but they were deeply patriotic, and Myke knew that there was nothing he could do to buy them. Kristina wasn't so patriotic that she wouldn't sell information or something of that nature, but she was too attached to her family to be willing to leave Earth permanently to live on another planet. Myke had found several more resisters among the com-cadets, but he knew none of them would be any more willing to sell out than Pierce, for the same reasons Pierce would never sell out.

Paul, Deia, Jacquae, and Dr. Luciani were his best chances, he felt, but they were also the most dangerous. He was beginning to feel more and more that Paul and Deia were presenting their true characters, that Deia might go with him out of love, and Paul out of a desire to be free from the controlling influence of his uncle. Even so, they were loyal to Earth in a way, and Deia in particular had an ambition that her uncle could help her realize and that he couldn't.

Jacquae could easily be enticed by money, but the D.I.I. agent opposing him could use that as an enticement as easily as he could, and he could also promise her power, something Myke couldn't give her. Jacquae did, however, seem to possess a strong sense of morality, and Myke thought that she might be of the nature to resist the power-at-all-costs lure. This sense of morality might even be strong enough that he could convince her of the corruptness of Earth's government and persuade her to go that way. Myke had always felt unsettled about Jacquae, however. She had always seemed to him to be a manipulator and a game player, perhaps innocently, but he couldn't be sure. Moreover, he remembered the time when Dr. Luciani had exposed her ridiculous little lie about their mother's dogs and had called her a "hypocrite" and a "whore." Did Dr. Luciani know something of her true nature that no one else did? Or were they together acting a lie?

As for Dr. Luciani, the Earthons might promise him the opportunity to research the spirit energy formula, but they wouldn't tantalize him with the opportunity to actually experience it with the spirit transforming formula in flight. Would someone like Dr. Luciani commit treason to experience the spirit dimension formula and go to a planet where he could learn new telepathic medical skills? Perhaps. Fortunately he had no strong attachments to Earth or on Earth that would get in the way. He would, however, have an extremely difficult time adjusting to Novaun's culture and probably wouldn't want to live there, regardless of the medical marvels he would be taught.

Dr. Luciani could still be a plant. His rapport with Deia had always struck Myke as strange. All of the other cadets who knew him were so convinced of his callous, shameless

nature that they were certain he wanted Deia as a lover, that the potential convenience of such a relationship so appealed to him that he was willing to engage in a slow seduction. Myke couldn't disregard an opinion held by so many people, particularly since most of those people had known Dr. Luciani far longer than he had, but he couldn't completely believe it either. Contrary to what the other cadets believed, Myke didn't believe Dr. Luciani was so ruthlessly dishonest. Dr. Luciani was opinionated and frank, and Myke couldn't comprehend his pursuing any woman in an underhanded way.

Myke believed it more likely that Dr. Luciani was using his friendship with Deia to feed him lies through her. Deia was perceptive, though. If Dr. Luciani were using her for some reason, she probably would have realized it long before, but she genuinely considered him her friend (that is, unless they were all in on it together), which had always made Myke feel as though Dr. Luciani really did care about her, and that he was completely sincere in everything he did and said.

As Myke and the others approached the theater on deck A2, they passed four servants of civilian guests standing stiffly by one of the entrances, dressed in the traditional forest green. The cadets inconspicuously tried to avoid looking at the servants' faces. Paul was the only member of the group who seemed comfortable. Myke glanced at one of the servant's faces and saw it, that blank stare and the flat, diamond-shaped arelada crystal embedded in the forehead. He shuddered.

Eslavu . . . one of the hundreds of thousands of house servants, menial laborers, and concubines that were controlled by telepathy and bred from birth to be bought, sold, and given as gifts in the circles of Earth's most rich and powerful. Many of the Eslavu had been criminals whose minds had been "cleansed" by Tohmazz Zarr during his three-year rise to power on Earth. Others were the men and women who had valiantly fought Arulezz Zarr during his climb to the emperorship after his father's death at the beginning of the Dark Years. On the original Day of Liberation, Zarr had expelled these freedom-loving "abominations" from the human race and had cursed their seed to remain eternally in the servitude of "God-fearing Earthons."

Novaun and many other planets considered the existence of the Eslavu a crime against humanity, and it was because of this abuse of telepathy that Novaun refused to sell its arelada to Earth. Other arelada-producing planets, however, weren't so scrupulous, choosing to capitalize on Novaun's economic policies to expand their own fortunes.

Myke and his friends received their programs and seat assignments from a young shipman at one of the theater's entrances and proceeded into the theater. The exotic designs in the carpet seemed to waver under their feet in the twinkling light of the crystal chandeliers. The blue velvet curtain was up, and a black grand piano with a huge vase of red roses sitting on it was positioned in the middle of the stage. On each side of the stage stood a large gold candelabrum, six of its seven candles lighted, representing the six years of anarchy that had preceded the Day of Liberation, the day Arulezz Zarr had been enthroned as Divine Emperor of Earth.

At least three hundred people were already there. Most were dignified, highly decorated captains, first officers, and admirals from the fleet, wearing white dress uniforms with red satin brocade sashes. They also wore ceremonial swords at their waists and arelada prisms on gold chains around their necks. There were many junior officers there in their white suits and plain red sashes, a few other cadets, some certified professionals and

warriors, and several civilian guests. Most were already in their seats, but some were mingling in the aisles.

After Myke and his friends had found their seats in the rear of the theater, Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce entered with his mother and sister on his arms. Everyone either moved out of the way or stood up. Both Saintesses Pierce possessed the same beautiful flaxen hair Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce did, and both were elegantly dressed in floor length gowns, Pierce's mother in peach with her hair swept up in an elaborate style, and his sister in jade green, her long hair down in curls.

Saintess Vahro-Pierce moved away from her son and greeted people as she passed them, shaking the hands of the women and allowing the men to kiss her hand. When the trio finally arrived at their seats, Saintess Vahro-Pierce smiled and waved the other concert-goers into their chairs. Once Pierce located Paul, he motioned him to the front of the auditorium to meet his mother and sister.

Dr. Luciani grunted as Paul walked away from them. "Pierce's not about to introduce his noble family to the likes of us."

"Too bad," Connor said. "The younger Saintess Vahro-Pierce is supreme!" Both Connor and Myke agreed. Jacquae, Kristina, and Tevaronia were busy admiring more interesting material—young starship commanders.

Myke, Connor, and Dr. Luciani skeptically watched Paul smile flirtatiously at the ladies and kiss their hands. Saintess Vahro-Pierce and her daughter remained beautifully poised, but both were obviously impressed.

Dr. Luciani smiled wryly. "Paul sure knows how to charm the ladies, doesn't he?"

"He sure does," Connor agreed.

"It's too bad they can't live with him for a day. That would change their opinion of him!" Myke said.

Two officers from Admiral Beaumont's staff stepped inside the entrances of the theater and took stiff standing positions. "Seats, please," one of the officers said in a loud voice. All moved to their assigned seats but remained standing. Paul quickly rejoined his cadet friends at the back of the theater.

"Attention!" ordered the other officer. The Star Force officers, certified professionals, cadets, and warriors immediately straightened in attention.

A moment later a stern man in his late forties with gold hair, blue eyes, and a thin face walked into the theater. "Our great Admiral Beaumont," Dr. Luciani whispered to Myke and Connor. "He's a three-star."

After Admiral Beaumont came another man with black hair and a domineering face. "I would assume that's Admiral Radonovich, from Fleet Twenty-one. He's also a three-star."

Following Admiral Radonovich was a taller man with an athletic build, graying dark brown hair, and gray eyes. Myke's attention was immediately drawn to his exceptionally authoritative bearing, that and the shape of the arelada prism hanging on his chest—it had been cut into the likeness of a sword.

"Is that him?" Connor whispered to Dr. Luciani. "Look at all those medals!"

"I suppose. Pierce looks a little like him."

As Admiral Pierce walked to the front of the theater to take his seat, Myke overheard a whisper from a couple of seats down: "Isn't he gorgeous!"

Pierce stood respectfully at attention. His father nodded at him when he arrived at his seat, his face glowing with pride. A voice from the back of the auditorium said, "At ease." Admiral Pierce smiled at his daughter and patted her shoulder, then kissed his wife very properly on the cheek.

Everyone sat down as the lights dimmed and an officer stepped onto the stage to introduce Deia. "We are fortunate to have with us tonight a brilliant young pianist who recently graduated from Divine Empress Jesalya School of the Arts, where she held the honor of Principal Keyboard. She has won numerous state and district awards for her talent, especially in the area of pre-Day of Liberation composer interpretation, and she has delighted audiences all over the world with her fresh, energetic approach to music, as, no doubt, she will do here tonight. I present to you Cadet Novice Deia Sheldon!"

The officer slipped away, and everyone applauded as Deia walked onto the stage and bowed slightly.

"She sure knows how to put on airs, doesn't she?" Connor whispered to Dr. Luciani.

"Like a little queen," Dr. Luciani replied.

Deia seated herself at the piano and began playing Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata. After twenty minutes or so, Deia completed the piece and the audience applauded. Then she played Chopin's Ballade No. 1, followed by Moreau's "Rhapsody of the Heart."

As Myke listened to Deia play, he couldn't help but feel disappointed. She played beautifully, as usual, but he had heard her play all three pieces better. She was technically perfect, but she lacked that uninhibited expression she displayed so often in the lounge as she practiced.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, feeling the whole recital was a waste of time and hoping it would be over soon so that he could get out of his suit and into something more comfortable. He passed the minutes by imagining he was lying on the couch by the piano in the lounge, listening to Deia play there. Then his mind drifted to even more pleasant thoughts. They were together in a tiny house, their house. She was playing Moreau on a baby grand piano in front of an open sliding glass door that looked out over a small yard with thick, fragrant grass and several auyvalnut trees, and he was lying near her on a mat on the polished white marble floor. His eyes were closed, and he felt a misty breeze drift in through the screen door and breathe on his face and hair . . .

Deia energetically played the last several chords of "Rhapsody of the Heart," and everyone in the auditorium applauded vigorously. As Deia stood to take her bow, the applauding intensified, and everyone stood. Myke almost laughed at the restrained enthusiasm. He didn't doubt that under more casual circumstances they would all have been whistling and cheering too!

Paul applauded as vigorously as everyone else, shaking his head in awe. "She was wonderful!" he said to Myke. "Brilliant! I've never heard her play better!" Then Paul turned to Jacquae, and she and Tevaronia and Kristina commented on what a shame it was that Deia had to waste such great talent in the military.

As Myke reseated himself with everyone else, he looked at Paul, then at Deia, feeling puzzled. Had the difference he had heard and felt in the music that night been in his imagination? Was Paul right? Had this been her greatest performance? As Deia resumed her seat at the piano and began playing the Liberation March, Myke reflected on that question.

Perhaps Myke's experience with Earthon music had been short and rather limited, but he had always felt in it such a reflection of his own feelings, which, perhaps, was why he had always found it so fascinating. No . . . the difference had been there, and Paul hadn't heard it because he hadn't been in the lounge those other times.

Myke gazed tenderly at Deia as she performed the Liberation March, joy permeating his heart. All of those times in the lounge she really had been playing for him. He knew that Deia was a deeply emotional girl, something he had sensed the first time he had heard her play, and he knew that she was incapable of lying about her feelings, especially in her music.

A dance would be held in the commons the next evening in celebration of the Day of Liberation, and Myke knew that it would be loud and busy and would provide him the perfect opportunity to hold her in his arms for a few moments on the dance floor and tell her of his devotion.

### Part 3: THE DAY OF LIBERATION

#### Chapter 20: ALONE AT LAST

*April 1, 20 Y.D.E.  
Day of Liberation*

Several hundred cadets were congregated in the commons that night at about 2000, waiting for the band to start playing. It had been a long, festive day of activities, beginning with a fighter laser display that had been shown in the ship's holodomes at 2400. As tradition dictated, three hours of total inactivity had preceded the show during hours 2100 - 2400 on Liberation Eve to represent the last hours of the Dark Years.

The Day of Liberation activities had then continued with a fencing tournament at 0800, a competition that had included six teams from the fleet, ten teams from Fleet Twenty-one, and four teams from the *Sovereign* itself. The *Sovereign*'s teams had included a team from the warrior ranks, one from the certified professionals, one from the cadets, and one from the officers.

A privileged few, including Deia with the Pierce family, had attended the tournament in person, while every other fencing fan had watched it in the holodomes. The cadets had been in a frenzy since the tournament's completion, because their team, consisting of Paul, Greg Pierce, and another com-cadet named Han Lockhart, had won the first place medals and Greg had received the All-Around Best Fencer medal.

Greg smiled down at Deia as they danced their first slow dance of the evening. "Mother and Father both think you would be a splendid daughter-in-law."

"There isn't any way I could have spent all day and last night with them without feeling that!"

Greg laughed. "Doesn't that figure?" He gazed at her affectionately. "Well, they're right, you know. You would make a splendid daughter-in-law, but you would be an even more wonderful wife. Deia, I love you and I want to marry you."

"Greg, I . . ."

"Shhhh . . . don't say anything yet. We wouldn't be able to get married for another year when I become an officer, of course, but I already talked to my parents about it, and my mother says she can get you discharged in a month or so anyway. Certainly you or your former instructor could persuade the great maestro to reconsider you as his protégée. It would be so perfect, Deia! You would be on tour most of the time, so we would be able to arrange to see each other much more than if you worked on Earth. I can't imagine a more perfect marriage!"

Greg's idea of a perfect marriage troubled Deia. "But what about our children? I'll never see you after our first child is born. I couldn't leave our children to tour."

"Why ever not? Only women who don't have money have to be with their children all the time. That's what nurses and governesses are for." He looked at her peculiarly. "You've always wanted a magnificent career as a concert pianist. What did you believe you would do after you were married if not leave your children with nurses and governesses? Retire at thirty?" He laughed.

Deia forced herself to smile. "No . . . no, of course not."

"Then I don't understand what the problem is."



"I guess leaving our children with governesses part of the time wouldn't be such a bad thing." She squeezed his hand. "It would be perfect, wouldn't it Greg!"

Greg nodded. "You know, lately I've been amazed by my luck at meeting you on this ship, at finding you so soon."

"Do you really think we would have met if I hadn't been drafted?"

"Oh, definitely. I see the great maestro in concert every chance I get. Eventually I would have seen you perform, and I would have found a way to meet you. I probably would have sent dozens of roses to your dressing room and invited you to dinner and dancing."

"How exciting and romantic!"

Greg smiled in anticipation. "And after we announce our betrothal and I give you your diamond, I'll even be able to arrange for us to have a stateroom on deck A2 when you come in. It'll be wonderful!"

Panic seized Deia. "Don't you think we could wait until we get married?"

Greg frowned. "Why?"

"I'd just feel better about it, that's all."

"Deia, darling, not only would that be unrealistic, it would be completely unnecessary. We love each other and are going to be married! Not even most priestesses would disapprove!"

"Still, Greg, I really would feel better if we waited."

Greg was not at all pleased. "Well, if you really feel that strongly about it . . ." He paused, then smiled at Deia knowingly, but sensitively. "Darling, it's only natural to be a little afraid the first time, but there isn't any reason to be, really. I'll make it perfect for you."

He pulled her closer and whispered in her ear. "We'll get the most magnificent stateroom. The lights will be dim and Moreau will be playing softly in the background . . . and then you'll hear the rhapsody of my heart . . ."

Deia pressed her cheek against his. "You make it sound so passionate and romantic."

"And it will be, love, it will be . . ." he breathed as he kissed her.

They held each other close as the dance ended. Deia touched her lips to his ear and whispered, "I care about you so much, Greg, but I'm not sure how to answer you yet. There are so many things to consider. I'm going to need some time to think about it."

Greg nodded. "I understand."

"I'm not much in the mood for dancing anymore. I think I'll go play for a while. Maybe that will help clear my mind a little. Do you mind?"

"No. But hurry back," he said as he released her.

Deia reached up and kissed him lightly on the cheek, then turned and walked quickly toward the door.

\* \* \*

Myke watched Deia dance with Pierce, becoming more depressed by the second. They seemed so intimate. Maybe he and Dr. Luciani had been wrong all this time. Maybe Pierce and Deia really did love each other. And Pierce was much more handsome and sophisticated than he was, and he could give her the universe. How could he ever hope to compete with that? Never in his life had Myke experienced such a loss of self-confidence.

When the song was over, Deia kissed Pierce and began walking toward the door. If he didn't do it now, he never would. He craved the closeness of her spirit, yet dreaded communicating with her in the intimate way required if they were to avoid having their discussion monitored. He wasn't sure he was ready to have her deepest feelings revealed to him in such an explicit, immediate way. What was she really feeling? What would she communicate?

She was so lovely, breathtakingly lovely, and he wanted to hold her, if only for a few minutes. Myke moved quickly and intercepted Deia when she was close to the door, just as another slow song was beginning. He gently but firmly took hold of her arm. "Would you like to dance?" He opened his spirit to her and expanded it to touch hers, pressing gently.

Deia looked at him in puzzlement and surprise.

"It's all right," he quickly assured, gazing at her in a meaningful way. "What's one little dance?"

Her lips quivered, then curved into a smile, happiness lighting her face. "Yes, I would love to."

Myke didn't say anything as he led Deia by the hand to the dance floor, and she didn't resist as he expanded his spirit to overlap hers by about a third, securing a bond deep enough to enable them to communicate without thought transmissions. She was shocked, bewildered, and ecstatic.

Once they were on the dance floor, Myke pulled Deia as close as he dared, trembling. For a moment he couldn't communicate or even breathe, overcome by the thrill of having her in his arms. Finally he said, being careful not to look at her face, "Paul fenced well today." As he spoke, his thoughts flowed into hers. *I know this is unusual, and I'm sorry if you're offended by my taking such liberties, but I didn't know of any other way to communicate with you privately.*

"Yes, he did," Deia replied. *I don't understand.*

*There are some things I want to tell you, Deia. Please don't communicate anything until I'm through, and whatever you do, don't make a scene. As difficult as it may be, we must act like we're just making small talk.* He paused. *Deia, I think you're beautiful, not just your appearance, but everything about you, and I can honestly say that I've never known anyone like you or that there's anyone I'd ever rather be with. I love you, I love you with everything that's in me.*

Deia was so astounded that she couldn't communicate for several moments. Her astonishment soon gave way to anger, but her anger was laced with fervent feelings of devotion, and Myke suddenly felt relieved.

*What happened to not wanting to get involved? What happened to all those times in the commons and in the lounge when I practically begged you to touch me, to do something, and you just turned away? Now after all this time, you tell me you love me? What in the universe has taken you so long? You sure have a lot of nerve!*

*Deia, do you think any of this has been easy for me? Every time I see you with Pierce, I feel like I'm being stabbed in the heart, and it's nearly killed me keeping my feelings for you in this long, but I did it only because I had to. Even now, no one, absolutely no one can know about this but you and me. For reasons I can't fully explain right now, I couldn't tell you how I felt before, but circumstances have changed somewhat, and I had to tell you, I had to be able to hold you for a few minutes.*

*You know, your timing is just terrific, and I just don't know what to say to you.*

*Why don't you start with "Myke, I love you too."*

*Myke, I swear, you are the most exasperating person I've ever met!*

*Now, Deia, I wouldn't have gone to all this trouble to get you out here on the dance floor to communicate with you if I didn't think you were as much in love with me as I am with you. Go ahead. Tell me you don't love me and that you love Pierce, and I'll believe you.*

*Deia's anger melted, and her spirit filled with anguish. That's just it. I do love you. I love you so much, Myke, that I lie in bed at night and cry myself to sleep because I want so much to be with you, to have you hold me and touch me and whisper your love to me. But you hurt me. You hurt me more than I've ever been hurt.*

*Oh Deia, Myke communicated, heartbroken, the last thing in this universe I ever wanted to do was to hurt you, and I'm deeply sorry. But you must believe me, if we'd become involved in the beginning, I would've hurt you more. I'm not experienced at all in love—I've never even had a girlfriend—so I guess I was naïve about what was happening between us until it was too late. That may not be much of an explanation, but it's the truth. Perhaps I'm not experienced, but I do know the real thing, and what I'm feeling for you is real. Deia, I love you, I really do.*

*Deia's emotions softened. I know. She finally relaxed and allowed her own feelings of love to surge through them both, unrestrained. It was all Myke could do to keep himself from pulling her closer. She communicated passionately, Do you suppose we could go somewhere where we could be alone . . . you know, to discuss everything in a more . . . private way?*

*Anticipation overwhelmed Myke. And I thought you were such a nice respectable girl!*

*Respectable girls don't fall in love with Zionites, Deia teased.*

*Myke wanted to laugh. Deia didn't know enough about the Zionites to recognize the irony in that statement, let alone the absurdity.*

*There are some other things I need to discuss with you, but I don't think this is the time. I'm afraid you'd be missed.*

*No, it's all right, really. Greg thinks I'm going to the lounge to play for a while. I was just leaving when you asked me to dance.*

*Myke withdrew his spirit from Deia's, since any formulated thought in this deep stage of joining would immediately become hers too, musing over the tempting prospect of being alone with Deia for a while. He could easily trick the monitoring devices in his compartment to make the D.I.I. think he was the only person there if he could be certain Deia wasn't being watched. The D.I.I. agent, however, would be a fool not to watch Deia constantly, considering how close they had become over the past weeks. He and Deia could hide their actions and communication easily enough, but if she disappeared on the D.I.I.'s monitors, they would know that she was the one in the compartment with him. Then it occurred to Myke that the D.I.I. agent might already know everything about his love for Deia, depending on what she had told Paul and her friends.*

*Myke, in panic, immediately touched his spirit to Deia's again to communicate. What have you told Paul about us?*

*The urgency of Myke's question startled Deia. Everything. Paul knows me too well—I can't hide anything from him. We just talked about it a few days ago.*

*What exactly do you mean by "everything"?*

*How much we love each other. How hurt I was when you rejected me. How frustrated I've been all these weeks that you wouldn't acknowledge your feelings for me. Does it matter that he knows?*

*I'm not sure.*

Myke withdrew his spirit again and began formulating his plan. If the D.I.I. agent knew his feelings for Deia and hadn't yet tried to use that knowledge against him, then he was probably trying to make it look as if Deia wasn't being watched, and he was confident he could later buy her. Myke didn't believe that, under the circumstances, anything would be lost if the opposing agent discovered he was alone with Deia, communicating privately.

Seeing no reason to go to the trouble of tricking the monitoring devices in his compartment and still not ready to let the D.I.I. agent know the extent of his telepathic powers, Myke decided he would arrive at the compartment before Deia and cover the holorecorders. The other agent didn't want him to believe Deia was being watched? Fine. He and Deia would do everything possible to encourage that belief.

Finally Myke expanded his spirit again to overlap Deia's. *I think we can have a few minutes alone together. I suppose my compartment will be as safe as anyplace else. Now I want you to assimilate my instructions carefully and do exactly what I say. When this dance is over, you go talk to one of your friends. I'll go to my compartment, and you follow me in a minute or two and let yourself into my compartment. Now it is absolutely imperative that you don't tell anyone where you are going and that when you get there, you don't make a sound. Don't so much as breathe heavily.*

*Why all the secrecy? Greg isn't that dangerous!*

*I'm not worried about Greg. Deia, there are hidden microphones and holorecorders all over this ship watching me and listening to every word I say.* He ventured a glance at her. Her eyes were puzzled, but her smile was cheerful as her voice chattered on and on about the fencing tournament and the cadet team's amazing performance. She could have fooled anyone.

*Are you in some kind of trouble?*

*That has got to be the understatement of the century!*

*This has something to do with your father, doesn't it? Are the Executioners after you too?*

*I'm afraid it's quite a bit more complicated than that, but yes, it has a lot to do with my father. Now I'm not going to tell you any more, because it's a long story and there isn't time for that right now, and I don't want you to worry.*

*I'm already worried!*

*But there're some things in this universe even worse than worry, fear not the least. Trust me, please.*

*Greg was right, wasn't he. You're not a regular cadet.*

*No, Deia, I'm not.*

*This trouble was the reason all along why you wouldn't get involved, wasn't it?*

*It was.*

*I just didn't know . . . I'm so sorry I got angry at you.*

*That's all right, I understand, really. And you weren't supposed to know about any of this. Now when we're in my compartment, we must both be completely silent, but we can continue communicating in the way we are now.*

Deia tried to pull Myke closer for the last few seconds of the song, but he wouldn't let her. *Pierce's supposed to be your boyfriend, not me, remember?*

*I suppose you're right.*

After their dance was over, Deia leisurely greeted two of the women from the compartment that adjoined hers. Myke left the commons and hurried to his compartment, immediately checked to see if any new holorecorders had been planted there, then covered all of the holorecorders with mounting putty he had purchased at the ship exchange.

Finished with making the compartment safe, Myke walked nervously to the door and waited for Deia. In only moments, the door slid open. Myke pulled Deia quickly into the compartment and motioned for her to take off her shoes. After Deia slid out of her shoes, Myke took her arm and gingerly helped her stand back up, drawing her close. Their arms felt eagerly for each other, and at first, they simply embraced and held each other as tightly as they could.

Eventually they looked at each other and smiled, both mouthing the words, "I love you," and their lips came together, trembling. They kissed over and over again, lovingly, longingly, all the while fondling each other's faces and hair. Myke dropped his hands to her waist, his arms sliding around her, and Deia responded by clasping him even tighter. Excitement swelled between their spirits with even greater intensity, and their kisses became more passionate and uncontrolled.

Suddenly, Myke released Deia and pushed her away with a jerk. *I'm not sure this is a good idea.*

Deia tried desperately to return her breathing to normal without making any noise. *I've nearly died with wanting you for weeks, but now that we're actually together, I feel it more strongly than ever, and it's kind of frightening.*

Myke took Deia's hands in his, kissed them, and held them against his face. *You should never be afraid or ashamed of your feelings. It's harder to control them that way.*

*Oh, I'm not ashamed of wanting you, but I am afraid.*

Myke raised his eyebrows. *You don't trust me?*

*It isn't so much that as it is I'm not sure whether I trust myself.* She caressed his cheek and he kissed her palm.

Myke brushed several curly strands of hair over Deia's ear and kissed her cheek, then put his hand on her waist and pulled her back a few steps so that he could lean on the table. They put their foreheads together and held hands. *Deia, I want you too. I want you so badly I hurt, but I've never made love to a girl, and I don't intend to until I get married. You must understand that.*

Deia pulled her head away from Myke's and gazed at him softly. *I do. The others might not have understood that day, but I did.* She hesitated. *Most people would say that you're setting yourself up for a lot of frustration, that you're . . . unrealistic. They might even say you're scared.*

Myke almost laughed. *I'm anything but scared!* He kissed Deia's forehead and stroked her hair and face with both of his hands. *And I don't think waiting for marriage is any more unrealistic than having a number of lovers. I can't comprehend how people can emotionally cope with sharing themselves so intimately without commitment. And as far as frustration goes, I'm used to being frustrated, so I figure I can live with it a little longer.* He gazed at her in resolve. *I've always felt that when it comes to preserving your self-*

*respect, no price is too high. I guess when your whole world falls down around you, it's kind of nice to have something to hold on to.*

Deia threw her arms around Myke and hugged him, her emotions as exuberant as her embrace. *I love you . . . I love you so much . . .*

*I love you too, Deia. I knew I loved you the night we danced. You were so beautiful that night. You're always so beautiful.*

Deia pulled away slightly and touched Myke's eyebrows, then traced his lips with her finger. *I've wanted this whole time for us to be together, just as we are now.*

Her expression suddenly became solemn, and Myke immediately perceived feelings of uneasiness and something else. Guilt, perhaps? Disloyalty? Before Myke could ask her what was wrong, she communicated, *Yes, I am being disloyal, to both you and to Greg. Greg asked me to marry him.*

*What did you tell him?*

*That I need time to think about it.*

*So, how are you going to answer him?*

Deia lowered her eyes to avoid Myke's face. *I don't know yet.*

Myke released her and turned away, devastated. *So you're considering it. Even after all of this, you're considering it.*

Deia reached out to touch Myke's cheek, and he turned to face her again. Her expression was one of anguish. *I'm so sorry . . .*

Myke tried to suppress his anger but couldn't. *Do you love him?*

*Not nearly as I do you . . . Myke, I know you agree with those things Dr. Luciani said last night, and you both are right, but aside from everything, there are real feelings between Greg and me.*

Myke leaned against the table motionless, waiting for Deia to continue.

Deia sat down in the chair next to Myke's legs. *I don't know how to tell you this easily, but I wouldn't consider the idea of marrying Greg if it seemed at all distasteful. The fact of the matter is, he appeals to me in a lot of ways, and I care about him a great deal. I was glad from the very beginning when he started showing interest, and when I started seeing him, I hoped I could forget about you. I didn't, but that didn't stop me from developing more feelings for him. And you didn't do anything to stop me, nor did you pursue me in any way or let me pursue you. What else was I supposed to do?*

Myke shook his head, still displeased. *I suppose you did the only thing you could. But that still doesn't make it any easier for me to accept.*

*I know. But if I do decide to marry him, I can study music, and perform, and have a family, and do all those things I've always dreamed of. And Greg would be a good husband, and I really do believe I could be happy with him. I even think that in time, I could grow to love him as I do you. My other option is to be stuck in Star Force without any hope of a future with you for at least seven years, and even after that, we wouldn't be able to have any children for a very long time, if ever.*

Myke nodded slowly. *I figured as much. You thought that was the reason all along I didn't want to get involved, didn't you?*

Deia nodded. *I wasn't sure it would be a good idea to come here with you tonight, but I thought maybe it would help me clear my mind. As it's turned out, it's only made me more confused. I just don't know what I want. I love you, but I just hate this ship and I want so much to be a concert pianist.*

Myke gently pulled Deia out of the chair and into his arms. He held her head against his neck and ran his fingers lightly over her hair. *Deia, one of the reasons I wanted to communicate with you tonight is so I could tell you that there is a chance for us to have a future together now. I felt you deserved that, along with an acknowledgment of my love, especially after what I've put you through. Now it's a slim chance, to say the least, because a lot of uncertain factors are involved, but it's not impossible. It all depends on whether or not I can get out of this trouble I'm in.*

Deia pulled away slightly and shook her head. *Even if it's possible, I don't know if it's right. Don't you see? You and I are from two different worlds, but Greg and I are from the same world. Do you understand?*

*More than you know. And I realize there are differences between our worlds, but I really don't think your world is any closer to Greg's than it is to mine, not really. It may even be farther away, but that's for you to decide for yourself.* Myke's hands moved to Deia's cheeks. *You're going to have to decide how much you're willing to give up to be with me. I'm not going to pretend that it'll be an easy choice, because it won't be. Believe me, Deia, the price is going to be high.*

Deia's arms tightened around Myke. *I'll put Greg off for a few days, anyway, but will you please tell me what's going on? Are you a real Zionite?*

*No, Deia, I'm not. I promise I'll tell you everything either tomorrow or the next day. That's not too much to ask, is it?*

*I suppose not.*

*I need you to help me with some things, though. In a few minutes, you'll leave and go to the lounge, where you'll play—start in the middle of a piece—and when I get there, we'll continue to communicate like we are now. I want you to tell me everything you know about your parents, your aunt and uncle, everything. I'll probably ask some questions about your family and also about some of our friends here on the ship. Some of them may seem too personal, but please be as honest as you can, because I won't ask about anything that won't be relevant.*

*That seems easy enough. As far as the personal goes, don't worry about that. I'm as comfortable discussing personal things with you as I am with Paul, and that's personal.*

*Since we won't be able to let anyone know we're communicating, we mustn't look at each other any more than we usually would when you're playing and I'm listening. I must stress again—what happened between us tonight never happened as far as everyone else is concerned.*

They gazed longingly at each other for several seconds, then embraced ardently, their lips finding each other's in passion and a bit of desperation. After a minute or two, Myke released Deia reluctantly and nodded toward the door. They walked silently to the door, arms around each other, and they held each other and kissed one last time. Deia slipped into her shoes and hurried out of the compartment.

## Chapter 21: NEW INFORMATION

*April 1, 20 Y.D.E.  
Day of Liberation*

Few cadets were in the lounge that night while Myke and Deia communicated telepathically as she played the piano.

*When Paul and I were little and it was just Lena and Sanel and us, we assumed our family life was normal. When we started going to school and began becoming more involved with other people, we began realizing that the other children had mothers and fathers and we didn't. So we pestered Lena and Sanel to death about it, but neither one of them would tell us anything. Lena, at least, told us that they had died tragically and that it was much too painful to talk about. After a while, we just stopped asking, but we always wondered.*

*They wouldn't tell you anything at all? They must have at least told you their names and what they did, something.*

*No. All we knew was that they had died when we were babies and that our mother was Lena's sister. Lena married Sanel shortly after our parents died, and we went to live with him. I just remembered something. Lena did tell us something about our father on the day she died, but everything that happened that day is a complete story in itself. Do you want me to tell you?*

*Yes.*

*Paul had been out talking with some people who had given him an illegal news disc, The Star of Freedom. I told him to get rid of it, but he refused and went to his room. A little later I told Lena that Paul had been talking to the Earthborns again, and she warned him about Sanel. At that Paul just exploded and started yelling things as if Sanel were right there with us. He screamed that Sanel had been having us bugged, which was why he always knew what we were doing. I was shocked and horrified to say the least, but I believed it. It made too much sense.*

Myke assimilated everything Deia told him with a growing consciousness of how strange Paul and Deia's situation really was. Deia's thoughts rippled in lightheartedness. *See, even you think we're abnormal!*

Myke quickly reined in his thoughts. He couldn't allow himself to inadvertently reveal his speculations to Deia. *What did Lena think of Paul's accusation?*

*She was very calm about it, and as the day went on, it became obvious to me that we really were being bugged and that she had known for a long time.*

*Does Paul still think Sanel is listening in on your conversations?*

*I don't know. Deia's lightheartedness immediately changed to horror. Oh, Myke! I never even thought he might be listening to us here! He couldn't be . . . could he?*

*If he was monitoring you on Earth, then I think you can be certain he's having you monitored here. This ship has holorecorders and listening devices built into the bulkheads, the furniture—everything.*

Deia's amazement was as great as her horror. *Are you sure? How can you possibly know something like that?*

*I expand my spirit into the bulkheads and furniture. The devices are easy to find if you know what to look for.*



Deia's spirit throbbed with indignation. *Why in the galaxy did Lena have to marry that awful man! Poor Paul; I hope he never suspects. He doesn't need that kind of worry right now.*

*You don't plan to tell him?*

*Do you think I should?*

*Yes, I do, only communicate it to him through spirit expansion. It's very important that you do nothing that would make the agent watching you suspect what you know about the monitoring devices. Then you and Paul can be very guarded in what you say and do and feed the agent any information you wish.*

*You mean lie! Deia communicated in delight.*

*No! Absolutely not! Your uncle knows the two of you too well. You would never get away with it. Use half-truths and manipulate him into thinking you're completely in his power. For the time being, that's the only way you're going to have any power over him.*

*I understand.*

*What did Lena tell you about your father?*

*That he had been a landowner, industrialist, and an extremely good administrator, and that he had been very dedicated to his family and honorable in everything he did.*

Myke quickly withdrew his spirit and mused. Obviously Paul and Deia's parents weren't John and Deborah Sheldon, Star Force pilots. Lena's description of Paul and Deia's father described a Novaunian Great House high patriarch who dealt in arelada, or one of his sons, extremely well. If Paul and Deia had been born into the first family of a Great House, they were royal—sort of.

Myke expanded his spirit to communicate with Deia again. *Did Lena tell you anything else about your parents?*

*Only that they had been devoted to each other and had loved Paul and me very much.* Deia went on to tell him about her peculiar conversation with Paul and Lena in Antonio's, and then she proceeded with the details surrounding her aunt's death. *When I went to wake her up from her nap, she was already dead. I just went hysterical. Paul was shocked and bewildered. I was so glad Miriam was there; she was so calm. She made me sit down in a chair in Lena's room while Paul went to call Sanel. When I was sitting there, I saw something sparkling near the bed, so I went to get it, and I saw that it was Lena's locket. She was holding it when she died. Inside of it was a sliver of arelada.*

*Show it to me,* Myke communicated eagerly. *Bring the entire memory of what happened to the front of your mind.*

Myke assimilated Deia's memory of the night Lena had died within seconds and again withdrew his spirit, not wanting Deia to discover his new understanding. Paul and Deia were the "royal twins," they had to be. Everything pointed to the fact that King planned to use them in a diabolical way: Paul's ability to associate with a violent underground organization and not be executed, King's close monitoring of their conversations, their presence on the *Sovereign*, and Lena's unusual death, which Myke suspected had been a suicide to prevent King from using her as tool to keep the twins loyal to Earth. She would have been his most powerful tool. Those twins had loved Lena so much that they would have done anything for their uncle had she been threatened in any way or had he made them think they would never see her again.

When Myke again embraced Deia with his spirit, she reiterated some of his own thoughts, making him even more certain that his suspicions were correct. *I didn't realize it*

*at the time, but I did after you starting talking about mind power and arelada, that Lena must have used the arelada in the locket to kill herself. That's the only thing that makes any sense at all, especially since her untimely death was so strange to all of us. Now why she did it, I have no idea, and I've really been disturbed by that. It went against everything she believed in to do something like that. Maybe that's what disturbs me the most—that she did something that went against what she believed in.*

*I keep thinking that maybe she was lonely and depressed and couldn't bear the thought of Paul and my leaving. It makes me feel terrible and sick inside, especially when I realize how blind I was to her real situation—I always thought she loved Sanel. Then I wonder if her doing that had something to do with all those decisions she told us about. I've been trying to come up with the answers for weeks, and I've also been wanting just as much to get it out of my mind, because it upsets me so much to think about it. Deia pursed her lips and closed her eyes, struggling to keep herself from weeping.*

*I don't have any answers for you yet, but I have a feeling she had very good reasons. Did you ever tell Paul how she actually died?*

*No, I didn't tell Paul. He's been so depressed lately that I just couldn't tell him something like that about Lena. It would kill him.*

*Tell me, Deia, you indicated that suicide would've gone against everything Lena believed in. What did she believe? Was she religious at all?*

*She believed killing was wrong, although she believed that under some circumstances it can't be avoided. I say that, because she was never the type of person who would lie down and die without a fight if our lives were ever in danger. I'm not sure how she felt about the sentence of execution for some crimes, and I'm not sure what all her views were about war, but I always felt she generally disapproved of it. I do know that she felt suicide was wrong, that it's just as wrong to take your own life as it is to take someone else's. And she always believed and tried to instill in Paul and me that we should face problems and challenges head-on and that we shouldn't run away from them. I suppose suicide is the ultimate form of running away.*

*And yes, I think she was religious, but not at all in the Zarrist tradition. She went to Worship with us from the time we were little, but she only went when Sanel was in town. Neither she nor Sanel ever gave us any kind of religious training at home, the traditional Zarrism or anything else, but one day Lena's bedroom door was cracked and I saw her on her knees by her bed praying and crying, and she was there for a very long time. That really affected me, because I had never prayed before, except at Worship, and those prayers always seemed so useless.*

*The only thing I ever learned about her religious beliefs was when I was about twelve and I was extremely disturbed about the Eslavu. It never seemed right to me that human beings should be controlled as they are and given no rights of any kind. I was really upset about it, so she sat both Paul and me down in the living room and explained that she believed that God is the father of all human children, that we are His supreme creation. She explained that we are all brothers and sisters, and that He loves everybody the same, even Eslavu.*

*She said that she didn't believe in reincarnation of the spirit, but that the spirit leaves the body after death and progresses to another sphere of existence entirely. She then went on to explain that it is our purpose to conduct ourselves in a manner befitting a child of God—that has something to do with being honorable, I think—and to treat each*

*other with kindness and respect since we are brothers and sisters. She said that it is very important for human beings to love each other and take care of each other, because our relationships with each other and with God and the things we learn are the only things we can take with us when we die. She said that those who hate and exploit and who have no one will take nothing with them when they die and that they will live in loneliness for eternity, because they wanted money and power and fame instead of love. She felt that eternal loneliness would be the worst kind of torment any person could ever suffer.*

*As far as Eslavu go, she said that they are just unfortunate souls who are used by the government to keep power over the people. She also believed very strongly that those who exploit the Eslavu will be punished with eternal loneliness and that God will not hold it against those of His children who are born into that race, that He will make sure they receive all the happiness and fulfillment they deserve in the next life.*

*I was so glad when Lena told me those things, because it made so much sense and felt so right. After that, I just felt sorry for the Eslavu, and I felt disgusted with those who program them and use them, like my uncle.*

*I wish I could've met your aunt. I know I would've liked her.*

*She would have loved you! She wouldn't have loved you nearly as much as I do, though.*

*I wish we could hold each other right now. I love you. They looked at each other and smiled.*

*Deia, this is going to seem strange, my asking this, but is Dr. Luciani in love with you?*

*Dr. Luciani? Oh, no! Except for his comments on the night of the recital, he's never treated me in anything but the most professional way, and we've become good friends. We both know what the others say, that he just wants me for a lover, but that isn't true at all. He knows as well as I do that it just wouldn't happen. We joke about it all the time, though.*

*I know you two talk a lot, but does he ever talk about himself, his past?*

*Not really. Sometimes I pick things up here and there, but for the most part, he stays clear away from any talk about Baltimore or his family, and I don't press him. I have always felt though, that he had a rotten childhood and that he left Baltimore as quickly as he could to get away from everything there. You know he joined Star Force when he was only sixteen.*

*Does Jacquae ever talk about Baltimore or Dr. Luciani there?*

*She talks about Baltimore sometimes and the things she used to do, but she never says anything about Dr. Luciani, except that she thinks he treats their mother badly. She's never been very specific about what she means by that though.*

*When you help Dr. Luciani in the lab, do you overlap spirits? Have you ever felt his essence?*

*We only touch spirits, so I've never felt his essence. I have felt his emotions, though. When we use the brain energy formula, he's always excited. He loves that work.*

*There's another thing that I've really been curious about, practically since we got here. Why does a guy like Paul have a girl like Jacquae as a girlfriend? It's always seemed to me that Paul would pick a more elegant girl, like Pierce's sister. You're going to think I'm trash for suggesting this, but I've always wondered just how good of a time she's giving him. What do you think?*

*I don't think you're trash, and I can understand why you would think that. To tell you the truth, I don't think you're the only one. I know that's what Dr. Luciani thinks. As for Paul, I would have said that there probably isn't anything happening between them but a little kissing if you had asked me that before we came aboard this ship. Paul's never been one to get close to anyone, and I know that Lena always told him to respect all girls, even if they didn't deserve it. He told me once that she told him never to treat any girl any differently than he would want another young man to treat me. And you know how he is about me! But he's been so strange and unlike himself since we've been here that I don't know anymore. Then again, perhaps that's why he's so strange lately. He couldn't have a relationship like that and be comfortable with it.*

*What about Jacquae? She puts on quite a self-righteous air sometimes, but is she sincere? I can't seem to forget how she told Dr. Luciani that their mother should feed him to the dogs, dogs that are obviously dead. It was a stupid lie, I know, and she was probably just trying to torment her brother, but I can't seem to get it out of my mind. You'd know more about her than I would since you live with her.*

*That lie about the dogs was stupid, I agree, but it made me angry all the same. If she meant to torment Dr. Luciani, she did a good job of it. He was really upset, and can you blame him? If he thought of those dogs as his, then he was probably attached to them. I don't take Jacquae's word on anything anymore, just as I don't believe much of what Tev says either.*

*As for Jacquae's sense of morality in the area of sex, I'm skeptical about that too. She talks for the most part as if she's inexperienced, but sometimes she says things here and there that make me believe she's more experienced than she would like us to think. And then there was that time Dr. Luciani got so mad and called her a hypocrite, not to mention all of his innuendos. I know that everyone we know would take Jacquae's word over Dr. Luciani's on anything, but it seems to me that he would know more about what she's like than anyone since he's her brother, and I've never believed any of the others ever gave Dr. Luciani enough credit. We were there when he exposed both Jacquae and Tev in their lies! I think Jacquae would gladly have sex with my brother, if she hasn't already.*

*What do the other girls say about her?*

*I've never heard any of the girls say derogatory things about Jacquae, and girls love to gossip. I even heard gossip about Tev, especially from Jacquae. That was why I led everyone to believe that I didn't care when you weren't interested in me. They always had so much fun teasing me and always wanted to know about everything that was happening between us, but I didn't want them to know how I was really feeling. They always want to know about Greg and me, and I tell them some things. That seems to satisfy them.*

*What exactly did you tell them about us? I've always wondered about that.*

*Please don't laugh—you're going to want to! I told them that you really didn't like me as well as I thought, and that the romantic music and osalaem in the air had caused us both to get a little carried away. Then I told them that I thought Greg was gorgeous and that I would be foolish not to give him a chance. As for Greg, he's always just assumed that I was the one who told you we couldn't be more than friends. I've never had the courage to tell him the way it really was!*

Myke struggled to keep from laughing; Deia looked down at the keys and tried not to smile. *Deia, that was beautiful! You have no idea what it was you did! So none of them know about us; that's good. What about Dr. Luciani?*

*No, I've never said anything to Dr. Luciani, only Paul. What should I tell Paul now? I won't bring it up, but he'll figure it out.*

*In speech, you can tell him anything we did or discussed before we came to the lounge—in fact, the more doubt you show about our relationship the better. In spirit expansion, you can tell him everything. As for us, we can't act any differently around each other than we would've yesterday or a week ago, and as much as it's going to kill me, you can't act any differently around Pierce either. Oh no! Here he comes. He's so good at ruining our moments together.*

Pierce approached Deia from behind, slipped his arms around her waist, and kissed her neck. “Deia, darling, please come back to the dance. I’m dreadfully bored.”

Deia stopped playing and smiled, then reached over her shoulder and caressed Pierce’s cheek. “All right, but not for very long. I suddenly feel awfully tired.”

As Pierce helped Deia up from the bench, Myke noticed that he was gazing at her without her realizing it, a tenderness in his eyes that was startling. Myke suddenly felt ashamed at himself for being so critical of Pierce, because Pierce really did love Deia.

Deia gave Myke a little wave, and she and Pierce clasped hands and walked toward the door. As they walked past him, Myke saw that a tear glistened on Deia’s cheek. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to alleviate some of the pain. Their spiritual bond gradually dissipated as she moved away from him, leaving him empty.

Myke lay there for several minutes after they left, then stood up and headed back to his compartment. He wasn’t at all in the mood to return to the dance and see Deia dancing with Pierce. When Myke arrived at his compartment, he booted up his laptop and started some music. Then he lay down on his bed and began analyzing everything Deia had told him.

Myke felt certain that Paul and Deia were the “royal twins,” but what were King’s plans for them? Their parents must have been, or perhaps they still were, associated with one of the Novaunian Great Houses, but which one and how? Myke assumed his father had acquired all of the necessary information from his informant, who must have been Paul and Deia’s aunt, but where had his father obtained his leads? Myke theorized that Lena King, too, was a Novaunian. Her religious beliefs were the same as Novaunian beliefs, and Paul and Deia resembled her so much that they had to be related, but who was she?

Myke wondered how much King expected him to know about the royal twins. Perhaps King believed his father had told him more about the twins than he had. Myke concluded that King wanted him to trust the twins. There could be no other explanation for their presence on the *Sovereign*. Obviously King was confident in his ability to maintain control of the twins, otherwise he wouldn’t have put them on the *Sovereign* and taken the chance they could be persuaded by a Novaunian agent to leave it, especially since he didn’t know how many people were needed to use the spirit dimension formula.

Who was misreading the twins? King? How could that be? He had, after all, been observing them since they were infants. Then again, Myke had felt Deia’s essence during their communication that evening. She was what she appeared to be. Myke believed she and Paul would go with him to Novaun, provided they weren’t so loyal to Earth that they were repulsed by his being a foreign agent, and provided he could convince them that they

were also from Novaun and that their uncle was setting them up to betray their family. Myke felt certain that both possessed enough of a sense of honor and morality that they wouldn't do their uncle's bidding in this matter if they could avoid it. Was Paul a secret ally of his uncle and such a supreme liar that he had been able to deceive Deia and Lena? Or was King completely blind? Perhaps King was blind with his own corruptness. Maybe he, like so many other corrupt individuals, discounted the power of love and honor and believed that there wasn't a person in the universe who couldn't be bought if tempted with the right price.

Then there were Dr. Luciani and Jacquae, his only two choices for a third helper. Either one of them might go, but either one of them could just as easily be a plant. Perhaps both of them were plants. Myke felt even more unsettled about Jacquae after communicating with Deia. Deia questioned Jacquae's sincerity in certain matters also, which made Myke feel even more strongly that she couldn't be trusted. And Deia was convinced of Dr. Luciani's sincerity.

There had to be something that would either substantiate or disprove his instinctive trust in Dr. Luciani—something. Until Myke found that something, he didn't dare enlist him as a helper. He just hoped he could come to a decision about Dr. Luciani in the next day or two so that he could get Paul and Deia and himself to Novaun.

Myke gripped his shoulder and rubbed it hard. The invisible wound he had received at the spaceport in Tryamaz so many weeks before still tingled painfully. He rubbed his shoulder for several minutes, then finally relaxed and lost himself in the music.

A little after 2400, Dr. Luciani and Connor came in for the night. "Aren't you two back kind of early?" Myke asked, stretching.

Connor began putting away his trumpet. "The party's over when the band stops playing!"

Dr. Luciani drew on what was left of his taffuao. "That's what you think. There may not be any music, but that doesn't stop the partying!"

"I thought for sure we wouldn't see you here until morning, Dr. Luciani. What, didn't any of the girls look interesting?"

Dr. Luciani shrugged. "Not particularly. Besides, Himes and his girlfriend have the office tonight."

At that moment the compartment door slid open. Paul stumbled in, holding an almost empty bottle of brandy and smelling as if someone had dumped it on him.

"Where's Jacquae?" Connor asked.

"Ho-how should I know? Have nothing to do with that slut . . . little Eslavu whore!" Then he staggered forward a few steps, his face reddening. He threw the bottle across the compartment and it hit the lavatory door and shattered. "Little Eslavu whore!"

"Sorry I asked," Connor mumbled.

Dr. Luciani chuckled. "What? You find her with one of your friends, or something? Or did she decide that you're too poor for her taste?" He snuffed out his taff in an ashtray on his shelf.

Paul turned and glared at Dr. Luciani, his eyes glassy. He instantly grabbed him by his collar and slammed him against the bulkhead next to Dr. Luciani and Connor's set of bunks. Dr. Luciani didn't have time register anger, only shock.

"I hate you . . . I hate you! You inhuman . . . Eslavu . . . How dare you! How dare you!"

Dr. Luciani's eyes filled with contempt. Before he could react in any other way, Paul began banging him against the bulkhead, yelling, "How dare you! How dare you! How dare you!"

Myke struck Paul sharply on the back of the neck, and Paul fell to the deck, unconscious.

Dr. Luciani watched Paul fall, unmoved. "Well, you didn't have to kill him." Connor gazed at Myke in amazement.

Myke quickly dragged Paul across the compartment, lifted him, and set him on his lower berth, trying not to laugh. "I didn't kill him. He's just unconscious. He'll come to in a few minutes."

"I think you should've killed him," Connor said. "That sure would've gotten rid of our roommate problem!"

Both Dr. Luciani and Myke tried not to laugh, both feeling it would be callous under the circumstances, but they couldn't help it.

Once the laughter died, Connor said, "Dr. Luciani, what did you do to make him so angry? You certainly aren't the most likeable person in the universe, but Paul has no reason to hate you."

Dr. Luciani shook his head. "I have no idea. He must've drunk himself delirious!"

Connor walked over to the mess of glass on the deck and picked up the piece with the label. "Look at this! Fifty-year-old Mediterranean cognac. That son of Abomination! He even gets drunk in style!"

Dr. Luciani was aghast. "He drank the whole thing? He ought to be shot!"

"I wonder where he got it?" Connor continued. "He's out of money, and this stuff doesn't come cheap, especially here."

At that moment they heard movement on Myke's bed. They turned and saw Paul open his eyes and look around the compartment, disoriented. He closed his eyes again and started sobbing.

Dr. Luciani grimaced. "This is disgusting."

Myke hated to see Paul in such a pitiful condition. "I'm going to go get Deia."

"Why in the galaxy do you want to bring her into this?" Dr. Luciani asked.

"Can't you see? He's depressed, abnormally, and has been for a long time. I think he needs her right now."

Connor nodded thoughtfully. "I think you're right, Myke, but let me get her. You'd better stay here in case he explodes again." He turned and hurried out of the compartment.

Several minutes later, Connor returned with Deia. She was wearing fatigues, her hair tousled and her face pale, and she looked as if she were half asleep. Her eyes widened in pleading when she saw Myke and Dr. Luciani. "Connor told me everything. You just can't put him on report or tell anyone! He would be so ashamed."

"Well, he should be ashamed," Dr. Luciani said.

"I know," Deia breathed, "but please give him another chance. After he sleeps it off, I'll talk to him and see if I can help him straighten things out. Please!"

Connor and Myke nodded that they would. Dr. Luciani shook his head. "You can't ask that of me, Deia. He deserves to be kicked out of the Science Corps for what he did."

"I know . . . I know . . . but he isn't himself. *Please* give him another chance, Dr. Luciani."

Dr. Luciani sighed. “Oh all right. But if he ever again gives me so much as a disrespectful look, I’ll make his life miserable.”

“Thank you!”

Dr. Luciani lay down on his bed, Myke and Connor began cleaning up the glass, and Deia knelt down on the deck next to Myke’s bed and gently held Paul’s head against her neck. “Shhhh . . . shhhh . . .” she whispered as she stroked his hair.

Paul put his arms around Deia and clung to her, still sobbing. A little later, the lights went out and Dr. Luciani, Connor, and Myke went to bed, Myke on Paul’s upper bunk, while Deia held Paul and he cried until they both fell asleep.

\* \* \*

In another part of the ship, D.I.I. agent Daniel Stewart accepted communication from one of his cadet helpers.

*It’s done. He’s no longer a virgin.*

*Excellent. See me tomorrow for your payment.*



## Chapter 22: CONSUMED BY HATE

Warm breath on her ear awakened Deia at about 0500 the next morning. “Deia, what in the galaxy are you doing here?”

Deia slowly opened her eyes and gazed into the darkness. She was still kneeling next to Myke’s berth and holding Paul’s head against her neck. She released Paul, sat down on the deck, and stretched her legs and massaged her knees to regain circulation. *Transmit to me so we don’t wake anyone up.*

“No, I can’t,” Paul whispered. “My head hurts too badly and I have no Awareness right now.”

Deia stood up and held her hands out for Paul. “Walk me back to my compartment, and we’ll talk.”

Paul took Deia’s hands, and she helped him stand. Once they were in the dimly lit passageway, Deia said, noticing Paul’s pale, haggard face and overall rumpled appearance, “You look awful!”

“I feel awful.”

“Would you like to go to the commons and have some hot chocolate?”

Paul nodded as they began walking. “You never did tell me what you were doing in my compartment.”

“Connor came and got me last night after you came in drunk out of your mind. Apparently you came in yelling and screaming terrible things about Jacquae, then you threw an empty bottle of brandy against the bulkhead and it broke all over, and then you attacked Dr. Luciani and told him how much you hated him and kept saying ‘how dare you’ over and over. Myke knocked you unconscious before you could kill Dr. Luciani or Dr. Luciani could kill you, and when you came to, you just starting crying. You don’t remember any of it at all?”

Paul shook his head slowly. “No.” Then he moaned, “I feel like a fool. And I’m surprised Dr. Luciani didn’t call Security.”

“Dr. Luciani would have reported you, but Myke and Connor and I persuaded him not to. Myke felt you became drunk like that because you’re depressed and bothered by something, and he thought you needed me. That was why I was there.”

Paul forced himself to smile. “Myke’s a good man, and perceptive. I guess I should feel good that a guy who doesn’t like me would defend me. I sure don’t deserve it though.”

“I wish you would stop criticizing yourself,” Deia said as they entered the commons. The Day of Liberation dance was long over, and the tables were already set up for breakfast. “If you don’t deserve it, it’s only because you’ve been extra irritable lately. And all of your roommates are willing to remain silent about what happened last night and give you another chance if you’ll just talk to me about what is bothering you and try to work it out.”

Deia removed a cup of cocoa from a synthesizing machine, Paul a cup of juice. They sat down across from each other and drank their beverages in silence.

Paul quickly finished his juice, folded his arms on the table, and laid his head down on them. Deia set her hot chocolate aside for a moment, put her arms over Paul’s shoulders, and laid her head on top of his. “Don’t you think it’s about time you stopped running away?”

"There are just so many things . . . too many things." Paul didn't say anything for a minute or two. Then he groaned, "I am never going to drink another drop of alcohol as long as I live."

Deia stroked his hair. "I don't suppose your roommates will complain about that."

Paul lifted his head and looked at Deia, his eyes tender. "Myke was right. I did need you, and I still do."

Deia touched Paul's cheek. "I'm always here when you need me . . . don't ever forget that." She continued gently, "Paul, I know it wasn't really Dr. Luciani you attacked last night. There's only one person in this universe you hate like that."

Not receiving a response of any kind, Deia continued, her tone soft, "Your hate for Sanel is destroying you. If you keep going on like this, Paul, you're going to kill yourself, and that would be such a terrible, terrible waste."

"No it wouldn't be. I have nothing to live for. Sanel has ruined both our lives. He's the one who's done the destroying." Suddenly his face pulled into a grimace so ugly it startled Deia. "Why shouldn't I hate him?" He stared beyond Deia, his eyes bitter and his hands tense and shaking in front of him. "If he were here right now, I would kill him. I swear, I would kill him. After what he did to me, I should put a sword in his heart."

Deia fought to keep the sorrow she felt from showing on her face. "What exactly did he do to you that would make him so deserving of such brutality?"

Paul's hideous expression disappeared, replaced by one of anguish. "That night Lena died, he—" His voice broke and his face tightened. "—he tried to break into my mind."

"Paul!" Deia exclaimed in horror. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Paul rested his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands, his entire body trembling to fight back the emotion as he remembered. Deia moved to the other side of the table and seated herself next to Paul, slipping her arms around his waist and leaning her head against his shoulder.

"Deia, it was awful. It hurt so badly, worse than anything I've ever experienced, and I was so afraid. At first I wanted him to break in. I wanted him to see how much I hate him, but more, I wanted him to *feel* it. Then I just felt terrified. I was so afraid of his seeing all of me, because I knew he would laugh. So I resisted and resisted and resisted . . . I didn't want him to see how scared I was of him . . . And, oh Deia, even now, I am terrified of him . . ." A few moments passed, and he removed his hands from his face and folded them against his nose. "I don't know how long I would have lasted, but he stopped."

"Oh, Paul," she said, releasing him, "what he did to you was abominable and simply inexcusable, but it's over now, and you have to forget about it, or at least put it to the back of your mind. If you don't, you'll be miserable for the rest of your life."

Paul shook his head. "It's so easy to say, but not so easy to do. I feel a little better now, telling you about it, but I'm still terrified, and I'm angry, and I hate him even more than I ever did. I feel awful inside, and depressed, and I just wish I could die."

Deia didn't know what to say. She had known for a long time that Paul's emotional state was fragile, but she had never suspected such a severe problem, one in need of help she couldn't give him. If only Lena hadn't died! She would have known the right things to say, the right things to do.

Finally Deia asked, her voice a whisper of concern, "What happened between you and Jacquae? Whatever happened with her was why you became so drunk in the first place, wasn't it?"

"That's not the kind of thing a man talks about with his sister."

"Paul . . . don't start this again. If you can't tell me about it, who can you tell?"

Paul stared at nothing for several minutes. He finally said, his shoulders slumping and his head drooping in shame, "We . . . I—"

"You made love to her, didn't you."

"Well, I wouldn't phrase it that way. There certainly wasn't any love involved."

"How did it happen? It's obvious you wish it hadn't."

"Well . . . we both had a lot of brandy at the party, and we were feeling good . . . and for the first time since we've been seeing each other, we were completely alone." Paul clenched his fists on the table, then unclenched them, then clenched them again. "I knew the whole time it was wrong. I was so disgusted with her, that she would be so free with someone she didn't love, and I was even more disgusted at myself, but once we started, I just couldn't stop myself."

Paul slammed his fist on the table. "And she was *experienced*! It was as if she had been toying with me all this time, just waiting for the perfect opportunity. I wondered how many others there had been, and then I remembered some of the comments from the guys and their chuckles, and I knew that she had probably been with all of them and that I was just another conquest. She's a regular whore! I called her that after it was all over and a few names that are worse, but she just laughed. And she was so ugly, so scornful and so ugly. Well, I cursed her even more violently after that, then left. I'm afraid I would have killed her if I had stayed, I was so mad. By that time I was almost sober, so I got drunk again."

Deia opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, feeling troubled. Then curiosity overcame her. "Maybe this isn't the right time to ask this . . ." She hesitated. "I'm just curious . . . was Greg one of the ones who said things?"

Paul's body was still convulsing in rage. Several minutes passed before he could answer Deia's question with some measure of calmness. "Yes." Deia was certain her heart had stopped. "He said something once, but it wasn't like the others. Right about the time Jacquae and I started seeing a lot of each other, he told me to make sure I knew what I was getting into. I kind of wondered why he would say that, but I didn't think it was important enough at the time to ask him about it." Paul shook his head and allowed himself a smile. "Greg . . . he's a real friend. He tried to warn me."

Realization awoke on Paul's face. "Now I understand why Jacquae always seemed to hate Greg, yet love him at the same time. He's the one she wants most, but he won't give her what she wants. He has too much class to waste time on trash like her! But he baits her. Deia, he *baits* her!" Paul leaned his head back and laughed.

Deia was too disgusted to laugh. "I've heard about girls like her. Being in love and losing it all in the heat of the moment, I can understand. It may not be right, but I can understand. But people who use sex to feel some kind of morbid sense of power—that's revolting!"

"Hey, she used me, not you. I'm the one who's supposed to be upset!"

"I suppose you're right. But Paul, she isn't only a slut, she's a liar. A *hypocrite*."

"She's no more a hypocrite than I am." Paul shook his head, his eyes filled with sorrow and shame. "I've made a mockery out of everything I've ever been taught, everything I believe in. If Lena knew the way I carried on last night at the party with the brandy, with Jacquae, and with my roommates, she would roll over in her grave—" He

gasped and covered his face with his hands. The next few words were muffled. “If she’s even in a grave. Ohhhh . . . she didn’t even have a funeral—” His shoulders shook as he began sobbing.

Deia embraced Paul tightly, feeling as though her heart would break. He clutched her and buried his head against her neck, soaking her hair with his tears. Her throat burned and her chest felt as though it would collapse. She bit her lip and blinked several times to hold back her own tears but couldn’t.

Deia knew how helpless he felt against the crushing grief and hate, how helpless she felt against it. She wished there were someone who would know how to help him deal with his emotions, someone he trusted. But no one understood him the way she did, no one. And she was the only person in the universe he completely trusted. She just wished she knew what to do. Emotional wounds as deep as Paul’s didn’t heal without a great deal of time and effort.

She also wished he hadn’t compounded the problem by indulging his physical appetites with Jacquae and losing his temper so violently with Dr. Luciani. Now he had shame to face along with the other things. Perhaps, however, the events of the previous night hadn’t been all bad. At least Paul was shaken up enough to admit he had some problems. Maybe that would help him muster enough of the inner strength necessary to conquer them.

Deia cradled Paul in her arms and rocked him. Once Paul’s sobbing died into sniffles and an occasional little gasp, Deia stroked his hair and said, ever so gently, “Sanel just isn’t worth wasting so much energy and hate on, Paul. He is what he is, and he isn’t going to change. But you can change. You can use all that energy to build yourself up, to gain confidence, and to regain your self-respect.”

Paul pulled away from Deia. “Self-respect . . . I’m afraid I don’t even know the meaning of the word.”

“You will, Paul, soon. But you have to start by having faith in yourself, faith that you’re a worthwhile person. You’ve made mistakes, we all have, but you have many, many reasons to feel good about yourself. You’re very intelligent and talented in many areas, and you’re an excellent brother—just the kind any girl would want. You’re loyal, considerate, and you’re a wonderful listener, and you have every reason to feel a sense of satisfaction about those qualities.”

Deia rested her hand on his. “Once I had a person I trust and admire a great deal tell me that when it comes to retaining your self-respect, no price is too high. I believe that. I also believe that getting it back is worth any price. Now I don’t mean to lecture you, but it’s going to mean giving up the liquor, gaining control of your temper, and most especially, subduing your hate for Sanel instead of letting it control you. I really believe you won’t fear him so much if you can control your hate. You have the strength to do it, I know you do, and you also have my strength, because I’ll be beside you the whole way.”

“I believe you,” Paul said meekly. “I really do. And I don’t want to hate him so much, but Deia, I can’t help it. It’s too deep. And what’s worse, I haven’t the slightest idea where to begin. I just don’t know what to do.”

“I really don’t know what to do either. But there must be something.” Deia shook her head. “The only thing I can think of is to have you talk to a psychologist—”

"No psychologists! No! Absolutely not! I can't tell some government lackey who doesn't care whether I live or die about my problem with Sanel and how he tried to rape my mind."

Deia wasn't surprised by Paul's reaction, especially since she agreed with him. "I know how you feel, and all I said is that talking to a psychologist is the only thing I can think of. I didn't say that's what we should do." Paul appeared relieved.

Deia pondered for many minutes. Finally she asked, "How much did Lena tell you about her religious beliefs?"

Paul appeared puzzled. "Oh, I don't know. I guess the same things she told you. I remember vividly when she told us about the Eslavu."

"Did you believe those things she said?"

Paul shrugged. "I suppose. I never had anything else to belief in, and I certainly never believed in the god of Tohmazz Zarr."

Deia hesitated. "Paul, have you ever prayed? I don't mean those empty prayers of Worship, but a real prayer, one from the heart."

"Now don't get religious on me, Deia!"

Deia refused to be jarred by Paul's retort. "I asked you a question. At least you can be courteous enough to give me an answer!"

"No, I never have."

"Is there any reason in particular why not?"

Paul didn't speak for several moments. Then he said simply, "I was afraid I wouldn't feel anything if I did." He paused, then asked, his voice so soft it was almost inaudible, "Do you pray, Deia?"

"Sometimes. Since Lena died, more than just sometimes."

"Does it help?"

"I won't pretend I haven't had a hard fight with the grief caused by Lena's death or with the disappointment of not being able to pursue my music career, but yes, praying has given me strength to survive it all. And it's helped me feel comforted somewhat. Lena was a good person, an honorable person, and I really believe God is taking care of her now and that she's experiencing a peace she didn't have when she was alive. If I didn't believe that, then I think I would quite literally die of despair."

Paul's eyes watered and he brushed his hand quickly over them. "Die of despair . . . you've always been so good at putting things into words."

"It's only because I understand the feeling." Deia squeezed his hand. "I think perhaps you could use the kind of influence prayer can give you in your life right now. It might be just what you need."

Paul didn't say anything.

Sensing Paul's uneasiness, Deia continued, "I won't ask you about it anymore after this, because it's a personal thing. Praying in itself won't cure all of your problems—It'll take a lot of faith and an awfully lot of effort on your part—but I really think it will help you, especially since there isn't anyone other than me you can talk to. And I want you to know that I'll pray for you too." She tapped the back of his hand with her finger. "Will you try?"

Paul finally nodded. "I guess I could try." He looked away from Deia. "It's just, well, it's just that I'm *afraid*."

Deia slipped her arms around Paul and squeezed him. "I know."

After several minutes of silence had passed, Paul said, "There are so many things I haven't told you, Deia, things you need to know."

Deia frowned. "What kinds of things?"

Paul shook his head and massaged his temples. "Not right now. My mind can't handle anything else. I need to go back to my compartment and sleep for the rest of the day, but I want to talk again after dinner. Is that all right? This is important, Deia."

Deia still felt puzzled, but she nodded anyway. "Yes, of course."

## Chapter 23: REVELATIONS

That night, about an hour after dinner, Paul and Deia met back in the commons and sat side-by-side on one of the tables in the middle of the room.

"I just talked to Greg down at the gym," Paul said, "and he told me that he asked you to marry him."

Deia tensed. She had wanted to tell Paul herself. "Yes, he did. How many others did he tell?"

"Only me. Have you decided how to answer him yet?"

"No."

"So you're considering it."

"Yes." The situation was strange and almost unbelievable. Here she was, only eighteen years old, and she had two serious possibilities for marriage. Her life wasn't unfolding at all in the way she had planned.

Paul hesitated. "Is what Dr. Luciani said the other night true? Is the only reason you're thinking about it because you could leave Star Force and pursue your music career?"

Deia shook her head. "Dr. Luciani was right about everything he said, but despite all of that, I do care about Greg, and I know he cares about me. The kind of person Greg is, he wouldn't marry someone who couldn't help him in his career, but that doesn't change the fact that he really does love me."

She thought for a moment about Dr. Luciani's observations, feeling a little sad. "Oh, I know I would never be the most important thing to him. In a few years he'll have his first ship command, then a fleet, then a number of fleets, and I know I'll never be able to compete with that. Believe me, Paul, if I decide to marry Greg, I'll be doing it with my eyes wide open."

"This doesn't sound like you, Deia. I know that you've always wanted to get married, but I always thought you wanted more from marriage than mere compatibility. Is your music career that important to you?"

Deia turned away from Paul and stared at her knees. "Yes, it is." When Paul didn't reply, she looked at him again and tried to explain, "I don't know what to say, except that it's difficult to give up a dream."

"What about Myke?"

Feelings of tenderness softened Deia's sadness. "I love Myke so much . . . there just aren't words to describe . . . but the situation is even more complicated than I thought before."

"I assume you've been with him."

Deia nodded. "Last night he asked me to dance and he told me he loved me, then we went to your compartment and held each other. It was so wonderful, but it only made me more confused about Greg. I don't know what I want or what I should do. Things are too complicated."

Paul slowly shook his head. "I'd say you're in a jam. Greg doesn't know about Myke?"

"No. You're the only other person who knows, and it has to stay that way. Absolutely no one can ever know about Myke and me," Deia hesitated when she saw that Paul was frowning at her. "He's in some kind of trouble, Paul. I don't know what, he won't

tell me yet, but it was the reason all along he wouldn't get involved. He made me promise that I wouldn't tell anyone or act any differently around him."

Paul's expression was skeptical. "So why all of a sudden did he decide to bring things out in the open with you? Did you ask him that?"

"I'm not sure what all of his reasons were, but I think he just had to get it out. Our being apart has been as agonizing for him as it has been for me, and he wanted me to know that there's a chance we can have a future together if he can get out of this trouble he's in."

Paul was still frowning. "What in the galaxy kind of trouble could he be in here? Wait a minute. He told me when we first came aboard that he'd tried to leave Earth to avoid the draft. The SPs caught up with him, though, so I imagine he's being disciplined somehow. That's probably what this is all about."

"He tried to dodge the draft? Really? I wonder why he never told me."

"He probably didn't think you'd understand."

Deia gazed at her lap. At length she shook her head. "No. That isn't it. It's something else. Something big."

"He didn't tell you anything about it at all?"

"No. He said there wasn't time and that I would worry too much, but he said he would tell me everything today or tomorrow. I hardly saw him today, and I've nearly made myself sick trying to figure it out, but I can't. So I guess I'll just have to wait until he tells me. In the meantime, I have to decide whether or not I want to marry Greg. So . . . what is it you want to talk to me about?"

"I don't know where to begin. Your life is already complicated enough as it is."

"I doubt anything you tell me could complicate my life any more than it already is."

"I wouldn't form any quick conclusions."

Deia twisted and drew her leg up to her body so that she could see Paul's face better. "Go on."

Paul turned, adopting a position identical to Deia's. "Well, to begin with, right after Sanel tried to break into my mind, he said, 'You are no match for me, son of Jenan,' as if he were trying to prove his superiority."

"Son of Jenan? That must be our father's name. It is masculine, isn't it? It's so unusual."

"Let me tell you, I was shocked that Sanel would say something like that after all these years, but I was glad I finally knew what our father's name was. What struck me the most, though, was that he said it with so much hate in his voice."

He paused in somber reflection. "I didn't realize it at the time, but some of the things you said this morning made me start thinking. I imagine our father's been dead for sixteen or seventeen years, and Sanel still hates him, and that hate has destroyed every milligram of compassion and decency he may once have had. I'll do whatever it takes. I don't want to end up like him."

Deia gave Paul's arm a squeeze of support. "Did Sanel say anything else?"

"No, but you know that portrait of us that was hanging on the wall upstairs? The one I brought with me?"

Deia nodded slowly.

"Well, that night when I put it in a new frame, I found a beautiful crystal medallion that has an insignia on it. The crystal looks like arelada that's been stripped of its energy."

Deia stared at Paul, dumbfounded.



"I also found another photograph. It's of a man and a woman, not much older than we are now, and they're dressed in clothes that are embroidered with tiny gems, and the woman is wearing a crown, and the man is wearing the medallion. I had never seen anything so extraordinary in my life as that medallion and those clothes, so I assumed the couple was on a planet other than Earth."

"Who are they? Paul, you have to show me!"

Paul transmitted the image to Deia. Several moments later, she gasped. "I feel as if I'm looking in a mirror! Paul, they must be our parents! We have the man's eyes, and you're even built like him. This is wonderful!" She looked at Paul in amazement. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"I guess I didn't want to add another complication to your life, at least not until I could make some sense out of the whole thing, and I suppose I was waiting for just the right moment." There was a queer light in Paul's eyes. "You didn't recognize the woman?"

Deia reached into her memory and put the image of the portrait at the front of her mind. She gasped. "It's . . . *Lena*." After the image faded to the back of her mind, she looked at Paul, feeling a strange combination of happiness, confusion, and anger. "She was our mother! But why did she pretend? Why? All these years?"

"Because Sanel forced her to. He must have had an awfully strong hold on her somehow, maybe even some kind of telepathic bond. We can't be angry at her when we don't know what her reasons were."

"I know . . . I know . . . but this is such a shock. We're from another planet, aren't we? That's why we never knew anything about our family. None of our relatives are even on Earth, and what of our father? What happened to him? And who is Sanel? And why, oh why in the universe, Paul, did we grow up on Earth?"

Paul put his fingers to Deia's lips. "I'll tell you what I believe if you would like. This entire thing has been on my mind for weeks."

Deia's relaxed a little, relieved Paul had some idea what was going on.

"Yes, I think it's certain we're from another planet, although I don't know what planet. I do, however, have a good guess, but I'll tell you that later. As far as our father goes, I think he's been dead since we were babies. Lena always talked about tragedy, so I think we can safely assume she was talking about our father."

"What about Sanel? Who in the galaxy is he?"

"At this point, all we know is that he knew our father well enough to hate him, which means he's probably from the same planet we are. I don't think there's any doubt, though, that we're pawns in some grand scheme of his."

"What kind of scheme?"

"He'll probably want us to go back to whatever planet it is we're from and work for him. I imagine this is why we grew up on Earth. He wants our loyalty. I also feel that he'll make a move soon and that we're going to have to make those decisions Lena told us about. I believe he arranged to have us drafted to set us up—he's going to try and buy us with our ambitions. What better way to get us to realize how much we want the luxuries and dreams we've grown up with than to deny them to us for a while?"

"But what could Sanel possibly want? He has everything! Earth is already one of the wealthiest planets in the galaxy, and Sanel is one of the wealthiest men on Earth."

"Deia, it has to have something to do with *arelada*. I have no ideas about who we are, except that the way our parents were dressed in that picture, they looked as if they, or

their families anyway, were important. Lena was even wearing a crown. So I would assume that our family is connected to arelada in some way.”

Deia shook her head quickly. “No . . . no . . . something isn’t right about this. Why in the galaxy should we give our loyalty to Sanel and Earth when we can go to this other planet and be just as rich, or more so because of the arelada? You could just as easily go into the arelada business as go into business back on Earth, and I imagine there would be plenty of audiences for me.”

“Deia, you’re assuming all planets are like Earth, and that just isn’t the case. They all have their own cultures, their own ideals, and their own ways of doing things. Now I have a feeling that the planet we’re from treats wealth differently than Earth does, and that it also treats art differently. If that’s the case, then our ambitions are very powerful tools for Sanel to work with.”

“You said before that you have an idea what planet we’re from.”

“Yes. I’m almost positive it’s one that produces arelada, and I think it’s very possible that it’s Novaun.”

“Why?”

“Remember that day when Dr. Luciani and Jacquae were talking about Novaun? They said that it’s the rumor that on Novaun, no one speaks—total telepathy. That may or may not be true, but let’s assume it is. Ever since that day, I’ve been thinking a lot about it, and I’ve come to some interesting conclusions on what a society where no one speaks would be like. Just think about it. Arelada would be readily available, so you could communicate to people all over the planet easily, just by transmitting your thoughts. There goes the need for all personal communication devices like holophones. And what about mass communications? If no one ever spoke, it would all be done telepathically too, especially with the extraordinary memory capacity that arelada gives you.”

“Paul, that’s bizarre. Maybe it would even go so far as no written word at all. Reading is extremely slow when you think about how much you can communicate to someone telepathically and how quickly. All communications would be from mind to mind.”

“Now take that one step further and think about what it would do to art. After all, art is simply another form of communication. Perhaps there would still be some photographs and paintings and things that you would display in your home, but what about holodramas, novels, and poetry? You could make a story live in your mind, and it would have a quality of reality that even a hologram can’t give you, especially since a hologram only works on sight and sound, whereas a mental image could work on all five physical senses, along with emotional senses. And what about music? You could actually live the music, perhaps even achieve sounds unknown to the ear, but it would be done entirely in the mind. Don’t you see? All creativity would be captured at its source.”

A few moments passed before Paul’s words registered with Deia. “That means there would be music . . . but no pianos.”

“Exactly. Are you beginning to see where Sanel’s strength might be? Now if you want to carry it even further, think about what a totally telepathic world would do to relationships.”

Deia pondered. “With mind-to-mind communication so liberal, especially in the area of art and mass communication, you would always run the risk of a relay, or anyone for that matter, tapping into your personal communication or someone taking control of a

brain cell when your mind is open and vulnerable, as the Divine Emperor does, unless everyone trusts each other.”

“Right. And you know that with trust come feelings of love and loyalty and familiarity. And think what that kind of total trust and intimacy among the inhabitants of an entire planet, an entire network of planets like the Citizens’ Union of Novaun, would do to their ideas about wealth.”

“Yes . . . now I see what you’re getting at. I suppose there might still be wealthy people, but they wouldn’t exploit the poor, if any poor even existed. There definitely wouldn’t be any poverty stricken, because it’s only natural that the poor, at least many who are poor, resent those with the money and distrust them, usually because they’re exploited. But for a society like that to work, you would have to find a more equal way of distributing the wealth.”

Paul nodded. “I have no idea how they would do it, but I think you’re right—things would have to be more equal than they are on Earth anyway. Wealth and power just couldn’t be the main goals of any of the people for the culture to work, and where it does exist, it would probably mean something entirely different than it does to us. The more I think about this, the more sense it makes, especially in light of Lena’s character and her religious beliefs.”

Deia nodded thoughtfully.

“And those differences in attitudes about wealth and power are probably why Sanel always gave us everything we ever wanted. He wanted to get us used to it so that anything different would be very unappealing.”

“You know, the bad part about this whole thing is that it’s working.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Paul said grimly. Then he blurted, “Deia, I’m so sick of his manipulating our lives! I can’t stand it. I feel like a puppet! But even more, I have absolutely no desire to go to some strange planet and live, even if it is where our long-lost family is. Maybe Lena and our father were Novaunian, or whatever, but we’re still Earthon.”

“I feel exactly the same way. Paul, there’s something I haven’t told you either.”

“What?”

“It’s all beginning to make sense. Paul, Lena didn’t die naturally, she killed herself. She was holding her locket when she died, and in it I found a sliver of arelada. I figured it out when Myke started teaching me about Awareness.”

“Are you sure?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind.” Deia transmitted an image of the locket as she had found it that dreadful day. “She wanted us to find the locket; she meant it to be a message from the grave.”

Paul gripped Deia’s arm, appearing shaken. “You know what this means, don’t you? She wants us to defy Sanel. She didn’t want to be one of our ties to Earth, and she would have been; she would have been the strongest one. It was so important to her that she gave up everything, even her life.”

“Paul, what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. But something tells me we’re going to see Sanel soon, and I know just as surely as I know you’re sitting next to me that if we don’t do what he wants, we’re dead.”

“When you said things were complicated, I just never imagined.” Deia attempted to interject hope into her voice. “Well, at least Sanel doesn’t know that we know all these things. Perhaps that will give us the time we need to think of a way out.”

Paul shook his head. “You’re being overly optimistic. Whatever else Sanel may be, he’s brilliant, perhaps even a genius. And he plays to win.”

Deia stood up. “I’d better get going. I promised to meet Greg in the lounge.”

As Paul and Deia started toward the door, Deia pressed her spirit against Paul’s in an attempt to communicate with him privately. Paul didn’t resist, but he was puzzled. Once they could perceive each other thinking, Deia explained, *Myke taught me how to communicate this way. It’s completely secret. I just thought of something, and I didn’t want Sanel to know about it—I’m certain we’re still being bugged.*

Paul’s mortification seared through them both. *Why do you think that?*

*Because Myke told me that there are holorecorders and listening devices all over the ship. He knows how to find them by expanding his spirit into the bulkheads and furniture. Sanel’s been listening in on our conversations for years. Why would he stop now?*

*Why in the galaxy didn’t you tell me this an hour ago?*

*Because Sanel already knew that you were going to tell me something important. We had to have the conversation. Otherwise, he’d realize we know about the listening devices.*

*I understand. You did the right thing.*

*While we were talking, it occurred to me that if I marry Greg, his family would give both of us the protection we need.*

*You may just be right about that, Paul communicated in hope. And it wouldn’t be as though you’d be using Greg. You do love him, in a way. I think he and his family would be very cooperative. It’s definitely something to consider.*

The direction of Paul’s thoughts changed abruptly. *Myke must be in some kind of major trouble if he’s telepathically searching the bulkheads for monitoring devices. That is so odd. He is so odd.*

Deia recalled her conversation with Myke and realized that his knowledge of the ship’s monitoring devices wasn’t the only thing that made him odd. *Paul, we have to tell Myke about our problem with Sanel.*

Paul was skeptical. *Why in the galaxy should we—*

*He knows something about it! Believe me, he does. Last night he wanted me to tell him everything I knew about our parents and Lena and Sanel. He said it might help him get out of his predicament. Don’t you see? Maybe he can help us!*

*How would Myke know about something like that? How would he know how to find monitoring devices? Who is he really? He can’t be who he says he is.*

Deia and Paul exited the commons into the passageway. *He did admit that he isn’t a regular cadet.*

*Greg’s thought all along that he’s a spy for Sanel.*

*Well, we know he’s not that. I did ask him if he’s a real Zionite, and he said that he’s not.*

*He’s a Novaunian, Deia. He has to be.*

It was a bizarre thought, but it made more sense than Greg’s speculation. *That would explain how he knows so much about telepathy and why he’s so interested in our family background.*

*If you think about it, there's no other way Myke could know anything about our situation. Only people involved in the set-up would know about it and possibly agents from the same planet our parents are from who are on Earth looking specifically for information of that nature.*

*Horror seized Deia. Then Myke's father wasn't executed because he was talking to spies; he was executed because he was a spy!*

*Remember the nineteen-year-old Diron spy who was captured at the spaceport right before we left Earth?*

*Deia felt ill. I remember.*

*It said in the news that the kid was on Earth working with his father, who was executed. Well, Myke just happens to have a father who was executed about the same time as that agent's father was executed, and he just happens to be nineteen, and he just happened to be at the spaceport trying to leave Earth during the period of time that spy was captured.*

*No . . . oh no . . . Deia struggled to maintain her air of silent thoughtfulness as she and Paul walked into the lounge. She couldn't help but glance around the room to see if Myke was there; he wasn't.*

*The public would have been abnormally curious about the incident if the reports had said a Novaunian spy was captured, so the D.I.I. told the press that he was a Diron. They must have not thought he would break under torture, so they set him up on the Sovereign. I wonder what it is they want from him. It must be extremely important, or he would have been dead long ago, and if they don't get it from him soon, they'll kill him, regardless.*

*He did admit that his trouble had something to do with his father. Oh, Paul . . . I never even dreamed it was something like this.*

*No wonder he's treated you so coolly. If they ever knew how he felt about you—Paul's thoughts were frantic. Whatever you do, Deia, don't tell anyone about the feelings between you two, and don't talk to him if you don't have to! Don't even look at him!*

*Deia wasn't sure whether to be angry or frightened or both. It hardly matters now. Sanel's having us watched too, remember? He knows everything about Myke and me or will soon.*

*You said that he told you there could be a future for the two of you if he can get out of this trouble. That means he must be planning to leave the ship somehow to go back to Novaun or wherever it is he's from, and he wants to take you with him.*

*So he wants to take me to a planet where no one speaks and where there are no pianos. He said the price would be high, but I just never imagined. Deia's thoughts trembled with bitterness. That's just great. The love of my life is a spy. And here I am, considering marriage to a nobleman, and I'm thinking about running away with a spy. They would sure get a good laugh out of that one, wouldn't they?*

*Paul sat Deia down at the piano to wait for Greg. Let's just feel grateful that Myke discovered something about Sanel's plans for us through his work as an agent. There won't be time tonight to get him alone to discuss this, so we'll talk to him tomorrow after class. No doubt he's from the same planet our parents are from, probably Novaun, so he might be able to help us, as you said. But you're going to have to decide what it is you really want. Don't think about Greg, or Myke, or Sanel, only you and what you want and what will make you happy.*

*I'll try.*

Paul's tone of thought softened. *And Deia, all that matters to me is that you're happy. You're the only thing in this universe that means anything. You're like a part of me, and I love you. I've never told you that before, but I do. The answer is inside of you, I believe that. All you need to do is find it. And if it means we have to give Sanel our loyalty, then that's what we'll do.*

Tonight, Deia replied as she began playing the "Funeral March" from Chopin's Sonata No. 2, *tonight I'll decide.*

\* \* \*

As Paul walked back to his compartment that evening, he felt someone grip his arm from behind. He turned just long enough to see that Jacquae was the one holding his arm, her face determined and somewhat flushed. He immediately pulled his arm out of her hand, turned, and strode away.

"We need to talk, Paul," she said as she caught up to him. "It doesn't have to be like this."

Paul walked a little faster and didn't answer.

"My feelings for you haven't changed. I still like you. I want to continue seeing you."

"Well, my feelings for you *have* changed, or didn't I make that clear enough to you last night," Paul said tensely.

"You were drunk. You said a lot of things you didn't mean."

Paul stopped abruptly and stared down at her. "I meant everything I said. You used me, and I resent that."

Jacquae rolled her eyes and shook her head slightly, her voice gentle and almost affectionate: "I didn't use you, not exactly. It's just that you're kind of stupid about these things."

"You are a severely disturbed person."

"Oh, come on Paul! Stop being such a baby! It's time for you to grow up and enjoy the pleasures of adult life. What's done is done. What are you going to do now? Wait to have sex again until you get married? Wouldn't that be a little ridiculous under the circumstances?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do."

"We've had a good time together, and we can continue to have a good time together." She stepped closer to him, her smile knowing and a touch lustful. "I know somewhere we can go. We won't be drunk this time, and it'll be *wonderful*. You have no idea the pleasure we can have."

"You disgust me."

He turned and walked away, and Jacquae didn't follow him.

## Chapter 24: THE OFFER

As Deia walked back to class the next day after lunch, she suddenly felt a hand on her back, pushing her toward the nearest transport pod booth.

"Your uncle is here, and he wishes to speak with you, Cadet Sheldon," whispered a male voice.

Deia turned abruptly toward the man who had spoken. He was about Paul's height, and Deia guessed his age to be early thirties. He had curly dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a pale complexion, and he was wearing a Star Force uniform, lieutenant commander rank.

"Why should I go with you?" Deia demanded, halting. "I don't know you." The guy had to be D.I.I. He had that cockroach feel about him.

The man smiled arrogantly. "My name's Daniel Stewart. I'm an agent for the Department of Internal Investigation."

Deia gave a contemptuous little sniff. "I should have known. You're one of my uncle's errand boys."

Stewart's arrogant smile was replaced by an immediate tightening of the lips. He motioned toward a transport pod booth. "Shall we go?" His eyes flashed with a ruthlessness that startled Deia.

As they stepped into the transport pod, Deia asked, "Why is my uncle here?"

"I told you. He wants to talk to you." Stewart pushed a button that said "A2."

"Why?"

"He'll tell you that himself."

"How long has he been here?"

"Ask him that yourself."

Neither spoke as they walked to Sanel's stateroom on deck A2. When they arrived, they entered without buzzing. Deia felt nervous as Stewart led her to the couch, but she managed to maintain an appearance of poise and confidence. As she turned to seat herself, she saw Sanel sitting in the huge black leather chair that was facing the couch with its back to the door. He was wearing a suit Lena had finished not more than a month before she died—navy slacks and a maroon velvet jacket that was embroidered with navy satin and delicately embellished with garnet beads.

Stewart moved toward the bar and poured himself a drink. He leaned against the bar and took a sip, watching Deia and Sanel intently.

Sanel's gray eyes studied Deia's face for several moments. Then he smiled, an odd, empty smile. Deia wanted to shudder. "My dear niece. You're looking well. Would you care for a drink?"

Deia shook her head, wondering why he didn't just get to the point.

Sanel lifted his glass of mineral water to his lips and took a sip, then slowly set it on the end table next to his chair, his arelada prism glistening against his white silk shirt as he moved. Deia held back a sigh of disgust. *Stalling . . .*

Finally Sanel spoke again. "Naturally you would like to know why you are here." Before Deia could reply, Sanel continued, "The reason is quite simple. I have a job for you to do."

"What's in it for me?"

"That all depends on you. I understand you're considering marriage to a young man from the Nobility—"

"You've spoken with Admiral Pierce?" Deia asked, feigning surprise. Sanel's knowledge of Greg's proposal made Deia more certain than ever that he had been listening to her conversations with Paul.

Sanel smiled slightly, an unsettling, almost mocking smile. "Yes. Now as I was saying . . . I approve of this match, in fact, I encourage it. If you decide to marry Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce, I can arrange for you to be immediately discharged, if that is what you wish, and I will give you my financial support. As far as your career is concerned, Mr. Moreau's offer is still good. He is currently on holiday on Vaena, but you can meet him on Latanza III, where he opens next week. He'll be there for two weeks, I believe, so there is plenty of time."

Deia couldn't contain her gasp of astonishment. "The great maestro . . ."

Sanel appeared amused. "I thought that might spark your interest."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Two quite simple things, really. I need Paul's help for a few years on another planet, but I won't bore you with the details of that venture. I'll just say that for doing relatively little, he stands to gain a great deal, for I will pay him well. Not only that, but when he returns to Earth in a few years, I can arrange for him to have a position in any number of thriving companies. I am heavily invested in pearls, which, of course, are worth almost as much on the interstellar market as arelada since they are an exclusively Earthon product. Many of my colleagues are invested in wine, others in weaponry and spacecraft, others in chocolate—whatever suits Paul's tastes. All I need you to do is convince Paul to do this thing for me. It's as simple as that."

"That's all?"

Sanel nodded. "As far as Paul's concerned, yes, but I need you to do one more thing. Recently you've become acquainted with a young man named Myke Zarek."

Deia nodded, alarmed at the mention of Myke.

"Your friend Myke Zarek, my dear, is a Diron spy—"

"A Diron spy!"

"Yes," Sanel said without feeling. "My people set him up on the *Sovereign* because he's in possession of a telepathic formula that Earth wants, and needs, to remain secure in this galaxy of conflict, a formula known as the mind energy or spirit dimension formula. I know you're familiar with it, so I won't give you an explanation. It will suffice to say that he's the only person in the universe who knows it. You can understand our position."

"We know that he's a strong, determined young man whose patriotism and training will not permit him to yield under torture, so it was necessary to set another kind of trap for him. He'll want to leave the ship so that he can return to his headquarters with the formula and whatever other information he may have acquired, and the only way he can do this is to use the formula. He can't, however, use it alone. That is where you come in."

"I've had him under close observation since we placed him on the *Sovereign*, and we believe he intends to use you as a helper. It's obvious he considers you his friend, and it appears he trusts you. Not only that, but he went to great lengths to prepare your mind for using a formula as complicated as the spirit dimension formula."

"He used me . . . this whole time, he used me . . ."



Sanel nodded sympathetically. "I am afraid so. Now all I need you to do is agree to go with him at the appropriate time and follow his instructions completely. He may or may not need other helpers besides you, we don't know, but in any case, after you've received the formula from him, you'll signal me from the vessel he decides to take, and then in that microsecond before you jump to the spirit dimension, my people will take control of his mind through yours, making him incapable of piloting the vessel."

"I just don't know, Sanel. Whatever else he may be, he is my friend. I don't want to have any part in killing him, even if he is something as despicable as a spy."

"I'm afraid you misunderstood me. I have no intention of killing him. My agents will simply render him unconscious. That will incapacitate him long enough for them to take him to Security. When I return to Earth, he'll come with me as my prisoner."

"I just don't know." After several moments, Deia asked, hesitating, "And if I refuse?"

Sanel shrugged. "Then you'll spend the remainder of your life in Star Force. Even Saintess Myri Vahro-Pierce can't get you a discharge if I don't wish it."

Deia's stared at her lap. Was Sanel lying about Saintess Myri Vahro-Pierce? Or was the Divine Emperor himself one of the masterminds of Sanel's scheme? Deia struggled to contain her panic, realizing that leaving the ship with Myke really was the only way she and Paul were going to break free from Sanel's grip.

Deia eventually looked back up at Sanel. "If I do as you ask, how much support could I expect from you?"

Sanel shrugged slightly. "Five hundred thousand a year."

"Sanel! You insult me! That wouldn't even cover my wardrobe!" Daniel Stewart nearly choked on his drink.

Sanel smiled broadly, a real, honest-to-goodness smile. "You're right. Eight hundred thousand then."

"I was thinking more in the area of five million, tax-free, and a condominium on Tenth Avenue. I have to have something of a home somewhere."

Sanel laughed. "My dear, you're being *unreasonable*."

"It isn't as if you can't afford it, and Myke is my friend."

Sanel's mood soured. "Three million and that's final."

"And a condominium on Tenth Avenue?" Deia said expectantly.

Sanel nodded, again amused.

"Greg would be a fine husband," Deia said softly, almost to herself, "and I would love to study with Phillip Moreau . . . And Myke *is* a spy . . ." She stood up. "All right, Sanel, I'll do it. But you have to promise me that you won't kill him."

"You have my word. I'll be in contact with Mr. Moreau immediately to tell him your decision, and we'll work out the details after you talk to Paul and we have Zarek's information."

## Chapter 25: THE DECISION

Myke entered his compartment that night immediately following dinner, his hands itching for an immobilizer and his body aching with tension. He wished he were in an armed shuttle on his way to Novaun with Paul and Deia, but he hadn't come to a conclusion about a final helper yet. What was he going to tell Deia? Two days had passed since he had promised he would tell her about his trouble, but he couldn't tell her anything until he was certain he had a chance. Not only that, but he knew he wouldn't have a chance if he couldn't decide on another helper that evening.

Myke had decided after Paul's drunken outburst on the Day of Liberation that he couldn't trust Jacquae. He didn't know what had happened between Paul and Jacquae that night, although he had a few speculations. Whatever had occurred, Paul's sense of morality had been severely offended, supporting Myke's theory that Jacquae had always presented a false picture of herself.

That only left Dr. Luciani. Myke had spent most of the previous two days observing Dr. Luciani and sifting through everything he knew about him. Myke wanted to trust him and had been unable to find any reason to doubt his sincerity, but he was still uncertain.

As for Deia, Myke hoped she had decided that the chance of a future with him, the one she loved, was worth giving up the life of fame and accomplishment she would have as a concert pianist and the life of luxury and power associated with marriage to a nobleman. This matter had dominated Myke's thoughts ever since he had communicated with Deia the night of the dance and had learned she was considering Pierce's proposal, and the more he thought about it, the more depressed he became. Even if she did agree to go to Novaun, how could he ever consider marrying her when he knew that, given the choice, she would have married Pierce and continued in her piano career? If Deia did go ahead and marry Myke, then she would always resent him, and she would be restless and unhappy for the rest of her life, and that, Myke knew, he would be unable to bear.

Myke decided he would keep his wits and refrain from proposing to her just yet. If they made it to Novaun, they would spend some time together before making such an important decision. He wanted to be sure it was what he wanted, and more than anything, he wanted to be certain it was what *she* wanted.

Myke pushed the button to turn on the light and walked to his bunk. He knelt down and removed some clean gym clothes from his drawer, hoping a hard workout would relieve some of his body's tension and help clear his mind. As he arose, he captured a glimpse of the family portrait that always sat on Paul's shelf. He leaned on Paul's bunk for a moment and gently removed the portrait from the shelf, focusing on Deia and her pretty, sincere smile and those dusky blue eyes that were always so full of life. In the picture she appeared happy and carefree, and Myke wanted more than anything to make her feel that way again.

After a few moments of gazing at Deia's likeness, curiosity overcame him. That portrait had always seemed odd. He studied the picture and the frame, then put his gym clothes back into his drawer, telepathically penetrating all of the monitoring devices of consequence and adjusting them to record him returning the portrait to the shelf and walking into the lavatory. Only then did Myke turn the picture over and examine the back. All of a sudden he realized what was so strange about it—it was too heavy. He removed the back of the frame to see if something was hidden there.

Filled with alarm, he grasped the crystal medallion and saw its markings. There wasn't a Novaunian alive who wouldn't recognize that insignia. It belonged to the Great House Doshyr, the Great House that controlled nearly half of Novaun's arelada. Myke had believed Paul and Deia were connected to a Novaunian Great House, but he had never imagined it would be to the most powerful one.

The medallion itself looked like something that would belong to a high patriarch, but it wasn't old enough to be an heirloom. Myke suspected it was a superb copy of the original family medallion, and he wondered where Paul had obtained it or if he even knew about it. If he did know about it, he hadn't told Deia. If so, she would have told him about it the night of the dance.

Myke set the medallion aside and examined the frame again. When he saw the second picture, he quickly checked a gasp of astonishment. It was a wedding picture, presumably of Paul and Deia's parents. The dark-haired woman, their mother, was wearing the swan crown of the Great House Vumaul's first family. She was an Amarian princess! And their father was wearing the crystal medallion around his neck with the Doshyr insignia. No doubt that had been the Novaunian wedding of the century, the most powerful Great House to the most popular one. The union was even more remarkable, considering the fact that Novaunian marriages were never arranged and that even those of the Great Houses married strictly for love and not for political or economic alliances.

As Myke studied the picture, he realized that the young princess who was Paul and Deia's mother was also their Aunt Lena, an incredible, but disturbing piece of information. How had King kept her so submissive all these years?

Myke recalled that the great high patriarch Patan Doshyr had no heir. For the first time in almost a thousand years, the patriarchal line would be broken when he died and the high patriarchate would pass to his uncle and continue through that line. Myke had always assumed Patan had sired no sons, but now he realized that had not been the case. Evidently his son and heir was Paul and Deia's father, probably long dead.

Myke suddenly understood Earth's plans for Paul and Deia. Paul would be introduced somehow back into Novaunian society, and, gaining the trust of his grandfather, would assume his position as heir to the high patriarchate of the Great House Doshyr. A Doshyr heir that was secretly loyal to Earth would be disastrous to Novaun, and Earth's hold on Paul was Deia. She was insurance, pure and simple.

With an overwhelming feeling of urgency, Myke quickly put the medallion and wedding picture back into their place in the frame and returned the portrait to Paul's shelf. What a tormented life Paul and Deia's mother had led on Earth, knowing that any attempt to escape or tell her children their true identities would have brought King's cruel wrath down on Deia. No wonder she had been so submissive. Myke swallowed hard to fight down the lump in his throat. Never in his life, not even during all the dark, dream-plagued nights since his father's death, had he felt such overpowering fear.

Myke's spirit retracted from the holorecorders. He stepped once toward the door, then froze, guilt overtaking him with as much force as the fear. His father had known all along. Paul and Deia and their mother were the people he had wanted to stay on Earth to help, but he, in his selfishness, had resented it all this time and had never considered the possibility that they were in danger for reasons unrelated to their acquaintance with him. They had been living all these years with a man they feared even more than they hated. How could he have been so selfish and blind?

Mentally chastising himself for being such a poor excuse for a human being, Myke hurried to the door. Even if he couldn't find a third helper, he needed to tell Paul and Deia who they were and prepare them for what was coming. The door buzzed just as Myke reached to open it. Deia rushed into the compartment. Myke's first instinct was to throw his arms around her, pull her fiercely to him, and touch her all over, as if to make sure she was still alive and unharmed, but he quickly stopped himself and stood there very still.

Deia held her hands together to keep them from shaking. Her eyes were wild and glistening with panic, but her words didn't match her face. "Oh, hello, Myke," she said calmly as her spirit seized him. "Do you have any idea where Paul is?"

In an instant, Myke expanded his spirit and overlapped hers.

*I'm so glad you're all right! Paul and I know all about you, what you are. When I didn't see you at dinner, I thought my uncle had taken you away after all. We have to communicate, in the lounge, I'll play—now!*

"I don't know, but I imagine he's down at the gym."

As he spoke, his thoughts said, *How do you know? I don't understand.*

*We know Sanel's planning to use us to do something horrible. Actually, I know now that it's only Paul he wants. And since you asked me so much about my family the other night, I knew that you knew something. Paul figured out the rest. You were the one at the spaceport, weren't you? We read about it in the news the day before we came aboard the Sovereign.*

*Yes. I was trying to go home, to Novaun.*

"Oh well, it figures. I guess I'll have to talk to him later. I'm not in the mood to do much hunting around for him tonight. I would much rather go to the lounge and play. Why don't you come with me?"

*Paul has a photograph and a medallion that he told me about last night. He assumed a lot about our background from them, which he told me, including the fact that Lena was really our mother! He also found out that our father's name was Jenan and that Sanel still hates him.*

Myke said, "Yes! I'd love to. C'mon." *Sanel still hates your father?*

*That appears to be the case. He and Paul had an argument after Lena's body was taken away, and Sanel threw him against the wall and said, "You are no match for me, son of Jenan."*

*It sounds like they knew each other.* Myke wondered if King, too, was a Novaunian.

*What exactly do you know about Paul and me?*

*My father's last communication to me before he died was that "royal twins" were the key to Earth's gaining control over Novaun's arelada, and because of that and your relationship to King, I've suspected for a while that you and Paul are from Novaun and that your parents were associated somehow with one of the families that controls arelada. When I talked to you the other night, I knew for sure. I didn't know who you were then, but I just found the picture, so I do now.*

*You're the grandchildren of the high patriarch of the great family Doshyr. The Doshyrs control nearly half of the mining of arelada on Novaun, and Paul is the Doshyrs' natural heir through the patriarchal line. Not only that, but your mother was the daughter of another great high patriarch and monarch.*

Deia walked with Myke to the door and into the passageway. *Paul and I are some kind of royalty? That's unbelievable. Paul did deduce from what Dr. Luciani and Jacquae said about Novaun's being totally telepathic, that it's the planet we're from.*

*How in the universe did Paul figure that out?*

*It's a long story. It's enough to say that he made some deductions about what a totally telepathic society would be like and how Sanel could use it against us. They were right, weren't they, when they said that no one speaks on Novaun?*

*Yes. That's the case most of the time, anyway.*

*That's what I thought. Myke, my uncle is on the Sovereign, and I spoke to him today. He wants me to convince Paul to do a job for him. I suppose he thinks Paul will do anything I say, especially if he buys me with fancy promises.*

*He also told me that you have the spirit dimension formula and that you need help to use it to leave the ship. He said that you would want to use me, and he offered me a chance to marry Greg and study with the great maestro if I would agree to go with you and then betray you at the last minute. I told him I would do it so that he and that horrible D.I.I. man of his would let us go without any problems. I have no intention of betraying you, but they won't know that until it's too late and we're already gone. Don't you see? It's perfect!*

Myke was ecstatic. Deia was better at playing these games than he was! *Deia, that was wonderful! Brilliant!* His ecstasy plunged to despair. He still needed another helper.

Myke's abrupt change of emotion puzzled Deia. *What's the matter?*

*There's a problem, Deia, which is one of the reasons I didn't tell you about any of this the other night. I know I can trust you and Paul, but even if both of you will go, I need another person. It takes four to use the spirit dimension formula.*

*Four?* Deia communicated in panic. She followed Myke through the door of the lounge and walked to the piano as he approached a couple of his friends nearby. Neither communicated telepathically for several minutes.

As Myke began conversing with a couple of the guys he saw occasionally at the gym, he thought again about Dr. Luciani. He knew that if Dr. Luciani were a plant, he would not only be watching him, he would also be watching Paul and Deia and manipulating them to his own ends. It seemed to Myke that Jacquae, not Dr. Luciani, was the likely informer. She had always been in a position to get close to all three of them, and always closer to Paul and Deia than to him, which made sense, because neither one of them would be suspicious. And being Deia's roommate put her close to him, but not too close. Then there was her apparently hypocritical nature and all of her little comments about money.

Not only that, but Deia thought highly of Dr. Luciani and believed in him. Moreover, it seemed Deia's uncle had planned from the beginning to buy Deia with her piano career. If that was the case, and from the conversation Deia had had with her uncle earlier in the day it was, then Dr. Luciani couldn't possibly be a plant. He had always encouraged Deia so eagerly toward medicine, even transferring some of his excitement to her. He simply wouldn't have given her that kind of encouragement if he were working for King.

Powerful realization struck, truth that burned in his mind and heart. Dr. Luciani could be trusted! Myke knew it as surely as he knew he could trust Paul and Deia. But would he go? Maybe if Deia communicated with him he would, maybe if he was paid well.

Myke reached out with his spirit and touched Deia's, indicating he wanted to communicate again. *I've been thinking, Deia, and I know I can trust Dr. Luciani. I have no idea, however, whether he'll be willing to go. Do you think you could convince him?*

*I'll certainly try. If I can't convince him, no one can, but he'll need some incentive.*

*Of course. Tell him that he'll be paid twelve thousand gold coins on arrival. That's about the equivalent of one hundred thousand Earth dollars. My superiors will give him a new identity and set him up on any planet he chooses, except Earth of course, or he's welcome to live on Novaun and continue his medical training with the most sophisticated telepathic medical technology in the galaxy. Tell him we have this device called the Awareness monitor that allows a physician to see every particle of the body from the inside out.*

*If he passes up a hundred thousand dollars and a chance to get out of Star Force to study medicine with an emphasis on mind power, then I deserve to die! Don't worry, I'll convince him.*

*Wonderful! And you're sure Paul will go?*

*There isn't any doubt in my mind.*

*Deia, I want to try to leave tomorrow at 0700. Fifteen minutes after I leave, go explain everything to Paul. I would communicate with him myself, but I don't think he will feel comfortable communicating with me on this level. Then after you've communicated with Paul, go find Dr. Luciani and convince him to come with us. Let me know tonight what he says. If Dr. Luciani agrees to come, then later tonight I'll give you all instructions. And get a good night's sleep; you're going to need it.*

*How long will our flight be?*

*Regularly it would be a good five Earth days from our present position, but with the spirit dimension formula it'll be instantaneous. We'll all be exhausted by the time we get there, though. More important now is that you convince Dr. Luciani to come with us.*

*I will. I just thought of something. I don't even know what your real name is. It isn't Myke Zarek, is it.*

*No, and believe me, I'll be glad when this thing's finally over and I can shed that name for good. It's caused me nothing but trouble. My given name is Teren, and my family name is Zaurvau.*

*It's a beautiful name, just like poetry, and it suits you well.*

*Just don't say it out loud until we get to Novaun!*

*Of course not. I love you, Teren Zaurvau.*

Myke was overwhelmed with joy. *I love you too, Deia Doshyr.* Feeling remarkably relaxed, Myke seated himself comfortably in a chair and basked in her love, Chopin's triumphant polonaise vibrating with excitement through his body as it did through hers. Their spirits remained overlapped until Deia left fifteen minutes later.

Deia reappeared in the lounge less than ten minutes after she had left. She immediately communicated with Myke and told him that Paul wished to communicate with him personally, that he would be in the gym fencing in five minutes.

Myke met Paul in the gym, and as they sparred and talked about the cadets' outstanding victory in the Day of Liberation fencing tournament, Myke telepathically explained the entire situation through the spirit expansion. Paul was particularly concerned with whether or not the spirit dimension formula had been tested, and Myke assured him that he and his father had used it many times to move themselves and had developed the

method of using it with a space vessel in numerous flight simulations using telepathy vision. Myke explained telepathy vision as well as he could and gave Paul a basic demonstration, putting them both in an armed shuttle in space. Paul was astounded at how real it looked and felt.

*And even without the spirit dimension formula, you're sure you can pilot a shuttle?*

*These days, shuttles are so automated that any idiot can pilot one,* Myke replied in amusement. *Just don't expect to see any precision flying!*

Convinced they could travel to Novaun in safety, Paul relaxed. *To tell you the truth, I'm relieved! Last night when Deia and I talked, I left the decision of what we should do up to her and told her I would support her. It sounded all along as though Sanel planned for me to do nothing less than treachery to my parents' families, and I don't think I could stomach that. I just hope Deia can convince Dr. Luciani to come with us!*

*She should be talking to him now.*

\* \* \*

Deia found Dr. Luciani in the office he shared with Drs. Himes and Irwin, filling out reports. Fortunately he was alone.

"Hi kid. What brings you here at this odd hour?"

Deia was too apprehensive to delay revealing her intentions. "I have a question to ask you—about my schedule." She pressed her spirit against his, hoping he would understand that she wanted to communicate telepathically. He did.

As their spirits overlapped, she felt in him a mixture of amusement, intense interest, and concern for a patient he had in recovery. When they reached the level of shared thought, he communicated, *You must have quite a question!*

Deia asked him about her schedule, then inquired about his patient, telepathically telling him about Myke's plan to escape the ship. He took it all in without responding once in formulated thought, that strange mixture of amusement, intense interest, and concern for his patient surging from his spirit into hers like electricity.

*So . . . what do you think? Will you come?* When Dr. Luciani didn't immediately give an answer, she began to despair.

Finally Dr. Luciani replied, *Myke's offer is tempting, but my life is Star Force.*

Deia knew that what he communicated was true. He had found success in Star Force and was comfortable there, perhaps too comfortable. Myke's offer did tempt him. He was ready for a significant change in his life; she could feel it. *Don't you see? You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by coming with us! You can go wherever you want to go, and live however you want to live!* Deia struggled to keep the desperation she felt out of her thoughts. *The Novaunians have telepathic medical technology more sophisticated than anything you or I have ever even imagined. Think of all the new techniques they could teach you! Think of the new challenges!*

*I'll do it.*

*You'll do it— That's wonderful!*

*Wait a minute. I'll do it, but one hundred thousand dollars isn't enough. You go tell Myke that if he doubles the offer, he has a deal.*

Deia stared at Dr. Luciani in shock; had she not been so grateful to him, she would have been outraged.

Dr. Luciani's thoughts flashed through her with mischievousness. *Myke wouldn't trust me if I didn't barter.* His spirit seemed to be emitting sparks of laughter in every direction.

Deia relaxed a little. *You're joking, right?*

Dr. Luciani was more amused than ever. *Oh no. This isn't a joke. I want two hundred thousand dollars.*

*I—I'll talk to him tonight,* Deia communicated with difficulty. *I'm sure he'll agree.*

\* \* \*

Later that night, the D.I.I. agent Daniel Stewart communicated telepathically with his primary cadet helper.

*So he trusts you . . .*

*Implicitly.*

*Good . . . you've done an excellent job, Dr. Luciani. Superb. It was worth every bit of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.*

*And King is a genius. Our Novaunian agent never had a chance. Stand by tomorrow for my signal . . . and the kill.*



## Chapter 26: THE DOUBLE-EDGED CHOICE

Jacquae, Kristina, and Tevaronia had left the compartment only minutes before to go to breakfast. Deia gazed affectionately at the little piano necklace Paul had given her for her birthday as she removed it from her jewelry box, then reached into her jewelry box again and removed the exquisite opal ring that Lena had designed exclusively for her and slipped it on the chain with the piano pendant. She fastened the necklace around her neck, regretting that she would have to leave her music texts, pre-recorded music, and family holodiscs behind.

Deia was excited to go to Novaun, but she was also afraid that something would go wrong. She hated to admit it, but she was also a little afraid of what she and Paul would find on Novaun. She hoped with all her essence they would like it there and that they and Dr. Luciani would be welcomed and accepted.

She had one regret about leaving the ship with Myke, and that was leaving Greg behind to feel the repercussions of her actions. She knew he would be angry with her, insanely angry with Myke, and completely humiliated. He might even miss her. Yes . . . he would miss her. She really liked Greg and didn't want to hurt him, but she knew there was no way to avoid it. She had struggled much of the night, while pretending to be asleep, to compose an explanation cryptic enough to fool Sanel, yet clear enough to enlighten Greg. He would just have to understand.

As Deia stood up, she leaned toward the middle of the table and pushed a button to activate the intercom, then left a message with the Earth Room's florist shop to deliver a vase of roses to Greg's compartment that afternoon.

Deia left her compartment and hurried to the meeting place. She and Dr. Luciani arrived at exactly the same time, and moments later Paul arrived. Paul appeared more assured and in better spirits than Deia had seen him in a long time, filling her with hope. She knew that once they were free of Sanel's control forever, Paul would eventually overcome his problems and become a confident, capable, and happy person.

Myke arrived at 0700 to the second. He motioned to Dr. Luciani, and Dr. Luciani pulled four laser scalpels from his pockets and distributed them. He held his device out for the others to see and showed them how to use it.

Myke pointed to his head. When Deia, Paul, and Dr. Luciani overlapped spirits with him, they were amazed to discern that his mind was projecting hundreds of images of empty passageway, each image a little different. Their minds gripped the fragment of the kaleidoscope Myke had reserved for them and felt his thoughts: *When we get up there, we'll aim the beams at the shipmen's eyes. They'll be distracted for only a couple of minutes, but that should be more than enough time for us to get away if we hurry. Let's go!*

They stepped into the transport pod, and in minutes, they arrived at deck F-15, one of the many fighter flight decks that were located in the outer hull that surrounded the cylindrical inner hull of the *Sovereign*. Armed shuttles were essentially fighters designed to carry important passengers and were thus launched from a fighter flight deck.

When the transport pod's doors slid open on deck F-15, the four sprang into the flight passageway, Myke and Deia facing right and Paul and Dr. Luciani back-to-back to them facing left. They fired their lasers down the passageway, taking the shipmen who were stationed there completely by surprise and temporarily blinding them. Then they adjusted

the lasers to high power and used them to break into several of the lockers that lined the side of the passageway opposite the fighter air locks and computers.

Myke fought off several of the more determined shipmen, while Paul, Deia, and Dr. Luciani slipped into their flight suits. Once the shipmen were unconscious, Myke put on his suit and helped Deia and the others make the proper adjustments to their suits. They placed the navy blue, arelada-lined helmets on their heads as they hurried to the air locks. The armed shuttles were docked by their wings into flat launching pads on the *Sovereign's* outer hull. Narrow tubes containing air locks held the docked crafts' seats and connected the cabin to the flight passageway.

Paul and Dr. Luciani took the passenger seats in the rear, and Myke and Deia ducked and sat down in front of them in the pilot and co-pilots' positions. They strapped themselves in, and Myke pushed a button that jettisoned their seats through the narrow tube and down into the cabin. A whirring noise sounded as the cabin closed and the air lock tube disconnected from the shuttle.

Myke transmitted his thoughts to Paul, Deia, and Dr. Luciani, *Reach into me now and get the formula. When I give the signal, lock spirits and put it into motion.*

Paul, Deia, and Dr. Luciani reached out with their spirits and received the spirit dimension formula from Myke as Myke expanded his spirit to encompass every component of the ship. In seconds, Myke's mind communicated, *Now!*

Just as Deia partially joined spirits with Myke, Paul, and Dr. Luciani and executed her part of the spirit dimension formula, an overwhelming surge of vital energy engulfed the craft and pressed down around her, giving everything the appearance of velvet. The pressure was so strong that she couldn't hear or even breathe. Myke's mind formulated images of a planet, its sun, its solar system, its galactic coordinates, and the velvet became an opalescent blur.

Deia felt as if the shuttle itself were alive and that she and Myke and Dr. Luciani and Paul were integral organs of the vessel-being. She felt the warmth of their combined spirits' energy, but even though they were in a sense one, she could feel and identify her companions' individual essences and strengths. Never in her life had she felt such rapture, such exultation, nor had she ever imagined it was possible for human beings to achieve such heights of emotion. She knew that this experience would change all of them, that it would strengthen their relationships with each other, and that their spirits would be bound forever.

Deia could hardly believe it was real. They were on their way to Novaun. Would it really only be an instant? Finally. *Novaun . . .*

## Epilogue: FINAL GIFT

Greg Pierce walked briskly to his compartment after class, carefully avoiding the stares of curiosity and pity he received from the cadets who walked by him.

Two days had passed since the disappearance of Myke, Deia, Paul, and Ton Luciani and an armed shuttle, and the cadets on the *Sovereign of the Stars* had been unable to talk about anything else. Commander Bernstein had issued a formal statement soon after the disappearance, saying that the Diron agent Myke Zarek had been executed, and that Deia, Paul, and Ton had been executed for treason.

No one completely believed Commander Bernstein's statement. On the other hand, no one knew what had happened, but everyone had a speculation. The most popular one was that Myke had taken Deia, Paul, and Ton with him in the missing armed shuttle to his Diron base, but why they had gone with him and how the shuttle had escaped being annihilated by the fleet were mysteries.

Greg clenched his fists at his sides. He had spent the last two days avoiding the questions and ignoring the whispers and stares. He had finally resorted to shrugging and saying that he wasn't the least bit disturbed by any of it. Myke Zarek had always been a low-life, everyone knew that Ton Luciani was a son of Abomination, and Paul had never wanted to be in Star Force, so why shouldn't he have taken his chance to leave? As far as Deia was concerned, he had never cared about her, not really. To admit anything more would have meant complete humiliation. And what was worse, his father refused to tell him the real story behind it all.

When Greg arrived at his compartment, he was met by a shipman holding a vase of red roses. The young man glanced at Greg's name tag, then said in relief, bowing slightly, "These are for you, sir."

"For me?" Greg replied, puzzled.

"Yes."

Greg stared at the roses in alarm as he took them from the shipman. They had to be from Deia. No one else would give him roses.

"They were ordered two days ago. We're sorry we didn't get them to you before now, but there was a mix-up. Hopefully your girlfriend won't be angry."

"No . . . no . . . I don't think she will be. Thank you." Greg quickly turned and entered his compartment, his emotions mixed. In a way, he felt glad that he was finally going to get some kind of an explanation. In a way, he felt angry that Deia would dare think he cared.

Greg set the vase of roses on the table, tore open the card, and read:

Greg,

My love is a rose,  
a rhapsody blooming  
in an evergreen garden.

My love is a crystal,  
a ballade shining  
in a star-brimmed paradise.

Affectionately,  
Deia

Greg laid the card on the table and gazed at the roses, more puzzled than ever. Why would a woman write so intimately to a man she had rejected? What in the galaxy did it mean? It couldn't be a love letter. She was in love with Myke and had been all along; that much had become obvious two days before. Greg felt queasy with mortification. The evidence had been there the entire time. He hadn't seen it because he hadn't wanted to know.

If the poem wasn't a love letter, then it had to be an explanation. Paul and Deia had taken a great risk by allying themselves with a foreign agent. Perhaps Deia had believed explicitness would increase their danger and had resorted to symbolism.

Greg read the card again and again, trying to see meaning in every word. The first stanza spoke directly to him. He and Deia had talked of roses and Moreau's "Rhapsody of the Heart" the evening he had asked her to marry him. The second stanza, however, didn't acknowledge him at all. A crystal? Ballade? Star-brimmed paradise? What did it mean?

After many more minutes of study, he understood. Arelada was crystal, and Chopin composed ballades. Myke had tutored her in telepathy; Myke's favorite composer was Chopin. Greg decided that the first stanza referred to him, the second stanza to Myke. Deia had written about her two loves to assure him that she hadn't used him, that her affection for him had been genuine. The rose and rhapsody were direct references to his proposal. She had acknowledged it and considered it but had, in the end, chosen Myke.

The evergreen garden didn't symbolize undying love—that was undoubtedly reserved for Myke. Perhaps the evergreen symbolized undying memories. That made more sense. The word "garden" suggested plants, soil, earth. Did garden mean earthly love opposed to heavenly or eternal, "star-brimmed," love? The lowly earth opposed to the exalted heavens?

No . . . that wasn't quite it. A rose blooming in an evergreen garden . . . Greg of a garden . . . Greg of plants, soil, and earth . . . Greg of Earth. Arelada shining in a star-brimmed paradise . . . Myke of a star-brimmed paradise . . . Myke of . . . ? Was this Deia's way of telling him where Myke was from? Where she had gone?

A star-brimmed paradise . . . a paradise surrounded by stars, brimming with stars, overflowing . . . Deia was not describing Diron; that was certain. Most of the former Diron Empire was located on the border of the galaxy, not surrounded by multitudes of stars by anyone's calculation and definitely not a paradise. Then again, Greg had never believed Myke was a Diron. Unusual, yes. An agent, yes. Foreign, yes. An obsessed savage from Diron, no. Myke was too wholesome, too compassionate, too serene.

Perhaps Deia's star-brimmed paradise was Novaun. Novaun, a planet with such a reputation of being beautiful, powerful, wealthy and mysterious that it was known throughout the galaxy as "the mythical galactic paradise," was located near the galactic nucleus and therefore surrounded by a sumptuous expanse of stars. "Star-brimmed paradise," coupled with the term crystal, meaning arelada, described Novaun so well that Greg felt certain his deduction was correct. In Greg's mind, Myke the Zionite effortlessly became Myke the Novaunian. It made perfect sense.

Greg knew he should be angry with Deia, but he couldn't be. Never. He glanced grimly around the compartment. He almost wished he had never read the poem or received Deia's gift. For some unfathomable reason, everything Deia had said in the card and everything she had done made him want her even more.

Greg sighed in surrender and placed the card in one of his drawers for safekeeping.

\* \* \*

Katherine Padilla, the mother of seven, was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. She resided more than thirty years in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area and recently moved to Florida. She has been writing novels since age thirteen. As a teenager, she was equally intrigued by prophecies of the Last Days and the television show *Star Trek*. At age seventeen she wrote her first story that combined prophecy with science fiction and even submitted it to a contest. That story remains unpublished (and unpublishable!), but her interest in exploring traditional values and religious themes through speculative fiction remains as strong as ever. Through many years of writing, studying, and reading widely, she has learned how to achieve just the right balance of spirituality and fantasy in her novels to both entertain and inspire.

Mrs. Padilla has given many speeches on the benefits of reading wholesome literature and has compiled resources to help readers in that pursuit on her website **Novaun Novels** at [novels.zerosilver.com](http://novels.zerosilver.com). Her work has also been published in the *Ensign* magazine. She is the author of seven faith-based novels:

### **Heirs of Novaun**

1. *The Double-Edged Choice*
2. *Twin Witness to Betrayal*
3. *Travail of a Traitor*
4. *Bond With a Terrorist*

### **Dominion Over the Earth**

1. *Fall to Eden*
2. *Alien Roads*
3. *Day of Liberation*