

**HEIRS OF NOVAUN Book 3**

# TRAVAIL OF A TRAITOR

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## DEDICATION

*To Steve*

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## Prologue: TWO AGENTS

On the Earth base ship *Sovereign of the Stars*, in a luxurious stateroom on “A” Deck, Sanel King and Internal Investigation agent Daniel Stewart gazed in satisfaction at a man who had been physically altered to look exactly like agent Stewart, except that his eyes were not brown, but blue.

King hurriedly dismissed the Stewart-twin and telepathically commanded his Eslavu servant to pour him a glass of mineral water.

Stewart received his own glass of mineral water, his satisfaction so extreme it was almost regret. “I almost wish I were the one going to Novaun. I want the pleasure of torturing that son of Abomination myself.”

King chuckled. “Your pleasure will be much greater if you live to see the destruction of our young traitor and Novaun’s humiliation. Your twin goes to Novaun to die.”

Stewart’s dark eyes searched King’s face calculatingly. “And your spy?”

King’s eyes shone with gloating ruthlessness. “My spy is in position and is progressing as planned, possessing a mind of even greater potential than I had anticipated. My plan is coming to fruition so easily I’m embarrassed for the great Novaunian Fleet.”

Stewart laughed.

King sighed in ecstasy. “My revenge will be glorious.”

## Part 1: REJECTION

### Chapter 1: CONFIDANTS

Ton Luciani had just completed a surgery with Dr. Lren Tervel and was on his way to the shower when he received a telepathic summons from Dr. Morlel Hovaus, his mentor. Since Ton was not scheduled for a review, the summons worried him. Had he done something to provoke a reprimand?

Ton quickly showered, changed, and hurried to Dr. Hovaus's office at the clinic. He entered looking as dignified as he could. Ton was relieved that a librarian wasn't present. At least this wasn't going to be an official meeting.

Dr. Hovaus greeted Ton with fingertips touching and invited him to sit down. *I'll come straight to the point, Ton. Since you've been here, you've been volunteering all of your free time at the hospital, and it's starting to show. You're slow and rundown.*

Ton gazed at his mentor, perplexed. *I do what is required, then only what I wish to do. All of my reviews have shown that my work is exceptional.*

*Your knowledge and execution of technique is exceptional, yes, but you are slow, and you aren't slow because you're being careful, which is what I expect from a new physician. It's a hesitating, unsure kind of slowness that comes from a cloudy mind. We need doctors who are dedicated, yes, but we don't want medical martyrs.*

Ton thought in exasperation that if Colonel Quautar would let him have his coffee on the days he worked he would be as fast and as sure of himself as any of the more experienced surgeons!

Dr. Hovaus leaned forward in his chair. *I'm worried about you, Ton. You need something in your life other than work. You will not only be happier, your work will become much more fulfilling and effective. I don't want to throw your life into a complete state of shock, but I do want you to relax a little. From today on, you will work only for me. I've already contacted the necessary hospital staff members.*

Ton assimilated Dr. Hovaus's thoughts in a daze. What would he do with all those extra hours a week? He would go insane with boredom.

Learning of the death of Ausha's brother a week and a half before had disheartened him enough. His fight with Miaundea had shattered him, and finding the taffuao remains of a woman spy in his room at the Doshyr estate had completely terrified and unnerved him. This final blow of having his working hours restricted devastated him. He scratched at his mustache, too perplexed to reply.

Dr. Hovaus gazed at Ton in concern. *I want you to relax, Ton. Not lie down and die.* He squeezed Ton's arm. *What is really bothering you?*

Ton shook his head quickly as if to communicate, "Nothing."

Dr. Hovaus withdrew his hand. *You want to tell me that your personal concerns are none of my business. Everything you do is my business if it in any way threatens the quality of your work.*

Ton leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, covering his face with his hands. Perhaps he couldn't tell Dr. Hovaus about his fear of Sanel King and the woman spy he knew had been in his room, but he could tell him something about the fight he had had with Miaundea. *I had a fight with a girl I like very much. She . . . well . . . I was full of rage, and if she hadn't run away from me I . . . I would have beaten her.*

Ton couldn't bring himself to communicate any more. He certainly couldn't reveal the nature of the argument. He couldn't take the chance that Dr. Hovaus or anyone else would tell Colonel Quautar, thus endangering his privilege to live on Novaun. He had no doubt that leaving Novaun at this point would mean instant death. He sat up and leaned back, feeling exhausted.

*You need to communicate with Counselor Brunel.*

Ton stiffened. *That is completely out of the question.*

Dr. Hovaus appeared puzzled. *Counselor Brunel is perfectly qualified to help you deal with personal problems as well as with the stresses that come with practicing medicine. Receiving help from a psychologist isn't anything to be ashamed of. If a large number of people didn't need emotional help at times, there wouldn't be counselors available to give it.*

Ton felt a flicker of spiteful satisfaction. As much as they demanded perfection, Novaunians were as human as everyone else and just as flawed. He shook his head. *I'm not ashamed. I just . . . can't.*

*I think I understand. The young lady you have the problem with is the daughter of your sponsor, Colonel Quautar, and you're afraid that anything you communicate about her would somehow get back to him.*

Ton could not muster a reply.

*Did it ever occur to you that he may already know everything?*

Ton regarded Dr. Hovaus suspiciously.

*She may have already told him about your argument.*

*That is extremely unlikely.*

Dr. Hovaus pondered Ton's problem for nearly a minute. Finally he communicated with a shake of his head, *You have a problem, Ton, and you need to communicate with someone. You can't change a lifetime of attitudes and inappropriate ways of dealing with frustration with a simple snap of your fingers. As long as we can keep your visits unofficial, I can promise you that neither Counselor Brunel nor any of the other Academy psychologists I can refer you to for counseling will betray your confidence to anyone, even Colonel Quautar.*

Ton wasn't so slow and rundown that he failed to take Dr. Hovaus's hint—that if he didn't initiate counseling on his own, his mentor would order him to do it and would receive reports on his progress from the psychologist he saw. *I understand. I'll make an appointment.*

*Good. In the meantime, I feel I should make a couple of suggestions. First, you need to learn to channel your anger. When you feel you're losing control, leave the situation. Then take a walk, write in a journal, scream into a pillow, participate in strenuous exercise, or whatever you find works for you. My other suggestion is to confide in a friend, someone you trust, someone who can help you understand and express what angers and distresses you.*

Ton drummed his fingers on his thighs, feeling helpless. *I've never had a friend like that.*

*If you would let some of your young colleagues into your life more, you would develop some deep friendships.* Dr. Hovaus stood up, smiling. *And since you will only be working for me, you'll have quite a bit more time to do so.*

Ton thought immediately of Ausha, but he wasn't sure what she would think of him now that his people had killed her brother. *Do you think that when Ausha gets back she'll blame me?* He stood up and walked with Dr. Hovaus to the door.

*Do you blame yourself?*

*Yes and no. I could never have ordered that invasion if I had been in a position to do so, but still, they are my people, and I was part of Star Force for five years. They trained me for combat and self-defense just as they did the rest of them. I wore an immobilizer when I was sent into a battle zone to treat the wounded. My ship might have been the one that attacked Jaunel's. How am I supposed to feel?*

*I don't know. You're in a unique and baffling position.*

Ton stopped in front of the door, unable to bring himself to look at Dr. Hovaus. *The most shameful thing about it is that it didn't bother me so much at first. I knew that what Earth had done was wrong, but still, it was just an intellectual game, a political puzzle. But then Ausha's brother died, and everything changed.*

Dr. Hovaus put his arm around Ton's shoulders and squeezed slightly. *What you're feeling is the pain of someone you care about, empathy. Just be honest with Ausha about the way you feel, and she won't blame you.*

Ton finally turned toward Dr. Hovaus, shaking his head. *It still won't change what happened.*

Ton left Dr. Hovaus, feeling depressed. His working relationship with Ausha would take care of itself when she returned from Dinevlea, but he didn't know what to do about Miaundea. He had struggled over the last week not to think about her, with no success. He hadn't realized how much a part of his life she had become. He missed her teasing smile, the way her eyes lit up as she analyzed a problem, the security of having her slide her tiny hand under his elbow and pressing it affectionately against his arm.

She had tried communicating with him several times over the past seven days, and he had refused, repelled by the possibility that she would do as she usually did whenever he did something to disturb her, treat him as if nothing had happened and continue on in her little charade.

He wanted her to be his lover and companion, and one way or another, he was going to force a decision from her. She wanted to communicate with him? Fine. She could do it on his terms. She could come to him at his apartment.

Ton went to the clinic cafeteria and had a quick lunch with Danal, then headed back to his office to study his new cases and complete some reports. Normally he and Dr. Hovaus's other apprentices didn't see patients on Sixth Day since they were usually in surgery or performing an Awareness manipulation, so as far as he knew, he didn't have any patients scheduled for that afternoon. He was surprised to find Ausha there, sitting in the glow of a magnified patient Awareness image being generated by their telepathic transmission recorder, systematically formulating various surgery strategies for one of their more difficult new cases.

Ton stopped in just inside the door. The change in Ausha was astounding. She looked sickly, her skin ashen instead of its normal creamy translucence. Her gaunt face, with its dark shadows of exhaustion, made her exotic brown eyes seem larger than normal, which only emphasized their sorrow. Gone was her cheerful exuberance and breathless, frenetic pace, replaced by unhurried graveness. Even her plants drooped around her in desolation, proud Hokinnon most of all.



Ton felt queasy. What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to communicate? It didn't seem right to act as if nothing had happened, and yet seeing her this way made him long to redirect her thoughts to happier subjects and help her forget.

Sensing Ton's presence by the door, Ausha lifted her head and looked at him. The Awareness image disappeared. She smiled, just barely, in an attempt to be cheerful. *Hello, Ton. I told you that one of these days I would surprise you and get here first.*

Ton walked cautiously to the middle of the office and the telepathic transmission recorder. *Hi, Ausha.* He groped for something to communicate. *When did you get back?*

*This morning.*

*Andrel came in yesterday and asked about you.*

Ausha grimaced. *I don't want to see him.*

*He seems very concerned.*

She sighed. *I know.* She continued, somewhat vexed: *I also know just what he'll communicate in his "concern." He lives completely in his idealistic world of knowledge and principle, rights and wrongs. He can't begin to understand real people and real pain. He'll try to comfort me, and instead he'll moralize and tell me that Jaunel has made a natural step in his progression, that he's at peace, and that there will come a time when we'll all be together again.*

Ausha stared into space, her expression wry. *Well, I already know all of that, and it doesn't change what I feel. It doesn't build a bridge over that awful chasm between this world and the next. And it doesn't make me miss him any less.*

Ausha's communication about death and "that awful chasm between this world and the next" paralyzed Ton. He could think of nothing at that moment but his treason, Sanel King, and the female spy that had been in his room in Launarda.

Feeling Ton's spasm of fear in their telepathic exchange, Ausha looked up at him and frowned, her expression one of alarm and concern. She stood up and pulled a chair over to the transmission recorder next to hers and gently sat Ton down in it. She reseated herself and stroked his arm. *What is it, Ton? What is it that terrifies you so?*

Ton gazed at her, uncomprehending. How did she know? How could she possibly know?

Ausha almost smiled, communicating as if in answer to his thoughts, *I felt it.*

Ton felt like a fool. Of course she had felt it. The problem with telepathy was that these Novaunians could read emotions too well, particularly the more empathic ones like Ausha and Dr. Hovaus. Virtually the only way to keep feelings private was not to communicate at all. With Ausha, though, that wasn't an option. Knowing how futile his effort would be, he had never fought it with her, nor did he withdraw abruptly now, but her perception made him uncomfortable all the same.

Ausha gazed at him solemnly, again feeling his emotions and understanding their nature. *We're friends, Ton. You have no reason to be embarrassed or uneasy with me about anything. I have no intention to ever judge you or moralize.*

For the moment, Ton's curiosity was stronger than his fear of King. *Why not?*

*Because I hate it when people do it to me, and it doesn't do one bit of good. Maybe that's why I've always felt so at ease with you. You're opinionated, maybe even more opinionated than I, but you never moralize.*

*I can't do anything to offend you!*

*I don't think we would work very well together if either one of us let ourselves get offended and irritated by our personal differences and idiosyncrasies.*

*But I can't offend anyone on this planet. Even the ones who get offended don't treat me differently afterward. I don't understand it, and I don't like it.*

*Why do you wish you could offend people?*

*So that they'll despise me. It makes it a whole lot easier to despise them.* He continued weakly, *It makes you a lot less vulnerable.*

Ausha gazed at him compassionately. *You've lost people close to you, haven't you?*

She was so sincere, and their communication had always been so natural and comfortable. Ton couldn't not answer her. *I have, but not to death. Sometimes I think death would be the easy way. At least the person who dies generally doesn't have control. It can't be anything like the agony of one day realizing that after years and years of fighting to gain someone's approval and support that you're never going to get it, no matter what you do. Or losing an intimate friend because you remind him of someone who hurt him.* Ton nodded. *I really think death would be the easy way.*

*At least I know Jaunel wouldn't have had it this way, that he misses us as much as we miss him. Sometimes that makes me feel better; sometimes it makes me feel worse. I can't bear the thought of him there and all of us here, and how lonely he must feel.* Ausha's lips trembled. *He was so young, Ton, so young, and he had his whole life ahead of him. All he ever wanted to do was join the Fleet and rescue wounded soldiers, but there was no one there to rescue him. He left a wife and a new little baby. It just doesn't seem fair, you know?*

Ton nodded slowly, again gripped with fear. *I know.*

*I guess that's what scares me most about dying, that I'll miss my family too much and that I'll leave something unfinished, like Jaunel did.*

Ton couldn't seem to restrain the outpouring of his own worries and emotions. *Sometimes I think it would be easier to die, to just shut everything off, all the pain, all the loneliness, all the fear. Then I get terrified that maybe our spirits do continue to live after we die, that all of those feelings, those needs, and those cravings just keep going on and on and on, forever and ever, nagging at you constantly but never consuming you and putting you out of your misery. I can't imagine a more exquisite torment.*

Ausha replied only with feelings. He sensed that she had internalized his fears and understood, and that in itself made him feel a little less afraid, at least for the moment. Perhaps the most unbelievable emotion he could feel in her was that she acknowledged his unequivocal right to want to be happy and at peace in his life, that she anguished with him at having never been able to find it, and that she wanted it for him as sincerely as he wanted it for himself.

They sat there still for many minutes, when suddenly Ton blurted in earnestness and anxiety, *I'm sorry about Jaunel, Ausha. I'm more sorry than you can know, but when I came in here a little while ago and saw you looking so miserable, I didn't know what to communicate. I didn't know what to do, and I still don't. The Senlana invasion never made me so ashamed of my own people as that day a week and a half ago when Dr. Hovaus told you about Jaunel. It doesn't surprise me that Earth invaded Senlana, but that doesn't make it any less wrong. And no, it isn't fair.*

*For not knowing what to communicate, you seem to be communicating all the right things.* She gazed at him, still sad, but with that incredible concentration that had always so impressed him. *Why Ton? Why would they have done it?*

It was a question she had longed to ask him since the moment she had learned of the invasion. Ton was disturbed that she hadn't felt comfortable asking it until now, but he was relieved that his race didn't matter to her, only his personal feelings about the invasion, and that she had used the pronoun "they" instead of "you."

*It could have been for a lot of different reasons. They're proud, they want arelada, and they need a war. War is something they understand. It's holy to them. It's their way of life, and unless you live among them, there's no way you can really understand it.*

Ton opened his mind to her and let her see the attitudes of his Earthon peers in Star Force, from the *Prince Jahnzel*, to *Latanza III*, to the *Sovereign of the Stars*. He showed her the religious services, their fencing tournaments, their rallies, their conversations, their basic military training. He showed her Earth's culture in general, their literature, their art, their knowledge and ambitions, their Zarrist history, their allegiance to their Divine Emperor.

Ausha assimilated it all, fascinated and appalled. She and the other student physicians had, at different times, asked Ton about his academic and medical training on Earth and his experiences as a neurosurgeon in Star Force, but they had never asked him about Earth's culture. She began to understand why Earth would do something so brutal and immoral as invade a tiny neighboring republic, that to many Earthons the invasion hadn't been immoral at all. She began to understand, but that understanding brought new concern about Earth as a significant threat to the security of Novaun and the other planets in the Union, especially those on the borders such as Dinevlea.

*I always told you that you're of a corrupt race,* Ausha teased.

*And being a traitor, I'm the most corrupt of all.*

*How did you escape it, Ton?*

*I don't know. I guess it was the natural Awareness ability I had to see the Divine Emperor attempting to take control of a cell in my brain on my Day of Awakening. I guess after that my instinct just took over and I fought it with all my strength. But I never escaped it. I was just never a part of it. I don't suppose anyone was surprised when I sold out to an enemy agent.*

*A traitor at heart long before you committed treason, hmmm?*

Ton smiled. *I guess so.*

Ausha smiled at him affectionately. *You know, for a corrupt Earthon traitor, you're an excellent physician.*

*Dr. Hovaus doesn't think so. He thinks I'm slow and rundown.* Ton told Ausha about his interview with their mentor and the new restriction in his working hours.

*I don't understand it, Ausha. At least half of the emergency physicians on the day shift are volunteers. Then there are the staffs of volunteer nurses and technicians both here and at the hospital. So why does Dr. Hovaus now tell me that I can't volunteer my time anymore? It doesn't make sense.*

*You do spend a great deal of time at the hospital, Ton.*

*Only time I want to spend.*

*Isn't there anything else you would like to do?*

*Have sex, but no one will let me do that either!*

Ausha patted his arm. *That settles it. You have no excuse now not to come with Bryaun and Danal and me to our Coalition functions.*

*I want to work!*

*I'll pick you up and carry you if I have to! We displaced persons have to stick together, you know?*

Ton rolled his eyes in good-natured resignation. *I know.*

Ausha telepathically turned on the telepathic transmission recorder again, and she and Ton brainstormed on several new cases and compiled reports on more than ten of their old ones.

They finished their reports at the eighteenth hour and spent the rest of the evening eating, relaxing, and debating with their colleagues at the Palm Pavilion. Ton went home at the twenty-first hour that night, hoping by some remote chance that Miaundea would be waiting there for him. She wasn't, and although he wasn't surprised, he was disappointed. He entered the apartment cautiously, sniffing for Froquenza and fresh osalaem smoke. He looked behind and under the few pieces of furniture and checked the balcony before allowing himself the luxury of relaxing.

Deciding to forego his usual hour session with InterMind News and Library, he lit a taffuao, poured himself some cognac, and sank into the large reclining chair in his living room, obsessed by a single question—why wasn't he dead?

A spy who had been capable of entering his room in Launarda undetected had certainly been capable of killing him then and was capable of killing him now. Had Colonel Quautar been conducting surveillance on him since his arrival? Even now he wondered. Maybe he had lied too well. Maybe Colonel Quautar had believed everything he had told him in that first interview, felt he was no threat and in no danger, and was thus forgoing any attempt at surveillance. The only way Ton would know for certain would be to ask the colonel himself.

Ton shuddered. Colonel Quautar had no reason to tell him the truth, particularly if he suspected him of being a spy. He would certainly suspect him of being a spy if he told him that he had double-crossed Sanel King. Ton could hear the conversation now:

"Colonel Quautar, you have to help me! Sanel King wants me dead and has sent a woman agent to kill me. She was in my room the night of the wedding. I didn't see her, but I know she was there. I smelled that awful Erdean perfume Froquenza, and I found a taffuao stub in the bathroom sink."

The colonel would look at him skeptically. "What kind of game are you playing with me, Ton? Sanel King has no reason to want to kill you."

"Oh yes he does! My sister Jacquae wasn't the plant on the *Sovereign* as Teren thinks. I was the plant. Sanel King's D.I.I. agent Daniel Stewart hired me to manipulate Teren and Deia and Paul into each other's favor, to be the third helper in the escape, and to be the channel through which Stewart and his agents would obtain the spirit dimension formula and kill Teren. They were going to pay me three hundred and fifty thousand Earth dollars and provide me a prestigious research position on Erdean.

"I knew immediately upon learning about this assignment that if I accepted it, I would be in a very powerful position of trust. I could just as easily sell out to this boy Novaunian agent as kill him, and there wouldn't have been a thing the Earthons could have done about it. Novaun is a very rich, powerful, and isolated planet, and I believed I could come here and be protected from the D.I.I.

“The thought of outwitting a Novaunian spy was tantalizing enough, but the temptation to also outwit the D.I.I. and Intelligence Director Sanel King was more than I could stand, and so was my desire to experience the spirit dimension formula in flight. I accepted the assignment, intending to sell out to the Novaunian agent. I came to Novaun with Teren without a moment’s hesitation or regret and, in the process, ruined Sanel King and all of his plans. That is why he wants me dead.”

Colonel Quautar, angrily: “Do you expect me to believe you came to Novaun because of a game? Do you really expect me to believe that anyone could be that insane and suicidal? All for a *game*?”

“You have to believe me! They are trying to kill me!”

“The woman in your room is working with you. You know that Internal discovered the rendezvous and that she was captured, and now you’re making a desperate attempt to cover yourself. You lied to Teren, you lied to me in our first interview about your reasons for coming to Novaun, and now you’re lying to me again. And far worse than anything else, you’ve been trying to seduce my daughter! You are done playing games on this planet, Dr. Luciani!”

No. It was absolutely out of the question. He could not go to Colonel Quautar. King would have him when he wanted him. The only questions were when and, more terrifying, how. He was no longer the player in what had been an elaborate psychological game—he was the prize.

Ton downed the remaining cognac in one gulp, cursing Earth’s government. Why in the universe didn’t they give that son of Abomination King to the Novaunians? He was no good to them now, and it would have saved them an enormous amount of trouble. It would have been a gesture that would have persuaded the other planetary powers of the galaxy to regard Earth with a certain amount of favor instead of putting an embargo on the sale of arelada and boycotting its products. Earth certainly wanted the flow of arelada to remain unimpeded and the price to remain stable. It needed to sell its products abroad to avoid economic chaos, and it needed favor with the planetary powers of the galaxy, especially now that Teren’s report on its plans to conquer several arelada-rich planets had been released on the galactic level and Earth had subsequently been forced to withdraw all of its fleets from the Alliance space territory.

Instead, Earth had refused to give King to the Novaunians and had provoked the boycott, causing the price of arelada to soar. Then when Earth had tried to secure its own continuous supply of arelada by invading the Senlana Republic, it had lost an astounding number of ships and warriors in what would be remembered in history as one of the most devastating military failures of all time.

Perhaps Earth was proud, but it was not that proud. Perhaps Divine Emperor Arulezz Zarr was a despot, but he was not a fool. What kind of power could King possibly hold over the entire Earth government?

Ton took one more draw on his taffuao, snuffed it out on the small plate he used as an ash tray, then stood up and went to bed. He had nightmares of dying. The nightmare was always the same. Miaundea came to him wearing the pale yellow dress she had worn that dreadful night a week before. They sat cuddled on the couch talking, kissing, and drinking champagne. Then he felt a shot in his back and smelled the peculiar odor of Froquenza mixed with osalaem and burnt flesh.

Sometimes the woman with the immobilizer was Miaundea, her yellow-green eyes shining malevolently. More often, the woman with the immobilizer was a shadowy figure in the background, withdrawing as he groaned, and Miaundea would clutch his head to her neck as he died.

Ton woke up with a start, drenched with sweat, his head throbbing. He reached for Miaundea and instead found a cold sheet. He forlornly stroked the place in the bed where Miaundea should have been, feeling no neurodart in his back, only the abyss in his heart.

## Chapter 2: A DISILLUSIONED BROTHER

Snow crunched under Paul's feet as he ran with Adaum Vundaun. The sun had not yet risen, but there was enough light for Paul to see that his friend was in turmoil. Adaum had not communicated a thought to Paul that morning, but Paul didn't have to be a genius to guess that Adaum was distressed about the information they all had received the day before concerning his brother Brys and his crimes.

The family had been told early in the day. Eauva had stood before the Criminal Council of Judges in Shalaun early that afternoon and confessed her involvement with Brys in aiding Jovem Doshyr's escape from Novaun, supplying him with sensitive government information, and concealing the fact that he was still alive and had kidnapped Paul and Deia and their mother.

After an hour of deliberation, the Council had declared Eauva guilty of treason and an accessory to murder and kidnapping. She had been stripped of her position as proxy-counselor to her father, indefinitely barred from practicing as a judge on any Novaunian planet, and sentenced to remain in prison until Sanel King was apprehended or proved dead.

Paul's grandfather and Eauva had then made a statement on InterMind, during which Eauva, heartbroken, had apologized for her crimes. His grandparents had temporary custody of Brys and Eauva's four children, which, in Paul's opinion, was the most depressing thing of all. He could hardly bear to look at their sad, bewildered faces.

Paul and Adaum completed their fifteen-kilometer run and halted for a moment on the back doorstep to Adaum's little home. Adaum spun around and charged at Paul with his thoughts, his angry pine green eyes the only part of his face not covered by his hat and thick wool scarf, *You're so calm and unaffected you disgust me!*

*I'm not unaffected. I just don't know either Brys or Eauva well enough to be angry with them.*

*Your father's dead. Your mother's dead. You spent most of the first eighteen years of your life on Earth, controlled by a man who hated you, when you should have been here, and all because my brother and Eauva were too cowardly and criminal to tell anyone you were still alive. You're not angry? How can you not be angry?*

Paul shrugged. *I'm only angry at the person who brought all of this about in the first place, and I'm not even so angry at him lately. It just doesn't matter anymore. As for Brys and Aunt Eauva, all I can bring myself to feel for them is pity.*

Adaum relaxed a bit, sorrow gradually replacing the anger. He stared at the icy doorstep, unable for the moment to open the door and go into the house.

*Whatever Brys may be, I don't believe he's a black marketeer or a murderer. I believe as Aunt Eauva, that he was framed by my uncle, at least for those two crimes.*

*I want to believe that too, I really do, but even if he didn't kill those people, what he did here was bad enough. You didn't know Brys. He was stalwart. A leader. And exceptional in everything he did. He was a great man. Adaum sighed deeply, a sigh of betrayal. Or at least I always thought he was.*

Paul communicated nothing. He didn't blame Adaum for feeling angry and betrayed. Paul wanted to tell him that the grief would eventually go away, but Paul didn't believe it ever would.

Adaum startled him with a question, seemingly off the subject: *Do you still want to go back to Earth?*

Paul didn't know how to reply. Adaum wasn't supposed to know that he had ever sincerely wanted to go back to Earth. No one was supposed to know except Deia.

Adaum put his hand on Paul's shoulder. *There are some things a person just knows. I wish Novaun could be everything you want it to be.*

*Earth was never everything I wanted it to be either. I could never go back—I don't fit. I learned that on the Sovereign. I do wish I could bring some of it to Novaun though, because I don't fit here either.*

Adaum regarded Paul knowingly. *You want a fencing friend.*

*I want a friend who can beat me. A real person. What an impossible dream. Everyone here thinks a sport that you fight with swords is barbaric. They all think I'm odd, all of the young people. They try not to show it, but they do. They don't know what to communicate to me, and I don't know what to communicate to them.*

*You do all right with me.*

*That's different. You're paid to be my friend.* His statement was almost true. Adaum was one of his grandfather's district managers, and for over a month, Paul had been learning the practical side of the business by working several hours a day as Adaum's assistant.

Adaum laughed, a wonderful, carefree sound in this time of his grief.

*I also wish I could go to Tryamaz and bring back some women.*

*Earthon girls must be very beautiful.*

Paul nodded. *They're gorgeous—gorgeous and exciting. Novaunian girls are just so plain. They're so plain I can hardly stand it!*

Adaum chuckled. *Your friend Miaundea Quautar isn't plain. She's actually quite pretty.*

*A lot of good that does me! She's Ton's girl. She's good for him, too. I think she may actually be reforming him.*

Jaunisa opened the door and looked out, shivering. Little Helauna peered up at Paul and Adaum from behind her mother, her luxuriant auburn head pressed against her mother's sapphire-embellished dressing gown. Jaunisa communicated, *What are you two doing out there? It's freezing!*

Helauna then communicated in that playfully saucy way of hers that so reminded everyone of her grandmother Maranda Vundaun, *You'd better hurry, Father, because I've almost eaten all of your breakfast.* Then quickly, calculatingly to Paul, *I already ate all of yours.*

She squealed in delight as Paul chased her into the kitchen, captured her, and mercilessly tickled her. Her two little brothers jumped on Paul, shrieking, tackled him effortlessly to the ground, and attacked him with his own hat and scarf.

\* \* \*

Deia and Teren returned to Launarda after spending six days in Norund skiing. Deia had never felt so relaxed, content, or more in love with Teren. Although she hated the thought of leaving her grandparents and Paul for an extended period of time, she was anxious to return to Shalaun and get on with her life. She wanted to finish organizing her



home and complete her education. Lauria was teaching her how to cook, and Ketina and Alysia were teaching her how to do gemstone embroidery. Deia longed to get back to her piano so that she could play the new music that had been dancing in her head for two weeks, music that harmonized with two beautiful mind songs she had recently assimilated.

Paul met Deia and Teren at the landing field in Launarda, his face solemn. "Have you two assimilated any news since you left?"

"No," Teren said, troubled. "Why?"

Paul motioned toward the station. "Let's have some tea while we wait for your luggage."

Teren and Deia looked at each other in puzzlement, then nodded at Paul. They hurried into the station, obtained cups of zaulym tea from a synthesizing machine, and sat down in the lobby.

Paul took a sip from his cup of tea. "Internal Security found the traitors."

Deia looked at Paul over her cup, stunned. "Traitors? Just how many are there?"

"Two. Brys and Eauva. Everyone is devastated. Grandfather and Grandmother have temporary custody of the children."

Deia, in shock, couldn't speak or even think.

"When did all of this happen?" Teren asked.

"Two days ago." Paul proceeded to tell Deia and Teren everything he knew. Deia listened to Paul, becoming more and more furious by the second. She had known from the beginning that there was a traitor, but it all seemed so much more real and intolerable now that the traitor had finally come alive in the form of Brys and Eauva.

Deia crushed her cup in her hand. "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. Seventeen and a half years! Aunt Eauva finally finds the courage to tell her story, but in the meantime, both of our parents are dead!"

"He was blackmailing them," Paul reminded. "They knew what he was capable of and were even more afraid of him than we were."

"They had no reason to be so afraid. They were here! On Novaun! With the entire Novaunian Fleet to protect them! And our mother was on Earth living in terror!"

Paul's face tensed at the mention of their mother, and he stared at the floor, unable to reply.

"Maybe it would be better if we took the next shuttle to Shalaun," Teren said. "You could just send our things, Paul."

Paul shrugged and looked up again, his expression helpless. "I don't know what to tell you. Grandmother has a room waiting for you, but everything is in chaos—if I could leave now, I would. It's just awful, sharing the house with those children. The little one doesn't understand what's happened, but the older ones do, all too well. They're bewildered and betrayed—destroyed. Faunel won't come out of his room, and Brenda won't eat. Yesterday Senaun disappeared. For hours. It's awful."

Teren squeezed Deia's hand. "What do you want to do, Deia?"

Deia shook her head quickly, her heart tight with anxiety and anger. "I can't stay here; I can't see anyone right now."

Paul stood up. "I'll go back to the house and get your wedding dress. Is there anything else you need?"

Deia shook her head. "No. Just . . . just tell Grandmother I'm sorry."

### Chapter 3: ANGEL-REBEL

Lieutenant Braysel Nalaurev stood and stretched his stiff muscles as the Fleet shuttle on which he had been traveling came to a stop on the landing field at the Fleet base in Shalaun. Tapping his hand on his thigh, he wormed through the crowd of other Fleet soldiers toward the exit, managing to be the third person to the ground. He swung his white duffel bag over his shoulder and stepped into a mild, sunny Shalaun day, eagerly scanning the waiting faces. He saw Maurek Avenaunta, his close friend and roommate for two years during his tour as a private on the *Larv Ylendoshal*, the same moment Maurek saw him.

Maurek rushed up to Braysel, exclaiming in playful horror, *What did you do to your face?*

Braysel stroked his beard. *This? It's a birth defect. And you thought my family disowned me because I joined the infamous Fleet of organized murder.*

Maurek laughed and threw his arms around Braysel, embracing him vigorously. They had corresponded regularly over the past year and a half since Braysel had been assigned to the base ship *Jerl Normundz* for pilot training, but this was the first time since then that they had seen each other.

They released each other and moved toward a transport pod booth. Braysel communicated colorfully about his involvement in the Senlana conflict, explaining and illustrating in the air with his hands every detail of his squadron's attack on the Earthon battleship *Champion*, *Champion's* destruction, and the eight Earthon fighters he had outwitted and annihilated in the process.

As they stepped into the transport pod, Maurek slapped Braysel's chest with its Star of Bravery and Sapphire Cluster, *Decorated too! I think I'm envious!*

*What? Isn't watching Novaun rotate on its axis enough excitement for you?*

*Hardly!*

*If I remember correctly, you're the one who requested Home Fleet so that you could finally find some excitement with that little blonde supernova you're in love with.* Braysel hesitated. The subject was one so sensitive that he hadn't dared address it in the inadequate one-way correspondence of mailing discs. *You have managed to at least communicate with her since you've been back, I hope.*

*Only long enough to have her humiliate me all over again.*

*Those friends of yours provoked her, didn't they.*

*No, it was the sight of me that provoked her.*

*When are you going to stop being such a jellyfish and tell her how you feel?*

*I did tell her how I felt. I told her that I thought her dress was pretty, that she looked pretty, and it made her furious. She communicated, "It's a miracle! Maurek Avenaunta deigns to give my dress his approval. It's too bad there isn't a dance tonight. Perhaps I would even go with you."*

Braysel smacked the side of his head. *What is it about that girl that turns you into such an idiot?* It never ceased to baffle Braysel that Maurek, a man who had always been successful with women, could be so obsessed with and so terrified of one particular girl. *You had to compliment her on her appearance, of all things. She probably thought you were being sarcastic.*

*How was I supposed to know she would take it that way? I wanted her to know that I thought she was pretty, despite what happened four years ago.*

*Still, Maurek, mentioning the dress was stupid. You could have told her you liked the way she was wearing her hair, anything.*

*I've tried communicating with her several times since, but she ignores me. She really hates me, and I don't blame her.*

*I do. She hasn't been the epitome of kindness to you either. Make her communicate with you. Then at least she'll have a good reason to hate you.*

*She's just too extraordinary, extraordinary and beautiful.*

*No woman is that extraordinary.*

They stepped out of the transport pod onto the marble walk at the base entrance. Maurek shook his head in hopelessness. *It doesn't matter anymore, anyway. She's in love with Ton Luciani.*

Braysel stopped abruptly and stared at Maurek in disbelief. *The Star Force doctor-traitor?*

Maurek nodded weakly. *They act like perverse lovers; then they act as if it's all a big joke. It's obvious, though, that she's in love with him. Who knows how he really feels about her.*

Maurek had to be exaggerating. *Perverse lovers?*

Maurek nodded again, the muscles in his face tensing. *She gave him a bottle of men's hair-setting lotion for his birthday with a note that said, "For all of those wishes that will forever remain wishes."*

*You know what's perverse? That you would actually think hair-setting lotion is perverse.*

Maurek moaned. *You don't understand. It was an inside joke. Teren explained it to us. Not long after Teren returned to Novaun, Miaundea told him that Mautysian men were wearing mustaches. Teren gave his opinion that it was only a fad. Miaundea pointed out that everyone had once believed the comb-backed hairstyles were a fad also. Teren asked how the combed-back styles stay combed back, and Miaundea told him about the hair-setting lotion. Then Ton communicated, "And just how many Mautysian men have had the privilege of having you in their bathrooms with them to watch them do their morning rituals?" Then Miaundea came back with, "There have been so many, I stopped counting a long time ago."*

Braysel was impressed. *Your little girlfriend has a sense of humor.*

*It's not so funny. That traitor's about the most lustful character I've ever seen. You should see the way he leers at her!*

Braysel shook his head, amused and a little perplexed. *Something's wrong here, really wrong. He hurled his thoughts at Maurek. Since when does a Novaunian woman do anything with a womanizer but slowly, torturously deprive him of his manhood and hurl him screaming in agony into a black hole?*

Maurek laughed.

Braysel threw both of his arms into the air. *My value system is shot to Andromeda, and all you can do is laugh? He shook his head in amazement. Your little girlfriend must really see something great in him. Either that, or she's an ocean of insecurity. Or maybe she's an enchantress.*

Braysel stopped and gazed thoughtfully at Maurek, who was now laughing harder than ever. *An enchantress . . . yes . . . that has to be it. That also explains how a colonel's*

*daughter, one of those mistresses of Perdition in the flesh, was able to corrupt all of those poor, innocent Mautysian boys.*

Maurek laughed so ecstatically he could barely breathe.

*Oh! The mere thought of it makes me shiver with the thrill of scandal!*

Maurek leaned his arm on Braysel's shoulder, attempting to catch his breath. *Only . . . you . . . would recognize . . . the absurdity . . . of the exchange between Miaundea and that Earthon about the hair-setting lotion.*

*You know, don't you, that if she's a true enchantress, he's in her power, not the other way around, which means that she'll undoubtedly transform him into her perfect husband!*

Maurek suddenly stopped laughing, his face bloodless.

Braysel smiled deviously. *I had to get your attention somehow.*

*Well, you didn't have to be so brutal about it!*

Now that Braysel had Maurek's attention, perhaps he could get him to see reason. *Don't let her fool you, Maurek. She's a little fake, a very convincing little fake. She's just as insecure as the rest of us, and I have a feeling she was just as hurt by what happened between you two that night as you were, and that she would give anything to know how you really feel.*

Maurek shook his head slowly. *I don't know if I can believe that, Bray, I just don't know.*

Braysel smacked Maurek's back and led him to the automated taxi that was waiting for them, his heart pounding with the anticipation of competition. *It's time to do the Run. You think Miaundea Quatar is the source of your torture? Let me show you the meaning of torture!*

They took the taxi to the entrance building of the mammoth VisionRun complex in Auyval Beach, quickly went to the locker room to change into their running clothes, then rode in a transport pod to the court area. Braysel and Maurek emerged from the transport pod in the start-finish corridor at one end of the fifty adjoining twenty-meter wide, one kilometer-long white rooms. They jogged to separate lanes, deciding between themselves the limits of their game.

*Let's make it interesting,* Braysel communicated. *Eight obstacles. Setting?*

*Beach. No duplications.*

The wall dissolved in front of them, and they ran as fast as they could into separate rooms, completely opening their minds to each other. Immediately upon stepping into the rooms, they perceived themselves running on separate versions of a beach.

A headwind suddenly slammed Braysel with sand. Braysel spit and covered his eyes with his arm, bending over and struggling against the wind as well as possible.

As Maurek ran, a beautiful sunbathing woman appeared in front of him. He leaped over her, she suddenly turned to her back, and his foot came down hard on her stomach, causing her to shriek with pain. He stumbled and fell face down into the sand. He spit sand out of his mouth, scrambled to his feet, and began running for the horizon.

The wind dissipated, and Braysel's vision cleared, and he nearly ran into a massive boulder. He lunged to the side and encountered another one, and another. Finally he gave up and began climbing. Had Maurek truly possessed no imagination, Braysel might never have forgiven him, but Maurek chose physical obstacles opposed to mental ones because he knew Braysel wasn't as good at them as he was the others.

A wall of seashells suddenly appeared in front of Maurek to block his path, and hanging on his arm was a basket of shells. Maurek halted, delighted and vexed. He dropped the basket of shells and frantically began trying to match the shells in the basket to the shells on the wall, frustrated that they all looked the same and wouldn't match. After matching only two, he gave up and began climbing the wall, climbing, climbing, until he had climbed five meters and still couldn't see the top. The wall disappeared under him and again he was spitting sand out of his mouth.

Braysel jumped off of the top of the boulder into a patch of seaweed that coiled around his legs like snakes, pulled him to the ground, and wrapped around his body too. He struggled to free himself, becoming more tangled every time he moved. Braysel lay as still as he could and gently unwound the seaweed from his body, then stood up and ran.

Maurek ran, dodging the fish that were swarming in the air around him. The air reeked with the smell of fish and blood. A shark flew straight at him, his teeth sunk into a quivering thing that looked like Maurek's own leg. Maurek threw his arms over his head and screamed. Braysel's laughter rippled through both of their minds.

Suddenly the ocean leaped toward Braysel from the side, violently swirled around his ankles, and pulled him into the water. Braysel swam vigorously against the waves, feeling as if his lungs would burst from lack of air. A minute and a half later, he was running again.

Maurek removed his arms from his head and found himself on his knees in a dark tunnel. He crawled along, feeling eels writhing all over his body. He shuddered and continued ahead. He eventually crawled out of the tunnel and into a starlit night.

The beach opened beneath Braysel and he dropped into a hole, screaming. This time Maurek's laughter rippled through their minds.

Maurek raced into the starlight and ran painfully into an invisible wall. The stars all around him blinked in different patterns, blinking faster and in more complex patterns as he telepathically generated the same patterns with his mind. He held his temples and panted. Finally he generated the proper pattern with his mind and the wall dissolved.

Braysel climbed out of the hole and staggered across a spinning beach.

Maurek ran forward a few meters to see an enormous, rickety old sea-faring ship in front of him, shipwrecked on the beach. He ran up a rotting plank to the deck of the ship and found that the ship had no deck. The plank dissolved underneath him and he found himself sitting inside a dank, dark compartment holding a tattered note on brown parchment, written in black, blotchy ink:

"Awareness I give, your mind I set free  
This ship is your brig, unless you find me!"

Maurek slumped over his knees. *Give me some clues!* Suddenly he was holding a fuzzy little gray kuka. Maurek set the animal on the old wood floor, jumped up, and followed the animal to its bed, where he found his first clue:

"I bob up and down till my survivor is found."

Maurek ran to the equipment room, finding his next clue on a flotation device, then hurried from clue to clue to find the arelada treasure.

Braysel flung himself out of the spinning beach, picked himself up, and ran like spirit energy toward the horizon. He stopped abruptly, nearly tumbling headfirst off a cliff. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and assimilated his surroundings at a glance. There was only one way he could go and that was straight down at least fifteen meters into the ocean, where he could then swim to the next shore. Terror gripped him. Diving off cliffs was Maurek's demented obsession, not his. *You're going to pay, Avenaunta!* Then holding his nose, closing his eyes, and praying he wouldn't vomit in fright, Braysel dropped himself feet first off the cliff.

Maurek found the chest of arelada trinkets and the ship dissolved, leaving him horrified to see a sixteen-year-old Miaundea Quautar standing a few meters away, smiling seductively and wearing the shimmering, crimson party dress that bared so much of her beautiful neck and back and curved so harmoniously with her body. *If you want to progress further, you have to kiss me.* Maurek stepped back suspiciously, then suddenly sprinted past her. Scores more Miaundea-images appeared in front of him, all smiling tantalizingly, all blocking his way to the finish corridor. Maurek's heart pounded frantically as he stared at the Miaundea-image that was standing in front of him. She appeared so real, breathtakingly real, and as terrifyingly beautiful as she had been that night four years before when he had met her at her front door to take her to the Salyumala Ball. His hands trembled as he placed them on her waist and leaned to rest his lips on hers. She wrapped her arms passionately around him and drew him closer. He touched his lips to hers and she disappeared. "I'm going to kill you, Nalaurev!" Braysel laughed sadistically.

Braysel pulled himself out of the water and onto the beach below the cliff. He ran toward the nearing horizon and the finish corridor, only to be tackled to the ground by a runner coming from nowhere.

After the Miaundea-image dissolved, Maurek plunged himself into his final obstacle, a sand-wall maze.

Braysel wrestled himself away from his attacker and again ran for the finish corridor, dismayed to see seven more runners coming at him from nowhere. He dodged two successfully before being thrown to the ground again.

Maurek raced through the maze in frustration, coming to dead-end after dead-end.

Braysel blitzed through three attackers, went flying through the air and into the sand, lifted his battered body the best he could, and crawled into the finish corridor as another attacker dove at him from behind. Soaked with sweat, Braysel prostrated himself on the floor, laughing hysterically.

Maurek kicked the walls of the maze and threw sand wildly in what he believed was the direction of the finish corridor. *You cheater! There isn't any way out! You slimy cheater!*

The sand maze disappeared, and Maurek stepped forward through the white wall and into the finish corridor.

Maurek kicked Braysel in his side. *Get up, you cheating snake!*

Braysel, still laughing, lifted himself up on one knee. Maurek grabbed Braysel's shirt, lifted him, and threw him against the wall with such force that Braysel gasped. Maurek looked at Braysel threateningly and, with all of the innocence and false curiosity he could muster, asked the paradoxical question he always asked whenever Braysel did something outrageous, the one that always sent Braysel into convulsions: *Were you a difficult child?*

Braysel burst into another fit of hysterics. Maurek released Braysel's tank top and leaned against the wall, attacked by sudden laughter. *If only you could have seen yourself on that cliff . . . and you call yourself a man . . . Only a jellyfish of jellyfishes goes in feet-first . . . holding his nose!*

Braysel shook his head and waved his hands in front of him, still laughing. *No . . . you were generating so much heat in the arms of that girl that I was getting excited. Then . . .* He snapped his fingers, then held his hands in the air. *Poof!* He laughed gleefully.

*It's kind of funny, Bray,* Maurek communicated, still laughing, but only a little. *You had her all wrong.*

Braysel looked at him in mock offense. *Me? He who is Novaun's greatest fantasy master? What? Would you rather have had me put her in her more natural state of emotion and have her chop you up into little pieces and throw you over the Cliffs?* He made vigorous chopping motions with his hands up and down Maurek's arm. *I guess it is your fantasy.*

Maurek chuckled and shook his head. *No, you had what she looks like wrong. It's been nearly four years and she's changed. It isn't just that she's grown up, either. She's different. There's just something about her eyes . . . It was that two years she spent abroad, I think.*

Braysel began walking toward the transport pod, not at all surprised that Maurek wanted to discuss Miaundea. Maurek walked at his side. *Two years abroad? Where did she go?*

Maurek shrugged. *Anthropological fieldwork of some kind. My father might know. She works for the Agency.*

They stepped into the transport pod. *She's an anthropologist? How old is she?*

*She's almost twenty.*

*And she's already spent two years in anthropological fieldwork? She's a librarian too, I assume.*

Maurek nodded.

*"Whew . . ."* *She must have some kind of mind.* They stepped out of the transport pod and went to the locker room to collect their bags.

*She does.* Maurek's face tightened in irritation. *That was why it was so aggravating when that Earthon was so humiliated to have to publicly communicate that she is his intellectual superior. He had to do it to satisfy a wager he made with her, and it nearly killed him. Who does he think he is? She's a hundred times his intellectual superior! He may be naturally intelligent, I'll grant him that. Maybe he's even naturally strong in mind power, but he's an Earthon. He hasn't had an iota of the stringent mind training we've all had to have. I'm his intellectual superior. And you. You could smash his mind with a single thought!*

Braysel laughed low and baitingly. *Don't you wish I would.* He added quickly, before Maurek could continue with his tirade, *And I don't necessarily agree. We both know people who are extremely strong in mind power but who don't use it in intellectual pursuits. I think it's entirely possible that Ton Luciani may have spent his life using the meager mind tools available to him in maximum effort to develop an astounding intellect. I don't believe strong mind power necessarily translates into strong intellect or vice versa.*

Maurek glared at Braysel.

*I do believe, however, that Miaundea is, without a doubt, a hundred times his mental superior. As for you and me?* Braysel shrugged. *We're a thousand times his mental superiors.*

Maurek laughed.

They left the building and waited many minutes for a taxi in communication silence. Realization seized Braysel. *She went to Saharenper, I'm sure of it. What I would give to ask her about it! She probably couldn't tell me anything anyway. The details of its culture may still be classified.*

*Saharenper?* Maurek communicated, baffled, as a taxi glided to a stop in front of them.

*You don't know about Saharenper?* Braysel slapped Maurek reprovably on the back. *You're slipping in your knowledge of current events, my friend.*

*No, your brain has gone nebula.* Maurek sprang into the taxi. *Whatever Saharenper is, it's not a major news item.*

*Oh no. Of course it isn't. Not yet anyway. Its existence was declassified to the Novaunian public two weeks ago, and only because the Earthons just discovered that the Gudyneans discovered it and that they and we are doing studies on it.* Braysel tossed his duffel bag into the aircar and then followed it. *Sometimes the most obscure pieces of information are the ones that are the most important.*

*It has arelada, doesn't it?*

Braysel nodded as the taxi lifted into the air.

*Where is it?*

*Trentanlia Cluster.*

*That means it's considerably more accessible to Earth than to the Alliance. Without a doubt, Earth will lay claim to it.* Maurek seemed troubled.

*The Earthons will try, but Saharenper is no uninhabited rock waiting to be raped by every galactic power as Erdean was centuries ago. There are people there, and whether the Earthons like it or not, the natural development of their society must be considered and respected.*

*The Saharenperans must not be space travelers, then. Otherwise we would have had contact with them long before now. What is their potential for space travel? Do they not attempt contact with other worlds because they don't wish to, or are they simply incapable?*

*The report seemed to indicate that they are incapable. It didn't state their actual technological progress or anything at all about their culture, and those are both things I'd like to know.*

*If the planet is incapable of space travel and at the same time saturated with arelada, then it will need to be protected, and that would be virtually impossible for the Alliance to do successfully without abandoning its own territories.*

Braysel nodded. *Within a year or two, Saharenper will be the cause of a massive conflict between Earth and the Alliance, and it may be a conflict we have no hope of winning.*

*Oh we could win it all right. Easily. We could annihilate those Earthons to atoms if we wanted to, and we wouldn't even have to use any weapons!*

*The Council of Prophets has forbidden us to use mind-altering tactics. It would be immoral.*



*And killing isn't?*

Braysel smirked. *Now you're beginning to communicate like my parents.*

*God gives us the right to kill in self-defense, so why is it so immoral to break into someone's mind in self-defense?*

*Because there would be no challenge and making war wouldn't be nearly so much fun.*

*Be serious, Bray. I don't understand it. The Dirons, in their three centuries of decay, have never had the arelada supply to engage us in a telepathic war, but their mind powers are still exquisitely sophisticated and telepathic tactics would never work on them. The majority of Earthons, though, are telepathic midgets. It's infuriating to have to grovel to them.*

*I disagree that telepathic tactics wouldn't work on the Dirons. They are so addicted to their fantasy that their minds are always open, and they may use all of the arelada they seize to maintain their vision abilities. It's possible they don't reserve the arelada that would be necessary to generate mind shields strong enough to protect themselves as we do, not to mention the fact that we are considerably stronger than they in sheer numbers.*

*So why grovel! Maurek demanded.*

*Because it is immoral.*

Maurek shook his head in reprimand as the taxi came to a stop on his neighborhood landing platform. *Don't be a jellyfish, Bray. Of course we know it's immoral. The question is: Why is it immoral? The only reason you have such an aversion to trying to understand what makes mind tampering in self-defense so immoral is because you're afraid you'll discover that the things that make it immoral are the very things that make killing in self-defense supposedly immoral, and if you do, you'll have to admit that your parents and all of your pacifist kinsmen and countrymen are right and that you are wrong.*

Braysel clamped his teeth together in outrage. *You, of all people, know me better than that.*

Maurek smiled gravely. *I had to get your attention somehow.*

They telepathically authorized their banks to pay the taxi fare and unloaded in silence. Braysel sent his duffel bag to Maurek's house in the transport pod. Braysel and Maurek had walked many meters down the palm-lined trail before Braysel allowed himself to relax a little and reply, *Well, you didn't have to be so brutal about it.*

*I'm sorry, Bray, but this war with Earth really disturbed me. It disturbed a lot of us. I can't help but question our policy against using mind-altering tactics. You can't expect me to believe that you've never tried to understand the Order's stand on telepathic warfare.*

Perhaps Maurek really didn't comprehend the reasons behind the Order's stand. Perhaps none of his Fleet comrades did. The thought surprised Braysel. It was so simple. Had he never discussed this issue with any of them?

*Well?* Maurek pressed.

*I've spent most of my conscious life trying to understand the immorality of war in all of its aspects.* Braysel paused, mentally formulating an explanation. *We know that as God teaches us, as mortals, the laws of the universe He sometimes gives a more restrictive, modified version of certain laws at times, sometimes because He wants us to make some decisions on our own, sometimes because mortal circumstances won't allow living the higher laws, and sometimes because if we were allowed to live the laws in their ultimate forms, we would destroy ourselves.*

Maurek nodded thoughtfully.

*My parents and my grandparents and all of their pacifist counterparts believe that in the ultimate version of universal law, there is nothing whatsoever that takes priority over the sanctity of the human life and human mind of another person, that only God has the right to take a life or tamper with a mind, regardless of the circumstances. They believe that this is the higher, ultimate law of the universe and that God allows us to kill in self-defense and to protect our culture and our freedom, therefore greatly restricting our spiritual growth, because the majority of us are weak and lack the spiritual strength and faith that God will by His own methods protect us. They believe that we, as a union of planets, are not ready to live the higher law because we don't want to live it.*

*They really believe that?* Maurek communicated in amazement.

Braysel nodded. *That's the core of Novaunian pacifism.*

*As much as you've told me about your heritage, I don't think I ever knew that.*

*That's only because you've never thought about it. You and I and every Novaunian who supports the Fleet in ideology, whether we realize it or not, believe that freedom of thought and expression of conscience is the ultimate law of the universe, that we have the right and the responsibility to defend our freedom and the integrity of our culture, even if that means killing in defense of ourselves. If we believe that freedom of thought and expression of conscience is the ultimate law of the universe, than it is inconceivable that we could ever knowingly deny members of any other race, no matter how hostile they may be to us, that same right. By using mind-altering tactics, we would be seizing freedom of thought and expression of conscience from others and denying them the very right we are fighting so hard to protect for ourselves.*

*That may be true, but killing a person takes away his or her freedom as well, perhaps even more ruthlessly than a simple mind adjustment would.*

*A minute ago, you weren't advocating simple mind adjustments. You were suggesting annihilating to atoms.*

*Yes I did, but now we're discussing mere mind adjustments, all right?*

Two years ago, Maurek's attitude would have depressed Braysel. Maurek was a competent, traditional, and patriotic officer, but he was like most of the others Braysel had met and been somewhat disillusioned by during his three and a half years in the Fleet. Most of them hadn't the faintest idea what they were fighting for. To them, freedom was a word, an idea. It wasn't real. To most of them, Novaun's enemies were monsters, not real people, and certainly not their brothers and sisters in humanity. Even killing wasn't real.

*All right. Your argument that killing takes a person's freedom away more ruthlessly than mind adjustment is the same one my parents use, but in all honesty, it is ludicrous. When an enemy warrior comes against me in some fashion and tries to kill me, he knows there will be a fight, and he knows one of us will be hurt or die. He has already made his choice, and whether he lives or dies, his mind will be the same as when he initiated the attack. Even in prison, a person retains freedom of thought. Earth's Eslavu are alive, but they have no freedom of thought. Death would be an escape for them. Our current policy of simply defending ourselves, our territories and trade, and giving reasonable help to our allies is a policy of defending freedom. Your suggestion of mind adjustment would make our enemies our Eslavu on some level, and we wouldn't be defenders of freedom anymore, but conquerors.*

*So it's ultimately the same old conflict, Maurek communicated thoughtfully. Which is more important, life or freedom? Is freedom worth giving our lives for, and is it worth killing for? Then if freedom is the most important, which is the greater sin against freedom? Taking someone's life or adjusting his mind?*

*Right. And when you look at it that way, the answer is obvious. Killing someone by crushing his mind is the most intolerable of all. From both the pacifist and the Fleet points of view, telepathic warfare is immoral.*

*There is still one question. In the end, whose freedom is more important? Mine or his? He can exercise his freedom and in the process assault mine. That doesn't mean he has the freedom to choose the consequences of that assault. There could come a time when our freedom is in such danger that we would be justified in using our telepathic powers.*

*And that is the only time that God would ever allow us to use them. Braysel shook his head. I don't know, Maurek. If we ever do come to the brink of destruction as a people, then I will be the first member of the Fleet to renounce telepathic warfare and support the pacifist position. Our only hope would be to isolate and rely solely on the power of God. With the entire galaxy against us like that, none of us would want to be a part of it anyway. And under those circumstances, I doubt even telepathic tactics would do much more than merely delay the inevitable. Besides, the thought of marring someone's mind in any way revolts me. Those poor jellyfishes on Earth are already victims enough to their own government, as are the few remaining Dirons to their fantasy and those savage warring admirals with their broken-down fleets. He felt ill. It's shameful enough that they make us have to kill them.*

*The two stopped in front of the home of Maurek's parents. Braysel communicated numbly, I'm going to have to pass on the surfing today. May I get a shower?*

*Maurek gaped at him. You aren't . . .*

*It's been three and a half years, Maurek.*

*Have you had any contact with them at all?*

*Braysel shook his head slowly. But Earth's invasion of Senlana and the murderous actions of Jovem Doshyr have made me even more certain that what I'm doing in the Fleet is right. I have to try and make them understand.*

*Maurek led Braysel somberly into the house and showed him where he could take a shower and dress. Maurek seemed relieved that no one was home.*

*When Braysel emerged from the bath lounge, Maurek exclaimed, Are you insane? You can't go to Mautysia dressed like that!*

*What? Is wearing a Fleet uniform a capital crime? What are they going to do? Execute me?*

*Still, Bray, it wouldn't hurt your position any to be a little discreet.*

*I'm not ashamed of what I am. If the Mautysian people don't like it, that's their problem.*

*Maurek walked Braysel out of the house. Just be back before tomorrow afternoon, if you can. Teren and Deia Zaurvau are having a wedding reception. Colonel Quautar will be there, I'm sure, and he loves to discuss politics. He just may let something slip about Saharenper.*

*Braysel looked at Maurek keenly. You don't have much faith in my success.*

*I don't mean to offend you, but not even faith is going to change your parents' position.*

## Chapter 4: THE PACIFISTS

Braysel took the taxi to the commuter depot in downtown Shalaun and took the next airbus to Mautysia. Four others were on the bus, a young married couple and two men traveling alone. Every one of them avoided looking at him. Braysel was thankful he wouldn't be obliged to, in any way, annoy them with polite conversation, as any polite Novaunian person would never wear a Fleet uniform to Mautysia, and as any polite, well-bred Novaunian man, would never, absolutely never, disgrace his face with something as barbaric as a beard.

Airbus wasn't a speedy form of travel, so it took nearly an hour for Braysel's airbus to fly the nineteen hundred kilometers across the Gulf of Verzaun. Braysel gazed transfixed at the unruly green-blue waves of the sea under the bus, remembering vividly the last time he had crossed the Gulf. He had been traveling the opposite direction then, leaving home and embarking on a space adventure.

How would his parents act when they saw him again? And what about his brothers and sisters? He realized, resignedly, that they very likely would not consent to see him.

Braysel's years as a child and then as a young man had been ones of intense study and conflicting ideology, turbulent emotionally, turbulent in his relationship with his parents. At age four he traveled with his family to Shalaun in their protest of the Latanzan War and saw the glorious white fighters, the sublime beauty of Shalaun, and people who were as peaceful and friendly as people in Mautysia. From then on, he challenged his parents and grandparents with continuing questions and debate.

*When I grow up, I want to see stars up close and see other planets. I want to fly in one of those beautiful big white birds.*

*(The Fleet takes good boys and makes them into murderers.)*

*The Fleet protects us and our freedom!*

*(God will protect us and our freedom.)*

*God expects us to do some things for ourselves.*

*(Yes, but killing is not one of those things.)*

*If we love our freedom, then we must show God we love it by being willing to fight to keep it.*

*(God gives us life and is the only one justified in taking it.)*

*If Fleet soldiers are so wicked, then how is it they are allowed to stay in the Order? How can they be worthy to be married in the Ordination Rite?*

*(The rest of Novaun doesn't know any better. They don't have faith. We live a higher law.)*

*Nauren Mostel, of the Council of Prophets, was a Fleet officer.*

*(It isn't our business to concern ourselves with the way Minon Mostel lived in his younger years. Our only concern is how he conducts himself now.)*

On and on went the debate, endless and perplexing, dismaying to his parents, blasphemous to all generations of his grandparents. By the age of eleven Braysel had studied his family's history, Novaun's history, and the doctrine of his religion, had asked all of the ideological questions, and had decided he wanted to be a Fleet officer. His parents were horrified, but confident he would abandon his plan long before he became an adult.

*(Verzaun has never had an army, and no Nalaurev or Jualaz has ever joined the Fleet in all its two thousand years of existence.)*

*Then it's about time someone did!*

*(You cannot be a member of the Fleet and remain a part of this family.)*

*Watch me!*

Braysel studied continuously. He specialized in telepathy science since it was a safe subject to which his parents would never object, developed an astounding memory and mind power, and made his mind power abilities the base for the rest of his learning pursuits. He delved deeply into military history and science, astronomy, foreign language, and spaceship engineering, shunning most social activity outside his family. If he was going to fly fighters, he was going to know everything about them—he was going to be the best officer in Novaunian Fleet.

His relationship with his parents during the two years before coming of age was tense and volatile. His parents were benevolent disciplinarians, but Braysel's constant challenging of their pacifist ideology made them angry and defensive. He argued that millions of Novaunian men had given their lives in service to Novaun through the Fleet and that Verzaun, Narquasa, the Southern Hemisphere, and all seven hundred and thirty-one pacifist planets in the Union were cowardly neglecting their duty. He worked hard to convince them. He was right and they were wrong and that was that.

Braysel graduated from the traditional application school at age seventeen, two weeks before coming of age, with a strong triple major in telepathy science, physics, and mathematics, a feat virtually unknown on Novaun. There was no celebration on his eighteenth birthday, only the rending of a family in betrayal and heartbreak.

Braysel ate breakfast that morning, cheerful and animated, while all nine others at the table stared at him in solemn despair, communicating nothing. After breakfast, he went upstairs to his bedroom to get his suitcase, then ran downstairs to say good-bye.

He embraced all seven of his brothers and sisters, Haunal, Mauya, and Raunen returning his embraces with eyes full of tears and faces begging him not to reject them, and Lisy, Shauna, Nymon, and Danal apprehensive and uncomprehending.

Braysel then kissed his mother. Her face was pale and pinched, and her luminous green eyes were full of tears. He squeezed her again and communicated compassionately, *It's all right, Mother. I'll send a commudisc as soon as I get stationed.* He looked down at his suitcase, then back up at both of his parents. *I'm only taking a few things for now, but I have a box of things in my room I'll want you to send to me once I get settled.*

His mother and father looked at each other hastily, then turned back to him with identical expressions of urgency and grief. His father communicated, *You're really going to do it, aren't you.*

*Of course I'm going to do it. I told you that years ago.*

His mother's thoughts were barely discernible in her sorrow and distress. *Even though it goes against everything we believe in, everything we've tried to teach you.*

Braysel gazed at his mother reverently. *You taught me to serve God and to follow my conscience. I'm going into the Fleet to do both.*

His mother leaned her head on his father's shoulder and wept. Braysel stepped back in bewilderment and alarm. His mother had always been as adamant in the pacifist position as his father and the more inclined to angrily refute his challenges. She had never been one to cry easily.

His father shook his head sadly. *Braysel, I don't think you realize how serious this is. That you could join an army and kill God's children utterly revolts us, severely offends our sense of human decency and morality. For the sake of our values and the stable, uncorrupted home we owe your younger brothers and sisters, we can't tolerate it. When we told you that a member of this family could never be a part of Novaunian Fleet, we meant it. If you walk out that door right now in open defiance of us and join the Fleet, don't even think of coming back unless you have given it up and your heart has changed.*

It couldn't be true. They were disowning him, completely banishing him from the family. It was a possibility Braysel had never considered. It was something that didn't happen on Novaun. It was unreal, a nightmare. It couldn't be happening.

*But that isn't fair! You're making me choose between the Fleet and you, and it's something I can't do.*

*We love you, Braysel. Believe me, this is not what we want. But you are giving us no choice. You can't have it both ways.*

Intellectually, morally, Braysel knew that his father was right. He couldn't have it both ways. He might as well give his mother a necklace made of stolen arelada, light a Vaenan taffuao at the dining room table, or bring home a mistress. Emotionally, however, he couldn't accept it.

*It's political, isn't it! No . . . it wouldn't do for the great activists to have a son who's a Fleet officer; it wouldn't do at all. I'm a big fat sacrifice to your precious Isolationism Movement!*

His father gazed at him, hurt. *You know that isn't true.*

*Keep your beliefs, his mother pleaded. We don't like them, we don't agree with them, but they're your right. Stay here and be a telepathy scientist, or a physicist, or anything at all you want to be. Or go to Shalaun and be with people who also believe in the Fleet. You can even go into space and fly commercial cargo ships or transports. You can believe what you believe—you can even be a pilot—without joining the Fleet.*

Braysel knew they were sincere, but he felt empty and betrayed. *You're both so good at preaching human rights, yet you don't have the human decency to let me follow my desires and my conscience.*

His parents appeared as betrayed as he felt, betrayed and disappointed in him. His jaw quivered violently. *I wish I had never been born into this inhumane family.* Then he picked up his suitcase and strode to the door. From Haunal, he received emotions of reprimand, betrayal, and desolation; from Mauya, an outburst of sobs and a hysterical plea to stay.

That had been three and a half years ago. What right had he to believe that anything had changed? Not only did he have no right, he had no hope. He thought about them every moment of every day, as hard as he tried not to. He missed them desperately. His desire for their companionship, their respect and support, was as strong and as unrelenting as his obsession to make up for all of the Verzaunians and those from the other pacifist countries and worlds in the Union who had, for two thousand years, shunned their duty to help keep Novaun free. There lay his eternal dilemma and his eternal anguish, his ultimate choice to join the Fleet made purely in an effort to maintain the self-respect that could only come by following his conscience. He had to somehow make them understand.

Braysel watched Mautysia come closer to his view, overwhelmed by its spectacular beauty. It, like Shalaun, was a city lined with white beaches and clothed in luxuriant tropical vegetation. Unlike Shalaun, it was hilly and backed by the sharp peaks of Mounts

Shraulnara, Laundera, and Wamunsaula, sparkling in the sunshine and giving the illusion of reaching upward to Paradise.

Braysel disembarked downtown and walked leisurely through the city, so relishing the feeling of being home that he wasn't irritated by the disgusted stares his appearance generated in the people he passed. He delightedly noticed several new buildings that boasted his father's colorful, dramatic, ultra-luxurious architectural style.

He walked along the marble sidewalk up a hill, then down a hill, then into a residential area, where he telepathically hailed a taxi. He took the taxi back to the coast and east to the Mautysian Cliffs, passing many mammoth estate homes before finally coming to the one his father had lovingly designed and given to his mother fifteen years before.

The home stood on the cliff with its back to the Gulf, elegant and sublime with its gold-flecked marble, enormous emerald and sapphire trimmed windows, and steeply sloped, gold-tinted roofs that reached into the sky. The numanda was breathtakingly in bloom, crimson and cascading down the hill. The lawn was soft and deep green, and the Gulf was glistening in the background as far as his eyes could see. Braysel didn't think a place more beautiful existed on all of Novaun.

Braysel walked slowly into the front courtyard, past the miniature citrus trees, the gold planters laden with flowers, and the shimmering fountain to the front door. It was lunchtime, and although his brothers and sisters would undoubtedly be at school, both of his parents would be home.

Braysel hesitated a minute at the door. He couldn't telepathically send a summons the way a polite Novaunian person would if wishing to enter someone's home. They would never let him in. Feeling a rush of resolve, he pushed down the door handle, opened the door, and quietly stepped into the three-story foyer. Sunshine shone through the window above the door, illuminating the emerald floor and making the diamonds in the chandelier above him sparkle.

The home was silent except for the tinkling of the diamonds in the chandelier, but it smelled wonderfully of water chestnuts and sweet sauce and homemade cheese rolls. Braysel walked quickly through the foyer to the back of the house and the kitchen, his stomach rumbling.

His mother and father were sitting at the table, eating and communicating, and at the head of the table, strapped into a high chair, was an unfamiliar baby girl, intently studying a little piece of cheese roll before she daintily put it into her mouth. Braysel watched the child in awe. Was this another sister?

His mother saw him first. She dropped her fork loudly on the crystal plate. She stared at him in shock and repugnance, as if he were a corpse. His father immediately turned in his chair and watched him approach the table, wearing the same expression of shock and repugnance as his mother.

Braysel set his duffel bag on the floor, sat down at the table next to his father, and reached for a cheese roll. *I happened to be in town, so I thought I'd stop in for lunch.*

Braysel ate the roll in three quick bites, then reached into his duffel bag. His father didn't care much for presents. When he wanted something, he bought it. His mother was different though. She loved presents, and the more sentimental and extravagant the better.

Braysel brought forth a small, flat box wrapped in gold paper and handed it to his mother. He had found the necklace on Homzan in the Republic of Vaena, an elegant Orter Tunase design with tiny pearls and emeralds. It had cost him a little over six hundred gold

coins, but his mother loved emeralds and this particular necklace would do justice to her glamor and elegance.

Braysel gazed at her apprehensively. *I know you will probably be too ashamed to wear it, but I want you to have it anyway, if only just to look at.*

His mother shook her head quickly and pushed the box away unopened.

His mother's refusal to accept the gift hurt him deeply. *Please, Mother.*

She shook her golden blond head again, trembling and disconcerted, turning her head as far to the side as she could to keep from looking at him.

Then it came. The anger. The outrage. His father stood up. *How dare you walk into this home and defile it with that uniform!*

The muscles in Braysel's face tightened. *I've never been so proud to wear this uniform in the service of Novaun.*

His father's eyes narrowed. *And are you also proud to wear that monstrosity on your face?*

Braysel stroked his beard. *My comrades call me Angel-Rebel. I had to do something to live up to the Rebel half of it.*

*Even your Fleet comrades would never so insult us by wearing their uniforms into our home. Your visit here is over, Lieutenant.* He extended his arm to the door.

Braysel didn't move. *Do you know anything about Earth? I didn't think you did, so let me tell you something about it. Earth lusts after arelada. Earth's emperor-prophet telepathically controls the minds of the majority of its citizens. They live for war and aren't afraid to die since it is by dying in war they believe they receive their salvation. Nearly four weeks ago, Earth's Star Force, in an abominable attempt to gain a fortune in Senlana arelada, invaded the Senlana Republic. Do you have any idea how many Senlanans would have died if Earth had succeeded? Novaunian Fleet and the Gudynean Navy and the Latanzan Fleet and all of the other star armies that make up the combined Alliance forces are not conquerors or murderers but keepers of our peace and freedom. In all the history of Verzaun, we never had an army, it is true, but we didn't need one. We never had enemies like Diron or Earth.*

Now his mother was angry. *If you've come here to try and change our position on the Fleet, you're wasting your time.*

*And what do you imagine would have happened to Novaun had Major Zaurvau and his son not discovered Jovem Doshyr on Earth and returned the Doshyr twins to Novaun? Do you think the twins would have just happily told their uncle that they didn't want to come to Novaun and steal arelada for him? Do you think that negotiating would have done a milligram of good against that murderous traitor?*

Braysel had struck a sensitive spot in his mother. Her anger dissipated for the moment, and all of the blood left her face. She had been Jovem Doshyr's leading lady on two occasions.

His father gripped Braysel's armpit, pulled him out of the chair, and dragged him toward the door. *We can all learn a lesson from the Doshyr tragedy. Your mother and I are not about to allow you to corrupt any member of this family the way Jovem Doshyr corrupted his younger sister.*

*You have a lot of heartless gall, comparing me with Jovem Doshyr! The man is a cold-blooded murderer!*



*And in your three and a half years in the Fleet, you have never killed anyone,* his father communicated sarcastically, still firmly dragging him out of the kitchen.

*It isn't the same thing! Whatever Earthons I killed in the Senlana campaign were making every attempt to kill me! And if we had not repulsed the attack, Senlana would have been ravaged!*

His mother communicated weakly, *So you have killed men in battle.*

Braysel froze. He couldn't bear that he had so disappointed his mother. He couldn't tell her that Star Force flew as many women into battle as men. It was bad enough that he knew. Braysel put his hand gently on his father's. He shook his head quickly. *I'll go.*

Braysel's father released Braysel in the hallway next to the kitchen. Braysel went back into the kitchen to pick up his duffel bag, trembling. He looked in anguish from his father to his mother. *I didn't want to. I didn't. But someone has to go into battle. Someone has to protect our freedom.*

Braysel threw his duffel bag over his shoulder and walked away from the table. He stopped before stepping out of the kitchen and turned to face them again. They were watching him desolately. He looked tenderly at the baby girl who was sitting so quietly in the high chair, still intently studying every piece of cheese roll before she ate it. *The child—she isn't . . . ?*

His mother answered expressionlessly, *She's Larysa, Haunal's daughter.*

Haunal was a year older than Braysel, the oldest of the children, and one of Braysel's closest friends and companions of his youth. *When was he married?*

*Two years ago.* His mother hesitated. *Are you married, Braysel?*

Was he married? Braysel gazed at his mother, baffled. What an odd question. Of course he was not married. There had been no marriage contract drafted for him and a bride and he obviously had not had the arelada Eternal Triangle embedded in his temple.

Several moments passed before realization awoke within him. She thought he might have married a woman of another race, perhaps even of another religion. Well, why not? They believed, after all, that he was a traitor and a murderer. They probably thought he was a rapist and child molester too. So what that he had been married by a Latanzan Legal Minister to an Erdean prostitute with three children by different Gudynean fathers and that he kept them all happily on Telchon gambling and injecting prime nuayem for pleasure?

If the thought of marrying a woman who did not share his history and culture and making her the mother of his children was incomprehensible, the thought of marrying a woman who did not share his religion was outrageous and repugnant. Braysel knew his mother did not mean to insult him, but he was insulted anyway, severely. *No, I'm not married. I have three beautiful mistresses who keep me very satisfied.* Sincerely hoping they would believe it, he left.

\* \* \*

Once Braysel was gone, Trynenuin Nalaurev returned to his chair. *We both knew he would come back eventually.*

Aulanora Nalaurev's hand trembled uncontrollably against her temple. *He hasn't changed at all. If anything, he's more resolute and even more impossibly impertinent.*

*What did you expect? One cannot reject such great Light and have the Spirit of God remain with him. Only complete repentance will bring him back to us.*

Aulanora sighed. *What is it that drives him?*

*I don't know. I wish I could get inside of him and discover it myself.*

*One thing is for certain, Tryn, he really believes what he is doing is right.*

The tone of Trynenuin's thoughts lifted with hope. *Grandfather will never perform a marriage for him and give him and his bride the moral and financial support of the family. He must know that. Perhaps the desire to marry will become so strong in him that he will seriously re-evaluate his position and repent.*

Aulanora shook her head sadly. *He will just marry the daughter of another Fleet officer or a girl of another race and religion.*

*Even Fleet officers don't marry their daughters to men who have no families, and it's unlikely he would marry a girl of another race or religion. It's a possibility that had never occurred to him before today. He made that obvious when you asked him if he was married.*

*Then he will never marry. Nothing means as much to him as the Fleet and his warped perception of God's will. Not family, not marriage, not anything.* She moaned and leaned her face into her hands. *I don't even think he likes girls.*

Trynenuin smiled, barely. *Braysel may have his problems, but revulsion for women is not one of them. His sense of idealism has always been too strong to allow anything else to get in the way. If he hasn't shown an interest in girls, it's only because there hasn't been one come into his life extraordinary enough to capture his attention.*

Aulanora looked up at her husband again in despair. *And when she does, she will not share our ideology, but will believe in him and in the Fleet and we will have lost him and many of our descendants forever.*

Trynenuin tenderly took his wife's hands and pressed them to his lips. *We haven't lost him yet, Aulanora, not completely.*

## Chapter 5: TASTUNAD HALL

Braysel left his parents that afternoon, furious. How dare they call him a traitor and a murderer! How dare they compare him to Jovem Doshyr! How dare they assume he would marry a woman of another culture, as if no Novaunian woman would ever have him! It was an outrage, an utter outrage. Who needed a family like that anyway?

He walked back toward the city, kicking the sidewalk as he walked. Then, as always, his anger dissipated enough that he could feel his emptiness too, and memories of all the good times flooded his consciousness—all of the evenings together as a family at his mother's theater premieres and Mauya's dance recitals; all of the evenings with the Jualaz clan in Uncle Maunen's ballroom, singing and dancing and performing; all of the Eighth Days at their private beach below the cliffs, swimming and surfing and roasting water chestnuts over the fire; all of the mornings and evenings together holding hands around the dining room table in family prayer; all of the First Days after Devotional with the Nalaurev clan at Grandfather Jeldaun's mansion in the city, eating Grandmother Shynauna's bean cakes with poppy seed sauce; the parades and family history plays on the Day of Ancestors; all of his parents' lavish late-night parties he had invaded with Haunal and Mauya, Mauya begging to dance and he and Haunal begging for food; the hours with his father and Haunal learning how to do VisionRun and designing elaborate buildings out of blocks or sand; the times he had bickered with his father and brothers over who would get the last piece of cake.

When Braysel could tolerate the memories no more, he opened his mind to InterMind and escaped into telepathy vision games. There were mazes and adventures, mathematical equations, color matching, word problems, and multitudes of mind puzzles. He walked dreamily down the walk until the daily three-hour vision limit was exhausted and he was flung back into reality.

Braysel mentally condemned the three-hour vision law. Now those Dirons had the right idea. Life was pain. Life was sorrow. The only escape was to abandon oneself to fantasy. It would be the perfect life.

Once Braysel reached the more populated region of the city, he decided to visit Haunal. Haunal had never believed Braysel's desire to go into the Fleet had anything to do with conscience, simply because he believed deeply in the pacifist ideology of their family. He felt that if Braysel were following his conscience, he would never have even considered joining the Fleet. He and Haunal, however, had been the closest of friends growing up, and Braysel knew that he, of all the members of his family, would see him. He checked InterMind for Haunal's address, then headed to the Mautysia Academy of Science section.

Braysel jogged up the stairs of the walk that led to Haunal's tall, narrow town house. When he arrived at the door, he hesitated. Since he wasn't a polite Novaunian person, he decided a telepathic summons was out of the question. He thought he ought to show a little couth, so he reached out and knocked. It was near the seventeenth hour, so Braysel hoped he would catch Haunal before he went out for the evening.

Panic suddenly seized Braysel. What if Haunal's wife answered the door? That would be a disaster. He didn't worry for long, however, because at that moment, Haunal himself opened the door. Haunal stared at Braysel in horror. The beard really was a shocker, and Braysel knew that Haunal couldn't help but be stunned.

The muscles in Haunal's face relaxed. *Bray*, he communicated, somewhat timidly, *it's so wonderful to see you*. He was trying hard to be sincere. *Please . . . please come in*.

Braysel stepped into the tiny foyer after Haunal, and the two stood there restlessly, groping for something to communicate. Somehow, Haunal never got around to asking Braysel to sit down.

Braysel asked him about his work. Haunal was a geologist employed by their Uncle Sunen and the House Jualaz on a team that worked to discover new prime sources of arelada. Haunal was less than eager to discuss his work, so Braysel asked him about his new family.

Haunal was telling Braysel about his wife Candesla's specialty as an electrical engineer and how they both volunteered research time at the Academy a few hours a week, when Haunal's wife stepped into the room. She was rather pretty, with light brown hair like Haunal's and a reserved, content bearing.

When Candesla saw Braysel, however, her expression immediately changed to one of contempt. "No man wearing the uniform of the Fleet is welcome in my home! You may think that bearing the name Nalaurev gives you that right, but you are a disgrace to that great name, Lieutenant Braysel." She put a loathing emphasis on "lieutenant" that made Braysel shudder with disgust and fury. "I won't stand for it! Get out!"

*Now that's the purest example of love and universal brotherhood that I've ever seen.*

*You have the gall to stand there and preach universal brotherhood to me? While the brother you hurt and betrayed three and a half years ago is standing right here next to you?*

*Such pious derision! Such spiritual sacrifice! Such sublime sisterly affection! I'm flattered, I assure you, mineste.*

"Get out!"

The muscles in Haunal's face twitched, his eyes filled with grief. He nodded at Braysel and motioned weakly to the door, then turned and trudged away.

*I apologize for honoring you with my presence, mineste.* Braysel bowed low and left. He thought with despair that he would most likely never see Haunal again.

Braysel knew that if Haunal wouldn't see him, his second cousin Shaun Jualaz, another close friend of his youth, wouldn't see him either. Shaun was as entrenched in the pacifist ideals of their family as Haunal, and when his father took the seat of High Patriarch of the Great House Jualaz, Shaun would become the legal heir. It wouldn't be right for Shaun to be friendly with his Fleet cousin; no, it wouldn't be right at all.

Braysel wanted to see another second cousin, Kara Jualaz, perhaps more than he wanted to see anyone, but he wasn't sure it would be a good idea. He knew Kara would see him, but he also knew that seeing him would disturb her. Kara had always believed Novaun should adopt pacifistic policies, but, at the same time, she had always found it difficult to believe the Fleet was an organization of murder. She, of all the members of Braysel's family, had come closest to sympathizing with his position, and he needed that glimmer of support he had always felt from her. He knew, however, that his desire to join the Fleet had confused her to the point of anger. She wanted to believe the Fleet was an organization of murder, but couldn't, and she wanted to believe that what Braysel was doing was right, but couldn't.

Braysel and Kara were the same age and had studied telepathy science together in school. They had spent hundreds of volunteer hours at the institute his grandfather Jeldaun

Nalaurev had established for the development of telepathic medical technology, absorbing everything they could learn from his grandfather and the other specialists. Kara had worked hard over the years to persuade Braysel to become a telepathy scientist instead of a Fleet officer, and her arguments had been powerful.

*Your grandfather needs someone to help him direct the Institute. He wants you, Bray. I want to be a Fleet officer!*

*But you have a gift! You would be an extraordinary telepathy scientist or telepathic systems engineer.*

*I have to join the Fleet.*

*You're perfect for the Institute, and the Institute is perfect for you.*

*The Fleet needs me, Kara. It's what I have to do. It's what I want to do.*

*Don't do it, Bray. The Jualazes won't accept it; the Nalaurevs won't accept it. It will destroy your family, and it will destroy you.*

No. He couldn't see Kara. It was completely out of the question.

Hope flickered though him as he realized that there was one other person who might see him, his sister Mauya. Mauya had come of age a year and a half before, and Braysel wondered where she was dancing and if she was still living at home. He checked InterMind for information on her and discovered that she had married a man named Raunel Dylesnum two months before. He recalled that Raunel was the boy with whom she had danced since age thirteen. The information surprised Braysel because Mauya had never been interested in Raunel romantically. He knew because Mauya was one who felt that all of Novaun would be offended not to know her every love interest.

Braysel felt uneasy. He knew nothing about Raunel other than what he looked like and how he had danced three and a half years before. Her husband could have qualms about her renewing relations with a brother who was a Fleet officer. Braysel didn't think he would ever forget Candesla's anger and contempt. As for how Mauya, herself, would feel about seeing him, he had no idea. Pacifism, in both its political and moral implications, had never been important to her, but Braysel knew that much could change in three and a half years.

When Braysel, in his inquiry, discovered that Mauya and Raunel were members of the prestigious Mautysian Company of Classical Dancers and that they were dancing the lead roles in *The Valley of Nesluada* at Tastunad Hall that night, he immediately made a reservation. To Braysel's surprise and delight, someone had just cancelled his reservation, so he was able to get a seat, and a very good one. With theater only two nights a week, shows filled far in advance, especially shows performed by the leading companies.

Braysel had three hours to get himself presentable. As much as he loved the Fleet and enjoyed outraging Mautysia in his uniform, none of the Fleet uniforms, even the formal one he was wearing, were close to being adequate for Tastunad Hall. The Fleet uniforms had to have been designed by a Shalaunian; those people hadn't the slightest idea how to dress.

Braysel immediately secured a suite at the Tastunad Inn and sent the valet to Nomundal's for a selection of top quality formal suits. While he was waiting, he ordered a sandwich and did some quick calculating in his head. Within seconds, he figured that after paying for his suite, the show, dinner, and saving some money for tips he would have one hundred, ninety-two gold coins and forty-three silver coins left for a suit. He would stay

with Maurek when he got back to Shalaun, and Maurek, as cheap as he was, was always good for a meal. If he had to, he wouldn't eat for a couple of days.

The valet arrived with a tailor and a generous selection of suits. Braysel tried several of them on but wasn't satisfied. He sent the valet back to Nomundal's for another selection. Eventually he found one he could wear without being embarrassed and had it altered and hemmed, a crisp, impeccably tailored white suit with gold threads and trimmed with rubies, emeralds, and topaz. The gold belt was wide, extravagantly engraved around the edges, and completely inlaid with rubies. The half-vest was stitched with gold and covered with tiny rubies, emeralds, topaz, and other precious gems that sparkled in an elegant, flamboyant, original design.

Braysel had the one hundred and thirty gold coins charged to his account, directed the valet to carefully hang his suit in the closet, then telepathically sent for a hair stylist.

Braysel arrived at the theater thirty minutes before the dance presentation was scheduled to begin. He sank into his red velvet chair and soaked up the atmosphere of the theater. No other theaters in the galaxy came close to possessing the sophistication and artistic opulence of the theaters in Mautysia, just as no planet in the galaxy came close to producing the flawless, transcendent, deeply emotional art of Novaun. The theater was ancient and beautiful with its gold and marble floor, larger-than-life, exquisitely painted and sculpted scenes on the walls and ceiling, and massive gold and gemstone chandeliers. Every square centimeter of the theater had been designed and crafted with the same expert artistry that had gone into the productions that had been performed on its stage for the past four thousand years.

The performing arts on Novaun were unique in that few Novaunian artists were able to participate in their art on the occupational level. Novaunian law designated three hours on Second Day and Third Day nights for InterMind drama and five hours on Fifth Day and Sixth Day nights for theater. Novaunian art, with its intricate vision qualities, was for both the artists and the audiences so emotionally taxing that the designated days had to be observed to avoid slipping permanently out of reality and into fantasy.

In the early days of Novaun's telepathic society, hundreds of thousands of actors, dancers, musicians, and dramatists, unaware of the dangers, had gradually withdrawn into themselves and lived with the characters they had created or performed in the vivid universe of telepathy vision, no longer functional in society. Even with the strict laws controlling the dramatic arts, some artists believed themselves invulnerable or involved themselves with uncontrolled obsession. The law couldn't control the individual and how often he withdrew inside himself to experience the glories of creation or to relive what he had already created, assimilated, or experienced, and hundreds of Novaunians all over the Union slipped into the universe of fantasy every year.

The curtain rose, and Braysel abandoned himself to the romantic history *The Valley of Nesluada*, one of Novaun's great classical dance dramas from the Third Millennium. Scenery for dance dramas in general, unlike the more modern vision scenes that were used for plays, was traditionally constructed of elaborate painted murals and sculptures. This particular production of *The Valley of Nesluada*, however, used mammoth tapestries with the scenes embroidered into the fabric with gems. The glittering tapestries, along with the opalescent vision veil cast over the stage by a dramatist, gave the dance drama an extremely romantic, mythical quality.

The dance drama began with the great prophet Raynau in the year 586 receiving instructions from God in Amaria's Rainbow Forest to call the original twelve patriarchs of the Great Houses. The man portraying God was draped in an unembellished robe of white satin, wore a wig of flowing, wavy white hair, and wore contact lenses that made his eyes glitter like gold. Telepathy vision light seemed to emanate from him, giving him the necessary aura of glory and immortality.

The dance drama went on to recount Raynau's difficult journey across the Gulf of Verzaun and into the depths of the Crystal Mountains to find the fifteen-year-old Nostaul Jualaz, played by Mauya's husband Raunel. Nostaul Jualaz's father had died when he was an infant, and although Nostaul was young, he would be the patriarch and ruler of Verzaun. Nostaul travels with Raynau and his mother and younger brothers and sisters to Mautysia, the seat of Verzaunian civilization, to be publicly ordained. Along the way, in the beautiful valley of Nesluada, he sees an enchanting girl, Glauria, picking flowers, and he falls in love.

Mauya danced the role of Glauria, beautiful with her golden hair sparkling with jewels and wound around the back of her head in a braided chignon. Her willowy body was perfectly toned, and she wore a gem-trimmed gown with a tight-waisted bodice and full, filmy, knee-length skirt, the traditional dress for the Novaunian female dancer.

Glauria and Nostaul are too young to marry, so Nostaul promises he will come back for her in three years, and she promises she will wait. Nostaul is ordained patriarch and ruler of Verzaun, and he spends the next three years under the guidance of Raynau, learning how to be a servant and judge of the people. Nostaul leaves Mautysia to get his bride, but on the way, his entourage is caught in a blizzard, the icy snow and cold air produced realistically through telepathy vision. Almost dead, he is taken to the isolated mountain home of an old miner and his family and spends the next year, weak and sick, being gradually nursed back to health.

In the meantime, Glauria, heartbroken that Nostaul has not returned to her, decides to marry Jaunel, a wealthy merchant. The afternoon before her wedding, Glauria goes to the Valley of Nesluada and mourns the rejection of Nostaul.

Mauya as Glauria danced wistfully, poignantly, emanating emotions of anguish and despair. Musicians played haunting melodies on flutes crafted in gold as they had been anciently, and the mind chorus echoed with silvery shadows and the dying moans of a desolate heart. Mauya was beautiful as Glauria and completely convincing.

Just when Glauria's sorrow had reached its peak and she was curled up on the ground sobbing, Raunel as Nostaul danced timidly, compassionately onto the stage. He gracefully knelt on one knee and touched her chin. She gazed up at him in astonished bliss as they rose from the ground together, touching only barely, and they exuberantly danced a pas de deux, their emotions and movement overflowing with devotion and ardor. Braysel didn't think he had ever in his life witnessed anything so beautiful.

The dance drama ended with the wedding and Nostaul and Glauria in white, reaching for each other as they posed at the points of a crystal triangle rendered through vision. The brilliant presence of God was suspended at the apex of the triangle, his arms reaching down to Glauria and Nostaul, and the entire dance company posed at the sides and in front of the crystal triangle amid a multitude of Verzaunians produced telepathically.

The curtain lowered, and the thousands of people in the audience applauded vigorously. The curtain rose again, and the dancers floated four by four to the front of the

stage as they were introduced. Mauya and Raunel were the last of the company to be introduced, holding hands and bowing deeply from their knees. The applause and emotional outpouring from the audience intensified to a deafening level as the curtain lowered. Braysel jumped up from his seat and, along with everyone else in the audience, telepathically begged the company to make another appearance. The curtain rose again, and the dancers bowed. Mauya and Raunel gracefully danced a few steps, then again bowed deeply as the curtain lowered for the last time.

Braysel wormed his way through the crowd toward the stage. He couldn't wait to see Mauya. He was acquainted with at least three-quarters of the people he saw along the way, and half of those were relatives. He greeted them all cordially and asked polite questions about their families, acting as if he encountered them every Sixth Day night at the theater and was in other ways actively involved in their lives. They all stared at him incredulously, and he managed to move on to the next relative or acquaintance before the incredulity turned into outrage. Only his mother's younger sister Launya, who was normally so generous and vibrant, was visibly hostile.

*Don't you dare try and see your sister! You've caused enough trouble as it is!* Braysel's teenage cousins Naura and Taunya stared at his beard with hands over their mouths, blushing and snickering.

*She was magnificent, wasn't she?* Braysel communicated as he waved, allowing himself to be carried away from his aunt by the crowd. He heard Naura and Taunya burst into giggles.

The crowd carried him forward a few more meters, and Braysel saw his cousin Kara Jualaz. She was tall and willowy like all of the Jualaz women, with large blue eyes and golden hair that was long and crimped. Braysel had not felt comfortable with the prospect of seeing Kara, but he couldn't help but be happy now. "Kara! Hello!"

*Hello, Bray!* Kara embraced him. *Mauya was terrific, wasn't she? Tonight was my fifth time seeing the show. I just love it!*

*She was beautiful; she's always beautiful.*

Kara hugged him again. *I've missed you, Bray. Why did it take you so long to come home?*

*I've been busy. This is the first chance I've had to get back to Novaun. I'm between assignments.*

Kara's spirit caressed his with concern. *How are you, Bray?*

Braysel shrugged and looked away, struggling to subdue his turmoil. *I'm fine.*

Kara could feel that Braysel was not at all fine. She expanded her spirit around his in an attempt to comfort him. Moments passed, and she smiled weakly. *Your grandfather finally gave me status. I could make a suggestion or two in your favor.* She looked at him hopefully.

Discussing his grandfather and the Institute was too painful. Braysel touched Kara's temple. *I see you aren't married yet.* He forced himself to smile. *I could introduce you to many fine unmarried men.*

Kara's hope suddenly changed to confusion. She didn't want to believe that fine, upstanding men existed in the Fleet. In a way, Braysel felt sorry he had disturbed her and wished he had communicated something else; in a way, he was glad he had disturbed her and wanted to pour his three and a half years of Fleet experiences into her and make her see how fine and upstanding Fleet men really were.



Kara laughed uneasily. *Bray, you have more gall than anyone I know. Thank you, but no thank you!* She drifted away from him, waving slightly.

Once Braysel lost sight of Kara, he turned and hurriedly pushed through the crowd on his way to the stage.

He eventually arrived backstage and looked for Mauya. When he saw her, he rushed up to her. *Mauya! You were wonderful! Absolutely wonderful!*

Mauya spun around to face him, her makeup-laden eyes and mouth flying open in astonishment. After a few seconds of standing there paralyzed, she screamed and threw herself into his arms. *Bray! I can't believe it! It's you! It's really you!*

Braysel squeezed her tightly. Mauya stretched her body up to kiss him, then stopped suddenly. She stared in lurid fascination at the beard. She reached one finger gingerly out to touch it, then quickly pulled it back. After a second, she regained her courage and tried to touch it again, but she still couldn't bring herself to do it. She laughed and hugged him again. *Only my outrageous brother would ever grow a beard! What do Mother and Father think of it?*

*What do you think? Father called it a monstrosity before he kicked me out of the house again.*

Mauya's eyes became grave. *So you are still a part of the Fleet. I thought so, but I wasn't sure.*

Braysel nodded slowly.

Mauya squeezed his arm. *I have to go change. Where are you staying?*

*The Tastunad Inn.*

*I'll meet you at the restaurant there in forty-five minutes.*

*You mean it doesn't matter?*

Mauya shook her head quickly.

*What about your husband? Haunal's wife nearly bit my head off!*

*I forget that you don't know Raunel. No, he won't mind. See you later!* And within seconds, she had fluttered away.

Braysel left the theater and walked back to his hotel in high spirits. At least one member of his family cared that he existed. He had brought gifts not only for his mother, but also for all of his younger brothers and sisters. The gifts he had brought for the other ones were silly trinkets, but Mauya's gift was special, just like his mother's, and he was glad he would be able to give it to her. He pulled the gold-wrapped box out of his duffel bag and carried it carefully with him to the luxurious restaurant at the Tastunad Inn.

Mauya and Raunel arrived ten minutes after Braysel did, Mauya elegantly dressed dancer style, with an opalescent, gem-trimmed body leotard, glittery slippers, and a circular skirt that was covered with colorful gems. Her golden blond hair was still pulled back into a braided chignon, and she wore a thin layer of mascara on her long lashes, rouge on her cheeks, and bright red gloss on her lips. Raunel was not a tall man, about the same height as Braysel, and he wore a dramatically tailored, unembellished one-piece suit of shimmering deep gray linen that, along with his luxuriant, ashy dark hair and huge gray-blue eyes, made him seem graceful, shadowy, and mysterious.

Braysel rose from his chair as Mauya and her husband approached the table. Raunel greeted Braysel warmly with a clasp of his hand as Mauya slipped into her chair.

The two young men sat down, and after they had all telepathically surveyed the menu and ordered, Braysel communicated to Raunel with all the seriousness he could muster,

*Whatever possessed you to consent to dine here with me in such brotherly affection? What are you? Ill? Deranged? Or just plain stupid?*

Mauya laughed. Braysel glanced at her with a mischievous smile.

Raunel looked at Braysel knowingly. *Mauya possesses me.*

*But I'm the family homicidal maniac. I may just cut your heart out and amputate your head while you sleep. I have a whole collection, you know. Heads and hearts. I give the bones to my friend Lieutenant Avenaunta. He beats his mother with them and then sharpens his teeth.*

Mauya, by this time, was in hysterics. She threw her hands over her face and hid her head under the table in an attempt to smother her laughter.

Braysel looked under the table at Mauya. *What? You don't think it's fair that I give all the bones to Lieutenant Avenaunta? Major Haubun doesn't want them, and neither does Lieutenant Nybaur. They both prefer to collect fingernails.* He looked back up at Raunel and shrugged.

Raunel dropped his chin into his hand, and his arm collapsed under his torso. He burst into laughter, seeming more like an uninhibited little boy than a mysterious shadow.

Mauya sat up again and wrapped her arms around Raunel's neck. *I told you he's just like Grandfather! I warned you, and you didn't believe me! You couldn't believe that the leader of the Isolationists and the only Verzaunian man to ever join the Fleet could be just alike! I told you!*

*How dare you compare me to that militant fanatic!* Braysel communicated playfully.

Mauya and Raunel gazed at each other nodding, then laughed some more.

A waitress approached the table with their salads and drinks, and Mauya and Raunel worked quickly to compose themselves. Mauya took a sip from her glass of fizzy citrus punch, and Jaunel reached immediately for the nut shaker and sprinkled the crunchy mixture all over his salad. Once the waitress walked away, Mauya slipped her arm under Raunel's and urged, *Tell him why. Tell him really why.*

Raunel handed Braysel the nut shaker. *The Isolationists and Fleet supporters can war without me. Political partisanship would make it more difficult for me to withdraw convincingly into a role and would detract from my aura as an artist.*

Braysel laughed. *And just what does your mother-in-law think of that?*

Mauya communicated excitedly, *Mother is absolutely outraged! Raunel has almost drawn some sympathy from Father, though, I suppose because architects aren't supposed to have any aura, even famous ones, and Father doesn't have any even if he's supposed to. But anyway, Mother and Father were actually arguing about it, because Mother couldn't tolerate that he could even begin to sympathize with the idea.*

Braysel laughed freely. Life continued as normal here at home. A part of him felt as if he had never left. Another part of him felt sad that it had moved on without him.

Mauya's telepathic chatter continued on and on through dinner with all the city and family gossip, Raunel as content to simply sit by and assimilate as Mauya was to communicate.

Braysel finished eating his soufflé, then reached under his chair for the gift he had brought for Mauya and set it on the table in front of her.

Mauya's hazel eyes glowed with anticipation. *A present! This is wonderful! You always give the most wonderful presents.* She ripped the gold wrapping paper off the box, then lifted out a delicately carved box made of polished green stone that looked very much

like malachite but was much harder. She gingerly opened the box and gasped when she saw a little dancer wearing a frothy green gown spin in time with the melody generated by the box.

Braysel watched Mauya in satisfaction. *It's a music box, and the girl is a Latanzan zsuka dancer.*

Mauya closed the box and the music stopped. Then she opened the box again and the music played. She and Raunel took turns opening and closing it, both fascinated.

Mauya reached over the table and hugged Braysel, kissing his forehead. *Thank you, Bray, it's beautiful!*

*But that's not all of it,* Braysel communicated as Mauya sat back down. *Look inside of the box.*

Mauya looked at Braysel, puzzled, then peered into the box. A moment later, she was tearing gold paper from another gift. It was a small bottle of perfume that was labeled in Manourean. "Perfume!"

*It's bluuanetz,* Braysel explained, *and it's extremely popular everywhere but Novaun. It's supposed to smell just a little different on every woman who wears it.*

Mauya immediately opened the bottle and sniffed its contents. "Ooooh!" She gazed at Braysel wide-eyed. *It's so erotic and exotic. I could never wear it! I'd be banished from this city!*

Braysel chuckled. *Wear it for your husband. You'll make him delirious with passion.*

Beaming, Mauya dabbed some of the perfume on her neck and put her arms around Raunel, pressing close. "Take me to Paradise, sweet partner!" Raunel smiled at her seductively and nuzzled up to her neck.

Braysel watched the two in pleasure. Then he felt a stab of sadness that he had not attended their wedding.

Raunel kissed Mauya, then communicated to Braysel, still clasping Mauya close, *That is a wonderful scent. Where is it from?*

*Manoure. It's a small republic, less than a hundred planets, but it produces the most extraordinary perfumes, colognes, and soaps.*

Mauya released Raunel and leaned toward Braysel, smiling conspiratorially. *So, dear brother, is there a special woman in your life who's wearing your gift of bluuanetz and making you delirious with passion?*

Braysel let out a little grunt, as if the possibility were inconceivable, and shook his head quickly.

*They do let you meet women on your ships, don't they? The old men in the Fleet must have daughters.*

A strange mixture of despair and frustration churned within Braysel. He avoided Mauya's probing gaze, shrugging. *We usually see them in port. There are parties and outings and seminars and . . . well, you know. I'm just having too much fun flying fighters to think much about women.*

*Oh, come on Bray! In all this time you must have met a few who were pretty and intelligent enough to capture your attention!*

Finding attractive women wasn't a problem. But finding interested women . . . well, that was a different matter entirely. For a moment he was furious—furious at Mauya and her innocent curiosity, furious at his mother and her insinuating question, "Are you married, Braysel?"

*I haven't met any yet who are even close to being as beautiful as Mautysian women.*

*Mauya grabbed his hands across the table. Come home, Bray.*

*I want to. They won't let me.*

*You know good and well why they had to do what they did. You defied them and scorned everything they believe in, everything that is a part of our heritage. Of all the things on Novaun you could have done, Bray, you had to join the Fleet.*

*I scorned them? What about me? What about my feelings and my desires!*

*Mauya's pretty little mouth quivered. You're the one who left.*

*So now they send you to pacify the family embarrassment and lull him home.*

*That isn't true, and you know it. You wouldn't be this way if only you knew how heartbroken they are and how much we all miss you.*

*Braysel stared at the table, feeling paralyzed.*

*Several moments passed and Mauya communicated again, her emotions overflowing with tenderness and love, *Quit the Fleet, Bray. Just quit and come home.**

*I can't.*

*You can. Don't you see? It isn't the Isolationists who are wrong, or the Fleet that is wrong—what's wrong is that our family is torn apart.*

*I can't quit, Mauya. I can't quit the Fleet any more than you can quit dancing. God is with the Fleet, and He wants me in the Fleet. It's what I have to do.*

*You're only one person, Bray. You aren't going to make that big a difference. Your colleagues didn't have to reject their families to join the Fleet. Let them be the ones to fly the fighters and command the battleships. Please . . . please, Bray . . .*

*I can't. Braysel stood up, his eyes avoiding his sister's hurt face. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry . . .*

*The image of Mauya's tear-filled eyes burned into his mind, he hurried out of the restaurant, nearly running.*

## Chapter 6: THE TRAITOR AND THE TERRORIST

After checking out of the hotel the next morning, Braysel went back to Shalaun and spent several hours surfing with Maurek. Braysel communicated nothing of his previous day in Mautysia, and Maurek asked nothing.

Later that afternoon, the two young men went in their finest attire across the walk to the Zaurvau family home, now owned by Teren's sister Ranela, for Teren and Deia Zaurvau's Shalaun reception. Wanting to congratulate two friends on their marriage was reason enough to attend this reception, but Braysel knew that Maurek's desire to attend was wrapped in ardor, anticipation, and apprehension. He was obsessed with the prospect of getting a glimpse of Miaundea. Braysel was more interested in discussing the spirit dimension formula with Teren, Saharenper with Colonel Quautar, and getting his chance to stare at the infamous Dr. Ton Luciani.

Maurek and Braysel were approaching the gate to the backyard when Maurek seized Braysel's arm and communicated in a good-natured but threatening way, *Don't you dare communicate anything to embarrass me!*

Braysel looked at Maurek innocently. *You mean you don't want me to go up to Miaundea and communicate, "Hello, my name is Bray. I'm here with Maurek. You know Maurek. He's the one who's been having fantasies about you from the time he discovered he was a boy."*

Maurek moaned. *This is going to be a long night.*

Braysel chuckled and opened the gate.

Maurek communicated cheerfully with people he and Braysel passed on their way to the reception line and introduced Braysel to some of them. Most of them stared at him as if he were an alien. Braysel wanted to laugh. These Tavoneans were just too prosaic!

Only Teren, Deia, and a young woman were formally receiving guests at the moment. Braysel assumed the others were getting refreshments. Teren and the young woman were communicating gaily; Deia stood by, silent and disinterested.

Deia's eyes brightened a little when she saw Maurek. She took hold of his hands and squeezed. *We're so glad you could come!*

Maurek lifted one of Deia's hands to his lips and kissed it. He addressed her in English. "You make a beautiful bride, Deia Zaurvau!"

Deia smiled. "Thank you."

Maurek and Teren embraced each other vigorously. Once Maurek's attention turned to Teren, Deia's attention turned to Braysel.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Deia," Braysel said in English. He took her hand in his and kissed it in the proper Earth custom. "My name is Bray Nalaurev."

"It's nice to meet you, Bray. You know English, so you must be in the Fleet. Is that how you know Maurek?"

Braysel nodded. "Maurek and I met three and a half years ago as privates on the *Larv Ylendoshal*. We studied English and nine other languages together during our two years as roommates."

Deia's long, delicate fingers traced the gem-embroidered designs in Braysel's half-vest. "Where did you get this magnificent suit? It's so colorful and so dramatic and so un-Novaunian! Paul, my brother, nearly made himself and the rest of us insane trying to find clothing like this!"

Braysel chuckled. “You mean it is un-Tavonean and un-Menauran. Evidently neither you nor Paul have had the pleasure of visiting Mautysia.”

“No, we haven’t, but we would both like to. Paul will be even more anxious now when I tell him about your suit. He can’t complain too much anymore, though, because Miaundea is in the process of designing a wardrobe for him. She finished several articles while she was in Launarda, and he is ecstatic! But I don’t suppose you know Miaundea, do you?” She glanced at Maurek, who was still communicating with Teren and Alysia. “No, I don’t suppose you do.”

Braysel didn’t dare miss this opportunity. He wanted to somehow inspire Maurek to be bold in expressing his feelings to Miaundea and thus persuade her to seriously communicate with him, and he knew he could manage the task far better if he understood Miaundea. “Perhaps you can introduce us sometime.”

Deia gazed at him knowingly. “If you weren’t here with Maurek—you have to understand, Maurek and Miaundea aren’t terribly fond of each other—I wouldn’t have to introduce the two of you at all; Miaundea would introduce herself to you. She will love that suit, and she will literally go insane over your beautiful beard!”

Braysel knew that anyone with good taste would appreciate his suit, and he also knew that no woman born on Novaun or any of its worlds could help but loathe his beard, despite Deia’s suggestion to the contrary with regard to Miaundea. Consequently, there was only one way he could reply. He stroked his beard and looked at Deia as if he were insulted. “Who wouldn’t?”

Deia laughed and slipped her arms around Teren’s waist, kissing him on the cheek. She said in playful reprimand, glancing at Braysel, “You told me that Novaunian men don’t wear beards!”

Teren immediately diverted his attention to Braysel. “They don’t.”

Maurek shrugged. *That’s what happens when a devout Verzaunian pacifist joins the Fleet. Something inside of him snaps.*

Braysel laughed. Maurek grinned and put his hand on Braysel’s shoulder, presenting him to Teren. *Teren, Alysia, this is my friend Bray Nalaurev, Lieutenant Bray Nalaurev. Bray, this is Teren Zaurvau and his sister Alysia Quautar.*

Braysel greeted Teren and Alysia with fingertips touching theirs. Alysia stared at his beard in fascination. Teren was interested in Braysel’s family name. *You really were a Verzaunian pacifist.*

*I am a Verzaunian, but I was never a pacifist.*

Teren studied Braysel’s face. *You must be related to Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev. You look too much like him.*

*He’s my grandfather.*

*And his father is Trynenuin Nalaurev.* Maurek had directed his thoughts to Alysia, and Braysel wondered if she was interested in art or architecture.

Alysia’s face suddenly went bright with excitement. *Oh, I love your father’s style! Someone should commission him to design a building for Shalaun. This city could sure use a good shot of drama!*

Braysel chuckled. *One of my father’s buildings would look so out of place in this city that its residents would demand it be torn down within a week of its completion!*

*So what does your family think of your being in the Fleet?* Teren asked. *Certainly they don’t approve.*

Braysel shrugged. *They disowned me.*

Dr. Ton Luciani walked up to the group, sharply dressed in a dramatically tailored black suit with a crisp white shirt and a long burgundy waist sash held in place to the side with an Earthon pin. He embraced Teren and Deia with affection. He kissed Deia's cheek. "He treating you well?"

Deia nodded and smiled.

Ton narrowed his eyes threateningly at Teren. "He'd better be."

Teren's eyes shone with laughter. "Maurek, have you met Ton yet?"

Maurek shook his head slowly, unable to keep his feelings of suspicion and disgust from revealing themselves in his expression. Braysel bit his lip to keep himself from laughing.

"Maurek, Ton Luciani; Ton, Maurek Avenaunta."

Ton held out his hand to shake Maurek's, surveying Maurek curiously. "You must live near here. I've seen you around."

"I grew up on this walk. I get back for a few days every two weeks or so on liberty."

"You're a Fleet man, then."

Ton was as urbane as Maurek was ingenuous, and Braysel had a feeling he was going to have to step into the conversation soon to keep Maurek from making a fool of himself.

Maurek nodded. "I'm a strategist and a navigator."

Ton gazed at Maurek intensely. "Maurek Avenaunta . . . I know that name." He frowned, trying to recall. Suddenly his face lit up and his mouth pulled into a grin of delight. "You're the domineering prude who thinks Miaundea's a shameless little hussy!"

Maurek flushed. "I have nothing but the utmost respect and admiration for Miaundea."

"Then why does Teren say you think she's a hussy?"

Teren was communicating with another guest, but he retreated from the conversation long enough to glance at Ton and say, "You leave me out of their ridiculous fight! I only repeated what Miaundea herself thinks!"

Ton laughed; Maurek looked as if he would be sick. Since the reception line had gradually reconstructed itself and guests were continuing to arrive to congratulate Teren and Deia, Ton and Braysel and Maurek were obliged to move in the direction of the refreshment table.

Before Braysel could walk away, he felt an anxious telepathic jolt from Deia. *The suit! Where in Mautysia did you get the suit?*

*Nomundal's on Tastunad Main in the theater district. Persuade Teren to take you to see The Valley of Nesluada. My sister, Mauya Dylesnum, and her husband Raunel dance the lead roles.*

*Oh! A ballet!*

*Not exactly, but almost. Novaunian classical dancers dance with their emotions as well as with their bodies, and they do not dance on their toes.*

*Oh, but still! I'm sure it's wonderful! Thank you! I hope we see you again soon, Bray.*

*So do I.*

Deia then gave her full attention to the new arrivals, and Braysel gave his full attention to the spectacle right next to him.

Ton gazed at Maurek in extreme interest. "So why does Miaundea herself think that you think she's a hussy?"

Maurek's cheeks were red and his tongue was obviously paralyzed. Braysel put his hand affectionately on Maurek's shoulder and answered for him, "You see, Maurek has this ugly monster lurking inside of him named Temper."

Ton gazed at Maurek in empathy. "She has that effect on you too? Between you and me, I wish she was a shameless little hussy. She'd be a lot easier to deal with." Ton reached for a glass of punch. "The domineering I understand. We both know that a man has no choice but to deal with Miaundea in that way if he wants to avoid complete physical and emotional castration."

Braysel laughed, suddenly yearning to meet this bewitching little creature who inspired in these two men such rage and obsessive desire.

Ton looked at Maurek penetratingly. "Why does she think you're a prude?"

Braysel communicated to Maurek privately, *If you want him to stop asking you about Miaundea, just say, in your most serious tone of voice, "Because I am," and then get yourself some food.*

Maurek's answer was immediate. "Because I am." Then to Braysel: *You'd better be right or you're dead!* Maurek sauntered past Ton to the buffet, appearing sufficiently nonchalant.

Before Ton could say anything, Braysel leaned forward and gazed at him intimately, as if letting him in on a deep, dark secret, and said in a very low voice, "You have to understand, Maurek must make everyone believe he is a prude. That way no one will ever see any of his unrestrained, insatiable, mutated appetites."

Ton listened in amusement as he sipped from his glass of punch, and Maurek's hand shook as he loaded his plate with fruit, cheese, bread, and shellfish. His face moved through many red and pink shades as he did everything in his power to restrain himself from laughing.

"Miaundea loves people to believe Maurek is a prude. You see, she and Maurek have been lovers for years, and this perpetual fight of theirs is how they keep it secret. We all know what Miaundea's father would do if he ever found out—Colonel Quautar does have the reputation of being a bloodthirsty mercenary."

Ton and Maurek exploded with laughter.

Braysel quickly took Maurek's plate before it ended up on the other side of the yard, wearing the most serious, offended expression he could muster. "You think I'm joking! This is the man who cleans his teeth with gamma rays, shoots his children's pets for target practice, and sends spies and double agents with complimentary ovens to the Nuntusils on Brego!" Ton and Maurek both erupted into another burst of hysterics. The Bregoian Nuntusils were cannibals.

Maurek, with considerable effort, straightened his face and asked Braysel in his most serious tone of voice, "Were you a difficult child?" Braysel smiled. Then he laughed and handed Maurek's plate of food back to him.

Ton handed Braysel a glass of punch. "Who are you? I would have remembered you."

Maurek grinned. "This is my companion in depravity, Lieutenant Bray Nalaurev, the Fleet's notorious Angel-Rebel."

Braysel and Ton shook hands, and Ton asked, "So, did you get the name before or after you grew the beard?"

"Before. Long before." Ton's eyebrow's shot up with interest.



"The beard is new," Maurek said. "Bray's from Mautysia and is the only Verzaunian man to ever join the Fleet. His father is a famous architect, his mother is one of Novaun's most glamorous actresses, and his grandfather leads Novaun's Isolationism Movement."

Ton reached for a plate and began filling it. "They're pacifists then. I daresay I'm not the only person here who is a traitor."

"Ah . . . but there are some very important differences between you and me." Braysel held up one finger. "I doubt very much you became a traitor for an ideal." He held up two fingers, smiling indulgently. "My parents are not only famous, they are rich, disgustingly, gloriously rich. I had to take a reduction in pay to become a traitor." He shot up three fingers. "I'm not only a traitor, I am a murderer too. I saw my father yesterday, and to him, I'm no different from the traitor that all traitors worship, the great Jovem Doshyr."

Maurek shook his head indignantly, his face tightening and his eyes narrowing in outrage.

Ton grinned. "You're right. Not even I have had that honor." He picked up a shellfish and waved it a little. "Are you a vegetarian?"

Braysel set his glass of punch on a plate and reached for the nuts and cheese. "I am."

"My partner communicates telepathically with her plants. I thought she was crazy, but she showed me the Awareness image of one of her plants in the Awareness monitor. If plants have spirit bodies, then why is it not killing to eat them, but it is killing to eat animals?"

Braysel turned and looked at Ton in surprise. "Good question!"

Maurek shrugged. "Even pacifists have to eat."

Braysel nodded thoughtfully. "I would really like to know my mother's answer to that one. I cannot wait to ask her if she thinks the grain that made the flour in her bread screamed out in pain when it was harvested!"

Ton's eyes lit up with realization. "You're related to that fanatical telepathy scientist doctor who tried to get the spirit dimension formula banned from military research."

Braysel nodded at Ton as the three moved away from the buffet table. "The one and only Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev. He's my grandfather."

"How many generations back?"

"Six."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, of course."

"So what does a devout pacifist family do with one of its members who joins the Fleet?"

"It disowns him."

Ton nodded thoughtfully. "So in Novaunian terms, what does that mean?"

"My parents will not see me or have any kind of contact with me, nor will most of the members of my extended family. As far as the family organization is concerned, over which my grandfather Jeldaun presides, I am completely on my own spiritually, which means my grandfather will not perform any ordinances for me. I am also completely on my own financially."

"That shouldn't be too much of a problem," Ton observed. "You have status, don't you? You must make a decent enough living. You probably wouldn't need your family's help anyway."

Braysel was amused that Ton understood so little of Novaunian culture that he was blind to the predicament. In a way, he felt sorry for him for understanding so little of closeness with God and family that he could not see any facet of life beyond an individual's own personal universe. "Supporting myself is not the problem."

"I have a question for the former Earthon," Maurek said suddenly. Ton looked at Maurek expectantly. "Why in the galaxy did your government order the Senlana campaign, killing nearly a million people, when Earth did not have a chance in eternity of winning?"

Ton looked at Maurek in surprise. "But that isn't true. It may have been premature, but it was an enormous power-seizing opportunity. It just turned out unfavorably, fortunately for Novaun, unfortunately for Earth."

Maurek shook his head vigorously. Even Braysel was surprised by Maurek's show of passion. "Superficially it seemed a great opportunity, but when all of the various factors are taken into consideration, ordering that attack was complete stupidity." Maurek immediately began generating all of the various possibilities, the planets and their rotations, and the positions of the various fleets involved in telepathy vision.

The images flew by Braysel in a blur, and he was only able to assimilate a mere half of the material Maurek presented, but what he assimilated was easy to understand. Earth had initiated an attack that it had had no hope of winning.

Maurek waved a roll in Ton's direction. "Do you not see? Earth had, at best, a fifteen percent chance of winning this campaign. I ask again, why in the galaxy would Earth's government order an attack it had no hope in eternity of winning?"

Ton frowned, obviously puzzling over the possibilities.

"Perhaps it attacked Senlana to divert the Alliance's attention away from more enticing plunder—Saharenper," Braysel suggested.

Maurek nodded at Braysel, then looked again at Ton.

"No," Ton said, shaking his head. "Earth can't help but be interested in Saharenper, that's true, but the Senlana campaign had more to do with Sanel King than with Saharenper." His dark eyes glowed with understanding. "Haven't you wondered why Earth refuses to give King to your government? Why it allows itself to suffocate economically to protect this man who is no good to it now? There's a connection between Earth's refusal to give up King and the Senlana invasion. There has to be."

Ton's suggestion fascinated Braysel and he wanted more explanation. "What kind of power could King hold?"

"Maybe he is blackmailing the people in power over him," Maurek said.

"Do either one of you know anything about Earth's internal politics?"

"A little," Braysel replied.

"You know that the Divine Emperor is the head of state and under him is the Council of Elders."

Both Braysel and Maurek nodded.

"All right, then. One of the Elders is Saint Kravim, and he's the Director of Defense. His first assistant is Admiral of the Fleet Laddan, who directs Star Force, and his second assistant, the one who directs intelligence, is, or was, Sanel King. King could have some volatile information on either Saint Kravim or Admiral Laddan or both, and it may be the two of them who are working so hard to protect King. It wouldn't be outrageous to speculate that the Divine Emperor is unhappy about Earth's political condition now, that he wants to give King to your government but is in some way prevented from doing so by

Saint Kravim and that Saint Kravim, in a desperate attempt to appease the Divine Emperor, ordered troops into Senlana to secure a continuous supply of arelada.”

Maurek nodded that he was satisfied with Ton’s suggestion.

Ton looked quizzically from one to the other. “Now I have a question for both of you. Why does your Fleet allow any of its people to die in battle at all? Why don’t you use your arelada and your telepathic powers to make your enemy fleets see ships that aren’t really there? Or make them think their power supplies are inadequate? Or surround them with imaginary asteroids?”

“We are forbidden by the Council of Prophets to use mind-altering tactics,” Maurek replied.

“So what does your religious organization have to do with war?”

“The people of Novaun want the support and power of God with them in everything they do,” Braysel explained, “which means that they support the High Prophet as an advisor to the government and that they demand that our military leaders are righteous men who possess the gift of prophecy.”

“You’re jok—” Ton suddenly froze, gazing in trepidation at the reception line. Braysel and Maurek simultaneously turned their heads to see what had caused Ton such distress. There, vigorously embracing Teren, was Miaundea.

Maurek watched Miaundea, his eyes glowing with unrestrained excitement. Braysel watched Miaundea in a scrutinizing way, hoping to discover what made her such an enchantress.

Miaundea certainly was lovely—Braysel couldn’t deny that—but he couldn’t help but be surprised that she was just an ordinary girl. Perhaps her style of dress was an artistic, stunning celebration of her femininity, made even more dramatic by her blond hair draped unbraided on her exposed back, but that was hardly enough to give her the status of enchantress. Braysel had expected a more vibrant girl, one not so reserved in manner, a girl so beautiful, so seductive, that she made him seethe with stormy hunger. That was, after all, the effect Miaundea had on Maurek, as much as Maurek tried to deny it. Maybe that was it. Maybe Miaundea could never have the same effect on him that she had on Maurek, precisely because she did have that effect on Maurek. There were four women in a man’s life who were sacred—his mother, his sister, his brother’s wife, and his best friend’s girl. Still, he had to admit, she was incredibly lovely.

Ton handed his plate to Maurek. “I’d like to buy you dinner tonight. Meet me at Sashna’s at the nineteenth hour.”

Maurek shrugged. Braysel nodded. “All right.”

Ton took several steps toward the reception line, hesitated, then turned to look at Braysel and Maurek again, his expression resentful and dour. “Have either of you ever experienced an erotic nightmare?” Then without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked over to Miaundea.

Maurek watched the meeting of the two with intense interest, and, at the same time, extreme difficulty. Braysel observed them analytically.

When Miaundea saw Ton, her expression was at once excited and apprehensive, and as they approached each other, Ton was finding it difficult to maintain his dour expression. Hesitating, Miaundea took his hands in hers and gazed up at him in love and complete submission, her eyes glossy and her lips quavering. “I’m sorry, Ton. I’m so sorry.”

Ton, ever so gently, lifted her hands and pressed them against his cheeks, gazing at her with a tenderness that was startling. “So am I.”

Braysel was both surprised and touched. Miaundea’s love for Ton was wrapped in such compassion and vulnerability that Braysel wondered how she could be the same severe, intimidating, impenetrable little lady Maurek had described to him. Braysel studied Miaundea, comparing what he saw to what Maurek had told him, and from that comparison emerged the vision of a young woman whose heart he was able to discern with clarity, as if he were looking through arelada, a young woman he knew and admired.

Maurek communicated to Braysel in amazement, *I would never have believed it. She’s turned that arrogant Earthon into a complete jellyfish. Total mush!*

Braysel turned abruptly to Maurek, feeling an urge to beat him in the head and shout to his face, “Don’t look at Ton, you idiot, look at Miaundea! Look at the girl you think you love!” Maurek was so proud that he wouldn’t allow himself to see that Miaundea was as soft, as submissive, and as much of a jellyfish as Ton.

Braysel’s urge to physically knock some sense into Maurek quickly passed, and he wanted to laugh. Maurek and Miaundea were so much alike they were unbelievable. *Ton said it himself—complete physical and emotional castration.*

Maurek chuckled and turned to communicate to his brother Taunen, while Taunen’s wife, with their two little girls, greeted someone else.

Miaundea said to Ton, “We need to talk.”

Ton nodded acquiescently. As they turned to walk toward the front yard, Miaundea noticed Braysel, who was watching her unapologetically. Her eyes traveled with interest from his shoes, to his suit, to his beard, to his eyes, and she smiled at him in amused approval.

Braysel couldn’t resist. He communicated to her with affection, *Well, it appears I finally get to meet the hellion of Auyval Beach.*

Miaundea’s eyes twinkled banteringly. *If I’m a hellion, what does that make you? Some kind of terrorist?*

Those ardent green eyes really were extraordinary. Braysel grinned and nodded at her as she rested her hand on Ton’s arm and disappeared with him around the side of the house.

## Chapter 7: SOMETHING MORE

Ton allowed Miaundea to lead him to the backyard and pull him down with her as she carefully sat down under the huge willow tree. Reluctant to relinquish the security of her touch, Ton slid his fingers along the back of her hand and held it on his knee. She gazed at him, her eyes sincere, the shadows of the willow branches moving gracefully back and forth across her face. "Why didn't you reply to my communications?"

"I was afraid you'd act as if nothing had happened."

"All I wanted to do was apologize," Miaundea said gently. "That night I just panicked. I said some very cruel things to you, and I only hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

Ton grazed Miaundea's cheek with his fingertips. "Why are you so afraid, Miaundea? I don't want to hurt you."

"I know. I guess I'm afraid that I'm going to do something I don't really want to do and that I'll hate myself for it. But more, I'm afraid that I'll hate you."

"You aren't making any sense. It seems to me that you've been feeling so much grief, anger, and frustration when we've been together because you won't admit to yourself what you really want."

"No, Ton. It isn't that. You don't understand."

Ton moved closer to Miaundea and stroked her hair over her ear. He had never seen her eyes so full of emotion, nor had he ever dreamed it was possible to feel such passion. In the beginning, all he had wanted from her was her body and her willing submission. He wasn't sure when that had changed, but it had changed. What he wanted now was more a relationship of mutual support and affection. Miaundea was different, special, and he didn't want anyone else.

As far as she knew, though, he was just after her body. "I think I do understand. You're unsure of my feelings for you." Ton wanted to tell her how he felt, but he wasn't sure how to express it.

Miaundea's lips barely moved, then tightened, her head tilted toward him just slightly, her eyes intense as if trying, through pure force of will, to help him articulate his feelings.

"I like you a lot, Miaundea." Ton paused, waiting to hear her burst into scornful laughter. She didn't laugh, she didn't speak, she smiled, and Ton was pleased. "I want us to be only for each other."

An expression of such shock consumed Miaundea's smile that Ton was startled. He thought for a moment about what he had just confessed to her, and he realized how ridiculous it must have sounded. He had never been reluctant to flaunt the fact that many women had passed through his life. Not only that, but Novaunian women were so repulsed, so outraged, or so inspired to laughter and scorn by the prospect of casual physical intimacy that he was unable to continue in his previous lifestyle even if he wished it.

"It's what I want, even if we weren't here. I understand if you don't believe me. I wouldn't believe me either. I don't know what else to tell you, though. It's how I feel."

The shocked expression on Miaundea's face melted into one of tenderness. "I believe you, Ton."

"You do?"

Miaundea smiled. "Of course I do."

Ton wanted more than ever to make love to her. He hardly dared touch her, though, not after the other night. He didn't think he could live with another rejection. He asked softly, "And you? What do you want?"

"I'm not sure how to tell you this." Miaundea looked away for several moments and studied the grass, then looked back at him again, her eyes solemn. "I'm in love with you. First I tried to fight it; then I tried to deny it, but I couldn't."

Feelings of warmth, happiness, and security consumed Ton, feelings he had never before experienced in this way, feelings that were far different from the disdain and constraint he had expected to feel hearing a girl declare her love for him. For a moment, he hadn't a care in the universe. She would be his lover now without shame.

One hand timidly crept to her waist, and the other caressed her arm. "Come with me, Miaundea, while every one is at the reception. We can go to your apartment if you'd feel more comfortable. I want to make it perfect for you, perfect for us."

Miaundea shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry, Ton, but that isn't what I want."

Everything between Miaundea and him was so perfect. How could it not be what she wanted? Ton didn't know what to say.

Miaundea placed her hands gently on his cheeks, her expression one of earnestness and anguish. "As much as I love you and admire you in certain ways, and as flattered as I am that you hold me in such high esteem, the greater part of me will never want the relationship you want right now. I don't want to hurt you, but you have to understand. If I really wanted to be intimate with you, I would have done it already." She shook her head quickly, still gazing at him with grief-filled eyes. "I want something more, Ton."

"And just what is that something more?" Ton already knew the answer, and he could feel the bitterness rise within him again. The situation was so unbelievable it was almost funny. He had spent years having sex with girls who, as much as they enjoyed the pleasure he gave them, despised him, girls he had never pretended to like or respect. Now he had a girl for whom he felt extreme affection, a girl whose companionship he wanted desperately, a girl who was interested in him personally and who even believed she loved him, and for that girl, even love wasn't enough.

Miaundea said softly, "I want a man with whom I can have a family and an eternal intimacy, a husband."

Ton backed away from Miaundea and leaned against the tree. "So that's it. You won't make love to me because you're being faithful to a man you may not meet for another ten years. He must be some kind of perfect man—some kind of god—to be worth so much self-denial."

"No, Ton. He won't be perfect. Just perfect for me."

Ton grunted. "And do you honestly believe that this perfect man will save himself for you?"

"I do," Miaundea replied with a dignity and sincerity that was amazing. As resentful and as jealous of that other man as Ton felt, he admired her all the more for not allowing him to intimidate her. She continued, "On Novaun there are no double standards with regard to physical intimacy."

What was she? An idiot? A foolish idealist? A naïve child? "The men on this planet sure do have you women fooled. You don't really believe that all of those men away from home in the Fleet and visiting foreign ports on a regular basis are denying themselves natural pleasures."

“Listen to yourself, Ton. Just listen to yourself and hear how ridiculous you sound! Fleet men are no different from any other Novaunian men. They marry, they marry young, and they abstain from sexual pleasures until they marry. Whether you believe it or not, or whether you like it or not, the dijauntu, or the joining of the spirit and mind, is part of our marriages. It is ludicrous to suggest that a Novaunian man could marry a Novaunian woman and lie to her about prior sexual experience!”

Ton bent his knees and rested his arms on them. “Jovem Doshyr found it easy enough to lie to his wife, and Brys Vundaun has been living a double life for years.”

“We don’t know that Brys Vundaun has been living a double life with Paul and Deia’s Aunt Eauva. The mistresses may be one of King’s lies, as Eauva believes.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. That still doesn’t explain Jovem Doshyr.”

“Jovem Doshyr can lie about his essence, an ability the rest of Novaun’s men never believed existed, much less have ever had.”

“And just how do you know? Perhaps Jovem Doshyr was merely the first person to use this ability openly.”

Miaundea stood up and went to get a couple lawn chairs. “You’re dying to discover filth and hypocrisy in this people, aren’t you? You can’t bear the thought that you’re living on an uncorrupted world.”

“And just what does your perfect culture do with flaws?” Ton called after her. “What of someone like Paul, who is sexually experienced and wants to become a part of this society? Does this mean he will never find a woman who will marry him?”

Miaundea returned with the lawn chairs. “Your argument is an awfully weak one. You haven’t the slightest idea whether Paul is experienced or not. He’s young, and I’m sure he was taught differently by his mother. For all you know, he may be as pure as Menaurean snow.”

Ton stood up and took a chair from Miaundea and sat down in it. “You forget. He was seeing my sister on the *Sovereign*, the whore of whores.”

“So?” Miaundea seated herself in her own chair and crossed her legs. “No one you knew on the *Sovereign* would believe you and I aren’t lovers.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” How could it not? Ton wondered.

Miaundea shrugged. “All that matters to me is that we both feel comfortable with what goes on between us.”

Ton wasn’t sure he believed her. “You want me to convince you that Paul had sex with Jacquae? All right. I’ll convince you. Paul, with his money and his looks and his aristocratic air and his powerful uncle, was a conquest of conquests. He was always depressed, half-drunk, and as unstable as I’ve ever seen anyone. He never did have his wits about him, and he was completely incapable of putting up a fight of any kind, even if he wanted to. If Jacquae wanted him, she had him, and believe me, she wanted him. Paul himself came in one night, deliriously drunk, shouting that she was an Eslavu whore.”

Miaundea was profoundly disturbed.

“You believe me. Well, it’s about time. I ask you again. What does your perfect culture do with a flaw like Paul?”

Compassion softened Miaundea’s face. “People make mistakes. God forgives those who change their actions and their hearts, and I know that Paul is trying very hard to change.”

Ton was so sick of her always bringing God into everything. As far as he could tell, God didn't have much to do with real life. "But even if Paul changes, a part of him will remember his experience. Even if, as you say, God forgives him, it happened. What, does God erase the memory too?"

Miaundea brushed a strand of hair out of her face. "I don't know."

"And what if Earth-bred Paul never has any intention of giving his mind to a woman, no matter how much he loves her. What then? Does a Novaunian woman marry a man she knows she will never have dijauntu with?"

"I don't think so, no," Miaundea said musingly, her voice still touched with compassion. "But there will be someone for Paul, I know it."

"Well I guess it's lucky for Paul there's a place for him here on perfect Novaun." Ton thought of Bray, and it occurred to him that Bray was more flawed than Paul because he didn't have any intention of changing. "What about a man who is disowned by his family? An idealistic man who has no intention whatsoever of changing his beliefs or his actions to please his family. What kind of chance does he have for obtaining your culture's perfect wedded intimacy?"

Miaundea tapped on the armrest of her chair. "I don't understand the problem. People who can't live with this culture leave long before their families would even think of disowning them."

Ton flicked away an ant that had climbed on his arm. "Perhaps this man only disagrees with half the culture. Let's say he's from a devout pacifist family and joins the Fleet."

"You're being ridiculous. Children born into pacifist families grow up to be pacifists. Even if they don't agree completely with their families' ideals, they don't do something as defiant and as disrespectful as joining the Fleet."

"We're talking about flaws, remember? Contradictions to the ideal. And just to show you how much you know, an acquaintance of mine is in exactly that situation. He's been disowned by his family because he joined the Fleet."

Miaundea shook her head quickly, somewhat defensively. "This isn't funny, Ton. There has never been a man from any of Novaun's pacifist countries or planets who has joined the Fleet."

"You think I'm making this all up?" Ton shook his head. "I don't pretend to know enough about your culture to make up a contradiction this good."

Miaundea's pale eyebrows drew together into a thoughtful frown. "A man from a pacifist family who joins the Fleet would have a problem," she admitted.

Ton couldn't contain a smile of spiteful satisfaction. He loved seeing her discomfort as she tried to defend her planet. A person like Bray was a flaw that even she had to admit was impossible to repair and embrace completely into this fastidious culture. "So what of this disowned man, Ms. Anthropologist? Would an average Novaunian woman marry a Fleet officer who's been disowned by one of the planet's most powerful families?"

"What family?"

"A very powerful one."

"It must not be as powerful as you say if I've never learned anything about this poor disowned Fleet officer. His predicament is, after all, the sort of thing that makes wonderful press."



Ton chuckled. "Perhaps you are not as well-informed as you believe. And you never did answer my question. Would an average Novaunian woman marry a Fleet officer who's been disowned by one of the planet's most powerful families?"

Miaundea looked at him as if she wished she could read his mind, then shook her head slowly. "I don't think most women would go within a light year of a man in that situation."

"I didn't think so. You people aren't so perfect and forgiving after all."

"Neither perfection nor forgiveness have anything to do with it. I'm no judge, but the legal problems that would arise at the time the two families attempted to negotiate a marriage contract would, by themselves, be a nightmare. If the man's family agreed to participate in the contract negotiations at all, it would only be because it was claiming the right to financially support the grandchildren if the father died."

Miaundea's eyes were brilliant with concentration as her mind worked quickly to examine all the possibilities. "The wife could probably receive financial help from her own family if her husband died, even though that would be unheard of under normal circumstances, but undoubtedly the man's family would declare its customary right to support the children."

"Which would mean they could force her to raise them in the family's pacifist tradition."

"No, not quite. Under Novaunian law, the father and his family are responsible for financial support and the mother and her family are responsible for the primary caregiving and education of the children. This prevents the type of tyranny you're describing. The father's family could never 'force' the mother to raise the children a certain way, but their strong presence in the children's lives would be a powerful influence that the mother would have a difficult time overcoming. Even if nothing ever happened to the father and he lived to be an old general, his children may decide later that they don't want to give up their pacifist heritage the way their father did, and that would bring about a storm of entirely new problems."

"So what you're saying is that this flaw is irreparable, that no woman in her right mind would marry into a situation like that, and that even if she did, she would introduce a host of new flaws when she had children. Then when those children had children, and the children had children, eventually an ugly wound would become visible on your perfect social system."

Miaundea gazed at Ton thoughtfully. "Perhaps it wouldn't become an ugly wound at all. Perhaps it would instead bring about a much-needed change. The Isolationists and the Fleet supporters despise each other. Maybe a new generation with none of the old prejudices would begin changing all of that."

"You're telling me that the all-perfect Novaun needs to change?"

"Novaun may be uncorrupted, but no Novaunian claims Novaun is perfect."

"And your laws against sex, should those change?"

Miaundea shook her head.

"You really believe the law should control something as personal as an individual's sex life? What's wrong with it if it doesn't hurt anybody? It's plain tyranny, Miaundea!"

"Who is to define what 'hurt' means? Two unmarried people who are intimate may argue that they aren't hurting anybody, but are spiritual and psychological hurts any less important because they are less noticeable? And what if a child is born? What happens to this child that neither one of them wants? Who is going to give him all the physical,

emotional, spiritual care he'll need to grow into a healthy, socially responsible adult? Is a government institution now going to assume responsibility for the child? Now that would be a fine idea if you wanted to raise a generation of immoral morons! The mother, merely by having the child, will bear a good portion of the responsibility, but she will have a difficult time without support from the father. Our laws are strict, yes, but they make men and their families responsible for the children they father."

Ton shrugged. "You can have strict laws to insure fathers take responsibility for their children without making all of these stupid laws to regulate the act itself. A child doesn't have to come from a sexual union."

"But who is going to make sure that contraception is always used and that it is used properly? Is the government now going to mandate birth control? Now what is tyranny? Improper sexual conduct causes all kinds of devastating social problems. Our laws protect the children, all of us against venereal diseases, mothers, and believe it or not, the fathers and their families. Our family organizations work so effectively precisely because our lineages remain clear. And if you want to talk about people getting hurt, what about the other extreme? People who like their sex really rough? Those two people, who say they should be allowed to do anything they want as long as they aren't hurting anyone else, are doing what others would consider assault, or maybe even rape. If you give free license to this sort of behavior, then how do you protect those who really are assaulted or who really are raped? There have to be limits. All planets recognize this, and they all have varying degrees of limits."

"You don't think it's insulting to suggest that the Novaunian people aren't intelligent enough to make responsible social choices on their own? Without all of these restrictive laws?"

"Who do you think makes the laws? Because of the literacy of our people and telepathic nature of our society, which allows people in all twenty-one hundred of our worlds to vote very quickly on any given issue, we have the purest democracy that has ever existed anywhere in the galaxy. Now we could argue the issue of law, whether or not laws are necessary at all, but it seems to me that any intelligent person recognizes the fact that laws provide a needed order to society because they hold people accountable for the things that they do. There will always be a certain percentage of people in any society who will do what they choose without regard to anyone but themselves. We all need to have something to remind us of our social responsibilities. It's too easy to forget about them or disregard them all together."

"You've spoken to me as an anthropologist, now speak to me as a woman. If you really believe all of this Novaunian dogma, then why have you had such a difficult time being, as you so eloquently say, socially responsible?"

"I've conceded that social responsibility doesn't always count for much, which is why there are laws. With me physical intimacy isn't so much a social or legal issue as it is a personal and moral issue."

"Which means you're waiting for your perfect man and that you believe it's a sin."

"I told you; I'm not waiting for a man who is perfect."

"But you do believe it's a sin." Ton thought it incredible that such an intelligent person actually believed in the concept of sin.

"No, I *know* it is a sin. And I don't know why you're so concerned about the law. Even if I were willing, the law would probably never be a problem, as long as I didn't conceive. My father would be the problem."

"Don't tell me you're afraid of your father."

"I have a feeling you're more afraid of him than I am. He does, after all, have a considerable amount of control over your life."

"So you are afraid of him, a little."

Miaundea shook her head. "I've never been afraid of my father." Her expression sobered. "But I don't want to disappoint him."

"And he would be disappointed if you committed the unpardonable sin of having sex with me."

"Very much." She stood up and began pacing. "I don't know what he knows, Ton, but he and my mother looked at me in the most worried way the day after the wedding. They were nearly heartbroken."

Fear crept into Ton's heart. "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing. Yet. I've been avoiding them all week." Her eyes flitted from the willow branches, to Ton's hand, to the gate that opened to the beach access. "It's kind of funny, Ton. As much as I don't want to disappoint my parents and the rest of my family, I'm more worried about disappointing myself . . . and God. That's what I mean when I say it's a moral issue."

Ton shook his head quickly, his heart a knot of anguish and anxiety. "I can't believe this is happening."

"You should be very pleased with yourself, Ton. The woman who never would almost did."

Ton stood up and grabbed her shoulders to force her to face him. "What do you want from me?"

Miaundea's gaze dropped to avoid looking at him. "I don't know."

"You want me to be your husband, is that it?" Ton felt anger rising within him, but at the same time, curiosity.

Miaundea looked back up at him, her eyes solemn and full of love. "I wouldn't be being honest if I didn't admit that I wish you were a man I could marry."

Her self-righteousness hurt and infuriated Ton. "So I'm not even good enough to marry!"

Miaundea's eyes flew wide. She shook her head frantically. "No, Ton. It isn't that at all. It's just that I believe deeply in the Eternal Triangle, and the man I marry must believe in it too. You and I simply don't have the right things in common to build the sort of marriage I want. It's nothing more or less than that."

Ton released Miaundea's shoulders and extended his arm in the direction of the city. "Go ahead, Ms. Snob, go find your perfect man! Go on! Go find yourself a Novaunian man who's good enough to be your lover! Just don't expect to ever see this sinful man again!" He turned and stormed across the yard.

Ton heard Miaundea run after him. She overtook him as he came near the gate. She threw herself against the metal bars, refusing to let him pass. He grabbed her arm to push her aside, but she stood immobile, her eyes wild. "I'm not going to let you push me away!"

Ton seized Miaundea by her tiny waist and threw her to the ground. He could hear her whimper as he walked through the gate and into the front yard. The gate opened and

slammed again, and Miaundea ran after him, saying in gasps, “You’re a traitor and a liar and an arrogant pervert! I know it and I love you anyway!”

She clutched his arm and he tried to twist it away. She maintained her hold, squeezing his arm so savagely that her fingernails pierced his skin. He strode toward the walk, dragging her along with him.

“You’re also brilliant and interesting and committed to people and things you believe in. I admire you, and I like being with you, and I can be your friend and companion without being your lover.”

Ton turned abruptly to face her. “No you can’t.”

Miaundea released her hold on him. “Why not?”

“Because I want you too much.”

“You want me too much because you need me so much.” Miaundea’s voice was soft. “I need you too, Ton. Not your body, just you.”

Ton turned and headed toward the neighborhood landing platform, and this time, she didn’t try to stop him.

## Part 2: BETRAYAL

### Chapter 8: AN IRRESISTIBLE INVITATION

Miaundea watched Ton leave, feeling more at peace than she had anticipated, given the fact that she had, in a very real way, rejected him. She felt so at peace, in fact, that she wished she had taken this approach with Ton in the beginning. Her greatest reward, however, was that the lust she had felt for him was gone. The incident the night of Teren and Deia's wedding had cooled it considerably. This last encounter had killed it—at least for the time being.

Perhaps it had been the honest expression of her love that had released her, or perhaps the release had come as she had strengthened her convictions by declaring them. Perhaps she had simply acquired from Ton what she had wanted all along—an intimacy of communication and his unconditional acceptance of her.

Miaundea decided to return to the reception and spend the rest of the evening there with her family and friends. She was also curious to learn the identity of the terrorist and why he had called her a hellion. She hoped he would still be there.

She returned to Ranela's house and peered through the white metal gate, scanning the clusters of people for the bizarre stranger. She discovered him immediately and was shocked to see him conversing with her father, Maurek Avenaunta, and Maurek's father. From the expression of delight on her father's face and the enthusiasm with which he communicated, she knew that they were either discussing the Fleet or interplanetary politics.

She watched them for several minutes. The terrorist communicated with passion, his face running from one extreme expression to the next, his arm gestures extravagant, intense, and subconsciously corresponding with the movements of his face. The odd thing about it was that the passion continued sustained and without affectation, as if he were not communicating about something that excited him so much as if this intense form of communication was the only way he ever communicated. She expected him to pass out from sheer exhaustion.

Colonel Avenaunta communicated something, then the terrorist communicated something, then Maurek laughed and leaned on the terrorist's shoulder. Miaundea wanted to scream. Maurek wasn't an acquaintance the terrorist had happened to make at the reception; he was the friend who had brought him to the reception. That explained why he had called her a hellion, and with such amusement too. She wanted to strangle them both.

Miaundea was enraged that she had become the laughingstock of Maurek's friends, but she was even more enraged that the terrorist so enthralled her that she couldn't turn and leave. This obsessive man who dressed with such fastidious luxury, who, at the same time, spit in the face of Novaunian culture with that beard, was the oddest friend imaginable for the prim, reserved, conservative Maurek. She couldn't believe Maurek was brave enough to be seen in public with a person like the terrorist, much less have him as a friend, but the more she watched them, the more convinced she became that they were not only friends, but very close friends who thought of each other as brothers.

Miaundea would never learn his identity now, but she was so repelled by the fact that he was Maurek's friend that she didn't care. She couldn't go back to the reception, not with

him there, with his knowing eyes and amused little smile, so she decided to walk to the pier for an early dinner.

Late that night after dinner and a long, thoughtful walk on the beach, Miaundea returned to her parents' house, hoping to find her mother and father there by themselves. Her mother had come to her room that awful night in Launarda and had asked about her relationship with Ton. Miaundea had promised to tell her everything after she'd had time to think and talk to Ton. Now that she had done both, she couldn't put it off any longer.

\* \* \*

Ton wasn't sure why he had asked Bray and Maurek to dinner, whether it was because he was fascinated with Bray and wanted to learn more about him, whether he wanted to observe these two military men who were his peers and yet uniquely Novaunian, or whether he just wanted a relaxed, rowdy evening of male companionship.

The evening turned out to be a relaxed, rowdy one of male companionship beyond Ton's expectations. He and Maurek told war stories, Bray acted out war stories, they talked about the foreign ports they had visited, they exchanged all of the Novaunian and Earthon racial jokes they had heard, they laughed hysterically, and they made fun of their commanding officers. Then they laughed some more. Even Maurek, who Ton knew despised him, relaxed and dove into the fun.

After dinner, a huge platter of spiced vegetables and cheese, and several pitchers of punch, Bray reached slyly under his gem-covered half vest and pulled out a small bottle of red liquid. Maurek's eyes flashed with eagerness.

Ton frowned. "What is it?"

Maurek pushed his glass forward to Bray to be filled. "I did not think even you would dare this!"

"What is it?" Ton demanded.

"Nuayem punch, you idiot!" Maurek said.

Ton grinned. "The aphrodisiac!"

"The undiluted aphrodisiac," Maurek said, his eyes wickedly wide. "That bottle is probably enough to make two whole bowls of the pink punch."

Ton immediately pushed his glass to Bray to get his sample of the forbidden drink.

Bray held the bottle against his jaw. "It was quite easy to get, actually. The women were in the kitchen filling the punch bowls. I communicated with them for a while, then asked them for a cup of the pink nuayem punch. They refused of course, but in the meantime, I slipped a bottle into my suit."

"The drink, Bray, the drink!" Maurek commanded.

Bray looked over at Ton. "You have to understand Maurek's eagerness. Wedding after wedding, anniversary party after anniversary party, betrothal announcement after betrothal announcement, we have been forced to sit through the most appalling discrimination ever known to the human male—"

Ton laughed.

"—to be given a disgusting-looking drink that might as well be dirty water and be forced to watch our brothers and our cousins and our fathers and our grandfathers sip this gift of Novaun, all the while watching us mockingly, taunting us, flaunting the fact that

they will be experiencing a pleasure that night so sublime that we will be unable to duplicate it, even in our dreams!”

Bray filled each glass with nuayem punch, dividing the contents of the bottle equally, and held his glass up for a toast. “To all of the married men on Novaun . . . may their wives have headaches tonight!” Then, amid spiteful shrieks of laughter, they drank the nuayem punch.

Maurek was the first to slam his glass of nuayem punch down on the table half drunk, pushing it toward the center of the table. Bray slammed his empty glass down, nearly throwing it across the room. They stared at each other in disappointment.

“It is not any different from the white punch!” Maurek said.

“I swear, we will be toasting with white punch at my wedding!”

Maurek looked at Bray sternly. “Do not be an idiot! We cannot underestimate the psychological effect the pink punch will have on our brides.”

Bray looked at Maurek penetratingly, then nodded in conspiratorial agreement.

Ton stared at the two. He suddenly knew what kind of man Miaundea wanted, an amorous but chaste man, and for the first time since his arrival on Novaun, he realized that every Novaunian man he knew somehow managed to live this contradiction. The amorousness had been easy to see, the chastity easy to ignore. Bray and Maurek, however, were making it impossible for Ton to ignore it now.

Ton not only felt frustrated by this new revelation, but jealous, because he knew that either one of these two men was more likely to be Miaundea’s lover than he was. Miaundea had always seen the chastity in the men around her, but Ton had known all along that she had somehow managed to ignore the amorousness, which was why she considered him so attractive. He had used this weakness of hers to manipulate her, but in her assurance that the majority of Novaunian men were chaste and that a chaste man was what she wanted, she had untangled herself from the manipulation and had defeated him.

Maurek waved his hand in front of Ton’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Ton slapped Maurek’s hand away. “Neither one of you have ever had sex, have you? You’re planning to wait until you get married, aren’t you?”

Maurek’s expression was one of astonishment, not so much that Ton had been so bold to ask the question, but that Ton could have ever believed anything else. Bray said with easy-going seriousness, “Yes, we are both virgins. Or at least I am a virgin. I cannot speak for Maurek.”

Ton shook his head slowly. “I can’t believe you would actually admit it.”

Bray appeared amused. “I cannot believe you would admit you aren’t.”

“How old are you?”

“We are both twenty-one,” Maurek answered.

“Which means you’ve been in space, what, three years?”

“Three and a half,” Bray said.

“And you’ve never had a wild, passionate encounter with a beautiful foreign woman?”

Maurek shuddered and shook his head.

Bray’s brow wrinkled a little, as if the prospect puzzled him. “I do not know how a man could ever hope to find passion with a woman he does not love or even know.”

Ton threw his arms up in exasperation. “The way you live isn’t natural!”

Bray shook his head. “No, the way *you* live, or, I should say, the way you want to live, is not natural.”

“What are we?” Maurek said in disgust. “Animals in heat? Or sons of God? Where is your dignity and self-respect?”

At first, Ton was astounded. Then he wanted to laugh. “You are really uptight. A prostitute would do you a universe of good.”

Maurek glared at Ton. Bray laughed gently. “Maurek does not need a prostitute; he needs a wife, a problem we are working on. Maurek cannot help but be uptight. He is in love with a woman who does not know he exists.”

Maurek looked at Bray oddly, then at Ton baitingly. “At least the women on this planet find me attractive. Chances are I will get married long before you find a woman who will relieve you from your forced celibacy.”

Ton’s body tightened in rage. Maurek was right and there was nothing he could do about it. “I guess when men spend their most virile years in frustration they settle for the first prim, plain, unexciting clone of a woman that shows any interest.”

“Novaunian women prim, plain, and unexciting?” Bray regarded Ton in amusement and perception. “And you have never seen a Novaunian woman you thought was attractive.” He shook his head quickly as if the possibility were inconceivable, his lips pulling into a mocking little smile. “*Never.*”

Maurek said knowingly, “A woman who is fully aware of her own beauty and power . . . what could be more exciting than that?”

Bray shrugged. “I rather like a good body myself.”

Ton could do nothing but stare at the two in disbelief. These men did not belong in any galaxy he knew. They didn’t even belong to the same universe. What was he doing on this insane planet?

“You would like Mautysian women, Ton,” Bray said suddenly. “They are artistic and beautiful, and they are not afraid to celebrate passion.”

“Celebrate passion? . . . I like the sound of that.”

Maurek took a drink from his glass of water. “Do not get too excited. They are every bit as chaste as Shalaunian women.”

Bray’s eyes flickered calculatingly. “We can go tomorrow. We can spend the entire day watching women. Just you and I. It will be refreshing.”

Ton nodded at Maurek. “What about him?”

“Maurek cannot come with us. He has to report back to his ship in the morning.”

Ton had a difficult time believing Mautysian women were that extraordinary. “I don’t know.”

“You do not, by any chance, still have your Star Force uniform, do you?”

“You are insane!” Maurek exclaimed.

Ton understood immediately what Bray had in mind. The prospect of terrorizing a haughty, Fleet-hating city of peace fanatics in his Star Force uniform with a disowned Fleet officer was one too tantalizing to resist. “I do, and I’d be more than happy to wear it in the service of Novaunian Fleet. I’m not even scheduled for stand-by tomorrow.”

Bray slid the empty nuayem punch bottle under his half vest and stood up. “I will see you tomorrow then. Meet me at the airbus depot downtown at the eighth hour. Thank you for dinner.”

\* \* \*



Maurek nodded to Ton in thanks and walked with Braysel out of the restaurant. Once they were standing on the walk in the warm night air, he communicated, *You're really asking for trouble, Bray. It'll be nothing more than a prank to you and Ton, but it'll make a lot of people angry.*

*A lot of people have made me angry lately.*

*So you're going to punish them by assaulting everything they hold sacred.*

*They've assaulted everything I hold sacred all my life. Besides. I had to come up with some sort of incentive to get Ton to come with me. Braysel slapped Maurek on the back. You see, while Ton is in Mautysia with me, you will be communicating with Miaundea.*

Maurek turned toward Braysel, stunned.

*The two slid into a taxi. It's Eighth Day tomorrow, so she won't be going to work. She always ignores you when you try to communicate with her? Fine. You let yourself into her apartment early tomorrow morning, slip into her bedroom, and wait there for her to wake up.*

*I couldn't do that!*

*Why not? You want her attention, don't you? She won't move a millimeter off her bed wearing only a nightgown until you leave. You will have her complete attention, and she will have complete proof that you are not a prude. You are not going to impress this girl by being a jellyfish.*

Maurek sagged his shoulders. *It won't work. I could communicate with her all day of how I feel and she wouldn't believe me. Miaundea doesn't believe anything she doesn't want to believe.*

*Of course she'll believe you, because you'll sit there in her room until she does. Maurek, she already hates you. You have nothing to lose!*

*Nothing but my pride!*

*A lot of good your pride is doing you! Which do you want? Your pride or Miaundea? Braysel sighed. You hurt her, Maurek. You hurt her intensely. If you ever want to have a chance with her, you're going to have to forget your pride and beg her to forgive you.*

*And what if she wasn't hurt? I'll look like a total fool!*

*Think back, Maurek. Think back to the time before you asked her to the dance. How did she feel about you then? How did you think she felt?*

*I always thought she liked me.*

*Of course you did, or you wouldn't have asked her to the dance at all.*

Maurek gazed, transfixed, through the front of the aircar at the reflection of the city lights on the bay. *Her eyes would light up whenever we saw each other, as if she were excited to see me. Sometimes I would touch her hand or she would touch mine. We never communicated in thoughts. I'm not sure why. Maybe I was scared, or maybe I just didn't want to take the chance that I would destroy the wonderful thing we had.*

*She liked you, and she liked you a lot. The dress she wore that night. Do you have any idea where she got it?*

Maurek shrugged. *How would I know that? Where do women get dresses? My mother gets hers from different shops all over the city.*

*Do you know what I learned today about Miaundea? It was by accident, when I was communicating with Deia. She designs and sews clothes. She probably designed that dress just for the dance and just to wear for you. Girls do that. When they're planning to go on*

*an engagement, or to a party, they shop for weeks, just to find the right dress. Only Miaundea didn't shop, she created.*

Maurek frowned. *What exactly did Deia say?*

*Apparently Miaundea is designing a wardrobe for Paul Doshyr. He thinks Menaurean and Tavonean styles are bland and boring. Imagine that.*

"Oh no . . ." Maurek moaned.

*Deia liked my suit and thought Paul would too. That's how the conversation began.*

*What have I done?* Maurek looked away for at least a minute. Eventually he shook his head. *What could I have done? Even if I had known, I couldn't have taken her looking the way she did. She was so beautiful . . . She was just too beautiful.*

Braysel rested his hand on Maurek's shoulder with a squeeze. *Tomorrow, tell her that.*

The taxi stopped in Maurek's neighborhood. Braysel telepathically authorized his bank to overpay for the ride and received ten gold coins from the change machine. *You know what your problem is, Maurek? You don't have any sisters.*

Maurek followed Braysel out of the taxi and walked with him to Ranela's house. *And I should take advice from you, the man who has never in his life been able to make more than one engagement with the same woman.*

Braysel stroked his chin. *Novaunian women just don't appreciate a good beard.*

Maurek laughed mildly, in understanding. Braysel couldn't help but feel depressed. Why couldn't he have been born in Maurek's situation? Maurek was handsome, he had a supportive family, and he had the Fleet. He was successful, and he was safe. Women couldn't help but be attracted to him. Braysel knew that he, on the other hand, was considered a rebel and an outcast by all the women he knew, a dangerous prospect for marriage, and that he lacked the necessary good looks to compensate for that dangerousness. No woman he had met yet had dared get close enough to begin to like him. He believed that if he had Maurek's looks they would come a little closer.

He thought of Trastanya, the dark-haired, willowy woman he had watched for months. Trastanya was from Nytaulel in the Union and had been working at the Fleet base on Horbun, in the Gudynean Federation, as a physicist. He had finally gained the courage to ask her to dance at one of the parties at the base, thinking a dance was a simple, safe way of getting to know her a little better, and she had politely refused him. He could have understood refusing an engagement—he had rarely had a woman in whom he was interested accept an engagement—but refusing a dance was mortifying. He had not attended a dance or any other kind of party or outing since.

Braysel yearned to possess Maurek's safeness, yet he knew that Maurek deplored his own safeness. Maurek could have any woman he wanted except the one he wanted, and he wanted her because she made him feel unsafe in living his moral standards. Maurek's obsession with Miaundea had never been innocent. Braysel's obsession with the Fleet had never been understandable. Braysel knew that, in some strange way, he and Maurek provided each other with a needed balance.

*Has there been anyone at all?* Maurek asked.

Braysel set the empty bottle next to Ranela's front door with the stack of gold coins. *What do you think?*

*I think that when you find the right woman, none of this will matter.*

Braysel turned to Maurek abruptly as they stepped off the porch. *How can it not matter?*

*If she loves you and believes what you're doing is right, how can it matter?*

*It would matter to me. I'm not sure I could ask a woman I love to live my nightmare of a life.*

*You don't think there is one woman in this entire Union who is capable of perceiving the universe as you perceive it? Who is capable of standing up to her family the way you stood up to yours? Or who is capable of standing up to your family? To believe otherwise is arrogance, Bray.*

*Braysel stared wistfully at the stars as they walked in the direction of Maurek's home. Arrogance has nothing to do with it. I've never been interested in a woman I didn't think was capable of all of those things. I think the majority of Novaunian women are completely capable of living the kind of life I live. They don't have the desire, and why should they? They have some twenty-one hundred worlds of men to choose from.*

*It only takes one, Bray.*

*Why should any of them want to marry a man who has no family to provide financial security? Who has no family with a taurnen to give the necessary ordinances to her children? Who will give her children no heritage, no extended family, no grandparents, just a very angry, very powerful family organization that she will be forced to fight her whole life? How could I even ask it of someone? It would be inexcusably selfish. Braysel shook his head. It isn't my destiny to get married, Maurek.*

*Maurek laughed. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever known you to communicate! Your intentions are all very noble and self-sacrificing, but Bray, you're very passionate, and you've also been known to be reckless. When the right woman comes along, you won't be able to stop yourself.*

*Reckless? Me? I'm offended, Maurek!* They arrived at Maurek's house and sat down on the front porch.

*Maurek grinned, telepathically turning off the porch lights. What do you call buying an expensive necklace for your mother and then three days later having to borrow fifty gold coins from Taurgren and me for new uniforms? What do you call missing the shuttle from Nestenal and being stranded there for four days, just so you could play another game of cards?*

*So? That card game was only supposed to take thirty minutes. How could I have known it would take over an hour? That Nestenalian was a beast! I couldn't let him win!*

*And what do you call trying to bribe Captain Suksval for an extra three days of leave and almost getting put on probation?*

*I convinced him I was joking!*

*You weren't joking!*

*I convinced him, didn't I?*

*And what do you call this plan to go to Mautysia in your uniform with a man from an enemy planet wearing an enemy uniform?*

*Braysel threw his arms into the air. All right. I won't be reckless. I won't go to Mautysia with Ton tomorrow, and Ton can spend the day here in Shalaun with Miaundea.*

*Take Ton to Mautysia, tell him you have to go to the bathroom, then sneak away and leave him there by himself. Maybe they'll throw him into the Gulf!* Braysel laughed.

At that moment, Miaundea stepped lightly out of her parents' home, which was located across the walk and to the right. The lights from the house surrounded her with a glow. She carried herself with grace and dignity, her face confident but tired, her entire

aspect one of relief, touched ever so slightly with tension, as if she were only a few meters away from finishing first in a difficult marathon race.

Braysel couldn't imagine anything more natural than for her to spot Maurek and him on the front porch, greet them, and then hurry across the walk and communicate with them for a while. Then he and Maurek would walk her to the landing platform, and she would take a taxi back to her apartment, animated and relaxed.

Miaundea didn't notice Braysel and Maurek sitting on the dark front porch. She didn't even look in their direction. She walked quickly in the direction of the landing platform, still tense, still exhausted. Braysel suddenly felt empty, as if something that was supposed to be happening wasn't happening.

"She's so beautiful . . ." Maurek breathed.

"Yes, she is," Braysel murmured.

\* \* \*

Ton sat in the restaurant, depressed to see Braysel and Maurek leave, and, at the same time, relieved. The evening had been interesting, even enjoyable, but very odd. He paid the bill, left the restaurant, and walked back to his apartment, lonely for Miaundea, yet not really wanting to see her.

The hour was late, and he went straight to bed. He dreamed that he was sitting with Miaundea under the huge willow tree in her parents' backyard, communicating much in the same way they had that afternoon, only the hour was much later. They communicated for hours. He told her all about Adrian and his life in Baltimore as a child and about his two months as a plant on the *Sovereign of the Stars*. She laughed gently and told him that she had known all along, her eyes alive with the same intensity and trust that had been there that afternoon.

They kissed, over and over, falling together into the grass. Miaundea wanted him desperately and was ready, but she was worried that someone in her family would discover them there together. They decided to go to his apartment.

Once at his apartment, their lovemaking continued, beautiful and unrestrained. Both marveled in the newness of the sensations they felt, her in surrendering her virginity, he in surrendering his emotions. They reveled in their newfound intimacy for hours into the night, finally falling into an exhausted sleep in each other's arms.

He awoke the next morning, content and bursting with affection for his beautiful new lover, sunshine pouring into his window. He was immediately horrified to hear Miaundea sobbing. She was sitting on the bed next to him, hunched over her knees and shaking, the sheet pulled tightly around her body.

He reached to stroke her arm. "What's the matter, Miaundea?"

She recoiled from his touch, shuddering. Seconds later, she grabbed the sheet away from him and wrapped it completely around her body, gathered up her clothes, and ran into the bath lounge, refusing to look at him. Ton sat up and watched the door to the bath lounge in shock.

She emerged minutes later with disheveled hair, a tearstained face, and eyes full of resentment and shame. "I don't ever want to see you again." Devastated, Ton watched her hurry out of the bedroom.

He awoke at that moment trembling, his bed wet with perspiration and his heart ripped apart with guilt and desolation. He had never seen so much hate and disgust. How could he have destroyed her beautiful, trusting innocence? What had he done?

He reached to the other side of the bed, fully expecting to find Miaundea there. He didn't, and the relief he felt was tremendous. Everything in the nightmare had been so real, so meticulously detailed, down to the soft whiteness of her skin and the smell of her hair. How could it not have happened?

Then he wondered how she could have rejected him like that after a night of such perfect passion, but even as he wondered, he felt sick to realize that it would really happen that way. She believed deeply that being intimate with a man who was not her husband was immoral, and for the first time in the months Ton had known her, he knew that no intensity of desire or height of erotic pleasure could ever erase that moral conviction.

But why? Sex wasn't immoral. How could something so pleasurable be immoral? How could she have such a strong conviction for a moral code that was wrong? How could she feel such devotion for a husband who, at this time in her life, was no more than a shadow, a man without a personality, feelings, or even a name?

As much as she baffled him, as much as she aroused him, Ton knew that her moral code mattered to him because it mattered to her. Living with her loving him as a friend but not as a lover would be difficult. Living with her resenting him as the man who destroyed her virtue and her dreams would be unbearable. Ton didn't think he could touch her now if he tried.

Then he remembered the nuayem punch. What was that stuff, anyway?

## Chapter 9: A PRIVATE RECITAL

By the time the remaining guests had left the reception, Teren, Deia, and the remaining members of Teren's family were languishing in patio chairs, intoxicated with exhaustion.

Teren had enjoyed the evening, but he was glad it was over. He and Deia had arrived in Shalaun late the night before, but since their bodies were still in sync with Menauran time, they had not desired sleep. He had lain most of the night on the couch, holding Deia as she had communicated in agitation with Paul.

Before their marriage, Deia's intense need for Paul had annoyed Teren. Now, knowing Deia far better, he accepted it, but he still couldn't help but be a little jealous. Paul and Deia's empathy for each other was complex, gained through years of experiencing life together. As much as Deia loved Teren, she still felt her deepest family bond with Paul and would always be able to work out certain difficulties arising from family issues more effectively with him.

Teren had drifted to sleep before Deia had ended her communication with Paul and had awakened with the sun to find Deia busy organizing the clutter in their home. The remainder of the day had been spent preparing for the reception, and Deia had occupied herself so completely that she hadn't had time to be depressed. Assuming a festive air for the reception, however, had been difficult for her, and Teren longed to take her home.

A joke and a giddy eruption of laughter later, Rayel clapped his hands and smirked. *Guests have gone home, ladies. Time for you to clean up.*

Ketina groaned and threw her slipper at him. Jaun, Ketina's husband, appeared from the house, drinking concentrated red nuayem punch straight from the bottle.

*Go put that away, Jaun!* Ketina communicated.

Jaun took another swallow. *I thought that's what I was doing.* Everyone laughed but Ketina.

*It's all right, Ranela assured. He can have what he wants.*

*At ten gold coins a bottle? You're short a bottle as it is! We started with eight bottles, and now there are only two.*

Lauria was surprised. *We certainly didn't go through twelve bowls of punch. Go put it away, Jaun.*

Jaun shrugged, then fastened the lid and tossed the bottle to Teren.

*To the groom!* Kevan communicated as he and Alysia stood to leave. Teren held up the bottle and nodded his satisfaction.

*Where're you going, you jellyfish?* Don, Ranela's husband, demanded of Kevan. *We've still got work to do.*

Kevan chuckled. *You've got work to do.*

*Leave him alone, Don,* Ranela communicated. *It can wait until tomorrow.* Then with a knowing look at Kevan, she added, *You will come back tomorrow—morning.*

Kevan laughed, pretending to assent, and he and Alysia hurried to their waiting taxi.

Teren was glad Ranela wanted to wait until the next day to clean up and haul away the portable tables and chairs. He stroked Deia's arm. *Are you ready to go?*

Deia sat limply in the patio chair, her dark curls strewn softly on her shoulders, her eyes glassy and staring at the stars, and her veil a pale haze in her lap. She turned her head slightly and nodded her relief. Teren rested his hand on hers and squeezed it, then stood up

and gently pulled her up with him. He kissed her cheek. *Go change, and I'll get everything into the taxi.* Deia nodded and walked into the house.

Teren telepathically hailed a taxi and enlisted the help of his brothers-in-law in sending the gifts he and Deia had received that night to the landing platform in the transport pod and then loading them into the taxi. He met Deia on the patio again after she had changed, and they immediately communicated their appreciation to those who remained and bade them good-night.

Teren's spirit merged with Deia's as they slipped their arms around each other and walked in the direction of the landing platform. He felt immediately that Deia's emotions were in chaos. She didn't communicate in formulated thoughts, but Teren understood. She was excited about their new marriage, but at the same time, she was angry about the part Brys and Eauva had played in the nightmare her mother had lived on Earth. More than anything, she was lonely for Paul and her mother, especially her mother.

Feeling Deia's grief caused Teren to miss his own parents more than ever, and he couldn't help but be a little depressed himself. He thought of Bray Nalaurev, and he wondered how Bray could bear living without a family. Even the Fleet wasn't that important.

Deia startled him with a thought. *You disapprove of Bray?*

*I don't know. I guess I do disapprove, a little. Maybe it's just that I don't understand.*

Teren thought it odd that he was experiencing such conflicting feelings. Finally a man from a pacifist country, a Mautysian at that, had decided to do his duty and join the Fleet. It was an act that any true Fleet supporter could not help but applaud. At the same time, however, a man had been disowned by his family. What kind of man could ever put his desire to join the Fleet above remaining part of his family? How could that ever be a good thing?

*Perhaps he didn't know he would be disowned,* Deia communicated as they slid into the taxi.

*Then what's stopping him from quitting the Fleet now and going home?*

*Nothing, I guess. His joining the Fleet was a good thing . . . wasn't it?*

*I honestly don't know.*

Teren and Deia rode home in silence. They unloaded the taxi and made several trips to the house, the homes in their neighborhood not having personal transport pod booths. Once they finished bringing all of the gifts into the house and sent the taxi back to its origination tower, they wearily sat down on the used white velvet couch.

Deia leaned her head back and gazed up at the dome ceiling and the floral mural Alysia had painted there. The painting was Earthon in style, emanating an aura of haunting romance, and the colors were cool and luxurious, blending perfectly with all of the thick crimson carpets and colorful silk pillows Deia had purchased in Talavaura. *Alysia did such a beautiful job. I love this house.*

*It's small, and it's so dreadfully old.*

*It's large enough, and it's so elegant.* Deia shifted and slipped her arms around Teren, pressing close, her lips clinging to his in savoring caresses. Her hand moved down his arm to his hand, and she withdrew slightly, telepathically turning off the lights and drawing him up with her, leading him slowly to the piano, her spirit permeating his.

Teren walked with her, simmering with anticipation. She had never played for him in this way before, not at this level of intimacy. Deia lifted the top of the piano and seated

herself at the keyboard in front of the huge bay window, her figure shadowy against the brilliant night sky. Teren lowered himself to the floor and crawled under the piano. He lay on his back and waited for her to begin playing, seeing the piano with her eyes and feeling the smoothness of the keys under her fingers.

Their thoughts were one, and he knew what piece she would play before she began playing—Beethoven’s “Pathetique” Sonata. Her fingers struck the keyboard with the first dissonant chords of the sonata; Teren gasped, as if stabbed. She continued, the music languishing, then racing; clashing, then seething.

Teren’s mind flowed into hers, following a tangled string of memories. He remembered incidents as if he had been there himself, being hugged by her mother, arguing with Paul, practicing Beethoven’s “Appassionata” sonata until her body ached and her head hurt and still not getting it right, performing “Pathetique” in London to an energetic audience, despairing when she and Paul had been drafted.

Teren suddenly felt a strong mental shove, and he immediately withdrew from Deia’s mind. *You’re making me think too much! I can’t play if I have to think!* Teren grinned and allowed their thoughts to be carried away by their intertwined emotions. He could feel the stress in her arms as her fingers ran vigorously up and down the keyboard, the tightness in her leg as it worked the foot pedal, the adrenalin swelling through her body, the release of her tension as she abandoned herself to the music. She pounded the final dramatic measures of the first movement, leaving Teren breathless.

She proceeded gravely into the melancholy second movement, fading into sad nothingness, then pressed restlessly through the final movement, ending in a rush. She paused, then plunged into the mournful, dreamy first movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata. Teren lay very still, smothered by her grief, and finally, sorrowful notes trudged to the last dusky chords.

The second movement, normally light and cheerful, gave him no relief. Deia charged through it, playing it at a frenetic speed, the phrases jerking spasmodically from one to another. Deia’s technique was perfect, which made the piece all the more loathsome. Within two minutes, the second movement ended, and the storm began.

Deia’s fingers moved at an astounding speed, crashing up and down the keyboard in flawless unrestraint and naked rage. The music vibrated through Teren’s body as it vibrated through the piano and floor. His heart throbbed feverishly with Deia’s, perspiration dripping down his face as it dripped down hers. He grasped at the carpet, thrilled and at the same time tortured. Finally, when he thought he could bear it no more, the sonata ended, and with the silence came release.

The ache in Deia’s chest subsided as the pace of her breathing slowed. She rested for a minute, then began playing Chopin’s Waltz in A Minor. The piece was wistful and tranquil, and Deia played it lovingly. She gently played the final longing notes, then slipped to the floor and crawled under the piano to be with Teren.

She leaned over Teren, her hair sliding off her shoulder and brushing his cheek on its way to the floor, the Chopin waltz still whirling between their spirits. She tenderly stroked his face. *Kind of a miserable way to start a marriage.*

Teren reverently caressed her lips with his finger. *At least we have a marriage.*



## Chapter 10: A NEW OLD FRIEND

Braysel collapsed late that night on a mat on the floor next to Maurek's bed. He had attempted to outwit Maurek into giving up his bed, but Maurek knew his psychological tricks too well and wouldn't be outmaneuvered.

Braysel slept that night in an unyielding state of arousal. His body burned for a woman he couldn't quite discern. His lips sought for the lips of a woman he couldn't quite feel. His hands reached to caress skin that wasn't quite there. He reached further and further, trying to cling to her, but the more he tried to touch her, the more elusive she became.

He awoke early the next morning, exhausted and miserable. He wished he had never even known of that poison nuayem punch.

Maurek had just showered and was sitting on the edge of his bed in his underwear, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, his slightly curly black hair wet and tousled.

Braysel sat up. *Why aren't you dressed yet? The sooner you get over there, the more likely you are to catch her before she wakes up.*

Maurek moaned and shook his head. *I can't do it. I can't go there and see her half-naked in her bedroom. I can't.*

Braysel didn't have to be a genius to figure out the woman and the setting of Maurek's erotic nightmares. *Hold on to your hormones, Maurek. First of all, she won't be half-naked, just wearing a tiny bit less than normal. Second of all, you aren't a rapist. Third of all, even if you did try and touch her, she wouldn't let you. If you don't go and communicate with her today, I'll communicate with her tonight when I get back in town and describe to her, in very vivid detail, the passionate dreams you had about her last night.*

Maurek slumped his shoulders even more and laughed nervously. *You're determined to make me go through with this, aren't you?*

*If you don't do it today, when will you do it?*

Maurek straightened and slapped his hands on his thighs. *You're right. If I don't do it now, I never will.*

\* \* \*

Maurek walked through the quiet house, relieved his parents weren't awake. He didn't feel like giving any explanations, and he didn't want to be teased and told, *Well it's about time!* Not that he would have given them the real reason for his early excursion anyway.

He stepped out of the house into the dawn. The air was damp, the pale, starlit sky was clear, and the horizon glowed. It would be a beautiful day, and Maurek would have been pleased had he not had the urge to vomit. He telepathically hailed a taxi and took it downtown to Miaundea's apartment complex. He had known where she lived since her return to Shalaun over half a year before. He walked as if in a dream down the hall to her apartment and opened the door as quietly as he could.

Maurek stepped into the apartment and glanced around the living-dining area, marveling at the beauty he saw there. Gripping the crystal dining room table for strength, he shoved himself toward the back hall and what he assumed was her bedroom. The door to her bedroom was partially opened. He peered in and saw her lying on her stomach under a gold-stitched white satin bedspread, her hair strewn over her arms and shoulders, bare

except for narrow straps of pink satin. Maurek stopped there for a minute, unable to breathe for the excitement.

He walked softly into the room and sat down in the gold velvet chair by her bed. He watched her in awe, revelling in every flutter of her eyelashes, every movement of her fingers, every quiver of her soft pink lips. He sat gazing at her for nearly an hour, rehearsing over and over what he would communicate. Finally, after the sun had risen enough to pour into her window, she turned slightly. Maurek's heart throbbed in anticipation and fear. He had no business being in her bedroom. What in the universe was he doing?

She stretched and yawned and opened her eyes. She caught a glimpse of Maurek sitting in the chair in her room and frowned. Then her eyes flew open in shock and outrage. She sat up quickly, pulling her bedspread in panic to her neck. "What are you doing here?"

Maurek could feel himself blush. He thought he would rather crawl under her bed than face her. The muscles in his body tightened, and he forced himself to reply, *I've been wanting to communicate with you for months, but you never give me a chance. I thought this way I would have your complete attention.*

Miaundea glared at him. *The last time I communicated with you, you made a sarcastic comment about my dress.* She pulled an arm out from under the fluffy bedspread and pointed to the door. *Get out of my home, Minon Avenaunta,* she communicated with a sardonic emphasis on "Minon."

Maurek's hands clenched the armrests of the chair. *The last time we communicated, you treated me with intolerable derision, and without a shred of provocation.*

Miaundea's eyes narrowed. *Not a shred of provocation? You sure have a lot of nerve! Trespassing in my home and attempting to justify your insulting behavior!* "Get out!"

*I have, in the past, treated you in a very insulting way. I have never tried to justify it to anyone, Miaundea. I was wrong all those times for telling my friends that you looked like a hussy the night of the dance, and I'm sorry.* Maurek stopped for a moment and watched her face. She was still angry, but her eyes were puzzled. *The last time I saw you, though, I was trying to give you a compliment. You took it the wrong way.*

Miaundea scowled at him. *And you expect me to believe you. You really expect me to believe you. What kind of deal do you have with your friends, Maurek? What? How much are they going to pay you for the details of the "hussy's" bedroom?*

Maurek leaned forward in the chair, covered his face with his hands, and shook his head. "No, Miaundea, no . . ."

*Get out, Maurek! Go collect your prize!*

*The only prize I want is your friendship and forgiveness. I'm sorry, Miaundea. I'm sorry about everything.* Maurek felt tears burn in his eyes. He turned his head to the side in mortification, stabbing his thumb and forefinger into his eyes, trying desperately to keep the tears from falling. This wasn't happening at all the way he had planned.

Many moments passed before Maurek finally gained the courage to look at her again. She was staring at him, dumbfounded.

His jaw quivered, and he felt as if he would suffocate. *You were so beautiful that night. You were so incredibly beautiful, and I became so . . . excited. The feelings terrified me, and I lost control. I was afraid that if I took you anywhere . . . looking so irresistible . . . that I would . . . do something shameful.*

Miaundea's hand went to her face, then to her bedspread in a violent grip, then to her temple to brush her hair over her ear. Her eyes darted in bewilderment from her bedspread, to the chair, to the door to her bath lounge, and finally to Maurek's face. *You're telling me the truth, aren't you?*

Maurek sighed, feeling relieved. *Would I be here now humiliating myself if I weren't?*

Miaundea stared at her lap for at least a minute. *Why, Maurek?* she finally communicated. *Why didn't you just tell me that night instead of being so presumptuous?*

*I told you. I lost control. I just reacted. I was terrified.*

She gazed into his eyes, her face contorted. *Why did it take you so long?*

Her anguish tortured him. He had never dreamed she had been so hurt. He wanted to take her in his arms and soothe away all of the pain, but he was too ashamed to even look at her. *I didn't think I mattered to you. I didn't think you cared.*

The bedspread trembled around Miaundea. *I loved you Maurek, at least the way I understood love then. I was so thrilled when you asked me to the dance. I wanted to be beautiful for you. I watched you and adored you from the time I was a tiny child. How could you not know I worshipped you?*

*I watched you and adored you from the time I was a tiny child. How could you not know I worshipped you?*

Tears spilled from Miaundea's eyes. She pulled the bedspread up to her mouth.

*My feelings for you haven't changed, Miaundea. I still love you, I still worship you, and I'm still terrified.* Miaundea could do nothing but sit there, baffled. Maurek hesitated. Finally, he ventured timidly, *Do you still have it, Miaundea? Do you still have the dress?*

Miaundea nodded slowly. She motioned to her white satin robe, which was lying on the floor next to her bed, and Maurek leaned over, carefully picked it up, and handed it to her. She put it on under the bedspread, then slipped out of bed and walked slowly to her closet. She emerged from her closet a minute later, holding the sparkling red dress up to her body.

"You are so beautiful . . ." Maurek whispered.

Miaundea wadded up the dress and threw it on the floor, gasping with sobs. Maurek walked over to her and gingerly drew her into his arms. She laid her head on his chest and allowed him to comfort her with the warmth and strength of his body. She was so tiny and so delicate, and he marveled at her softness.

He had held her for many minutes when she pulled away and looked at up at him awkwardly.

Maurek hesitated. *Are you still angry with me?*

Miaundea shoved her hair over her ear. *I wish I could be, but losing control and behaving irrationally are things I can understand and empathize with all too well. You and I have much more in common than I believed, Maurek.* She paused. *Why now? Why like this and after so many years?*

*I've been trying to communicate with you ever since you returned to Novaun from your fieldwork. Nothing seemed to work, and then there was the fiasco when I complimented you on your dress. After that, you were always with Ton.* The muscles in his body instinctively tightened.

Miaundea's mouth curved into a tiny smile of understanding. She gazed at him expectantly, waiting for him to continue.

*I had almost given up hope that you could ever think of me as something other than an enemy. Coming here early like this was my friend's idea. He thinks—and he's right—that I haven't been honest or forceful enough with you, that it's about time I make you communicate with me. He also convinced me that you were just as hurt about what happened as I was.* Maurek brushed a strand of hair away from her eye. *It made me feel all the more urgent about communicating with you. I don't think I would have had the courage otherwise.*

Miaundea's eyes glowed with a strange, almost eager curiosity. *Your friend?*

Maurek shrugged. *You know, a Fleet comrade. From my first tour. He's here for a week before he reports for his new assignment. He's the only one I've ever told about . . . you. He set this whole thing up. He's even taking Ton out of town for the day.*

Miaundea's eyes became huge. *He's taking Ton out of town? You're joking!*

*I hope you don't mind.*

*Oh no! Even if I wished to see Ton, he doesn't wish to see me. Where did they go?*

*Mautysia, to leer at women.*

Miaundea laughed.

*I have to be back for my shift at the twenty-fifth hour. I only have today. Would you let me take you to breakfast?*

Miaundea appeared uncertain. Finally she communicated, *Sure. I need to bathe, though, and dress. I have zaulyem tea, fruit, and pastries in the kitchen. You may help yourself.*

*Thank you! And take as much time as you need. I'll wait.*

Before Maurek could leave, Miaundea gripped him with a thought: *It's been four years, Maurek. A lot has happened to me, and my feelings have changed. I can't promise you anything, not even hope.*

Maurek smiled over his shoulder, shaking his head slightly. *I don't want you to.*

\* \* \*

Maurek left the room, and Miaundea collapsed onto her bed in a daze. None of this was real. It couldn't be. Nothing was as she believed anymore. Nothing. A cynical, promiscuous young man who had never cared about anything but his work was in love with her and wanted their relationship to be exclusive. She had fallen in love with this man who was so completely wrong for her. A Novaunian man grew a beard. This same Novaunian man had encouraged Maurek to do something as shameless as enter her bedroom. Maurek, the prude, was shameless enough to do it. Maurek, who hated her, loved her.

Miaundea didn't know what to think about Maurek. The feelings of anger, hurt, and resentment were too deeply rooted to just toss from her essence in a matter of mere minutes, yet she knew his feelings were sincere and couldn't be angry with him anymore. She had seen and felt the passion she generated in him, excitement more intense and uncontrolled than she had ever even seen in Ton.

Ton, however, in his desire for emotional privacy, rarely communicated with her telepathically so had never let her feel his excitement. She was certain Maurek would have hidden it had he been able. She would have been embarrassed had she not been so shocked

and flattered. Besides, Maurek had been embarrassed enough for both of them. She didn't think she had ever seen anyone undergo such torment, and in a way, she felt sorry for him.

She thought back to the night of the Salyumala Ball four years before. She remembered everything in the most vivid detail, but this time, she observed the scene with as much objectivity as she could muster. She saw Maurek's excitement at seeing her, then felt his flustered communication: *That dress . . . that dress is, well, it's totally improper. Please go change.* What she saw now was a nervous, uncertain, terrified boy who was trying to be as tactful as he could under the circumstances, and she felt terrible that she had, in her own pride and insecurity, so hurt and humiliated him.

Why had she been so rash? Why had she assumed he was being self-righteous? Why had she not just asked him why he thought the dress was improper? Why hadn't she paid any attention to her father all of those times he had told her that she merely misunderstood Maurek? Why had she attacked Maurek so viciously when he really hadn't given her a shred of provocation? Why had she forced him to go to such lengths to communicate with her? Why?

Miaundea forced herself to stand up, slipped out of her clothes and into a bath. The warmth of the water relaxed her. She remained there longer than she normally did, at least half an hour, needing the time to clear her mind. She also hoped a little that Maurek would grow tired of waiting and leave. She wasn't sure she wanted to spend any time that day with him. On the other hand, he was a man she had known all her life, a man who knew every intricacy of their beloved Auyval Beach, who knew her family and everyone she knew, and yet was a stranger. A part of her was curious to know him. A part of her longed to apologize and tell him she forgave him.

Could she ever love him again? The thought of it seemed ludicrous, yet he was so handsome and so in love with her. Was she that unforgiving, or was she just scared? He claimed he was in love with her, but how could he be? He didn't know her any better than she knew him, not really. Was he in love with her or with a childhood fantasy?

The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that he loved her in the same way she had once loved him, with a naïve obsession and expectation that ignored reality. Once he came to know her, he would likely be disillusioned when he realized she didn't have all of the perfect qualities of his fantasy Miaundea. The possibility did scare her.

And who was this mysterious friend of his? This bold, eccentric friend who had, in a very real way, brought them together? This friend who understood her far better than Maurek did? This friend who had even managed to get Ton to take a day off work?

Miaundea emerged from her bath, refreshed. As she walked from her bath lounge back into her bedroom, she smelled the spicy aroma of zaulyem tea brewing, and she knew Maurek was still waiting for her. She was at once nervous and excited. She realized that she really did want to spend the day with him. She almost dressed herself in her most conservative casual dress, but decided instead to wear something a little dressier, a little more daring. She applied her make-up and dried and curled her hair with an electromatrix mesh, then walked as casually as she could manage to the kitchen.

Maurek smiled when he saw her and handed her a cup of hot zaulyem tea, his eyes alive with approval of her appearance.

They sat down together at the dining room table. *I'm sorry I didn't go to the dance with you, Maurek. I feel terrible about it.*

*Then you forgive me?*

Miaundea nodded. *And I'm sorry that I got angry when you tried to give me a compliment. I thought you were taunting me. Can you ever forgive me for the inexcusable way I've treated you?*

Maurek gazed at her, his blue eyes brimming with love. Miaundea didn't think she had ever seen a man as handsome as Maurek was at that moment. He communicated tenderly, *Of course I forgive you, Miaundea.*

Miaundea took his hand and gently pressed it to her lips. *I'm glad you threw away your pride long enough to come and see me this morning. I know I never would have done it.*

*I'm glad I came, too.*

They sipped their zaulyem tea in silence, each waiting for the other to initiate a conversation not burdened with the past. Miaundea had never been in such an awkward situation. She knew so little about Maurek personally that she hardly knew what to ask. What in the universe interested him? She might have asked him about his family or his home, but she knew all about both.

Her cup clinked on the table as she set it down, empty. She communicated hopefully, *What do you do in the Fleet, Maurek?*

Maurek appeared relieved that they had finally found something to discuss. *I'm a strategist and a navigator. I majored in galactic history and astronomy in application school.*

*My mother's an astronomer,* Miaundea said enthusiastically.

*I know. I used to see her at the observatory about once a week. She was one of my best teachers.*

Miaundea laughed uneasily. *Of course.*

The conversation continued in the same manner the rest of the morning, both learning things they didn't know about each other, but more, learning things they already knew. They ate a leisurely breakfast downtown, then took a walk at the harbor. They ate lunch at the huge international market, then spent the afternoon touring the Museum of Novaunian History.

They grew more comfortable with each other as the day progressed. Miaundea was surprised to discover that Maurek was interesting, intelligent, and quite charming. She loved the feeling of power his companionship gave her, seeing how the women they passed stared in admiration at his physical beauty and how it never occurred to him to notice any woman but her.

He took her back to her apartment late that afternoon after an early dinner. *May I see you again when I'm back in two weeks?*

Miaundea didn't know what to tell him. In a way, she had been dreading the question all day. She was happy to have made a new old friend, and she liked the idea of spending more time with him, but the thought of being involved with him romantically unsettled her. *I had a really good time today, but as far as seeing you again . . . I just don't know, Maurek.*

Maurek hesitated. *Is it because of Ton?*

Miaundea couldn't help but be surprised by his question. She wasn't sure whether her surprise came from the fact that Maurek had not once asked her about Ton that day or from the fact that she had not once thought of Ton that day.

Miaundea wasn't sure what to tell him. *I can't tell you that Ton doesn't matter because he does, but I'm realistic. He and I can never be more than friends. I don't intend to stop seeing him, but I'm not about to stop my life for him either.*

Maurek's expression of relief was so great that Miaundea wished she had explained her status with Ton sooner. Maurek smiled knowingly. *It's just me then you're unsure about.*

Miaundea nodded. *It's going to take some time to get used to all of this. I'm not sure what's right. I'm not even sure what I want. More than anything, I don't want to lead you on.*

Maurek squeezed her arm. *Would you be opposed to spending another day together like today?*

*Not at all.*

*I'll get in touch with you in two weeks, then.*

Maurek walked down the hall, and Miaundea slipped into her apartment and leaned against the wall by the door. She relaxed her shoulders, then, in sudden emptiness at his departure, walked quickly across her living room to the French doors that opened onto the balcony that overlooked the walk. She leaned over the ornately carved white metal rail and watched for him to emerge from the front doors of the building. He did, and she telepathically hailed him. He turned and looked up at her in surprise. She waved at him and smiled. He waved exultantly and walked backward to a taxi.

\* \* \*

Once Maurek was in the taxi and on his way back to Auyval Beach, he reached out with his thoughts toward Mautysia and Braysel. Within a minute, the relay located Braysel, and Maurek communicated, *It worked! You're a genius!*

*I'll expect my fifty gold coins by the end of the week. That's the customary rate, you know.*

Maurek laughed.

*So the two of you worked everything out? Did you spend the whole day with her?*

*Everything's all worked out, and we spent an entire, wonderful day together. I don't know if she'll ever love me, but in time, who knows?*

*That's great! I guess it's farewell then until we meet again at your wedding.*

## Chapter 11: THE JOVEM DOSHYR HONORARY CLUB OF TRAITORS

When Ton had arrived in Mautysia with Braysel that morning wearing his Star Force uniform, he had expected shock, disgust, outrage, and even anger, but he had not expected hostility. Oddly enough, none of the hostility was directed at him, but entirely at Bray. It was as though Ton were a non-entity, a non-human, only a pawn in a revengeful maneuver of Bray's to terrorize a city he disdained. Ton thought the Mautysians were probably right in their perceptions.

Even though Ton knew that Bray was using him for his own purposes, he had a good time. This sort of manipulation was something Ton understood and respected, and besides, the women were beautiful, the food was excellent (in the restaurants that would serve them), and he loved to see all those perfect Novaunians so hateful and hostile, especially when their venom was directed entirely toward a single person. It was almost warlike, and he couldn't help but get a certain amount of spiteful entertainment out of the venture.

Ton liked and admired Bray. Bray did what he wanted, he was selfish and imperfect, and he admitted it gladly. He was fascinating and likeable because he was so different. Whenever anyone would demand to know what business they had in Mautysia, Bray would reply with a smirk, *We've come to the city of peace to negotiate a treaty*. Then Ton would reply, *If you want more information, you'll have to contact our respective governments*. Then they would walk gaily away, bantering and pointing out between themselves attractive women.

They were eating fried vegetables they had purchased from a street vendor when a not-so-hostile man approached them, wearing an expression of predatory curiosity. Bray, having grown up in a family that had considerable dealings with the press, recognized the man as an interviewer for MautaNet, the most powerful local telepathic network.

*Ah! Minon Juastiva!* Bray turned in delight to Ton. *The press has come to cover the first meeting of the Jovem Doshyr Honorary Club of Traitors!*

Ton gasped in mock awe. *What an honor!*

Bray communicated quickly, before Juastiva had time to ask any questions, *We only have two members of our organization at present. I'm president, and Ton here is vice-president.*

*But you only betrayed your family! I betrayed an entire Empire! I should be the president.*

*But I've been a traitor much longer, and I'm not only a traitor, I'm a murderer. Besides, this club was my idea. I'm the president.*

Ton nodded in agreement and resignation.

Juastiva gazed at Ton's new friend as if he were a misbehaving child. *All right, Braysel. You've had your fun. Have you no concern for your family and how this antic of yours will hurt them?*

Bray shrugged. *My mother and father will probably not even do me the honor of getting angry. My grandfather will just disown me.* He burst into laughter, and so did Ton.

Juastiva looked at Ton pointedly. *And your sponsor Colonel Quautar, Dr. Luciani? What will be his reaction when he learns of your day in Mautysia?*

Terror gripped Ton. The colonel had allowed him to keep his uniform as a kind of memento since he had spent a good part of his life in Star Force, but it had been with the understanding that he wouldn't wear it. It had never occurred to him that Colonel Quautar



would learn out about this adventure. A second passed, and Ton, in his apprehension, couldn't reply. Juastiva seized that second and smiled at Ton gloatingly. *So you admit that you are worried about how Colonel Quautar will react.*

Ton tried to smile. *Why should I be worried? He'll probably just send me back to Earth. They shoot traitors there, you know. Unfortunately, the Jovem Doshyr Honorary Club of Traitors will lose a devoted vice-president.*

Bray bowed to Ton in veneration. *But you can feel content with the knowledge that you will be the Club's first martyr.*

*It's an honor I hope always to be worthy of.*

*And now, Bray communicated, it's time we leave this hateful city and return to Shalaun, where we are only hated and scorned by young unmarried women and their parents.* He slapped Ton on the back and led him away from Juastiva.

Ton looked over his shoulder. *If you want more information, you'll have to contact our respective governments.* Apparently Juastiva had acquired the information he was seeking, for he walked in the opposite direction.

Ton and Bray staggered toward the airbus depot, laughing and reliving every second of their encounter with the interviewer.

Once they arrived at the depot, Ton hungrily noticed an angry young woman wearing a sparkling, gauzy skirt over a tight leotard, her long gold hair hanging in multitudes of tiny, tight braids and glittering with miniature rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and topaz, an extravagant hair style even for Mautysia.

Bray watched the young woman in horror. "Mauya . . ."

Ton gazed at her, breathless. He had never seen such a perfect body accompanied by such perfect sensuality.

She stomped over to Bray and smacked him on the arm. *Do you hate us so much, Bray?* She smacked him again, three times, her hands taking turns. *Of all the stupid things you've ever done, this was the stupidest!* Bray shrank away from her in shame. Ton couldn't believe he was putting up with it. Who was this impassioned woman anyway? An old girlfriend?

*My brother! With a brain the size of Novaun and not a milligram of caution or common sense!* She smacked him again.

Suddenly, she turned and looked at Ton strangely.

*Don't look at me!* Ton protested. *It wasn't my idea.*

*Oh, I know good and well whose idea it was. Do you have any idea at all what it is you've done, Bray? Do you even care? Father will be so heartbroken that he'll be defensive and angry with everybody, and mother will be in despair and unable to perform or attend any family function for at least a month. Grandfather will tell everyone that you don't belong to us at all, that you were an orphan child a merchant found on another planet in his travels, and that you were never worth the twenty silver coins Father paid for you. How can you bear it, Bray?*

*How can I bear anything? I don't have any desires or feelings of my own. They don't think so anyway.* Bray stopped, then looked at Mauya in disbelief. *Does he really tell people that I'm an orphan?*

Mauya nodded quickly, trying not to smile.

Bray rolled his eyes in annoyed amusement. *I should have assumed as much.* He ran his fingers through his hair, suddenly appearing tired. *I didn't want to hurt any of you, Mauya.*

*Yes you did.*

Bray threw his arms into the air. *All right, I did. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was ever even born. Come on, Ton. Let's go.*

They walked to the airbus that was waiting. Ton was the only one of the two to look over his shoulder to catch one more glimpse of the glamorous Mauya.

It had never occurred to Ton that Bray was upset about being disowned by his family, that joining the Fleet had been a difficult, heartbreaking decision, but seeing how flustered and desolate he had been with his sister, he knew that Bray was living a life of torture.

Once they were on their way, sitting in seats facing each other, Ton asked, "Why do you do it?"

"Because I have to."

"What? Does that mean you think you're on a mission from God?"

"Something like that." Bray drummed his fingers on his leg. "You do not seem surprised."

Ton shrugged. "All of you Novaunians seem to think you're on missions from God. Personally, I think you're more sane than the rest of them."

"Do not delude yourself into thinking you are flattering me."

Ton smiled slightly. "Compliments don't mean much coming from a lying, double-crossing traitor, hmmm?"

"You do not care much for Novaun, do you?"

Ton couldn't have kept the sarcasm out of his voice had he tried. "Who couldn't love the peaceful, paradisiacal, perfect Novaun?"

Bray nodded, the muscles in his face relaxing. "Why do you stay?"

"Because I have to."

"That answer does not work for you. You are not on a mission from God."

"I'm on a mission of much graver importance, that of preserving my life."

"So you remain here because you believe it is safe."

"Safe-er," Ton corrected.

"Why did you come?"

"You really want to know?"

Bray nodded slowly.

"I was bored."

Bray allowed himself an amused chuckle.

Ton's remaining time with Bray in the airbus passed in brooding silence. The afternoon sun dropped rapidly toward the horizon as they traveled northeast over the Gulf of Verzaun toward Shalaun. Fifteen minutes before they landed, Ton felt stern thoughts charge into his mind. He would have preferred to close his mind to the message but didn't dare. The thought patterns belonged to Colonel Quautar.

*Come to my home immediately after you get back to Shalaun.*

*I will,* Ton communicated with as much self-possession as he could muster.

"Well, this is it," Ton said to Bray grimly. "The hour of execution has arrived."

Bray frowned.

“I’ve just been summoned by the great and terrible all-powerful entity. He wants to see you too.”

Bray smirked. “Your nasty little manipulative tricks will not work on me, Ton. I am an expert at them, remember? Colonel Quautar is a senior officer, but he is not my superior. He has no authority to rebuke me for this matter, and I do not intend to give him opportunity. I will not step one foot on his property. You know what they call him in the Fleet? Colonel Bloodsucker. After he drinks your blood, he drinks your mind. I will keep my miserable life and my deranged mind, thank you.”

Ton felt as though he would be sick. As much as he liked and respected Colonel Quautar, he had always been afraid of him. Even so, he had never thought he was so severe that his subordinates in the Fleet would call him a bloodsucker. Then again, he had never really tested him.

“They don’t really call him Colonel Bloodsucker,” Ton said with assurance. Bray was rarely serious about anything. Why should he start now?

Bray’s eyebrows shot up. “They do.” He nodded at Ton in pity.

Minutes later, they disembarked downtown and took a taxi to Auyval Beach. They stepped out of the taxi on the neighborhood landing platform and walked to the Avenaunta and Quautar homes in silence.

Before they separated, Bray put his hand affectionately on Ton’s shoulder. “You do not belong here, Ton.”

Ton knew Bray was right, but he didn’t know what to do about it, nor did he know where he did belong.

Bray squeezed Ton’s shoulder, then released it. “I will see you around.”

## Chapter 12: THE COLONEL'S GAME

Ton walked to the Quautar home, hesitated at the door, then knocked. Jaun answered the door and looked at him strangely for a moment, then smiled. *Dr. Luciani! I should have known it was you. No one else knocks.* He motioned Ton into the foyer.

*I need to see your father.*

*He's in his office, through the kitchen, the first door you'll see. But I wouldn't try and see him now, if I were you. He's in a bad mood.*

Ton walked through the kitchen to the small utility wing of the house and stood in dread in front of the door to Colonel Quautar's office. What would the colonel do? Certainly he wouldn't deport him. Ton had done nothing more than wear his Star Force uniform to Mautysia—a prank, not a crime. What would the colonel do? Ton lifted his fist to the door and knocked.

*Come in, Ton,* the colonel commanded.

Ton slowly entered the office. Colonel Quautar sat in a beige leather chair on the opposite side of the room, facing the door, his ankles crossed and his arms folded across his chest. His aspect was one of such severity that Ton nearly turned and ran out of the room. He understood immediately why the junior officers in the Fleet referred to him as "Colonel Bloodsucker." That stare alone was enough to rip open a man's neck and suck him dry of his blood. The grim set of his mouth slightly bared gritted teeth that appeared capable of crushing a man's heart.

*"I want the uniform, Ton, now."*

Ton stared at him, baffled.

*"Strip!"*

Ton immediately began taking off his clothes. When he was down to his underclothes, the colonel said sternly, "Now fold everything and lay it all on top of the telepathic transmission recorder."

Ton did as the colonel directed, and the colonel motioned him into the chair facing his. Colonel Quautar stood up abruptly. He glared down at Ton. "Do you have any idea what the Earthons will do when they learn of this incident? You want to tell me that there is no chance they will learn of it, that they will never see a hologram of you, a miserable traitor, wearing the sacred uniform of Star Force. I'm here to tell you that they will see it. That when they do see it, they will demand that we return you to Earth. Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce will cut your heart out, Daniel Stewart will put it on the end of a sword, and your beloved sister Jacquae will hold it aloft for the entire Empire to gloat over!"

Ton sank into his chair, his jaw quivering and his hands clammy, feeling as though he would vomit.

*"You have actually made my job easier. We want King and we certainly don't want you, an arrogant boy who makes a mockery of the customs and ideals held sacred by a good part of this Union of planets. We may be able to negotiate a trade, you for King. That is, if Earth's Foreign Intelligence Agency doesn't send an assassin here for your head before we begin the negotiations!"*

The colonel went on and on, pacing back and forth in front of Ton's chair, telling him that there wasn't an Earthon alive who wouldn't shoot him personally, offering him an immobilizer so that he could make an easier job of it himself, berating Ton for humiliating

him in front of the entire Union, and threatening to send him back to Earth and offering to buy him a coffin.

"If you want to remain on Novaun now, Ton, if you want my protection, you're going to have to convince me you're worth my trouble. You're going to have to beg me to let you stay."

Ton's shoulders shook and he sobbed like a little boy, his hands covering his face. In his anger, pride, and desire to live anywhere but Novaun, he wished he could get on the next transport away from the planet, a transport heading anywhere, but he knew better than anyone that he was at Colonel Quautar's mercy.

"Please let me stay," Ton whimpered, his hands still covering his face. "Please."

"Why?"

"They'll shoot me."

"Why?" Colonel Quautar demanded. "Why would they care?"

"They shoot traitors!"

"The extent of your treason is that you aided an enemy agent. Certainly you cannot return to Earth or any of its territories, but you could get on a transport today, travel to any planet you wish but Earth, and hide there as easily as you are hiding here. There's the door, Ton. You're welcome to go."

Ton's tears stopped stunned in his eyes. He stared at the colonel in horror. "You're serious, aren't you?"

The colonel nodded quickly and gestured toward the door. "We have nothing more to discuss, Ton."

Ton quivered violently, and he felt feverish. "Let me stay! Please let me stay! I'll do anything, anything you ask! You can't make me go! You can't! They'll blow up my transport, they'll blow my brains out, or they'll capture me and put me under slow torture! Can't you understand? I double-crossed Sanel King and he wants me dead!"

Colonel Quautar dropped himself into his chair. "Well, it's about time," he said in a calm, soft tone.

Ton gaped. At least a minute passed before he gained enough control over his quaking body and his reason to say, "You knew. All this time, you knew."

"Of course I knew. I knew before I allowed you to leave Dignitary Island."

"How?" Ton asked with as much dignity as he could muster.

"The facts pointed to it. Your attitude pointed to it. I've been in this business a long time, Ton." The colonel leaned toward him. "I can't protect you unless you trust me. Now why don't you start from the beginning and tell me everything. This time, tell me the truth."

Ton nodded in resignation, and every detail of his adventure as the *Sovereign* plant tumbled out without restraint.

"When Teren and Deia and Paul and I all came together on the *Sovereign*, everything went exactly as King had predicted. My part was so easy, it was pathetic. I could do and say anything I wanted, because that was what everyone expected me to do anyway. It wasn't difficult to make Deia trust me, and to keep my colleagues and others from being suspicious, I made them all think I was planning to have her as a lover. That wasn't hard, because it was what they all believed anyway. Teren was a little more of a problem, but I liked him. His attitude was always so determined and respectful and moral, and it fascinated me to see someone in his position carry himself with such modest confidence

and self-respect. I guess I expected him to just give up and party away his remaining days. It wasn't long before I began to like him and really want to go with him, and it became apparent to me right away that the way I would get both Deia and him to trust me was to be myself, no pretenses, no nothing. What can I say? It worked."

Colonel Quautar handed Ton a bathrobe. "Was Jacquae working for Stewart also?"

"I always believed she was, but I don't know for sure."

"Why did you believe she was?"

"Because I know Stewart had access to the quartermaster's files. He admitted he had arranged for Teren, Paul, and Connor to be assigned to my cabin. It makes sense that he would have chosen Deia's roommates also. Tev was the only one who had lived in that cabin during the previous term. Bringing Tev, Jacquae, and Kristina together didn't appear unusual to the other cadets because sometimes Star Force reassigned cabins between terms. I had no idea at first why Stewart would have put those three particular women with Deia, but when Jacquae and Tev started pursuing Paul so vigorously, it began making sense. At the time I believed they had been hired to corrupt Paul, and now, looking back on it, I'm more certain than ever."

"You believe both Jacquae and Tevaronia would accept payment for sexual favors?"

"Yes I do. Jacquae received gifts all the time for her services. Cadets don't get exorbitant salaries and she has several very expensive pieces of jewelry. I never knew Tev to be a prostitute, but she isn't choosy about who she sleeps with. I think she would accept payment if given the right opportunity."

"And Kristina?"

"No. I still can't figure out why she was put in that cabin."

"You said that King expected Teren to become particularly close to Deia. Do you have any idea why he was so certain of this prediction?"

"Sure. The D.I.I. had been watching Teren and his father for months. I don't know why the D.I.I. became suspicious or anything like that, but Stewart did tell me that they had been under surveillance for quite some time. The D.I.I. couldn't have watched Teren for long and not discovered his interest in Earth's music, not to mention the fact that he had been away from Novaun for a very long time among strangers and that he was at marrying age for a Novaunian. Deia just happens to be a musician, a Novaunian in attitude as well as by birth, and very beautiful. Any idiot could have seen that one coming."

"Do you know whether or not Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce was part of King's plan?"

Ton shook his head. "I don't know. All I can tell you about him is that I knew him for two years and that he acted the way he had always acted. Now it wouldn't surprise me if he had been part of King's plan unwittingly. None of the cadets were surprised that Pierce and Deia became interested in each other. King could've easily foreseen that himself, and if Pierce hadn't been interested in Deia, another com-cadet would have been."

"King was on the *Sovereign* when you made the escape. Did you get to meet him?"

"Yes, actually I did. I met him shortly after he arrived on the *Sovereign*. One of his bodyguards confiscated my taffs before I could go into his stateroom. Then I sat down and he offered me mineral water. He had expensive brands from all over the galaxy in his liquor cabinet—it was very weird. He asked me about work, how my job as a plant had been going, and what my plans were for the future. I knew he was interrogating me, really checking me out to see if he could trust me, so I gave the callous, cynical observations I give everybody."

“Did he attempt to communicate with you telepathically?”

“Yes, and I wouldn’t accept it. I resisted him vehemently.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t trust him and was able to communicate with him perfectly well the normal way. Besides, if I’d allowed him only a second’s telepathic touch, he would have felt my triumph and immediately known my plan. I resisted with vigor and gave him a scowl of displeasure, hoping my obvious reluctance to communicate telepathically would assure him that I had no desire to participate in the spiritual joining of the spirit dimension formula or to live on a totally telepathic planet.”

Colonel Quatar leaned his chin on his hand and laughed.

“It is funny, isn’t it? And he was so easy to fool too, so pathetically easy! Teren and Deia were far more difficult to convince than he was.”

“Ton, I still can’t figure out whether you’re incredibly brilliant . . . or incredibly stupid.”

The colonel’s statement tormented Ton. He would have told the colonel about the spy that had been in his room in Launarda that moment, but before he could, the colonel asked, “How did King react when you refused to communicate with him telepathically?”

“Who knows? The man shows no emotion—he’s about as dead as an Eslavu. But it was right after he tried to communicate with me telepathically that he taught me to lie about my essence. He told me that I would need to communicate with Myke, and maybe even Deia, in an intense telepathic way and that the only way I would be able to fool them and get a seat on that armed shuttle was to use this technique.”

Colonel Quatar nodded slowly. “Have you ever actually used the technique?”

“Only when I was with King.” Ton knew immediately that Colonel Quatar had suspected all along that King had taught him to lie about his essence, and Ton was glad he had given the colonel the information without being prompted. Had he not, Colonel Quatar would never have been sure Ton wasn’t lying in these discussions with *him*. “I took on the persona he gave to me and was then invited to overlap spirits with him. I didn’t feel I had a choice at that point. After only a few seconds telepathic touch, he dismissed me. Apparently he was satisfied that he could trust me and that I understood what to do.”

“Why didn’t you use the technique once you were here? You lied about so much else.”

“I didn’t think I could get away with it. I’ve known from the beginning that you people are telepathic experts, and I’m not, at heart, a liar. When I used it for King I was extremely uncomfortable. I felt like I was being torn in half. There’s no way I could have kept that up for long. It’s been easier for me to simply avoid using telepathy. Will you block this knowledge from my mind the way you did the spirit dimension formula?”

The colonel smiled knowingly and removed the device he had used before from a pocket under his half-vest. Ton laughed a little as he brought his knowledge of the technique to the front of his mind. “You came prepared!”

The colonel leaned toward Ton, holding the device to his head. “I can’t have people with knowledge like this roaming freely around my planet!”

Terror surged through Ton. “There was a woman spy in my room in Launarda. I smelled that horrible Erdeanian perfume Froquenza and found a taff snuffed out in the bathroom sink.”

Colonel Quautar returned the device to his pocket, troubled. "I have had you under surveillance, Ton, and in all this time, the agents I have working on your case have never seen or holorecorded anyone suspicious anywhere near you or anywhere you have been."

Ton tugged at his mustache. "So you were having my room watched all night, but no one saw a spy go in. What kind of operation are you running? Someone had to see her enter my room!"

"No, it just means the Earth agent was able to deceive the thousands of holorecorders that were painted onto the wall across the hall from your room." The colonel smiled slightly. "You should be flattered, Ton. King did not send a mere amateur, he sent his best. Only an agent with extraordinary telepathic capabilities would have been able to successfully deceive those devices and their mind guard. Don't worry. We'll find her."

"So is my life going to continue to be at the mercy of these holorecorders that can be so easily tricked?"

"They are not so easily tricked. I'll assign more agents to your case. We can have one move in with you if you would like. Even sleep with you in the same room."

Ton put his hand to his temple and winced. "Please, no!"

The colonel looked at Ton thoughtfully. "You've known about this Earthon agent for over a week now. Why didn't you relieve yourself of your torture and tell me about it?"

"I thought you would think I was a spy working with her."

"All right. Let's pretend I did think you were a spy. Tell me, Ton. What was it I wanted so desperately from you that I was willing to let you move about freely all over the planet?"

"That's what I was trying to figure out," Ton said weakly.

"Even if I did think you were a spy, how could that have been worse than knowing there was someone else watching you who wanted you dead? You had absolutely nothing to lose by coming to me!"

"I guess not," Ton said numbly, feeling exhausted.

The colonel leaned toward Ton, his face suddenly solemn. "I'll be frank with you. Something sinister is going on. Not only have we not seen anyone suspicious near you during the entire time you've been here, but the galactic whisperings are completely silent concerning you. King is being extremely cautious. He wants more from you than your death, I'm afraid."

"He wants to torture me."

"He can only torture you if you allow yourself to fight him blindly. You have two options. You can leave Novaun now under Novaun's protection and live in fear of being killed by the Earthons your entire life. I don't recommend this option, especially after your little escapade to Mautysia today and the anger it's likely to generate in the Earthon community."

The colonel's eyes suddenly flashed with vexation. "What kind of people did you think you were dealing with? Did it never occur to you that this agent who was in your room would find it simple to telepathically record your entire day in Mautysia, transfer her recording to holodisc, and send it to anyone, anywhere in the galaxy?"

Ton could feel the fluids from his stomach rising into his throat. He squeezed his hand over his mouth and swallowed hard. He shook his head, barely, realizing that the colonel's agents, if they were competent at all, had followed him to Mautysia themselves. "You



knew! You knew I was there! If it was such a dangerous thing to do, why didn't you stop me?"

"I needed you to trust me."

"In other words, you needed a reason to reprimand me."

"I could have reprimanded you easily enough for your intention. I could have even threatened to deport you. I'm just not certain the feelings of relief you would have felt by not being allowed to do something dangerous would have done as much to inspire the necessary fear in you as having actually done the dangerous deed and knowing you will have to live with the consequences. I am also counting on this incident to move the Earthons toward action. I need to acquire a better understanding of their plan concerning you."

Ton couldn't believe it. Colonel Quatar played an elaborate game that even he couldn't comprehend. He moaned and put his fingers to his temple. "Just tell me my other option."

"The other option, no less dangerous but more realistic, is that you can stay and help us make King and his agents believe you are falling into their trap. The main problem with this plan is that I, and others in authority, don't know for sure what his trap is going to be."

"A lot of good that does me!"

"We've come up with hundreds of possibilities, but there are only four we believe King would consider feasible. One is that King will suspect you fear and distrust us and that he will send an agent to try and recruit you to do something for him."

"That's the most ridiculous idea I've ever heard! I double-crossed the man. King isn't stupid enough to think he could fool me with a set-up like that!"

"No, but he may try to make you believe that he knew all along that you were going to double-cross him in the armed shuttle, that he expected you to come to Novaun with Teren, that he wanted all along for you to come and do some treachery against us, and that all you have to do to absolve yourself with him and the Earthons is to do this treachery."

As much as Ton hated to admit it, he knew that such a plan might have worked.

"Of course he would never absolve you. Either he would assume we would capture you and deport you, or he would plan to kill and torture you in his own way after getting you off the planet. Another possibility, similar in many ways, is that he will try to make us think that you are a spy working for him. He may even have a crime committed here in Shalaun and leave evidence that will frame you."

"Just like Brys Vundaun . . ."

"Exactly like Brys Vundaun. If this happens, we will all simply play along, and then we will somehow set up an opportunity to fake your death and get you off Novaun under a new identity. Another possibility is that he may try to discredit you as a physician and destroy your career. I've already discussed this possibility with Dr. Hovaus, and we're both watching your professional life carefully in hope of avoiding this."

"Dr. Hovaus knows? And he still agreed to take me as an apprentice?"

The colonel nodded. "He certainly didn't want to waste his time training a physician who would be dead before certification, but he was impressed with your application and is dedicated enough to humanity that he had no reservations about training a physician who would ultimately practice among people of a race other than Novaunian. We made a deal. I keep you alive, he keeps you practicing medicine."

Ton nodded, feeling peculiar and, at the same time, relieved.

“The final possibility is that King is planning to have you shot at his trial. It may not be for another year or two, but he will be extradited and go to trial, and he knows it. He also knows that you will be unable to resist the opportunity to gloat and will be at the trial. If he decides to use this option, he would humiliate you publicly, and, in the process, make the Citizens’ Union of Novaun look foolish for protecting you. This plan would also provide us an opportunity to fake your death and get you safely off of Novaun.”

“But all of Novaun would still be made to look the fool, and you the biggest fool of all.”

Colonel Quautar shrugged. “That will make the charade all the more convincing.” He gazed at Ton gravely. “Whatever it is he has planned for you, it is guaranteed he will manipulate your weaknesses and attack you where you are most vulnerable, where he thinks it will hurt you the most. He has already begun to work on your fear of him and your distrust of people in general. His spies will continue to try to terrorize you, and there is no doubt in my mind that his final thrust will be as much to your pride and your arrogance as to your life.”

“You flatter me,” Ton said sarcastically.

“You want to gloss over your weaknesses? Fine. You will be dropping yourself right into his trap.”

Ton shuddered.

“I know that in some ways this all sounds hopeless, but I assure you, it’s not. King knows what is important to you, or thinks he does, and he knows the art of terror, but this is my planet. I have far more resources than he does at my immediate disposal and more agents than he can possibly dare put here. He is being extremely cautious, which means he may only have one spy here, perhaps as many as three. He can’t afford any more than that, and he certainly can’t afford to make a mistake and reveal himself too soon. The next thing you need to do though, is decide what you want to do. Do you want me to set you up on another planet now, or would you rather wait until we can lure him into a trap of our own?”

“I think the best way for me to leave is for them to believe I’m dead. And I really do want to finish my training with Dr. Hovaus.”

“When the time comes, where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think about it and let me know. Give me several options, and I can then decide which one would be the safest. Then once we make a definite decision, I can begin making the arrangements. If anything suspicious happens, tell me as soon as is feasible. I will expect you at my house for lunch the First Days you aren’t working. This will give us a chance to communicate privately and without the knowledge of any Earthon spies who may be watching you. I’ll give you any new information I may have received, and you can tell me of anything that has happened that troubles you.”

Ton nodded.

“And if you are ever in immediate danger, send a telepathic distress call of ‘help’ or ‘emergency.’ If you are ever attacked telepathically and cannot transmit a telepathic distress call, either find someone to make the telepathic distress call for you or open the top of your ring and press the button.”

Ton removed the arelada ring Colonel Quautar had given to him on the day he had left Dignitary Island. “There’s an alarm in this ring? And it’s been there the entire time?” He quickly opened the ring and found the alarm button.

The colonel chuckled. “Yes, it’s been there the entire time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me it was there? Why didn’t you tell me that you knew I was the *Sovereign* plant?”

“The alarm button wouldn’t help you if you didn’t trust me enough to use it.”

Ton nodded that he understood. “Do you really think a telepathic attack is a possibility?”

“It’s always a possibility. I don’t think, however, that King would consider it his best option. On Novaun it’s too easy for an adult to get the help he needs to fight it off and, in the process, telepathically trace the location of the perpetrator. If you are attacked in any way, I can get help to you within seconds. I have agents stationed near all of the places you spend your time. I even have two agents living in the apartment next to yours who can enter your apartment secretly through the closet in the bedroom Teren occupied. The important thing is that you call for help if you’re in trouble. Don’t try to fight off an attack by yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“And whatever you do, don’t tell anyone our plan. And don’t tell anyone that you double-crossed King, not even Teren and Deia.”

“I don’t intend Teren and Deia ever to know.”

“I believe Miaundea knows, but I don’t want you to discuss it with her either, even if she brings up the subject.”

Ton thought he should be surprised that Miaundea knew, but he wasn’t. If she had figured it out, it was only because she wished she had double-crossed King herself.

“If you have anything to discuss, discuss it with me.”

Ton hesitated. “Do you think what I did was wrong? I know you’re glad I did it, but do you think it was wrong?”

“Honestly, Ton?” The colonel shook his head. “I don’t believe that what you did was wrong, but, at the same time, I don’t believe your motives were pure. You were driven to play King for a fool by a blatant lust for power, and yes, lust for power is *wrong*. Unless you change your attitude, King will use this weakness against you and make a fool out of you—a dead fool.”

The colonel’s words were kind and affectionate in tone rather than berating, and they cut deeply. The colonel’s frankness was inspired by genuine concern, not a desire to criticize, and Ton knew he had found an ally.

The door opened and revealed Jaun standing there, holding a stack of clothing. Colonel Quautar stood up and took the clothes from his son. “Jaun played the agent today and rescued these from your apartment.”

Ton accepted the clothes gratefully and quickly dressed as Jaun left the office. Once he had dressed, Colonel Quautar motioned him back into his chair, staring at him forbiddingly. Ton was immediately alarmed.

The colonel leaned toward him, his face again wearing that bloodsucking expression. “I know, Ton, what your intentions have been toward my daughter, and I won’t stand for it. If I so much as *suspect* you have dishonored her, no matter how willing she may seem, I will escort you back to the *Sovereign of the Stars* personally.”

Ton had no doubt that he would. "I understand."

Colonel Quautar nodded, stood up, and motioned Ton to leave the office with him. Ton followed the colonel out of the office gladly. He had entered the office that afternoon full of dread, had sat in that chair and endured the most horrible reprimand and humiliation of his life, and was now leaving chastised, but confident and relieved.

The door shut behind them, and Ton stopped. Now that they were out of the office, he felt his courage returning. "Colonel Quautar," he said quizzically. Colonel Quautar stopped and turned to him. "You must have appreciated it just a little. For Bray's sake and for the Fleet's. We were men of enemy planets enjoying the day together as friends. Isn't that what they profess to want? Universal brotherhood?"

"The Mautysians are no more hypocrites than Shalaunians or any other Fleet supporters. The ideal of universal brotherhood doesn't permeate the hearts of Novaunians as much they would like to believe."

"That may be true, but the Fleet is justified in its grievance against those insane pacifists. Those men are out risking their necks for all of them, and look at the thanks they get! Look at the thanks Bray gets. His family disowns him!"

"You're a military man yourself, so I'll excuse you for your lack of objectivity . . . this time."

"So you do think Bray was wrong."

Colonel Quautar shook his head. "I didn't say that. I think we're all wrong. Braysel just happens to be in a unique position to plant that realization in the minds and hearts of an extraordinary number of people, and I've never had a desire to stand in the way of what he has to do."

"How long have you known him?"

"I met him at the reception yesterday, just as you did, but I've been watching him for years. I knew about him long before he ever joined the Fleet."

"Really? How?"

"I first learned about him fifteen years ago, when I was home between assignments. He was six years old then and with his family here in Shalaun. They were protesting the funding of a new base ship. Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev, Braysel's grandfather, stood on the steps of the Marnautqal, as he always does when he leads a protest, and gave a discourse to the crowd. At the end of the discourse, little Braysel climbed up there next to his grandfather and began vigorously protesting everything that had just been communicated, much to the mortification of his entire family. The press loved it. As far as I know, his parents never took him on another protest."

Ton laughed. "That son of Abomination! He was outraging them even then!"

Colonel Quautar nodded and smiled. "Braysel is an idealistic, brilliant boy. For such a young man, he's already an exceptional officer. I understand he's a very good pilot, very dedicated, and that he possesses a unique compassion for our enemies, an attitude desperately needed right now in the Fleet. He'll be a powerful influence in developing new ways of dealing with our enemies and in determining the direction the Fleet will move as it incorporates the spirit dimension formula in its methods of travel and warfare and develops the new telepathic technology that will emerge in the process."

"You're good. Not only can you spot promise, you can plot destinies. Have you informed Bray of his glorious future?"

"He wouldn't believe me if I did."

“But you believe it yourself.”

“No, I don’t believe, I know.”

“What? Did God come and tell you?” Ton’s tone was playful instead of sardonic, only because he was talking to the only great and terrible all-powerful entity he knew.

Colonel Quautar appeared amused. “Not exactly. It’s assurance and truth that burns in my heart and mind. It’s something you will never understand until you want to understand.”

The colonel’s presumptuousness fascinated Ton and, at the same time, disturbed him. How dare he assume so much about the future of a man he hardly knew! Even more exasperating was that he didn’t seem to think this presumptuousness was at all insulting or even out of the ordinary. Somehow, Ton was certain that even Bray wouldn’t think it was odd.

Ton was driven to extensive questioning by his own lurid curiosity. “So—dare I ask—what gives you the right to know more about Bray’s future than he does himself? Is God now giving you the destinies of all your Fleet subordinates?”

Colonel Quautar shook his head. “I can see promise in new recruits, and I can predict to a certain extent what those young men will do. As far as Braysel is concerned, I can only assume that at some time in the future I will be in a critical position to help him. As for what that position will be and why I will need the understanding I’ve been given, I already have an idea.”

“Well?”

The colonel’s smile was one of pleasure. “You don’t want to believe I have the understanding I do, and yet you’re anxious to learn its purpose. I’m sorry, but that information is classified.”

Ton wondered whether the colonel sincerely believed he possessed this unique knowledge of Bray at all, or whether he had professed it just to tease him. “You’re completely insane.”

The colonel’s eyes shone sadistically. “And you thought the reason I didn’t yank you out of Mautysia this morning concerned only you.”

“You wanted Bray to go to Mautysia with me?”

The colonel nodded complacently. “His little escapade with you today was necessary precisely because it was in such horrendous taste. His conscience will sting him, which may compel him to go back to Mautysia and apologize to his family. He may even begin looking at the situation from their perspective. Even if they won’t consent to see him under normal circumstances, they may see him long enough to let him apologize. He needs to continue to communicate with his family. If he can acquire appreciation of his family’s ideals and take that appreciation to his comrades in the Fleet, and if he can gain any shred of approval from his tremendously influential family, he will ignite a spark that has the potential to blaze into that massive change in attitude I explained to you earlier.”

“You are a ruthless, manipulative ogre!”

“What is so manipulative about allowing two young men to do what they had already decided to do?”

“You’re a madman. Utterly deranged. And my life is in your hands.”

Colonel Quautar laughed, put his hand on Ton’s shoulder, and led him to the dining room. The table was already set for dinner, and Nelena and the children had already given

the prayer on the food and were beginning to eat. The colonel communicated to Jaun, who was closest to the kitchen, *Set another place. Ton is staying for dinner.*

Astonished, Ton sat down in the chair Nelen brought to the table for him. Ton ate timidly, the Quautars communicating freely and with liveliness, drawing him into their conversation as if nothing unusual had happened that day.

## Chapter 13: THE IRREPARABLE FLAW

Maurek left, and Miaundea prostrated herself on one of the white metal chairs on her balcony. As the sunset faded into twilight, she thought about Ton, wondering whether he was still in Mautysia with the terrorist, and she realized that she had enjoyed her day with Maurek far more than if she had spent it with Ton. She did not feel the affection for Maurek she felt for Ton, but Maurek had wanted to be with her for *her*, not for a body from which he hoped to gain sexual favors. He had made her feel desired, respected, and beautiful, and yet, as awkward as their communication had been in the beginning, she had never felt as if she were on her guard. When she was with Ton, she was constantly on her guard.

Miaundea didn't love Maurek, and she didn't know if she ever would, but what about other Novaunian men? In the beginning she had believed they didn't like her because she was so little and plain. Then in later years, she had always attributed their lack of interest to her assertiveness and dramatic style of dress. The incongruity of it had always perplexed her. It didn't matter what she did; they had never been interested—or at least that was what she had always believed.

If Maurek loved and admired her and thought she was beautiful, especially when she dressed with drama, then why shouldn't other men think so too? Maybe this wasn't about appearance at all. Maybe the make-up and short, contoured dresses and hairstyles unrestrained by braids had never mattered to anyone but her. None of it had ever mattered to Maurek. Did other men not approach her because she offended them by the way she dressed or because they sensed hostility and disinterest?

Her mother had told her that she stood in the corner at dances and wore a dour expression on her face that literally defied any young man to ask her to dance. She did stand in the corner at dances, and no one ever asked her to dance. Did she at other times clothe herself in a lofty attitude that literally defied any young man to approach her at all? Any young man but the one who perceived her attitude, her isolation from the men of her own culture, and used it to seduce her?

Miaundea recalled all of Ton's attacks on Novaunian men. "Go ahead and save yourself for an unexciting Novaunian boy . . . Minon Noble Novaunian, died on his wedding night, killed by his bride's lust . . ."

Miaundea wondered whether Ton believed those statements himself or if they had been lies. Whether they had been lies or not, the manipulation was obvious. She had no doubt that Maurek would be a passionate lover, not so much because he was so passionate by nature, but because the passion he felt for her was so intense. She felt uncomfortable with the possibility of ever being with Maurek in that way, but at this point, the only feeling inspired by the possibility of being Ton's lover, or even his wife, was revulsion.

Miaundea's feelings of anger and revulsion eventually passed, leaving her thrilled by Maurek's revelation and the way it had demolished the barriers of isolation that had existed between her and Novaun's huge community of young unmarried men. She could correct the problem now that she understood what it was. She felt stupid, naïve, and completely inept for not allowing herself to understand it sooner, yet the reproaches she gave herself were tinged with humor and happiness.

The twilight faded into night, the sky growing brilliant with stars. Miaundea stretched her arms and legs and opened her mind to InterMind News. She sprang to the edge of her

chair when she saw in her mind the image of Ton on a Mautysian street corner with the terrorist, Ton in his Star Force uniform and the terrorist in his Fleet uniform. Her first thought was they were delightfully audacious, brazenly irreverent, and completely insane. No wonder the terrorist had been able to persuade Ton to take the day off work.

The terrorist was in the middle of an explanation: . . . *have two members of our organization at present. I'm president, and Ton here is vice-president.*

*But you only betrayed your family! I betrayed an entire Empire! I should be the president,* Ton protested.

Miaundea assimilated it all with anticipation, yet with an underlying feeling of horror.

The terrorist communicated flippantly, his tumultuous deep-set eyes flickering triumphantly and his smirk almost a sneer, *But I've been a traitor much longer, and I'm not only a traitor, I'm a murderer. Besides, this club was my idea. I'm the president.*

Realization nearly suffocated Miaundea. The terrorist was the acquaintance of Ton's who had been disowned by a powerful pacifist family for joining the Fleet, the "irreparable flaw." She felt her cheeks become feverish and was perplexed by the empathy she felt for this man she didn't even know. She perceived the resentment he felt toward his family for disowning him, and she suffered with him. Her hands flew to her cheeks, trembling.

The invisible interviewer communicated baitingly, somewhat condescendingly, *All right, Braysel. You've had your fun. Have you no concern for your family and how this antic of yours will hurt them?*

Miaundea was furious with the interviewer for treating the terrorist in such a patronizing way, insulting him and addressing him by his first name as if he were a child.

*My mother and father will probably not even do me the honor of getting angry. My grandfather will just disown me.* He and Ton laughed.

The interviewer asked Ton, *And your sponsor Colonel Quautar, Dr. Luciani? What will be his reaction when he learns of your day in Mautysia?* Even Ton, a foreigner and traitor who was wearing the military uniform of an enemy planet, received the proper and respectful form of address.

Ton appeared disconcerted, but only for a moment. The interviewer took advantage of his hesitation and communicated, somewhat gloatingly, *So you admit that you are worried about how Colonel Quautar will react.*

*Why should I be worried? He'll probably just send me back to Earth. They shoot traitors there, you know. Unfortunately, the Jovem Doshyr Honorary Club of Traitors will lose a devoted vice-president.*

*But you can be content with the knowledge that you will be the Club's first martyr,* the terrorist communicated, bowing low and worshipfully to Ton.

*It's an honor I hope always to be worthy of.*

*And now it's time we leave this hateful city and return to Shalaun, where we are only hated and scorned by young unmarried women and their parents.*

The image of the interviewer appeared at that point, and he concluded his report: *Colonel Sharad Quautar, Director of the Special Cases division of the Novaunian Intelligence Agency and Dr. Ton Luciani's sponsor, has already apologized to the government of Verzaun for Luciani's disgraceful behavior and has assured that he will be reprimanded. The Nalaurev and Jualaz families do not wish to comment at this time.*

Miaundea assimilated several more minutes of the news, waiting for the mention of the terrorist's full name and family status, but none came. One of his parents was a



Nalaurev and the other parent was a Jualaz, that was obvious, but what Nalaurev and what Jualaz? There were so many in Mautysia that bore the Nalaurev and Jualaz names that it was impossible to know.

Did the interviewer mean *the* Jeldaun Nalaurev family organization and *the* first family of the Great House Jualaz, presided over by High Patriarch Sunen Jualaz? As unlikely as it seemed, Miaundea believed it was possible. Ton had said that the “irreparable flaw” had been disowned by one of Novaun’s most powerful families. Not only that, but the Mautysian interviewer had treated the terrorist with the familiarity of having known him a long time. That, in itself, suggested to Miaundea that the terrorist was a child of famous parents.

Miaundea felt frustrated that she had missed the first part of the report. She flew off the couch and out of her apartment. Her father meticulously recorded every piece of news that came off of InterMind, several local telepathic networks all over the Citizens’ Union of Novaun, and many other news broadcasts originating from sources all over the galaxy on the telepathic transmission recorder in his office at home, much to the exasperation of her mother. He would have the beginning of the report. Come to think of it, she had seen him communicating with the terrorist at the reception. He would know who he was. She had to know more about him than “Braysel” Nalaurev or Jualaz.

When Miaundea arrived at her parents’ home, she saw her father and Ton standing in the glow of the porch light, communicating. Ton’s air of humility startled her. He had so lost his arrogant, cynical, lustful manner that she hardly believed it was him. Seeing him stripped of his ugliness of character, the old feelings of desire flared up within her again. She approached the two, trying to maintain calm. He was so stunningly handsome anyway, and this air of humility and the deep emotions that had characterized their relations of late made him all the more attractive to her.

“You seemed to have been reprimanded, Ton,” Miaundea teased.

Ton’s eyes were intense with passion as he watched her approach him, but his manner was timid. “You mean destroyed.”

Miaundea knew immediately the cause of his timidity—her father had forbidden him to make advances to her, probably with the threat that he would send him back to Earth. She wasn’t sure whether to be angry or not. In a way, she felt infuriated that her father would presume to interfere in her personal life. In a way, she felt grateful for his concern and that the days of her sexual combat with Ton were gone for good. Miaundea gazed at Ton in sympathy and affection. His lips curved ever so slightly into a smile of tenderness.

Her father asked, “Where have you been all day? We expected you for dinner.”

Miaundea smiled mysteriously. “You will never believe who I was with.”

Her father’s eyebrows rose in curiosity.

“Maurek! I was with Maurek Avenaunta. He came to my apartment this morning, and we communicated and cried together and completely forgave each other of everything.”

“You’re joking!”

Miaundea shook her head, barely able to contain her elation. “I’m not. I spent the entire day with him. You could ask him yourself, but he’s on his way back to his ship.”

Her father still couldn’t believe it. “You actually let him into your apartment?”

“Yes. He was alone, and he seemed so humble and sincere.” Miaundea shrugged. “What else could I do?” Miaundea didn’t dare tell her father what had really happened. He, Kevan, and Teren would harass her forever, but more than anything, she was concerned

about Maurek. Her father would congratulate Maurek on his success and treat the whole incident as a joke, but Maurek's father would be outraged. Colonel Avenaunta was a kind man in his way, but he had always been extremely strict with his sons, and Miaundea knew that if he ever found out how Maurek had made his apology, Maurek would be severely reprimanded.

"The woman who doesn't know he exists . . ." Ton said under his breath. Then he exploded in vexation, "That son of Abomination Bray set me up!"

Her father embraced her vigorously. "Well it's about time! I think we and the Avenauntas ought to throw a party to celebrate!"

Miaundea nodded in happiness.

"So you spent the morning in that holy shrine you call an apartment . . . with a man," Ton said sardonically.

Ton's display of jealousy delighted Miaundea. "We weren't there the entire morning. Just an hour or two."

Ton couldn't keep the anguish he felt from showing on his face. Her father watched him in amusement. Miaundea felt sorry for him until she reminded herself of how he had purposely tormented her over the past four and a half months.

Ton smirked. "So when does your new boyfriend get back in town? I'm just dying to see the Novaunian mating ritual in action."

Miaundea knew that Maurek would be ecstatic if he could see how jealous Ton was of him. She could think of no reason why she shouldn't let Ton believe what he seemed to want to believe. She knew Maurek would approve. "Two weeks. Only Maurek and I have no desire to ever let you see our 'mating ritual.' We wouldn't want to over-stimulate you." She and her father looked at Ton, then at each other and laughed.

Still laughing somewhat, Miaundea said, "Well Ton, you have had a busy day. I'm not sure whether to think you and your friend are stupid, insane, or incredibly heroic."

"It was appalling."

"Oh, come on, Father! You had to think it was a little funny."

Her father couldn't contain a slight smile.

Miaundea said eagerly to Ton, "Did the Mautysians get very angry?"

"They were downright hostile. They don't know me, so I didn't matter. There isn't one person in that city, though, who doesn't know Bray, and as furious and insulted as they all were, you would think he was Jovem Doshyr in the flesh."

Miaundea's heart nearly stopped in anticipation. The thrill of being so close to solving the mystery of the terrorist was almost too intense to bear. "So he is someone famous."

"Famous?" Ton grunted. "Infamous, you mean. Notorious. Try utterly scandalous."

Miaundea laughed softly. "I mean he's from a famous family. All I know is that his name is Braysel and that he's your 'irreparable flaw.' I only caught part of the report." She leaned a little toward Ton, waiting to devour any information he would give to her. "Who is he?"

Ton studied Miaundea's face. "Why do you want to know?"

"Men from pacifist families join the Fleet every day and get disowned. Forgive me for showing my stupidity by being curious."

"You're forgiven."

Miaundea waited anxiously for Ton to continue and tell her the identity of the terrorist, but he didn't. He continued to study her face with an expression of mocking curiosity.

“Your friend is the only Verzaunian man to ever join the Fleet. He’s a cultural oddity. You can’t blame me for wanting to know who he is,” Miaundea explained.

Her father’s mouth curved into a knowing little smile. “Especially when this ‘cultural oddity’ is young, unmarried, daring, stylish, and reasonably good-looking.”

Ton stared at Miaundea in taunting realization. “You’re hot for his body!”

Ton, in his vulgar way, was almost right. Miaundea could not deny that the terrorist appealed to her on many levels and that he was a man she believed had the capacity to interest her in a serious way. He was, however, a very close friend of Maurek’s and so unlikely to ever become interested in her. As for herself, she loved Ton too much and had been attracted to him for too long to be enthusiastic about the prospect of romance with someone else just yet.

Miaundea said melodramatically, “He’s the boldest, most elegant, most passionate man I’ve ever seen. He’s absolutely, utterly gorgeous. To tell you the truth, Ton, I have never in my life been so hot for a man’s body . . .” Her words faded into a seductive whisper, and then she laughed.

Ton pointed to the Avenaunta home. “Well, your new lover is living for the next few days at your boyfriend’s house. If you’re so curious to find out who he is, why don’t you go ask him?”

The Avenaunta home glowed with light. Miaundea fidgeted slightly, then turned in question to her father. Her father smiled at her mockingly. “Why don’t you go ask him, Miaundea?”

Miaundea couldn’t pass up a challenge. “You don’t think I will, do you?” She turned and walked determinedly toward the Avenaunta home. Even with her back turned, she could almost see Ton’s expression of uneasiness. She could hear her father chuckling softly.

Miaundea approached the door, transmitting her thoughts in a telepathic sweep of the house. *This is the hellion of Auyval Beach, and I wish to communicate with the terrorist at the front door.*

Within a minute, Braysel stepped on the front porch and closed the door, gazing in amusement down at Miaundea. *To what do I owe this honor, Mineste Hellion?*

He really was handsome in his ruby-embellished shirt, red satin pants, and neatly trimmed beard. The rippling waves of his hair glistened under the porch lights in countless blond, gold, and brown shades that were intertwined in strands that were as luxurious as his clothes and his mien. Miaundea didn’t think she had ever seen hair so beautiful. *The hellion officially requests the name of the terrorist.*

He shrugged and looked at her in pity. *But I’ve been paid not to tell you my name. Sorry.*

Miaundea turned abruptly and glared across the walk at Ton and her father. They both laughed sadistically.

*You really can’t blame me,* Braysel continued. *I am, after all, just a poor disowned Fleet officer with no shame. I take money wherever I can get it.*

*In that case, I’ll double whatever you’re being paid. What is your name?*

Braysel communicated dryly, *I already have a psychologist and two sociologists studying my case. I do not wish to add an anthropologist.* He turned to go back into the house.

Miaundea grabbed his arm, and he turned to face her again. She gazed tenderly into his tormented eyes. *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I've wanted to know your name from the moment I first saw you at the reception, and I knew nothing of your family situation then. I didn't even know you were a Fleet officer.*

Braysel's brow wrinkled in puzzlement and surprise. *Why didn't you just ask me then?*

*There wasn't time. Then after I communicated with Ton and returned to the reception, I saw you with Maurek and was mortified. I thought he had told you all kinds of horrible things about me, which was why you had called me a hellion. I couldn't face you at that point, so I didn't go back to the reception at all.*

*You spent the entire evening away from the reception and your friends because you thought Maurek had told me all kinds of derogatory things about you?* He shook his head. *You're terribly paranoid. I didn't call you a hellion with any kind of malice.*

Miaundea was abashed. *No, you didn't. I guess I was paranoid. You can't blame me, though. You know better than anyone my turbulent history with Maurek . . . and his friends.*

*That's true,* Braysel admitted.

Miaundea gazed at him softly. *I can't thank you enough for inspiring Maurek with the confidence to communicate with me. His visit today meant more to me than I can possibly express.*

*He told you about the part I played in his attack on your apartment this morning, but he didn't tell you my name?*

Miaundea shook her head. *I asked him, I guess too subtly—he was there, after all, to discuss us, not you—but all he told me was that you are a comrade from the Fleet from his first tour.*

*That ungrateful jellyfish! I'm going to charge him a hundred gold coins now instead of the fifty I told him!*

Miaundea laughed, then communicated in playful impatience, *Since the reception yesterday, my life has been in chaos! I want to know who you are. Is it really too much to ask?*

Braysel bowed slightly and communicated with a formal tone of thought, *Permit me, Miaundea Quautar, to formally introduce myself.*

She grinned with delight and anticipation. She touched her fingertips to his, the soft warmth of his skin shooting sparks of excitement through her hands and arms to her heart, igniting it in such frantic, feverish throbs she could hardly breathe, then bowed her head slightly to complete the formality.

*My name is Braysel—Bray—Nalaurev, Fleet pilot, traitor, terrorist, and admirer of hellions. As for my family status, my father is Trynenuin Nalaurev, the architect. My mother is Aulanora Nalaurev, the actress and niece of High Patriarch Sunen Jualaz. Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev is my grandfather.*

Miaundea had known he had been disowned by a powerful pacifist family, and she had guessed that he had grown up accustomed to fame and luxury, but she still hadn't been prepared for the full magnitude of his revelation. She wasn't surprised they had disowned him, and she doubted they would ever accept him back into the family while he was in the Fleet. He was living a nightmare she could hardly comprehend.

Braysel communicated wryly, *Don't tell me you're surprised.*

Miaundea shook her head, barely. *I'm surprised and yet I'm not. Why, Bray? Why do you do it?*

Braysel's gaze pierced her with its resolution. *Because I have to.*

Miaundea nodded that she understood. *I know this is very personal, but do you have any idea why?*

Braysel's eyes widened a bit in surprise. *No one's ever asked me that question before. I'm sorry. Forgive me for being so intrusive.*

Braysel quickly squeezed Miaundea's hand. *Oh no! I'm flattered. To answer your question, a day doesn't go by that I don't beg God to tell me why. The only answer I ever get is that I won't understand until I'm capable of acting on that understanding.*

*Have you ever asked Him to help you gain that capacity to act?*

Braysel frowned. *No . . . no. I never have.* He hesitated. *Do you approve, Miaundea? I wasn't sure at first, but I am now.* She nodded. *I do. Very much.*

Braysel appeared surprised and perplexed, but pleased.

*Do you know what the tragedy of it all is, Bray? That you and your family are fighting over a difference in ideology that is so minute as to hardly be a difference at all.*

*How can you believe that? The Fleet supporters want peace by arms; the Isolationists want peace by destroying our arms.*

*That's just it, Bray. We all want peace. The only ideological difference between us is that you and I believe the Fleet is God's instrument, that we ourselves have a certain amount of responsibility in maintaining our freedom that goes beyond praying. The sin isn't with Fleet men for killing in defense of themselves and Novaun, nor is it with pacifist men who morally don't have the ability to join in that defense. It's with all of us for allowing this stupid, almost insignificant difference in ideology to so brutally divide us.*

Braysel nodded quickly, in understanding. *My sister also believes that the division in our family is the real sin.*

*Has it ever occurred to any member of your family that they will never be able to accomplish what they wish to accomplish without achieving unity with the supporters of the Fleet?*

*I think their only concern is to convert the entire Union to their way of thinking.*

*Which is exactly what the Fleet supporters are trying to do too.*

*So what's the solution?*

*For each faction to begin seeing the beauty of the other and to begin working together toward the goals they have in common. That will never happen until the Isolationists stop thinking of the Fleet as an organization of murder and the Fleet supporters stop thinking of the Isolationists as cowards who are refusing to do their duty. As for how to bring about that change in attitude, I haven't the slightest idea.*

Braysel dropped himself into one of the chairs on the porch. *I suppose it would help if a certain Fleet officer stopped trying to terrorize Mautysia in his uniform.*

Miaundea moved a chair and sat down in front of Braysel so that she could look at him directly. *I'm not sure that what you did was so bad. Think of it this way. If you just went on with your life not caring about your family or anyone in Mautysia, nothing would ever change. Your family would gradually become nothing more than a memory to you, and you would become nothing more than a memory to them. The thing is, you do care. You're hurt and you're angry and you want everyone who ever hurt you to know it. I'm not sure that's*

wrong. *Maybe your methods aren't the best right now, but you're supposed to shake things up, Bray. I know it.*

Braysel grabbed her wrists, squeezing her hands and arms, his eyes traveling from her face to her feet, then back again, as if he didn't believe she were real. *You're an angel from Paradise, Miaundea, you must be. You're an angel sent from the throne of God to come pull me out of this black hole of despair.*

Miaundea gazed at him in wonder, stroking his hands as he had stroked hers, reluctant to give up this physical joining that so exhilarated her. His communications would have struck her as odd and a bit funny had he not been so earnest. She had never felt such bliss in making someone happy, even though she wasn't sure what it was she had done, nor had she ever felt such pleasure in gaining the approval of another. Not wanting to tease him or trivialize his feelings, she simply communicated what was in her heart: *You give me too great an honor. What did I do? I would like to be able to do it again, anything to make you so happy.*

Braysel smiled exultantly. *But that's exactly what makes you such an angel. You don't know what you do, you just do it.* He gazed at her hopefully. *Mineste Zrenauna made this wonderful nut cake. I'll ask her if you can have some if you'll tell me about Saharenper. Your father wouldn't tell me anything. He told me to ask you.*

*Sure. And I have crates of things I brought back with me. I'll show it all to you if you would like. We can go through it tonight or tomorrow after Devotional.*

Braysel stood up, pulling Miaundea up with him. *Let's do it tonight. It's still early enough.*

Miaundea nodded and smiled up at him in agreement, allowing him to lead her into the house. As she entered, she glanced over her shoulder and looked toward her parents' home. Ton and her father were gone.

## Chapter 14: A VISION

Braysel presented Miaundea to Maurek's family as "the hellion of Auyval Beach," and they all laughed and communicated that they had guessed it.

Braysel sat Miaundea down in a free chair and communicated to Maurek's mother, *I told Miaundea that I would ask you for a piece of your cake if she would tell me about Saharenper tonight.*

Mineste Avenaunta laughed merrily and nodded that it was all right. Colonel Avenaunta looked questioningly from Miaundea to Braysel. *She's going to tell you all about Saharenper? I don't suppose we'll see you until tomorrow morning.* Braysel laughed and headed toward the back of the house and the kitchen for a piece of cake.

Miaundea smiled at Maurek's father knowingly. *Didn't you know? I was planning to bring all of my Saharenperan treasures here and share them with your whole family.*

Colonel Avenaunta had already learned as much as he ever cared to know about Saharenper from both her and her father. He groaned and rolled his eyes in playful dread, and everyone laughed. Miaundea asked, *Did any of you communicate with Maurek today?*

*Only barely,* Mineste Avenaunta replied, obviously thinking it strange that Miaundea would ask about Maurek.

Maurek's brother Sarnel communicated, *That jellyfish dropped off the planet today. He knew I'd beat him in the Run.*

*He didn't drop off the planet completely,* Miaundea said mysteriously. *He was with me.*

Every face gaped. Miaundea chuckled. *Father didn't believe it either, but it's true. We're friends now.*

Braysel handed Miaundea the piece of nut cake and sat down beside her, while Maurek's parents and the two brothers who were there gushed with questions about how it had happened. Miaundea gave them the details of her day with Maurek in the city, explaining vaguely how it had begun that morning in her apartment, not wanting to humiliate Maurek by revealing his intimate feelings. She wondered how much members of his family had guessed over the years.

Maurek's little dark-haired niece and two little dark-haired nephews rubbed against Miaundea's legs, whimpering, their big blue eyes begging for bites of her cake. She shared it with them delightedly.

Miaundea and Braysel communicated with the Avenauntas for about an hour, then took a taxi to Miaundea's apartment. She overflowed with details about Saharenper, showing him all of the clothing, gadgets, and pieces of art she had brought back with her, and he assimilated everything in fascination, asking question after question. She explained that the Saharenperans were in the beginning of an industrial revolution and that they had only barely discovered electricity, and she telepathically showed him several of their recent inventions.

They discussed Novaun's own technological history as it related to Saharenper, and Miaundea was amazed by Braysel's knowledge in the area, which was far greater than hers, discovering at that time his interest in engineering. They discussed the Saharenperans' telepathic abilities and the way they used their arelada, again relating Saharenper's history to their own. Having extensively studied telepathy science and being so closely related to a Great House that had mined arelada for millennia, Braysel knew

Novaun's telepathic history in vivid detail. Miaundea soaked up his knowledge, as eager to learn from him as he was to learn from her.

*So we have agents there now basically giving key people key technology, Braysel observed. You must then teach the agents.*

*No, I teach the instructors who teach the agents. I'm also on the committee that's working to define and document our policy.*

Hour after hour passed, but instead of their growing weary from lack of sleep and bored with communication, their excitement at all they were learning and sharing increased, and their energy increased with it.

The night had flown to the twenty-third hour when Miaundea communicated suddenly, *I'm hungry. Are you hungry? Let's go find something to eat.* Braysel followed her to the kitchen, and the two began rummaging through her refrigerator and cupboards for food. They found a carton of fresh water chestnuts and half a carton of small shellfish.

Miaundea opened the carton of shellfish and smelled them to make sure they were still fresh. They smelled wonderful, and her stomach rumbled at the thought of them sautéed in butter with the water chestnuts. Six hours had passed since she had eaten dinner with Maurek, and she was famished. She looked at Braysel curiously. *Have you ever eaten fish? Do you eat meat at all?*

Braysel shook his head as he began measuring ingredients into a pan for sweet sauce to go with the water chestnuts. *It isn't so much that I have a moral objection to it. My stomach and my tongue just aren't accustomed to it. I had fish once and was sick all night.* He shuddered.

Miaundea shook her head at him in playful pity. *Oooo . . . big strong pilot gets sick on fish . . .* She laughed.

Braysel's eyebrows shot up. *Big strong pilot may just throw you and the fish out the window and eat all of the water chestnuts himself!* Miaundea threw a raw water chestnut at him and he leaned to the side and caught it in his teeth. They leaned against the counter and laughed.

Once the laughter diminished, Miaundea sliced a loaf of bread, seasoned the slices with hot spices, and slipped them in the oven, then cleaned and prepared the water chestnuts and the shellfish and began sautéing them. Braysel finished making the sweet sauce for the water chestnuts and brewed some zaulyem tea. They piled all of the vegetables, shellfish, and slices of crunchy bread on a huge platter with the bowl of sauce in the middle and moved it, napkins, cups, and the pot of tea to the balcony.

They ate and communicated under a bright spread of stars, the city silent around them and the water of the harbor glimmering in the distance. Miaundea asked Braysel how his trip to Mautysia with Ton had come about, and he told her about their meeting at the reception. That Ton had asked him and Maurek to dinner the night of the reception especially interested her, and she demanded to know every detail. Braysel told her about the red nuayem punch and she laughed so much she nearly put herself into hysterics.

*And to think I believed not too long ago that Novaunian men were very prudish.*

Braysel shook his head at her in playful hopelessness. *What a naïve little girl you were.* He smiled at her in admiration. *But for a naïve little girl, you certainly handled Ton well.*



Miaundea didn't find it strange that Braysel had guessed so much about her relationship with Ton. *No, I didn't handle Ton well at all. I led him on, and I put up with far more than I should have.*

Braysel's spirit stroked Miaundea's in tenderness. *Why?* His question wasn't one of censure, but curiosity.

*I liked the way he looked at me; he made me feel beautiful—* Miaundea paused. "Beautiful" had described the feeling before, but it didn't properly describe it now. Maurek had made her feel beautiful, and Braysel—how could she adequately express it?—when she was with Braysel, she *was* beautiful. *No, he made me feel desired. It's so frustrating. He's an interesting person, and I like being with him, and he does feel affection for me; I know he does. He has some good qualities, but his moral standards are so warped. I can never be more than friends with him, and yet I don't know if we can ever be friends.*

Miaundea detailed some of her experiences with Ton. She didn't need to discuss Ton—she needed Bray to know her. Braysel wanted to know Miaundea as much as she needed him to know her and assimilated everything hungrily, probing deeper into her spirit. Miaundea loved the sensation of his spirit interlaced with hers and reached deeper into him. They sat with their chairs facing each other, their fingertips barely touching on the table beside them, communicating more in images and feelings than in formulated thought, the food gradually disappearing.

*Did you get to communicate with any members of your family at all?* Miaundea asked.

*I went to dinner with my sister Mauya and her husband Sixth Day night.* Braysel showed Miaundea his meeting with Mauya and everything that had led up to it, including his visit to Haunal and his encounter with Kara at the theater. Finally, they relived his visit to his parents, their spirits clutching in frustration and despair.

*How could she ask it, Miaundea? How could she even think it?*

*Because pacifism is an enormous part of her religion. She isn't capable of equating Fleet service with religious conviction.*

*She just doesn't understand me; none of them have ever understood. I'm as worthy to be married in the Ordination Rite as any other Mautysian. How could they ever believe I would be married any other way?*

Their communication became rapid and intense, their spirits overlapping in a concentration and intimacy that would have been difficult for an outsider to disturb. Miaundea felt as if she had always known Bray and that the hours they had spent together were more a reunion than a meeting. She was as comfortable with him as if he were a member of her family, yet so much about him fascinated her. She wasn't sure she had ever encountered a mind so inquisitive and complex or an essence so idealistic, so tender, and so passionate. Emotions surged back and forth between them with vigor, and they communicated with an increasing level of awe at the feelings of comfort, fascination, and rapture they inspired in each other.

They reached deeper into their memories, their feelings, and into the essences of their personalities and poured themselves into each other, devouring as speedily as they poured, their touching fingertips slowly moving along each other's arms to their elbows and their knees touching, then interlocking, as if the closeness of their bodies would provide a more effective conduit for the fusion of memories and feelings between them. The flow of self continued, intense and unrestrained. They sat on the edges of their chairs, gazing at each

other in impassioned fixation, their hands clasped and their arms intertwined between them.

They searched deeper and deeper into each other until the transfer of thought between them was instantaneous. Miaundea hadn't opened her Awareness or her mind to Braysel, but even so, she had no private thoughts. She wasn't even certain the thoughts in her mind were her own thoughts.

Observations flashed from one mind to the other, as if they were thinking at once.

*They're our thoughts. We're one essence.*

*We think together and are one.*

*This isn't dijauntu.*

*We aren't married.*

*But we are.*

*In a way.*

*Is this supposed to be wrong?*

*We haven't joined spirits, so it isn't wrong.*

*It doesn't feel wrong.*

*We feel no shame.*

*We feel together too.*

*I want all of you.*

*I can't not have you.*

They reached a little further, probed a little deeper. Miaundea felt as if she were holding her own hands as well as Braysel's, and his heartbeat was almost hers.

Panic erupted and they immediately withdrew, knowing they had reached too far.

They lingered at the stage of shared thought, their spirits yearning for each other, wanting to delve deeper, aching, but knowing they must reach no further for the time being. They continued pouring and devouring and aching, their bodies shaking and their hearts pounding frantically against their chests and toward each other.

*We can't want dijauntu.*

*We do.*

*How?*

*We just met.*

*Our understanding of each other is perfect.*

*I know you as well as I know myself.*

*I don't always understand myself, but I understand you.*

*Is it really this easy?*

*Telepathy makes intimacy easy.*

*Too easy.*

*I must give myself to you!*

*We should stop.*

*We can't stop.*

Passion blazed between them. Miaundea had never experienced such acute sensation, such unbearable ecstasy, such overwhelming love. Her fingers reached to caress Braysel's face. She forced herself to whisper, wanting to assure him that she alone was the source of the thought, "I love you, Bray."

The muscles in Braysel's face convulsed. His fingers trembled against Miaundea's cheek, gently stroking her hair away from her face, and he gazed at her in wonder and

worship. He had never imagined such happiness would ever grace his life, and the years of frustration and desolation for being ignored and refused faded into nothingness, carrying with them the haunting images of cool little smiles of pity and embarrassed eyes lowering to avoid his.

Miaundea moved to Braysel's lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. *None of them matter anymore. You have me now.* She drew him so close that his lips caressed hers as he whispered, "I love you, Miaundea . . ."

Braysel's whisper dissolved into a kiss. Miaundea's fingers combed through Braysel's hair, feeling every ripple, every texture, her lips sensitive to the soft strands of hair around his mouth and the delicate folds of his lips. He loved her with all the power of his being. She didn't just feel his love; it permeated every cell of her body and every thread of her essence.

She could feel his deep need for intimacy and physical demonstration, needs that had gone unfulfilled for an excruciatingly long time, needs no one but she had ever come close to satisfying. As emotionally bound as he was to members of his family, they had never been able to understand him and had finally rejected him. As occupationally bound as he was to his comrades in the Fleet, they presumed to understand what they didn't and more often than not trivialized his position with insensitive exclamations of delight and support such as: "Well it's about time one of you Verzaunian jellyfishes decided to do your duty!" As ideologically bound as he was to others who supported the Fleet, they rarely tried to understand him and therefore thought of him as an outcast.

Within a few intense hours of sharing, she had become his sole sustenance, his reason for surviving, and the exclusive recipient of an astounding outpouring of passion. She clasped him even closer, showering him with her love as he showered her, engulfing him with her passion as he engulfed her.

They pulled away for only a moment, gazing at each other tenderly. Miaundea had never seen a man as handsome as Braysel was to her at that moment, his angular face touched with red and his gold-flecked gray eyes full of devotion. He wasn't a mere man, he was an angel, and a vision of prophecy opened to them at that moment, intense in its power of emotion, sublime in its assurance to their minds and spirits.

Miaundea saw herself standing next to Braysel, receiving a crystal triangle in her temple. Then she felt his spirit merged with hers as they travailed together to bring forth their first child and saw him holding the boy, wrapped in a white blanket. Many golden-haired children with gray, gold, and green eyes followed. The gold highlights in Braysel's hair faded into pale gray, and he still drew her close in the morning light and was happy, and so was she.

*We'll name our son Jeldaun, after my grandfather.*

*Of course.*

They kissed again, but as their lips touched, distress in Braysel stabbed through them both like a skewer. He pushed her out of his lap, withdrawing his spirit so suddenly that tremors of pain shot through their bodies. Miaundea whimpered. Braysel shuddered and recoiled from her, grimacing in agony. *This isn't right. Not now, and not like this.*

Miaundea sat back down in her chair, bewildered. *How can it not be right?*

Braysel sat with his elbows overlapping his knees and his arms covering the sides of his head. *It isn't fair! Why does it always have to be a choice? Why can't I be anything but*

*a traitor?* He covered his face with his hands, his shoulders drooping in shame, and Miaundea immediately understood.

A sinking feeling gripped her heart. She didn't want to hurt Maurek, but more, she had never wanted to do anything that would jeopardize Braysel and Maurek's friendship. *It's Maurek you're worried about, isn't it?*

Braysel nodded heartbrokenly.

*You have nothing to be ashamed of, Miaundea communicated gently. You didn't plan to fall in love with me, it just happened. Our night here together has been beautiful and right. You can't let yourself feel guilty for something that is right.*

*I don't. That's what is so shameful about it. If only I'd had an inkling this would happen . . .* Braysel choked in despair. *It isn't bad enough that I stole you, I stole his chance. I yanked it right out from under him.*

*Maurek's chance was four years ago, Bray. I don't want to hurt him either, but I don't love him. I love you. He doesn't have any delusions about my feelings for him.*

*You don't understand. This isn't a stupid game over which one of us saw you first. Maurek has loved you all his life. We would go to parties and dances and girls would practically beg him to give them his interest, but he never met or danced with or even saw any girl he didn't compare with you.* Braysel moaned. *And he confided in me. If only I could just give him back his chance.*

*Bray, you and I are for each other and we both know it. Do you really think that any amount of time I might have spent with Maurek under different circumstances or may still spend with Maurek in the future would ever change that?*

Braysel shook his head. *But he wouldn't have known that. Perhaps he would have grown dissatisfied with you before you grew dissatisfied with him. It would have been between the two of you, and I wouldn't have had to betray him.*

*If it is true that you and I are for each other, then any time I would have spent with Maurek agonizing over whether or not I could ever love him, and, by the way, thinking about you and wondering when I would see you again, would have wasted my time and his. He deserves better than that. He'll be hurt and angry, and he may even hate you for a while, but if he is truly your friend—and he is—he won't blame you and he'll understand.*

*What am I going to do, Miaundea?*

*What do you want to do?*

The muscles in Braysel's face were taut with dread, but his eyes shone with devotion. He leaned forward and took her head in his hands, pressing his lips to hers. She returned his kisses with vigor, laughing softly as his spirit burned through her again and he drew her back into his lap.

Miaundea finally communicated, *He'll be hurt by what he will perceive as your betrayal, but he will be more hurt by being deceived. If you don't tell him, I will.*

*I'll tell him.* Braysel stroked her back. *What are we going to do about Devotional tomorrow?*

*We can't go together, Miaundea communicated in disappointment. We can't flaunt our relationship or tell anyone about it at all. Seeing me around the neighborhood on such familiar terms with a good friend of his would spark all kinds of gossip, and everyone would harass him. Ton, in fact, already guesses his feelings.*

Braysel stared at her in horror. *Ton guesses?*

Miaundea nodded and telepathically gave Braysel her conversation with Ton and her father in an instant.

Braysel groaned and rested his forehead against her chin. *Me and my big mouth! Why did I tell Ton that Maurek was in love with anyone at all?*

*It wouldn't have mattered. Ton is sharp, and he would have guessed it anyway. The second I told him about my day with Maurek, he knew you had set him up.*

Braysel shook his head vigorously. *Of all the people you know, Miaundea, Ton must not—absolutely must not—learn anything about us. Not yet.*

*Why do we have to have such problems? My life with Ton will be much more pleasant if I tell him.*

*If you do, he will never give Maurek a moment's peace!*

*Unfortunately, you're right.*

*Let him keep thinking you're interested in Maurek. It'll make him crazy, and Maurek will get a lot of satisfaction out of it too if he ever finds out about it.*

*I would much rather let him see how insane I am about you.* Miaundea ran her fingers over his beard. *How will they not see? How will they not guess? All I'll have to do is look at you and they will know.*

Braysel's lips found hers again. *They will guess, angel, they will all guess. They will never know though, not if we don't tell them.*

*It'll be hours before I'll be able to get away from my family tomorrow afternoon if we want everything to appear normal. I already hate this. We should both spend the day with my family.*

*We'll tell your parents before I leave Novaun, but here, not in Auyval Beach.*

Miaundea nodded quickly that she understood and agreed. He held her tightly as he stood up. They kissed again and again, both knowing it was time for Braysel to leave. They reluctantly separated, and Braysel stepped toward the door, his face pale with misery. *Now I have to find a way to face Maurek's family.*

\* \* \*

Braysel walked down the hall of Miaundea's floor toward the elevator, giddy and ecstatic with love and admiration for her. He could imagine nothing more wonderful than making Miaundea his wife, but as much as he wanted it and as certain as he was that it was right, he hadn't the slightest idea how he was going to accomplish it.

How was he going to face the Avenauntas? They had been so kind to him. How could he continue to accept their innocent hospitality knowing he had betrayed Maurek? Yet if he spent the remaining five days of his leave somewhere else, they would be confused and hurt. Maurek's friendship was the price he had paid for Miaundea's love, a price far too high, and yet one he knew he would pay again if somehow presented with the chance to relive the past twenty-five hours. Why did there have to be a price at all? Why couldn't he have both? How in the universe was he going to tell Maurek?

Once on the ground floor, Braysel stepped out of Miaundea's apartment building and slid into the taxi that was waiting. How in the universe could he bring Miaundea into his nightmare of a life? She accepted him as he was and understood to a degree what kind of life she was accepting by agreeing to be his wife, but the thought of her as an outcast and disdained by his family appalled him.

And what of her family? Would they approve? Certainly not. Would her father give his consent at all? Perhaps, perhaps not. What if he didn't? Braysel knew that Miaundea would marry him regardless, but the last thing he wanted was for her to be rejected by her own family.

Braysel had never wanted so desperately to be accepted back into his own family. He had missed them terribly over the past three and a half years, but somehow, the feelings of desolation were even more acute now, knowing he would be unable to share them with Miaundea and Miaundea with them. The thought of anyone other than his grandfather Jeldaun marrying them was incomprehensible, yet he knew that under the present circumstances, it would be impossible.

Guilt tormented him. Joining the Fleet three and a half years before had been right. All the disrespect he had shown his parents, his grandparents, and the rest of his family and the blatant way he had constantly attacked their values had been wrong, utterly wrong. He couldn't rid his mind of the image of Mauya's accusing face. *Do you hate us so much, Bray?*

He could never hate them; he could never hurt them. Yet they believed he hated them, and he had hurt them, unforgivably. His trip to Mautysia with Ton had been the most vengeful, vulgar, unforgivable conduct of all. They wouldn't accept him back now if he went to them on his knees and begged them, professing pacifism for eternity. He wished more than anything that to acknowledge them as right and profess pacifism for eternity was within his power. Why had he been born into such an impossible situation? Why couldn't he have been born with the ideals of his family? His thoughts and feelings flew upward to Paradise and the throne of God. He cried, he begged, he demanded in bewilderment. Why? Why? Why? But he felt no peace, no answers, nothing but bitterness and confusion.

Braysel arrived at the Avenaunta home and walked with dread into the silent house. The rooms were dark, the atmosphere peaceful. Braysel had never felt so ashamed, yet he was furious at himself for feeling that way. He and Miaundea had done nothing wrong. He walked as quietly as he could to Maurek's bedroom and collapsed into Maurek's bed, exhausted.

## Chapter 15: A NEW HERO

Ton and Ausha met at the hospital early First Day morning to check on their patients, as they always did. Ton hadn't slept well the night before. Learning that Miaundea had spent the day with Maurek Avenaunta had been bad enough, especially knowing Maurek's intense feelings for her, but seeing Miaundea's interest in Bray and her easy way of being with him had been unbearable.

Ausha didn't look any better than he felt. She was wearing a plain beige silk dress for Devotional under her lab coat, but it was wrinkled. Her hair hung down, damp, and she seemed to have made only a slight attempt to comb it. The hollows of her eyes were still dark with despair.

Seeing Ton cheered Ausha up a bit. After they checked on their separate patients, they walked together to the emergency room lounge for breakfast with Bryaun and Danal. It was Danal's scheduled weekend to work the emergency room, and since Danal's partner had taken Bryaun's shift the weekend before while Bryaun was on Dinevlea, Bryaun was working it too.

*I can't believe you actually wore your Star Force uniform to Mautysia!* Ausha communicated as they walked.

*You know about that?*

*Of course I do. All of Shalaun knows about it. You're a hero! I just can't believe you would do something so outrageous. You're usually so serious and down to business. I always knew you were crass, but I didn't think you were that crass!*

*I'm the crassest person you'll ever know.*

Ausha actually smiled. *I don't know . . . Bryaun and his brain ball were awfully crass!*

They arrived at the lounge, and Bryaun and Danal were already there, wearing their scrubs. Ausha greeted them both affectionately, with tight embraces and kisses on the cheek. Bryaun kissed Ausha's forehead and released her, then bowed lowly to Ton and kissed his hand. *Let me be the first to honor you, Dr. Luciani, Your Worship, for your amazing feat of bringing Mautysia to its knees.*

Ton shook Bryaun's lips off his hand and looked at him strangely. *Get away from me!*

Danal squeezed Ton's shoulder, his expression one of veneration. *Amazing, amazing, amazing.*

*I told you that you're a hero now, Ton,* Ausha communicated.

Ton addressed Bryaun and Danal: *When did you two have time to assimilate any news?*

Danal headed to the synthesizing machine. *Yesterday was slow, very slow.*

*Those haughty racist pacifists would all be wholeheartedly supporting the Fleet if Verzaun had been invaded, its government and property seized, and its citizens murdered,* Bryaun communicated bitterly.

Ton remembered something Miaundea had said weeks before about the Isolationists protesting the Latanzan War, how the Fleet had, regardless, driven the Dirons off Novaun's own planets Jeltar, Bristaun, and . . . Dinevlea.

*Certainly the Isolationists didn't continue to protest the Latanzan War after three of Novaun's own planets were invaded.* As often as Ton had debated politics with the three, this particular subject had never come up.

All three of his colleagues nodded.

*But why? That has to be almost as inhumane as Earth's invasion of Senlana!*

Danal removed his breakfast from the synthesizing machine. *You won't find any arguments here.*

*They think of us as only half-Novaunians,* Ausha wryly explained as she took her turn at the synthesizing machine. *Even the border planets that don't have Dinevlea's particular cultural history tend to be more racially mixed, the Latanzan and Kavellan races as well represented as the Gudynean. The Isolationists, with all their rhetoric about universal brotherhood, don't care an iota about non-Novaunian planets.*

Danal sat down at one of the round tables. *I think they're embarrassed by the existence of "half" Novaunian planets and would rather just forget about us.*

*And it's very easy for people on Novaun and the other inner worlds to sit back, relax, and communicate that God should fight "our" battles when the border planets are taking the punishment for them,* Bryaun communicated, taking his turn at the synthesizer while Ausha went to the table. *That's why we have the Coalition. To educate all Novaunians to the reality that culturally, socially, and politically, we're all Novaunian.*

Ton nodded that he understood.

Ausha took a sip from her glass of milk. *Your Fleet officer friend really is a Mautysian, isn't he?*

Ton punched his selection into the machine, nodding. *His grandfather is the leader of the Isolationists, Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev.*

Ausha choked on her milk and coughed into her napkin. *You're joking!*

Ton tapped on his thigh, his stomach growling. *I'm sure Bray wishes it were a joke at times. His family disowned him.*

Bryaun split his muffin in half. *You have to admire him. It must have taken a lot of courage to join the Fleet under such pressure.*

Ausha thoughtfully uncoiled her sweet roll. *He had to have been raised in the pacifist tradition. I wonder what makes a person do something so rebellious and so extreme.*

*I don't know, but it's about time,* Danal communicated. Ausha and Bryaun nodded and murmured their agreements.

Ton's food synthesizer beeped and he quickly sat down with his friends. Danal was the first to get called back to work. He stuffed the last of his biscuit into his mouth and hurried out the door, waving back at his friends.

Ausha sat there despondent, nearly in tears. *What am I going to do today, Bryaun, with you here?*

Bryaun gazed at her in compassion, but his sigh was one of irritation. *Isn't lunch at Taurel and Garnen's today? Spend the day there.*

*I don't want to go there. I like them all, but they don't care that Jaunel died, and they aren't like family.*

*What am I supposed to do, Ausha? I have to work. I want to work.* Bryaun had been close to Jaunel and was nearly as stricken with grief over his death as Ausha was. He possessed, however, more of Ton's attitude, preferring to work to numb himself to painful thoughts.

*Why don't you come with me to the Quautars' this afternoon?* Ton communicated tentatively. *I just communicated with Mineste Nelena, and she told me it would be all right.*



Ausha turned abruptly toward him, frowning.

*Please, Ausha. I don't have anything else to do today, and I really don't want to see Miaundea. If you come with me, I can more or less avoid communicating with her.*

*Things aren't going so well between you and Miaundea?* Bryaun communicated.

Ton shook his head, depressed. *To put it simply, not at all.*

Ausha squeezed Ton's arm. *All right. I'll go with you to the Quautars' this afternoon, but you have to come with me to Devotional this morning. You don't have to assimilate anything; I don't need your mind, just your presence.*

Ton shrugged and nodded. They asked him to go to Devotional with them every First Day at their breakfast ritual, and this time, he actually wanted to go. He was still too perplexed by Miaundea's moral objection to being his lover, and he had to find some way to explain twenty-one-year-old virgin military men. What was it that made them so firm in their bizarre attitude? He hoped the Novaunian Devotional service would begin giving him some acceptable answers.

Neither Bryaun nor Ausha appeared surprised that Ton would finally agree to go to Devotional, but Ausha looked relieved and even grateful. Ton knew that she honestly didn't want to be alone that day, or even worse, with people she knew superficially, who wouldn't understand her grief, or care. She had lived on Novaun for nearly three years and knew many people, but her work schedule didn't permit her to form very many deep friendships. Ton knew that her only really good woman friend was her roommate Tauna, a chemist, but Tauna was from Amaria and always went home on the weekends.

Bryaun soon went back to work. Ton and Ausha quickly finished their breakfast, then drove back to their neighborhood in Ton's car for Devotional. Ton was a little nervous about going to a religious service at first, but once he got there, he didn't feel uncomfortable. Nearly everyone there was near his age and from places other than Shalaun, and many were unmarried. All of them lived in apartments in the neighborhood, and Ton recognized quite a few people. He even knew some of them.

He was amazed by the serene, positive, participative spirit of the services, so different from the ritualistic Zarrist Worship services to which he was accustomed, and if he learned anything, it was that these people believed what they preached. Ausha sat close to Ton, her arm interlocked with his for support, and assimilated the counsel, appearing somewhat refreshed, and Ton was glad he had come.

## Chapter 16: THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Braysel awoke to the smell of zaulyem tea brewing and images of Miaundea and their late-night supper swirling through his head. Feeling more content than depressed, he arose, showered, and dressed for Devotional. Normally Fleet men didn't wear their uniforms to Devotional, although it was considered appropriate under certain circumstances. Believing his flamboyant Mautysian formal suit was inappropriate for Devotional and lacking a more conservative civilian suit, Braysel really had no choice that morning but to wear his uniform.

He walked to the kitchen and found Maurek's parents already eating breakfast. Seeing them made him feel guilty. They greeted him warmly and invited him to eat with them. Mineste Zrenauna watched him from under her luxuriant dark lashes with a kind of knowing amusement.

Colonel Avenaunta regarded him with mocking curiosity. *What time did you get in last night?*

The colonel's teasing question increased Braysel's misery. He attempted to wrap himself in emotions that were as playful as his smile. *Late. The woman is obsessed. She wouldn't let me leave. Barricaded the door! She kept telling me that she had one more thing to show me. I was a helpless victim to her anthropological reports. You warned me. I guess I should have taken you more seriously.*

Both the colonel and his wife laughed, and the conversation continued in a relaxed fashion until they left for Devotional. Maurek's parents and Braysel joined several other families in their walk to the neighborhood house of worship, arriving ten minutes later. Braysel spotted Miaundea immediately near the door with her parents and younger brothers and sisters, beautiful in an exquisite pale yellow silk dress with pleated V-shaped necklines in the front and back. The whole family communicated animatedly with Teren's sister Ranela and her husband Don.

Miaundea glanced at him through the glass doors and smiled lovingly, her cheeks slightly flushed and her eyes full of devotion. Braysel could feel his neck growing hot, his lips curving into a smile, and his eyes fixating on her. He tried to tear his gaze away but couldn't. He didn't know how he would be able to bear being so near her and yet unable to demonstrate his affection.

Braysel entered the house of worship with Maurek's parents. Seeing the Avenauntas, Ranela smiled conspiratorially at them, then at Miaundea's parents, and communicated to Miaundea, *I understand that you spent the whole day with Maurek yesterday.*

Colonel Avenaunta chuckled. *Miaundea is a busy little lady. She spent the day with Maurek and the evening with Braysel.*

*She was holding me captive.*

Don smirked. *Holding you captive with ardor. Life is ruthless.* Everyone laughed.

Miaundea smiled mysteriously. *Maurek will have my days, and Bray will have my evenings. I like it.*

The banter continued on for several more minutes before everyone began heading to their doctrine study classes. Miaundea taught a class of six-year-olds, so Braysel didn't see her at all that hour. After doctrine study, he entered the huge, sky-lit holy room with Maurek's parents and seated himself comfortably at the end of the turquoise velvet-padded pew, casually watching every entrance for Miaundea.

Miaundea's family entered and seated themselves behind the Avenauntas. Miaundea finally entered the holy room, only minutes before the Devotional service was scheduled to begin. As she walked down the aisle to join her family, she communicated in exasperation to Braysel, *I can't believe how quickly everyone learned about my reconciliation with Maurek. Everyone keeps asking me if we've set a date for our wedding! I expected to be teased, but I didn't expect this! My only peace has been my forty-five minutes with my six-year-olds. I'm afraid Maurek will get the worst of it. I'm thinking a real betrothal announcement would seem banal.*

Braysel suddenly felt relieved. *You're right, Miaundea. This isn't helping Maurek at all, and it's making us miserable.* Miaundea slid into the pew next to Sharauna, much to his surprise. *What are you doing back there?* He glanced over his shoulder at her.

Miaundea's eyes gleamed calculatingly, the corner of her mouth lifting into a tiny smile. *I'm not about to throw my diamond to the sharks just yet. Now that we're in control, we can have some fun. After Devotional at my parents' house, after everyone gets there, we're going to give them a shock they'll never forget.*

Braysel hesitated. *What if they don't approve? What if your father forbids you to marry me there in front of your entire family? I'm not sure I could bear such humiliation.*

As the members of congregation began pouring out their praises to God in song, Braysel felt Miaundea's love and compassion gush through him. *You don't know my father, Bray. You possess the qualities he respects in a man. Your family situation will seem trivial to him.*

*Ton really scared him, didn't he?*

Miaundea nearly laughed out loud. *Ton terrified him. But Ton has nothing to do with you. Father will require us to be very sure and very careful, but he will approve, I have no doubt.*

Braysel reached into her with his spirit, and they clung to each other in a telepathic embrace. *I'm so confused, Miaundea. Pray with me. Please.*

The opening hymn ended, and a man from the congregation walked up to the pulpit and gave the invocation. President Saudreg, the presiding taurnel of Miaundea's congregation, gave announcements. Then two more hymns followed, after which two women and one man from the congregation took turns addressing everyone on the related subjects of repentance and forgiveness.

Braysel leaned forward with his face in his hands, soaking up the counsel given in the service, searching into his memory for the scriptures referred to in the addresses and pouring his essence out to God in prayer. He had never imagined the effect Miaundea's spiritual presence in his prayers would have, the hope it would inspire, the happiness that would overwhelm him, and the transcendent power that would emerge, and his heart burned with gratitude for Miaundea's presence in his life.

He thanked God over and over for giving him His most precious angel, and he felt overpowered by His love, the answer to his prayers coming in a gush of knowledge. Peace permeated his being, and he understood several things simultaneously. God had chosen him to do a sacred work and would not abandon him. He was to lean on Miaundea and trust her perception. He had to return to Mautysia and apologize to his family. Miaundea's parents would give their approval. Maurek would understand and be all right.

The service ended with a hymn and prayer, and everyone stood to leave. Braysel turned to face Maurek's mother, still clinging to Miaundea in spirit. He communicated

with pleasant confidence, *I'll be over to change later in the day, but other than that, don't expect me until late. I'm spending the day with Miaundea.* Miaundea watched him intently, her face radiant with happiness.

Mineste Zrenauna patted Braysel's arm, smiling at him affectionately. *Have a good time.*

\* \* \*

Miaundea and Braysel and members of the two families made their way out of the holy room, approached every few seconds by someone else in the neighborhood who wanted to take a gibe at Miaundea regarding her upcoming marriage to Maurek. Several people teased her about Ton, asking what he thought of her plans, and Miaundea just shrugged and replied that she had started the rumor that she was betrothed to Maurek to make Ton jealous.

As Miaundea and Braysel walked home with Miaundea's family, they lingered behind and kept as much to themselves as they could. They communicated in contented leisure, touching each other now and then in tender fascination.

They arrived at the Quautar home and saw Kevan and Alysia already there, communicating with Teren and Deia. Little Sharad was chasing his cousins' fuzzy little pet kuka back and forth across the two yards.

Miaundea spotted Ton walking from the neighborhood landing platform and was both delighted and apprehensive. That Ton would be there that day hadn't occurred to her, yet she wasn't surprised. Ton joined the family now and then for the traditional First Day family lunch, depending on when he worked. He would be the most shocked and disturbed of everyone when she and Bray announced their betrothal. She didn't want to hurt Ton, but he needed to know and she was relieved she could tell him. Having him learn it with the rest of the family seemed the most appropriate way. What did surprise her was that Ausha Ferudant was with him.

Braysel saw Ton approach them, and his spirit swelled around her in triumph. Miaundea was immediately horrified. *Don't gloat! Please don't gloat!*

*But I love to gloat, and he deserves it.*

*No Bray, he doesn't deserve it. I don't want to hurt him.*

*Whatever you want, angel.*

Alysia approached Miaundea eagerly. *What's this rumor about you and Maurek spending the day together?*

*Oh, it's no rumor.*

Ton joined the group in the front yard and began assimilating the conversation with cynical curiosity. Miaundea noticed that Ausha didn't look at all well. Miaundea remembered that Ton had told her Ausha's brother had died in the Senlana conflict, but Miaundea couldn't feel much more sympathy for Ausha now than she had the night Ton had told her about it. Seeing Ausha at her parents' home with Ton was too odd. Ausha lightly held Ton's arm, but that simple touch seemed to be her complete support at the moment, as if without it she wouldn't be able to stand.

Miaundea couldn't comprehend anyone's depending on Ton for such obvious physical and emotional support, but even more, she couldn't comprehend Ton's allowing it. His

attentions to Ausha, however, were very tender, very respectful, and very affectionate, and that was the strangest thing of all.

Jaun looked at Miaundea goadingly. *Then after she spent the day with Maurek, she spent the evening with Lieutenant Nalaurev.*

*Two men in one day?* Ton communicated dryly. *You must be exhausted.*

Miaundea smiled sweetly. *Exhausted, me? But I intend to see Maurek every day, and Bray every evening, and, only because I feel the need to occasionally donate to charitable causes, I'll see you every other weekend.*

*Good of you to be so indulgent,* Ton communicated caustically.

Miaundea noticed that Braysel had become the object of Ausha's lurid fascination. Apparently he noticed too, because he frowned at her in puzzlement. *I'm sorry, but I don't believe we've been introduced.*

Ton nodded slightly in Ausha's direction. *This is my partner, Dr. Ausha Ferudent. Ausha, Lieutenant Bray Nalaurev.*

Braysel and Ausha greeted each other civilly, with fingertips touching. Ausha communicated carefully, *I'm sorry, minion, that I regard you with such curiosity. I'm just not certain you are real. I never thought I would ever see a Verzaunian man wear the uniform of Novaunian Fleet.*

*You have brown eyes,* Braysel communicated, his tone of thought one of uneasiness.

Ausha nodded slowly. *I'm from the planet Dinevlea.*

Braysel could not muster a response, but Miaundea could feel his shame. Thankfully Ausha was discreet enough to refrain from communicating more on such a sensitive subject.

Noticing that Teren and Deia were beginning to move in the direction of Ranela's home, Miaundea motioned them toward her. *Come in with us, just for a few minutes.*

Teren and Deia looked at each other in surprise, then at Miaundea in curiosity. She nodded at them and smiled invitingly, and they followed the group into the house.

\* \* \*

When Ton entered the house with Ausha, he saw Miaundea's mother and several of her sisters setting food for the buffet lunch out on the long bar that divided the kitchen and breakfast area from the huge living room. Miaundea's father and his sons-in-law were in the living room throwing pillows at the children and trying to knock them down. All of the children giggled and shrieked and threw pillows back at their fathers and grandfather, falling over when hit, then popping back up and begging, *Me! Me! Me!*

Jaun was sitting on a high stool, leaning against the bar, and pretending to take bets on who Miaundea would marry, whether she would chose Maurek, Braysel, or Ton, holding up an auyvalnut-covered caramel candy bar as the prize, and everyone playfully cast their votes, deciding unanimously that she would get rid of them all within a week and find three new love slaves.

Jaun ate the candy bar, and Teren, Kevan, and Jornel began speculating on which neighborhood boys would be Miaundea's next targets, all the while throwing pillows at the children and each other.

Ton ate several soft round vegetables that reminded him of olives, trying his best to appear nonchalant. The playful marriage speculations pierced deeply, though, and seeing Miaundea on such friendly terms with Bray was torture.

The way they all discussed Ton as if he weren't there, without a moment's regard for his feelings in the matter, made Ausha angry. She wanted to leave, but Ton convinced her that he was hungry and that to leave before such a feast of a lunch would be rude as well as stupid. Nelena greeted Ton warmly and introduced herself to Ausha, and both Ton and Ausha began feeling a little more at ease.

*She's been on an engagement with Maurek, so she has to go on engagements with Vodel and Huneer, Teren communicated realistically. It's inevitable.*

Kevan grimaced and shook his head. *Mention charitable causes! Why Avie chose those two as friends has always perplexed me. They're such jellyfishes they can't manage a mere two obstacles.*

Teren hurled a pillow into Kevan's stomach. *They're just phenomenal surfers.*

*If Miaundea went on an engagement with either one of them, she'd be so bored she'd find an excuse to leave within ten minutes!* Kevan tackled his little brother Charlel to the ground and tickled him. Little Sharad screamed with happiness and jumped on his father's back.

Daura kicked a pillow at her father. *Teren, you're the only neighborhood boy who could ever handle Miaundea. You didn't want her, so she'll just have to do with Maurek and Bray and Ton for now. Perhaps in time, Father can give her one of his handsome young agents to marry.*

A feeling of queasiness seeped into Ton's chest. Miaundea was putting her arms around Braysel's waist! She smiled and communicated happily, *Actually, I'm going to marry Bray.*

There was an explosion of laughter. Ton couldn't laugh with the rest of them, even though he, too, believed it was a joke. It was obvious Miaundea and Braysel liked each other, but marriage?

Braysel gently removed Miaundea's arms from his waist, stepped away from her slightly, and reverently removed a decoration from his uniform. Her eyes grew huge as she watched his hands carefully pin his medal to her dress.

The laughter stopped, and everyone held their pillows still, all doubt about the seriousness of the announcement gone. Horror submerged Ton, intensifying the queasiness. How could they be engaged? Hadn't Miaundea, only the day before, confessed that she was in love with him? Ausha clutched his arm, partly to support him, partly to restrain him.

Braysel and Miaundea moved into each other's arms again and kissed lightly. Miaundea turned to her family. *Isn't anyone going to congratulate us?*

Every face turned solemnly toward Miaundea's parents. They smiled at each other across the room, then approached Braysel and Miaundea from their separate places. Her mother embraced her and kissed her cheek, emanating emotions of love and congratulations.

Miaundea's father put his arm affectionately around Braysel, patted his shoulder and kissed his temple. *I can't imagine a more suitable husband for Miaundea. Welcome to the family, Braysel.*

Deia, Alysia, and Sharauna gasped with excitement; Daura and Saulystia gazed at each other in amazement; Teren and Kevan whistled and cheered; Jornel and Gavaun shook their heads in disbelief; and Jaun threw grapes and auyvalnuts at everyone in celebration.

Braysel gushed with gratitude. *Thank you. Thank you so much.* He and Miaundea began communicating privately with Colonel Quautar and Nelen. Ton watched the four in anger and agony. Ausha pulled on his arm and tilted her head toward the door. Ton wanted to leave but felt paralyzed. Maybe if he waited long enough, he would wake up and realize it was all a nightmare.

Miaundea laughed softly and kissed her mother's cheek, then stood on her toes and kissed her father. Colonel Quautar put his arms around both Miaundea and Braysel and squeezed them. He announced to the rest of the family, *I'm getting rid of her for good! Break out the nuayem punch!* Everyone stopped their eager evaluations of the betrothal long enough to laugh, Miaundea most of all.

Colonel Quautar looked over at Ton in amusement and winked, as if the two of them shared a secret. *Certain information has just been declassified.* Ton was startled out of his daze long enough to stare at the colonel in wonderment and fear.

Deia, Alysia, and Miaundea's sisters gathered impatiently around Miaundea and Braysel, lavishing them with their congratulations and demanding to know every detail of their romance. Then, with no provocation whatsoever, Kevan communicated with emphatic, but teasing dread, *What in eternity is happening to this planet? My sister is going to marry a Mautysian!* He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, pulled his hand down over his face, and shook his head. *I won't be able to allow my son off the boat. He'll come home from visiting Aunt Miaundea primping and whining and wanting to wear those gaudy Mautysian suits!*

Everyone but Ton and Ausha was in hysterics.

*He'll refuse to eat fish, and before I know it, he'll come home wearing one of those shiny leotard things and tell me he wants to be a dancer!* Kevan dramatized his point by curling his arms over his head and twirling around on his toes, displaying an appalling lack of grace. Braysel and Miaundea were in convulsions.

Still laughing, Deia patted Kevan's shoulder. *Actually, Kevan, he'll probably just grow a beard.*

Kevan frowned and stared at Braysel suspiciously, then communicated to him with sudden vigor and delight, *Love that beard!* Then he shot an accusing look at Alysia. *Too bad my tyrannical wife won't let me grow one!*

Daura and Alysia and Saulystia looked at each other, then at Miaundea, with expressions of curiosity mixed with fascination and revulsion. *What's it like to kiss that beard?* Saulystia asked.

Miaundea smiled at Braysel seductively, nuzzling up to him and kissing his cheek. *It works for me!* Deia, Alysia, and her sisters laughed in delight, and Braysel squeezed her tightly.

Ton couldn't bear it anymore. He broke free from Ausha's grip and walked to the back of the living room, opened the French doors, and stepped onto the deck for some air. He leaned against the rail of the deck, gazing at the Gulf shimmering in the distance. Many minutes later, he became aware of Miaundea's presence beside him.

"You're angry," she said gently.

Ton turned to face her. "How can I not be angry? You lied to me! You lied to me about everything!"

Miaundea shook her head solemnly. "I didn't lie to you about anything. I loved you then, and I love you now. Those feelings haven't changed."

"Then how can you do it, Miaundea?"

Miaundea leaned against the white metal rail, the wind tossing her hair into her face. "I feel very deeply for you, Ton, but what I feel for Bray is a thousand times more. I want to be with him forever."

"How can you know? You just met the man last night! What? Am I the only person who's expressing the natural doubt? Am I the only person who questions your sanity?"

Miaundea smoothed her hair over her ear, her mouth curving into a knowing little smile. "Bray and I learned in a few hours what it would take you and I years to learn. We shared ourselves with each other in a profound spiritual way, holding nothing back. Every person here today except you understands perfectly, because they, in one degree or another, have themselves experienced the same thing."

Miaundea's lofty attitude enraged Ton. "So he asked you to marry him, just like that."

"No, our decision to marry was simultaneously mutual. It was a natural decision to make because we both know that our needs and desires for each other could never be adequately met in any other type of relationship."

"Which is a puritanical way of saying you want to have sex."

Miaundea stepped away from the rail and took a step toward the house. "You just don't get it, do you? This isn't so much about sex as it is about intimacy."

"Right, and you don't want to have sex with him."

Miaundea groaned and rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm hot for his body, hot, hot, hot! I've never wanted a man so much. Never! Are you happy now?"

Ton seized Miaundea's arms. "You condescending, lying, double-crossing little Eslavu whore." Her cool expression with its utter lack of fear enraged him even more. He wanted to squeeze all of her condescension and devotion to Braysel out of her and, at the same time, relieve himself of his own anger, frustration, and bewilderment.

"Take your hands off of me!"

Ton shook Miaundea hard. "You think you can lead me on all these months, begin making love to me then brutally refuse me, a week later tell me you love me, then a day later go and get engaged to another man and expect me to accept it? Well I don't accept it! It isn't right! It isn't right at all!" He shook her again and couldn't stop.

"You're acting like a baby who is having a temper tantrum," Miaundea said, her voice wavering with every shake.

Ton suddenly felt ashamed that he was out of control of his temper again and realized that this violence wasn't doing anything but deepening her disdain for him. He wanted to wound her, to strangle her, to throw her to the ground and then hurl her off the deck and hear her scream in terror, yet he knew that as much as she had hurt him, throwing her off the deck was not an appropriate way of dealing with that hurt. Somehow in his fog of rage and unrestraint, he knew also that Colonel Quautar would kill him.

Dr. Hovaus had told him something. What was it? Leave. Yes . . . leave. That was it. Ton abruptly released Miaundea's arms and stormed across the deck to its exit to the side yard.



Miaundea screamed at Ton as he walked away from her, “Go ahead, Ton, run away! Leave! Why don’t you just go to some other planet and buy yourself a prostitute! That’s all you really want! Sex that doesn’t require any effort on your part! Maybe if you pay her enough, she’ll be your mistress! Maybe she’ll even pretend to love you!”

\* \* \*

Once Ton and Miaundea’s argument reached the shouting level, it grabbed the attention of everyone in the house. Everyone watched, astounded. Those who could understand what was being said were appalled. Ausha watched Ton in concern, completely oblivious to the reactions of those around her.

Braysel moved to the door to intervene, but Colonel Quautar restrained him. *I’ll give him a mind jolt he’ll never forget if he makes an attempt to really hurt her.*

When Ton finally released Miaundea and left, Braysel quickly went to Miaundea on the deck. Ausha hurried out the front door and took the transport pod to the landing platform, getting there before Ton did.

Miaundea sat down on a bench and bowed her face into her hands, shaking uncontrollably.

Braysel embraced Miaundea lovingly. *He’s gone now, angel, he’s gone.*

*He’s so hurt, Bray, so hurt. I had no idea his feelings for me were so intense, that he would get so, so angry.* Miaundea’s body tightened in rage. *How dare he! How dare he!*

Braysel caressed Miaundea’s shoulder. *I don’t want you to see him, and I don’t want you to communicate with him, at least not for a month or two. You don’t need this kind of agitation, and he needs to come to terms with this on his own.*

## Chapter 17: A MAN OF DISCIPLINE AND DETERMINATION

Ton threw himself into the passenger seat of his car. He trembled, he cursed, and he slammed his fist on the door. Ausha drove him back to his apartment, communicating nothing.

Ton paced his apartment, hitting and kicking walls and shouting in both English and Italian, smoking taffuao after taffuao. Ausha sat on the floor against the wall with her arms clutched around her knees and chewing her fingernails, gazing at him through the purple fog of osalaem smoke, her face pallid and quivering uncontrollably and her eyes wide with suffering.

After an hour, Ausha began to look dizzy, the thick osalaem smoke finally taking effect. She coughed and choked, then swooned and fell limply the rest of the way to the floor.

Ton heard Ausha cough and turned just in time to see her faint. He snuffed the taff he had in his hand out in his plate on the table and rushed over to her. He picked her up, carried her to the dining room, and set her in a chair at the little round wooden table as she opened her eyes and looked around, disoriented. He quickly opened the French doors and turned on the apartment's air filtering system, then sat down at the table next to Ausha.

Ausha communicated weakly, *I'm amazed you can make it through a three-hour surgery, much less a twelve. You know, if you'd get rid of all your poisons, you'd be amazed by the stamina you'd have.*

Ton stroked her red-brown curls away from her face. *Why are you still here?*

Ausha deeply inhaled the fresh air pouring into the apartment through the French doors. *I was worried about you.* She reached her hand out and rested it on his with a squeeze. Her face was still very pale, the concern and sorrow in her eyes deep and sincere. *I'm so sorry, Ton. I'm so sorry.*

Ton put his hand to his temple. *How could she do that, Ausha, how?*

Ausha shook her head that she didn't know.

Everything about his affair with Miaundea poured out without inhibition, their intense attraction, his trying to manipulate her into having sex with him, their games and discussions and companionship, their deeply emotional evening together in Launarda and the guilt he felt for wanting to beat her when she rejected him, the day of the reception under the willow tree, the details of his fight with her that afternoon.

*Why did I ever care for her to begin with? How could I have done something so stupid?*

*It isn't stupid to like someone.*

*Yes it is. It's stupid to like someone you want to have sex with. It just complicates everything. But I really thought it would be different with her, that it would somehow be better. But she isn't any different from the others, the patronizing little whore. She's just like Karla and my slut sister Angela.*

*You liked Karla too, didn't you.*

Ton nodded slowly, staring at the table. *Karla had long dark hair and extraordinary blue eyes, and I was just crazy about her. I was only thirteen and she was sixteen, Ben's sister. I watched her all the time, and she would always smile. Sometimes she would even talk to me, and I would be flying for the rest of the day. One day when I went to see Ben, she was waiting for me outside the front door. She kissed me, then took me upstairs to an*

*empty apartment and we made love. I was shocked and terrified and ecstatic all at the same time. I never imagined there could be anything in this universe so wonderful. But after that day, she never spoke to me again. She completely ignored me. Acted like I had never existed.*

Ausha embraced Ton's spirit with hers and stroked and squeezed his arms and hands in an effort to console him, assimilating all of his bitterness and hurt with undeviating attention and tenderness.

*Then when Angela married Adrian, Mamma was furious, because Adrian is a teacher and is poor. She always told Angela and Jacquae that the neighborhood boys were sons of Abomination, every one of them, and that they were only good to have as lovers. She told them that they could learn a lot from them about the art of seduction and the intricacies of physical pleasure, things they could use to get men who were rich. Adrian may be poor, but he's honorable and decent and idealistic, and he was in love. They hadn't been married six months, when the two of us went to his apartment after school and found her there with another man. The worst thing about it was that Adrian wasn't angry or even humiliated; he was just hurt. Utterly devastated and betrayed. If I'd been bigger and had a way, I would have killed her and that son of Abomination she was with right then.*

Ausha looked as if she would be sick. *Ton, what Karla did to you, and what Angela did to Adrian, and your mother telling your sisters that a man is only worth something if he is rich was indecent and utterly wrong. It's only natural you are upset and offended by all of those things—any sensitive person would be—but Miaundea isn't Karla or Angela or your mother. I think her feelings for you are sincere.*

*Then how could she get engaged to him, how? Is there something wrong here, or am I just going crazy?*

*You aren't going crazy, at least not unjustifiably. It's obvious from what you tell me that her feelings for you have been very strong for a long time. That she could turn around and in a day decide that Bray is the man of her dreams seems unbelievable to me too. Actually, it borders on the appalling.*

*No one else seemed to think it was unbelievable or appalling. They were all so happy and excited and treated it as if it were the most natural thing that had ever happened in their family.*

*They might have thought it was a little unbelievable if they knew as many of the details as I do.*

*No, they would've been more ecstatic. Compared to me, Bray is a perfect, sinless, divine being. Let's face it, Ausha. I'm not the kind of man a woman takes home to her family.*

Ausha's mouth curved into a perceptive little smile. *Maybe that's true, but it's only true because you want it to be, and it doesn't change the intensity of Miaundea's feelings for you or the past four and a half months you've had with her. I don't know her family. I don't know how they would feel if they knew all the complexities of your relationship with Miaundea, but Ton, you don't know all of the complexities of Miaundea's relationship with Bray. You aren't either one of them, and you weren't there.*

She leaned back in her chair and stretched. *What can I tell you, Ton? I've seen it happen this way so many times, and I've never understood it myself. My own brother came home one weekend with a woman he had met only three days before and announced he was going to marry her, and they've been happily married for nearly seven years now. I've*

*had three different men want to marry me, and two of them I refused because I didn't feel I knew them well enough, and I certainly didn't love them. How can two people decide they love and know each other well enough to get married in a few hours? It baffles me as much as it baffles you. I think all you can do is accept the explanation she gave you and understand that she thinks highly enough of you to give you an explanation at all.*

*Oh Ausha . . . I could live with her not being my lover. I could live with anything if I only thought she wanted me.*

Ausha squeezed his hands. *You could live with it, but would you really be happy?*

Ton considered Ausha's observation. *Do you think she should have made love to me?*

*No I don't, but the morality of it has nothing to do with the reality of it. Do you really think you could continue on with her, becoming more and more emotionally intimate with her, and not resent another sexual rejection?*

*No, you're right. I couldn't have. It had to end and it did, under the willow tree the other day. There was nowhere for it to go.*

*But you know within yourself that your feelings for her haven't changed. It ended because you're incompatible.*

"Incompatible . . ." Ton breathed. Yes, they were definitely incompatible. Their personalities and temperaments clashed as violently as their standards of morality. *I was a fool to think a girl like Miaundea could ever want me. I gave her everything that was in me, everything that I was capable of giving without making love to her, and it wasn't even close to being enough. Do you have any idea how worthless that makes me feel?*

Ausha reached out and gently stroked Ton's cheek. *You aren't worthless, Ton, not at all. I wish you could stand back and watch yourself and see and feel how much you inspire all of us with your discipline and commitment, your knowledge and your perception.*

Ton leaned his head into his hands, pulling the skin on his face back. *My family doesn't want me. Adrian doesn't want me. Earth never wanted me. Miaundea doesn't want me. Novaun doesn't want me. Even the hospital doesn't want my volunteered time anymore. Then on top of everything, I'm completely out of control. I can't leave, but I can't stay. I need sex, but I can't have sex. I can't work when I want to. I don't want to hurt Miaundea, but the other night I nearly killed her and today I almost threw her off the deck.*

Ausha stood up, stepped behind Ton, and began massaging his neck, shoulders, and head.

*This afternoon if I had allowed myself to have a drink, I would have drunk myself delirious. My whole life has fallen apart around me, and all that's left is a blur of insanity. I haven't the slightest idea what to do.*

Ton relaxed a bit, and he realized Ausha's fingers were rubbing his temples. *What . . . what are you doing?* He breathed deeply, relaxing a little more and closing his eyes. *That feels nice.*

*My mother does this for my father when he's had a long day in surgery or petitioning the Network for new equipment. When my mother has had a stressful day, he comes home and prepares a hot bath for her.* Ausha leaned her head over his shoulder to whisper in his ear, resting her fingers lightly on his neck. "When I need to relieve myself of frustration, I spend hours at the VisionRun courts, screaming my brains out."

*I thought all you Novaunians did was pray.*

Ausha resumed the neck and head massage. *I do a lot of that too.*

Ton sighed. *I might someday be able to kill my temper, but I can't live without sex.*

Ausha's hands stopped, and she communicated, her emotions laden with grief, *And I can't live without Jaunel.*

Ton didn't know how to reply. No one felt the reality and horror of death as acutely as he did. Suddenly sex didn't seem so critical.

Ausha sat down at the table and broke the stillness with a knowing smile on her desolate face. *Anyway, I doubt Colonel Quautar would let you live very long if you were intimate with Miaundea.*

*Actually, he told me that he would escort me back to the Sovereign of the Stars personally.* Ton shuddered.

*And if I were Miaundea, I would have gone to the Pavilion on a busy Seventh Day night, made you happy with lots of affection, and then I would have stood up and communicated, "As you all know, Ton and I have been seeing each other for a while. I'm excited to tell you that we've decided to make it official. We're betrothed!"*

Ton laughed freely, relieving himself somewhat of the pain.

Ausha nodded calculatingly. *Yes . . . That would have been the perfect revenge!*

*Well you aren't Miaundea, thank goodness!*

Ausha smiled mischievously. *Why? Because you don't want to have to explain to everyone that you really aren't planning to get married? Or because Miaundea's personality is so much less pleasing than mine?*

*Both. I could never be with Miaundea all day every day for any length of time. I'd kill her. I've never worked with anyone as well as I work with you. Or maybe, as ruthless as you are, I'm just too terrified to argue with you!*

Ausha shrugged and smiled smugly. *When I'm right I'm right.*

*And to think, I could have ended up with Tervel as my partner!*

Ausha's face became serious again. *Ton, you aren't ignorant of the reality here. While you remain on Novaun, it isn't very likely you will ever have a physical relationship with a woman unless you get married in the Ordination Rite. Why do you stay?*

*Because if I leave right now, the Earthons will shoot me for treason.*

*Couldn't Colonel Quautar get you off the planet secretly?*

*It isn't as easy as that.*

Ausha frowned. *Did you have any idea before you came to Novaun what it would be like?*

Ton nodded thoughtfully. *Actually, I did. I guess I thought I could seduce a Novaunian woman as easily as I could seduce any other woman. I didn't expect any of you to be so hopelessly bullheaded. I guess I also thought at the time that it would be worth the sacrifice.*

*Sacrifice? For what?* Ausha gazed at him in intense interest. *You make it seem so much more complicated than I always thought. Why did you come?*

Ton gazed at her, hesitating. He wished he could tell her. She, of all people, would understand. Then in an instant, he was glad he couldn't tell her. She would not only understand his motives, she would understand all of the implications of what he had done, and it would terrify her. She would probably make herself sick worrying about him. He had never lied to her about anything, though, and not telling her that he was in a great deal of danger and would have to leave Novaun under the guise of death seemed an inexcusable breach of trust.

*There have never been any pretenses between us, Ausha, but it's extremely complicated and I can't tell you anything, for your sake as well as for mine. I'd like to, though. You'd get a good laugh.*

Ausha gazed at him, troubled, as if she knew subconsciously he was in danger.

*You know what the crazy thing is? As far as practicing medicine is concerned, Novaun is supreme. I have no desire to study or practice anywhere else. And what's even more utterly insane—the most interesting women I've ever met have been Novaunian women.*

Ausha squeezed his hand and smiled. He pulled her hand gently toward his neck. *Do it some more*, he communicated hopefully.

*Sure.* She stood up and moved behind him so that she could again rub his head, his neck, and his shoulders.

Ton closed his eyes and abandoned himself to her exquisite fingers. She kneaded his shoulders and the top of his spine, then worked her way up his neck with her thumbs, then around his head to his temples, to his cheekbones, to his jaw, back to his neck and down again, then back up again, then down again; over and over, systematically, sometimes hard, sometimes soft, but all with the same precision, concentration, and care she devoted to every task she considered important. They didn't communicate in words, images, or ideas, only in feelings as their spirits touched.

Ton could feel in Ausha peaceful satisfaction at being able to do something to relieve him of his anger and stress. The neck rub was a significant, important task to her because she considered him significant and important and cared deeply for him and his happiness. Ton knew this to be true, even though he didn't understand it. Helping him feel better sweetened many of her own bitter feelings of grief, and keeping her hands and mind occupied with this new task was as emotionally healing for her as communicating his anger and confusion to an understanding friend had been for him. Seeing Ausha so unhappy, so ill-looking, and so unlike herself since her brother had died disturbed Ton tremendously, and he found himself feeling peaceful and satisfied that he was doing something to help her forget for a while.

The massage continued for another hour, or was it two? Ton lost all track of time and comprehension of his surroundings, feeling so relaxed and so serene that he felt as if he were floating. Then gently, confidently, Ausha's thoughts drifted into his being along the tendrils of her spiritual embrace: *You've overcome so much, Ton. You made it through your intermediate school early and graduated at the top of your class on the Prince Jahnzel, all with very little money and no support from anyone. You've studied and worked hard for years, and not only are you a scholar, you will be a certified neurophysician in one year. A neurophysician! You can heal people in one of the most technically demanding, physically taxing of all medical disciplines, and you've made it this far literally on the strength of your extraordinary determination. Not only that, but it's only through your perfect discipline and the sheer force of your will that you make it through the last few torturous hours of surgery and Awareness manipulation. I know how hard those last few hours are for you, we all know, and we all admire you for being able to will yourself through it. You will do anything you wish to do, you will change anything about yourself you wish to change, and you will live with any situation you set your mind to live with. You can and will do anything—anything at all—you really want to do.*

Ton felt surprised, uncertain, and abashed at Ausha's level of confidence in him. As out of control as he felt, he knew innately that Ausha was seeing him not as she wanted to

perceive him or as he wanted her to perceive him or as he perceived himself. She was seeing him as he really was, that those qualities of discipline and determination were part of him and always had been. His heart felt it, but his mind didn't accept it. *Do you really think so?*

Ausha continued the massage without deviation. Ton thought he could feel her smile. *I know so.*

### Part 3: NEW PATHS

#### Chapter 18: A FRESH ARRANGEMENT

Ausha wrapped her arms around Ton's shoulders and neck and hugged him tightly, pressing the side of her head affectionately against his. *I'm starving. Do you have anything to eat?*

Ton smiled slightly, feeling her hair on the corner of his mouth. *I have a synthesizing machine*, he replied, absently stroking her arm.

Ausha released him and moaned. *This place really is bare. It's no wonder you always want to work and never come home. You live in a prison!*

*It isn't so bad.*

*It is bad! I'll give you some of my plants. How can you live without having other living things around you?*

*Just nothing too weird.*

*Then Seventh Day after next, I'm taking you shopping for furniture.* Ausha strolled through the living room, dining room, and kitchen, studying the rooms as she walked as if trying to decide what decor would be suitable.

*What's wrong with this Seventh Day?*

Ausha turned abruptly toward Ton. *I'm seeing several of the patients I was supposed to see last week. You're actually agreeing to it?*

*Sure. We'll spend the morning shopping for furniture, have lunch, and then we'll spend the afternoon shopping for new clothes for you.*

Ausha appeared hurt. *My clothes aren't so bad . . . are they?*

Ton nodded, somewhat apologetically. *They're horrendous. Ausha, you're a beautiful woman, and you don't do yourself justice dressing the way you do.*

Ausha's brows drew together in skepticism. *I like to be comfortable, and I have far more important things to do than to fuss over my appearance.*

*You can wear clothes that flatter you, are comfortable, and that don't require a lot of effort.*

Ausha tried another excuse. *Whenever I shop for clothes, they always show me those pink frilly things.* She shuddered. *I hate pink, and I hate frilly things.*

*I hate pink, frilly things too. Don't worry! We won't get you anything that makes you look like a little girl. You hate to shop, so we'll make a party out of it. You'll pick out the furniture and decor, and I'll approve it. I'll pick out the clothes, and all you'll have to do is approve them, all right?*

Ausha finally nodded. *All right. Now let's go get something to eat. I have some rolls and a huge bowl of fruits and vegetables I harvested from my garden yesterday.*

Ton dropped his body into a semi-lying position on the table and grimaced. *I don't want to go anywhere.*

Ausha tugged on his arm. *Come on, Ton, you don't have anything else to do, and I promise, I won't let anyone in so you don't have to see anyone. We'll make some salad. There's nothing in this universe like fresh produce.*

Ton finally agreed, and the two walked to Ausha's apartment, the late afternoon sun sinking low in the sky. Once there, Ton gazed around the apartment in amazement. The layout was similar to his, but everything looked so different. All of the furniture, tapestries,



pillows, and rugs were various shades of brown and creamy white, every piece of decor a different, interesting texture. All kinds of exotic plants stood in corners and hung near windows, and a huge bouquet of large orange flowers sat on the polished wood table. The apartment was homey and nice, and it looked, smelled, and felt so much like Ausha that Ton liked it immediately.

Ausha introduced Ton to all of her plants, much to Ton's delight, and explained the history and origin of each, then took him to her patio and showed him her garden. The patio was large and covered with crates and barrels full of plants, and pots hung from the balcony of the apartment above Ausha's. Two of the barrels contained small fruit trees. Ton couldn't believe a person could put such an extensive garden in so small an area.

*When do you find time to do all of this?* Ton asked in wonder.

*I get up early, before it gets too hot. It isn't much work, actually, if I keep at it regularly.*

Ton followed Ausha back into the apartment, sat down at her breakfast bar, and put the vegetables into a processor that scanned the size and type of fruit, then peeled and cut it into pieces as telepathically directed. Ausha cooked three different vegetables in the oven, then removed them and dropped them into a blender, added vinegar, a little auyvalnut oil, and several spices, and in minutes had a dressing for the salad. Ton tossed the dressing with the chopped vegetables in his bowl, while Ausha warmed some rolls and prepared iced zaulyem tea. Within fifteen minutes, they were eating supper.

Ausha often brought her fresh fruits and vegetables to the clinic for lunch and gave any extras she had away. Ton sometimes took some of the fruit, but he had never eaten one of her salads. He ate hungrily, savoring every bite.

*Ausha, this is fantastic! Maybe I've just been in space too long, but I've never had food like this before.*

For a moment, Ausha almost looked happy. *If I'd known that you were so easy to impress, Ton, I would've made you a salad a long time ago.*

*So easy to impress? Why shouldn't I be impressed? I've never had food from a garden before. I've never even known anyone who had a garden.*

Ausha gazed at him as if she didn't believe him. *There was no one you knew on Earth who had a garden?*

*In Baltimore?* He shook his head. *Nothing grew in Baltimore but weeds and wild trees. Anyone who manages to get out of there never goes back, no one but Adrian, and he only went back to help other kids like him get out.*

Ausha gazed at him in compassion. She understood about Adrian; he had told her enough at different times that he knew she understood.

Ton stared past Ausha, feeling very peculiar. *Most of the guys I used to run around with are in jail, and some of them are dead. The fortunate ones are working in the synthesizing machine factory. And here I am, a neurophysician on Novaun. The mysterious Novaun. The mythical galactic paradise. It's almost unbelievable.* Ton suddenly frowned, feeling thoughts belonging to someone other than Ausha touch his.

*Ton, where are you?* The thought pattern belonged to Teren, who was at the door of Ton's apartment.

Ton touched Ausha's spirit with his and let her feel Teren's communication. *Is Miaundea with you?*

*No. Miaundea and Bray left for Mautysia two hours ago. It's only Deia and I.*

*I'm at Ausha's. Across the street, apartment 128.*

Ton and Ausha quickly finished their meal. Just as they were getting ready to put the leftover salad away, Ausha received Teren's telepathic summons and moved quickly to the door. Once in the apartment, Deia and Teren walked directly to the breakfast bar to Ton, their faces anxious.

Deia gave Ton a slight embrace. *Are you all right?*

*You can't tell me you aren't happy about this engagement.* Ton communicated bitterly.

*I don't know that I am,* Teren admitted.

Ton wasn't sure he believed Teren. *Really?*

Deia didn't appear completely comfortable with Teren's opinion. *Teren thinks that Bray's priorities are confused.*

*It doesn't matter what I think about the marriage, so I won't communicate any more about it,* Teren communicated.

*I like Bray,* Deia admitted to Ton. *But I'm closer to you than I'll ever be to him.* She embraced him again, tightly. *Why don't the two of you come to our house for the evening? Paul gave us a synthesizing machine that he programmed to produce popcorn, hamburgers, chocolate chip cookies, and pizza!*

Ton pulled away from Deia, aghast. *Pizza from a synthesizing machine?*

Deia smiled. *I know it isn't the same as real American pizza, but Ton, it's still pizza!*

*It isn't bad at all,* Teren communicated. *And when we were in Amaria four weeks ago, I commissioned a gem artist to make me a chess set.*

*Chess? Really?* Ton turned to Ausha. *Would you like to go?*

*Sure. Deia, did Alysia finish the mural she was going to paint on your ceiling?*

*She did, and it's absolutely breathtaking! I'm still working to record all of the gifts. There are so many, I hardly know what to do with them all! I have five large curio cabinets I am using to display the more unusual things, along with all of my mother's jewelry and gem art. My home is terribly cluttered and looks a little like an art museum, but I like it.*

Teren looked at Ton and Ausha in a playfully authoritative way. *We want you to come, but no body humor! Not in my house!*

Ausha affectionately patted Teren's shoulder. *I'm afraid you should have never stepped one foot into the Pavilion, Teren. No hospital stories or body humor tonight, we promise.*

\* \* \*

Ton and Ausha went to Teren and Deia's for the evening and ate popcorn and chocolate chip cookies. Deia showed Ausha her tiny home and all of her wedding gifts while Teren and Ton played chess, a game Ausha instantly hated, claiming she needed to save all of her concentration for surgeries and manipulations. Deia played Chopin nocturnes on the piano for much of the evening. Ausha sat limply on the couch, absorbed in the music.

Ton and Ausha didn't leave Teren and Deia's until late. Teren and Deia lived only a half a kilometer away, so Ton had not taken his car. Ton walked home with Ausha in the

dark. They both felt it was time to sleep but wanted to remain together instead, so they stood by the door and easily found things to discuss.

Finally after thirty minutes, Ausha found the courage to articulate the feelings they shared. *I can't make myself go to bed. I hate it. It's too lonely.* She tugged on his thumb. *Why don't you come in for a while?*

Ton followed her into her apartment, feeling relieved. When he was with Ausha, he didn't feel so empty and afraid. Once they were in the apartment, he gently sat her down on the carpet between his legs and began rubbing her back and shoulders as she had done for him that afternoon. She sighed in pleasure and slowly began to relax.

*Ausha, do you know anything about red nuayem punch? What's in it?*

Ausha laughed a little. *What sort of torment did it give you? Or maybe I shouldn't ask. You shouldn't have to ask.*

*Miaundea? Certainly you didn't have a premonition about her engagement!*

*No. We made love, and then she told me she never wanted to see me again. I guess in a way it was a premonition. I have no doubt that what happened in my dream is the way it would really happen. What is it, Ausha? It's more than a hallucinogen.*

*The active chemical is arlundanol. It works entirely on the highest brain mechanism.*

*"Consciousness . . ." Ton breathed.*

The back of Ausha's head nodded. *It's a chemical that affects the spirit, not the body. It makes perception more lucid, feelings more acute. My brother Faurney explained it to me. In a loving relationship with the dijauntu, it intensifies the already clear, powerful feelings and understandings that are there. Emotions become more than feelings; they become living, vibrant beings, almost touchable. It's to the person who is confused, frustrated, or isolated in his or her relationships that the nuayem punch becomes a torment.*

Ton was fascinated. *What else did he tell you about it? Is that one of those things Novaunian parents tell their children the night before the wedding?*

*That's something I wouldn't know. Faurney only told me the red punch's significance to those who are married. Bryaun, Jaunel, and I and our friend Shaun conducted our own tests and learned its significance to the unmarried.*

Ton's hands stopped. *You tried it?*

*Of course! A Novaunian unmarried person does not reach my age without sneaking red nuayem punch at least once.*

Ton laughed delightedly and again began rubbing Ausha's shoulders. *What did it do to you? I can't imagine you having an erotic nightmare.*

Ausha glanced over her shoulder at Ton in amused curiosity. *You're so funny. Do you really think I'm so sexless?* She seemed uneasy. *I'm not a child.*

*I'll bet you were before you had that dream.* Ton didn't have to ask her if she had ever been with a man. He understood Ausha to her essence and had no doubt whatsoever that she hadn't.

Ausha's mood sobered. *Actually, you're right. My experience with the red punch wasn't really erotic, but it did thrust me into womanhood without mercy. It really was a nightmare.*

*What happened?*

*Bryaun and Shaun and I were eighteen and just starting the second year of our general apprenticeship on Dinevlea. She paused and reflected. You have to understand,*

*Shaun and I had always loved each other. The question was never if we would get married, it was always when. We had always just assumed it, but we had never made any definite plans. That night we sneaked the nuayem punch, I dreamed that I was in Shaun's bedroom sitting on his bed, wearing my mother's wedding dress and waiting for him to come to me. I sat there feeling kind of queasy, like I wasn't supposed to be there. I waited and waited, feeling more apprehensive with every second that passed. I sat there and waited until he came through the door. He was smiling and so handsome in his white wedding suit, and his eyes were so full of love. At that moment, horror and revulsion overcame me. I jumped up from the bed and pushed him out of the way as I ran out the door. I ran and ran and ran in the darkness, screaming to know where to stop, where to go. Finally I woke up, but when I did, the feelings of confusion and horror were still there. I knew I didn't want to marry Shaun, at least not for a long time.*

*Ton couldn't believe that Ausha was confiding something so personal to him.*

*I spent the rest of the night thinking and praying and crying. I loved Shaun and I had always wanted to marry him. I just didn't know what to think or what to do about this horrible dream. I didn't know if I just wasn't ready, or whether I was afraid of intimacy, or whether it was just plain wrong for some reason. That morning though, I knew what I wanted to do, and I knew what I had to do. I would specialize in neuromedicine.*

*Ton's astonishment increased. You didn't always want to be a neurophysician?*

*I had always been interested in neuromedicine, but you have to remember, I was planning to marry Shaun. As it was, I was looking at finishing my medical education at age nineteen. I would have been a certified primary physician with status and free to give as few or as many hours of service as I wished, depending on my family circumstances. If Shaun and I were to get married and start our family, specializing in neuromedicine simply wasn't practical. There was no way I was going to begin an apprenticeship and not finish it; there was no way I was going to have children while I was in the middle of a demanding apprenticeship; and there was no way I was going to wait four or more years after my marriage to have a baby. As interested as I was in neuromedicine, I wasn't interested enough to make those particular sacrifices.*

*What did Shaun think of all this?*

*That was the biggest irony of all, Ausha communicated wryly. I don't know what Shaun's nuayem punch experience was, he never told me, but he did tell me that he was in love with someone else, a technician at the hospital named Nanci. I was astounded. I never did tell him about my dream, and for a long time I was very bitter. I knew that I didn't want to marry him, but still, I felt as if I had been the one who had been rejected, and I guess I had been. I sometimes wonder if Shaun and I would be married now if we hadn't drunk the nuayem punch, but then I think that it would have had to end sooner or later, and I'm glad it ended sooner. Shaun married Nanci within three months. He's a primary care physician in Marquauna, has two children, and is very happy.*

*You still love him, don't you?*

*Of course I still love him. The romantic attraction faded with time, but whatever happens, a part of me will always love him.*

*Do you ever regret? Do you ever see him and wish you could marry him now?*

*No. I've never regretted what happened, not for a moment. I don't see him very often, but when I do, I see my friend Shaun, not a man I wish I could marry. I guess it's just not in my nature to want something I know I can never have.*

They continued communicating, telling each other experiences from their early medical training and making each other laugh. Finally, after a period of communication silence, Ausha's head and shoulders went limp as Ton rubbed them. He slowly laid her down on the carpet and slipped out of the apartment into the humid night air.

Ton walked home, feeling strange. Being with Ausha for such a length of time and in such a personal, affectionate way had done much to console him. The thought of having her as a lover, however, disturbed him as much as it ever had, which bothered him far more than ever. He couldn't have Miaundea. Why not want Ausha? Disgust jolted him with violence at the very thought. And why did a woman of her moral convictions not feel compromised being alone with a man of his reputation for such a great length of time? The only answer Ton could come up with was that she didn't feel so much as a spark of attraction for him, and that disturbed him as much as anything.

As much as Miaundea's engagement to Bray had mortified Ton, he was, in a way, relieved. With or without the engagement, his intense relationship with Miaundea was over. The last thing he wanted to do was to have sex with her and make her loathe him, and he certainly didn't want Colonel Quautar to surrender him to the Earthons. He also knew that he couldn't continue seeing her so frequently and not be her lover without torturing himself and her. The mere thought of being reduced to friend and brother revolted him. Miaundea's engagement made the break clean, saving them from weeks or even months of weak pretense at being "friends," all the while tormented by their desire to be lovers and growing to despise each other in the process. Even so, Ton hoped he would never have to see her or Bray again.

Ton's consciousness throbbed with a confusion of depression, humiliation, bewilderment, and fear. There was King, and Jaunel Ferudant, and the woman spy, and Brys Vundaun, and his sexual frustration, and Miaundea, and the Senlana invasion, and the restriction in working hours, and Colonel Quautar, and his strange feelings for Ausha, and his stamina being devoured by wine and taffuaos (Would giving up the alcohol and osalaem really make that much difference in his level of stamina in surgery?), and his capability for violence, and the memories—all those horrible memories! Memories he hadn't even known were there.

There was the screaming and cursing in Italian; and the men who came for a month at a time and thought they could do whatever they pleased; and his mother's bitterness; and pressing close to the bodies of Cocoa and Dracula for warmth; and his mother giving him a bloody lip for accidentally spilling a glass of red wine on her white dress; and his mother whimpering and sobbing in fear; and sitting at the table with Adrian, studying, smoking, and telling jokes; and being stabbed in the arm by his friend Angelo; and eating pizza on the street; and crying frantically, not knowing himself what was wrong, then having a large male hand slam his infant body against the wall, leaving him incapable of crying, seeing, or even feeling.

The past had been buried for so many years, but now it stomped on the surface of his consciousness with the other torments, forced out of exile by his growing powers of Awareness and subsequent sharpening of mind. Each memory was its own nightmare. Each terror, inadequacy, and distress spun frenetically around an abyss of darkness and desolation.

Ton and Ausha and Lren Tervel were supposed to attend a lecture and observe a surgery Second Day morning, but instead, Ton went to the office of Counselor Shauna

Brunel, the Academy psychologist assigned to him and the other medical personnel that worked in the clinic.

Ton walked into the psychologist's office, apprehensive. He didn't want to discuss his personal problems with a counselor, but he needed help and didn't know where else to go. This woman had been trained in psychology and counseling and was an expert in her field, just as Ton was an expert in the field of neuromedicine. If she were to contract a disease of the nervous system, she would seek help from him or another neurophysician. It only made sense that if he needed emotional help, he would seek it from someone with her training and background in psychology.

Counselor Brunel was a dignified woman in her hundreds, and Ton felt encouraged by the fact that she was so old and had so much experience. She greeted him kindly and invited him to sit in a large upholstered chair near hers.

*Hello, Dr. Luciani. What can I do for you today?*

Ton leaned on his arm and clutched his forehead in misery. There were just too many things. He hardly knew where to start.

He communicated weakly, in shame, *I have this problem with my temper. I get so angry and full of rage that I lose control and want to hurt people.*

## Chapter 19: APOLOGIES

Braysel and Miaundea sat cuddled together in the airbus they were taking to Mautysia, planning their visit to Braysel's family. Miaundea was exhausted and numb from her fight with Ton and nervous about meeting Braysel's parents. Braysel was apprehensive about seeing his family and didn't know yet what he would communicate to them.

*How am I going to convince them I'm sincere?*

*I think they'll believe you if they just give you a chance.*

*But will it matter?*

*Probably not.*

*How am I going to make them understand that joining the Fleet was a matter of conscience and that I'm not a murderer?*

*Bray, I don't think they've ever tried to understand. In their opinion, the ideologies are in direct opposition. To admit you are following your conscience would be to admit they might be wrong. They don't try to understand because they're either too certain they are right or feel too threatened.*

*They're too certain they're right. And why not? They have fifty-five hundred years of tradition telling them they are right.*

*They are right, about some things.*

Braysel squeezed Miaundea's shoulders. *I know. But how can I make them see, just for an instant, that we can both be right?* He shook his head in vexation. *What's worse, they're wrong about so many things. I'll never be accepted back into the family unless I grovel to them, but how can I do it? How can I remain still on the subject when I know how vehemently they protested the Latanzan War after our own planets were invaded?*

*Maybe you should think of your parents' protest of the Latanzan War as an example of how sincere they are. They live their ideals, even when it's difficult. You have to admire them for that. And maybe their protest of the Latanzan War was right in some ways. Maybe if the Novaunian people had been more unified and had more faith in God and each other, God wouldn't have allowed Dinevlea, Bristaun, and Jeltar to be invaded at all.*

*Maybe not, but it's easy for us to discuss it this way, just as it is for members of my family, because we weren't there. Did you see that woman's face today, Miaundea? The Latanzan War wasn't political to her. She remembers the chaos and death among her own people, and what I felt in her was anger and bitterness and contempt for my countrymen and members of my family. Can you blame her?*

*Not really. But Ausha and others like her have no excuse either for letting themselves be so certain they're right that they don't try to understand the alternate point of view.*

*My parents will accept me, I know they will, if they can just try to understand.*

*And if they don't?*

*They will. Braysel caressed her face. They have to, Miaundea. For us and for our children.*

*But Bray, it doesn't matter to me. I want to marry you, whatever your family status. My family supports us, and we'll have at least a year to work and save our money. I want us to married with your family's approval and support, but if we can't be, we'll be all right and so will our children.*

Braysel stiffened. *I don't want any discussion of saving away a fortune and living the rest of our lives as outcasts! None! I'll do whatever it takes, but we will be married by my grandfather and with full support of my family. I promise you, Miaundea.*

Miaundea nodded her head slowly, heartbroken to see him in such torture.

Once they arrived at Mautysia, Braysel took Miaundea to his parents' home on the Mautysian Cliffs, and, establishing that no one was there, left her on the multi-level terrace at the back of the house to wait. The terrace was at least twice as large as the house Miaundea had grown up in, with twenty ornately carved marble tables positioned in various places, surrounded by gold chairs. Gold planters stood along the edges of the terrace, overflowing with flowers.

Miaundea stepped onto the emerald and sapphire-inlaid marble near the pool and ran her fingers over one of the patio chairs. Gold-plated planters and patio chairs! It seemed obscenely luxurious. Was this really where Braysel had spent his childhood? He was from a world she could barely comprehend. It was a world Braysel wanted back, but she wondered if she could ever feel comfortable there.

\* \* \*

After Braysel left Miaundea, he went to the city, to the ancient Nalaurev ancestral mansion, home of his grandfather and grandmother Nalaurev. The Nalaurev family was the one to which he was accountable, so it was proper that he should make his apologies there first. He approached the mammoth white wood door and telepathically projected his thoughts in a sweep of the house, *This is Braysel. I'm not wearing my uniform, and I want to apologize.*

He waited there by the door in terror. What would they do? Would they allow him in at all? Even if they did, what would he communicate?

Minutes passed, and the door opened. His grandfather stepped outside, carrying himself with as much elegant dignity as ever, the glint in his eyes as ironic as ever, and his expression as skeptical as ever.

Braysel felt as if he would die of shame. His hands trembled and his eyes burned, and he gazed at his grandfather with as much directness as he could muster. *What I did yesterday was inexcusable. It was wrong and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all of the disrespect I've shown you, and for all the grief I've caused you. If I could go back and change things I would. I only hope that someday you can forgive me.*

His grandfather's face softened and his deep-set hazel eyes filled with tears. He gripped Braysel's shoulder with affection. *I've missed you, Braysel. Give up these ridiculous ideals and come home. You can come to work for me.*

Braysel's chin quivered, and tears dripped down his cheeks. He wanted to embrace his grandfather, but he didn't dare. *I've missed you too, and I want to come home, but my ideals aren't any more ridiculous than yours.*

His grandfather shook his head in sad resignation. *You're wrong, Braysel. Eternally wrong.*

Braysel tightened his lips. *Are you so sure of that? Are you?* He sighed shortly. *I didn't come here to argue. Believe me, Grandfather, I wish with all my heart I could believe what you believe, I honestly do.*



*Search your conscience, Braysel. Even if there were any good in the Fleet, would God have you scorn your family and your friends and your noble heritage? Would He have you break the hearts of your parents? You've been taught better than this. You know in your heart what is right.*

*I know in my heart that God wants me in the Fleet.*

His grandfather gazed at him in anguish. *If you really believe that, Braysel, you're embracing the spirit of Perdition, not the spirit of God.*

*I know that God wants me in the Fleet,* Braysel communicated, barely.

*Then I guess we have nothing more to discuss.*

Braysel thought his heart would die. It couldn't end like this, but there was nothing more he could do. *I want to apologize to the rest of the family. Is there anyone else here?*

His grandfather nodded slowly and opened the door. Braysel walked tentatively into the lounge, where his grandmothers and grandfathers and aunts and uncles and cousins were waiting for him in silent grief. Most of the cousins his age had married, and there were so many new faces. No one from his immediate family was there.

*I'm sorry about yesterday. I'm sorry about the last twenty-one years. I was wrong about a lot of things.* No one replied; no one moved.

*That's all I wanted to tell you.*

Braysel turned and left, relieved somewhat, but bitter that no one seemed to care. He took his taxi to the Jualaz Palace, home of his Uncle Sunen Jualaz, knowing it was where his parents would be. He telepathically sent the message that he wanted to apologize and that he wasn't in his uniform, then waited, completely numb. The terror had left when he had seen his grandfather's tears.

Within a minute, Mauya slipped through the main doors and threw her arms around him. *I'm so glad you came, Bray. Are you serious? Do you really intend to apologize?*

Braysel embraced her tightly and nodded. Mauya released him and led him toward the doors by the arm. He stopped abruptly. *I met someone yesterday. I'm betrothed, Mauya.*

Mauya turned and stared at him. *Betrothed?*

*Yes. Her name is Miaundea, and she's from Shalaun.*

*Is she here?*

*She's at home. Her father wanted me to bring her to meet Mother and Father.*

*Her father gave his consent?*

Braysel nodded, still not sure he believed it himself. *I guess he likes me.*

Mauya embraced him again. *Of course he likes you, Bray!*

*Just don't tell anyone yet. I want to do it in my own way.*

Mauya nodded and released him, and they walked together through the Grand Hall to the garden, where members of the family were lounging. The faces of his parents and grandparents and other family members stared at him in skepticism and betrayal. Haunal and Candesla's faces were angry, and his cousin Shaun Jualaz watched him in confusion and concern. Mauya's hand gripped his arm for strength.

Braysel wanted to vomit. He had never in his life felt such humiliation. For the moment, his pride was stronger than his guilt and he almost turned and went back into the Hall. His rampage of Mautysia the day before had been a vulgar thing to do, but they thought of him as an apostate and a murderer. Why should he grovel to them?

Finally he communicated, *What I did yesterday was appalling. I was angry and hurt, but that was no excuse. I'm sorry. For twenty-one years I've criticized the ideals of our*

*heritage. I still don't agree with all of those ideals, but I was wrong to be so critical and disrespectful, and I'm sorry about that too. I don't have anything else to communicate.*

Some of the expressions softened. His parents appeared bewildered. Mauya lightly kissed his cheek. *That took a lot of courage, Bray.*

Shaun stepped forward and embraced Braysel tightly. *It's good to see you, Bray. Does this mean you've come to your senses and quit the Fleet?*

Braysel returned Shaun's embrace with vigor. *No.*

Shaun withdrew and gazed at him in disappointment. *I know you mean well, but you're wrong.*

Braysel refused to get angry or defensive. *In your opinion.*

Shaun squeezed Braysel's shoulder and went back to his wife. Haunal's thoughts charged into Braysel's with indignation. *You really think a few moments of communication is going to erase an entire disgraceful day? An entire twenty-one years? You disgust me, Bray.*

Haunal was right; what was done was done. No matter how much time passed or how much he changed, he could never repair the wounds he had inflicted on members of his family. Braysel gazed at Haunal, hurt and ashamed. *I'm sorry, Haunal. I don't know what else to tell you.*

Braysel approached his mother and father and knelt down in front of them. *There's someone I want you to meet. She's at home, waiting on the terrace.*

His mother looked at him hesitatingly; his father looked at him in reluctance.

Braysel continued gently, *She's my betrothed. I want you to meet her. Her father wants you to meet her.*

Cynicism twisted his father's features. *So this is the reason for the sudden apology.*

*You don't understand. Miaundea's the one who helped me realize how wrong I've been about certain things, she and Mauya both. Please come and meet her.*

*Her father has given his consent?* his mother asked skeptically.

Braysel nodded.

His father was astounded. *You can't be serious! Who is her family?*

*Come meet her, and she'll tell you herself.*

His parents looked at each other intensely, privately conferring. Finally his father nodded and arose. As Braysel walked with his parents to the engraved crystal doors that led back into the Grand Hall, Mauya communicated, *Please come to my house later. I want to meet Miaundea. I live at 206 Shosha Main.* Braysel looked over his shoulder at Mauya and nodded.

Braysel and his parents walked to the aircar in communication silence. Braysel was terrified of communicating something that would make them angry, and his parents were still too bewildered. His parents' automatic aircar was large and luxurious, with three groupings of seats. His mother crossed her legs once they were on their way and communicated, her expression gentle, *Where is she from, Braysel? How did you meet her?*

*She's from Shalaun. I more or less met her at the wedding reception of Teren Zaurvau and Deia Doshyr.*

*More or less?*

*My good friend and colleague Maurek Avenaunta grew up on Teren and Miaundea's walk.* Braysel's cheeks grew hot. He couldn't bear to think about what he had done to

Maurek, even now. *He . . . he told me about her three and a half years ago when we were roommates on the Larv Ylendoshal.*

His father's eyebrows lifted in amusement. *You stole your friend's girl?*

*I didn't steal her! It wasn't like that at all!* Braysel leaned weakly on the wall of the aircar and told them everything—Maurek's obsession with Miaundea and inability to deal with her rationally, Miaundea's bullheaded spiritedness and refusal to have anything to do with Maurek, his own provocative exchange with her at the reception, his idea for Maurek to wait for her in her bedroom, his setting Ton up to come to Mautysia, her begging him that evening to tell her his name, and his deeply emotional experience with her that night.

He explained it all in detail, without once giving them any information that would reveal the name and status of Miaundea's father. Braysel's parents laughed uninhibitedly, and even Braysel laughed a little. If he hadn't been so concerned about Maurek, he too would have thought it was funny.

Their laughter drove away all of the discomfort, and they arrived at the house ready to communicate with intelligence and amity.

\* \* \*

Braysel walked to the back of the house with his parents, smiling and relaxed. When Miaundea saw him in such good spirits, she was immediately glad.

She waited on the terrace as they approached, anxious and wondering what she would communicate once they were introduced. Braysel's father was medium-height, with brown hair and the same deep-set gray eyes and angular face as Braysel, dressed in casual luxury. Braysel's mother was the same height as his father and wearing an elegant, smoky green gown, her long blond hair crimped, parted in the middle, and draped away from her face and held in place on her back by a round diamond barrette. Even wearing no make-up, she was the most glamorous woman Miaundea had ever seen.

Braysel tenderly took Miaundea's arm and kissed her cheek, then presented her to his parents. His parents studied her mercilessly as they each took a turn greeting her with fingertips touching. Miaundea could feel in them curiosity and uneasiness, and she realized they had been awaiting Braysel's decision to marry with dread and that they considered her a threat to his giving up the Fleet and returning home to Mautysia for good.

Braysel's father frowned in alarm when Braysel introduced Miaundea by her full name. *Quautar?*

*My father is Colonel Sharad Quautar.*

*He works for the Novaunian Intelligence Agency, Braysel's father communicated in realization. Special Cases division, isn't it?*

Miaundea nodded and smiled playfully. *He's one of Novaun's head spies.*

Braysel's mother tried to smile, but couldn't. Her eyes were dull with despair. *A colonel's daughter.*

*I find it difficult to believe that your father would approve of this marriage, mineste,* Braysel's father communicated coolly. *Did he send you here today to petition our support?*

Miaundea answered with as much delicacy as she could. *My father wanted only for us to meet. Certainly he would prefer me to marry Bray with your support, but he gave his approval knowing full well you may never give your support. My father has complete confidence in Bray's character.*

*He has complete confidence in the character of a young man he has only known superficially a few days?* Braysel's mother communicated.

*My father has been aware of Bray for many years. As I told you, he's one of Novaun's head spies. No one is safe from his all-seeing eye—no one.*

Braysel's father smiled in amusement; his mother appeared disconcerted, as if she weren't sure whether to laugh or be offended.

Braysel's eyes flickered facetiously. *He has agents all over Mautysia, secretly corrupting young, unsuspecting boys from pacifist families and recruiting them for the Fleet.*

Miaundea laughed. Braysel's parents were appalled. Braysel laughed, suddenly and ecstatically. *Come on, you two, that was funny! This is difficult enough. Relax, please. Miaundea must think you're both a couple of ogres.*

Braysel's mother gave up a smile. She motioned to a table. *Let's sit down.*

Once everyone had seated themselves, Miaundea communicated sincerely, *I'm able to get to Mautysia occasionally, and I've always admired the talents of you both.* Braysel's parents nodded their thanks, appearing pleased. *My sister-in-law and childhood friend is an artist, and she particularly loves your architectural style, minion.*

Braysel grinned, taking Miaundea's hand under the table. *She thinks you should be commissioned to design a building for Shalaun, Father. I told her that the residents of Shalaun can't handle that much drama, that they would demand it be torn down within a week of its completion!* His parents laughed and nodded in good-natured agreement.

*What do you do, Miaundea? What is your specialty?* Braysel's mother asked.

*I'm a cultural anthropologist. I work for the Novaunian Intelligence Agency.*

Braysel's father appeared surprised. *You look awfully young to be an anthropologist.*

*I'll be twenty next month.*

*She spent two years in fieldwork on the newly discovered planet Saharenper,* Braysel communicated.

Braysel's father was more surprised than ever. *That must have been a tremendous responsibility for a woman of such a tender age.*

*It was a tremendous opportunity, one my parents were reluctant to let me take. They gave their approval, but only after my father arranged for me to be teamed with a Gudynean married couple he knows personally.*

They asked her about her work at the Agency and her two years on Saharenper, and she told them many of the same things she had told Braysel the night before.

*Don't you think that tampering with the technological development of another planet is a dangerous thing to do?* Braysel's mother communicated thoughtfully. *That you could very easily do a great deal of damage? Damage that would be irreparable?*

*Their culture will be in considerably more danger if they ally with the Earthons in the way the Earthons allied with the Zarrists thirty years ago. We're aiding them toward natural progress in an effort to protect them, that's all. What would you have us do?* Miaundea sincerely wanted to know.

*Leave them alone and let them find their own solutions to a peaceful world and develop their technology in their own way,* Braysel's mother replied.

*And in the meantime, Earth will attempt to make Saharenper economically dependent on its own natural resources and will, in the process, gain an unlimited supply of arelada,* Braysel pointed out.

*The Earthons may succeed anyway, Braysel's mother countered. And even if they don't, how do you know which of the millions of Saharenperans to attempt to influence? You can look toward the acknowledged scientific thinkers of their world, but often discoveries are made by unlikely people in unlikely ways. Wouldn't it be more productive to ask God to inspire the hearts of those people who can make a difference and reveal the needed information to them in His own way?*

Miaundea was taken aback. *That's a good idea, and admirable, and faith can bring about great change, but do you actually pray for such specific aid to people totally unrelated to you?*

*They aren't unrelated to us; they're our brothers and sisters, and yes, we do pray for such specifics,* Braysel's father answered. Braysel nodded that they did.

Miaundea gazed at Braysel's parents earnestly. *We pray too, a great deal. And we are led to people who can be an influence for positive change.*

*How do you know that positive change came about because of anything you did? That the prayers of the concerned wouldn't have brought it about on their own?*

*We don't know,* Miaundea answered honestly. *We just do the best we can, and I know that most of my Novaunian colleagues usually do try to do the will of God in the matter and seek His help. This was what I was trying to explain to Bray last night. The difference in ideology between the Isolationists and the Fleet supporters is so minute as to hardly be a difference at all. We all want peace. The Fleet supporters just happen to believe that we as human beings have responsibility that goes beyond praying, that the Fleet is God's instrument.*

Braysel's father looked at Miaundea in quizzical amusement. *Eight hundred and twenty-six billion gold coins a year and loss of human life is an extremely high price to pay for such a minute difference in ideology, don't you think?*

*It is a high price, but the cost of freedom is high. God expects us to fight our own battles the best we can, to show Him we are sincere in our desires. Through faith people are cured of horrible diseases. Does that mean we should get rid of physicians?*

Braysel's mother smiled slightly. *That is a poor analogy. Physicians are trained to heal and to preserve life, not to maim and to kill.*

*Did it ever occur to you that you will never accomplish what you wish to accomplish without achieving unity with those who support the Fleet?* Miaundea asked.

Braysel squeezed Miaundea's hand, his spirit brushing hers in laughter.

Braysel's father relaxed into his chair. *Has it ever occurred to any of those who support the Fleet that they're taking the easy way out?*

*Actually, I don't think it has,* Miaundea admitted.

Braysel's mother leaned toward Miaundea. *So you believe that the Fleet and its supporters may be taking the easy way out.*

*I do. I think that often we rely too much on ourselves and not enough on God, and I believe that gaining the humility to trust completely in God is often one of the most difficult things in this life to do. But that only proves the Fleet and those who support it aren't perfect, not that they're evil. We have abundant scriptural references to support both the pacifist and the military methods of preserving freedom and achieving peace. Both methods have been used at various times in our history to achieve our purposes, all with God's approval and help. I believe that the Fleet supporters and the Isolationists should*

wake up and realize that they aren't really in opposition and that they should work together to accomplish peace, using whatever method is best for the situation.

Braysel's father was intrigued. *Your ideas are very creative, Miaundea. Do young Fleet supporters now profess these views?*

*Unfortunately, no. I suppose I'm strange. Your pacifist culture has always fascinated me, and I've long wondered why two groups of people who are trying their best to do what God wants them to do are in such opposition. My only answer is that both groups are wrong and both groups are right, and that if those in both groups who pray for guidance aren't getting answers that coincide, then they must be asking the wrong questions.*

Braysel's father frowned. *What do you mean, asking the wrong questions?*

*Well, if a Fleet supporter asks God if what he is doing is right, his answer will be yes, because the Fleet is doing many things right. If an Isolationist asks if whether he is right, his answer will be yes, because the Isolationists are doing many things right. The only way both groups are going to start getting answers that coincide is for them to begin considering the possibility that the other group is right about some things and then ask God very specific questions, such as, "Is Bray Nalaurev a murderer?"*

*You have an interesting theory, Miaundea,* Braysel's mother communicated gravely. *But you're wrong.*

*Are you so sure, Mother?* Braysel asked.

His mother appeared offended. *How can you even ask a question like that?*

Miaundea felt defeated. Braysel's mother truly had no doubts. How could Braysel ever hope to fight that? Miaundea made one more attempt to persuade her to question her position. *Is being so sure really worth losing Bray? Is it worth losing your future grandchildren?*

Braysel's father shook his head. *We may have lost Braysel, but we haven't lost our future grandchildren. They will seek their heritage, and they will choose for themselves what is right.*

Miaundea felt courage rise within her. *Yes, they will have their rightful heritage, both their pacifist heritage and their Fleet heritage, intertwined in perfect unity. And they will understand for themselves what is right.*

*That is an interesting plan,* Braysel's father communicated, *but it won't work.*

Braysel's mother reached across the table and took Braysel's hand. *Come home, Braysel. We don't want it to be like this, and we fear that if you don't repent, you'll be unhappy for the rest of your life and that your eternal standing will be in jeopardy.*

Braysel tensed. *I won't repent joining the Fleet, because it wasn't wrong.*

Miaundea didn't like the implication that honorable men like her father and so many others would lose their eternal glory by being part of the Fleet. She communicated with as much calmness as she could, *And just who are you to judge? I've lived among Fleet men all my life. They are working as hard as you to do what God wants them to do, and to suggest that they will be condemned is insulting and wrong. There is nothing in the teachings of the prophets that even suggests it!*

Braysel's father shook his head at Miaundea. *You misunderstand our position. We know that most Fleet men are doing the best they can with the understanding they have, and we don't believe they will all be condemned. God will judge their hearts. It's Braysel's position we question, because he was taught differently. He knows better. He rejected the higher truth, and God will hold him accountable for it unless he repents.*

Miaundea was too shocked and outraged to think of a reply. The suggestion that Novaunian Fleet men were just too ignorant and lacking in faith to live a higher law was insulting enough. The suggestion that Braysel would be condemned because he rejected their higher law was intolerable.

Braysel had borne all the torture he was willing to bear. *Higher truth as you define it, not as God defines it!* He arose, pulling Miaundea up with him. *Good-bye, Mother. Good-bye, Father. Thank you for deigning to see me today.*

Miaundea smiled as much as she was able. *It was nice to meet you.* She and Braysel walked away, and Braysel's mother and father watched them leave, heartbroken.

Once Braysel and Miaundea were in a taxi, Braysel asked, disturbed, *Did you really mean what you communicated? That you intend to train our children in a combined Fleet and Isolationist ideology?*

*Yes, I did. One way or another, they will have their pacifist heritage. The only question is, who will give it to them and how?*

Braysel nodded that he understood, still troubled.

\* \* \*

Miaundea went to work the next morning as she always did since Braysel was going to attempt to see Maurek. When she arrived at the Novaunian Intelligence Agency, she went directly to her father's office.

Her father was interested to learn about her trip to Mautysia with Braysel. *How did it go? Did you get to meet them?*

Miaundea nodded and dropped herself into a chair. *Father, you would not believe these people. They are so certain they are right that they will not for a moment even question their stand! They honestly believe that Bray is a murderer and will be condemned because he rejected their "higher truth." It's absolutely infuriating!* She gave him her discussion with Braysel's parents, not omitting a single detail.

*They are the leaders of the Isolationism Movement, Miaundea. Certainly you didn't expect this to be easy!*

*No, but you would think that Bray's apologetic attitude would persuade them to at least consider the possibility that what he is doing in the Fleet is good, that they would try some way to come to a compromise.*

Her father smiled slightly, a smile of amusement. *There is either right or wrong. There can be no acceptable compromise where there is absolute truth.*

*And they are so absolute! The most perplexing thing about it is that what they want is so good. Father, they almost had me convinced! I understand now why Bray is the way he is. He's just like them! It's no wonder they can't agree. Father, he's convinced he will gain their support and that his grandfather will be the one to marry us.*

*Do you think it's possible?*

*I don't see how. They won't accept Bray back into the family unless he changes his convictions or they change theirs, and there is no way they are going to change their convictions, not even an iota.*

*Have you given any thought to what might happen if Braysel gives up his Fleet quest and decides to embrace the ideals of his heritage?*

*That won't happen. He's too firm in his own ideals, and he's never been a pacifist. I'm afraid, though, that he will never marry me without his family's support, and that his family will never give its support. When I suggested we save our money toward our marriage just in case, he nearly went crazy. He told me that he would get his family's support, no matter what.*

*Her father's expression was grave. You need to understand, Miaundea, that Braysel not only misses his family very much, he feels very inadequate right now in being unable to provide you with a family. If you insist on saving your money toward the marriage, you will reinforce the already deep feelings of inadequacy he feels, and that will significantly damage your relationship with him. I know you want to be careful and prepared, but your good intentions aren't going to mean much if, in a few years, your marriage crashes down around you.*

*My suggestion to you is to let Braysel work his family business out all on his own. He knows the financial obligations that will come with marriage. He has status, and he knows that he will have to make plans for what is coming. Leave him alone and let him do it. Then if he does reconcile with his family, it won't matter. If he doesn't reconcile with his family, then I will insist he legally sever his ties with them, and we will negotiate a marriage contract with him alone as the sole representative of a new Novaunian family organization. Our organization will give an endowment in a customary amount to him, the same endowment it would give the Nalaurev organization under more regular circumstances. I don't think you have any reason to worry about being financially independent, provided you and Braysel manage your money properly after you are married.*

*Miaundea nodded quickly and arose. Her father asked, Why aren't you spending the day with Braysel?*

*He has some business to attend to.*

*Her father raised his eyebrows. Maurek?*

*Miaundea nodded weakly, then turned to leave.*

\* \* \*

The first thing Braysel did that morning was communicate telepathically with Maurek through InterMind and FleetNet. Braysel didn't want to communicate such devastating news to Maurek without seeing him personally, so he told him he needed permission to board his ship. Maurek was perplexed by Braysel's urgent request, but he immediately made the necessary arrangements and agreed to meet him in his compartment sometime that morning.

Braysel dressed in his Fleet uniform, ate breakfast, then went to the base and nervously waited for the scheduled shuttle from the base ship *Rayel Srozentel*. The shuttle arrived forty-five minutes later and took thirty minutes to return to the *Rayel Srozentel*. From the *Rayel Srozentel*, Braysel took a shuttle to Maurek's cruiser, then anxiously disembarked and found Maurek's compartment.

Braysel stood in shame outside Maurek's compartment. Everything in him shouted to turn and run, to spare Maurek from the truth. Maurek would learn the truth eventually, however, one way or another. Braysel couldn't undo what had already been done, but for a



moment, he wished that he had never even seen Miaundea. Finally Braysel transmitted a thought to open the door and entered.

Maurek jumped up from his chair and greeted Braysel enthusiastically. *Hi, Bray. To what do I owe this shock?* He frowned. *What's the matter?*

Braysel motioned Maurek back into his chair. *Sit down. I have something I need to tell you.* Braysel pulled a chair up to Maurek's and sat down facing him. Maurek appeared troubled.

Braysel leaned his elbows on his thighs and his face into his hands. He nervously rubbed his temples. *I don't know how to tell you this.* He put his hands together and rested them against his mouth, then sat up straight and looked painfully into Maurek's puzzled blue eyes. *You know how you told me that when I found the right woman, I wouldn't be able to stop myself? Well, I found her.*

Maurek looked at him in surprise. *That's gre—*

*She's Miaundea.*

Maurek stared at him blankly.

*I didn't mean for it to happen, Maurek, it just did. We communicated briefly at the reception; I told her I was glad to finally meet the hellion of Auyval Beach, and she called me a terrorist. Then after I got back to your house from Mautysia, she came to the door, asked for me, and begged me to tell her my name. We communicated there on the front porch for quite a while, and I asked her to tell me about Saharenper, as her father suggested I do. We communicated with your parents for a while, then spent the rest of the night at her apartment.*

Maurek's blank expression had changed to one of shock.

*We shared deeply for hours; we just couldn't stop ourselves. Maurek, she understands me in a way no one ever has. While we were embracing in spirit, we saw a vision of our future together—it was absolutely phenomenal. We're going to be married as soon as I can get an extended leave. I'm sorry, Maurek.*

Braysel waited for Maurek to respond, too ashamed to look at him. Braysel couldn't hear him breathe. Finally after two minutes, Braysel jumped out of his chair and saw that Maurek was motionless, staring at him in anguish and betrayal.

Braysel demanded in exasperation, *Communicate something, Maurek, anything. Hit me if you like. Beat me senseless! Kill me! Just do something!*

Maurek dropped his head into his hand, shaking it slightly. *Leave Bray, he communicated weakly. Just leave.*

Braysel stood paralyzed with grief. He hadn't known what kind of reaction to expect, but he hadn't expected such incapacitation and despair. Braysel longed for Maurek to release his hurt and anger on him in some way, and his refusal to do so made him feel worse than ever. Braysel finally gained enough composure to turn and walk out the compartment.

Braysel waited in the shuttle bay for two hours, engulfed in a fog of guilt. Miaundea met him at the base in Shalaun late that afternoon with an embrace. *He'll be all right, Bray. Just give him time.*

Braysel clutched her. *We'll have dinner at Rouseal's, then spend the rest of the night dancing. I've paid dearly for the next three and a half days, and I intend to torture myself with pleasure.*

\* \* \*

Braysel left Novaun Sixth Day morning, exactly a week after he had arrived. His shuttle landed on the Mukaul-shaped base ship *Glautel Monsa* at the twenty-second hour that night. He received his compartment assignment, dropped into bed without changing out of his uniform, and fell immediately into an exhausted, depressed sleep.

He awoke early the next morning, briefly became acquainted with his roommate Lieutenant Wilyl Faumtren over breakfast, then reported to the designated conference room for his squadron assignment.

Braysel was surprised upon entering the conference room to see nineteen other men already there, all, with the exception of a lone navigator, many years older than he and ranking captain or above. The men communicated lightly among themselves about their last assignments and made their speculations on what this mysterious new assignment would be, all emitting that dignity and confidence that came with maturity and experience. Braysel recognized many of the names as legends in the Fleet and was abashed to be in such superior company. He thought it odd that the best flight teams of the Fleet had been brought together in this place from posts all over the allied galaxy, and he wondered why he was there.

Braysel wandered over to the only other lieutenant in the room, the young navigator, and asked him about his last assignment. His name was Mykal Vandur from the country Karajaun on Novaun, and he had just finished his training stint on the base ship *Danal Tustraul*. Several more pilots and navigators arrived, making the total number twenty-four. Just when Braysel and Mykal decided they were probably going to be teamed together, their commanding officer, Colonel Rytal Gristenla, entered the room.

Some of the men sat and some of the men stood, but all gave their complete attention to Colonel Gristenla. The colonel gazed around the room with a proud, triumphant smile. *You men are the best the Fleet has, and as the best, you have been chosen for the most exciting, demanding assignment you have ever had or will have during your entire service in the Fleet. The twenty-four of you here will form the first two squadrons that will fly with the spirit dimension formula.*

The men glanced at each other in amazement. Braysel felt a rush of exhilaration. He could hardly believe any of it was real. What an opportunity! What a fantastic dream! The spirit dimension formula!

## Chapter 20: A NEW COMPANION

Ton ate lunch at the clinic after he left Counselor Brunel's office, then spent the rest of the afternoon seeing patients. Working kept his mind and body occupied, but after he finished his last report for the day at the seventeenth hour, he felt an intense feeling of dread and defeat. Normally he volunteered his Second Day evenings at the hospital, but since Dr. Hovaus had put an end to that, he had nothing to look forward to for the next sixteen hours but isolation, boredom, and if he was lucky, a little sleep.

Ausha had slipped out of the clinic at the sixteenth hour that afternoon immediately after seeing her last patient, so Ton walked to the Pavilion alone. He ate dinner with a doctor who was interning in the primary care clinic, two nurses, and a technician with whom he was slightly acquainted. Ton assumed Danal and Bryaun had gone home and back to bed after their four hours of seeing patients that afternoon, which was what all the apprentice physicians did the Second Day evening after working their weekend stints in the emergency room. Ausha never did show up, and although it didn't surprise him, it did disappoint him. They had been up so long the night before that she, like Danal and Bryaun, had probably gone home from work and to bed.

An hour was all Ton could bear these dull people he hardly knew. He finished his meal, excused himself, and went home to immerse himself in InterMind library and news. Whatever happened, he could always count on InterMind library and news.

Ton entered his apartment cautiously, peering into corners and sniffing for the smell of osalaem in the glow of the sunset through the cracks around the window blinds. He saw movement of pale turquoise in the bedroom that had been Teren's and started in fear. Within seconds, Ausha appeared from the empty bedroom, her face still haggard, but her eyes excited. Ton relaxed and smiled in gladness and relief. *It's you. What are you doing here?*

Ausha motioned him to follow her to the extra bedroom. *I have a surprise for you. Come and see.*

Ton telepathically turned on the lights in the apartment and followed Ausha to the extra bedroom, feeling curious and surprisingly serene. When he looked into the room, he was astounded to see a moderately sized gold dog with huge brown eyes flecked with gold, relatively short hair, and floppy ears. A basket with a pillow and a brush sat in one corner of the room, two large bowls and a bag of food sat next to the basket, and large sheets of paper were stacked in another corner.

Ausha sat down next to the dog and gave it a hug, and the dog licked her face and crawled comfortably into her lap, wagging its tail. *This is Anenka, for when you want some warm female companionship in bed with you at night.*

Ton looked at Ausha uneasily. *I can't believe you did this.*

*I spent the morning communicating with people all over Shalaun before I finally found Anenka. She's six months old, spayed, and completely house-trained. She's from a litter of five, and her previous owners were unable all this time to find her a home.* Ausha smiled softly at Ton and patted the floor. *She's very anxious to get to know you.*

Ton slowly knelt down on the carpet next to Ausha. He felt ridiculous asking, *You've communicated with her?*

*Yes. I told her all about you, that you live by yourself and that you've been depressed lately, that on Earth you had two trenauls that you loved very much, and that you'll take very good care of her.*

Ton felt a strange constricting, burning feeling in his throat and in his chest, and he wasn't sure whether he felt overwhelmingly happy or overwhelmingly sad. He timidly reached out and patted Anenka's head. Anenka eagerly stepped away from Ausha and nuzzled up to Ton's neck.

Ton stroked her and scratched her behind the ears. *She really is a beautiful dog, and she has such a friendly disposition.* He liked the dog and marveled that Ausha would do something so generous for him, but the gift made him all the more aware of his uncertain position. It was all he could do to contain his panic. *I'll keep her, Ausha, but only if you promise me—you have to promise—that if anything happens to me, you'll take care of her.*

*Ton, you're being morbid.* Ausha hesitated; then her eyes suddenly expanded in realization. *You're afraid of the Earthons, aren't you?*

Ton nodded once, barely. She didn't know enough to be afraid, but he could feel that she was troubled, that she understood his fear wasn't mere paranoia, that the Earthons were a real danger to him. He communicated carefully, *I told you yesterday that my coming to Novaun was all very complicated.*

Ausha nodded slowly. She was obviously curious and concerned, but she didn't press him for details she knew he couldn't give.

Ton communicated wearily, *It doesn't matter what I do, I can't change what I've already done. My treason is something I'm going to have to live with for the rest of my life.* He thought that the terror of being hunted down and killed was too high a price to pay for his arrogance, yet he didn't for a moment regret what he had done.

Ausha suddenly threw her arms around Ton, squeezing him tightly, her spirit caressing his with feelings of support and acceptance of him as a person and as a friend, contradictions, imperfections, complexities and all. His arms went around her, and he clung to her gratefully.

After a minute, Ton withdrew slightly and smiled a little. *Promise?*

Ausha nodded, her face beautiful with a smile.

Ton turned away from Ausha slightly and focused his attention to Anenka. He stroked and scratched her and allowed her to nuzzle up to his face. "Well, girl," he said in English. "It looks like you're stuck with me." He communicated to Ausha, *I'd like to take her for a walk. Does she have a leash?*

Ausha stared at him, bewildered. *A leash?*

*Yes, you know. A strap of thin leather you hook to the dog's collar to keep control of her.*

Ausha shook her head. *You Earth people sure do like to do things the hard way. Establish a telepathic connection with her, and she'll stay with you and do anything you ask her to do.*

*I guess a leash would be stupid!* Ton had always wondered why Bryaun's dog never ran off, even when Bryaun wasn't with him.

Ausha smiled and nodded, then stood up with Ton and went with him and Anenka for a walk to the park down the walk.

Anenka loved Ton immediately and slept in bed with him every night he wasn't working, but as much as Ton liked Anenka's companionship, she wasn't an adequate

substitute for Miaundea. As much as Ton tried not to think about Miaundea, he missed her desperately, especially at night when he was alone in the bed he had yearned for so long to share with her. Ton didn't think he would ever forget the passionate way she and Bray had looked at each other, the tenderness that had been in their eyes as Bray had given her his medal, or the gentle way they had kissed. Miaundea hadn't once attempted to communicate with him since he had left her screaming at him on the deck of her parents' home, and Ton wasn't sure whether to be relieved that she was leaving him alone or bitter that she didn't care.

Ton arranged his appointments so that he could communicate with Counselor Brunel three times a week. Counselor Brunel was a perceptive, sympathetic confidante, and Ton believed that in time her suggestions and observations would help him work out some of his problems. Now, however, the only benefit he felt he was gaining from the sessions was the knowledge that he was at least moving in the direction of positive change, however slightly.

Ton and Ausha always went to dinner together at the Pavilion, then took Anenka for walks to the park or to the beach, even on Fourth Day evenings when they were in the office until the twentieth hour. Ton had always been confused and disturbed that he couldn't make sense of his feelings for Ausha, and he had always been baffled by being treated with such respect and regard by a woman who knew more than anyone what a son of Abomination he was, yet the one thing he didn't think was strange was that she would be content to spend so much time with him. She had no family on Novaun, and not only did they work the same odd, exhausting hours, they understood each other, enjoyed each other's company, and were used to being tolerant of each other's habits and moods. Such a friendship seemed natural as well as convenient. Ausha was not in the mood for parties and frivolousness and much preferred their quiet, relaxed evenings alone together communicating and walking with Anenka. She avoided seeing Andrel, and he was either too timid or too unconcerned to try and see her.

They saw Danal and Bryaun most evenings at the Pavilion, but the four could rarely get together for an entire evening since their emergency room shifts were on different nights. Neither Danal nor Bryaun were in the mood for frivolousness either, and they enjoyed the quiet evenings in discussion as much as Ton and Ausha did. Ausha's roommate Tauna had her own circle of friends, but sometimes she joined them too.

Ton and Ausha were walking to the park with Anenka after dinner Fifth Day evening when Ton thought he saw Daniel Stewart pass them. The fog and shadows of the walk lights made it too dark to see for sure, but Ton was sure enough to freeze in terror.

Although Ton's fear of the Earthons was an accepted element in his relations with Ausha, they never discussed it. Ton's present incapacitation, however, was something Ausha couldn't ignore. *What's the matter, Ton?* she asked anxiously.

*I thought I saw someone.*

Ausha fidgeted, as anxious as ever and a little frightened. *Who?*

*A real son of Abomination.* Ton remained there a moment, then finally managed to make himself walk again, only after he realized that Daniel Stewart would have a much more difficult time shooting a moving target. Where were Colonel Quautar's agents? Why could he see Daniel Stewart and never them?

Ton walked with Ausha and Anenka in communication silence, realizing he hadn't communicated with Colonel Quautar in nearly two weeks and that it was time. He had no

intention of going to Auyval Beach or anywhere he might see Miaundea, but Colonel Quautar sometimes came to the Pavilion to see him. Ton didn't think Colonel Quautar would want him to communicate with him telepathically about Stewart. As urgent as Ton felt about communicating with the colonel, he decided he would wait until the colonel made contact with him, and he believed that would be very soon. Two weeks had passed, and certainly Colonel Quautar's agents had discovered something about the woman spy who had been in his room in Launarda.

The rest of the evening passed in a pleasant manner, and no shadows came to life again in the form of Daniel Stewart. Ton watched scrupulously, though, and as satisfied as he was to have the companionship of Ausha and Anenka, he remained tense all night.

\* \* \*

The next evening after work was one of those rare, beautiful nights with no fog and two full moons, a night so bright that Ton didn't need to use the headlights on his car. Bryaun suggested that he, Ton, Ausha, Tauna, and Danal go to the beach to go swimming. The week had been grueling, and Ausha was delighted with the prospect of cool waves and starlight. Ton didn't like the idea and finally had to admit, in mortification, that although he had lived most of his life near the water, he didn't know how to swim. The other four insisted that he didn't have to swim to enjoy the water, that he could stay with the dogs where it was shallow, and finally persuaded him to join them. Fortunately he still had the baggy swimming shorts and tank top he had been given on Dignitary Island.

After an hour of running and playing catch with the dogs in the breaking waves, Ton decided he was having a good time and thought learning to swim wouldn't be a bad idea. Ausha wore a shimmering peach swimsuit that clung to her body from her shoulders to her knees and had a filmy flounce around the waist. The style of the suit was prudish compared to the styles Ton was accustomed to seeing, but compared to the clothing Novaunian women typically wore, it was extremely revealing. Ausha was so utterly beautiful with her smooth white skin, wild hair, and soft, mature curves that Ton could hardly keep himself from staring at her. He didn't feel any sort of physical arousal, only the breathless, sublime reverence he sometimes felt when he walked under the stars on a particularly beautiful night or beheld the miracle of the human brain under his fingers as he performed an operation.

Ton watched Ausha unceasingly, even after they were through swimming and she was wrapped in an old towel and sitting very close to him in front of a fire, roasting nuts and vegetables on a skewer. He never grew tired of looking at her, and she never seemed to mind. Often she would turn her head and gaze at him tenderly, her lovely full lips curved ever so slightly in that enigmatic smile of appreciation.

The five slept on the beach that night with the dogs. They awoke with the sun and ate the fruit and rolls Ausha had brought for breakfast, then went to their apartments to shower and dress for the activities of the day. Bryaun and Danal planned to go sailing with a group of friends, and Tauna planned to go with them instead of home to Amaria for the weekend.

No one thought it was strange that Tauna would stay in Shalaun that weekend, but it did make Ausha sad. *I guess it was inevitable*, she communicated to Ton as they began to drive back to their neighborhood. *They love each other, you know.*

Ton didn't need to ask who "they" were. *Do you think they'll get married?*

*Yes, I do. Bryaun's so shy around women, but now that he's almost gained enough courage to do something about his feelings, I doubt it will take very long.*

Tauna was dark-haired, soft, serious, and intelligent, very much like Bryaun in some ways, and in other ways very different. Ton could visualize them together and almost felt pleased.

*Ausha sighed. I've known Bryaun my whole life, but things will be different now.*

*Do you think they'll live on Dinevlea after Bryaun finishes his apprenticeship?*

*No. It would kill Tauna to live so far away from her family.*

*Bryaun has a family and a life too. Will he be happy if they stay here?* Ton was sincerely curious.

*I think so. Bryaun has lived away from Dinevlea for three years, and I think he likes his independence.*

*Living so close to her family won't do much for their independence,* Ton observed.

*Maybe not, but if Bryaun wants Tauna to be happy, he's going to have to live on Novaun. He'll choose what he wants the most.*

*What if he decides he can't be happy living here the rest of his life?*

*Then they shouldn't get married.*

*Even if they love each other?*

Ausha looked at him in surprise. *Ton, I think you may actually have a streak of romance in you.*

Ton shook his head thoughtfully. *No. I'm just trying to understand how the concepts of sex, love, and marriage are supposed to work together and how they work together in real life. The Sacred Writings of Tohmazz Zarr say that sex without love is a sin. The priestesses used to tell us that sex without love is a sin and that true love only exists in marriage, but everyone believes that having sex with someone you love is all right, even if you aren't married. Everyone pretends they're only having sex with people they love or not at all, when they are really having sex with people who arouse them. Then many years down the road, they get married because they want to have children or fulfill some social responsibility or something, and on the surface it's made to be the fulfillment of every fantasy of what perfect love and life should be, when in reality, it's anti-climactic, something you do when you think you want to be in love or get tired of the other.*

*The attitude here is entirely different. You people seem to want to get married more than you want to do anything, yet you have this practical way of doing it that makes it impossible to be a fantasy of what perfect love and life should be. You won't have sex with someone you don't marry, you won't marry someone you don't love, and sometimes you won't even marry someone you love. So how do you decide what person to marry? And can someone who's such a practical match ever really excite you? Do you people ever marry for love and practicality without the chemistry? How is it you people can get it to work and no one I knew on Earth ever could? I've always thought marriage was a bad idea, but I was glad to see Teren and Deia get married, and I think Bryaun and Tauna will be good together. Honestly, Ausha, I'm baffled.*

Ausha pondered Ton's observations for at least a minute. Finally she communicated, *I think the only way you'll get satisfactory answers to those questions is to ask them to Dr. Hovaus or Colonel Quautar, someone you know well who's been married a long time.*

Ton was taken aback. *You don't understand it either?*

*I understand some things, not everything.*

*Tell me what you do understand.*

*Well, first of all, I think it's wrong for you to assume all Earthon marriages are failures because those around you were failures, just as it's wrong to assume Novaunian marriages are perfect because they are successful.*

Ton had to admit that was a fair assumption.

*Novaunian couples have problems, sometimes serious problems. They just do everything in their power to work them out.*

Ton considered what he had learned about Paul and Deia's parents in the telepathic presentation and was satisfied that at least one Novaunian couple in recent history had struggled with a serious relationship problem.

*And I think you're confusing romance, lust, and love. As I understand lust, it's obsessive sexual desire that seeks only to gratify itself. It cares nothing for who may be hurt. Love is selfless concern for the welfare of another, and sexual desire can be a part of that. Since these two emotions are practically in direct opposition of each other, they may inspire very different levels of physical desire and sensation, I don't know. Romance is making life magical and mysterious and always exciting, never boring, dull, or practical. Your acquaintances on Earth were probably trying to build their love affairs and their marriages on lust and romance and not so much on love, or maybe they mistook romance and lust for love. Lust and romance may seem more exciting at first, but they won't hold up for the long term. Novaunians build their marriages on love, consider romance something that can be fun in its place but never a substitute for love, and discard lust altogether.*

Ton nodded thoughtfully. *So how does the practicality fit into all of this?*

Ausha shrugged. *Marriage is life and life is practical. There are finances to consider, how many children to have, how the children will be taught and disciplined, who will clean what, which family will be visited on which holiday, where to live, and the list goes on and on. Love and romance are fine and good, but they don't decide who will get up in the middle of the night and comfort a screaming baby, and they will never compensate for two people whose temperaments clash or who have drastically different ideas on religion or disciplining children. I don't think basing a marriage on compatibility and commitment as well as love in any way diminishes the force of the love. Perhaps the love becomes even stronger.*

*And the physical chemistry?*

*It's supposed to become stronger too. Remember though, attraction in a situation like that isn't lust and probably would never feel like lust. Then again, that's something I don't have the experience to answer.*

They rode the rest of the way in communication silence. Ausha's answers made sense, but Ton wasn't completely satisfied. He could feel that she had many questions and concerns about marriage herself, and he believed most of her lack of understanding lay in the area of sex. Ton thought it was ironic that as much as he knew about sex, he had no idea how it related to marriage and was, therefore, as ignorant as she was on the subject.

Ton and Ausha went to their apartments to change, then met back at Ton's car to go on the shopping trip they had scheduled two weeks before.

Shopping for Ton's furniture was easy. Ausha had purchased most of her furniture in Shalaun and knew where to get what she liked. They bought the basic furniture in wood



and velvety silver-blue upholstery, then went to several import shops to get rugs, linens, and other accessories.

Ausha enthusiastically selected the oddest assortment of vases, tapestries, prints, and figurines that Ton had ever seen, and he consented to the purchases more to see what she was going to do with it all than because he liked what she selected. Every item she picked was dramatic in design and richly colored, and she tried to find at least one item from every foreign port he had visited. She even found fabric with deep colors and odd designs that she explained would be very interesting draped over the tops of his windows. The last thing they bought for Ton was a robot to clean his apartment.

Shopping for Ausha's clothes was a nightmare. Hundreds of women's clothing shops were scattered around the city, and neither Ton nor Ausha had any idea where to start. Ton insisted they buy all of the accessories first, reasoning that Ausha would never agree to the dresses he would select if she couldn't see the entire outfits. He found several brightly colored scarves and shiny painted ceramic hair barrettes at the import shops, then after searching for jewelry stores without finding anything but gold and faceted diamonds, rubies, and other precious gems, he finally asked the jeweler in the fourth store where he could find jewelry made of opaque gems and ornamental minerals. Ton was surprised to learn that the type of jewelry for which he was looking had been popular during a thirty-year period more than two hundred years before and that he would have to go stores that sold either antiques or theatrical supplies.

They entered the first antique shop, and Ton studied the jewelry in satisfaction. He looked at several pieces, finally holding up a necklace made of polished malachite beads and tiny, ornately engraved gold beads. *This one is perfect, Ausha, absolutely perfect!*

Ausha gingerly took the beads out of his hands and gazed at them in appreciation. *They're exquisite, Ton, but fifty gold coins. Fifty gold coins!*

*I'll buy them. I'd pay two hundred gold coins to see you in these!*

They went to three antique stores and two costume shops, finding seven strings of beads, ten hair barrettes, four very interesting belts, and several little purses, all constructed out of velvet, leather, and opaque stones. Ausha liked the items, but she was so skeptical of the purchases that she made Ton pay for them all himself, promising to pay him back if he found any dresses that would match. Ton was certain enough of his selections that he agreed to the arrangement.

After filling two shopping bags with accessories, they began looking for dresses. They went to at least ten shops without finding anything Ton could imagine Ausha wearing, and Ausha became so irritated with the prospect of going to hundreds of shops and not finding anything she liked that she was ready to give up right then.

*I refuse to waste my day off in such torture! I'm going home.*

Ton gripped Ausha's arm. *Oh no you aren't. We aren't done.*

Ausha scowled at Ton and yanked her arm out of his hand, shaking her head vigorously.

*We have a deal.*

*Deal's off! I'll go naked if I have to! I'm not shopping anymore!*

Shopping for clothes really did turn Ausha into a peevish, impossible monster, and Ton wondered if making her wardrobe more attractive was worth this aggravation. Then again, he understood her frustration. All the dresses he had seen so far were silky and frothy, with sheer drapes and laces and elaborate embellishments of diamonds, rubies,

emeralds, and other similar precious gems. Even the casual dresses were frothy, although not so elaborately embellished, and most were in pastel shades. They were designed for an artistic, elegant girl like Deia, not for a spicy, erotic girl like Miaundea, and certainly not for a vigorous, earthy woman like Ausha.

*This is ridiculous! Even Novaunian women have to wear something other than silk to do athletics, work in their gardens, and go to the beach. I've seen Novaunian women wear dresses that are attractive, yet simple. Where do they get them?*

*I can't wear a beach dress to work! Or to Devotional!*

*Just wait until you see what I have in mind.*

*Ton, you're impossible! But I suppose you're just bizarre enough in your tastes to make this work.*

*If I weren't a bizarre Earthon, I would've never persuaded you to do this!*

*That's true, Ausha agreed, laughing. I guess we could get a list of sportswear shops from InterMind.*

*Do it.*

Within minutes Ausha had assimilated a list of seventeen sportswear shops. They went first to the one closest to them, and Ton was happily surprised to find exactly the type of clothes for which he had been looking. He had Ausha try on a baggy, mustard yellow net swimsuit coverup over a simple cotton dress of the same color. She looked at him suspiciously as she walked out of the dressing room, unable to comprehend how a cotton dress and a swimsuit coverup could possibly be suitable for anything but the beach. Ton confidently put an antique belt around her waist that was constructed of black velvet and moss agate cabochons, a string of moss agate beads around her neck, and piled her hair loosely on the top of her head, twisted it, and secured it in place with an exotically engraved onyx comb he had found in an import shop. He positioned her in front of the holorelector and asked, *Now. Does this woman look like she's going to the beach?*

Ausha gazed at her reflection, then at Ton in amazement. She shook her head, her eyes wild with excitement. *Ton, I love it! Find me another one!*

## Chapter 21: A PECULIAR RAPPORT

First Day morning Ton ate breakfast at the hospital with Ausha, Bryaun, and Danal, then went to Devotional with them. Ausha wore a swimsuit dress with the malachite beads, green scarf, green slippers, and a big malachite barrette. No one Ausha knew was accustomed to seeing such an eclectic combination of styles on one person at one time, and they were all shocked.

*That is the most outlandish outfit I've ever seen,* Danal communicated.

Bryaun smiled knowingly. *Suits her perfectly, doesn't it?*

Danal nodded. *You're simply gorgeous, Ausha.*

*Thank you! But I can't take the credit. This was Ton's idea.*

*I was tired of seeing her in those ugly dresses.*

*They were ugly,* Bryaun agreed.

*They weren't so bad!* Ausha communicated.

*They were awful, Ausha!* Danal insisted.

*All right, I'll admit, they were boring.*

Bryaun and Danal complimented Ton for being as provocative, exotic, and diverting as ever, and when Ausha explained to all of her other friends at Devotional that she had hired a personal wardrobe consultant, Bryaun and Danal instantly pointed to Ton.

Some of Ausha's friends were impressed. Others, including Tauna, weren't impressed at all. *Ton! I can't believe you did this to her! You've ruined her for good!*

*Ruined her for what? Elegance? It's against Ausha's nature to be elegant.*

*Ausha could be elegant if she wanted to be.*

*Who wants her to be?* Danal communicated.

Bryaun studied Ausha with a peculiar expression, as if he were trying to visualize her that way. *I can't quite comprehend it myself.*

*Ton's right,* Ausha communicated good-naturedly. *I was born ruined. Ton simply helped me learn how to display that ruination to the universe.*

Ton ate lunch with Bryaun, Danal, Ausha, and Tauna and spent the afternoon at Ausha and Tauna's apartment, then that evening took the entire group to Teren and Deia's for chess and chocolate chip cookies. Both Danal and Bryaun were fascinated by the game of chess, and Teren was happy to find two new opponents.

Nagging at Ton all day was Colonel Quautar's order to go to lunch at his house every First Day he wasn't working. He didn't feel any desire to go, nor did he feel at all guilty, but he needed to communicate with the colonel and couldn't think of any other inconspicuous, convenient way to do so. As it turned out, Colonel Quautar found Ton at the Pavilion the next evening after work.

Colonel Quautar drew a chair up to Ton's table, and Ausha, Bryaun, Danal, and several others at the table greeted him. Ton momentarily withdrew from his conversation with his friends and communicated to Colonel Quautar in relief, *I'm sure glad to see you!*

Colonel Quautar regarded him in teasing reproof. *If you wanted to communicate with me, you know you have a standing invitation to my home for lunch every First Day.*

*I don't ever intend to visit your home again. Unless you can think of a better idea, I'd rather have our weekly meetings here.*

The colonel smiled baitingly. *As you wish. But you don't seem to be suffering too much loneliness from Miaundea's absence in your life. You certainly don't lack for female companionship.*

The colonel's observation startled Ton. *It isn't what you think!*

*So tell me, Ton, what do I think?*

Ton scowled at his glass of water, feeling ridiculous. *What I mean is . . . well, we spend a lot of time together but . . . well, I have no designs on her, none. There's nothing between us, nothing at all. We're just frien—* He stopped abruptly and frowned. "Friend" wasn't an adequate word to describe Ausha, and neither was "partner." They were friends and partners and more.

*You're just companions,* the colonel communicated, completing Ton's thought.

Ton finally nodded quickly, in resignation, yet he felt strange. "Companion" didn't seem an adequate word either.

The colonel's expression of amusement faded to one of seriousness. *I understand you've been in emotional counseling.*

Ton nodded, feeling more ridiculous than ever. He hated being constantly watched, even though it was for his own protection. *I have some things to work out. It was Dr. Hovaus's idea.*

Colonel Quautar squeezed his shoulder. *You have nothing to be ashamed of, Ton. If you need this kind of help, then you're right in getting it. Personally, I think the simple act of laying down your pride and admitting to yourself you need help has already done you a tremendous amount of good.*

*I was desperate, and I didn't know what else to do.*

The colonel nodded that he understood. *I want to emphasize again. Be extremely cautious. Don't discuss your treason with this counselor, not in any way. If she asks you about it or if it comes up somehow, tell her simply that you're comfortable with what you did and that you don't wish to discuss it. Getting you off the planet and to a new location safely will depend very much on our plan remaining secret.*

Ton rocked his fork back and forth on the polished wood table. *Does that mean there might be people I associate with closely who are spies for King?*

*It's always possible, but I don't worry as much about that as I do your giving information to people who will not understand its significance and who may be careless themselves. As for the people you associate with, my agents have investigated them thoroughly. I have reviewed all of the investigations and have put myself in a position to meet many of these people personally. For now, I feel comfortable with the people around you, but that may change as your acquaintances change.*

Ton tapped his fork on his plate. *I know I have to keep this secret, but it's becoming more and more difficult, and I don't know what to do.*

The colonel frowned at him in question.

*I haven't told Ausha anything about my treason except that my coming to Novaun was very complicated, but we understand each other and feel with each other, and I can't hide anything from her any more than she can hide anything from me. I'm afraid she's going to figure it out. She already figured out that I'm afraid of the Earthons. What am I supposed to do? It isn't as if I can stop seeing her.*

*No, don't stop seeing her socially. That would be too drastic. I might as well lock you in a little room somewhere and not let you have any friends at all.* The colonel's bearing was relaxed, but emotionally he couldn't mask the fact that he was troubled.

Ton immediately understood Colonel Quautar's anxiety. *You're worried they might try and hurt Ausha to get to me.*

The colonel looked at Ton in surprise. *You're becoming quite empathic, Ton.*

*I don't care what you do; just don't let anyone hurt Ausha!*

The corner of the colonel's mouth lifted into a slight smile, but he was still troubled. *Her safety will be as high a priority as yours. It may comfort you to know that, given your disdainful treatment of women in the past, it isn't likely King's agents will think they can injure you by hurting her. Anyway, let's hope that's the case.*

Ton nodded quickly in understanding and relief.

Colonel Quautar raised an eyebrow. *How long have you and Ausha had this . . . understanding?*

*I'm not sure. Always, I guess. More lately though.*

*And you don't think this rapport you have with Ausha is at all peculiar?*

Ton frowned. *Is it peculiar?*

*You tell me.*

*There's a lot I don't understand, but sharing so much with Ausha doesn't feel peculiar. It's only when I try to understand it that I feel peculiar.*

Colonel Quautar smiled. *I don't think we have to worry about Ausha being careless with your secret. At this point, I wouldn't consider it a major tragedy if she knew, but I would rather you put off telling her as long as you can.*

Ton nodded, then communicated in agitation, *I thought I saw Daniel Stewart Fifth Day night when Ausha and Anenka and I were walking to the park.*

*Are you sure?*

*Sure enough.*

*Good . . . that's very good.*

*Good?*

*It will give us someone tangible to find and to watch.*

Panic seized Ton. *Which means you haven't found the spy who was in my room in Launarda.*

*No, I'm afraid we haven't. This is a baffling puzzle. We've found no evidence whatsoever that there was anyone suspicious anywhere near your room.*

*But there was! I smelled the osalaem. And the Froquenza!*

*I believe you, but to be honest with you, you did yourself an extreme disservice by waiting so long to tell me about the spy in your room. I could have had the taffuao stub and the room examined, and something significant might have been discovered. I'm not sure yet what's going on, but two things I know—this agent is King's very best, and he or she knows the Doshyr mansion and grounds intimately.*

*Which means it was someone who was already here,* Ton communicated in horror. *It could have been any of them! That wife of King's. He probably controls her mind. And what about the daughter? He probably controls her mind too! And Eauva Vundaun, and all of the sisters. He could control all of them, and no one would ever know!*

*Relax, Ton. Relax. Remember, Eauva Vundaun is in prison now, so even if she was the person in your room, she is no threat to you. King himself knows the Doshyr mansion and*

*grounds intimately, and he could have easily given that information to one of his Earthon agents. If you're going to have panic spasms every time we communicate, I won't tell you anything anymore.*

Ton breathed deeply and forced himself into semi-composure.

*I understand that you're worried and afraid and that you feel helpless. King wants you to be terrified of him and you have good reason to be terrified of him. And you are very helpless. There is nothing you can do, aside from letting me know when anything suspicious happens. Please. Do the best you can at what you need to do and try not to think about what may be coming. Let me be the one to worry.*

*I'll try.*

The colonel turned casually to Bryaun, Danal, Ausha, and Tauna and the others and joined in their discussion. The colonel left ten minutes later, and Ton and Ausha left five minutes after that to go to Ton's apartment. Ton and Ausha had skipped their lectures that morning to receive the delivery of the furniture they had purchased, but there had been no time to arrange it or to decorate, and Ausha was anxious to organize Ton's apartment and make it liveable. Ton just wanted to see all of the money he had spent put to use.

Ausha didn't want everyone giving her advice on where to put things and warned their friends not to come near Ton's apartment at all that evening, and they all gladly complied, not wanting to go anywhere near Ausha and any heavy, sharp tools she might decide to use as weapons.

Since Ausha knew where she wanted everything and Ton didn't care where she put anything, they were able to finish by the twenty-first hour. Ausha was pleased with the way it looked, and Ton was amazed. He liked having so much color around him and things that reminded him of the places he had been, but it was Ausha's presence in the decor that made going home from work alone at night a little easier from then on.

One evening, when Ton and Ausha were stripping off their caps, masks, gloves, and gowns after surgery, Ton communicated with a mysterious smile, *I'm having a party tonight.*

Ausha looked at him strangely. *We just finished a ten-hour surgery, and you want to have a party?*

*It's because we finished the surgery that I want to have the party.*

Ausha was on the verge of understanding. *What sort of party do you have in mind?*

*I need to get rid of a large collection of poisons. I could use some help.*

Ausha stared at Ton in astonishment. *You're joking!*

Ton shook his head. *You told me I'd have more stamina if I gave it all up, so I decided to conduct an experiment. I promised myself that if your observation proved correct within four weeks, I would give it up for good. Well, you were right. I think I've felt more energetic in the last week than I have in the entire last year, and the long surgeries have become much more bearable.*

*So you stopped smoking and drinking, just like that.*

Ton nodded. *I haven't had a drink or a taff since that day in my apartment.*

*But you've been smoking and drinking for years. Wasn't it excruciating to stop so abruptly like that? How did you fight such compelling urges?*

*I wasn't allowed to have those things whenever I wanted anyway. I've been fighting compelling urges since I got here.*

*And you haven't had any headaches? Nothing?*

*I can live with headaches.*

Ausha laughed and embraced Ton vigorously. *Ton, you are amazing!*

Ton and Ausha finished at the hospital at the nineteenth hour, went to eat, then went to Ton's apartment with Bryaun and Danal to pour wine and whiskey down the drain and to drop packages of taffuaos into the trash disposer. They had contests to see who could pour the fastest, Ausha sprayed them all with champagne, and they laughed hysterically. Ton didn't think he had ever had so much fun, and he felt very free.

Ausha, Bryaun, and Danal left at the twentieth hour that night, but when Ton went to put the disc containing the history of Novaunian medicine that Ausha had given him for his birthday into the telepathic transmission recorder, he couldn't find it. Ton settled into his recliner with Anenka on his chest, feeling uneasy. What had happened to that disc?

## Chapter 22: AN UNCOMFORTABLE ENCOUNTER

Braysel left Novaun, and Miaundea spent the first weeks in his absence immersing herself in his Verzaunian heritage. She wanted to understand the intricacies of pacifism, but more, she wanted to better understand the complexities in Bray's relationships with members of his family.

After four weeks of research, Miaundea spent three weeks compiling everything she had learned and began preparing a dissertation on her combined Fleet/Pacifist philosophy. Once her dissertation was accepted by the Board of Novaunian Academies, she would be able to lecture to specialty schools, academies, and conferences all over the Union. She didn't think her project would in any way soften the resolve of Bray's parents and she had no idea how her ideas would be received by the Novaunian intelligentsia or public in general, but she knew her view was one that needed to be presented, and her status as an anthropologist gave her expertise and authority that commanded respect, even if it didn't command agreement.

Miaundea decided she was ready to begin educating people to the similarities in the Fleet and Isolationist positions, and she felt her most effective vehicle would be the Coalition for the Integration of Novaunian Cultures. The Coalition was a political organization in part, but its charter forbade it to directly support either the Fleet or the Isolationist positions. In charter, the Coalition existed for the benefit and education of all Novaunians, but in practice, its leanings were toward the Fleet. In her research, however, Miaundea had learned that powerful chapters of the Coalition existed on four pacifist planets. That had given her the idea to go to her own chapter and suggest they work to recruit new members from Verzaun, Narquasa, and other pacifist countries on Novaun.

Miaundea attended the executive meetings of the Home World chapter of the Coalition since she organized their seminars. The executive board held its meetings every three weeks, and the meeting that Eighth Day morning would be at the apartment of Ausha Ferudant.

Miaundea had wanted to ask Ausha about Ton at the last meeting, but Ausha hadn't been there. Ausha couldn't very well skip a meeting that was at her own home, though, so Miaundea decided she would get there a few minutes early. Miaundea was uncomfortable about the prospect of communicating with Ton, and she thought that finding out how he was doing from Ausha would be safe and easy. Then depending on what Ausha told her, perhaps she would attempt to communicate with Ton himself.

Miaundea arrived at Ausha's apartment fifteen minutes early and transmitted her telepathic summons. Ausha immediately answered the door, wearing a little dress that looked like a swimsuit, a turquoise scarf with streaks of yellow and green around her waist, a big malachite barrette in her hair, and around her neck, two strings of beads, one of turquoise and the other of malachite and gold. Her fingernails were still bitten short, her eyebrows were still thick and unshaped, and she still wore no makeup or perfume, but that hardly mattered. In eight weeks she had gone from drab to dazzling.

*Hello, Miaundea, Come on in. You're early.* Ausha's attitude was cheerful, but her dark eyes were as grave as they had been on that First Day when Miaundea had last seen her and Ton.



Miaundea stepped into the apartment. *Ausha, you look beautiful! I mean, you've always been beautiful, but these new clothes, and this new jewelry—you look extraordinary!*

Ausha smiled. *Thanks. I've never been able to find clothes I like, but all of my new outfits really are perfect.*

*Your dress, it isn't a swimsuit . . . is it?*

Ausha nodded, laughing a little.

*Who would have thought you could put a swimsuit with imports and antiques and have it look so good! How did you think of it?*

*I didn't. I'm not nearly this fashion-clever, I assure you. A friend put some new outfits together for me in exchange for some decorating.*

Miaundea was instantly curious to discover what friend of Ausha's had such eccentric, inventive taste. *Who? Is it someone I've met?*

Ausha's eyes flickered in what Miaundea could perceive only as extreme amusement. *My wardrobe consultant wishes to remain anonymous.*

*Why?*

*Because the arrangement between us is a personal one, and we both wish it to remain that way. Besides. My friend gets embarrassed by so much praise.*

*How can a woman who can put together an outfit like that be shy?*

*A person doesn't have to be shy to be embarrassed by praise, especially when that praise comes from unlikely sources.*

*No, I suppose you're right.* Miaundea's gaze rested on the faceted ovoid that dangled below Ausha's neck, framed there by the two strings of beads. For at least three months Ausha had worn that peculiar little necklace. Miaundea had assumed she wore it all the time because she had no other jewelry, but now she wondered if it had some sort of sentimental value to her.

Miaundea carefully touched the ovoid's gold setting. *This crystal. Is it arelada? What's the mineral that flaws it? It's so odd.*

*It is arelada, and the other mineral is tritenza.* Ausha removed the necklace and held it up to dangle in the sunlight. Little rainbows didn't dance on the walls the way they would have if Ausha's ovoid had been pure crystal. The rainbows were fragmented, and all the colors were surrounded by a fiery glow. Ausha gazed in awe at the images of refraction on the walls. *It sits on my nightstand while I sleep, and when I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is hold it up to the light, just like this. Every morning the shapes and the colors are a little different, depending on the light, and sometimes I stare at it for as long as fifteen minutes. It's the most beautiful piece of jewelry I've ever seen.*

*It is very beautiful. Where did you get it? I've never seen anything like it before.*

*A friend gave it to me for my birthday.* Ausha clasped it around her neck again. *I don't have any idea where he got it.*

*He?* Miaundea communicated in surprise and delight. That explained why Ausha was so attached to that necklace. Somehow, though, it had never occurred to Miaundea that Ausha might have a serious love interest. Who was it? She wondered.

Ausha immediately understood Miaundea's emotions of curiosity in the exchange. She smiled enigmatically, her eyes overflowing with amusement, answering Miaundea's curiosity in gentle reproof, *A friend.*

Miaundea was taken aback. She wasn't accustomed to encountering such privacy, particularly on the subject of men. The women she knew were more than eager to discuss the men in their lives, generally volunteering far more information than Miaundea ever wanted to know. Ausha's reticence irritated her a little, and she was offended that Ausha would interpret her attempt to be friendly as intrusiveness.

Ausha looked at Miaundea, puzzled, as if she couldn't understand why she would be offended.

Miaundea relaxed a little. Ausha wasn't trying to be difficult; she simply wasn't a person who confided easily. Miaundea certainly couldn't fault her for that, especially since they were little more than acquaintances, and she had to admit, she wasn't really that interested in Ausha's personal affairs.

Miaundea hesitated. *How is Ton?*

*He's fine.*

Miaundea waited for more, but Ausha didn't give her any more. *What exactly do you mean by "fine"?*

*If you want to know how Ton's doing, why don't you ask him yourself?*

Miaundea felt irritation rise within her again, but she held it in check. *I don't think Ton is interested in communicating with me.*

Ausha's face was soft with innocence. *Have you tried?*

Miaundea couldn't reply, she was so angry. Ausha was with Ton nearly every day. It wouldn't kill her to give a little information. Why was she being so unyielding?

Ausha stared at Miaundea queerly. *Who do you think you are?* The thoughts she transmitted were reproachful, but her attitude remained composed. *You come in here and ask me how Ton is. Just what is it you want me to tell you? That he hates you? That he's so bitter and incapacitated that he can't work? That he never cared about anything you ever did? That he's so devastated he goes home at night and sobs himself to sleep? Or do you want the names of his new female interests? What? What piece of information is going to satisfy your lurid curiosity?*

Miaundea couldn't contain her fury. *And just who do you think you are? All I did was ask you a simple question, and you act as if I'm some sort of criminal!*

Ausha remained unruffled. *It's a simple question that you could answer far better for yourself if you would just communicate with Ton.*

Miaundea sighed in defeat. Ausha was determined not to give her any information about Ton, and trying to force her to was useless. *All right. You win. You won't tell me anything about Ton. Fine. All I want to know is, why? What is the big concern? Why are you determined to make this so difficult?*

Ausha gazed at Miaundea solemnly. *You think I'm being difficult?* She shook her head as if she couldn't comprehend any reason Miaundea would accuse her so energetically. *My big concern is Ton. I honestly thought that you, of all people, would understand this, but I guess I was wrong. Ton is my friend. I care about him deeply, and I respect his privacy. I have no right to communicate to you or anyone a thing about his state of mind or his personal affairs. He will choose his own confidants.*

Miaundea nodded quickly, in resignation. Ausha made a valid point, even if her adherence to it was fanatical. Had Miaundea not known Ton so well and understood his distrustful nature and reluctance toward emotional intimacy, she would have believed Ausha was deep in his confidence.

Miaundea hesitated, deciding she would try one more time. She asked, somewhat timidly, *Is he happy?* In actuality, Miaundea wanted to know if he was bitter, but she thought Ausha would be more likely to tell her what she wanted to know if she tempered the question a little.

Ausha regarded Miaundea shrewdly, as if she understood perfectly the true nature of the question. She pondered for many moments, then replied with a nod, *Yes, I think so. For the most part.* She smiled politely. *Please excuse me.* Perplexed, Miaundea watched Ausha walk to her door and invite two more members of the executive board into her home.

Miaundea hadn't known what type of reply to expect from Ausha, but she hadn't expected her to profess with such positive feeling that Ton was happy. She could accept the possibility that Ton wasn't bitter anymore about her betrothal, but it had never occurred to her that someone as sardonic and cynical as Ton could possibly be happy. But why did the thought of Ton's being happy irritate her so? Why wouldn't she want Ton to be happy? Or was it that she was upset that he could be happier without her than with her? Why should it matter? Was she really that arrogant? Was she really so obsessed with maintaining power over him? Or did he still have power over her?

Miaundea mentally reproached herself, but she couldn't stop herself from feeling irritated that Ton was happy and even more irritated that she could gain no information from Ausha.

Miaundea communicated lightly with members of the board as they sat down in Ausha's living room, and after the ten who were expected to be there arrived, Tevaul Murshen, the president, called the meeting to order. The secretary gave the proceedings from the previous meeting, and then the group discussed various pieces of business, including two fund raisers, the upcoming Interplanetary Fair, plans to protest a new bill to the Union Council that called for new security restrictions on intraunion space flights, and their campaign to encourage application school students on Novaun to participate in the Coalition-sponsored student exchange program.

After an hour, Tevaul opened the meeting to new concerns and ideas. Miaundea seized the opportunity and asked, *What has this chapter done in the past to recruit new members from Verzaun, Narquasa, Lausena, Arkashaun, and Jaulans?*

Miaundea's only reply was a collection of quizzical stares. She waited several moments, then tried again. *It seems to me that if our membership comes from only seven of twelve Novaunian countries, then the variations in culture on this planet are being grossly ignored by our chapter.*

Nenel Synan, the secretary, nodded thoughtfully. He was the only other person from the planet Novaun on the executive board, a new member from Sakaur. *I think Miaundea is right. This is the Home World Chapter, and the home world is certainly not being accurately represented by the current membership.*

Tevaul Murshen finally communicated, *I've been a member of this chapter for four years, and during our last membership drive a year and a half ago, we did make an effort to recruit new members from those five countries.*

*The fact of the matter is,* Ausha explained, *we couldn't find anyone who was interested.*

Miaundea found that difficult to believe. *And just how hard did you try? And who was sent to do the recruiting?*

*And what's that supposed to mean?* Shere Hamon, the activities chair, blurted defensively. *That a Novaunian who was not born on Novaun isn't an adequate representative for this chapter of the Coalition?*

*No, but a native to this planet might have better success recruiting new members to this chapter, only because he or she may be able to present the Coalition in a more pertinent, personal light. By the same token, I, being a native of this planet, might not have the same success recruiting new members on Istylen as Braunel, simply because I don't understand the issues and culture on Istylen as well as Braunel does since he grew up there.*

Tevaul and Braunel stared at Miaundea strangely, as if they couldn't comprehend why she would be so concerned about recruiting new members from Novaun's five pacifist countries; Shere shook her head intolerantly; and everyone else gazed at the floor in discomfort, everyone but Ausha.

Ausha regarded Miaundea in cynical understanding. *Perhaps your argument would be more persuasive if those of us with Gudynean blood flowing through our veins had encountered no success in recruiting members from the native population in the seven countries that are represented.* Several board members murmured their agreement.

Miaundea was shocked. Ausha was interpreting the reluctance of pacifist Novaunians to join the Coalition as racism. Miaundea shook her head vigorously. *If you think the Isolationists are racists, then you don't understand their position.*

Tevaul raised an eyebrow at her in surprise. *And you think you do?*

*Yes, to a degree. It's this misunderstanding that makes it so important that we try to recruit people from the five pacifist countries into our organization.*

No one communicated anything. Miaundea looked from one skeptical face to another, realizing finally that these people didn't want to understand. It was no surprise they had never been successful recruiting members with pacifist political leanings.

Miaundea stood up, indignant and disillusioned. *Some Coalition for the Integration of Novaunian Cultures this is. You people don't care one bit about understanding other Novaunian cultures. All you care about is promoting your own interests. You can find someone else to organize your seminars.* She turned and walked out of the apartment, and no one made an attempt to stop her.

Without the support of the Coalition, Miaundea would have to look primarily to lecturing on the academic circuit as a means of presenting her ideas, which made her more determined than ever to complete her dissertation. She went directly home and began to work.

After two hours of compiling facts and formulating observations, Miaundea discarded the entire dissertation, overwhelmed by frustration. None of it was right. None of it at all. She had told the executive board of the Coalition that she understood the pacifist position to a degree. To a degree simply wasn't adequate. She had to understand it completely, and the only way to do so was to live among them for an extended length of time. She would have to live and work in Mautysia.

She didn't have an abundance of work at the Agency, and she believed that the director of the cultural section would allow her to take a six-month leave of absence or at least reduce her working hours. The director would probably be supportive of her desire, considering the anthropological nature of her research, and if she had to, she would simply give up her position at the Agency.

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While Ausha was at her Coalition executive meeting that Eighth Day, Ton was with Danal, Bryaun, Tauna, and fifteen colleagues from the combined clinics at the VisionRun courts downtown, watching the clinics' team from the spectators' room, which was located on the floor above the fifty VisionRun lanes. Each lane had its own telepathic transmission recorder and a partitioned area from which the spectators assimilated what was happening below them. Sometimes the spectators were allowed to communicate with the participants through the telepathic transmission recorder and microphones. Sometimes they were even allowed to mentally participate themselves and help the team they were supporting create obstacles in the paths of those on the opposing team.

Ton loved to assimilate VisionRun. It was the wildest, most interesting, most creative, most insane sport he had ever witnessed, and Eighth Day was the VisionRun enthusiasts' paradise. The lanes were always full, and the partitions between the telepathic transmission recorders were always opened, making one huge spectators' room. On Eighth Days, all fifty lanes competed with each other, and what should have been a mass of confusion was the most complex, grueling, beautiful competition in the universe, and the spectators urged it on with vigorous, opinionated screaming.

Ausha joined the group at the VisionRun complex after her meeting, screaming for their team more vigorously than anybody. Finally after three runs and a victory for their team, the spectators and participants from the clinics met outside the officiators' room, then went to the pier for lunch and a party. The party remained wild and loud well into the afternoon, then moved to the beach for swimming, games, and a dinner of water chestnuts, shellfish, fruit, and nuts over an open fire. Ton and Ausha didn't find themselves alone together until late that night.

Everyone finally went home, and Ton and Ausha remained sitting in the shallow water in their swimsuits. The waves splashed on their feet as they watched the clouds whirl in the darkness above them, listening to Anenka sniff driftwood on the beach behind them.

During the past few weeks Ausha had gradually begun resuming some of her normal social activities, more out of a feeling of obligation than a real feeling of desire. She was still grieving Jaunel, but more than anything, she was exhausted. The pace of her life had been too strenuous for too long, and everything in her rebelled against resuming her previous lifestyle.

Ausha lay back and stretched, gazing contentedly into the darkness. *I quit today.*

*You did? How did the board take it?*

*How could they take it? They tried to persuade me not to, but my decision was firm. I've been in that job for nearly a year and a half, and it's someone else's turn. The chapter will elect a new vice president in the general meeting next week. I'm free!*

Ausha's emotions were light and relieved, but there was something unsettled in her, something Ton couldn't define. They communicated a while longer, lying on their sides with their weight on their elbows, facing each other. It took awhile, but finally Ton understood. Ausha knew something she wasn't sure she should tell him.

*What is it you're not telling me?*

Ausha rolled to her back again, groaning and covering her face with her hands. *I can't keep any secrets from you! It isn't fair!*

Ton was more curious than ever. *And just what is this secret you're so determined to keep from me?*

*It isn't really a secret.* Ausha sighed in resignation. *I just didn't want to tell you anything that might upset you.*

Ton smiled. *I'm in an extremely relaxed mood. I dare you to upset me.*

*I saw Miaundea today.*

Dread seized Ton's heart.

*I knew you would get upset!*

*I'm not upset. Not yet.* Ton hesitated. *Did you communicate with her?*

Ausha nodded slowly. *She admired my new clothes and asked me where I got the little necklace you gave me for my birthday. She asked me all about you and didn't know it. It was really rather funny. Finally she asked about you directly. I didn't tell her anything, of course, and I'm afraid I offended her.* She telepathically showed him the entire conversation.

In a way, Ton thought the conversation between Miaundea and Ausha was funny; in a way, he was angry that Miaundea would dare intrude on his life again, even if it was with only a question; and in a way, he resented the superficial, insincere, prying nature of the question, "How is Ton?" When people asked the question to each other, they did it to be polite and expected a flat, trite answer, but when they asked it about another, they usually expected an answer that was complicated and revealing, not because they cared, but because they wanted to satisfy their lurid curiosity. Ton was relieved Ausha had told Miaundea nothing.

*It's been eight weeks, Ton. Have you considered communicating with her? Maybe ask her to lunch or something?*

Ton sat up abruptly. "No!" *Absolutely not!*

*Why? Wouldn't you like to make peace with her?*

*Why should I make peace with her? She isn't a part of my life. I don't intend to see her again, and even if I did, what good would it do me? She doesn't want to see me, not really, and if she does, then she has no business being engaged to Bray. Either way, I've had it with her.*

*Why are you afraid?*

*I'm afraid she's going to arouse me. I've spent the last eight weeks fighting hard to put her out of my mind. I've tortured myself enough; I don't want to think about her! And I don't want to be humiliated all over again!*

*Does the thought of her still really excite you that much?* Ausha asked in surprise.

Ton shook his head and shrugged impatiently. *I don't know. To tell you the truth, I hardly think about her anymore. I can't seem to think about her without thinking of Bray, and those thoughts certainly don't excite me.*

*Then why are so worried? You don't have to be intimate friends with her, but it might make things more comfortable between the two of you and those who are friends with you both, like Teren and Deia, if you establish a relationship of civility.*

*But what would I say to her?*

*You know her. Ask her about something that interests her.*

*But what? You think I know her, but I don't. And she doesn't know me, not really. We rarely discussed anything personal, and somehow it just wouldn't seem right discussing politics after everything that happened.*

*Then discuss what happened.*

*If we discuss what happened, I'll probably kill her!*

*You don't have to get angry. Just tell her that you resent what she did and why. Maybe once you get past that and try to understand each other, the two of you can be somewhat cordial.*

Counselor Brunel had suggested the same thing, and Ton couldn't help but be troubled. Maybe seeing Miaundea was the only way he could ever hope to put his affair with her behind him for good, and yet, he honestly didn't want to see her. *I don't know, Ausha, I just don't know. I guess I'll just have to think about it.* He doubted he and Miaundea could ever understand each other.

## Chapter 23: THE DREADED MEETING

Braysel spent his first weeks of work on the *Glautel Monsa* with the three men in his flight crew, rigorously preparing to use the spirit dimension formula in flight. Months of thought control training, flight simulation, maneuvering exercises in the armed shuttle, and practice moving themselves with the formula were required before Braysel's crew could actually use the formula to power an armed shuttle.

The members of Braysel's crew were the youngest of the forty-eight pilots, navigators, engineers, and telepathy scientists that comprised the two new squadrons, chosen more for their strong mind power than for their technical experience. They spent most of their time doing stringent thought control exercises. The most exciting and dangerous aspect of using the spirit dimension formula was that the pilot would operate the ship by thinking. A microsecond of uncontrolled thought could send the ship hurling into a star, set it too deep into the orbit of a planet, ram it into other ships in the squadron, transport it into the middle of an asteroid, or drop it into enemy territory. Braysel knew the thought control training was necessary, but it was exhausting and he hated it, and he was anxious to move on to the actual body maneuvers with the spirit dimension formula.

Braysel missed Miaundea more than he had believed he would. He didn't think he could bear an entire year of separation and often considered taking a few days of leave to go see her, but always decided against it. He was afraid that if he saw her, he would be unable to leave her.

He corresponded with Mauya, and with every commudisc he received from her, he hoped to receive the assurance that his parents were softening. So far Mauya had communicated nothing of his parents. Braysel sent commudiscs to his parents often, telling them what he could of his life without mentioning his work, but he never received any sort of reply. He only hoped a year would be long enough to gain the support he needed from his family.

Braysel sent a commudisc to Maurek every two weeks, but Maurek refused to respond. Braysel wanted to communicate with Maurek telepathically but didn't dare. He didn't blame Maurek for hating him and wondered if they would ever be friends again.

Eight weeks after his arrival on the *Glautel Monsa*, Braysel waited restlessly in his cabin for telepathic communication from Miaundea. They took turns communicating every two weeks, and although such communication was expensive, it was worth it. Finally he felt the customary transmission from the relay touch his mind and accepted Miaundea's communication eagerly.

The tone of her transmission was tender. *Hello, Bray.*

*Angel . . . I wish I could be there with you.*

*So do I.*

*Have you seen Mauya?*

*Yes, but nothing.*

*Nothing?*

*Nothing.* Miaundea's thoughts paused. *I'm afraid she isn't having much success.*

*Or she isn't trying. She wants me to quit the Fleet and come home.*

*Have you ever considered it?*

*Do you want me to?*

*I only asked if you had considered it.*



*I can't, Miaundea. I have work to do. Important work. Somehow they'll just have to understand.*

*Can't you tell me what you're doing?*

*I wish I could.* Braysel remembered the intimacy of her spirit interlaced with his and craved a complete union. *You'll understand soon . . . I hope, very soon.*

*Have you received your notice of leave yet?*

*No . . . nothing.*

Neither communicated anything for several seconds. *You'll never believe what I did yesterday,* Miaundea communicated carefully.

*What?*

*I secured an apartment in Mautysia.*

*You what?*

*I secured an apartment in Mautysia.*

*You aren't serious!*

*Of course I'm serious. It's to do research for my dissertation.*

*Haven't you already done most of the research for your dissertation?* As hard as he tried, Braysel had never felt comfortable with Miaundea's plan to organize a treatise on her combined Fleet/Pacifist ideology.

*It wasn't enough. I have to live there.* Miaundea told Braysel about her confrontation with the Coalition for the Integration of Novaunian Cultures and how it had inspired her to move her research to Mautysia.

*Do you really have to do it?*

*Yes, of course. Why does it bother you?*

*It doesn't bother me.*

*Yes it does.*

*All right, it does. I don't want you to move to Mautysia. I don't know why; I just don't.*

Miaundea's thoughts shook with laughter. *What, are you afraid they're going to convert me to pacifism?*

Braysel nearly laughed himself. *No, of course not.* In the beginning he had been awed by Miaundea's progressive ideas. Now he wasn't sure he liked them at all. Why couldn't she be a regular Fleet supporter? *I guess you have to do what you have to do.*

\* \* \*

Ton still didn't know if he could bear seeing Miaundea when she communicated with him two days after the VisionRun tournament and asked if he would like to meet for dinner sometime. He told her that he would think about it and agonized for days over whether or not he should accept her invitation. As bitter as he still was about some of the things she had said and done, he didn't feel that expressing his bitterness to her would accomplish anything useful, that it would, more than likely, just make them both angry at each other again. He didn't want to see her, but he felt there was something unfinished between them and knew that eventually he would have to see her, even though he had no idea what he would communicate. Doubting she really wanted to see him that badly and skeptical of her motives, he decided to wait to accept her invitation until she contacted him again.

She did contact him again, exactly a week later, and Ton agreed to meet her at a restaurant downtown at the seventeenth hour for dinner. Ton's habit was to arrive at all

appointments a few minutes early, but he decided to arrive at the restaurant five minutes late, partly to avoid a nervous wait, and partly to disconcert Miaundea.

Miaundea was already there when Ton arrived, sipping water and looking more composed than he felt. Seeing her again after nine weeks didn't inspire so much as a spark of arousal but, instead, provoked intense feelings of disgust. How could he have ever thought she was attractive?

She noticed him when he was a few steps away from the table, her mouth curving into an agitated smile. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes glowed with restrained eagerness and uncertainty. Ton wasn't sure how to interpret her reaction, whether she was excited to see him, or whether she was just nervous. That she could be excited to see him in her fiancé's absence offended his sense of propriety, and he was more disgusted than ever. He seated himself coolly in a chair across the table from her.

"Hello, Ton," Miaundea said tentatively. "I've missed you."

"I find that extremely difficult to believe."

Miaundea averted her eyes. "You're still angry."

"Is that why you wanted to see me today? To find out if I'm still angry?"

Miaundea stared at the table, unable to reply.

Ton was becoming more and more irritated by the second. "Why did you want to see me?"

Miaundea shook her head quickly, still not looking at him.

"Why?" Ton demanded.

"I . . . I'm not sure. I guess I just wanted to find out how you're doing and . . . and I wanted to assure myself that it's over between us."

Ton couldn't believe that even she had such gall. "Oh, it's over, I assure you."

Miaundea nodded quickly, finally looking at him directly. "Yes, it is." Ton wasn't sure, but he thought that the gleam in her eyes was one of triumph. She hesitated. "Ton, you have to believe me. I never wanted to hurt you."

"The least you could have done, Miaundea, was tell me about your engagement in private. After everything that passed between us, you owed me at least that. But instead, I had to stand there and be humiliated in front of your entire family!"

Miaundea nodded in acquiescence. "I'm sorry. It never even occurred to me that you were offended by the way I announced my betrothal."

Ton threw his arms into the air. "How could it not have occurred to you?"

"Ton, I'm still in shock that you took it all as personally as you did. I never imagined your feelings for me were so intense, that you would be so hurt."

"I wanted you to be my only lover! If that isn't intense feeling, I don't know what is!"

"I never understood that either."

"You just didn't believe me. I don't suppose I should be surprised."

"It wasn't that I didn't believe you. I just never believed you were capable of such . . . such deep emotion."

Her condescending attitude had never so outraged Ton. He clamped his teeth together, mentally rehearsing everything Counselor Brunel had told him to do when he felt provoked. Wait . . . Don't do or communicate anything . . . Breathe deeply . . . Ask yourself if it's really worth your time and energy to get angry . . . Try to look at the situation from the other person's point of view . . .

No, Miaundea wasn't worth his time and energy. She probably didn't realize that what she had said was so condescending. Treating him as a fourth class citizen was, after all, second nature to her. He could educate her to that fact, however, without yelling at her and calling her vulgar names. He waited there for at least another five seconds, attempting to gain further control. His silence made her uneasy, as if she weren't sure whether she should wait for him to speak or say something herself.

Finally Ton said, cool and dignified, "Shall we order?" Miaundea nodded and said nothing.

After they ordered, Ton said slowly, taking care not to raise his voice, "You never believed I was capable of such deep emotion. Do you have any idea how offensive that statement is?"

Miaundea drew back a little, as if slapped.

"I have no idea what species you think I belong to, but you certainly don't seem to think of me as a fellow human being. I have feelings, and talents, and passions, and people and things in this life that I value, and I resent being treated like a piece of trash. Ever since I've known you, Miaundea, you've acted so righteous, and so good, and too superior to meet me on any kind of level of equality, and frankly, I'm sick of it."

Miaundea's cheeks reddened. "How dare you! You accuse *me* of treating *you* like a piece of trash? After spending four months trying to manipulate me into being intimate with you? After four months of treating me as nothing more than your personal plaything? After four months of trying to undermine everything I value, and for what? A few moments of cheap pleasure? If you don't want to be treated like a piece of trash, stop acting like a piece of trash!"

Ton wanted to strangle her, throw her through the restaurant window, and hear glass shatter on the walk outside under her screams. His fingers twitched uncontrollably under the table, but somehow he managed to sit there and force himself to remain composed.

"If I remember correctly," Ton finally said, "you were flattered by my advances. You even encouraged them. I distinctly remember you coming to the Pavilion to have dinner with me several nights a week, and I also remember a provocative birthday present. If you were so offended by the way I treated you, why did you continue seeing me? Why did you wait until that day under the willow tree to tell me why you couldn't be my lover?"

"If I so offended you, why did you continue pursuing me?" Miaundea countered.

"Feelings of affection have never been a criterion in my selection of lovers, and I've never treated a woman with any more contempt than she treated me."

"Well aren't you a perfect specimen of the human species?"

"If a person wants my respect, he or she has to earn it."

"So a person has to earn your respect, and in turn, you do absolutely nothing to earn his. I didn't think that even you were capable of such supreme arrogance, Ton."

"Oh, so I'm arrogant for requiring a person to earn my respect and you're simply taking what's due you. What? Do you really think I'm so incapable of earning someone's respect? Is my respect worth so little?"

"You certainly never tried to earn my respect."

"That isn't true. Somewhere along the line, I began thinking you were different from the others, and I did try to treat you with as much admiration and affection as I felt. I hoped you would think as highly of me as I did of you, but I guess that was never possible. I think I understood the moment I discovered I wasn't even good enough to marry."

Miaundea's eyes flashed with exasperation. "You're being overly sensitive! I never told you that you weren't good enough to marry, only that we didn't have the right things in common!"

"You said you wished I was a man you could marry. Do you know how condescending that sounds? You made it sound as if I have some terminal flaw, as if marrying me would be a debasement."

"And just why should you care? You've never felt anything but disdain for the institution of marriage!"

"So why couldn't you have made that point then? Maybe answered my question by saying something like, 'To be honest with you Ton, I've never thought about marriage to you because you never acted like you were interested in getting married.' That answer would have been valid and to the point, and it wouldn't have been so infuriatingly snobbish. Or you could have said, 'We fight too much and it would never work.' Or, 'I want to marry a man who shares my religion.'"

Miaundea rolled her eyes. "This is ridiculous. You're arguing over technicalities."

Ton shook his head. "No. You've always held the attitude that you're better than I am, that you're more refined, more intellectual, more morally superior, more worthy of respect. You've proved it to me time after time after time."

"You are such a hypocrite! You always act so intellectual and scholarly, belittling everything I believe that doesn't correspond to your idea of right, including my own planet, this planet that has given you money, a job, friends, and protection!"

"I'm the hypocrite! I'm not the one who lied and professed feelings I didn't have!"

"I never lied to you about anything!"

"You obviously never loved me, and you certainly never needed me. I'm not sure there's ever been a time in your life when you really needed someone, but if there was, that someone was never me. Oh, I supposedly needed you, all right. You're so good and so moral and so righteous and so strong—you're just what I needed to reform me, to make me into everyone's idea of a decent person."

Their food arrived, but they hardly noticed. "A decent person? You're the most disgusting of liars! Your whole existence on this planet is a lie! I know you were the plant on the *Sovereign* and that you double-crossed King. You've lied to everyone, especially to Teren, one of the people who cares about you the most!"

"All right, Ms. Honesty. Let's discuss Teren for a minute. I *was* hired to steal the spirit dimension formula and manipulate him to his death. Did it never occur to you that it was only by deceiving him that I was able to save his neck? And that in the process, I made myself a white, shining target?"

Miaundea face suddenly paled, and she could say nothing.

"The universe suddenly becomes quite a bit more complicated, now, doesn't it?"

Neither one of them spoke for many minutes. Ton glared at Miaundea, and Miaundea moved the food around on her plate with her fork, finally dropping the fork with a bitter sigh. "Well, I guess we've established that we can never respect, trust, or even like each other."

Another minute passed, and Miaundea looked up at Ton, shaking her head weakly. "I really never wanted it to be this way, Ton."

Ton suddenly thought it was shameful that he couldn't respect, trust, or like a girl he had once wanted as an intimate companion. What was wrong with them? Why were they

so determined to treat each other cruelly? “I never wanted it to be this way either,” he said in resignation.

Miaundea’s face trembled. “When I told you I loved you, I meant it, or at least I thought I did. If I’m guilty of anything, it’s misunderstanding my own feelings. I don’t know anymore what I really felt.”

Ton looked at her ponderingly. “Maybe you were mistaking feelings of lust and romance for love?”

Miaundea looked at him in surprise, then after a moment, nodded slowly, her expression still curious. “Something like that. Whatever I felt, I liked you and was concerned about you. I’m not sure ‘infatuation’ is even a noble enough term to describe what I felt. Maybe ‘affection’ or ‘immature love’ would fit better.” She paused thoughtfully. “No, not immature, incipient.”

Ton nodded. In a strange way, he actually understood what she was trying to say, and the anger he felt about her lying disappeared.

“Bray burst into my life with no warning whatsoever, and I was as shocked by what happened as you were. You have to believe me, I never wanted to hurt you, and I’m sorry you had to find out the way you did. It really was insensitive of me not to tell you privately, and I’m sorry I haven’t always treated you with the decency you deserve. I’ve admitted as much to myself many times, but you always made me feel so powerless, and I guess disdain was just my best defense. You always acted so cold and cynical, and I honestly never thought anything I ever said or did could offend you. I was wrong, and I’m sorry.”

Ton shrugged, barely. “I guess I’ve never hesitated to look for opportunities to offend people. I don’t suppose I should be surprised that you would think I’m incapable of being offended.” He stared at his plate. “I treated you with inexcusable violence in Launarda and at your parents’ home that First Day. It was wrong, but I lost control and couldn’t stop myself. If you hadn’t run away from me that first time, I would have hurt you, and if I’d remained on that deck another ten seconds, I would have hurt you then too. I’m sorry. I’ve never been in a position where I’ve wanted to hurt someone I care about. I’ve spent my entire adult life learning how to save lives and relieve pain, and seeing this violent, ugly side of myself has really made me understand the meaning of shame.” He ventured a look at her. “I’m sorry, Miaundea.”

Miaundea nodded a little, her expression one of forgiveness and compassion. Ton thought at that moment that she looked very beautiful, but oddly, he didn’t regret that she hadn’t been his lover. It wouldn’t have been right for her, and it wouldn’t have been right for him either. He had often thought in the past nine weeks just how stupid and suicidal making the colonel’s daughter the object of his advances had been, and he was relieved that nothing had happened. He certainly wouldn’t make love to her now, even if her father wasn’t an issue and even if she begged him.

A minute passed, and Miaundea said softly, “You’re so different, Ton. Like a stranger. I wish now that I had tried to really know you. I think we could have been good friends.”

They sat there motionless for a moment, then slowly began eating in silence. Miaundea was nearly finished when she asked curiously, “Why did Ausha come with you that day to my parents’ house?”

“I wanted her to come, and she didn’t feel comfortable spending the day with anyone else. Our other friends were either working or out of town. I asked your mother first.”

Miaundea was taken aback. "Did she spend the rest of the day with you? Even after . . . after everything that happened?"

Ton nodded and took his last bite of meat. Miaundea's curiosity didn't surprise him much; seeing Ausha with him at her parents' home that day probably had seemed strange to her. Her curiosity didn't irritate him, but still, he had no intention of giving her any details. He reached into a pocket and took out a small paper bag. He quickly unfolded the bag, set it on the table, and scraped all of the fat he had trimmed off of his meat into it.

Miaundea's eyes were immediately drawn to Ton's new activity. She watched him, perplexed. "What in the universe are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm saving my scraps."

She looked at him strangely. "Why?"

"For a treat for Anenka. She loves this stuff."

"Anenka?"

"My dog."

"When did you get a dog?"

Ton folded the top of the bag and set it aside. "Two months ago."

"But why?"

"Ausha gave her to me."

"That's kind of an odd present."

"No it isn't. She knew that I liked dogs and that I had two on Earth."

"Do you even have time for a dog?"

"Sure. She goes nearly everywhere with me."

"But you work all the time."

"I don't work all the time."

Realization seemed to strike Miaundea all at once. "Ausha's more than just a colleague, isn't she? I mean, you're really close to her, aren't you?"

Ton nodded. He could see that he had tossed her just enough bait to make her ravenously hungry for more detail. He didn't think her curiosity was inspired by jealousy, at least not to any great extent, but it was perhaps inspired by pride. Ton wondered what was charging through her head, why his friendship with Ausha would unsettle her, and it was all he could do to keep from laughing.

Ton sat there for many moments without speaking. Miaundea was in agony wanting to ask him more about Ausha, but she didn't dare. Finally Ton said, "I'll answer your question, before you make a fool of yourself and ask it. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but Ausha is a good friend, not a lover and not even an amorous aspiration."

Miaundea's face relaxed, and she smiled. "Not even an amorous aspiration? I'm sorry, but I have a hard time believing you could look at her and keep your thoughts so pure. She's beautiful, or haven't you noticed?" Miaundea's expression was playful, but her voice was tense.

So she was jealous, not of his friendship with Ausha now, something she knew nothing about, but of Ausha's beauty and what his intentions might have been for Ausha in the past. Beautiful women had always irritated Miaundea, Ton assumed because she didn't believe she was beautiful herself. This insecurity about her appearance was one element of Miaundea's personality Ton had never been able to understand.

Ton's voice softened. "Ausha is very beautiful." Miaundea could choose to believe his intentions for Ausha were pure or not. He didn't care either way, and there was no way in

the universe he was going to confide in her about anything, especially his perplexing feelings concerning Ausha.

“Oh . . . so you’re finally admitting it! I remember your telling me once that you didn’t think she was attractive.”

Ton shrugged. “I lied.”

Miaundea hesitated. “Did Ausha tell you we communicated?”

“Of course.”

His quick response seemed to surprise Miaundea. Before she could ask him anything else, Ton asked her, “Did you get to meet Bray’s parents?”

Miaundea nodded.

“What did they think of you?”

“I’m not sure, really. They aren’t at all happy that my father’s a colonel. I think they look at me as a bad influence on Bray. They’re sick about his joining the Fleet and want him back.”

“I never thought, not in a million years, that you would ever marry someone like Bray.”

Miaundea smiled at him knowingly. “Because he is, as you say, an ‘irreparable flaw?’”

Ton nodded. “How are you going to manage it?”

Miaundea’s eyes shone with assurance. “Bray’s family can never have any power over me, because I fully intend on giving my children their rightful pacifist heritage.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Of course I’m serious. Bray has a beautiful heritage, and, contrary to popular opinion, it blends perfectly with my own Fleet heritage.”

“What does Bray think of all this?”

“He doesn’t know whether to agree with me or not. He will though, eventually, if only because he will want to prevent our children from going to his family to learn it.”

“What if when they grow up they decide to become pacifists and begin associating with their extended family?”

“It doesn’t matter to me, as long as they never reject Bray, sever contact with him, or regard him as anything but the honorable man he is.”

Ton hesitated. “What makes you so sure that Bray isn’t deranged? Seriously.”

Miaundea didn’t seem surprised by Ton’s question. “Do you think he’s deranged?”

“I’m not sure,” Ton answered honestly. “He says he’s doing what God tells him to do, as if he would have really rather remained in Mautysia and never joined the Fleet. Then other things he says and does make me believe he wants to be in the Fleet and wants it fiercely. There are things about him that disturb me, and it finally hit me, weeks ago. He’s lying to himself about something.”

Miaundea frowned, appearing almost offended. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it almost seems that he’s using what he perceives is God’s desire for him as an excuse, almost as if he thinks that God’s approval will somehow make him not look like such a son of Abomination for scorning his family.”

“And just what do you know about God?” Miaundea said defensively. “What makes you so sure God wouldn’t have a great mission for Bray in the Fleet?”

“If there is a God, then I don’t suppose Bray is any less worthy than anyone else to have a divinely inspired mission. That’s not my point. My point is, if he wants to be a part

of the Fleet, why not just take the attitude that he wants to be part of the Fleet? Why is he so afraid to admit that to his family and to himself? Why does he think it's so much fun to outrage Mautysia one day, then feel so grossly ashamed about it the next? If it was so wrong for him to go to Mautysia with me in his uniform, what else will he decide later he's wrong about?

"If God did direct him to join the Fleet, as he leads people to believe, then why doesn't God direct his family—God-fearing people themselves—to understand it and approve it? If God didn't direct him to join the Fleet, then where are these strange voices that are inside of him coming from? It seems to me that if he's interpreting his own desire to join the Fleet as God's will, then there is something seriously wrong somewhere."

"Your questions are insightful and valid," Miaundea said slowly. "There's a lot I don't understand myself."

"But you don't think he's deranged."

"I do think Bray wants to be in the Fleet, and I also think he's doing the best he can to do what he perceives as being right. I believe his parents are doing the same and that they are right about some things and that Bray is right about some things, which is why Bray's involvement in the Fleet is such a dilemma. Whatever happens, I'll support Bray." She flickered her eyebrows in a playful way. "I'm sure there are many who think I'm deranged, and everyone has always believed that my father's deranged, even before he approved this marriage."

Miaundea's comment about her father didn't disturb Ton, only because he had made the same observation himself long ago and had decided that only a brilliant psychotic like Colonel Quautar could ever successfully defeat a brilliant psychotic like Sanel King. He asked, "Do you really think your father's giving approval for your marriage was so out of the ordinary? I could understand if Bray was a scoundrel and a mercenary, but he isn't, and he makes a decent living. I can't believe your father is the only man on twenty-one hundred Novaunian worlds who would approve of Bray."

"I don't either, but I don't think you understand what a serious problem Bray has. I don't doubt that my father is one in a hundred thousand. A Novaunian father would rather marry his daughter to a man with no family than to a man estranged from his family, especially a powerful family like the Jeldaun Nalaurev organization. If Bray doesn't reconcile with his family before the wedding, things could get very ugly."

"How?"

"If we want to be independent and have complete control over our children, Bray will have to legally separate from his family and form his own family organization."

"Why is that so ugly? He's already separated from them."

"It would be extremely difficult for Bray emotionally for one thing, and it may be that the court wouldn't allow it, that it would insist on some sort of compromise that neither side could really live with. I'm not sure this sort of separation has ever even been done before."

"You don't think his family would fight it, do you?"

"Yes I do. His parents have already made it clear that they expect Bray's children to embrace their pacifist heritage. They will fight for any shred of control they can get over our children."

"That's insane."



“No it isn’t, not really. The family unit, from the huge family organizations to the couple just married, is the foundation of our government and culture. We’re educated in our families, we’re taught religion in our families, we’re given ordinances in our families, and we study and celebrate the history of our families. Our ancestral lines are meticulously recorded, and tremendous care is given to passing family traditions and values to the next generation. Our families give us history and identity, and to withdraw from one’s family would be the ultimate effrontery. From the point of view of Bray’s parents and grandparents and perhaps even the law, Bray would be stealing a family line, an entire generation, from its honorable, rightful origin. You see, they aren’t only worried about losing Bray, they’re worried about losing an entire family line.”

“And you actually condone breaking from his family like that?”

Miaundea looked at Ton in surprise. “And you don’t?”

“It isn’t for me to judge, but it seems that you and Bray are fighting a huge tradition, a tradition you both believe in.”

“That’s true. But if Bray has to do it, he has to do it.”

“And you’ll marry him anyway.” Ton still couldn’t believe Miaundea would marry into such an imperfect, explosive situation.

Miaundea nodded resolutely. “Bray is the man I love and want to be with forever. And it isn’t just Bray.” Her eyes were intense with zeal. “Passions have been awakened within me that I never knew were there. I’ve spent the weeks since I saw you last studying the relationship between Novaunian pacifism and militarism. I’m organizing a dissertation on my combined Fleet/Pacifist ideology, and I’m moving to Mautysia for half a year or so to complete my study.”

“What about your job at the Agency?”

“I’m reducing my hours to two days a week, Second Day and Third Day. I’ve already found an apartment, which I’ll share with three other women. I’ll find a part-time job or two, take a history class at the Mautysian Institute of Humanities, socialize with my roommates and others I meet, and attend Verzaunian Devotional. In a couple of months, I’ll spend a number of evenings attending town and city council meetings all over Verzaun.”

“I think you’re right. You’re just as deranged as Bray.”

Miaundea laughed a little, picking up her glass and pressing it to her lips. Ton could think of nothing else to say to her as she sipped her water in silence. They sat there for at least a minute, growing more and more uncomfortable with each other. They had said all they had wanted to say and had learned all they had wanted to learn, but neither was sure how to gracefully leave.

Finally Ton said, “Well, I don’t think you’ll kill Bray with your lust.”

Miaundea nearly choked on her water, then burst out laughing. Ton smiled and arose, picking up the bag of meat scraps. “See you around,” he said, knowing he probably wouldn’t see her at all.

Miaundea nodded as Ton turned away from the table. Her face was still animated, but her eyes were sad.

## Chapter 24: PARTNERS

Ton drove home and went immediately to Anenka's room. He knelt down right inside the door, and she jumped on him, her tail wagging frantically. Ton hugged and petted her. "Hi, girl! I have a surprise for you." He turned the bag over and let the meat scraps drop to the floor next to his knee. They disappeared in one savoring bite.

Anenka rolled contentedly to her back and allowed Ton to scratch her stomach. "Well, she's still a self-righteous little snob, but I can't hate her. She's just as crazy as Bray, so I guess they'll be good together. I sure don't want her anymore. It's kind of a relief, you know?"

Ton sighed. "Who do I want now though? Sex is impossible on this planet, so I guess it's better not to want anyone. It's easier just not to think about it." Anenka rolled back over, scooted into his lap, and nuzzled affectionately up to his neck. He scratched her hard and smiled. "You're my only lady now, yes, my beautiful, devoted, loyal lady."

Moments passed, and Ton looked at Anenka's puzzled eyes in surprise. "What's that about Ausha? I know you love Ausha, and she is very beautiful. Why can't I want her? I don't know. I ask myself that all the time. Maybe I'm just incredibly attracted to her and am having all of these conflicting feelings because I'm afraid of being rejected."

Ton shook his head grimly. "Ausha would never have me, not as a lover. I've never been so attracted to a woman that the thought of being rejected by her made me ill, but then I've never known anyone like Ausha." His voice became tender. "We understand each other, and her eyes are so passionate and intelligent, and her skin is so creamy and soft. How could being with her be anything but pure ecstasy?" He felt a sharp stab of nausea at the very thought.

Ton shook his head quickly. "No, Ausha and I aren't for each other, not like that anyway. And yes, she told me she would come over tonight. She's out with that character Andrel now. I know you don't know Andrel. He's a nice enough guy I suppose, and he's insane about her. I saw them dance together at a party last week, so I know. I feel kind of sorry for him, though. Ausha has no serious affection for him. I hope she lets him know gently and doesn't tease him too long. I have a feeling she'll end it with him soon."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. She is too sad sometimes. She didn't used to be that way, though. She was bursting with energy and excitement all the time. Even when she was in surgery, she sparkled. Since her brother died, she's slowed her life way down, and I'm not sure that's bad. No, I don't think she'll waste much time on Andrel."

Ton stood up, slapped his thigh and whistled, and walked toward the living room. "C'mon, girl, c'mon!" Ton sank into his recliner and opened his mind to InterMind News, and Anenka climbed into the recliner with him and lay on his chest.

Ton had never asked Colonel Quautar about his missing medical history disc, not thinking it was important, but Colonel Quautar, himself, had informed Ton that his agents had taken the disc from his apartment after observing Daniel Stewart entering Ton's apartment and tampering with the disc. Colonel Quautar's agents had searched the apartment for dangerous items and had taken the disc in question to him.

Colonel Quautar had then discovered that Daniel Stewart had planted an Earth broadcast of Ton and Braysel's day in Mautysia on the disc. The colonel had refused to let Ton see the broadcast, but Ton had been unnerved enough by the information that millions of Earthons had seen it. Colonel Quautar's agents had immediately put Stewart under

surveillance after discovering him in Ton's apartment. Their finding Stewart had eased Ton's fears somewhat, but not completely, because the colonel was certain there was still another spy, the one who had been in Ton's room in Launarda.

After three hours of relaxing with InterMind and waiting for Ausha, Ton drifted to sleep there in his chair, later awakened by the sound of Anenka whining and scratching the door and a telepathic summons from Ausha, *May I come in, Ton? Please!*

Ton forced himself awake in an instant. *Sure.*

Before he had time to slide out of his chair and meet Ausha at the door, she was dropping herself onto the couch and leaning her face into her hands with a moan. She rubbed her temples for a moment, then ran her fingers through her hair hard and flung herself against the back of the couch, shaking her head at Ton in exasperation. *He asked me to marry him. Andrel asked me to marry him!*

Ton sat on the edge of his chair, dumbfounded.

Ausha burst into shrill, bitter laughter. *You don't believe it either.*

*He really asked you to marry him?* Ton couldn't believe it. Was Andrel really that much of a masochist? Certainly he had no delusions about Ausha's feelings for him. Or did he just not know how she felt? How could he not know? And if he didn't know what she felt for him, then why in the universe had he asked her to marry him before discovering her feelings?

*He had no business asking me to marry him, none! There's no closeness between us; I hardly even see him anymore. He told me he had wanted to ask me weeks ago, but still! He's nice, but we didn't have any closeness between us then either. Why does he have to be so sweet and so stupid?*

Ton didn't know for sure what marriage should be, but he knew it wasn't worshipful awe in one person and contempt and frustration in the other. He would have felt sorry for Andrel had he not been so embarrassed by his ignorant eagerness.

Ausha shook her head in bewilderment. *What is it with these men? This is the third time this has happened, and the third time I've been baffled. It seems to me that marriage is a natural step when two people are in love and want to share their life. When the question of marriage comes up, it shouldn't be a surprise to either person. Am I just crazy?*

*Do you think either Bryaun or Tauna will be surprised when the question of marriage comes up?*

Ausha smiled and shook her head.

*And no one who knows them will be surprised either. Personally, I think Andrel's an idiot. If nothing else, he should've found out your feelings before he even mentioned the topic of marriage.*

Ausha nodded in relief.

Ton smiled playfully. *Face it Ausha, you're gorgeous, you're brilliant, and you're exceptionally talented. You're near perfection in a woman and utterly irresistible. These men can't help but be in love with you.*

Ausha laughed.

*All right, so you have your faults. Maybe you're not perfect, but you're still irresistible.*

Ausha slid off the couch, over to Ton's chair, and leaned against his leg. Ton slipped to the floor next to Ausha, and she gazed at him in comfort. *I'm nearly as flattered as I am angry. I guess I just want to understand.*

Ton shrugged. *Maybe you ought to be more careful about who you see formally more than once.*

Ausha looked at Ton in dismay. *You think I teased Andrel too much?*

*I don't know. Do you think you did?*

*He knew I was seeing other men besides him!*

*Maybe he didn't. Did he ever actually see you out with anyone else?*

*I don't know, Ausha communicated, troubled.*

*If he didn't, he may have never deep-down believed you were seeing other people, and you went out with him more than just one or two times. That might be why he thought you were more interested than you were. If you really want to keep this from happening again, you need to end it the moment you know it isn't going anywhere.*

*I'm not sure I understand.*

*If a man asks you for an engagement and you really aren't that interested, tell him no.*

*That would be horribly rude!*

*And it would be better to lead him to believe you're interested when you're not?*

*No, I guess not.*

*It would be a waste of your time and his. Then if you go out with someone and don't want to see him again, don't accept another invitation. Don't accept another unless you think he's a possibility for marriage.*

*But I haven't met anyone in four years that has interested me that much! Sometimes I like to just go out and have fun.*

Ton shook his head resolutely. *Fun, frivolous engagements are out. That's how you got in trouble with Andrel. Think of it this way. Most of the men who ask you out are going to be in their middle twenties to early thirties, which, on this planet, is rather old to be unmarried. Very few of those men are going to be interested in frivolous engagements. They're looking for wives.*

*You're right, of course. How could I have been so stupid? So stupid and naïve all these years!*

*You aren't stupid, Ausha. You just don't want what they want right now. We're Dr. Hovaus's slaves! It would be difficult to maintain a marriage while you're apprenticing, even if you found someone you wanted to marry. Your mind isn't geared to it right now. There's nothing wrong with that.*

Ausha's face trembled, more distressed than ever. *But my mind has never been geared to it. And there hasn't been anyone in years that I've even been remotely interested in. Ton, I've had four opportunities to get married, four, and none of them have worked out. What's wrong with me?*

*There's nothing wrong with you! You haven't wanted to get married, so you haven't. Something would be wrong with you if you had married one of those men!*

Ausha shook her head quickly, choking back tears. *It's strange not to want to get married, to not want to be with a man in that way. I liked all of them, but none of them excited me. Maybe I'm being unrealistic, I don't know. Maybe I'm expecting too much of marriage.*

Ton shook his head adamantly. *No. If you're going to be this man's lover for the rest of your life, then he'd better excite you. Marrying someone who didn't would be unrealistic, at least by my definition.*

*Then I must be completely passionless.*

So that was it. She didn't think she understood physical passion and this was the reason she believed she wasn't married yet. Ton felt very strange. These were emotions he couldn't comprehend anyone having, even Ausha.

*But you did want to get married once. You must have felt physical desire for Shaun on some level.*

Ausha's distress plummeted to depression. He had apparently communicated the wrong thing, and that made him feel terrible. He reached out his hand to gently rub her shoulder, hoping that would compensate a little. *I'm sorry.*

Ausha relaxed a little and smiled, barely, reaching forward to caress his cheek. *You shouldn't feel bad for asking the obvious question. My love for Shaun was very innocent. That's probably why he fell in love with Nanci before we could get around to getting married.*

*Didn't you ever kiss him?*

Ausha nodded.

*I mean really kiss him.*

Ausha frowned. *I don't understand.*

*Kisses with the whole mouth, Ausha.*

Ausha shook her head slowly. *No. That, well, that wouldn't have been right. We weren't married.*

Ton could do nothing but stare at her.

Ausha sighed. *You really think I'm a prude.*

*No, Ausha, Ton finally managed to say. Oddly enough, I don't. If you don't intend to be intimate with a man, then it probably is better if you don't kiss him that way.*

*But I haven't even wanted to! I really am a prude.*

*Tell me, Ausha. Have you ever seen a man that was so handsome he made you burn with excitement, that the mere sight of him made your heart pound so fiercely that you could hardly breathe? It doesn't have to be someone you know, not even someone you've ever met. It may even be someone you hate. I'm not referring to love, Ausha, or even infatuation, but gut animal passion. Has there ever been anyone like that? Anyone. Ever.*

Ausha lowered her eyes and blushed.

*There has been someone!*

Ausha was more embarrassed than ever. *Please don't make me tell you, please! You'll laugh.*

Ton was determined to discover the identity of Ausha's mystery passion. *I won't laugh, I promise. Who was it? Who is it? If you don't tell me, I'll assume it's Tervel!*

*It is Tervel. Now are you happy?*

*I don't believe you. Come on, Ausha.*

Ausha laughed nervously and shook her head at him in playful irritation. Finally she relaxed in resignation. *When I was eighteen, some friends and I went to Latanza III for a week, just to see everything and have fun. While we were there, we went to a music concert. She stopped, unable to continue.*

*What kind of music? Who was the performer?*

Ausha shook her head quickly, her cheeks as red as ever.

Ton suddenly understood. *It was the performer, wasn't it! Who was he?*

Ausha's eyes were feverish. *He was magnificent! And the way he danced was so erotic, and his music was so sultry.*

*Who!* Ton demanded.

*It was that Earthon man who plays the trumpet—*

"Kent Diamond!" Ton exploded in ecstasy.

*Don't laugh. Please don't laugh!*

*Why should I laugh? Half the young women in the galaxy are as hot for him as you are.* Ton smiled. *My diagnosis? You're perfectly normal. You just haven't found the right man yet.*

*You really think so, Doctor?*

*I know so, Doctor.*

Ausha hugged Ton in happiness and relief. Ton stood up and pulled Ausha up with him, slipped into his shoes, and led her to the door, telepathically summoning Anenka to come with them.

*Where are we going?* Ausha asked.

*For a drive,* Ton communicated mysteriously. *I have a surprise for you.* They took the stairs to the ground floor, hurried to the walk where Ton's car was parked, and slid into the car with Anenka between them. Ton drove through the city to the coast and headed north, while Ausha sat dying to know where he was going. Once they were out of the city, Ton pushed a button to lower the car's top, slipped a Kent Diamond disc into the drive, and turned it up to heart-stopping volume. Ausha screamed out in surprise and excitement. Ton laughed and increased the car's speed.

They sped along the lonely coast, Ton rocking his head and shoulders with the beat of the music and tapping the dashboard and Ausha gripping the armrests and listening breathlessly. After five songs, Ton turned toward the Gulf and stopped the car when they arrived at the beach. The car hissed as Ton lowered it to the ground. He turned off the lights, but left the music playing. Anenka jumped out and trotted to the water.

Ausha shook her head at Ton in amazement. *I can't believe you, Ton. All the times I've ridden with you everywhere, and you've never played any Kent Diamond music for me before tonight.*

Ton shrugged. *I didn't think you would like it.* Ausha laughed, and Ton smiled. They got out of the car and walked a little way down the beach. They turned to face each other, and Ton could see that she was still in a state of impassioned excitement. She looked more wild and beautiful than ever, and Ton suddenly felt sad.

For the first time since he had known her, he realized that she really would find someone to love and to marry, just as Miaundea had, and that everything between them would change. She wouldn't want to see him as much as she did now, and she wouldn't need him anymore. He couldn't bear the thought of her not being his companion, and the thought of her being another man's lover repelled him almost as much as the thought of her being his lover. The feelings baffled and infuriated him. He was going to leave Novaun anyway, so why should it matter? Why couldn't he just enjoy her companionship now and not worry about sex or her marrying or the future? How could he want her so desperately, yet not want her? Nothing made sense anymore.

Ausha moved closer to Ton and looked up at him in affection and curiosity. *What's the matter, Ton? What is it about me that unsettles you so much?*

*You don't unsettle me.*

*Yes I do. Not always, just sometimes. Like now. Something in you feels confused and upset, and it has to do with me, I know it does.*

Ton sighed. *There are things about our dealings with each other that unsettle me, nothing about you personally. I can't explain anything more than that.*

*Why not?* Ausha asked gently.

*Because I don't want you to be revolted by me.*

*I could never be revolted by you.*

*You're so different. I've told you things about myself that ought to make your skin crawl and your stomach turn inside out.*

Ausha smiled. *My stomach's fine, and my skin hasn't crawled yet.*

*Why? I've completely disgusted a good many people in my life, and none of them have known me nearly as well as you do.*

*Maybe that's why. Maybe I know you well enough to understand to some degree why you do some of the things you do and have some of the attitudes you have.* Ausha looked at Ton thoughtfully. *And it's not only that. There are things you've done and ways you act that don't really seem like you, that don't fit with the Ton I know. The fact that you think I should be revolted by certain things is proof enough that you've done a lot of things that are against your nature.*

Ausha was right. He loathed the violence he had seen in himself, and often he thought it was just part of his nature, something impossible to change. If he really were violent by nature, then those feelings wouldn't torment him so much. He would continue to have gruesome thoughts and perhaps even act them out without feeling an iota of shame or disgust.

But what about all the women he had been with? He thought his sexual behavior should revolt Ausha, but why? Did it really revolt him? His liaisons had never left him completely satisfied, which was what had compelled him on to the next woman, and the next, and he had always felt as much revulsion as pleasure, revulsion he had always assumed was for those women he had never respected and who had always held him in contempt. But why had he held those women in such contempt? They were no different from him, not really. Maybe the revulsion he had felt had been as much for himself. Did that mean sleeping with many women was against his nature? If it was, then what sort of sexual practices would be in harmony with his nature? He couldn't help but be deeply disturbed.

Ausha lightly squeezed his arm. *I told you about my secret passion for Kent Diamond. The least you can do is tell me what it is about me that unsettles you.*

Ton looked at her in dread, then erupted in vexation, *You're so beautiful, Ausha, and I can't figure out why the thought of making love to you fills me with horror and repugnance.*

Ausha regarded him in surprise. *Maybe you feel that way because it would be wrong.*

Ton shook his head adamantly. *No. That answer doesn't work. If it's so wrong, then why didn't the thought of making love to Miaundea make me sick?*

*Perhaps your perception has changed.*

*The thought of making love to you has always made me sick! It's too strange, Ausha. Beautiful women have never made me feel this way. I'll admit there have been beautiful women who haven't aroused me—Deia is certainly one of them—but all I've ever felt toward any of them has been indifference.*

Ausha gazed at Ton tenderly. *Maybe you're feeling this way because all of your affairs in the past have been cheap and superficial.* She shook her head knowingly. *And nothing between us has ever been cheap and superficial. Maybe you're afraid a sexual relationship would destroy our friendship and replace it with something shallow and ugly.*

Ton felt a confusion of emotions. His heart was warm with peace, as if he had found the right answer at last, at least in part, and, at the same time, he wondered if he was doomed to only physically enjoy women he despised. He communicated tentatively, *Have you ever thought about it? About you and me . . . lovers?*

*Honestly, it had never even occurred to me.*

Ton wasn't surprised, and for some reason, he didn't even feel rejected. *Do you . . . think I'm . . . attractive?*

Ausha smiled. *Yes, very.*

Ausha's answer paralyzed Ton with astonishment and rapture. Several moments passed, and he asked, puzzled. *Then how could it not have occurred to you?*

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

Ausha and her brutal practicality. Her feelings and observations seemed almost too simple and too obvious to be real.

Ausha looked at Ton in discomfort. *You really think I'm too practical?*

Ton smiled, feeling more serene than he had ever dreamed he could feel. *No one could ever accuse you of being a romantic, that's for sure.* He gazed at her, intensely curious. *So what am I to you, really? Do you think of me as a brother?*

Ausha frowned, pondering. Finally she shook her head. *No, not a brother. Bryaun and Danal are like brothers, but not you. Never you.*

Ton was completely bewildered now. *Then what?*

*You're, well . . .* Ausha looked at him in frustration at being unable define her feelings, then threw her arms up in helplessness. *You're my . . . partner.*

Ton burst into blissful laughter and embraced her vigorously.



## Chapter 25: CELL BOND

Two months after her wedding, Deia traveled to Launarda again to be with Paul on their birthday. During those two months Brys Vundaun had been convicted of charges of murder and marketeering on Manoure and sentenced to be executed. He was currently being held in an institution in Shalaun, where he was awaiting Sanel King's capture and trial. He would testify to his knowledge that Jovem Doshyr and Sanel King were the same person at King's trial, then be sent back to Manoure for his sentence. Brys and Eauva's children were living in their own home under the guardianship of one of Eauva's widowed aunts.

Deia was still angry with Brys and Eauva for what they had done and had been depressed for some time because of it, but all Paul could feel for them was empathy and pity. He didn't think what they had done was right, but having lived under Sanel's control himself, he understood what sort of terror had kept them silent.

Paul's hate for Sanel was dissipating, and he was beginning to think of him as a real person who had not always been evil. Paul had begun to cast off his hate only after hundreds of hours of counseling, communicating with members of his family, writing in his journal, and prayer.

Having built self-esteem and a new spiritual strength, Paul wanted to join the Holy Order of God and believed it was the right thing to do. Paul had not excluded Teren from his invitation, but Deia had decided to go to Launarda without Teren so that she could have some time alone with Paul. Because of the time difference, she and Teren had been able to celebrate her birthday on the correct date before she left. Teren had given her three rose bushes that he had ordered from Latanza III, and Ausha had promised to help him plant them before Deia returned to Shalaun.

Paul was the only member of Deia's family at the landing field in Launarda when she arrived Eighth Day morning. He embraced her vigorously. "Speak English to me, please speak English to me!"

"I don't know how to speak English anymore," Deia teased.

"Then you can get on that airbus and go right back to Jastray!"

"Seen any good Dane Santiano holodramas lately?" Paul loved those idiotic Dane Santiano spy melodramas.

Paul moaned. "I wish!" he said as they slipped into a taxi.

Deia knew better than anyone how Paul hated telepathy with its lack of privacy, especially since everyone he met always wondered whether he would be appointed the Doshyr heir. Paul felt this curiosity in people, which irritated him tremendously. Then to make matters worse, Paul could never successfully mask the fact that he did not feel as if he were a Novaunian or at home on Novaun, and those feelings made people uncomfortable because they didn't understand how a Novaunian could not feel like a Novaunian.

Paul was voraciously studying secular, religious, and family history, but even with all of his study, he could not make the history personal. Intellectually he knew that the people about whom he learned were his ancestors, but he did not feel it. Intellectually he knew that Patan and Yaulanda Doshyr were his grandparents, but as fond of them as he was, he could not feel that bond of family.

Deia knew that a great deal of the problem was that Paul had been born to be the Doshyr heir. Paul was confused about the heirship. He didn't think he wanted that responsibility, but he understood the family business and was comfortable with it, was interested in Novaunian law, and felt triumphant that he could have this position of power Sanel had coveted for so long. He didn't know, though, whether he was capable of being a competent high patriarch, and he didn't know whether anyone else considered him capable.

Paul didn't want to think about it, but no one would let him not think about it, especially Evelayna, who had the idealistic notion that she and Paul would together do for their family and for Novaun what their fathers should have done. Deia also believed that Paul was still grieving the death of their mother, and that, at the same time, he resented her for dying before she could teach him his Novaunian duty. Lena was the link connecting privileged Tryamazzan youth Paul Sheldon and Novaunian Great House heir Braudan Doshyr, and with that link destroyed, Paul didn't know if he would ever understand his place on Novaun or in the Doshyr family.

Deia gripped Paul's arm. "I have some wonderful news for you, Paul. I'm going to have a baby!"

"A baby?" Paul stared at her face, then her stomach, then her face again. "Really? Already?"

"Yes, really."

"You didn't want to wait for a while?"

"No, neither one of us did."

"Are you all right?"

Deia laughed. "Of course I'm all right! I'm pregnant, not terminally ill! It's all very exciting, but I'm always so tired. I can't play any difficult pieces anymore."

Paul and Deia continued discussing what was happening in their lives, the conversation eventually lingering on Paul's new, intense friendship with Evelayna. Paul felt more comfortable with Evelayna than with anyone in Launarda other than Adaum, but in many ways, she disturbed him.

"She's so strange, Deia. Sometimes I don't know what to think of her. She's dedicated her entire life to becoming a proxy-counselor to Grandfather. That wouldn't be so strange, but when I communicate with her, I feel nothing but that ambition. It's worse than obsession. The unfortunate thing about it is that Grandfather has already told her that he doesn't intend to make her a proxy-counselor, ever. I assume Grandfather will appoint Uncle Cherl's son Saum to take Aunt Eauva's place, and after him it will be Saum's son Kylem. Perhaps Grandfather would appoint Evelayna eventually, but her obsession really concerns him."

Deia frowned. "I always thought that Grandfather intended to make her a proxy-counselor. Was I mistaken, or has the situation changed?"

"I don't think you were mistaken. I think Grandfather intended it before he knew Sanel was still alive."

Paul's observation alarmed Deia. "Which means Grandfather thinks Sanel may have influence over Evelayna somehow."

Paul nodded slowly. "There are things that are never discussed and never even implied, but I can't stop myself from wondering if Sanel bound Evelayna's mind to his when she was a baby."

"Do you think Grandfather suspects that?"

“I think he would be a fool not to suspect it.”

“Then what about us?” Deia said, horrified. “What would have stopped him from doing it to us too?”

“Nothing,” Paul replied without emotion.

“Is there any way anyone can find out?”

“Not by any traditional methods. It won’t even show up on an Awareness monitor. It seems to me, however, that the binding telepathic thread would have to be visible in some form on the spirit dimension.”

“The spirit dimension formula . . .” Deia breathed.

Paul nodded. “I already suggested it to Grandfather.”

By this time, they had arrived at their grandparents’ home. Deia communicated with her grandparents for over an hour, took a nap, then went ice-skating with Paul and Evelayna on the estate’s small lake. Her grandfather gave Paul the Covenant the next day in Devotional, and the remainder of the visit passed in a pleasant way. Deia returned to Shalaun on Second Day evening, content.

Two weeks later, Colonel Quautar came to her home one evening and communicated with her and Teren. *Deia, I’ve been concerned for a long time that you, and maybe others, are in some way under telepathic control of your uncle.*

Teren moved to the edge of the couch. *That’s impossible! If Deia were under the influence of her uncle, she would never have agreed to come to Novaun!*

*That may be true; it may not be true,* the colonel communicated gently. *But there is no way we can know for sure until we test her. Fleet scientists have developed a way to detect the connecting thread using the Awareness monitor in conjunction with the spirit dimension formula.*

Deia could feel no fear, no panic, no relief, nothing. She communicated numbly, *Paul and I discussed this. If Sanel does control a cell in my brain, we need to know.*

Teren clutched Deia’s hand, gazing at the colonel in worry. *Has Paul been tested yet?*

*Yes. I just returned from Menaurea, and I’m relieved to tell you that Paul is completely free from telepathic suggestion from any outside source.*

Deia felt relieved too, but not completely. *And Evelayna?*

*Evelayna is free too.* Colonel Quautar paused. *Your Aunt Tashaura is not.*

Deia was too stunned and heartbroken to communicate anything. She couldn’t even weep.

*Are there any others?* Teren asked.

*We don’t know yet, but we’re preparing to conduct testing on young people your age in all of the major cities on Novaun. Major Austaun, the telepathy scientist who will do the test, is at the door.*

Teren quickly went to let Major Austaun into the house. Major Austaun entered, carrying an Awareness monitor. Teren brought a dining chair into the living room and positioned it in front of Deia, then walked around the couch and stood behind her.

Major Austaun sat down and telepathically activated the Awareness monitor so that its beam encompassed Deia’s head. Then he, Colonel Quautar, and Teren together executed the spirit dimension formula, instantly disappearing from Deia’s sight.

In moments, the three men reappeared on the physical dimension. Deia felt as if she would suffocate with terror. The identical expressions of grief on their faces could only mean one thing. Sanel possessed control of a cell in her brain.

Deia lifted her trembling hand to her mouth. "It isn't true," she whispered, her vision blurring. "It can't be true."

Colonel Quautar quickly dismissed Major Austaun. *I'm sorry, Deia.*

Teren began rubbing Deia's shoulders in a soothing way. *It's bad, Deia, but it isn't a tragedy. Sanel can't put any suggestions into your mind without touching his spirit to yours, which means he must be on Novaun or at least very close, and this is the last place he wants to be right now. And even if he was here, he couldn't make you do anything if your will is strong enough to resist him. He could be extremely persuasive, but still, he could do nothing more than suggest.*

Colonel Quautar took the dining chair back into the little dining area. *I don't think you understand. It's much more serious than that. Deia spent most of her childhood years on Earth. It may not be King's mind that binds hers.*

"Oh no . . ." Deia gasped, the tears finally spilling from her eyes. She had never felt so violated.

Teren's hands became still on her shoulders, his spirit convulsing in confusion.

The colonel sat down in the red linen armchair again. *If King isn't the person who has this foothold into Deia's mind, then it's possible he has an agent here who does. I don't like to do this, Deia, but I'm going to have to put some kind of restriction on your movement. I don't think King or anyone will be able to telepathically persuade you to do something you feel is morally wrong, but I can't take the chance.*

"No!" Teren exclaimed in outrage.

*He's right, Teren,* Deia communicated weakly, wiping away her tears and trying to appear in control.

*And it isn't as bad as you think,* the colonel tried to explain. *I simply need to know where you are at all times. I can do this by assigning a man to watch you. This man will be as much for your protection as for my peace of mind. What may be more difficult is that you won't be able to leave Shalaun. Then if we find any evidence that someone is here and telepathically feeding suggestions into your mind, we'll have to take more drastic precautions.*

Teren began pacing behind the couch. *Something isn't right about this. The possibility that Deia's mind could be telepathically bound to King's isn't a new one, even if the method of detection is. If you were suspicious—and you were—why didn't you restrict her movement and assign a man to watch her to begin with? Why are you suddenly being so cautious? I want to know what's going on, and I want to know now.*

*If I could tell you anything, don't you think I would?*

Teren slumped over the back of the couch next to Deia and rubbed his temples.

The colonel leaned toward Deia. *I want you to search deep into your mind, Deia and see if there are any memories that don't belong.*

Deia closed her eyes and breathed long, even breaths, withdrawing into herself and studying her memory. After five minutes, she opened her eyes again, troubled. *There is something, something really strange. There's an odd smell, osalaem and something like . . . I don't know . . . an exotic wine. Or maybe some sort of perfume, and . . . I'm wearing my wedding dress.* She looked from Teren to Colonel Quautar in bewilderment. *What in the universe does it mean?*

The colonel's face was impassive. *I'm not sure.*

Teren moved to sit next to Deia again. *If Deia unconsciously did something to produce that memory the night of our wedding, then the person whose mind binds hers is here, and he's obviously not King.*

Deia stroked the back of Teren's hand. *Does this mean that person can read my mind?*

Teren nodded slowly. *In a way. He can suggest you give him the contents of your mind.*

*Deia, I'm going to have to confine you to your home under guard and mind shield and restrict your use of InterMind until we can find who's doing this. Then there is also the matter of Teren, the classified information he has in his possession and the things that are now a part of you. I'm going to have to insist that you don't do any mind joining until this is over.*

Teren nodded weakly, in resignation and anxiety.

*Deia, I want you now to put yourself into the part of your mind that is Teren and bring everything that has to do with his work into your conscious thoughts. Let the images pour forth, and I'll overlap partway with you and block what is there.*

Ten minutes later, the mind block was complete, leaving both Deia and Teren feeling depressed. The colonel communicated, *I want you, Deia, to think back again to the osalaem smell. Can you remember what it was exactly that made the smell?*

Deia reached back in her memory again and pondered. Then she slowly arose, went to her bedroom, and came back holding a small bottle of Froquenza. She handed the bottle of perfume to Colonel Quautar. *It was this.*

*Where did it come from?*

Deia shook her head, baffled. *I can't remember.*

The colonel nodded that he understood and stood up to leave. *Hopefully, we'll get this whole thing settled quickly. I can't promise anything though. I'll come back tomorrow, after you've both had a chance to think about everything.* Teren showed the colonel to the door, while Deia remained on the couch, despondent.

After the colonel left, Teren returned to the couch and drew Deia into his arms. Her emotions were ones of shame and self-reproach. *This shouldn't have happened. I should have been able to resist the suggestions. I guess I'm just a telepathic weakling.*

*No, Deia, that isn't true. It never occurred to you that this sort of thing could happen on Novaun, and you were caught off guard. You now know what I know, but you still have a lot of work to do before your mind power is as strong as the average Novaunian's. The agent knows this, and that's why he chose to manipulate the bond when he did.*

*Why isn't my mind power strong enough yet? After all those weeks of work on the Sovereign?*

*Those were basic exercises, Deia. Without arelada, we couldn't do anything more advanced. Since we've been on Novaun, we've neglected your telepathic conditioning, but no more. We're going to get you a tutor.*

*Teren, what's going on? Why would someone want to manipulate my mind?*

*I don't know, but I'm going to find out.*

\* \* \*

The next day Teren went to Colonel Quautar's office at work to discuss Deia's situation.

*What's going on, minion? Why would someone want to manipulate Deia's mind?*

The colonel tapped his mouth with his fingers. *I'll tell you, Teren, because I do believe it's necessary. This will not be easy for you to accept, and it's important that Deia doesn't know until the danger is over. No one else must ever know, even after the danger is over.*

Teren nodded. *I understand.*

*It's Ton, Teren. King intends to torture and kill Ton.*

*Ton? Why?*

*This is the part that will not be easy for you to accept, and you're the last person in this universe Ton would want to know, but you must know if you're going to understand the seriousness of Deia's problem.* A peculiar light came into the colonel's eyes. *Ton was King's plant on the Sovereign.*

Teren sat there for at least a minute, unable to comprehend this new piece of information.

The colonel finally communicated again, in explanation, *King is furious, for obvious reasons.*

The anger, the humiliation, and feelings of betrayal dropped on Teren in one crushing blow. *I trusted the plant?*

*There was no one else to trust, Teren. It was Ton or no one, and as strange as it seems, Ton really could be trusted. You didn't misjudge him, not in the least.*

*Why did he come?*

*I don't think there was any one reason. He took the job as a plant intending all along to come with you to Novaun. It was a game to outwit you, the D.I.I., and King. It was also a chance to experience the spirit dimension formula in flight, and it was a chance to come to Novaun and learn what it was that made you carry yourself with such moral fortitude under such pressure. You really impressed him.*

*He told you that?*

The colonel nodded. *It took me months to get it out of him, but it finally did come out. We're working to get him off the planet safely, to a situation where he can live without worrying about the Earthons, but it won't be easy. Until we apprehend King and the agents that are here working for him, it will be dangerous for Ton to leave. At least here we can offer him protection. We've located one agent and are watching him, and we believe there may be one more.*

*How does Deia fit into all of this?*

*When Ton was in Launarda, he went back to his room after the reception, smelled osalaem and Froquenza, and found a taffuao stub in the bathroom sink.*

Teren gaped. *Deia was telepathically manipulated by someone who's after Ton?*

*It looks that way. None of my agents saw Deia or anyone else enter or leave the room, nor have they found any evidence that there was anyone there at all. It's all very sinister. Whoever is here is someone who has known Deia since she was a child, is a superb agent, and knows the Doshyr grounds so intimately he could manipulate Deia to enter Ton's room without being detected.*

*Almost as if it's King himself.*

The colonel nodded slowly. *It seems that way, even though it's impossible. You understand the danger now, Teren, and I'm going to count on you to watch for anything peculiar and to keep Deia's spirits up. Your attitude will make a great difference in how*

*she perceives her confinement. Don't emphasize the danger, but let your attitude assure her the confinement is necessary. This will be difficult for both of you, but the time will pass more pleasantly if you can keep from being angry and bitter, and Ton will be much safer if we can make Deia's situation seem more routine than scandal.*

Teren nodded. *I understand.*

\* \* \*

Three days later, Colonel Quautar communicated with Ton at the Pavilion. *I found out who was in your room in Launarda. It was Deia.*

Ton laughed.

*I'm serious, Ton. King has an agent here who controls a cell in her brain. We found the bond with a new method using the spirit dimension formula in conjunction with an Awareness monitor.*

*How can that be? How could she not know?*

Colonel Quautar moved a chair from another table and sat down next to Ton. *It happened when she was a child, before she was old enough to know what it was to resist. A person can see another attempting to take a cell in his brain with his Awareness if he knows what to look for, but once it's done, there's no way to tell unless the perpetrator wishes himself to be known. As far as I know, this is the first attempt the perpetrator has made to manipulate that bond.*

*But if she's telepathically bound to some unknown person, how could she do dijauntu with Teren and stay sane?*

The colonel reached for a slice of bread. *The person didn't rape her mind, he only created a foothold for himself. A foothold is not a complete bond, which leaves the victim able to form a complete bond with someone else.*

*So he doesn't actually control her mind.*

Colonel Quautar used Ton's knife to butter his bread. *No, and he can't make her do anything she doesn't want to do, but the foothold does make her vulnerable. It would make it easier for him to take complete control, and if he were able to overcome her will and succeed, that control would be permanent. If he doesn't gain permanent control, all he can do is make suggestions. And unless he completely controls her mind, he cannot see into it, but he can inspire her to give him what is there and in that way read her mind.*

Ton only half believed what the colonel was telling him. *How do you know it was Deia in my room? Did she tell you?*

*I had her search her memory for things that didn't belong, and all she really remembered was the osalaem smell and the fact that she was in her wedding dress. Then she went to her bedroom and brought back a bottle of Froquenza, only she doesn't know where she got it.*

Ton set his fork on his plate, his appetite gone. *Then it is true. I've never known Deia to wear Froquenza.*

*Ton, for her safety and for yours, I've had to confine her to her home under guard and mind shield, and I had to forbid her and Teren from doing the dijauntu. Teren was at the point of outrage, and justifiably so. Under the circumstances, I felt he needed to know the danger to both her and you. I had to tell him that King wants you dead and why.*

Ton felt a sinking feeling of shame. He had never intended Teren to know the part he had played on the *Sovereign*, ever. Teren knew now that he had been deceived and that logically, he should now be dead. With that trust destroyed, things would never be the same between Teren and him again.

Ton went through the next day, Eighth Day, feeling sick with dread. Colonel Quautar had assured him that Teren had taken the information that he had been the *Sovereign* plant reasonably well, but Ton still couldn't face him. Even worse was the fact that Deia was being unfairly confined to her home because of his danger. How could he face either one of them?

Ausha was used to Ton's inexplicable bouts of depression, but she wasn't in high spirits that day either. Both were irritable and spent the first half of the day bickering and making each other even more miserable. They spent the morning shopping, which only served to aggravate the problem.

After lunch Ton and Ausha took Anenka to the park, which relaxed them both. They spread their blanket in the shade of a cluster of trees, which was their favorite place, and napped the afternoon away, clinging to each other in spirit, if not in body. They spent the rest of the day together, but in mutually desired communication silence.

Ton spent First Day with Ausha and Danal, feeling panicked most of the day, not knowing how he would be able to see Teren and Deia as he usually did on First Day evenings. Teren and Deia would think it was strange if he didn't come to their home, and Ausha and Danal would be disappointed.

As it turned out, Teren appeared calm, not angry or humiliated or hurt. There was something queer in his expression though, something Ton couldn't define. Ton felt more ashamed than ever, and he avoided communicating with Teren.

Two hours into the visit, while Deia played jazz ballads on the piano and Ausha and Danal ate pizza, Teren motioned Ton to step outside with him. Since Teren and Deia didn't have patio furniture yet, Ton and Teren had no choice but to sit down on the patio step. Teren didn't look at Ton, and Ton had no idea what to communicate.

*I don't know why you should feel ashamed,* Teren finally communicated, still not looking at Ton.

*You aren't angry?*

*I was. I guess I felt betrayed, and even more, I felt like an idiot. As the initial shock and anger wore off though, I couldn't reproach myself anymore. I knew that day on the Sovereign, the day I had Deia ask you to go with us, that I could trust you. The truth of it overpowered me—truth from God Himself. The fact that you were the plant didn't make that feeling any less real, and once I came to terms with that, all I could feel was confusion.*

Ton didn't feel relieved quite yet. Teren had accepted the truth, but their friendship had changed, and Ton still didn't know how. *What are you confused about?*

*Why you came.*

Ton extended his legs into the grass. *Didn't Colonel Quautar tell you?*

*Yes, but I want to understand it from you.*

Ton shrugged. *I was bored. It was an irresistible challenge, an irresistible opportunity. One I couldn't pass up.*

*What did they offer you?*

*Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars and a research position on Erdean.*



*That was a good offer.*  
*Not nearly as good as yours.*  
Teren gazed thoughtfully into the foggy night sky. *It's strange. I had no idea what it was I was really offering.*  
*I probably would've come with you for free.*  
*Seriously?*  
*Seriously.*  
*Then why did you want the offer doubled?*  
*Had I made things too easy, you wouldn't have trusted me. Besides, I wanted to see Deia's face. I wouldn't have gotten any shock out of you, but Deia! She was shocked and completely offended. It was beautiful!*  
Teren finally turned his head and looked at Ton's face. Suddenly he laughed. *You're such a son of Abomination.*  
Ton laughed with him, feeling relieved and very free.  
The laughter subsided, and Teren communicated, *I want to know everything.* And without a moment of hesitation, Ton told Teren all about his experience as a plant on the *Sovereign of the Stars.*

\* \* \*

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*