

HEIRS OF NOVAUN Book 2

TWIN WITNESS TO BETRAYAL

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

DEDICATION

To Christina, who, at nine months old, was my model for the baby twins

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Part 1: DISCOVERY OF A TRAITOR

Chapter 1: FOREIGNERS

An instant later, or so it seemed, Deia was looking in amazement through the shuttle's canopy at the planet of Myke's thoughts—Novaun. Suddenly she could feel her body again, but she couldn't move it. She was so numb and drained of energy that she could no longer maintain a telepathic connection with her companions.

Myke reached for the controls, turned on the engines, and began piloting the craft manually. He reached up to turn on the mouth speaker of his helmet and said, "You three were wonderful! Turn on your helmets and we can talk."

Deia did so, but it took extreme effort, almost more effort than she cared to exert.

"We just arrived in Novaunian space territory," Myke continued. "In about two seconds, we'll be surrounded by Novaunian fighters."

An awful thought occurred to Deia. "They won't shoot at us will they?"

Myke laughed, a happy, carefree laugh. "No, Deia, they won't. But they will be perplexed. We're in the heart of Novaunian space, to them an impossibility. They will wonder how we avoided detection."

Moments later, as Myke had predicted, Deia saw several white, bird-shaped fighters bearing Novaunian Fleet markings. She felt foreign thoughts invade her mind, and although they had no substance of words, she could feel images and understand.

Earth vessel A-BV472—state your purpose for entering Novaunian space.

Myke looked as if he wanted to shout with joy, and Deia wondered if the pilot was someone he knew. *This is Fleet agent, codename Myke Zarek, returning to base. Please allow me to contact my superior at the Novaunian Interplanetary Intelligence Agency, Shalaun, and he'll clear me through your commanding officer.*

Switch to audio, A-BV472. Your thought transmissions are almost too weak to discern.

Acknowledged. Myke pushed a button on the control panel and began speaking in the Novaunian language.

The image of a white-helmeted pilot with bewildered blue eyes appeared on Myke and Deia's viewing screen. Myke spoke, and the Novaunian pilot spoke, and then the screen went blank.

"Doesn't anyone speak English around here?" Dr. Luciani complained good-naturedly.

"Only us," Paul said uneasily. "I already feel like a foreigner!"

"Don't worry," Myke assured, "you won't feel that way for long. You'll feel right at home in no time."

"Then why do I feel so nervous?" Deia said. "I know we're supposed to have a family here, but I still get the most awful feeling that they won't believe we are who we say we are, or that they will disown us or something."

Myke was amused. "You say that only because you don't understand Novaun's patriarchal structure. Believe me, no one gets lost or disowned. It's more likely that your grandfather will be so thrilled to have you two back that he'll whisk you off to the Doshyr estate in Menaura and surround the place with soldiers!"

Myke finally made contact with his headquarters in Shalaun. He communicated with a dignified man, also dressed in white, with wavy hair the color of honey and jade green

eyes. Myke conversed with this man for at least five minutes before the screen went blank again.

“For a commanding officer and his peon, you two are awfully chummy,” Dr. Luciani declared.

“Perhaps, but Minon Sharad Quautar was my second father long before he was my C.O. He and my father were stationed together during the Latanzan War and were the best of friends, and two of his children, Kevan and Miaundea, are my closest friends. Kevan, in fact, married my sister Alysia shortly before I went to Earth.”

“Oh . . . they’re the ones you talk about sometimes,” Deia said. “Only you changed the names.”

Myke nodded. “Myke Zarek never really lived, so he didn’t have a collection of real life experiences to draw on like Teren Zaurvau. I guess you could say that Myke Zarek’s life story was always Teren Zaurvau’s, Earth style!”

“Well, Teren Zaurvau,” Paul said lightly, “tell us what this strange Novaunian word ‘minon’ means.”

“I suppose the closest translation would be ‘brother in humanity.’ It isn’t as intimate as ‘brother’; it’s used kind of like the term ‘mister,’ but it’s more respectful without being as detached and formal. The word for ‘sister in humanity’ is ‘mineste.’”

Deia squeezed Myke’s arm. “So it’s all right if we call you Teren now.”

Teren nodded. “Please!”

Dr. Luciani chuckled. “And now that we’re no longer in Star Force, you can call me ‘Ton.’”

“Yes, sir!” Teren, Deia, and Paul chorused, laughing.

* * *

The sun had just risen on the continent’s eastern coast, as the armed shuttle descended on the planet, escorted by a squadron of Novaunian fighters. As the shuttle approached Shalaun, Deia saw that it was a huge, graceful city located on a cape. She was immediately struck by its elegance and aura of serenity.

The city appeared to be laid out in an organized manner, the buildings perfect in form and symmetry, architectural styles that Deia could only describe as classical. All of the sidewalks were constructed of marble, and many of the buildings and houses were delicately ornamented with colorful minerals. Between the buildings were courtyards containing colorful statues and fountains, citrus groves, luxuriant tropical gardens, and many swimming pools of various sizes and shapes. Rising into the sky were gold towers that were discharging and receiving aircars from all directions.

“It’s the most beautiful city I’ve ever seen,” Deia whispered. “It really is a paradise.”

Paul was also overcome with wonder at Shalaun’s sublime beauty. “Is every city on Novaun as beautiful as Shalaun?” he asked Teren.

“All of Novaun is beautiful, but common opinion is that Talavaura in Amaria is Novaun’s most beautiful city. I imagine we’ll see it soon since it’s your mother’s ancestral home. Her memorial service will probably be held there.”

“Did you hear that, Paul?” Deia said softly. “She’ll have a funeral after all.”

The squadron commander began giving Teren landing instructions. The armed shuttle tilted, did a one hundred-eighty degree turn, and descended rapidly toward a huge military base. In minutes, it landed.

Deia, Teren, Paul, and Ton quickly removed their helmets as the canopy lifted and the side of the cabin slid open. Immediately feeling the Shalaun humidity and summer heat, Paul and Ton rapidly removed their silver flight suits and walked quickly down the stairs to the ground, anxious to walk and stretch their stiff muscles.

Deia wasn't in such a hurry, and neither was Teren. This first moment together on Novaun seemed like a dream. "I can't believe it." Teren's fingers trembled as they brushed her hair away from her face.

Deia shook her head. "Neither can I." Teren touched his lips to hers, drawing her closer. Deia responded happily.

"Hey, come on, you two!" Paul yelled up at them. "There'll be plenty of time for that later. It's too hot to stand out here all day!"

Teren and Deia put their foreheads together, their arms still entwined. Teren's hair was disheveled and his cheeks were ruddier than normal, making him all the more handsome. "I guess there is plenty of time, isn't there?"

"I suppose, but it sure doesn't seem like it yet, and there's just something wonderful about being able to do this in public." They kissed again.

Teren and Deia released each other a few moments later and slipped out of their flight suits.

"Just friends, huh?" Ton teased once Teren and Deia were on the ground. He gazed seductively at Deia. "Speaking from friend to friend, I want to know when you're going to kiss me like that."

"She'd better not." Teren's voice was angry, but his smile was confident.

Deia laughed, hugging Ton and kissing him on the cheek. Then she reached for Paul, kissing his cheek and embracing him vigorously.

A group of men dressed in white Novaunian Fleet uniforms with short sleeves and standing collars gathered by the shuttle. Each man was wearing an arelada crystal, held in place on his forehead by a white band and carved in the shape of the mukaul bird. Most of the men had tiny arelada triangles embedded in their right temples just below the white bands.

Deia released Paul and slipped her hand under Teren's arm. Teren suddenly, as if he had received some sort of subliminal message, turned to face the blond-haired pilot who was watching him in amusement. "Rayel!" he cried.

Teren and the pilot clasped each other and kissed each other's cheeks, then held each other's shoulders and gazed at each other in excitement, their expressions indicating that they were communicating telepathically.

Teren released the pilot and turned back toward Deia, whose arm was still around Paul. He smiled and motioned to her. Deia could feel the images of his thoughts. *This is Deia Sheldon.* He nodded at Paul and Ton. *And this is her twin brother Paul and Dr. Ton Luciani.*

Teren said to his friends vocally, "And this is Captain Rayel Sekura, my brother-in-law." Deia, Paul, and Ton all nodded once and acknowledged the introduction in English.

Rayel turned his head and motioned to one of the other officers. The second officer and his men quickly surrounded Teren, Ton, Deia, and Paul and, after taking their four laser scalpels, led them to a nearby building where visitors and prisoners were checked in.

Once in the building, Teren was asked to remove his arelada, and he did, requesting that his arelada eye contacts be placed in a special container of solution and sent immediately to Colonel Quautar. Then all four of them stood one by one behind a sensor

screen to be checked for hidden weapons and arelada. When nothing was found, they were led to separate rooms and left for a few moments to remove their Star Force uniforms for further inspection and to dress in the fatigues that had been provided.

Once in her dressing room, Deia plopped wearily down on the white divan and unzipped her boots with slow, heavy fingers. After pulling her boots off, she leaned her head against the wall for a moment, contemplating her arrival on Novaun and her and Paul's impending meeting with members of their extended family. Everything was happening so fast, and she had never felt more overwhelmed or excited or frightened . . . or happier.

* * *

Miaundea Quautar spread auyvalnut butter sloppily over a thick slice of chilled homemade bread, accidentally dropping some on her thin silk dressing gown. Ignoring the spill, she quickly lifted the bread to her lips. In seconds, the oven beeped. She stuffed the remaining bread into her mouth, quickly opened the oven, and carefully lifted the mug to her lips. She gulped the tea, burning her tongue and throat, then set the mug in the sink and leaned for a moment against the white counter, breathing slowly to calm herself. Funny, even Kavella's zaulyem tea couldn't relax her that morning.

Only minutes before, her father had given her all of the details of her new assignment, one that promised to be especially fascinating. Teren's story was fascinating enough, what she knew of it, but the stories of his companions had to be equally incredible, and she would be one of the first to learn them since she would be their cultural tutor. Along with her duties as cultural tutor, she would deliver a telepathy vision presentation to the presumed Doshyr twins under the direction of their grandfather Patan.

Patan wanted this necessary presentation to be given to the twins by someone unrelated to the family and so had asked her father to appoint one of the Agency's librarians. Since as an anthropologist Miaundea was also a librarian and since she had already been assigned as the cultural tutor to the twins and the Earthon doctor, she had been the natural choice for the task.

The polished white marble floor felt cool under her feet as she walked quickly through the living room to her bedroom and its adjoining dressing lounge. She welcomed the coolness, for even at this early hour of the day, the summer heat was pouring into her apartment through the opened windows.

From what Miaundea knew about Earth, most of its citizens were zealously loyal to their Divine Emperor, for they were proud of their culture and their religion was extremely nationalistic. With that loyalty and the Divine Emperor's practice of using telepathy to subliminally bind the minds of his subjects to his, Miaundea marveled that Teren had been able to persuade three people to help him escape the Star Force base ship.

Perhaps it wasn't strange that he had enlisted the help of the Doshyr twins. They had been raised by their mother, so undoubtedly she had instilled much of the Novaunian ideology in them. Not only that, but Teren had strong feelings for the girl twin. Certainly love had been part of her incentive. The Earthon doctor, however, was an entirely different matter.

Miaundea slipped out of her gown and into a cream silk dress with jade green pinstripes. The dress's hem fell just below her knees, its colors were conservative, and it lacked the contoured lines of the styles from Gudynea she liked so well—nice and

respectable. Her father would be pleased. Surprised, but pleased. She fastened a green cummerbund around her waist and seated herself at her vanity. She smeared lotion on her face and touched her cheekbones with rouge, then reached for the dark brown mascara from Telchon. She smiled mischievously. She couldn't be *too* respectable.

As she brushed her hair, she thought again about Teren. Although she was deeply saddened by the loss of his father, she couldn't wait to see him. He was one of the most interesting people she knew, and he and his sister Alysia were her closest friends outside her family. He and she had been playmates as children and each other's only escorts during their youth, which had always led both families to believe they would be a couple permanently. After all, that was the way it had happened with Kevan and Alysia. Miaundea twisted her hair in the back and placed a long, pearl-studded comb in it to hold it in place, leaving out a few blond strands to hang in wisps around her face and neck. She abhorred braids.

She and Teren had known from the beginning that their relationship would be permanent only in the way of friendship. They had used each other as escorts for convenience. The other young men of Auyval Beach had never liked her at all. As for Teren, he had always been too busy to be interested in girls, although he had been quite popular with the girls and had never known it. Teren was a good friend and he was fun, but he was far too comfortable—too much like a brother—and he was really rather ordinary-looking. (Although she had to admit, he did have a nice shape.)

As Miaundea slipped into her green slippers and laced them over her bare calves to her knees, she tried to picture in her mind the girl Teren loved. Miaundea didn't doubt she was incredibly beautiful and probably exceptionally talented in some way. Miaundea knew Teren well enough to know that any other girl simply wouldn't have merited his attention. And being the daughter of an Amarian princess, she was probably elegant and very graceful. Yes, a girl like that would definitely appeal to Teren.

After dressing, Miaundea rapidly closed the windows and reset the temperature control—no use coming home to a sultry apartment. In minutes, she was anxiously riding to work in a taxi.

Miaundea didn't think she would get to see Teren and meet his companions that day, which was unfortunate, but she would be spending the day assimilating as much as she could of the information the Agency possessed about Earth, and she would get to communicate with Minon Doshyr after he arrived from Menaura. What an extraordinary opportunity!

She was most eager, however, to meet the Earthon doctor. He had to have exceptionally strong mind power to have detected the Divine Emperor attempting to take control of his mind that first time, to have resisted him all of those years, and to have used a telepathic formula as complicated as the spirit dimension formula surely was. That meant he was likely to be intellectually superior also.

Miaundea contemplated the reasons he may have had for leaving his people and his life to come to Novaun. Was it because of a hatred of tyranny? She doubted it. More likely, he had come for the money. She suddenly had an irresistible desire to know how much Teren had promised him. Five thousand gold coins? *Ten* thousand? She wondered what kind of man became a traitor. Definitely not a virtuous one, and perhaps one who was a little dangerous. She shivered with excitement.

* * *

Something terrible has happened! Jenan's twins just arrived in Shalaun.

How can that be?

They arrived in an armed shuttle with a young Fleet agent and an Earthon. What is Jovem trying to do to us? The girl was never supposed to see Novaun, and I wasn't supposed to bring the boy here for at least a half a year!

He must have changed his plans. Yes, he changed his plans. There can be no other explanation.

Something went wrong, I tell you. Jovem was so certain Lana was completely submissive and swore he would never allow any harm come to her, but the twins claim she committed suicide!

Lana lied to him about her essence; that has to be it. The thoughts were wrapped in shock, admiration, and shame. She used his own device against him, kept a piece of herself back, and fought him with the only weapon she had—herself.

That's impossible. He would never have taught her to lie about her essence.

He didn't have to. She knew firsthand he could do it and developed her own method.

Awe and understanding surged through them both. That explains why he was so obsessed with her. It wasn't just her beauty and position he wanted; it was her mind. She's as brilliant as he is!

We surrendered at the first difficulty, and all these years she remained at war.

The Fleet will suspect he's still alive in a few days, and once they learn his body is gone, they'll know he had help. They'll know about all of the false sales in a matter of months.

What are we to do? What are we to do!

There's nothing we can do. They will have us and he will have us. He'll never allow himself to be apprehended until he has dragged us through the mud of shame and buried us with him.

No! Never! He would gain nothing by implicating us!

Nothing but a little satisfaction to that mutated lust for power. Don't you see? We can tell our story and agree to be witnesses, and we may never have to go to prison. We will be left with a lifetime to rebuild our reputations. He won't stand for that. He told us he would have one of us killed, and he will, I tell you, all to prove his superiority.

No . . . oh no . . . What are we going to do?

Chapter 2: DIGNITARY ISLAND

Ton gazed through one of the rear windows of the military aircar as it flew over Shalaun, feeling satisfied. Everything was proceeding exactly as planned.

Novaun. Secluded . . . private . . . well defended. It was easily the most powerful planet in the galaxy, not so much for its excessive military strength (although Novaunian Fleet was highly respected and feared), but for its wealth and control of the arelada trade. Because of its exclusiveness, however, the galaxy knew little about its people and their culture.

From the beginning of his job as a plant, Ton had been curious to learn how King could know the Novaunian culture so intimately that he could, with such startling accuracy, predict far in advance every action of the twins and a young agent he had never met. Ton had always suspected King was a Novaunian himself, and now that Ton had met the man, he was even more certain. The man was a traitor and a murderer—he just had that feel about him. He did, however, possess an incredible mind, and Ton couldn't help but admire him.

Ton stretched his arms a bit and glanced to his right. Teren and Deia were nestled together, gazing at each other and occasionally touching each other's faces. After a moment, Deia's closed her eyes and laid her head against Teren's neck, smiling in contentment. He gently smoothed her hair back and kissed her temple. Even as she slept in his arms, he continued gazing at her. He stroked her face and hair with touches so soft, Ton wondered if she could even feel them.

Ton marveled at the methods they used to show affection. There was an intensity of emotion between them that he had never seen in any of his shipmates' short-lived romances and had never experienced in all of his own casual liaisons with women. He had known from the beginning that there was strong attraction between Teren and Deia, but he had always assumed that they were both driven by lust and that they merely believed they loved each other. He had, after all, known many others who had been duped by that sham.

But surely it hadn't been lust that had made Teren so cautious in his association with Deia, knowing that his love for her would put her in danger. Since a purely physical relationship probably wouldn't have affected his mission, wouldn't lust have instead driven him to pursue immediate gratification from her, especially when he was so close to death?

And surely it hadn't been lust that had motivated Deia to give up her ambitions so that she and Teren could be together. Ton had never been motivated to such acts of sacrifice by anything, least of all lust. Now, after finally seeing the two in their affection, he realized that in rare exceptions, love could exist between a man and a woman, because Teren and Deia certainly loved each other.

Fifteen minutes later, Ton, Teren, Deia, and Paul's aircar and its five escort transports lowered as they approached a tiny island. They flew over acres of lawns, gardens, and various recreational facilities that had originated on different planets, then skirted the marble mansion and glided to a stop on a third floor landing platform.

The security men in the escort quickly exited their transports, then surrounded the mansion and took their posts in the guard towers on the beach. The commanding officer of the small security group that had been stationed on the island earlier briefly conferred with the driver of Ton's vehicle, then motioned for Ton and his companions to get out of the car.

The security officer led the group into a sparsely furnished lobby with a low ceiling and polished white marble floor. Off the lobby were two wings of suites. The officer quickly showed Deia her room in the right wing and Ton, Teren, and Paul their separate rooms in the left, then directed them into the dining room, where a large oval table constructed of crystal was already set with eating utensils and napkins and exotic fruits, breads, cheeses, and fish.

The four seated themselves and ate eagerly. Using the spirit dimension formula in flight had consumed all of their strength. By the time the food on the table was almost gone and the four were full, the security officer entered the dining room again, only this time, a young woman was with him.

The woman's golden blond hair was braided around her head, studded with sapphires, and she was wearing a loose-fitting, pale blue satin gown and carrying an infant seat. A tiny arelada crystal the shape of a triangle was embedded in her left temple, and a small round arelada prism sparkled on a gold chain on her forehead. The prism on her forehead reminded Ton so much of the crystals worn by the Eslavu that he gasped. Judging by Paul and Deia's speechless expressions, the woman had affected them the same way.

As soon as Teren saw the woman, he jumped up and shrieked with delight, "Lauria!" The woman, as overjoyed to see Teren as he was to see her, set the infant seat on the floor and met him in an embrace. Teren squeezed her tightly and kissed her several times on her cheeks and forehead, and she returned all of his affection warmly. After a few moments, they backed away from each other slightly.

Lauria was smiling, barely, but her eyes were sad and glistening. "Ah, Teren," she said in English, an unnatural sound coming from a Novaunian woman, "it is so good to see you, but it is true, is it not . . . he is dead."

Teren nodded quickly, his face tense and his eyes glassy.

Tears sprang from Lauria's pale blue eyes as they closed, and her lips trembled. Teren drew her close again and laid his face on her shoulder, weeping silently with her.

At length, they withdrew and gently wiped each other's tears away. Teren's voice quavered, "I thought I was over it, that I could bear it from now on, but I guess I was just pretending."

Lauria forced herself to smile. "Enough grief. Perhaps it is better this way. When Mother passed, he nearly died of a broken heart, but now he is with her and much happier, I am sure."

Teren nodded solemnly.

Lauria held Teren and arm's length and surveyed him. After a moment, her eyes brightened a little, and she smiled. "My baby brother has turned into a man, and a very handsome one at that." She playfully pinched his arm. "But you are looking pale!"

Teren smiled weakly. "Give me a week on the beach, and we'll see who's pale. What are you doing here? I didn't think I'd get to see you for at least another week. And why in the galaxy are you speaking English?"

"Minon Sharad thought it would be easier to communicate with your friends if I spoke their language. Rayel and I have been cleared to be your chaperons."

"Chaperons!" Ton exclaimed. He laughed, then looked over at Paul and grinned wickedly. "I wouldn't trust them either."

Paul shook his head and grinned. "I wouldn't either. That Teren, he's an animal."

"Paul!" Deia exclaimed in exasperation.

"Well, what can you expect?" Ton said mischievously. "Deia's a seductress!"

Lauria listened, amused. “Rayel certainly would not disagree with you. I have communicated with him since you arrived, and he referred to Deia as—now let me see if I can find the appropriate words . . . ‘the Earthon enchantress.’”

That comment sent Ton and Paul into hysterics. Deia bowed her head, her cheeks red with embarrassment, and Teren turned away from Lauria and threw up his arms in resignation.

Noticing Deia’s discomfort, Lauria walked over to her and knelt down beside her chair. “I am sorry I embarrassed you. We love to tease Teren, but we forget that there is another now who is not accustomed to it. If you are as beautiful on the inside as you are on the outside—and I am sure you are—then I can certainly understand why Teren is so enchanted by you.”

Deia smiled. “You’re sweet.”

Teren knelt down beside the infant seat Lauria had brought with her. He gently lifted a tiny silk bundle out of the cradle and held it snugly against his chest as he stood up. He removed the thin white blanket from a fair little face and stroked the sleeping baby’s fuzzy blond head. “Is it a boy or girl?”

Lauria stood up and faced Teren again. “A little boy, Braunen. He is eight weeks old.”

Deia peered around Lauria at the baby. “He’s beautiful! But where are the rest of your children? Teren said that you and Rayel have three others.”

Lauria laughed merrily. “Do you think I would bring my children along when I have a chance to be with my husband for a while in such a beautiful place as this? As soon as Minon Sharad asked me to do this, I gave them to my sisters!”

Deia appeared puzzled. “Why didn’t you leave the baby too?”

“Because I am the only one who can feed him.”

Deia flushed. “Oh.”

Teren shifted the conversation away from Lauria’s baby. “In all of the excitement, I forgot to make introductions!” He turned toward Paul and Ton. “I guess you’ve figured out by now that this is my oldest sister, Lauria Sekura.” They nodded.

Teren turned to face his sister again. “It seems Minon Sharad has given you a little information about my companions. How much have you learned?”

“He informed me that Paul and Deia are the grandchildren of Patan Doshyr, if that is what you mean. He deemed it unnecessary for them to play-act as Paul and Deia Sheldon while they stay here, and he felt it would be a difficult thing to do under such casual circumstances. All of the guards have been informed, and by the time Rayel arrives tomorrow, he will know too.”

Deia hesitated. “I don’t mean any offense, Lauria, but I don’t understand why Teren and I need to be chaperoned. If we were going to do something, we would have done it by now. And besides, I don’t see that it’s anyone’s business except ours.”

“The one thing a Novaunian unmarried man and woman do not want to do is be alone for an extended period of time without a chaperon, especially if there are feelings between them, for everyone they know will think the worst. It is not because people are so distrustful, but because they remember that time in their lives so well and how vulnerable they were.”

Teren’s mouth curved into an astute little smile. “Tell me, Lauria, did Grandfather recommend you to Minon Sharad, or did Minon Sharad recommend you to him?”

“Actually, they both thought of Rayel and me first. And yours was not the only grandfather who requested a chaperon.”

Deia rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "I guess we don't have much choice, do we Teren?"

Teren shook his head. "No."

Lauria squeezed Deia's shoulder. "Do not worry about it too much, Deia. I am not going to watch you every minute. That would spoil things for you and Teren, and it would also spoil my vacation. It is, however, good to have an authority figure near in a situation like this, if only because it helps you live the standards you have already set for yourselves. And if it makes you feel any better, a chaperon probably would have been brought in even if you were not here."

Ton leaned back in his chair, laughing a little. "Which means you're here to chaperon Paul and me as much as you are to chaperon our little lovers. Well, I guess there's a first time for everything."

Paul shook his head in amazement. "It's been less than two hours since we entered Novaunian space, and it seems as though everyone on the planet knew we were arriving days ago. Things sure do happen fast around here."

"That's one of the advantages of a telepathic world," Teren said.

Lauria nodded. "It was not more than a few minutes after you broke orbit that all three of my sisters agreed to take my children, and by the time Minon Sharad communicated with me, he had already communicated with both grandfathers, the overseer of this island, and had arranged for a security team to meet you on the landing field. Then I was able to assimilate your language from another librarian on my way here."

"You learned the entire English language in fifteen minutes?" Paul exclaimed.

Teren nodded. He touched the arelada crystal on his sister's forehead. "The faceted forehead crystal is the emblem of a Guild librarian. Lauria has spent many years beyond regular education requirements developing her mind so that she can assimilate information rapidly and recall it just as rapidly. She stores a specific type of information and releases it into another's mind by request, and by way of the planetary relay system InterMind, she can release it as easily into the mind of a person on the other side of the planet as she can to someone who lives in Shalaun."

Ton regarded Lauria in admiration. "So you're a human computer."

Lauria smiled modestly. "I suppose that is a fairly good description of a librarian. But actually, the human mind working in conjunction with arelada has a much greater storage capacity than a computer and it can relay that information much more rapidly, which is why computers for storing information have been obsolete on Novaun for over a thousand years."

The security officer entered the dining room again, accompanied by Teren's commanding officer and a man carrying a small medical kit. Teren immediately set Braunen back into his cradle and approached the newcomers. He embraced his commanding officer, then communicated silently with the doctor. The doctor held a small square device to Teren's right shoulder, and a glowing image of the inside of his shoulder appeared next to his head.

As the commanding officer introduced himself to Paul and Deia and shook their hands, Ton moved closer to Teren and examined the glowing image, astounded by what he saw. The sensing devices Ton normally used were precise and accurate, but this image was like nothing he had seen in all his years of medical training. Ton could not only see every nerve in Teren's shoulder, and every cell, but he could see inside and around the nerves and the cells. Teren's wound was as nasty as the image was miraculous. He

wondered how long ago Teren had been shot, thinking it criminal that both the D.I.I. and Star Force had allowed the wound to go untreated.

The image of the inside of Teren's shoulder faded and the physician returned his examining device to his kit. He gave him two bottles of pills. Ton assumed that one contained an anti-inflammatory drug and that the other contained medication for the pain.

"That was an amazing image, wasn't it?"

Ton turned to face Teren's commanding officer. "Yes, it was. What kind of device was he using?"

"An Awareness monitor." The officer extended his hand. "You must be Dr. Ton Luciani. I'm Colonel Sharad Quautar, director of the Special Cases division of the Novaunian Intelligence Agency. Welcome to Novaun."

"Thank you, sir."

The physician left, and Lauria asked Teren, "What was that all about?"

"I was shot nine weeks ago as I tried to leave Earth—"

"You were shot!" Deia exclaimed in horror.

Teren nodded slowly. "Yes, but don't be alarmed. I have nerve damage—I figured as much when the burning in my shoulder lingered—but it can be repaired by surgery."

Deia still appeared unsure and very concerned. She stood up and went to him, embracing him tenderly with one arm.

Ton shook his head, feeling angry. "Had they treated you the day you were shot, you may not have needed surgery at all!"

Teren shrugged. "I survived. That wound was the least of my problems." He yawned in Colonel Quautar's direction. "Well, let's get this done before I pass out."

Colonel Quautar smiled and motioned to the men's wing.

* * *

To Teren's relief, Minon Sharad only required him to telepathically regurgitate the past two months. He wanted everything Teren knew about his father's death and Paul and Deia's situation on Earth. The rest would wait until after Teren had slept.

Once Teren was done, he felt so light-headed that he had to lie down. Fortunately, he was already sitting on his bed. He was too weak to communicate telepathically. "How did Paul and Deia and their mother get lost, minion? Why had I never heard of missing 'royal twins'?"

"It's no surprise that you aren't familiar with the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of Jenan Doshyr and the disappearance of his wife, the Princess Lanuvael of Amaria, and their twin children. Perhaps it's because of the extreme tragedy of the story that those of my generation don't discuss it."

"What happened?"

"Minon Doshyr was killed in a fire on Latanza. His wife was believed to have been so traumatized that she went into hiding to save her children from being killed."

"So everyone thought she'd gone insane."

"The evidence was overwhelming."

"He must've planned the whole thing . . . the fire and everything."

"Sanel King?"

Teren nodded. "He's a Novaunian; he has to be. Was there ever a traitor among the Doshyrs or Vumauls?"

Minon Sharad nodded slowly, frowning. “Yes . . . that story is even more tragic than the death of Minon Doshyr and the disappearance of his family, and it’s connected in many ways.”

“What happened?”

“Several months before Minon Doshyr and his family took holiday on Latanza, his younger brother Jovem was incarcerated for high treason and murder.”

“Murder? On Novaun? Who did he kill? And what in the galaxy was his treason?”

Minon Sharad’s face was grave. “He murdered his brother’s firstborn, a beautiful little two-year-old girl, and it was brutal—a mind rape.”

Teren felt as though he would be sick. Paul and Deia had had a sister. All he could see in his mind at the moment was the picture of them with their mother and Sanel—and the sadness in her eyes. A feeling of foreboding suddenly overcame him. How would Paul and Deia react when they were forced to confront this particular piece of family history?

“As for the treason,” Colonel Quatar continued, “he conspired to sell part of the Doshyr mining territory to some Vaenan investors, but his effort was thwarted by his brother.”

“So what do the Doshyrs believe happened to Jovem? After what you’ve told me, I feel very strongly that Jovem Doshyr and Sanel King are the same person.”

“Not possible. Before Jovem went to Shalaun to stand trial, he committed suicide.”

Teren rubbed his temples. “And supposedly Princess Lanuvael went crazy and took the twins to Earth by her own choice. After what I showed you, minion, you can still believe that?”

“I won’t know what to believe until I’ve interviewed Paul and Deia.”

“It’s the same man.”

“You have no evidence, and Awareness monitors don’t lie.”

“Sanel King is far too young-looking, and he knew Paul and Deia’s father.”

“King could be a Kavellan. Or a Manourean. And it would be unusual for a man *not* to know something about his wife’s first husband.”

“I know there’s no solid evidence yet, but the possibility makes too much sense. You have to admit that it does.”

“It would explain a great deal,” Minon Sharad conceded.

“Certainly it couldn’t hurt anything to send someone to Menaura to take a look at the grave.”

Minon Sharad thoughtfully tapped his lips. “Perhaps not . . . if we can keep it unofficial.” The corner of his mouth lifted in a conspiratorial smile. “Patriarch Doshyr himself might be willing to take a telepathic peek into his son’s grave before he leaves Menaura.”

* * *

Miaundea slipped into a taxi after work that afternoon, invigorated by her communication with Patan Doshyr and his daughter Amburna, but disappointed she had been unable to see Teren and meet his friends. She was, however, excited about the opportunity she would have to meet with Deia alone the next morning to give her the clothing and personal items she would need.

Miaundea took the taxi to her parents’ home in Auyval Beach as she did every Fourth Day evening for dinner and family council-scripture discussion. The taxi stopped on the

landing platform where the neighborhood walks came together. She emerged from the taxi, exhausted from a long day of mind work, but happy. Since the weather was pleasant, she took the walk instead of the transport pod that connected the landing platform with her parents' home.

After she had been walking five minutes and was almost to her parents' home, her happiness evaporated, replaced by excitement and, at the same time, dread. There he was on his way to the beach for surfing with two of his friends, tall and muscular in his swim shorts and tank top, fair and dark-haired, with contemptuous, heart-stopping blue eyes, beautiful, brilliant—an arrogant prude. There he was, resplendent, a supernova in a galaxy of weak little stars, her childhood love, her greatest enemy—Maurek Avenaunta.

She struggled to repress her excitement, but the more she struggled, the more the excitement intensified, and that made her angry, angry at herself for still being so excited by him, but more angry at him. How dare he walk by her parents' home! How dare he ruin her evening!

The three young men approached her before she could hurry across the walk to her parents' house. When Maurek saw her, something all-too-familiar happened to his face, something Miaundea could only assume was displeasure at seeing her. It flushed, then paled, then some of the blood returned, leaving it mottled. His eyes weren't contemptuous this time, but staring at the ground to avoid looking at her. After a moment, they rose again, as if compelled, and looked at her uneasily.

The friends, Fanal Huneer and Trenaun Vodel, looked at nothing but her dress as they approached. Trenaun gazed at her in amusement, and Fanal was wearing a taunting little smirk.

Trenaun rested the bottom of his surfboard on the marble walk and leaned on it. *Hello, Miaundea*, he communicated with an air of friendliness. *It's been a long time*. His eyes were still studying her dress.

Miaundea resented Trenaun's attention to her clothing. *Hello, Trenaun*, she communicated icily.

Fanal did not appreciate the coldness of Miaundea's reply to his friend. *It's a miracle, Trenaun*, he communicated sarcastically. *The queen of Auyval Beach deigns to give you a hello*.

Miaundea felt bitterness rise within her. *And I'm so delighted to see you too, Fanal*. Miaundea looked away from them and resumed her walk to her parents' home.

Feeling one of them seize her arm, she turned. Seeing the culprit was Maurek, she looked at him uneasily, yanking her arm out of his hand and stepping away from him.

Maurek stepped away from her, his eyes charged with agitation and his face quivering. He hesitated, then communicated quickly, *That's a pretty dress, Miaundea. You look very pretty today*. Trenaun looked at Maurek in surprise; Fanal was suspicious. The corner of Maurek's mouth lifted into the slightest of smiles, and Miaundea thought he was ready to laugh at her.

Miaundea's body tightened in outrage. Of all the gall! How dare he taunt her with a compliment on her dress, her bland, conservative dress! He wasn't going to get away with such sarcasm. *It's a miracle!* she communicated in mock shock. *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*.

Maurek stared at Miaundea as she turned and walked determinedly back toward the neighborhood landing platform, quaking with rage.

Miaundea slid into the waiting taxi and took it to her apartment downtown. Her fury was dying, but she couldn't face anyone at the moment, not even her family. Three and a half years had passed since that horrible night, the night that had started it all. Three years had taken them into the Fleet and her away from Novaun for fieldwork. She had seen Maurek rarely in the three months she had been home and until that evening, had never communicated with him. Fanal and Trenaun she hadn't seen at all. Why hadn't they changed? Why did they still have to provoke her? She loathed them, but, at the same time, she longed for their approval and respect. Auyval Beach passed by her in a blur.

When she arrived at her apartment, she trudged into her dressing lounge and sat down on her chaise longue, enveloped in despair as she remembered. She had loved Maurek once. He had always been extraordinary. Extraordinarily handsome. Extraordinarily brilliant. Extraordinarily talented. She became interested in diving because he was interested in diving. She went to the pool every day and watched him passionately, although always passively.

Maurek always watched her too, and as time went on, he became less subtle about it. Although they were attentive to each other, they never communicated, except with smiles and an occasional touch in passing. When he asked her to the Salyumala Ball, Auyval Beach's most extravagant annual event, she was thrilled. She immediately began designing and sewing a dress as magnificent as the ball she would be attending. She put all of her love for Maurek into that dress. She wanted to be beautiful for him.

When the dress was finished, it looked even more exquisite on her than she had imagined it would. It made her look sophisticated, not so much like a little girl, and as lovely as she was capable of looking. The dress was crimson satin, overlaid with a delicate lace, dotted with tiny crystal beads, the hem falling just a little above her knees, with moderate slits in the sides. It flowed elegantly over and around her curves, showing them off to their greatest advantage, the front and back V-shaped necklines coming together at points at her shoulders.

Her parents warned her about the dress. They believed some people would be uncomfortable with it and think it was too revealing. Her father admitted to being disturbed by the dress himself and nearly forbade her to wear it. She, of course, defended her dress, telling him that there was nothing immodest about it and that she would wear it whether he approved or not. Her mother resolved the conflict by pointing out that it was disturbing, but only because the style was so different, not because it was immodest. Her father eventually gave up and told her that he didn't mind her wearing the dress, as long as she didn't complain later about the negative comments she would undoubtedly receive. Miaundea expected a few negative remarks about the dress, but she never anticipated the disapproval and rejection she would receive from Maurek.

Her older sisters were baking a cake for the guests that they would entertain after the ball, and the whole house was filled with its aroma as she ran to answer the door. She was overwhelmed by excitement to see Maurek and hoped he would be as excited to see her. She tingled with anticipation when she saw him standing on her front porch, dressed so neatly in his new white suit.

At first, he was excited to see her. He was smiling, and his blue eyes were radiant and alive. Then, almost immediately, his face flushed, then was pale, then mottled. He communicated, completely flustered, *That dress . . . that dress is, well, it's . . . totally improper. Please go change.*

She couldn't believe it. Of all the nerve! Insisting she change her dress! *I will not! This dress covers me and is completely appropriate.*

Her defensiveness seemed to give him courage and resolve. *If you don't change your dress, then I'm afraid I can't take you to the ball.*

His manner was pleasant, but his eyes were so presumptuous at that moment, too presumptuous. He had no doubt that she would respect his wishes and change her dress. *Then it appears you will be going to the ball alone!* She slammed the door, but not before she saw his expression of astonishment and humiliation.

Seeing him so humiliated that night hurt her as much as his rejection. She feigned illness and didn't come out of her room for a week, except to go to the bathroom. Even then, her parents never suspected her feelings for Maurek. She had never even told Alysia. Those closest to her assumed she had exiled herself to her room because her pride was hurt. She emerged from her room after a week, haggard and hardened, left to thrash in the wake of Maurek's mortification. How could he have told all of his friends that he didn't take her to the dance because she had come to the door "dressed shamelessly, like a hussy"?

Miaundea never discussed the events of that night with anyone, communicating only, *I will not tolerate having a domineering prude insist I change my dress.* She had promised her father she wouldn't complain about any negative comments she might receive about her dress, and except for that simple explanation, she never did.

Miaundea pulled herself off of her chaise longue, dragged herself to her closet, and removed the wardrobe bag that stored the dress she had worn that night. She had placed it in the bag then and hadn't been able to bring herself to look at it since. Holding her breath, she ever so carefully removed the dress. It was as lovely as it had been the night of the dance. Her eyes filled with tears, leaving her dress a glistening veil in her hands. She fought hard to keep the tears from falling. She never cried, not even for Maurek. Especially not for Maurek. Her tears dissipated, and she was again staring at her sparkling party dress. It should never have happened. She would do the same thing again given the same provocation, but still, she wished it had never happened.

She laid her dress on her bed and went to her crystal vanity. She carefully removed what little make-up she was wearing and brushed her hair, parting it more traditionally in the middle, braiding many tiny strands, and looping the strands of braids and pinning them to her head with tiny jeweled barrettes. She arose from her chair and went to her full-length holorelector.

She gazed painfully at her reflection. She was so petite that she looked like a little girl, especially in that prudish Novaunian-style dress that had no form. Her facial features were tiny and bland, except for her eyes, which she had always felt were disproportionately large. Why couldn't she have been born taller, more curvaceous, and with lush dark lashes? Why couldn't she have been born beautiful? She made a face.

Is this what you want, Novaunian men? Miaundea the ugly little girl? No one but that prude of the century ever noticed her, and I never liked her!

With fierce rejuvenation, she took off her cream-colored dress with its pinstripes, wadded it up, and threw it in the trash, then slipped, trembling, into her magnificent party dress. She reseated herself at her vanity and shook out the dowdy braids, brushing and teasing her hair, parting it again on the side. She applied her make-up generously, brushing her eyelids with silvery gray eye shadow, blackening her lashes with heavy mascara, and

touching her cheekbones with rouge. Then for an even more emphatic impression, she painted her lips with crimson lipstick.

She went to her holoreflector again and smiled at herself in satisfaction. *Who needs you, Maurek Avenaunta!*

Chapter 3: THE INTERROGATION

The moment Teren saw Minon Sharad the next morning, he knew that his hunch was correct. *The grave's empty, isn't it?*

Minon Sharad nodded. *It's official—our government now presumes Sanel King is Jovem Doshyr.*

* * *

Ton entered Colonel Sharad Quautar's office suite on the second floor of the mansion the next afternoon as Paul was leaving. The colonel met him at the door and extended his hand to him, smiling. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Ton."

"You speak English easily," Ton observed. "Lauria speaks it correctly, but not so freely." Even as Ton spoke, realization trickled through him. "How long has it been since you were assigned there?"

"Twenty-six years."

"But that would have been at the beginning of the Dark Years. Were you there during the initial invasion?"

Colonel Quautar nodded. "We were in Washington, D.C. to pick up an agent. I was in the craft that shot down Tohmazz Zarr."

Ton tilted his head toward the colonel, eager for more information. "What happened? I was taught that Zarr was killed by the Dirons in the invasion."

"That's a story that will have to wait for another time." Colonel Quautar waved Ton into an armchair upholstered with pale blue silk.

Ton sat down. "You don't look old enough to have been there. How long do you Novaunians live, anyway?"

The colonel reached under his diamond-trimmed half vest. "About two-hundred years." Ton could do nothing but gape.

The colonel brought forth a device that looked like a stylus. "With this instrument, I'll insert a tiny arelada crystal into your temple. This will give you complete Awareness, but you won't be able to transmit thoughts beyond a distance of five meters. When you and your friends are allowed to leave Dignitary Island, you will each be given the amount of arelada necessary to use InterMind."

The colonel held the device to Ton's temple. "You'll feel a slight prick . . . There. Now I want you to pull the spirit dimension formula out of your Awareness and put it to the front of your mind. I'll overlap spirits with you partway and block the memory."

Ton did as the colonel asked. In moments, he was unable to recall the spirit dimension formula.

Colonel Quautar replaced the cylinder device in the pocket under his half-vest. "The Earthons possess this knowledge and know that we do too, so you shouldn't worry about their kidnapping you for the spirit dimension formula. By the same token, the memory block will enable us to allow you to move about freely on Novaun or anywhere you would like without worrying about your selling the formula to another government."

Ton nodded that he understood. Colonel Quautar seated himself in the chair opposite him. "It's necessary for me at this time to ask you a few questions."

The colonel was so close that his knees were no more than half a meter away. "You mean you want to interrogate me."

“Call it what you want, but I prefer not to refer to this interview as interrogation. I want our communication to be natural, and I have no desire to intimidate you in any way. I also want you to understand that none of what we discuss will be made public. Indeed, most of it will not go beyond this office.”

Ton shrugged in surrender and pushed his lower back against the chair in an effort to move as far away from the colonel as he could. “Then let’s get it over with.”

“I’m most interested, Ton, to know what motivated you to come to Novaun with Teren.”

“It seemed like a good thing to do at the time.”

“Why?”

The colonel’s question caught Ton off guard. He had expected a reprimand, a request for a more specific answer—anything but a “why.”

“Well, as Deia said when she approached me about Teren’s problem, I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. In fact, coming to Novaun was probably the best career move I’ve ever made. The military’s much too restrictive.”

“Your attitude suggests that you believe your career was the only aspect of your life that was affected by your decision. Won’t you miss your friends? Your family?”

“I don’t have any friends, and no, I won’t miss my family.” Ton realized he was drumming his fingers on his thigh and immediately stopped, not wanting the colonel to observe how nervous he was.

“Will anyone in your family miss you?”

“They’ll be glad I’m gone.”

The colonel leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his waist. “I understand, Ton, that you were born on Earth date August 6, 2 Before Liberation, in Baltimore, North American State, to Marco and Lisa Luciani, and that you have two sisters, Angela Passari and Jacquae.”

Ton grunted. “Teren certainly was thorough. I didn’t tell him those things.”

Colonel Quautar smiled good-naturedly. “Teren may be young and relatively inexperienced, but he knows his business. I understand your mother is an inspector in a synthesizing machine factory, but according to the *Sovereign*’s file on you, your father has no occupation.”

“That’s strange. Even if I don’t know what my father does, the government should.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen your father?”

Unable to meet the colonel’s penetrating gaze any longer, Ton turned his head and studied the gem-studded tapestry on the wall. “He left right before the Divine Emperor’s army marched on Baltimore and burned out Antonio Vaccaro and his rebels. I was eight months old.”

“Then he isn’t Jacquae’s father.”

“No.”

“Did your mother ever talk about your father and what he did?”

“Oh, she talked about him, had quite a few colorful names for him, but I don’t ever remember her mentioning his occupation.” Realizing that he was drumming his thigh yet again, Ton moved his hands to the armrests of his chair. “What does this mean? Certainly the government knows where my father is . . . doesn’t it?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not sure, and we can’t know unless we see his personal file. If the government doesn’t have any up-to-date information on him, then perhaps he left the

planet or secretly changed his name. The other alternative is that he died and his body was never identified.”

Ton couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“Do you ever wonder about him? What he was like?”

The tapestry suddenly went hazy. Ton diverted his attention from it to his lap. “Sometimes. My mother always said that he was as much a son of Abomination as Antonio Vaccaro, but she always spoke with bitterness, so I was never sure what to believe.”

“Does she believe he really was one of Vaccaro’s rebels?”

“No. If anything, she believes the opposite, that he was a Zarrist spy in Vaccaro’s organization and that he bolted when he learned Baltimore was going to be torched. I don’t think she’ll ever forgive him for leaving her there to live through what happened after that.”

“Would you like to know where he is now and what he’s doing?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Did your mother ever try to get a divorce?”

“I don’t know, but I was always under the impression that she used the known difficulty of obtaining a divorce on Earth as an excuse not to try.”

“So she never remarried.”

“No.”

“According to your school records, your grades during levels one through seven were mediocre, then practically overnight, during level eight, your grades jumped from mediocre to excellent, and you were able to complete the next five levels in only four years, allowing you to graduate from intermediate school as a science major at the young age of sixteen, still receiving perfect grades. I’m curious to know, Ton, what it was that brought about such a dramatic change.”

Ton shrugged.

“I find it difficult to believe that a twelve-year-old boy would take that kind of initiative entirely on his own, especially a boy in your particular situation.”

Ton stared at his lap for a long minute. Finally he said, resignedly, “It was Adrian. Adrian Passari, my eighth level teacher. He spent hours and hours tutoring me in his home, and he encouraged me and believed in me when no one ever had. He saved my life.”

“How long did this go on?”

“Four years.”

“You two must have become quite close during those four years.”

Ton finally met the colonel’s gaze. “Yes . . . we did.”

“What happened to change things? Did it have something to do with your sister? She married him, I presume.”

Ton’s body tensed. “Yes, he did marry Angela, and then five months later, he found her with another man, the whore. And then she had the gall to lie and tell everyone that *she* was leaving *him* because he beat her.” Ton leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees and his face into his hands. “Adrian is honest and decent, and he didn’t deserve to be betrayed. And he really loved her too, or at least he thought he did. A lot that got him—shot in the back. Things between Adrian and me never were quite the same after that.”

“Did you communicate with him while you were in Star Force?”

Ton rubbed his temples. “All of this happened shortly before I joined Star Force. I wrote to him occasionally during my three years on the *Prince Jahnzel*, but he never

answered. Then before I went to the *Sovereign*, I saw him while I was in Baltimore on leave. We corresponded regularly after that and spent my last leave together in Europe.”

Colonel Quautar laid a hand on Ton’s shoulder, startling him. “A few minutes ago you told me you didn’t have any friends to miss, but it seems to me that you and Adrian are very good friends.”

“Yes, I guess we are,” Ton admitted, sitting up. “But my friendship with Adrian is something very personal, which is why I didn’t want to tell you about it. I wasn’t lying before. I don’t have any other friends on Earth or anywhere else I’ve been stationed, and Adrian is more than just a friend. He’s like an older brother. I will miss him.” Ton relaxed into his chair, feeling drained.

“Was it Adrian who told you to resist communication from the Divine Emperor on your Day of Awakening?”

Ton shook his head, finally able to meet the colonel’s gaze again. “I did that on my own. I’m not sure Adrian’s even a resister. One doesn’t speak of those things on Earth, for obvious reasons.”

“Did the knowledge that the Divine Emperor wanted control of your mind change your feelings about him and Earth’s religion, or did it simply confirm what you already knew or suspected?”

“Before that time, I’d never given religion or politics much thought. My family supported the Divine Emperor and his government and attended Worship regularly, because those are the things good Earth citizens do. And since I was young and had nothing else to believe in, I never questioned it. But when the Divine Emperor attempted to take control of a cell in my brain, I understood everything about the government’s corrupt intentions and Tohmazz Zarr’s sham, and it made me furious, so I immediately threw him out.”

“Did you ever allude to what happened to anyone?”

“I never came out and said it, because no one would’ve believed me, no one but the Executioners. I don’t think I understood at the time, though, how great a danger the Executioners really were to me. By the time I realized it, I also realized that my brain was my best ticket to a nice long life. As for the other, I did stop attending Worship, which caused an uproar in my family.”

“Did your experience with Zarrism disillusion you to such an extent that you turned atheist?”

“Yes, I suppose it did.”

“Why did you choose the medical profession?”

“Medicine has always interested me, even when I was very young, although I’d never given it serious thought until after I met Adrian.”

“And it was Adrian, I presume, who suggested Star Force.”

Ton nodded. “I was somewhat familiar with Star Force at the time, of course, but I’d never even heard of the cadet program. I had no money for medical school, and no money to support myself while I was in school, so Star Force seemed to be the best route. As it turned out, it was the best thing I ever did. I needed to get out of Baltimore and the situation there with my family, and I also needed to make my own life.”

“So once you joined Star Force, did you find that you enjoyed medicine as much as you thought you would?”

“It was wonderful. Star Force has an excellent program, and everywhere I was stationed I was able to train with physicians who are experts in their specialties in the best

of facilities. There was always so much to learn and experience, and I never could get enough of it.”

“Both Paul and Teren indicated that you helped Deia study and spent time with her in ways that weren’t required by the job, which led the other cadets to believe that you wanted her as a lover. Was there any truth at all to that speculation?”

Ton shook his head. “I’ve never been attracted to her in that way.”

“Why? She is, after all, an extremely beautiful girl.”

“Yes, she is very beautiful. Like a statue. And she’s also about as exciting as one.”

The colonel understood completely, and oddly, Ton felt pleasure in that. “How do you explain Deia’s acceptance of you when you were so disliked by most of the others?”

“I can’t explain it other than to point out that she’s tolerated Paul for eighteen years. If she can tolerate him, she can tolerate anyone, even me.”

“I assume you don’t have a high opinion of Paul.”

“He’s a spoiled aristocrat and more vain than anyone I’ve ever met. All we heard from him this morning was how badly his new clothes are tailored and how none of the colors bring out his features properly. As if any of us even care!” Ton rolled his eyes. “He is impossible to live with.”

“And if you didn’t have to live with him?”

Ton considered the colonel’s question. Finally he replied, “Maybe then I wouldn’t think he’s such a bad sort.”

“Do you think your relationship with Teren will change now that his mission is over?”

“I’m not sure. Whether there was ever more to the friendship than his need for a third helper has yet to be seen.”

“Do you feel that your experience using the spirit dimension formula with Teren, Deia, and Paul has changed your relationships with them in any way?”

Ton contemplated the colonel’s inquiry for several moments. “I’m not sure if it’s changed things. It’s really too soon to tell.” He ran his finger over the piping on the arm of his chair. “But we were in a very emotional state, and I don’t know about the others, but I could feel their essences, and well . . . I feel like I understand them all a little better now, especially Paul and Teren. I didn’t notice it so much with Deia, and I think that’s because I’d already felt the same thing with her, only in a smaller degree, while doing the mind power experiments.”

Colonel Quautar seemed satisfied with Ton’s answer. “What were your career plans before Deia approached you about coming to Novaun with Teren? Were you planning to retire with Star Force, or were you hoping for an eventual discharge?”

“I would’ve stayed with Star Force. Discharges are difficult to get unless you’re well connected, and I could’ve waited years beyond the fourteen I was committed. Besides that, I’m well-suited for space travel and I enjoy it, and I’ve never had a home on Earth to go back to.”

“What would you like to do now? Do you wish to remain on Novaun, or would you prefer to have us set you up on another planet?”

Ton laughed. “The minute I leave this planet, I’ll be shot for treason. I have no desire to leave.” He picked at the piping on his chair. “How safe is it here, really? I don’t see that Teren and Deia and Paul are in any danger since this is the planet of their birth. That makes their actions justifiable even to the Earthons and their warped sense of values.”

“Novaun is extremely safe,” Colonel Quautar said carefully. “No one enters our space illegally who is not immediately grounded on one of our border planets, and no one is

allowed to mingle in Novaunian society on any of our planets without being cleared, because our telepathic society cannot work uninhibitedly and successfully if there are impurities.

"I would not be being honest with you, however, if I were to tell you that foreign agents are nonexistent on Novaun. Occasionally one gets in, but as soon as he or she is discovered—and our society being what it is, that usually isn't very long—he is immediately put in prison until he is no longer a threat to us. If a foreign agent breaks a law, he is subject to punishment under our law, and the penalty for premeditated murder is execution after trial. During the forty years I've been in this business, we've captured around one hundred foreign agents. Only three of those attempted assassination, and all three were thwarted in their efforts."

The colonel sighed. "Only one person in recent Novaunian history has murdered and avoided the punishment, a native Novaunian, a traitor of the worse kind—Jovem Doshyr."

"Would this Jovem Doshyr be related to Paul and Deia?"

"Yes. He's their father's brother, and until yesterday, was believed dead."

Ton nodded slowly. "Sanel King."

"Yes. But you will learn that story soon enough, so I'll tell you no more about it. I was merely illustrating that you are safe here. Accomplishing an assassination on Novaun is extremely difficult, and when it is accomplished, the assassin is dealt with immediately and effectively. Planets who deal with us know this, which is why their spies don't attempt it unless, in their opinion, it's critically necessary.

"Now as far as the Earthons go, assassination is common procedure. They are not, however, bloodthirsty barbarians. When they deem assassination necessary, it is always because it will benefit them in some way, and it is seldom done for vengeance, particularly when the killing must be accomplished under difficult circumstances, as on Novaun. Your death wouldn't serve the Earthons any useful purpose, because they've probably already declared you dead to the public anyway. The situation being what it is, it would be unlike them to risk the life of one of their best agents for you."

The colonel studied Ton's face. "If you are so worried about your life, why did you come with Teren in the first place? And don't give me, 'It just seemed like a good thing to do at the time and I had nothing to lose.' A person does not place himself in a potentially dangerous situation, whether real or imagined, because 'It seemed like a good thing to do at the time.'"

"You really want to know why I came? Two hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money."

Colonel Quautar scrutinized Ton's expression. "I see."

The colonel still didn't believe him completely—Ton was sure of it. He wasn't, however, going to pursue his doubts in the interview, but he would put him under surveillance once he released him into Novaunian society. Ton felt some comfort in that, and yet he knew he would have to be careful.

"So did I pass?" Ton suddenly asked. "Am I a spy?"

The colonel raised his eyebrows and smiled temptingly. "I'll reserve judgment until I've received all the necessary information from my various sources."

"One of whom is King himself, no doubt."

Colonel Quautar's smile lingered. "Perhaps you can introduce me to him."

Too jarred to think of a comeback, Ton forced himself to chuckle.

Colonel Quautar's smile faded. "Since you wish to stay on Novaun, I must at this time impose a few rules on you."

"Rules?" Ton said skeptically.

The colonel nodded slowly. "Yes, rules. I'm being completely honest when I tell you that I don't want to do this. I don't, however, have any choice, since many aspects of your lifestyle can't be tolerated in this society."

Ton's skepticism changed to scorn. "The reason you don't want to do this is not because you would have me live my life the way I choose. You just wish my habits corresponded more to those of Novaunians so that you wouldn't have to set any rules."

"You're right. I abhor many of your personal practices, and I wouldn't want to see you live the way you do here or anywhere else. I hate to see anyone engage in such destructive behavior. I doubt there's anyone you'll meet here who won't feel the same way, but that's beside the point.

"It's unlikely anyone will be prejudiced against you because of your past, as long as you don't make an issue of it and as long as you abide by the rules. The only way I can see your past being a true problem is if, by chance, you decide you want to marry, but that's something you'll have to work out for yourself, when and if that time ever comes.

"As far as rules go, there will only be two. First, and this is extremely important, you can't drive or use InterMind within six hours of having a drink, a taffuao, or any other drug. This is necessary, because it doesn't take much alcohol or osalaem to impair a telepathic network like InterMind. If you do use the network under the influence of either one of the drugs, I'll find out about it immediately, so don't even try. Along with this, you won't be allowed to drink or smoke publicly, but you may do it in your own living quarters. I'll communicate with your landlord personally to make sure you are extended this courtesy. While you are here at the mansion, you may smoke outside too, as long as your companions don't mind.

"Secondly, I don't want to learn that you've made improper advances toward any young females, and I don't think I need to explain what I mean by 'improper.' If you do, ninety-nine point nine percent will be outraged, and rightly so. Then they and their families will become suspicious of you, and if you lose that kind of trust among Novaunians, I will have to take away your privileges to InterMind. If, by chance, you do find a girl who is willing and are physically intimate with her, then you will be responsible for your portion of the fine, which means you could end up paying the government anywhere from one thousand to twenty thousand gold coins, and I can guarantee you that in your case, a judge would not be lenient. If a child comes from the union, then you would be responsible for that child too, which in your case, would probably mean you would have to pay a settlement of several hundred gold coins to the girl's family since you wouldn't be here long enough to do anything else. Do you understand?"

Ton nodded.

"If you break either one of the rules, you'll be responsible for all of the fines, and I'll immediately deport you, because no one's going to want you here if you can't show proper consideration and respect for the established customs and laws of this society, and more importantly, it's impossible to live in this society without using InterMind. I know this is going to be difficult for you, so if in a few months you decide you can't abide by the restrictions, I'll set you up secretly on another planet. The Earthons will never find you, unless you want them to. Do you still want to stay here?"

"I really don't have any choice."

The colonel nodded once, considering the matter closed. “Now for the matter of your payment. The twenty-four thousand gold coins Teren promised you will be deposited into a bank in Shalaun. In the next day or two, I’ll send over a representative from the medical community in Shalaun to discuss your options with you. Then once you determine the direction you wish to pursue your medical training, I’ll have my daughter research the available positions and help you make application.”

Ton shook his head. “No. I want a representative here *today*.”

The colonel’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and amusement.

“I’ve been working my entire career to specialize as a neurosurgeon, and I intend to complete my training in that specialty. The available positions may be limited, and I have no intention of idling away my time on this island when I can prepare myself to obtain license to practice medicine on this planet, and I do intend to practice as soon as possible. I need language training, information on the diseases encountered here and their treatments, information on medical equipment and technology, and especially, the names of the medicines Novaunian physicians use and their chemical compositions.”

“I understand. I’ll get someone over here this afternoon.”

Ton nodded, satisfied with the colonel’s answer.

The colonel stood up and proceeded to the door. Ton arose and followed him. Before Ton could leave, the colonel placed a hand warmly on his shoulder. “There’s no need for cynicism on Novaun. The people here are very loving and hospitable and sincere, even to young Earthons who are reluctant to trust them. I wish you well.”

Ton frowned, surprised by such perception and show of kindness from the colonel. After a moment, he nodded once. “Thanks.”

“Go ahead and send Deia in.”

“Sure.” Ton immediately stepped through the door to face a wide-eyed Deia.

“How did it go?” she whispered.

Ton brushed the back of his hand over his forehead and let out a heavy, “Whew . . .”

“What did he ask you?”

Ton shook his head. “You’re getting nothing from me—I like to forget bad experiences. You’re on your own, kid.”

It was only after Ton had proceeded down the corridor a little way and had heard the office door slide shut behind Deia that he could allow himself a deep sigh and a shiver of relief.

Chapter 4: CALL TO CONTEST

Ton had finished his meal and was relaxing into his long, delicately carved jade patio chair, when he heard movement at the French doors that opened onto the balcony. He tilted his head forward slightly to see Lauria with her husband and a girl he assumed was Miaundea Quautar, their cultural tutor.

Ton watched Miaundea curiously as she and Teren enthusiastically embraced and kissed each other's cheeks. So this was the colonel's daughter. She wasn't perfectly beautiful, but she was attractive, with a petite, exquisite figure that was displayed in an exciting way by her sleeveless green satin dress. The dress's softly draped neckline exposed a gracious half of her graceful back, and the hem fell several centimeters above her knees to reveal fair, shapely legs. She was wearing a large, teardrop-shaped arelada prism on a long, braided gold chain around her neck, and her hair was parted on the side and was pale blond with just a tinge of red, the ends curled under and clinging alluringly to her bare shoulders and back. Her face was pretty with a delicate nose and tiny mouth, but what appealed to him most was the inquisitive, intellectual quality about her large, yellow-green eyes.

Teren released Miaundea and pointed her toward the table. "Miaundea Quautar, I'd like you to meet Novaun's two most eligible bachelors, Ton Luciani and Paul Doshyr!" Miaundea smiled and unconsciously smoothed her hair over her ear.

Paul and Deia laughed, but Ton pushed himself out of his chair and demanded in protest, "Eligible for *what*?"

Miaundea's eyes sparkled knowingly as she tilted her head to look up at Ton. "Why, marriage of course, Dr. Luciani."

"Then I am definitely *not* eligible."

Miaundea smiled invitingly, a smile that was more in her eyes than on her lips. "You have no idea how much that disappoints me."

Ton slid his finger slowly along Miaundea's hairline. "When am I going to get my official Novaunian welcome?"

Miaundea frowned. "Novaunian welcome?"

Ton traced the outline of her mouth with his finger. "Mmmm, hmmm. Everything here is so huggy-huggy, kissy-kissy, but even so, I haven't yet received a true Novaunian welcome."

Miaundea grinned, her eyes full of laughter. "It would be improper for me to give an 'official Novaunian welcome' to an *ineligible* bachelor."

"You know, for a person who's just been reunited with a very good friend, a friend who wouldn't be here now if I hadn't come to Novaun, you don't seem very grateful." He rested his hands on her waist. "How about that welcome now?"

Miaundea carefully removed his hands and stepped back. "It seems to me, Cadet Mentor Luciani," she began, with emphasis on "Cadet Mentor," as if to emphasize his treason, "that twenty-four thousand gold coins is more than adequate Novaunian welcome for returning Teren, the spirit dimension formula, and the Doshyr twins to Novaun."

"I find it interesting that the life of a friend is worth so much to you."

"Perhaps you should be asking Teren for your 'official Novaunian welcome!'" Everyone laughed.

Ton's excitement for this girl grew with every verbal thrust. She acted so cool, tried to be so sophisticated, but the exhilaration in her eyes and the way she watched him told him

that he was as attractive to her as she was to him. Miaundea was in no way artless, but he was an artist. It wouldn't take him long to discover her vulnerabilities.

"But you are much lovelier than Teren, and a much better kisser, I'm sure."

"You certainly are persistent!"

"I wouldn't be so persistent if you weren't interested."

"And presumptuous."

"Which is precisely why I'm so attractive to you."

"Begging doesn't become you."

"It won't be long before you're begging me."

"You are a masochist!"

"Come hurt me all over."

"What are you? Some kind of pornographic caricature?"

"No, I'm a pornographic masterpiece!"

Miaundea couldn't keep herself from laughing and neither could anyone else. Ton casually reseated himself, confident he had won the bout.

After the laughter died, Miaundea, Lauria, and Rayel pulled up chairs and the conversation continued with lively discussion about the Quautar and Zaurvau families and the happenings in Auyval Beach. Ton wasn't the least bit interested in any of the conversation, and it seemed to him that nothing new or exciting ever happened on Novaun.

Of much more interest to him was Miaundea. His gaze sauntered over the curves of her body, and when he fantasized about holding that body in his arms, the excitement nearly became intolerable. He loved her eyes, her beautiful blond hair, her vivid expressions, and the deep, melodious voice that had at first seemed an unnatural trait in a girl so petite.

As he watched her, she often gazed back at him, not at all embarrassed or uncomfortable, nor, on the other hand, accepting of his offer. Surprisingly, she didn't appear the least bit disgusted either. She stared back at him just as audaciously and unabashedly as he stared at her, her eyes laughing at him. This unusual reaction was one he was unprepared to deal with, which only escalated the intrigue of her.

After a while, the conversation drifted toward Paul, Deia, and Ton and their lives on Earth. Ton was brief in answering the questions placed to him by Lauria and Miaundea, and the things he did tell were only generalities. He had learned long before how to evade talking about his past.

Unlike Ton, Paul and Deia were eager to talk about the life they had led in Tryamazza with their mother. Eventually the circumstances involved in their being drafted and the events that had occurred the day before they had been shuttled to the *Sovereign* poured out in vivid detail.

Ton was especially amused that Paul and Deia believed their mother was the person who had hidden the photograph and medallion behind the family portrait, probably to prevent King from disposing of what must have been romantic treasures. But then, of course, that was what King had intended them to believe.

After Paul and Deia told the entire *Sovereign* experience from their point of view, Teren indicated that the D.I.I.'s not knowing precisely how many helpers he needed to use the spirit dimension formula had been one of his major strengths.

Ton wanted to laugh. Actually, that had been Teren's greatest weakness. Perhaps Teren and his father had never given their surveillants opportunity to discover the number of assistants needed by not communicating the information to each other except during

their simulated test flying, but Major Zaurvau's Earthon colleagues had been advanced enough in their knowledge of the formula that they had been able to give King an accurate estimate. Teren should never have underestimated King in that way, and Ton was proof of that.

Ton smiled seductively at Miaundea, settled into his chair, and continued quietly reveling in reliving the events of an extraordinary eight and a half weeks.

* * *

Miaundea adjusted the pale green cushions on her patio chair, then leaned back and lazily stretched her arms and legs. She had been on the island for an hour and a half, which was apparent from the long shadow a palm tree was casting over the balcony. The sun had almost dropped below the horizon, and the sky was an apricot haze. The temperature was warm, not hot as usual, and the breeze made the humidity more bearable. It was a nice evening to be outside.

As Deia teased Teren about how little she really knew about him, Miaundea looked over at Ton and humored him with a smile. Ton smiled back at her and tempted her with his eyes.

Miaundea had been anxious to meet the Star Force mentor-doctor who had turned traitor, but she certainly hadn't expected him to pursue her as a lover. His forwardness was indecent, utterly shameless, and she knew she should be embarrassed or at least offended, but she couldn't help it—she loved it.

Of course, she would probably feel differently if he were anyone else. According to Deia, however, he was exceptionally brilliant, and he was obviously exceptionally gorgeous! He was, in fact, the most handsome man she had ever seen, and she could hardly keep herself from staring at him.

He was medium-height and thin, but his frame was small, so he didn't appear the least bit gaunt. Unlike Novaunians, who were all light-eyed and fair-skinned, he was olive-skinned. His hair was short and black, combed slightly to one side over his forehead, and his face was striking, with a thick mustache and perfectly-proportioned features. His lips were full and his eyes were black under lush black lashes and bold black brows. He possessed an aura of dangerousness that Miaundea found compelling, and his overwhelming sensuality, so intense as to be forbidden, considered obscene in any civilized culture, thrilled her, yet repelled her at the same time.

As far as personality went, he was frank and vulgar, and everything about him pointed to cynicism. Miaundea deplored cynicism, and she wasn't surprised that he was generally disliked. Only slight affection existed between him and Paul, and Teren's mission had necessitated he get close to him. Miaundea couldn't help but wonder, though, why Deia had originally been so drawn to him. Miaundea doubted it had been physical attraction—Deia was too enamored of Teren and apparently had been from the beginning—but it had to have been something. Oddly enough, the affection both Deia and Teren now felt toward Ton seemed to be reciprocated.

Miaundea awoke to the conversation as Teren began telling about being sent to Earth.

"About three years ago, shortly after Mother died, Miaundea's father approached my father about going to Earth as an agent under the cover of communications specialist. Since he was the right age, unattached, and already a telepathy scientist with combat experience, he was perfect for the job. Not only that, but Minon Sharad wanted two men for the

mission (much safer), and he thought a father and son team would be an excellent cover. And because of my more technical skills as an engineer, I was an excellent complement for my father, even though I didn't have much experience. Minon Sharad also thought he could use my abilities as an athlete to make me into a dangerous combatant."

Miaundea looked at Teren knowingly. "No doubt my father has been watching you for years, thinking just that! That is the way his mind works."

Teren grinned and nodded. "We spent the next nine months training, then left on a mission that was supposed to last two years."

Lauria shook her head in amazement. "All that time, and none of us had any idea what was going on!"

Deia regarded Teren curiously. "What did you tell everybody?"

"That we were being sent to a research outpost on the other end of the galaxy and that we wouldn't be in contact with anyone for a while."

"So what did you do on Earth?" Paul asked. "Did you and your father find the information you were searching for?"

"I can't tell you much about what I did on Earth and why I was sent there, only that my father and I worked in government-related jobs and that most of my time was spent breaking into computers. My father, being older, was the one who talked to people. He was an expert with disguises. Much of what we learned will be released on the galactic level soon for political reasons, along with your story, so you'll find out about most of it soon enough. Actually, there's no telling what the publicity of this incident will do to the galactic situation. It'll be interesting to see."

Ton raised an eyebrow. "You mean our coming to Novaun—everything—it's really that big?"

Teren nodded. "Especially when considered with other pieces of intelligence, information of the nature that sent my father and me to Earth to begin with."

Deia appeared troubled. "So the entire galaxy is going to learn about us sooner or later. That means it might get back to the *Sovereign*."

"Very likely," Teren said.

"I can understand how the spirit dimension formula would make a big difference in the galactic situation," Deia said, "but I don't understand how Paul and my returning would make that much of a difference."

"Oh, but it will."

Paul frowned. "Why?"

"I don't know many of the details, and I'm not sure how much I'm supposed to tell you yet."

Miaundea broke in at this point. "You will learn everything you ever wanted to know about your family history tomorrow, probably more than you want to know. I have been working with your grandfather to put a series of family incidents together into a telepathic presentation, and believe me, you will realize the importance of your return after you have assimilated everything."

Deia leaned forward in her chair. "So can you tell us some of it now? When are we going to meet our grandfather?"

"Your grandfather wants your family history presented to you in a specific way, so neither Teren nor I are at liberty to discuss it tonight, of which I am grateful." Miaundea smiled, barely. "Tonight should be a happy night. You are here and alive and free, and all of us are together." She shook her head. "Your family history is not so happy, and if it

were up to me, I would put it off as long as possible. As for your grandfather, you will meet him tomorrow, right before my presentation. He prefers to wait until then, because he thinks it will be less awkward.”

Paul and Deia both appeared disappointed, but they nodded in resignation. Deia hesitated, then asked, her voice barely audible over the waves breaking on the beach below, “What’s he like, Miaundea? What’s our grandfather like?”

“He is dignified and authoritative and very kind—the perfect high patriarch. He is tall, his hair is white-blond, and he has beautiful blue eyes, just as you and Paul do.”

Teren squeezed Deia’s shoulder. “Just wait, you’re going to have all kinds of grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins—far more than you ever dreamed of having!”

“That’s the kind of life I’ll never complain about.” Deia asked Teren eagerly, “Did you have a tight black suit and mask and everything? You know, to break into buildings at night?”

Teren laughed. “No, I’m afraid not.”

“You didn’t?”

“I never needed anything like that. We never broke into any buildings.”

Deia’s excitement diminished into disappointment. “I rather thought you were a regular Dane Santiano.”

Paul smiled broadly. “Yes, you know, on special secret mission to cleanse the galaxy of evil, ignorance, and the heathen Diron fleets!”

“You mean the heathen *Earth* fleets. He was on Earth, not Diron, remember?” Ton reminded with a smirk.

Paul and Deia laughed uneasily, their laughter almost immediately dying into expressions of question. They still wanted to know why Teren and his father had been sent to Earth in the first place.

Teren’s face tensed. “I hate Dane Santiano, and I hated being an agent. It’s stressful and lonely, and people die.”

Rayel’s face became somber, and Lauria closed her eyes and pursed her lips.

“We’re so sorry,” Deia whispered. “We’re so sor—”

Teren stopped her with fingers over her mouth and a shake of the head. “This needs to be discussed. Lauria needs to know what happened.”

Deia nodded quickly, her eyes glassy with tears. The others waited in silence.

Proceeding with difficulty, Teren told the others about the discovery and testing of the spirit dimension formula and the events leading up to his father’s disappearance two months later.

“I continued going to work, just like he told me to, but with each day he didn’t come home, I grew more anxious. On the third day, after I got home from work, I received a telepathic communication from him that said, ‘Get out. Cover blown. Royal twins key.’ Almost immediately, I felt his spirit leave, and I knew he was dead.”

Teren stopped. Several moments passed, and he continued in a weak voice, “He endured the Ex-men’s torture for three whole days.”

“Your father’s informant was Lena, wasn’t it?” Deia’s lips trembled, and she put her hand to her forehead.

“I think it’s pretty likely.”

“If they communicated, then why didn’t she wait for him to rescue her? And us? Why did she have to kill herself?”

Paul shook his head. "Lena was telepathically bound to Sanel, Deia. All of the evidence points to it. If Lena knew about Teren's father, so did Sanel. Lena knew better than anyone that under those circumstances there could be no rescue."

Deia rubbed her forehead. "What she did wasn't right."

Teren drew Deia into his arms and held her tightly. "You have to understand. She'd been in your uncle's power so long that she had no hope left for herself. She obviously did, though, want to prevent your uncle from using her as leverage to keep you and Paul loyal to Earth."

"She should have done spirit expansion with Paul and told him, or tried to take us away—*something*."

"How can you, of all people, think that?" Paul cried. "You know better than anyone what kind of man Sanel is!"

Deia broke away from Teren to turn toward Paul. "Don't tell me what I know or don't know!"

"She didn't even have enough freedom to kill him, and you can bet she considered it."

"Only you would have been stupid enough to try something like that, Paul."

"Well, our mother wasn't stupid. She knew him better than we do, so stop criticizing her decisions!"

"I'm not 'criticizing' her. I'm just trying to understand. Too many things still don't make sense."

"You will understand your mother's motives better after you assimilate my presentation," Miaundea said.

Teren took Deia's hand in his. "In the beginning, your mother had to keep herself alive. Any attempt at rebellion would have meant your death and probably hers too, which would've left Paul completely in the power of your uncle. In the end, she chose to die, because to remain alive was to betray her planet and her family and everything she loved, and that she couldn't do."

Miaundea said to Paul and Deia, her voice reverent, "I wish I could have known your mother. She must have been an outstanding person. She was a true patriot, a true heroine. All of Novaun will be grateful to her for a very long time."

After several moments of silence, Paul asked Teren, "Did your father ever tell you anything else at all about us besides 'royal twins key'?"

"Father was very secretive about the whole thing, I assume to protect me, as well as you and Deia and your mother. Thinking back on everything that happened, I'm certain it was Deia's picture in the news that put him on your mother's trail. 'Royal twins' didn't mean anything to me because I didn't know your story. It took me the entire eight and a half weeks on the *Sovereign* to figure out who you were."

At that point, everyone wanted to know everything that had happened to Teren after his father's transmission about the royal twins. Paul and Deia were most eager to learn how Teren had come to trust them, and Ton was interested primarily in Teren's capture. The sun had set and the fog had descended to further darken the sky before the conversation drifted to the area that most tantalized Miaundea.

Teren detailed how he had come to trust Ton and explained that he had thought from the beginning that Ton was the most dangerous of all the cadets he had considered.

Ton, of course, was interested in the reason. "Why?"

“Because I couldn’t figure out what your motivation was or what your price would be, and I was never sure how much of you was sincere and how much of you wasn’t. I always kind of thought of you as a very sharp, double-edged sword.”

“Whoa!” Paul exclaimed, his face twisting into a playful grimace.

Ton stared at Teren, wearing a strange expression, and Miaundea couldn’t help but feel that Teren’s observation was completely accurate. “Such a compliment,” Ton said with a touch of sarcasm.

“You asked!”

“And so I did!”

Paul couldn’t resist the opportunity for another playful gibe. “Who says you can’t trust a traitor?”

“Paul!” Deia reprimanded. Paul made a sincere effort to keep from laughing.

“He’s right, you know,” Ton said, unconcerned. “I am a traitor, but that doesn’t matter. I don’t regret what I did, nor am I ashamed.”

“Well, I for one am glad you’re a traitor,” Teren said lightly, “because if you weren’t, I’d be dead. So as far as I’m concerned, the matter’s closed.”

“Why did you come?” Miaundea asked Ton.

His gaze pierced her to her toes. “Actually, I’m a spy working for Paul and Deia’s uncle.”

Rayel, Lauria, and Paul were completely taken aback. Teren and Deia looked at each other, then at Ton, and laughed. After a moment or two, Ton began laughing with them. Then everyone laughed together—everyone but Miaundea.

Miaundea watched Ton carefully in the dim light of the little globe on the table. Perhaps he wasn’t a spy, but he didn’t seem to want anyone to discover his reasons for leaving the *Sovereign*. She wondered what he had told her father and how much her father had believed. She did know that if Ton had lied during his interview, her father would have known immediately. One did not reach her father’s position without being a shrewd judge of character and situations. (Indeed, an intelligence agent lacking that discernment didn’t usually live long enough to reach her father’s position!)

As Miaundea watched Ton, the laughter subsided, and he turned his head and studied her without saying a word. Everyone else on the balcony waited in puzzled silence. At length, she said with a smirk, “To tell you the truth, Ton, I was not expecting you to give me such an honest answer.”

Ton raised his eyebrows and dared her with his smile. He had immediately taken her statement for what she had meant it to be—a call for contest.

Chapter 5: COMPLICATIONS

When Miaundea arrived at the Novaunian Intelligence Agency for work the next morning on Sixth Day, she went directly to her father's office in the Special Cases area. They greeted each other with an embrace and kisses on the cheeks.

Miaundea's father laughed a little. *Since when did you become conscious before the seventh hour?*

Miaundea rolled her eyes. *Stop playing with me. You know why I'm here.*

What? Isn't this usually where you work? He casually seated himself in his overstuffed, white leather chair from Erdean. *This wouldn't have anything to do with an especially enigmatic young man you met last night, would it?*

You do know why I'm here! So, is he a spy for Jovem Doshyr?

Her father's eyes flickered with amusement. *You tell me.*

Miaundea gladly swallowed the bait. *I think Paul and Deia are more likely to be spies than he. Jovem Doshyr had to get them here somehow, and what better way than through Teren?*

That's an interesting theory.

What I can't figure out, though, is why Ton came to Novaun. He wants everyone to think it was for the money, but that's precisely why I think it was for some other reason. You talked to him all afternoon yesterday. You must know.

Her father smiled cryptically. *When you find out, you tell me.*

That's no answer!

Her father's eyes widened in mock offense. *I give you a real Earthon boy to study, an enigmatic one at that, and this is the thanks I get?*

Miaundea gave up a smile. *At least you could have given me one that is a little more normal. He's so perverse, he's hysterical!*

Normal Earthons do not become traitors. Her father grinned. *So, he's already propositioned you?*

His first words to me were, "When am I going to get my official Novaunian welcome?" She burst out laughing.

Her father nearly laughed himself. *Just don't be too severe with him. There is such a thing as hospitality, you know.*

Miaundea placed her hand over her heart in an attempt to gain control over her laughter. *Oh, he loves it when I'm hospitable. The problem is, I can't seem to bring myself to be hospitable all the time.*

For the first time that morning, her father appeared worried. *Just be careful. He may start taking you seriously.*

Don't worry. I can handle Ton Luciani.

A dark-haired, sturdily built man about her father's age entered the office. Miaundea greeted him with fingertips touching. She knew the man well. He was Colonel Avenaunta, director of the Home World division of the Internal Security department of the Agency and Maurek's father. Despite her antagonism toward Maurek, her relationship with Colonel Avenaunta was cordial. In fact, all four parents had been embarrassed for years by the conflict between her and Maurek. Now they just ignored it.

Miaundea couldn't help but notice Colonel Avenaunta's disapproval of her new bright pink crepe dress, although he was trying hard to conceal it. She looked over at her father,

smiling to mask her venomous feelings. She communicated so that Colonel Avenaunta couldn't assimilate her thoughts, *It's no wonder Maurek's such a prude.*

Her father gazed at her gravely. *You are a fool. You misunderstand Maurek.*

What is there to misunderstand? He's an arrogant, domineering prude. She looked from her father to Colonel Avenaunta on her way to the door. *Happy traitor hunting!*

* * *

A little later that morning, Patriarch Patan Doshyr met Teren in Colonel Quautar's office shortly after Teren arrived at the Novaunian Intelligence Agency for work. Patan had been anxious to meet the young man who had returned his grandchildren to Novaun and who was, by all indications, in love with his granddaughter. Patan wanted to develop a comfortable relationship with Teren before Paul and Deia were given the telepathic presentation that night.

Patan knew Paul and Deia's complete states of mind from information given to him in a private meeting with Colonel Quautar and two Agency psychologists, and he knew that the presentation would throw all of their lives into chaos. Patan wanted to prepare Teren as much as he could for the magnitude of chaos that was coming.

Teren was seriously concerned about Patan's plan to reveal Paul and Deia's tragic family past to them through telepathy vision, a method that would allow them to experience the events as though they were living them.

They aren't ready for that, minon. Deia has only barely been able to cope with the loss of her career and her mother's death. But being forced to experience the murder of the sister she never knew . . . Teren shook his head quickly. *That she won't be able to handle. And Paul. It will destroy Paul.*

I feel with an urgency I can't explain that Paul and Deia need to know their father as he was and feel how much he loved them and their mother. They also need to know Jovem as he was then if they are ever to completely forgive him. This is not only necessary for their own emotional well-beings, but because he has a daughter their sister's age who lives with her mother in Launarda and who is very much involved with the family.

King was married?

Patan nodded slowly.

So his marriage on Earth to Paul and Deia's mother was a sham—in the eyes of God unlawful.

It wasn't Lana's fault, Teren.

I know. But it's just so horrible!

As horrible as the truth is, it must be faced. In her pensive way, Evelayna has been quite affected by her father's life. Naturally the reunion between the cousins will be an awkward and perhaps very painful one for all three of them.

What a complication . . .

Yes, but perhaps a more serious complication is that once Paul and Deia begin developing their minds to a point where they can function in this society and not feel like isolated outsiders, they will begin remembering, because they were there. This is why they both need to feel the horror of what happened and deal with it now, because if they can't deal with what Mineste Miaundea will give them later today, they will never be able to deal with the other murders they most likely have witnessed.

Teren looked as though he would be sick. *Their father . . . I never even thought of that.*

Now do you understand?

Perhaps they won't remember.

Patan communicated carefully, *They must remember, and the sooner the better. They are our primary key to proving that Sanel King of Earth is indeed my son Jovem and that he murdered his brother.*

But they aren't the only key! There are other ways to bring Sanel King to justice without making Paul and Deia remember! It would be cruel!

Patan's heart was full of sorrow, but with that sorrow was urgency. *No one intends to make them remember anything, but if they are to eventually gain complete emotional health, especially Paul, then it is imperative that they confront the tragedy and accept it. Not only that, but without Paul and Deia's testimonies, it will be impossible to obtain the galactic support we need to extradite King.*

Can't he just be brought up on the original charges? From what I know of his crimes, it seems that our allies will give us plenty of support, just on the original crimes.

Yes they would, if Jovem had been tried and convicted and we could prove he and King are the same person, or if we had legal testimonies of witnesses to the crimes. Jenan was the only witness to his daughter's murder, and even then, that was only to the threat. Even though Jovem never went to trial, Jenan's testimony is on record, but the testimony of a dead man to a threat just won't make much difference. The twins and their mother are the only witnesses to the kidnapping, and without their testimonies, the Earthons will claim Lana took the children to Earth by her own choice.

Teren appeared more troubled than ever. *The evidence does point that way, doesn't it?*

Patan nodded gravely. *Jovem is extremely gifted, a genius if you will, and he is a talented actor and an accomplished librarian. With his extraordinary mind power and discipline, along with his acting techniques, he developed the skill to not only fake his death, but to lie about his essence. It is imperative that he be brought to trial and given up to God to be punished for his crimes. We aren't dealing with an ordinary murderer.*

Teren shook his head. *No one can lie about his essence. Even actors—*

He was able to fake dijauntu.

Teren stared at Patan, horrified.

He is my son, Patan communicated with difficulty, my own flesh and blood. No one likes this ugly business any less than I do, but to keep more innocent people from suffering, he must not be allowed to escape the ancient penalty this time.

Teren sprang up from the white leather couch he shared with Patan and paced. "There must still be a traitor who can lie about his essence. Someone had to have dug King out of that grave. And what about spies? What is General Larauna having done about the possibility of spies and traitors who can lie about their essences?"

The Agency is already investigating everyone who has left and returned or who has visited Novaun in the last twenty years. Anyone with any discrepancies at all will be immediately placed under surveillance or imprisoned, and until the investigation is finished, we are restricting our ports. We hope to find any Earthon spies who may be here before a disaster occurs. As for a traitor, Internal Security is investigating that possibility too.

Teren breathed deeply and nodded.

Patan arose and placed his hand on Teren's shoulder, squeezing it affectionately. *We'll apprehend King, and Paul and Deia will be fine. All of the necessary Order and family resources have already been consulted and gathered, and I can assure you, they will both have all of the love and support and counseling they will need, and more.*

Teren slumped his shoulders, overwhelmed by depression. *Deia will have to go to Menaura with you for an extended period of time, won't she.*

Patan nodded slowly. *Even if it won't be so necessary for her, and I'm sure it will be, Paul will need her more during the next few months than he ever has.*

Teren sighed bitterly. *All this happiness we've both been feeling has been one giant deception. I'd hoped that all of our problems from now on would be little ones, but deep down, I knew we would have a lot to work out once we got here. I knew it the moment Minon Sharad told me they had a sister.*

Patan gazed at Teren sympathetically. *Why don't you go back to the island and spend the rest of the day with Deia. I'll communicate with your commanding officer and explain. I'm sure that under the circumstances he'll have no objections.*

Teren's eyes regained a touch of their former exhilaration. *That would be nice. No . . . that would be wonderful. Thank you, sir.*

* * *

Ton was lying on a long patio chair in front of a telepathic transmission recorder on the third floor balcony, his shirt off and pant legs pushed to his knees, studying, smoking, and basking in the sun. Teren had arrived at the island several hours before, and he and Paul and Deia had gone to the beach to go swimming. Lauria and Rayel were exploring the mansion, not wanting to get out of earshot of Braunen.

A low female voice sounded from the direction of the French doors. "Polluting the air again, are you?"

Ton didn't turn to look at Miaundea as she approached him from behind. He drew nonchalantly on his taff. "You know, for such a little thing, you sure have a big mouth."

Miaundea laughed, then suddenly was silent.

Ton curiously looked up. Miaundea was standing at the foot of his chair, her eyes wide and staring at his chest. Ton quickly snuffed out his taff in a cup on the floor and sat up completely. "So it isn't all just a game."

Miaundea lowered her eyes.

Ton stood up in front of her and lifted her chin with his finger so that he could look at her directly. Her eyes were confused, but her cheeks were flushed and she was barely breathing. He leaned to kiss her. She flinched a little in surprise but didn't pull away. He encircled her waist with his arms, drawing her close, and she automatically wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kisses deliriously, her eyes closed and lips trembling.

A minute later, Ton withdrew slightly and stroked her hair away from her face. "You are so incredibly lovely." He kissed her again, then whispered in her ear, "We have thirty minutes, maybe an hour, before the others come back."

"Thirty minutes is not much time," Miaundea whispered.

"It's enough."

She smiled dreamily and let him lead her to his suite. Once they arrived, Miaundea let go of Ton's arm, turned, and began to walk away.

Ton watched her in puzzlement. "Where're you going?"

Miaundea turned to face him again, her eyes flickering sadistically. "I changed my mind. From now on, Dr. Luciani, you may look, but you may not touch."

Ton stared at her in outrage, then seized her and threw her against the wall.

Miaundea gazed at him incredulously, almost laughing. "Let go of me!"

"Oh no. It's time you learn that you don't offer what you aren't willing to give." He lowered his face to hers and kissed her hard. Miaundea choked and tried to twist away. After many seconds of stimulating struggle with Miaundea to keep control of the kiss, Ton withdrew, victorious.

Miaundea gulped for air and attempted to wrench away, but her efforts only made Ton more determined. He held her against the wall, his mouth pressing down on hers again and again as she whimpered and quivered against him in terror. Finally, he pulled away and laughed.

"You filthy snake!"

Ton laughed even harder.

Miaundea sprang away from the wall in an attempt to escape, but Ton grabbed her arm and pinned her again. He gave her a shake. "Why didn't you scream or communicate telepathically to someone for help?"

She glared at him and set her jaw.

"You would've gone all the way through with it, wouldn't you have? You would've gladly accepted the shame and disgrace before you would've ever admitted to anyone that you weren't a willing participant in the act. And why? Because you can't stand the thought that someone might discover that there was one time in your life when you completely lost control."

Miaundea's eyes narrowed, and her cheeks reddened. She swung her palm at his face, but his hand shot forward and grabbed her wrist before impact could be made.

"My, you are a proud little thing. Proud and very, very foolish."

"You are the most conceited, overbearing, morally degenerate person I have ever met."

"Well then. We understand each other, don't we?" He softened his hold on her wrist. "I don't understand your coolness, Miaundea. I thought you liked me."

"Well, I don't."

"Why?"

"Because you are conceited, overbearing, and morally degenerate."

Ton laughed. "You're conceited, overbearing, and morally degenerate, and you seem to like yourself just fine!"

She jerked her arm out of his hand. "I do not have to listen to this."

Ton seized her arm again. "We're not done talking yet." He gripped her shoulders and stared down at her mockingly. "Now. I'm not going to insult the intelligence of either one of us by addressing the first two qualities. As for being morally degenerate, if I remember correctly, you were on the balcony a few minutes ago kissing—and only for a tease—a person you don't even like. I happen to like you. I guess that makes you more morally degenerate than I am."

She shook her head, her eyes flaming. "You have a lot of nerve."

He smirked and released his grip on her shoulders. She turned and walked angrily back to the balcony.

Ton leaned against the wall, more aggravated than amused. He remained there for a while, trying to decide what to do. He wanted to be with Miaundea, but he resented her haughty attitude. Why did the most exciting girls always have to be the ones who were the most irritating?

He finally decided to go to the balcony. When he arrived, he found Miaundea lying leisurely in his patio chair. Anticipation stabbed him. She really was exquisite.

Ton leaned and reached over her for his shirt, which he had earlier draped over the parapet. He quickly pulled it over his head and seated himself in a chair next to Miaundea, reaching out and caressing the back of her hand with his finger. Miaundea pulled her hand off the armrest of the chair and put it in her lap.

Ton withdrew his hand. "I'm absolutely certain at this moment that I'm a much bigger temptation to you than you'd like to admit. And I'm not going to let you forget it."

Miaundea met Ton's gaze with equal shrewdness. "And I am absolutely certain at this moment that you are a *boy* who has absolutely no control of himself." Her smile was touched with contempt. "And I am not going to let you forget it."

Miaundea's insult offended Ton, but he chose to ignore it for the moment. He hesitated. "I want to, you want to . . . so what's the problem?"

Everything was silent except for the waves crashing on the shore below and the wailing of gulls in the sky. Several moments passed before Miaundea smiled innocently and replied, "I do not have a problem. You are the only one who seems to have a problem."

Ton glared at her and said nothing. She looked away in discomfort.

A little later, Teren, Paul, and Deia strolled onto the balcony, pink, sandy, and smelling of the ocean. Teren and Paul were both barefoot and wearing long, ribbed tank tops and baggy trunks that hung to the lower thigh. Deia was wearing sandals and, under a long white mesh kimono, a pale pink bodysuit with capped sleeves, a tight, but fully covering bodice, and a sheer flounce around the waist that hung to the lower thigh. It was the most ridiculous swimsuit Ton had ever seen.

After the three exchanged cheerful greetings with Miaundea, Deia exclaimed, "Ton! You should have come too! It's so hot out, but the water was just cool enough, and we had so much fun!"

Ton gazed sidelong at Miaundea. Miaundea ignored him. "That's okay. I'm quite sure I had much more fun here."

Miaundea rolled her eyes condescendingly at Ton, a gesture that shocked and enraged him. He opened his mouth to blurt something out, but quickly stopped himself.

Miaundea smiled at him gloatingly, then stood up and addressed the others. "You three should shower and dress. By the time you are finished, Lauria and Rayel ought to be back and we can eat. Minon Doshyr will be here in about an hour, and then I can start the presentation."

Teren, Paul, and Deia all seemed to think that was a good idea. They walked leisurely through the French doors, followed by Miaundea, while Ton remained on the balcony to sulk.

Just as Miaundea had predicted, about the time Teren, Deia, and Paul were finished showering and dressing, Lauria and Rayel returned to the third floor for dinner, carrying Braunen in his infant seat between them.

Paul and Deia chatted gaily as they all ate, excited that they were finally going to learn their mysterious family history and meet their grandfather. Miaundea, Lauria, and Teren

weren't so talkative. Ton was even more uncommunicative than the others. He ate his meal slowly, rarely moving his eyes away from Miaundea.

He had never known a more infuriating, puzzling girl, or one who had the capacity to attract him so irresistibly. She desired him as much as he desired her, or did she? He wasn't sure. No. A girl's heart didn't pound like that when she was teasing. Her body didn't tremble and perspire like that when she was teasing. She didn't kiss those intimate, yet tender, saturated with passion kind of kisses when she was teasing. Or did she? If Miaundea noticed his preoccupation with her, she didn't acknowledge it, which only intensified his frustration and vexation.

As they were finishing their meal, a security officer entered the dining room with a distinguished blonde gentleman who Ton assumed was Paul and Deia's grandfather. He looked about sixty, and Ton wondered how old he really was. He stood tall and erect, dressed in a pale gray suit with sharply creased slacks, a short-sleeved tunic of shimmering linen, satin cummerbund, and, fastened to the shoulder with a sapphire pin, a sturdy half-vest that fell square on the thigh and had a large, sleeveless armhole. The collar, cummerbund, and gray-blue half-vest were delicately trimmed with diamonds and sapphires.

Teren and Miaundea simultaneously arose and greeted Patan Doshyr with quick embraces. Patan reciprocated the greetings generously. Then Teren and Miaundea took his arms and led him to the table to meet everyone else.

Rayel greeted Patan by placing his fingertips to his and bowing his head. *Minon Doshyr, this is a great pleasure. I'm Rayel Sekura—*

Yes! One of the Fleet's most highly regarded pilots, I understand. It's an honor to meet you, Captain Sekura.

Rayel beamed and put his arm around Lauria, who was a little awe-struck at meeting such an important person. *This is Lauria, my wife and Teren's sister.* Lauria and Patan greeted each other with fingertips pressed together and bowed heads.

Miaundea knelt beside Ton and gently cupped her small hands around one of his. She gazed at him for a moment, sweetly, guilelessly, and with unsettling empathy. Then she bade him with her eyes to stand up with her, and she presented him to Patan.

Not knowing what else to do, Ton extended his hand and nodded once. Patan smiled graciously and shook Ton's hand, and Ton could feel emotions of gratitude emanating from him. *I represent all of Novaun and especially the Doshyr family when I express how grateful I am that you left your people and your life to come to Novaun, regardless of what your reasons were.*

The patriarch was so kind and so genuine that Ton was touched. He smiled and mustered all of his emotion in an effort to transmit an image and feeling of, *Thank you. I appreciate that.*

Apparently Patan received the image and interpreted it the way Ton meant him to, for he nodded and squeezed Ton's hand.

Paul and Deia watched their grandfather, wide-eyed, as he was introduced to Rayel, Lauria, and Ton. They instinctively moved closer to each other when it was their turn.

Patan gazed at Paul and Deia in tender recognition. He reached out with both of his hands and delicately touched their cheeks. *Jenan and Lana . . . they're both in you so vividly.* Paul and Deia gazed at their grandfather reverently, also experiencing a form of recognition.

Unable to contain her happiness, Deia stepped forward to embrace her grandfather and gently kiss his cheek. Her grandfather squeezed her lovingly and kissed her forehead. Paul stood aside, rigid and uncomfortable.

Sensing Paul's awkwardness, Patan patted his shoulder and communicated, *Both of you, come. I would like us to be alone for a little while before Mineste Miaundea gives the presentation. Teren, please come too. I may need you to translate.* Paul, Deia, Teren, and Patan walked together to the lobby, while the others reseated themselves and finished their meals.

Paul appeared in the dining room an hour later to say that his grandfather was ready for Miaundea to begin the presentation, and he invited everyone to come and witness it. Rayel and Lauria politely declined, expressing concern that their presence at the revelation of such private and tragic family events would make Deia and him uncomfortable. Rayel and Lauria's action caused Ton to feel as though he had no business being involved with the presentation either, but he was too curious to decline, so he arose with Miaundea and walked with Paul to the lobby.

Teren offered his suite to use for the presentation. Once they had arrived and seated themselves in comfortable positions, Miaundea communicated privately with Patan. Several moments later, she nodded quickly and began to speak, her words indicating that Patan had used the previous hour to learn about Paul and Deia and had told them little, if anything, about himself and the Doshyrs. She spoke in English, simultaneously transmitting corresponding telepathic images for Patan.

"As you know," Miaundea said solemnly to Paul and Deia, "I have been given the charge of presenting a telepathic family history to you. Your grandfather requested that someone who has never been involved with your family give you this presentation, because he feels it would be much too difficult for someone involved to reiterate the events and emotions without his or her own emotions clouding what actually happened and what was actually felt at the time.

"For the last two days, I have been working with your grandfather, several librarians (one of whom is your father's sister Amburna), and a dramatist in order to compile a series of events that will help you understand your mother, father, and uncle and the reasons your uncle kidnapped you. At this point, I feel I must warn you that you will not only see the events as they occur, you will feel them, as if you are living them. If you have never experienced what is referred to on Novaun as telepathy vision, you will probably be overwhelmed at first.

"You will see your father and, at the same time, be able to feel his thoughts and emotions and will come to know him intimately because of it, and you will also come to know different sides of your mother and your uncle. Some of what you learn will please you, and some of what you learn will trouble you greatly. But you have to remember that your parents were human beings just as you are, with many strengths of character, but also with weakness.

"All of the events in this presentation really happened, some exactly in the way you will see, others, such as the meeting of your father and mother, very close to the way they actually happened. Your father was very close to his father, and he communicated much of what you will see to him, some in telepathy vision, and some just in feelings, ideas, and images. The experiences that your father communicated to your grandfather in ideas and images have been adapted into telepathy vision by your grandfather and the dramatist."

“Now for the facts. Your father’s name is Jenan Doshyr.” Miaundea pronounced the “j” in Jenan as “zh.” “He was the firstborn son of your grandfather Patan Doshyr, high patriarch of the Great House Doshyr of Menaura. Jenan was nineteen years old when this presentation starts, twenty-one when he met and married your mother. The man you know as Sanel King is, we believe, your father’s brother Jovem, younger than he by a year. Your mother is the Princess Lanuvael Vumaul of the Great House Vumaul of Amaria and was eighteen when she met and married your father.

“To give you a brief history of the Great Houses, about five hundred years after our Eternal Father created our world and placed our first parents in Amaria, he ordained a great prophet named Raynau. Through Raynau, God chose twelve high patriarchs to serve His children in twelve separate areas of the world, and those high patriarchs were the founders of the twelve Great Houses. High patriarch is simply the term that refers to the patriarch who possesses the proper lineage to be the president of the family organization, and the family organization may consist of one line or several hundred, depending on the specific family and its needs.

“From that time forth, all government was with the Great Houses and Councils of Patriarchs. Each community had a Council of Patriarchs, which consisted of the eldest males of each line. Hence, the high patriarchs of the Great Houses during this period were literally kings, and for the most part, they did rule justly for a space of about thirty-five hundred years.

“It was about four thousand years after our first parents that the Age of Colonization began. Most families were separating themselves with distance, taking new vocational opportunities in all areas of the Union. This dispersing of families quickly reduced the effectiveness of the traditional tribal rule, and the Great House high patriarchs were also growing weary of their heavy responsibility with the rising population.

“Thus, the new system of Councils of Judges, with the ultimate law being a constitution and one person, one vote, was adopted. Then as each new world was colonized, it also adopted this system, and even now, our planetary union is governed the same way. The Great Houses have not been the planetary government for two thousand years, although each House even now retains a seat on the home world High Council of Judges.

“The only exception to this is the Great House Vumaul and Amaria. The high patriarchs of that Great House have always led and judged with such justness that the Amarian people, in their elections, have always voted to keep the Vumaul high patriarch as their king, and the Vumaul high patriarchs have never renounced this responsibility the way the others did. This is the reason your mother’s title was ‘Princess,’ because she was the daughter of Patriarch Launs Vumaul, Amaria’s king. She was, in fact, the youngest of forty-three children.”

Paul checked a gasp. Deia’s eyes were wide with wonder.

“There is only one more facet of Novaunian culture you need to understand briefly if you are to understand this presentation and your uncle’s motives, and that is Novaunian business. All Novaunian business is composed of corporations. Even the smallest companies are corporations. Each corporation has a charter that dictates the rights of owners and employees and what percentage of the profits everyone gets, and these charters are protected by civil law and cannot be changed without the consent of the members of the corporation and a judge. All of the charters are constructed so that the employees get a large share of the profits from the beginning, thereby enabling them to gradually buy out

the original investors as their company thrives completely on its own profits. The oldest Novaunian corporations, such as the Guild of Librarians, are completely employee-owned.

“The arelada business, however, is conducted in an entirely different way, in that those who are employed in any area of arelada production do not own any share of the company that employs them. All prime territory and companies that mine, process, and market arelada are owned completely by one of four Great Houses. This is because there is so much prime territory that needs to be developed, and nearly all of that prime territory consists of mountainous regions that these four particular Great Houses have had claim on since the beginning of our civilization. It is the general consensus that these four Great Houses have the money and expertise to develop these areas prudently and with high regard to safety, so they continue to own it all and have assumed the planetary responsibility of developing more arelada production.

“The Great Houses control every aspect of arelada mining and development, but it is an act of treason to sell even a square meter of a mine or prime territory to a foreign investor, and to do so is punishable by life imprisonment. This was a law passed as an amendment to our constitution a thousand years ago to counteract a galactic law that states that once Planet One legally gains control of arelada mines or prime territory on Planet Two, Planet Two cannot interfere with Planet One’s establishment and administration of mines on said property. (To do so would invite interplanetary war.) I know this probably seems very confusing right now, but you are Doshyrs, and soon all of the legalities, intricacies, and politics of the arelada business will become second nature to you.

“Enough of my exhaustive lecture.” Miaundea tilted her head to the side and looked questioningly at Patan. “That is enough, is it not?”

Patan smiled and nodded. *You did an excellent job. I couldn’t have presented even a portion of that information nearly as simply or as eloquently.*

Miaundea laughed. *You are much too modest, minion.* Then she spoke again to Paul and Deia: “I am the vehicle by which this presentation will be given to you, but your grandfather will answer your questions when it is over. Now, everyone relax, and open your minds to me . . .”

Part 2: TRAGEDY OF A TRAITOR

Chapter 6: NO ANGEL

A white airbus glided noiselessly in the noon sun over the Jastray Valley, a long, wide valley that lay in the Launarda range of the Mountains of Awareness. When the transport was within fifty kilometers of Jastray, Menaura's capital city, it soared to a greater altitude and veered to the east over the craggy peaks toward the narrow, secluded, high mountain valley where rested the small mining town Launarda.

On that airbus was Jenan Doshyr, returning from a two-week trip to inspect the arelada mines and plants in the Norund region of northern Menaura. He was a casually elegant young man, tall, strong, and overflowing with cheerful animation, with lots of pale blond hair like his father, an affable smile, and under brown brows and lush black lashes, sparkling gray-blue eyes. He leaned one elbow on the seat in front of him, communicating gaily with the elderly gentleman who was sitting beside him.

The airbus descended into Launarda and eased to a stop on the town's small landing field. Just as Jenan exited the bus and began walking across the landing field to the terminal, he scooped up a crying little boy and set him on his shoulders. The little boy suddenly stopped crying, patted Jenan's head, and giggled, and Jenan laughed merrily with him, continuing to wave and extend his farewells to those of the other twenty-five passengers he had met on the flight and in Norund's port. Once in the terminal, Jenan delivered the child to his mother, retrieved his luggage, and telepathically summoned an automated taxi to take him home.

Jenan gazed eagerly out the window of the taxi as it whisked him a hundred meters in the air through Launarda, and, as always upon returning home after an extended time away, he marveled at the town's quaint, rustic beauty. Red brick watchtowers, restored many times, stood at both ends of the valley. Steeply roofed houses, all with chimneys, were built up the mountains on both sides of the narrow, winding valley and were nestled in spruces, cottonwoods, maples, and aspens, the red brick and wood exteriors nearly covered by the heart-shaped leaves and deep blue, violet-tinged blossoms of the wild patris vine. The red brick walks were hilly and curving, except in the flattest part of the valley where the major part of the town was located. Jenan knew that the look and feel of Launarda had changed little in all of the five thousand years of its existence.

During that time, before the rise of technology and demand for arelada, Menauran life had been simple and harsh, boasting little wealth, and had been considered barbaric by the more civilized regions of the planet in Amaria and the southern areas of Tavon, Verzaun, Narquasa, and Sakaur. In Launarda, with its peaceful, secluded, rural lifestyle and unspoiled beauty, lay the very essence of Menaura.

The Doshyr first family had lived in Launarda and overseen the upkeep of the Launardan estate for several generations. After Jenan had been born, his parents, knowing they were approaching the end of their childbearing years, had moved their family into a smaller, more recently built house on the grounds, preferring to use the mansion as office space and guest accommodations.

Though large, the Doshyr estate in Launarda was much smaller and less luxurious than the estates overseen by other branches of the family in the Jastray Valley and wasn't as much of a tourist attraction as the others were. Jenan's family occasionally entertained large groups of people in the mansion, but those events were usually restricted to family

reunions, weddings, and a few parties during the nature-hike season in autumn and the ski season in winter, when people were more likely to be visiting from out of town.

Within minutes, Jenan arrived at the estate, where a robot was waiting at the stairs of the red brick terrace of his home to take his luggage. To pay for his ride, Jenan transmitted his thought pattern imprint to the taxi. He then transmitted a telepathic message to send it back to its origination point and checked InterMind for the time. Determining he was well ahead of his schedule, he proceeded down a winding brick path through the trees to the stables.

He stopped for a moment and smiled, watching his mother as she gracefully led her silver mare from its stall, preparing to embark on her traditional Sixth Day afternoon ride. She, a rancher's daughter, was a natural, wholesome beauty, with long, rippling brown hair, a rosy complexion, and lively gray eyes. Jenan doubted that she looked much different than she had when his father had met her at an equestrian contest in Jastray as a young man. With his mother and leading her own horse was Maranda Vundaun, his mother's closest friend and the daughter-in-law of his father's head manager, Dryson Vundaun. The Vundauns had been closely associated with the Doshyr first family over the years and had married into the family many times. Maranda's children were, in fact, Jenan's third cousins.

Maranda noticed Jenan first in his position among the trees. She stopped and placed a gloved hand on her hip, her pine green eyes flickering in that playfully saucy way that was so characteristic of her. "Hey, young heir!" she called. "Come out of your hiding place! Don't you know? We warrior-women are merciful to our captives!" Leaning back, she looked over at Yaulanda (Jenan's mother) and they laughed merrily together.

Jenan laughed with the women as he jogged down the path toward them. *Hello, Mineste Maranda.* He kissed her lightly on her cheek, then stepped away and studied her for a moment. *Your hair's different. It looks nice.*

You become more charming every day, young man! And why isn't such a pleaser married yet? I happen to know that all of the eligible young Launardan women are nearly dying in anticipation! Poor things.

Jenan smiled broadly. *But how can I marry, when in Launarda, I can find no match for your beauty?* And he meant it, too. With her thick auburn hair and flawless skin, Maranda really was very beautiful—for a woman in her early one hundreds.

Maranda placed her hand over her heart and sighed. *Child, you are just too good to be true!*

And it's a pity you have no daughters, mineste. They would be well worth waiting for. He then spun around, flung his arms around his mother, and embraced her vigorously, causing her to drop her reins.

Yaulanda laughed and kissed Jenan's cheek. *Jenan, my darling, how was your trip?*

Oh, it could have been better, but then, of course, there's always something going wrong. I hope Jovem's trip was more successful than mine. What about Jovem? Is he back yet?

Maranda smirked. *Well, mention the family boor! Here he comes.*

Jovem walked determinedly up the path, gracefully handsome and meticulously dressed as always in a stylish ash blue silk, diamond-trimmed suit. He contrasted sharply with Jenan, who loved to wear neatly pressed denim slacks, hiking boots, brightly colored knit shirts, and suede jackets with no embellishment of any kind. Jovem's hair was the same pale blond as Jenan's, but his skin was fairer, his features were lighter, and his eyes

were deep gray. Although he was the same height as Jenan, he was a bit slimmer, and his disposition was much more sedate.

Jovem smiled at Maranda in a bantering way. *It's so gratifying to see my mother taking pity on the Vundaun trash.* He turned and kissed his mother. *Hello, Mother, I've missed you.*

Yaulanda smiled lovingly at Jovem and embraced him. *And I've missed you too, Jovem.*

After Jovem released his mother, he and Jenan simultaneously slapped each other's backs and clasped each other eagerly, beaming at each other in the deepest of brotherly affection.

Arm still around Jenan's shoulders, Jovem smiled in that bantering way again at Maranda. *Some of us do have to work, you know. It must be nice to just drop everything and take the whole day off.*

Afternoon, Yaulanda corrected with a smile.

I had no idea raising ten little boys was so undemanding, Jovem continued to Maranda.

What I would give to have such a life of leisure, Jenan added.

Maranda's eyes sparkled impishly. *I'll gladly trade places with both of you. I could use a vacation! You just name the day. Your father will be so impressed by my work that he'll fire you two and you'll be stuck working for me, as my baby-sitters!*

Jenan and Jovem both burst into laughter. *Don't you wish!* Jenan teased. But he and Jovem knew that Maranda, with her business-geology degree and experience as a former assistant manager of one of the Doshyr mines, really could replace them both.

Once Jovem's laughter died, he asked Maranda, *Are Minon Mays and Brys still planning to go with us on our run down the Roshaul next week?*

And Brandaun and Halaun and Shaun and Gavaun, Maranda was quick to add.

Why, you just can't wait to dispose of them, can you? Jovem playfully accused.

Actually, you're right. I was serious when I told you I want a vacation. I'm bringing the little ones to your house, and we'll spend the week with your mother and the girls.

Jenan shook his head at Jenan. *Can you believe it? The men leave, and the women have a party!*

Yaulanda rolled her eyes in mild annoyance. *I still don't understand why we can't go this time. I could use a good week on the rapids.*

Jenan's expression was resolute. *No, Mother. This trip is for men only, fathers and sons. Having mothers and little sisters along would spoil everything.*

Maranda's eyes were full of laughter. *You think you know so much.* She looked slyly over at Yaulanda. *Mays and Patan will be so lonely without us, they'll persuade the boys to come back a day early!*

Jenan and Jovem shook their heads vigorously. *No! Absolutely not!*

And I'm so sure we won't be home early, Jovem asserted, *that I'm willing to make a wager.*

Maranda lifted her eyebrows and commented to Yaulanda, *This is getting interesting. Perhaps Jovem isn't the family bore I thought he was.* Yaulanda laughed.

If Father and Mays want to come home early, as you seem to think they will, then Jenan and I will watch the boys—

"Me!" Jenan exploded. *Leave me out of this! I don't want to watch those kids! Mention boors!*

Jovem's eyes flickered temptingly. *Then I get to eat all of the toffee Maranda's going to make for us when we win.*

Jenan looked at Jovem uncertainly, then nodded that he was in the bet too.

Yaulanda smiled teasingly. *Toffee? I can make you boys all the toffee you want.*

Jovem groaned. *Oh, Mother! Don't even suggest it!*

Jenan shook his head. *Mother, you are the finest rider in the entire Jastray Valley and the most wonderful mother in the whole universe, but unfortunately, you can't cook!*

Yaulanda laughed, but Maranda communicated quickly in Yaulanda's defense, *Why boys! Your mother makes the finest mountainberry pie in all of Launarda!*

That's true, Jovem agreed. But a repertoire of steak and eggs and mountainberry pie does not make one a cook. And you know how it is with toffee, Maranda. Even Jenan and I can't get it right, and you know how many times we've tried.

Maranda smiled. *All right. If you stay out the entire six days, I'll make you a double batch of toffee, which will be ready for you when you get back. Now. I'm anxious to find out what I'm going to get out of all of this. You'll watch my children when?*

For the night you and Mays will have alone together at the Jastray Inn.

Maranda's eyes lit up in surprise. Yaulanda quickly asked Jovem, *So when exactly does Maranda get her night out? As the only official witness to this deal, I feel responsible for making sure all the details are agreed upon and that no one falls through on his commitment.*

If Maranda wins, Jovem replied, then the soonest it could be would be Third Day or Fourth Day after we get back. I have auditions for the week following, so it couldn't be much later. On Second Day night, Jenan and I have a party in Jastray to attend, and since we already have engagements, it's impossible to get out of it.

Jenan looked at Jovem strangely. *Who wants to get out of it?*

Jovem half-smiled and held his hands back in resignation. *Not me, of course. I'm just trying to be cooperative.* Jenan laughed.

Maranda eyed the two with playful skepticism. *A party in Jastray? You boys too good for Launardan girls?*

None of the girls in Launarda will go out with Jovem, Yaulanda commented.

That's because I don't ask them. Launardan girls bore me, and there isn't a girl in Jastray I've met yet who isn't dying to go out with Menaure's most famous leading man.

They won't accept engagements with you because you're such an arrogant, ungracious young man, Maranda chided.

Hey! I may be arrogant, but I'm not ungracious.

Jovem's right, you know, Maranda, Jenan communicated with a nod. All of the girls in Jastray we've met do want to go out with him. And I get all of the gorgeous actresses, so who's complaining? And we can't forget that there is one Launardan girl who would go out with Jovem. Actually, she would probably kill to have an engagement with him!

Jovem moaned. *Don't even mention her!*

Jenan threw his arms around Jovem and gazed at him dreamily, fluttering his eyelashes in a fawning way. *Oh . . . Jovem . . . Jovem! I love you . . . I love you sooooo much! How can I ever live without you? You're so, so handsome, so handsome and sophisticated! Oh . . . I'd do anything for you!* Jenan released Jovem, and they both burst out laughing.

Yaulanda looked as though she would be sick. *Boys, you're being terribly cruel. Tashaura's a lovely girl, and very sweet.*

Yes, she is, Jenan admitted. But she's so obvious about how she feels about Jovem she's disgusting. And she's also a masochist. You would think she'd realize after all these years that he despises her.

Jovem rolled his eyes in disdainful agreement with Jenan. Yaulanda shook her head at them both, glaring.

Jenan and Jovem humbled under their mother's glare, and Jenan's expression of meekness actually appeared genuine. *I'm sorry, Mother. I won't communicate cruel things about Tashaura to you or anyone else anymore, and from now on, I'll just ignore her attempts to get Jovem's attention.*

Yaulanda nodded once at Jenan in acceptance, then turned to Jovem and waited. Jovem pursed his lips and lowered his eyes. *I'm sorry, Mother.*

Yaulanda nodded. *All right. Now I think it's time for you boys to go and report to your father.*

Yes, Mother, they replied simultaneously, turning to leave.

Maranda smiled at them both affectionately. *And don't you dare tell your father about the bet, or it's all off.*

Jenan and Jovem turned back around and grinned at Maranda. *And you can't tell Mays either, or use that feminine garbage of yours on him,* Jovem playfully warned.

What's fair is fair. I won't waste this opportunity, believe me. Your father and Mays will make the decision to come home early completely on their own. Then with a graceful turn, Maranda slipped a foot into the stirrup and hoisted herself into the saddle. *I'll make the reservation for the Jastray Inn today.*

Jovem chuckled. *Just be prepared to cancel it.*

Jenan smiled devotedly at his mother. *Have a nice ride.*

Yaulanda smiled back at Jenan, then at Jovem, and mounted her mare.

As the women rode away, Jenan and Jovem proceeded back down the wooded path to the mansion, communicating lightly as they walked. They entered the mansion through a back entrance and hurried up to the second floor, where all of the offices were located.

Their father wasn't in his office and the door to the adjoining conference room was closed, so they assumed he was in conference with their uncles and Dryson Vundaun. Jenan and Jovem seated themselves in their usual places in the royal blue velvet chairs that were positioned next to the telepathic transmission recorder and waited.

About five minutes later, Patan telepathically summoned the boys to come into the conference room. As they entered, they saw Dryson Vundaun, their father's head manager; Cherl and Jaun Doshyr, their father's uncles and closest aides; and Dauril and Jesaun Doshyr, their father's brothers and head architect and chief scientist. Embraces and cheerful greetings were exchanged, and for fifteen minutes, the eight laughed and communicated about everything but the family's enterprises. Then Patan took his sons back into his office, while the other men left the conference room to attend to other business.

Patan quickly resumed telepathic communication with his absent librarian, and Jenan and Jovem gave their reports, occasionally using the telepathic transmission recorder to convert mental images into charts and graphs onto the large screen that covered one wall.

After an hour and a half had passed and Jenan and Jovem had completed their reports, Jovem hesitated, then asked, *Father, do you suppose you could take me to Council with you this time?*

Jenan was stunned. In only a second, he overcame the initial shock at Jovem's request and looked at his father, his expression pleading frantically for reinforcement.

Patan leaned back in his chair and folded his hands against his mouth, taking his time to respond. When he did, it was with delicacy. *Jovem, there should be no reason to even discuss this. You know as well as anyone that I can only have two proxy-counselors. Your Great Aunt Paumala has been a proxy-counselor since before I was born and is the finest judge you will ever know, and Jenan is the heir. He needs the experience now as a proxy-counselor so that he will be confident and competent when he takes the seat.*

Jovem's pale face tightened, his gray eyes as sinister as the sky before a blizzard. *And why should it be Jenan? Why should he be the heir? I'm the one who's better qualified. It isn't fair.* Then he shot a glare so full of resentment at Jenan that it shredded Jenan's heart.

Patan glanced warningly at Jenan and pointed briefly at the door. Jenan frowned, for a moment not comprehending his father's request. Then gripping the armrests of his chair, he forced himself to stand and walk, dazed, out of the office.

Once Jenan had left, Patan replied calmly to Jovem, *On the contrary, Jovem, it's completely fair.*

Jovem's expression was full of scorn. *That's easy for you to think. You're already the high patriarch.*

My being this family's high patriarch doesn't affect my opinion on this issue. The patriarchal structure has been the recognized family structure in all Novaunian families since the beginning of our civilization.

Traditions can and sometimes should be changed.

In some cases yes, but in this case no, at least not until the structure is clearly being abused by those in authority. Who is either one of us to tamper with a method of organization that has been so effective since the beginning of time?

Patan's eyes searched Jovem's lowered face for reaction. Jovem's attitude was softening, however reluctantly.

Patan continued, *If I were to appoint you the heir instead of Jenan, or if he were to relinquish his seat to you for any reason other than moral unworthiness, then after my death, you would both witness the complete chaos and division that would occur in this family as a result of that action, for a large percentage of the family would still look to Jenan for leadership.*

Now as far as qualifications are concerned, you are no more qualified than Jenan. It is true that you have achieved a degree of intellectual superiority through your certification as a librarian. Your individual achievements, however, do not in any way diminish Jenan's intelligence or anyone else's. Jenan is intelligent and intellectually capable, as are many who are not librarians, and being a librarian is certainly not a requirement for the seat of high patriarch. Jenan is eager and charismatic, a natural leader, and more importantly, he is humble in accepting this responsibility. He will be an excellent high patriarch. Patan smiled affectionately. *That is, if he can bring that obsessive nature of his under control a little more.*

Patan's final comment brought a smile to Jovem's lips, though not a smile of ridicule or contempt, but a smile of love for the brother he knew so well.

If only you could see as clearly as I can, Jovem. You and Jenan are both extremely talented in your own individual ways, and there isn't a doubt in my mind that there hasn't been such a powerful combination of talents in this family for generations. The two of you

will carry this House to heights it's never seen, as long as you don't allow your resentment of Jenan's position to come between the two of you.

Jovem nodded quickly. *I understand, Father.* He hesitated, then admitted soberly, *My feelings haven't changed, but I'll try.*

That's about all you can do for now, isn't it? And I don't suppose any of your uncles would be opposed to communicating with you if you feel you would benefit from further discussion.

Jovem nodded thoughtfully, then was suddenly overcome with horror. He sprang out of his chair and in a few long strides was out the door.

* * *

Jenan left his father's office, his neatly organized world collapsing all around him. He stepped rapidly across the lawn, then burst into a run.

In minutes, he was climbing the huge marnouj tree in front of the mansion and crawling to the little wooden tree house he and Jovem had built when Jenan was ten. He hoisted himself into the fort and dropped his head between his knees, engulfed by an awareness of his inadequacies for the high patriarchate and desolate from a shattered brotherhood.

Only moments later, he felt emotions of confidence and love embrace him, and he knew that they were coming from his father. He accepted the communication gratefully, although he didn't return it. *Jovem has some problems that only he can work out. He is in no way more qualified than you for the heirship, and his individual achievements don't in any way diminish your intelligence. You are intelligent and intellectually capable, eager and charismatic, a natural leader. You will be an excellent high patriarch when your time comes.*

Even as the communication from his father was ending, Jenan could feel an urgent, *Jenan! Jenan! I'm sorry!* Jenan lifted his head and, through the branches of the tree, saw Jovem running from behind the mansion, looking frantically around the grounds.

"Jenan! Jenan!" Jovem yelled in frustration. "Where are you? We have to communicate!"

Jenan watched his brother search the grounds of the mansion and those of the family house, still too immersed in grief to be capable of receiving the transmissions that were bombarding him.

For some time Jovem entered and exited the mansion, the house, the stables, the woods around the grounds, and anywhere else he could think of where Jenan might be secluded. Finally Jovem, near despair, approached the marnouj tree and peered shamefaced up at Jenan. *May I come up?*

Jenan nodded weakly.

In only moments, Jovem was in the tree house sitting next to Jenan, gazing at him in remorse. *I'm so sorry, Jenan. I've made a mess of everything. Can you ever forgive me?*

Jenan lifted his shoulders in the smallest of shrugs. *Why didn't you tell me how you felt a long time ago? Why did you have to wait until you were full of resentment?*

I guess I thought it would go away. Jovem gazed at the darkening sky. *You have to understand. God has given me so much . . . so many gifts, so much knowledge, so many opportunities. And I feel as if I can just reach out and have the whole universe.*

Jovem looked again at Jenan, his eyes aglow with ambition. *But then I realize that the heirship is the one thing I can never have. And I get so angry! So angry that there is one thing that prevents me from having it all. Can't you understand, Jenan? It's your position, not you.* His gaze softened and he shook his head. *Never you.*

I guess I'll never understand. The very thought of being high patriarch completely overwhelms me. More often than not, I would just like to run.

Neither young man communicated for several minutes. Finally, Jovem's thoughts flowed into Jenan's. *I have to leave for a few years. I've been considering it for a while, but now I'm sure.*

Leave? But why?

Because I'm not sure I want to work for the family anymore. I'd like to try acting full-time for a while.

Where will you go? I didn't think that even Mautysia had full-time theater.

It doesn't. I've already been accepted into the Latanza III Interstellar Theater Company. I have to report in Neestian in two weeks. The company will be on Latanza III for nearly half a year before it goes on tour again.

Several moments passed before Jenan could absorb everything Jovem had told him. *I guess I should be ecstatic for you. The Latanza III Interstellar Theater Company is one of the best. That's quite an opportunity.*

But you're not ecstatic for me.

Jenan shook his head slowly. *I don't want you to leave. I'll miss you.*

Jovem threw his arms around his brother. *I'll miss you too.*

* * *

Jovem did leave Novaun, almost immediately, and Jenan was left to tend Maranda's children. Patan and Yaulanda, in the short days before Jovem's departure, had attempted to persuade him to wait for at least a month before he left. They were both uncomfortable with his leaving Novaun in his current state of mind, and they hoped that after a month, he would decide not to go at all. Neither believed he could rectify his feelings toward his family responsibilities while away from his family.

Jenan grieved Jovem's departure most. The parties weren't the same without Jovem, so Jenan eventually stopped going to them, and the evenings in his room without Jovem in the other bed were terribly lonely. For the two years Jovem was away, Jenan devoted himself completely to his work.

Jovem rarely sent commudiscs to members of the family while he was gone, and when he did, the communication was vague. Only twice did he arrange to communicate with his parents telepathically. When Patan and Yaulanda finally received word that Jovem was returning to Novaun for good, they were uneasy about how two years touring the galaxy with a foreign theater company had affected their son.

Patan and Yaulanda's fears subsided soon after Jovem's return. He was a little aloof but basically the same as when he had left, although he seemed much more accepting of his position in the family. He did return, however, an electrifying actor. People came from all over the Union to see him perform in Jastray.

Several months after Jovem had returned to Novaun, he and Jenan traveled with their Uncle Cherl to Amaria to oversee the employee-purchase of a lilcryen mine the family owned there. After a long day of negotiation, the Doshyr men, along with all of the other

men and women involved in the purchase, attended a formal dinner at Diamond Palace, hosted by Patriarch Launs Vumaul, his wife Naoma, and their youngest child and only daughter, eighteen-year-old Princess Lanuvael.

Jenan saw Lanuvael before she saw him. She was standing in the luminous foyer next to her mother by the entrance of a spacious sky-blue lounge, greeting everyone who came through the reception line. She was wearing a pink satin and lace gown that, along with her long, onyx black hair, was modestly embellished with lilcryens, the opalescent gems for which Amaria was famous.

So that's the celebrated Princess Lana, Jovem observed to Jenan as they waited to pass through the reception line. *And I thought she was older. She can't be any more than fifteen. Or maybe it's the pink. Pink is such a babyish color on a woman.*

Jenan continued to watch Lanuvael intently as he replied to Jovem, *Amburna told me that she's eighteen. She looks every bit of it to me.*

Lanuvael turned her head slightly and noticed Jenan. Her sapphire eyes increased in brilliance, and she smiled, ever so slightly.

She likes you, Jenan! And she's so amazingly dignified about it too. I would have expected her to blush and burst into giggles.

That just goes to show you how much you know about women!

Jovem laughed, even as their Uncle Cherl greeted Patriarch Launs and his wife. Cherl had known Launs and Naoma since his youth and communicated with them easily. Naoma asked him how he liked babysitting that “boy patriarch,” and the three of them laughed merrily together.

Cherl's conversation with Lanuvael's parents dragged on for quite a few more tedious minutes, and Jenan didn't think he and Lanuvael would ever be introduced. Lanuvael's expression indicated that she felt the same way.

Jovem looked at Lanuvael, then back at Jenan. *This is ridiculous! Jenan, this is Princess Lanuvael, and Princess Lanuvael, this is my brother Jenan Doshyr. I'm Jovem, but I don't suppose you care.*

This time, Lanuvael did blush. After a second or two, she smiled at Jovem. *I'm glad to meet you Jovem, and thank you.* She focused her vision on Jenan again, and the two gazed at each other, captivated. *Princess Lanuvael is much too tiresome. Please call me Lana.*

All right, Lana. And I'm glad to meet you. My sisters' descriptions didn't do you justice, and their skinny little bodies don't do your dress designs justice either! How long have you been designing clothes?

I'm sure your sisters are lovely! And I've been designing clothing and jewelry for as long as I can remember.

Cherl's thoughts momentarily interrupted Jenan's conversation with Lana. *I'd like you to meet my nephew's boys,* Cherl communicated to Launs and Naoma. *This is Jenan, and this is Jovem.*

Lana's parents greeted the boys warmly, complimenting them on their participation in the day's business dealings and displaying excessive enthusiasm for Jovem and his reputation as Novaun's finest young actor.

Jenan's fingers tingled against Lana's as they were introduced, and he was delighted to learn that she would be seated across from Jovem and him at dinner. Having little concern for decorum, Jenan intended to remain with Lana and walk with her to the dining room. Jovem slipped his arm under Jenan's and pulled him away from the reception line.

Jenan and Jovem waited with their uncle in the lounge until all of the guests had arrived. Then Launs, Naoma, and Lana led their guests into a huge dining hall with a gold floor and an artistically sculpted lily table.

Jenan and Lana communicated all through dinner, concentrating entirely on each other and eating slowly, as if they felt they could prolong the dinner and be together longer. As Launs arose and bade the guests walk with him back to the lounge, ending the dinner, panic overwhelmed Jenan. He, Jovem, and his uncle would return to their hotel within minutes and leave Amaria the next day. He doubted he would ever see Lana again.

Jenan and Lana stood up at the same time, and Lana waited for Jenan to join her on her side of the table. She touched his arm and smiled up at him. *You aren't planning to leave so soon, are you? Why don't you stay for a while, and we can go for a walk.*

That would be wonderful! Jenan quickly explained his plans to Jovem and Cheryl, then left the dining room hand in hand with Lana.

Lana took Jenan on a tour of Diamond Palace and its grounds. The palace itself seemed to be one giant diamond, with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and numerous other precious gems designed among the diamonds into the walls and cathedral ceilings in ways that simulated the natural refraction that would occur if the palace had been constructed completely of diamonds and sunlight was shining through it. Jenan couldn't imagine the Eternal Father's home in Paradise being so gloriously beautiful.

The palace grounds were equally magnificent. Jenan and Lana wound their way through gem gardens, sculpture gardens, and tropical gardens, finally ending up in a flower garden that overlooked Talavaura and the ocean. They sat down together on a polished white marble bench and watched the sun fade into twilight over the glittering waves of the ocean.

Lana rested her arm on Jenan's shoulder and grazed his cheek with her fingertip. *Does it ever bother you that your brother gets so much attention?*

No. Jovem is very talented, and he deserves all of the attention he gets.

You never get jealous? Ever?

Jenan shook his head. *Honestly, I don't. He doesn't have nearly the singing voice I do, he's terrible at athletics, and he's terrified to ride a horse. Do you have any idea what it would be like to live with my parents, the two most avid equestrians on all of Novaun, and be terrified to ride a horse? I wouldn't trade places with him for a moment!*

Lana laughed gaily. *I don't suppose I would either!*

Jenan hesitated. *You don't like my brother, do you.*

Lana bowed her head.

Jenan lifted her chin so that they were looking at each other again. *It's all right, Lana. I'm just wondering what your reasons are.*

Oh, he's charming enough, and handsome, I suppose. But there's just something about his eyes . . . They're so cold . . . and calculating. She shuddered. *And I don't like the way he watches me.*

Jenan fought hard to keep from laughing. *Jovem? Cold and calculating?* He shook his head. *He is very private though, which might make him seem rather cold to someone who doesn't know him very well.*

That's probably all it is, then.

As Jenan gazed at Lana, memories of that day in his father's office over two years before trickled from his subconscious, and he remembered the resentment and ambition

that had been in Jovem's eyes. Was that what Lana had seen? The possibility troubled Jenan. As for the other, Lana had to be imagining things.

What's the matter?

Jenan almost told Lana everything, but out of respect to his brother, he didn't. *Nothing . . . nothing, really.*

Lana seemed to understand that Jenan was disturbed about something he preferred to keep to himself, so she made an attempt to lighten the conversation. *Jenan Doshyr, I believe I'm jealous! Your brother seems to have your whole heart!*

Jenan grinned. *Well, at least ninety-nine point nine percent of it!* Lana giggled.

Their laughter quickly died into expressions of tender longing. Jenan opened his spirit to her as far as was proper and allowed his rapture to flow around her, and she did the same, touching her lips lovingly to his. Jenan eagerly drew her into his arms and clasped her against him, kissing her ardently. Then suddenly, he withdrew, horror-stricken.

Lana, I'm so sorry! I let my feelings overcome me. I'm sorry.

Lana's eyes sparkled with happiness. *You did surprise me, I'll have to admit, but what a wonderful surprise!* She kissed him again, lightly.

Jenan's face was solemn. *Lana, I love you. Is that terrible? I know we've only known each other for a few hours, but I can't help how I feel.*

Lana shook her head. *No, it isn't terrible at all. I love you too, Jenan. I think it had to be this way for us. You would have left after dinner and we would never have had a chance. Menaura is so far away.*

I can't leave yet, Lana. Do you think Minon Nedul would let you have the next two or three weeks free so that we can spend some time together?

I think so, but do you think your father will let you have some time off work?

He'd better! I haven't had more than two days off at a time for over two years!

Even as Jenan ended his communication with Lana, he transmitted his thoughts to his father in Menaura. *I want to remain here in Talavaura for a few weeks. I met a girl, Lana Vumaul.*

Jenan could feel in his father animation of spirit, as if he were laughing. *Is she as pretty as your sisters think she is?*

Absolutely!

Then go ahead and stay. You certainly won't be good for anything if you come home.

Jenan smiled at Lana. *I can stay as long as I want.*

A little later Jenan went with Lana to the wing of the palace where she lived, and they spent an hour with her parents. After Launs and Naoma went to bed, Jenan and Lana conversed well into the night. When Jenan finally went back to the hotel, he entered his room as quietly as he could so that he wouldn't wake Jovem.

Jovem, however, was waiting for Jenan. As soon as Jenan entered the room, Jovem transmitted a thought to turn on the light and sat up in bed. He smiled broadly. *You're staying, aren't you.*

Jenan nodded as he sat down on his bed. *I'm going to marry her, Jovem. I knew it when I first saw her, and I think she did too.*

You're betrothed?

Oh, no! Our relationship is progressing quickly, but not that quickly!

Jovem shook his head in amazement. *That's good, I guess. I'm just having a difficult time seeing whatever it is you think is so attractive about her. She looks frigid to me! He shivered.*

Jenan laughed, feeling relieved. *She probably would be with you!* If Lana was wrong about Jovem's "watching" her, she was, undoubtedly, wrong about the cold and calculating part too. *For once I don't have to worry about you stealing my girl!*

Jovem laughed with Jenan. *So, did the prim little princess let you kiss her?*

What do you mean? She kissed me, and it was wonderful! Jenan collapsed backward onto his bed in exhilaration.

The brothers communicated a little longer before they turned out the light. Jenan didn't sleep at all that night, anticipating the next day when he would see Lana again.

Jenan and Lana spent nearly every moment together for three weeks. They toured Talavaura, went swimming in the ocean, hiked in the mountains above the palace, and visited Lana's family and friends who lived in the city. They spend their evenings in the same basic way Novaunians all over the Union spent their evenings. Second and Third Day nights were spent quietly in the flower garden enjoying the scheduled entertainment from InterMind; Fourth Day evenings were spent at parties given by friends; Fifth Day and Sixth Day nights were spent at plays and concerts; and Seventh Day nights were spent going to Talavaura's finest restaurants for dinner and dancing. Eighth Days were spent at the VisionRun complex downtown cheering for all of the local teams as they competed in VisionRun, and First Days were spent in religious worship with Lana's family in their home and at Devotional.

They were alone in the flower garden overlooking the ocean after nearly three weeks together, when Jenan presented Lana with an exquisite moonstone ring.

"Ohhh . . ." Lana breathed, holding the ring gingerly. *It's so beautiful, Jenan.*

Do you recognize the design?

Lana nodded. *It's Minon Nedul's, but where did you get the moonstone? He never designs jewelry with foreign gems unless someone gives him the gem.*

Jovem sold it to me. He brought back hundreds of moonstones from Gudynea, and he sells them below market price to anyone who wants them, and he still makes a good profit.

Lana laughed. *Your brother! He's quite the businessman!*

Jenan smiled and took the ring from Lana's hand so that he could slip it on her finger. He looked up and gazed at her, emotions of love, admiration, and passion gushing from him and surging around her as a torrent. *Lana, I can imagine nothing more wonderful than for us to be companions forever. Will you marry me?*

Lana glowed with happiness. She stroked his face and hair and softly kissed him, emotions of love and anticipation caressing his spirit. *Yes, Jenan, oh yes! There is nothing in this universe I want more than to marry you.*

Later that evening, Jenan and Lana told Lana's parents about their betrothal. After a few minutes of discussion, Launs and Naoma dismissed Jenan from the room with such gravity that he was dismayed. He had never considered the possibility that they would disapprove.

Naoma sat down next to Lana and embraced her. *Jenan is a fine young man, Lanuvael, and we've grown to love him over the past few weeks.*

Then why would you not want me to marry him?

It isn't that we disapprove of your marrying him, Launs communicated delicately. *Quite the contrary. We just feel there are factors in this decision you haven't considered.*

But I've considered everything! I've never felt more right about a decision in my whole life!

Launs positioned a chair so that he could sit down in front of Lana and look at her directly. He affectionately took her hands in his. *Jenan has a great responsibility to his family. You know that, but perhaps you don't understand completely what it means. He will need you to stand beside him and support him in every way, which means, among other things, you will never be able to return to Amaria to live without leaving him completely or causing him to forfeit his heirship. If you marry Jenan, you will, in a very real way, marry his country too. Menaura is a beautiful country in its own way, but it will seem like a different planet to you.*

But I understand that, Father! Jenan has shown me his home, and I already love it. And no woman he knows in Menaura could understand the duties of a patriarch's wife better than I!

Launs smiled. *You're probably right about that.*

Naoma stroked Lana's hair away from her face. *We suggest you go to Menaura with Jenan and live with his family for a while before you make a final decision.*

That's a fair enough request. Lana smiled radiantly and jumped up from the couch. *And I would certainly rather go with Jenan when he leaves than stay here without him! I'll go tell him now, and we'll make the arrangements with his parents tonight!*

* * *

Lana left with Jenan three days later and occupied the guest room in his family's home. Lana immediately set up a workshop in a utility room and continued her apprenticeship with gem artist Horautij Nedul through telepathy. Jenan reluctantly went back to work himself, although he accomplished half as much as he normally did. After a cold, snowy month passed, Jenan and Lana set their wedding date. Lana made all of the arrangements with her mother through telepathy and traveled to Amaria only once during the betrothal period. Jenan was so lonely when Lana left that he followed her after only two days.

The wedding day approached slowly for Jenan and Lana, but finally, after two months, it did come. Jenan's father, as the oldest worthy male of his line, holding the office of taurnen in the Adaumic Authority, performed the ceremony of the Ordination Rite at the house of worship Lana had attended all her life. He put his fingertips to their foreheads and ordained them to the roles of taurnel "ordained father" and taurjra "ordained mother" in the eternal family of God, then put Jenan and Lana under covenant to commit themselves to each other and God for eternity.

Jenan dipped his forefinger in a dish of the sacred nuayem oil, touched his other forefinger, then touched both of his fingers to her forefingers. They placed their fingers on each other's temples and felt the warmth of the oil permeate their bodies in symbolism of the dijauntu. Patan instructed them to hold hands as he embedded the tiny arelada triangles in their temples that symbolized the eternal triangle, with God at the top point and Man and Woman at the base points.

An afternoon and evening of festivities followed the wedding at Diamond Palace. Dinner was served to the families, and the palace was open for dancing to everyone in Amaria who wanted to come, and practically everyone did.

As a wedding gift, Lana made Jenan an exquisite imitation of a family heirloom, an arelada pendant that was inlaid with diamonds and gold. Jenan and Lana posed for portraits that afternoon in the flower garden, then after several hours of dancing, left the party and

took an airbus to Shalaun. They traveled the next day to Latanza, where they spent two weeks in newly married bliss, compliments of Jovem.

After returning to Launarda, Jenan and Lana finished acquiring furniture for their tiny, two-bedroom home and went back to their individual educational and occupational pursuits. When Lana wasn't studying with Minon Nedul, she was creating her home. She fashioned beautiful plaques, tapestries, and flower arrangements of fine fabrics and gems and designed and sewed shades, drapes, and bedding.

Jenan and Lana loved their tiny home, and they enjoyed the moments they spent there together. They also spent many evenings with Jenan's family, visiting friends, or at the theater in Jastray watching, spellbound, as Jovem performed. Once they traveled all the way to Mautysia in Verzaun for the premiere of a play in which Jovem starred with one of Novaun's most promising young actresses, the glamorous Aulanora Jualaz Nalaurev. Lana loved to tease Jenan and ask him which actresses he had engaged, but he never told her. She always had to find out from Jovem.

Three months after the wedding, Patan conversed soberly with Jenan alone in his office. *Your dedication to your work is about half what it should be. I could overlook your preoccupation with Lana in the beginning, but you've been married for three months now, and there isn't any reason your relationship with her should be interfering so dramatically with your work.*

But it isn't! Jenan protested. *And of course I'm getting about half as much done now. I don't spend nearly as much time at work as I did half a year ago, and if I remember correctly, you weren't happy about all of those extra hours either!*

Patan sighed. *No, Jenan, I wasn't, but now you have simply traded one extreme lifestyle for another. Frankly, you're more of a hindrance to the business right now than a help.*

Jenan was stunned. *So, what is it you want me to do?*

I need the mines in the Solsila region inspected, and I want you to do it. You'll leave tomorrow morning.

But that's practically the other side of the planet! And I certainly can't leave Lana for that long!

Yes, you certainly can. Lana will be just fine by herself for a week. She seems to have managed just fine without you for most of her life.

All right, Father, I'll go. Jenan left his father's office, planning to take Lana with him to Solsila the next day.

When Jenan arrived home, he found Lana in her shop, buffing a gold ring she had just broken out of a casting mold. He telepathically turned off the buffing machine and embraced her lovingly from behind.

Lana stiffened. *Now why did you have to do that? I'm almost done with this one.*

Jenan kissed her neck. *I wanted to see you and be with you. You're just too beautiful!*

Lana turned around and smiled. She wrapped her arms around Jenan's neck and kissed him adoringly, then wriggled away and turned her buffing machine back on. *Just give me fifteen more minutes, then we can have dinner.*

Jenan gently rubbed Lana's shoulders and turned the buffing machine off again. *Oh, come on, Lana. Can't you finish that later? Let's go for a walk. It's too beautiful an afternoon to be in the house.*

Lana turned away from her work, and this time she was angry. *Why do we have to be together every single second when you're home? I can't get anything done when you're*

around, and believe it or not, I have other obligations and interests in this life besides you! I love you with all my essence, Jenan, but this constant togetherness is smothering me!

Jenan was devastated. "Fine," he mumbled. *Then I'll just leave.* He turned and left the house, almost at a run.

Lana realized the anguish she had caused Jenan and was horrified. "Jenan! Jenan! Wait!" she cried, running after him. "Come back!"

But she was too late. By the time she reached the front door, he was gone. Lana waited for Jenan to return home that night, but he never did. The next evening, when he didn't come home from work, she went to his parents' house to see if he was there, nearly hysterical with confusion and grief.

But didn't he tell you? Yaulanda asked, putting her arm around Lana and guiding her into the living room. *Patan sent him to inspect the mines in Solsila. He'll be gone for a week.*

"A week!" Lana gasped.

Oh darling, Yaulanda soothed, *a week isn't long. He'll be home before you know it.*

A week is an eternity! Lana turned away from Yaulanda and walked quickly to the door. Patan nearly collided with her as he entered, but she didn't notice. Once she had stepped down from the terrace, she ran all the way back to her house.

What was that all about? Patan asked his wife.

Yaulanda shook her head slowly. *I'm not sure, but from what I could understand, Lana didn't know about Jenan's trip and thought he was gone for some other reason. I think they might have had a fight.*

Well for all of our sakes, it's about time! Patan replied. Yaulanda hated to agree.

* * *

Lana tried desperately to communicate with Jenan during the week he was away, but he refused every attempt. When he finally did come home, she threw herself into his arms and apologized, weeping. He led her to the couch and softly kissed her and stroked her hair.

Lana, my love, you have no reason to apologize. You were right about everything.

Lana shook her head quickly. *No, I was terribly cruel.*

No more than I deserved. I should have been able to feel the dissatisfaction in you long before you ever told me about it. I guess I didn't want to know. Can you ever forgive me?

Lana squeezed him tightly. *Of course. But why couldn't you have replied to my communications, just once?*

I needed the separation, Lana, and I needed it to be complete. I'm sorry if I made it hard on you, but I didn't know what else to do.

Lana nodded that she understood.

I missed you so much, Lana. I love you.

I love you too, Jenan. Lana pulled away slightly, her eyes overflowing with excitement. *I have the most wonderful thing to tell you. We're going to have a baby!*

Jenan laughed and hugged Lana again.

* * *

Jovem walked coolly into his father's office the next week, responding to an urgent summons.

Patan gravely motioned Jovem into a chair. Once Jovem sat down, Patan communicated directly, *I've just been informed, Jovem, that Tashaura Selmel is pregnant and that you are the father. Is my information correct?*

This is the first I've learned of it.

Patan inhaled deeply to maintain his patience. *Could it be true?*

Jovem shrugged. *It probably is.*

Patan's face tensed, then turned pale in anger and disgust. *A mistake, I can understand, but your indifference and complete lack of remorse is deplorable! You go to that girl on your knees and beg her to forgive you!*

I will not! She's an adult woman. She made the decision to be intimate with me. Why should I be made responsible for that decision?

Any man who wishes to call himself a man does not make love to a woman until he is ready to accept the responsibility of fatherhood!

Jovem stood and glared down at his father. *And why is it always the man's fault! Why can't the woman justifiably take fifty percent of the blame! Even the fines for the man's family are higher!*

Patan stood up to rebuke his son to his face. *Your attitude is inexcusable! Whether she's as much to blame as you doesn't matter. Your action concerns many more people than just you, Jovem. It concerns a young woman and her honor and dignity and self-respect, and it concerns a child who hasn't been born, a child who has a right to a stable family life. Proper sexual conduct is your moral and social obligation!*

Jovem stood frozen in anger for several moments before the realization of what he had done tumbled down on him. He dropped into his chair and bowed his face into his hands. He didn't communicate for several minutes. When he did, his thoughts were charged with shame and contrition. *I'm sorry, Father . . . I'm sorry . . . and I'm so scared. I'll go to Tashi and ask her to marry me.*

Patan spent a minute pondering Jovem's present repentant attitude in relation to his previous indifference. He sat down and rested his hand affectionately on Jovem's shoulder. *Are you sure you should marry her? Do you love her?*

Jovem raised his head and nodded. *Of course I love her. What kind of reprobate do you think I am?*

Patan leaned back in his chair and studied Jovem's pallid, distorted face. *Tell me something, Jovem. Is she your first?*

Yes!

Patan shook his head. *I don't know what to think. I want to believe you're sincere, Jovem, I really do, but after that display of defiance, I'm finding it extremely difficult. I'm afraid that in this case I'm not capable of acting as your spiritual advisor. I want you to go and discuss your problem with your Uncle Cherl, and the two of you can put things in order with President Denaul.*

Jovem nodded and stood to leave. Patan arose with him and embraced him tenderly. *I want you to be happy. You must believe that.*

Jovem laid his head on his father's shoulder and squeezed him tightly. *I know. And I'm sorry. I won't let you down. I'll make it right, I promise, and I'll take good care of Tashi and the baby.*

* * *

After leaving his father's office, Jovem immediately went to Tashaura's home. When Tashaura came to the door, she gazed up at Jovem's angry face in terror. He took her hand and quickly led her outside.

You could have at least had the decency to tell me first! But no! I had to find out from my father!

Tears streamed down Tashaura's face. *You have to believe me—I meant for you to know first—but my physician just told my parents and they knew it could only be you. What was I supposed to do?*

Jovem sat down on the front step, pulling Tashaura down with him. *I guess there's no way you could have helped it. Come here.* He put his arms around her and she wept on his neck.

Tashaura gasped. *I just don't know how this could have happened. I did just what you told me to do.*

You obviously didn't do just what I told you to do!

I tried, I did. I guess I didn't understand. You still love me, don't you, Jovem? Oh please tell me you still love me.

"Shhh, shhh . . ." Jovem whispered. *Of course I still love you, Tashi. I'll always love you. This just means we'll have to get married a little sooner than we had planned, that's all.*

Oh, Jovem . . . we've made such a mess of everything.

Jovem kissed her ash brown hair. *Now that's enough.* He helped her stand. *Let's go for a walk, and then we can discuss the wedding plans with your parents.*

* * *

When Jenan and Lana learned of Jovem's upcoming marriage to Tashaura Selmel and the circumstances surrounding it, Jenan was shocked. *This isn't like Jovem. Tashaura Selmel, of all people! He despises her and always has!*

Lana sniffed. *He never intended to marry her. After two years of riotous living abroad, several months of celibacy here must have frustrated him to tears. He took a chance with the girl he thought was most likely to give him what he wanted, and he got caught.*

Lana!

There's only one woman in Launarda he wants, and it isn't Tashaura.

You have to be the most suspicious person I've ever known!

No, Jenan. This goes beyond suspicion. I'm awake and you're asleep. You won't take my problem seriously because it's easier for you to believe that I'm delusional than that your beloved brother's a reprobate.

How many times do we have to go through this? He's not attracted to you in the least.

I know what he told you, and he's a liar. His pride was hurt when he saw that I was interested in you and not him.

Are you sure it wasn't your pride that was hurt?

Lana refused to be jarred or even stung. *He knows you don't believe me, and he thinks you're a fool. When he watches me, his eyes laugh.*

Lana's certainty unnerved Jenan. Has he ever made an advance?

No.
Do you think he will?
I only claim to know what he desires, not what he intends.
Would you mind if I tell Father and get his advice?
Please!

* * *

Jenan was afraid that if he didn't act immediately he wouldn't at all, so for Lana's sake, he went immediately to his parents' home and communicated privately with his father in his office.

What do you believe, Jenan?

Before today, I thought Lana was paranoid. After Mother told me about Tashaura, though, I wasn't so sure anymore.

When he "watches" her, what do you see?

I see Jovem looking at her in that intense way he looks at everybody. He does seem to be laughing with his eyes, just as she claims, but he could just as easily be laughing at her suspicions as at my blindness.

If Lana's claim is true, what are you going to do about it?

Jenan frowned. *I don't know. I haven't thought about it enough to come to any kind of conclusion.*

Then you don't believe her claim enough to give it serious consideration.

No, I guess I don't. Jenan felt frustrated with this understanding, because he knew that Lana would lose confidence in him because of it.

Patan drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair. *I don't know what to believe either. Your brother is no angel, and Lana may very well be right about him. On the other hand, unless he makes an advance, there isn't much we can do but watch him.*

Jenan nodded. *Watch and wait.*

And keep her out of situations where she might end up alone with him. If nothing else, such a course will help her feel more secure.

* * *

Jovem and Tashaura were married three weeks later by President Netaun Denaul, the presiding taurnel of the Doshyr first family's congregation of the Order, quietly in the home of Tashaura's parents. Because of their moral unworthiness, Jovem and Tashaura were not allowed to participate in any ordinances during a probationary period of a year, although they could attend Devotional services on First Day. The most heartbreaking reality of this probation to both families was that they could not be married by a taurnen in the Ordination Rite.

During the months following the wedding, Lana and Tashaura spent many hours of anticipation together preparing for the births of their babies. Lana loved designing and sewing her maternity clothes and buying furniture and supplies for the baby. She had completed her apprenticeship with Nedul Horautij, so she was able to spend that much more time in all of her preparations.

Tashaura was a young woman of sweet disposition and overwhelming compassion, and for those reasons Lana greatly enjoyed her company. She was often disturbed,

however, by Tashaura's seeming lack of ambition for herself. She possessed too much potential to be so shy and fragile. She sang in the community choir, and Lana knew she had a beautiful voice, so she encouraged her to sing a solo at an upcoming concert. After weeks of encouragement from Lana, Tashaura finally agreed to sing when Jenan asked her if she would sing a duet with him.

Jovem and Tashaura's baby was born first, a little girl they named Evelayna. Jenan and Lana's daughter, Mara, was born two weeks later. In a few short months, Jovem and Tashaura were given the ordinance of the Ordination Rite by Patan, which was a happy day for both families. To both Patan and Jenan's relief, Lana never complained about the way Jovem "watched" her again.

During the following months of awe at and discovery of the new little creations, Lana and Tashaura became the closest of friends and so did their daughters. Mara grew into a vivacious toddler, fair and blond-haired, with pale blue eyes full of excitement and a smile that seemed to cover her whole face. Evelayna, on the other hand, was graceful and serene, also blond-haired, but with the deep gray eyes of her father.

Nearly a year and a half after Mara's birth, Jenan came home from work one day and found Lana wandering around the house, glassy-eyed and trembling.

Jenan drew her into his arms. *Lana, my love, what's wrong?*

Lana gasped and wept on his chest, but didn't answer. Jenan led her to the couch and they sat down together. Mara climbed up on the couch and squeezed her mother's neck from behind with all of her energy and compassion. "Ma ma, ma ma," she said softly. Lana cried even more.

Jenan stood up and quickly scooped Mara into his arms, carried her to her bedroom, and set her in her crib. He closed the door to Mara's bedroom behind himself as he went back into the living room and sat down next to Lana.

Oh, Jenan, I just don't know what I'm going to do. Tears were still streaming down her face. *I just went to the doctor today, and I found out that our baby is twins.*

Twins? Why, that's wonderful, Lana.

It's terrible! I could manage one more baby, but two? Lana threw her hands over her ears and tightened her face in distress. *That screaming! Why can't she stop that screaming!*

Just ignore her. It won't hurt her to scream for a few minutes.

I have to have two more like her? At the same time? I'll have a nervous breakdown. She burst into sobs.

Jenan cradled Lana in his arms and rocked her until her sobs were little sniffles, feeling compassion for her, but feeling more that pregnant women were certainly a strange breed.

We'll manage just fine with twins, Lana. Where do you think I'll be after the delivery, anyway? I'll take a few months off of work if I have to, and after that I'll still be able to help you quite a bit of the time. And what about your mother? She came to help out with Mara. I'm sure she'll come for the twins.

Lana nodded that she thought she would too and wiped her face with her fingers.

Jenan suddenly looked away. *Listen . . .*

Lana opened her eyes wide in curiosity. *What?*

She stopped screaming.

Lana relaxed and smiled. *She must have gone to sleep.*

Jenan kissed Lana's forehead. *Just think of it, Lana. We get to have two babies, two new little people to get to know. Did you find out what sex?*

One of each.

Jenan was delighted. *A boy and a girl! Only this little girl will be dark and look just like you.*

The corner of Lana's mouth quivered, as if she were on the verge of laughing. *I really doubt it, Jenan. Your genes are too strong. It's beyond my comprehension how we got a blond-haired child to begin with. No one in my family has blond hair.*

Then these children will be dark for sure. Jenan stopped for a moment, reverence trickling through him. *Do you realize what this birth will mean? We're going to have our first son, the son who will be the Doshyr heir. This little boy twin will be high patriarch someday.*

I didn't even think of that! But he will be. He'll be the heir!

Jenan thought for a moment. *We'll name him Braudan. That was the name of the first Doshyr high patriarch, and besides, I like the name. What do you think?*

Lana nodded vigorously. *Braudan Launs Doshyr. That would be the perfect name for a Doshyr high patriarch.*

And we'll name our daughter Patrisa.

Lana looked at Jenan strangely. *Wherever did you come up with that name?*

From the patris vine that grows all over Menaura. This little girl will have the same color of eyes as the patris flower, just as you do.

Lana laughed merrily. *Oh, you sweet, romantic man! But I want to name her Deia.*

Deia? I suppose that name is all right, but I still like Patrisa better.

Well, we'll see.

* * *

Jenan, Lana, and Mara moved into a larger house a month later, and Braudan and Patrisa were born four and a half months after that, four weeks premature. Lana's mother came to Launarda to take care of Lana and the babies for a month, while Jenan took several weeks off work to entertain Mara. Even after her mother left, Lana's days were spent primarily in eating, sleeping, and breast-feeding the babies on pillows.

For the first six months following the delivery, Jenan worked half-days so that he could help Lana more with the children. Often he would come home from work to a cluttered house and screaming children, and Lana would kiss him on her way out the door to go shopping, visiting, or just somewhere to get away from the routine.

After Jenan returned to work full-time, Lana worked for two months to get all three of her children to take afternoon naps at the same time. Once she did, she gained two to three quiet hours a day for working on her gem art. Although she didn't have the quantity of time she had had in the beginning of her marriage to work on her art, she produced some of her most touching creations, among them a lilcryen statuette of a mother with her twin babies.

Mara loved her new little brother and sister with their fuzzy dark brown hair and eyes like her father's. She constantly patted their heads and kissed them, and as they grew older, she loved to roll with them on the carpet and make faces at them to make them giggle. Dan was the most fun, because he was the biggest, he played the hardest, and he never cried when she pounded him on the head or knocked him over the way Trisa did, although she loved to hear Trisa sing, and Trisa sang all the time.

Braudan and Patrisa loved Mara just as much as she loved them. Whenever she sat down on the floor, they scooted across the floor as fast as they could, climbed all over her, and grabbed her long blond curls, Trisa cheerfully singing, “Da, da—da, da, da—bla, bla, bla, bla.”

When Mara was two and a half and Braudan and Patrisa were nine months old, affectionately known all over Novaun as the “royal twins,” Jenan spent a grueling two weeks in High Council at Shalaun with his father and Aunt Paumala. After the Council had been adjourned, Jenan met Jovem on the moon Trael to take part in a sale of arelada to three representatives from Vaena. With the party were also two witnesses, an attorney from Vaena and a judge from Shalaun.

Jenan went through the motions of the sale mechanically. All he could think about was returning home to Lana and the children. He missed them terribly. The bill of sale passed from Jovem, to the witnesses, then to the Vaenans, each person notarizing the document in his turn. When Jenan received the document, he read it quickly, then notarized it, keeping one copy and handing the other to one of the Vaenans.

Even as Jenan handed the Vaenans their copy of the document, realization suffocated him as he visualized the document clearly again in his mind and saw that it had been skillfully manipulated to be a sale of property. He reached frantically for the other document, but the Vaenan backed away quickly, then turned and calmly left the office, followed by the other two Vaenans and both witnesses.

Before Jenan could pursue the men and women, Jovem grabbed his arm and warned, *Let them go, Jenan.*

But we’re being robbed! That document is really a bill of sale for property! Jenan wrenched his arm out of Jovem’s and pulled his brother toward the door. *Why in the galaxy are you just standing there? Come on! We have to get that document back!*

The sale is final, Jenan. Let them go.

Jenan gaped at Jovem in horror and disbelief, then turned and hurried out of the office after the document. Jovem followed Jenan out the door, communicating urgently, *I have the arelada and mind power to kill your oldest daughter from right here, Jenan. You will allow the Vaenans and me to leave this moon unhindered.*

Jenan ran down the corridor of the private office building, communicating angrily back to Jovem, *You may be a traitor and a thief, but you would never murder an innocent child.* As he ran, he summoned Internal Security for help.

Within five minutes, Jenan had retrieved the document, and Jovem and the Vaenans had been apprehended by Internal and taken to Trael’s security station.

It wasn’t until Jenan had the document in his hand that panic jolted him. What if Jovem’s threat had been sincere? He immediately contacted his Uncle Cherl in Launarda, knowing his father was probably not yet home from Shalaun.

Cherl assimilated the story on the way to Jenan’s home to check on Lana and the children. He instructed Jenan to go to the Internal Security station where Jovem was being held and promised to communicate Mara’s condition to him as soon as he discovered anything.

Jenan took a taxi to the security station. While he waited for his Uncle Cherl’s communication, an officer questioned both him and Jovem in communication presence of Patan. Jovem didn’t volunteer any information, answering only the questions put to him with evasiveness and sarcasm. In minutes, Patan and the security officer knew the entire

story and were attempting communication to Cherl in Launarda. Cherl refused communication, leaving Patan and Jenan frantic with worry.

Meanwhile, Internal Security men led Jovem to a maximum-security cell to await transportation to Shalaun, where he would be tried for treason, perhaps murder, by Novaun's Criminal Council of Judges.

Patan arrived in Launarda twenty minutes later, and he was the one who communicated the dreadful news to Jenan. *Mara is dead. Come home immediately.*

Jenan was stunned. It couldn't be true. He thought he must be dreaming, living a startlingly vivid nightmare. His brother was his confidant, his devoted friend, his companion in the very deepest of religious conviction. It couldn't be true.

The mists of the nightmare gradually dissipated and reality crashed down on Jenan as an arelada mine had crashed down on three of his grandfathers fifteen years before. It was true. His brother was a conspirator, a traitor, an apostate, a cold-blooded murderer.

Panic overwhelmed Jenan with regard to Lana and the twins. Were they hurt? What had they seen? The twins were too young to understand, but they would remember—someday they would remember. He reached out to communicate with Lana, but he felt nothing. She didn't reply or even resist. It was as if she didn't exist.

Jenan ran out of the security station and took a taxi to the spaceport, where he persuaded a pilot to take him home in a fighter. Ten minutes later, Jenan jumped out of the fighter on Launarda's small landing field, then took a taxi home.

Jenan's father looked like a corpse when he met him at the door of his home. Internal Security men were still in the house collecting evidence. Jenan tried to push past his father to enter his house.

Patan shook his head slowly and gripped Jenan's arm. *There isn't any reason to go in there. You'll just be in the way.*

But I have to see her! I have to see Mara! I have to be with Lana and Braudan and Patrisa!

Patan's eyes filled with tears. *You can't see Mara. Cherl and the security team told me that the little person they found in that bed was not Mara.*

Jenan stood as still as the mountains, his face deformed with shock and anguish. He gasped several times, then sobbed uninhibitedly. His father very gently put his arms around him and wept with him.

After crying so hard that his head hurt and his father's shirt was soaked, Jenan asked, still clinging to his father, *Where are Lana and the twins? Please tell me they're all right.*

Patan led Jenan to a taxi and helped him sit down. *Patrisa and Braudan are with your mother, and Lana is in the hospital.*

The hospital!

When Cherl found her, she was on the floor by Mara's bed, screaming. Cherl believes she saw the whole thing and may have attempted to fight off the attack. She's been sedated.

When Jenan and Patan arrived at the hospital, Patan helped Jenan out of the taxi and walked with him into the hospital and up to Lana's room, then left him alone with his wife.

Lana was lying in a bed, wearing a white hospital gown. Jenan kissed her, held her hand, and remained with her until she awoke. Not more than thirty minutes later, Patan communicated to Jenan the somber news that, in his grief and guilt, Jovem had telepathically manipulated his body functions to cease and was dead in Shalaun.

After receiving his father's communication, Jenan laid his head on Lana's bed next to her waist and lamented every cruel act Jovem had initiated, his death, and his slaughtering of the guileless, upright person he had once been.

Lana awoke four hours later, screaming, thrashing, and crying Mara's name. It took Jenan and two nurses several minutes to calm her. She stared at Jenan blankly, then glanced around the hospital room in terror.

"My babies!" she shrieked. "Where are my babies?" She sat up and struggled with Jenan and the nurses to get out of bed.

Jenan tightly restrained Lana from standing. *Braudan and Patrisa are all right, Lana. They're with Mother.*

Lana fought to free herself. *I want my babies!*

A nurse quickly injected Lana with another sedative and she collapsed into Jenan's arms. Jenan gently laid Lana back down on the bed, then communicated firmly to the nurses, *I'm taking her home now. She'll be fine, as long as she can be near her children.*

The nurses protested and summoned Lana's physician, but Jenan was adamant. He communicated to his mother and told her to take the twins back to his house. Before Jenan left the hospital with Lana, her physician, Dr. Lymaun, assured him that she would stop by their house later in the day to examine Lana.

Lana awoke in her own bed screaming, but once she saw Braudan and Patrisa there in their cribs, she relaxed. Jenan lifted the babies out of their cribs and tucked them wriggling and cooing into bed with Lana. She squeezed them tightly and cried softly.

Jenan sat down on the bed with Lana and the children and slipped his arms around her waist. He laid his head on hers. *I'm so sorry this had to happen. I'm so sorry I wasn't here.* But Lana continued hugging and stroking Braudan and Patrisa, acting as though Jenan weren't even there.

Devastated, Jenan released Lana and left the room.

Later that day, Lana's parents and her forty-two brothers with their families arrived from Amaria. Mara's funeral was held the day following. Jenan communicated at the service of Mara's love for others, her excitement for living, and all the joy she had given to everyone during her short life. Patan then communicated of her peace in Paradise and the glorious inheritance she would have there with God and members of the family who had passed on ahead of her. All who attended her funeral sadly mourned her death, but they were filled with the assurance that she was at peace and the hope that they would be with her again someday.

Jovem's funeral was held two days later in Launarda, conducted by Patan. The grief felt by those family members who attended Jovem's funeral was excruciating, for they knew Jovem's spirit was not at peace, that he had forfeited his inheritance in Paradise, and that he would not be a member of the family in eternity.

Tashaura grieved Jovem's death most. Through the dijauntu, she had given Jovem her essence, and he had given her a character he had created to exploit her for his physical pleasure. Immediately following the funeral, she moved in with her parents and didn't leave the house for weeks. Every time she looked at Evelayna, she thought of Mara and broke into sobs, which motivated her parents to keep Evelayna away from her as much as possible during those first weeks.

Melancholy blanketed Novaun as snow blanketed Launarda all that winter, and the planet mourned the senseless slaying of a child and the ruin of one of its finest young men.

Novaunians everywhere, particularly Jovem's fans, felt shocked, appalled, angry, and betrayed, but no one felt as betrayed as Jenan.

Jenan spent months bouncing from anger, to grief, to guilt that he could have prevented the death of his child had he not been so concerned about stopping the sale of property to the Vaenans. He also felt like a fool for not believing Lana's perceptive observations about Jovem in the first place, and the realization that his brother really had been leering at his wife all that time shamed and outraged him as much as anything.

Jenan spent the first several weeks after the funeral at home with Lana, attempting to comfort her and yearning for her to return the comfort. Lana however, responded coolly and mechanically to his kisses and caresses and rarely communicated her thoughts and feelings to him in any way. He knew that she blamed him for Mara's death. Overwhelmed by guilt, he eventually stopped going near her at all.

Naoma Vumaul remained with Lana and Jenan for two weeks. Naoma pampered Lana and gradually helped her re-establish her basic daily routine. Lana was no more communicative to her mother than to Jenan, but she was more affectionate. Naoma left Launarda extremely worried about Lana's state of mind but hoping time would bring all of the ugly feelings to the surface in a form other than tears. A psychologist visited with Lana twice a week, attempting to attend to her emotional needs, but Lana refused to discuss the tragedy with anyone.

Lana spent every moment for months with Braudan and Patrisa. She played with them, read to them, told them stories, and sang to them in her thin little voice until she was hoarse, rarely leaving the house and never working on her gem art. She rarely slept at night, but paced the hall in front of the twins' bedroom. When she did sleep, she often woke up screaming. She seemed not to eat, becoming emaciated and haggard, more a wraith than a woman.

Jenan spent most of his waking hours at work. Often he would come home late and Lana wouldn't even seem to notice. Once he decided not to go home at all and slept at the mansion. He went home the next evening and slept on the couch, engulfed with emptiness at the realization that Lana hadn't missed him.

* * *

Nearly four and a half months after Mara's death, Jenan went to his parents in despair.

I don't know what to do. My marriage is falling apart and I'm a stranger in my own home. Lana doesn't even care that I exist. All she cares about is Braudan and Patrisa. Sometimes I hate them.

Yaulanda's eyes were glossy with tears. *She's very sick, Jenan. None of us know exactly what she saw that night.*

Patan's face was somber. *Counselor Trental recently came to us and expressed her concern that Lana will not respond to her efforts to counsel with her. She feels she needs to be placed under the care of a psychiatric physician, and she suggests Dr. Menan Glorbarm at the Marnouj Canyon Retreat.*

Then why didn't she discuss it with me? I'm Lana's husband! Everyone seems to have forgotten that!

She was afraid you would be too upset by the suggestion to give it proper consideration, Patan replied. *We've recently discussed the problem with Lana's parents,*

and they agree that the Marnouj Canyon Retreat may be a good idea for Lana for a month or two. Your mother and I have been trying to decide how to present this prospect to you.

Jenan shook his head quickly. *No. Absolutely not! At least not yet. I know about that place. It's where they put all of those musicians and dramatists who withdraw into their art. He shuddered. Lana doesn't belong there. She belongs with the children and me, and if she needs more help than Counselor Trental can give her in our home, then we'll just find another psychologist who can come to our home.*

Yaulanda rested her hand on Jenan's with a squeeze. *Counselor Trental feels that part of the problem is that she needs a change of environment.*

Jenan nodded decisively. *That I can understand, but the Marnouj Canyon Retreat is not the answer. I'm going to take Lana and the children to Amaria for a while.*

No, Jenan, his father communicated. Absolutely not. Her father forbids it.

But why?

He's afraid she won't ever want to come back, Yaulanda replied.

So he wants to leave her here to get sicker and sicker! That's about as cruel and heartless as anything Jovem ever did!

Jenan! his mother reprimanded. He is your father-in-law!

I'm afraid Minon Launs is right, Jenan, Patan communicated. Lana needs to learn to live with the tragedy here, where she belongs.

Jenan stood to leave, expressionless. *Then I guess we have no choice. I'll make the arrangements for the Marnouj Canyon Retreat today.*

As Jenan walked home from his parents' house, he became angrier and angrier with every step. From the moment of his birth, everyone had unconsciously tried to condition him with the idea that his entire duty and responsibility in life was to be the Doshyr heir and that nothing else really mattered. No wonder Jovem had become so resentful.

Work for the family, Jenan thought in rage. Breathe for the family. Grovel for the family. Lana meant a thousand times more to him than that stupid heirship, and if they had to live in Amaria for the rest of their lives for her to get well, then that was what they would do. Neither his father nor her father would ever dictate to him how he would take care of *his* family!

Jenan entered his home to find Lana sitting lifelessly on the couch and Braudan and Patrisa screaming happily and chasing each other around the house. As soon as the twins saw him, they toddled over to him and bobbed up and down with their arms in the air. He scooped them both up and carried them to the couch. He sat down, clutched them to his chest, and kissed their soft little dark heads. They patted him, kissed him, and cuddled up to him lovingly.

After many minutes with Braudan and Patrisa, Jenan set them on the floor to play and scooted over to Lana. Guilt clenched his heart. He reached out to touch her, trembling. He hesitated, then finally mustered the courage to touch her cheek and turn her head so that he could look at her directly.

He laid his hands over hers and embraced her with emotions of devotion and compassion. *Lana, I want us to go and live in Talavaura for a while just as soon as I can make the arrangements. Would you like that?*

Lana stared at him with those tormented blue eyes. Finally she frowned. *But we can't, Jenan. You need to be here, and you need me to support you and stay with you.*

They've brainwashed her too! Jenan thought resentfully. *It's more important to me that you get well. I should be able to find an excellent position in Talavaura.*

She turned her head away from Jenan and thought deeply for several minutes. Eventually she turned again to Jenan and reached out to caress his face. *I haven't been much of a wife to you lately, have I? I'm so sorry, Jenan.*

Jenan drew her into his arms and she didn't resist. *It's all right, Lana. Mara's death has been hard on you, and I understand that. And I know you blame me. I didn't believe you when you told me that Jovem was watching you, and I let him kill Mara. All I've ever wanted is for you to let me comfort you. I guess that's impossible.*

Lana slid her arms around him and laid her head on his chest, her body trembling. *But I don't blame you. And I couldn't let you comfort me. Don't you understand? It was horrible, oh, so horrible! Our beautiful little Mara . . . I just couldn't let you see.*

"Shhh . . . shhh . . ." Jenan soothed. As he kissed and comforted her, all of his anxieties about her recovering emotionally from Mara's death floated away like the pollen of patris in the spring, and he felt like a fool for not understanding the problem sooner.

He tenderly touched his spirit to hers, allowing it to flow around her in a caress. She resisted vehemently. *Lana, you have to let me see.* She resisted again and shook her head.

He relaxed the guard on his feelings, and his desolation nearly consumed her. *Please, Lana. I need you.*

After a few moments, he felt dizzy—it had been so long. Lana trembled in his arms. His flesh tingled, then burned, and their spirits were one.

The horrors Lana had experienced that night ravaged Jenan at once—the screaming, the poor little body writhing in Lana's helpless arms and begging for help, her innocent little face grotesque with terror and agony, Lana's guilt at not realizing in time to fight off the assault. As Mara's murder became a part of him, Jovem's betrayal and all of the anger, guilt, and anguish Jenan felt became a part of Lana. They clung to each other and cried themselves into headaches and exhaustion, and then they cried some more.

Braudan and Patrisa wept bitterly and climbed all over their mother and father and the couch, frustrated in their search for solace. Finally they slipped to the floor in a weary sleep, red-faced and streaked with tears.

About an hour later, after Jenan and Lana had withdrawn from each other in spirit, they managed to find enough strength to discuss their future.

I don't want to go to Talavaura to live, Jenan. We belong here.

Jenan agreed. *I still think we need to get away, though. How would you like to go back to Latanza? We could stay at the same resort we stayed at before.*

Lana looked at Jenan uneasily. *I really don't want to leave the children.*

So we won't. We'll take them with us.

Can we afford it?

We'll just have to! Lana, if you don't want to go, just tell me!

Lana's eyes widened with a touch of excitement. *I would love to go, Jenan. How long do you think we could stay?*

A month or two. But before we go, I'd like to move to a different house, perhaps one in Jastray. Then when we come back, we can start all over again.

That's a wonderful idea!

Jenan hesitated. *There's just one other thing. I think we both need counseling. Would you be willing?*

Lana nodded slowly. *But I want it to be with my great aunt Gwenavila. She's been trained as a psychiatric physician, but the spiritual gifts of taurjra, which she has cultivated in great abundance, are what have made her such a valuable counselor in the*

family for generations. I think she might come stay with us for a while if we ask her. She may even come to Latanza with us.

Again, Jenan felt like a fool. He thought about how Lana had discerned Jovem's true nature from the very beginning and how her extraordinary empathy for Jenan and Mara had kept her silent and suffering for all of these months. Obviously Lana, herself, possessed the gift of taurjra in remarkable abundance, despite her young age, just as her aunt did. When Lana had refused to discuss the tragedy with her mother and his, the families had believed that the empathy, wisdom, and discernment of taurjra were inadequate on their own to cope with the needs in this case. What they hadn't perceived was that Lana required the expertise of the medical gifts and the spiritual ones in the same person. This wasn't an unusual combination of talents on Novaun, but that Lana would desire them from a cherished member of her own family made sense. *I think that's a perfect idea, Lana. Why don't we ask her right now?*

Jenan joined his mind partially to Lana's, and Lana transmitted their request to her aunt in Talavaura. Gwenavila gladly replied that she would be in Launarda in two days and that she would stay with them as long as they needed her.

* * *

Gwenavila did arrive in Launarda in two days, and by that time, Jenan and Lana had made arrangements for their trip to Latanza and were searching for a new house in Jastray.

Before Lana's Aunt Gwenavila arrived in Launarda, Jenan went to his parents and told them how much he resented their taking from him his responsibility of providing for Lana's needs. They admitted he was right and that they were wrong and apologized, promising they would never interfere again. He also went to Lana's psychologist, thanked her for her service, and told her never to leave him out of a diagnosis for Lana or any of his children again. Then with a boldness that surprised and delighted Lana, he communicated with her parents and expressed his displeasure with them in the same way he had to his parents. At first they were angry, but once they had a chance to think about Jenan's complaint and discuss it together, they realized he was right and apologized.

Jenan and Lana moved to Jastray within a month, and they counseled with Lana's Aunt Gwenavila every day concerning their feelings about the tragedy and also concerning ways they could improve their marriage. In their moments alone, they comforted each other and became re-acquainted after four and a half long months of separation. Lana remained melancholy, but she smiled sometimes and slowly regained her beauty as she began eating and sleeping again.

Two weeks after Jenan and Lana moved to Jastray, they, the children, and Gwenavila traveled to Latanza for their much-anticipated vacation. A month and a half later, Patan received a telepathic transmission from Jenan. *We're finally alive again. Lana and I now have an intimacy that is deeper than anything we could have comprehended before, and she's stronger and more beautiful than ever. We'll be home in three days.*

Three days passed, and Jenan and Lana didn't return to Novaun on their scheduled flight. Patan and Yaulanda communicated with the Latanzan spaceline Jenan and Lana had planned to take to the Novaunian border planet Bristaun to find out whether they had kept their reservations. They discovered that Jenan and Lana had, indeed, secured reservations but had not kept them.

Patan immediately attempted to communicate with Jenan on Latanza, but was unable to reach him. Within the hour, he received communication from the Novaunian Embassy on Latanza stating that Jenan and Gwenavila had been killed in a fire at the resort. No one knew what had happened to Lana and the children.

Patan didn't remember walking home from the mansion that morning. When Yaulanda met him at the door, her face suddenly blanched. *Patan, what happened?*

Patan managed to drag himself into the dining room and dump himself into a chair. He stared, dazed, at the polished wood table. *There was a fire at the resort. A freak malfunction of a power matrix. Jenan and Gwenavila are dead. No one knows where Lana and the children are.*

Yaulanda gasped and dropped into a chair next to Patan. She held her abdomen with one hand and her face with the other as she cried and convulsed. Patan hardly comprehended his wife's anguish. The death of Jenan had demolished him.

Many minutes later, Yaulanda regained a measure of her composure. She communicated bitterly, *Where is the justice? What have we done to deserve all of this?*

* * *

Patan met Launs Vumaul in Shalaun that evening and left for Latanza the next day with a team of Fleet officers to investigate the fire at the resort. He learned that Jenan and Gwenavila had, indeed, died in the fire, and that Lana had left with the children soon after on a transport to the planet Searvyo in the Gudynean Federation. A witness at the resort claimed that Lana was hysterical and that before she disappeared, she said she had to take her children to a place where "he" would never find them.

Patan returned to Novaun with Jenan and Gwenavila's bodies, and Launs and the investigators went in search of Lana. Many months later Launs returned to Novaun with no Lana, no children, and no hope.

By all appearances, it appeared that losing Jenan and Gwenavila had pushed Lana into insanity. Convinced that Jovem had come back from the dead and killed Jenan, she had gone into hiding to protect her children. No one in either family wanted to believe Lana could do such a thing, but there was no evidence to support any other theory and those closest to Lana knew how unstable she had been since Mara's murder. Investigators searched for nearly five years before finally giving up, but members of both families continued to pray that Lana would return to Novaun on her own.

All of Novaun remained in shock for many months after the accident on Latanza, and for years following, most were reluctant to discuss the Doshyr tragedies in the vain hope that they could be forgotten and that nothing even remotely similar would ever befall a Novaunian family again.

A year had passed since the day had Jovem had betrayed his family and his planet, and Launarda was again frigid and white for the winter. For the first time since Jenan's death, the family celebrated, and the celebration was glorious. Patan and Yaulanda's eighteen-year-old daughter Eauva wedded Mays and Maranda Vundaun's son Brys, who was the same age. The wounds had begun to close, but while Patan was alive to know he had no heir, they would never heal completely.

Chapter 7: PICTURES ON A WALL

Brys and Eauva's wedding and Launarda as it had been sixteen years before slowly faded into Teren's suite as Miaundea discontinued the telepathy vision, but all of the feelings of horror, betrayal, and melancholy remained.

Deia sobbed on Teren's chest. "Lena . . . never . . . wore . . . pink . . . never . . ."

Teren held Deia tightly in an attempt to comfort her, his face pale and his eyes glassy.

Paul sat nearby, clutching the armrests on his chair, his body quivering in rage. "That son of Abomination . . . I should have put a knife in his heart. I should have killed him while I had the chance. It would have been so easy." He sprang out of his chair and erupted in a scream, "Why didn't I do it when I had the chance!" He strode to the door, kicking furniture along the way.

Deia pushed Teren away in panic. She jumped up and ran after Paul. "He's killed Paul too! I wish we had never come to Novaun!" And she was gone. Patan arose and followed his grandchildren out of the suite.

Teren sat paralyzed with devastation. Miaundea moved to his side. *She didn't mean it, Teren.*

Teren leaned his head into his hands. *Yes she did.*

Miaundea stroked his shoulder. *She had to know. The truth is painful, but so is the not knowing.*

Miaundea lifted her head and noticed Ton sitting in his chair, wearing a peculiar, almost gloating expression. He stood up and reached for his taffuaos on his way to the door.

Miaundea patted Teren's shoulder. *Why don't you try to communicate with her? She may want you to be with her now.*

She doesn't. I would just be in the way.

Miaundea slipped her arm under Teren's and pulled him up with her. *Then come on. Let's go wait for them on the balcony.* Teren nodded and followed Miaundea.

Teren seated himself near Lauria and Rayel, and Miaundea leaned over the parapet with Ton, coming as close to him as she could without actually touching him. She wanted to feel just a milligram of the excitement she had felt that afternoon in his arms.

Feeling her presence so near, Ton subconsciously leaned to the side to rest his arm against hers. Miaundea was too thrilled to move aside. "What do you want?" he asked, exhaling smoke into the sunset.

Miaundea shrugged, her shoulder rubbing his arm as it moved up, then down. "Company, I guess." Then she quickly added, "Not that you are such good company. You will do for now, though. Teren is downright depressing!"

Ton turned his head slightly and looked at her quizzically. "I'll do, huh?"

Miaundea smiled indulgently. "Well, I cannot use you for the only thing you appear to be good for, at least not in good conscience."

Ton drew on his taffuao and chuckled.

The two were silent for many minutes, Ton deeply inhaling osalaem and Miaundea gazing mesmerized at the waves crashing on the shore below. "Poor Paul and Deia," she said with a sigh. "Being controlled by someone as ruthless as Jovem Doshyr for all these years. It is no wonder Paul hates and fears him so much, especially now."

* * *

The balcony was still silent and somber two hours later when Patan appeared and summoned Teren to the lobby. Deia was sitting in a chair, her eyes bloodshot and her face swollen. Teren knelt down next to her legs and gingerly touched her hands. "I'll help you through this, Deia."

Deia's chin trembled. "No. That's what I want to tell you. I'm going with Paul and Grandfather to Menaura tonight." She gasped. "Paul needs me now. He's so angry he's irrational. I just don't know what to do. I'm afraid he's going to try to kill himself, he's so angry and depressed."

Teren embraced her. "What about you, Deia, how do you feel?"

"I don't know," she squeaked. She couldn't speak for several moments. She finally whispered, "I grew to know and love my father and sister, then lost them in the same breath. It's like having Lena die all over again, ten times worse. And Paul . . . I can't bear it if Paul dies too."

Teren held her tightly as she wept. "I want to be with you through this. I'll come to Menaura with you."

"I wish, oh, I wish . . ."

"So I will."

"No . . . you don't understand." She gasped again. "If you come, I'll be with you and not Paul, and I need to be with Paul."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"But it will be. You'll wait for me, won't you?"

"Of course I'll wait for you."

Her voice tightened with panic. "You won't marry Miaundea while I'm away, will you?"

Deia's comment shocked Teren. "Of course not! That's as ridiculous as my worrying about you and Paul getting married!"

"No it isn't. She isn't your sister, and she's beautiful."

"She might as well be! Deia! You aren't making this any easier for me, you know that?"

"Why shouldn't I be worried? You're the one who rejected me for two months!"

"I don't want to marry Miaundea. I love you. Only you. I'll wait as long as you want me to, as long as I know you still love me."

"Oh, I do." She stroked his face and kissed his forehead. "Please walk with me."

"You don't have to go right now, do you?" he said weakly.

Deia nodded sadly. "Paul and Grandfather are waiting for me in the aircar." Teren nodded that he understood, terribly disappointed.

They stood up together and walked slowly to the aircar. Teren helped Deia into the aircar next to Paul. "Please communicate or write, or something."

Deia shook her head quickly. "I don't know . . . I don't know."

The aircar door slid shut, and within minutes, it and its escort disappeared into the night fog.

* * *

Paul and Deia arrived in Launarda with their grandfather the morning of the day they had left Dignitary Island, exhausted from the telepathic presentation and grief.

Deia sat down at the dining room table in their grandparents' home with Paul and ate a little bread and fruit. They met their grandmother, but her features were fuzzy and her personality undefined, much like a minor character in a dramatization, who steps into the fictional world once, then fades into the scenery.

Their grandfather led them upstairs to side-by-side rooms. Deia smelled varnish and paint, as if one or both of the bedrooms had recently been redecorated. Once the bedroom door closed behind Deia, she collapsed into the bed.

Deia awoke late that afternoon with a headache. She looked around her spacious room disoriented, attempting to capture in her mind the events of the past twenty-five hours. She immediately remembered the telepathic presentation and her father's death, Paul's bitterness, and Teren's heartbroken face when he had helped her into the aircar at Dignitary Island. Tears burned in her eyes, the ache in her breast deepening.

She rolled to her side, clutching herself. She tried to imagine Teren sitting next to her on the bed, stroking and consoling her. She could have borne any sorrow had she and Teren not been separated.

Somewhat later, she felt gentle fingers caressing her hair and shoulder. Emotions of love and understanding embraced her. She opened her eyes and saw, not Teren, but a woman with brown hair that curled carelessly around her face and fell to her shoulders. She was wearing pale violet knickers, light gray boots, and a violet satin blouse that had blunt elbow sleeves and was gathered at the waist with a wide gray sash. She smelled of broiled steaks and wildflowers.

Deia stopped crying and gazed reverently into those compassionate gray eyes. "You're my grandmother, aren't you?" she whispered.

The woman frowned, uncomprehending.

She didn't understand English. Deia squeezed her eyes shut. "I want to go back to Teren."

The woman seemed to understand the word "Teren." She communicated in a soothing way, *It's difficult to be separated from one you love so much.*

Deia nodded.

The woman continued stroking her hair and communicated again, *I don't understand your speech, but think to me in images and feelings, and I'll understand.*

Deia believed the woman was her grandmother, but she didn't know how to ask. What could possibly be an image for grandmother? She thought of Patan and Jenan, then of Sanel. She shook her head and tightened her face in frustration. Finally she presented an image she remembered from the telepathic presentation, one of her father smiling affectionately at his mother as she mounted her horse.

Yaulanda smiled and nodded.

Deia sat up abruptly, overcome with anxiety. An image of Paul wasn't difficult to create.

I haven't heard any noise from Paul's room, and I looked in on him a little while ago. I assume he's still asleep. She patted Deia's shoulder and stood up. *Why don't you clean up and come downstairs and have dinner with your grandfather and me? I've unpacked all of your clothing and toiletries for you, and the bathroom is across the hall.*

Deia nodded that she would. She gingerly ran her fingers over the white velvet bedspread that was delicately embellished with rubies and arelada. *This bedspread is beautiful!* She lifted her eyes and gazed around the rest of the room. *This entire room is beautiful!*

This room belonged to your Aunts Eauva and Dauna. The spread is exquisite, isn't it? Your great, great Aunt Mishela Vundaun made it years ago. Deia's grandmother walked to the door, pausing for a moment in the doorway. I'll see you in a little while.

Deia quickly changed her clothes, washed her face, and brushed her hair, then cautiously went downstairs to have dinner with her grandparents. Both were on the wood deck outside the dining room, watching steaks sizzle on a grill. Neither saw her through the French doors. She walked softly through the bottom floor of the house, peering around corners.

She kept expecting to see a piano. She pressed her fingers against the sides of her thighs as if she were playing the Adagio of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata and listened to the notes in her mind. That, for the moment, seemed to be the only piece she could remember. She walked into the living room. Still, there was no piano, no music disc collections, no instruments of any kind. The entire house was so silent. What in the galaxy did these people do for music?

Her grandparents' huge living room, even without a piano, was impressive, decorated in pale blues and purples, with a window-wall that overlooked Launarda and the mountains. A polished wood china cabinet stood against one of the walls of the adjoining dining room. It held dozens of horse statuettes in the top section and engraved crystal dishes and goblets in the bottom section. Silver-framed photographs of family members covered another wall.

Deia gazed in wonder at the photographs. So many people were represented on that wall, all related to her in some way. Her eyes immediately gravitated to a photo of her father and her uncle as teenagers, arms affectionately over each other's shoulders, wholesome and innocent. Her eyes moved to a family picture, then to her uncle's wedding picture. Deia had never imagined Sanel's having so many people who loved him, but somehow, he seemed more in place on that wall that she and Paul would be. She had never felt such a sense of belonging, yet so misplaced and empty.

She gazed for a moment at a portrait of a tender-eyed woman with a teenage girl. The girl's hair was blond, her skin the whitest of white, and her eyes pensive and gray. Deia recognized the woman as her uncle's bride. That meant the girl was her cousin Evelayna. Deia felt sick. How must the woman feel, knowing her husband had been living with his sister-in-law on Earth for sixteen and a half years? How must the girl feel, knowing her father was a traitor and a murderer? That he had murdered a baby girl her own age? How could a person ever overcome the grief left by that kind of legacy? Deia suddenly didn't feel so wronged.

She finally rested her gaze on a family portrait of herself and Paul as babies with their parents and Mara, all five of them smiling and happy. Jovem's betrayal must have occurred only weeks later.

The French doors opened on the other side of the room. Deia smiled weakly at her grandparents as they entered the dining room carrying plates of steaks and strange vegetables that looked like onions and smelled like potatoes.

Deia immediately transmitted an image of Paul to her grandparents and looked at them questioningly.

Yaulanda shook her head. *Paul is still sleeping.*

I guess that's good. Poor Paul. He needs to sleep and forget.

Yaulanda nodded sympathetically.

Deia ate dinner with her grandparents, not communicating much until her grandmother asked her how she had met Teren. Deia told them all about Teren, then about her friends on Earth and on the *Sovereign*. After that, she told them all about her school, activities, piano recitals, and Lena. Eventually she asked about the people on the wall.

After dinner, Deia and her grandparents continued their communication in the living room, gazing out the window at the stars. Novaun was located closer to the galactic nucleus than Earth was, and Deia was amazed at how bright the dense star field made the night sky, especially there in the mountains where the atmosphere was dry and there was no ocean fog. Such a bright night sky wasn't right, and she didn't know if she would ever be able to get used to it.

Paul didn't wake up at all that evening.

* * *

Deia awoke the next morning, Seventh Day, to the dim rays of the sunrise and the wild smell of the outdoors pouring into her bedroom. Her immediate thought was of Paul.

Deia sprang out of bed and hurried to Paul's room. His bedroom door was open, and he wasn't there. Panic seized her. Paul had awakened and, consumed by anger and depression, had left his room to find a knife or anything that he could use to kill himself. She should never have left him alone, never! She flew down the stairs to find him.

Deia did not find him in the living room, kitchen, or study room, nor did she encounter either one of her grandparents. Finally, in a state of frenzy, she ran outside, the grass damp against her bare feet. Paul was walking aimlessly in the lawn in front of the mansion, gazing at the trees, the structures, the rippling orange sky, and the orange-pink mountains, absorbing his new surroundings. His face was as icy as death.

Deia nearly burst out crying with relief. She walked quickly over to him and touched his arm. "How long have you been up?"

Paul turned and gazed at her with tormented eyes. "Hmmm? Oh . . . an hour or two, I suppose." He wrinkled his face and put his fingers to his temples. "This headache . . . it just never goes away."

"Are Grandmother and Grandfather up yet?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them."

Suddenly Paul drew Deia into his arms in a tense, desperate way. She held him tightly and laid her head against his neck. His body shook as he fought to subdue the violent feelings that had erupted within him again.

"Make it stop, Deia," he whispered. "Make it stop."

Deia anguished with him, but oddly, felt some relief. He was not incoherent or insane anymore, but weary and engulfed with anger and hate, despairing, yearning to change but believing he was powerless to do so.

Eventually Deia said, "Grandmother and Grandfather told me last night that our other grandparents are coming to Launarda today and that we'll have a memorial service for Lena."

The ice melted a little. Deia released Paul slightly, and with arm still around him, led him back to the house.

"Deia?" Paul said as they stepped onto the red brick front porch.

"Hmmm?"

"Everything we saw . . . it was true, wasn't it."

"I wasn't sure at first either, but I am now."

"It hurts so much, like a sword stabbed in my chest and twisted again and again, but I feel as if I should be ecstatic instead."

Deia nodded that she understood.

"He was a great man, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was," Deia said softly.

"We saw Sanel kill him, didn't we?"

"I hope not. I hope with all my heart not."

They helped each other through the front door and sat down at the dining room table. Neither knew what food in the kitchen was available for breakfast, and neither cared. Paul gazed, mesmerized, at the family pictures on the wall as Deia, in as perfect detail as she could remember, told him about those people who were so familiar, yet unfamiliar.

Within thirty minutes, they heard their grandparents come down the stairs. Deia suddenly felt embarrassed that she was so rumpled and still in her nightgown. It was so strange living with people she barely knew. But then they probably felt strange too. To them, she and Paul probably seemed like ghosts.

Her grandparents entered the dining room as she stood up and turned to run for the stairs. They both smiled and wished her and Paul a good morning. Her grandmother kissed her. They were both amiable and affectionate, as if they had all been meeting together for breakfast every morning of their lives.

The illusion didn't last long, though. Deia glanced at Paul and noticed how tense and suspicious he was. Her grandparents must have noticed it too, because although their communications were kind and they touched him lovingly on his arm or shoulder, they were careful not to embrace or kiss him.

A feeling of peace warmed Deia, and she suddenly felt at home in her grandparents' house. They loved Paul enough to understand his difficulty at intimacy and to refrain from pushing him into a situation that would make him even more uncomfortable, and they loved her, earnestly and completely.

Deia sat down again and ate a quick breakfast of hard rolls, cheese, and juice before she went upstairs to bathe and dress. When she came downstairs again, her grandfather was already back from the landing field with her Vumaul grandparents. They looked older than her Doshyr grandparents, but they were extremely elegant and distinguished.

Lena's parents. Paul and Deia couldn't help but be awed as they were all introduced. Their first meeting with their Doshyr grandfather had been awe-inspiring enough, but meeting their Vumaul grandparents was just a little more overwhelming. They had known Lena.

Naoma Vumaul had brought a large chest of her daughter's possessions from Amaria—clothing, books of family portraits, jewelry and other gem art, and a diary bound with shiny silver cloth and daintily embellished with lilcryens. Naoma explained the history of each item, and at the request of both grandmothers, Deia chose one of the items that most reminded her of her mother to place in the coffin. She chose a sapphire and diamond necklace that was very much like one Lena had often worn to her concerts.

Later that morning, immediately before the funeral, Paul selected the item that most reminded him of Lena, the tender lilcryen statuette of a mother with her twin infants.

Lanuval Doshyr's memorial service began privately in the graveyard with a prayer by Yaulanda. Each person gingerly placed his or her chosen item from the chest into the coffin, expressed his most cherished memories of her, and acknowledged his love. Launs

Vumaul placed his item in the coffin last, concluding with a message of peace and commending his daughter to her husband, her firstborn daughter, and to God.

After the funeral, Paul and Deia and their grandparents ate lunch, then spent the rest of the day in the living room communicating about Lena. Launs and Naoma communicated about her as an energetic little girl who had grown into an intelligent, accomplished young woman; Patan and Yaulanda communicated about her as the wife of their son, elegant and devoted to him beyond expression; and Paul and Deia communicated of her death and their life with her on Earth, not omitting a single detail. Much of Paul and Deia's bitterness and grief melted away like the snow in the spring, while their grandparents' sadness grew as specifics of Lana's life with Sanel gushed forth.

Launs and Naoma went to bed right after dinner that evening, exhausted by the time change. Deia helped Yaulanda and Patan clean up. After the last morsels of casserole and fruit salad were scooped into storage containers, Deia turned to speak to Paul. He was gone.

Her body tensed in alarm. She transmitted an image of Paul to her grandparents, and they both shook their heads. She quickly checked every room in the house. Not finding him, she ran outside, expecting him to be wandering on the lawn in front of the mansion again. When she didn't find him there either, panic nearly swallowed her.

Finally, in a burst of inspiration, she ran across the grounds to the family graveyard. From behind a tree, she saw Paul kneeling over Lena's tomb in the twilight as if praying, sobbing and gasping, "I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry . . ."

Deia watched him, heartbroken. After a minute she walked quietly over to him and knelt down beside him, embracing him in a consoling way.

"What are you doing here?" He wasn't angry, just curious.

"I was worried about you."

Paul leaned back and sat down on the lawn, bringing Deia with him. "I don't know why."

"I suppose that's because you're you, and not I."

"You're afraid I'm going to try and kill myself, aren't you?"

"You wouldn't think that if you hadn't considered it."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that." He turned toward her, his eyes wide and desperate. "Don't you understand? If I kill myself, it means Sanel has won."

Deia nodded slowly, understanding completely and feeling overwhelmed by relief.

Paul lay back on the grass and gazed at the stars as they gradually pushed through the waning rays of the sun. Eventually he said, "We don't belong here, Deia. I don't know where we belong, but it isn't here."

"I already know where I belong," Deia said softly. "In Shalaun, with Teren."

"That's good for you, but what about me? I want to go back to Earth, but I don't belong there either. What is it they want from me? To be their heir? I don't want to be their heir. I can hardly even communicate with them."

"I think they want us to feel as if we have a history and are part of a family. I felt closer to Lena today than ever, being with people who knew her and loved her as much as we did. And it made me feel close to all of our grandparents too."

"They knew just what to do, didn't they? I'm still in shock. How could they know so perfectly what we needed? I didn't know what to expect this morning when I woke up and found myself here, but I didn't expect that."

"I think they knew because that was what they needed too."

“How long are you going to stay here?”

“Where? In Launarda?”

Paul nodded.

“I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

Chapter 8: SPECULATIONS

Ton and Miaundea lounged on the balcony alone the morning after Paul and Deia's departure, discussing Novaunian culture. Ton had already become familiar enough with the Novaunian telepathic language in his study of Novaunian medicine to be comfortable using it, so Miaundea concentrated on customs. Teren was on the beach with Lauria and Rayel.

"I'm really curious, Miaundea. What is it you people have against sex? Your father tells me I can't have sex, and that if I do, I'll have to pay some outrageous fine. What kind of tyranny is this?"

"Just what makes you so sure you would even find a woman who is willing?"

"I've found one who'd like to awfully badly."

Miaundea laughed, her eyebrows rising in a touch of disdain. "Do not flatter yourself."

Resentment chafed Ton. "You're a self-righteous little fool."

Miaundea quickly gained control of her laughter. "And you are an arrogant pervert." She reached for her glass of water. "No Ton, Novaunians have nothing against sex. They love sex. They just give it its proper reverence."

"What? They sacrifice it to that great god marriage?"

Miaundea thoughtfully sipped her water. "Not exactly," she finally said, setting the glass on the table. "Novaunians do not worship marriage; they seek intimacy. Marriage is simply the vehicle by which Novaunians seek what should be the greatest of all intimate relationships, aside from man or woman to God, and that is man to woman, woman to man."

"But marriage isn't necessary for that kind of intimacy."

Miaundea gazed at him knowingly. "And what you are referring to is not intimacy, but lust—a sham. The intimacy I am talking about is a devotion and passion that comes from sacrifice and knowing the other person spiritually and emotionally, not just physically, and that takes a lifetime, forever, to achieve. Trust and commitment and fidelity have as much to do with achieving that kind of intimacy as love. We just believe that commitment and fidelity to one's mate should begin long before marriage, that premarital and extramarital sexual relations are destructive to intimacy all-around."

"Not to mention the fact that it's a sin," Ton caustically reminded.

"And why do you think it is a sin? The laws of the universe cannot be broken without consequence. God teaches us these laws for our own happiness and protection."

Ton couldn't help but feel amused. "That wasn't any deep and meaningful intimacy you were looking for yesterday. The boy you marry won't have the slightest idea what to do with you. I can see his tomb. Minon Noble Novaunian . . . died on his wedding night . . . killed by his bride's lust." He laughed.

Miaundea's cheeks flushed and her eyes ignited. She opened her mouth to say something, then immediately closed it.

Ton smirked. "I thought you were a person who appreciated honesty."

Miaundea glared at him.

"Okay, okay, so you don't kill him. He never gives you a chance. Oh, you'll satisfy him, all right, but he won't have any idea what will give you pleasure, and you won't know what you want, to teach him. The only thing you're going to get out of that farce is frustration!"

Miaundea was still angry. "Of course it would not be perfect in the beginning, and it probably would not always be perfect after that! But I would certainly rather have a few

weeks or months of imperfection and an eternity of intimacy with a man who sincerely loves me than one or two encounters of lust with a pervert like you!”

“Keep telling yourself that, and you may start believing it.”

Miaundea sniffed. “You are a lot of talk. I really doubt you are all that great.”

“Keep telling yourself that, and you may start believing it.” Ton leaned across the table and said in a low, seductive voice, “And it would be more than just one or two times.” He leaned forward a bit more, their lips almost touching. “And passion more exquisite than you can imagine.”

“You are addicted to sex.”

Ton didn’t move a millimeter. “What a wonderful thing to be addicted to.”

“I would not be surprised if you have some foreign venereal disease—”

“You know what kind of heart-stopping pleasures I’d teach you, and you’re tempted, almost more than you can stand.” He barely touched his mouth to hers. She didn’t move a millimeter.

“Munalriec makes your eyes yellow, your fingernails black, your teeth rot, and your skin fall off.” Her tiny features pulled into a grimace. “And what of when you are old? Your incredible looks will be gone, and you will be wrinkled and gray and bent. Women will not be so eager to be with you then. The beautiful young prostitutes will probably be out of your price range for as often as you will have to have it—addictions get worse as you get older, I understand—and you may be incapable anyway.”

Ton backed away and stared at her in horror.

“You will have no parents, no wife, no brothers or sisters, no nieces and nephews, no children—*no one*. You will die of loneliness and no one will even care enough to come to your funeral. Then after you die, you will still have no one.”

Ton jumped up and strode to the balcony. “Stop it!”

“I thought you were a person who appreciated honesty.”

“Honesty is one thing, brutality is another!”

“The truth is only brutal to those who despise or fear it.”

“Aren’t you the philosopher. How does a nice little Novaunian girl get to know so much, anyway?”

“Ignorance and sin kill civilization from within. Ignorance of sin makes a society gullible and vulnerable—easy prey.”

Ton raised an eyebrow. “Spoken like a true anthropologist. But there’s just one thing you seem to want to forget. Sex is a need.”

Miaundea shook her head. “Sex is a *desire*. A person can live his whole life, never have sex, and still be perfectly healthy, physically and emotionally.”

Ton grunted. “You’ve lived a life without sex, and you’re frustrated and warped.”

“You have lived a couple of days without it and you are more frustrated and warped than I am! And you seem to be perfectly healthy otherwise.” She shook her head again. “No, Ton, you have your needs confused. Everyone needs love and some physical expression of it—”

“That’s what sex is for!”

“Oh, come now! For such a brilliant person, you are being awfully ignorant! You can and should have intimacy with people you never have sex with, like your parents, your brothers and sisters, and your friends. You tell me—have you ever loved or even felt a deep friendship for any girl you have been with in that way?”

Ton shook his head slowly.

“Well then, if I am right about love’s being the basic need—and I am—then I would say that sex is not doing a very good job of filling that need for you.” She looked at him with eyes full of pity. “You *will* die of loneliness.”

Being the object of such obvious pity infuriated Ton, but it troubled him even more. Choosing to ignore Miaundea’s observations until he had more time to think about them, he decided to redirect the conversation. “It’s precisely the intimacy of your culture that allows you to become prey to a traitor like Jovem Doshyr.”

“Your logic is faulty. A traitor like Jovem Doshyr would make any society cringe. His effect on those around him would be similar in any other culture. The difference is that traitors like Jovem Doshyr are rare on Novaun. Your statement supports my position more than it discredits it.”

“No it doesn’t. Not even close. Jovem Doshyr had everyone but Paul and Deia’s mother completely duped, and why? Because everyone had such affection for him that they were unwilling to believe he could be evil.”

Miaundea considered Ton’s observation for a moment. She shrugged slightly. “All right. I will almost concede that.”

“Almost?”

“I don’t believe it was the intimacy of our culture that made us easy prey as much as it was an inability to believe such evil could exist among us.”

“The ‘ignorance of sin makes a society gullible and vulnerable’ syndrome?”

“Precisely. And what I find particularly interesting is that Lanuvael Doshyr, the one person who understood his true character from the beginning, was, in the end, the only person who was able to effectively fight him.”

Ton nodded thoughtfully. “She was also the only person he respected enough to want as a permanent companion.”

“I had not thought of that, but you are right.”

“So how does your culture bring such an elusive criminal to justice? Certainly such God-fearing, intimacy-seeking people wouldn’t resort to such an ugly method as assassination.”

“No, not assassination. Even if it were an option, it would be ineffective. The Earthons could put any body in King’s place to receive the shot, and we would be back to where we started, prey to a criminal we believe is dead.”

“So, the solution?”

“We extradite him and he goes to trial.”

“Extradite him?” Ton shook his head. “He’s elusive, remember? Earth won’t hand over one of its most effective leaders through such a weak procedure as extradition.”

“I do not doubt you are right,” Miaundea admitted. “But our government will try that way first. If it does not work—and you are right, it will not—then I suppose our government will work to gain the support of our allies and attempt to force Earth to give us King by boycotting its products and refusing to sell it arelada. Earth would be able to buy arelada through other sources, but it would be extremely expensive. This sort of economic suffocation would be slow, but effective. Frankly, I do not believe King is worth so much to the Earthons now that we know about him.”

“You may be right. Of course, there’s a better way. Hitting them in the bank account would be bad, but hitting them below the suit sash would be worse. Your father’s people should dig up some dirt on Saint Kravim or some other government figure supposedly above reproach. Earth would hand King over like that.” He snapped his fingers.

"But King may hold information of the same nature that he would use for his own protection."

"He may. But he isn't capable of blackmailing the entire government."

"True. And although I do not believe King is worth as much to them as he was, I do believe he is worth something while he controls spies that are here."

"But I thought your intimate culture prevented spies from establishing themselves."

"It does, generally." Miaundea gazed at him penetratingly. "But it does not immediately bring traitors to the surface or spies who so innocently and conveniently seek the affection of their long-lost grandfather."

"Paul and Deia?" Ton exclaimed, aghast.

"Why not? I cannot believe their story. Teren was duped. It was all too easy."

"And what, little Ms. Novaunian agent, makes you so certain Teren was duped?"

"Because the escape was too perfect. The sort of girl Deia presents herself to be would never have betrayed Teren in that armed shuttle, even if she had not been in love with him. I know that, and I barely know her! King has been watching those twins since they were born. I cannot believe he would have made such an error in judgment."

"King promised Deia that Teren wouldn't be harmed. He probably thought she would believe him."

Miaundea shook her head quickly. "No. Deia is an intelligent person, and she knows her uncle's character. King would have been a fool to think he could trick her with a promise of that kind. King had always intended to introduce one or both of the twins somehow back into this culture. What better way than to send them here with Teren? And then there is the problem of your sister Jacquae's being the plant, as Teren assumes. She was too risky. If she really is a hypocrite leading an immoral lifestyle—"

"She is," Ton assured.

"—then there are probably quite a few young men on that ship that know it. Teren could have seen through her sham long before he did, which would have made her an even less likely choice for a helper. King must have known that. That is why it makes more sense to me that he would have chosen someone more like you—"

"Oh, so now I'm a possibility for a spy."

"No, I did not say that! Let me finish! I cannot imagine any possible reason the Earthons would want you here as a spy. You could not be any use to them; you are too suspect. What I was trying to say is that you would have been a more likely choice for a plant on the *Sovereign*, because everyone already knows you are a snake."

Ton threw his arms up in hopelessness.

"I am sorry, Ton, but that is what they think of you, is it not?"

"'Son of Abomination' is the correct, and more derogatory term."

"All right then, they already know you are a son of Abomination. You could have done anything you wanted and no one would have been suspicious. Since, however, you would be no good to King here as a spy, then Paul or Deia must have been the plant all along. Paul is too obvious. He is the heir, and he is the one who hates King and the Earthon government. It is only natural that Teren would have suspected him in the beginning, and it is only natural that he is most suspect now by my father and his grandfather. Deia, though, is different. She would have been the perfect plant and she would be the perfect spy now. The Doshyr women are very much a part of the family involvement in the business and in Novaun's government at all levels, and she would be capable of doing much damage, perhaps even more than Paul, since he would be watched more closely by everyone."

"There's one important fact you forgot in your eagerness to accuse. Deia may marry Teren and live in Shalaun and have lots of little baby Zaurvaus. A lot of damage she could do to the Doshyrs from there!"

"But even if they do get married, we do not know that she and Teren will live in Shalaun. She and Paul are in Menaura now. Deia may decide she does not want to leave Paul or her newly found family to live in Shalaun, and Teren, as her perfect cover, loves her too much to let something as simple as her preference for Menaura destroy their chances for wedded bliss. He would move to Menaura without a second thought. Then in a few years, she could find some excuse to leave Novaun, and she would go on with her career and go back to her Earthon lover."

Ton was appalled. "You're sick! Utterly deranged! And there's another fact you so conveniently forgot. King summoned her to his suite and offered her the chance to study with Phillip Moreau and marry Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce for Paul's support and Teren's life. Why in the galaxy would he have done that if she were a spy? Not to mention the fact that he wanted the spirit dimension formula and certainly wanted to keep his true identity secret for as long as possible. Sending Deia here with Teren as a spy would have frustrated both plans."

"Deia says she talked to her uncle, but how do any of us really know she did? And what if she did? There was another person there, that D.I.I. agent Daniel Stewart. Maybe she and King were putting on a show for him."

"But why?"

"I do not know, but it is a possibility. And as far as the spirit dimension formula is concerned, how do we know King does not have it? Paul or Deia could have transmitted it to him upon receiving it, and neither you nor Teren would have known. There was an instant between the moment Teren gave you the formula and the moment the four of you locked spirits, was there not?"

Ton's nodded slowly, feeling troubled.

"And King may not care that we know his true identity. So the Earthons give him to us. So we try him for murder and treason and any other crimes we can prove he committed. How do we know that the man on the stand is really Sanel King-Jovem Doshyr? Ton, he can lie about his essence! You cannot fight against someone who can lie about his essence."

"You need radical brain therapy! What do you think life is? Some grand melodrama? King misread Deia. He's a human being. He's capable of making a mistake."

"And you believe that. With everything you know about him, you believe that."

"Of course I do! He underestimated Paul and Deia's mother, after all. I would call that a big mistake."

"A mistake he wouldn't have wanted to repeat. He would have been extra cautious when dealing with Deia."

Suddenly Miaundea's eagerness to find faults in Deia made sense. "You're certainly going about this with a great deal of spite. You're just jealous because Teren's in love with her and not you."

Miaundea's face tightened in shock and outrage, then after an instant, her expression softened, and she looked at Ton with eyes full of guilt. "All right. I deserved that."

"You deserved more than that!"

Miaundea sighed and slumped down in her chair. "All right. I suppose I am a little jealous."

“A little!”

“A little,” Miaundea said commandingly. She continued meekly, “And it is not so much because she and Teren have feelings for each other.” She looked away and absently began scratching at the table. “I suppose as I was preparing to return to Novaun after my fieldwork I entertained the hope that when Teren and I met again, there would be an excitement that had not been there before.”

“Was there?”

Miaundea shook her head. When I saw Teren again, I saw my adopted brother. Deia, though . . . I can certainly understand why Teren is so captivated by her. She is so perfect she is disgusting! She is kind, sweet, talented, elegant, and so—” She sighed again, shortly. “—so incredibly beautiful.”

Miaundea’s shallow assessment of Deia amused Ton. “Deia’s nowhere near being perfect.”

“She is a lot closer than the rest of us! And she is certainly much closer to a man’s idea of perfection than the rest of us.”

“What man’s?” Ton said, still amused. “Teren’s? Why should Teren’s opinion mean so much to you? He’s your adopted brother, after all, and not your idea of excitement himself.”

“No, it is not just Teren.”

“Did it ever occur to you that most men would be intimidated by a woman so seemingly perfect?”

“That is ridiculous. Men may be misguided sometimes, but they are not so stupid and spineless as that.”

“That’s what you think.”

Miaundea regarded him with surprising tenderness. “I think that, in your own odd way, you are trying to console me.”

Ton shrugged. “I just don’t think you have any reason to be jealous of Deia.”

“I am not, not too much anyway. And believe it or not, I really like her. For Teren’s sake, I hope very much she is not a spy, but I am still not sure she is not. I will not be sure until she comes to live in Shalaun.”

“When are you going to Menaura?”

“In three days. I will not be there long though. The Doshyrs are prepared to cope with most of Paul and Deia’s transitional problems.”

Ton leaned forward and whispered mysteriously, widening his eyes, “Maybe you’ll actually see Deia make contact with the traitor, you know, to give him new instructions from her uncle. Then you can run back here and tell your father, like a good little agent.”

Miaundea rolled her eyes. “You just love to harass me!”

Ton leaned against the rail and laughed.

Miaundea said defensively, “No one knows for sure that there is a traitor among the Doshyrs.”

“What, did Jovem Doshyr claw himself out of that grave seventeen years ago? And how did he get off the planet without anyone knowing about it?”

“That traitor could be long gone, by now.”

“But he isn’t, and you know it. There’s no way King would have taken such an effective spy off the planet until Paul was done with what he was to do here. King had to have had some kind of plan to monitor Paul and keep him loyal.”

“That is assuming King’s plan was to introduce Paul later.”

"And it was." Ton looked at her pointedly.

"Well, between the two of us, Ton, I feel positive there is a traitor too. I only hope Internal finds him quickly." She shook her head sadly. "Poor Patan. He gains two family members, only to learn of another's betrayal."

"It has to be the wife," Ton said. "She loved him slavishly. He may even control her mind. She'd be the perfect spy because there probably isn't any way anyone could prove it."

"That is probably true, but I do not think it is she. Paul and Deia's Aunt Amburna informed me as we were compiling information for the presentation that Tashaura is a completely changed person. She even remarried two years ago."

"Well, it couldn't have been the daughter. She was too young. One of the sisters, perhaps?"

Miaundea's lips parted in a grin of realization. "You are just as morbidly interested in this as I am!"

"An intriguing puzzle, and full of possibilities."

"Oh, I know!" Miaundea's excitement faded to distress. "But I feel terrible! We speculate at Patan's expense."

"You didn't feel so terrible when you were speculating at Deia's expense."

"But I know Patan is not a spy. I do not know Deia is not."

"How many Doshyr sisters are there?"

"More than thirty. Six were born after Jenan and Jovem. And it could very well be one of them. At least three of the younger ones were old enough. In fact one, Eauva, is a judge and one of Patan's proxy-counselors."

"Do proxy-counselors do business off planet?"

Miaundea shook her head. "That is the primary reason I do not believe any of the sisters are the traitor; they all stay close to home. I feel it must be a business counselor of Patan's. Someone who does do business off the planet regularly. There are at least ten possibilities there, and all very close to Patan. At least three of them are men from the Vundaun family, many are cousins, and at least ten are his sons-in-law."

Ton nodded and lit a taff, sitting down. "I suppose someone in that position would have more to gain, and he'd also have quite a lot of freedom. He'd also be the most likely to avoid getting caught." He drew deeply on his taff.

"Not necessarily. If he has left evidence all over the galaxy, he may be easier to track down. And if he was not away from the planet when our ports were restricted, then he is a sitting target. He cannot run, he cannot try to destroy any evidence, he cannot do anything but wait and hope that another person is implicated."

"But he may try to point the evidence toward another person."

Miaundea shook her head. "This traitor is smart. Patan and Internal will be watching for that, and he would be suspect immediately. No, all he can do is wait."

Ton grunted. "Wait for the kill. A sitting target."

The French doors opened; Ton and Miaundea stopped talking and looked to see who was there. They watched in puzzlement as Miaundea's father and a small, white-haired man approached them.

"I didn't know your father was going to be here today," Ton whispered, lifting his taff to his lips.

Miaundea shook her head. "Neither did I."

Colonel Quautar's expression was one of relief and satisfaction; his partner's was one of guarded eagerness. Colonel Quautar communicated, *Dr. Hovaus, I'd like you to meet my daughter Miaundea and Dr. Ton Luciani.*

Understanding immediately that this visitor was for him, Ton snuffed out his taff in a cup, stood up, and extended his hand. Miaundea stood up and bowed her head slightly at Dr. Hovaus, then moved toward her father.

Ton, this is Dr. Morlel Hovaus of the Shalaun Medical Academy. He wishes to communicate with you about a position as an apprentice neurophysician.

A specialized position already? Ton motioned Dr. Hovaus into a chair as Colonel Quautar and Miaundea left the balcony.

Dr. Hovaus folded his thin hands on the table. *Yes. I reviewed your application with the other professors on staff yesterday. Your knowledge and abilities are impressive, and I'm anxious for you to work with me. My current apprentices are Drs. Lren Tervel and Lataushla Ferudant. Lren will be taking his Committee exam for certification in half a year, and you will be taking his place. You can, however, come and work for me now if you wish, although it will mean that you and Ausha will have to share an office for a while. We're working to capacity as it is, and we could use the extra help.*

Of course I'll come work with you now. When do I start?

Colonel Quautar tells me that you will probably leave the island on Second Day. Report to the clinic at the seventh hour on Third Day. That will give me a chance to show you around the clinic and introduce you to Lren and Ausha before conference at eight. Our office opens at nine on Third Day, and you can spend the morning seeing patients with Ausha. After lunch, I'll show you around the hospital and introduce you to people; then at the eighteenth hour, you and Ausha will take the emergency room shift until the sixth hour the following morning, and I'll put Lren on stand-by.

Ton nodded. Dr. Hovaus went on to give Ton the address to the Clinic of Neuromedicine and other important information. They discussed their office and hospital schedules, training and certification requirements, Novaun's unique medical technology, many of Dr. Hovaus's current cases, and the other staff members with whom Ton would work.

Lren is a good, conscientious physician. Ausha is from a medical family. Her father is Dr. Vumen Ferudant, the Union's foremost authority on brain stem surgery. Ausha Ferudant is as excited and creative a physician as her father was when we apprenticed together ninety years ago, and she shows every indication of continuing in the same tradition. The two of you should make a powerful team.

Ton knew immediately which apprentice was the average physician and which was the brilliant one. Ton couldn't believe his good fortune in being teamed with the brilliant one, and with such immediacy too.

I guess we'll know that for sure after our shift together in the emergency room. An idea came to Ton. Feeling bold, he decided to go ahead and express it. Teren Zaurvau has a shoulder injury caused by a neurodart. It will require major nerve reconstruction. I would like to do that operation if he and the Fleet Network are willing. I've done a lot of operations of that kind, and I think having him go under the scalpel of a foreigner will do much to inspire confidence in my future patients.

You may be right, but it doesn't matter. The Fleet clinic has more work than it has personnel, and the physicians there refer patients to us all the time. I'll have Colonel Quautar summon Teren, and the four of us can discuss the possibility.

Chapter 9: HOMECOMING

Ton spent much of Eighth Day exploring the island with Teren and Miaundea and First Day alone in his suite, studying. Second Day morning, six days after his arrival on Novaun, he and Teren prepared to leave the island.

That morning, in a press release that shocked the Union, Novaun's High Judge Glanan Alhet announced that the Interstellar Alliance of Planets, having received evidence that Earth was armed and ready to conquer the planets on which it owned arelada mines and prime territory, had ordered Earth's space fleets, all but a designated number of trade ships, to return to Earth's space territory within three Earth months. If the Earth fleets failed to return immediately to Earth's territory, the host planets would seize all Earth-owned arelada companies.

Following President Alhet's announcement, Patan Doshyr and General Larauna communicated their statements concerning Teren's escape from the *Sovereign of the Stars*, his return to Novaun with the Doshyr twins and the spirit dimension formula, and their belief that Jovem Doshyr was still alive as Earth's Director of Intelligence, Sanel King. Patan and General Larauna answered questions, and then InterMind News presented a documentary containing press reports from the past that examined Jovem Doshyr's treason, murder of his niece, his suicide, and the subsequent death of Jenan Doshyr and the disappearance of his wife and their twin children.

Ton and Teren waited in the third floor lobby that Second Day afternoon with Miaundea, surrounded by luggage, when Miaundea's father arrived to give them final instructions.

He handed them each gold rings set with the arelada necessary to use InterMind. "An interviewer for InterMind will be here in about ten minutes with his librarian."

"The press?" Ton put his hand to his head. "I think I have a headache."

Colonel Quautar smiled. "A necessary evil, I'm afraid. General Larauna and Minon Doshyr's statement this morning nearly raised the dead from their graves." The colonel turned to Teren. "Minon Doshyr would prefer you be cautious in revealing personal details about Paul and Deia for now, particularly your relationship to Deia. He doesn't feel either one of them are ready for that sort of publicity yet. They will get their chance with the press in due time."

Teren's already somber eyes filled with desolation. "May I tell my family?"

"Yes, just be cautious."

* * *

Twenty minutes after the interview, Teren, Ton, and Miaundea arrived at the apartment Miaundea had secured for Teren and Ton in a complex across the walk from her own. Teren and Ton unpacked a few things, then went with Miaundea to Auyval Beach for an early dinner at Teren's former home, currently the home of his sister Ranela. All of his sisters and their families would be there, along with his grandparents. After dinner, they would attend the memorial service for Teren's father.

The three arrived at Auyval Beach an hour before dinner while the sky was still a pale blue. The air was heavy and hot, smelling of salt and a piquant fragrance Ton had never encountered. "What makes the fragrance that saturates the air?"

"The auyvalnut tree," Miaundea replied. "No matter where you go on the Peninsula, you cannot get away from it."

They flew over veined marble walks lined with long, two-story marble homes. Some of the homes had domed roofs, others had slightly slanted roofs; some had exquisitely carved pillar promenades, others had arches; some had neatly-tended lawns, others had pools, fountains, and beds of colorful flowers, while still others had rock and gem gardens. All were towered over by exotic semi-tropical trees that seemed to be dripping with moss. Novaunian Fleet shuttles and squadrons of fighters occasionally passed over.

Returning home brought ruddiness into Teren's cheeks and happiness into his eyes. He animatedly pointed out the homes of everyone he knew to Ton and told him the names of birds, flowers, trees, and anything else he could think of.

The taxi came to a stop on the landing strip at Pier 4. Teren pushed himself out of the taxi and bounded down the pier.

Miaundea turned to Ton. "Do you want to come?"

"Where?"

"To meet Kevan and Alysia, my brother and Teren's sister."

Ton shrugged. "Why not?"

The two slid out of the taxi and walked briskly down the long pier to the *Alysia*, almost overtaking Teren. Kevan and Alysia emerged from the boat, just as Teren arrived.

"Teren!" Alysia shrieked, and in an instant, she, Teren, and Kevan were in a vigorous three-way hug, the dock rocking gently under their feet.

Teren found a free hand and flung it at Kevan's golden brown mustache. *What's this? You radical! Miaundea didn't tell me anything about a mustache!*

I had to see your face when you saw it!

Kevan's jade green eyes shone with glee. *You should've seen Father's face! He threatened to shave it off in my sleep!*

Alysia grinned. Her actions and attitude were excited and energetic, but her face was haggard, red and puffy. *He's never even been so angry with Miaundea!*

What? Ton asked, a bit sarcastically. *Is facial hair a sin too?* He stroked his chin. *Maybe I'll grow a beard.*

Alysia gasped in delight. *Oh, you're shameless!*

Ton smiled baitingly, gazing sidelong at Miaundea. *I've been taking lessons from Miaundea.*

Miaundea caught the bait in her teeth and spit it right back at him. *Lessons in refinement and self-control.* After only a second's pause, long enough to smile at him complacently, but not long enough to allow a retort, she continued, *And no, facial hair is not a sin, it's simply not culturally acceptable.*

Like wearing denim slacks and sandals to the theater, Teren communicated. *It just isn't done.*

Alysia slipped both arms around Kevan's waist and lovingly kissed his ear, then his cheek, strands of her long brown hair floating carelessly in the breeze. *Well, I'm glad he did it. I forbade him to shave it off.*

Miaundea looked in excitement at Teren. *But it is done now. Quite a few young Mautysian men are wearing mustaches.*

Right, and Mautysian restaurants are serving meat.

I wouldn't have believed it either, but I was at a seminar last week, and I saw several.

Kevan raised his eyebrows. *That means I'm actually in style! I guess I'd better shave it off.*

"No!" Alysia exclaimed in horror.

Teren waved his hand. *It's just a fad. Within two years, you won't see any.*

That's what everyone thought about the combed-back hairstyles too, Miaundea communicated, and look at how many of those you see now.

I know! I nearly died when I saw Fleet officers in them. Teren clownishly combed his hair straight back, then rolled his eyes up to watch it fall limply back down on his forehead. Everyone laughed. He shook his head in mock disappointment. *How do they get it to do that, anyway?*

Miaundea smiled in amusement. *They rub a lotion in it after they wash it, then it dries the way it's combed.*

Ton smirked. *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?*

There have been so many, I stopped counting a long time ago.

Teren's features wrinkled in disgust. *While Mautysian men are primping, Shalaunian men are in the Fleet dying.*

What, not all of Novaun supports the famous Fleet? Ton asked with interest.

Miaundea shook her head. *Verzaun, which is where Mautysia is located, Narquasa, and all three countries that make up the southern continent are pacifist countries, and over seven hundred worlds in the Union have pacifistic policies. They abhor the Fleet, and they believe capital punishment is murder. They are a minority, but still, they have a lot of political power.*

Power that they wouldn't have if Mautysia and the House Jualaz didn't support the Isolationism Movement with their money and delusions of culture, Teren communicated.

So your telepathic society has social classes after all, Ton communicated.

There isn't anyone who is poor, if that's what you're asking, Teren replied, *but there are definitely families that are wealthier than others.*

I'm not sure the Mautysians are so much wealthier than other Novaunians, Miaundea observed. *They just seem to enjoy their money more.*

You mean they're pretentious, Ton communicated.

No, luxurious.

No, gaudy, Kevan corrected.

Miaundea continued, ignoring Kevan, *Everything in Mautysia is done in a luxurious, passionate, dramatic way. I don't necessarily think that makes the Mautysians or any other Verzaunians pretentious.*

They are pretentious! Teren looked knowingly at Ton. *Picture this—an entire city of spoiled rich kids just like Paul. Most of them are artists and actors and musicians, all living quite well off of their families. No one has to work for status—there is no such thing as a struggling student in Mautysia.*

Ton groaned and shook his head.

Miaundea brushed her hair away from her face. *I don't agree with their ideology either, Teren, but they are sincere. And many of them may be artists, but they're hard-working, exceptional ones. I don't know of one person who hasn't been across the Gulf at least once to see a play. As long as we keep accusing them of being cowards and shunning their duty, they will continue to think of the Fleet as an organization of murder.*

Teren sighed. *I know. It wouldn't be so bad, but the glares they give poor unsuspecting Fleet privates in uniform! I'm tempted to go to a play tomorrow in full dress!*

Alysia turned and headed back toward the boat. *Please! Enough discussion of politics! Sometimes you two can be so dreadfully dull.*

Teren and Miaundea laughed delightedly.

Kevan waved a hand toward the boat. *Come aboard for a while. Ranela won't have dinner for at least another thirty minutes.* He followed Alysia down the stairs from the dock to the deck of their boat.

Once on the boat, Teren, Miaundea, and Ton followed Kevan and Alysia into their cabin-living room, where their little honey-haired, blue-eyed baby boy was playing in fascination with his mother's paintbrushes.

"Oh!" Alysia gasped. She grabbed the brushes from his fists, scowled and shook her head. The baby peered at her hesitantly, almost calculatingly, then burst out crying, banging his palms on the mat. Teren instantly dropped to the floor to meet him and find him a toy. Alysia informed Teren that his name was Sharad, after her father-in-law.

Ton looked around the cabin, shaking his head in amazement. "This place is incredible," he said under his breath.

Miaundea smiled in understanding. "Isn't it?"

Kevan and Alysia gave new meaning to the word casual. Aquariums of all sizes and shapes sat in various places around the room, sea shells were piled in corners and sitting on the aquarium stands, unframed paintings of seascapes and marine life hung haphazardly on the walls and ceiling, and a covered easel stood in the corner by the kitchenette. The only pieces of furniture were a low table, aquarium stands, and huge life-preserver pillows of blue, beige, and coral pink, and the floor was covered with multi-colored woven mats. As for Kevan and Alysia themselves, both were deeply tanned and in a constant state of touch, their clothing for the funeral formal, contrasting sharply with their home and leisurely physical bearings.

"Alysia is an artist, and Kevan is a marine biologist," Miaundea explained in a whisper.

"Your brother's even stranger than you are, and looks about as sex-starved."

"That is called *affection*."

"They're sickening!"

"And satisfied! You are just jealous."

Kevan dropped himself down on a pillow next to Teren and little Sharad, and Alysia cuddled up next to him. Miaundea sat down nearby and reached up to tug on Ton's arm. Ton reluctantly sat down next to her. Miaundea leaned toward Kevan and Alysia. *So, did you two assimilate the interview?*

Alysia's face paled, and her eyes lost all animation. She nodded quickly and leaned her head on Kevan's shoulder, weeping uninhibitedly. Kevan drew her closer, kissing her and attempting to console her. His face was sad as he communicated to Teren, *I just don't know what to think. You and your father spies. And his death was so horrible. We're both in shock.*

Didn't Lauria tell you five days ago? Miaundea asked.

Kevan shook his head. *Dumped Trenda on us and left, telling us something about a vacation with Rayel. Father came by this morning before I was supposed to go to work and told us about Minon Danal's death, right before General Larauna's statement. I think he may be more devastated than any of us.*

After several minutes of communication silence, Kevan slapped Teren's shoulder and attempted to change the mood in the cabin. *You sure handled that traitor! Not to mention that jellyfish who interviewed you.*

Really, Teren, we wanted to learn more about the royal twins, Alysia chided. *Since when did my guileless brother become so evasive?*

I was under orders to be evasive.

I told you it was Father's fault, Kevan communicated to Alysia.

Miaundea immediately communicated to Teren, *Well, aren't you going to tell them?* Kevan and Alysia looked at Teren expectantly.

Teren's eyes shimmered with anticipation. *I may be getting betrothed soon.*

Kevan and Alysia's faces were identical pictures of amazement. They immediately turned to Miaundea.

Miaundea shook her head vigorously. *Oh no! Not to me! Tell them, Teren.*

My girlfriend is Deia Doshyr. We've loved each other practically from the moment we met.

Kevan and Alysia were stunned. *You handled that jellyfish even better than I thought,* was all Kevan could reply.

She is the most elegant, exquisite girl, Miaundea communicated, *and she's just perfect for Teren.*

Alysia leaned forward and embraced Teren. *That's wonderful! When will we get to meet her?*

Soon, I hope. It all depends on how long it takes her and Paul to become comfortable with Novaun and everything they've learned about their family's tragic past.

Alysia hesitated. *How are you going to manage it? Will she come here to live, or will you move there?*

Neither one of us is going anywhere for a while.

You radical! Kevan communicated playfully. *Getting involved with a foreign girl—*

She isn't foreign! Miaundea interrupted. *She's Patan Doshyr's granddaughter, and her brother is the natural heir!*

Menaura seems foreign to me! Kevan shot back. He grinned. *So, is she good-looking?*

Ton glanced sidelong at Miaundea. *She's beautiful. Intimidatingly beautiful.* Miaundea glared at him.

Teren began telling Kevan and Alysia all about Deia. He hardly seemed to have begun when Alysia communicated, standing up with Kevan. *It's time to go. You can finish telling us about her on the way. I can't wait to meet her!*

Kevan scooped up Sharad, who was tapping an aquarium with a seashell, and a diaper bag, and the five left the *Alysia* and headed to the waiting taxi. They arrived at Ranela's home five minutes later.

Teren's reunion with his family was one of kissing, embracing, and crying tears of happiness and grief. Members of the family ate dinner on the spacious back patio, then slid into separate taxis and flew to the Zaurvau ancestral home north of Shalaun for the memorial service.

Major Zaurvau was honored with full military and religious ceremony. Teren communicated a prayer to begin the service. General Larauna then proceeded to relate Major Zaurvau's achievements as a Novaunian Fleet officer and expressed his appreciation for his service to Novaun and his patriotism. Braunen Zaurvau, Teren's grandfather, communicated of his son's contributions in all other areas of his life. Colonel Quautar

communicated of his friendship with Danal Zaurvau, reminded everyone of God's love and the peace his friend was now experiencing in the company of those family members and Novaunian Fleet peers who had already passed on, and gave the prayer to consecrate the grave.

A coffin, containing only a Novaunian Fleet dress uniform with all of Major Zaurvau's decorations, including the medals of heroism General Larauna had just presented to him, was lowered into the ground next to the grave of Shauna Zaurvau, Teren's mother. Everyone sang a hymn to end the service that praised God, expressing joy in the gift of life and the blissful continuation of families in the eternities.

Following the service, Teren and all of the other members of his immediate family remained at the estate to greet friends and family members from all over Tavon who had stopped by to welcome Teren home and communicate their condolences on the death of Major Zaurvau. Miaundea stood in the mammoth sky-lighted hall all evening, introducing Ton to the hundreds of people who came to pay their respects.

Late that night, after Teren, Ton, and Miaundea returned to the men's apartment, Teren rummaged through one of his suitcases and removed a commudisc in its sleeve. He handed it to Miaundea. "When you see Deia, I want you to give her this."

Miaundea embraced Teren and kissed his cheek. "I'll tell you everything as soon as I get back."

Teren squeezed her hand. "Thank you."

Miaundea glanced around the room, unfurnished except for a chair and two small cots. She gazed playfully up at Ton. "I sure wish I could come shopping with you. I would help you pick out the most magnificent single bed." Teren laughed.

Ton didn't even attempt a retort. He smiled complacently, his eyes following her amorously out the door.

Chapter 10: INTRODUCTIONS

Paul and Deia spent the day after their mother's funeral, Eighth Day, getting to know their grandparents and learning about their relatives. Deia slept uneasily that night, awaking at the second hour to the muffled sounds of kicking and cursing from the room next door. She sprang out of bed and in only a second, was trying to open Paul's door. It was locked.

She knocked. "Paul, let me in!"

"Go away!"

Deia turned and sat down with her back against the door, not communicating so much as a feeling in reply.

Several minutes passed, and Paul's door opened. Deia fell backward against his shins. She stood up and turned to face him. Paul looked at her with wide, bloodshot eyes. "I didn't mean it."

Deia stayed with him all that night as he paced, clenching and unclenching his fists, convulsing, and cursing Sanel. She fell asleep on his bed, and he didn't get close enough to his bed all night to even sit down.

Deia awoke the next morning, First Day, to see Paul leaning out his window, holding his head and gulping the fresh air. When he turned to her, she saw that his face was contorted and corpse-white. She went to embrace him, and he gripped her in desperation.

Patan entered some time later, looking as though he hadn't slept well either. He put his hands on their shoulders and guided them to the bed to sit down with him. Deia put her hands, trembling, to her temples, and Paul sat as still as a tombstone.

Patan as always, communicated with gentle directness, *The next few weeks and months will not be easy ones for any of us. Your presence, your coming back from the dead, has reopened many very deep wounds of grief for your grandmother and me. We want all four of us to visit a counselor together until all of us feel our ugly feelings are gone or at least under control.*

Paul looked at him, stunned. *You want all of us to go? But I thought . . .* He frowned at his lap, completely disconcerted.

Patan gazed at Paul and Deia sadly. *This Sanel King, this man you hate so much and who has committed so many crimes against human decency, is our son. Neither one of you is a parent, so you cannot comprehend the sorrow we feel for how he has destroyed himself spiritually or the guilt we have had to live with every day for the past seventeen years that we in some way caused all of this.*

Deia was just as stunned as Paul. *You didn't do anything wrong,* she communicated in an effort to console.

Patan squeezed her shoulder. *It is so easy to think I should feel a certain way, but so seemingly impossible to make myself feel it.* He stood up. *Your grandmother and I are going to Devotional this morning, and we would like both of you to come with us.*

Deia nodded.

Paul looked at their grandfather skeptically. *Devotional? Is that something like Worship?*

If Worship is a weekly religious service, then yes.

Paul shook his head adamantly. *I'm not going.*

Please, Paul, Deia implored. *I would like to go, and I won't if you don't.*

"I'll think about it," he muttered.

Deia kissed his cheek, stood up, and left Paul's room with Patan.

Deia bathed, applied what little make-up she had, and slipped into a beautiful pale blue silk dress with a V-shaped neckline embellished with tiny emeralds, sheer green drapes hanging from her hips on the front and back, and a green silk cummerbund. Once she was dressed, she went downstairs to have breakfast with all four of her grandparents. She was swallowing her last bite of roll when Paul appeared in the dining room dressed for Devotional, acting displeased.

He tugged impatiently at the half-vest of his pale beige suit, then at his pale turquoise cummerbund. "Look at this suit!" he said shrilly to Deia. "I can't believe I am going out in public dressed like this. I would rather look like a clone in Star Force. At least that suit was tailored properly and I had a decent sash. And I have no cologne. How am I supposed to feel dressed without cologne?" He put his finger to the corner of one of Deia's eyes, then to her lips. "Where are your mascara and lipstick? Didn't they give you any mascara and lipstick either?" He was angry now.

Deia tried very hard not to smile. Paul had come to breakfast the first morning at Dignitary Island complaining about how atrocious the clothes were. She was surprised he hadn't complained about it since. "I can live without mascara and lipstick for a while, and Miaundea said she would get me some. And that's a very nice suit, Paul. It isn't exactly your style, but it's still very nice."

Patan and Yaulanda frowned at each other, then turned again to Paul. *What's the matter? Is something wrong with your suit?* Launs and Naoma were also frowning.

Everything is wrong with this suit! And Paul repeated everything he had just said to Deia, adding, *I have nothing to wear. Everything in my closet is all wrong. The cuts, the colors, nothing is right. I can't believe I've survived so long wearing these paper doll clothes, even in private.*

Patan gazed at him in disbelief. Yaulanda stared at him as if she had seen a ghost.

Launs smiled, and Naoma laughed. *You act just like your Uncle Taunen, not to mention all of our granddaughters!*

Paul threw his arms up in hopelessness. *How can I expect any of you to understand?* He turned and walked sulkily out of the house. Naoma immediately transmitted an apology for being so frivolous, and she and Launs finished their breakfast in communication silence.

After several minutes of stillness, Patan turned again to Yaulanda. *Perhaps we can give him the names of the designers Jovem used.*

Yaulanda nodded weakly.

Deia immediately understood her grandparents' distress. She finished her breakfast quickly, feeling chilled.

After breakfast, Paul, Deia, Patan, and Yaulanda escorted Launs and Naoma to the landing field in Launarda, where they sat down in an airbus that would take them to Jastray. From there, they would take their private shuttle back to Amaria. Launs and Naoma invited Paul and Deia to come to Talavaura any time they wished for a visit, and the twins agreed that they would.

Paul and Deia spent the rest of the morning at Devotional. Deia loved the Devotional service. She felt in it such rapture, such peace, and such truth and familiarity, that when they all returned to the house for lunch, she overflowed with questions about the Novaunian religion.

Deia was too excited to sit down for lunch just yet. *When can I actually join your religious order?*

Yaulanda took a piece of meat from the platter. *You're sure you wouldn't like to wait a little while to be sure it's really what you want?*

Deia shook her head vigorously. *I've been waiting for this my whole life. I'm ready now.*

Patan laughed a little. *I can give you the Covenant next week, if you'd like.*

I would, very much!

Yaulanda smiled and waved toward Deia's chair at the table. *Now sit down!*

Neither Deia nor Paul received opportunity to learn all they wanted about the Novaunian religion, because immediately following lunch, Patan and Yaulanda's daughters and their families, members of the extended family that resided in Launarda, and other members of the immediate community began stopping by to meet them.

Paul tolerated the visit from his Aunt Amburna, her husband, and their six children; he sat morosely through the visit from his Aunt Eauva, her husband Brys Vundaun, and their four children; and he restlessly paced the kitchen during the short visits from his great uncles Cherl, Jaun, Dauril, and Jesaun and their wives, along with Mays and Maranda Vundaun with their son Brandaun and his family. He finally stomped upstairs to his room during his Aunt Sara's visit with her young family. After Paul's departure, many others stopped by. So many people visited that Deia assumed she was meeting the entire town of Launarda. Her uncle's former wife Tashaura and his daughter Evelayna were the family members she was most curious about, and, to her disappointment, they were the only ones who didn't come.

The visitor who pleased Deia the most was a lean young man of about twenty-five, with red-brown hair and pine green eyes, who stopped by that evening after dinner with his wife and three tiny children. Patan proudly introduced him as Adaum Vundaun, one of his managers, youngest child of his head manager Mays Vundaun, and his nearest neighbor, living half a kilometer down the walk.

Helauna was the name of Adaum's six-year-old daughter. Her long auburn hair was thick and curly, her skin was extremely fair, and her eyes were pine green, rimmed with extraordinary black lashes. She looked up at Deia, her eyes wide with awe. *Are you a princess?*

Deia smiled in delight and quickly knelt down to communicate with Helauna at her level. *No, I'm not a princess, but my mother was.*

Helauna studied Deia. Finally she nodded. *You are a princess. You're too beautiful to be a regular lady.* Everyone laughed.

Deia hugged Helauna. *You're very sweet, and if I'm a princess, then you can be my little princess sister.* Helauna beamed and didn't move a centimeter away from Deia all evening.

Deia stood up and turned to communicate to her grandparents. *She looks just like Mineste Maranda. She is just like Mineste Maranda.* Her grandparents smiled and agreed. So did Adaum and Jaunisa.

At that moment, after a six-hour absence, Paul came downstairs from his room, appearing as sick and haggard as Deia had ever seen him. She jumped up and led him to the couch as Patan introduced him to Adaum and Jaunisa. Paul nodded once at each and sat down so close to Deia that he was almost on her lap. He continued to grip her arm unyieldingly.

Helauna and her two little brothers, Tarnel and Raunev, snuggled up to Paul and surveyed him unabashedly, as if he were some unknown space creature. Paul waved his arms at them, completely unnerved. "Get away! Get away!" he said to the boys, who were the closest.

The little boys stared at him with wide, horrified green eyes, then burst out crying on his knees. Embarrassed, Jaunisa sprang out of her chair to pull Tarnel and Raunev away from Paul. Yaulanda urgently waved Jaunisa back into her chair. Jaunisa sat back down, reluctant and nervous.

Helauna put her hands on her hips and looked at Paul squarely. *It was not very nice to be so mean to my brothers. They're just little babies.*

I am not! Tarnel protested. He was four.

You are too! You still wet your bed at night! Then she asserted again to Paul, *You may be sick, but you didn't have to be mean!*

The little girl's outspokenness astonished Paul. *I'm not sick.*

Then you must just be mean.

Jaunisa reprimanded Helauna with a stern look, shaking her head. Adaum gazed around the room nonchalantly as if to say, "That's not my child!"

Helauna looked at her mother innocently. *Well he must be!* Patan and Yaulanda laughed.

Deia put her arm around Helauna and pulled her close. *My brother really isn't mean, but he is very sick, and it's going to take him a very long time to get better.*

Helauna squeezed Paul's hand and gazed at him compassionately. Guilt softened Paul's face. *I'm sorry.* He scooped Tarnel and Raunev into his lap. *And I don't think either one of you are babies. You are both very big boys and you have a very bossy big sister.* He shot an impish look at Helauna. She burst into giggles and wedged herself in between Paul and Deia.

Adaum and Jaunisa remained for an hour, during which genuine warmth developed between Paul and Adaum. Adaum loved sports and asked Paul all about fencing, not knowing that Paul was superb at the sport, only that it was the major sport on Earth.

Paul responded apathetically at first, communicating only yes or no to Adaum's questions, but Deia told Adaum about Paul's tournaments and telepathically showed him Paul's first bout with Greg Pierce and the Day of Liberation tournament on the *Sovereign*, where the cadets had won first prize. Upon learning from Deia that Paul was an exceptional fencer, Adaum pressed him for more details. Paul finally relaxed and became communicative enough to eventually ask Adaum about the sports on Novaun, learning for the first time about VisionRun.

As Adaum left with his family, he communicated to Paul as he jogged down the porch stairs with Tarnel on his shoulders, *How are you for a fifteen-kilometer run?*

Paul leaned wearily against the wall right inside the door and shook his head.

Good! Then I'll be by tomorrow at five-thirty.

"That's a wonderful idea, Paul!" Deia exclaimed.

Fifteen kilometers? I would be doing well if I could do fifteen lunges right now.

Good! Then you'll be able to rest up well for tomorrow.

Paul tried another excuse. *I don't have the proper clothing.*

Wear your underwear if you have to! See you tomorrow.

Paul went to bed as soon as Adaum left, muttering, "He sure has a lot of nerve . . ."

* * *

That night, after the original transmission of Patan Doshyr and General Larauna's statement over InterMind, two traitors communicated in despair.

What are we going to do?

We can do nothing. It's all over for us.

I was certain he sent one of those two here as a spy.

Those twins are no more spies than we are Earthons. That Earthon doctor has to be the key. He must have double-crossed him somehow. What triumph! What beautiful justice! Double-crossed by an arrogant, fortune-hunting kid! Then in anger, How could Jovem have been so stupid! Double-crossed by an arrogant, fortune-hunting kid!

I'm terrified, and yet my whole soul is laughing.

May God have mercy on the poor boy. He'll die a more degrading death than we will.

At least he saved the agent and Jenan's children. Poor Paul-Braudan . . . Jovem nearly destroyed him, and it's our fault. It's completely our fault . . .

Chapter 11: ADJUSTMENTS

Paul slept little that night. He finally fell asleep, exhausted, at the fourth hour, only to be awakened at five-thirty by Adaum Vundaun.

Adaum shook him, finally pulling him to sitting position. *Come on Paul, it's time to go run.*

Paul moaned and would have fallen back to his bed had Adaum let him. *I'm not going.*

Oh, yes you are.

Winching, Paul put his hands to his temples. *I have a headache.*

You don't need your head to run. Adaum snapped a knit shirt at Paul's chest. *Here, get that suit off and put this on.*

I'm not in shape.

Adaum slapped Paul's abdomen with the back of his hand. *You're in excellent shape.* He dropped sweat pants, cotton socks, and running shoes on Paul's lap.

Paul pushed Adaum away, the clothing tumbling to the floor. "Leave me alone!"

Adaum quickly caught himself and bounced back next to Paul on the bed. *I'll strip you down and dress you myself, if I have to!*

"Return as Eslavu, you son of Abomination!" Then telepathically, *Grandfather told you to do this, didn't he!* Paul sprang up and stormed to the door.

Adaum grabbed Paul's arm before he could take more than two steps and pulled him back down on the bed. *Your grandfather has nothing to do with this. He doesn't know about running. When he wants to relieve his tension, he goes for a hard ride. I prescribe a hard run.*

Paul drooped his head in resignation, pressing his temples again.

Adaum jumped up and headed to the door. *If you're not out here in two minutes, I'll come back in to dress you myself.* Paul nodded weakly, dressed himself, and met Adaum outside his door in two minutes.

Paul couldn't allow anyone to outrun him, especially an old man of twenty-five, so he ran hard, even though he was weak from lack of food and sleep and had difficulty breathing the thin mountain air. After they had run the entire fifteen kilometers, Paul collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table in Adaum's little home, and Adaum immediately brought out plates heaped with sausage, fruit, cheese, thick bread, and a pitcher of milk with glasses. They ate heartily, joined in only moments by Jaunisa and the three ecstatic children.

* * *

Paul returned to his grandparents' home, his cheeks rosy and his eyes glowing with a touch of their natural cheerfulness, just as his grandparents and Deia were finishing their breakfast and assimilating the repeat InterMind transmission of Patan and General Larauna's statement. Immediately following the statement came the repeat transmission of the interview with Teren and Ton, which had been transmitted live at the first hour that morning while Menaura had slept.

Deia spent the first thirty minutes of the interview choking back tears. InterMind gave so much of Teren's appearance and presence that the anguish of separation became unbearable. And there was nothing in his expressions or communications that revealed his

love for her. Nothing at all. She remembered her desolation on the *Sovereign* and Teren's close relationship with Miaundea, and all the fears and doubts burned through her once more.

Finally, she couldn't bear it anymore. Paul's laughter. The smell of mountainberries. The wall of pictures. The living room without a piano. She stood up and walked quietly up to her room. She flung herself down on her bed.

A few minutes later, she felt her grandmother's mind touch hers. *I don't want to be with anyone now*, she managed to communicate.

Yaulanda replied gently, *Why don't you communicate with Teren over InterMind? I'm sure he misses you as much as you miss him. Patan feels terrible that he didn't tell you—he asked Teren's commanding officer to tell him not to make your relationship public yet. He realizes now that may not have been a good idea.*

Deia sat up, stunned. Could they read minds too? Hardly realizing what she was doing, she stood up and opened the door for her grandmother. Yaulanda gazed at Deia tentatively.

Deia nodded once. *It's all right.* She dragged herself over to her bed and sat down. *I don't know what to do*, Deia confessed. *I want to be with Teren now, but I want to be here too. I can't leave Paul, and I can't have Teren here because of Paul, and if I communicate with Teren, I'll miss him even more and he'll know that and he'll come whether I tell him to or not.*

Yaulanda sat down next to Deia. *I think I understand. I agree that you can't leave Paul yet, and I also agree that having Teren here would threaten Paul too much.* She squeezed Deia's hand. *Don't worry too much about Paul. He's making progress, and he doesn't need to be completely over his problems or become an authentic Menauran mountain man for you to leave and make your own life with Teren.*

Deia smiled.

Yaulanda's eyes sparkled impishly. *If Paul is still clinging desperately to you in a month or two, I'll pry you away and take you to Shalaun myself! In the meantime, I think both you and Teren will be much happier if you communicate every day or two.*

Deia hesitated. *How do I do it?*

First you transmit your thought pattern to our relay, along with the name or thought pattern of the person you want to communicate with and as much as you know about where he is located.

How do I find out what my thought pattern is?

You simply look inside of yourself, at your brain and its processes, and transmit what you see. After the first few times, you'll remember without having to look. You contact our relay here in Launarda by transmitting her thought pattern. Here, I'll give it to you. Yaulanda transmitted the relay's thought pattern to Deia in an instant. *If you forget, just ask me and I'll give it to you again.*

Deia nodded slowly. *So I transmit the relay's thought pattern, then I transmit my own, then I transmit "Teren Zaurvau, Shalaun," then I transmit my thoughts.*

Exactly! And it's much easier than it seems.

Deia hesitated. *How much does it cost?*

Yaulanda looked at her blankly for a moment, then smiled knowingly. *We pay the same fee every month, and it's really quite low, about two gold coins, so you can communicate as often and as long as you wish without running up the cost.*

Deia felt relieved. *Is everything so inexpensive here?*

Her grandmother laughed. *Is two gold coins inexpensive?*

Our news service in Tryamaz alone cost fifty dollars a month, and that didn't include holophone or holovision.

Yaulanda kissed Deia's cheek, then stood up to leave. *We only have our network that entertains us, informs us, and connects our thoughts and feelings with those of anyone we wish, but I think you will find it superior, even if it does only cost two gold coins a month!*

Deia laughed as her grandmother left, then lay back on her bed, trying to decide whether she should communicate with Teren. A few minutes later, she felt her grandmother's thoughts tell her to open her mind to InterMind News again. She did and found herself standing in a spacious cemetery in early evening in a hot, humid climate, surrounded by several hundred people, many in Novaunian Fleet uniforms.

She knew immediately that she was in Shalaun at the funeral of Teren's father, or at least at the InterMind memory of the funeral. She eventually saw Teren in the crowd, his arms intertwined with a girl she assumed was his sister Alysia, a boy she assumed was Kevan Quautar, and Miaundea. Alysia wept freely through the entire service. Teren stood, dignified, next to his sister, shedding no tears, his eyes desolate and dark with grief. He looked so empty. He was there with his family and closest friends, and yet he was empty.

Once the funeral was over, Deia decided not to communicate with Teren until later. Shalaun would be at its twentieth hour, too soon after the funeral, and Deia knew Teren would want to spend that time with his family and friends. She left her room and went to the bathroom to wash her face, then went back downstairs to learn the plans for the day.

Paul and Deia spent the remainder of the morning with their grandparents in a counseling session with a psychologist, a kind and non-threatening man named Haurlen Bardaunt. Deia thought she was prepared for her grandparents' candor, but during the session, she found herself becoming more astonished by the moment at her grandfather's uninhibited revelations of guilt, sorrow, and feelings of being betrayed, at her grandmother's revelations of guilt, sorrow, and anger.

After feeling her grandparents' emotions about the tragedy, Deia's grief and fears about being in a new family poured out without restraint. Paul, surprisingly, wasn't belligerent or opposed to being there but, not surprisingly, was unable to communicate any of his own feelings of sorrow, hate, and rage. Deia felt frustrated that Paul seemed destined to a life of releasing his deepest emotions only through involuntary spurts of sobs and fury.

Before the session ended, Minon Bardaunt left the room for a moment and brought back a bound book and a package of pens. He handed it all to Paul. *This is a book that I want you to use as a journal.* Paul stared at the book and pens strangely.

Bardaunt smiled knowingly. *I realize that you're used to writing on a computer screen with a stylus and that this may seem crude, but putting your thoughts in this book and seeing the pages before you every time you write will allow you to more easily see your writing accomplishment and will encourage you to look back at what you have written more often and see how your attitudes have changed. Write everything you're feeling in it, and write in it at least once a day. When you come back in two days, I'll ask you if you have been writing every day, and if you tell me you have been and communicate nothing else, I'll consider your contribution to the session satisfactory.*

Paul turned the book curiously over in his hands. *All I have to do is write in this book?* Bardaunt nodded.

Will I ever have to show it to anyone?

Not unless you want to.

Paul nodded slowly and walked out of the house with Deia and his grandparents, still staring uneasily at the book.

They had arrived home and were walking to the front door, when Deia felt Teren's presence flow around her. She stopped suddenly and glanced at the sky and mountains surrounding her. "Teren! Teren! Is that you?" She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Teren himself seemed to be laughing. *It's me. Don't say your thoughts, Deia. I can't hear you clear in Menaurea!*

Deia laughed and ran straight up to her room. *I'm so glad to be able to feel you. What time is it there, anyway?*

It's the twenty-fifth hour. I just got home from my sister's house and I'm in bed. Ton's already asleep, I think. Teren's loneliness nearly drowned her.

I miss you too, Teren.

Teren immediately communicated, in the greatest distress, *Minon Sharad told me not to tell that interviewer anything about us. It nearly killed me not to tell him anything. I want the whole universe to know. We've had to keep it secret for so long. I wanted to tell him, but your grandfather didn't want me to. He told you, didn't he?*

Yes, but not until afterward. Teren, I don't care what Grandfather says about it. You can tell anyone you want. I want the whole universe to know too!

* * *

While Deia communicated with Teren in her bedroom, Paul ate a leisurely lunch with his grandparents. After eating, he stood up to go to his room, but before he could leave, his grandfather motioned him back into his chair. Sighing in reluctance, he sat back down. Yaulanda made an excuse to leave.

Patan began with his gentle directness: *I believe you're worried about what it is I expect from you.*

Paul lowered his eyes. Finally, he nodded.

I expect you to try your best to be happy and productive. I don't expect you to be the Doshyr heir. Even if you were to decide at some point in time you would like to be the heir, it's up to me to make the final decision on whether you would be appointed, and I may never feel good about appointing you. You were born to this calling, but you were not raised to it, and it takes considerable preparation. I believe you could make the preparation and be qualified in time, but you would have to really want to do it.

Paul lifted his eyes and looked at his grandfather with deeper respect. *Thank you.*

Paul ate in silence, then communicated again, musingly, *Do you think Deia and I are spies?*

Patan shook his head. *Colonel Quautar is certain you aren't spies, and I trust his judgment.*

Then why did he send men here to watch us?

Patan's eyes widened in surprise.

Paul smiled. *There are certain powers of judgment that come with having Earth's Director of Intelligence as a guardian for sixteen years.*

Patan laughed. *How long have you known?*

I waved to one of them on the grounds the morning after our arrival. He was embarrassed. Why are they here if you don't suspect us of being spies? Paul didn't ask in innocent curiosity, but pressed for an answer he thought he knew.

Patan's face became grave. *I will be frank with you. We believe you and Deia witnessed your father's murder. If you did, you may be the only surviving witnesses to any of Jovem's murders. Those men are here for your protection.*

Paul nodded slowly. *I thought so.* He hesitated. *When are you going to tell Deia? She suspects we witnessed the murder, but she doesn't know about the men.*

We'll tell her when the time seems right. If both of you can, at some point in time, bring yourselves to remember and we make your testimonies public, then the threat to you should be eliminated.

You're worried about a traitor, aren't you?

Patan nodded somberly.

Deia bounded down the stairs, exclaiming, "Paul! Guess who's coming tonight!"

Paul turned toward her as she stopped breathlessly by the table. "Certainly not Teren."

"Oh no. Miaundea! Miaundea's coming to spend a couple of days with us! She's our cultural tutor, remember?"

Patan smiled at Deia's mention of Miaundea. *I believe Teren has spoiled my surprise!*

Chapter 12: AUSHA

Ton arrived at the Shalaun Medical Academy Clinic of Neuromedicine at the seventh hour the next morning, Third Day. Dr. Hovaus showed him around the clinic, then took him to Supply to get his personal clothing and equipment. The neuromedicine clinic occupied half the ground floor of a huge octagonal building it shared with the separate Clinics of Cardiopulmonary Medicine, Gynecology, and Orthopedic Medicine. All of the waiting rooms, offices, and examining rooms were located on the perimeter of the octagon; the laboratory, Supply, and staff lounges shared by all four clinics were located at the core.

Ten minutes before conference, while Ton was sitting in one of the physicians' lounges communicating with Dr. Hovaus, Dr. Lren Tervel, and another neurophysician, a woman in a lab coat rushed into the room. Ton immediately arose at Dr. Hovaus's lead, assuming the young doctor who had just entered was his new partner, Ausha Ferudent.

Her hair, the deep red-brown of autumn leaves, was damp and pulled back in an elastic band, teeming around her face in curls as it dried. She regarded Ton with curiosity and intelligence, her aspect and shape ripe and gently resilient, like a chrysanthemum in bloom.

With her tiny chin and bony nose, she could never be perfectly beautiful, but she was very pretty. His first thought was that he wanted to know her intimately. His eyes traveled lustfully over her body. Her dress was plain and revealed little, but Ton had never been one to have difficulty envisioning the woman under the clothes. Ausha met his gaze with shrewdness, and strangely enough, appreciation.

That look of hers disarmed him. What did it mean? It contained no acceptance, no return of feeling, no disgust, or even disdain. It wasn't even a look of naïveté. Anyway, how could this woman be naïve in sexual matters? She had been intimately acquainted with the human body since she had examined her first patient during her medical training in application school, and having been studying medicine for at least seven years, her age couldn't be any younger than twenty-one, making her the same age as he was.

Ton couldn't comprehend a neurophysician of her age, training, and experience being a virgin, and yet he wondered. He was certain she understood the nature of his gaze, and yet she returned it with appreciation, nothing more, nothing less. His desire for her vanished as speedily as it had appeared.

Dr. Hovaus introduced Ton to Ausha, and the group of doctors continued communicating together lightly until the rest of the clinic's medical staff arrived and they began their conference. They spent the next hour rapidly reviewing their more difficult cases, then dismissed for the remaining business of the day.

As Ton walked with Ausha to the office he would share with her for the next six months, he communicated, troubled, *I hope you don't mind giving up half your office.*

Ausha replied with emphatic sincerity, *Are you joking? You have no idea how happy I am about this arrangement!*

Ton was immediately skeptical. *Why?*

Ausha laughed. *You'll understand soon enough.*

Ausha's mysteriousness left Ton too curious to let the matter rest. *I want to understand now.*

Ausha looked at him mischievously out of the corners of her eyes. *Your presence here brings me a certain amount of relief six months earlier than I had expected. Lren Tervel and I have no love for each other.*

Ton hadn't known what kind of explanation Ausha would give, but he hadn't expected a personality conflict with Dr. Hovaus's other apprentice. *Tervel's a real son of Abomination, huh?*

If a "son of Abomination" is someone a person can't stand to be around, then yes. Tervel is the ultimate son of Abomination. When we're joined in spirit to perform an operation or an Awareness manipulation, we feel emotions and irritations in each other we don't want to feel, and everything in both of us wants to recoil or scream out in horror. And we have to stay like that for hours, and hours, and hours. Ausha shuddered. *I can't stand working with him.*

Ton chuckled as he followed Ausha into the office. *How do you know I'm not more of a son of Abomination than Tervel?*

That would be impossible. Besides, you seem to be a likeable son of Abomination.

Ton stopped and looked around the office in astonishment. The oddest assortment of plants he had ever seen sat on the shelves, stood in the corners, and hung in front of the window, nearly devouring the telepathic transmission recorder and the three cushioned chairs.

This is our garden office, Ausha communicated cheerfully. *I took a few of my companions home yesterday to make room for you.* She proceeded to introduce Ton to each one that remained. The last plant she showed Ton was a huge, thorny, dark green plant containing mammoth purple blossoms with fuzzy black centers. *This is Hokinnon.* Her eyes were alive with affection. *He's my favorite.*

You name your plants?

No, of course not. Why should I do that? They already have names.

They already have names . . . So, they told you their names, is that it? This woman was as eccentric as they came.

Of course they told me their names. Ausha hesitated, then regarded him in realization. *You think I'm about the strangest person you've ever met.*

Well, maybe not the strangest . . .

Ausha smiled. *You're from a corrupt planet, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I guess I just assumed that your general science education wouldn't have neglected the basic information that plants, like human beings and animals, have spirits, that they're intelligent, and that they respond to telepathic communication.*

Ton stared at her, dumbfounded.

You don't believe me?

You have a very interesting theory, Dr. Ferudant. Yes, I believe that particular piece of information was neglected in my general science education. Ton placed an ironic emphasis on "science."

Oh, it's no theory. You and I are both scientists. You want proof? I'll give you proof. Ausha picked up Hokinnon and walked out of the office, motioning Ton to follow her. In moments, they were standing in an examining room in front of an Awareness monitor.

Ausha telepathically turned on the Awareness monitor, handed the plant to Ton, and stood in the monitor's vision field. Ton watched the formation of the multi-dimensional Awareness image of Ausha in awe. The machine was reaching into Ausha's spirit and projecting the same thing she would see if she were telepathically looking inside of herself. Ausha's lungs rose and lowered as she breathed, and her blood flowed through her body with every beat of her heart. Ton couldn't wait to use one of those magnificent machines in surgery.

Observe, Dr. Luciani. I have Awareness. That means I have a spirit. I am a living, intelligent being. Ton couldn't argue with that.

Ausha stepped out of the monitor's vision field, her Awareness image dissipating as she did, and took the plant from Ton's hand and placed it on a chair in the vision field. Unbelievably, an Awareness image of the plant materialized in the chair. Ton gasped.

Observe, Dr. Luciani. Hokinnon has Awareness. That means he has a spirit. Certainly he does not possess the same degree of intelligence as you and I, but he is a living, intelligent being.

This was a fascinating new idea that Ton couldn't dispute. *The pot your plant is in has Awareness too. Why is that?*

The pot is made from materials that came from the ground. Every particle of the planet, of the universe, has a spark of intelligence.

Ausha paused, then smiled at him amiably. *You still think I'm the strangest person you've ever met, don't you?*

Ton nodded slightly, unable to contain a chuckle.

I guess then that we're on unequal ground. You certainly aren't the strangest person I've ever met. That honor goes to Bryaun Taus.

Another doctor?

Ausha nodded. *Cardiopulmonary. A friend of mine from Dinevlea. I'll introduce him to you at lunch.* She paused, then communicated, *Our first patient has arrived.*

Ausha turned off the Awareness monitor, picked up Hokinnon, and walked out of the examining room.

The morning continued with seeing patients. The first time Ton examined a patient using the Awareness monitor, he wasn't sure he was actually seeing the Awareness image at all, at least with his eyes. The image was too miraculous. Could Awareness ever be read by something other than another Awareness? He asked Ausha, and she answered that the Awareness image was comprehended by all of the senses, including Awareness.

Why doesn't the Awareness monitor just project the actual Awareness so that we can manipulate it directly?

Because such an action would require us to join our Awarenesses with the Awareness of the patient, which would be immoral since one does not join Awareness with anyone except his or her mate. A physician establishes a great deal of intimacy with a patient by examining his body and studying and manipulating Awareness through a machine like the Awareness monitor, but to actually join Awarenesses would be a blatant invasion of privacy.

That the medical profession on Earth or anywhere should be denied such marvelous technology seemed to Ton criminal. The only logical explanation to why Earth did not have this telepathic technology was because its population as a whole did not have access to arelada. Ton couldn't help but wonder whether Earth's Executioners used machines like the Awareness monitor in their atrocious mind manipulations.

After the last of their patients had left for the morning, Ton and Ausha ate a leisurely lunch in one of the lounges in their building. As they ate, Ausha introduced Ton to many of the other specialists who worked in the four clinics. All of the other doctors were fascinated by Ton. They overflowed with questions about him, his experience with Teren Zaurvau on the *Sovereign of the Stars*, and his medical training in Star Force. Ton communicated uninhibitedly with his new colleagues, as interested to learn about them, their techniques, and their training, as they were to learn about him.

Ton finished lunch, then went with Dr. Hovaus to the hospital for the promised tour. After the tour, Ton spent the remainder of the afternoon seeing patients with Ausha. After their last patient had left, Ausha communicated, *Do you have plans for dinner?*

I thought I would just grab something to eat at the hospital.

Why don't you come with me to the Pavilion instead.

The Pavilion?

The Palm Pavilion. It's just down the walk. It's where everyone eats. The food is almost as good as the debate. You'll love it!

Ton shrugged and nodded, then left the clinic with Ausha and walked with her to the Palm Pavilion. Once they arrived, Ton was pleased to see that everyone really did eat there. All the people he had met at lunch greeted him warmly, and many other medical specialists who worked in nearby buildings introduced themselves to him. He and Ausha remained there long enough to eat, then went to the hospital for their weekly Third Day emergency room shift.

After they had been at the hospital an hour, they received communication from the dispatcher that a woman with a depressed skull fracture would arrive in five minutes. Ausha received the Awareness image of the woman's injury from the medic on duty in the ambulance and gave it to Ton as they scrubbed.

You'll do the Awareness manipulation while I perform the surgery, Ausha explained. You know what it's supposed to look like. All you have to do is telepathically move the cells where they're supposed to go. If you need a change in Awareness focus, think it and the technician will do it. I'll direct the tissue repair once we relieve the pressure on the brain. Together we'll use concentrated spirit energy.

Ton nodded, certain he didn't comprehend. Could it really be so easy?

Ausha's eyes flickered in amusement. *It is easy. Watch, assimilate, and be amazed.*

Ton followed Ausha into the operating room, where they were immediately wrapped in gowns and helped into long, tight gloves. Only moments later, the patient was brought into the room, her head shaved and scrubbed. The medical team gathered around the operating table, and just when Ton expected Ausha to secure the patient's head, she nodded at one of the nurses.

Ton watched, baffled, as the members of the medical team lowered their heads and closed their eyes. They stood there in utmost solemnity as the nurse communicated, *Dear God, guide our hands and our minds—*

What is going on! Ton demanded to Ausha.

Be silent! Ausha commanded. *I'll answer your questions later.*

—and help us exercise our skills to the best of our ability. Amen. The nurse then lifted her head and the surgery began.

The members of the medical team expanded their spirits into each other, securing their bond at a level where they could feel each other's thoughts instantaneously. Ton was surprised by this level of intimacy and uncomfortable with it. They all immediately perceived Ton's discomfort and consoled him with emotions that seemed to say, "Before too long, you'll never believe you did surgery any other way."

The Awareness image of the patient's injury immediately appeared in Ton's mind. He saw what needed to be done and did it, following Ausha's lead. He telepathically manipulated the Awareness image, and the image simultaneously commanded the machine to manipulate the patient's body tissue through her actual Awareness. Ton telepathically

restored the cells to their natural places, pushing the bone from the brain tissue as Ausha lifted it out.

Whenever Ausha needed a different instrument, it was given to her as she realized the need. Whenever Ausha required a change in the Awareness focus, the change was made as she realized the need. When Ausha wanted assistance from a member of the medical team, she was given the assistance before she could request it. Ton had never seen a surgery proceed in such harmony.

Ton and Ausha knew simultaneously when it was time to repair the damaged tissue. Together they executed the spirit energy formula and concentrated it on the injury, then used it to fuse the skull back together, then the skin.

The members of the medical team withdrew spirits and stepped away from the operating table as the patient was moved to the recovery room.

Grinning, one of the nurses communicated, *He's not bad, is he, Dr. Ferudant.*

The corner of Ausha's mouth lifted into a tiny smile as she removed her facemask. *He'll do.*

Ton quickly removed his gloves, mask, and gown. *Why do you people pray before a surgery?*

Because we want God's help. Why else? Ausha answered.

You really believe in that religious nonsense?

I don't believe in nonsense—I believe in truth. Ausha smiled at him in understanding. *I'm sorry I didn't explain our procedure. The primary surgeon always calls on someone to give the prayer.*

This surgeon will never do anything so ridiculous.

Then I'll do it for you, Ausha communicated good-naturedly. *I'd be honored to appear so ridiculous.*

The neurophysicians' night wasn't a busy one, with only an extradural hemorrhage and a ruptured disc. Ton continued to work well with Ausha and the rest of the medical team on duty that night in the emergency room, and he couldn't help but be relieved. He spent his free minutes in engrossing discussion of the spirit dimension formula with the other physicians or in the men's on-call room asleep.

Ton and Ausha finished their thirteen-hour shift at the sixth hour the next morning, took a taxi together to their neighborhood and went to their separate homes to sleep for a few hours, then met back at the clinic lounge for lunch and conference with Drs. Hovaus and Tervel on the afternoon's cases.

Teren came in for his preliminary exam that afternoon. Ton extracted several nerve cells from Teren's arm and sent them to the lab to have them telepathically regenerated into nerve tissue that he and Ausha would fuse to the existing nerves in Teren's shoulder during surgery by using the spirit energy formula. Reconstructing the nerves in Teren's shoulder with his own tissue would restore a greater percentage of function and sensation than if the tissue were composed of both his own tissue and synthetic nerve tissue. Ton was amazed that this remarkable ability he and his colleagues on the *Sovereign* had been researching had been in general medical use on Novaun for seven years. Later that evening, Ton checked Teren into the hospital and ordered all of the preparatory work.

Ton and Ausha arrived at the hospital at seven-thirty the next morning, changed into their surgical greens in their separate locker rooms off the surgeons' lounge, then scrubbed for the operation, all the while joking lightly and discussing the case. Dr. Hovaus, several

other neurophysician apprentices, and a group of medical students would observe the operation from the theater.

Ton and Ausha finished rinsing the foamy yellow soap off of their hands and arms, telepathically turned off the sink faucet, and held their arms under the dryer. With her mouth, nose, and hair covered, Ausha's vibrant brown eyes appeared even more emphatic. Ton realized for the first time that she was the only Novaunian person he had seen with brown eyes.

Where did you get your brown eyes?

Ausha's eyes smiled. *I'm from the planet Dinevlea.*

I don't understand.

Dinevlea was one of six planets to be colonized by both Novaun and Gudynea. Dinevlea just happens to be one of three that are part of the Citizens' Union of Novaun.

So you are of mixed race.

Ancestrally, yes. Spiritually, emotionally, and culturally, I'm completely Novaunian. Ausha nodded at the door to the operating theater. *We're on. After you, Dr. Luciani.*

* * *

Miaundea spent two days in Menaura with Paul and Deia, tutoring them in Novaunian customs, particularly teaching them universal symbols that were used in telepathic communication to describe various items and ideas. She left them ready for the Launardan teacher who would spend six half-days with them a week giving them the general Novaunian education all Novaunian young people finished when they were fourteen years old.

Miaundea hurried to the Shalaun Medical Academy Hospital immediately after she returned to Shalaun that evening. She knew Teren was there, recovering from the shoulder operation Ton had given him that day, and she wanted to give him news about Deia.

Ton was sitting in a chair by Teren's bed, still wearing his green surgical clothes, appearing exhausted. Next to him was a woman with whom Miaundea was acquainted through their mutual involvement in the young adult extension of the Coalition for the Integration of Novaunian Cultures, Lataushla Ferudant.

Ausha was one of those women Miaundea couldn't help but hate. She was twenty-one years old, two years older than Miaundea, and she was the vice-president of the Home World chapter of the Young Adult Coalition. It was rumored that she had been proposed marriage by at least three different men and had turned them all down. Miaundea believed it, because she herself had seen the uncanny, unconscious way Ausha attracted men. Miaundea assumed Ausha was too obsessed with being a neurophysician to be interested in men, but everyone else assumed she simply hadn't found a man worthy of her. Ausha herself never commented.

Ausha was medium-height and curvaceous, with luxuriant black eyelashes and huge brown eyes that were one moment overflowing with impish exuberance and the next moment gazing at someone or something in intense concentration. Her hair was long and naturally curly, and her skin was that creamy translucent perfection that seemed only to belong to women with red hair. The unbelievable thing about Ausha was that she didn't care to be beautiful. Her dark eyebrows remained thick and unshaped, her fingernails were always bitten short, her dresses were embarrassingly simple and drab, and she never wore cosmetics or perfumes of any kind.

That evening in Teren's hospital room, wearing her green pull-over shirt and slacks and her hair pulled untidily away from her face and held in place at the back of her head by a thick white band, she was as attractive as Miaundea had ever seen her. The surgical clothes seemed fashioned just for her, and instead of her disheveled hair making her look rough and slovenly, it made her look passionate and adventuresome. Instead of her rouge-bare, creamy face appearing colorless and banal, her white skin contrasted with her full red lips, thick brows, soulful dark Gudynean eyes, and red-brown curls to give her an appearance that was even more dramatic. She was extraordinarily beautiful despite what she didn't do. It just wasn't fair!

Ausha smiled gregariously at Miaundea and nodded once at her in recognition. *Hello, Miaundea.*

Hello, Ausha, Miaundea communicated civilly, also nodding once.

"Miaundea!" Ton exclaimed, jumping up to meet her. He took her arm and guided her to Teren's bed.

Miaundea's skin tingled and her heart nearly erupted with excitement at Ton's touch. She couldn't speak for a couple of seconds. "Hello Ton," she finally said. "How is he doing? You did not cut off his arm, I hope."

Ton released her arm, his gaze lingering over her with a desire more intense than anything she had ever seen in him before. She gazed at him tenderly, her cheeks warm with embarrassment and excitement. She had missed him terribly, and, at that moment, she didn't care that he knew. She couldn't have hidden it if she had tried.

Ton smirked. "And you look like you survived the last two days without being hunted down by spies or shot by a traitor."

Miaundea glared at him, the heat in her cheeks intensifying.

"Hi, Miaundea," Teren whispered, fighting hard to overcome his lethargy long enough to find out about Deia. "Is . . . is she safe?"

"She and Paul are fine. The grounds are being watched carefully, and as far as I could tell, neither one of them know about it. Minon Patan and Mineste Yaulanda never go very far from them. They are both very concerned." Teren breathed heavily in relief and drifted back into unconscious sleep.

Ausha gazed at Teren, troubled. She squeezed his hand and leaned to speak loudly in his ear, "Wake up, Teren. Come on, wake up!" Miaundea jumped in surprise at the volume of Ausha's voice. Teren didn't respond. "Wake up, Teren!"

Ton immediately turned from Miaundea and took his seat next to Teren's bed. He too spoke loudly into Teren's ear, using the Novaunian language. "Teren! It's time to wake up! Wake up, Teren!" Teren still didn't respond. Ton and Ausha wore identical expressions of puzzlement and concern, and Miaundea was starting to worry that something was really wrong. She pulled a chair up to Teren's bed, across from Ton and Ausha, and sat down.

Ton telepathically turned on the Awareness monitor at the head of Teren's bed, and Teren's Awareness image began materializing above his sleeping body. Ton telepathically stimulated the nervous system of the Awareness image, and the image simultaneously commanded the machine to stimulate Teren's nervous system through his actual Awareness.

Ton and Ausha studied the reactions of Teren's nervous system in the Awareness image. *He's recovering, but very sluggishly,* Ausha communicated. *There's something wrong.*

Ton telepathically commanded the Awareness monitor to magnify Teren's shoulder. He and Ausha studied the area of reconstruction and together analyzed every nerve that had been repaired and every surrounding tissue that had been affected. The surgeons didn't communicate directly to Miaundea, nor did they make an effort to keep their consultation private. As far as they were concerned, Miaundea wasn't there. Miaundea assimilated every thought of their consultation, even though she understood little of what was being communicated. Still, she felt a little like an eavesdropper.

There is nothing wrong here. Ton smiled slightly. *You are incredible, Dr. Ferudant.*

Ausha returned Ton's complimentary little smile, still concentrated on the Awareness image of Teren. *Magnificent job, Dr. Luciani. Your expertise overwhelms me.*

That is what they all tell me, Ton communicated banteringly.

Oh! You unchaste, septic man! Just how many surgeons did you scrub with before me? Break it to me gently . . . I'm not sure I can bear such dishonor.

At least a hundred. No . . . I think it was more like a hundred and seventy-five.

A hundred and seventy-five! You give me a mortal wound! Call a resuscitation team!

I'll resuscitate you!

You going to give me a little mouth-to-mouth?

I would rather drink your cerebrospinal fluid.

Sorry, but Dr. Tervel's the only one I ever let drink my cerebrospinal fluid.

A smile illuminated Ton's entire face. A moment later, he laughed.

Ausha grinned, her sidelong glance saturated with mischievousness.

The affinity between Ton and Ausha was unmistakable. Miaundea sat there in communication silence, becoming more and more irritated by the second.

Ton telepathically commanded the monitor to delve deeper into Teren's Awareness, and within seconds, a moving mélange of color appeared above Teren's head, the psyche reading. The color gray dominated.

He's depressed, Ausha communicated in realization.

Ton took Teren's hand in his, leaned forward, and said gently into his ear, "It's over, Teren. You're home now—you're home for good. The Earthons have no power over you now. You have to get well for Deia, Teren, for Deia and your sisters."

The tenderness of Ton's gesture shocked Miaundea. She didn't believe him capable of such compassion. Did he treat all of his patients this way, or only Teren? Or was it just an act to get the job done?

Evidently Teren, in his unconscious state, didn't think it was an act. His eyelids fluttered, and for a moment, he looked as if he would wake up.

"Good . . . good, Teren. Come on now, you're doing fine. Wake up now. Come on, Teren. Wake up. You have to get well for Deia. Wake up for Deia, Teren."

Ton leaned away from Teren and looked at Ausha, troubled and confused.

Miaundea suddenly felt Ausha's spirit touch hers. *Miaundea, Teren needs Deia. Please help her establish a telepathic connection. She doesn't know me, and Ton isn't sure how to do it.*

Miaundea knew Ausha was right, but she couldn't help feeling disturbed that Ausha even knew about Teren's relationship with Deia.

Ausha immediately perceived Miaundea's agitation in their telepathic touching and understood its nature. *A person undergoing major surgery is always at a better advantage if his physicians know his emotional state,* she communicated kindly. *It helps us do our job more effectively. Teren understands this and volunteered the information himself.*

Miaundea nodded quickly, feeling foolish. Her hand tightened around Teren's, and she embraced his spirit with hers, soothing him with her love and generating thoughts and feelings of both Deia and his father. She reached out to Menaura and Deia with her thoughts and helped Deia establish a telepathic connection with Teren. Deia was unhappy herself that she couldn't be with Teren physically while he had the operation, and she reached out with her thoughts without reservation to comfort him.

The change in Teren's bodily functions was immediate and phenomenal. The healing of the reconstructed nerves accelerated, and within three minutes, he awoke and sat up. He smiled at Miaundea and pressed the back of her hand to his lips.

Ton gazed down at Teren. *How do you feel?*

Well enough. My shoulder doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would.

That doesn't surprise me. It had to have been hurting badly already. We need you now to roll to your side so that we can have a look at that shoulder. Ton helped Teren move to the proper position, then slid his gown away from the incision.

Ton deftly touched an instrument to Teren's shoulder in numerous places around the incision, while Ausha concentrated on a magnified Awareness image of Teren's shoulder. Several minutes passed, and Ton and Ausha's faces relaxed in relief. Ton stopped his examination, and the Awareness image dissipated.

Ton smiled at Teren. *The new tissue is still alive, and you're regaining function and sensation. We shouldn't have to go in again.*

Thank goodness!

In a few weeks, you will hardly know you were ever shot.

Ausha affectionately touched Teren's hand, then stood up, tilting her head toward Ton. *I need to get going. I'll see you both tomorrow. Good-bye, Miaundea.* She turned and rushed to the door.

The jealousy Miaundea felt toward Ausha lingered. "You seem to be having exceptional luck, Ton. Dr. Ausha Ferudant is very beautiful."

Ton looked at her queerly for a moment, then exploded in shock, "You think I'd actually try and sleep with *her*?"

The last reaction Miaundea had expected from Ton was shock, and it caught her completely off guard. She replied, somewhat defensively, "You cannot tell me you have never propositioned someone with whom you have worked."

Ton appeared as uncomfortable as Miaundea felt. After a second of hesitation, he said, "Sure, but what does that have to do with Ausha?" He shrugged, his expression suddenly nonchalant. "Personally, I don't find her attractive."

Miaundea knew Ton was lying. His reaction had been too peculiar and contradictory. If he was so indifferent to her appearance and the idea of making love to her, why had the suggestion shocked and disturbed him so intensely? Perhaps Ton had already propositioned Ausha and failed. On the other hand, Miaundea knew from personal experience that he wasn't one to get discouraged easily. Whatever his reluctance toward Ausha, Miaundea was certain he was attracted to her. The thought of his wanting a woman other than her repelled her, yet she wasn't surprised and the attraction she felt for him didn't in any way subside.

Teren smiled at Ton. "So how was it operating with the Awareness monitor?"

Ton patted the Awareness monitor at the head of Teren's bed, suddenly excited. "You should've seen this supreme piece of machinery at work!" He spread his hands apart reverently over Teren. "Your image was right here. I could see everything—every single

cell of every single nerve. It was magnificent! I can't believe they ever had the gall to teach me surgery any other way!"

Both Teren and Miaundea laughed. "Blame your corrupt Earthon government," Miaundea said. She had never believed Ton was capable of such childlike enthusiasm, and seeing it in him exhilarated her.

Ton stood up and stretched. "Latanza III doesn't have them either."

"Latanza III isn't anywhere close to being a telepathic world," Teren said.

Miaundea shook her head. "The Awareness monitor is only a tiny part of the complex network of telepathic technology that exists in this hospital. If they used Awareness monitors, they would want the rest of it also. We would sell it to them, but Latanza III isn't ready to incorporate telepathy so extensively into its culture. Its people don't want that kind of intimacy with other people or even with machines."

Kevan and Alysia walked in at that moment. Alysia was carrying a plate of spicy cheese chunks, auyvalnuts, and sautéed sea vegetables with hot sauce.

Teren beamed when he saw Kevan and Alysia. *You brought me some food!*

Deciding this was a good time to speak with Ton privately, Miaundea stood up and walked with him to the door. Once they reached the corridor, she said, her voice soft with respect, "Congratulations, Dr. Luciani. You are official. No one has an excuse not to trust you now."

Ton gazed at her earnestly. "You really mean that? You trust me?"

Miaundea hesitated. "As a surgeon, yes. As a person?" She shook her head. "No."

"If you'd said yes, I'd have been disappointed in you." Ton gazed at her complacently, almost challengingly. "You missed me."

Suddenly Miaundea was angry with herself for being so indiscreet. She did a much better job this time, however, of masking her feelings. She was glad they rarely communicated telepathically. Telepathic communication would never allow him to read her thoughts, but it would easily allow him to read her emotions of the moment as their spirits touched in the exchange. She replied nonchalantly, "You have a very vivid imagination." She may have missed him, but she didn't have to admit it vocally.

Ton looked at her knowingly. "My imagination isn't nearly as vivid as your beautiful eyes and the way they make love to me." He squeezed her arm with his free hand, unknowingly squeezing all of the anger away. His expression softened into a smile. "I need to go shower and change. Wait for me here, and we'll go to dinner, then for a walk downtown."

Given his obviously impure motives, good judgment would have dictated she decline, but Miaundea knew that if she did, he would laugh and tell her she desired him so much that she was afraid to be alone with him. Besides, she wanted to go. She shrugged. "I suppose some company tonight would be nice."

Part 3: PURSUIT OF A TRAITOR

Chapter 13: MEMORIES

Deia hesitated at the back door of her grandparents' house, five and a half weeks after her arrival in Launarda. "Are you sure you don't want to come?" she said to Paul, who was sitting at the table, finishing lunch.

Paul shoved a handful of mountainberries into his mouth and shook his head adamantly.

Deia sighed in frustration and followed her grandmother out the door. She stared uncommunicatively at the red brick sidewalk as they walked down the hill toward town. Her fingers nervously formed chords on the sides of her thighs as she walked, and she would have turned back if not so overwhelmed by curiosity.

Deia finally looked up at her grandmother's soft, lined face. It appeared relieved, but not completely. Paul wasn't with them.

They walked past Adaum and Jaunisa's home. A huge tree stood in the front yard, its pointed leaves turning shades of red. Deia loved that tree. It reminded her of the beautiful maple trees in Liberation Court whose leaves turned red in autumn. They walked past several more red brick houses and turned onto another walk. Six houses later, they walked up to a small, but lovely red brick home.

Yaulanda didn't ask Deia whether she still wanted to go into the house. She quickly sent a telepathic signal to the home's occupants.

Deia clutched her grandmother's arm and stared down at the porch as the door opened in front of her. *Deia*, Yaulanda communicated gently, *This is your Aunt Tashaura*.

Hello, Deia. Tashaura patted Deia's arm and invited her in as her grandmother extended her arms to Tashaura's little brown-haired boy, who was toddling merrily around the room.

Tashaura's sincerity of affection put Deia somewhat at ease. She finally looked up into Tashaura's pale green eyes and smiled, surprised to see that Tashaura was pregnant. Her grandmother hadn't told her that. Tashaura seemed much more pleasant and dignified than Deia had imagined, so much like Lena. The moment their gazes locked, however, Tashaura completely lost her composure. Her eyes filled with astonishment, then tears.

Deia shrank away from Tashaura in sudden helplessness and confusion.

Tashaura quickly took Deia's arm and led her into the living room. *I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. It's just that you look so much like Lana before—* After a second and a little choke, she turned to Yaulanda. *We knew this would be difficult for all of us.* Yaulanda nodded gravely, lifting the little boy into her arms.

Deia moved closer to her grandmother as she released Tashaura, feeling the loss of her mother intensely. She had never been able to think of Tashaura as anyone other than her uncle's betrayed wife and mother of the cousin who was the same age as her dead sister. She had forgotten until that moment that Tashaura had also been her mother's very close friend.

Tashaura stepped out of the room and re-entered with Evelayna, a willowy girl of twenty, with blond hair that curled softly around her face and wrapped around the back of her head in a braid. Yaulanda stepped forward and lovingly squeezed her hand, and Evelayna embraced Yaulanda slightly and kissed her little brother's cheek.

Yaulanda communicated with an artificially cheerful smile, *Deia, I promised to introduce you to someone more your own age. This is Evelayna.*

Deia ventured a direct look at Evelayna's face and saw that her cousin was just as uneasy as she was. She couldn't help but laugh in nervousness and relief. Evelayna started in surprise. Deia reached out and lightly touched Evelayna's arm. *I'm glad to meet you, Evelayna. I promise not to be terrified of you anymore if you promise not to be terrified of me.*

Evelayna's features relaxed, her mouth curving into a smile. *You aren't at all what I expected.*

What did you expect?

Evelayna released her grandmother's arm and put her hand on Deia's elbow. *Come with me and I'll tell you.* Deia followed Evelayna down the hall to her bedroom.

Evelayna seated herself formally on her bed. Deia sat down in a window seat and crossed her legs. Evelayna's eyes widened; she was still a touch uncomfortable. *Will you promise you won't be angry?*

Deia felt puzzled. *How could I be angry with you? I don't even know you, yet.*

I thought you would be aloof and condescending, and I was just certain you would be much more foreign-looking.

Deia smiled broadly. *So I am somewhat foreign-looking.*

Evelayna nodded. *You wear more cosmetics than Mautysian women do, and your hair is so curly and exotic. I guess I thought you would be wearing Earthon clothes and jewelry and perfume too.*

Deia laughed. *If only you could have seen me a few weeks ago, Evelayna! I wore twice as much make-up, and I wore slacks quite often, and I wore shoes with high, narrow little heels, and deep, brilliant colors and lots of expensive perfumes. I look so different now that I hardly recognize myself!*

Evelayna gazed at Deia empathically. *You really were an Earthon, weren't you?*

Deia stopped laughing and nodded slowly. *Yes, I was.*

Do you miss Earth quite a lot?

Sometimes. I'm finally getting to the point where I think of myself as a Novaunian though. Novaun is so like, and yet so unlike Earth. The strange thing is that now I'm learning more about Earth and its policies than I ever knew when I lived there. Neither Paul nor I have been surprised about a lot of it, but at the same time, we've been very disturbed, especially about the information Teren brought back having to do with its plans to conquer several Alliance planets. Sometimes we can't imagine how we could have ever been comfortable thinking of ourselves as Earthons, and then sometimes we feel like traitors. It's really been difficult.

Was it very terrible living with my father? Evelayna asked the question with the utmost curiosity.

Deia lowered her eyes. She couldn't bring herself to give an answer.

I know what my father did and what he is. I bring this subject up now, because I know that if we don't discuss it, we'll continue to feel embarrassed and uncomfortable with each other.

Deia lifted her eyes and nodded that she understood. *I'm not sure it was any worse living on Earth as his ward than it would have been to live here in the wake of everything he did.* She stroked the blue velvet cushion on the window seat. *How old were you when you learned about the tragedy?*

I can't remember a moment when I didn't know.

Deia was stunned. *But you were just a baby!*

I was two years old. I can remember things from the time I was born.

Realization of Novaunian mind power abilities and how they would affect a child's memory trickled through Deia, and she was grateful her childhood had been free of such horrible memories. Compassion for Evelayna overwhelmed her. *What an awful thing to have lived with.*

I've never known anything else. That's why I'm studying to be a judge. My father betrayed Novaun, and I want to do everything I can to serve it.

Evelayna's statement made Deia feel strange. *But there's no reason you should feel you have to make restitution for the sins of your father.*

Evelayna's gray eyes were wide and earnest. *But I do. I was one of my father's sins, and people don't forget that easily. It's a very difficult thing to overcome.*

Certainly people don't treat you with any condescension. It was, after all, something you couldn't help.

No. But still, no one ever forgets.

Deia couldn't communicate for several moments. When she did, it was out of morbid curiosity. *What does your mother think of all of this?*

You mean about the fact that he's still alive and that he was living with your mother in a bigamous marriage all those years?

Deia nodded.

She's very sad for your mother. She's so sad at times that she's inconsolable.

She isn't angry?

No. She gave her anger and humiliation to God a long time ago.

I admire her for being able to do that. I hope someday Paul and I can adopt that attitude.

Paul hates him very much, doesn't he. Is that why he didn't come with you today?

Deia nodded slowly.

Evelayna communicated with the deepest of empathy, *I know that one day Paul and I will be very close friends. You must tell me more about him.*

Somehow, Deia knew that what Evelayna believed was true. Deia told Evelayna about Paul's natural personality, which was cheerful, gentle, and private; about his meticulousness in dressing, particularly about his abhorrence for Novaunian clothes and his failure at finding a suitable designer, at which Evelayna laughed heartily; about his fencing, his love of parties and dancing and jazz music; about his fascination with VisionRun and reluctance to try it; and more seriously, about his complete loyalty as a brother. She ended her description of Paul by telling Evelayna about Adaum Vundaun and how he had dragged Paul out of bed every morning for two weeks to go running.

So does Paul go run every morning now, or did Adaum finally give up?

I don't think Adaum knows what "giving up" means! Paul runs with him and eats breakfast at his house every morning, and it's done him a universe of good. I'm not sure which has done the most good, the running or the friendship with Adaum, but either way, I will be grateful to Adaum forever.

So how long do you plan to stay in Launarda? Grandmother did tell me that you eventually want to move to Shalaun to be near Teren Zaurvau.

I don't know how long I'll be here. I hope not too much longer. Teren and I miss each other very much. It all really depends on Paul.

Couldn't Teren come here?

Not unless he resigns from the Fleet.

Evelayna's eyes brightened with eager curiosity. *You must tell me how you met Teren.*

Deia gushed with all of the details about how she came to know Teren. Evelayna was intrigued by the story and very disappointed when it ended.

Oh! There's one other thing I must tell you, Deia said in excitement. *Believe me, you'll die!*

Evelayna looked at her expectantly.

Three different young men have asked me out formally since I came here. I told all three of them that I couldn't go out because I have a boyfriend. They were all in shock, and every single one of them protested, "But you haven't been here long enough!" All three times I just laughed and told them, "My boyfriend brought me here!" If only you could have seen their faces! It took them awhile to figure that one out!

The two laughed hysterically, and Evelayna continued laughing for at least five minutes when Deia told her the names of the three unfortunate young men.

Deia and Evelayna became more and more comfortable with each other as time progressed. Evelayna told Deia all about her studies to become a judge, her mother's success as a vocalist and music teacher, her new father of two years, and her new brothers and sisters, all but little Davaun older and married. Deia was disturbed that Evelayna didn't seem interested in social activity and even less interested in men. Her desire to become a judge and serve as a proxy-counselor to their grandfather seemed to dominate her existence.

After an hour, Tashaura summoned them both back into the living room. Tashaura smiled as they entered and communicated cheerfully, *You two have been back there long enough.* She motioned Deia to sit down beside her on the couch. *Come, Deia. You must tell me all about your mother.* Deia nodded slowly and sat down next to Tashaura.

* * *

Deia walked home with her grandmother late that afternoon, immersed in memories of Lena. Her mind power studies over the past weeks had so refined her memory that every day events from further and further into her past flashed through her consciousness.

She remembered her attempts with Paul to climb up that strange gold statue in the red and white room, her uncle's voice and how it had made Paul cry, her mother's weeping and trembling and trying to smile. She also remembered her mother sitting on the couch in the family room in front of the fire, practicing words she couldn't understand at first, teaching her and Paul words to say and pointing to herself and saying in a heartbroken whisper, "Lena. Aunt Lena."

Deia remembered climbing on that shiny, beautiful thing in the red and white room and learning that she could make music on it. A lady began coming soon after that to help her make more music, and she loved to make music, because it was so much fun and because the music made her Aunt Lena so happy.

Those early tunes she played danced gaily in her mind all evening, and she went to bed humming a Bach gavotte. As she lay in her bed in the dark, she relaxed and attempted to reach even further into her memory. Remembrances of her father had to be there too. Eventually she remembered her hands clutched around glossy blond curls, crawling on a jeweled rug and red hardwood floor, and the shock of water on her face from a cup she had

tried to remove from the table. She could even remember the smell and feel of her father when he cuddled her on his lap.

She drifted easily into sleep, still humming gavottes. She dreamed of Lena scooping her four-year-old body off the piano bench and waltzing her around the living room; of herself and Paul, even younger, crawling curiously around on that strange, soft white floor, intrigued by all of the new smells and sounds.

She awoke again, abruptly. She was close to the night of the fire, very close. Certainly she could remember the events of that night if she tried hard enough. She stretched her memory back and back until she could see flashes of the tiny cabin in the forest and her mother and father's happy faces. She could even feel her Aunt Gwena's hugs. For the first time in five and a half weeks, she wasn't afraid to remember.

She recollected chasing Paul around the table on the soft blue carpet, then being thirsty, standing on her tiptoes, and reaching for a cup that had been left on the table. She grabbed it, and as she did, she plopped to the floor, dumping the water on her face. She gasped, then grinned. The water was cold and good.

Her mother arrived quickly to clean up the mess. "Patrisa!" she exclaimed, part in irritation, part in concern. Her mother changed her clothes and her diaper, then picked her up and carried her over to her father for a hug and a kiss. Within minutes, her mother was kissing her and setting her in her little crib with her favorite blanket. Her mother then left the room and soon brought Paul in, set him in his crib with his blanket, and cheerfully bade them both good night, turning out the light and closing the door behind her, leaving them to chatter each other to sleep. The next thing Deia remembered was her mother despondently lifting her out of a new crib in a room without Paul. She looked desperately around the new crib for her blanket and, not finding it, burst into sobs.

The scene of her Tryamaz bedroom faded, leaving Deia in a way disappointed, in a way relieved. Of course she and Paul hadn't witnessed a thing. Their uncle had always been meticulously careful about leaving no evidence of his crimes. To believe she and Paul had witnessed their father's murder was only the wishful thinking of their grandparents, Miaundea's father, and everyone else who knew their story and wanted to bring King to justice. She still wondered what exactly had happened that night. Now she would never know.

Deia didn't get to sleep again for at least another hour; her mind was so full of her new knowledge. When she awoke the next morning, she hurriedly dressed herself and ran downstairs. Her grandparents were already setting breakfast on the table. She greeted them, seated herself at the table, and ate her breakfast, communicating nothing. She couldn't tell them anything until Paul returned from running with Adaum.

Deia, are you all right? Yaulanda asked in concern.

Deia looked gravely up from her plate. *I have something I need to tell you, but I can't until Paul gets here.*

Yaulanda and Patan looked from Deia to each other, troubled.

Paul burst into the house only moments later. Deia jumped up, grabbed his arm, and pulled him over to the table. *What's the matter?* he asked as Deia sat him down in the chair next to hers.

You don't have to be afraid to remember anymore.

Paul knew immediately the memories to which she was referring. "Why? What happened?"

Deia looked from Paul, to her intent grandparents, back to Paul. *Nothing, at least as far as we're concerned. I remember Lena putting me to bed in the cabin; then I remember her getting me out of a different bed in Tryamaz. There's nothing in between. Paul, we didn't see anything! He must have drugged us or something to get us off Latanza.*

Paul leaned back in his chair. *What fools we've been! Naturally he didn't allow us to be witnesses. Sanel may be many things, but he isn't stupid.* He looked at Patan. *So will our father's testimony concerning Mara be enough to get him back and convict him?*

Patan shook his head slowly. *I don't know. I just don't know.*

But what will happen if it isn't? No court can prosecute a criminal without evidence, Deia asked.

Patan's eyes were somber and thoughtful. *But there may still be a witness.* Yaulanda tensed, as if her husband had trespassed on a forbidden subject.

Paul nodded in realization. *The traitor.*

* * *

Paul went through the rest of the day feeling uneasy. Logically he knew that his memory of the night of the fire couldn't be different from Deia's. Instinctively, however, he knew there was more. As his telepathic skills had become more refined, he hadn't been troubled so much by terrible memories as he had by the fact that there were no terrible memories. He kept expecting to find something that would substantiate his hate for Sanel, and there was nothing. Other than the mind assault the day Lena had died, Paul had no memory of Sanel's treating any of them cruelly.

No doubt Sanel had wanted to insure nothing in either Paul or Deia's memories could incriminate him, which led Paul to believe that Sanel's telepathic assault had not been premeditated. Lena's death had shocked and infuriated Sanel, and Paul had irritated him just enough to provoke an explosion. Obviously Lena had not been as immersed in Sanel's power as Sanel had thought. Paul recalled Lena's strange words that day at Antonio's—"I might as well be Eslavu"—and concluded that she had been lying to Sanel's monitors. Had Sanel had any inkling that Lena's frame of mind was one of a person preparing to commit suicide, he would have prevented her from following through with her plan. Paul believed Sanel's desire to dominate Lena would motivate him to defame her if he were ever brought to trial.

Paul felt sick to realize that the memories he had of Sanel would be more likely to exonerate him than condemn him. Aside from the conversation at Antonio's, Lena had never acted as if she were anything but content in her marriage to Sanel, and he had always treated her with kindness and affection. No wonder Deia had always been so certain Lena loved him. Were Sanel ever extradited, he would undoubtedly have both Paul and Deia called as witnesses in his defense.

Paul didn't think he would ever forget the expressions of grief and revulsion on his grandparents' faces the day of the funeral when he and Deia had given them the details of Lena's life on Earth. Paul still didn't regret communicating so much—his grandparents needed to know everything. The Novaunian public, however, did not. Given the evidence, the court would have no choice but to determine that their mother had taken Deia and him to Earth by her own choice.

Such a potential court decision seemed such a desecration of his mother's honor that Paul decided it was time to go in search of his own memories. Once he made up his mind

to do it, he went to his room and began writing in his journal. He often wrote descriptions of his memories, but this time he began with his earliest memory—Deia’s first piano lesson—and attempted to connect it to an older one.

Back and back he searched, one memory after another in a chain. Soon the flow became so rapid that Paul could no longer write them down. He sat his pen on the desk and stared out the window at the starlit mountains, abandoning himself to the past.

He remembered sliding his hands over the soft red cushion and then lifting his hand to pound on the slick little white boxes, making angry noises while Deia touched the boxes gently and made beautiful sounds. He pressed his face against the see-through wall next to the sound maker, longing to run in the park he saw below. He ran up and down the furry white stairs, flew over the bottom two stairs, and rolled on the floor. He and Patrisa crawled all over the strange white floor and tried to climb the shiny man in the corner. His Aunt Lena wore a shiny spider web around her white neck with big sparkling stones, and underneath it all, a silver heart. A strange man who was not his father put his arms around his mother and kissed her, making sparkles drip from her eyes.

The man had nighttime hair like his mother, but he smelled like his Uncle Jovem, who had sunshine hair like his father. Confusion poured through him and he cried. His mother had told him that Uncle Jovem was bad and that he must fight him. He felt a pain in his heart when he saw him kiss her as if he were his father. His mother stood in front of the see-through wall, wearing white and holding red flowers. “Your Aunt Lena is a bride today,” the strange man said as he fastened the silver heart around her neck. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Whatever “bride” was, it was wrong. He ran to his room, and when the woman in red came to say a prayer in front of his mother and the man with nighttime hair, he watched from the top of the stairs. When his mother put him to bed that night, she was so sad and mad that the sadness and madness leaped from her and made him sad and mad too. He yelled and yelled until his mother returned and rocked him to sleep.

While he slept, he felt as though he were covered with water in the bathtub. He wanted to float to the top but couldn’t. As he floated, the water around his head grew warm, and his mother’s thoughts came to him in a hot, fierce spray.

With the few moments of freedom I have left, I must speak to you, my baby, and my grown son at the same time. I went to bed in our cabin at the Latanzan resort and awoke, bound and gagged, in this stateroom with you and Patrisa, who are still unconscious. I don’t know what happened to your father and Aunt Gwenavila, but I assume they’re dead. I haven’t seen your Uncle Jovem yet, but undoubtedly he’s responsible for our current situation. His suicide was too convenient, and I feel stupid for not suspecting he was still alive.

I assume he wants to destroy his father and the patriarchal structure of Novaun and that he plans to use you to accomplish this evil thing. As an heir to the Doshyr High Patriarchate, you are critical to his plan. If he kills you, he has nothing. For this reason, you will have freedom to act that Patrisa and I will not have. You must use your freedom to fight your uncle and to keep your sister safe and smart.

The reason I’m not dead is because he wants me for himself. As revolting as this will be for me, I will do what I must to keep myself alive and both you and Patrisa out of his power. No doubt he will monitor my actions, words, and thoughts and leave me no choice but slavery or death. Despite the things I will do and say, I am with this man against my will. He is completely evil and should never be trusted.

If you are on Novaun now and working for him, you must tell your grandfather Patan everything. I don't care what terrible things you may have done, your grandfather will love and accept you and will recognize the disadvantage under which you have lived and won't blame you. Trust no one else among the Doshys. There is a traitor there. If Patan does not survive, communicate with my parents, Launs and Naoma Vumaul. If they don't survive, communicate with my brother Aerenel. Don't act openly until Patrisa is safe on Novaun. Have her kidnapped if you must to get her there!

Now it's time to bury the memory of this communication deep, where he will never find it. Farewell, my beloved.

His mother's thoughts ended abruptly, and he floated back to consciousness. The mountains stood immobile in front of him again, illuminated by starlight.

Paul stared at the mountains for a very long time, unable to move or even feel. When emotion did come to him again, he was conscious of only one thought—that he needed to communicate with Deia.

Chapter 14: CULTURE CLASH

Miaundea arrived at Teren and Ton's apartment for lunch one rainy afternoon, surprised and uncomfortable to find Ton there alone. She glanced around the apartment, then frowned at Ton. "Where is Teren?"

Ton shrugged. "He has an exam this afternoon, so he decided to use this time to study. He won't be back until later this afternoon."

Miaundea suddenly felt suspicious. "Why didn't you communicate with me and tell me he wasn't going to be here?"

"I just found out myself."

"It doesn't take that long."

"What would you say if I told you Teren and I arranged for him to be gone so that I could be alone with you for a while?"

Miaundea shook her head again. "Teren has too much of a sense of propriety to ever make an arrangement like that."

"You know, for such a brilliant person, you sure are being ignorant!"

Before Miaundea could erupt in outrage, Ton said quickly, "Of course Teren has an exam. Of course I didn't tell you sooner. I want to have lunch with you alone today. What's so wrong with that? Even when Teren is here, he may as well not be. He hardly ever says anything and I don't think I've ever in my life seen anyone so bored. I don't know why he doesn't just eat with Kevan and Alysia."

Miaundea finally smiled. "That is his sense of propriety too."

Ton tugged on her hand. "Come on, have lunch with me."

As much as Miaundea wanted to stay, she felt it would be improper to be with a man in his apartment alone. "Let's go out."

Ton shook his head and tightened his hold on her hand.

Miaundea felt a rush of anticipation. Well, it was only lunch . . .

"I already have everything ready. Have you ever eaten hamburgers?"

Miaundea shook her head and allowed him to help her out of her raincoat and guide her across the living room to the dining area.

Ton sat her down in a chair at the table, letting his hands rest on her shoulders for several seconds before he proceeded to the counter to get the plates.

Miaundea closed her eyes and momentarily enjoyed his touch. When Ton slid the plate in front of her, she looked up at him and smiled.

"Ground tolu for beef, sweet betau sauce for ketchup, and rolls for buns. Not quite the same as a good North American hamburger, but not bad," Ton said as he sat down.

Miaundea picked up the glass of a gold drink in ice that was sitting in front of her and sniffed. She looked at him strangely. "Zaulym tea with ice?"

"Don't be so squeamish! It's really good, and it's too hot to drink anything brewed. Earth tea is far better, but we can't be picky, can we?"

"The Kavellans wouldn't agree."

"The Kavellans are weaklings, and they like weak tea."

"Zaulym tea has a wonderful flavor!" Novaunians didn't like Earth tea either.

"But no caffeine. What's good strong tea without caffeine?"

Miaundea laughed. "You use caffeine *and* osalaem? Isn't that rather like exercising while listening to lullabies?"

"Rather."

"It's no wonder you're so warped. That poison is corroding your insides, and it's affected your brain. I'll say the prayer." Miaundea folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes without any protest from Ton. "Eternal Father, please bless our food, and bless Teren that his mind will be clear and that he will be filled with confidence as he takes his exam this afternoon. Amen." She opened her eyes and gingerly picked up her tolun hamburger.

Ton shook his head, looking at her as if she were as unnatural as a nuayem plant growing on Earth. "You people certainly are a superstitious lot. Praying to do well on an exam! The only thing that's going to make a difference in how well Teren does on that exam is this." He pointed to his head.

Miaundea swallowed her first bite of hamburger. "God gave us our talents and our knowledge, so why shouldn't He help us learn more and further grow in our abilities? To deny His influence and be unwilling to ask for His help is the most supreme arrogance."

"I don't know. It seems to me that to believe a super powerful being like your so-called God would be concerned enough about one insignificant individual to help him on something as insignificant as an exam is the most supreme arrogance."

Miaundea shrugged and reached for her zaulyem tea. "I suppose it all depends on your perspective."

The two were silent for several moments before Ton said, "Your English is sounding better."

Miaundea nodded in thanks as she took another bite of her sandwich.

Ton reached for the bowl of grapes. "Did you assimilate the interplanetary market report on InterMind this morning?"

Miaundea shook her head. "I didn't get a chance."

"The price of Erdean arelada just doubled again. I can see old Arulezz screaming at the Council of Elders now."

"It serves them all right for not giving us King to begin with. And if those Erdeanians weren't so greedy, we would probably have him by now."

"There was another report on InterMind that I thought was interesting, one about a petition to disallow the spirit dimension formula for use by the Fleet."

Miaundea put her glass of zaulyem tea to her lips. When she had finished drinking, she said, "I assume the petition is sponsored by the Isolationism Movement." She shrugged one of her shoulders. "It's to be expected."

Ton set his hamburger on his plate and stared at her. "Earth planned to go to war to conquer the Alliance, stopped only for the moment by Novaun's acquisition of the spirit dimension formula. Some insane pacifist group wants to toss the formula in the trash disposer, and you say it's to be expected?"

Miaundea nodded and repeated, "It's to be expected." She couldn't help but be amused. Ton had lived on Novaun a mere six weeks, hardly long enough to learn anything about Novaunian politics, and yet he believed he knew everything.

"In the early days of the Fleet," Miaundea explained, "the protest was aimed at disallowing arelada. The Fleet is Novaun's primary purchaser of arelada. When I was a small child, the protest was against the Latanzan War. My father and Teren's father and many other men fought in the Fleet in the Latanzan War, and the Dirons were driven completely off our own planets Dinevlea, Bristaun, and Jeltar and out of the Latanzan systems. A few years ago it was to oppose the bill to increase the Union budget for exploration. Research opportunities for anthropologists have never been better.

“The Isolationists will produce their petition and Dr. Jeldaun Nalaurev will lead the demonstrations in Shalaun. Patriarch Sunen Jualaz will present a proposed law in High Council. It’s inevitable. Because of the Isolationists’ persistence, laws will be passed insuring strict control of the spirit dimension formula’s development, diminishing the likelihood that the Fleet or anyone else will abuse its power, but when all is done, the Fleet will be known in history as the primary developer of the spirit dimension formula as a form of space travel. Remember, the Fleet has the majority of Novaunian support.”

“But with the Diron Empire almost extinct and the Earthons so hungry for war, any war, this protest could cause a dangerous delay. They’ve withdrawn amazingly quickly into their own territory, except for a few ships that are reported to remain in the Telchonian and Erdeanian space territories, and chances are, they’re building up their forces on the Senlana border. They may just decide to invade Senlana.”

Miaundea considered Ton’s suggestion for a moment, then shook her head. “Senlana is the obvious choice, it’s true, but we’re sending the majority of our own fleets there to fortify the border. I know that you are an Earthon and know how they feel, but personally I don’t think they will be a significant threat to us anytime soon. Too many of their plans have been frustrated. It would be suicide.”

Ton shook his head. “You have no comprehension of how proud they are and how badly they need a war, not to mention how combat strong. This embargo Novaun and all of the others are waging to get Jovem Doshyr back may just backfire. It may force Earth to resume its plans to go after the arelada by force. And with the Dirons still enough of a threat to keep the Alliance forces partially occupied, not to mention a delay in the development of the spirit dimension formula, this may be the perfect time.”

“I suggest a wager on which happens first—the Fleet is given permission to develop the spirit dimension formula or Earth commits a belligerent act against some member of the Alliance.”

Ton’s face lit up with interest. “The stakes?” His eyes traveled lustfully over her body.

Miaundea shook her head. “Not that! This is a somewhat significant contest. The stakes have to be high.” Her heart was already pounding with victory. “A trip around my old neighborhood saying, ‘Miaundea is my intellectual superior.’ That ought to be enough to make you wither up and die of humiliation.” She ate the last bite of her hamburger.

Ton’s eyes were alive with anticipation. “Oh no. You’ll be saying, ‘Ton is the object of my lust.’”

“Yes! And my father will be the moderator. He’s the only person I can trust to tell me accurately if a military act of Earth is truly belligerent.”

“All right, we can talk to him about it tonight.”

Miaundea suddenly felt queasy. Her father often stopped into the Palm Pavilion to talk with Ton when she and Teren were there also. She knew that her father was officially responsible for Ton, but Miaundea felt that two or three contacts a week was too much, especially since Ton sometimes joined her family for Sabbath lunch. Not only did Ton and her father see each other frequently, they actually *liked* each other. Miaundea wasn’t sure if it was their friendship that bothered her or the fact that her father was lingering at the gateway into her private universe. She had a sinking feeling that he would discover the attraction that existed between Ton and her. She forced herself to drink the last of her zaulyem tea, shuddering with distaste, then reached into the bowl of grapes.

Ton reached into the bowl at the same moment, running his fingers gently over the back of her hand and wrist. His dark eyes rose to look yearningly into hers. She attempted

to avert her gaze, but couldn't. He was so stunningly handsome, so brilliant and exciting, and she loved that overwhelming feeling of exhilaration that poured over her whenever she saw such desire in his eyes.

She slowly turned her hand and allowed him to caress her palm and the inside of her arm, the nerves in her skin fluttering at his touch. He lifted her hand to his lips, kissed it, and pressed it against his face, leaving her cheeks burning and her heart thumping frantically. Her legs felt so natural intertwined with his under the table. Her arms felt so natural nestled with his against his heart, as he drew her closer. Their mouths touched, trembling. She tore herself away in anguish.

Ton's hand still caressed one of Miaundea's on the table. "You want me as much as I want you. Why can't you just admit it and relax?" He ran his fingers up her arm and massaged her shoulder as he leaned to attempt the kiss again.

Miaundea turned her head, and Ton's lips brushed her cheek. Confusion, by this time, charged through her with much more severity than the excitement. She wanted to kiss him, but she knew it wouldn't be right. She didn't know what to do or what to say. Without a word, she stood up to leave.

"Be that way," he said sardonically as she walked to the door. "Go ahead and save yourself for an unexciting Novaunian boy. Have a bunch of bratty little babies and watch your marvelous career disappear like the dew in the sun. In twenty years, you'll remember me, that I offered you escape. But by then it will be too late."

Miaundea turned and regarded Ton in puzzlement. "But I want to have children."

"Even if it means you'll have to give up your career?" He sounded surprised.

Miaundea had never been able to understand the Earthon concept of career. Why would anyone want to dedicate his or her life to a vocation? "I can hardly give up something I don't have."

"You aren't making any sense."

"Neither are you."

"Your career! Being an anthropologist!"

"Being an anthropologist is not my life's work, my 'career' as you put it."

Ton shook his head quickly. "You people are insane."

Miaundea laughed. "You wrap your entire life, your entire being, around a vocation, and you call *us* insane?"

"Okay, okay . . . so anthropology is your *specialty*, not your *career* and the goal of your life is to do your part to make life on Novaun pleasant for everyone. Come on, Miaundea. You're not that altruistic."

"No, *you're* not that altruistic."

"You've got that right. I'm no fool."

Miaundea thought about Ton's bizarre habit of spending most of his off-hours volunteering at the hospital. "And just who is the greater fool? The person who gives service because he's concerned about people or the person who donates all of his free time to serving the community because he's bored?"

"Obviously you people don't understand what it means to be dedicated to a profession."

"You're not dedicated, you're obsessed!"

Ton gazed at her penetratingly. "It really doesn't bother you that when you marry and have children that your culture won't allow you to focus on anthropology in the same way you do now?"

“What my culture may or may not demand is beside the point. When I get married, I will *want* to change my priorities. I’m assuming my husband will want to change his also. Having children will require an even more drastic change for both of us—that’s life. Even now, I have responsibilities other than my job at the Agency, and I certainly have other interests.” Miaundea turned and walked to the door.

Miaundea slipped into her raincoat and left Ton’s apartment, took the elevator to the ground, and ran through the rain to a taxi, overwhelmed with guilt. He presumed she wanted to be intimate with him. Had she really been *that* indiscreet? She was attracted to him, certainly, and she enjoyed the feverish stimulation she felt whenever he touched her or came near, but that was different from wanting to be physically intimate, or was it? Perhaps she had been fooling herself all this time. She was horrified by the possibility that she could actually *want* such a casual physical relationship with a man.

She had been taught all her life to be chaste, to reserve sexual expression for the man she would marry. She had been told that it is natural and right to love someone and want to express those feelings, and she had always believed it. She had never felt guilty about the feelings of desire she had felt for Maurek. Although Maurek had treated her badly, he was a principled person. She had often fantasized about marriage with Maurek and could even excuse herself for more recently being excited by him since she had, at one time, been completely in love with him.

She did not love Ton. As much as she enjoyed their banter and intellectual discussions, the actual affection she felt for him was minimal, or at least she had always believed it was. She could never marry him, even if she wanted to. She wasn’t sure what distressed her more—the thought that she could desire a physical relationship with a man she did not love or the thought that she was falling in love with such an unfeeling, immoral young man.

Miaundea slid into the taxi and took it back to the Novaunian Intelligence Agency. *If I ignore it, it will go away. Yes, that’s the solution. He’s ugly—ugly, ugly, ugly—and a dreadful bore. It never happened. It never happened . . .*

* * *

Ton returned to his office that afternoon, satisfied with the progress he had made with Miaundea. Her defenses were falling, and it was only a matter of time before he accomplished his desire. He sat down at the telepathic transmission recorder at exactly twelve fifty-five, as he did every day he wasn’t in surgery. Ausha rushed breathlessly into the office at exactly thirteen-two, as she did every day she wasn’t in surgery.

Ton watched her in amusement as she forced herself haphazardly into her lab coat and threw herself into her chair. *Don’t look at me like that!* she communicated with cheerful vigorousness. *So I’m a few minutes late. So what?*

So you’re the most undisciplined, inconsiderate person in the universe. So what?

One of these days, I’m going to surprise you and be here before you are!

One of these days, I’m going to surprise you and tell Dr. Hovaus you’re always late!

Dr. Hovaus already knows I’m always late!

It was the same every afternoon following lunch. Then once they finished their ritual, they quickly went over their cases for the afternoon, then began seeing patients. Ton had never known a more contradictory surgeon than Ausha Ferudant. In some ways, she was the most careless, anxious woman he had ever met, a chronic procrastinator. She was

always late, but never more than two or three minutes, as if she never intended to be late but lived to be constantly running, constantly under some kind of pressure. She paced the office while they discussed cases or compiled reports, wringing her hands, biting her nails, or sucking on her bottom lip, her eyes feverish, dancing, and alive, now and then exploding excitedly with new ideas and observations.

She was an attractive woman, but she did none of the normal things women did to make themselves attractive. She was of a culture where women had no excuse to dress atrociously, but she dressed with atrocious plainness. She always bought simple dresses made for women who enjoyed doing their own embellishment and choosing and combining their own drapes, sashes, and collars, only she never added any embellishment or accessories of any kind except simple cummerbunds that were usually the same color as the material of the dress. She didn't own very many work dresses, and the ones she did have she wore until they were threadbare. Ton expected one day to see her run into the lounge in the morning for conference with her dress inside out and in slippers that didn't match. She always came to conference in the morning with wet hair, and Ton had asked her once why she didn't wear her hair in braids the way other Novaunian women did. She had gaped at him, shaking her hands at him and communicating in good-natured outrage, *What? Waste these hands on braids!*

The thing that didn't make sense about Ausha was that for such a careless person, she was a natural neurophysician. When she was studying a case or standing for hours and hours in surgery, she possessed a discipline and an ability to concentrate that Ton had never seen. Ton had never had difficulty memorizing, learning techniques, or analyzing cases, but he had always had a difficult time concentrating, and the discipline and stamina needed for the extremely slow, precise operations on the nervous system, spinal cord, and brain had been difficult for him to develop. He had wanted to develop it, and he had developed it after considerable effort, but even now, the last hours of a surgery or manipulation were torture. Surgery required effort on Ausha's part too, but she had such stamina and ability to concentrate that she made it look easy. She inspired Ton with her ability to focus all of her energy and concentration on a single task. What Ton lacked in stamina and concentration he made up for in technical expertise and objectivity. Ausha's primary weakness as a physician was that she tended to become too personally involved with her patients to be completely objective.

As much as Ausha amused and baffled Ton, he liked working with her. They complemented each other in temperament, and they were alike enough in their basic attitudes about medicine that they didn't disagree often, but different enough in their knowledge, ability, and perception that they were able to analyze problems with far more depth than if they did all of their work separately or had been partnered with other doctors.

When Ausha's childhood friend told Ton that Ausha's birthday was approaching and invited him to the birthday party he was giving for her, Ton determined to choose for her a unique, perfect present. He thought for a long time about what he could get her. Perfume was his usual gift of choice for women, but Ausha didn't wear perfume and Ton liked her natural smell, which was of moist soil, foliage, and everything wholesome and alive. Besides, he wanted to give her something more personal, something *perfect*. What did a man give a woman who was not only his partner, but also a friend? What would Ausha like?

Ton spent his lunch hour every day the week before Ausha's birthday browsing in shops all over the city, not knowing what to get but knowing he would recognize the item

once he found it. Finally, in a novelty shop at the International Market, he found what he was looking for—a necklace that looked as if it had been crafted for a little girl, a freak piece of arelada streaked in the middle with the orange-rust mineral tritenza, cut and polished into a faceted ovoid that dangled on a white satin string. The arelada looked as if it were exploding into flames from the inside one minute, then as if it were smoldering orange-red embers the next, depending on the light.

Ton liked it immediately because it was so odd and because for some reason it reminded him of Ausha. He purchased the necklace and took it to a jeweler to have it put on a feminine gold chain appropriate for a woman.

He spent the entire next day trying to decide how to give Ausha the gift. Everyone else would give her their gifts at the party, but Ton didn't feel comfortable with that and ultimately decided to give her the necklace in their office.

After they had seen their last patient for the day and had returned to their office, Ton quickly removed the present from a pocket in his lab coat and handed it to Ausha. *Happy birthday, old lady.* She really was older than he was, if only by a couple of months, so he could legitimately tease her about being "old."

Ausha chuckled sadistically as she accepted the gift. *How does it feel to be a little boy playing doctor?*

Ton fingered through her hair. *Have any gray hairs yet?*

You still sleep with a stuffed animal?

Shall we make you a black cake? You're almost dead, after all.

Ausha reached quickly toward his head and pulled her hand back again. She then presented Ton with a short strand of hair that was pure white. *Just look who's really going gray. I've been dying to do that for weeks!*

Ton took the strand of white hair and stared at it in astonishment. *No!*

Of course, you only have two or three now, but by the time you're my age . . .

Did that really come out of my head?

Ausha nodded. *My diagnosis? You're turning gray prematurely. It's hereditary—nothing to worry about.* Her lips curved into a devious little smile. *Perhaps I shouldn't be seen with someone who looks so old. People will start thinking I'm seventy-two instead of twenty-two.*

Ton still couldn't believe it. *You've been carefully studying my head all this time? Just waiting for the perfect opportunity to pull out my gray hair?*

Ausha nodded, her expression innocent. She put her hand on his shoulder and pushed down. *Bend your knees a little.* She picked through his hair and, in moments, handed him two more strands of white hair. *There. No more gray hair.*

Ton looked at her in amusement. *Do you feel better now?*

I'm in ecstasy, Ausha replied, opening the present Ton had given to her.

Intense curiosity drove Ton to ask, *How long do Dinevleans live, anyway?*

The shiny silver paper fell to the floor. *About a hundred and fifty years. How did you know about my birthday?*

Bryaun.

I should have known.

So Dinevleans lived, on average, fifty years less than the average Novaunian. Ton wondered if that caused problems but decided this wasn't the time to ask. He watched Ausha open the box in silence.

She carefully removed the necklace and stared at it, communicating nothing. For one dreadful moment, Ton was afraid she didn't like it. Then her face softened in appreciation, and her dark eyes glowed with awe. She held the ovoid up to the light, and fractured rainbows danced on the walls of the office in a fiery orange sheen.

It's utterly beautiful. Thank you. Ausha squeezed his arm and kissed his cheek, and Ton was happy he had pleased her.

Chapter 15: SEPARATION

Paul gave the memory left by their mother to three notary librarians, and Patan issued a statement to the Novaunian public. Feeling Paul and Deia were finally ready for public attention, he encouraged them to be interviewed by the press. They agreed, although reluctantly, and were interviewed in their home in Launarda.

Oddly, Deia couldn't bring herself to publicly discuss her relationship with Teren. She felt too much in limbo, not knowing when she would even see him again, much less live anywhere near him. He had his life in Shalaun, and she was stranded in Menaura. Since Deia wanted intensely to both acknowledge her relationship with Teren and see him, she was depressed for several days.

A month after Paul's first remembrance of their mother's communication to him the night of the kidnapping, Deia went to breakfast to find her grandfather already gone. Since this wasn't typical, she asked her grandmother where he had gone so early.

He'll be back in a few minutes. He has a surprise for you.

What? Deia asked in curiosity touched with excitement.

If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise.

Deia rolled her eyes in hopelessness as she reached to pour herself a glass of milk. A minute later she heard the door open and turned to it anxiously. "Oh, it's only you," she said as Paul walked through the door.

Paul sat down at the table. "And just who are you expecting?" He sounded uneasy.

"Grandfather. Grandmother tells me he has a surprise for me."

"Oh," Paul said as he poured himself some milk.

Deia managed to gulp down two biscuits and jam before she heard the door open again. She turned. She expected to see her grandfather, but instead, she saw Teren.

"Teren!" she cried, and she was in his arms. After several moments, Deia drew Teren toward the stairs, out of the view of the dining room.

Teren's lips trembled against hers. *I've missed you so much . . . I can't believe I'm really here.*

Deia sighed in happiness. *I can't believe it either. Was I that much of a baby when we last communicated?*

Teren pulled away a little and nodded, smiling. *But that's okay. Actually, it's better than okay. It made me determined to see you and lay to rest a matter that's been weighing on me for some time.*

Anxiety mixed with anticipation surged through Deia. *What matter?*

Teren brushed Deia's hair away from her face. *Is there somewhere we can communicate for a little while in private?*

I don't think Grandfather would mind if we used his office. Deia released Teren enough so that she could guide him to her grandfather's home office.

As soon as Deia pulled the door closed behind them, Teren drew her into his arms again, kissing her lingeringly. *I love you, Deia.*

I love you too.

Teren withdrew a little and gazed at her without smiling. *Do you, Deia? Do you really?*

The gravity in Teren's countenance alarmed Deia. *Of course I do. You know that.*

Teren's hands moved from Deia's waist to her hands. He squeezed them, then lifted them to his lips, averting his eyes. *You once told me that we're from two different*

worlds and that you didn't know whether we could ever have a future together because of it.

After all they had been through together, Deia couldn't believe Teren would still be concerned about the difference in social status between them. Deia dropped his hands and threw her arms around his neck, squeezing tightly. *That was ages ago, Teren! None of that matters anymore.*

Teren's body was still tense, his countenance uncertain. *Doesn't it? The differences between us haven't changed that much.*

Deia kissed his cheek and whispered into his ear, gently chiding, "Do you really think I'm so shallow that I would care about something like that?"

He finally relaxed. Deia felt him smile against her cheek. "Taking the differences between us seriously wouldn't mean you're shallow; it would mean you're realistic and practical."

"Do you know what I think is unrealistic and impractical? That we're separated by half a planet and haven't been able to see each other in over two months."

Teren touched his lips to her ear. "I've been paid for those two years I worked as an agent, which is enough to buy a small house, and as long as I work part-time for the Fleet, I'll receive a salary. I won't have the status to choose my salary, however, until I've finished school, so the next couple of years will be tight financially. The family will help if we have any unusual trouble, but we'll be expected to manage as best we can on our own."

Deia pulled away abruptly and stared at him. *Are you asking me to marry you?*

Teren smiled and nodded, reaching into a pocket and bringing forth a velvet box. Will *you marry me, Deia?* He opened the box for her, revealing a gold ring set with a solitary diamond surrounded by tiny diamonds and pearls.

Deia immediately removed the ring from its box and placed it on the proper finger. *It's beautiful, Teren. Of course I'll marry you!*

* * *

Teren and Deia remained in her grandfather's office long enough to order a piano from a catalog disc Teren had brought with him. When they returned to the kitchen, Deia immediately announced her engagement and showed Paul and her grandparents her new ring.

"So it's finally official," Paul said, his words strained.

"Yes! Oh, yes!"

Paul stood up and headed for the stairs.

"You don't have to go," Deia said gently.

Paul shrugged. "I have something else to do."

"Please stay."

Paul shook his head, then bounded up the stairs.

Deia gazed after him, feeling worried and a little angry. Why couldn't Paul be happy for her?

Yaulanda arose from the table and embraced Deia. *Don't be concerned about Paul. This is the right step for you and he knows it.*

Deia recalled the conversations she had had with Paul on the *Sovereign* about Teren and was startled to realize that her grandmother was right.

Deia and Teren spent the day together in Launarda, then stayed up late that night communicating telepathically, seeing Paul for only a few moments that evening during dinner. The next morning Teren attended First Day Devotional with Deia, her grandparents, Paul, and several members of the extended family.

That afternoon Deia and several of her aunts and older cousins helped Yaulanda prepare the huge lunch that was being given in Teren's honor. Patan and his sons-in-law set dishes on the portable tables in the living room as Paul and Deia's younger cousins chased each other happily around the house. Teren attempted to converse with Paul, but Paul remained uncommunicative and irritated that Teren was even there.

A few of the teenagers were courageous enough to approach Teren and ask him about his adventures as a foreign agent, and he told them what he could, much to Deia's delight. Miaundea had told Deia that it was the same in Shalaun—everyone knew who Teren was and regarded him with affection and awe, and it never occurred to him to be anything but surprised and flattered.

After lunch, the men put the extra food away and washed dishes. Then Yaulanda and two of her daughters, Klarysa and Dauna, set food on the dining room table for the reception buffet. Almost immediately after the food had been set on the table, friends of the Doshyrs from all over Launarda and the Jastray valley, along with other relatives, stopped by to meet Teren.

At sunset, after the last guests had left, Deia and Teren escaped the house to go for a walk. Eventually they sat down on a red brick bench near the mansion.

Teren put his arm around Deia and drew her close. He caressed her cheek with his finger. *Deia, I want you to come with me when I leave tomorrow.*

Deia had known all day that she would have to stay, but telling Teren was more unbearable than she had imagined it would be. *I can't yet.*

Why not?

Paul still needs me.

Teren hesitated. *How is Paul doing, really?*

Deia sighed. *On the surface he seems normal most of the time, but there's still so much bitterness and hurt.*

Is that why he hasn't taken the Covenant yet?

Deia nodded. *Neither Paul nor Grandfather nor the presiding taurnen of our congregation believe he's ready.*

Has he met Evelayna?

Deia shook her head. *Whenever any of us suggest it, he gets furious.* She sighed again. *I just don't know, Teren. He's still so bitter. I just can't leave until he can gladly let me go.*

Teren was not at all pleased. *But that may take years!*

You're being insensitive.

Teren slumped his shoulders. *I don't mean to be insensitive, Deia. I know he's still somewhat bitter, and that's understandable. Other than that, though, he seems well adjusted. Doesn't he work hard at his studies? Doesn't he have his own fencing area in the mansion that he uses every day? Doesn't he have a friend he runs with every morning? Isn't your grandfather taking him into the mines and factories and teaching him everything he knows?*

Deia nodded slowly, feeling overwhelmed by concern for Paul and, at the same time, the desire to be with Teren.

A month ago, I would've admitted I was being insensitive and selfish if I had begged you to come back to Shalaun. Now I believe he's the one who's being insensitive and selfish. He's pursuing his destiny, but he's not allowing you to pursue yours. Besides that, this dependence, this attachment to you, just isn't normal!

Deia would have laughed if she had not been so upset. *You're as jealous of him as he is of you.*

Yes I am! Deia, I love you. I want to marry you. I just want us to be together and live a normal life.

Deia caressed the back of Teren's hand, feeling hopeful. *Maybe you're right about Paul. Maybe he will be just fine. He does fence, although he hates having holograms as opponents, and he writes in that journal of his for hours every night. He seems comfortable enough with Grandmother and Grandfather, and he does have Adaum and the children. He loves those children, and they worship him. Sometimes he even takes them on picnics and to the park.*

Teren shook his head in amazement. *He does like those children, doesn't he? I never thought of Paul as a person who would like kids.*

I don't think Paul is inspired so much by a love for children as he is by a need to identify himself. Those particular children help him understand more explicitly what our life would have been if we had grown up here instead of on Earth. I've watched them so many times myself and seen their little games and the way they tease each other and how they look forward to special family events. It helps me understand, but more than anything, it makes me realize that, in a lot of ways, our childhood on Earth was very similar to what it would have been here, and that's comforting. Paul needs that comfort and feeling of security right now, maybe more than he needs anything else. And besides, that little Helauna is a riot! She's either shocking Paul or making him laugh.

Teren gazed at her in pleading. *Now you see? Paul's doing fine, and you just have to come back, if only to rescue me from Ton and Miaundea.*

What are they doing now? He hasn't proposed to her yet, has he?

Proposed? Ton? Propositioning is more what is going on between those two, only I'm not sure anymore who is propositioning whom.

Do you think she may really be interested in him?

Teren frowned slightly in contemplation. *I'm not sure.*

Miaundea wouldn't . . . I mean . . . Miaundea wouldn't . . . would she?

Teren shook his head. *Not Miaundea. Never Miaundea.*

Are they still debating political issues of planets none of us have ever even heard of?

Teren groaned and nodded. *The more complex and obscure the better. And then there are all of Ton's demented doctor friends.*

Deia smiled. *Wasn't it your idea to start eating dinner with Ton and his colleagues at the Palm Pavilion to begin with?*

Don't remind me! Those doctors have the crudest, most gruesome humor you can imagine! It fascinates Miaundea, but it makes me sick.

They can't help themselves, Teren. You'd be a little demented too if you had to deal with death and disease every day the way they do. Trust me, I know!

A little demented? And what's almost as bad as all the body humor, now Ton and Miaundea are talking in all kinds of weird languages. Ton started it all, and Miaundea is

ecstatic. They make bets on how long it will take the other to respond in the same language. Teren shook his head in hopelessness. They started out at ten seconds, but no, that was too easy as to be “insulting.” Now they’re down to five. The loser always has to buy lunch. Then they start up again, and the loser is supposed to buy my lunch. I keep telling them I can buy my own lunch, but they ignore me. I’ve never in my life felt like such an idiot. Then when lunch comes, Miaundea has ordered something Ton hates and will make him eat something off her plate when he loses, and Ton always makes her drink her zaulyem tea with ice when she loses. The other day, they were talking and laughing in some ancient Earth language, and all of a sudden, Miaundea turned so white I swear, there was no blood in her face. Then she got mad, and he laughed and laughed. I think he must have told her a vulgar joke. Deia, you have to rescue me!

Deia laughed. *Do you think when I get there they’ll buy my lunch?*

Teren relaxed and laughed too. *Probably!*

At that moment, Paul appeared out of the darkness. Deia abruptly turned toward him; Teren leaned back on the bench, clutching its seat.

“Don’t you two think it’s getting a little late?” Paul said stiffly.

“Not really,” Deia softly replied.

Teren’s thoughts slipped into her mind with determination. *Tell him.*

Deia looked quickly at Teren, then apprehensively back to Paul. Teren arose and walked in the direction of the stables. Deia watched Teren walk away, then took Paul’s hand and drew him down next to her. She tried to smile. “Paul, I want to go to back to Shalaun with Teren tomorrow.”

Paul’s body tightened. “But you can’t! Not yet! You can’t leave me here alone.”

“You won’t be alone, Paul,” Deia said gently. “You have Grandmother and Grandfather and Adaum, and we can communicate every day.”

Paul gazed at her pleadingly. “Deia, you can’t leave.”

“Then how long will it be, Paul?”

Paul bowed his head. “I don’t know.”

“You belong here. I don’t. I want to be with Teren.”

The muscles in Paul’s face quivered. “Please don’t leave me, Deia.”

Deia tenderly placed her hands over his and bowed her head. “I won’t.”

* * *

The next morning at breakfast, neither Teren nor Deia communicated much to anyone, touching hands and gazing at each other with heartbroken faces. Deia trembled as she ate, barely able to keep herself from crying.

After Deia and Patan returned from taking Teren to the landing field, Deia went up to her room and didn’t come out all day. When the rest of the family did see her that evening at dinner, her face was red and puffy, and she was as uncommunicative as ever. Patan and Yaulanda attempted to cheer her up, but knowing she was ready to leave Launarda and wouldn’t be happy until she did, their attempts were painfully artificial. Only Paul seemed more animated than usual.

Deia ate a few bites of her food and moved the rest of it around, finally giving up and going back upstairs to her room. Once she was gone, Yaulanda communicated to Paul, *She can’t stay here forever.*

Paul stared at his empty plate. *She won’t.*

She will if you force her to. Look at her now. She's here, just as you want her to be, but she's miserable. Is that really what you want?

Paul stood up, glaring, and strode to his room, muttering under his breath.

Patan's thoughts flowed into Yaulanda's. *You may have been too harsh with him.*

He's being intolerably harsh with Deia. He still needs her, yes, but he doesn't need her physical presence anymore.

That's true, but those two have never been separated for more than a few days at a time. Even under normal circumstances he may have a difficult time.

Circumstances are as normal as they will ever be. If she stays here any longer, life is going to become very abnormal again.

* * *

Later that evening Deia heard a soft knock on her bedroom door. She smoothed her hair slightly, half-heartedly wiped her face with her hand, and proceeded to the door.

"Oh, it's you," she said when she saw Paul. She walked back to her bed and dropped herself down on it.

Paul stepped into Deia's room and said without emotion, "There's a flight out of Jastray to Shalaun tonight at the twenty-second hour. I already made reservations for you, and I had Grandmother approve payment." He turned and walked out of the room, leaving Deia dumbfounded.

Deia sat on her bed, astonished, for ten minutes before she reached out to Paul with her thoughts, *Are you serious?*

Aren't you packing yet?

* * *

Shalaun time was noon the next day. Ton and Miaundea were sipping water in a restaurant downtown where they were waiting for Teren, playing their language game. Teren was late, which was unusual, and Ton and Miaundea were about to order lunch without him. When he did arrive, Ton and Miaundea were surprised and happy to see his arm around Deia.

The corner of Ton's mouth lifted into a triumphant smirk. "So much for your theory about Deia being a spy. You owe me a bottle of Mediterranean champagne and a bottle of cognac, at least fifty years old."

Miaundea rolled her eyes. "I know what I owe you."

Ton smiled complacently. "I just like to gloat."

Miaundea shrugged. "So Deia isn't a spy. There's still something wrong with Teren's story. And don't worry. I'll figure out what it is." She stood up, stepped away from the table, and greeted Deia with a hug. "Hello! When did you get in?"

Deia returned Miaundea's embrace. "Just a few minutes ago! Paul made the reservations himself, and I didn't hesitate. I was afraid he would change his mind. My flight left Jastray at the twenty-second hour." Teren helped Deia into the most accessible chair, the one Miaundea had previously occupied, then sat down himself.

Miaundea reseated herself in the only chair that remained, one uncomfortably close to Ton, never taking her eyes away from Deia. "You must be exhausted!"

"For the moment, I'm too excited to be tired!"

A gold robot fluidly arrived at the table to take their order. Teren and Deia quickly assimilated the menu while Ton and Miaundea telepathically communicated their orders to the robot, then gave the robot their own selections.

Deia shuddered as the robot moved away from the table. "As long as I live here, I'll never get used to being served by robots."

Ton's fingers began caressing Miaundea's knee under the table. "Neither will I!"

As much as Miaundea craved Ton's touch, she moved her knee away and crossed her legs. "We just don't automatically shun everything that doesn't have a human element."

"And they sure are better than Eslavu!" Teren said.

Ton glanced at Miaundea, his eyes laughing. "Well, I've never been served by Eslavu either."

Deia reached for Ton's hand across the table and squeezed it. "How do you like Novaun, Ton?" Miaundea was instantly jealous of Deia's hand.

Ton shrugged. "A place is a place."

Teren looked knowingly from Ton to Deia. "Don't let him fool you. He loves it here, if only because he gets to have his new Vaenan Soarez."

Deia grinned. "I never saw one of those on the *Sovereign*!"

"You never saw one of those on Novaun either, until now," Teren said. "Especially not a bright green one playing jazz from its speakers! Not only that, but he's one of the only people in the city who's licensed to own and drive a private car. Ton couldn't be inconspicuous on this planet now if he tried."

Ton finally smiled, in obvious pleasure. "I guess I do like it here, maybe a little."

Deia turned abruptly to Miaundea. "Oh! Before I forget, Paul wants me to ask you a very great favor."

"What is it?" Miaundea asked, her curiosity piqued.

"He wants clothes made out of all kinds of luxurious, highly contrasting, richly-colored fabrics in a blend of Earthon and Novaunian styles. The only problem is that he's tried at least a dozen different designers and none of them can come up with anything that even comes close to what he wants. He loves your clothes, and only a couple of days ago, he asked me if I knew who designed them. I told him that you design and sew all of your own clothes, and he wants me to ask you if you could design a wardrobe for him. He said that if you do, he'll be your slave for the rest of his life!"

Miaundea was completely taken aback. "He wants me to design clothes for him? An entire wardrobe?" She couldn't believe it.

Deia gazed at Miaundea, suddenly cautious. "He wouldn't ask you—he knows how busy you are—but he's really desperate. You're the only person he's seen on this planet he considers well dressed. Grandfather even told him that he can pay you whatever you want. He and Grandmother (and so am I) are tired of all of his complaints."

Miaundea suddenly laughed. "What a compliment! Of course I'll do it, but I wouldn't think of letting him pay me. I'll do it for the cost of materials. What fun! I'll communicate with him later today."

Deia looked pointedly at Ton, her eyes moving from his loose-fitting crimson, sleeveless knit shirt to his baggy black cotton slacks, which were barely visible to her from under the table. "I would have never thought you were concerned about clothes, Ton."

Ton shrugged. "I'm not. But I can tolerate only so much white and pale everything. And all of that silk and stones." He shuddered. "There's only so much luxury I can stand." Everyone laughed.

The robot arrived with their food, and the conversation continued in a lively fashion until Ton and Miaundea had to return to work and Teren to his part-time job at the Defense Research Center.

Since Miaundea and Deia had long ago arranged that Deia would live with Miaundea once she relocated to Shalaun, Miaundea dropped Deia at her apartment to rest and unpack and then went back to work. Miaundea returned home later that day, just as Deia was leaving with Teren.

Miaundea went to her dressing lounge to bathe and change her clothes, then went to the kitchen to find something for dinner. As she was reaching to open the refrigerator, she heard a knock at the door. She felt a rush of excitement. Only one person she knew ever knocked.

Miaundea answered the door, holding her hands as still as she could to keep them from trembling. "Hello, Ton. What do you want?"

Ton smiled complacently over a huge bouquet of flowers. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"No."

"I came to see Deia."

Miaundea gazed at him knowingly. That was a good excuse. "She left a little while ago with Teren. They're spending the evening with his sisters."

"You aren't going?"

"I wasn't invited."

Ton handed Miaundea the flowers. "For Deia. A welcome present."

Miaundea carefully took the vase from Ton's hands. "She will be very pleased. Now if you will excuse me?" She shut the door.

Ton communicated telepathically, amused by Miaundea's coolness, *Oh, that's right. It isn't proper for a young Novaunian woman to be alone with a man in her apartment, especially with an unsavory one like me.*

Miaundea turned and leaned her back against the door, biting her lip to keep herself from laughing. *Perhaps I don't want to see you tonight.*

She could almost feel him leaning his shoulder and cheek against the door. His thoughts trembled around her like a longing whisper: *I want to see you.*

Miaundea closed her eyes and leaned her head back, shivering with anticipation. She wanted desperately to see him.

Have you had dinner yet? he asked.

No.

Then why are you still in there? You're buying tonight!

This time Miaundea did laugh. *Let me put these flowers on the table, then I'll meet you at your car. You're driving tonight! And if I'm buying, we're not eating at the Pavilion!*

Chapter 16: CONTRADICTIONS

Ton took Miaundea back to her apartment at the twenty-second hour that night. They had spent most of the evening walking along the beach and talking. Miaundea knew that she should have had him bring her home earlier, but she hadn't been able to tear herself away from him. Ton had been very much a gentleman all evening, which distressed her as much as it relieved her. He was so patient, so painstaking in his efforts to seduce her, and she felt he was being gentlemanly to throw her off guard.

Miaundea changed into her nightgown and collapsed on the chaise longue in her dressing lounge, her emotions invigorated by him and how near he had been all evening and her mind stimulated by all of their debate. What was she supposed to do about this attraction? She had believed that seeing him publicly only and staying at a bantering distance would make it go away, or at least diminish it, but instead, his regular presence in her life during the past several weeks had escalated the attraction. She just didn't know what to do.

She lay on her chaise for at least an hour, worrying and thinking about nothing but her relationship with Ton, nearly giving herself a headache. Eventually, she fell into an uneasy, exhausted sleep.

Somewhat later, she awoke and sat up with a start, her body burning, shaking, and dripping with perspiration, her heart pounding and her breathing erratic. She was delirious with desire, and at the same time, overcome by the most horrible feeling of shame and degradation. In her dream, her meeting with Ton by the door to his suite on Dignitary Island had not ended with her leaving to go back to the balcony, but had instead ended with them in his suite in bed.

She quickly transmitted a thought to turn on the lights and glanced frantically around the room to make sure he wasn't there with her. The relief she felt, seeing he wasn't there, was tremendous, but so was the insatiable, forbidden craving. For a moment, she wished he were there. She swung her legs off the chaise and let her feet rest on the floor, hunching over and clutching herself, as if shielding herself from further advances.

Moments later, she heard the door to her lounge open. In her mind, it could be no one but he. She abruptly turned and shrieked, "Get out!"

In actuality, Deia was the person at the door. She sprang back in shock. "I'm sorry. I saw your light on . . . I'm *sorry*." She turned to leave.

"Oh! It's you, Deia. Please don't go. I thought you were someone else."

Deia walked toward Miaundea tentatively. After Deia had come a little closer, her eyes widened and she approached quickly, sitting down next to Miaundea on her chaise. Deia rested her hand on Miaundea's forehead and cheek. "You're burning up! You must be ill!"

Miaundea shook her head quickly. "I'm fine. I had a nightmare, that's all." Seeing Deia still dressed and appearing animated, Miaundea assumed Teren had just brought her home. "Is Teren still here?"

"No." Deia gazed at Miaundea in worry. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Miaundea studied Deia's face. Beautiful, sweet, perfect Deia. How could she possibly understand? Then again, she was planning to get married, even if it was only to Teren. Her feelings for him had to include physical attraction, even if she didn't understand the feeling or had not identified it yet. Maybe she would understand.

"No, I'm not ill," Miaundea said in resignation, "but still, I'm not all right." She took Deia's hand and squeezed it gratefully. "I'm so glad you're here, Deia. I really need to communicate."

Deia frowned in concern and looked intently at Miaundea, waiting.

Miaundea stood up and motioned to the door. "Let's go to the kitchen. I'm terribly thirsty."

Miaundea led Deia into the dining room and sat her down in a chair. Then she proceeded into the kitchen to the synthesizing machine. "Would you like something?"

"No thank you."

Miaundea telepathically commanded the machine to produce a big glass of juice. She quickly drank the whole thing and put the empty glass back into the machine for a refill, then walked around the counter and dropped herself into a chair.

"It's Ton." Miaundea leaned her elbows on the table and put her hands on her temples, pulling her skin and hair back. "I want to be intimate with him so badly I can hardly stand it. What's worse, he knows it. I just don't know what to do."

Deia was astonished. "Are you in love with him?"

Miaundea leaned on one arm and shook her head. "Not in the least. This desire I have, it's insatiable . . . consuming. It's, well, it's . . . *lust*." There, she had finally admitted it. She shuddered.

Deia was still in shock. "What does he do? Has he actually propositioned you?"

Miaundea nodded wearily. "It all started on Dignitary Island."

Deia's eyes widened in even greater amazement.

"It was the day after I met all of you. Everyone was on the beach except Ton. He was on the balcony, smoking and wearing no shirt. Deia, I had never seen a man without a shirt on before, except my brother when we were children, and Ton is so absolutely gorgeous anyway. He could see that I was attracted and before I knew it, he was kissing me. Well, I loved it, but I couldn't admit it, so I played as if the whole thing were a tease. I let him lead me to his room, and then I turned to leave. He was furious. He threw me against the wall as if he intended to force me, and I really believed he would do it. When I was at the point of surrendering, he stopped and laughed hysterically. I was furious and humiliated."

She shook her head. "Since then, the more I resist, the more determined he becomes. He tells me that I really don't believe what I think I believe. He looks at me so longingly and with such appreciation of my appearance that it completely disarms me. No one has ever looked at me that way before, and I love it. How can I not? And he knows just how to touch me too. Today at lunch, he touched my knee, just barely. I ignored him, of course, and he left me alone after that, but still, I nearly died with desire. And he contrives to get me alone, because he knows that is when I am the most vulnerable. Tonight we went to dinner and spent the rest of the evening on the beach, talking. He was so gentlemanly—too gentlemanly. I think it must just be another tactic."

Miaundea sat up and took a sip from her glass of juice. "What is it about me that attracts him? Novaunian men think I dress and act like a 'hussy,' but the men on the planet where I did my fieldwork thought I was an overly wholesome little girl. So why do I have the misfortune of attracting someone like Ton, who is a hundred times more depraved than them all? I think he must really be desperate."

Deia smiled in a knowing way. "Did you ever consider the possibility that he may really like you?"

"Never."

"I think you should. Ton would rather work than do anything." Deia finally felt comfortable enough to begin removing her jewelry. The diamond earrings came off first. "If you spent the entire evening with him, just talking, than he must really like being with you."

Miaundea shook her head. "He just loves to debate. I'm a librarian that argues, a computer that fights back. But more than anything, I'm the object in an elaborate seduction."

"Maybe. But I doubt he's ever spent so much time talking or even debating with a girl he's trying to seduce. On the *Sovereign*, I hardly ever saw him with any girls, although I do know that he had regular girls he took to his office. The point is, he doesn't see the girls he sleeps with socially, except in the most superficial way."

Deia's words troubled Miaundea, not so much because she didn't want him to feel affection for her, but because she didn't want to feel affection for him, and she knew now that she did.

"As for his being desperate," Deia continued, "I don't think he's all that desperate. He didn't have to remain on Novaun, and he can leave whenever he wants."

Miaundea felt like an idiot. Of course he could leave! She had always known it, but she had only considered the possibility in terms of what he would do once he was through with her, assuming they were to become lovers. Deia's observation, however, did raise a question in her mind. "Why does he stay? Has he ever given a reason?"

Deia shrugged. "He doesn't want to be shot for treason." Her silver necklace made a swishing sound as she absently swirled it on the table.

"That's the only reason he gives?"

Deia nodded.

"Now that is odd. My father could set him up anywhere he wants without the Earthons knowing about it."

"Teren seemed to think that too. He was shocked when I told him Ton was planning to stay. Personally, I think Ton's happier here than he would be anywhere else. What better place could there be to study the medical uses of telepathy than on Novaun? That's what he was researching before we came here, after all, the uses of telepathy in neurosurgery."

"Yes, that is true." Miaundea ran her finger back and forth along the rubies that were embedded in her crystal dining table. She wanted to know everything about Ton, and Deia knew a different side of him than she did. "If you worked with him doing experiments in mind power, then you must have felt of his essence, and you had to have felt it more strongly while the four of you were engaged in the spirit dimension formula. What is he, really? He hardly ever communicates with me telepathically, and I feel I know him only superficially."

"He is his work. Being a doctor isn't just an important part of him, it is him. It's what gives him purpose. If he couldn't be a doctor, he would curl up in a corner somewhere and die."

"That is so sad," Miaundea said softly. And yet no one knew better than she did how his work consumed his life.

Deia nodded. "He's very lonely, I think, but I'm not sure he realizes it. I was so glad when he and Teren decided to share an apartment. He needs a good friend like Teren. He's so cynical and distrustful—completely, to his essence—that I think he must have really been hurt in the past." Her face became grave. "He has no real family. You should have

seen the way he and his sister Jacquae treated each other on the ship. There was so much venom—it was unbelievable. But why am I telling you this? I can show you.”

Incidents from Deia’s time with Ton and his sister on the *Sovereign of the Stars* flew through Miaundea’s mind. Eventually the Earth ship faded, and she was again sitting in her dining room, a single question thrusting itself to the front of her mind: “What is it about Ton that made you in the beginning believe his coldness and his apparent lack of principle is all just a façade? Why did you fall into a friendship with such a person to begin with?”

Deia didn’t seem surprised by Miaundea’s questions. Her answer was much simpler than Miaundea had expected. “When I met him, he wasn’t cold at all, and I had no prejudices formed about his character. He never gave me any reason not to be his friend.”

“But if he is so distrustful, why did he so easily enter into a friendship with you? I’m afraid I would have believed, as everyone else did, that he just wanted you for a lover.” She was beginning to understand why Teren felt Ton was such a contradictory person.

Again, Deia’s answer was simple: “We worked so closely together that it would have been difficult for us *not* to be friends. We were together at least five hours a day, six days a week!”

Deia’s words made Miaundea uncomfortable, and she wasn’t sure why.

Deia shrugged a little. “And besides. I was a loyal friend when everyone else thought I was a naïve fool. Only an extremely unfeeling person would not have responded to that.”

And Ton had responded. If only Deia knew how loyal he was to her. Miaundea recalled how horrified he had been at the mere suggestion that Deia might be a spy for her uncle. Miaundea was suddenly ashamed of herself for treating Ton with such disdain. Of course she didn’t know him on any kind of personal level. She had never made an attempt.

Miaundea quickly took a drink, feeling a little embarrassed. “I guess he’s not nearly as unfeeling as I always thought. It’s obvious he feels affection for you and Teren.”

Deia smiled perceptively. “And it’s obvious he feels affection for *you*. I wonder what he’s going to do when he wakes up one of these days and realizes he loves you. I doubt there’s much in this universe that would terrify him more.”

Miaundea tapped on her glass. “What am I going to do, Deia? I do want to be his friend, but I’m afraid of falling in love with him. I’m already so hopelessly infatuated. He may be capable of affection, but what he wants now is still mutual exploitation, and he is so persistent. What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know. On the ship, I tried to force the feelings I had for Teren to go away—I even began seeing someone else—but it didn’t work.” She looked at Miaundea thoughtfully. “Maybe that’s it. Maybe you should stop fighting it.”

“If I stop fighting it, I’ll be his lover for sure!”

Deia shook her head. “That isn’t what I mean. I mean be honest with yourself about how you feel, but also be resolute and unafraid. Then just don’t let him get you alone anywhere!”

“Maybe you’re right.” Miaundea tiredly pushed her hair over her ear. “I’m so sick of fighting it. Maybe I should just tell him how I feel and why I can’t act on the feelings. Perhaps he will respect me enough to leave me alone.” She squeezed her head with her hands, leaned her elbows on the table, and moaned. “Who am I fooling? He doesn’t have a milligram of respect in his whole body! To admit my feelings is to admit his superiority. He will taunt me until I die. He is so disgustingly arrogant!”

“I don’t mean any offense, Miaundea, but you are disgustingly proud. You may refuse to ever admit it to him, but he already knows how you feel—you said so yourself.”

Miaundea relaxed and smiled. "You are disgustingly honest, disgustingly, disgustingly!" She and Deia laughed together.

Once the laughter died, Deia said lightly, "Poor Ton! You make him sound like such an ogre!"

Miaundea playfully raised her eyebrows. "You convince me otherwise; you just try! He wants a woman's respect? Tell him to stop trying to seduce her the first moment he meets her. Scream it at him and watch him smirk!"

"Yes, his moral standards are different from ours, but he's honorable in other ways, he really is. He's honest, and he's a doctor because he believes passionately in life."

Miaundea laughed. "He's a doctor because he likes to play God! And he's honest only because he likes to make people uncomfortable. Try again!"

"No, really, Miaundea. He does believe in life. If you could see him with his patients, you would believe me."

Miaundea suddenly stopped laughing, remembering the compassion Ton had shown for Teren after his operation. Was Deia right about Ton's character? Or was Miaundea?

Miaundea did not voice her questions about Ton's motives to Deia, but instead, smiled weakly and said, "I guess I misjudged him again."

Deia yawned and nodded. "Only slightly."

Miaundea smiled at Deia and squeezed her hand. "Go to bed."

Deia pulled herself out of her chair and stretched, yawning again. "All right. You convinced me." She picked up her jewelry and trudged to her room.

"Good night," Miaundea said softly, feeling more animated than ever.

Once Deia had gone to bed, Miaundea quickly set her glass in the recycling tank and walked to her room, telepathically turning off the lights. She stretched out on her chaise, eager to decipher the puzzle of Ton.

What was he, really? How much of him was sincere? He really was a contradictory person. Perhaps she would understand him better if she unraveled the mystery of why he had come to Novaun. She determined that she would not sleep that night until she did.

He had not come because of a hatred of tyranny. His attitude toward the Earthon government wasn't terribly hostile. His only concern had been that the government not interfere with his personal life. Being in the military had restricted him in some ways, but basically, he had been doing what he wanted with his life.

Miaundea was almost certain he had not come for the money. He just didn't care about money. She doubted his standard of living had changed much at all since his arrival on Novaun. He had no desire to invest his twenty-four thousand gold coins or even to spend them. His apartment was still not furnished very well, and although he was an attractive, careful dresser, his clothes were far less luxurious than the average Novaunian's, and he wore no jewelry. Even his car, although it was imported, was only average as far as luxury was concerned. It was the sort of car he could have afforded on the salary of an average Earthon neurosurgeon.

Miaundea was even more certain Ton had not come to Novaun for friendship. He certainly felt affection for Teren and Deia, but Ton was not a person to make a drastic change in lifestyle simply for two budding friendships.

Had he come to further his career? That possibility was a little more likely. He was interested in the medical uses of mind power, and Deia was correct in her observation that the best place in the galaxy to pursue that interest was Novaun. He had been studying the medical uses of telepathy, however, with Star Force, and Miaundea felt it very unlikely

that he would restrict his osalaem and alcohol and give up his sexual freedom, not to mention his freedom to travel, for a mere career change. Perhaps he had accepted Teren's proposal simply because he had not realized how drastic the lifestyle change would be.

No . . . the Novaunian lifestyle simply didn't matter. Even now, he was free to reside on any planet he chose. By the same token, however, no other planet could possibly offer the same tantalizing studies in spirit energy and medicine. Then again, perhaps he had given it all up so that he could experience the spirit dimension formula in flight. That, to her, seemed likely, but she wasn't satisfied yet. Something still wasn't right about the entire *Sovereign of the Stars* experience.

Ton had told Deia that he was remaining on Novaun because he didn't want to be shot for treason. Miaundea decided that he was either using that reason as an excuse, or he was sincerely frightened. There was no reason to give excuses for wanting to remain on Novaun. Certainly no one would question or find fault with his wanting to pursue his medical career in the Novaunian philosophy. Miaundea didn't think he would use an excuse, even if he wanted to stay only to be close to Deia and Teren. He had never been shy about admitting affection for them.

On the other hand, he had no reason to be afraid of leaving. Her father was an intelligence expert. She was certain he had accomplished far more difficult tasks than that of hiding a fugitive on another planet. Perhaps, however, Ton was simply too proud to give up his true identity.

The only other possibility Miaundea could think of was that Ton really was a spy for Sanel King. Obviously Deia was not a spy, and Miaundea did not think Paul was a spy either. She still felt, however, that King had allowed the four to leave, that he had known good and well that Deia would never betray Teren in the armed shuttle. Miaundea still firmly believed that King would never have made that kind of an error in assessing Deia's character.

Ton was the only other choice for a spy, but he could not possibly be a spy—he wasn't inconspicuous enough. Her father and Colonel Avenaunta would never let Ton near any information that would threaten Novaun if placed in Earth's hands. Perhaps they even had him under surveillance. A lot of good a conspicuous spy under surveillance would do!

Perhaps he was an assassin. If he was an assassin, however, who was he on Novaun to assassinate? A political figure? A high patriarch? The Doshyr twins? No . . . Sanel King would never have come out of hiding and relinquished his control of Paul and Deia merely to put a very conspicuous assassin on Novaun.

Miaundea examined the situation from another point of view. King had wanted to retain control of the twins. He had wanted to capture Teren. He had wanted the spirit dimension formula. He had not wanted to give up the spirit dimension formula to Novaun or do anything that would lead Novaun to suspect he was really Jovem Doshyr. He had placed Paul and Deia on the *Sovereign* so that Teren would find them and trust them. He had wanted Teren to find them so that he would gain hope of returning to Novaun and at the same time become even more desperate, desperate enough to trust someone else—hence, the plant.

Teren did trust a third person—Ton. Ton, however, came to Novaun and was not an instrument in killing Teren in the armed shuttle after receiving the spirit dimension formula, which seemed to indicate that he was not the plant. King, however, knew Deia would not betray Teren in the shuttle, and yet he allowed them to make the escape anyway.

That fact seemed to indicate that the escape had proceeded as King had expected it to proceed, that his plant had been among the four.

The information contradicted itself. Perhaps Paul was the spy after all. That was assuming he was as ruthless and power hungry as his uncle and so able to lie that he had deceived his mother and Deia. It was also assuming King had been so anxious to put Paul on Novaun that he had been willing to give up Teren, Earth's control of the spirit dimension formula, and the veil of secrecy under which he had worked for years by being presumed dead by Novaun. Miaundea sighed in frustration. Under those circumstances, Paul couldn't possibly be the spy.

Then it hit her, another possibility so preposterous, so fantastically outrageous that it might be true. She thought about the mystery of why Ton had come to Novaun, his fear of leaving, his position as third helper, his strange friendship with Deia and his contradictions. She also thought about how positive he had been that Deia was not a spy. Miaundea remembered his saying to her on Dignitary Island: "King misread Deia. He's a human being. He's capable of making a mistake."

King hadn't misread Deia at all; he had misread Ton! Ton had been the *Sovereign* plant all along, a plant that in the armed shuttle had double-crossed the great Sanel King. Miaundea laughed. What beautiful humiliation! What magnificent justice! The master of deception outsmarted by an insignificant boy surgeon, his power, his dignity, his intellect, his very essence served up to Ton on a glistening arelada platter. For Ton it had been the contest of contests, the conquest of conquests, with the spirit dimension formula thrown in as a bonus. Miaundea's laughter became hysterical. The utter audacity of it! What supreme arrogance!

Once the initial excitement of her discovery wore off, she wondered if Ton had told her father. She decided that he probably had not. He was not a trusting person, and as afraid as he was of leaving Novaun, he probably didn't want to take the chance that her father would think he was a spy. Her father knew, though; she was certain of it. He had interviewed Ton personally and had access to much more detailed information than she did. Miaundea shivered with pleasure. Her father was an expert at the game. He probably hadn't told Ton that he knew his secret just to see how long it would take Ton to tell him himself. She didn't doubt he had been laughing heartily himself over the past several weeks. No wonder Ton so delighted him!

Miaundea decided that she would not confront Ton with her new discovery, not yet at least. Secretly holding such explosive information put her in a unique position of power over him. She chuckled to herself. What irony! Deia thought she knew him, but Deia didn't know him at all. Miaundea had known his true character all along. Ton lived for the game. He lived for the conquest. He lived for a challenge. Being a doctor was simply the primary manifestation of that drive.

Miaundea slipped into bed and turned off the lights, but remained awake for at least another hour, reveling in her delectable discovery.

Chapter 17: PARTIES

Teren and Deia spent the next several days visiting with the press and seeing the sights in Shalaun. Teren and Deia immediately decided on a nine-week engagement. Teren continued working and attending classes at the Fleet Post Graduate School, and Deia continued her basic Novaunian education, with emphasis on history and cultural arts, with a tutor in Shalaun. They met Ton and Miaundea downtown for lunch nearly every weekday and spent their remaining free time with Teren's family. They purchased a tiny, two-bedroom house in the city with the money Teren had earned for his two years as an agent and began making it into a home.

All of Novaun was so delighted with Teren and Deia as a couple and so enthralled by the romance of their meeting and falling in love, that wedding gifts and letters of congratulations immediately began arriving from all over the Union, much to Teren and Deia's amazement and appreciation. After a month, presents began arriving from planets as far away as Manoure.

Three weeks before the wedding, Kevan and Alysia gave Teren and Deia a betrothal party on the beach, inviting all of their childhood friends. Miaundea spent the entire day at the party. Over two hundred people were there, and Miaundea enjoyed communicating with those she hadn't seen for a while. Even those who had moved away or joined the Fleet somehow made it to the gathering to congratulate Teren and meet Deia.

Miaundea squatted down to get another water chestnut out of the barbecue pit, her wispy cotton dress rippling around her bare legs in the breeze. As she stood up, she saw Maurek Avenaunta walking slowly toward her, his expression one of seriousness and apprehension. Funny, Maurek didn't generate so much as a spark of excitement anymore, not since she had met Ton. She didn't even think he could upset her with any of his spiteful remarks. She just didn't care.

Kevan called everyone's attention to where he, Alysia, Teren, and Deia were standing. Miaundea immediately turned and walked toward Kevan, unable to contain a smile of excitement.

As you all know, Kevan began once the party had gathered around him, Teren and Deia would not be getting married, nor would they be here today, if they had not had help from their Earthon friend, Ton Luciani.

Ton was standing only a few meters away from Miaundea. She glanced at him and saw that he was frowning.

Kevan smiled broadly at Ton. Alysia, Teren, and Deia beamed. *Well, today Ton is twenty-two years old. Happy birthday, Ton!*

Rayel and Lauria approached the group, carrying a long, flat, chocolate birthday cake with twenty-two candles in the Earthon tradition. In shock, Ton watched them set the cake on the portable table and light the candles with a laser wand.

Teren, Deia, Miaundea, and Lauria sang "Happy Birthday" to Ton in English, and Ton could do nothing but blow out the candles. Everyone in the party whistled and cheered.

"Thank you," Ton said to Teren and the others, still in shock. "Thank you very much."

Deia stepped toward Ton. "We're not through yet. Here." She handed him two packages wrapped in silver paper, one moderately large and the other very tiny.

Ton hesitated.

"Go on! The little one is from Paul, and the other one is from Teren and me."

Ton quickly opened the package from Paul and found a box containing a holodisc of Earth's recent Olympic fencing championships. He examined the disc in excitement. "How in the universe did Paul get this?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know!" Deia replied.

Ton slipped the holodisc into a pocket, opened the present from Deia and Teren, and pulled out a black leather coat. "It's the one in the Soaurez advertisement!"

"Yeah, and you ought to know how hard it was to find one like it," Teren said. "Nothing even remotely similar exists on Novaun. We had to communicate with a supply company on Vaena and have them send us a catalogue disc. This coat is close enough."

Ton ran his hand over the leather. "You two really shouldn't have done this."

Deia brushed her curls out of her face. "You need something to wear over your suit when you come to the wedding, and living here, we knew you would never buy one yourself. Menaura is very cold right now. And if you take out the lining, it's a perfect raincoat. We even had it waterproofed."

Ton returned the coat to its box. "Thank you."

Alysia approached Ton with another wrapped package. Ton raised his eyebrows. "There're more?"

Not many at the party knew Ton well, but they were interested to see what was in the package. Everyone gathered around and watched in silent delight as Alysia nodded and presented Ton with the gift she had brought. *This one is from Kevan and me. For when you get homesick. Besides, Teren told us that you need some decorations for your apartment.*

Ton accepted the present and opened it. Within moments, he was gazing at a perfect reproduction of the famous Earthon painting "Sunset over Tryamaz." He looked at Alysia in appreciation. *It's fabulous! Thank you.*

Maurek looked over Ton's shoulder at the painting. *It's beautiful, Alysia. Is it an original?*

This is just an imitation. Teren gave me the image of the original painting, and Lauria and Rayel contributed the frame.

Ton was staring again at the painting when Miaundea nonchalantly reached into her pocket for the present she had brought for Ton and handed it to him.

Ton handed the present back to Miaundea. "You can do better than *that*." He lustfully surveyed her shape.

Miaundea shrugged as she tossed her gift into the sand. Ton waved his hands in front of her. "Come on! Where's that fire? Where's that spirited retort? Where's that exciting little Miaundea I know and lust?" Teren, Deia, and Lauria laughed.

Miaundea couldn't help herself. She smirked. Her gift would have a far more powerful effect on him than a retort. She leaned over, picked up the gift, and handed it to him again.

Ton tore open the package and, with eyes widened in delight, pulled out of the box a bottle of men's hair-setting lotion and read the note that was with it: "Just to remind you of all those wishes that will forever remain wishes."

Teren erupted with laughter, but he didn't laugh nearly as ecstatically as Ton. Miaundea wanted to laugh too but knew that would spoil the effect. The expression on Ton's face was such a strange one of delight, excitement, and at the same time uncertainty. He had been so positive in the beginning that she would be his lover. He wasn't so sure anymore, and Miaundea was thrilled, yet terrified to see that he now wanted her more than ever.

She turned and casually walked through the crowd toward her parents' home, the crowd immediately parting for her to pass. Most watched her in puzzlement, wondering what was so funny about a bottle of lotion.

Teren gained control of his laughter long enough to translate the note and telepathically replay his initial reaction to Kevan's mustache, which had led to Miaundea's explanation of how Mautysian men used a special lotion to get their hair to stay combed back, which had led to Ton's teasing question: *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?*

Everyone laughed as Ton handed the bottle and note to Teren and hurried after Miaundea. "Where are you going?"

Miaundea didn't reply, but began walking so fast she was almost running.

Ton ran and caught up with her just as they were almost through the crowd. He reached to grab her waist, but in her eagerness to avoid him, she stumbled and landed in the sand. He couldn't stop himself fast enough to keep himself from tripping over her legs and falling down in the sand with her.

They looked at each other, Miaundea on her side and Ton on his knees, and laughed. Miaundea pulled herself into a sitting position, scooped up some sand, and threw it at him. He shot sand back at her, and the sand fight continued wildly for another minute before others joined in and water started to fly too, mingled with shouts of laughter.

* * *

The party continued into the night with swimming, playing games, eating, and telling jokes. Ton left at the twenty-first hour and went back to his apartment to relax. He put all of his birthday presents on the breakfast bar that separated the kitchen and the dining room and slipped into his burgundy velour bathrobe. He stretched out in his recliner with a glass, a bottle of champagne, a package of taffuaos, and a lighter. The only thing missing in this private birthday celebration was a beautiful woman. No. Actually, the only thing missing was Miaundea.

He was smoking his second taffuao and on his third glass of champagne when he felt a telepathic message enter his mind. *Ton, are you there?* The thought pattern belonged to Ausha. Ton knew that she lived in the building across the walk, but as close as she lived, she had never visited him at his apartment. What in the galaxy was she doing there now?

When he went to the door, he was astonished to find not only Ausha, but Bryaun Traus and Danal Navtur also. Both were cardiopulmonary physicians who worked in the same building he and Ausha did, and although they weren't apprenticing with the same professor, they were good friends and shared an apartment in Ton's complex. Bryaun was tall, blond-haired, and very fair, and Danal was small and serious natured, with huge gray-blue eyes and curly brown hair. With the three visitors was a freak of nature that looked to Ton like a big pink dog.

Happy birthday, Ton! Ausha dropped the mesh shopping bag she was carrying and threw her arms around him, embracing him tightly. Ausha was typically very demonstrative with everyone and was so unabashed and natural in her affection that Ton couldn't feel uncomfortable with it if he tried.

He pressed her back slightly in acknowledgement, being careful not to let his taff touch her hair. *Thank you, Ausha, but how in the galaxy did you know?* As far as he could remember, none of his colleagues had ever asked him his birth date.

Bryaun shrugged and walked past Ton into the apartment. The pink dog followed. *I asked, I learned.*

Danal smiled. *Since Bryaun got called in for an emergency surgery earlier and you were working most of the day, we decided to help you celebrate tonight. I hope we didn't interrupt anything.*

Ton nearly laughed. Danal was always perfectly polite. He shook his head and drew on his taff. *No. I'm just relaxing.*

Bryaun took Ton's taffuao out of his hand and made a face. *You smoke these things, Luciani? It's a wonder you have enough concentration to even open someone's head, let alone play around in it.*

This time, Ton did laugh. Bryaun was always the perfect example of good-natured rudeness. *I only smoke after work!* Bryaun went to put the taff stub out in the sink. Ausha and Danal walked into the apartment, and Ton sat down on the floor. He whistled and slapped his thighs in an effort to get the pink dog to come to him. The dog walked over to him and looked at him skeptically. Ton reached out and scratched its head. "Come on—come on—" He looked up at Bryaun, who was walking out of the kitchen and watching him in amusement. *What's his name?*

Bryaun, Ausha replied, bursting into laughter.

Ton's eyebrows shot up. *Bryaun?* Both Ausha and Danal nodded. Ton laughed. Bryaun the man rolled his eyes and shrugged.

Finally Bryaun the dog decided that Ton was a friend and lay down between his legs. Ton stroked and scratched him. Then in a sudden burst of energy, the dog sprang toward him, knocked him flat, and licked his face. Ton laughed in delight.

Ausha knelt down next to Ton and gave the dog a hug. *You had a trenal on Earth, didn't you Ton?*

Trenal? This creature is a dog, and yes, I had two dogs, German Shepherds, Cocoa and Dracula. All three of us used to sleep together on the balcony. He sat up and continued scratching behind the dog's ears. *My friend Adrian has two golden retrievers that he breeds, Don Quixote and Dulcinea.*

Ausha gazed at him in wonder. *You slept on the balcony?*

Ton shrugged. *When the weather was good. Mamma and whatever son of Abomination took her fancy for the month had her room, Angela and Jacquae had their room, and I was supposed to have the couch. Angela and Jacquae were always fighting though, so one of them usually claimed the couch. When it rained or was too cold, Cocoa and Dracula and I and all of our blankets just moved in to the kitchen floor.*

Bryaun shook his head in exasperation. *What a deprived childhood I had! My parents never let me sleep on the balcony or with my trenal.*

Danal looked at Bryaun conspiratorially and nodded. *It would be fun, wouldn't it.*

Look how Bryaun loves you, Ton! Ausha said. *You should get a trenal.*

Ton shook his head quickly. *I'm not here enough. It wouldn't be fair to the dog.*

You don't have to work so much, Danal observed.

What would I do if I didn't work?

Ausha slipped her arm under Ton's. *You can come with us to our Coalition seminars and socials.*

Ton chuckled and shook his head. *I like to work.*

Someday we'll convince you. Even Danal comes to the seminars with us now. She patted Ton's arm. We displaced persons have to stick together. And besides, if they'll let Bryaun and Bryaun into Coalition functions, they ought to let you in. Danal and Ton laughed.

Bryaun looked at Ausha as if he were offended. *Well at least I know I'm at a Coalition function. That's more than that eccentric you're seeing can ever admit.*

Ausha moaned. *Stop making fun of Andrel.* She released Ton's arm and leaned back on her elbows.

I'm not making fun of him. I'm simply making an honest observation. The man lives in some uncharted galaxy in some unknown universe. I'm surprised he ever joins the living long enough to remember his name!

All right! Ausha admitted. *So he's a dramatist and a librarian and is therefore doubly strange!*

Strange? Bryaun communicated. *He's unconscious! A walking vegetable. No, a walking piece of fruit!*

Ton and Danal were laughing so hard they were nearly in hysterics. They both knew how accurate Bryaun's comments were, and it was no secret that Andrel disliked Bryaun and thought he was the strangest, most ill-mannered person he had ever met.

He's very creative and sweet, and unlike most of the other men I've known, he wasn't discussing marriage on the second engagement!

He probably has ten wives waiting for him in that other galaxy, Ton observed. He laughed again.

Danal patted Ausha's shoulder sympathetically, still laughing, *Just be sure and tell him before he travels to Dinevlea for the wedding to sit in the transport, not on top of it!*

Bryaun sat down on the floor near Ton and stroked his dog. *I can just see him with your family, Ausha. You, your father, your mother, and your Uncle Semrel are discussing new applications for the Awareness monitor, and Andrel communicates, "Awareness monitor? Isn't that what you use to record all the story ideas that come to you in your sleep?" Your mother would then look at you queerly and communicate, "Darling, is something wrong with me, or does this nice young man have less intelligence than one of my bacteria specimens?"*

Ton curled over his knees, breathless with laughter. Ausha was from a family of physicians, medical specialists, and biological scientists. Not only was her father a neurophysician, her older brother was a neurophysician who, like she, had studied under Dr. Hovaus; her younger brother was a medic in Novaunian Fleet; and her mother was a microbiologist. Ton knew that there were even more medical professionals among Dr. Ferudant's children by his first wife.

Ausha wasn't amused. *I like Andrel. That doesn't mean I see only him, and it certainly doesn't mean I'm going to marry him!*

Then why do you see him at all? Danal asked.

Because he likes to dance. Do you know how many men really like to dance? Hardly any. The only reason they do it is because it's the only legitimate method they have for examining the goods. Then if they like what you have, they might ask for an engagement.

Danal was aghast. *Give us some credit, please! What you're suggesting is not only unfair, Ausha, it's downright vulgar!*

Even Bryaun was surprised and a little offended. *Since when did you become so cynical?*

How can a woman not be cynical after five years of over-zealous men and worthless engagements?

Ton wondered why such a sensible woman would waste so much patience on fools. *If you're sick of worthless engagements, stop seeing that idiot Andrel!*

Danal nodded emphatically in agreement.

Bryaun continued to Ausha, somewhat defensively, *Maybe we don't like to dance as much as we simply like being with women, but that doesn't mean we're just out to "examine the goods"!*

Ausha pulled Ton up and demonstrated on him, putting one hand on his shoulder and one hand in his, as if they were going to dance. She pressed close and Ton nonchalantly complied. *See? This is the way they all want to dance. Now that's all right if you really like someone, but these are men you don't even know! You tell me you're not examining the goods when you dance like that with a woman you've only just met!*

Ausha continued her demonstration by pulling away from Ton just enough so that they were almost touching, but not quite. *That's why I dance like this. You give them just enough to get them excited, but not enough to examine the goods.* She released Ton, and he laughed heartily.

Bryaun and Danal wore strange expressions. *Remind me to put a warning about this monster on InterMind to all those innocent, vulnerable men out there,* Bryaun communicated to Danal with teasing sarcasm, standing up.

Danal nodded. *I tell you, letting a woman live beyond the age of twenty without being married is downright dangerous!*

Oh come on, you two! Ton communicated suddenly, still laughing. *She's right and you know it. Why don't you just admit it? Dancing isn't my idea of ultimate fun either, but it is a supreme tool in the art of seduction. If you two were smart, you would admit it and work to perfect it.*

Danal stared at Ton in curiosity mixed with shock, as if he couldn't decide whether he should be offended; Bryaun laughed; and Ausha gazed at Ton in delight.

Ausha grabbed Ton's arm. *I've got to see your perfect seduction dance, Ton. Seduce me, please! I've never been seduced before!*

Ton shook her hand off his arm and stepped away from her. *I can't seduce you!*

Why not?

Because you're not blonde, you're not erotic, and you wear too many clothes!

Ausha gazed at Ton knowingly. *I'm just not Miaundea Quautar.*

Ton raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Ausha smiled. *Of course we all know you're interested in Miaundea. She's at the Pavilion nearly every evening. We're not blind and we're certainly not stupid!*

Miaundea wears too many clothes too.

Bryaun shook his head, perplexed. *No one can deny that Miaundea Quautar is attractive, but erotic?*

The girl is so hot she glows! With just the right spark, she'll explode—all over me.

Danal looked at Ton in amusement. *You looking to get married, Ton?*

Never in eternity!

Danal shook his head. *I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Miaundea is going to explode in the arms of the man she marries, and you'll probably get to see the love-play!*

Bryaun grunted. *Marriage or no marriage, you pursue that woman to your peril. Mention a monster! She's an utter snob. No man can get close to her. When she communicates with you, she acts like she's doing you a favor.*

Ausha looked up at Bryaun in surprise. *I don't know her too well, and I don't think she likes me, but who knows? She may just be shy.*

Ton nodded confidently. *Oh she's a snob all right, and she's shy. But she's an extremely exciting shy little snob.*

Ausha suddenly sprang behind Ton, grabbing his neck and shoulder with one arm and jabbing a finger into his back. Ton gasped. *This is Dr. Lataushla Ferudant, mad surgeon. Seduce me Dr. Luciani, or I'll cut a hole in your spine.*

Ton stood there for a moment, then spun around and clutched Ausha close. She gazed at him in ecstasy. *A beat, men, I need a beat,* Ton ordered to Bryaun and Danal.

Bryaun and Danal began tapping the wall in a steady beat.

Ton shook his head and moaned, *No, not like that! Put some heat into it!* They looked at him bewildered. Ton gave up and telepathically projected a wild and brassy song made popular by Tryamaz jazz. He whirled Ausha around the sparsely furnished living and dining rooms, holding her close, spinning her and several times dipping her slightly. The dog Bryaun trotted along beside them, barking, and Danal and Bryaun rocked their bodies and tapped the wall in time with the music.

After two minutes, Ton stopped, released Ausha, and shook his head in hopelessness. He couldn't seduce a woman who didn't arouse him, even to pretend. *I'm sorry Ausha, but you're about as exciting as a crushed frontal lobe.*

Oh, I don't know . . . I don't think a crushed frontal lobe would be so unexciting.

Ton pointed vigorously to one side of his forehead with all four of his fingers. *No, Ausha, my crushed frontal lobe. Come on, stay with me here.*

Let's try again, Ton, please, Ausha begged. *Just pretend you're seducing Miaundea.*

But you aren't Miaundea!

Close your eyes. Pretend!

It won't work. The eyes are part of it. How can you gaze with lust into a woman's eyes if your eyes are closed?

Just do it with the body then. Come on, Ton.

Oh, all right. Ton went to his chair, picked up his bottle of champagne, and drank several swallows straight from the bottle.

Bryaun laughed. *Look at this! Ausha's so boring that Ton has to get himself intoxicated just to dance with her!*

I'm not intoxicated! Ton protested. *Just relaxed.* He set the bottle on the counter and approached Ausha again. The jewel he had given her a month and a half before for her birthday suddenly burst into flame below her neck in what seemed to be its permanent place. Vexation seized Ton. He had wanted Ausha to like the necklace, but he had never dreamed she would like it so well. She wore it all the time, much to his embarrassment. He waved his hand at her neck. *Why do you wear that ugly thing all the time?*

Ausha lowered her eyes to look at her neck, then lifted her eyes again to look at him, her eyebrows coming together in a frown. *It isn't ugly. I wear it all the time because it's the most beautiful piece of jewelry I've ever seen.*

Ton shook his head in hopelessness, then giddily took Ausha in his arms again, breathing deeply in an attempt to get himself in a seductive mood. He again emitted the Tryamaz jazz song and smoothly led Ausha across the floor a second time, caressing her

back and swaying her sensually with the beat. He spun her around and dipped her almost to the floor, his lips almost touching hers, then brought her up gently and pressed her close, spinning her around quickly, then reversing into an extremely slow spin.

Ausha danced with Ton with breathless energy and excitement. When the dance was over, she hugged him. Danal and Bryaun pounded the wall and cheered. Ton felt extremely uneasy. Even half-drunk, the dance with Ausha had been painful and perplexing. Ausha was an attractive woman, and Ton had never been so repelled by an attractive woman. He had certainly felt indifferent at times, but never repelled. What was the matter with him?

You're wonderful! Ausha communicated vigorously, perceiving Ton's emotions in the exchange as the already acknowledged lack of interest in her as a woman and reluctance to dance. *Thanks for being such a good sport.* She reached into a pocket in her dress, brought out a tiny telepathic transmission-recording disc, and placed it in Ton's hand. She hugged him again and kissed his cheek. *Happy birthday, Ton.*

He studied the disc as she explained its contents. *This is a fifty-hour telepathy vision recording of Novaunian medical history. I didn't want to get you something you would get bored with too quickly.*

Ton gazed down at Ausha in gratitude, the uneasiness dissipating as they communicated in the familiar way. He knew very little about Novaun's medical history and was interested to learn more, and she knew it. *This is great! Thank you, Ausha.*

Danal pulled a wrapped present out of the mesh shopping bag Ausha had set on the floor next to the door and handed it to Ton. *Happy birthday, Ton.*

Ton accepted the present from Danal and looked from Danal to Bryaun to Ausha, shaking his head. *You three really shouldn't have done this.*

We wanted to, Ausha gently assured.

Ton opened the present from Danal and found an odd-looking contraption made of metal and rubber. Ton already knew that it was a stethoscope, a tool primitive doctors used to listen to the sounds of the body. Danal had brought several of his medical antiques to the clinic to show everyone, and the stethoscope was an imitation of the original he had encased in glass. Danal had given one to Ausha too.

Thank you, Danal! Ton put the stethoscope to his ears and held the bell to Bryaun's chest for at least a minute. Finally he nodded. *Can you believe it? Bryaun does have a heart.* Ausha and Danal laughed.

Bryaun looked at Ton gravely. *I may have a heart, but I'm afraid I've lost my brain.* He reached into the shopping bag and tossed a moderately sized, cube-shaped wrapped box to Ton. Ausha threw her hands over her mouth and choked back her laughter.

Ton looked at them all suspiciously. Danal appeared as curious as he was, Bryaun wore an ironic smirk, and Ausha was trying her best to appear ignorant. Ton carefully opened the present. In shock, he pulled out a transparent ball with a wrinkled mass of perfectly preserved dead tissue inside, a human brain. Danal was as shocked as Ton. Ausha couldn't hold back her laughter.

Ton turned it over in his hands. *This is the most beautiful, ingenious, appalling thing I've ever seen.* He tossed it into the air and laughed.

Bryaun caught the ball in mid-air, then spiked it hard to the floor. "Save me Dr. Ferudant!" The ball bounced from the floor to the ceiling. "I crushed my frontal lobes!" Ton and Ausha and Danal shrieked with laughter.

Bryaun caught the ball again, his body convulsing. "Seizure! Seizure!" He pounded the ball with his fist. "Ohhhh, a migraine." The other three were in hysterics, and Bryaun

the dog was barking to join in the fun. Bryaun spun the ball on the tip of his finger, rocking back and forth, stumbling over his feet, and grasping at the air with his free hand. "Help me, Dr. Luciani! It's vertigo!"

Ton grabbed the ball from Bryaun and stared at it in disbelief, shaking his head and still laughing. *Only a person with a severely impaired brain would ever think of doing something this bizarre. Ausha, I think we should operate tomorrow.*

Ausha nodded. *Complete brain transplant. We'll exchange his brain for the one in the ball!*

How in the galaxy, Bryaun, did you do this? Danal asked. *It isn't real . . . is it?*

Bryaun grinned wickedly. *This morning, Ausha and I reprogrammed the synthesizing machine in the lounge at the clinic to construct these balls. All morning, whenever a person ordered food, he or she got a brain ball instead!*

Ton laughed again and went to the breakfast counter, bouncing the brain ball on his fist. He tossed the ball in the air and smacked it across the room to Bryaun the dog. Bryaun barked and chased the ball, grabbed it with his teeth, and took it back to Ton. Bryaun, Danal, and Ausha laughed with delight. Ton smacked the ball across the room again. Bryaun and Danal went after the ball and began playing keep-away with the dog, while Ausha went over to the counter and examined Ton's other gifts.

Teren and Deia walked into the apartment, the brain ball flying through the air and landing in Deia's arms, Bryaun the dog barking and close behind.

Deia dropped the ball and sprang backwards with a scream. Bryaun clutched the ball in his mouth and trotted back to Ton. Ton smacked the brain ball again, and Danal and Bryaun whooped and hollered and leaped in the air toward the ball, nearly crashing into each other. They both missed the catch, and the brain ball ricocheted off the wall and flew back toward Ton. Ton whooped and smashed it again with his fist, then leaped off the counter and went after it himself, nearly knocking Ausha down. Ausha backed against the wall, laughing, then poised herself to catch the next throw.

Teren watched the party in his apartment, stupefied. *What is that hideous thing?*

Danal tossed it to Teren. *It's Bryaun's brain, what did you think? Ton and Ausha removed it this morning.*

Teren's face became a sickly white. Deia stared at the brain ball in awe. *That's one of the cleverest things I've ever seen! Where did it come from?*

Teren dropped the ball and put his arm around Deia, steering her back out the door.

Hey! Bryaun communicated flippantly as they left. Aren't you going to stay for some crushed kidney cake and blood punch?

Chapter 18: A DISHONORABLE WAR

Miaundea burst into her parents' home two days after Ton's birthday as her mother, father, and younger brothers and sisters were sitting down to eat dinner.

You all have to come outside! Now!

Her mother frowned. *Why?*

Ton and I made a wager on which would happen first, the spirit dimension formula would be approved for development or Earth would commit a belligerent act against the Alliance. The spirit dimension formula was just approved for development today, so Ton has to make the trip around the neighborhood, communicating, "Miaundea is my intellectual superior." Everyone is here, and Ton is already about to die of humiliation!

He won't do it, her father communicated.

Care to make a wager on that?

Her mother, Jaun, and Sharauna laughed. Her father looked at her suspiciously. Her mother teased him: *Go on, Sharad, then you can make the dreaded trip around the neighborhood too!*

Jaun's youthful face lit up with delight. *Do it, Father!*

Miaundea communicated knowingly to her father, *He will do it. He has to. If there is any part of him that is as strong as his arrogance, it's his obsession with contests. He's going to be one unhappy person if his prime competitor refuses to play his games because he refused to pay on his loss.*

The corner of her father's mouth lifted into a smile of expectancy. He stood up and moved away from the table. *This, I have to see.*

Miaundea stepped outdoors with her family, thrilled to see that several more people had gathered around Ton, waiting to bask in his degradation. Everyone who had been at the beach party was there. Maurek Avenaunta was standing as close to Ton as he could manage, wearing an expression of intense curiosity.

Ton was talking with Teren and Deia, successfully ignoring everyone who had gathered around him.

Miaundea approached the group, communicating sadistically, *It's time.* Everyone looked immediately at Ton. Ton stared at Miaundea as if he wished to kill her. Miaundea said and, at the same time, communicated telepathically, "Go on, Ton, everyone's waiting."

Ton still glared at her. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He shook his head and looked at the ground. "I can't do it."

"And I thought I had found an audaciously brilliant opponent, one who revels in the thrill of competition when the stakes are high. I guess I was wrong. Even Kevan is a more stimulating competitor than you. He pays on his losses." Kevan laughed ecstatically.

Ton's eyes rose again to meet hers. He smirked, also transmitting his thoughts as he spoke in English: "I'm sure everyone here would first like to know what the stakes were for you."

Miaundea was suddenly ashamed. This was a tactic she had not anticipated. She stood there with as much composure as she could muster.

Every face was alive with curiosity, more eager to know what Miaundea's stakes had been than to witness Ton's humiliation. Ton nodded. "Yeah, I think the interest is definitely here." He looked at her expectantly.

The nerve! “Oh, no! Never! You’re not going to get me to say it that easily. You snake! You’re the one who lost the wager!”

“And I thought I had found an audaciously brilliant opponent, one who revels in the thrill of competition when the stakes are high.”

Teren and Kevan both eagerly demanded at once, “What were her stakes?”

Ton was as gleeful as could be. “Oh, it was nothing, not really.” He wore a smile of victory. “She simply agreed to make a statement that expresses her wild, torrid adoration of me— ‘Ton is the object of my lust.’” Miaundea’s humiliation was complete.

Almost everyone laughed, but no one laughed nearly as hard as Teren and Kevan. They were nearly on the ground in convulsive laughter. Miaundea’s father moaned and put his hands to his temples.

But that isn’t fair! Haunal Sekura protested. *I want to be the object of her lust!* Everyone laughed even more hysterically.

Miaundea waited patiently for the laughter to die. *If I’m not mistaken, Dr. Luciani, we still have a wager to settle.*

Everyone looked at Ton expectantly. Ton shuddered with reluctance. At least a minute passed before he said in a croak, “Miaundea—Miaundea is . . . Miaundea is my . . .” His whisper was one of anguish, “intellectual superior.”

Miaundea cupped her hand behind her ear and leaned toward Ton. “I can’t he-e-e-ar you . . .”

“Miaundea is my intellectual superior!”

Everyone laughed, whistled, and cheered. Miaundea looked over at her father and saw him chuckling, his expression one of satisfaction. She had no doubt that he knew Ton had double-crossed Sanel King and why. She jarred him with a thought: *And you didn’t think he would do it.*

Her father raised his eyebrows. “*Ton is the object of my lust?*” *It’s a good thing you won. I would have disowned you if you had lost.*

* * *

The next day InterMind reported that Earthon forces had invaded the arelada-rich Senlana Republic from the Vaenan border, a clear act of war. Attacking the Senlana Republic from the Vaenan border instead of its own would have been disastrous for Senlana and the combined Alliance forces had they been stationed primarily on the Earth border, as Earth had apparently assumed. The Alliance had anticipated that the Earthons would attempt this tactic, however, particularly since Vaena had always been one of Earth’s strongest allies, and had repelled the attack with ferocity and ease. The Alliance lost tens of thousands of men and women in the bloody week-long battle. Earth lost nearly a million in what would be known in history as one of the greatest military failures of all time.

Earth withdrew into its own territory and that of Vaena. No one believed it would dare another attack for some time, but Alliance forces remained prepared, continuing to supply strength to the Senlana and Gudynean borders. Planetary governments immediately began seizure of all Earthon businesses on their respective planets and officially discontinued all trade to Earth and Vaena until both planets agreed to an unconditional new treaty. Earth, in its immense pride, refused to agree to a new treaty, which would have demanded that Sanel

King be handed over to the Novaunians. Relations between the Alliance and Earth remained severely strained.

* * *

Several days before the wedding, Deia met Teren at the door of their little home at noon with an apprehensive embrace. He frowned at her as he walked into the living room, followed by Ton. *What's the matter?*

Deia looked at him cautiously. *Another gift arrived today.*

Deia's air of guardedness made Teren uneasy. *So?*

Deia took his hand and led him to the piano, where Alysia and Miaundea were organizing gifts.

Teren's concern about the gift grew. *It couldn't be another one from the Sovereign . . . could it?* He had already received the greatest shock imaginable three days before when an engraved silver platter, sent from Erdean, had arrived from Jacquae, Kristina, and Tevaronia. Even though the gift had been sent from Erdean long before the Senlana invasion, it had been a great shock.

Deia nodded slowly. Miaundea and Alysia both stopped what they were doing and quickly came to Deia's side. Miaundea was carrying a box wrapped in shiny gold paper. Alysia grabbed it from her and shoved it at Deia. *Open it! Please!*

Miaundea removed the little card from the outside of the package and handed it to Deia.

Ton was as perplexed as Teren was troubled. *Another one from the Sovereign? But who could've sent it?*

Deia looked steadily at Teren. *It's from Greg.*

Even Ton was astounded. *Saint Cadet Vahro-Pierce?*

Deia nodded. *He's the one who had it insured. His name is on the print-out. That's how I know it came from him.*

Teren stared at the envelope in Deia's hand. *You mean you haven't even looked at the card yet?*

Deia tore open the envelope. *I wanted to wait for you.*

Teren, Ton, Alysia, and Miaundea stared at Deia's hands as she removed the card from the envelope. They stared at her face as she began to communicate, translating Pierce's words into images they could all understand:

Dear Deia,

It is with sincerest feeling that I send my congratulations on your upcoming marriage. I appreciate your thinking highly enough of me to write me an explanation at what must have been a stressful time. I received the news, the interviews, etc., on Erdean.

Frankly, I am still in a state of shock and outrage at your uncle's betrayal of his family and Novaun and his cruelty to you, Paul, and your mother, as is everyone else, even those who didn't know you personally.

Earth does not need a son of Abomination traitor like King as an ally—our honor is in jeopardy now. I am ashamed that our government ignores the problem like a group of spineless Eslavu and nearly drives us into a dishonorable war, but perhaps

there is too much fear among the majority of Elders. Saint Kravim, undoubtedly, is behind all of this, and he is the most powerful, commanding the entire force of Ex-men. Only God knows how my uncle (the Divine Emperor) feels. Even now, I don't dare post this letter to you openly from the Sovereign.

Please accept my congratulations. I hope you are happy. Please know also how grateful I am to you for keeping our relationship from public domain.

*Sincerely,
Greg*

Deia handed Teren the card, her eyes shining with tears. She fumbled with the gold wrapping paper, eventually pulled it off the box, and let it fall to the floor.

Teren read the letter to himself, then slapped it down on the piano. *I wish he weren't so decent. Then I wouldn't feel so guilty for not liking him.*

Ton smirked. *He doesn't like you any more than you like him. His closest mention of you in that letter he addressed to Deia is, "Congratulations on your upcoming marriage." I still feel guilty.*

You can bet that gift won't be an expensive set of satin sheets.

Within seconds, Deia was holding an exquisite gold-plated vase, inlaid with tiny pearls and rubies and delicately engraved in the modern Earthon style. Everyone's gasps seemed as one.

Deia stared at the vase in awe. *It's beautiful. I wish now that I could get some red roses.*

Teren was not at all pleased. *He shouldn't have sent it.*

Why not? Deia communicated gently. *It's his way of saying he has no bitter feelings.*

Alysia gingerly took the vase from Deia and studied it with an artist's eyes.

Miaundea pushed her hair over her ear. *Saint Pierce's attitude about honor is different from his government's. Earth refuses to relinquish King to us precisely because it doesn't want to admit to having corruption within its ranks. Apparently public opinion at home means more to the Divine Emperor than public opinion abroad.*

Ton leaned on the piano. *Although I'm not sure public opinion at home really matters. Most of the public will never know what happened or care. And who is to define corruption? Perhaps Pierce is right. Perhaps there is fear among the Elders. I'm more inclined to think, however, that most of them would have King do what he did again, although I doubt any of them respect him much. The government won't admit it was wrong about King or the Senlana invasion, precisely because it doesn't think it was. I think pride has more to do with what's coming out of Tryamaz now than honor.*

Teren slipped his arm around Deia's waist. *Well, at least what's coming out of Tryamaz now isn't war anymore. I never thought I'd ever feel this way, but I think Pierce is very naïve.*

Deia looked up at Teren. *It's probably the first time he's ever openly questioned the government.*

He won't question for long, Ton communicated. *To get where he wants to go, he'll have to play all of its games, even the ones he doesn't like.*

Deia straightened Teren's collar. *Perhaps he won't play the games.*

He will, Ton assured.

Alysia handed Deia the vase, and Deia set it reverently on the piano. She touched Pierce's card. *Paul will be glad to see this. Perhaps it will put him in a good mood.*

Teren slipped an arm under Deia's and motioned toward the sliding glass door. *Let's step outside for a few minutes.*

Deia nodded as they moved toward the door.

Have you communicated with Paul today? Teren communicated as he closed the sliding glass door behind them.

Deia shook her head. *He won't accept any communication at all from me. Actually, I can't blame him.* She tightened her fists. *How dare he! How dare he upset me like this four days before my wedding!*

Teren walked Deia forward a few steps, and they sat down together under the citrus tree. He squeezed her and kissed her hair. *When we get to Launarda tomorrow, the first thing we'll do is give your Aunt Tashaura and Evelayna a personal invitation. Then that will be the end of that.*

Then Paul may not come.

He'll be there, Teren assured.

Deia put her fingers to her temples and closed her eyes. *Why does he have to be so stubborn? Why won't he just go and meet them?*

Because he's Paul and he's stubborn.

I guess I'm just as afraid of how Tashaura and Evelayna will feel if they do come. Paul will be angry and embarrassed, and Tashaura and Evelayna will be hurt and embarrassed, and I'll be more embarrassed than all of them!

I think you're worrying too much about something that isn't your problem. Invite Tashaura and Evelayna. Don't get angry or embarrassed or even worried. Just leave it alone and let them work it out.

Deia sighed. *Perhaps you're right.*

* * *

Ton ate lunch with Teren, Deia, Miaundea, and Alysia, then headed back to his office at the clinic. He sat down at the telepathic transmission recorder at exactly twelve fifty-five. Ausha rushed breathlessly into the office at exactly thirteen-two.

Ton watched her in amusement as she threw herself into her lab coat and dropped herself into her chair. *Don't look at me like that!* she communicated with cheerful vigor. *So I'm a few minutes late. So what?*

So you're the most undisciplined, inconsiderate person in the universe. So what?

One of these days, I'm going to surprise you and be here before you are!

One of these days, I'm going to surprise you and tell Dr. Hovaus you're always late!

Dr. Hovaus already knows I'm always late!

They finished their ritual, then quickly began going over their cases for the afternoon. Several minutes after they had started their review, Bryaun stepped quietly into the room. Ton and Ausha finished the case they were reviewing, then turned off the transmission recorder and simultaneously asked Bryaun what he wanted. Bryaun pulled up a chair and sat down, appearing agitated.

I'm sorry to disturb you, but I felt I should tell you about Danal before you see him this evening. That traitor fiancée of his decided she would rather marry someone else. He got the commudisc this morning.

Ausha sighed in regret and heartfelt sympathy. *Oh no . . . poor Danal . . . That daughter of Abomination! We all knew she was going to do it to him.*

Bryaun nodded in wry agreement. *She didn't want to leave her family, she told him. She didn't want to live on Novaun, she told him. That coward just waited until he was gone so that she wouldn't have to face him. Danal's better off without her!*

Ausha's eyes glinted at Ton and Bryaun in warning. *That may be true, but it isn't what Danal needs or wants to have communicated to him right now.*

Bryaun nodded weakly. *I know. Maybe the two of you can come up with something to cheer him up. He's really miserable.*

Bryaun stood up and headed to the door. Dr. Hovaus walked into the office, wearing the most grief-stricken expression Ton had ever seen. Bryaun was ready to leave, but Dr. Hovaus motioned him back into the office.

All three of the younger doctors were immediately alarmed. They watched Dr. Hovaus in dread as he seated himself in the chair that Bryaun had just abandoned and tenderly took Ausha's hands in his. *I just received communication from your father, Ausha.*

Ausha's jaw trembled. *Oh no . . . what has happened?*

It's Jaunel. His ship was disabled in the invasion. A few of his comrades survived. He did not.

Ausha stared at Dr. Hovaus. A moment passed, and she shook her head, her eyes glazing and the muscles in her face quivering. *He can't be dead. I just received a commudisc from him, not three days ago!*

Bryaun assimilated the information about his friend, paralyzed with shock. "No . . ."

Ton couldn't bear it. Memories flooded his consciousness—the moans of warriors in agony; the burnt, broken, still bodies of the dead; the sounds of shouting and immobilizer blasts; the smell of blood and burning equipment. He thought of Ausha's medic brother, imagining how he might have died. He might have been struck by falling bulkheads, suffocated in a fire, shot by a Star Force warrior feigning death.

Ton wanted to tell Ausha that she was right, that Jaunel was still alive, but he knew it would be a lie. He gritted his teeth and swallowed hard to force the fluids that had risen into his throat back into his stomach, leaving a piercing pain in his chest. He wondered if the *Sovereign of the Stars* had been the ship that had made Jaunel's battleship its prey.

Dr. Hovaus squeezed Ausha's hands. *Both you and Bryaun will take the fifteen twenty-five flight from Shalaun to Marquauna this afternoon. Bryaun's father will be there to meet you when you arrive.* He grasped her arm and pulled her out of the chair, and she and Bryaun followed him, dazed, out of the office.

Despair engulfed Ton. Why did it have to be Ausha's brother? Why did she and Bryaun have to be the ones to pay for this disgraceful war? He felt as if he would suffocate with guilt, as if being an Earthon and a former member of Star Force made him responsible for Jaunel's death. He knew intellectually that it wasn't his fault, but in his heart, he knew what could have been and had never felt such shame. Why did it have to be Ausha?

Ton turned on the transmission recorder and delved into his work, struggling to drive all thoughts of burning ships, blood-covered warriors, and Sergeant Jaunel Ferudant out of his mind, but nothing he did could change the fact that his partner was gone. As hard as he tried, he couldn't fill the emptiness that was now there in her place.

Chapter 19: CONFESSION

Eauva Doshyr Vundaun stepped apprehensively through the front entrance to the mansion on the Doshyr estate. She kicked the snow from her boots, then slipped out of her coat and handed it quickly to the attending robot.

As she walked through the foyer, she saw three unfamiliar men in Manourean attire, sitting and conversing in their native language. Panic clutched her throat. She put her hand to her mouth as casually as she could to keep herself from screaming. She hurried up the stairs to her father's office, the hem of her wool dress rhythmically tapping her boots.

When she arrived at her father's office, she noticed two more Manourean men standing in the corridor in front of the conference room. She could no longer control her trembling.

She entered the office to find both of her parents. They stared at her as she entered, their faces grave and full of compassion.

"What has happened?" she whispered.

Yaulanda quickly rose from her chair and led Eauva to the small leather couch. *Your father will tell you.* Her hold on Eauva's hand tightened. *Oh darling, I'm so sorry.*

Eauva looked immediately to her father. *Eauva, you know that for some time now, Internal has been conducting an investigation to discover the identity of the person who assisted Jovem seventeen years ago.*

The room seemed to tilt. Eauva immediately clutched the couch to keep from fainting and sat down. She nodded weakly.

We believe that person is Brys.

Eauva knew that she should feel relieved but didn't. *How? He was . . . only a boy.*

He was seventeen years old, a young man. Eauva, during the past fourteen years that Brys has been on the sales team, he has been recording sales of arelada he never made. We are nearly positive the arelada in question has been going to the Earthons.

Patan paused, his entire countenance seeming to sink even deeper into grief. *If only that were all.*

Dread seized Eauva. *There's more?*

Eauva, Brys wouldn't have helped Jovem if he hadn't been promised compensation. He has been living an extraordinary double life. He has luxurious homes, money, and mistresses all over the galaxy.

No . . . it can't be true. I would know if it were true.

Jovem has the ability to lie about his essence, her father communicated gently. *Brys very likely has that same ability.*

No one in the room could communicate for several minutes. They couldn't even bring themselves to look at each other. Finally Eauva asked, unable to keep herself from trembling, *Why are the Manoureans here?*

They have evidence that Brys is a black marketeer on their planet, involved in everything from selling nuayem, to prostitution, to smuggling arelada to the Dirons. They've also traced several recent killings to him. They want to take him back to Manoure with them tonight, and the High Judge has agreed. Novaunian and Manourean authorities have been conducting a dual investigation for the past nine weeks, and the evidence is overwhelming.

Eauva leaned her head into her hands. Her mother's arm went around her in an attempt to comfort. Many minutes later, Eauva wiped her tears away, even as they were still spilling out. *Where is he now?*

Next door. He refuses to communicate except to tell me that he won't see anyone. Oddly, though, he begs to see you, and in private. Eauva flew off the couch and was in the conference room in an instant.

When Brys saw Eauva step into the room, he sprang out of his chair and met her in a vigorous embrace. After a minute of clutching and kissing, they withdrew slightly and gazed at each other in desolation. Brys tenderly stroked her hair. *It isn't true, any of it, you know that. I have never been involved in any kind of black market or any killings, and I have never, ever been unfaithful to you.*

You have to tell them that. You have to tell them he framed you. If you don't, you'll be executed.

How can I tell them anything without telling them everything? You would be implicated too, and for no reason. Even if we told the universe what really happened, I would still be convicted of the crimes. Don't you understand? I've done business in Runryden often. I've been in many of the places they say I've been in. Jovem has bought some overpowering evidence. I told you he would bring us down with him.

I hate him. Oh, I just hate him!

I communicate nothing, and I act as if I don't care. That's the only way. Brys's pine green eyes shone in desperation. *You mustn't tell, Eauva! Think of the children. Think of what your parents will do if they ever find out why we did it.*

They will hate me. I would rather die than live in such shame. But you will die for sure if we don't tell, and without our testimonies, he may never be convicted.

I will die anyway! And stop worrying about whether Jenan's twins will convict Jovem. Your father thinks they will, and even if they don't, what have you lost? He was never supposed to be discovered alive in the first place! Think of the children!

Eauva nodded quickly. *You're right . . . you're right . . .*

Brys tightened his hold on his wife. He kissed her sadly. *I love you, Eauva.*

Eauva's body shook. *I love you too.*

They clung to each other, communicating only in feelings. After several minutes, he reluctantly released her. *You had better leave.* Eauva nodded slowly, kissed his hand, then turned and walked despondently toward the door. His emptiness seized her. *I'll miss you.*

* * *

Patan and Yaulanda watched Eauva re-enter the office in heartbroken curiosity. Eauva's face was quivering and her blue-gray eyes were glazed. *I need to be alone*, was all she could communicate. Patan and Yaulanda nodded as she dragged herself out of the office.

Patan communicated wearily to Yaulanda, *What are we going to do? The wedding is only four days away.*

Yaulanda shook her head, perplexed. *It wouldn't be fair to the children to postpone it—they've waited so long. But no one is going to feel very festive now. Perhaps we can put off telling anyone for another week.*

I don't know if that's possible. The Manoureans are here. People will ask questions. And we must tell Mays and Maranda. They may want to go with him.

Yes, we must tell Mays and Maranda. Yaulanda slowly stood up and went to Patan. She sat down on his lap and cuddled his head consolingly against her neck. He held her tightly, engulfed with grief by the tragedy that had befallen his family and feeling as though it were his fault.

* * *

Eauva spent the rest of the day in torment. The thought of losing Brys brought excruciating grief. The thought of his being convicted as a black marketeer and a murderer and unjustly exposed as the vilest of traitors was humiliating and degrading. She had never so hated Jovem nor more hated herself. She sat on her bed in her bedroom, her door locked, completely oblivious to the requests from her children.

Finally, after many hours of painful contemplation, Eauva walked desolately, although resolutely, out of her house and took a taxi to her parents' home.

Her parents welcomed her compassionately, their faces still stricken with grief. Eauva had never felt so ashamed. The thought had never occurred to either one of them that she was a traitor too. She would have turned and left if she hadn't felt such urgency about Brys's situation.

Is there anyone else here? Eauva asked as soon as she walked in the door.

Yaulanda frowned and shook her head. *But Paul will be back any time.*

Then we must go to your office, Father. I need to tell you something, but it has to be private. She strode out of the living room, past the stairs, and into her father's home office.

Her parents followed her. Before they could sit down, Eauva bombarded them with what she knew: *You can't let them take Brys! He isn't a black marketeer and he didn't kill anyone! He is a traitor, but it isn't what everyone thinks. Jovem has been blackmailing him all of these years to make the false sales. Jovem never intended to be discovered alive, but that Earthon doctor double-crossed him. Now that Jovem is at Novaun's mercy, he framed Brys for these other crimes because he wants everyone else who was ever involved with him to be ruined too.*

Yaulanda shook her head quickly. *What you imply is preposterous.*

Patan didn't seem so sure. *How long have you known that Brys is a traitor?*

"For seventeen years," she whispered. *But it wasn't just he. Jovem was blackmailing both of us.*

Yaulanda choked back a scream, her face suddenly hideous with anger. She lunged out of her chair and grabbed Eauva's shoulders, shaking her violently. *You knew! You knew he was alive before he murdered Jenan! You knew about Lana and those poor children on Earth. You knew! You knew! You knew!*

I didn't know about Lana until . . . Eauva bowed her head, wishing she were dead instead of Lana.

Yaulanda released Eauva's shoulders and turned away from her in disgust.

Eauva felt for a chair and clumsily backed herself into it.

Yes, I knew. I learned about Lana in time to have saved her life if not her . . . Eauva couldn't bring herself to communicate more. She didn't think she would ever forgive herself for the part she had played in Lana's degradation and death.

Patan was completely unnerved. *When did you learn about Lana?*

Four months before her twins arrived.

Yaulanda dropped herself into a chair. *Why, Eauva?*

Eauva could not bear to look at her mother's face, with its revulsion, and her father's face, with its grief and lack of trust and respect. *Jovem loved Lana in his twisted way. He assured Brys that she was in no danger and that she would not want to return to Novaun.*

Her mother's thoughts charged into hers with contempt. And you believed it.

How could I have known that Lana had managed to keep a part of her mind private? That she, too, knew how to lie about her essence?

How was Jovem blackmailing you? her father asked.

Maybe you don't remember, but when I was fifteen or so, all in life I ever wanted to do was go to Mautysia. Eauva ventured a look at her parents' faces. They remembered, but the memory didn't bring smiles, only soberness and skepticism.

Brys and I had it all planned. We weren't even sixteen yet, and we had decided we would go there for our wedding trip. Jovem knew what we wanted to do; how could he have not? By the time we were seventeen, he told us that if we could make you both and Brys's parents believe we were somewhere else for the night, he would take us to Mautysia. He said he was going for an audition that he didn't want anyone to know about, which is why he didn't want us to tell. We were certain that neither you nor Brys's parents would let us go. We wanted to go so badly that we both lied and said we were going to friends' homes for the night.

We were terribly excited but also terrified that we would be discovered missing. We had a fantastic time with Jovem—he showed us everything. We went dancing and to a play, and we ate so much food! Very, very late, we went back to Jovem's suite at the hotel—oh, it was the most beautiful, expensive hotel!—and he gave us a fizzy pink drink. He said it was a very expensive drink from Erdean. We were so deliriously happy and feeling so bold and grown-up, and of course, anything that was so exotic as to be from Erdean deserved our attention. The drink was sweet, and it tickled our noses and made us feel giddy and ecstatic. It was such a feeling! We drank glass after glass, until the whole bottle was gone. We acted silly and ridiculous the rest of the night. Neither one of us remember falling asleep, but we both remember waking up in Jovem's suite with terrible headaches and the horrible realization that for some unfathomable reason, he had given us some type of liquor.

He was just sitting there, waiting for us to wake up. I don't ever remember his looking so sinister and evil. Eauva shuddered. That was when he played the recording he had secretly made the night before of us intoxicated. He told us that he needed help to get off Novaun. He told us that before he sat in on that fake sale to the Vaenans, he would post the disc to a man on Latanza III, who would then post it to you and Brys's parents if Jovem didn't come out of the grave and get to Latanza III before a certain date. The only way for that disc to be intercepted was for us to help him.

Both Patan and Yaulanda gazed at Eauva, completely astounded. Yaulanda's face grew angry again. *Everything, all of this, was because of a ridiculous recording of you and Brys in Mautysia getting drunk on Erdean liquor?*

I know it seems ridiculous now, but at the time, the thought of treason wasn't nearly as terrifying as the thought that you would find out what we had done. Don't you understand? You trusted me, and I lied to you! I couldn't let you assimilate that recording any more than Brys could let his parents assimilate it. We had a whole year before we would come of age. We had all kinds of horrible fears about not being allowed to see each other, and Jovem lost no opportunity to feed those fears. In our minds, we had no choice but to help him.

As angry and as devastated as her parents were, they were beginning to understand and were chilled.

You have to understand! We knew nothing about what he was going to do to Mara until after it happened. We almost left him alive in his grave—we hated him so much for what he was doing to us and what he had done to Mara. We finally decided that we couldn't just leave him there, that we would just dig him out and be done with it all.

But we weren't going to be done with it all. Jovem immediately told us that Brys was to seek position on the sales team and that I was to seek position as a proxy-counselor. He reminded us of the disc and the fact that we had just committed treason and were now accessories to murder. He told us that if anyone found out—anyone—that one of us would die and that both of us would be publicly disgraced in the process. It was horrible, horrible, horrible, but by that time, it was too late for us.

And now he intends to ruin us with him, just as he threatened all those years ago. He knows that Brys can't testify against him if he is dead and his reputation is completely shattered by all of those lies, and he believes I won't testify to save myself and to keep my children. He was almost right. Brys didn't want me to reveal anything, but I can't let him die if there is any way I can prevent it!

Patan gazed at her reprovingly. And what exactly do you expect us to do?

Tell the Manoureans that Brys was framed and why.

That isn't so easy. There are documents, witnesses, overpowering evidence from all sides.

There is Brys's word, and now that I'm willing to tell my part in it all, Brys can testify for himself. The court will know he's not lying.

Manoure's methods aren't like ours. Their mind power abilities aren't nearly as sophisticated, and they don't trust our methods. Even now, our methods of exposing someone who is lying about his essence are in the embryo stage. Nothing even close has ever even been used in our courts, and our traditional methods are in question now that we know the ability to lie about essence exists.

Eauva wrung her hands in despair. How can we fight against Jovem's wealth? He's already bought the witnesses and the evidence, and he'll buy members of the court.

The Manoureans have high standards of law and justice, and next to the Gudyneans and us, they possess the system freest of corruption in the Alliance. Patan shook his head and looked at her sharply. The members of that court will be far more above reproach than you.

In her shame, Eauva could find no strength to reply.

We can always appeal the court's decision if it finds Brys guilty, but only if Brys will cooperate, Patan communicated. I also believe the High Council will assist him if he will agree to testify in Novaunian court against Jovem when he is apprehended. Even if he is convicted on Manoure, we may be able to get the sentence postponed until Jovem's trial, and then Brys will get a chance to fully explain his involvement with Jovem. By then, our method of exposing a person who is lying about his essence should be perfected. If Brys was no more involved than you believe, all of Novaun will know and something of his honor will be salvaged. Know, however, that nothing that happens in court here will have any bearing on the Manoureans' decision. If he is convicted of marketeering and murder there, we will have to send him back for his sentence.

I'll try anything.

Yaulanda hesitated. *He may have lied to you too, Eauva. Are you prepared for that possibility?*

How could her mother suggest such a thing? *After what I told you, you believe that?*

Yaulanda shook her head slowly. *I don't know what to believe.*

* * *

After discussing Brys's situation with her parents, Eauva went immediately to the mansion to tell Brys what she had done and how it would help him. Eauva's news didn't anger him, but it seemed to depress him more than ever.

You shouldn't have done it, Eauva.

Eauva felt more relaxed than she had in years. *I couldn't live with it anymore, and I couldn't let them convict you for crimes you didn't commit.*

Brys dropped his face into his hands and shook his head. *You don't know what you've done.*

Chapter 20: THE WEDDING

Teren and Deia left Shalaun in the evening and arrived in Launarda the morning of the same day. They spent the next three days making final preparations for the wedding and greeting friends and members of both families as they arrived from Tavon, Amaria, and all over Menaura. Friends and family closest to Teren and Deia were provided rooms in the mansion in Launarda, while more distant relatives were provided rooms at the Doshyr estates in Jastray.

Teren and Deia's wedding day finally arrived. Snow had fallen the day before, leaving the deep green pine limbs dusty white and the steep rooftops glittering. The sky was sunny and a crisp blue.

Deia arrived at the house of worship shortly after lunch to dress for the wedding ceremony. Both of her grandmothers, Miaundea, and Alysia went with her to assist.

Her dress was white organza, covered with lilcryen-embellished lace that added just enough color to simulate snow glistening in the sun. The bodice was corseted, trimmed at the waist with lilcryens shaped like snowflakes and at the neck with tiny lilcryens shaped like icicles. The skirt fell in full, sparkling folds to the floor. She wore her hair down in curls, with a lilcryen headpiece and waist-length lace veil. Around her neck and on her ears were lilcryens her mother had years before cut and polished into narrow, delicate little stars. The dress had been designed, sewn, and fitted in Menaura, then sent to Amaria for the embellishment.

Once Deia was dressed, she met Teren and his grandfather Raunel Zaurvau, a bright-eyed, easygoing man in his hundred and eighties, in the holy room. Her grandmothers, Miaundea, and Alysia went to the foyer and waited there with the other friends and family members who would be attending the wedding.

In the holy room, Teren's grandfather counseled with Teren and Deia for several minutes on the importance of the ceremony and what to expect. Then he went to the door and invited all of the guests to come in and sit down. Deia and Teren sat in luxurious white velvet chairs that were positioned in front of the pulpit and behind the shimmering gold ordinance mat. On the mat stood a gold vessel of nuayem oil. Teren and Deia held hands and glanced at each other in anticipation. Teren was wearing full military dress uniform.

Deia watched anxiously as friends and family members walked into the holy room and seated themselves. Kevan and Miaundea, as attendants, were the first to enter and take their chairs next to Deia and Teren. Paul walked in with his grandparents, appearing so pale and disconcerted that Deia was at once nervous and excited.

'Look at Paul's face,' she communicated to Teren. 'They must have come.'

With that, Teren watched the door more attentively. A moment later, Tashaura, her husband, and Evelayna entered with Amburna and Klarysa and their husbands. Deia gazed at them in animation. 'I'm so glad you could come!' Tashaura and Evelayna both nodded and smiled.

Once all of the guests were seated, Teren's grandfather, as the taurnen who would marry Teren and Deia, stood up and counseled them for the next ten minutes on specific ways they could make their marriage fulfilling. He then invited the married people in attendance to add whatever counsel they wished.

As tradition indicated, Patan, as the patriarch of the bride's family, arose next and counseled the couple for several minutes. Teren and Deia, together and separately, had been counseled extensively by both grandfathers and their presiding taurnel in Shalaun, but

those counseling sessions had been more to determine their worthiness for the Ordination Rite and readiness for marriage than to give specific counsel about marriage itself.

Following Patan's communications, several other family members stood and gave their brief counsel. From Deia's grandmother Naoma Vumaul: 'Pamper each other.' From Teren's sister Ranela: 'Don't ever let life get so busy that you don't take time alone together.' From Nelena Quautar: 'Don't ever argue or fight—discuss. Then respect each other's opinions, especially when you don't agree.' Several other guests added counsel of similar nature.

After all of the advice had been given, Teren's grandfather stood up again and approached the vessel of nuayem oil. Teren and Deia took their places in front of him, with their backs to the guests, and the three joined hands. Teren's grandfather overlapped spirits partially with Teren, who reached out his spirit to Kevan, who reached out his spirit to Alysia. One by one, everyone in the holy room joined the telepathic chain until it came to its completion at the link between Deia and Teren's grandfather. The prospect of becoming a part of such a chain made both Paul and Ton feel uncomfortable, so when the invitation came to them, they declined.

Teren's grandfather looked from Teren to Deia and smiled, placing his fingers on their foreheads and communicating, 'By authority of the Eternal Father, I ordain you, Teren Zaurvau, to the role of taurnel and you, Patrisa Doshyr, to the role of taurjra in the eternal family of God, our Father. In doing so, I put you, Teren, and you, Patrisa, under covenant to commit yourselves to God and each other for this life and forever. By continuing in righteousness and committing yourselves to each other, God promises to bless you abundantly in this life and accept you into His eternal family in Paradise.'

He turned first to Deia. 'Patrisa, do you accept this covenant?'

Deia gazed devotedly at Teren. 'Yes.'

Teren's grandfather then turned to Teren. *Teren, do you accept this covenant?*

Teren's gaze was filled with as much affection and devotion as Deia's. *Yes.*

Please remove your headdresses. Teren removed his military headband with its arelada mukaul bird and handed it to Kevan, and Deia carefully removed her veil and handed it to Miaundea.

Teren and Deia turned to face each other, and Teren's grandfather took the forefinger of Teren's right hand and dipped it lightly in the nuayem oil. Teren touched the forefinger of his right hand to the forefinger of his left hand, then held up his hands to Deia's, wetting her forefingers with the oil from his. They touched their wet forefingers to each other's temples, feeling the warmth of the nuayem oil glide through their bodies.

Teren's grandfather continued with the ceremony: *Now you are privileged to enter into the most holy and intimate of all human relationships, the dijauntu. Repeat after me: Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.*

Deia: *Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.*

Teren: *Our bodies, our minds, our hearts are one forever.*

The old patriarch took Teren's right hand and Deia's left and joined them. Then he used a tiny instrument to insert the arelada triangles into their temples. *These sacred triangles represent the Eternal Triangle, with God at the top point and Man and Woman at the base points. Wear them and remember the covenants you have made here today.*

Then, taking their hands and turning them toward their guests, he communicated, *I present to you Novaun's newest family, Teren and Deia Zaurvau!* He embraced Deia and kissed her cheek. *Welcome to the family, Deia.*

Thank you! She and Teren squeezed each other tightly and kissed, then received their headdresses from Kevan and Miaundea and put them back on their heads. Kevan and Miaundea hugged and kissed them and enthusiastically gave them their congratulations. Then all of the other guests came forward in little groups and did the same.

Paul embraced Deia and kissed her cheek. "You finally got it done! I'm still not sure I believe it."

Deia gazed at him tenderly. "You aren't angry?"

"No." Then Paul embraced Teren. "You may not believe it, but I'm really happy for you."

Teren patted Paul's back and released him. "I know."

Ton grinned wickedly. "May I kiss the bride?"

Teren laughed and drew Deia a little closer. Deia grinned and put her finger to her cheek. Ton stepped forward and kissed Deia's cheek, lightly embracing them both. He looked at Miaundea, who was standing a little behind Deia. "May I kiss the bride's attendant?"

Miaundea grinned deviously. "Certainly." And she held out her hand.

All who attended the wedding left the house of worship and went to the mansion's lower lounge for light refreshments and communication. Many distant relatives began arriving from Jastray for the dinner-dance and reception that would be held in Teren and Deia's honor.

Before Deia left the holy room with Teren, she asked her grandmother, a little confused and hurt, *Where were Eauva and Brys? And Minon Mays and Mineste Maranda?*

Yaulanda smiled weakly. *Mays, Maranda, and Brys had to leave Novaun on some urgent business a couple of days ago, and Eauva is feeling ill today. They all wanted me to give you their apologies.*

I was really hoping Aunt Eauva would be here. Deia shook her head, feeling a little sad. *I don't think she likes me very well.*

Whatever makes you think that?

She's just always so distant. Well, tell her I missed her and that I hope she's feeling better.

Deia and Teren spent the next thirty minutes posing for portraits outside the house of worship and nearly freezing in the process. Afterward, Deia went back to her dressing room and quickly changed out of her gown. Then she, her grandmother, and Teren took a taxi to the mansion. Once there, Deia changed back into her gown, and she and Teren posed for more portraits before going to the lower lounge to greet all of the new arrivals. These included distant relatives from the Doshyr and Vumaul families, and most were people Deia had never met.

Teren and Deia mingled among their guests for about fifteen minutes before being escorted by Deia's Uncle Cherl to the head table in the huge dining room. Blue and white flower arrangements sat on the tables, and potted, flocked evergreen trees, decorated with large Amarian sapphires, stood on the polished dark wood floor.

Deia's uncles then escorted all of the grandparents to the head table. After that, they escorted the remaining guests to their assigned places at the other tables. Everyone remained standing, waiting for the fertility toast that was customarily given by the bride's father.

Once all of the guests were standing at their assigned places, Patan faced Deia and Teren, held up his glass of pink beverage, and communicated, *May you have bountiful*

posterity. The guests held up their glasses of either pink or clear beverage and communicated to Deia and Teren in unison, *May you have bountiful posterity*. Everyone drank and sat down, and robots began serving dinner.

* * *

Ton sipped his clear beverage, frowning. *What is this?*

It's nuayem punch, Alysia replied. *It's made from the nuayem berry and is only drunk at weddings, anniversaries, and other celebrations of a marriage.*

Why is mine clear and yours pink?

Kevan smiled mischievously. *The pink is made from nuayemsia, which comes from the ground, and is only drunk by people who are married.*

Ton turned and looked suspiciously at Miaundea, who was sitting next to him. She smiled knowingly. "Nuayemsia is believed to be an aphrodisiac."

Ton looked at her, stunned, then laughed. "An aphrodisiac? On Novaun?"

* * *

After dinner and dessert, the company adjourned to the ballroom, a spacious, elegant room with arelada chandeliers and a shiny wood floor. Like the dining room, it was decorated with flocked pine trees and blue flower arrangements. At one side of the room stood a long table with spiced nuts, hot spiced fruit juice, cake, and various Menauran confections. At another wall was an even longer table for presents. Scattered all around the room were small round tables and chairs upholstered with maroon velvet.

A mind chorus of six men and women had been hired for the dance and was already there, emanating soft, leisurely music of the mind. Mind choruses usually worked through InterMind, but they were hired in person for truly gala affairs so that they could gauge the moods of the groups they were entertaining.

Teren, Deia, and all of their grandparents formed a reception line, and within thirty minutes, more guests began arriving. Most of the guests conversed, and a few began dancing. A little later, Patan urged Teren and Deia to the floor to formally begin the dance.

As Teren and Deia walked arm in arm to the middle of the dance floor, they heard the nostalgic notes of a trumpet begin playing the slow jazz number they had danced to on the *Sovereign*. Both were startled.

I didn't plan this one, Deia communicated. *Did you?*

Teren shook his head as the scene around them faded into the dimly lit pro-cadet commons on the *Sovereign*. In moments, they and everyone else in the room were wearing Star Force uniforms. The faces, however, weren't those of their guests, but were those of the cadets with whom they had associated for eight and a half weeks. Even the air was tinged purple and smelled of osalaem. Teren and Deia gaped at each other in astonishment.

A familiar thought pattern jolted their minds. *Come on, you two! Dance! This one's from Ton and me. This time you get to finish it properly!*

Teren took Deia into his arms. *Thanks, Paul!*

Where is everyone? Deia asked. *I can feel them here, but I can't see them.*

Teren gazed at her in amusement. *They're all watching, just as they did before.*

Deia snuggled closer to him and smiled. This time it didn't matter. They kissed freely at the end of the number as everyone clapped and the *Sovereign* scene faded into the airy rainbow scene of the next number.

The mind chorus generated mind song after mind song, each with a different vista of sense stimulation swirling around the couples as they moved across the dance floor. After an hour and a half, the mind chorus took a break, and Paul began playing jazz on a disc player. He danced every dance, either with Deia, Miaundea, or one of his cousins. Surprisingly, many of the guests were eager to give the Earthon music and dance styles a try, especially Paul and Deia's cousins on the Vumaul side, young people who didn't care what kind of party it was, as long as it was a party.

* * *

Ton stood near the food table during the first several songs in the jazz break. Colonel Quautar casually approached him, handed him a piece of candy, and asked, "Why aren't you dancing? There are so many attractive young women here."

Ton shrugged. "There's only one I want to dance with, and she'll refuse. 'No' seems to be her favorite word." He wasn't sure why he had said that, but he liked the colonel, and it had seemed to be the right thing to say.

Colonel Quautar smiled knowingly. "I doubt she would say no to something as innocent as a dance."

Ton gazed at him quizzically. "And why don't you ask Mineste Nelena to dance?"

"I already did."

"When? I haven't seen you dance with her once!"

"You've been watching? All evening?"

"What else is there for me to do? This Novaunian dancing is too bizarre for me!"

The colonel grinned. "Actually, my wife refused me, flat."

"Why?"

"She tells me she hates to see me in such torture. I hate to dance, and I'm very bad at it." The colonel raised an eyebrow. "And I wasn't aware that jazz was a bizarre Novaunian style of music."

Ton threw his arms into the air. "I give up! There's one who might dance with me."

Colonel Quautar slapped Ton's shoulder and gave him a little shove toward the dance floor. Ton walked across the dance floor as a fast song was ending and a moderately fast one was beginning. He approached Deia, who had just finished dancing with Paul.

Ton held out his hand to her. "Would you like to dance?"

Deia looked at him in surprise. "But you don't dance fast."

Ton gazed at her knowingly. "Oh, but I do. Occasionally."

Deia smiled broadly and took Ton's hand. Once on the dance floor, they danced easily together. As the music gained momentum, Ton pressed his hand against Deia's back and drew her close. "Shall we make your husband jealous?"

Deia giggled, then gasped as he whirled her across the floor and dipped her deeply, half spinning her at the same time. She shrieked with delight. He lifted her and spun her again. She came out of the spin breathless. "Why haven't you ever danced with me like this before!"

Ton chuckled and again drew her close. "Because I never had any intention of seducing you."

Deia rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Earth men do have to know how to dance if they expect to have any success with the ladies!"

Ton nodded complacently. He spun her and dipped her again, and while still in the dip, halfway to the floor, she looked up at him questioningly. "Tell me, Ton." And she was on her feet again. Ton led her across the floor, their arms outstretched and cheeks touching. "Have you ever failed in one of your attempts to seduce a girl?"

"No."

Deia seemed surprised by his self-satisfaction. "Never?"

Ton faced her again and shook his head. "My success is easy to explain, actually. I simply never pursue a girl who isn't interested to begin with." He whirled her around, threw her out for a spin, and let go of her hand in front of Teren, just as the song ended.

Everyone cheered. Teren and Paul whistled and clapped vigorously. "You son of Abomination!" Paul exclaimed to Ton as Ton bowed to Deia.

"He's wonderful, isn't he!" Deia said to Teren and Paul. "Who would have believed it?"

Ton barely heard Paul and Deia's comments; his attention was too consumed by Miaundea. She was the only one he really wanted to dance with. He stepped to the side and held out his hand to her, gazing at her expectantly as the next song, a slow one, was beginning. She stepped back, flustered and uncertain. He could see that under the uncertainty was desire. He lifted his hand and moved it closer to her. After another moment of hesitation, she slowly set her hand in his and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor.

Ton and Miaundea held each other breathlessly close. Miaundea stared at his shoulder, unable to look at him directly. "Are you having a good time?" he asked softly.

Miaundea nodded in reply.

Ton caressed her lower back as he moved her rhythmically to the music. "You look very beautiful tonight."

Miaundea slowly lifted her head and smiled at him in appreciation. They gazed at each other without a second's diversion throughout the remainder of the song, barely talking.

Ton and Miaundea remained absorbed in each other, dancing every dance until the jazz break ended. Then they left the party together.

* * *

The hour was late when Deia communicated to Teren, *Now will you finally tell me where we're going for our wedding trip?*

We'll leave Jastray tomorrow for a resort in Norund. We're going skiing.

But I don't know how to ski!

Neither do I. I can't think of any better way to start our marriage than learning something new together. Besides, it sounds like fun.

Deia's smile faded, and she communicated with an earnestness of emotion that emanated from her entire being, *I love you, Teren.*

Teren's fingers quivered in anticipation as he stroked her face. *I love you too, Deia.* He firmly took her arm. *Let's go.*

They quickly walked toward the door as the number ended and a new one began. Deia glanced over her shoulder before they left the ballroom. *Oh, look!*

What?

Paul is asking Evelyana to dance!

Really? Teren communicated in surprise. His face was skeptical until he saw for himself.

It's over for him. It's finally over.

Once they were in the hall outside the ballroom, Deia communicated, *I need to go shower and change.*

I'll wait for you downstairs. Teren drew her into his arms and kissed her passionately. *Just don't take too long.*

Deia withdrew reluctantly. *I won't.* And she turned and hurried away.

Chapter 21: COMPLETELY SAFE?

Miaundea worried all evening that Ton would not ask her to dance and, at the same time, feared that he would. When he finally did ask, she was thrilled and could do nothing but accept. She enjoyed every moment of their dances together, and was even successful in engaging him in conversation about something as personal as his work.

When he suggested they leave the dance for a while and go for a walk in the night snow, she accepted, nearly bursting with anticipation. She wanted to be alone with him, but not too alone, and this wedding dance was the perfect opportunity. With her father and all of her family so near, he wouldn't dare try anything, and she wouldn't dare do anything. For once, she was completely safe.

They went back to their rooms to get their winter wraps and snow boots, then left the mansion and walked arm in arm around the Doshyr estate, kicking the new snow with their boots as they walked and feeling snowflakes melt on their faces. They walked down the mountain a little way to the main part of town, where they stopped into a small restaurant for hot pastries and brewed zaulyem tea. They sat in the restaurant for an hour, talking, then finally headed back to the mansion. Ton seemed to enjoy walking in the snow, and he also seemed pleased that Miaundea was showing such a sincere interest in him and his work.

Once they returned to the mansion, they took their coats to their rooms. Since both were still too exhilarated from their walk outside to go to bed yet and didn't want to return to the dance, they decided to explore the mansion's upper floors.

They talked as they walked, ending up in an empty lounge. Miaundea moved toward the glass showcase that stood in a corner of the room. "Oh! Look at this!"

Ton frowned as he gazed into the showcase. "Three large chunks of arelada. So what?"

"Look at them more closely. Can't you see? Each piece is imprinted with the emblem of a Great House. There is Mushal of Karajaun, Shyvert of Narquasa, and Jualaz of Verzaun. These were given as goodwill pieces over a thousand years ago at the ratification of the Arelada Cooperation Treaty of 5123 between the four Houses that have always controlled arelada production."

Ton raised his eyebrows. "You mean there hasn't always been cooperation between the Great Houses of peaceful Novaun?" He gasped in mock surprise. "Was there ever—dare I ask—a war?" Even with his teasing tone, he was genuinely interested.

Miaundea laughed. "No, there have been no wars since the Narquasa-Sakaur War of the Second Millennium over the Narquasan outlet." Her tone grew serious. "The millennia of border disputes between the three Great Houses Mushal, Shyvert, and Doshyr—Jualaz, you remember, is pacifist and was even then, and although they fought with words to defend their borders, they never fought with arms—were black ones in Novaunian history. During the last dispute, between Mushal and Doshyr, eighteen people were killed. That was what prompted the peace talks."

Ton sat down on what looked like a very old couch that had been restored and gently pulled Miaundea down with him. "So now your people just war with other worlds."

"Not willingly."

Ton's face suddenly became grave. "Ausha's brother was killed in the invasion." Miaundea watched him in surprise. Ausha's brother had died? What a strange thing for

him to tell her! She had no idea how to reply. "I'm sorry," she said weakly, doing her best to extend sympathy she didn't feel.

Ton seemed to understand that she was uncomfortable with the subject and, to her relief, didn't say anything else. He just sat there with a queer, depressed look on his face that made her nervous.

Miaundea felt a mind caress hers. Miaundea touched her mind to Ton's so that he too could receive the communication she was receiving from her mother.

Miaundea, the reception is over, and your father and I were worried when we didn't find you in your room.

Ton and I went for a walk into town, and now we're sitting in one of the upper lounges, talking. Please tell Father not to worry or be angry. Everything's all right. I'm telling Ton all about the Arelada Cooperation Treaty of 5123.

Her mother was amused by her realization that it was on account of her father's worry and anger that this communication was taking place. *Please just let us know when you get in, no matter how late it is.*

Yes, certainly, Mother. Miaundea turned to look at Ton directly and rested her arm on the back of the couch. She was glad to see that the depressed look that had been on his face was now gone.

"Even when there is no chaperon, you're still being chaperoned. It seems odd to me that they still check up on you when you no longer live with them."

"Not really. They're just concerned."

"I'm surprised they let you go abroad for two years. You were under age when you left, weren't you?"

Miaundea nodded. "They were never happy about the prospect, but I really wanted to go. Besides, I was, to a certain extent, chaperoned. I did my fieldwork with a middle-aged married couple."

Ton relaxed more comfortably into the couch, leaning his arm on the couch's back and his head against his palm. "Why did you decide to become an anthropologist?" He seemed sincerely interested.

Miaundea shrugged. "I've always been fascinated with different cultures, I suppose partly because of my father's work. Even when I was very tiny, I understood that he was working on other planets, and I always wondered where they were and what they looked like. His more permanent assignment at the Agency came about ten years ago."

"So was he gone very often?"

Miaundea nodded. "But when he was home, he was home completely for several months at a time. Mother always told us that Father was helping to keep Novaun beautiful and protecting our freedom, and I grew up thinking my father was the grandest of heroes."

Ton smiled in understanding. "And you still do." He rested his hand on her arm and lightly stroked it. "You look a lot like your mother. I suppose you and she must be a lot alike. I can't imagine a man like your father being attracted to a weak, insipid little idiot."

Miaundea smiled broadly. "A weak, insipid little idiot couldn't have raised my brothers and sisters and me so successfully in my father's absence. Kevan and I, by ourselves, were enough of a challenge."

The corner of Ton's mouth lifted in amusement. "You and he are quite the hellions, aren't you?"

Miaundea shook her head. "No, I'm the hellion. Kevan is just eccentric. He lives completely in his own odd universe. Mother and Father still can't tolerate the fact that he and Alysia and little Sharad live on his boat."

Ton laughed.

Miaundea gazed at him tenderly, pleased with his apparent interest in her personally. Her evening with him had been so wonderful, more wonderful than any other evening of her life, and it was only just beginning. There was so much still to know about him, so much left to discover. She asked, "Why did you become a doctor?" She paused. "Deia seems to believe it was because of some noble belief in life."

"And you don't agree."

Miaundea smiled knowingly, her fingers fondling his, their arms still draped together over the back of the couch. "I know you aren't so noble."

Ton's eyes narrowed in a bit of challenge. "So what reason would you give?" He smoothed her hair away from her face and over her ear and took her other hand in his.

Miaundea shrugged slightly. "I think you chose medicine because it promised you the most interesting challenges."

Ton's face lit up with pleasure. "That's a perceptive observation."

Miaundea shook her head quickly. "Not really. You reveal much more about yourself at times than you would like to believe."

"Oh-ho! Touché!"

Miaundea smiled and corrected her previous statement somewhat, "At least you do to me."

Ton was extremely amused. "And what if I were to tell you that Deia's observation was just as perceptive as yours? That I get a great deal of satisfaction out of saving lives and relieving suffering?"

"I'm not sure I would believe you."

Ton gazed at her challengingly, but at the same time, humorously. "So, Ms. Quautar, if you can see through me so easily, tell me why I came to Novaun."

Miaundea hesitated. He almost seemed to want her to know, but she wasn't ready to reveal what she knew, at least not everything. She finally said, "I don't think you're a spy, and I don't think you came for the money or for some noble flight from Earth's dictatorship. I believe it had a lot to do with wanting to experience the spirit dimension formula."

Ton's face sobered in surprise. "You are very perceptive," was all he could reply.

"What was it like to travel in the spirit dimension formula?"

"It was incredible." Ton shook his head slightly, still somewhat in awe of the whole thing. "The energy was all around us and through us, and it was *alive*. Even the ship was alive, and I felt like I was in control of the whole universe. Teren and Deia and Paul were a part of me, and I was a part of them. I had never been a part of anyone before, but I was then. It was almost terrifying." He shook his head again. "It was incredible."

"Why did you choose Star Force? You were very young when you joined, weren't you?"

Ton nodded. "I was sixteen. The reason I joined was because on Earth, unlike Novaun, we don't all have the luxury of a huge family organization to support us. Star Force was the only way I could afford the proper schooling. My mother carried herself with the dignity of an educated lady, but she married my father and had my sister Angela before she

finished college. She, for years, has been an inspector in a synthesizing machine factory, an occupation not known for its glamor or high pay. It all made her very bitter, I think.”

Miaundea frowned. “What about your father?”

Ton’s face darkened. “I never knew my father. He left when I was eight months old.”

Miaundea felt overwhelming compassion for him, not so much for learning about his father, a fact she already knew, but for seeing how much his father’s disappearance disturbed him. “Do you ever wonder what he was like?”

“Sometimes.”

“Have you ever asked my father about him?”

“Do you think he knows anything?”

“Certainly. That is his job.”

Ton shook his head, his expression one of discomfort. “I’m not sure I wonder about him *that* much.”

Miaundea smiled. “I’m impressed, Dr. Luciani. You have turned yourself into a neurophysician and a scholar, and all against enormous odds.”

Ton ran his hand over her arm and shoulder and rested it on her back, pulling her a little closer. With his other hand, he lightly stroked her hair. He gazed at her, his eyes earnest. “Miaundea Quautar, you are supreme. Beautiful and supreme.”

Ton’s breathing was erratic. His fingers quivered as they moved from her hair and delicately ran over her face, ear, and neck. Miaundea sat paralyzed with anticipation. His lips trembled as they tenderly, yet yearningly caressed hers.

Miaundea felt feverish. Nothing in the universe existed for her at that moment but him. She gasped and pressed closer, wrapping her arms around him, returning his kisses with equal, trembling fervor. He stroked her hair and caressed her arms and her back. He carefully loosened the three pearl buttons at the bottom of the V-shaped back of her dress, caressing her back even more deeply.

Miaundea leaned her cheek against Ton’s temple as his lips moved breathlessly to kiss her neck. He moved his hand up her back and gently slid her dress off her shoulder with a kiss.

Feeling her dress slide off her shoulder, Miaundea jerked away from Ton and clutched herself with arms crossed and hands gripping her shoulders. She looked from one of her shoulders to the other, ashamed by the realization that her dress was completely undone.

Ton drew in a deep breath, still trembling, his eyes glazed but concerned, and his cheeks a bit flushed. “What’s the matter?”

“You practically have me undressed, and you have the nerve to ask, ‘What’s the matter?’”

Ton smile was very slight, very knowing. “We’re making love, Miaundea, and you’re reveling in it.” He reached to touch her face. “You’re so beautiful. I never imagined there could ever be anyone so passionate.”

Miaundea jumped up and frantically buttoned her dress as she backed toward the door.

“What’s wrong with you?” Ton stood up and followed her to the door. “What are you so afraid of?”

“Stay away from me! I’m sick of all your lies and fake flattery. You don’t want a lover. You don’t want to ‘make love.’ You just want to relieve your frustration!” She spun around and ran out of the lounge.

Ton ran after her, yelling, “How dare you! How *dare* you!”

Miaundea ran through the mansion, down the stairs, and down the empty corridor to her room. She slammed the door behind herself just as Ton got there.

He pounded and kicked her door, yelling words that were barely discernible in his rage. "Let me in, Miaundea! Let me in! I'm not through with you yet!" He pounded on the door again. "You know why it is that no man will come within a light-year of you? Because you burn him then freeze him to death! You'll never have a husband! You'll never have a lover! You and your little games can just return as Eslavu! Let me in, Miaundea! Let me in, you sadistic prude!"

Miaundea sat on the floor against her door as it nearly crashed in on her from the severity of Ton's pounding and kicking. She covered her face with her hands, and for the first time since the age of three, she cried.

Ton finally gave up and left. Miaundea's body shook from a strange combination of fear and grief. Her sobbing intensified and with her heart, eventually died.

* * *

Ton slammed the door to his room, his body convulsing. He had never wanted to hurt anyone as much as he now wanted to hurt Miaundea. He wanted to bruise her and make her bleed, hear her scream and beg him to stop.

Miaundea Quautar, you're supreme, so supreme. What a fool he had been! She was no different from any of the others, the condescending little whore. He stripped off his shirt and hurled it across the room.

He sat down on his bed and covered his face with his hands, his body shaking to release all of the rage. Once the rage was gone, what was left was despair and shame for being so out of control that he would have hurt her if given the opportunity. She was so delicate, so tender, and so beautiful. He would rather die than ever release a blow to hurt her.

As he sat there, he became aware of a strange odor in his room, something like osalaem and an expensive Erdean perfume called Froquenza. He frowned and sniffed. Froquenza was a fragrance worn by women and not one he had ever particularly liked. It was not even one he had ever smelled on Miaundea. As for the osalaem, he had not brought his taffuaos to Menaura with him, knowing he would not be allowed to smoke in the mansion or anywhere near it.

Fear seized him. A woman was in his room, a woman who was not a Novaunian. He stood up and cautiously looked under the bed, in the closet, and in the bathroom, expecting at any moment to be shot in the back. To his relief, he didn't find the mysterious woman, but he did find a taffuao stub snuffed out in the sink.

What had happened to Colonel Quautar's surveillance? Why had this foreign woman been allowed into the mansion and into his room? He held the stub up in the light, struck with the terrifying realization that even on Novaun, he was not safe from the vengeful wrath of that son of Abomination Sanel King.

Epilogue: A FATHER'S DISAPPROVAL

It was in amusement that Sharad Quautar watched his young friend Ton Luciani dance with the bride. It was in dismay that he watched that boy pervert dance with his daughter. As he watched them and every moment became more aware of their romantic interest in each other, his apprehension grew, reaching its peak when they left the dance together at the end of the jazz break. He was restrained from interfering only by being unwillingly drawn into a discussion with Patan Doshyr and two of Patan's brothers.

By the time Sharad and his wife left the dance, anger had consumed him.

Nelena's tiny hand gripped Sharad's arm as he nearly dragged her out of the ballroom. *You're not going to do a thing, Sharad, not one thing! If you antagonize her, you're going to make what is probably a very innocent relationship into something much worse.*

Innocent relationship! Innocent! My daughter, sport for that arrogant, spiteful brat! What an idiot I've been! I should have seen this coming. I gave him the restrictions, and all the while he just sat there and silently laughed at me!

Nelena pulled him into their room, groaning. The door shut, and she turned to look at him squarely. *Are through with your egotistical tirade? If so, maybe it will occur to you that Miaundea's relationship with Ton Luciani has nothing to do with you.*

Sharad relaxed somewhat and put his hand to his temple. *How can she allow herself to be seduced by that lustful boy?*

Nelena smiled weakly. *At least you now admit it isn't Ton that makes you angry, that it is the way Miaundea feels about him that makes you angry.*

Sharad shook his head in perplexity. *This infatuation isn't like her at all.*

Nelena's expression was musing. *What I saw between those two tonight was something more than mere infatuation. There is genuine affection between them, maybe even love.*

But Ton Luciani! Of all people! He may love her, but he's still such a troubled young man.

After that horrible misunderstanding with the Avenaunta boy—she so adored him—Ton probably seems like a wonderful dream.

Sharad slipped his arms around Nelena's tiny waist. Nelena squeezed him and laid her head on his chest. He lightly stroked her hair, sighing in worry. *I only wish it were Maurek Avenaunta now. He really is a fine young man. We could just marry them and be done with it.*

Now wouldn't that be a laugh! Maurek and Miaundea!

Sharad nodded in amused agreement.

Nelena gazed imploringly up at her husband. *Please promise me that you'll be reasonable. Miaundea will do the right thing. Please. Be reasonable.*

I'll be reasonable. But I won't pretend to approve.

* * *

Katherine Padilla, the mother of seven, was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. She resided more than thirty years in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area and recently moved to Florida. She has been writing novels since age thirteen. As a teenager, she was equally intrigued by prophecies of the Last Days and the television show *Star Trek*. At age seventeen she wrote her first story that combined prophecy with science fiction and even submitted it to a contest. That story remains unpublished (and unpublishable!), but her interest in exploring traditional values and religious themes through speculative fiction remains as strong as ever. Through many years of writing, studying, and reading widely, she has learned how to achieve just the right balance of spirituality and fantasy in her novels to both entertain and inspire.

Mrs. Padilla has given many speeches on the benefits of reading wholesome literature and has compiled resources to help readers in that pursuit on her website **Novaun Novels** at novels.zerosilver.com. Her work has also been published in the *Ensign* magazine. She is the author of seven faith-based novels:

Heirs of Novaun

1. *The Double-Edged Choice*
2. *Twin Witness to Betrayal*
3. *Travail of a Traitor*
4. *Bond With a Terrorist*

Dominion Over the Earth

1. *Fall to Eden*
2. *Alien Roads*
3. *Day of Liberation*