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Author's Notes: This is part two of what will likely be a four-story arc. And it's what I was working on when Steph asked me to play in the Academy Valentine's Invitational, so it became my Valentine's offering for 2012. Thanks for the invite, Boss!

The Storyteller's Cardinal Rule is in effect... but still kind of suspended in this part.

Favors of Fortune - Part Two

Storm Warning

By D

Prologue

When the monitor crackles to life, I close my eyes and wait. Caleb has always been pretty spot-on about his gut feelings, so I know whatever's coming next is liable to be more complication for me and the team. I'm a little surprised when he chooses to utilize old-fashioned radio code to transmit his concerns. Then I realize that not only does he not want to wake up the young woman sleeping in the bed, but he probably doesn't want to alert the others to what he's telling me.

I sigh and take a minute to fortify myself. It's already been a long night and given what Caleb just told me, my night is going to bleed over into the rest of the day. Not that I didn't expect it, but I had hoped for a little more of a reprieve before I had to begin again.

I take a deep breath and open the door, realizing immediately that Caleb didn't tell me everything.

They are lined up like pins behind her, offering Eli their support while acceding to her authority as their chosen leader. In front of me stand fourteen of the fifteen scientists I expect to be selected as the Alpha team on this project. I lean against the door, casually crossing my ankles and tucking my hands in my pockets. I'm not going to make this confrontational if I can avoid it.

"Where is she?" the blonde standing in front of the rest asks, her gray eyes boring into mine. I don't move my gaze from her but I can see Jacob just barely shake his head in my peripheral vision so I know he has kept secret the conversation we shared at three o'clock this morning. Before I can speak, she continues. "She missed breakfast - she's never missed breakfast with us... even when..." Eli pauses but never drops her scrutiny of me. "So where is she?"

I jerk my thumb at the door closed securely behind me. "She was unwell last evening." I'm not going to explain that Arianna's maladies weren't physical in nature. They don't need to know that... unless she decides to share with them after the selection process is done. "I've been up most of the night making sure she'll be okay. She simply needs to rest now."

"You're certain?" she asks cautiously.

"I am. I've dealt with this kind of thing with my own children - it's simply a matter of having the time to rest now. I had Malcolm removed for being disruptive." I watch as every one of them sighs in relief and know I have to ensure he is removed permanently. He's obviously been much more disruptive than we have intel about. "I brought her to my room where she fell asleep after a bit of care. She should be able to return to the interview process tomorrow as scheduled."

Eli stares at me hard for another long moment, before turning around and facing her teammates. I watch as she meets each set of eyes, waiting for a signal from all of them before turning back to me with a nod. "Thank you, Ms. Wellesly. We were... concerned."

Jacob looks around at his companions. "Anyone up for a game of *Nuke 'em Duke 'em?*"

The boys almost as a singular entity head towards Jacob's room. By unspoken consent, the girls turn and head in the opposite direction. Only Eli remains separate.

"Hey Eli!" one of the other girls shouts down the hallway. "You coming?"

She shakes her head and waves them on. "Not now. Maybe later." They nod as a group, as though they'd been expecting that sort of reply from her. Then they continue on their way, disappearing into one of the rooms at the end of the corridor. She waits until she hears the door close behind them, then turns to me.

"Can we talk?" she asks, her eyes sad and her smile melancholy.

I nod and follow her down the hall.

Her room, like mine, is pretty standard for a luxury hotel - bed, chairs, table, nice sized closet and a decent bathroom. The only personal property I can see from my place at the door is her Pad that is on the bedside table much like mine had been. Otherwise, you wouldn't know someone was occupying the room unless you opened the closet door.

She shuts the door behind me and motions me further into the room. I feel like an intruder, and if it wasn't for the fact that Arianna was asleep in my room, I would have insisted we meet there instead. These kids deserve whatever privacy can be afforded them, and this to me is an unnecessary invasion... even if she did invite me. She chuckles as she walks around me and drops onto the end of the bed, kicking off her shoes in the process.

"You can come in, you know. I did ask you to be here."

"Right... sorry. It's been a long night."

"Yeah... about that. What's really going on?" I tilt my head in question and she stares at me for a long moment, trying to gauge my honesty. "Is Arianna really sick?"

"Arianna was unwell last evening, but I think we've resolved that issue. A little rest should take care of any lingering problems."

"I don't believe you." She holds up her hands. "Oh... I believe Arianna is still sleeping, and that she's doing so in your room for whatever reason. I even believe that you removed the asshat known as Malcolm. But something about this whole story is off, and I want to know the truth."

"Why?"

She blinks at me - gray eyes showing her confusion as blonde eyebrows crease her forehead. "Excuse me?"

"Why do you think something is off? Why do you want to know the truth? From what I have gathered in my observations of you two, you're not friends. You're barely colleagues at this point." Truth as far as it went. But my actual observations and what I know as truth are two completely different things. "So why do you care? Shouldn't it be enough that she's being taken care of and should resume her normal schedule again tomorrow?"

She glares at me, but the sadness in her expression undermines whatever threat she is trying to convey. Finally, she speaks softly - so low I almost miss her words.

"Can I trust you?"

"Eli, I know things about each of you that you probably don't know yourselves - things I haven't shared with anyone and never will. But only you can decide if I'm worthy of your trust or not."

She stares at me again, studying me, and I keep my eyes on hers, allowing her scrutiny. Eventually she nods to herself as though she's reached a decision. "I'll make a deal with you," she said at last in her soft, husky voice. "I'll tell you why, but then you have to level with me. You have to tell me the truth about Arianna."

I can see the clock behind her and realize it's going to be a bit of a race to get this done before I need to go meet with the Committee. But at least I will be going armed with both sides of the story. I nod.

"All right, Princess. You've got yourself a deal." The look of startlement on her face means I've got her attention. This is turning out to be a hell of a night.

Chapter I

"Princess??" she spits at me with more than a hint of venom, though she never raises her voice above its natural soft tone. "Do you think you're funny?"

I have the passing thought to wonder if I missed a memo, since this is the second time in just a few hours that I have been accused of that particular condition. I hold her gaze for a moment, and the swirl of emotions are similar to what I saw reflected in Arianna's eyes. The biggest difference - where Arianna's held confusion... Eli's radiate anger.

"I'm not allowed to be funny," I reply drolly, my expression never wavering. "I was a Marine Corps brat and an Air Corps wife. I was never issued a sense of humor... even when I became a Marine and Air Corps mom."

She blinks, taken aback by the information I've just relayed. As Arianna pointed out, none of these kids really know anything about me, and I watch as Eli tries to digest the new information. She looks away from me, standing and moving towards her closet. She slides out of her suit jacket, carefully hanging it up while keeping her back to me.

I remain quiet, knowing she's processing a number of different factors, trying to decide what to say. Finally.... "You're a warrior?"

I smile. I know I was, but I also know I wasn't... not in the manner in which she is referring at any rate. "Not as you consider warriors, no. I was the daughter of a warrior; the wife of a warrior and I am the mother to two warriors. But I never served on the front lines myself."

She turns then to look at me - to gauge the sincerity of my words. "Many times that is the hardest kind of warrior to be," she says softly.

"Perhaps," I shrug. "But it is not the type of warrior that most people understand... or appreciate. They think if you're not willing to go and fight...."

She nods. "Only those who never serve in any capacity believe that. Those who serve? They know the truth." She crosses the room again and resumes her place at the end of the bed. I can see the stamp of military training in her bearing - her posture is too ramrod straight to be anything else. She tilts her head at me and I quirk a brow in response. Still there is hesitation, and I know she won't question if I don't explicitly give her permission.

"Ask."

She can't stop the blush that stains her cheeks, but she nods her relief. "Will you tell me about it?"

Now I frown. In the space of thirty seconds, I have completely lost the thread of conversation. Besides, isn't she supposed to be telling me why she wants to know the truth about what happened with Arianna last night? What did I miss? "About what?" I ask cautiously.

Eli glances down at the fingers now clasped together in her lap before looking up to meet my eyes. "Two things, actually," she replies, clenching her fingers just a little tighter at her confession. I nod my head and she continues. "Will you tell me about your experiences as a warrior? It does tie into my story."

"And the second," I ask.

"Tell me why you called me Princess."

I chuckle. "Princess is your code name."

Her eyebrow goes up high enough that it partially disappears under her bangs. "Code name?" she repeats. "Are you serious?"

"Why would I make it up?" I ask with a perfectly serious face. "My job is to protect each of you from any number of threats - keeping people from knowing your true identities plays into that."

She nods slowly. "I can see that. But why Princess?"

"Because we felt it suited you. You're a natural born leader. I saw a prime example of that in the hallway just now."

"Somehow, I don't think what happened in the corridor has any bearing on the name you selected. I am under the distinct impression that we've had these code names for longer much than that."

"That doesn't negate the fact that it is a prime example of your leadership capabilities."

"That was concern for a fellow candidate... nothing more."

I sit up straighter in my chair and pin her with a look. "Let me explain something to you about how this works," motioning around the room and between us. "While we are in here, you can say anything you want to me and it will be held in confidence. BUT," I add, pointing my finger directly at her and glaring, "everything you share with me has to be the truth. If you can't be honest, you're wasting my time... and yours."

"I haven't..."

"Think very hard before you finish that sentence, Eli. I will be straight up with you; the only courtesy I ask is that you do the same in return."

"How do you know...?"

I lean back in the chair, forcing myself to relax. I don't want to intimidate her or make her uncomfortable, but I do want her to understand I'm completely serious about the honesty thing. I don't have the time to coddle her like I did Arianna... not if I have to go fix the parts of this I can affect in the next couple hours. And Arianna never lied until the end... which I put an immediate stop to - it simply took a little effort to coax the truth from her. However, she still deserves as much time and attention as I can give her, and I will do my best for her.

My gaze softens as I watch her, knowing she is torn between the desire to know exactly what I do and the need to keep her secrets private. I wait, knowing she has to choose. When she relaxes just slightly, I smile gently.

"I know because I have been part of this project longer than any of you kids have. I know because it's part of my job to know."

"You're a spy?" her voice is outraged. I simply look at her.

"I am a security advisor. Part of my responsibility includes gathering and disseminating information - so much of what I have learned is for my eyes only because they're things that serve no purpose for others to know. But I'm also a mom - I had to learn to read the signs as a matter of survival."

"How long?" blunt and to the point.

"Have I been with the project?" I ask to clarify. She nods. "I started this assignment before it was actually a project. It was still in the idea stages."

Her eyes widen, but otherwise her expression doesn't change. "That's a long time."

"It is indeed. And in that time, I've learned many secrets about each of you... most of which the Committee will never know because they don't affect your work. Therefore, they have no business knowing and will never find out from me."

"Like what?" she asks, her curiosity coming to the fore.

"Like the fact that you beat up a boy in your fifth year studies when he laughed at your faery wings." She blinks... stunned. I chuckle softly. "He wanted your attention."

"He got it," she smirks.

"Yes, but not at all the way he expected. He became something of a thorn in your side after that... at least until you blew him out of the water in your ninth year of training. Then you were moved to a higher level group and he was out of your circle. The Committee made certain he was never allowed to return to it."

"You...?" The horror in her eyes makes it plain to see what she's thinking, and I'm quick to put her mind to rest.

"NO! No! He is still alive and well on your home world. The Committee simply ensured that he served elsewhere and was no longer part of your training circle. Because everyone could see how much you excelled without his constant heckling, and you showed such promise... even then."

She nods slowly. "I was glad to see him go, honestly. He... it was much easier for me to concentrate on my work and my training without him badgering me about something every other minute. The rest supported the work I was doing, but he just couldn't seem to let anything go." She pauses. "You want to know the funniest thing? He was the one who constantly reminded everyone of his humiliation at my hands. None of the rest cared... not even me. Especially not me, if the truth be told."

"Yes, but at least by mentioning it, it kept him at the forefront of your thoughts."

She considers my words, then winces. "You think...?"

I shrug. "That's what it sounds like to me."

I watch her cringe and shudder. "Okay, that is just... No." She shudders again and I wait. Finally she takes a deep breath and returns my regard. "Sorry," she apologizes. "I never even considered that possibility before and to think he was trying all that time to mate with me? It's a little flattering and a lot creepy. I was never even attracted...." She shakes her head.

I chuckle. "Is that unusual?"

"Trying to mate that early?" waiting for my nod. "It's not unheard of, but it only actually happens in rare cases, and only when there's something very strong between the two people involved. Most kids aren't looking for their other until after their warrior service is complete. And I certainly wasn't; my focus was on my research... and my training, of course. Which is a good thing - the mating process

seems to disrupt the brain synapses that provide rational, logical thought. Most of those who mate early don't do well in training."

"How about otherwise?"

"Excuse me?"

"How do those who find their life companion early do in other aspects of your culture?"

She shrugs. "I don't know really. It's not something I paid any attention to - it never affected me, so it really didn't matter in the broad scheme of things as far as I was concerned." I nod, remembering Arianna's comment about Eli's ability to see the big picture. Before I can say anything to move the conversation along, Eli speaks, and her words take me off guard. "So what's her code name?" her voice dropping to that husky whisper once more.

"Why does it matter?"

She sighs and her shoulders slump in an air of defeat. "If you've been with us for as long as you claim, you know the answer to that. Just like you know why I want to know the truth about what's going on."

"Do you think I'm lying about that?" I ask.

She stares at me a long moment, then shakes her head. "Surprisingly, no. I think you're telling the truth. Lying doesn't really garner you anything at this point." She shrugs. "Besides, you promised to be honest with me as long as I was honest with you. And I have been. I would really like to know."

"She goes by the name Angel," seeing the flinch Eli can't hide this close. "She was that to us before you were even brought into the project. I didn't know it's significance until..."

"She told you?"

"She asked me not to call her by that name. Said only one other person had ever called her that and it made her uncomfortable for anyone else to do so. Between that and your own reaction to it... well, it's not very hard to connect the dots when you're holding all the pieces."

She snorts. "No, I guess it wouldn't be. And you don't strike me as lacking in intelligence."

I laugh, and her expression shifts into one of bemusement. I shake my head and hold my hand up to keep her from speaking as I try to bring myself under control. After a minute, I take a deep breath and give her a grin. "Sorry. That is probably the most politely worded question of my intelligence I've ever encountered."

She blushes. "That's not what I meant!"

I chuckle again. "I know. But it was funny. Princess..." shifting tack when her face clouds over. "Eli, I know I'm not stupid, but I also know I'm not in the same league as you kids are. Besides, a lot of my smarts are street smarts and common sense, and they've served me well. I'm not complaining."

She cocks her head at me and studies me intently and I return her scrutiny. Finally she smiles. "You're not like anyone I've ever met, Ms. Wellesly. Tell me about your children - you have two?"

"I have three, actually - two boys and a girl. My daughter is a dancer here in the city and her brothers are both in the service - in service Academies in fact."

"Really?" her interest piqued. "Who is your daughter? Wait.... Joy Wellesly?"

"Yes. You've heard of her?"

She lifts a sardonic brow at me. "Of course. On my planet, it's believed that to be a good warrior, you need to be well-rounded. Study of the arts is part of the required curriculum, including those of our neighboring allies. We visited here in my tenth year - saw the ballet; went to the museums; caught a couple shows." She gives me a genuine smile and I suddenly understand why Arianna was entranced. "It was probably one of the happiest experiences of my life. Joy was a delight to watch - she made me want to learn to dance."

"Me too," I admit with a smile. "Her dad and I both had two left feet; we never did figure out where exactly she got her grace from."

"And your boys?"

"My sons learned to dance at an early age because they had to attend the same lessons Joy did as I had no one to watch them and they had energy to burn. So they learned by default."

"Did they enjoy it?"

"They didn't hate it, and it's served them well since." She arches her brow in query. "Much of the grace and flow necessary for the defense training we used to protect Joy tied directly into what they learned dancing as children. Besides, formal dancing is a requirement in all the military Academies - they were far enough ahead of their peers that they actually helped their instructors."

"Wait... what? They protected Joy?"

"Quite fiercely, in point of fact. They were my best team until they left for their respective Academies. Their sister never came to harm under their watch." Her brow furrows and I smile. "She's the reason I'm in this business."

She tilts her head thoughtfully. I can see she wants to pursue the thought, but instead she shifts the conversation in a different direction. "That's interesting. I never realized... I never thought of dancing as part of defense training. I may have to mention that to the leaders of my world. Of course, the trainees may not appreciate having to learn to dance. No doubt they will believe it is some sort of trickery to embarrass them."

"But it would help with that well-rounded thing, right?"

"Yes, it would." she adds with a smirk. "Do you think your sons would be willing to do a demonstration?"

"I'm pretty sure that can be arranged. They graduate from their Academies again in the spring. Perhaps something can be arranged before they ship out to their next duty stations."

"Wait - they're graduating twice?"

"Yes. They were offered the opportunity to qualify in a second specialty if they remained for another entire term to teach the instructors their defense tactics. They decided to accept the positions because it gave them the chance to cross-train in other fields of interest they would otherwise have missed out on."

Eli shakes her head. "That is so different from how my society functions."

"How so?"

"Everyone trains - it's part of the normal school curriculum growing up. When we reach the age of choice, we are then placed into whatever advanced training we are most qualified for. When that training is complete, we're put into service in our specialty. Once the actual service time is done, we move on. In my case, I was recruited for this project, but most return to their ancestral homes to carry on the family traditions of their mother's clans; a few continue their role as warriors."

"And if they are gifted outside of the familial constructs? You, for instance, would have returned home to become a shaman or a healer because that is what your clan does. I know an exception was made for you because of the talents that you have that lie beyond that singular capability."

She smiles. "No one is forced into service they don't choose Ms Wellesly. While most members of my society do return home, each of us is given the opportunity to choose our own path... our own future."

"And what of your service? That is compulsory, is it not?" My tone is not accusatory... merely curious, and she can sense that I am not being derogatory in my question.

"It is, but it is something each of us chooses our role in. Some go, some stay; some fight, some heal; all protect and defend. Each of us earns the right to be called 'warrior' and is proud to serve in our chosen capacity. And any of us would return to those roles if called to duty again - keeping the skills we learned honed is part of life for us. But most don't choose the life of a warrior as their calling; it is only part of who we are as a whole."

"It's been part of my life for my entire life. I'm not sure I would know what to do if it wasn't."

"I can understand that. I feel that way about my work. So will you tell me what it's like to be a warrior here on your planet? I'd like to hear."

I nod and sit back. It's going to take a few minutes. I might as well be comfortable.

Chapter II

"Of course you have to understand that my perspective is a little different from what it would be if you were to have asked my father or my husband or my boys. Because I never went to the front lines - I never fought... never even trained. My entire involvement was always in a supporting role - first as a daughter, then as a wife and now as a mom."

"Are they so different?"

I smile. "Oh yes," I reply with a nod. "For a number of reasons. As a daughter, my main task was to support Mother when Daddy wasn't home. As a wife, I had to learn how to support my husband and

still keep my kids a priority. As a mom, well... my boys are grown men. I love them and I listen to them and I talk to them. But ultimately, there's not much else I can do for them at this point. Though I will always be there for both of them if they need me for anything, they have to make their way and rely on their respective partners for most of their support."

"They have families of their own?"

"Ian has just become engaged to a lovely girl and Nathaniel has a husband. As of yet, there are no grandchildren, and I'm perfectly okay with that. I'm too young to be somebody's grandma."

She chuckles at my words and so do I... even though it's the truth. I told my children I would do horrible, evil things to them if they made me a grandmother too quickly, and they obviously took it to heart - because I gave them that speech at the beginning of puberty. "And Joy?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Joy isn't in any hurry to settle down. She started dancing professionally so young in her life; I think she's just enjoying the chance to simply be for a little while. She's taken up baking as a hobby and she's actually quite good at it. If I'm not careful, I'll have to change my name to Short Round, because that's the way I'm going to end up looking. She sends most of her efforts to her brothers and me, and really, you can't eat just one."

"That good?"

"Remind me and I'll share her latest batch of cookies with you later."

Gray eyes sparkle. "You've got yourself a deal. Speaking of... can I get you anything?" reaching towards the room service button. "Some coffee or water perhaps?"

"Only if you're having something." She nods and presses the button, ordering coffee and some pastries. When she's done, she turns back to me.

"It will be a few minutes, of course. Tell me your story. Tell me about being the warrior that stays behind to support those who go."

I cock my head and give her a small smile. "You don't ask much, do you?"

"Of course I do," she corrects. "I am a scientist. That makes me curious by nature. Besides," she adds, giving a slight shrug, "your society and mine developed so differently. I'd like to hear about your experiences."

"All right," I nod. "But you might want to get comfortable. This could take a few minutes."

In response, she stands and moves to the head of the bed, sitting carefully so as not to wrinkle her clothing, then stretching her legs along the length of the mattress. "Whenever you're ready," she instructs me as she folds her hands in her lap. I grin and curl my legs up underneath me before taking a deep breath and beginning my story.

Mother had joined the Army right out of high school. They offered her an opportunity for training she couldn't refuse. She was actually serving when she first met Daddy, and when they did, sparks flew. Quite literally, if they were to be believed.

"So not love at first sight?" she interrupts. I chuckle.

"Not even close. Depending on whom you asked, it was explosive, incendiary, destructive, frustrating... The list goes on for a while. But they both agreed it was unforgettable."

"Obviously," she says with a smirk. "That you're here is proof enough of that."

"Touché," I reply.

Mother was a firefighter at the time and Daddy was an explosives expert. He was a training officer and by luck of the draw, she was one of the firefighters assigned to his unit. Her job was safety - his was making things go 'BOOM!' So you can imagine how well their initial meeting went. In fact, Daddy threatened to have her removed from the task force. Mother pulled rank on him.

"She outranked him?"

"Logistically speaking, no. But since she was in charge of safety, she sure did."

"And how did he react to that?"

"Surprisingly, *that* is what brought them together. Daddy dismissed the recruits and they went and sat down together to talk. He knew if Mother cared so much for people she didn't even know, she was someone he wanted to keep in his life."

"Sounds like a smart man."

"He was."

"So what happened? I mean obviously they ended up together," waving her hand in my direction again, "but...." I chuckle.

"Well, I wasn't there, of course, but by all accounts it was quite the whirlwind romance. And in the space of six months they were married and expecting their first child."

"You?"

"Me," I nod. "Mother shifted into a civilian role with the firefighters and Daddy stayed in the Marine Corps. It was fairly easy at first - the world was at peace so Daddy was home almost as much as he was gone. He went from base to base on temporary assignment training recruits - three months on, then a month off. And it went that way for the first few years of their marriage. He was gone, but not beyond the confines of this planet; and certainly not to war. That changed when I was nine."

"He went to war?" she asks, but there is a knowing in her eyes. I nod.

"He did... and for the first time in our history, the war wasn't here against others on our own world. This was a world away - an entirely different planet and a brand new species."

"So what happened?"

Neither of them was surprised by the orders when they came down. It had been talked about and speculated on for weeks. Having the orders in hand just made it all real. It was quiet in our house that night, and for many of the nights that followed. Because knowing something could happen and expecting something might happen were very different realities from having it actually become fact.

Mother, of course, knew and understood the realities of being a service wife - she'd served herself. But there had been little threat of war service during peacetime. And there was something infinitely worse about letting the one you loved go instead of going yourself. But she'd made promises to Daddy, and she'd keep them... supporting him as she always had.

But Daddy knew how difficult it would be for her, and before he left, he pulled me aside.

"Mary," he said gently. "I have something important to ask you." I nodded, my eyes wide. "I need you to be a big girl for your mama while I'm gone - help her as much as you can, okay? Can you do that for me?" I nodded again. I was always Mother's big girl - helping with my sisters and doing whatever Mother asked me to do. Daddy smiled at me and clasped my shoulder before lifting me up in his arms and hugging me tightly. "I love you, baby girl. Never forget that," giving me an Eskimo kiss.

I threw my arms around his neck and squeezed tightly. "Love you too, Daddy."

The following morning Daddy left for 'Destination Unknown'."

"Was it really?"

"Excuse me? Was it really what?"

"Was it really 'Destination Unknown'?"

"For us it was at the time. We knew he was going off world, but otherwise we had no knowledge of where or for how long. And to make it worse, Mother was pregnant with my fourth sibling, though we weren't aware of that at the time. It was only when she lost it..."

Eli's eyes widened. "That's horrible."

"It was. And for Daddy to be gone when it happened..."

"What did you do?"

I shook my head. "Everything I could. But I was only nine, so that wasn't very much."

"Will you tell me?"

I heard Mother scream from the bathroom, and I ran as fast as my short little legs could carry me. The door wasn't locked and I ran in without thinking. I think, had the situation been different, she probably would have scolded me for my lack of courtesy. As it was, she was too distraught to worry about it, and I was stunned by the blood that was pooling at her feet.

There were tears in her eyes and on her cheeks, but her voice was calm when she asked me to go to the comm unit and call my Uncle Walter. Aside from being family, he was a paramedic, and he knew what was going on as soon as I told him what had happened. When he knew that my sisters were both already asleep in bed, he told me to go stay with Mother until he and Aunt Lee could get there.

It didn't take long, but I sat in the bathroom beside Mother while we waited for them to arrive. I didn't say anything and neither did she. She simply stroked my hair and kept an arm around me, clutching me periodically when a spasm passed through her. I didn't move until Aunt Lee convinced Mother to let Uncle Walter take care of her while Aunt Lee took care of me.

Mother was depressed for days after it happened, and we had no idea how to reach Daddy. So I did the best I could to do what Mother couldn't seem to manage. Fortunately, we all loved peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and bath time was managed with a lot of play and bubbles. My sisters knew something was wrong, so even the three year old tried her best not to make things harder than they already were. But there were things I couldn't do very well on my own, and I finally had to ask Aunt Lee for help.

"Where was she before this? Surely she knew...."

"She visited every day, but Mother put up a brave front while Lee was there. She didn't want Lee to know she was struggling... that she was devastated by not only the loss of a child, but also by her inability to have more children. The miscarriage had taken that from her as well. And Josie and I were in school during the day, so I didn't know what was going on. It wasn't until I asked Aunt Lee for help with the laundry that we sat down and compared notes and she realized it was a much bigger problem than she'd imagined."

"What did she do?"

"Saved Mother's life."

"Share?"

I never heard exactly what Lee said to Mother the day she came over, but when she was finished, she dragged Mother to the doctor. The change wasn't instantaneous, of course, but it was enough. Aunt Lee offered to take us home with her until Mother was better, but I refused. She tried to insist, but I refused again, explaining to her that we couldn't - I had promised Daddy.

She wanted to argue - I could see it in her eyes. Instead, she changed her schedule so she could come over once Josie and I were out of school. Since Mother believed in eating non-processed food, Lee taught me how to cook a few simple things... like vegetable casserole and meatloaf... and helped me

with the laundry. And within a couple weeks, Mother was back to herself - a little quieter than before, but back to being Mother again.

I don't know if she and Aunt Lee every talked about things. Lee and I did - we had an understanding. When Daddy was gone, I was Mother's support. And if I needed her, Lee was mine. Mother and I certainly didn't discuss it... not until shortly before she passed away.

Daddy had died about six months prior, and Mother was lost without him. It was different when he was serving... even in wartime. Though there was always the possibility of something bad happening, there was every likelihood he would come home as well. Once he was gone... it was as if she lost her will to live anymore. It was almost a relief to get the call asking me to visit her deathbed. I knew she would finally be at peace soon.

When I reached her bedside, she reached out a cold hand and drew me close so what she said to me remained private. I knelt so I was close to her lips, holding her frail hand between my warm ones. She lifted her other hand and brushed her fingers through my hair as though I was a child again, and when she smiled at me it was reminiscent of those times in my childhood when I had been her main support system at home.

"I'm so proud of you, Mary," she whispered. "You far exceeded every dream your daddy and I ever imagined for you. You have a loving husband, a beautiful family and a career you seem to derive a great deal of pleasure from and are exceptionally good at."

I smiled sadly. Leave it to my mother to eulogize me on her deathbed. I squeezed her hand gently. "Thank you, Mama," calling her as I hadn't since I'd been that child of nine years of age. She stroked her hand through my hair again, and I gave thanks I hadn't pinned it up as I normally did.

"I want to share something with you," she continued, her whisper so soft I could barely hear her even at close range. I nodded and held my breath, not wanting to miss her words. "I want you to know that you were my rock - not that your daddy wasn't when he was home, but when he wasn't, I always knew I could depend on you. I tried not to - after all, you were a child and it wasn't your place to take that responsibility. But after..." She stuttered to a stop and my lips parted to speak. She covered my mouth with her fingers. I kissed them and she smiled before removing them.

"After the... miscarriage," she sighed. "You were so strong, and you held us together until I was able to again. And I never... I never said thank you." She cupped my face with her free hand. "Thank you, Mary. I'm so proud of you. And I love you - never forget that."

Her words brought tears to my eyes and I blinked hard to keep them from spilling onto my face. "I love you too, Mama. Go be with Daddy now... and your son. You've earned your chance to rest."

"She smiled at me when I said that, and patted my cheek before she closed her eyes and fell asleep. I stayed with her a little while before duty called me away. She never woke up. I got a call late that night telling me she had finally passed over."

"Was it hard?" Eli's voice startles me I was so lost in my past. My focus sharpens and she holds out a hand to cut off my retort before I can answer. "Not losing your MaTb - I can only imagine what that pain is like. No... sorry. Was it hard to be her support like that? You were only a child."

I hold her gaze while I give her question some thought. "At the time," I finally reply, "I struggled a lot. After all, I didn't know how to cook and doing laundry was something I'd never been taught. Thankfully, technology made it easy once I had access, but no provision had been made for me needing it so soon. So yes, it was hard. But I learned and I adjusted and I grew. And despite the difficulties and though I would never have wished something like that on Mother, it made the bond between my sisters and I unshakeable. And Aunt Lee became my hero."

"She sounds like quite the formidable woman," Eli offers with a smile.

"Oh she was - still is, actually. Uncle Walt swears she's too tough to die and too stubborn to let him go first."

She laughs. "She sounds like my MaTb."

"I should introduce you then. You'd like her. She thinks your world got it right putting the women in charge at the start. It's the source of some wonderful and hysterical arguments between her and her brothers." I chuckle. "Uncle Walt has never actually voiced an opinion on the subject."

She laughs again. "You have a very interesting family."

"Well," I mutter loud enough for her to hear, "that's probably the politest way to put it."

This time her laughter is a full-out belly roll, and I grin, knowing she's loosening up a little. Despite our time constraints, I don't want her to feel rushed or forced into something. A knock on the door goes unheard by her, so I rise from the chair and answer it, not surprised to see Caleb looking back at me when I open the portal. He cocks a questioning brow, and the look I give him lets him know I'm making progress, though I'm not there yet. He nods his understanding and releases the cart to me. I pull it into the room and he closes the door.

By the time the door is shut, Eli is standing beside me, fair features covered in a delicate blush. "Sorry," she mumbles. I give her a look.

"Why? Laughter is good for the soul and I heard the knock. Besides, I needed to stretch. So it's all good." She pours two cups of coffee at my nod, then waits for me to prepare mine before she does the same. I make a mental note to get some water soon before the coffee has a chance to make me jittery. I accept the danish she offers and we resume our seats.

"So," she says as we settle in again. "How was supporting your MaTb different than supporting your husband? Surely you were his rock as well."

"Yes, but I also had our children to consider."

"Do tell," she asks. And I begin again.

Chapter III

Due to Edward's designation, he was gone more than he was home. I did everything I was able to support him when he was gone - I sent communication every day through the static channels that were available; I sent care packages with friends and colleagues who were sent out to wherever he was; I

ensured I was around to take the odd communication link when he sent them. And when he came home, my schedule was clear for whatever amount of time he had.

After Joy was born, however, some things changed - they had to out of necessity. Having the boys just added to that. I had to teach my children about their father. For the most part, they only knew him as a face on a screen, and they needed to know that he was someone who loved and cared about them enough to go and do what was necessary to keep them safe.

Fortunately, we worked on those things every day, until it was second nature for them to be excited about doing things for their daddy. They helped me make up care packages; they each had a few minutes to talk to their daddy when he called; and when he came home, we made certain there was lots of family time so they could get to know him.

We still had couple time when it was just us - Mother or one of my sisters would come to watch the kids so we had an opportunity to be alone together - it was just more difficult to find after the kids were born. We made the effort though, because it was part of what held us together as a family.

As the children grew, there were activities and school that took up a lot of time, and Edward and I had to make adjustments so there was time for us as a couple and time for us as a family. Joy started dance almost as soon as she could walk... by her choice. She was always twirling and pirouetting and when given the opportunity, she jumped at it... literally.

When the twins came along, they went with us and they were so active, the instructor suggested I let them join. Edward thought it was highly entertaining; I think the boys just found it to be fun. About the same time, we enrolled them in martial arts. The boys loved it because eventually it meant they got to break things. Joy liked it because to her it was simply a new form of dance.

For me, it was a way to keep them busy and active; it kept them from missing Edward too much because as they got older, they realized he was gone much longer than he was home. And though they loved their time with their daddy, they needed things to fill the void his absence left.

When Joy started dancing professionally, we traveled to let her perform. Edward followed us - keeping abreast of her performances and contacting us wherever we happened to be. After she was threatened, however... things changed. She was assigned to the ballet here and we made the city home for a while.

It was actually better for us then - Edward knew where we were and on the occasions he was able to get back planet side, we were able to take time to be a family. When he was finally stationed planet side, it was wonderful and awkward and an adjustment for all of us... especially since we had to leave the city to be where he was. But we managed, and the kids loved having Daddy home to do things with.

Even Joy thrived, because she became a sensation in whatever venue she played. And the boys never relaxed their vigilance of her.

As they got older, there were sports - baseball, soccer, archery - whatever was available here or wherever we happened to be stationed with Edward at the time. My role at that point was to make sure there was time for everyone and that everyone was where they were supposed to be when they were supposed to be there.

When Edward was here, we did as much together as we could. When he was gone, it was just me and the kids. And so it went.

"How long did it last? And how were you pulled into this?" she asks me as she motions around the room, grimacing when she sips her coffee that has gone cooler than she likes. She rises from the bed and grabs the coffeepot, raising it in my direction. I shake my head and she refills her own, stirring in honey slowly.

"How long did which part last?" I reply. She inclines her head and frowns in confusion. I take pity on her and continue. "We went back and forth between different duty stations until Joy was fifteen. Then we moved here permanently. By that point, Edward had served in...." I pause in thought - it's been a while. "I think he had served in three different wars at that point, and any number of missions. I'd have to go count them at this point. Anyway, because of his service, he was allowed to stay here with us and still remain on active duty. He was pulled from here for specific missions - he would go and we remained in the city. The kids were settled - Joy had secured her place as the prima donna in the ballet here; the boys were vested in their studies and sports. It was easier for the kids that way and Edward and I were satisfied with the arrangement. It wasn't like I could go with him when he was off-world fighting anyway, and if his superiors were willing to grant him the dispensation to keep him on active duty, we were thrilled to accept the compromise. Especially since it gave us more time together than we'd had in our marriage before." I smile. "That was amazing."

She returns my smile with one of her own. "I can only imagine. I don't know how you managed to be without him for so long."

I shrug. "I knew what I was getting into when I married him. Life in the military means separation for weeks or months at a time. Ours were a little more extreme than some, but we did what it took to stay together. I just wish our together hadn't been shortened."

"What happened... if you don't mind me asking?" she queries, apparently forgetting her other question. Fortunately, I don't mind, and I will remember.

"His unit was assisting with an evacuation of personnel from a contested planet - he was on the last shuttle scheduled to leave. It never made it off the ground."

She winces. "That's harsh. I'm sorry."

"So am I. But he died a hero... doing what he loved. Hard to fault him for it."

"It still makes you angry though, doesn't it?"

"Furious," I reply honestly. "There are days I want to kill him myself for going off and leaving me here. Even though I always knew...."

"Doesn't matter. There's no comfort in knowing when the results aren't what you want."

"Still pissed with your brother I take it."

She nods. "You know it. I was so angry - I still get that way if I think about it too long."

"What would he think... if he could see you now?"

She smiles a little wistfully. "He'd be so proud," she replies, her eyes misting a little bit. "He was my biggest cheerleader... my best friend. He's the one who convinced me to take the chance when I was offered the opportunity to become part of this project." I nod. I remembered that - it was so unusual for any candidate to hesitate that Eli's was brought to my attention as soon as we became aware. Her gaze sharpens and she sits up, letting her legs slide from the mattress. "You knew?"

"I did indeed," I confirm. "Your reluctance to participate was so unexpected that I was informed as soon as it came to light."

Now she glares at me, standing and crossing to stand in front of me with her arms folded over her chest. "Just how long have you been watching me??"

"Take a seat, Princess," not surprised to see the glare grow more pointed. I gesture towards the table and its less-than-comfortable chairs. "Eli, take a seat... please. I'm willing to talk to you, but I'm not going to sit here with you hawking over me like you're waiting to pounce. I promised you I'd be honest with you - sit down and I'll tell you the story."

She stares at me for another long minute; then she takes a deep breath and forces herself to relax. When I can see some of the anger drain from her posture, I sigh and watch as she sits in the chair closest to me. I idly wonder if she feels that gives her more leverage, then realize she's folded her hands on the table and is waiting for me to speak. I inhale deeply.

"When Joy was seven, a threat was made against her." I see her eyes fill with outrage and I nod my agreement. "Yes, we felt much the same. We reacted quickly and extinguished the threat, but it brought the need to protect her to our attention. And I started putting together a team to do just that."

"You created a team to protect your daughter?"

"I did. At the time, Edward was off-world and her brothers were only five. I knew I would need professionals to help me take care of my girl. Fortunately, I had the resources to find the people I needed. And most of them were more than willing to join me."

"Warriors?"

I smile. "Warriors. Most of them friends of the family who loved Joy. There were those who handled the physical security and those who analyzed everything around her looking for possible threats against her so we could neutralize them before they became unmanageable. They were quite a formidable team, and it got the attention of others who desired a higher level of security. It was never my intent to create something so far reaching - my only concern was protecting my child."

"So you got pulled into this project...?"

"By the time this project came along, I had assembled a team capable of handling anything. We had resources everywhere and could cover practically any contingency. I was approached by the Committee to participate, and like you, I was hesitant."

Her eyebrows go to her hairline in surprise. "Were you really?"

"I was. We were still moving periodically with Edward and even though my job was mostly administrative as far as the rest of the clients went, I still had my hands full taking care of my

family... especially with the boys helping me. They were black belts before they were ten, and they insisted it was time they took some of the responsibility for their sister's safety. So when the Committee approached me, I really wasn't interested - especially since they wanted me to head it up personally instead of turning it over to Caleb and the rest of my team."

"What changed your mind?"

"You kids did... and the Committee learned how to compromise with me." Her brow arches - the Committee isn't known for its ability to compromise. As far as most are concerned, the Committee says and everyone else does. I laugh. "Information is a marvelous thing. When they realized I managed all the information flow that each of my team members procured - allowing me to see the big picture and all the details - they agreed that allowing me to assign agents to each of you was acceptable as long as I held the reins holding everything together. That worked out especially well for me; it allowed me to remain home with my family while building portfolios on each candidate. So by the time I ventured into the field, I had very clear ideas of who each of you were and what you could accomplish." I grin and she leans her head to one side. "I shouldn't tell you this, but I think of everyone involved in this project, you're one of the few who could appreciate it."

"Do tell," she invites, intrigued.

"When I was building cases for and against each candidate based strictly on the information my agents were collecting and sending to me, the Committee asked me to make a list of the most viable prospects. It was put into an encrypted file and stashed in a safe deposit box at the bank here in the city. When I was able to observe each of you I was asked if I wanted to re-evaluate my choices. I refused, stating I had firm faith in those I had initially chosen. When the Committee makes its final selection, my list will be removed from the bank and compared."

"To what purpose?"

"Part of it is simply bragging rights," I confess. "Part of it was to make a point."

"You're so confident then?"

"Aren't you?" I smile. "If I asked you right now to name the top twenty candidates you expected to be chosen for this assignment, could you do so with ultimate confidence in your choices?"

She looks at me a long moment. "I think so. I know I could pick some without a doubt."

"Because you know the people involved and trust their abilities."

"Exactly. They're people I've already worked with... people I know."

"As do I. The difference is my knowing comes from observation and yours comes from interaction."

"I'd like to know how you did... once the Committee's choice is made."

"I'll make sure you do. But as you can see, I've been doing this a long time."

"I'm curious," she starts and I smile to myself. Of course she is - it's what makes her so good at what she does. I wave a hand in her direction and she continues. "Why did you do it?"

"Why did I accept the mission?"

"Well, that too. But what I was asking was why you took a more active role. Obviously from what you've indicated, your team was more than qualified to collect the information you needed to compile to produce the profiles for each of us. So why...?"

"Because at some point, hands-on is always necessary. You know that as well or better than I do," I accuse with an arched brow and she nods the truth of my statement. "Besides, I wanted to meet you all... in a manner of speaking. I wanted to know how close the pictures I had formed of you in my mind were to the actual people. I needed to know if adjustments were necessary to my way of thinking."

"And were they?"

"Small things. But overall? No... I was pretty spot on. It's one reason I'm confident in the candidates I chose. It's my business."

"But what made you decide to become more active? Or was it simply curiosity about us?"

"Not at all, though that was a factor of course. I knew when I accepted the responsibility of the contract I would have to be an active participant at some point because ultimately I'm accountable for each candidate. And this project is important in the broader scheme of things."

"So you think you're the only one that can handle something of this magnitude?" she snorts. "Egotistical much?" she asks, though her smile softens the accusation in her tone.

"Always," I confirm. "It's my name and reputation on the line if something goes wrong. And if I don't believe in what I'm doing, why would anyone else? But I trust my team to take care of things and they trust me to sweat the details and hold it all together." I shrug. "Besides, this is how we've always done things and it's never failed us before."

"Do you ever wish you hadn't gotten involved in this particular project?"

"Do you?" I reply without missing a beat.

"Sometimes," she admits more candidly than I expected. She leans back in her chair and shifts uncomfortably. "Don't get me wrong," she cautions. "I'm thrilled to be here. The opportunity to be a part of something so groundbreaking... the foundation of something that could change society itself... it's at once humbling and a massive ego boost. And everyone loves stroking, right?" giving me a knowing smile. "But at the same time there's so much pressure... so much expectation to deliver that it takes away from the joy of discovery. Already we have advanced so many disciplines of science, but that's gotten lost in the shuffle of creating a new world."

"Do you want to stop? Would you rather leave the program?"

"NO! No, of course not! I love what we're doing with this project - what we're capable of. I just wish we could enjoy the fruits of our labors a little more before being pushed for the next big discovery." She sighs. "And I miss my family... my home."

"That's natural; and part of growing up. Haven't you found a new family with your colleagues?"

"Yes, of course... some of them, anyway. You can't spend that kind of time secluded with the same people day in and day out without becoming fond of them."

"Or developing a distinct dislike of them."

She nods. "That too. No one is going to like or be liked by everyone. All of our lives would be much different if that wasn't true. But that doesn't make me miss my home any less. Sometimes it just makes me miss it more - because they're the family I grew up with; my childhood friends; those who share the same memories and values that I have. Sometimes I miss that support."

"I can relate," I remind her. "But what you have to do in that case is create a new support structure within the new family you're establishing in your new environment. It's not easy, but it is possible. I've been where you are - maybe not to the same extreme, but there were times when my family was too far away to be more than a contact over a comm unit. And talk doesn't always help. Sometimes you need a hug for comfort or brute strength for lifting or an extra pair of eyes to watch that particular twin who uses a mud puddle as camouflage." She snickers and I snort. "Yeah, it sounds funny now, but it scared the shit right out of me until we found him."

"I'll bet." She smirks and blushes at the same time. "I did the same thing to MaTb once. I couldn't sit right for two days," squirming in memory, "but it put me at the top of my training class."

"Was it worth it?"

"Absolutely."

"This will be too, Eli. Have a little faith in yourself... and them."

"You think so?"

"I predicted it, remember? Sight unseen." I pause and she cocks her head. "Can I ask you something?" She nods. "What did you mean about sharing the same values? I thought most of you wanted the same things out of this project. For different reasons, perhaps, but I thought the goals were similar." I hope this goes where I think it will. I need to pick up the pace if I'm going to get the results I need before it's time for me to go address the Committee.

"Goals and values aren't the same thing, Ms Wellesly. Goals are things we hope to attain; values are ideals we hold dear... that help make us the people we are and cause us to respond in the way we do."

"I stand corrected," I answer. "Will you explain what you meant? I'd like to understand."

"Get comfortable," she instructs me. I sit back and wait.

Chapter IV

"On my world, our society is a matriarchal one. All citizens are trained to be warriors and protect the family; that is a shared responsibility. But men are in charge of providing for the home - they are the hunters, the gatherers. Women make the laws and manage the money. And though most stick to tradition and remain within their own clan - serving in whatever capacity is the clan's calling - a few do step outside that tradition to work in another vocation."

"Like you did."

"Usually not to that extreme," she agrees with a smile, "but yes. And it's worked out well for us. We've prospered under this system and people are happy."

"Okay - I'm with you so far."

"Good. So for the most part, everyone on my planet subscribes to the same beliefs - the importance of family; the honor in service; self-reliance, trust, fidelity. They're all part of the moral fiber of our society." I nod, hoping this is finally headed where it needs to be. "And there are other things ingrained in our systems - things we cannot change about ourselves... for better or worse."

"Such as?"

"Depending upon your clan and your genetics, it is possible to fly; or see in the dark; or run faster than most four legs. But that is something that varies depending on the person and the lineage involved; there are a number of different variables and everyone is a little bit different. But one thing is constant for all my people - something ingrained in the very marrow of our bones." She stops and looks down at her twined hands. I wait.

"Would you like to share?" I invite quietly when it appears she's gone mute.

"You don't know?"

"Eli, in my position I know many things and I can make educated guesses on any number of others. But this is your story now, and you need to tell it. I'm not going to judge or mock - that's not my place. But you have to decide if you want to share something you obviously feel is very personal and private."

She closes her eyes and covers them with one hand. The other hand clenches into a fist. I reach out a hand to cover it, and she flinches in reflex but she doesn't remove her hand from mine. After a few long moments, I feel her begin to relax. Finally, she takes a deep breath and drops her hand from her eyes, opening them to meet mine.

"In my culture," she says in a hushed tone, "when we mate, we do so for life. We search until we find the one our heart tells us is our half. Sometimes there is an immediate connection; sometimes it comes early in life. That happened to my brother and his wife - they knew they were meant for each other before they began warrior training. Sometimes it takes a while; sometimes we don't recognize it immediately because it's unexpected." She smiles gently. "It was that way for MaTb and OTeU. They grew up together... had known one another since the cradle. OTeU said when he first realized MaTb was his half, he panicked. He wasn't sure how she would take the change from friendship to mates; because even though the heart says so doesn't always mean it's right. And that's okay - as with every other progressive culture in the galaxy, liking someone enough to believe they are your half isn't a commitment. Time and effort are required to see how you fit together - if you truly are halves. And in some cases, the people involved decide the heart was misinformed and they go their separate ways before allegiance is promised to one another. As long as the two people in question do not consummate the relationship, neither is bound by its rules."

"So what happened?" knowing full well what's coming after my earlier discussion with Arianna.

She sighs and closes her eyes again, and I see a tear slide down her cheek.

"I was a fool. I decided my heart knew better than my mind," she replies with a defeated breath.

I knew who she was when she crossed the threshold. I'd done some research on my own as well as studied the information we'd been given upon selection so I could be familiar with who I was working with... and who the competition was. I knew this was merely another step in the selection process. It only made sense. It wasn't simply our work that was important, but our ability to function without outside support... to work together as a team inside our segregated environment.

I was a little surprised she didn't step up and take responsibility for leading the group. After all, it's what she was born to and I knew that. I could tell, though, that she wasn't interested in accepting a mantle that - outside of our little experimental community - had been forced upon her by birth. And she certainly didn't appreciate having the issue forced by someone at that time she so clearly disdained. So I stepped in. Like it or not, organization is something I'm good at and I wasn't willing to waste the opportunity we'd been given to show we could create a successful project just because no one else wanted it.

It wasn't without opposition... or perhaps resistance would be a better adjective. Because it was mostly grumbling, and everyone fell into line pretty quickly. It's easier to follow than it is to lead, and in reality, no one wanted to fail. It was a matter of pride as much as anything else.

Once things settled down, we got the living situation resolved. It wasn't difficult really; everyone understood what I was trying to do, and even the dissenters realized it necessary. I saw the asshat that had given her trouble by outing her as a royal approach her, then veer off when she glared at him. It was kind of funny, but I transmuted my laughter into a smile when I turned in her direction.

"What do you say, Angel? You and me?"

She smiled back at me, and I was entranced.

Interesting that I heard the same description of their first meeting from both of them. I prop my head on my hand. "How so?"

"Excuse me?"

I bite my tongue and count to ten to keep from rolling my eyes. *Really? From both of them again??* I let out a slow breath. "You said she entranced you. How? How were you entranced by her at your first meeting? You barely exchanged two words."

She smiled impishly at me, though I can still see the shadow of tears in her expression. "Perhaps, but we did exchange two words, and that was enough. Besides, you've met her - can you honestly say she doesn't remind you of an angel?"

"I can honestly say I have never to my knowledge seen an angel. But I've seen her smile and it does remind me of the pictures I saw when I was a little girl."

"Have you heard her sing?" waiting for me to nod. "With a voice like that, what else could she be?"

"Is that why you called her Angel then?"

"Yes. Seeing her... hearing her... knowing she was the brilliance that had enabled the project to become reality...." Eli sighs and removed her hand from beneath mine so she can stand and pace. "I don't know how else to explain it, Ms Wellesly. She was an angel in my book. I couldn't help being spellbound by her presence."

"And when you got to know her?"

She turns her back to me and moves to the window, opening the curtains and staring out unseeing at the vista beyond. "I was a goner."

At first we were too busy trying to settle in and get things up and running to do more than see one another in passing. If we were in our quarters at the same time to sleep, it was a minor miracle. Aside from getting the labs and test areas set up, we had to establish living space and recreational venues as well. We were working twenty-four/seven it seemed like, and I needed to be everywhere at once. Because I accepted the role of head idiot in charge, it was my responsibility to oversee everything... including work schedules and chore rotation.

"Head idiot in charge?" I interrupt.

She looks away from the window and laughs. "Nicest way I could think to put it. I did volunteer after all, and only an idiot would add that kind of responsibility to their workload on purpose."

"Fair enough," I acknowledge. "Please continue."

It took us a little while to settle in - there was simply a massive amount of work that needed to be accomplished before we could even think about relaxing our vigilance. And some of the scientific work required round-the-clock monitoring. Eventually, though, things did start to settle down... enough to allow us to take a day off every couple of weeks. That was amazing - to be able to sleep more than two hours at a time was wonderful, but to actually have the chance to play a little? That was so relaxing. And it improved morale and our work environments because people were able to concentrate a little more on getting to know one another; everyone started making friends across the board... not just in their area of expertise.

She and I got the opportunity to talk - really talk - about things that mattered, and things that didn't. We discussed philosophy and music; literature and religion; my family and her parents. Eventually, our evening talks migrated into evening walks. We'd tour the facility together. It was something I tried to do everyday - it kept me in touch with everyone and everything going on and made my job easier.

And bringing her with me seemed to help her socially. A number of candidates had gotten their backs up against her because of the debacle when we first arrived, and she still hadn't learned the subtleties of socialization. She vacillated between ignoring everyone and pushing herself into conversations she wasn't really part of.

At first it was a little awkward, but she tried and gradually people learned to include and appreciate her when we walked around the complex together. And it was wonderful watching her blossom.

"When did you know?"

"You don't know?" Keeping her focus on something beyond sight.

"I only know that it happened - I knew when you told me about your culture mating for life and you being a fool. Most people are only foolish where matters of the heart are involved."

"I suppose so," she says with a sad smile. "Was it the same for you?"

"In a different way, yes, but I was still a fool for a while." Her eyes meet mine in the window and I smile at her. "So there is hope of recovery."

I see her eyes drop in the reflection and she keeps her back to me as she shakes her head. "Not this time," she says softly. "Not from this."

"When did you know?" I ask again, hoping she'll give me a legitimate answer.

"Too late," she replies.

We went walking in the arboretum one evening. We'd had trouble with this particular lab because the trees weren't growing properly and we were struggling to understand why. But on this night, I had something to show her.

One of the citrus trees we'd been fighting for had not only finally taken firm root, but it had produced its first blossom. And I wanted to share it with her - not just the scent, which was incredible, but the promise it offered.

When I took her hand, it fit in mine perfectly, and she simply clasped mine tighter. It brought a smile to my face. And though not her field of expertise, she was as excited by the new growth as I was. And she held onto my hand throughout the remainder of our stroll.

A few weeks later, the roses were blooming en masse in the conservatory and our walk naturally wound through the new flowers. We stopped to smell the buds and she leaned over too far, almost falling into the thorns. I grabbed her around the waist, steadying her before releasing her to stand. When she did, she turned in my arms, and it was the most natural thing in the world for me to lean down and kiss her. And could she kiss.

It wasn't my first kiss, of course, but it was the first time I'd felt... so much. I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck and my skin became sensitized to the very air currents that stirred around us. And when her tongue touched mine, heat erupted in my chest and down into my belly.

It was wonderful and amazing and could have gone on forever, but I wasn't sure I was ready for that commitment yet, so I backed off slowly and we returned to our quarters to sleep. It happened every

night for two weeks... the kissing, I mean. I probably shouldn't have been so anxious for such contact, not when I was trying to figure out if she was my half, but her lips were so soft and her kisses addicting. She could make me feel things that I never even thought to experience, and I wanted that - I wanted that with her.

I didn't think about how unfair I was being to her until she confronted me about it. And I never realized we were still so far apart in our thinking.

"What do you mean?" I ask when she drops into silence. She rubs a hand across her brow and sighs, keeping her focus on the ever-changing vista of the city.

"I knew we were from many different planets with many different backgrounds. I believe our diversity plays into the selection process as much as our scientific work. After all, everyone wants to support the home team, right? And it helps to solidify the Alliance."

I nod - she's good. That is exactly why the candidates are as diverse as they are. It may not make a difference in the final selection, but at least no one can claim bias on who was given the opportunity to participate, because everyone was represented at some point.

"Of all the things we discussed," she goes on without turning, "the mating habits of our planets never came up in conversation. I don't know why - it wasn't deliberate. There were just so many more interesting things to talk about. And it never occurred to me to question...."

"So what happened?"

Her shoulders drop in a posture of defeat, but she takes a deep breath and resumes her story.

I don't remember what set her off that evening - maybe it was the time of the cycle when her hormones spiked. I don't honestly know. But when our kiss was over, and I started to move away to get ready for bed, she grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me back into her.

And she was angry. She was gorgeous when she was angry. Her eyes sparked and heat flushed her cheeks; her lips were kiss swollen - even her unruly hair suited her in that moment. And she insisted on knowing if I was playing with her... if she was doing something wrong.

That kind of confused me - I thought her kisses were perfect. I didn't understand how she could believe any differently. Then she demanded to know when we were going to consummate our relationship and I was ecstatic. Even though her putting out there so bluntly was unconventional in my society, it was a welcome sign for me. Surely we were on the same page - if she wanted to make love together then my heart had been right in choosing her as my half.

I played it off lightly, though. I didn't want her to feel pressured, and I wanted it to be special for us, because this would be the first time we'd be together in a lifetime of togetherness. And she seemed to embrace that idea - it removed the anxiety of our impending coupling from us and allowed us to enjoy our time together.

When it did happen... it was perfect.

She stops speaking again and I sigh. I can hear her pain and confusion and it makes me wish I could do something to fix this. Still, the best I can do is make sure they get the opportunity to make things right themselves. And to do that, I need Eli to finish her story so I'm armed for every possible contingency when I face the Committee.

"Eli, I need you to finish your story for me."

She shrugs. "What difference does it make? What's done is done."

"Perhaps, but it possible I can give the two of you the chance to fix things between you. Don't ask," I command when she parts her lips to demand an explanation. "Just trust that I'm actually on your side and hers in all of this." I spare a significant glance towards the clock by the bed, then turn my attention back to her. "But we're running out of time. If you want to hear about her, you need to finish sharing your side of the story."

"Why don't you already know this? By your own admission, you've been watching us since before the beginning of the project. So why don't you already know all this?"

"First of all, we didn't observe any of you within the privacy of your living quarters and since we didn't wire anyone with audio and video capabilities, we weren't privy to every moment of every day. We were mostly interested in how you interacted together - we tried to respect your privacy otherwise. Besides, we knew if a fight broke out in one of the living spaces, we'd know about it soon enough.

But more importantly, you deserve the chance to tell your story from your perspective. With a little luck, you and Arianna will actually be able to sit down together and share your experience with one another, but until then I need to see both sides of what occurred."

"Why? Why do you care?" throwing my words back at me.

"Because I've been where you are. I know what it is to lose your half, and I wouldn't wish that kind of pain and loss on anyone." I release a slow breath. "If there is a way to make this right... well, let's just say I'm a sucker for a happy ending."

"Too bad I don't think that's possible for us anymore," she replies softly.

"Finish your story, Eli."

Chapter V

When it happened, it wasn't anything special - not what you'd consider special in that we didn't plan for it. One nice thing about being the head idiot in charge meant that I could schedule our days off together and surprisingly, no one complained about it. That evening we spent with our friends - eating dinner; playing games; dancing - I remember laughing a lot. And when we left for our nightly walk through the facility, it was much like every other night. It was only when we returned to our room that it changed.

She was amazing, and the things she made me feel... And for the first time in my life, I felt like I'd come home.

For three months, my life was more fantastic than I had ever imagined it could be. She was mine and I was hers and I was complete sharing life with my half. I thought she felt the same.

Then she was summoned home, and everything changed.

"Do you know what happened? Why she was called home? What occurred while she was there?"

This time she turns from the window and the agony in her eyes is only partially eclipsed by the rage there. I will my expression to remain stoic though her upset is palpable. She blinks and her gaze becomes a glare.

"I don't know, nor do I care. She came back publically committed to that ass that we all know and hate. I haven't spoken to her since that day. I reassigned her living quarters and exorcised her from my life."

"And in doing so made you both miserable. Did it occur to you to talk to her first?"

"About what?" she whisper screams at me. "They announced their engagement and pending marriage the moment they returned to the compound. Obviously she was not bound to me as I a... was to her. It left nothing to talk about."

"Even though you're still her mate."

"That can't be helped. She's not mine - she made that clear. I don't have to like it, but I do have to respect it. Now," she continues more forcefully, "As the de facto leader of the candidates still participating in the selection process, I'd like to hear the truth from you now. What is really going on with Arianna? We have the right to know."

"I'm not sure you really do," I reply, "but I promised I'd be honest with you if you were honest with me. However, just as what you shared with me will remain confidential, what I say to you now stays between us. You don't even share this with your colleagues."

"Are you sure you can trust me?"

"Yes. It is my business to know. You wouldn't betray Arianna despite everything."

She doesn't respond verbally... not at first. She turns her back and returns her focus to the world outside the window. I wonder what she sees. I watch her reflection as a tear slides down her face, then her expression hardens. She shifts her gaze to meet mine in the glass.

"You're the one on a schedule here, Ms Wellesly," she reminds me harshly. "Perhaps you should get on with the telling before time runs out."

Her prickly attitude makes much more sense now, but I merely give her a nod of acquiescence before standing from the chair with a sense of relief. I walk over to the window, but stand far enough away

to only be in her periphery, letting my eyes take in the ant-like multitudes of people scurrying around below us.

"Last night, Arianna ran away from Malcolm. I don't know what the argument was about - I didn't ask. It wasn't relevant to the situation."

"Excuse me?" she interrupts, her stare searing even across glass. "What do you mean it wasn't relevant?? How could it not be relevant??"

"Eli, I knew all I needed to know. She left her room because of him and she didn't want to return while he was there."

"Did he hurt her?"

"Not physically, no. But he made her uncomfortable... enough that she felt the need to get away from him. I removed her from that environment and removed him from the premises. After I speak with the Committee, he will be removed from the program."

"You can't be certain of that."

I smile, my eyes glinting evilly. "Oh... but I can, Eli. Information is my business. And I have information about all kinds of interesting things. Most of them will never see the light of day, but I will share enough of what I know about Malcolm to guaranteed his dismissal."

"Why? What did he do to you?"

"Let's just say I don't like what I know of him and leave it at that."

She holds my eyes in the reflection and I wait. She gives me a small nod and returns her focus outside. "So he didn't hurt her," she states.

"He didn't lay a hand on her. He wouldn't have walked out of here under his own power if he had. I don't know what he said to make her leave last night, but I have my suspicions on why she walked out."

"Would you like to share?"

"I think you need to know my suspicions... and maybe a little of her background. It might help you to understand things a little more." Her stance is as stiff and unyielding as it has been, and I let my eyes stare at the glass, blurring the city beyond.

"Though he never assaulted her physically, I believe he was working towards alienating each of her colleagues from her life. If she was alone, he would be the one she had to turn to."

"Wouldn't she turn to him anyway? They were betrothed." Her tone is bitter.

"Don't be stupid, Eli," I growl. "It doesn't suit you." I bite my lip to keep from pointing out the fact that Arianna never turned to Malcolm before they were betrothed and that she had resisted doing so since their formal engagement. "Arianna was never socially inclined - between her birthright and what could be considered an abrasive personality, she found it very difficult to make friends. But her mother insisted she attend school for the socialization aspect; but it wasn't until her last year of school that she actually made any friends."

"I know all this. Is there a point?"

I turn and stare at her, waiting for her to look at me. There is resentment in her eyes when they meet mine. "There could be, if you could get past your anger with her."

Fury flares in her gaze, turning her grey eyes golden. "Ms Wellesly," she hisses through clenched teeth, "I have done everything possible to keep my distance from her. That's the best anger management I've got considering the circumstances. I'm not sure what else you'd like me to do."

I know it's her pain and anger and frustration talking, but knowing doesn't lessen my desire to shake some sense into her. I take a deep breath and release it, closing my eyes to briefly center myself. When I open my eyes, she's still staring at me, waiting. I take another breath, then begin to speak.

"I'd like for the two of you to find a resolution to this situation that leaves you both happy with the result. Barring that, I'd like to see something that doesn't isolate her from the rest of the candidates."

"WE are not responsible for her isolation - SHE is. She's chosen to separate herself from us, and she's allowed the asshole to facilitate that effort."

"And if it isn't her choice? If it's been forced upon her?"

She shrugs. "I don't know what to tell you, Ms Wellesly."

"Well then let me tell you, Eli," I say slowly. "Do you remember the introverted young woman that you met at the beginning of the practical segment of the selection process? The one who didn't say much of anything to anyone and when she did, it was harsh and intrusive? Do you remember how everyone shied away from her because they didn't like her and wouldn't give her a chance?"

"Ms Wellesly...." Her tone resigned.

"Eli, that is who Arianna was until her last year of school. It was only because of a young man named Kip who befriended her that she mellowed into something closer to the woman you found when you made the effort. His effort, much like yours, made her more human... more approachable and gave her the friends and social interaction everyone needs to function properly in society."

"Ms Wellesly...."

"When school was over, Arianna was on her own again, stuck in the lab for days at a time with no human contact beyond someone dropping off food or her mother reminding her it was time to sleep. Once in a while her father would visit because a royal duty required her presence, but those instances merely reinforced her isolation. She did get out some - her society demanded it. But mostly she was left to her own devices."

"Is there a point here, Ms Wellesly?" her entire being exuding an air of exhaustion.

"Like it or not, Eli, you're the leader of this bunch - you volunteered and they look to you naturally for leadership. They'll follow your example."

"Ms Wellesly, I seriously hope you're not suggesting what I think you are. I'll resign the program first."

I lean my head to one side and study her carefully. "May I ask why you haven't already?" She frowns at me and I restate my question. "If you hate her so much, why haven't you quit? I know you have numerous prospects at home to choose from, and you've been offered several fellowships from scientific communities across the galaxy. So why stay?"

"My work has the best chance of succeeding as part of this project. And though not as necessary as Arianna's efforts, it's still quite integral to a number of other experiments. I earned my place here. I shouldn't have to give it up unless I'm deemed unfit by the Committee."

"So you'd stay with the project even if you were both selected."

"Yes. I'm perfectly capable of functioning in Arianna's vicinity. I've proven that over the last few months. We don't have to interact to make the project successful."

"So you're unwilling to include her in your social circle."

"I'd say that sums things up pretty well. I don't want her there anymore than she wants to be there. However, I'll speak to the rest and inform them that they should feel free to pursue friendship with her - that there are no sides here. Will that satisfy you?"

I step closer to her, until I can look up into her eyes. There is still anger and pain in her glance, but mostly I see resignation. I sigh. "Will that satisfy you, Eli?"

"Ms Wellesly, I will remain unsatisfied and unfulfilled for the remainder of my natural life because I allowed my heart to overrule my head. But it's the best I can do for her."

I shake my head. It's not even close to the resolution I was hoping for, but maybe Eli can convince Jacob to stand up and be a friend to Arianna. She needs one of those. With a little luck, the rest will follow his example - these two will both need the support of all their friends if they're going to get through this project intact.

I turn my back to her and head towards the door, stopping by the table to pick up the Pad I had laid down when I entered the room. I hesitate, feeling her gaze follow my movements. I close my eyes and drop my head, hoping to stretch out the tight muscles in my neck before the headache I can feel forming there becomes a full-blown migraine. After a moment, I open my eyes and turn my head slightly to find her still looking at me.

"Can I ask you something?" She shrugs and crosses her arms over her chest defensively though she never loses my gaze. I turn so I'm facing her more fully - I want to catch even the tiniest reaction. "With Malcolm out of the picture, would you be willing to give her a second chance if she asked for one?"

"Since I'm bound to her, you mean?" she asks derisively, her lip curled in distaste. She holds up a hand before I can respond. "No, Ms Wellesly. I don't think I would. It only took three months with her as my half for it to nearly destroy me and I have finally started to put my life back together without her in it. I don't want to go through anything like that ever again."

"So a chance at happiness..."

"... isn't worth risking the peace I've managed to achieve. I'm sorry."

"Me too," I say. "I never took you for a coward." I pick up the Pad and walk towards the door, putting my hand on the handle and turning to find her still staring at me with those golden eyes. "I hope one day you figure out it's worth it... before it's too late, Eli. The only regret I have in my relationship with my husband was the time we missed together - especially the time when the only thing keeping us apart was anger or pride."

"You don't know anything about me or my feelings, Ms Wellesly. Please don't pretend you understand my actions or my motivations."

"I don't have to pretend, Eli. I understand a lot more than you'll ever give me credit for. It's my business to know what makes you tick remember? And there is one thing I'm as sure of as I am that I gave birth to three children. You're as angry at yourself as you are at her. And until you can forgive yourself, neither of you will have a chance at real happiness. And that's just a damn shame - most people would risk everything to find what you have with her."

"Had, Ms Wellesly. If I still had anything with her, you and I wouldn't be having this conversation. Thank you for reassuring me about Arianna's condition. I will ensure the rest of the team is made aware of the need to include her in their activities once more. Was there anything else?"

"No, Eli. If you're satisfied, I think we're done here."

She turns her attention back to whatever is happening in the world outside the window. "Goodbye, Ms Wellesly. I'd say it's been pleasant, but it really hasn't and I prefer not to lie."

"Except to yourself," I mutter loud enough for her to hear. I know she got the message when she stiffens though she doesn't shift her interest from the scene playing out below. "Please come by my room later," I invite in a louder voice. "I'll share those cookies with you."

She swings away from the glass, but before she can speak, I've opened the portal and slipped out the door. I lean against it for a long moment trying to regain my bearings. The headache I've been anticipating pounds through my brain and I wince in reflex at the pain. From out of nowhere, Caleb appears in front of me with a needle in his hand and I tilt my head to allow him to put the shot into my neck. I grip his arm as pain ripples through my body, then relax as the medicine takes effect, immediately relieving the pressure in my head.

"Rough day, Chief?"

"You knew to have it ready," I say, motioning at the empty syringe in his other hand. I push off the door and hold onto his arm as we make our way back down the hallway. "And the day hasn't even officially begun yet. I hope the Committee isn't as hostile as she was," jerking my thumb in the direction of the room I just left.

"That bad?" I cock my head and raise an eyebrow. He winces. "Sorry."

"Me too," I reply. "Is the day crew in place?" waiting for his nod. "And you debriefed Adam about...?" Another nod. "Good. He can handle things for a while. As soon as they move the candidates off the floor, I want you and Martha to move Arianna back to her room. When I get done with the Committee, I'm going to lay down and see if I can catch a short nap."

"Will that be enough, Chief?"

"Assuming I get to sleep tonight, yes." I sigh. "At least we shouldn't have too much longer with this assignment. We're closing in on the holidays and the schedule calls for them to be on their way by the first of the year. So the Committee is going to have to make their choices soon. Then we just have to get them to launch."

Caleb grins at me. "And what will you do with all the free time that leaves you?"

"What free time?" I grumble. "We do still have other clients."

"Yes, but nothing this demanding... at least not for a while," he says as we reach the lift I need to take to meet with the Committee this morning. I still have a few minutes, so we don't bother pushing the button yet, choosing instead to continue our conversation here where we're less likely to be interrupted for anything less than an emergency.

"Well, I do have a couple graduations to attend again this spring but until then? I don't know. Maybe I'll be a hippie again and travel the world like I did when I was a kid. I can see what's changed in thirty years."

"Not much, I'm sure," he offers. I snort.

"I've changed, Caleb. Pretty sure a lot will seem different. Besides, assuming I don't piss the Committee off six ways to Sunday this morning, we will have the second round of candidates to protect when they begin culling them. And Joy's sabbatical is over at the end of the year, and she's always a priority for me."

"For all of us, Chief. I'd never forgive myself if we let Eddie down by letting something happen to his little girl."

I chuckle. "You boys were the only ones who ever got away with calling him Eddie. He hated that from everyone else."

"War allows for strange exceptions, Chief. You know that as well as any of us."

"True," I agree as I glance at my watch. "Guess I better get going. I don't want to be late for the hanging."

Caleb laughs. "Yours or theirs?" I hold up my Pad.

"Who do you think?" I stepped through the open doors and turn around to look at his smiling face. "Wish me luck," I order.

"Knock 'em dead, Chief."

I grin, and the door closes between us. Time to do what I do best.

Epilogue

I walk out of the elevator without pausing. If I've timed this right, I should be the first one in the room. Stephen is sitting at the desk outside the conference room, and he rises when he sees me coming. I shake my head and gesture for him to resume his seat.

"Ms Wellesly...."

"Save it, Stephen. I'm well aware of what's going on, and I am going to have my say. Don't even think about warning them - we both know what will happen if you do. Don't worry - I'll tell them your protest was noted and I overruled your objections. Fortunately, I'm in a position to do that when necessary. In fact, why don't you do us both a favor and go get a cup of coffee from that delightful little coffee house across the street?" I hand him a credit card. "Maybe you'll have time to eat a muffin and check the news while you're there."

He nods and stands again, deliberately placing his comm device in the center of his desk. "As you say, Ms Wellesly. Will an hour be sufficient time?"

"I believe that will be sufficient, thank you Stephen." He crosses to the lift I just exited from and steps inside.

"The catering service should be here in moments, Ms Wellesly. The Committee decided to show his majesty a bit of hospitality and offer him breakfast while listening to his complaints."

"Thank you, Stephen. I'm sure they'll regret that decision before the day is over." He grins as the doors close on him and I laugh softly as I slip into the conference room. It is set up for the interviews that have been going on for the past few weeks. Each candidate is required to come to this room twice - once at the beginning of the interview procedure and again at the end. We are nearing the end, thankfully. Frankly I'm tired of the politics that have crept into the selection process. This was much more interesting when it was just about science... and possibilities.

Part of my job, however, is to keep these people honest, so it's time for me to step in and force the issues that need to be addressed before the end is reached.

I take in the raised dais with its tables and chairs, nameplates marking where each member will sit when the session begins. My fingers itch to scramble them all around just to screw with them, but the truth is I'm too tired for the drama that will cause some of the anal retentives sitting on this board.

In front of the center chair, on the floor and set about fifteen feet away, is another table and a single chair. This is where each candidate sits during their interviews. It's meant to intimidate, and with some it's successful. With others, it's just a means to an end. Those are the ones who've done well - they're not distracted; they've got their eyes on the prize.

Along the far wall are two more tables set up - these are for the refreshments the Committee keeps on hand so they don't have to leave the room during the interviews which can go on for hours depending on the candidate involved. This is where the catering team will set up the breakfast meal the Committee has ordered for their meeting with Fernando.

I'm already jittery from the amount of coffee I've consumed and I certainly don't need to eat again anytime soon. Instead I move back to the back corner of the room where a lone chair waits for my occupation. I have occasionally been asked to sit in on interviews of questionable candidates - those who aren't quite making the cut for one reason or another. The Committee seems to feel my research

might give them a better understanding of why some candidates flake out when they reach this stage. It's not rocket science, but their first concern was never the people involved, but the science. For me it's always been about the people. That's why I made the list that I did.

I sit down slowly, sighing in relief when I sink into the comfortable chair. My body aches from the lack of sleep; I can only hope that keeps me awake long enough to do what I came here to do. After that.... Well, after that, I'm hoping for a long, hot shower and a little rack time as far as I'm concerned. Princess and Angel will have their chance - what they do with it will be up to them.

The door opens and the catering crew comes inside, not even hesitating when they notice my presence. They go right to work and in minutes, the buffet is set up and ready for use. One of the boys offers me coffee and I ask for water. He hands me an ice-cold bottle, then as a singular entity, they exit the room. I know it's only a few moments before show time.

The Committee members are complaining about Stephen's absence when they open the door... until the one in the lead takes note of me carefully situated in the rear of the room. She sighs and points me out to the rest, and I see the resigned expressions that cross their faces.

Good - maybe this won't take as long as I feared.

I don't move from my spot, allowing them to loiter around as they prepare their plates, though their conversation is much more subdued than it was when they walked in. The door opens again, and this time Fernando walks in pompously with Malcolm in tow. They don't notice me, but I don't mind - they will hear from me soon enough.

Another chair is brought for Malcolm, though he does not sit at the table beside Fernando. Instead he sits slightly behind and to his left. I find that curious, especially given the fact that Fernando chose this man to be his daughter's life partner.

The woman in charge of leading the meeting looks at me and I shake my head. She sighs and nods, closing her eyes before giving Arianna's father a bright smile.

"Thank you for joining us, your majesty. We understand you have some grievances you'd like us to address?"

"Indeed I do, Madame Chairman," he replies with a tight smile. "However, I believe we can come to an accord about what needs to be done."

"I'm sure we can, majesty," I say as I rise from my seat in the back of the room. I smile when I see both Malcolm and Fernando stiffen at the sound of my voice. *Sorry, boys, I think to myself as I saunter towards the front of the room. If you didn't want to play with the big dogs, you should have stayed the hell on the porch.*

I look up at the Committee as I reach the table when Fernando and Malcolm are currently ensconced and give the members a bright smile. "Let's get started, shall we?" I offer. It's going to be a good day after all.

END PART TWO

01/12-02/12