

Disclaimers: None. If you're still reading my stuff at this point, you pretty well know what you're getting into. If you don't have an open mind or if you find something you think needs disclaiming, you are still more than welcome to let me know. It won't change anything, but it may make you feel better. Ugliness will earn you a smack to the back of your head.

Thanks: To Phil, Mac and Jeanne for reading through this for me to pick up Pink & Fluffy's dropped letters and missed quotation marks. Honestly, I couldn't ask for a better group of women to beta read for me. Their diligence is greatly valued as Pink and Fluffy tend to leave a trail of missing pieces. Their contribution to making this a better read is much appreciated. All errors belong strictly to me.

Author's Notes: This is part three of what will be a four-story arc, and the last part written in a first person present format... hallelujah!

The Storyteller's Cardinal Rule is in effect... but really has little to do with anything herein contained. It will become a factor in the final story of the arc.

Favors of Fortune - Part Three Behind Closed Doors

By D

Prologue

I walk out of the elevator without pausing, knowing I should be the first one in the room - a status that happens to suit my needs very well this morning. 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. He's a good kid and does what he's told. Obviously his mother raised him right. And it doesn't hurt that he's one of my guys, either. It didn't take much to get the Committee to agree to have someone outside their doors for added security purposes.

"Ms Wellesly...."

"Save it, Stephen. We both know I'm going in that room and they're going to be surprised by my presence today. Don't worry - I'll tell them you protested quite vocally and vehemently and I overruled your objections on the grounds that I'm your boss and have the final word in these matters." He chuckles and I smile. "Fortunately, I'm in a position to do that when necessary and I don't do it often enough for them to be able to complain about it." I hand him a credit chit. "Take a little break - stretch your legs... maybe go get some coffee."

He nods and stands again, deliberately placing the comm device that links him to the Committee members in the center of his desk. He shifts slightly to show me he still has his security comm unit. "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. Indigestion is such an unhappy circumstance to suffer through." 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 sits while in session. My fingers itch to scramble them all around just to screw with them a little bit, 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 the interview. 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. I'm looking forward to the day that I get to reveal who I chose as the most viable candidates. I feel confident I'm going to be right on the money.

Along the far wall are two more tables set up for refreshments. This is where the catering team will set up the breakfast meal the Committee has ordered for their meeting with Fernando.

I move back to the back corner of the room where a lone chair waits for my occupation, already jittery from the amount of coffee I've consumed. 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.... 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.

They 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.

They fill their plates and 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. Wouldn't he want Malcolm to be acknowledged as his heir... his equal?

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 McMurry," he replies with a tight smile. "As you know, my daughter's betrothed was removed not only from her room last night, but he was forbidden to remain in the hotel where she is staying. That is highly irregular and unacceptable behavior, Madame Chairman. But 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.*

Chapter I

"Madame Chairman, I must protest," Fernando says with a smile, though his gritted teeth make it a little hard to understand him. "These matters are private, and this woman has done nothing but interfere. *She is the reason we're here today. It is her actions that have brought us to this place.*"

"And that is precisely why she is permitted to be part of these proceedings, your majesty," McMurry replies. I sit on a corner of the table, crossing my arms over my chest. I expected Fernando to protest; just as I expect McMurry to explain things to him. "I know things function a little differently on your world," she says to him with a polite smile pasted on her lips, "but here the accused is allowed to stand before her accusers and hear the charges being brought. She is also allowed to answer any accusations that are made against her."

"That is highly unusual, Madame Chairman. Surely as a reigning Head of State...."

"Your status as a monarch cannot preclude her rights as an individual, your majesty. Moreover, as the head of security for the project, Ms Wellesly has every right to sit in on any and all business that could have an impact on our work here."

"Very well, Madame Chairman. I would like my protest to her presence noted."

"So noted," McMurry said with a nod. "Would you like to begin, your majesty? Perhaps we can address your concerns one at a time and come up with an equitable solution for all involved."

"And if we can't, Madame Chairman? I'm not convinced there is an equitable solution to be found in this situation that will be satisfactory for everyone."

"We'll do what is best for the project," I reply. I feel him tense behind me and I turn so I can look at him directly. "This is not about what you want, majesty. This is about making the best choices for the success of the project."

Fernando growls, but I turn away from him - essentially ignoring him because I know it will rile him up further. And angry people make stupid mistakes. It occurs to me to wonder why Malcolm has remained mute and disinterested in the proceedings; he has yet to say a word and his eyes haven't moved from his plate. I wonder if it's because he really doesn't care; he's been told to remain silent; or if he fully expects to resume his place on the team no matter what gets said today. I can't wait to disabuse him of that last notion.

I face the Committee once more, noting that several of the members are finding amusement in the events playing out in front of them. That should work to my advantage - it indicates that at least some of representatives here are as tired of the political grandstanding as I am. I maintain my position and wait for Fernando to speak.

I hear him shove his plate aside, then turn and whisper to Malcolm. There is more shifting before he clears his throat and begins to address the Committee. I slide from the table and move unobtrusively to a corner of the room where I can observe everything without interfering in the process. I am happy to let the man have his say - he has every right and he's entitled an opinion... even if it's wrong. I'll get my chance to respond. And I'm pretty sure he's not going to see me coming.

"First of all, Madame Chairman, I would like to remind the Committee that we had an agreement. Malcolm was added to the candidate list in order to protect my daughter - he was in place as her personal royal security agent. Ms Wellesly had no right...."

"On the contrary, majesty... I have every right. Especially since your boy there is the one who put her in danger."

"Madame Chairman... if I could finish...."

"Ms Wellesly," McMurtry cautions me with a smile. "Perhaps you should let his majesty finish airing his grievances before you start answering them."

"No, Madame Chairman. Since I am entitled to defend my actions, I'd prefer to address them one at a time. It might help curtail these proceedings. I am well aware of the tight schedule the Committee needs to maintain to wrap up the remainder of these interviews."

"Very well, Ms Wellesly. Please continue."

"Madame Chairman... I must protest again. You're obviously biased in her favor."

"Not at all, your majesty. But Ms Wellesly has a point - we are on a tight schedule and she has the right to defend herself as each charge is brought if she so desires. I assure you that you'll have every opportunity to present each concern you have, and we will maintain neutrality as we listen. Please allow her to answer your first charge." She turns back to me. "Tell us, Ms Wellesly - what gave

you the right to dismiss Malcolm? He was part of an agreement we made with his majesty when his daughter was recruited to participate as a candidate in this project. And you don't have the authority to dismiss a candidate on your own - it still has to go through us," motioning along both sides of the table.

"First of all, Madame Chairman - I was never notified that Malcolm was brought in as Angel's private security." Of course that doesn't mean I wasn't aware, but they don't need to know that. I'm not giving anything away at this point. "Perhaps if I'd been informed at the outset, we could have worked something out to include him as part of the security detail. As it is, he has done nothing but put Angel in danger and as such had to be eliminated from the project."

"You have no proof!" Malcolm shouts. Fernando turns and gives him a glare. Malcolm shrinks back into himself and I smile.

"On the contrary, I have viable proof of your actions. You were under observation whenever you were in the public areas of the prototype facility." I give him a hard stare. "You outed her as a royal on your first day in the compound - set everyone against her. It took intervention from Princess and a lot of time and effort for her to overcome that introduction."

"It wasn't that big a deal!!"

"Maybe not to you, but to her it was crippling." I shift my glance to her father. "Much like her so-called childhood was... only worse. Although her childhood was less than stellar because she was forced into things she should have been sheltered from," I say, staring at him until I see his gaze waver, "everyone has growing pains. It's just a part of life." I resume glaring at Malcolm, whose eyes refuse to meet mine. "But you, Malcolm..." I'm not about to call him by his codename - it shows just how much we despised him from the start. "You were worse. You took what should have been a fresh start... an opportunity for her to find friendship among peers that respected her, and made her the outcast she'd been for most of her life. That alone would have gotten you removed if it'd been my choice," leveling a look at the Committee. They are smart enough to appear chastised. "At least now I understand why you remained."

After a moment of silence, McMurtry meets my gaze. "Were there other things that contributed to his dismissal last night, Ms Wellesly?"

"Of course, Madame Chairman. Although he continued to try and segregate her from the friends she finally attained during the practical test at the compound, he wasn't entirely successful - at least not until they became betrothed."

"Now see here, Madame Chairman. This woman is not permitted to stand in judgment of the customs of our society!" Fernando shouted. "This is yet another complaint I wish to lodge. She seems determined to make others conform to her ideals." I hold up a hand to keep McMurtry from speaking. Instead, I turn and face Fernando directly and give him a small smile.

"Majesty, I would never dream of standing in judgment of your society. Too much damage has been wrought on this planet because one man thought himself in a place to judge what was right and wrong for everyone." I tilt my head and look at him seriously, realizing I have thrown him off his stride once again by using a calm, rational tone of voice and meeting his eyes squarely. "Did you know, majesty, that there was a time on this planet that one of my sons would have been beaten or even killed because he loved another man?"

"That's unconscionable!"

"It is," I agree. "But it's also true. He would have been crucified for being unnatural... for being different. And the world would have missed out on someone amazing if that had happened. So I try to always keep that thought in the back of my mind when dealing with anyone - different doesn't mean worse or better. It just means not like me. And if I listen and give different a chance to be heard, I might learn something." I pause, noting the thoughtful expression on his face.

"So you weren't mocking our betrothal process? I know many people consider us to be morally loose or even reprehensible by their standards."

"As you do about those who are different than you.... Don't," I instruct before he can interrupt. "I know what you think about meat eaters... including the people in this room. However, I'm not actually concerned with that or your betrothal customs at the moment. I'm more troubled about how betrothing Angel to Malcolm impacted Angel's life within the project."

"How do you mean?"

Good - I have his attention now. I keep my back to the Committee, knowing they can still hear everything that is said. But I want this to be a conversation between Fernando and me. I don't want him to worry about there being anyone else in the room besides us. I take a step closer, giving a feel of intimacy between us.

"In your culture, sexual discovery is a mandated part of early adulthood, correct? It is encouraged to help individuals learn how to please others as well as introducing them to many aspects of sex that they might find enjoyable... all in an effort to make your marriages successful." He nods. "This goes on for how long?" knowing the answer Arianna shared but curious to hear Fernando's reply.

"Generally two to five years, depending on the parties involved. Sometimes there are exceptions."

"Arianna was one of those exceptions, wasn't she?"

He nods. "She was. Her royal position as well as her participation in this project made it more difficult for her to meet people she might connect with. We decided to offer her a little more time to enjoy the benefits of exploration."

"So what made you decide to betroth her when you did?"

"It was time," he replies harshly. "She was beyond the normal age of betrothal. She has responsibilities to the realm."

"Okay... I understand that. But you just said that you extended her exploration period because of those same responsibilities. So what caused you to force her into a betrothal six months ago? You know the rules here."

"I did not force...."

"Yes, majesty - you did. You didn't ask her preference. You informed her that she was being betrothed and that her intended was Malcolm here," I say, gesturing to the man slouching in his chair behind Fernando and pouting his lips petulantly. "You didn't even ask if she liked him."

"That is inconsequential. It's my right and responsibility to make the best match for her that I can. That is how it's done on our world."

"I get that," I reply reasonably as I perch on the corner of the table closest to Fernando... which is the furthest away from Malcolm and gives me an unhindered view of him. "I do. I don't necessarily agree with it, but I do understand the custom. I have kids too - two boys and a girl. The difference is that I allowed my children to make their own life choices in their careers as well as their mates; my wish is that they find happiness in their lives."

"Are you saying I don't wish the same for my only child??" his voice rising as his temper flares.

"I'm saying you never have, majesty," watching his face darken as rage flushes through his system. "Arianna's needs and desires have always taken second place at best to what you want for her and from her. Otherwise, you would have at least discussed things with her before matching her with a man she barely tolerates on a good day."

"IT WAS MY RIGHT!!!"

"Strangely, that doesn't really help your case, majesty. Not all tradition should be adhered to as though it was gospel."

"How dare you?!" slamming his hand on the table and half-rising from his seat.

"Very easily, majesty. I have files upon files of reports of her treatment from the time she was brought to the attention of the Committee. And I've seen for myself since the candidates were brought in for their final interviews."

"I thought you said you weren't going to judge."

"I'm not judging, majesty. I am stating unadulterated fact that I can prove without prejudice." Fernando gives me a disbelieving stare and I meet his glance without hesitation. "Would you like me to show you? I will be happy to do so from the very beginning, though we will need to take this somewhere else to finish this discussion as the Committee does have interviews to conduct today."

"We are not leaving here until this is sorted," he declares. "I am not at all concerned with your schedule. I am concerned with finding some justice for my daughter's intended as well as the people of my planet," he states, frowning and crossing his arms over his chest again.

"And what do the people of your planet have to do with these proceedings, majesty?" I ask, feeling the Committee focus harder behind me. They are as curious about his answer as I am.

"If we cannot find satisfaction in our dealings today, I will be forced to remove my daughter from the project. That makes it a matter of planetary importance as far as my people are concerned and it will bring your project to a halt."

I smile, knowing he has made his first major misstep... aside from starting these events in the first place. He has no idea the minefield he's just wandered into, and I'm going to lead him like a sheep to slaughter - just because beneath the veneer of civility beats the heart of a prick. The Committee remains silent behind me, but I know they are waiting with bated breath to see where this is going. I see Malcolm grinning and realize he thinks this is his ticket back into the project.

"I see," I reply slowly. "How do you figure such a thing, majesty?"

"It is Arianna's work that the entire project is based upon - everything else is tied into her discovery of nuclear fusion. Without that, everything else ceases to be," he informs me, leaning back with a satisfied smile on his face. I nod my consent to his words.

"That's true, majesty. But you're forgetting one very important thing."

"I'm sure I'm not," he counters. "Arianna's work needs Arianna's presence. That is why I know that things will turn out in my favor no matter what defense you offer here today for your actions. They need Arianna here much more than they need you. And the Committee and I already have a standing agreement that keeps Malcolm by her side. As long as they remain betrothed and not married until they arrive at the asteroid, no one has the authority to remove him."

"Except I do, and I have. And before our time here is done, the Committee will agree with me... even the representative from your world. Besides," I continue over his outrage spluttering, "the project doesn't need Arianna's presence on a team to continue," I assure him. "It may be her work, but we have a working model. We have the plans and diagrams. And if your boy over there was smarter than a box of rocks, he would have told you that several of the scientists I expect to be chosen to be part of the Alpha team have been trained to utilize and maintain the reactor. They aren't the experts that Arianna is, of course, but they know enough to suffice in her absence."

"You can't do that!!" he bellows, standing up from his chair so rapidly that he knocks it over. "You have no right!!"

"Actually, we have every right. Each of the candidates agreed to such measures at the beginning of the process - of their own free will and without obligation. They agreed to teach each other as well as learn from the rest so that we were ensured a nice field of cross-trained candidates."

"No!!! I won't allow it!!" thumping his fist on the table and leaning forward to scream in my face.

"Majesty, it's not your choice. Nor is pulling your daughter from the project. If she chooses to leave, that is one thing. But you cannot make her go - only the Committee has that power now." I stand and drop my arms so I can lean on the table and go nose to nose with him. "And you and your boy are no longer allowed contact with her until the Committee has made its decision. I won't let you manipulate her into choosing to leave."

"Madame Chairman!!! I must protest!!" letting his eyes shift to the Committee members without backing away from his standoff with me. She nods.

"Your protest is noted, your majesty, but given what we have heard so far, Ms Wellesly is well within her rights to block any and all communication with your daughter. Can you show proof that Ms Wellesly is lying or has some sort of vendetta against you personally?" McMurtry waited, but Fernando didn't reply. Only I could see the absolute hatred in his eyes. "Very well, unless something can be shown otherwise, I think all of Arianna's communication will go through Ms Wellesly from now until such time as we make our decision. At that point, it will be Arianna's choice whether or not to continue to have her communication monitored."

Fernando looks at his man on the Committee. "Have you nothing to say, Bartolo?"

"Your majesty, I'm afraid in this instance what the chairman and Ms Wellesly have said is true. You have very little standing here; we offered you some concessions at the beginning by permitting Malcolm's presence as a candidate because of the Princess' status as the sole heir of a monarchy, but it has gone far beyond that now. And Ms Wellesly's testimony becomes more damaging with every passing moment."

"You are dead to me," Fernando growls, smiling fiendishly when the blood drains from Bartolo's face. Bartolo swallows hard but accepts his king's judgment.

"As you say, majesty, but at least I sleep with a clear conscience knowing I have done my best for my world and my Princess. Can you say the same?"

Fernando goes to lunge towards Bartolo, but I stop him with a forceful hand to his chest. We're only inches apart, and if looks could kill, I'd be ash now. Instead, he snarls at me. "Remove your hand from my person before I break it."

"Try," I dare him, a smile crossing my lips. "It'll be the last thing you remember for a long time." He keeps his eyes on my face, gauging my seriousness. I push at him slightly and he steps back in reflex. "Sit down, majesty. We still have things to talk about."

Chapter II

"I realize that it was important to you and your people to betroth Arianna - after all, you want them to see that she is committed to them and their way of life." I see the confusion in his eyes at my change of tactics and wonder what kind of leadership training this man received to make him a ruler of his people. He nods and resumes his seat. I slide back and sit on a corner of the table facing him while keeping the Committee in my periphery. I wait for him to respond.

"Yes... exactly. As excited as everyone is about the notoriety we as a people and Arianna in particular have received thanks to her inclusion in this project, they needed to be assured that she was still their Princess... and that she will still return home one day to serve in that capacity."

I nod. "I see. And how was Malcolm the best choice for her?" I hold up a hand to stop his tirade before it begins. "By your own admission, it was your right and responsibility to make the best match for her possible. I'm just asking for clarification on how Malcolm filled that bill."

He stares at me, evaluating my sincerity once more. I have no hidden agenda; I've made it quite clear what my goal here is. He releases a deep breath and leans back in his chair, a little more comfortable with this line of questioning. There are no accusations... yet.

"Aside from being responsible for her security, Malcolm is someone she's known her whole life... someone she's comfortable with. He's titled... a knight-errant of the kingdom. In addition, his family is wealthy and owns a company that provides employment to a number of citizens. The merger of our two households would benefit Arianna greatly - even though Malcolm would retain ownership of the company, their marriage would put the company and its employees squarely behind the monarchy. That would give my daughter added support in her reign."

"So Malcolm doesn't become a ruling monarch?"

Fernando laughs; Malcolm glares for a brief moment, then returns his gaze to the floor. "Not at all, Ms Wellesly. Ruling is strictly for those born into the royal line. He will merely be her consort."

"So he brings money, title and political support into the marriage to make Arianna a stronger ruler, but his sole benefit is that he fathers the children who will carry her title when the time comes," I say and wait for Fernando's little nod and shrug of affirmation. "That's kind of a crap deal for him, isn't it? Who makes the decisions in the household?"

His brow furrows. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Ms Wellesly."

I bite my lips to keep from making a sharp retort. Instead, I give him a small smile and gesture towards the Committee. "Chairman McMurtry is from this planet - household decisions here tend to fall to both partners, but usually whoever is closest to the situation is the one who winds up deciding whatever the issue is that needs a resolution. In Member Mien's society, the men make the decisions unequivocally and on Member Danski's world, women have the final say... though their men are allowed to express their opinions and wishes until that decision is made. So on your planet, majesty - who makes the decisions in the household?"

"In a mixed pairing, it is the man. If the wedding partners are the same gender, then that is decided between them. They are, after all, adults. It traditionally falls to the older of the two however."

"And in Arianna's case? She is the Princess after all... who will one day be responsible for the wellbeing of her entire planet. But she's still a woman and younger than Malcolm. Who would have the final say in her household?"

"Realistically, the decision should be her husband's, but as Princess, she would ultimately have the final say." I see Malcolm flinch and clench his hands into fists, shaking slightly. I wonder what it will take to make him break.

"Would it interest you to know then that after you betrothed Arianna and Malcolm, he started asserting his rights as her other? He's forbidden her to talk to any of her colleagues outside a professional setting; he's cut her out of all social activities that he cannot attend... girls' nights and the like; he's said hateful and hurtful things both to her and about her."

"Are you certain?" I raise my eyebrow at him.

"Majesty, I assure you I can back up every statement I make today with visual and audible proof."

"It's my right," Malcolm cuts in, jumping up from his chair before Fernando can reply. I shift my attention to him, but he's pointing his finger in Fernando's direction. "It's my right to be the head of the household and to have my wife look to me for guidance in all areas of our private life. I never agreed to anything less. Besides, Arianna knows her place."

"Which place would that be, Malcolm?" I ask with deceptive calm. If there is going to be an interstellar incident today, I'm going to do my best to ensure the idiot turns it in my direction. I'm not looking to destroy a culture - only to tweak it enough for Arianna and Eli to have a chance at happiness. "At the end of the day, she's still royalty... and you're still the commoner chosen to be her consort. Nothing more, nothing less."

He crosses his arms over his chest and gives me a smirk. At least I have his complete attention now. "But I was chosen," he reminds me smugly. "I am still the head of the household outside any royal

duties or commitments. That includes this project - it doesn't fall under the royal purview. And there's not a damned thing you can do about it. You can't break our betrothal agreement."

"And why is that?" I ask, turning my focus back to Fernando. I hear Malcolm huff and flop back into his seat, but keep my expression serene despite my desire to mock his tantrum.

"There are only a few mitigating circumstances that can break a betrothal contract once it has been entered into. And you don't have that authority."

"Do you?"

"Naturally, as do Malcolm's parents. But betrothal contracts are considered binding unless agreed to by both parties or, as I mentioned, in the case of mitigating circumstances."

"Consequently it's like marriage without the sex."

"Essentially, yes. Divorce is unheard of on my world." I notice he didn't say anything about separation but I nod my understanding, marveling that such a weird culture has managed to exist for as long as it has. On the other hand, they have found a way to thrive under such mandates, and their history is clouded with far less bloodshed than my own. I set my thoughts aside and return my focus to the man in front of me.

"So even knowing the rules that apply to all of the candidates - that no one working on the project can be married - you still betrothed them, fully expecting the Committee to honor your agreement with them in allowing Malcolm to remain with Arianna... even though it meant she would be cut off from the rest of her teammates."

"Of course. We have an agreement - where Arianna goes, Malcolm goes as well. As long as they remained unmarried, there is little the Committee can do about them being betrothed to one another. Their betrothal requires that they remain celibate until their vows are exchanged, so I'm not sure I understand the problem. They're not breaking any rules."

"Except they really are. Sex is not commitment on your planet; betrothal is. You just said it is marriage without the sex... that it was a binding contract unless agreed to by both parties involved in the arrangement. That makes it commitment. That is what the rule is in place for. They cannot be committed to one another to participate in this project."

"You're changing the rules to suit you!"

"Not at all, majesty; I'm not changing anything because I don't need to. Even if I were a candidate - which I am not - the rule wouldn't apply to me. I'm not married nor am I promised to anyone."

"And this?" he demands, snatching my left hand and holding it up between us. I hear the Committee shift uncomfortably behind me. They were around when I got the news of Edward's death.

"I am a widow, majesty. My husband was killed trying to evacuate women and children from a planet that was under attack."

He drops my hand as if it scalded him, and lets his eyes fall to the table. "My condolences, Ms Wellesly. I was unaware."

"Thank you, majesty," I murmur. "I wouldn't expect you to know. It's not public knowledge."

He nods gratefully, entirely aware that he stepped into what could have been a landmine. He pinches his lips between his fingers a moment, then looks at me again. "However, that doesn't change the fact that the Committee and I have a standing arrangement. I will of course ensure that Malcolm understands his rights and responsibilities as her betrothed, including allowing her socialization with those around them." Fernando shrugs. "Her mother would be greatly distressed to learn that she was being segregated from the others. She feels very strongly about getting out among people, and she worked very hard to ensure Arianna was given every opportunity for socialization possible."

"Your agreement does not take precedence over the rule, majesty."

"Ms Wellesly...." I hold up a hand to halt his words. I stand and begin to pace.

"Your culture is based in part on its attitude towards sexual exploration. For years, you encourage your young people to find compatible partners to experience every manner of sexual intimacy available. Then after a suitable time, a match is made by the young person's parents - they have little to no say in who gets chosen for them correct?"

"Ms Wellesly, we've already been over this," Fernando says impatiently. "Why are we rehashing it yet again?"

"Just answer the question, please, majesty."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "That would be correct."

"And how long is the betrothal period... generally speaking?"

He shifts uncomfortably and I know he doesn't want to answer the question. Probably because this is going in a direction he really doesn't want it to go. "Usually three to six months - long enough to make the necessary agreements, settle any disputes and to allow the technicalities to go through the system." Everyone smirks at that declaration - even Fernando. It's reassuring to know that even in our paperless societies, we all still suffer through the same paperwork drag our ancestors did. You'd think that in all our advancements we could have improved that, but bureaucracy is still bureaucracy. "It varies from couple to couple of course, but three to six months is fairly standard."

"Okay, so what are you planning to do about Arianna and Malcolm?"

"I don't understand the question."

I turn my back to roll my eyes where Fernando can't see me. Surely the man was a lawyer in another life, because he continues to ask for clarification on every little point - even those that are clear. I turn around again to meet his eyes, putting my hands on my hips.

"Majesty, Arianna and Malcolm have already been betrothed for six months already, give or take a few days. By your own accounting, betrothal equals celibacy in your culture, right?" seeing him offer a grudging nod. "They're not allowed any type of sexual activity or physical intimacy until they've taken their vows." Another reluctant nod. "Now, even if we overlook the fact that betrothal on your planet is the same as commitment or marriage for everyone else - we're not ignoring it, by the way, but just for argument's sake, let's pretend we are for a moment - they CANNOT be married if they have any hope of being chosen to participate as a member of the Alpha team."

"That is the reason they have NOT been married, Ms Wellesly - so they will be abiding by the rules the Committee established for participation in this project while the Committee honors its agreement with me." He's smug again, and only the knowledge that I can wipe that expression from his face by pulling the rug out from under him and his imagined cleverness is keeping *me* from starting an interstellar incident this time. Because right now, I would seriously like to beat him soundly about the head until I feel better.

I make a mental note to be sure that Eli receives a copy of these proceedings at some point. I know what Arianna did hurt her deeply, but I think she needs to realize what Arianna has been up against her entire life. I let my focus come back to the room and the arrogant man in front of me. He's going down, and I'm not going to soften the blow.

"So you're willing to doom your daughter to years of celibacy just to make a point??" I see Malcolm's head jerk up and his eyes widen in horror, but I ignore him for the moment. I give Fernando a look of disgust and almost snicker at his confusion. I suppose he has his good points - he must have to have had a hand in creating someone like Arianna that could capture Eli's heart. But I really don't like this man or his attitude. He sputters at me.

"What?? No... of course not! Why would you think something like that?? I'm not cruel!!"

I purse my lips to keep the mocking laughter I want to release from escaping. I hear various strangled responses behind me and know that the Committee is having an equally hard time restraining themselves. I wonder if he can feel their support wavering the longer we remain in this room.

"Tell me, majesty - what are the customs of marriage on your planet?"

"Why?" suspicion in his tone.

"I am trying to get a clear picture of how things work on your world. I told you I wouldn't judge, but I can't understand if no one explains things to me, can I?"

He lets out a deep breath, trying to figure out my motives again. I consider why this is since I have been completely honest about what I am doing here. I tilt my head and cock an eyebrow, tucking my hands into my pockets and relaxing my stance. He glares a moment longer then shakes his head.

"On the chosen day, the two participants are separated. They are brought into the bosom of their families where they are pampered - fed, bathed, dressed. It is a time spent rejoicing and celebrating their good fortune."

"And how long does it last?"

"Generally it begins in the morning and lasts until just before sunset."

"What happens then?"

"The wedding walk. The two participants and their families walk together to the spot chosen for the ceremony. Once they meet, they exchange vows in front of those gathered, and there is more celebrating. Finally, before the last hour of the day, everyone walks the new couple to their new abode. The two that serve as primary witness each offer a toast; the couple kisses and goes into

their home. Those gathered cheer until the lights are extinguished, then they disperse back to their homes."

"Would that be the same for Arianna? I mean... as the Princess, would there have to be special allowances made for her security and the crowds of people I'm assuming would want to be witness to her nuptials?"

"Of course, of course," he replies with a smile, excited at the prospect of Arianna's wedding. "Much of it would remain the same - there would still be the celebration with family and the walk... though there would be security around her as well as along the parade route. The ceremony itself would be indoors for family only - inside the State Church so the Holy Father himself could preside over the service. But it would be televised so those who wished to celebrate with her could participate. After the ceremony, there would be the presentation and public celebration. Then would come the walk to the palace - we would never reveal her private residence to everyone. After the toasts and the kiss, the wedding is over, though the celebrating would continue until the early hours of the morning. Royal weddings don't happen very often and are much cause for celebration when they do."

"I see. So who exactly are you planning to screw here - your daughter or your realm?"

"Excuse me?!? How dare you??"

"I dare quite easily, majesty. It's a legitimate question. Arianna and Malcolm cannot be married and be chosen for the project. Yet if they were both able to be chosen, it would be years before they could be married."

"Not at all - they can be married once they reach the asteroid. There is nothing in the rules that precludes any of the team from forming permanent attachments with one another once they're in place to begin making the project a reality."

"Who will marry them that would be recognized by your people? By your own declaration, her marriage is practically a planetary holiday. Everyone expects to be part of it in some small way. So who among any of the candidates remaining would be an acceptable substitute for your Holy Father?" I turn to look at Bartolo, but he simply shakes his head. "If there is no one, then they couldn't be married until they returned - which in the case of this project is a minimum of five years. You really want your daughter to be physically and socially celibate for that long, majesty? Because you can't change the rules of betrothal just for her - that could lead to planetary uproar and rebellion."

"Wait... what do you mean, five years?"

"Majesty, it's not like the asteroid is around the corner, nor do we have regular shuttle service between there and here. Five years was determined to be the minimum amount of time necessary to establish a colony. That was ascertained at the beginning of this whole process. Have you not been paying attention?" I step back to the table, though I choose the opposite corner for my perch this time. If he's going to lash out, I'm going to make him work for it.

"So," I persist, tucking one leg behind the other and crossing my arms over my chest to keep my balance. "Who would get screwed here, majesty... metaphorically speaking of course? Your daughter or your people? Because assuming Malcolm could make the cut, you're going to have to make a choice."

"I don't see...."

"Of course, since Malcolm isn't going to be part of the final project, it's almost a moot point," I continue as though he hadn't spoken. It's almost impossible not to enjoy the fury that crosses both his face and Malcolm's, but I'm a better poker player than that. "What you need to decide now is whether or not Arianna is going to be forced into prolonged celibacy because she is bound to Malcolm or if you're going to release her from the betrothal contract you forced upon her."

"You have no right! It's not your place - you don't get to make those kinds of choices!!"

"Majesty, I'm not choosing - I'm simply showing you the options you have."

"Breaking the contract is not an option," Malcolm declares. "I won't release her from her obligation to it... or me."

"I'm sure I can change your mind."

"I don't think so," he growls. "I will be part of the Alpha team, and I will be wed to Arianna."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," I counsel him, and pick up my Pad. Time to kick it up a notch.

Chapter III

I turn and face the Committee, pressing a button on my Pad to alert Caleb and Adam to the situation. That will at least get Stephen back out front in case something goes haywire. I feel the shudder of vibration indicating their acknowledgment and look up to meet the eyes of each of the Committee members waiting for me to speak. I can see they are less than enthusiastic about the proceedings, given what's been revealed already, but there is a certain amount of curiosity too. Chairman McMurtry nods, and I turn back to meet Malcolm's eyes. There is a level of hatred I haven't encountered in a long time, and I feel my blood stir. Time to get personal.

"So, Malcolm," I say casually, watching his jaw clench before he forces himself to relax. Fernando leans back to observe, wondering where I'm going this time. I ignore him and focus on Malcolm. Any candidate whose codename was 'The Prick' deserves what's coming to him.

"Yes, Ms Wellesly?" I can hear his teeth grinding and I smirk.

"You said Arianna knew her place," waiting for him to nod. "Tell me... what place is that?"

"Her place in the household is what it should be in our society - in subjection to her betrothed. In this case, me."

"Even though she's the heir to the throne and the next in line to rule your world?"

"That is irrelevant. Her responsibilities in the home vary greatly from her duties to the realm. She recognizes that fact."

"Um hmm," I reply noncommittally. "And would it surprise you to know that she despises you?" He stammers incoherently, but I ignore him and continue. "Despite what his majesty indicated, she's not only completely uncomfortable with you, she actually cannot stand you at all."

"You have no proof!!" he hollers, jumping from his chair and leaning forward aggressively. I smirk and lean towards him as I did with Fernando earlier.

"On the contrary," I disagree with a smile.

"Tell me, majesty," I begin, turning away from Malcolm. He grabs my arm with intent, and I clench his hand with my own, bending his thumb back so far and so fast he sinks to his knees with a scream. Fernando rises swiftly from his chair, but doesn't step in to help Malcolm. I meet Fernando's eyes and he shakes his head slightly - he's seen the rage. I focus on Malcolm again, jerking my hand just enough to make him whimper as his face pales. "Don't you ever touch me again. Next time I'll grab something far more sensitive. You got me?"

He shakes his head so rapidly I can hear the rocks in his head rattling. I hold his gaze, conveying my sincerity to him. It is only when the Chairman clears her throat that I release my grip. Malcolm drops the rest of the way to the ground and I straighten the sleeve of my jacket before meeting Fernando's eyes. He slowly resumes his seat and I clear my throat.

"Tell me majesty," I repeat, "What are some of the mitigating circumstances that would cause a betrothal to be broken without both parties agreeing? Would the fact that Arianna hates Malcolm and has zero respect for him be a compelling enough reason?"

Fernando shakes his head. "Not really. Perhaps if those feelings would affect the monarchy in some way...." He trails off thoughtfully, then shakes his head again. "It's not required that the two parties involved like one another, though they generally do. Are you certain of Arianna's feelings towards Malcolm?"

"There is no doubt, majesty." He remains thoughtful, but he says nothing. "We'll come back to my question directly," I tell him, then I turn to focus on the Committee.

"Let me lay out the facts we have so far." They glance at one another before McMurtry finally gives me a nod to continue. "You as a singular body made an agreement with his majesty to allow Malcolm to be a viable candidate as long as Arianna was one - an agreement which has no merit."

"Now see here...."

"Shut it," I command, watching them flinch. It's a satisfying response. I'm tired and I'm cranky and the level of stupid here is starting to piss me off beyond all reasonable expectation of control. "Your agreement is invalid because *I* am in charge of security... all security... and I was not consulted nor informed of such an agreement. For Malcolm to be part of my security team, he would have to meet the same vigorous standards as the rest of my team members, and I know for a fact he cannot."

"Wanna bet?" he sneers, cradling his hand. It's very likely I've dislocated the joint in his thumb. I know I didn't break it.

I set my locked Pad on the table in front of the Chairman and slip my shoes from my feet. "Bring it on, big boy" I invite him, motioning him forward. "I've already proven I can take you. Would you like to go for two?" He glares at me, but doesn't move. I put my hands on my hips and snort at him. "Yeah... I didn't think so." I step back into my shoes with a wince and pick up my Pad. "Since I do have final say over who is and is not part of the security team, Malcolm is hereby fired and your standing arrangement is null and void."

"Madame Chairman!!" Fernando shouts, rising from his seat again. "We have a contract."

"We *did*, your majesty," she replies with a slow nod. "But it is well within Ms Wellesly's purview to negate that pact if she feels security is not sufficient. Given what she showed us a moment ago, and Malcolm's inability to defend himself against her... Well, frankly we're at something of a loss to understand why you'd want to allow him to continue to be responsible for your daughter's safety."

I can feel both men fuming behind me, but I refuse to turn and look. This is just the first nail. I want the coffin sealed before we leave here. McMurtry looks at me again.

"Is that everything, Ms Wellesly, or is there more?" I tilt my head and smirk at her and the Chairman sighs. "Of course there's more," she answers resignedly. "Go ahead, Ms Wellesly."

"Thank you, Madame Chairman," I respond with a gracious nod. "So we've established that Malcolm is an ineffective security officer - his primary reason for inclusion in this project. We know that his betrothal to Arianna flaunts the rules the Committee created before candidates were even chosen to participate in the project. Because by the king's own admission, betrothal in their culture is marriage without sex."

"May I ask why it is so important to you that their betrothal be broken, Ms Wellesly?" Bartolo interrupts. "Surely it doesn't matter to you one way or another who does what with whom."

"In the broad scheme of things I suppose you're right, Member Bartolo. But in this case, I do - and I'll tell you why." He nods and motions me to continue. "I like Arianna - she's a good kid and she deserves all the accolades and recognition she's been given. But she also deserves to be happy, and since her betrothal to Malcolm, she hasn't been. She's become progressively miserable as the months have passed. Most of the rest of the kids still involved in this project were her friends once - to varying degrees, of course, but they were all friendly with her and she with them. But Malcolm destroyed that, and he's also brought disharmony to the groups' dynamics."

"And that's a problem." A statement... not a question. I nod.

"As you well know, sir," I say. "He started causing difficulties with everyone from the moment he was brought onboard, and that has only increased since his betrothal to Arianna. And I don't think anyone should be forced to remain celibate for years because of someone else's choice for them."

"Fair enough," he replies. "And you think removing Malcolm and his betrothal to Arianna..."

"I think removing Malcolm from the program will make for a much more unified, cohesive group... something they're going to need if they're going to be successful establishing a new colony light years away from here. I think breaking Arianna's betrothal to Malcolm will make Arianna the happy young woman she was before."

"And that's important?" Member Brave Heart questions.

"I believe so, madam," I respond seriously. "Production levels at the trial facility were at an all-time high before Arianna was called home to be betrothed. They plummeted when she returned bound to Malcolm."

There is silence for a few minutes while they consider my words, then Chairman McMurtry clears her throat again. "Is there anything else to add, Ms Wellesly?"

"Yes, Madame Chairman. But perhaps the Committee would like to take a few minutes break. I know you weren't expecting this meeting to last so long," glancing down at my Pad pointedly then back up to meet her eyes. She gives me a small nod.

"A short respite would be nice. I think fifteen minutes will suffice." I nod my agreement. Fifteen minutes should be more than enough time to talk to my guys. "Very well. We're recessed for fifteen minutes."

"Madame Chairman... I must protest again! I thought expediency was required here."

"It is, your majesty," she replies as she stands and stretches covertly. "But we could all use a chance to freshen up for a moment, and I'm confident Malcolm could probably do with a little medical attention," noting his pallor and the sweat dotting his upper lip. "Would you like me to call someone?"

"No thank you, Madame Chairman. I can handle this myself."

"As you wish, your majesty," she says. "We'll be back in a few moments."

I wait for the Committee to exit the room before I turn to follow them. The room is under surveillance, so anything that happens while I am gone will be monitored by my team, though I don't expect there to be much. I close the door behind me, realizing the Committee members have dispersed throughout the floor to take care of whatever business they need to tend to. I walk to the stairwell where my guys are waiting for me. They smile and I return the gesture, knowing we're still not done, but at least they have my back.

"Everything all right, Chief?" Caleb asks as I approach. Adam stands to his right and Stephen to his left, holding a cup of steaming coffee. I snigger just a little when I see that. I love my guys - they can follow directions to the letter when they have to, but they know when to disregard them as well. I rub my eyes.

"It would be better with about twelve hours of solid sleep," I admit with a smirk, "but it's going about like I envisioned. How are things upstairs?"

They shrug as one unit and Caleb gestures to Adam since it's his shift now. "About like you'd expect, Chief. We packed up the Prick's things from Angel's room. They've been moved to the room downstairs where the shuttle pilot is waiting to take them back to the transport pad," jerking his head towards the door Fernando and Malcolm are currently ensconced behind. "Princess called a meeting of the entire list of remaining candidates - we shifted pretty quickly to cover that."

I frown. "Where did they go? They can't all possibly fit comfortably into a single room... even standing shoulder to shoulder."

"Precisely," he agrees. "Hence the shifting. We got them settled into the large conference room downstairs. Both day and night crews have the place surrounded in and out."

"Do you know what it's about?" I ask, having a very good idea myself.

Adam touches a finger to his ear, then lifts the comm device on his wrist. A tiny push, and we hear Eli's voice resonate in our small space... just loud enough for us to understand her.

"Look, I know that she chose this path - that she's the one who's been pushing all of you away." She sighs. "But the fact is - she's part of this team... an integral part. Without her, none of the rest of us would be here, despite how brilliant we like to think we are. All I'm asking is that, for the good of team dynamics, you search your heart and decide if she's worth offering another chance to."

"What about the asshat?" Jacob asks. "We all know that he's at least partly responsible for her change of attitude towards us... all of us. Do you want us to make nice with him too?"

I wish I could see the expression on Eli's face at his question, but I settle for hearing her answer.

"Jake, if I had my way, we'd throw him from the roof of the building just to see how high he'd bounce on the return trip," drawing chuckles from the room, including the security personnel who is sharing the feed with us. "However, I wouldn't want to see anyone disqualified from the program for taking such drastic measures to get rid of the idiot. He wouldn't be worth the consequences that would follow." She hesitates a moment and takes a deep breath. "That being said - no. I don't expect anyone to make nice with the asshat. The only reason I am asking for her is because we all know she's going to be selected for the Alpha team. And to make the project work once we arrive on the asteroid, we need to be comfortable with one another. That means no more excluding her."

There is a pregnant pause, and I ponder which question they want to ask - whether she... Eli... is included in the mandate to make nice with Arianna, or if she knows more about who is and isn't going to be chosen for the project than she's telling. Before the silence can become too awkward, Jacob clears his throat, but surprisingly, it's Eden who speaks and we can hear the shrug in her voice.

"I suppose I can try to be nice to the pipsqueak for you, Eli. The only reason we let her push us all away so easy was because...."

"Thanks, Eden," Eli cuts in before Eden can finish her sentence. "All I'm asking is that you try," and I know by the silence that follows that she's looking around the room. "All right," she says after a moment. "Let's get back upstairs before the security team has a freak out. We're not really supposed to be sequestered together like this for any length of time."

We can hear shifting and recognize the sounds of the team scrambling to cover this new movement. I hear the sighs of relief when another candidate speaks up and almost everyone stops walking to hear what's being said. Part of the security team continues on to prepare for the return upstairs.

"Eli, is she okay? Arianna, I mean. We heard rumors this morning...."

"I spoke with Ms Wellesly earlier. She's all right; she's just sleeping off a rough night."

"You mean like...?"

"She wasn't drunk, if that's what you're asking, Titus," Eli informs him impatiently. "She was unwell enough to require some attention. I didn't ask for details. Ms Wellesly stayed up the night to facilitate the healing process. She's upstairs asleep as we speak. Ms Wellesly assured me she'll be back on schedule tomorrow."

"Thanks, Eli," Titus replies as movement begins again. "We were concerned."

I smile. Glad to know I wasn't off the mark with these kids. I look back at my guys. "Did you get her moved?" speaking to Caleb. He nods.

"As soon as the rest got them herded off the floor."

"Good. You and the night shift go get some sleep... or at least go rest and relax for a while," I add, catching the look he's giving me. "I don't expect too much more trouble from these two - I've already dislocated Malcolm's thumb once. I'm sure I can break something if it comes to it."

"Chief?"

I nod. "It's why I asked Stephen to come back early... for a little back-up close by just in case. If they are that stupid, I'm pretty sure the day crew would take great pleasure in escorting them from the premises."

Caleb sticks out his tongue, but we can all see his eyes twinkling in amusement. "Day crew gets all the fun," he whines. I cock an eyebrow at him.

"Really?? You want another night like last night??"

"Oh hell no. I'm on night shift for the peace and quiet!" he responds instantly, reaping the laughter he was looking for. I shake my head and glance at my watch.

"All right - it's about time for me to get back in there." I meet Stephen's eyes. "I'm getting ready to bury Malcolm, so if you hear shouting...."

"I'll hit the alarm and come running, Chief."

"Good man," I smile. "Glad you've got my back up here." I turn to Caleb and Adam. "You two know what you've got to do?" seeing they nod their heads in answer. "All right - let's do it."

And just like that Adam and Caleb disappear back into the stairwell. Stephen takes his place at the desk and I take a deep breath, straightening my shoulders and re-entering the conference room. It's time to get back to work.

There is a crowd gathered around Malcolm and I watch for a minute before shrinking my Pad and dropping it into my pocket. Then I ease my way into the throng, sliding through quickly as the Committee members recognize who I am. In only a moment, I am standing in front of a furious Fernando and a Malcolm who looks like he's about to throw up.

"Gentlemen?" I query, not giving an inch when Fernando storms up to me, face red and finger moving precariously close to my body. He stops just short of touching, but it doesn't keep him from invading my personal space.

"This is your fault!" motioning to Malcolm's now mangled thumb. I arch my brow in his direction.

"I assure you, majesty - I didn't do that damage to him. You did."

"Why you...!!!"

"However," I go on, holding a hand out to prevent him from approaching closer, "I can fix it. I had two boys who played every sport imaginable. I've had to deal with broken bones, dislocated joints, a couple concussions and one scalp wound that bled for two hours." I smirk at those flinching at my description. They should count themselves lucky - I could have been graphic about it. I look at Malcolm ignoring Fernando's rage for the moment. "Would you like me to put it back in place?"

He nods rapidly even as Fernando bellows a sharp rejection of my offer. I look Fernando in the eye. "Majesty, I understand you're angry with how the proceedings are playing out and with me in particular. But I can end his suffering. Why would you deny him that?"

Fernando glares at me a moment longer, then gives me a single, staccato nod before stepping out of my way and falling into his chair with a huff. He crosses his arms and eyes me like a hawk. I move to stand in front of Malcolm. Despite my dislike of him and his attitude, I wouldn't leave anyone to suffer with this kind of pain for too long. I grab the napkin that is still on the table and twist it into a roll, then tap his lips with it.

"Open," I command, sliding it between his teeth when he complies. "This is going to hurt, so this is for you to bite onto. It will also muffle any screams you make," holding his eyes when they widen. He studies my stare for a minute, then nods again once. I turn my glance behind me. "You might want to give us a little room," I instruct. The Committee moves back several steps and I look back at Malcolm. "Please don't make me break the other one."

He slips his hand from where it had moved to try to steal the Pad I had put away and returns it to the arm of his chair. His eyes drop to his lap, but he keeps the napkin between his teeth.

"You ready?" I ask and his eyes snap up to meet mine just as I jerk the bones back into place. He bites and screams and I feel a hand on my back. McMurtry is standing behind me with an extensive first aid kit. I nod my thanks, and together we immobilize the injured area. I reach up and take the napkin out of his mouth and weary eyes look at me with less hatred and more confusion.

"Thanks," he mumbles, and I nod.

"All right," I say as I turn back to the front of the room and shoo the Committee members towards their seats. "Let's finish this."

Chapter IV

"So we've already discovered that Malcolm is ineligible to participate in this project as Arianna's security - he's not qualified. We have also determined that by their own definition both Arianna and Malcolm are disqualified as prospects because of their betrothal and that Malcolm refuses to release Arianna from the betrothal contract. Can we all agree to those three facts?" I meet the eyes of each Committee member and wait for them to nod their acknowledgment before moving on to the next one. They are each slow and thoughtful, and some more reluctant than others, but eventually I receive agreement from all of them.

I can feel Fernando seething behind me, but he doesn't speak. Malcolm is too exhausted from his ordeal to even bother to grunt in protest. I sigh - I need to wrap this up before I drop from

exhaustion myself. I pull the Pad from my inner pocket and expand it out again, glancing at it before letting it rest against the outside of my leg.

"His majesty mentioned that there were occasions in his culture where mitigating circumstances allowed betrothal pacts to be dissolved... circumstances where agreement from both parties was unnecessary. Tell me, majesty," I say as I turn to face his stony expression. "Who makes the decision on which circumstances are considered mitigating enough?"

He stares at me and I question whether or not he's going to give me an answer. I don't need him to, of course - I have the answer right in front of me. I am offering him the courtesy as a measure of control. He sighs and leans forward, folding his hands on the table.

"Most circumstances are standard; there are only rare exceptions. In the exceptions, I make the determination."

I nod. "What are some of the standard conditions in which a betrothal can be broken without an accord from both parties?"

He sighs again. He has a good idea where this is going and I think he's starting to realize he doesn't have much hope of leaving here with anything he expected to have when he arrived here this morning. Now it's a matter of him saving face. "Does it matter, Ms Wellesly?" he inquires resignedly.

"It does, majesty. The Committee needs to know. Now would you like to tell them or shall I?"

He looks at me then, eyes full of disdain and dislike. Then he rises from his chair to address the Committee. "Because of the way our society is constructed, any infidelity during the betrothal period automatically breaks an agreement."

"Even if the participants are the betrothal couple, your majesty?"

"Even then, Madame Chairman. They are disrespecting our culture and dishonoring their vows. It is considered one of our most grievous crimes."

McMurtry nods her slowly. "I see. What else?"

Fernando clears his throat. "If one of the betrothed is caught abusing the other in any fashion; if it is discovered that one of the parties is unhealthy... although that is dependent upon those involved; if one or the other cannot conceive children... although that too is a case by case choice."

"What of those rare instances when you're called upon to make a judgment?" the Chairman asks. I wasn't going to go there, but I'll admit to having a little curiosity, so I let it slide and wait for his response.

"Those usually involve some sort of business failure, a loss of income or an accident - something unexpected and unforeseen."

McMurtry nods as do a number of the other members. I look towards them. "Are you satisfied, Madame Chairman?"

"Thank you Ms Wellesly," she agrees, gesturing in my direction. "Please continue."

"Thank you. Madame Chairman," offering a nod of my head. I turn back to Fernando who has folded his hand in front of himself and is waiting for me to address him. "Majesty, would you say that Malcolm's behavior - behavior he has admitted to and even bragged about - would be considered abusive by your standards?"

"Ms Wellesly, that's not my determination to make. Unless Arianna files a complaint, I have no compelling reason to contemplate the possibility."

"You're a cold bastard, majesty... did you know that?" I heard the outcries from the dais, but I ignore them in favor of keeping my eyes on the smirking man in front of me. I know I've crossed a line, but at the moment I can't bring myself to care. Parents should care and it makes my blood boil to hear his apathy. "You are so determined to be right about something that you'd allow your only child - your daughter - to stay in an abusive relationship with a man she despises rather than admit you made a mistake betrothing her to him."

He leans against the table, crossing his arms over his chest, smirk still firmly in place. He's enjoying this a little too much, but I still have one ace he can't shoot down no matter what he says. I cock my eye and he chuckles as if he finds me amusing. "I'm going to let the insult slide, Ms Wellesly, because from the looks of things, the Committee is going to do far worse things to you than I could manage. After all, they don't want an interstellar incident arising out of this meeting, do they?"

His face hardens and he straightens to tower over me as he glares at me. "Let's be clear about something though," a little surprised that I haven't backed down. It causes him to take a step back; I keep the smirk out of my expression - I'm in enough trouble. "I love my daughter, but even she is bound by the laws of our culture. I could of course step in if there was physical evidence of abuse. But for verbal assault or emotional abuse, she has to be the one to say something."

"Even though you've seen evidence of such from the abuser," jerking my head in Malcolm's direction.

"Even then."

"That is fucked," I say, knowing I may as well go for the brass ring of offending everyone as long as I'm going to catch hell for it later. Surprisingly, Fernando doesn't look affronted by my word choice. He nods slightly and shrugs.

"Perhaps, but it works for us and has for generations."

"Very well, majesty. As I said, it's not my place to judge, so I apologize for the opinion. If it works for your society, then I have no right to offer my appraisal of the concept."

I almost laugh - Fernando looks gobsmacked over the fact that a polite apology just spilled out of my mouth. He nods. "Apology accepted, Ms Wellesly. Are you going to try and apologize for calling me a bastard as well?"

"Not at all, majesty. What I said was the truth and I have absolutely no remorse for calling you out on your behavior. On the diplomatic front, I'm sure it's going to make my life impossible, but speaking as a mother, I stand by what I said. I never let anyone treat my children the way you treat Arianna. And as long as I'm able, you won't treat her like that anymore either."

"You're quite the spitfire, aren't you Ms Wellesly," he asks with amusement in his voice. "It makes me almost want to tell the Committee not to worry about punishing you for your impertinence."

"Oh they won't punish me... not like you're thinking, majesty. They can't use my behavior to rule against Arianna in this case. And if they fire me before I walk out of here, at least I will have given her the chance at happiness she deserves. I can go into retirement knowing I won."

The anger flares again in his eyes and I wonder what is wrong with me that I derive perverse pleasure from seeing it. I think I may need to get out more, but before I can pursue that line of thought, Fernando looks at the platform.

"Is this true, Madame Chairman? Can you not use her disrespect of me to secure the contract we already have?"

The Committee looks at him as if he's a few marble short of a full bag. "It's true, your majesty." McMurtry replies with a solemn expression. "Her behavior here has no impact on the decision we must make on these other matters. They are unrelated." She pauses, then resumes. "Besides, she insulted you as an individual, not your office. Can't really make an interstellar incident out of that unless you'd like the details of this assembly to become public."

Fernando's jaw drops and his face becomes ghastly. "You can't do that!! This is a private conference."

"It is, your majesty," she agrees gravely. "But if you'd like it to remain that way, there won't be an interstellar incident... even if we do nothing to Ms Wellesly."

"That's blackmail!!!"

"No, your majesty. It's the truth. For there to be an incident, *something* has to set it off. And everyone will want the details of what that *something* is. It's in our natures to be curious. Therefore, you need to decide which is more important to you - privacy about everything that has been discussed here today or retribution for Ms Wellesly's faux pas. I assure you that we will punish Ms Wellesly for her indiscretion, but we are not going to dismiss her over this. Nor are we going to renew Malcolm's security contract. So you decide what's more important to you here - it's your choice."

"Did you make a deal with a higher power, Ms Wellesly?" he snaps as he swings in my direction. "Because no one is that lucky."

I snicker. I've been going for close to thirty hours now and everything is just a touch hysterical at this point. "It has very little to do with luck, majesty. It has to do with hard work and preparation. Because I haven't even delivered the killing blow, so to speak," I say in a stage whisper. "I haven't told you why you're going to break the betrothal contract. It's one of your mitigating circumstances, you know. Or maybe more than one - kinda depends on your point of view." I blink, trying to focus my eyes when I hear McMurtry call my name. I shift my focus to the stage in front of me. "Yes, Madame Chairman?"

"Do you really have more evidence to present to us Ms Wellesly or are you simply grandstanding for his majesty's benefit? We need to move this along a little faster if we can. The Committee does have other responsibilities to see to today."

"Yes, Madame Chairman," I reply, trying to stand straighter in an effort to appear more awake than I really am now. I give Fernando a little nod. "If you'll permit me, majesty." He snorts in disgust and waves his hand at me before returning to drop into his seat and wait for whatever I have to say. "Thank you," I respond, and turn back to the Committee.

"Madame Chairman, we all heard his majesty outline the mitigating circumstances that call for the breaking of a betrothal contract on his world. Even if we can't accept abuse as a reason, there are in fact two more prevailing conditions that will in fact exorcise the agreement. The first deals with the health of both parties and the second with their ability to have children."

"Now wait just a minute!" Malcolm roars as he comes to life once more. I'd wondered if this might get his attention on the proceedings once more. "You have no right...."

"I have every right! And Arianna is entitled to know."

"Know what, Ms Wellesly?" the Chairman asks.

"Madame Chairman, do you remember your history?" I inquire without waiting for an actual reply. "At one time we were cursed with an epidemic known as Aids," seeing the recognition in her eyes as she winces. I look to the other members. "It was an auto-immune disease, spread by shared needles, blood donation and sexual activity. It metamorphosed several times - every time researchers thought they were close to a cure, it would mutate into something more powerful... more deadly."

"It was a horrific time in history - there were a number of viral contagions and diseases that propagated in such a manner. At one point it was feared that these blights would wipe out the human race and make us extinct."

"What happened?" Member Mien asks, his head tilted in curiosity.

"The scientists of that time decided to try something radical. They found something that would eliminate all of them once and for all, but it was risky. They combined all the pathogens into a single mega virus - knowing the strong parts of each would eat away the weaker bits and then fight with each other for dominance, making it a prime target for total annihilation. They decided to sterilize it... remove any possibility of it ever breeding again."

"It worked?" from Member Danski.

"It did," I reply, "but not without serious consequence. Not only did the treatment sterilize every viral contaminate it came into contact with, it sterilized the host as well. Everyone who was diseased was forced to consume the cure. Every one of them was sterile within days of intake. That consequence was non-reversible."

"And what does this have to do with Malcolm?" Fernando asks. "He's had to submit to every physical examination required by all of the candidates. Nothing unusual has been reported."

"It wouldn't be... not yet anyway." I look back at the Committee. "I want you to understand the seriousness of this situation - if we had not discovered this in time, it is quite likely than an epidemic could have broken out here on this planet again. And the project would have been doomed before the shuttle even left the ground."

"What did you discover, Ms Wellesly?"

"We believe Malcolm has contracted a form of the virus." I stop speaking to allow the outcry that follows - from Malcolm from Fernando and from the Committee. The Chairman bangs her gavel to

bring order to the room - a first in these proceedings to my knowledge - and waits for everyone to settle into silence once more. Then she motions to me.

"Go ahead, Ms Wellesly. I'm presuming you have proof to back this up?"

"I do, Madame Chairman," lifting my Pad and punching a few buttons. In seconds I look up again. "I have sent the proof to each of you... yourself and Malcolm included, majesty. I don't know where he got it from, but all indications from the set of tests he took yesterday show that he does indeed have a strain of the Aids virus. The team doctor sent them to me this morning."

"How do we know this is not a hoax, Ms Wellesly? How do we know that you're not doing this to get Malcolm removed from Arianna's life? You've made very clear your contempt for him and our way of life. Why should we believe you?"

"Majesty, I have genuinely tried to give you the benefit of the doubt here, and if you believe I've scorned your way of life, I sincerely apologize. I have tried very hard not to judge the culture of your planet. I can honestly say, however, that I do not like you for reasons I'm not going to elaborate on right now. I'm in enough hot water for being honest as it is." He snorts and I smirk before my expression hardens once more. "And to be completely honest, I like your boy Malcolm even less than I like you, which is saying quite a lot. I could give you a list of reasons, but suffice it to say that if I really wanted him gone from the project and Arianna's life, I could have made him disappear without a trace - no muss, no fuss, no Malcolm. It would have been a lot easier for me than this diplomatic nonsense we've spent the morning playing at."

I hold up my hand and take a deep breath, not wanting to be interrupted while I'm on a roll. I cross my arms over my chest and fix Fernando with a glare that causes a physical shudder to go up his spine. "However," I continue, letting the coldness in my eyes creep into my voice, "if you would like me to, I will ask the doctor to join us. He can give everyone in the room the same test when he retests Malcolm in front of everyone. That would guarantee there were plenty of control samples. We'll have to wait for the samples to be verified, but for your peace of mind... to assure you that I'm not lying or making this up just to get my jollies, I'm sure we can spare the time. Right, Madame Chairman?"

McMurtry looks like she swallowed some bad tuna and shifts her glance to the monarch. "Is that really necessary, your majesty?"

He holds her eyes for a moment, then turns back to me. "Tell me why we are just now hearing about this? Why is it only now being discovered? Seems like a bit of fortuitous timing if you ask me."

"Because, majesty, this is the first time the team doctor and not his assistant has performed the test on Malcolm," I answer wearily. Fernando turns to Malcolm.

"Is this true?" Malcolm meets Fernando's gaze very briefly, then lets his eyes drop to the floor. "And you knew?? You knew you had this terrible disease they spoke of?? You knew and remained betrothed to my daughter??"

"Majesty, I...."

Fernando crosses to stand over Malcolm in a rage. "You kneel when you speak to me, commoner!" I see Malcolm flinch at the words and clench his jaw and good hand in rage. But he falls to his knees on the floor and keeps his head and eyes lowered in a sign of respect. "You knew!!" Fernando repeats. "You would have infected my daughter!!"

"No sire! I would have taken the treatment. Nick was trying to obtain some for me."

Fernando turns to me. "You don't keep this vaccine readily available?"

"No, majesty. We haven't encountered this virus in centuries. And the treatment was considered to have consequences too damaging to warrant keeping it available. It is possible to produce - we simply haven't needed it again until today." He jerks his head in acknowledgment.

"Have you infected my daughter?"

"No sire - we've abided by the rules of betrothal. She insisted and I agreed. I had too much to lose not to."

"And now you will lose it all anyway."

"Sire?"

"You say you would have taken the treatment - you will take the treatment when Ms Wellesly is able to make arrangements for some to be created for you. Then you will return home with the contract between our families dissolved. As long as you keep your mouth shut, people will think that you sacrificed your betrothal so Arianna could continue to participate in this project. But if you say one word to anyone... even your parents... I will disgrace you in front of the world. Everyone will know your shame. Do we have an understanding?"

"Why am I losing my position as Arianna's consort? I earned that place!"

Fernando spits. "You earned nothing. And when the remedy is administered to you, you will no longer be capable of fulfilling the one role you had as consort. Now," watching the horror dawn in Malcolm's face, "do we have an understanding?"

There is a long pause before we hear a whispered, "Yes, sire."

Stephen is already waiting at the door with Isaiah and John. They will escort Malcolm to the quarantine facility the doctor set up as soon as he became aware of the emergency. I motion them over now and they stand one on either side of Malcolm and pull him to his feet. I nod my thanks to Stephen who closes the door behind himself with a nod of the head. Then I look back at the Committee.

"Well, Madame Chairman - I think I made my case."

"You have indeed, Ms Wellesly. Malcolm is no longer part of the project and his betrothal from Arianna has been officially dissolved. Is there any more chaos you'd like to contribute to the days' accounting or have you caused your quota for the day?"

"In fairness, Madame Chairman, I think I've about reached my limit for a few minutes anyway. If I could be excused?"

"Of course. We'll discuss your discipline when you're actually awake enough to argue about it," drawing laughter from around the table. Only Fernando remains stoic and I open my mouth to speak. He holds

his hand and shakes his head. So I wait to hear what he has to say. It should be interesting, at least... if not enlightening.

Epilogue

"I don't like you, Ms Wellesly. At all, if I were to tell the truth. I find you to be rude and crass and obnoxious to a degree I've rarely seen. Quite frankly, if you weren't a woman..." At this I smirk and he has the decency to shrug in acknowledgment. "Honestly if you weren't such a formidable individual, I'd be tempted to put you in your place quite forcefully... female or not. The fact that you're extraordinary at what you do doesn't endear you to me at all - it has caused me no end of embarrassment here today - yet I find I am forced to respect your capabilities despite everything."

"Thank you, majesty."

He snorts. "It wasn't a compliment, Ms Wellesly - it was a statement of fact. You have kept my daughter safe in spite of herself... and in spite of me. I expect you to continue to do so... because it's only that impressive skill that keeps me from giving you a much-needed lesson in manners and deportment."

I tilt my head at him and smile. "Majesty, my mother couldn't manage to teach me that crap in the eighteen plus years I lived under her roof. Trust me when I tell you that there's not enough time in the world for you to succeed... even if I give you a head start."

Fernando laughs aloud at my words, a genuine cackle that startles everyone in the room. I smirk and lean against the table while the Committee stays on the platform and waits with confused countenances for the commotion to die down. After a long minute, Fernando's laughter tapers off into soft chuckles and I cock an eyebrow at him.

"Feel better?"

He stares at me thoughtfully. "Surprisingly yes. If I didn't dislike you so much, Ms Wellesly, I think we could be great allies. You don't pull your punches for anyone, do you?"

"Not usually, majesty. I have found blunt truth tends to expedite any number of situations. Sometimes, people just need to hear it without all the crap that diplomats throw around it to keep from hurting people's feeling, you know?"

He nods and gives me a genuine smile. "I do indeed, Ms Wellesly. I do indeed." He straightens his sleeves and dusts off his clothing, then steps back to the chair and picks up the Pad he'd taken out at the beginning of the proceedings. "I'd say it's been a pleasure...."

"... but it really hasn't. Trust me, majesty, the feeling is more than mutual on my part." He simply laughs again and walks towards the door, shaking his head.

When he reaches the portal, he turns back and looks at me. "You fought long and hard to obtain the result you were looking for Ms Wellesly. I hope you get what you want from it."

I give him a genuine smile. "I got what I wanted, majesty. The rest is up to them."

I watch as the truth dawns upon him, and he glares at me with anger on his face. I give him a tiniest nod, and hear his teeth grind together as he tries to bring his wrath under control. After a moment, he appears to draw himself up and turn his attention to the Committee that has been silently observing our interplay. He offers a slight bow, holding McMurtry's eyes.

"Thank you for your time, Madame Chairman... esteemed members. If you'll excuse me...." exiting the conference room before anyone can formulate a response. All eyes turn to me and I shrug.

"I'm going to go get some sleep. Adam is in charge if something comes up."

McMurtry nods. "Rest well, Ms Wellesly. We will talk more this evening."

I give her a nod and leave the room, content in the knowledge that I've done something good today. Now it's up to them to see if it plays out to a happy ending or not.

END PART THREE

02/12