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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 four of what was supposed to be a trilogy - it was also supposed to be the final story in this series. However, I'm *pretty sure* at this point there will be a part five... if only to keep this one from becoming another never-ending story. Kind of like Valiant all over again.

The Storyteller's Cardinal Rule is in effect.

Favors of Fortune - Part Four

Beautiful Mess

By D

Prologue

"Thank you all for coming. I promised our minders I wouldn't take very long, so let's get to it, shall we?" Eli looked around at the few dozen prospects left as part of the program. They met her eyes and waited. She smiled.

"It's been brought to my attention that you've all been avoiding Arianna, and it needs to stop." A cacophony of sound broke out around the room and Eli held up her hand for silence. After a moment, quiet fell once more and Eli nodded her thanks. "Look, I know that she chose this path - that she's the one who's been pushing all of you away, and you've let her for whatever reason." She sighed. "The reasons don't actually matter; but it needs to stop now. 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 asked. "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?"

"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 everyone in the room. "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. And I don't believe he will make it to the final cut no matter who he's betrothed to." The last made her voice shake a little and she hesitated a moment and took a deep breath before speaking again. "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 is 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 was a pregnant pause, and the candidates looked at each other trying to decide if they really wanted to give voice to the questions they wanted to ask - namely whether Eli would be included in the mandate to make nice with Arianna, and if she knew more about who was and wasn't going to be chosen for the project than she was telling. Before the silence became too awkward, Jacob cleared his throat, but surprisingly it was Eden who spoke with a casual 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 cut in before Eden could finish her sentence. She didn't want reminders of her private pain... or public humiliation. "All I'm asking is that you try," looking around the room. "All right," she said 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."

There was a general shuffle towards the doors... which halted when Titus spoke up "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 informed 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 with the rest of us tomorrow."

"Thanks, Eli," Titus replied as movement shifted towards the doors again. "We were concerned."

She nodded, and they exited the room, splitting up to make their way back upstairs to their rooms to wait for the Committee to call them to begin the day's interview process.

Chapter I

Eli was silently pensive as she hung at the back of the procession leaving the conference room, waiting for the rest to go ahead of her. Her brow furrowed in a manner that caused the rest some concern, wondering what this meeting had cost her. Jake exchanged a look with Eden who gave him a slight nod, before she stepped into the elevator. Jake sidled up next to Eli and linked his arm in hers, smiling when she looked up at him... startled out of her preoccupation. She cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Something I can do for you, Jake?" giving him a small smile.

"Another time, another place maybe," he replied with a teasing grin, wagging his eyebrows up and down for emphasis before coaxing his expression into something more serious. "Are you okay, Eli? You seem a little... lost in thought." He kept his eyes on her when she looked away and took a deep breath before returning her attention to him.

"I'm fine, Jake," she replied, holding his eyes with her gaze. He studied her for a long moment. They all knew what had happened between her and Arianna - not the details of course, but enough. Enough to know that one minute they had been a couple and the next Arianna was engaged to the asshole and Eli was no longer speaking to or about Arianna at all. That more than anything else had caused them to choose sides... to stand by Eli while ostracizing Arianna.

Eli kept her eyes steady, willing Jake to believe her. He finally nodded slowly, and he could almost feel the tension roll off her like water. "If you're sure," he offered finally. She nodded and smiled at him again though it made him sad to see it. It wasn't the smile he'd fallen in love with so many months ago when they'd become a family. But he knew it was the best he was going to get anymore.

"I'm sure, Jake - thanks for asking though," she answered, patting his arm affectionately. He covered her hand with his own, squeezing it lightly to convey his support.

"All right," he drawled slowly, stepping into an empty lift and pulling her in with him and letting the doors close behind them before he spoke again. "And we'll make sure the Princess gets taken care of as well. You know the only reason so many of us excluded her was because...." She clenched her hand around his forearm to halt his speech, then swiped her card and the elevator started its swift ascension back to their floor.

"I know, and on one level it's both flattering and humbling that you guys would do that for me. But it's not fair to her." She held up a hand before he could fire off a retort. "What happened was my responsibility as much as hers, Jake."

"Maybe," he shrugged, leading them from the elevator as soon as the door opened. "But you didn't subject the rest of us to an asshole that has no business being part of the project." He turned towards her room, moving at a slow and steady pace. "Can I ask you something?" he said as they reached her door, tilting his head at her thoughtfully. Eli smirked.

"You can ask. It doesn't mean I have to answer."

Jake grinned. "Fair enough," waiting for her to open her door. She crossed the threshold and kicked off her shoes, turning to find Jacob leaning against the doorframe. She arched an eyebrow at him. "You didn't invite me in, and I didn't want to assume," he said with a shrug.

"Get in here and close the door, Jake," she commanded with a hint of irritation in her voice. He did as he was bidden and took the seat she motioned him to even as she dropped onto the end of the bed. "Now what did you want to ask?"

"Do you know something?"

"No... what?"

He looked at her like she was crazy then realized she had misunderstood his question. He shook his head and waved his hands to erase the query. "No... sorry. Not what I meant," reaching a hand back to scrub the back of his neck. He blew out a breath and met her gaze. "When we were downstairs just now - it sounded like you knew something... something the rest of us aren't privy to."

"Like what?"

Now Jake glared at her. "Playing stupid doesn't suit you, Eli," he accused. "Do you know who is and is not gonna be chosen as the Alpha team for this project?"

"Oh... that." It was her turn to look away. "Not really. I am completely confident she will be part of the Alpha team; since she developed the nuclear fission process that is the basis for everything else we're doing, it just makes sense." She brought her gaze back to his.

Jacob nodded. "I agree. But what about the asshole? Why do you think he won't make the cut? After all, he's made it this far on her merit."

"True," Eli agreed cautiously, not wanting to betray Mary's confidence despite the fury the woman's words had stirred in her belly. "But you know and I know that his... relationship... with her," keeping the wince out of her expression but unable to keep her voice from cracking slightly, "won't matter in the grand scheme of things when the final selections are made. Each of us has to contribute in a variety of areas to make this viable, and he is unable to participate in a single arena with any authority."

He nodded slowly, mulling her words over in his head. "That makes sense," slapping his hands on his thighs and standing up. "I hope you're right. I'd hate to have to put the guns to use burying the body once we arrived at the project site," he said with a rakish smile as he flexed his strong biceps. She chuckled and he waggled his eyebrows for good measure. It was nice to see this side of Eli again... however briefly.

"It'd be worth it to see you trying to dig through solid rock," she teased him.

"Maybe I'll just shove him out an airlock," he grumbled, causing a bubble of genuine laughter to flow from Eli's lips.

"I'd put down some serious credit chits to see that," she snarked. Jacob smirked.

"Him I'd do for free," walking to the door and resting a hand on the knob. "You wanna come play *Nuke 'em Duke 'em?*"

"No, Jake, but thanks. You go have some fun because you know once the Committee is done it's going to be back to work for us."

His brow furrowed. "Yeah - what's up with that anyway?"

Eli shrugged. "I got the same message you did, Jake. I figure it's just more political crap," running her fingers through her hair. She shrugged. "I think it's all mostly political crap at this point... even the interviews."

"How do you figure?"

"C'mon, Jake - we're supposed to be out of here by the first of the year. That's only about six weeks by this planet's calendar, which just happens to be the timetable we're using. Keeping that in mind, a decision has to come down in the next week or so to give the Alpha team the time it needs to prepare for departure. Therefore, the Committee has to have already pretty much made its choices. What they are doing now is mostly posturing... showing consideration for all the candidates so they cannot be accused of bias when the time comes."

"So you think...?"

"I think we'll know by the end of next week if not sooner. I would expect that those chosen will be allowed to go home for a final goodbye or that their families will be brought in prior to mission launch. I believe it would be the latter, myself."

"Why?"

"Because the security team is responsible for our safety until we depart for the asteroid to begin our actual work. To send everyone back to their respective planets would be creating an unnecessary burden for them. Keeping us here would be similar to how things are now."

"Do you ever regret it?" Jacob asked unexpectedly. "Leaving home to become part of this?"

She gazed at him thoughtfully. "I will always be grateful for the opportunities being here has afforded me," she replied. He waited, but she didn't add anything and he was unwilling to push further. He could read between the lines, and he knew what was left unspoken was as important as what was being said. Jacob nodded.

"I think that's true for everyone... even those who've been washed from the program already. It's kinda cool to be part of making history." He shrugged. "Thanks, Eli."

She tilted her head at him and frowned in confusion. "For what, Jake?"

"For confiding in me. It's nice to know I have your trust." Before she could reply, he opened the door and slipped into the hallway. Eli sighed and closed her eyes, falling backwards until she was lying flat against the mattress. She hoped Mary would be satisfied with her efforts. As draining as that had been, she wasn't sure she could do it again no matter *what* the reason.

Jacob wasn't surprised to see Eden and the rest waiting for him when he walked out of Eli's room. He had seen Mary enter her room after their hallway confrontation over Arianna's absence from breakfast and he hadn't been the only one to notice. They had held their own mini-meeting before Eli had called all the remaining candidates together and decided to ensure Eli was all right. Her announcement and request had thrown them all off-stride, so Jacob and Eden had nonverbally agreed that he would discover what was really going on, then share with the remainder of them.

Now the rest waited patiently for his report, and he motioned them towards his room without a word. They filed in one after the other, not noticing when several members of the security team shifted to blanket the hallway a little more thickly. They stood around the room and waited for Jacob to speak.

He shook his head. "She's fine," noting the disbelieving looks a number of his fellows offered him. "As fine as she's been since...." breaking off when Eden waved her hand. "She doesn't seem to *know* anything about who's gonna get selected, but she's got some pretty clear cut ideas on why Arianna is going and why the asshat won't be."

"Yeah... about that - what's up with that anyway?" Esther asked. "Does she *really* want us to make nice with Arianna? Girlfriend's the one who's been pushing us away for months now. I thought we were just accommodating her." Her dark skin flushed nearly black in her anger.

"Yeah, Esther - she was serious. And she was right." Jacob looked around the room. He certainly didn't plan to function as Eli's second-in-command - that was normally Eden's job. But he'd been the one to talk to her, so... "We all expect to make the final cut. Even though there are still a number of candidates left for the Committee to choose from, everyone in the room expects to be chosen as part of the Alpha team. We are each the strongest in our fields and everyone here has crossover knowledge in at least two areas outside their expertise." He waited for them all to nod their agreement. "Right. And we know without a doubt that Arianna will be chosen; they can't not choose the one whose work everything else relies on."

"Is there a point here, Jake?" Eden asked impatiently. He glared at her.

"Surprisingly yes, if you'd let me get there," he replied tartly. Eden held her hands up in surrender. Jacob sighed. "We have about six weeks before the Alpha team is scheduled to leave this planet to begin its journey to the asteroid where the project is taking place. If we can't get along now, how can we expect to get along later? We're going to be stuck living with each other for a long time to come. We don't want to start out with issues."

"What about Eli?" Deborah asked, arms crossed over her chest.

Jacob's eyebrows shot into her hairline. "What about Eli?"

Deborah shrugged. "Is she planning on following the mandate she issued to the rest of us? All the rest of us including the people not currently in this room?"

Jacob's eyes darkened, but before he could speak, Eden stepped up beside him and put a hand on his arm. He turned and looked at her, then nodded and gestured for her to answer Deborah's query. Eden put her hands on her hips and glowered.

"First of all, Eli made a request... not a demand. It's your choice whether or not to honor that request, but you might want to consider doing so for yourself if no other reason. As Jake pointed out, team dynamics are going to be important especially once we arrive at our destination to begin our real work. And Arianna will be a crucial part of that team. Secondly, Eli is the only one with a real excuse to totally disregard the pipsqueak, and yet she's never been less than professional with Arianna when they've been forced into situations together since...." She broke off and glanced around. "Look, I think we all know what happened between them out there... enough to know that Arianna broke Eli's heart. But if Eli wants us to make nice, then I think we should."

It was silent for a few minutes after that until Luke finally clapped his hands together, startling everyone in the room. "Sorry," he muttered. "So now what?"

"Now unless you're gaming, clear out of my room," Jacob answered with laughter in his voice. "I wanna go back to playing *Nuke 'em Duke 'em*."

Eden and Esther rolled their eyes in tandem and headed for the door without further prodding. The rest of the girls followed behind, while the boys spread out around the room and started gearing up for another round of gaming.

Eli blinked her eyes open, struggling to orient herself. Her dream had been so real that it took her a minute to recognize the hotel room that had been her home in recent weeks. She looked around

slowly, trying to figure out what had awakened her until a glance at the clock made her sit up straight in the bed. Only then did she hear the knock on the door, then Eden's voice calling her name.

"Eli? Hey... you okay?" Another knock, a little louder. "Eli?"

Eli scrubbed a hand over her face and ran a hand through her hair as she rose and shuffled her way to the door. She pulled the portal open just as Eden raised her hand to knock again. Eden jerked her hand back even as Eli lifted her arm to catch the hand headed towards her face.

"Sorry," Eden murmured, a light blush coloring her tanned cheeks. "You all right? I've been knocking for the past five minutes." Eli cocked an eyebrow at her, a smirk firmly planted on her lips despite the sleepy expression. Eden shrugged. "Okay," she relented, "maybe not *quite* five minutes, but long enough to bring security a little closer," she confided in a lower voice, jerking her head back towards the personnel who were scattered up and down the hallway.

Eli looked both ways, then covered her mouth to conceal the yawn she couldn't stop, pulling the door open wider and inviting Eden inside. Eden crossed the threshold and Eli shut the door firmly behind her even as she motioned the other woman towards the bed as she headed to the bathroom to grab a brush. She returned immediately to find Eden standing at the window looking out and Eli walked over to join her as she continued to work the snarls out of her messy hair.

Eden caught sight of her activities in the window and sighed greatly before turning from the vista spread out below them and removing the brush from Eli's hand. She pushed her back towards the bed, and Eli did as she was bidden, sitting and offering Eden her back. Eden pulled the brush through tangled blonde hair, wincing as it caught more than once. She eased it through each knot carefully, removing it before moving on to the next.

"How the hell did you make such a mess of your hair in the hour you've been in here alone? If I didn't know better, I'd say it was sex hair, but damn, Eli..."

Eli shook her head briefly, but stopped when Eden pulled it gently. "I don't know, Eden. I didn't even realize I'd fallen asleep until your knocking woke me up." She blinked. "Was there something you needed?"

"I just wanted to let you know that Mary alerted us that the Committee is done with whatever emergency business they had this morning, and the interviews will resume shortly."

Eli nodded, and Eden tugged again, forcing Eli to still her actions once more. "Okay... thanks." She sighed. "I'm so glad we don't have much longer to have to do this."

"Me too," Eden agreed, brushing through the now smooth, silky hair. "I'm ready to get to work... real work... not this audition crap we keep putting up with. There so much more we could be doing besides sitting around here all day waiting for our turn to talk to people who don't understand half of what we say to them."

"It will be worth it, Eden."

"Gods, I hope so." A beat. "Do you really think the asshot's gonna get booted from the project?"

"You talked to Jake?"

Eden huffed impatiently and raised an eyebrow. "Of course I talked to Jake. I'm your second - I need to be in the loop!"

Eli smiled. "Yes, I suppose you do. And yes - I expect to hear that he's been cut from the selection list very soon."

"Goodbye and good riddance," Eden muttered as she stood. She placed the brush on the table and extended her hand to Eli. "C'mon. Go change your clothes and grab your shoes and let's go meet the rest to wait. You've been holed up in here alone long enough."

"You're not going to take no for an answer, are you?"

"Nope - if we're gonna play nice with the pipsqueak again, then you're gonna have to play nice with us too... at least when she's not around. We've missed you, Eli," wrapping an arm around Eli's waist. Eli let her arm drop onto Eden's shoulder, giving it a light squeeze before turning her attention to her clothing options. Eden snatched a fresh pair of trousers and a blouse from their hangers and threw them in Eli's direction. Eli glared, but dutifully stripped off the wrinkled clothes and replaced them with the choices Eden had made.

"It's good to be missed," she said as she fastened the final button on her top. She crooked an eyebrow at Eden. "Better?"

Eden nodded. "Yes. And it's better to be appreciated. Now get a move on. The girls were getting ready to have a dance contest when I came to get you."

Eli laughed. "That sounds like fortuitous timing if you ask me."

Eden snorted. "Absolutely impeccable," and they closed the door behind them and headed towards the other end of the hallway and the rest of their friends.

Chapter II

Mary dropped into the bed with a sigh of relief. Every joint in her body ached, but even that pain couldn't dull the sense of satisfaction she felt with the morning's events. She'd suspected when she'd gotten the doctor's preliminary report that she finally had a way to remove Malcolm, but it was gratifying to have that suspicion vindicated. She knew her team already had Nick in custody - they were efficient like that. She just hoped the Committee would wrap their part of things up soon. Even though her research team was already vetting the family members she expected to be brought here to say goodbye, there was still a lot of work to be done before the kids chosen for the Alpha team would be ready, and there wasn't a lot of time left if they were going to stick to the original timetable they'd been given.

She stretched beneath the covers, feeling her bones pop back into alignment. She made a mental note to call her daughter later. It would be nice to do something for these kids before they left for the asteroid, and she had a feeling Joy would love being part of the celebration. Then Mary closed her eyes, confident that her team would look after the details - including Nick - for a while and hoping that the Committee would finish up now that they had less of an agenda.

The candidates were surprised by the instruction - they were to have lunch, then go to the interview room. All of them. Together. They hadn't been to the interview room as a single entity since their very first meeting upon returning from the trial compound when the Committee had explained how the next round of elimination would be a series of interviews that would culminate in the Alpha team being chosen. Since then, they'd met with the Committee singly or in small groups of two or three.

So they could only look at one another in confusion, wondering what had happened that morning to change the standard operating procedure they'd grown accustomed to. As soon as the announcement was made, they spilled out into the hallways, filling the space with the buzz of speculation.

Eli lagged behind the rest of the girls as they left Gay's room, pondering what this could possibly be about. Her eyes widened as realization struck, wondering what exactly Mary had done to have Malcolm eliminated from the program because she didn't doubt that was the case. She had said he would be removed and Eli believed Mary could make it happen. Then Eli sucked in a deep breath. She wondered if Arianna was aware yet or if she'd even care. And she realized that someone would need to go wake her. Arianna might have been excused from the day's interviews, but she'd want to be there if something big was coming down the pipeline. Her shoulders sagged and she looked around, not surprised to find Eden snuggled up under Jacob's strong arms, talking excitedly about the possibilities.

Eli sighed, not wanting to take that pleasure away from her friend, but needing Eden to step up and be her second. As if sensing her regard, Eden looked up and dark eyes met gray. Eden patted Jacob on the chest and offered him a few words. He released her, brushing a kiss across her temple and smiling when she blushed. Then she shouldered her way through the excited throng, anxious to know what had put the pensive expression on Eli's face when everyone else seemed enthusiastic about what the sudden change in procedure could mean.

"Isn't this great, Eli?" Isaac asked as he stumbled into her. She held out her arms to steady them both, and in a minute he seemed to get his bearings again. He released his grip on her arms, and not noticing her slight wince, gave her a goofy smile. "I think it means they're ready to make the announcement about who made the Alpha team cut. I hope so anyway. Don't you? I mean...."

Eli sighed. Of all the people she wanted to avoid at the moment, Isaac was probably at the top of her list. It wasn't that she hated him, but he had a tendency to grate on her nerves. He was always so focused on his own work that he was oblivious to everything else going on around him. And he was naturally clumsy, which made for some embarrassing accidents for almost everyone he interacted with. His saving grace was that he was exceptionally mechanically inclined - there wasn't a piece of machinery that he couldn't coax into working.

Still it didn't mean Eli wanted to be around him more than she had to be, and right now she had other things on her mind. Fortunately, Eden, with her impeccable timing, chose that exact moment to arrive. She looked up at the tall young man, allowing her lip to curl just slightly before giving him a cordial expression, cutting off his monologue with an excuse before she dragged Eli away from him.

Eli gave Eden a grateful look as they left Isaac behind with his jaw hanging in surprise. Eden's facial muscles didn't move, but her eyes twinkled in mischief. "You're welcome," she said with a hint of snark before allowing her expression to harden in one of complete seriousness. "What's up?" she asked when they reached an alcove that offered them a modicum of privacy.

Eli sighed. "I need you to go wake Arianna. If she's still... not well... let her go back to sleep. But if she's feeling better, give her the heads up on what's going on out here. Even if she's exhausted, I doubt she'd want to miss this."

"You think...?" leaning against the nearest wall and crossing her arms over her chest.

"Yes, I do. Don't you?"

Eden shrugged and nodded simultaneously. "I suppose," she agreed. "Don't worry, Eli. I'll take care of things. I'll get Danny to go with me. He's been the only one who was allowed to talk to her after... everything." She snorted. "Probably because he's the one person Malcolm didn't see as some sort of threat against his personal property."

"Eden, please...." Eli pled softly. Eden looked up, startled.

"Sorry, Eli," Eden apologized sheepishly and she pushed away from the wall. "Let me go get Danny and we'll take care of... her. Do you want us to bring her to lunch with us?"

Eli was good, but even she wasn't quick enough to hide the flash of pain that swept through her before she could school her features into something less revealing. "Good idea, Eden," her voice tight. "The sooner everyone gets used to including her again, the better for all involved."

Eden waited another moment, but when Eli didn't say any more, she nodded again. "All right. We'll see you shortly," she replied as she started walking away, noting that Eli didn't offer a reply of her own. It made Eden sigh in frustration, but there was little she could do about it now. She had her orders and she needed to find Danny first.

"Hey, Eden. Everything okay?" the tall thin young man asked as she approached him with a frown. It was decidedly out of place among all the smiles and excitement currently enveloping the hallway and its occupants. Her eyes snapped to his and he held up his hands in surrender at the fierce expression on her face.

"Oh... hey, Kai. Yeah... just - have you seen Danny anywhere? I need his help, but he seems to have disappeared."

"I think he and Luke went off to lunch together already," Kai replied. "Anything I can do?"

She scowled at his explanation and she forced herself to give him a small smile as she shook her head. "No - I appreciate it, Kai, but I need Danny specifically. Hopefully he's got his comm unit with him so I don't have to go hunting for him. Thanks, though."

"Sure. Um... I know at least part of our group was planning to go to Nickel's. You want us to save you a spot?"

Eden growled but gave him another smile that seemed more like a grimace. "I'd like that," she said through clenched teeth. "Let Jake know will you?"

"Sure. We'll meet you down there in a few." Eden nodded and turned away even before Kai finished speaking, pulling her comm unit out and flicking through her contacts until she found the one she

needed. She didn't even give him a chance to respond when he answered; she simply gave him a command.

"Get back here now. I need you."

Arianna felt like she was swimming through the thick swamps of her home planet. She had tried that once... unwillingly, and it was dark and cloying and almost suffocating. Without warning, she shot upright, eyes wide and gasping for breath. The brightness of the room caused her to slam her eyes closed again and she brought a hand to her chest trying to control her harsh breathing and the thundering beat of her heart. When she was finally able to hear more than her pounding pulse in her ears, she blinked open her eyes again. What she found wasn't what she expected.

"Danny?"

"Hey, Sweetie. You okay?"

She glanced around, recognizing that she was back in her room. Danny was sitting on the edge of her bed with a hand lightly poised on her knee and Eden was standing just inside the door... arms crossed over her chest and legs crossed at the ankles. Arianna frowned, more than a little confused and disoriented. Closer inspection revealed that the things that Malcolm had deposited in her room the previous evening before she had stormed out after their fight - his shoes and jacket; his comm unit and timepiece - all these things were gone as if they had never been there in the first place. Brown eyes met blue and his expression softened at the confusion in hers.

"Danny?" she said again.

"It's all right, Sweetie. Mary said to let you sleep after the night you had, but the Committee has called for all of us to go to the conference room after lunch. We," gesturing between himself and Eden, "thought you might not want to miss it. Especially if there's a chance that they'll be announcing the Alpha team."

Her eyes widened and she looked at him, then Eden, then him again. "Do you really think they will?" Danny glanced at Eden and she pushed away from the wall so she could approach the bed.

"There's every possibility," Eden replied softly. She and Danny had decided to keep Eli's name out of things for now. They didn't want to put Arianna's back up against her... not when Eli had asked everyone to be nice to her again. "It's what all the candidates think anyway. So c'mon... go get ready and we'll go to lunch together before the announcement, all right?"

Arianna's eyes narrowed. "Why? Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?"

Eden grit her teeth together loud enough for Arianna to hear the squeak. But before she could snap off a biting retort, Danny put a calming hand on her arm and shook his head minutely. "We've been talking and realized if we want to be successful, you need to be a part of us," Danny said. "But you have to meet us halfway, Sweetie. You have to want to be part of us too."

"I never stopped wanting to, Danny," her voice so soft Eden had to strain to hear it.

"I know, Sweetie, but the rest didn't. They had no way of knowing how much was you and how much was Malcolm."

"They still don't."

"Maybe, but they want to try again. The question is will you let them? Will you try too?"

"But why now? What changed since last night??"

Eden cut in. "We decided to present a unified front instead of allowing Malcolm to pick us off one at a time. And if he continues to be an asshat, Jake will just push him out of an airlock."

Arianna's laughter was tinged with tears, but it was the first real emotion they had seen from her - aside from the despair that flooded her eyes when she looked at Eli - since her betrothal. Eden grinned, pretty proud of herself for the accomplishment and Danny gave her a thumbs up, his lavender skin tone flushing a deeper purple in his happiness. He squeezed the knee under his hand.

"However, we're going to miss lunch if you don't hurry things up, missy, and I don't know about you, but I'm ravenous. So go do whatever it is you need to do to get ready." Arianna nodded her head, her smile watery as the tears filling her eyes slid soundlessly down her face. Danny gave her a sympathetic smile and wiped her cheeks dry, then she flipped the blankets off her body and slid from the bed.

"I won't be but a few minutes. Will you wait for me?"

"We'll be right here, Sweetie. The gang is saving us a spot at the table," he answered, waving her towards the bathroom.

Arianna smiled. "I'll be right back."

It wasn't immediate - it was her first time being welcomed into the group in what felt like forever, and she wanted to look good. Still she made all haste to get ready. Eden was waiting and she was known to be one of the least tolerant of Arianna since the whole betrothal debacle. It made sense of course. She was Eli's second and as such probably knew as much or more about the situation between them than they themselves did.

It was funny, Arianna mused. She had been so jealous of the relationship Eli and Eden had formed even though it had been borne of necessity and it wasn't something she herself would have ever felt comfortable being part of. Although she would also be proud to watch Eli's back, she didn't have Eden's physical strength and endurance - something granted her by virtue of the dual hearts beating in her chest. But Arianna also didn't have Eden's dominating personality and thus her ability to get things done. She had quickly learned that being *taught* to lead didn't necessarily make you *able* to do so. And being loud and pushy didn't equate to leadership either.

So she showered and dressed as quickly as she could manage, thankful for the second chance she'd been granted for whatever reason. When she stepped out of the bathroom, she signaled her readiness to the other two. They gave her the once over before both gave an approving nod. Danny proffered his arm while Eden mock bowed and opened the door, gesturing for them to go ahead of her.

Danny nodded his head sharply while Arianna gave a slight curtsy, then the three of them burst into laughter at their silliness. It made the security smile to hear the foreign sound again. Maybe it had been a good day after all. Mary just smiled in her sleep.

The sound of laughter faded as the elevator doors closed, and Adam sighed. He knew it was his responsibility, but he sincerely did not want to be the one to wake Mary from the short nap she'd gained. The woman was entitled to more than a couple hours sleep. But he knew that she should at least be notified of the coming announcement gathering. She could choose to skip it and return to sleep once she knew, but at least the decision would be hers to make.

There was only a bare bones contingent of security left upstairs to keep those out who didn't belong on this floor. Otherwise, it was astoundingly quiet - it was rare that all the candidates were gone at the same time.

Adam took a deep breath and headed down the short hallway to Mary's room. If he was going to do this, he was going to do it face to face where he could gently wake her. She'd already been jerked out of a sound sleep once in the last twenty-four hours.

He knocked lightly, not expecting her to answer. Even though she was a mom, she was a little out of practice at having to listen for every little sound. So he was astonished when the door swung opened abruptly and Mary was standing in front of him with a scowl on her face. She put her hands on her hips when he didn't speak immediately, then sighed and waved him into her room. "Come on in, Adam. I know you had a reason for waking me up, and I am too damned tired to stand at the door while you try to remember what it is."

"Sorry, Chief. You kind of knocked it out of me when you actually opened the door. I didn't really expect you to," he added as he crossed to the chair by the window. Mary climbed back on the bed, but remained on top of the blankets.

"If you didn't think I'd answer, why did you bother to knock?"

"Because it's the polite thing to do. You taught us that, remember?" chuckling at the memory. Mary snorted.

"Yes... yes, I do remember. That was a mighty steep learning curve," giving him a smile. "So what's up? I know it's something pretty important for you to be waking me up. But it's not critical like it was last night. It's not Nick...?"

"No, not Nick. You'd be right about it being important though. A couple new developments, and at least one of you need to know about now so you can decide what action you want to take."

"Do tell."

"Well, Wonder and Flash went into Angel's room and woke her up." Mary started and frowned hard, but refrained from commenting when Adam held up his hand. "They were inviting her to lunch with the rest of the candidates." He paused. "I'm almost certain Princess was behind it. She and Wonder disappeared for a few minutes after the announcement was made, and the next thing we knew, Wonder and Flash were in Angel's room. When they came out, they were laughing and joking together and they headed downstairs to meet up with everyone else."

"And why is everyone else downstairs? What announcement?"

"That's why I woke you up. The Committee instructed the candidates to have lunch, then congregate in the conference room. The speculation is that they're ready to announce the Alpha team."

"Even though they still have interviews left on the schedule. I wonder...."

"Chief?"

"I wonder if they were waiting for Malcolm to be ejected from the program - hoping I would find a reason to get rid of him."

"Chief?"

"He was still part of the program because Fernando had a contract, but he was never actually qualified to participate."

"And you...?"

"I was able to dissolve the contract legally without breaking it. Malcolm won't be returning - he's out of the program, off the project and no longer betrothed to Angel." She smiled fiendishly. "Today was a good day for me." Adam laughed.

"I guess it was. Glad you're on our side."

"Well, you know - I hate someone thinking they can play games like that with me and win. Especially someone like him." She snorted. "Malcolm's lucky I was too tired to crucify him. Fernando knows enough to realize I knew my business. I didn't share everything with him; he doesn't know I know his business as well."

"Like I said... glad you're on our side." Adam slapped his hands on his knees and stood. "So what do you want to do about the committee meeting? Are you going to go or...?"

"What I'd like to do is box their ears for doing this right now today. I'm pretty sure this could have waited until the interviews were over." She wiped a hand over her face. "What I'm going to do is take another shower and try to wake up long enough to stay awake without caffeine stimulation until the announcement is over. Then I'm going to come back here and go back to bed until the next crisis or tomorrow morning... whichever comes first."

Adam laughed. "Got it, Chief. The kids are still at lunch so you have a little time." Mary shook her head.

"If I don't get up and get moving now, I won't make it. Wait here for me, please. I'll only be a few minutes." Adam nodded his agreement and turned his attention to the window. Mary disappeared into the bathroom once more.

Chapter III

"You all right?" Danny asked Arianna again as she hesitated outside the doors to the restaurant their friends were currently ensconced in and waiting for them. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, nodding her head jerkily. Her eyes popped open when she felt the incredible warmth of Eden's hand rest on her arm. Arianna looked at her with surprise and more than a hint of confusion.

"Az," smirking when Arianna rolled her eyes and frowned at the designation. Most of them had given each other nicknames at the compound and Eden used Arianna's initials - A and Z - because it drove the young woman crazy. No one else but Eli had ever called Arianna anything besides her name, and none of them were willing to intrude on that moniker. Eden let her disquiet show briefly. "Hey... we don't have to do this if you're that uncomfortable with the idea."

"You'd skip lunch...?"

Eden sighed. "If that's what it takes. I'm sure Danny can get Luke to bring us something to the meeting. But you know - the sooner you do this, the easier it will be. Not as much time to build things up in your head, you know? And wouldn't you rather do it informally like this?"

Arianna drew in a deep breath, pondering Eden's words thoughtfully. For all their discord, Eden had never deliberately lied to Arianna or steered her wrong. And she had always looked out for her when Eli had asked. It occurred to Arianna that this might be the case this time as well, but she didn't know how to bring it up without stirring up all kinds of anger and resentment on both their parts.

Arianna slowly released the breath she'd been holding and opened her eyes. She looked first to Danny who was nodding encouragingly at her, then at Eden. Her black eyes were mostly shuttered, but that wasn't unusual. Eden didn't show much to the world that she didn't want them to see. Arianna blinked and Eden lowered her walls a little... enough that Arianna could still see the honest concern. She straightened her spine and pasted on her best Princess smile.

"Let's do this," she said.

"You're sure?"

"No, but I'm going to overthink the whole thing if we don't move along with the program."

"Fair enough," Eden said, whipping open the door before Arianna could change her mind. Danny caught her hand in his and tucked it into the crook of his arm. Eden motioned them ahead of her, then took her place at Arianna's other side, a gentle hand on the small of her back.

Their entrance startled most of the candidates into sudden stillness, but it lasted only a fleeting second before they began cheering - a sound that grew in volume as the blush covering Arianna's face deepened in response to their accolades. From her place in the back corner of the room, Eli smiled, then disappeared into the kitchen unnoticed by everyone except Eden... and Arianna.

Mary wasn't sure how, but she managed to beat most of the candidates into the conference room. Only a very few had gathered in the space so far, and a look at her timepiece told her it was getting dangerously close to time for the Committee to return from their own repast. She yawned, wishing desperately to be back in her bed, but given the way the last twelve hours had gone, she was leery of voluntarily missing out on anything.

Her comm unit beeped in her ear and she touched a finger to the device to activate it. "Wellesly."

"Chief, this is Sarah. I wanted to let you know that the candidates are headed your way en masse."

"You're staying with them, correct? One agent per car until they've all arrived?"

"Yes, Chief. We just wanted to update you on their status."

"I appreciate that, Sarah. Do you know *why* they're coming up all together? Surely they didn't all finish lunch at the same time."

"No, Chief... they didn't. But when Angel joined them, it caused a bit of chaos."

Mary started again at the use of Arianna's codename. Just a few hours of addressing the young woman by her given name and hearing her called otherwise... especially by the name that Eli had chosen for her... was jarring. "Excuse me?"

"Oh... nothing we couldn't handle, Chief. But everyone made it a point to speak to her since the Prick wasn't around to hinder their ability to do so. Of course some were more enthusiastic than others."

"Everyone?"

Sarah sighed. "Almost everyone. Princess left when Angel and her escorts entered the restaurant."

"Is someone with her?"

"Yes, Chief. Reuben made sure she got back to her room all right, and as far as I know he's still there with her. I'm guessing she'll be the last to arrive."

"Not a bet I'd take," Mary replied. "I think the same thing." She paused as people started trickling into the room - project contenders and security personnel alike. "All right - the candidates are starting to file in. I'll see you shortly."

"Yes Chief," Sarah replied then cut the connection. Mary turned her attention to the people making their way into the room. You could feel the excitement and curiosity crackling the air around them, and she smiled. She was more than a little curious about this meeting herself. She yawned again. She just hoped the Committee would move things along fairly quickly.

"So was it what you expected?" Danny asked as they entered the lift. His face was flushed purple in his excitement, and he couldn't keep the twinkle out of his eyes or the lilt from his voice.

"No," Arianna replied, shaking her head though her eyes remained firmly focused on the floor. "I didn't expect anyone to really notice... much less be happy to see me. I mean... we all know I'm not the most popular person here. It was... it was weird getting that kind of attention from everyone."

Eden frowned. "Bad weird?" She really didn't want to have to tell Eli that her request to include Arianna had backfired spectacularly because everyone had been so inclusive they had put Arianna off. Arianna shook her head again.

"I don't think so. I just never thought people would try so hard to care. I know some of them really don't, but they still managed to say a kind word before they left the restaurant. Why do you suppose that is?" jerking her head up and letting her eyes meet Eden's squarely. "We're all still in competition with each other so why would they bother? Unless they were directed to do so."

The elevator stopped moving and they felt Danny shift behind them, but Eden and Arianna never lost their stare. "Tell me, Eden," Arianna hissed in a harsh whisper, "did Eli issue orders for everyone to be nice to me?"

Eden moved her hand to signal to Danny but she never removed her gaze from Arianna's. "You know as well as I do that Eli doesn't have the authority to issue orders to anyone here. She was chosen to lead at the compound because she stepped up and took the task. But here we're all equals." Arianna blinked and let her eyes drop. Eden cupped her chin and waited until brown eyes met hers again. "This was the first opportunity we've had to talk to you without the ass... without Malcolm around since you came back to the facility betrothed to one another. Maybe people figured out that their real problem with you was him."

"We're still betrothed."

"Yes, but we don't have to be nice to him," Eden said with a smirk. "Now c'mon. Danny's tired of being a doorstop and I don't want to make an entrance because the Committee is waiting on us."

Arianna jerked her eyes away from Eden's to look around. Sure enough, Danny was standing in the door of the elevator holding it open and people were exiting the remaining lifts and making their way towards the conference room in small groups. She nodded and Danny took her hand again while Eden walked on her other side.

They weren't the last ones in, but they were close and Arianna met Mary's tired, smiling face. She gave a small smile and a nod of her own, then followed Eden into a row of empty chairs and took a seat. She didn't see Eli slip in the back just before the doors closed.

Eli stayed in the restaurant long enough to know that her request was being honored before making her way into the kitchen and out to an elevator. She didn't even turn her head when she was joined by a member of the security team; she just entered the lift and leaned against the wall until they reached the correct floor. Then she gave Reuben a nod and slid from the elevator, walking to her room and entering without hesitation. If she figured right, she had about an hour or so to simply rest and recover from what had already been a rough, exhausting morning.

She lay down on the bed again, mindful of the clothing she wore. Eli really had no desire to appear before the Committee and her fellow candidates in wrinkled clothes, but she was to the point of tired that all she wanted to do was rest for a few minutes. Eli closed her eyes and immediately felt her body relax. She never realized when she fell asleep.

"Ms Wellesly?"

Mary frowned when the unexpected voice of Chairman McMurtry sounded through her earpiece. "Madame Chairman?" her confusion evident.

"I'm sorry to contact you this way; I do realize it is highly unorthodox. But your man Stephen informed me that you had been notified of this meeting and I wanted to assure myself of your presence."

"I am inside the conference room, Madame Chairman. In my usual place."

"Is everyone else gathered?"

Mary glanced around the room, meeting the eyes of each of her team members. One by one they nodded their heads at her, assuring her that their charges were present and accounted for. She was mentally tabulating the number of candidates in the room as well as calculating which security members were still missing. Just as Mary opened her mouth to speak, she saw Reuben and Eli slip in and take a place in the corner opposite hers against the back wall.

"Ms Wellesly?" McMurtry's voice came across the comm unit again. There was the slightest hint of impatience in her tone.

"Beg pardon, Madame Chairman. I was doing a head count and my team was checking in."

"And the result?"

"All present and accounted for, Madame Chairman."

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly. The Committee will be there in approximately three minutes." Without further elucidation, there was a click and McMurtry's voice went silent. Another moment passed and Stephen was on the line. "Sorry, Chief. They got here and she demanded to speak to you - practically snatched my comm unit away from me. Given the way the morning has gone around here, I thought it best to let her talk to you directly."

"You know something?"

"Only that their lunch was a little intense. They went into the private dining room and locked the door. No one was happy when they went in, and no one was happy when they came out. The Chairman was the only one to come to me directly, though. The rest are still freshening up."

Mary pinched the bridge of her nose and blew a breath of air between her lips. "Fabulous. Everyone keep an eye out," watching her team nod in tandem.

"Hail, hail the gangs all here," Scott sing-songed. "Looks like it's show time, boys and girls," Scott said as the Committee approached his desk. He rose and walked to the door to open it.

"Thanks, Scott."

"Wish I could have done more, Chief," he replied apologetically. Then he pulled the door wide and allowed the Committee to pass over the threshold before closing it firmly behind them and resuming his place at his desk.

The candidates didn't stand when the Committee walked into the room, but they did still into a silence so complete the footsteps of the Committee Members sounded loud in the room. Once they were all on the dais and seated behind their various placards, Chairman McMurtry cleared her throat to draw all eyes to her.

She looked out across the crowd of eager, expectant faces and sighed. She knew what they believed - what they *hoped* - this gathering had been called for. She felt a little guilty that the truth wasn't anywhere close to that aspiration. But she and her fellow Members had spent every moment since Mary Wellesly had left them sequestered in this very room debating the consequences of the revelation she had made. It hadn't been pleasant, and this wouldn't be either. But it was necessary.

"I know many of you believe that we've called you all together to announce the final choice of the Alpha team for this project." She took a deep breath and released it slowly, using the time to look around the room as some of the candidates caught on to what she hadn't said yet. "Unfortunately, that isn't the case. We do still have a number of closing interviews to conduct and we will be rescheduling the ones we missed today to take place sometime this weekend. We will be making our definitive selection and the announcement of those chosen by the end of next week."

Those words caused a cheer to go up from a majority of the candidates, but McMurtry was quick to notice that three of their top picks didn't join in. She wondered if they were that certain they would be chosen or if it was because they realized her words were simply a buffer for the announcement that was coming - the one she and the Committee were still dissatisfied with.

"Why are we here?" The Chairman looked around to see who had spoken... not at all surprised to see Arianna stand to her feet. "If you are not informing us of the composition of the Alpha team, why are we here?"

The candidates started murmuring amongst themselves as they recognized the validity of Arianna's question. Arianna herself didn't look around - she held McMurtry's eyes with intense brown ones... almost daring the older woman to look away. A shrill whistle resounded throughout the room, causing silence to fall once more. Mary stepped forward from her place against the wall as she removed the fingers from the corners of her mouth.

"Arianna has asked a legitimate question. Perhaps if you all settle down, the Chairman will have the opportunity to address it."

McMurtry removed her gaze from Arianna to give Mary a nod. "Thank you, Ms Wellesly. Candidate Zarita has indeed asked a fair question - though I promise you I was getting to the reason for having directed all of you to be here for this." She cleared her throat again. Arianna took a seat.

"This morning, it was brought to our attention," motioning towards her fellow Members, "that one of your number has acquired a disease we believed long eradicated from this planet. We do not yet have specifics on where he came into contact with it or when - there are people working on obtaining that information as we speak. Suffice it to say, however, that we will find out."

"What disease?" one of the candidates at the front of the room asked.

McMurtry sighed. "Something with the potential to wipe out the population of the planet."

"What disease?" another voice demanded.

She waited for several heartbeats before she replied. "Aids."

Again there was an outbreak of sound as the postulants began talking amongst themselves, sharing what information they knew about the deadly infection. McMurtry held up her hands before Mary could give another ear-splitting whistle. "There is a cure for it, but it has some ghastly side effects. Unfortunately there's no vaccine against it. So before we can do anything else, each of you will need to be tested by the team physician. Those of you who have been cleared by the assistant will by necessity be put at the front of the line."

"Will having this disease eliminate us from the program?"

The Chairman pinched her lips. Here was the heart of the controversy she and her colleagues had been arguing about for the better part of the morning. "That has not been decided. We have yet to reach a consensus."

"So we're just supposed to hang in limbo until...."

"No," McMurtry replied forcefully. "We won't even know the outcomes of the tests until after we make the selection. Ms Wellesly and her team will be responsible for collecting the results and administering the cure if necessary." The Chairman watched as Mary's head jerked up, and she gave her a small nod. Mary nodded back, understanding that this was her punishment for her disrespect of Arianna's father earlier.

"The likelihood of one of you having contracted this disease is very slim. This is mostly a precautionary measure for your safety as well as that of this planet. One incident does not an outbreak make. But it is enough to cause us to ensure that it is simply a single case and not the beginnings of an epidemic."

"So who's the idiot who managed to land us in this mess?" Jacob asked. "I'd kind of like to thank him personally."

McMurtry chuckled and felt the tension in the room break as the rest of the Committee snickered along with her. "I'm sure you would, Candidate Aryoch. But I'm not at liberty to discuss it. Now," she continued before he could protest further, "the team physician was kind enough to set up screening appointments for each of you. The day and time has been sent to your Pads. Please adhere to the schedule - he has a reason for placing each of you where he did in line."

"How long before we get the results?" Hannah queried. McMurtry looked at Mary.

"Ms Wellesly? Do you know...?"

"I should have the results within a day of your testing. I will contact each of you as I am alerted to your prognosis. No one will be left wondering for longer than necessary."

The candidates seemed to accept this and turned their attention back to McMurtry when she spoke again. "That's all we have for the moment. As I said, today's interviews will be rescheduled for this weekend and we will have a final decision on the Alpha team by the end of next week." With those words, the Committee rose and made its way out of the conference room. The candidates sat silently for another minute before they rose and began chattering and moving towards the door.

Chapter IV

Mary remained in place against the far corner of the back wall watching as the candidates streamed out of the conference room. They didn't look pleased with the turn of events - not that she could blame them - but no one was panicking either. From the bits of conversation she could pick up, a majority of them were mostly curious as to which of them had contracted the virus... and how they had done so.

She turned her eyes to the room, noting Arianna hadn't moved from her seat. Eden was turned towards her and Danny was crouched down beside her, both with frowns on their faces. Mary watched as Arianna shook her head and Danny rose, leaning over to hug her gently before he slipped up the aisle to join Esther, Jacob and Luke. Eden remained with Arianna another moment, then squeezed her hand and rose from her chair, sliding by Arianna and making her way to her waiting friends. Without a word, they left the conference room, but Eden met Eli's eyes for a moment and offered her a single nod. Eli quirked a half-smile in her direction in acknowledgment.

Before Mary could push away from the wall and approach Arianna who hadn't moved, Eli shifted so they were standing side by side. "Thank you for the cookies," she said without turning to meet Mary's gaze. "You didn't have to do that since it was entirely my fault I missed lunch, but I appreciated it. Please tell your daughter she's in the wrong line of work."

Mary smirked, but kept her stare on Arianna's bowed head, figuring this was as close to an apology or forgiveness she would ever achieve with Eli. "I've told her that on more than one occasion. She just gives me her father's smirk and laughs. It's a little unnerving." She glanced at Eli briefly before returning her focus to Arianna, noting Eli was looking at the same image. "Did Reuben have to get you some milk to wash them down?"

Eli chuckled, and Arianna's head jerked up. Eli froze and her words were suddenly as cold as her demeanor. "He did. If you'll excuse me..." And she was gone before Mary could respond. Mary looked at Arianna who had risen and turned at the sound. Arianna's shoulders slumped for a brief moment, then she gave Mary a heartbreaking smile and stepped towards her. Mary leaned back into the wall and waited.

"Hey," Eden said as they remained seated while their compatriots filed out of the room around them. She placed a hand on Arianna's wrist. "You all right?" she asked quietly. Arianna's reaction to the Chairman's announcement would have gone unnoticed if Eden hadn't been paying close attention to her. As it was, she was still confused by it. Arianna had stiffened slightly, then become completely motionless. Eden hadn't been sure she was breathing until she rested a hand on her pulse and felt the rapid heartbeat beneath the smooth skin.

Arianna took a deep breath and nodded her head once, not lifting her eyes from the hands in her lap. "I'm fine, Eden."

"You sure?" feeling Danny move from her side to kneel down next to Arianna. "You seem to be taking this announcement pretty hard." She felt Arianna take another breath before she looked up and met Eden's black eyes. She gave her a small smile.

"I'm sure, Eden. But you don't know what it means to me to have you ask. I just need a minute to catch my breath. Why don't you and Danny go meet the rest who are waiting for you, and I'll catch up later?"

"We'd rather not leave you alone, Sweetie," Danny confessed, saving Eden the embarrassment of admitting such a thing. She gave him a grateful look that Arianna didn't see because she was giving him the same expression.

"I appreciate that, Danny... really. But I need a moment to myself."

"We'll be right outside," he assured her before he rose and hugged her. He slipped away without another word. Eden slid her fingers down to curl into Arianna's clasp.

"You sure you'll be all right alone?" Arianna smiled again... this one a little bigger.

"I'm sure."

Eden nodded. "All right then," she said gruffly, squeezing the fingers holding hers. Then she stood and made her way up the aisle towards the friends that were waiting for her. She met Eli's eyes and gave her a nod, assuring her that Arianna was okay. Eli's half-smile was expected, but Eden cringed at the pain she witnessed in those flat gray eyes. She wondered if they would ever return to their natural color, and then they were out the door and waiting for Arianna to join them.

Arianna sat motionless for a few moments longer until she heard light laughter that was so familiar, but that she hadn't heard in what felt like a lifetime. Her head jerked up instinctively and she rose and turned towards it, only to have the sound cut off immediately.

The look in Eli's eyes was so cold... so lifeless, and Arianna felt herself crumble under the weight of responsibility she felt. Her feet refused to move and her lips were unable to call out, and Eli left without offering Arianna the first hint of recognition.

Her shoulders sagged and she met Mary's understanding gaze. It was all she could do to smile, then she straightened and headed to where Mary stood waiting. It was time to get a few answers.

"Is everything all right, Arianna?" Mary asked, concern filling her tone even though her eyes reflected her exhaustion.

"I don't think so," Arianna replied honestly. "And you look like you could use a little sleep."

Mary laughed heartily, causing Arianna to give her a big, genuine smile. "Ah... the mark of a true politician," Mary said with a grin. "That's the understatement of the century, my dear. The Fates are conspiring against me today in that regard, though." She met Arianna's gaze and felt her demeanor sober. "How can I help you, Arianna?"

"I'm sorry for putting you into this position, but I really need to know - the candidate who contracted this virus the Committee seems to be genuinely in fear of... it's Malcolm isn't it?"

Mary arched an eyebrow, but her eyes never left Arianna's. "What makes you think that?"

"Other than the fact that he wasn't present at this meeting and that the few belongings he brought with him into my room last night are gone as if they were never there?" She waited for Mary to nod. "Just call it a hunch."

"Is your hunch based on anything other than a gut feeling?"

"Yes, but there is a big portion of instinct in use here too."

"Like what, if I may ask?"

Arianna sighed and closed her eyes, lifting one hand so she could tick her points of on it to prevent herself from forgetting anything. "Like the fact that he hasn't been seen since he was removed from this property last night; like the fact that all his belongings are gone from my room; like the fact that he was only ever examined by the assistant physician - never by the team doctor; like the fact that you were confident you could have him removed from the program without jeopardizing my place." Mary's eyes widened, and she was thankful Arianna's were still closed. It gave her a moment to school her features before brown eyes blinked open again and Arianna leveled a stare in her direction. "Is that enough?"

"It is," Mary admitted. "If you weren't so brilliant otherwise, I'd recruit you for my team. Your observational skills are to be commended."

"So he is the idiot behind the not-quite panic the Committee seems to have going on, isn't he?"

"He is," Mary nodded. "But please don't share that around. You have the right to know because of your previous betrothal to him, but it will only cause issues for you and for us if you tell people." She saw the disbelief in Arianna's eyes, and she reached for her hands. Arianna clasped them together tightly, studying the truth in Mary's eyes.

"Previous?"

"Yes. I'm sure you'll get official notice from your father," trying not to curl her lip in distaste, "and I'll be happy to share the whole story with you later, but trust me when I tell you that Malcolm is out of your life for good."

"So what issues would it cause for people to know he's gone? People are going to start noticing on their own if they haven't already, and I'm pretty sure a number of candidates would be thrilled to celebrate that fact."

"If you give them the official version of why he left - the one that says he relinquished his place and your betrothal so you could stay with the program - it wouldn't be a problem," smirking at the disgusted face Arianna made at that suggestion. "But to let them know the truth - that he was the one that caught a deadly disease whose only cure is sterilization - they will go back to shunning you, Arianna... for fear of being exposed to the virus because of your acknowledged relationship with him."

"But we've never...."

"I know that and you know that. But most here won't understand it even though it is an acknowledged law and custom of your people. That's not how it works in most societies."

"So to protect myself...."

"... you have to protect him at least until we know all the facts. We're still working on putting them all together, but when we have them so will you."

Arianna closed her eyes again and smiled. "Thank you, Mary. I know that doesn't sound like much, but I mean those words. I wish there was more I could say to convey to you just how grateful I am for what you've done." She squeezed the hands she held and opened her eyes. "If there is anything I can do...."

Mary smiled gently and shook her head. "We both need more rest than we've had so far today so I'll tell you what," releasing Arianna's hands and motioning towards the door. "You take it easy for the remainder of the day - I'm not saying you have to sleep right now, but try to do something low impact and go to bed early tonight, all right? I'll go try to actually get some sleep so I have more than two functioning brain cells - and when I get up, I'll tell you the whole story. Then you can decide what you want to do from there, okay?"

Arianna nodded. "Okay. Thank you, Mary... sincerely," opening the door to find her colleagues... her *friends*... waiting patiently. Only Stephen and Mary remained of the security team, and he shrugged when she cocked her eye at him. She just shook her head.

"All right, boys and girls - looks like you're stuck with me until we get to back to our floor so let's go." Luke and Daniel walked to the elevator immediately and stood waiting for Mary to key the door open. Jacob and Eden looked at one another, then between Arianna and Mary before allowing their eyes to settle on Arianna.

"You okay, Az?" Eden asked. Arianna nodded.

"Yes, Eden... thank you. I'm still tired from last night."

"How about you, Ms W?" Jacob asked with a rakish grin though there was serious concern in his eyes. "You look like...." Eden slapped a hand over his mouth and he scowled at her. She smirked and shook her head.

"Never tell a woman how she looks unless you're complimenting her, Jake. You'll live a much longer, happier life." His eyes widened and he turned a sheepish expression in Mary's direction even as he removed Eden's hand from his mouth.

"Sorry, Mary," he mumbled. "I didn't mean anything by it."

Mary chuckled. "I know, Jacob. And I appreciate the concern," wiping a hand over her burning eyes. "It's nothing a few hours of sleep won't cure, so can we go upstairs? I'd like to try and catch a few more winks before the next crisis arises."

"I'd like to have no more crises if they're gonna be like this one," Luke replied as the rest approached the lift. "I mean, the Aids virus was part of my studies when I was working on my inter-species medical degree. Do you realize how badly...?" Mary gave him a look and he changed directions. "I'm just glad it was caught so quickly." He clapped his hands together and blew out a breath when he realized everyone was looking at him. "Right... I'm just gonna shut up now."

At that moment the elevator dinged and the doors opened onto their floor. Members of the security turned their heads and shifted to protect the last group and Mary made her way out of the lift and

headed down the hall towards her room without a backwards glance. They all turned to Arianna who was watching her go with a frown.

"Everything all right?" Jacob asked, placing a hand on her shoulder. She nodded and turned her attention back to him and the others.

"Yes. I just hope she gets some rest. She's been going pretty hard for a while now thanks to me. I'd hate for it to be my fault that something happened to her."

Jacob grinned debonairly. "Nothing can stop Mary, Arianna. She's a tough old broad."

Eden snorted. "She hears you calling her old, you might not make it to tomorrow, Jake." She turned to Arianna. "C'mon, Az. I think the girls are in Gay's room. She said something about Dancing Like a Rock Star... whatever that means."

Arianna blinked at her. It had been a long time since she been included as part of the group, and Eden had *never* been the one to invite her. She was a little bit stunned.

Jake smirked. "I think you broke her, Eden." Danny just gave him a withering stare and put a hand on Arianna's arm. She glanced down at it after a moment, then looked up to meet his eyes. He just cocked an eyebrow at her and smiled before nodding in Eden's direction. She had her arms crossed over her chest and an impatient frown on her face though the twinkle in her eyes belied her true exasperation at Arianna.

"You back with us, Az? Or do you need a little longer? I'm sure we have time for a three hour tour," said with a smile and more than a hint of sarcasm. Arianna narrowed her eyes and gave Eden a contemptuous stare, but that only caused Eden to smirk. Arianna huffed. Eden chuckled aloud. "So you coming with me, Az or you gonna go back to your room and rest a while?"

"You really sure you want me there, Eden?"

Eden frowned. "What the hell kind of question is that, Az? I wouldn't have asked if I didn't, and if we don't get down there soon, they're liable to come looking for us. They're expecting us - *all* of them are expecting *both* of us."

Daniel stepped up and wrapped an arm around Arianna's shoulders. "Accept it, honey. You were never the one we had an issue with... not after we really got to know you. And since the asshat's not here at the moment to interfere, we want to take advantage while we can."

Arianna teared up, but her smile was bright. "I've missed you guys... so much."

"Yeah, yeah," Eden mocked, though her eyes were suspiciously tender. "Now c'mon... before Gay decides we need to do some dance called the Funky Chicken."

Arianna frowned. "You mean like the farm animal on this planet?" watching Eden nod briskly. She arched an eyebrow. "You're making that up."

"Swear to the Holy Heavens she's not," Daniel assured her. "We saw the list."

"So we're square now?" Jacob asked impatiently. "Cause I need to get back to *Nuke 'em Duke 'em* before Titus or Simon beats my high score. What??" he whined when Eden and Daniel rolled their

eyes simultaneously. "You know what - never mind." He looked at Luke. "You with me, man or you going with them?"

Luke gave Daniel an apologetic glance, and Daniel just shrugged. Luke turned to Jacob. "Let's go kick some alien ass!" Jacob whooped and headed down the hallway, only to turn and walk backwards for a few steps to blow kisses. Then he and Luke disappeared into his room, only to be greeted by a muted cheer. Eden chuckled and shook her head.

"C'mon you two. Let's not waste any more of this unexpected day off." She took Arianna by the elbow, knowing Daniel would do the same on the other side. And they waltzed down the hall until they reached the room some of the girls were gathered in. It was time for a little fun.

Mary paused when she reached her door. Eli stood in the doorway leaning against the doorjamb, conveniently out of sight. Mary gestured her away from the lock, then opened the door and ushered the younger woman in ahead of her. Without a word, she motioned Eli towards the bed, stopping at the closet to kick off her shoes and hang up her jacket. Then she walked to the small refrigerator and pulled the door open, reaching inside and pulling out the milk. She held it up and Eli nodded. Mary poured out two glasses and handed one to Eli, then took a seat beside her.

"So what can I do for you, Eli?" she asked quietly.

"I owe you an apology. I was rude this morning, and it was uncalled for. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Mary assured her with a smile. "I was pushy. People get angry when they get pushed, and I obviously pushed too far. So I'm sorry too."

Eli nodded, but otherwise didn't respond, and they sat in companionable silence as they drank their milk. When Eli finished, she sighed deeply. "That hit the spot," she commented softly with a chuckle. "Reuben didn't give me quite enough to wash down those cookies."

Mary winced. "I'm so sorry. Would you like some more?"

"Oh... no thank you. This was perfect." She nodded towards the refrigerator. "Nice perk, by the way."

"There's gotta be some benefit for being the Head Idiot in Charge, right?"

Eli laughed, startling herself and Mary alike. "I guess there does." She stood. "Let me get out of here so you can get some sleep. I'm pretty sure you've waited long enough for that. And besides, I've got a couple things to take care as well. I can show myself out," she added when Mary made a move to rise from the bed.

"Eli?" Mary said as Eli reached the door. Eli stopped and turned, waiting for Mary to continue. "Malcolm's out." Eli's eyes widened briefly before she shuttered her gaze. Then she gave Mary a curt nod and exited the room, closing the door quietly behind her. Mary just shook her head. She stripped out of her clothes, letting them fall where they lay, and crawled under the blankets. With any luck, the world would be able to go on without her for just a little while.

Chapter V

"Are you certain you're well, ДОЧЬ?" Eli's mother asked with concern. "You seem... not yourself, and your coloring disturbs me. There is something... off, though perhaps..."

"I'm fine, MaTb," Eli cut into Eve's rambling before it could become a full-blown rant. "I'm just a little tired. You know how wearing I find politics," rolling her eyes and chuckling deprecatingly. Her mother smirked and nodded.

"I do indeed. I'm more than a little surprised you've lasted as long as you have," she offered honestly. "Oh, not in the program," she hastened to add when Eli's brow furrowed at her perceived criticism. "I fully expect you'll be chosen, ДОЧЬ. You have very few peers in that regard. But this is the first I've heard you complain about the political game necessary to achieve that."

"It's only recently gotten tiring, MaTb. We're into the grandstanding and posturing stage." She blew out a breath forcefully, causing her bangs to fly up before they settled over her eyes once more. "I just want to get on with it, you know?"

"I know, Elizabeth. At least it shouldn't be much longer."

"I hope not. Limbo sucks."

Her mother laughed. "You always were impatient, ДОЧЬ. Enjoy the relative peace - once you leave to begin the project in earnest, it will be chaos and hard work for quite a while before you get settled in and can take a break."

"Yes, MaTb. Will you and OTeU be coming to see me off?"

"Of course," grinning at the confidence Eli showed about being chosen. "We are simply waiting for notification and clearance. We've already been through the preliminary and secondary processes."

"Excuse me?"

Eve frowned. "For what, ДОЧЬ?"

"What preliminary and secondary processes?"

"Security clearance. When you were selected for the program we all went through a security check and when you made it to the interview procedure, your OTeU and I were visited again. The young woman we spoke to was lovely - she told us her boss was taking the initiative with the families of the candidates she expected to be chosen as part of the Alpha team." Eve frowned. "Surely we've talked about this, Elizabeth."

"No, MaTb - we haven't," Eli said drolly. "Trust me... I'd have remembered that conversation."

"I am sorry, ДОЧЬ. I thought I had told you before - it might have provided you with a measure of peace about your place in the program."

Eli smiled and shook her head. "Not then. I've only just learned how thorough the Chief, as the security team calls her, is... and has been throughout this entire project. She knows things about me I had forgotten - things that happened in my fifth year."

Eve's brows went into her hairline. "She sounds very... efficient."

"She is, MaTb. I will introduce you when you come. You'll like her."

"I'll look forward to it, Elizabeth. Now are you certain everything is all right otherwise? You seem somewhat pale."

Eli smiled. "I'm sure, MaTb. Just ready to get to work." Before Eve could pursue that line of thought further, Eli pressed on. "Tell me about the rest of the family - how is Sarah? And Samuel and the twins?"

Eve let it go, caught up in her daughter's enthusiasm and questions about the rest of the family, and they spent the next hour catching up. Finally though, a chime sounded on Eve's end, and she turned her head from the monitor briefly before looking back at Eli remorsefully. Eli smiled and shook her head.

"It's all right, MaTb - I understand. Go take care of it and we'll talk again soon."

Even nodded. "I'm glad you called, ДЮЧЬ... however unexpectedly. It was wonderful to have so much uninterrupted time just to talk." The bell rang again, and Eve scowled. "Impatient little..." causing Eli to smirk and herself to snort. "I need to go. We'll talk soon?"

"Yes, MaTb. Love to you and the family."

"Love back, Elizabeth... always. All right, I'm coming," she shouted as she turned away from the screen when the tone pealed across the airwaves again. She raised a hand in farewell and cut the connection before Eli could respond. Eli sat staring at the darkened screen for another minute, shoulders shaking in mirth in a way they hadn't for far too long. When she had herself under control save for the occasional grin, she rose from the chair and moved to the closet.

A quick change of clothes later, she grabbed her gaming gear and headed to the door. She hoped Jacob's invitation was still open.

The hallway was empty save for the security personnel scattered up and down the corridor. Eli chanced to wonder if everyone was sequestered in their own rooms or if they had gathered in larger groups in a few rooms. Judging by the way the security team was placed, she was betting on the latter.

She was almost to Jacob's room when the door closest to her opened and Esther stepped out. She stopped abruptly upon seeing Eli, then grinned and closed the door soundly behind her.

"Hey, Girlfriend!" she greeted with a drawl. "We missed you at lunch. Come dance with us."

Eli smiled and shook her head. "Not this time, Esther. I'm going gaming," motioning to her gear. "Besides, I tried that this morning, and I'm not sure that practice makes perfect in this case. Have you seen me dance?"

Esther laughed and nodded. For all the grace Eli had when it came to doing almost anything else, dancing was just not something she was very good at. Esther had her suspicions on why that was, of course, but she wasn't about to bring them up now. "Yeah, I have. You're not *that* bad."

Eli snorted. "I'm not that good either. At least I can hold my own in *Nuke 'em Duke 'em.*" She frowned. "Why are you out here instead of dancing with the others? You *are* really good at it."

"Yeah," Esther agreed nonchalantly. "But not everyone else is, and I needed to get the red stain out before it set. I don't care how technologically advanced we seem to get, red will always stain white if you don't take care of it immediately."

Eli nodded. She knew Esther's words for truth. Before the silence could drag on into awkward territory, she spoke... not realizing Esther was doing the same. They broke off together, then exchanged glances and laughed. Eli motioned for Esther to speak first.

"Since we're off tonight, we're gonna all get together at Nickel's and party a little later. Make sure you're there. All right?"

Eli didn't answer. Instead she shifted the conversation. "I need to go if I'm going to have any chance of beating Jacob's high score. I'll see you later?"

"You better," Esther instructed with a grin, then turned and headed back to Abigail's room where her girls were waiting. Eli watched her go until she knocked on the door, then turned to do the same to Jacob's door. It only took a moment before Kai opened the portal, and a round of cheers went up as she was welcomed into their midst.

Eli smiled. She had missed this.

It had been a good night... mostly, Eli mused some hours later as she dropped tiredly on the end of her bed, flopping back gracelessly with a moan. The guys had been great about letting her barge into their gaming session though Isaac and Jacob had pouted a little when she and Kai had wiped the floor with them... metaphorically speaking, of course. It hadn't helped that the rest of the guys were cheering her on while jeering at the boys. Still it was all in good fun, and they had been gracious losers.

Eli chuckled at the memory - it had been *fun*. She'd missed gaming with the boys; she made a mental note to do it again soon. It had been fun and relaxing, and when they'd mentioned the party as she was leaving, she'd agreed to go for a little while at least. She knew she'd been shutting herself off from them more than was necessary and resolved not to do that anymore. She'd meant what she'd said earlier - if they were going to be a cohesive team, they were going to need to start forging those bonds now. She realized that meant she was also going to have to start dealing with Arianna again sooner or later, and figured she may as well do it while she was still feeling good. It helped that she had the silent support of her teammates.

The party hadn't really been a party at all. Instead a group of them had taken over the small dining room at the back of Nickels. The group of them had been her team - the people she would choose to

be part of the Alpha team if it was her choice to make. They were the men and women she considered to be her peers and her friends. And all of them were present... with one notable exception.

Eden had noticed her looking around even as Eli chatted and mingled with everyone. When she got to Eden, Eli just arched a brow, and Eden tucked a hand into the crook of her elbow and guided her out of the reserved room and towards the restrooms. Eli had gone along without complaint, knowing Eden was securing privacy for them. A security member nodded an 'all-clear' and stepped outside the door to wait. Eli leaned on the sink counter and crossed her arms.

Eden shrugged. "I sent her to bed. She was dragging, Eli - fighting to stay awake because she was so excited to be included again. But since we weren't sure you'd be here or if you'd want to see her even if you were, I sent her to bed." She shrugged again. "She was asleep before her head hit the pillow. Danny and I barely got her to her room in time."

Eli nodded her acceptance. "Thank you for looking out for her, Eden," she offered quietly. "I think it will go a long way towards getting the rest to make her part of the group again."

Eden looked as though she wanted to comment, but she bit her lip instead. Eli lifted her hands in question, and Eden sighed loudly. "It'd go a lot farther if it was you instead of me. Everyone is real curious to see if you're going to follow your own mandate - if you're going to include Arianna again."

"I've never *excluded* her, Eden."

"Professionally, no. But personally you slammed the door so hard we all got bruises from it. What she did was wrong; what you did was harsh."

"I'm not going to discuss my private life with you, Eden."

"Well, you need to find someone to talk to about it then. Because when we leave here, we're not going to have private lives anymore again. It's gonna be just like it was in the desert... only worse. Everybody's gonna know everybody else's business. Because we're gonna be stuck living in each other's hip pockets for years without any hope of relief. It doesn't get much more 'in your face' than that."

"Look, Eden..."

"Save it, Eli," Eden cut her off impatiently. "We're not gonna do this here and we're not gonna do this tonight. I don't care if you don't wanna talk to me," though the hurt in her eyes told a different story. "But you need to find someone. Az would be the best choice, but since I don't see that happening..." She blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm not trying to get all up in your business, Eli. I'm just..."

Eli sighed. "I know what you're doing, Eden. And you're right. I'll see what I can do."

Eden nodded once sharply, then took Eli by the elbow. "That's all I'm asking, Eli. C'mon. I need a drink and so do you. And you know security is gonna chase us upstairs sooner rather than later." They walked out of the restroom and picked up their shadow, and Eden rolled her eyes. "You think they're as tired of this merry-go-round as we are?"

Eli blinked at the reference for a moment, then smiled as she nodded. "Considering how much longer they've been at this than we have, I can only imagine it's much, much worse."

Eden had looked surprised by her reply, but she had accepted it for the olive branch it was, and their conversation flowed easily from there. Eli made sure she spoke to everyone before she left, and she was quite satisfied with the evening on the whole. Now she looked forward to some real sleep, confident the exhaustion she felt to her bones combined with the alcohol she'd consumed would help contribute to the first solid night's sleep she'd had in months.

She stood with a groan and stripped off her clothes, leaving them in a pile by the bed where they fell. She stumbled to the bathroom, managing to clean her teeth and wash her face before falling into bed. She never realized when she fell asleep, but after a few minutes of stillness, the lights dimmed and the room fell into dark silence with only the sound of her breathing to break the stillness.

Mary frowned when she woke suddenly, wondering what had brought her out of a sound sleep. A glance at her nightstand showed her she'd been sleeping for almost fourteen hours, and she realized the pain of being in one position too long was most likely the cause of her wakeful state.

She moved slowly, stretching each individual muscle group until she felt everything relax, then she turned her attention to popping her joints back into place. Once that task was complete, she rose and moved to shower, finally ready to begin her day.

Caleb was waiting for her with a hot cup of coffee when she stepped from her room, and she accepted it with a smirk and a nod. He grinned.

"Been a quiet night, Chief. Malcolm hasn't spoken since he was put into quarantine and Nick swears he's done nothing wrong. We kept him up all night - nothing unusually cruel," he assured her. "We just didn't let him sleep. So he should be more than ready to spill his guts when you go to talk to him - just so you'll let him get some sleep."

"I can sympathize," Mary commented. "It was wonderful to finally be able to sleep, but it was even better when I could finally move enough to actually roll out of the bed this morning." Caleb winced and Mary nodded. "Yeah... I had forgotten about stiffening up like that. It made for quite the stretching routine this morning." She took another swallow of coffee, sighing in relief as she felt the caffeine actually working its way into her bloodstream. "Anything else happen?"

Caleb snorted. "Compared to last night - no. Wonder and Flash tucked Angel into bed pretty early; she stayed in Bright's room until the rest left to get ready for dinner, but she was so tired she didn't really argue with them when they were escorting her down the hall. She just let them put her to bed. The Alpha team - the ones we expect..." Mary nodded and waved her hand; Caleb dipped his head. "Right... anyway, they met up in the private dining room in Nickels - had dinner and socialized for a while. Wonder and Princess had words in the bathroom. I don't know what was said, but neither of them appeared too happy when they exited."

"Who was watching them?"

"Carmel."

"All right. I'll talk to her later. Maybe she overheard something." She raised her cup to her lips and savored the coffee flavor as it swept over her tongue. "Anything else?"

"Princess actually spent time with both the male and the female portion of her teammates - separately, but still. She was with the females while Angel was still sleeping; she was with the guys when Angel was with the girls."

"Was that deliberate?"

"I don't know, Chief. I don't think so. According to Ben, she spent almost an hour in her room after she spoke to you. Logs show she was talking to her mother. When she came out of her room, she was dressed for gaming - she went straight to Jacob's room." Caleb smiled. "They cheered when they saw her come in ready to play."

"Good. She needs to be more involved if she's going to lead these people on a successful mission. Are the interviews on schedule for today?"

Caleb deliberately glanced at his timepiece before crooking an eyebrow at Mary. "Chief... it's still oh-dark-thirty in the morning. Nothing's on schedule yet." He smiled gently, but the twinkle in his eye was nothing short of mischievous. Mary narrowed her eyes.

"Allow me to rephrase - have the interviews with the Committee and the physical appointments with Dr. Morris been scheduled?"

"Oh yes, Chief. We went over them to make sure there were no conflicts before we sent them out a little while ago. It should be on your Pad."

"Thank you. I think I'll go have a little breakfast and look things over before I go down to talk to Nick." She held out her cup when he lifted the pot. Caleb filled hers, then his before reseating the pot on the heat. "Has he said anything?" she asked after her first swallow. "Aside from protesting his innocence, I mean?"

"Not really. He whined until I had to threaten him with that silver tape you're so fond of - you know the one I mean. Quacked tape?"

Mary hastened to swallow the mouthful of coffee she had to keep it from squirting out her nose. Then she gave him a dirty look. "DUCT tape, Caleb. DucT tape. No feathers or quacking ducks involved."

He smirked. It wasn't often he got her... not like she got him anyway. "Well anyway," he continued, "he stopped talking after he saw that. Apparently he didn't appreciate the thought of losing his beard in chunks."

Mary winced. "Can't say I blame him. But he can wait a little while longer. Make sure... who's with him?"

"Del and Jed."

"Make sure they keep a close eye on him, and let them know I'll be there in an hour or so. Have we heard anymore about the other?"

"No, but the very silence is telling. When are we going to move them?"

"We need to wait as long as we can, but soon. I was hoping the Committee would decide to wrap things up this weekend since Malcolm is no longer a liability, but it looks like they're going to drag it out til the bitter end."

"Can't you tell them...?"

"Since I suspect it is one or more of them, I don't think that would be in anyone's best interests. I need to meet with you and Ben and Adam this evening. Can you be available for a late dinner... or in your case, an early breakfast?"

"Give me a time, Chief. I'll be there."

Mary nodded. "You'll know before you get off this morning. Thanks, Caleb." And she walked to the elevator to head downstairs.

Chapter VI

"Please... I just want to go to sleep," the man whined as Mary entered the small conference room some time later. There wasn't much in it - a table with two chairs and two other chairs strategically placed on either side of the only exit. She pulled the single empty chair away from the table and seated herself, looking at him with compassion.

"As soon as you tell me what I need to know, Nick, you can go to sleep."

"I don't know anything - I already told them that," motioning to the two security agents guarding the door.

"Yes, I know. The problem is that I don't believe you. I think you do know something, and we're going to stay right here until you tell me what that is."

"You can't do that!! I have rights."

"You do have rights," Mary agreed calmly. "However, I can do that. Your actions have threatened the existence of an entire planet... quite possibly several of them, depending on who has been exposed. So let me assure you that your rights are the least of my concerns at the moment."

"Wait... what? I haven't done anything!!"

"I know - that's part of the problem," Mary snapped. "You didn't inform anyone when you discovered the virus. You didn't treat the virus as soon as it was detected."

"Now hold on a minute...."

"No, Nick! This is serious. You are going to be charged with treason; use of a deadly biological warfare agent; and deliberate disregard for the lives of your fellowman. It's documented, and each of those crimes is a capital offence on most of the planets that could have possibly been exposed to the virus. All of them combined carry a death sentence."

"But I didn't do anything wrong! I was trying to obtain the cure as quickly as possible."

"That doesn't negate the fact that you deliberately withheld the information from the authorities that should have been made aware of the issue immediately upon discovery."

"And been responsible for the mass panic that would have followed?? I didn't ask for that obligation!"

"That wasn't your decision to make. Your responsibility was to report it. The Council would have assumed accountability after that."

"So why would I want to help you?" Nick asked sullenly when the silence became pensive and awkward, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. "What's in it for me? If I'm going to die anyway, I mean... what's the point?"

"Nothing says you will be put to death, Nick, but you need to recognize the fact that there will be consequences for your actions or your lack thereof. There's no getting around that. The Alliance is going to demand some kind of retribution and you are the most obvious target for that at the moment. I'll see what I can do about allowing you to be imprisoned if you think you'd rather endure an extended period of hard labor. Or I will do what I can to make sure you can choose the method of execution you'd prefer if it comes to that. Because there are many, many ways to die and some much more brutal and horrific than others."

"You're so certain I'll be convicted."

"You believe there are mitigating circumstances? I have all the evidence I need that says you will. You haven't given me a reason to believe otherwise."

"And if I provide proof in my favor?"

"Let me hear what you've got, Nick. Then we'll see if there's anything we can do for you."

Nick met Mary's eyes, holding her gaze while he judged her worth. After a moment, he jerked his head in agreement. "All right," he said, blowing out a nervous breath, "but I want you to represent me." Her brows climbed into her hairline, but before she could question further, he continued. "When it comes up in front of the Council, I want you to stand and speak for me."

"You tell me the truth, Nick, and I'll stand for you at your hearing."

He nodded sharply. "Fair enough."

"I want you to understand that this wasn't deliberate - not really, at any rate. I want to be perfectly clear about something first - I don't actually know when or how Malcolm was infected. It wasn't anything I did. He already had the virus when I tested him." Nick closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands for a moment before taking a deep breath and meeting Mary's eyes once more.

"Dr. Morris asked me to take charge of part of the candidates - he gave me a list. I now know they were some of the candidates he believed would eventually be cut from the program." Mary nodded. She and Dr. Morris had discussed this very subject just after everyone had arrived back from the experimental compound. Morris had asked her for a list of the most viable postulants and she'd given

him the list she'd made for the Committee. He had personally taken charge of them as well as some of the secondary candidates. The rest had been assigned to Nick.

He shrugged. "I didn't mind. I know the Doc is responsible for everyone's health, but it was nice to be given some responsibility that allowed me to be a part of the whole effort, you know?"

"I do. That's why I don't understand..."

Nick held up his hand. "I always spent a little time talking to each individual that came through the doors. A lot of them were confident they wouldn't be chosen, but it didn't make them less enthusiastic about the whole idea. The fact that they'd made it this far gave them confidence to look towards the future and one of the other teams if they were right about being dismissed from the Alpha team." He chuckled. "A number of them found new inspiration to work with that they took back with them after this whole experience."

Mary's eyebrows rose. "You got all that from the short amount of time you spent with them?"

Nick nodded. "People tend to over share when they're nervous and physical examinations make most people nervous. So yeah - I heard all kinds of things... most of it good."

She cocked her head. "Anything about this virus?"

Nick shook his head. "No. I have to believe that if Malcolm encountered this disease within the confines of this project, he did so unwittingly. I don't believe the carrier would even be aware."

"Do you know who the carrier is?"

"No, because I don't believe the carrier is part of the project. I am inclined to think that Malcolm picked it up from somewhere not on this planet."

Mary pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. That thought *had* occurred to her, but it certainly didn't make it a happy one. It just made her workload impossibly heavier.

"Any ideas where that might be? Did he say anything to you?"

Nick shook his head again. "No. He didn't talk much about anything... except to complain a lot. He was horrified when he found out."

"So what happened?"

Nick sighed. "I was doing my scheduled tests - you know how they go," waiting for Mary to nod her head. "Right. So I was doing his blood work and he was telling me about his engagement... his betrothal... and I have to tell you, Ms Wellesly - he was kind of a jerk about it. Said the only reason he hadn't fought the betrothal was because it put him in a position of power."

Mary curled her lip in distaste. She really didn't like Malcolm, but her disdain for him grew the more she found out about him.

"So he didn't like An... Arianna?"

Nick shrugged. "I don't think he *disliked* her. I just think he was in it for what he could get out of it himself. He was willing to *endure her* - his words - for the seat of power he would gain by marrying the throne."

Mary clenched her jaw and took a deep breath. "So you were doing his blood work and...."

"And nothing... not then, anyway. I finished doing his tests and moved on to the next candidate on my list. It wasn't until the following day when I was analyzing the test samples that I noticed the anomaly."

"Why didn't you call Dr. Morris immediately?"

"I wanted to be sure of my findings first. You know - no reason to stir the pot until you know the fire's hot. So I called Malcolm back to acquire another sample - something larger for me to get solid results with."

"He didn't wonder?"

"He did, but I put him off. I told him the tube had gone missing, and I didn't want to delay his results any longer than necessary. That we needed the upshots as soon as possible to keep him eligible for the program. He went on to tell me that he couldn't be washed from the project - that his betrothal to Arianna ensured his participation."

"So once you found out...."

"As soon as I knew, I called Malcolm. He had the right to know first. But when I went to call Dr. Morris, he begged me not to. Said he would lose everything if he was found out. When I balked at keeping it secret, he threatened my family."

"So why didn't you come to me?"

"Did you miss the part where he threatened my family, Ms Wellesly? Besides, he promised to make it worth my while if I kept it off the radar. I thought if I could get him the cure and be done with him with no one the wiser, it was all to the good. I didn't know I was going to have such an impossible task trying to obtain it. Otherwise...."

"Otherwise you'd still have been found out when you reported him infertile. And you'd still be in trouble for not reporting this to the authorities." Mary sighed. "Nick, I don't think you appreciate the magnitude of your crime... just how serious this really is." She held up a hand when he would have interrupted her. "Don't get me wrong, Nick - I don't think you're guilty of treason. I don't think you maliciously exposed Malcolm or anyone else to the virus. But that doesn't change the fact that your failure to report his exposure to the proper authorities could still result in catastrophic consequences for everyone on this planet and several others as well." She straightened in her seat and leaned forward, clasping her hands on the table and meeting his gaze. "You said you were inclined to believe Malcolm contracted the virus off-world. Do you have any evidence to back up your theory?"

"Only the fact that no one else - not even his betrothed - has been infected. Since they have all been together and exposed to the same elements and conditions, surely it follows that he incubated the disease somewhere other than where they have been as a team."

Mary stared at him for several tense moments before nodding her head and standing. "Thank you for your cooperation, Nick."

"So what happens now, Ms Wellesly?"

"What happens now is you'll be escorted to a holding area where you can take a shower and get some sleep. After that...? You'll stand before the Council when they call you and I'll stand with you... so they know the whole truth."

"Do you think they'll convict me?"

"I think you're going to have a long time to decide if Malcolm could have ever made it worth your while," she said as she moved to the door.

"Ms Wellesly.... What about my family?"

"They won't be charged with your crimes, Nick. And no one but those in this room and the Council will ever know there was a crime committed. They won't suffer for your poor judgment."

He nodded his acceptance of her speech, and Mary exited the room without another word.

"What do you want?" Malcolm ground out when Mary stepped into the quarantine area that had been hastily erected when they realized what they were dealing with. She could tell he wanted to add some kind of derogatory address, but for now his manners held his anger back.

"I want any number of things, Malcolm, but I'll settle for knowing where you picked up the virus."

He frowned at her, his face so pinched Mary could see creases forming. "You really think if I knew where I got it, I wouldn't have done something about it already? The first I heard about it was when Nick told me I was infected."

"And you have no idea where you could have contracted it?"

"Look!" slamming his hands on the bed he was currently ensconced in. "I don't know where this came from or who gave it to me. But if you find out, I'd love to thank them personally for RUINING. MY. LIFE!!!!"

Mary nodded slowly as she regarded him. "Can I ask you something?" Malcolm stared at her like she'd grown a second head but nodded, curious to know what she was thinking. "How do you feel about Arianna... really?"

He shrugged. "One bitch is as good as the next, I suppose. And at least she had the clout of the throne behind her. I would have been set for life."

"So you really don't care about her. Do you even like her?"

"I don't dislike her. But she wouldn't have even been on the list of possibilities if she hadn't come with the dowry she did."

"So why agree?"

"It wasn't my choice, remember? My parents made this arrangement." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "It's one of the worst things about our society, if you ask me."

"So there was someone else...?" Malcolm nodded but didn't elaborate, and Mary let the line of questioning lapse. "I need you to do something," not flinching when Malcolm whipped his head around to glare at her with hatred. "I know you don't like me, but this is important. It could even be important to whoever it is that *is* important to you."

"What?" Malcolm growled. "What could possibly be so important that I'd be willing to help you with anything?"

"I need to know where you've been in the five years before you were chosen to be part of the project. And I need to know who you've had contact with - every single person you can remember... especially those encounters of a sexual nature."

"You're kidding me right?? Do you know how many...? Why?"

"We need to find who did this - to stop an epidemic before it starts. And we need to treat anyone who has been exposed to it."

Malcolm held Mary's gaze for a long moment, then simply nodded his head. He pulled his Pad towards him and started writing.

"Gideon, I need you and Ruth to take the list I've sent to your Pads and start checking the health statuses of everyone on it. I know it's a lot," Mary continued before either could voice an opinion. "Pull whatever resources you need from research - just don't leave me short here. Try to be discreet, but be as quick as you can."

"These are...?"

"... all the people Malcolm has had contact with in the last five years - those he can remember anyway. The ones marked with asterisks are sexual encounters, so start with them first. Most of them should be on his home planet, so we need a small contingent to go and stay there until it's complete. The rest will need to be divided into one or two person units to cover the most areas as quickly as possible. This is going to be our problem until we solve it. And we need to solve it fast."

"We're on it, Chief."

"Let me know if you find anything familiar on the list... or if there is a pattern or repetition. I haven't had a chance to study it myself yet, but I'll be looking as well. If I find something I'll let you know. Otherwise keep me in the loop."

"You got it, Chief."

"Chief? He does know he's gonna be persona non grata for the rest of his life no matter where he goes, right? Especially when the truth comes out?"

"The whole truth may not need to go public - it depends on how quickly we can contain this. As for the other, I don't know," Mary said honestly. "It wasn't something we talked about."

"All right. We're outta here - we got a lot to do. See ya, Chief."

Mary waved and nodded her appreciation and her agents headed out to begin the daunting job of taking care of an epidemic before it could become one. Mary turned back to the rest of the reports, wondering just what the next crisis would be... and when it would hit.

Chapter VII

Arianna woke up refreshed and enthusiastic, something she couldn't remember happening in longer than she cared to acknowledge... especially since she could pinpoint the exact moment it had ceased to be true in her life. She yawned and stretched, noting she was still in yesterday's clothes. The rumbling in her belly served to remind her that she'd missed dinner the night before and she jumped from the bed, ready to correct both oversights.

It didn't take long, relatively speaking, until she was showered and dressed and ready to face the day. She did chance to wonder if yesterday had been an incongruity in what had become her new normal, or if it was in fact the start of what would become normal again. Before she could ponder the thought too long, a knock sounded on her door, and she heard Danny's voice coming through the closed portal.

"Sweetie, you up?"

Arianna walked swiftly to the door, smiling widely when she opened it to find not only Danny, but also Luke on the other side. "Good morning, gentlemen," she offered by way of greeting.

"Good morning, lovely lady," Luke replied with a smile of his own. "Could we perhaps escort you to breakfast?" extending his elbow on one side while Danny performed the same courtesy on the other.

"That sounds wonderful," she said, tucking a hand into the crook of each elbow and stepping from her room. "I'm starving."

"Yes, we missed you at dinner last night, but I think the rest did you good, Arianna. You haven't been this bright-eyed and sparkling in a while. Nice to see that twinkle back in your eyes." Luke stepped forward and pressed the lift button, not at all surprised to see it open immediately. They entered together and Danny pushed the restaurant floor and they were off.

"I feel good," Arianna answered when the doors shut. "I feel like I've been given a second chance, and today is a new opportunity to get things right."

"Well, I don't know where you got this newfound optimism, but I like it. It looks good on you, Sweetie. It looks a lot like happiness."

"It feels a lot like happiness, Danny. Thank you for sticking with me."

"I'm glad I was allowed to," he replied with a smile. "I'm confident everyone else is glad you're back among us again - for however long the as... Malcolm allows it."

"He no longer has a say in my life," Arianna said quietly. "Our betrothal has been dissolved."

The lift stopped and the doors opened, but no one moved. The two men were stunned into immobility and Arianna was embarrassed by her outburst, quiet though it was. It wasn't like it was even official yet. Mary had told her Malcolm was out of her life, but she had yet to hear that from him or her father and if she was wrong.... She closed her eyes and prayed to the Holy Father that they hadn't heard her whispered words, but a glance at their gobsmacked faces was simply proof that her words had been received loud and clear.

"That's wonderful news, Sweetie! Simply outstanding," Danny gushed when his stupor broke, only to notice the distraught look on Arianna's face. His eyes met Luke's and Luke shook his head in confusion. He didn't understand her reaction either. Danny put his hands on either side of Arianna's face and raised it gently until blue eyes met brown. "Isn't it wonderful news?"

"It will be if it's true. So far I've only heard it from Mary. My father has yet to inform me."

Danny laughed and brushed a kiss over her forehead, flushing a rich plum color. "Oh, Honey. If Mary told you, you can take it to the bank. I don't think that woman does anything without being certain of the outcome first. She'd be a horrible scientist."

"But a wonderful friend," Luke added before Arianna could open her mouth to reply. "However, we won't say anything about your betrothal. That's your news to share or not, Arianna. I personally don't blame you for wanting to hear it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. So we'll keep this to ourselves and you can announce it in your own time and your own way."

Arianna smiled. "Thanks, Luke. It's not that I don't want to shout it from the mountaintops. I just want to be sure it's not going to be yanked out from under me."

"Totally understand, Sweetie. Now can we get off this elevator and go eat? I'm hungry and if your belly growls any louder, security is going to come looking for us for disturbing the peace. Besides, it's stuffed French toast today, and I happen to know that's your favorite."

Arianna's eyes widened and she smiled before taking them both by the elbows. "What are we waiting for?? Let's go to breakfast!"

"You all right?" Eden asked as she took a seat next to Eli. She'd been more than a little surprised to find her in the room at all after their discussion the previous evening. Surely she knew Arianna would be joining them. Then again, Eli had never been one to follow anyone else's prescribed expectations on her behavior. It was one of the things that had made her such an outstanding leader at the compound.

"Of course," she replied in a tone that gave nothing away. "Why wouldn't I be?" cutting off another piece of French toast and consuming it. She met Eden's eyes and it was all Eden could do not to flinch at the deadness apparent even with the shutters locked in place.

"Hey, Eli!" Jacob welcomed as he took a seat on Eden's other side. "When are you gonna give me a rematch? I can't believe you came in and kicked my ass like that yesterday."

Eli chuckled and shook her head, but kept her attention on the plate of food she was steadily consuming. Eden gave him a look, but he shrugged and mouthed 'What?' at her, not understanding her

upset. All he wanted was for things to go back to the way they had been, and Eli gaming with them was part of that. Eden shook her head and focused on her own breakfast.

"Hey," Hannah said as she took a seat next to Jacob. "Have you guys heard? Rumor has it that the asshat is no longer one of our number."

All eyes went to Eli, but she maintained her façade perfectly, continuing to consume her food with methodical precision. After a brief moment, Eden turned her gaze back to Hannah. "Where did you hear this? You have details?"

"I overheard a couple of the security people talking last night when we came back upstairs after dinner." She tapped her ears. "I have sensitive hearing, you know?"

"Uh huh. And what did they say?" cutting her eyes in Eli's direction. Hannah's flush was obvious even on her brown skin and cleared her throat cautiously as she shrugged.

"They were just talking about how Mary managed to get him removed without screwing up Arianna's chances to stay on the project." She sighed. "Sorry, Eli."

Eli swallowed the last of her milk and wiped her lips on her napkin before meeting Hannah's eyes. "Why? I fully expect her to be chosen for the Alpha team. Ms Wellesly knows we need her and that the asshat didn't really contribute much of anything besides disharmony to the group dynamics." She shrugged. "Seems like a no-brainer to me." Eli dropped her napkin on her plate and stood. "A word though," holding Hannah's gaze a long moment before letting her eyes sweep around the table. "It's her news to share - let Arianna do so or not as she feels comfortable. We're not even supposed to know," waiting for them to nod the acceptance of her words. "Now if you'll excuse me...."

Eli moved towards the door, stopping short when it opened of its own volition only to note Luke's face a bare instant before Arianna's visage came into her view. She stood her ground and waited for the three to enter the restaurant.

"Good morning, Luke... Danny. Nice of you to join everyone for breakfast, Arianna; you've been missed," said without actually looking at Arianna directly. Eli took a step towards the door, only to halt when Arianna reached out a hand. Eli flinched away before they could make contact, jerking her hand back as if it had been burned. Arianna let her hand fall though she kept her eyes locked on Eli's face. "Now if you'll excuse me...." Eli said, giving them a slight tweak of her head in acknowledgement as she turned to the door again.

"You're leaving?" Arianna asked.

"I've already had breakfast and I have a few things to take care of before my interviews begin this morning," she replied while still avoiding Arianna's gaze. Then she exited the restaurant before another word could be spoken.

"That could have gone better," Danny commented to Luke sotto voce. Not quietly enough that Arianna missed his words. She blinked the tears from her eyes and shook her head.

"It could have gone much, much worse," she answered. She took a deep breath and pasted on a Princess smile. "Now let's have some breakfast. I've got an appointment to get to this morning, and I'm sure you boys do as well. Besides, that French toast smells divine."

With a flourish, they turned towards the table to be welcomed by those still seated... all of them ignoring the pink elephant that had sauntered into the room with Eli's departure.

Eli leaned against the wall out of sight as soon as the door closed behind her. She took a moment to simply breathe, trying to rid herself of the feeling of having her guts kicked out by a dragon. Having experienced that once in her youth, it wasn't an experience she wished to repeat; nor did she like having something just as painful to compare it to.

Resolutely she forced herself to focus on her breathing - in, out, in, out - until that was the only thought in her mind. Once that was true, she was able to push her encounter with Arianna into a locked box and tuck it away in her mind's vault where she dropped unpleasant experiences. Satisfied, she pushed off the wall and continued her journey upstairs. She really did have things to take care of.

"So, what's this we hear about Malcolm being removed as a candidate?" Deborah asked when Arianna was seated, drawing looks of consternation from all comers and bewilderment from Arianna. Deborah looked around the table. "What?? Don't sit there and act like you didn't want to know. He's been nothing but an ass to everyone. Personally I'd be thrilled to know he was really gone. So how about it, Arianna? Is it true? Is he out?"

Arianna frowned, curious as to where Deborah had gotten her intel. "Why do you ask?"

"So it *is* true!" Deborah exclaimed in satisfaction.

"My father has not informed me of such," she replied truthfully, cutting into her breakfast and savoring it as the flavors hit her tongue. She chewed slowly then redirected her attention to Deborah. "Have you been told something about it, Deb?"

"Not directly, but that seems to be the rumor." She shrugged. "Not that I care really except it would mean no more putting up with his crap. I don't know how you got stuck with him, Arianna, but he kinda sucks. He needs to go."

Arianna looked around the table to see everyone's heads nodding in agreement. "You all feel that way?" meeting each pair of eyes but leaving Eden til last.

"We do, Az... sorry."

"Don't be," Arianna replied. "I prefer the truth even when it's unpleasant. This, however, is not unpleasant. It's nice to know I'm not the only one."

Eden blinked, knowing her shock was reflected in the faces of the rest. But before she could recover her wits to speak, Abigail spoke up. "If you feel that way about him, why are you betrothed to him, Arianna? He's done nothing but cause problems since he was brought on board as a candidate."

"Because, Gay... I didn't have a choice."

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Jacob stated flatly. Arianna gave a sardonic snort.

"Why would I kid about something like this, Jake? I know I'm socially awkward, but I've never been stupid. I wouldn't make something like this up."

"So would you like to back up and explain that statement?" Eden asked. "Because I think it's safe to say that everyone at this table is completely confused now. Betrothal usually indicates a willingness to be together on at least *some* level."

Arianna sighed. It wasn't really something she *wanted* to get into, yet at the same time she felt as if she owed these people at least a small explanation. "In my culture, betrothal is arranged by the parents of the parties involved. It is done as a business arrangement, but it is hoped that the parties involved will find enough common ground to love one another eventually. Most couples are friends before a betrothal takes place and their liking does ultimately become love; it has been a successful practice on my planet for as long as we have kept records of such things. In my case, however, none of that was accurate. Though we grew up together, I didn't really know Malcolm before he was pushed into this project; I never liked him; and the betrothal was done to benefit his parents and mine... not us."

"That's a crap system," Deborah commented into the silence that fell after Arianna's explanation.

Arianna shrugged. "I can't argue... not in my case at any rate."

"So what now, Girlfriend?" Esther asked. "If you're not tied to him anymore...." letting the thought lay.

"I don't know. I'm still not certain it's true. I mean, until I hear it from my father...." She shrugged. "But right now, I've got to get going. I have the first appointment this morning, and I don't want to be late," she said, dropping her napkin on the table and rising. "I would like for this all to be over though," she added with a tired voice, seeing everyone nod in agreement again. "I'll see you all later?" she asked, smiling when they all smiled. "Bye, guys."

They waited until the door was closed behind her and Eden had counted to thirty before they all turned and looked at Deborah with anger and animosity bristling out of their eyes. Her eyes widened and she held up her hands defensively.

"What??"

"What the hell was that?" Eden demanded. "Did you miss Eli's instructions...?"

"Eli is not the boss of me or anyone else at this table. You might want to clue into that."

Eden stood until she was leaning into Deborah's space, their size difference notwithstanding. "You want a clue?" she ground out. "I'll give you a clue. Eli was our leader in the compound by choice... hers and ours. And she will be again once we get to the asteroid to begin our work. If you can't deal with that, you need to recuse yourself from participating. Because we don't need you stirring up crap."

Deborah folded her arms over her chest defensively. "I don't understand why you're getting your shorts in a twist, Eden. We got some important information from Arianna directly."

"She's got a point, Babe," Jacob commented, only to be met with a death glare. He held up his hands in surrender.

"That isn't the point. The point is your lack of respect, Deb. Find some, or I'll be more than willing to beat it into you myself."

Deborah's skin flushed an unhealthy shade of purple and she rose to her feet to glare down at Eden. "You and what army?" she asked with a sneer.

"I won't need an army, Deb. I suggest you not test me." Eden held Deborah's eyes, not flinching when Deborah lunged at her. Deborah halted her movement, surprised that her intimidation of Eden was unsuccessful. Most people were immediately put off by her large size, and tended to balk at going up against her. She nodded respectfully.

"All right," she agreed. "I'll try to treat Eli as a leader. Still it was interesting to get that much knowledge on her culture directly from the source as it were. It explains a little anyway."

"It does," Eden agreed grudgingly. "There are still a lot of pieces missing though." She shrugged. "I imagine we'll have time to get them all eventually, but right now we're gonna be running late if we don't get out of here."

Her words caused them to move as a single body, rising from their seats and exiting swiftly. It was time to start another day.

Eli didn't even glance at her escort as she left the elevator, knowing she would be returning to the restaurant as soon as Eli stepped foot onto the residence floor. She made her way down the hallway, stopping in front of a familiar door before knocking sharply. A bare minute passed before Mary opened the door and wordlessly invited her in. Once the door was firmly closed, Eli whirled on Mary who simply waited for her to speak.

"You need to do something with your gossipy security detail," Eli hissed, causing Mary's eyebrows to shoot into her hairline.

"Would you like to take a seat and tell me what this is all about?" she asked calmly. Eli took a deep breath and composedly took the seat Mary proffered. Mary took a seat as well and set her Pad aside, giving Eli her full attention.

"Apparently you've got some gossipy team members. They were overheard last night talking about Malcolm's dismissal from the project." Mary frowned, and Eli continued. "Hannah heard them," explaining *how* they had been overheard. "But the fact remains that they were caught talking about something that is none of their business."

"Actually it is, but I will reprimand them for speaking out of turn. There's a reason all of our discussions take place away from you kids. Do you know who the guilty parties are?"

"No. I didn't ask. It was bad enough Hannah felt the need to share this with everyone at breakfast this morning."

"And how did Arianna respond?"

"She wasn't there. But now all the remaining candidates are aware of his dismissal. It's only a matter of time before they put things together, Ms Wellesly. They're going to figure out that he's the one who's infected."

Mary's countenance remained stoic and she shook her head. "Perhaps not. The official story is that he left to ensure Arianna's place on the Alpha team. A betrothal in their culture is like marriage without sex - and the rules clearly state no married persons shall be allowed to participate."

Eli blinked. That was news... and unexpected. She hadn't realized.... She shook her head. It didn't matter. What was done was done. "Be that as it may...."

"Not to worry, Eli. I'll take care of it."

Eli rose and nodded. "Thank you, Ms Wellesly. If you'll excuse me?"

"Of course, Eli."

Eli was out the door before Mary could stand. She watched the door close silently, then turned her attention back to the reports she'd be studying. They were going to have to move sooner than they'd planned.

Chapter VIII

"So how does everything look, Dr. Morris?" Arianna asked as she gingerly sat up. The team doctor had done a complete physical workup on her, just to be safe. After all, she was Malcolm's betrothed and she would be the greatest loss to the program if she was no longer an active participant. Dr. Morris shifted the privacy screen so she could stand and redress, then stripped off the gloves he insisted on in addition to the force field barrier that was normally utilized. He stepped to the sink and began washing his hands before he started speaking.

"Everything looks good, your highness," addressing her by title. He was an old-fashioned man with old-fashioned manners and sensibilities, and no amount of assertion by Arianna or anyone else could convince him otherwise. So Arianna accepted it as the respect it was intended and let it go. "Of course, it will be tomorrow before I have your lab results, but everything points to your being a strong and healthy young woman. How do you feel?"

Arianna let the shirt drape across her body and cinched it with a belt before she deigned to respond. "I feel good," she said honestly. "Except for being tired by this whole process and just wishing it was over with...."

Morris chuckled. "I can understand the sentiment. It does seem like the Committee has been going over the same ground for a while now, doesn't it?"

"I'm fairly certain we've created a rut at this point," Arianna responded wryly, then slipped out from behind the screen. "Am I all done, Dr. Morris?"

"You are indeed, your highness. Ms Wellesly will have your test results as soon as they are available to me, and she will notify you immediately of any problems. Not that I expect to find anything...."

Arianna smiled and placed a light hand on his arm, causing Morris to stop talking immediately. "It's all right, Doctor. I understood what you meant."

He patted her hand lightly. "Thank you, your highness. You have a good day now, and don't hesitate to come see me if you have any issues, all right?"

She nodded and squeezed his arm gently before slipping her hand from beneath his and heading out the door. The worst part of her day was over. Now it was simply a matter of waiting for the fallout.

Eli was waiting to speak to the doctor when Arianna stepped from the examination room, and she cursed every deity known to man and alien alike when she realized she had every reason to stay and nowhere to go besides. She took a deep breath and stiffened her spine, keeping her eyes away from Arianna's. She couldn't bear the pity she knew she'd find in those telling brown eyes.

She prayed for Arianna to bypass her and continue to the door, but she wasn't at all surprised when small, fashionable footwear stood unmoving in front of her. Eli took another breath and raised her head, careful to keep her eyes focused beyond Arianna.

"Is there a reason you are standing speechless in the middle of the waiting room?" Eli asked with cutting precision.

Arianna wanted to stomp her foot in sheer frustration, but instead she clenched her hands at her sides and gritted her teeth until her jaw ached. After a moment, she regained control of her faculties and relaxed enough to speak.

"I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for this morning - for acknowledging me, especially in front of the others. You don't know what that meant..."

"What it meant," Eli interrupted biting, "is that I won't do less than I asked everyone else to do. But don't expect anything more from me. Nothing has changed between us. And nothing will."

Arianna's brow furrowed. "Wait.... What did you ask everyone else to do?"

Eli ignored her and stood, carefully stepping around Arianna so as not to come into contact with her in any way. "If you'll excuse me..."

Arianna reached for Eli, only to have her jerk away again. This time, with no audience around, Arianna pursued the touch and Eli whirled on her the moment their hands made contact. Eli ripped her hand away and moved swiftly out of touching range. Arianna respected the motion this time and remained still. But she couldn't let things go completely.

"What did you tell the others, Eli? And why won't you look at me??"

"It doesn't matter, Arianna," not seeing the heartbreak that crossed Arianna's face at the soulless intonation of her name from those lips. "Just accept it for what it is and leave it alone."

Before Arianna could demand answers, Eli opened the door to the examination room and crossed the threshold. She turned her back to Arianna and shut the door firmly, closing off any avenues of further conversation.

Arianna stared at the closed door with a sense a fury sweeping through her. She had half a mind to stay put until Eli left the room, but even as she entertained the thought, she dismissed it. She had her own business to oversee and responsibilities to take care of. Huffing, she clenched her hands into fists again and stomped out of the small medical wing. If she couldn't get answers from Eli, she would damn well get them from someone else - or several someones, as the case may be.

In her anger, Arianna didn't notice the exam room door crack open, or gray eyes track her progress down the hallway and out of sight. And she never heard the sigh of relief Eli gave before she turned around to face the doctor who was regarding her with a raised eyebrow and arms crossed over his chest.

"Do I even want to ask?" he said kindly. Eli shook her head.

"Probably not, Doc. Have you got a minute?"

Dr. Morris nodded. "Of course," gesturing her out of the exam room and across the hall to his office. They entered and he closed the door behind them, then he waited for her to take a seat before crossing to sit on the other side of the table that substituted for a desk. "What can I do for you, Eli?"

"I need you to add me to your list." Morris blinked and Eli sighed. "The list of candidates you are rescreening because of Malcolm and Nick."

Dr. Morris cocked his head. "May I ask why? You've been under my care since you arrived back from the compound."

"So has Arianna, and yet she was at the top of your list."

"Because of her proximity to Malcolm. It's precautionary, I assure you."

Eli met his eyes, and he felt the pain in her gaze but held his tongue and waited for her to speak. "Everything we say is confidential?" Morris nodded. "You need to test me because of my proximity to Arianna. We were... intimate... for a brief period during our stay in the compound."

Dr. Morris cleared his throat, but otherwise gave no reaction. "I see," he finally replied. "Very well. I will add you to the roster. Ms Wellesly will need to be notified, of course, but otherwise I believe we can keep it between the two of us."

Eli nodded and stood. "Thank you, Dr. Morris."

"Of course, Eli. Thank you for your foresight. I'll send you a note with your time."

"I'll be here," she assured him and slipped out of his office without another word. Morris closed his eyes and sighed. This was becoming one fine pickle of a mess.

"You LIED to me!!" Arianna accused as she burst into the common room where Eden was currently waiting with a few of the others. Arianna marched right up to her and thrust a small finger into Eden's face. "You LIED!!"

Eden took a deep breath to keep from breaking the finger Arianna had shoved at her. Then she grabbed Arianna by the wrist and dragged her into a private corner, smiling darkly when the rest scattered to the other side of the room to give them whatever privacy they could manage.

"First of all, you need to watch where you point your fingers - they could get broken if you're not careful. Secondly, you better watch your tone and your volume when you speak to me. And lastly, you should be more prudent about throwing accusations around. It could get you into a lot of trouble if you speak without knowing what you're talking about."

"I know what I'm talking about. You lied to me!"

"About...?"

"Really? You're going to make me do this?? Fine!" Arianna continued without giving Eden an opportunity to respond. "You told me Eli didn't order all of you to be nice to me, but she did, didn't she? For whatever reason, she gave an order and the rest of you followed it blindly, didn't you?"

Eden sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. When she felt her heartbeats slow, she returned her focus to Arianna. "You need to lower your voice and take a deep breath, Az. No!" she instructed when Arianna opened her mouth to cut in. "You had your say; now I get mine." Black eyes held brown until Arianna acquiesced. "Thank you. Eli didn't *order* anything. She *asked* that we reconsider our treatment of you, aptly pointing out that we needed to be a team - all of us together - if we were going to make this project a success. We all know that you're going to be chosen, and even though you are equally culpable in separating yourself from us, Eli reminded us that we should be making an effort to create a team and not let you become isolated... whether by your choice or our actions. Malcolm's absence made it easier for us to try," adding the last with a diffident shrug.

"Oh."

Eden rolled her eyes at the short, flat response. "Yeah, oh. Make sure you get all the facts next time." She scrunched up her eyebrows in thought. "What the hell made you start throwing around accusations like that anyway?"

"Eli," said on a shaky breath. Arianna sucked in air and released it slowly, willing herself to steadiness. "I was so happy she actually acknowledged me today - speaking directly to me even if she refused to look at me - that I wanted to thank her. I thought we could start having real dialogue again if she knew just how much..." She took another shuddering breath and blinked her eyes to clear them. "She said she couldn't do less herself than she'd asked of the rest of you - but it didn't mean anything... it didn't change anything between us." Arianna swiped a savage hand across her face, angry that she still had tears to shed. "I miss her, Eden; I miss her so much."

"Then why didn't you tell her the truth about the betrothal? Why didn't you tell her what you told us this morning?"

"When?? When was I supposed to tell her, Eden? She shoved me out of her life when Malcolm and I returned to the compound bound to one another. Until today the only interaction I've had with her since that day has been in a professional capacity surrounded by other people."

"You didn't seem to have a problem sharing the story with us at breakfast earlier. So you can't tell me you were worried about sharing with her in front of other candidates. C'mon, Az... we all knew you

were a couple for a while there in the compound - it was impossible *not* to. You brought out the best in one another - we all benefited. So don't tell me you were too embarrassed to tell Eli the truth in front of the rest of us because that's crap!"

"I shared with the rest of you this morning because you asked - you and Gay and Deb. You actually asked and were interested enough to listen to the answer. You cared enough to try and understand the situation I was put into. Eli never gave me that chance."

Eden quietly regarded Arianna for a long moment, holding her gaze despite Arianna's desire to drop her eyes. After a moment, Eden spoke and Arianna's brow furrowed in confusion as her mind endeavored to decipher the words Eden had spoken.

"Excuse me?"

Eden huffed a little impatiently. She still wasn't sure how she'd ended up in the middle of this whole debacle and having to repeat herself... She closed her eyes briefly, then met Arianna's, keeping a firm hand on Arianna's chin to ensure Eden didn't lose her attention.

"What exactly did you and Eli talk about?"

"I don't... when?"

Eden glared. "When do you think? At the compound. I know you two spent a crap load of time talking when we first got there. We all did - trying to get to know one another while we were settling in. Besides, Eli shared that much with me." She shrugged. "But she never gave me any details. So what the hell did you two talk about? Because obviously sharing your backgrounds and cultures wasn't high on the list of discussion topics."

"That's not completely true," Arianna protested. "We did talk a little about our cultures - it's how I discovered that she was a meat eater trying to adjust to being forced into a vegetarian diet. I did all the cooking for a while," she added with a sad smile. "But most of our talks were about important things - things that interested us."

Eden tilted her head. "Like what? I'm curious. Because I know most of the rest of us talked about home as part of getting acquainted."

"Oh we talked about home - she told me about her family members; about her brother's death; about how her mama would laugh to know that Eli had become the *de facto* leader of our little colony."

"Why's that?"

Arianna smiled again... a little happier. "Because Eli refused a leadership role in her clan to be part of this project. Apparently it was a really big deal."

"What else? What did you share?"

"I shared about being a princess and an only child; about my friend Kip who made my last year of school something I remember fondly; about working in the lab since I was eight."

"Wait... what?? Isn't that like illegal or something??"

"Normally, yes. But I actually didn't mind it. It gave me the chance to do work I was interested in - something I found challenging. I was only in school for the socialization aspect. I wasn't there to learn - children my age were too far behind my intellectual level."

Eden grimaced. It sounded like growing up had been more than a little unpleasant for Arianna on several levels. "But why did you start working so early? Surely you deserved the chance to be a child for a little while."

Arianna snorted. "I was never allowed to be a child, Eden. I began my royal training at the age of five. I wrote down my first theories on the possibilities of fuission when I was eight. As soon as my father figured out what they were and the possibilities they presented, I was sent to the lab to begin developing the prototypes."

No wonder she had such a hard time relating to anyone, and Eli had managed to not only tap into that, but caused Arianna to blossom under her tutelage and caring. Now it fell to Eden to see if there was anything she could do to help bring the two back together. "You know," Eden stated conversationally, "your old man sounds like a real prick. It kinda explains Malcolm, actually," she added with a smirk, grinning when Arianna choked out a laugh. "So you didn't really discuss your home worlds or the cultures you came from?"

Arianna shook her head. "Not like you mean. Like I said - we talked about our families, our childhoods; even described where we came from - mine was ore tropical; hers more mountainous. But mostly we talked about important things... things that mattered to us," she reiterated.

"Such as?"

"Such as music and art and philosophy. Dreams and hopes for the future. Things we wanted to accomplish outside the scope of the program. Favorite food. Hobbies. Good literature and trashy media. Real conversation about anything and everything we could think to talk about."

"So how in all of this exchange of information did you *both*," emphasizing the word so Arianna would understand that Eden found them equally culpable, "manage to neglect to share pertinent information about your society's mating customs. You don't think that might have held a *tiny* bit of significance in the development of your burgeoning relationship?"

Arianna scowled. "I don't understand what you mean."

Eden gritted her teeth and sucked in a deep breath through her nose before she closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. The frustration was causing her hearts to pound uncomfortably so she needed to find a calm center soon. Still this needed to be dealt with first. She released the breath slowly and opened her eyes, staring until Arianna cocked her head in question. Eden held up a hand before she could voice it.

"Az, we come from different planets," seeing Arianna huff and roll her eyes. Eden glared. "I'm not finished. Each of us has been raised in different cultures and with different rules and expectations. Luke's society, for instance - it is extremely laid back compared to my own upbringing. In my culture, fighting is as much a part of life as breathing; in Luke's, fighting is an offense punishable by death."

Arianna's eyes widened. "I didn't realize."

Eden nodded but continued speaking. "In Gay's culture, she is only allowed to mate with someone in a specific sect. Simon's people do not engage in sexual activity at all - their species is propagated by science. They choose the attributes they want in a prodigy and then their scientists go to work to create the child they seek. Gabriel and Naomi have to find release once a month like clockwork - not necessarily with one another, but...." She stopped speaking when Arianna held up her hand.

"I get the picture, Eden, but not the point."

"Did you and Eli ever talk about the sexual or mating customs on your planets before you became intimate with one another," sighing when Arianna's eyes got impossibly wide. Eden shook her head. "Maybe you should have," she commented softly, then moved out of the corner and back to the other side of the room with the rest of the candidates. Arianna stayed motionless for several minutes, then turned and left the room without a word to anyone or a backwards glance.

"Well," Eden muttered to herself. "I don't know what good that did, but here's hoping." Then her name was called, and she moved into the interview room to begin answering another round of questions.

Chapter IX

"So, Candidate Vasya - how are you today?" Chairman McMurtry asked with a smile as Eli stood behind the lone chair at the candidates' table. "Are you excited to get to work again after yesterday's unexpected time off?" gesturing for Eli to take a seat. Eli remained standing.

"If I was actually getting to work, I would be thrilled," Eli commented dryly, smirking when the smiles slipped from Committee Members' faces. She was still disturbed by her earlier encounter with Arianna, and that made her reckless and outspoken. "As it is," she continued without missing a beat, "I am tired. We've been treading the same ground for weeks on end, and we're accomplishing very little. I will be glad when you are done with your grandstanding so we can actually return to doing real scientific work."

As a single body their postures stiffened and their faces hardened at her bold accusation. The Committee Members looked at one another before turning back to Eli, who remained standing casually at the table unaffected by their anger. McMurtry cleared her throat.

"So you feel this is all a waste of time."

"It is now, and we all know it - not just those of us in this room." Eli let her eyes run the length of the dais, meeting each Member's eyes before moving on to the next. "You know and I know - as does every candidate outside this room - that your decision has already been made; it has been for a while. All you're doing at this juncture is wasting our time and yours to make a point."

"And what would that point be?" Member Lafferty asked.

"To ensure that it appears that everyone is given a fair chance so none of you will be accused of favoritism or bias when the Alpha team is announced."

"And you don't think that's important? You don't think it's important that we not show bias or favoritism?"

"That's not what I said," Eli bit off impatiently. "What I said was that you're wasting time by continuing to do interviews that ask the same questions and rehash the same scenarios when you have already reached your decision on the members of the Alpha team. That has nothing to do with avoiding bias or prejudice - that is strictly showboating for the purpose of making a point."

"You're quite vocal in your opinion today, Candidate Vasya. Are you so confident in being chosen that you feel you can disrespect the Committee in such a manner?"

"I don't see it as disrespect, Member Mein. I was asked a question; I am simply making an honest statement in answer. The sentiment is true throughout the list of candidates though most will not risk expulsion by speaking up. It is, however, something you need to be aware of because it is causing the candidates to become dissatisfied with not only the process, but also the program itself."

"So why did you? Risk expulsion from the project I mean. Even if we have already made our choices for the Alpha team as you seem to believe, nothing is set in stone. Certainly things can change until the formal announcement is made."

"Chairman McMurtry, allow me to be candid."

McMurtry cocked an eyebrow at Eli and smirked. "Candidate Vasya, honesty doesn't seem to be a problem for you. Since we asked the question, the floor is yours. Speak your mind."

"Thank you, Madame Chairman," Eli replied with a gracious nod of her head. She looked at the Committee again. "I want each of you to understand something first. I would love to be chosen to be part of the Alpha team - I'm not going to lie. It would be quite the honor and I feel I bring a lot to the project; I fit well with the other candidates and we work well together... we've proven that. That being said... I don't need this to validate who I am or what I can accomplish. I have already been part of several scientific breakthroughs that have been made since I was tapped to be part of this program. If I was sent home tomorrow, I would be welcomed like a conquering hero. My life and my work will continue - whether it be as part of the Alpha team or at home.

So I'm not actually risking anything by calling you out on your crap. I have nothing to lose. And you need to know the problems it's causing within the ranks. The candidates are losing respect and tolerance for both you and the whole process. They deserve better than that. You want them to respect you? Then you need to give them respect in return. Even those who don't make the cut for the Alpha team are valuable, and many of them will be excited to come back as participants on the Beta or Gamma teams. But not if you don't treat them right now."

"And you feel we are mistreating them?" Member BraveHeart asked.

"I believe you are disrespecting them - you are taking advantage of them by drawing this process out longer than is warranted."

Chairman McMurtry cleared her throat. "Have you discussed this with the others?"

"No, Madame Chairman. All I have done is listened to what is being said by them."

"Do the rest know you were planning on speaking to us about this matter today?"

"No, Madame Chairman. A good leader takes responsibility for those under her care without bringing attention to the fact that she is doing so. I like to think I'm a good leader."

McMurtry looked down the table in both directions before she returned her attention to Eli. "We like to think so too. Thank you, Candidate Vasya. It's been... enlightening."

Eli bowed her head in the direction of the dais, then spun on her heel and left the conference room without a backwards glance. The Committee waited until the door was completely closed before releasing a simultaneous sigh, which in turn caused them to titter with laughter. When that had died down, McMurtry met each of their eyes again, settling them back into the seriousness required.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, it appears we have some things to discuss and some decisions to make."

Arianna knocked on Danny's door, pushing past him the moment it opened. "Tell me about your mating habits," she demanded, watching his jaw drop open in shock as his skin flushed purple.

"Excuse me?!?" he sputtered out, looking at his other guests in bewilderment. "Seriously, Arianna... what the holy heavens are you thinking?" Luke, Gay and Esther remained silent, wondering what could possibly have brought on this particular conversation.

"It has been brought to my attention that I have been remiss in learning the mating habits of those around me and that doing so is at the basis of my socialization issues. So I decided to correct that oversight immediately and have chosen to begin my quest for knowledge with my best friend."

Danny blinked. "Honey, I don't think I got one word in ten."

Arianna scowled at him and pouted just the smallest amount. "I was speaking the common language, was I not? What did you not understand?"

Before Danny could summon the breath to answer, Esther spoke up from where the rest were sitting at the table. "Someone told Girlfriend there that her problems with Eli are due to the fact that they didn't talk about the sexual expectations and mating rituals their planets abide by. So she's decided to learn about everyone's in an effort to understand us all better... starting with you."

Both Danny and Arianna turned their heads in the direction of the table, eyes wide and mouths open in surprise. Realizing she and Danny were not alone, Arianna simply said, "Oh," and dropped her gaze to the floor. Danny was a bit more vocal in his response.

"How did you get all that, Esther?"

Esther laughed, a full-bodied sound that caused her eyes to crinkle at the corners and her teeth to sparkle brightly against her dark skin. "Easy, Danny. I wasn't stunned by the demand because it wasn't directed at me. There was less trauma for me to overcome to recognize what was said... and what wasn't."

Danny looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded his head in agreement before turning to Arianna. "Is she right, Sweetie? Is that what this is all about?"

Arianna blinked and took a deep breath. "I need to go," she insisted, spinning on her heel and walking briskly towards the door. She'd forgotten Danny was still standing in front of the portal and was now barring her way. "Please let me out, Danny," she begged softly.

"No, Honey. We're all friends here. We can talk about this. A little more warning to prepare might have been nice, but we don't have anything to be ashamed of... none of us. Now come on," he offered, gesturing towards the rest. "I'll even go first. Who knows what we'll learn about each other?"

Arianna sighed and let him lead her back towards the small group. She didn't see the look he gave them nor the agreement they imparted with only the subtlest nod of the head. Then he ushered her to a seat and cleared his throat. "Is there anything you'd like to know particularly?"

Arianna shook her head, but her eyes never left the table. Danny held up his hand to prevent the rest from saying anything and simply waited. It took a few minutes, but finally Arianna raised her head and met his eyes with a frown on her countenance and confusion in her expression. He tilted his head at her and studied her for a long moment.

"There's more to it than this, isn't it?" he asked. "Oh, I think you absolutely want to know about the different sexual mandates that exist within our different cultures, but there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

"How did you know?" she queried quietly, causing the other three to exchange glances but not disrupt the tableau that was taking place in front of them. Danny leaned forward and took one of her hands in both of his.

"Because I know you," he answered simply. "I've been allowed the privilege that no one else has yet," ignoring her tie to Eli. "To know the person behind the princess and the scientist. I know your mind, Arianna, and it's as beautiful as it is complex. It's time for you to share with everyone so they can appreciate you for all that you are."

"I'm not certain it's all that attractive, Danny."

"How about you let us be the judge of that?" Luke offered softly. "We promise to share equally."

"Why?" Arianna asked. "Why would you do this for me?"

Abigail smiled. "We've all done it, Arianna. We're just trying to catch you up to the rest of us. After all, we're going to all be family soon, right?"

"Do you really think so, Gay?"

Abigail nodded. "I do. Even if I wasn't an empath, I'd still think that. Everyone in this room will be part of the Alpha team."

"You're an empath?" more surprised by Abigail's revelation than her belief about them all being chosen as part of the Alpha team. Arianna noted the rest didn't seem at all surprised by Abigail's statement... either of them.

"I am," Abigail replied. "It only happens to a small percentage of my people; I am one of the chosen," screwing up her face in distaste at the description. "It's kind of crappy actually... at least until the blocks are in place. But as a kid, being forced away from friends and family until I learned to maintain distance emotionally...." She shook her head.

"Was it hard? Did it take long?"

Abigail looked at her intently for a long moment. "It was hard at first. Even now, it can be hard, because people tend to project when things upset them or something unexpected throws off their routine and it always takes me off guard for a few minutes until I can adjust my barriers. But mostly? No, it wasn't hard, and it really didn't take long once I got the hang of it."

"So how does it work?" Arianna asked, her scientific curiosity engaged. She had never encountered an empath before to her knowledge, and she really wanted to understand the phenomenon that it was. "Can you feel what we feel right now?"

Abigail smiled. "Not exactly. I felt your confusion when you arrived because you were broadcasting loud and clear. So I strengthened my barriers to give you some privacy. Now there is just a trickle of awareness running through the back of my mind - I have to actually focus on it to feel it."

"Can you read people?" Luke asked, then looked abashed for speaking out. "I don't mean to be nosy, but I've never met an empath before."

"I can," Abigail answered, "but I try not to without their permission. The only time I have blatantly ignored that obligation is if it's an emergency."

"Like what, Gay?" Esther asked.

"Like a situation where the person I'm reading is unable to respond otherwise - a medical trauma or a nightmare... something of that nature. It's not something I am comfortable doing."

"Do you ever regret being one of the chosen?" Arianna asked. Blue eyes met brown before Abigail nodded slowly.

"Sometimes, yes. Not as much now as when I was a kid, but I do still have those days. Especially when my máthair starts asking about grandchildren."

Everyone frowned in confusion, but it was Danny who spoke. "Having children affects your abilities as an empath?" Abigail shook her head.

"Would to God," she muttered. "No. On my planet, empaths can only mate with a certain sect of the population. It's believed to help strengthen the possibility of passing on the ability to one's children."

"So other empaths then?"

"Nothing nearly so easy," Abigail replied. "The religious order," nodding when everyone winced. "Yes, that has been my reaction to date as well. I'm not particularly enamored of the religious sect on my planet. There is a snobbery aspect to them that makes me cringe - like they're entitled to something because of their calling."

"What if you chose not to have children? Does it matter then? Or what if you find someone who isn't part of the religious sect? Can they join so you can be together?"

"No, to the second. You have to be born into the religious sect. As for the first, I don't know. I don't know if I would survive telling my máthair she was never going to be a seanmháthair because I refused to find a mate from the religious sect."

"Surely she would want you to be happy, Gay," Arianna reasoned, even knowing the truth of her own mama's proclivities. There had to be more mothers like Mary in the galaxy, right?

"I suppose she would. I'm just not sure how well she would tolerate me bucking tradition for my own happiness... especially if it meant she never had grandchildren to dote on."

"She may not anyway," Luke interposed. "After all, we're going to be gone a while."

"Yes, but at least she has hope."

"And don't we all live on it?" Danny asked with a hint of snark in his tone.

"Lately especially," Luke commented. "What do you suppose is up with that anyway?"

"You mean the fact that the Committee is dragging it out to the bitter end?" Esther jumped in. "Maybe they figure the ones of us who survive without having gone crazy will be the ones best suited to survive on an asteroid with no viable means of support. After all, it's basically going to be us on our own out there once we set the ship down. We won't be able to pick up and leave and there won't be any neighbors to borrow from."

"Maybe, but I'm actually looking forward to it... even the challenging parts," Arianna confessed. "It will be nice to get back into the labs and start working again." She sighed. "I think that is the worst part of this whole process - the fact that we're not *doing* anything. It feels like so much wasted time because there's no lab here, and no way to do anything constructive."

Esther nodded. "I think it's even bothering Jake and gods know that boy loves playing those games of his. But there's only so much of that a person can tolerate." Heads nodded in agreement.

"I know," Abigail commented. "I love to dance, but I'm going to have to start inventing my own at the rate we're going. I'm not sure the universe is ready for that," she added with a smirk.

"Well, hopefully, this will be done soon," Luke said. "There's still so much that needs to be accomplished before we can leave and I'd like the chance to say goodbye to my family."

"You think they'll give us the chance to do that?" Arianna asked.

"You think they won't?" Danny replied.

"I almost hope not... in my case anyway. I believe it would be a monumental cluster if my parents were to make an appearance here - for me and everyone else. My papa is not going to be at all gracious about my betrothal having been broken."

"Even though it was done for you?"

"Especially because it was done for me." Arianna sighed, debating how much to share with these people she called friends. "Papa would like to believe he can function above the law because of his position. In this instance, he wanted my betrothal to Malcolm to be overlooked by the Committee while we were both chosen to be part of the Alpha team. He believed my discovery of fission would ensure my inclusion in the project and that if the Committee wanted to maintain that right, they would give special consideration to his demands."

"That's pretty ballsy," Danny commented. "Not that you should be included because of your discovery of fusion - we all believe that. After all, the rest of our work rests on your breakthrough. But that's just it - it's *your* work... *your* discovery. That doesn't entitle him to anything."

Arianna smiled. "I know. But it doesn't keep him from thinking it should. Is it wrong that I want to be part of this project just so I'll be out of reach for a little while?"

Esther snorted. "Girlfriend, given what little you've just told us about your papa, I have to admire you for not having run away long before now. I'd have probably slapped him." Arianna's eyes went wide, and Esther chuckled and shrugged. "What can I say? Everybody needs a good smack in the head now and then to keep them honest."

Danny noticed Arianna's discomfort and cleared his throat. "How did we get so far afield of mating rituals and customs?" he asked. "Who's next?" not surprised when three fingers went in his direction. His lavender complexion flushed a little darker, but he nodded his head gamely and turned his attention to Arianna. "So what do you want to know?" And the conversation was off and running again.

Chapter X

"So did you hear the news?" Adam quietly asked his compatriots as they seated themselves at the table Mary had reserved for them in the restaurant. It was rare that they were all together in the same place and time; usually such action preceded a major change for one if not all of them. The fact that they weren't sequestered upstairs was even stranger - normally, this type of meeting was held in privacy so they could voice questions, arguments and objections without fear of censure. They couldn't help but wonder at the change.

Before either Ben or Caleb could respond to Adam's query, Mary strode through the doors and headed directly towards their table. They rose as a matter of courtesy, and she nodded her acknowledgement even as she motioned for them to resume their seats. She held up her hand, gesturing for the server and indicating that she wanted her agents to remain quiet for a few moments.

The server hastened over and took their orders, scrambling to take care of their drinks, then backing a safe distance away from the table. Only when Mary was sure the woman was out of hearing did she look around the table and meet the eyes of each of her shift leaders.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Adam, would you like to continue sharing the news you had started revealing to Caleb and Ben before I arrived?"

Adam's eyes widened, but he nodded. He'd try to figure out how she knew that later. For now.... "Apparently Eli ripped the Committee a new one in her interview today - basically called them out on their crap."

Ben and Caleb looked between Adam and Mary. "Dude," Ben said after a moment of shocked silence. "Seriously?"

"Oh yes," Adam confirmed. "Stephen was monitoring the session. Said she was polite and respectful about it, but basically told them to stop dicking everyone around. That all the candidates believed the Alpha team had already been chosen and they knew the Committee was screwing around so it would look like everyone was getting a fair shake before the announcement was made."

Their server chose that moment to return to the table with their food, and conversation ceased while she set plates in front of everyone and refilled drinks. When everyone was satisfied, she moved away again, leaving them to their discussion.

"Wow," Caleb said after the first few minutes were spent in satisfying their initial hunger pangs. "I'm trying to figure out if that was incredibly brave or exceptionally stupid." They all looked at Mary and waited for her to weigh in.

She swallowed the food she had been chewing and lifted her glass, washing it down carefully before leaning back in her chair. "In this case it was incredibly brave because she was absolutely right, but it was still a risk. However, what was even better was the fact that she pointed out that it was her duty as the de facto leader of the candidates that compelled her to speak out on their behalf, and they couldn't argue with her logic."

"And she wasn't afraid of being dismissed?" from Ben.

Mary shrugged. "If she was, she hid it well. She told the Committee that as much as she'd like to be part of the Alpha team, she didn't need it. I'd have loved to have seen their faces when she made that particular announcement."

"So what happened?" Caleb asked curiously.

"Well, even though I haven't heard anything officially yet, I'm fairly confident the Committee will call another meeting before Monday rolls around. So at least Eli got things moving. The problem with that is it changes our timetable more than it already was."

"The timetable changed?" Adam asked. "When?" glancing at Ben and Caleb and realizing none of them had been aware of the alteration. Mary cocked an eyebrow at them.

"It's why I called this meeting gentlemen - to make you aware of the changes I've made to our original schedule. For the record, I have already reworked the schedule a second time to allow for an earlier announcement of the Alpha team, but it means we'll be in motion starting tonight."

"Damn!" Ben muttered. "Didn't see that coming. Can I ask what changed... aside from the Committee stepping up their timetable, Chief?"

"Malcolm," Caleb answered succinctly before Mary could respond. Then he looked at her and she nodded and gestured for him to continue. "As much as everyone despised the Prick, the fact that he's been discovered to have a disease we thought had been wiped out on this planet is cause enough to step up our security measures." Caleb turned back to Mary. "So I'm guessing we'll be sleeping in short shifts for a while?"

"Yes, unfortunately, but it's necessary. I've got the schedule all worked out - you three need to ensure that it is adhered to. We'll be moving the candidates tonight in increments. Each of you will be in charge of a different group at a different location - we've already secured the new facilities. It won't be as plush as staying here has been, but we need them out of here before morning. I've already mapped out the routes you'll need to take - one route per vehicle regardless of the destination. It will be harder for anyone to spot you that way."

"What about the announcement? What are you going to tell the Committee? They haven't actually canceled the rest of the interviews or indicated they're going to move up the Alpha team notification."

"The Committee will be informed of the change of venue for the candidates once they have all been secured in the new locations. Any communication they need to do with the remaining contenders will be done through secure channels."

"And when the Committee objects?"

"I will have a much clearer idea as to who the perpetrator is."

"So you still don't know, Chief?"

"No," Mary ground out in frustration. "I'm convinced at least one of the Committee is part of the effort to sabotage this project before it gets off the ground. But I don't have anything concrete I can base an accusation on."

"I'd like to know why," Adam said. When he caught a glimpse of everyone else's confusion, he elaborated. "Why go to all the trouble to become a Committee Member just to destroy what you're supposed to be helping create?"

"One of two things," Mary said, pushing her plate away and leaning back in her chair. "Either they became a Committee Member for the sole purpose of obliterating the program. Or someone got to them - using money or a family member as leverage to accomplish the same thing."

"But why?" Adam repeated. "If you hate the idea so much, why not just refuse to be a part of it? Or why not tell someone if you're being blackmailed?"

"We'll ask when we discover who the guilty party is. But my theory on the first is that they are trying to make a point. As for the second...." Mary shrugged. "If money is involved, I doubt it is blackmail as much as it is bribery. If it's a family thing, they may believe they are just protecting their own."

"At the cost of everyone else's? What a selfish bastard!"

"No one said we were evolving for the better," Mary said with a derisive smirk. "Now, gentleman," pulling out her Pad and waiting for them to do the same, "let's get down to business, shall we?"

Eden bumped Eli's elbow, almost causing her to spill her drink and earning her a glare. She struggled to appear appropriately apologetic, but she couldn't keep the smirk from forming. "Sorry," she mumbled. "But what do you think is going on over there?" jerking her head towards the table where Mary and her security guys were sitting having some intense discussion as they poured over their Pads.

Eli shrugged. "I have no idea. I don't think I've ever actually seen them eat in the restaurant before."

Eden sighed. She really wanted to know what was going on at that table. She had the distinct impression it was far more interesting than the awkwardness that was happening at her own. Eli was sitting next to her as she usually did when they ate together as a group, but she was mostly lost in another world. Eden had to wonder if something had happened in her interview to make her so pensive or if it was something closer to home.

Because then there was Arianna - sitting at the other end of the table actually laughing and carrying on with those around her - something that hadn't happened since she'd been betrothed to Malcolm. Even before, when it had been her and Eli, much of her personality was focused on Eli first and everyone else second. Now she appeared to be trying to make up for lost time.

Eden couldn't decide if Arianna's sudden brashness was affecting Eli, but it was unnerving the hell out of her. Topped by the fact that Mary Wellesly was sitting in a relatively private corner of the room with her three top aides, and it was enough to make Eden antsy. She turned to Hannah, who had somehow ended up across the long table from her. She tapped the brown hand and waited for brown eyes to meet hers. Hannah arched a brow at her in response.

"Can you hear them?" Eden asked, jerking her head in the direction of Mary's table.

Hannah's second brow shot up to join the first in reaction as she eased her head around in the direction Eden had indicated. Then her eyes widened in surprise. Whatever she'd expected Eden to say, she obviously hadn't considered that to be an option.

"Are you kidding me?"

"No. C'mon, Hannah. You're the one with sensitive hearing. I just wanna know what they're talking about. I didn't think they even ate, considering we've never seen them do so."

Hanna gave Eden a look. "Eden, even if I could hear them over all the noise and confusion in the room - not to mention the distance - I'd never disrespect Mary like that. She's been above reproach in respecting our privacy whenever she can."

"How can you possibly know that?" Eden demanded.

"Because common sense says she's been witness to a lot of our behavior, but the Committee has yet to bring up anything that only she could have told them."

Eden glared. "I hate you sometimes," she grumbled. Hannah just smirked.

"She's right," Eli said unexpectedly, causing those in hearing range to turn towards Eli. Mostly she listened during meals, so when she spoke she captured attention. Eden tilted her head in question.

"She's right about what, Eli?"

"Mary respecting our privacy. She and her crew have been watching over us for a long time, so you know she's had to have seen any number of embarrassing events that have occurred in our lives. And yet not only has the Committee failed to mention them, Mary and her team have never brought attention to them."

"Yeah, yeah," Eden grouchyly agreed. "But that doesn't make me want to know what's going on over there any less."

"Did you ever think it might be another test?" Naomi asked, causing Eden to whip her head around and glare. Naomi held up a placating hand. She and Eden had gotten off on the wrong foot and everything Naomi did now tended to rub Eden the wrong way. However, they were both trying for the sake of

team dynamics. Eden sucked in a deep breath and nodded for Naomi to continue. Naomi shrugged. "I just wondered if it was possibly another test."

"How so?" Eli asked quietly.

"I don't know. It just seems like that's all we've done for a while, so why not one more?"

The others nearby chuckled wryly and Eden snorted. "She's got a point." Then she shrugged. "Whatever. I'm just ready for this to be over with," she sighed, scrubbing her eyes with the balls of her hands. Eli wrapped an arm around her shoulders and Eden leaned into the comforting touch.

"I think we all are, Eden," Eli said with a light squeeze before releasing her hold. Everyone nearby nodded their agreement to Eli's words. Eli smirked. "Who knows? Maybe Mary is planning a way to spring all of us from here. I imagine she's as tired of this as we are."

"Do you think that's possible?" Eden retorted with a snort.

"Of them being as tired of this as we are - yes. Of them plotting our escape - not so much; but I like the idea... especially if it means we get to start this mission soon. In the meantime, I'm done here. I'll see you all later," she added as she rose from her seat. "Goodnight."

"You're not going to wait for dessert, Eli?" Eden asked.

"I've had enough, Eden," her eyes conveying more than her words said. Eden nodded but didn't drop Eli's gaze until Eli turned her back and strode from the room. Then Eden let her attention drift to the other end of the table where Arianna was still staring at the now closed door. When Arianna noticed Eden's scrutiny, she gave her a tentative smile before turning her focus back to her closest tablemates though her antics were greatly toned down.

"You know," Hannah said softly as the door closed behind Eli and her escort, "if they don't find a way to get along before we leave, it's gonna make this project a hell of a bumpy ride."

Eden sighed. "Eli's trying to abide by her own request - you know, to include Arianna as part of the group. But that seems to be mucking things up for both of them. Personally I think it would probably be better if they just stuck to the professional thing. At least they both know what to expect from that kind of relationship."

"Maybe you should talk to Eli about it," Jacob offered, speaking up for the first time since dinner began. "The rest of us can make Arianna part of the family again without excluding Eli when she wants to be included as part of us. It should be her choice - not something she should have to suffer with trying to be a good example for the rest of us. We're all adults here."

"And you think someone like Deb would let her get away with a 'do as I say, not as I do' mentality?"

Jacob shrugged. "I'll talk to Deb."

Eden snorted. "Yeah... good luck with that."

He smirked. "Thanks. I think I can get her to understand. I mean... we all want what's best for the team, right? If I get her to agree though, you have to talk to Eli."

Eden raised an eyebrow at him, but returned his leer. "Don't I always?" she asked with a hint of snark, then turned her attention back to the table where Mary and her team had been ensconced only moments before. Somehow however, Eden and the rest had managed to miss their exit and Eden sighed. "Damn! I really wanted to know what they were talking about."

"Maybe they're gonna get the Committee to post the Alpha list early. If anyone could do it, Mary could," Jacob said with a shrug, leaning back to allow the server to set his dessert in front of him. He shoveled a huge bite of pie into his mouth and grinned. Eden gave him a look of disgust, but he simply kept chewing and grinning.

"Is everything all right, Caleb?" Mary asked when she'd sent the specs on moving the candidates to her team leaders. He looked at Ben and Adam, but they studiously kept their eyes glued to their Pads. Caleb met Mary's eyes and breathed slowly, then opened his mouth to reply.

"Well, Chief - honestly? I'm trying to decide if you're a brilliant tactician or absolutely insane."

Mary snickered and gave him a smile. "I see. And have you come to any conclusions?"

"Not exactly," he admitted, "though I am leaning towards the brilliant side. Because no one would ever think to look for them in plain sight - not like this. They'll expect us to move them to underground military facilities to keep them secure."

Mary chuckled and nodded. "Any questions, gentlemen? All the information is there," jerking her head in the direction of the Pads they all held, "but if something is unclear you need to ask now. There won't be time once we get underway. Communication will be limited to code and only under extreme duress in an emergency."

The men turned the focus back to their Pads, carefully studying all the information Mary had shared with them. One by one they purged the files and collapsed the Pad back into its carry size, slipping it into a pocket before resting folded hands on the table.

Mary regarded each of them for a long moment - these were men she trusted with her life... that she had entrusted her daughter's safety to once upon a time. They had been through a lot together... both for her and with her. Now once more, she was putting her ultimate faith in them - only this time it wasn't her daughter's life, but the lives of kids who held the future in their hands.

"I do have one question," Ben said finally, drawing their attention to him. Mary motioned for him to continue. "Are you sure about the way you've broken the candidates down?" holding up his hands in an effort to ask for forbearance from his compatriots. Mary just waited. "I mean... the awkwardness that's between Princess and Angel is going to make it a nightmare for whoever gets stuck with them."

"Good thing I'm the one in charge of that group then, isn't it?" She glanced at her watch. "Ian, Nathaniel and Joseph will be here within the hour. They have already been briefed - each of them, like you, will be taking charge of a group of ten candidates. Five candidates to a vehicle with four agents to cover them. We'll leave incrementally in three-minute intervals - I will randomly choose the order that you leave in so make sure you and your team and candidates are ready to go when zero hour arrives."

"What are you going to tell the candidates?"

"The truth... but as little as possible. You three need to get upstairs and start prepping your teams. Caleb, your team will need to be quick and relieve Ben's as soon as you're ready so they can prepare as well. As soon as each member of your shift has checked in as ready to proceed, notify me and I'll give you our go time. The sooner the better."

Mary rose and the men stood as a matter of course, then they followed her from the restaurant and headed upstairs. There was a lot of work to be done and a very short amount of time to do it in.

Chapter XI

"Okay, for the record, this is not what I was hoping for when you talked about us being sprung," Eden grumbled to Eli as they piled into the vehicle that was waiting for them. Eli just grunted at her. It had been a long and eventful night already, and it wasn't over yet.

Mary had gathered them together in the hallway almost the moment they had stepped from the elevator - doing the same to everyone until the entire contingent of candidates was gathered together. She met their eyes, conveying the seriousness of her demeanor, then in short, clipped sentences, informed them of the change of venue. Before anyone could think to question or protest, three young men - all of whom were military by their bearing and attitudes, and two of whom obviously belonged to the woman who had just finished speaking - stepped in front of her, giving Mary the opportunity to slip away. The taller of them walked forward just a bit and clapped his hands together to get their attention. Then he held up his hands to forestall their questions.

"My name is Ian Wellesly - my brother Nathaniel and his husband Joseph," gesturing to the two men standing beside him. "I'm going to assume you all know the rest of the security team that has been with you for the last few months. I know you all have questions and concerns, and they will be addressed in due time. But right now, we're on the clock. Mama doesn't make decisions like this lightly, and she's not going to explain anything until she's convinced of your safety," his firm tone causing them to glance around at each other.

"So, in that vein, you have fifteen minutes to pack your things and be ready to move out. Anything you leave behind will be stored, but you will have to do without it until such time as this matter is resolved."

"And the matter is?" Eli asked. Ian smirked and arched his brow at his brother who grimaced. He should have known better than to bet against his mama.

"The matter is we need to move you to a more secure location. That is all you need to know for now."

Gray eyes hardened. "And if we refuse?"

"You won't, Eli," holding his composure when Eli's eyes widened and her jaw dropped just slightly. "You know Mama wouldn't do this without a reason, and everyone will be watching you to follow your lead. Besides, you're all leaving here tonight if we have to physically move you. Of course, you won't have any of your personal belongings to get by with, but that won't be anyone's problem but yours."

"Have you always been a hard ass?"

Ian laughed and even Nathaniel and Joseph sniggered. "Trust me, Eli - I'm the easiest going of Mama's kids. It only gets worse from here."

"Wonderful," she murmured.

"With that in mind, go pack your things and be quick. The sooner we get everyone settled, the sooner you'll get some answers. Oh," he added before they could fully turn away from him, "your comm devices have been disabled for now."

"Are you serious?"

Now Nathaniel stepped forward and met Eden's eyes. "Deadly. The point of moving you is to protect all of you. To do that, you have to disappear from the grid for a while. That means you can't tell anyone - even your families - what's going on."

Eden studied his hazel eyes for a long moment, then nodded. "All right. How much time do we have left?" looking at Ian.

"We'll give you fifteen minutes from right now. But sooner is always better. We've still got to get you divided up into your groups for traveling."

"We don't get to choose who we go with?"

Ian shook his head. "Mama has already split you up. Now get a move on - the clock's ticking." That was incentive enough, and soon the hallway was cleared of candidates and only the security teams remained.

The security team, long used to Mary's methods, had needed very little time to prepare - only one member of each four person team was still upstairs waiting to accompany their group to their vehicle. Mary's boys had arrived ready to go, barely having time to exchange hellos before the candidates had started congregating for Mary's announcement. Now it was a matter of waiting for the candidates to return to the hallway so they could be segregated into smaller groups and moved downstairs where the vehicles and security personnel waited to sneak them out to their new, hopefully very temporary locations.

It didn't take them long to reappear, and true to the pronouncement Mary made to her sons, Eli was among the first out of her room. Mary signaled Eli to stand beside her, but otherwise there were no words exchanged between them. As each candidate emerged in the corridor, Mary instructed them which security member to stand with. When a group was complete, they immediately headed downstairs... except for those with Mary. They would, by virtue of her position, be the last to leave.

Arianna was among the last to appear and was somehow unsurprised to find herself with Eli, Eden, Danny and Isaac. She didn't say anything and kept her eyes down, having seen the anger and frustration in Eli's before Eli could pull her mask firmly into place.

They could hear Mary speaking to the other units, but none of them could hear what was being said. And then it didn't matter - their belongings were being removed from their possession and they were being propelled into a vehicle and whisked away into the night.

"So what were you hoping for, Eden?" Mary asked from the front of the vehicle. Eden's eyes widened in surprise - she hadn't realized anyone other than Eli could hear her muttered comment. She cleared her throat awkwardly and shrugged slightly.

"Um... honestly?" watching Mary simply cock an eyebrow in her direction. "I was hoping to get sprung to the transport facility. You know, because the Committee decided to announce the Alpha team that I was part of?" smiling when Mary gave her an understanding smirk. "Barring that, I'd have been happy with practically anywhere else besides where we've been stuck for the last few months. I'd prefer to go back to the compound - at least we had work to do there."

"That seems to be the consensus among you kids," Mary said. "Not that I blame you for the sentiment. It's not like any of you have been away from your respective sciences for this length of time before, and there is such a thing as too much downtime. And as has been pointed out to me, you haven't even been given the opportunity to study the discoveries you've already made."

"So what's the real story, Mary? Where are we going? And why?" Eden asked. Mary shook her head.

"I can't tell you where... for your own safety," gesturing at the windowless sides of the vehicle. "What I can tell you is that you are being removed from the current facilities as a precautionary measure."

"Someone made a threat against us?" Arianna asked.

"Nothing so blatant. This is anticipatory on my part."

"And what does the Committee think?" Eli queried.

"I'll let you know. I haven't informed them yet."

There were gasps from most of the candidates; Eden, however, snickered. "I would love to be a bug in the rug when you share that bit of news."

Mary blinked at Eden's colloquialism, then smiled. It still got the point across. "I'm fairly confident I can predict their reaction. They will demand that I return all of you so they can complete their interviews and make their choices. When I refuse, they will threaten me with vile and unspeakable consequences. And when they realize that I'm not budging and there's nothing they can do without causing an interstellar incident, they will make a decision and we can move on from there."

"You're forcing their hand?" Arianna inquired.

"Not exactly," Mary replied. "I do expect that to be one result from having moved you away from their physical presence. But that would just be a bonus in my book."

Eli snorted and rolled her eyes. "Ours too."

"So you expect us to be wherever here is for at least a week?" Isaac cut in.

Mary shook her head. "The period of this 'exile'," motioning at the candidates, "is of yet undetermined as to its actual length. It depends on any number of factors that are currently in play. I was simply

giving you my take on what the Committee's response will be to the fact that you are no longer readily available. I never offered a timeline to that scenario."

"You're as tired of this as we are, aren't you, Mary?" Danny asked, his eyes studying her closely.

"I won't pretend that I'm not going to be happy to see this project come to a successful close in the next few weeks, but I will miss you kids when you finally do get to actually begin your great adventure."

It was silent after that, and in a few minutes they pulled up to their destination. The driver and other two security personnel left the vehicle while Mary turned back to her charges.

"All right - when I say go, I want you to leave the vehicle one at a time and make your way inside the building. Once we're all in, I'll show you to your rooms and I want you to stay there until someone comes to get you in the morning. Tomorrow I promise I'll give you the full tour, but tonight I'd like for you to try and get some rest."

"Are you sure...?"

"Trust me, Arianna. I'm going to take the very best care of you that I can - like you were my own kids."

Without another word, the five glanced at one another and reached a decision. Then Eli nodded. "All right, Ms Wellesly - let's do this." And they headed out of the darkened van only to be swallowed up by the darkness of night. Then they were in a corridor with five more of their compatriots and waiting for further instructions.

Mary was surprised that no one made an issue of the fact that some of their number had joined them or that most of their comrades were missing. She figured they were suffering from sensory overload by that point and were happy to be shown to their rooms. They weren't quite as thrilled about the prospect of sharing space - six in one room and four in the other... thank God for bunk beds - but they managed to sort themselves out without too much difficulty.

Now she was sitting in her daughter's living room with the rest of her team waiting for Joy to return with her last agent. They had taken the vehicles back to the underground garage of the hotel the candidates had been living in; it was the best place to hide them. Joy had picked up the drivers in shifts and returned them to their new posts; she only had to drop her brothers and Joseph off, then she would be returning to her home.

It wasn't the worst family reunion she'd ever had, but it certainly ranked among the screwiest. She stopped her vehicle to let Joseph out, stepping out to collect the hug she'd been waiting ages to receive. Joseph got to her first, and the big Navy man lifted her off the ground and held her tight for a long moment. Then he put her down without a word and moved back.

"You stay safe, Joyfulness," he said with a teasing grin. She cocked her eyebrow.

"You too, Joey - you don't want Mama coming after you for breaking Nat's heart because you did something stupid, right?" He gave her a kiss and a smirk, then turned to kiss his husband goodbye.

After a moment, he was inside the building, and they were on their way to the next holding facility to drop Nathaniel off.

It didn't take long, and Joy emerged from her vehicle once more to get her hug from her youngest brother. "I've missed you, Big Sister," he said, carefully taking the tiny woman in his large embrace. He kissed her cheek. "It's been too long."

"I've missed you too, Baby Brother. So you be careful. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

He kissed her again and set her on her feet. "Yes ma'am," he replied. "You do the same."

Joy smirked. "I've got Mama at my house. Really, Nat??"

He chuckled deprecatingly and shrugged. "Point taken. Love you," he said, opening her door and closing it behind her when she was seated. He ducked his head and met Ian's stare. "Eyes open, Brother."

Ian nodded sharply. "You too." And then they were off and headed to Ian's assigned duty. When she pulled under the portico, Ian was out and around the vehicle before she could actually put it in park. Once that was done, she stepped out and walked into his arms, holding tightly for a long moment before releasing him.

"Be careful, Ian. The holidays are coming, and plans are already in the works. So don't you go mucking them up, all right?"

He snorted. "Like Mama or Prue would allow it. Now go - before Mama sends the hounds out looking for you." He lowered his head to meet Ephraim's gaze. "Keep an eye on this one, will you, Eph? She's pretty special," ducking the swat from Joy he knew was coming and grinning at Ephraim's light blush.

"Will you get out of here so I can go home?" Joy huffed. Ian chuckled and leaned forward to brush a kiss over her cheek. Then he ran up the steps and waved goodbye before closing the door. Joy climbed back in the vehicle and rolled her eyes at Ephraim who simply cracked a smile at her. Then she put it in gear and they headed back to Joy's home to talk to Mama and the rest of her team. It would be nice to have the whole story before the fallout started.

Mary had already sent most of the agents to bed by the time Joy and Ephraim walked through the doors. She had given them their instructions, and sent them to bed, wanting them to get sleep while they could. So Mary was sitting alone in the relative darkness of the kitchen when she heard Joy pull into the enclosed garage and shut off the engine. In moments, Joy and Ephraim were walking in. Ephraim looked around and noticed the silence - he locked the door behind them and took a seat.

Joy looked at her mother and Mary just smiled and jerked her head towards the front of the brownstone building. When they were standing at the base of the stairs, Joy turned back to Mary. "Mama?"

Mary took Joy in her arms and held on for the longest moment, relishing the embrace. Like with her brothers, Mary had missed having Joy's physical presence in her life in recent months. Even being nearby, most of their contact was done via comm unit and the odd cookie delivery.

"I've missed you, Baby Girl. It's nice to be here even with all the crap going on."

"I'm glad you're here, regardless of the reason. And as a bonus, I finally get to meet some of the kids you've been telling me about."

"I should warn you then - you already have a couple of fans among them."

"Are they dancers as well?"

Mary smirked. "They are both aware of your reputation as a dancer, but they are huge fans of your cookies."

Joy's eyes widened. "Mama!!"

Mary shrugged. "What? They needed comfort, and I had your peanut butter cookies and milk."

Joy shook her head but hugged her mother again. "Do you ever stop being the mama?" Mary arched her eyebrow and Joy just chuckled. "Are you sure you'll be all right down here with just you and Ephraim keeping watch?"

Mary nodded. "I trust Ephraim to watch my back just like I would his father. Caleb trained him well - just like he did with your brothers."

"But just the two of you?"

"No one knows we're here, and I'd prefer to have a majority of my guys looking out for these kids during the day. I want them to be able to get out a little at least. The Committee is driving them crazy and I'd like them to be able to take advantage of this bit of freedom while it lasts."

"How long do you expect to be here?"

"Depends on how long it takes Gideon and his team to find my link. I'm pretty confident that one will tie into the other. Then it's just a matter of tying all the pieces together."

"So what does this mean for the holidays?"

"Nothing, I hope... other than I expect we'll have a house full of kids to celebrate with."

Joy nodded. "Good. Prue and I have already been making plans."

Mary kissed her daughter's forehead. "Good girl. I knew I could count on you. Now get on up to bed. I don't know when these kids are going to be up and moving, and I know how proprietary you tend to get about your kitchen."

Joy rolled her eyes and snorted. "Hello, Pot... this is Kettle," skittering away and laughing when Mary took a swing at her head. "Goodnight, Mama," easing her way upstairs to the only room in her home she could claim as her own for the next little while. Mary stood at the bottom of the stairs and watched Joy go. It was only when Joy entered her bedroom and closed the door behind her that Mary turned away and walked back to the kitchen. Ephraim met her smile and offered her a cup of coffee.

"Thank you, Eph," Mary said with a sigh of relief.

"Thank you for letting me watch with you, Chief. You don't know what it means...."

She patted his free hand. "You've earned your place here, Eph. Never doubt that."

"Enough that I would be considered a good match for Joy?" he asked, meeting Mary's eyes squarely.

Mary studied him carefully, taking his measure. "You talk to Joy. If she's interested and thinks you're a good match for her, you have my blessing."

Ephraim relaxed and smiled at her words. "Thank you, Chief."

Mary took her cup and nodded her head. "Good luck, Ephraim," she offered with a small smile and a twinkle in her eye, then moved back to her post at the front of the house.

Chapter XII

Eli was the first to awaken, and she blinked her eyes rapidly as she tried to orient herself. Then she remembered their unexpected relocation under the cover of darkness the night before, and she let her eyes close and pushed her head deeper into the pillow until she regained her equilibrium. When she was satisfied she was stable again, she sat up slightly and looked around the large room.

It reminded her a little of a dorm room - aside from the fact that she was one of six bodies occupying it instead of two. It was also a little like summer camp, though not nearly as big. Eli smiled. She had wonderful memories of summer camp when she was a child. And college had been a great experience as well. So maybe this temporary living experience could turn out all right as well. It would certainly be one for the memoirs if she ever got around to writing them.

With a wry smile, Eli sat up and eased herself from the upper bunk in an effort not to waken her lower bunkmate. She ducked her head - she wasn't even sure who had ended up in the bed below hers. Last night she just wanted to sleep and had basically instructed the rest to find a bed and crash. She figured any issues could be ironed out in the light of day.

She glanced down at herself clad in drawstring trousers and a long sleeved t-shirt and shrugged as she escaped the bedroom. She would probably regret the lack of footwear later, but she didn't want to risk slipping on the stairs in her sock feet. Not only would it be embarrassing, she'd probably end up waking the rest of the household.

Eli followed her nose and her memory and made her way into the kitchen. Mary was there of course - *honestly, did the woman save up all her sleep for a once a month dalliance with the phenomenon??* - as well as their driver from the previous night and two of the agents who had ridden with the other group. She nodded good morning and headed straight to the coffee pot, glad there was a stack of cups sitting beside it.

She poured hers and prepared it, closing her eyes and releasing a deep sigh when the first taste hit her tongue. The others in the room chuckled quietly, and Eli's eyes popped open and focused on Mary, eyebrow arching in question. She smiled and waved a hand.

"Your reaction to caffeine this morning kept the streak alive. Every one of us did the same thing." Eli smirked. Mary tilted her head thoughtfully. "So what brings you downstairs at the butt crack of dawn, and why aren't your feet covered?" instantly becoming the mom again to the amusement of her agents. "The floors are freezing!" Mary looked around the room and gave her team the stink eye. "And no comments from the peanut gallery, thank you."

"Why, Chief? We think it's cute when you go all 'Mama Bear' on one of us. Glad to know you do it to the kids as well." Mary muttered under her breath but turned her attention back to Eli, an expectant look on her face. Eli swallowed and met her eyes.

"I didn't want to tumble down two flights of stairs. Pretty sure that would have brought the entire household running, and we've had enough excitement for at least a day or two, I think. And since the only socks I had out weren't the non-slip sort...."

"And digging through your bag would have woken the rest of your room up?"

"More than likely," Eli replied wryly. "I would have needed to find my bag first. I'm fairly confident it's in the same room I slept in, but given the way we crashed last night it's hard to say for certain."

Mary didn't have to turn to know Martha had already left the room. In another moment she was back, and placing a pair of warm, comfortable non-skid socks in front of Eli. "Put them on," she instructed quietly. "It'll make the Chief happy and if the Chief's happy...."

"...everyone's happy?"

Martha clapped her shoulder lightly. "You catch on quick, Kid. You can return them later. More coffee?" she offered as she stepped away, noting Eli immediately moved to cover her cold toes. Eli nodded as did Reuben and Mary. Ephraim shook his head.

"No. I'd like to get a little sleep at some point today."

"Not before you've had some breakfast," Joy announced from the doorway. "That goes for all of you, and what are you doing in my kitchen?" glaring slightly and raising an eyebrow in her mother's direction. Mary just smirked.

"We were having coffee. You can mostly expect the pot to stay on for the duration of our stay. The kids drink some, but you know my team lives on the stuff," smiling when Joy rolled her eyes and nodded in acknowledgment. "By the way - Joy, this is Eli... a fan of your cookies. Eli, this is my daughter, Joy... baker extraordinaire and sometimes prima donna."

"It's nice to meet you, Eli."

"You as well, Joy. Will you be offended if I tell you that I enjoyed your dancing, but I loved your cookies more?"

Joy laughed. "Not at all. Dancing I do for me. Baking is something I do for everyone else. If they make you happy, it's all good in my book. Now how many waffles can you eat? It's what we're having for breakfast."

"Actually...."

"Unless that sentence ends with a nice, round number, I'm going to advise you to rethink your answer before you speak," Joy informed Eli, pointing a wooden spoon in her direction. "Everyone in this house starts the day with a healthy breakfast."

"Even the prima donna?" with a smirk.

"Especially her. Do you know how many calories I burn an hour in practice? Granted, I usually don't start with something as filling as waffles, but today is a special day."

Eli met Joy's brown eyes, smiling when she realized they were smiling back at her. She shook her head and chuckled. "All right - how big?" eyes widening comically when Joy spread her hands about thirty centimeters across. "Um... can I have half?"

"Sure - that's about what Mama eats."

Eli nodded but didn't reply to that. Instead she asked, "Is there anything...?" motioning around the kitchen.

"Actually yes," Joy said with a decisive nod. "And don't take this the wrong way, but I need all of you out of my kitchen. Refill your coffee cups and go, but get out of my kitchen. I can't work with all of you underfoot." She looked at Mary. "And please catch the rest of your kids before they come in. I will call you when the kitchen is ready for invasion."

Eli and the security team members watched as Mary stood and headed towards the door. Just before she reached the threshold, she turned back and gave each of them a look. "Well, come on, ladies and gentlemen. You heard her, and it's her kitchen. If you want to be eating more than pre-packed military meals, I suggest you hop to and move it."

As a single unit, the other four jumped from the chairs, not even bothering to refill their cups before following Mary out the door. Mary motioned them towards the stairs so they could sit and catch everyone else on their way down, but before she could take a seat herself Eli lightly touched her arm.

"Ms Wellesley? Could we talk?"

Mary nodded at Eli and gestured her towards the living room at the front of the house. Then she turned back to her agents. "When Joy calls, you're welcome to go back into the kitchen and share breakfast with her and whoever else is up by then. If the kids complain about not being able to have their morning dose of caffeine, tell them - her house, her rules. And around here, if you snooze, you lose. They'll be able to get it shortly. Ephraim, if you're done eating before I'm finished in here," jerking her head towards the room Eli was waiting in, "do you know where your bed is?"

"Yes, Chief."

"All right then. I'll be back shortly." And Mary headed into the next room and closed the door behind her, knowing a confrontation was coming.

Eli was sitting calmly on the divan, hands folded in front of her and her eyes closed. Mary could tell by the depth and speed of her breathing that she was meditating, and she took a seat in the overstuffed easy chair to give Eli the time she needed to center herself. Mary propped her elbow on the arm of

the chair and rested her head on her hand. It had been a long night - both eventful and quiet - and she was tired. But there was still work to do and things to take care of so she patiently waited for Eli to speak.

Eli knew the moment Mary entered the room. The scent of coffee would have given her away even if the slight whisper of sound hadn't. But she didn't yet have the control she sought so she kept her eyes closed and her breathing even. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes to find Mary regarding her benignly.

"Why?" she asked, her voice low and level. "Knowing what you know about us - what I told you and what I'm confident she probably shared, I want to know why. I think I'm entitled."

Mary's eyebrow shot up with Eli's use of the word 'entitled' and she bristled slightly. Nothing irked her quite as much as someone believing they were entitled to something, although admittedly, Eli had a better reason than most for wanting an answer to her question. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"You believe you're entitled to know why I put you and Arianna into the same group, knowing it could be days or even weeks you were forced to share living space?" Mary asked coldly. Eli's eyes snapped up to meet hers, surprised to find a hint of anger in the brown eyes that met her gray ones. It made her bite her lip pensively, but she refused to break Mary's stare as she nodded slowly.

"I wanted you together where I could keep an eye on you myself. You're here together because in my mind, you are the two candidates that cannot be replaced on this project. Arianna for obvious reasons, and you for your ability to lead and organize on top of your scientific skills. And I feel better about being able to watch out for you myself."

Eli's brow furrowed. "Excuse me?" She held up a hand. "Wait... let me finish please." Mary gestured for her to continue. "You brought us to *your daughter's home* together thinking we'd be safer than if you split us up and put us with other agents? Did you ever consider that you made it easier for someone to find us?"

Mary's eyes flashed her rage, but her voice was as calm and collected as always. "I started this security agency for the sole purpose of protecting my daughter. I asked her father to remove the singular physical threat that was made against her before we had safeguards in place to eliminate that kind of issue before it became a problem. Do you *really* think anyone would believe I would willingly place her life in jeopardy - for any reason?"

Eli released a deep breath. "I didn't realize," she replied. "And keeping us together? Surely it would be safer if we were in different locations."

"I don't think that's true in this case because this is the safest location in the world. You'll understand a little better after the full tour. But keeping you and Arianna is as much for the two of you as it is for my peace of mind."

Now Eli's eyes darkened to a flat slate gray. "You had no right."

"Actually I had every right," Mary replied smoothly, studying Eli with an unflinching gaze until Eli dropped her stare to the hands clenched in her lap. "Let me ask you something, Eli," waiting for Eli to agree. "If it bothers you now - being forced to share accommodations when it's necessary for your safety - how are you going to survive living together for years once you leave here?"

"I would have had a few weeks warning to prepare," Eli ground out. "It wouldn't have been an overnight change of circumstance. And once we arrive at the asteroid, we will be working in rotating shifts for months trying to establish the colony. When we can finally ease off on our initial work efforts like we did at the underground facility, we'll have created enough space that I won't be sharing with anyone. I will have a sanctuary."

"I see," Mary nodded. "Well let me suggest that you get to work preparing on sharing space because that sanctuary eventuality is a very long way off." She paused for a sip of coffee, never taking her eyes from Eli's. "I understand your position and how you feel about your situation with Arianna - I do. I may not agree with it, but I respect it. However, that doesn't change the fact that you're going to have to get over it and yourself to make this project work. You might as well start now instead of waiting until the Alpha team is announced."

"It's not as easy...."

"I never said it was going to be easy. But you need to decide on a course of action and stick with it. You're confusing the hell out of everyone right now."

Eli frowned. "How do you know that??"

"I'm a mom, and it's my job," Mary replied smoothly. "Frankly I think...." She started, then trailed off, pinching her nose before rubbing tired eyes. It really wasn't her place. They were all adults, after all, despite her inclination to refer to them as kids.

"You think what?" Eli asked, breaking into Mary's train of thought.

Mary sighed. "Do you really want to know?" Eli nodded. "I think you would be better served to try to salvage your friendship with her at the very least. It would go a long way towards smoothing out the situation for everyone. Barring that," Mary continued before Eli could object, "keep it strictly professional. Only interact with her when necessary for the sake of the work getting done. But don't blow hot and cold. Don't try to include her in group activities and then turn around and leave. It's not fair to her; it's not fair to you; and it's not fair to the rest of the team. You did your part to make sure that everyone knows she needs to be included. Trust them to pick up the slack on a personal level if you decide to keep things professional."

Eli kept her eyes on Mary, but her focus was elsewhere. Mary was content to let her remain that way for however long she needed to reach a conclusion. Finally Eli blinked and returned her attention to Mary. She took a deep breath and sighed.

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly."

Both of Mary's eyebrows slid into her hairline and her eyes widened in question. "For what?"

"For being able to see the big picture. I seem to have lost sight of that in this case," Eli offered with a small shrug. "Is it okay if I go outside?"

"As soon as Joy calls breakfast, yes," smiling at Eli's confused expression. "The short version? You can go out into the backyard without an obvious escort, but the only way for you to access it is...."

"... through the kitchen?" seeing Mary nod. "Got it."

"As soon as everyone is stirring around, I want to go over a few house rules for the duration of our stay. After that, I have a little surprise to share with you kids and then...."

"... a nap?"

Mary laughed aloud, and Eli smiled sympathetically, even though she had no clue why Mary was laughing. "Sorry," Mary apologized. "But that was funny. My 'nap', as you call it, isn't scheduled for about another six hours. I still have to deal with the fallout from the Committee on your disappearance."

Eli winced. "Oh, I'm sorry - I forgot all about that."

"Trust me," Mary said wryly. "I would too if I could." She heard Joy call from the kitchen and stood. "Is there anything else I can do for you Eli?"

Eli cocked her head. "Maybe," she answered honestly. "I'll let you know."

"Well, you know where to find me," Mary offered as they exited the room together.

"I do. Thanks, Chief!" Her address caused Mary to stutter stop and Eli to smirk before slipping into the kitchen. Mary just shook her head and smiled then headed into the kitchen herself.

"So where is everyone else?" Isaac asked as the candidates took places around the living room. They had finished breakfast only moments before, and Mary had motioned them into the living room for a conference. Several of them had protested the need to help Joy clean up. But Mary had assured them that was part of the conversation they needed to have and promised they could return to help as soon as they were done with the meeting. Now they waited for Mary to answer Isaac's question, but all they got was a shake of her head.

"That's need to know, and you're not on my list for that information. Next question."

"Are you serious?" Eden asked.

"As I can possibly be," Mary responded without batting an eyelash. "I'm sure this seems very mystery spy thriller-ish to each of you, but this is my job and your safety," not wanting to seem too melodramatic about the whole thing, but needing to convey the gravity of the situation to them. "It doesn't get more important than that, and I take it extremely seriously."

They studied her a moment, and one by one nodded their agreement to her words... both heard and unspoken. Mary let her gaze wander around the room, not surprised when Eli stepped into the breach. "So what can you tell us, Ms Wellesly?"

"Not much more than I shared with you last night on the way over. My guys have shared the same information I gave you with the members who were not with us," directing her comment at Eli who nodded. "I just wanted to set a few ground rules for our time here," meeting each pair of eyes to be sure she had their attention. When she was satisfied, she nodded slightly and cleared her throat.

"This is my daughter's home - please respect that. She allowed ten people to move in with her practically overnight, and even though she knew it was always a possibility, it's a bit of adjustment for

her as well. The kitchen is her domain so if she asks you to leave, please do so. She will be cooking for all of us for the duration of our time here." This statement garnered cheers and excitement and Mary smiled. Joy would appreciate the enthusiasm. "However, she would definitely approve of having help to clean up."

"I have already started a schedule for that, Ms Wellesly," Eli interrupted. "I worked on it after we ate." They had eaten in shifts to accommodate those who had risen early and those who had overslept. "And we'll try to make more of an effort to coordinate our schedules to hers."

Mary nodded and saw the surprise, then acceptance on the faces around the room. "Thank you, Eli. I'm sure she'll appreciate that. Are there any questions so far?" Mary looked around the room, but no one spoke. "All right. Let's move on. There are a few more things you need to know."

Chapter XIII

Mary led them out to the living room and to a door behind the staircase. When she opened it, there was a set of stairs leading to the basement. "Follow me," she commanded then headed downstairs. She walked to the far wall and stood back and watched the expressions of the kids as they looked around the massive room slowly. When they'd had a chance to examine the space visually, Mary cleared her throat and waited for their attention to return to her.

"This is Joy's practice studio. This small area still is," motioning to the cleared space. "You're welcome to be here while she practices, but unless she invites you into this particular area, please keep this space clear for her use. The rest of the room is yours to enjoy... including the two extra bathrooms," watching brows rise in question. "She's held practices for her dance troupe here - trust me... she needed them," garnering grins from everyone.

"This door and that one," gesturing to a small door almost hidden in the shadows across from her. "If something should happen to cause me to call for an evacuation - you're to head downstairs immediately. These doors will take you outside beyond the boundaries of this building and there will be someone waiting to move you to another location. It shouldn't come to that, but better to be prepared. And before you ask, no - you can't use this access to sneak out."

"How did you...?" Isaac asked, frowning.

"She's a mom," Eli said before Mary could respond. "And it's her job."

"And if you do decide to try, you'd better run far and hope I don't catch you. Because what I'll do to you will be far worse than any outside threat that could possibly be made against you." Mary looked at them sternly. "Please don't make me be the bad guy because you'll be removed from the project... period."

"You can't...."

"I don't want to, but I can and I would." She paused, then spoke again. "If you don't believe me, and you'd like to test me, you're welcome to try. But please understand that I won't allow any one of you to jeopardize everyone else's lives and futures."

"So we're as much prisoners here as we were before," Titus stated bitterly.

Mary sighed. "If you want to look at it like that," she agreed sadly. "I can't change many of the elements that are already in play here until they reach their conclusion - the ones that kept you confined to the hotel and the ones that forced us to break you all up and move you around are still very much a concern. I'm doing my best to get this wrapped up quickly so your lives can return to a semblance of normalcy before your mission takes you off the planet and puts you back to work. At least here you're welcome to spend time outside in the backyard if that helps at all - there will always be someone watching over you even when you're unaware of them."

"Guys," Eli cut in. "She's on our side. Cut her a little slack, all right?"

"So you're okay with this arrangement?" Eden asked Eli derisively.

"It wouldn't be my first choice," Eli admitted without hesitation, meeting Eden's black eyes and not letting her gaze waver. "But neither was being stuck in interview hell for months on end. Let's face it - we would all much prefer to be getting ready to leave on this mission as opposed to still waiting for the Committee to make a decision. But barring that, our circumstances could be much worse. We actually get to spend time outdoors; our hostess is a fabulous cook; we have a place to sleep and take a shower. And we've got the Chief watching our backs."

"The Chief?" Arianna spoke up. Eli stiffened and Mary stepped into the breach.

"It's what my team calls me," she volunteered.

"Is there a story behind that?"

Mary smirked. "Yes, and it's not for your tender ears."

"Aw... c'mon, Mary," Jacob wheedled. She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Maybe another day?" he relented with a charming smile and a shrug.

"Maybe when you get back from the mission."

Danny cocked his head at her and cupped his chin in his hand. "How is it you know? Why are you so certain that we'll all be part of the Alpha team?"

"It's her job," Arianna and Eli replied in tandem. Their eyes met for a startled moment before they both looked away in embarrassment. Mary nodded her head and replied, hoping to take attention away from both of them.

"I've been with this project and you kids for a lot longer than most of you know. It's given me a lot of insight... and some really good stories," she added with a smile, chuckling when everyone flushed just a little at her words. "I have one more thing to show you down here and then we can go back upstairs." She walked over behind the stairs and waited for them to join her. "It's not much, but it was the best we could manage under the circumstances."

She pressed her palm to the pad and after a moment, the door popped open and Mary gestured them across the threshold. The first motion brought the lights on and they each entered slowly, walking the corridor before coming to a dead halt. Eli, who was the first into the spacious room, gasped and turned to meet Mary's eyes. She just shrugged.

The room was a rudimentary lab - not much... especially compared to the state-of-the-art technology these kids were used to working with. But it was the first science they had been near in months and they looked around in awe and wonder.

Arianna, who was the last to enter and therefore the closest to Mary, turned to her with tears in her eyes. "Ours?"

Mary shrugged again. "Such as it is, yes. It's all yours." She barely had time to brace herself before Arianna flung herself into Mary's arms.

"Thank you, Mary! Thank you! Thank you!! Thank you!!!" The rest of the candidates cheered and clapped and stomped their feet in support of Arianna's reaction. Mary returned Arianna's embrace for a moment, then gently set her back on her feet and cleared her throat.

"We do need to go back upstairs to go over a couple more things, but then you all can come back downstairs and...." She waved her hand in the direction of the lab. "Do whatever it is you do. Just please don't blow anything up or catch anything on fire. Those things would actually draw attention to your presence here, and we're trying to be inconspicuous," drawing laughter from everyone in the room. "Besides, you'd piss off my daughter if you destroyed her home, and you *really* don't want to know how much like her mother she is, okay?" They laughed again and obediently headed out of the large room though not without several backwards glances.

When they were ensconced in the living room once more. Mary rubbed a hand over her face. "Okay, so... you'll be helping out with the household chores - mostly cleaning up the kitchen and the bathrooms you're using. You might want to decide who is using which bathrooms for showers and then each smaller group will be responsible for keeping their own clean. We're trying our best to make sure you won't be here that long, but with so many people using them, it won't take them long to get messy if you don't stay on top of things. "

"Although I hate that we're imposing on your daughter, I have to say that I'd rather stay here than go back to the hotel even when things do get cleared up," Titus said honestly. "With that lab downstairs...." He looked at Mary. "How did you do that? Do you have any idea...?"

Mary smiled. "I started setting up safe houses as soon as you kids went to the underground facility in the desert... just on the off-chance we might need them. Better to have and not need...."

"Thank you, Mary," Titus replied sincerely. "Suddenly this is less a prison than an opportunity, and I for one am overwhelmed to have it."

"It's not much... especially compared to what you kids are used to working with. But it might help pass the time a little."

"Well, I think I can safely speak for all of us when I tell you that we appreciate it."

"Ms Wellesly?" Isaac interrupted before Mary could respond to Titus. She tilted her head and waited for him to continue. "If we are here for more than a couple days, can we request things for the lab... you know like tools and parts and stuff?" Everyone rolled their eyes and Jacob reached out and slapped Isaac across the back of his head. Isaac put his hand up to cover the stinging spot and turned to glare at Jacob. "Whaddya do that for?"

"Because, dumbass - just having a lab should be sufficient. Mary's already gone to a lot of trouble for us without us asking for more."

"I know that. What I meant was...."

"It's a legitimate question," Mary cut in before things got more heated. She looked at Isaac. "You can certainly ask, Isaac. Whether or not I can do anything to accommodate you is something else again, but we could at least discuss it."

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly," making a face at Jacob who just rolled his eyes in response.

"Of course. Is there anything else I can answer for you guys before I leave?" She looked around slowly and saw the hesitation in Eli's eyes. But when she didn't speak, Mary nodded in satisfaction. "All right then - you're free to go. Please don't forget about helping Joy clean up the kitchen and you might want to sit down and decide on your bathroom and shower schedules before it gets lost in everything else. If you'll excuse me, Reuben and Martha will be around if you need them and Matthew and Sarah will be joining them later." Without another word, Mary left the room and headed upstairs to take care of her business with the Committee privately. She didn't think the rest needed to be exposed to what she knew was coming and figured Eli would find her when she was ready to talk.

"You know those kids are going to be furious when they find out you've crammed them into two rooms when you and the team are using the empty buildings on either side of Joy's place to sleep and shower, don't you?" Gideon asked Mary over the secure channel she had long ago installed in Joy's office. Aside from Joy's bedroom, this was the only other untouched room in the house, and the door remained locked to ensure it stayed that way. She couldn't risk one of the candidates getting in here and trying to hack into her system. It would create havoc they might not recover from.

"They can't complain too much - they have heat, hot water and Joy cooking for them. There's no power in the other two buildings except when the construction crew is in there working, so heat and hot water are in short supply." Gideon winced at Mary's matter-of-fact tone.

"Ouch," he murmured sympathetically.

"Yes, well... we all make sacrifices, right?" she asked giving him a wry smile. "If everything goes like I'm hoping, we'll be able to use the space during the holidays. At least the remodeling will be done by then."

"Something to look forward to, I guess. Does the building crew even know you're there?"

Mary shook her head. "I had them redo the attic area in both places first, then sealed it off. They don't even go up there now."

"Very clever, Chief."

Mary shrugged. "Maybe. What have you got for me, Gideon?"

He sighed and shook his head. "Not as much as I'd like, Chief - certainly nothing concrete. But...." he said slowly for dramatic effect, smiling when Mary arched an eyebrow at him. "I do have a few good leads."

"Such as?"

"Chairman *McMurtry* has been in his vicinity several times. Member *Bartolo* has also been in his general area on more than one occasion though that could be related to the fact that they are from the same planet. We are digging deeper into that angle. He was also seen talking to associates from the staffs of Members *Mein*, *Tortuna*, and *Yesu*."

Mary let her gaze go inward as she absorbed the information *Gideon* had just conveyed. *Gideon* just waited in silence, allowing her to process. Finally she met his eyes again and *Gideon* straightened and waited for her to speak. "If you had to draw a conclusion based solely on the information you have now, what would it be?"

He smirked. "Other than I need more information?" waiting for her nod before allowing his expression to become serious again. "My first inclination is to look deeper into Member *Bartolo*. I understand that they could naturally be in contact on a regular basis to ensure their princess was taken care of - except we know how the *Prick* felt about *Angel*." He shook his head. "There's just something off about the whole thing."

Mary nodded thoughtfully. "What about the other candidates?"

"Chief?"

"*Gideon*, we know the other candidates didn't like him - they made no secret of that fact. Is there anyone who stands out above the rest in wanting him gone?"

"Aside from *Princess*?"

Mary pinched her bottom lip between her thumb and forefinger. "Including *Princess*," she corrected gently.

"I'll take another look," he promised. "And I'll send you what we've got so far. We're still working on it though. There's a *lot* of information here to cover."

"I know; just do your best."

"We will, Chief. And we'll be as quick as we can."

"As long as you're thorough."

"Always."

"Good man. Now I need to go and deal with the *Committee*," Mary announced. *Gideon* grimaced in sympathy.

"Sorry about that, Chief. Hope it goes okay or goes away. Someone will be available here anytime if you need us."

"Thanks, *Gideon*," by way of dismissal as she cut the link. Then she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes briefly, wondering if there was a way to speed things up to get them over with. Then her comm unit chimed and she sighed. Time to deal with the *Committee*.

"I don't think you understand, Ms Wellesly," Chairman McMurtry said calmly through gritted teeth. "I'm not *asking* you to do anything. I'm *telling* you what is going to happen. This is not up for discussion or debate."

"Well, you're right about that last, Madame Chairman. But the candidates are not returning now nor at any time in the foreseeable future."

McMurtry sat back in her chair and crossed her arms firmly over her chest. "You seem to have outlived your usefulness, Ms Wellesly - quite impertinent thinking you are more here than you actually are. Consider yourself fired."

Mary looked at the screen that showed each of the Committee Members attending the meeting. Some were nodding their heads in agreement with McMurtry's words, while others remained neutral or shook their heads in disbelief. She didn't let her gaze waver from the Chairman's, however, and was unsurprised to see a hint of confusion in her eyes at Mary's lack of reaction.

"That's fine, Madame Chairman. I've had about all of your political crap I can stand anyway. However," she overrode McMurtry when the woman would have jumped in to protest, "that doesn't change the fact that I'm not returning these kids to the hotel or the Committee until I'm convinced it's safe and in their best interests to do so."

"You'll be charged with interstellar treason and kidnapping."

"You'd have to find me first, and you'll have an interstellar incident on your hands long before that happens. Because I assure you these kids will be in contact with their home worlds and explain exactly what kinds of games you've been playing with their lives."

"You wouldn't dare," flatly.

"Why not?" Mary countered. "I have nothing to lose - you just fired me, remember? And I took this assignment to protect these kids... nothing else."

"And removing them from this secure location accomplishes that how?"

"It is highly possible someone got to Malcolm there, Madame Chairman. That puts the threat closer to there than here, and until I'm satisfied that the threat is gone, the candidates will remain hidden. No one can afford the fallout that will occur if steps aren't taken to protect these kids until the threat is found and eliminated. They are more secure where they are now."

"Doesn't that make it your fault... that someone was able to breach your security?"

"I don't believe my security has been breached," Mary replied smoothly, but didn't deign to explain further. She wasn't about to give the perpetrator any advanced notice of her suspicions that the individual in question was among their number.

"And what of us?" Member BraveHeart asked when the silence grew uncomfortably long. "What about our protection?"

"Frankly, Member BraveHeart, that's not my concern and never has been. Each of you is as replaceable as I am; there are any number of people on each of your planets who could step in and do the job you're doing as well or better than you're doing it. But the candidates who are vying for a place on the Alpha team and the teams to follow - they all bring unique qualifications with them. Replacing them to make them fit would be a much more difficult proposition."

Mary smirked in satisfaction as she watched them squirm under her directness though she kept the expression to herself. She was ballsy... not suicidal. Chairman McMurtry looked around at her fellow Members before focusing her attention back on Mary who regarded her with a patient air and a raised eyebrow.

"So where does that leave us, Ms Wellesly? We seem to be at something of an impasse."

"Not at all, Madame Chairman. You have enough information on each candidate to make a decision if you have not already reached a conclusion," Mary stated calmly though her tone indicated where her belief lay in that regard. "When you are ready to make the announcement - even if the threat has not yet been eliminated - the candidates will all have access to it. Once that is done... well, it depends on where we are as to what will happen then. But this circumstance does nothing to hinder your ability to do your job."

"There will be consequences for this, Ms Wellesly."

"Count on it, Madame Chairman," Mary replied as she cut the connection before putting her hands to her temples. She had one more communication to make, but first she needed some coffee.

Chapter XIV

The kitchen was already spotless and empty by the time Mary made her way back downstairs to retrieve another cup of coffee. She took a deep breath, glad for even a moment's respite. She stood still and listened for a moment before a frown crossed her face as she recognized the silence for the trouble it could mean.

She stepped to the back door, opening it and glancing out. Reuben glanced up at her briefly, but otherwise kept his attention on his surroundings even though the yard remained empty. Mary closed the door and headed to the living room - also empty - before spotting Martha by the door. Mary cocked her eyebrow in question and Martha just gestured towards the basement door.

"Is someone down there with them?"

"Of course, Chief. Sarah and Matthew... and Joy, of course. She's the reason they went down in the first place." Mary's second brow shot up her forehead to meet the first.

"Really? They didn't rush down to play in the lab?"

"Eli asked them to give her an hour or so to sketch out a schedule - you know, to make sure everybody gets equal time and access. So Joy invited them down for practice." Martha shrugged. "It's been quiet, and no one's yelled for backup yet so I'm guessing it's all good."

"All right. I need to go talk to the doc. He should have the first round of test results back. Then I need to figure out how he can test the rest without giving away our positions. I wouldn't put it past the Committee to have him followed to find us," snorting in agreement with Martha scrunched up her expression in distaste. She rubbed her face. "I need you and Reuben to stick around for a few minutes when Michael and Dorcas get here."

"Problem?" Martha inquired quietly.

"Could be," Mary stated. "Let me go call the doc. Maybe I can put a couple minds at ease today anyway." Martha nodded and turned her attention back to the door, and Mary made her way back to the office.

"Hi, Tom," Mary greeted as soon as Morris' face filled the screen. "How's it going?"

He snorted. "I take it you know the kind of ruckus you've raised around here taking all those kids out of here."

"I had to do it, Doc. They weren't safe there anymore."

"Maybe," he agreed noncommittally. "But you won't be safe if you come back here. McMurtry's having a genuine come apart. What did you say to her?"

"Me?? I didn't say anything - well, except to refuse to bring the candidates back. She fired me."

"Yeah, pretty sure that won't stick. You obviously don't believe it," Tom added with mirth twinkling out of his eyes. "So since neither of us believe you're actually fired, that makes this an official communication. What can I do for you, Chief?"

"I need to know what the test results were, Doc. I've got kids waiting to hear their outcomes."

"I'll send them to you. The usual address?"

"Of course. Can you give me a hint?" wincing slightly at his glare.

"They'll be there before I could tell you anything," hearing the ding over the speaker as his sent mail arrived in her inbox. "See? Would it *kill* you to learn even a little patience??"

"Me?" Mary asked innocently as she minimized the screen enough to bring up the enclosed results. She looked over them briefly before giving a nod of her head. "It would probably get others killed if I had to learn patience, Doc. Really not a good thing all the way around. Are these conclusive?" motioning to the other side of her screen.

"As much as can be at this point. The couple of names that I highlighted need to have tests run in more depth, and everyone needs to be tested again in six months. But for now, that's where we stand." He paused and met her eyes and she maximized the screen again to be able to see him better. "I still need to test another half dozen or so, Mary. What are we going to do about them?"

"I know, Tom. I'm working on it. As soon as I come up with an equitable solution, I'll be in touch."

"Be careful, Mary. Something's brewing around here and I don't like it."

"Keep me informed."

"You know I will," Morris promised, then closed the connection between them. Mary watched the screen flicker dark for a moment before the email he'd sent brightened the screen once more. She let her eyes rove its contents again, then moved it to an encrypted file before shutting down her computer. *Now to go talk to Arianna and Eli*, she thought before leaving the office and locking the door closed behind her.

A knock on the doorjamb brought Eli's head up, her brow furrowed even before she knew who was requesting her attention. When she realized it was Arianna waiting to speak to her, she struggled to make her expression impassive. She glanced down at the Pad she was currently composing the schedule on and took a deep breath. When she felt sufficiently under control again, Eli met Arianna's eyes for an instant and beckoned her forward. Then she waited.

Arianna studied Eli a long moment - with her gaze focused anywhere but *on Arianna* it was impossible not to take advantage of the opportunity. Still she didn't linger, knowing Eli would become defensive and coldly aggressive if the silence dragged on too long. Just as she saw Eli's lips part, Arianna stepped into the room and started talking.

"After I left you waiting to speak to Dr. Morris yesterday," she began as she sat down on the sofa across from Eli, "I realized that you were concerned about the possibility of having acquired the AIDS virus from me because of Malcolm." Arianna clenched her hands in her lap and kept her eyes trained on them. "I wanted you to hear it from me personally that it isn't even a possibility."

Arianna felt Eli's head jerk up but she refused to meet the stare she could feel burning a hole into the side of her face. "How could you know that?" Eli hissed. "Did Mary say something to you about your results?"

Arianna shook her head. "No. But I know it's not possible."

Eli rose from her chair and moved to stand beside Arianna, gripping her chin firmly and raising it until their eyes met. She was careful not to hurt, but her eyes were filled with fury and Arianna flinched away instinctively. Eli growled. "How. Do. You. Know?"

"Because I was never intimate with him - not before we were betrothed, not any time after!" Arianna almost shouted, then covered her face with her hands. This time Eli released her grasp, then turned and marched out of the room. Martha watched her leave, knowing Reuben would take over the duty as soon as Eli set foot on the back porch. She stayed where she was... turning her back to allow Arianna some privacy for her breakdown.

"What are we going to do about them?" Jacob asked into the silence that fell after Arianna raised her voice. They couldn't hear what was said, but it was obvious what was happening. Eli was the only other person missing from their group.

"Why do you have to do anything?" Joy asked as she picked up a dry towel. "Isn't whatever is going on between them, you know... between *them*?"

Eden shook her head. "If only it was that simple." Joy cocked her head in a listening pose and Eden blew out a frustrated breath. "Think about how it would be if your whole family lived here - Mary, your brothers and their spouses, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins - fill up every room with at least two different family members... more if you need to for lack of space."

Joy's eyes widened but she nodded gamely. "Okay."

"Right. Now you have to share this space with all of those people for the next five years - you're not allowed to leave... not to go outdoors; not to go shopping; not for any reason can you leave this building. You're stuck sharing this space and only this space for five years. Even communication is practically cut off for part of that - your world is literally only you and the people that live here... no one else."

Joy held up her hands in surrender and shook her head. "I see your point. Talk to Mama," she advised. "She might be able to help."

"You think Mary would...?"

Joy shrugged. "It's worth a shot. At the very least she might have some insight to share."

"I agree," replied Esther as Danny nodded his concurrence. Eden looked around to find the rest in harmony and turned to Joy.

"Do you have any idea where I could find Mary?"

"Yes. C'mon... I'll help you find her," Joy offered as she wiped her face with a towel.

"We'll wait here," Jacob and Titus said in tandem, then regarded one another warily. Then Jacob cleared his throat. "And see if you can find Eli," he directed towards Eden. "It would be nice to get into the lab today."

"Will do," she agreed and headed up the stairs at a jog behind Joy.

Mary hadn't heard the altercation, but like the rest she heard Arianna raise her voice at Eli. However, she was determined to try and stay out of it so she motioned to Martha that she was headed to talk to Eli to give Arianna a chance to recover herself. She walked through the kitchen and opened the door, not surprised to find Eli laying in the yard looking up at the bright blue sky.

Mary stepped out and spoke to Reuben, then made her way down the steps and through the crunchy brown grass thankful snow hadn't yet started falling this year.

"I suppose you heard and are here to lecture me?" Eli's pained whisper cut across the silence. Mary shook her head and sat down cross-legged beside Eli's prone form.

"I just got off the comm with Dr. Morris," knowing the instant Eli's attention shifted from the outside world to her words. "Your test results came back negative," feeling her sigh of relief. "You will need

to be tested again in six months, but there is no indication of you being anything more than a healthy, young woman."

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly," Eli replied softly after a long moment. Mary kept her focus on the yard, not wanting to embarrass the woman beside her.

"I'm glad to be the bearer of good news," she replied with a smile. "Everything else all right?" she probed after another few minutes of silence. "It's mighty chilly to be laying outside looking up at the sky."

"It's very different from the sky on my world," Eli said by way of response. "I've never seen a blue quite like this one. At home, it's always a pale green unless it's storming - then it becomes a very deep green shade." She sat up and brushed off her arms. "I miss being outdoors," she added with a shrug. "I thought I should take advantage while I have the opportunity."

Mary nodded and slapped her legs before slowly standing to her feet. "Just don't catch a chill. I don't know what you do for a cold on your planet, but there's nothing happy about the shot you'd have to have here." She shuddered dramatically, drawing a small smile from Eli's lips. "They should outlaw needles that large... just saying," Mary added before heading back indoors.

Arianna was no longer in the living room when Mary returned indoors. Martha pointed her towards the stairs and Mary sighed. Hotel living had softened her and running up and down the stairs was wearing her out... not to mention the thirty hour day she had currently going. Resolutely she trudged up the stairs again, wishing they'd been able to put the bedrooms on a lower floor. Still it was only two flights instead of three, so she kept her mutterings to a minimum as she stopped in front of the closed door she suspected Arianna to be behind.

A knock revealed her assumption to be correct, but Arianna refused to open the door. Even when Mary insisted Arianna would want the information she had to share with her kept private, Arianna still refused to answer the door. So Mary sighed resignedly and informed Arianna to let her know when she wanted to know what Dr. Morris found out and turned to head back downstairs. It sounded like Joy was getting ready to start lunch. Before she made it to the landing, however, the bedroom door swung open and Arianna was standing in front of her with a fiercely determined look. Mary gave her a gentle smile. "It's all right, Arianna. You tested clean," seeing her almost go limp in relief.

"You're sure?"

"Oh yes. This is too important to screw up."

Arianna straightened and sucked in a deep breath. "Thank you, Mary. It's a weight from my shoulders."

"I can only imagine. I'm glad it was good news," Mary offered before she disappeared down the stairs. Arianna watched her go before slowly closing the door and retreating to the silence of her bed.

Eden and Joy arrived in the empty kitchen, and Joy decided to start lunch, knowing her mother would come from wherever she was to investigate. Eden noticed Eli outside and slipped from the kitchen at

Joy's nod. If nothing else, Eden should be able to get the schedule from Eli so the rest of the candidates could start enjoying their time in the lab.

She strolled out into the yard, her footsteps muffled by the brisk wind that had picked up. Eli jumped when Eden kicked her lightly with the tip of her toe and leaned up on her elbows to give Eden a glare.

"Eden!! What was that for?"

"For one thing it was to bring to your attention the fact that it's cold out here and you don't need to be laying on the ground. I know you warrior types thrive on misery and all, but that's enough for today," she stated unequivocally. "The other thing is we'd like to have the schedule so we can start playing in the lab downstairs. You said an hour and it's been a little longer than that. So cough it up, Boss. I know you wouldn't be out here if it wasn't done."

Eli sighed, but held out a hand, knowing Eden could pull her to her feet with very little effort. A moment later she was standing, and they waved to Joy as they passed through the kitchen on the way to the living room. Eli recovered the Pad she'd been working with and passed it to Eden.

"Post it by the door. Without the comm ability, it's pretty much useless to me right now."

"Yeah, we all feel the same. My makuahine isn't going to be happy if that ban doesn't get lifted pretty quickly. She thinks we need to talk every day to make up for the time we're going to miss once I leave."

Eli smiled. "I think all MaTbs are like that. They only want what is best for their children... no matter what age they become. Look at Mary - what she did for her daughter... and her sons are bigger than her and yet she still worries after them."

Eden shook her head. "I think good makuahine are like that, but I don't think all makuahine are good. Some people are just not suited to be parents."

Eli placed a concerned hand on Eden's shoulder. "Is everything all right, Eden? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Eden shrugged. "I'm sure there are a number of things I'm not telling you - some for your sake and some for mine," she added with a smirk to lighten the atmosphere briefly. "But this? This isn't mine to tell."

"Do I need to know?"

"Probably. But you need to hear it from the source. In the meantime, I need to get this downstairs before Jacob starts telling ghost stories again. You know how well that went over the last time he tried it."

Eli nodded and clapped Eden on the back gently. "All right. But if you need to talk..."

"... I know where to find you."

Eli watched Eden out of the room, then dropped onto the couch and stretched out. She was thankful everyone else was downstairs at the moment. It was nice to have a few minutes of peace and privacy

in the warmth. Despite her warrior upbringing, Eli had learned to appreciate her creature comforts, and was happy to indulge that hedonistic tendency now. And even though she wasn't sharing a room with Arianna so there was no chance of running into her upstairs, not having to move was a bonus. She never realized when she drifted off.

Mary had called an emergency meeting of her security team the moment she was certain all but the few working nights were up and functioning. Luckily, it coincided with lunch for the candidates so it worked out well for everyone. Talking into a computer screen so everyone else could hear her was less so, but it was also necessary. This was something they all needed to be aware of.

"Just to let you all know - Chairman McMurtry and I got into a pissing contest this morning when I refused to return the candidates to the hotel. She fired me." Stunned silence so Mary continued speaking. "I don't expect it to stick - I don't think she *wants* it to, but for now, we're technically not employed though we are still working. Questions? Comments?"

Everyone remained silent and Mary nodded her head. "All right - that's about the reaction I expected from all of you," getting the smiles she knew her words would cause. "Any problems I need to know about?" Silence again - they had all been through this kind of thing before at some point. It was just a matter of tailoring it to a larger company. "Good," she said again. "Then I need to talk to Nathaniel, Delilah and Caleb. The rest of you are free to go back to working while unemployed. I'll let you know as soon as things change again."

Most of the screens darkened after her dismissal - only the three requested agents remained. It wasn't the ideal situation, but the candidates waiting for the test results deserved a swift response and this was the only way to ensure that. No one should be left to wonder for longer than necessary.

Chapter XV

"Mama?" Mary sighed when she heard Joy's voice over the intercom but answered anyway, glad her daughter couldn't see her rubbing her face in an effort at wakefulness.

"What's up, Baby Girl?"

Joy blushed. Mary didn't know she was calling from the kitchen that was still full of candidates who were eating in silence so Joy could speak to her mother. She glanced at them, and blushed a little redder when she caught their grins at the address.

"I was just wondering if you were going to come downstairs for lunch or if I needed to bring something upstairs for you." They had missed each other all morning, and Joy knew Eden was anxious to talk to Mary before she went to nap. Eli had snapped when Joy had awakened her for lunch, and though she had immediately apologized, Joy agreed wholeheartedly that something needed to be done now to fix the situation that was affecting everyone. And Joy knew Mary was the right one to ask for advice about it. If anyone could solve this... she could.

"Oh, Sweetheart - I'm just getting ready to head to bed. I can eat la..."

"Mama, don't you even try it! You know what the...." Joy swallowed the words when she remembered her audience. "You're the one who implemented scheduled mealtimes when we were kids - you don't get to skip because you're an adult. I know you need to sleep, but you need to eat first."

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"No ma'am, I'm not."

Mary sighed. "Then if it's not too much trouble, I'd appreciate it if you brought something to the office. Not much though... please? I really do need to get to bed soon."

"Trust me, Mama. I'll have something ready in a few minutes."

"Thank you, Baby Girl. Love you," Mary said before closing the connection. Joy took a deep breath and turned back to the table where the candidates sat finishing up their meal. Arianna rose with her plate and moved to stand beside her, putting her plate on the counter and taking Joy's hands in hers.

"I hope Mary knows how lucky she is."

Joy shook her head. "I'm the lucky one," she corrected. "Who do you think taught me?"

Arianna nodded. "Can we help you get something ready for her?"

"I've got it covered," Joy assured her, "but perhaps once the kitchen's been cleaned, those of you not scheduled for lab time might want to join me back in here to make cookies. I have a feeling I'm going to need more than a single batch for the lot of you."

"Ooooh... I'm definitely going to be a part of that," Arianna exclaimed. "Lab time or not. I want the secret to those peanut butter cookies Mary shared with me. I've never had anything so...." Arianna stopped and frowned, searching for the right word.

"Melt-in-your-mouth," Eli supplied at Arianna's hesitation. Arianna whipped her head around to meet Eli's eyes, but Eli turned her focus to Joy. "I hope you have a good supply of milk though. Water just isn't the same, and they were very rich."

"I'll see what I can do about the milk," Joy replied, breaking the tension before it could escalate. "But first I need to get something up to Mama before she falls asleep at the desk."

Eli motioned her on. "Go ahead. We've got this covered," she promised. And Joy started laying things out on a tray as those with kitchen duty began their detail. The others cleared out of the room pretty quickly - some headed for their time in the lab; some headed downstairs to play games; and the rest slipping outside to enjoy the frigid air and chilly sunshine.

Joy picked up the tray and walked out of the kitchen... only to nearly drop it when Eden stepped up and took it from her hands. Joy glared and took a deep breath, trying to calm her raging heart, and Eden shook her head in apology.

"Sorry," she muttered. "I didn't mean to scare you, but I figured this might be the only chance I got to talk to Mary for a while. And I think it's important."

"I agree," Joy said as she motioned Eden up the stairs in front of her. "You just surprised me. I didn't realize you were there until you took the tray from my hands." They stopped in front of the closed, locked door. "Let me go in alone first. This is Mama's sanctuary when she's here and she may prefer to keep it that way. She'll still talk to you - she just might rather it be somewhere else." Eden nodded and Joy knocked on the door, waiting for Mary's beckon before she keyed in the lock code and took the tray from Eden. Eden got the barest glimpse into the room before Joy closed the door behind her. Eden shoved her hands into her pockets and took up her post against the wall across the hall... and waited.

Joy crossed the room - tray in hand, eyes focused on her mother. Mary sat leaned back in the chair, eyes closed but still acutely aware of Joy's presence. When Joy was close enough to set the tray on the desk, Mary opened her eyes and sighed.

"Thank you, Baby Girl," she offered with a tired smile. Joy removed the contents of the tray and placed them in front of Mary. She moved the tray from the desk, then brushed Mary's hair from her forehead.

"How are you, Mama? I was in the kitchen with your kids when I called you so I didn't want to ask."

Mary shrugged. "Nothing a few hours of sleep and finding out who's behind this wouldn't cure. How are you doing with all this? You've never had to share quite like this before and it's been a while since you've had to share at all."

"Ask me again if you have to stay longer than a few days. Right now I'm enjoying the company. You were right about these kids - they're bright and eager and frustrated. But they're trying so hard to make this as pleasant as possible."

Mary swallowed her bite of sandwich and cut her eyes at Joy. "Who's causing you an issue?"

Joy shook her head. "Nothing like that, Mama... I swear. But Eden is waiting outside to speak to you," jerking her head towards the door. "I told her this was your refuge. I think you should talk to her, but would you rather it be elsewhere?"

"Does it need to be private or is it something like needing more lab supplies?"

"I think it probably needs to be handled privately."

Mary folded her napkin and placed it back on the now empty plate. Obviously she'd been much hungrier than she'd realized. She picked up the glass of milk her daughter had thoughtfully included. "Invite her in. If she needs private, this is going to be about the only place in the house I can guarantee it." Joy nodded and put the plate back on the tray before she walked to the door and opened it to motion Eden into the room.

Eden didn't even bother to look around as she crossed the threshold, intent on speaking to Mary. Joy closed the door and leaned against it. She'd learned to wait for a dismissal, and Eden *had* asked for her help. Mary cocked an eyebrow at her, then met Eden's stare.

"I understand you need to speak to me in private. Would you prefer Joy leave or do you feel comfortable...?"

Eden waved a hand. "She knows why I'm here - everyone knows except for Eli and Arianna." Mary closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Eden chuckled. "Yeah... that's about the way we all feel at this point. That's why I wanted to talk to you. Please, Mary - do you know of anything we can do to make this more tolerable? It's wearing on all of us, and if we don't figure something out soon, it's gonna ground us before we even get chosen."

Mary rubbed a hand over her face and gestured Eden to take a seat. She did so, leaning forward and clasping her hands between her knees. "I've already talked to Eli - told her she needed to choose a course and stick to it."

"I don't understand."

"Either she interacts with Arianna on a professional basis only, leaving the rest of you to pick up the slack in the friends department. Or she sucks it up and reintegrates Arianna into her life as a friend again. But she can't keep blowing hot and cold - it's bad for everyone and confusing as all hell."

"And if she doesn't? Or does?" Mary frowned and Eden waved her hands. "Sorry. That was a stupid way to put that. I mean... what if she doesn't choose one or keeps bouncing back between the two. What then? Is there anything we can do?" She sighed and looked up to meet Mary's eyes. "Mary, I know we need both of them, but the rest of us can't live like this. We'll end up killing them assuming they don't kill each other first."

Mary regarded her for a long moment, then released a slow, deep breath. "Can I give you my answer tomorrow, Eden?" not wanting to reveal her code name. "I have an idea, but I'd like to think about it, and I have got to get a few hours of sleep before it's time for my shift. I promise I won't string you along or draw this out any longer...."

"Mary... Chief... it's okay. I didn't expect you to have an answer right this second. I'm just asking for some help because we can't figure out what to do either. We just know something's got to give, and the way things are going, it's gonna be our sanity."

Joy chuckled and caused two pairs of eyes to swing her way. She covered her mouth with one hand and held up the other in apology. "I'm sorry," she finally gasped out when she had her laughter under control. She met Mary's eyes. "It reminded me of Nat and Joey before the wedding."

"Nat and Joey?" Eden asked, looking between them.

"My son Nathaniel and his husband Joseph," Mary said, shaking her head at Joy. "That wouldn't work in this case except to ensure two dead bodies instead of ten."

Eden frowned. "I don't understand. What happened?" Mary waved her hand at Joy to continue.

"It was about six weeks out from their wedding, and they got into a screaming match about something - I don't even remember what anymore. But it was something completely stupid. They both stormed off and refused to speak to each other. It went on for almost a week - we knew from talking to Joey's parents that he was miserable, but determined to make Nat be the one to apologize. Meanwhile Nat was moping around vowing that Joey would break first."

"So what happened?"

"Mama. She locked them in a room together - told them to figure it out because they weren't leaving the room until they did. They tried protesting that they had school - they did, by the way - and she told them that they'd better get to it then because if they failed...." Joy turned and looked at Mary. "What did you threaten them with exactly?"

"I didn't have to," Mary replied smugly. "They knew that scenario would be much worse than either of them having to say 'I'm sorry' first."

"So why can't we do that to them?" Eden asked.

"Because they're not in the same place in their relationship. Nathaniel and Joseph were secure in their love and committed to one another - they were just having a case of nerves. Arianna and Eli have trust and communication issues aside from the betrayal and anger concerns that are plaguing them. Forcing them in that manner would only cause hatred and resentment with the rest of you and cut them off from your support. We want to make this better... not worse."

Eden bit her lip as she nodded her head. "Good point."

Mary shrugged. "Lots of practice. However, if you'll both excuse me, I think it's about time for a nap. I hear my bed calling my name."

Eden immediately jumped from the chair and scooted to the door. "Thanks, Mary," slipping out with a wave before Mary could respond. Joy cocked an eyebrow and walked over to pick up the empty tray.

"Are you going to be able to sleep with the construction going on over there?"

Mary shrugged. "Most of the noisy work should be about done. I'll put the plugs in and let Dorcas and Michael know in case I am needed. Hopefully, I can get a few hours of quiet."

Joy nodded. "Make sure you come say goodnight if I'm settled in when you get up," waiting for Mary to open the door. Then she walked out and headed for the staircase going down while Mary went to the staircase going up.

"I always do, Baby Girl," Mary said with a smile as she headed towards the attic. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Mama."

"So what's the word?" Titus asked as Eden stepped into the lab. He and most of the others were gathered downstairs by the time Eden had finished talking to Mary. Those that had gone outside had gotten cold fairly quickly, and they had naturally congregated in the basement. A few remained upstairs to get in on the cookie making, but for the most part, everyone she needed to talk to was gathered together in the lab. And fortunately the two that she was trying to avoid weren't present.

"Az is in the kitchen?"

Jacob nodded. "With Danny, Esther and Isaac. We promised to fill them in later."

"Isaac? Isn't that like a recipe for disaster?"

Jacob shrugged. "Maybe, but if it keeps Eli and Arianna from joining us down here until we're done, I'm not too worried about it. Pretty sure Joy can keep him contained - Mary's managed to for months."

"Where's Eli?"

Hannah lifted her hands. "The last I saw she was still outside. It's like she can't stand to be inside if the opportunity is available to be outdoors."

Eden frowned. "I'll kill her later... especially if she gets sick from this."

"Eden?"

She waved her hands and shook her head. "Talking to myself - it doesn't matter. So I spoke to Mary," watching the rest straighten and give her their attention. "She has an idea, but asked for a little time to ponder it. Considering she's been going since yesterday morning, I agreed. She did instruct me that we can't just lock them in a room together and force them to do something so give that idea up," she commanded with a stern look at Titus and Jacob.

"How did you know?" Titus asked.

Eden snickered. "Easy. I wanted to do the same thing."

"So how long do we have to wait for her to tell us? Mary, I mean."

"Not long, I would imagine. She told me she's already talked to Eli... which means she knows there's a problem and it's serious. Since she's already said she has an idea, I doubt she'll drag things out. As soon as she's comfortable with sharing, we'll know. My best guess? Tonight or tomorrow morning."

"So we just what...? Let it go?"

"For now," Eden agreed with a sharp nod. "As long as they're separated, it should be fine, and I'm fully confident that Joy can handle them if it becomes a problem with them sharing the same space for any length of time."

"Why Joy?" Jacob cut in. "I mean... they're our friends. Why don't we get to handle things?"

Eden gave him a look. "Really, Jacob? You *really* want to get in the middle of all the crap between Arianna and Eli?" She gave him a knowing look as his eyes widened and he shook his head rapidly. "Exactly. Besides, as Mary pointed out to me, we're their support - we're not supposed to make this worse. And we can't support them if we try to force anything."

"But why Joy? I mean... she seems like good people and all, but she doesn't know us or anything about us."

"And that may be for the best. Can't those on the outside looking in at all the circumstances surrounding something sometimes see better than those who are in the middle of whatever the situation is? Besides, we don't know that she doesn't know anything, Jake. She's Mary's daughter - who knows what Mary might have shared over the months we've been here? But even if Mary hasn't said a word and Joy doesn't know us, this is her home. That gives her the right to say something."

"She has a point," Titus said, nodding his blonde head. "Besides, I'm willing to wait to hear whatever idea Mary has. As long as they're not together, we should be all right."

"Eden, do you know what Mary said to Eli?" Mordecai asked softly. She whipped her head around to look at him and he shrugged apologetically. "Sorry... I just...."

"No - it's a valid question. She told Eli to pick a position and stick with it - that her indecisiveness was unfair and confusing to all of us."

Hannah's eyes widened. "She really said that?"

Eden smiled. "Yeah. It's one reason I agree with her about us not locking them in a room together and forcing them to work this out. It hasn't come to that yet, and if it does, Mary's willing to be the bad guy. She's already crossed that line, and since she's not part of the team it doesn't actually matter if she pisses them off. She won't be stuck with them on an asteroid for the next five years."

"About that - has she heard anything?"

"Not that she's shared," Hannah spoke up before Eden could reply. "And I know she talked to the Committee this morning. They fired her." Exclamations broke out among them and Eden held up her hands for quiet and turned to Hannah with an unspoken directive. Hannah shrugged. "I only overheard part of the discussion. I left the kitchen just as lunch started, remember?" seeing the others nod. "As I was returning, I overheard Mary say that they had been fired and would be working while they were unemployed. She apparently refused the dismissal."

"Well, that makes things a little more interesting now, doesn't it?"

Chapter XVI

"So why baking?" Danny asked Joy as he stirred the ingredients in front of him. "I mean... you're a dancer - someone with strict dietary requirements, I would have thought. So what possessed you to do something that goes completely against that mindset?"

Joy smiled and passed the peanut butter chips into Arianna's waiting hands. Isaac leaned over and stole a couple out of her bowl with a grin. Arianna rolled her eyes, but couldn't keep the smile off her face at his playfulness. "Oh, they're quite strict," Joy agreed, adding vanilla to each bowl. "That's why Mama and the boys end up with a majority of my creative output, so to speak."

"So you do this for creative purposes?" Esther asked. Arianna looked up to watch Joy's expression; Isaac ignored the conversation, trying to keep all the ingredients in his bowl as he stirred vigorously. He concentrated on not embarrassing himself with his natural clumsiness. Joy concurred.

"When I decided to take a break from the stage, I gave up my creative outlet. And no matter how much I practice to keep in shape, it's just not the same. Baking, however, let's me exercise that creativity freely. Unlike ballet which is so structured, I have the freedom to try new things and do them a little bit differently every time." She shrugged. "It makes me happy."

"It made me happy too... when Mary shared those cookies with me," Arianna confided with a smile, getting a smile in return.

Joy nodded. "That's another thing I like about it - I still get to share with others like I did with dancing, only I see the results on a more personal level because I know the people I'm sharing with."

Arianna chuckled and Danny, Esther and Isaac exchanged surprised glances. "Mary said you were trying to fatten her and your brothers up."

Joy gave her a droll look. "Have you met my mother and brothers? I would go bankrupt trying to get anything to stick long enough to be seen, much less actually put meat on their bones." She snorted. "I'd have better luck trying to grow wings and fly."

Arianna blinked. "I didn't know that was possible for people from your planet."

Joy cocked her head. "It's not. I don't know of anywhere that it is."

"It is," Arianna commented. "I've seen it," and despite the looks in her direction, she refused to elaborate. Instead she turned her attention back to Joy. "Can I ask you something?" waiting for Joy to nod. "Why did you leave the stage?"

Joy tilted her head and regarded Arianna for a long moment. "Honestly? I was tired. Dancing had become a chore for me, and if you don't love what you're doing, then why do it?"

"Do you miss it?" This from Danny.

"I do," Joy replied without hesitation. "It's always been a part of my life... for as long as I can remember, anyway. But this break has been good for me. I've found happiness again - in dance as well as other aspects of my life. I'm looking forward to going back actually."

"Well, I for one am glad you took the time off," Arianna confessed. "These cookies are totally worth it," she said with a smile.

Joy laughed. "I'm glad you think so. Besides, as Mama has reminded me on more than one occasion - there's a reason for everything and everything happens in its own good time. I think this is probably one of those times when that's true," motioning at them. Joy set cookie sheets in front of each of them and showed them how she made her cookies the same size and shape. They watched, then tried themselves... with less-than-perfect but somewhat hilarious results.

"Well, they may be funny looking, but I bet they taste all right," Isaac said as he dug out a portion with his finger and stuck it in his mouth. "Das weal goo'," he said around his mouthful. Danny, Esther, Joy and Arianna just laughed at him and Isaac grinned in response. He scooped another bite and pulled Arianna into his body - her back to his front - and offered it to her just as Eli walked in from outside. She looked at them and bristled - hurt and anger prevalent in her eyes before she glanced away stalked out of the room without a word.

Arianna jerked out of Isaac's grasp and moved to the other side of the room with her arms crossed over her chest defensively. Esther and Danny met each other's eyes and shook their heads. "That could have gone better," Esther commented. Then the timer went off and they went back to focusing on the rest of their baking.

"What makes things a little more interesting?" Eli demanded as she crossed the threshold into the lab. Her movements were still jerky with her anger, and she took a deep breath to calm herself before hanging up her coat and walking further into the room. Everyone grew silent and turned their attention to Eden, knowing she would answer Eli's question. Eli looked around at each of them before letting her gaze rest on her second. "Eden?" she quietly demanded. "Something you'd like to share?"

Eden cleared her throat. "Yeah, actually. Apparently Mary and her security team got fired this morning."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"I did. But I'm not sure I understood."

Hannah put her hand on Eden's arm and arched an eyebrow in question. Eden simply nodded and motioned her towards Eli. It only took Hannah a moment to repeat to Eli what she had overheard earlier. Then she went back to her work though she waited for a response from Eli like the others. Eli stood silently absorbing the information for so long that Eden finally felt compelled to speak.

"Eli? You all right?"

"Yes," she said slowly though her gaze and her tone remained distant for several minutes. "It does make me wonder about the angle though."

"Angle - what angle? Whose angle?" Jacob questioned before Eden could ask. She cut her eyes in his direction, but he studiously avoided looking at her for fear of what he would see. Eli bit her bottom lip, ignoring the by-play between Eden and Jacob. She shook her head.

"Likely several angles and several players." She pulled up an empty stool and seated herself, propping her elbows on a table so she could rest her chin on top of her linked hands. "There's the Committee's angle - why would they feel the need to fire Mary so close to the end of her contract? And there's Ms Wellesly's angle - why would she continue to protect us if she's not required to... or if she and her team aren't being compensated for it? She pulled her sons out of school to help with this assignment after all and brought us into her daughter's home. And then of course, there's the angle of the person or persons who forced us into hiding in the first place," motioning around her. "Not that we're all not very grateful for the fact because let's face it... we'd all much rather be here than where we were, but still." She shook her head again. "I don't know. I'll have to do some thinking about it. But you're right - it does make things more interesting to contemplate."

"Maybe we should just ask her," Titus commented. "Mary, I mean."

Eden smirked. "Yeah, I'm sure *that* would go over well," rolling her eyes at the questioning looks she got. "Like we don't trust her to do her job?"

"But if she's not being paid, is it really her job anymore?"

"If she hasn't given any indication that she's done protecting us, should we jeopardize the one stabilizing influence we've had through the whole interview process?"

"Actually," Eli said thoughtfully, pulling attention back to her again. "Ms Wellesly and her team have been around a lot longer than we've been aware of their presence." Eden cocked an eyebrow at her and crossed her arms over her chest. The others stopped their work and waited.

"I keep hearing that, but how do you know that for sure? If we've been unaware of their presence, how can you possibly know they've been around longer?"

Eli sighed. These were her friends... her team - the people she expected to call family for at least the next five years. They deserved to know the truth. She just hoped Mary wouldn't feel she was betraying a confidence with her sharing. She shrugged.

"Ms Wellesly told me. When we confronted her the other morning, I asked for further clarification about what was going on," hoping they would catch her point without her having to mention Arianna by name. She still avoided that when at all possible.

"What did you learn?" Eden asked.

"Not much in regards to what I was asking about. But I did learn a little bit about Ms Wellesly and her family... including her security team. She's been around since this project was still in the idea stages. Which brings us back to her being discharged. Why? Who benefits from her dismissal?"

"Whoever threatened us," Arianna replied from the doorway, causing Eli to stiffen and give Eden the stink eye. Eden held up her hands in surrender. It wasn't like she could actually see Arianna in the short hall before she appeared in the doorway. Arianna ignored the interplay as she moved further into the lab carrying a tray of still warm cookies. Danny and Esther followed carrying pitchers of cold milk and Isaac brought up the rear with glasses for everyone. Arianna continued speaking as if nothing untoward was going on. "Assuming there is a genuine threat and Mary didn't remove us for the purpose of forcing the Committee's hand, the person who benefits the most from her removal would be the one who wants to do us harm."

"But why?" Eden cut in. "Why now? Why not at the beginning? Or once the Alpha team is chosen?"

"Unless we're a secondary target," Eli replied as Arianna set the tray down in the space Mordecai had made. Isaac placed the glasses down beside the milk and they took turns helping themselves to the snack. Silence reigned for a few minutes as they took the opportunity to appreciate the treat. Only once their first cravings had been satisfied did the conversation resume. "Let's face it - the infected candidate could easily have spread it to any number of people outside the program. Even as sequestered as we've been, we've been in contact with plenty of people who aren't part of the project at all - housekeeping, wait staff, personal shoppers... anyone, in fact employed by the hotel that wasn't a candidate or security. In that regard, it could simply be an act of terrorism for the sake of terrorism itself."

"But you don't believe that," Arianna stated flatly as she met Eli's eyes. She extended her hand and Eli accepted the glass of milk, careful not to touch Arianna in any way. She let her eyes wander around the room as soon as the transfer was complete, noting that they were all watching the interaction closely. Arianna didn't move but waited for Eli to answer. Eli sighed and shook her head.

"I don't. Frankly, if Ms Wellesly felt concerned enough to involve her family in protecting us, I think the threat against us is serious. Which begs the question - who is the real target? Is it just one of us - retribution for something that candidate did perhaps and the rest of us are simply collateral damage? Is it those of us who are expected to become the Alpha team - to ensure that others are

chosen in our stead? Or does it not matter as long as the program dies? I think in the end that will need to be answered for the culprit to be found."

It was silent for a moment as they pondered Eli's words. Arianna passed the tray around again until the cookies were gone. Then she resumed her place close to Eli, which also happened to put her nearest the exit. She took a deep breath and spoke softly.

"I need to share something with all of you - you deserve to know. I hope it won't change how you feel about me, but...." She twisted her hands together and studied the floor intently for a moment. Eden glared at Eli, but when she made no move Danny stepped forward and lifted Arianna's chin until blue eyes met brown.

"What's up, Sweetie? You can tell us anything, yeah?"

"I hope so, Danny." She took another deep breath and glanced around the room to find eight pairs of sympathetic eyes turned her way. Only Eli kept her eyes on the ground. Arianna shook her head and cleared her throat. "Malcolm was the infected candidate," she blurted, grateful when Danny didn't yank his hand away; instead he moved to cup her face gently.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly. Arianna nodded.

"I'm fine - my tests came back negative and Dr. Morris gave me a clean bill of health."

"Good - that's the important thing. The rest... not a problem for us."

"Just that simple?"

"Just that simple."

Arianna blew out a breath of relief and smiled shakily. "Thank you. You don't know how much...." She broke off for a moment to clear her throat, then continued. "But knowing he's the one who was infected, does that change any of our theories? Could someone have hated him enough to do this to him without any concern for what might happen to anyone else?"

Eli cleared her throat. "Is it possible he was infected to target you specifically?" Her words caused the rest to freeze and Arianna to meet her eyes. Eli didn't flinch away. "Since he was your betrothed...." She let the thought lie, but Arianna immediately shook her head.

"No - not unless whoever infected him was stupid beyond words... ignorant of both the customs of my world as well as the consequences of the virus and its cure."

"Yeah, well... no one ever said terrorists were the brightest lights in the shed," Eden said with a smirk into the awkward silence, causing the others to chuckle in relief.

"So is there anything we can do?" Esther asked after a moment. They exchanged looks, then as a singular body they turned to look at Eli. She pinched the bridge of her nose between her forefinger and thumb and blew out a breath.

"I don't think so... other than try to make things as easy for Ms Wellesly and her team as we can. I wish we had a way to talk to the other candidates. I'd be curious to know what they're hearing, if anything."

"Maybe we can ask Mary if we can - I mean, as long as we're not trying to contact our families, maybe we could...." Mordecai stopped talking when Eli shook her head.

"I don't think so, Kai. There are too many variables, and it only takes one going wrong for us all to end up in a bad place. We all know that from up close and personal experience," she added with a smile, causing laughter to ripple around the room. They'd had a few close calls at the desert compound - funny enough now, but rather chilling while they'd been happening. "I don't think Ms Wellesly would be willing to risk our safety. She's worked too hard to protect us."

"So how long do you think we'll be here?" Jacob asked.

Eli shook her head. "I don't know," but before she could continue the thought, Dorcas stuck her head in the door.

"We need you guys upstairs for a few minutes."

Eli frowned and slid from the stool. "Is something wrong?" Dorcas shook her head.

"I don't think so. I was just sent to down here to fetch you all. So please...?" motioning to hallway she stood in.

Eli sighed and nodded, then walked out the lab door with the rest following along behind her.

Mary yawned and rubbed her eyes. Obviously she had used up her allotted sleep for the rest of her life... or someone decided that it was illegal. Honestly, she would have been satisfied with just a few uninterrupted hours. She scrubbed her hands over her face, then shook her head when Michael offered her a cup of coffee.

"I'd like to try and get a little more sleep when this is done. Where are the kids?"

"Dorcas went to get them from downstairs. Joy said they took a batch of cookies down to share."

Mary nodded and closed her eyes, then immediately opened them as she heard the candidates file into the room. She let Michael direct them around the space while Sarah contacted the rest of the agents. When they were ready, Dorcas touched her shoulder and nodded. Mary stood in front of the candidates she was in charge of, but she was also reflected in the screen behind her.

"Good morn...." Mary blinked and squinted at the clock. "What time is it anyway?" She waved her hand to say it really didn't matter. "Has everyone checked in?" looking at Sarah for confirmation and bobbing her head in acknowledgment. "All right - I apologize for my incoherence. I was sleeping when this came in, but it's urgent enough to warrant this immediate communication. I have heard from the Committee and the Alpha team selections have been made." She heard the buzz and gave the candidates a minute before holding up her hands for silence so she could continue. "We'll let you hear the message, and then I'll let you know what will happen from there." Mary nodded her head and Sarah started the message.

"Hello, Candidates," Chairman McMurtry offered with a smile surrounded by the rest of the Committee Members. "In light of recent events, and in an effort to help expedite and facilitate the

project's launch, today we are notifying the remaining candidates as to which of you have been chosen as members of the Alpha team. The formal announcement will not go out until it was scheduled to at the end of next week, but this early notice will allow our Alpha team members more time to prepare and will give us the opportunity to begin forming the beta and gamma teams, though it will be some time before we institute their formal training. With that in mind, we are pleased to appoint the following candidates to the Alpha team."

Mary observed with proud eyes as one by one McMurtry named the candidates she expected to be chosen. Ten of the fifteen were seated in front of her and she watched their reactions with a smile. There were cheers and tears and hugs between most of them, though as expected a few did refrain from interacting with everyone. When the Chairman was finished, she offered a few closing remarks and signed off. Mary expected that she'd hear from the woman privately later, but she had business to wrap up and a nap to finish first. She reappeared on the screen.

"I know this is not the news some of you wanted or hoped for, but at least you have an answer now and can begin working towards your future. I will be in touch with your security team leaders and we will begin making arrangements for each of you to return home. If you have any questions, please direct them to your team leaders and I will address them as soon as possible."

Mary nodded to Sarah who cut the transmission. Mary yawned again and covered her face for a moment to steady herself. Then she looked back at the kids who were regarding her with concern. Jacob stepped forward.

"You all right, Chief?" the moniker getting attention from the entire security contingent. They watched Mary for her reaction, but she just laughed.

"Nothing a little more sleep couldn't cure," she promised him. "I'm sure you all have questions. All I ask is that you relay them to one of the team here. I will address them, either tonight or in the morning. But for now, I'm going back to finish my nap."

"Good night, Mary," the kids chorused together, garnering them a smile and a wave before she disappeared around the corner. Then they sat back to discuss their good, great fortune.

Chapter XVII

They didn't celebrate too long - there was a lot of work to be done in the next few weeks, and Eli's attention naturally turned in that direction when the first rush of victory faded. Arianna was the first to notice her absorption, but given the precariousness of their interactions recently, she nudged Eden instead and got a glare for her trouble. Only when she jerked her chin in Eli's direction did Eden's gaze soften, and she nodded in acknowledgment. She patted Jacob's chest, and he unwound his arm from her shoulders so she could stand and cross the room to take a seat next to Eli.

Eli remained oblivious to Eden's presence until Eden shoved her hard enough to almost push her over. Eli turned angry gray eyes to meet Eden's twinkling black, and she huffed impatiently. "Something I can do for you, Eden?"

"Well, that's kind of what I was wondering. The rest of us are over there," pointing in the direction where everyone else was currently gathered, "celebrating the fact that we've been chosen as part of the Alpha team. I mean even though we all expected it, it's still kind of exciting to know for sure.

And yet you're sitting over here alone brooding. What the hell, Eli? Can you not be normal for more than ten minutes without breaking or something?"

Eli glared at Eden for a moment, then snorted. "Bitch," she muttered, but offered Eden a smirk that was returned with a full-blown smile. "For the record, I'm not brooding. I'm making a mental list of things that need to be accomplished before we leave here - the planet... not Joy's home," she clarified before Eden could ask. Eli chuckled when Eden's eyes widened comically as the meaning of Eli's words sank into her consciousness, and she nodded. "Exactly. That's why I was sitting here."

Eden cleared her throat. "Well, in that case...." She rose from her spot beside Eli and put her fingers to her lips, the whistle shrill enough to bring the security agents running from their various posts. Eden shook her head and motioned them out again. "Sorry, guys - there's nothing wrong. That was just the quickest way to get everyone's attention," motioning to the members of the Alpha team sitting quietly with all eyes focused on her.

"Mission accomplished," Sarah commented wryly. "Try not to do it again though, huh? We automatically think the worst, and it was loud enough to wake the Chief," smiling when Eden clapped a hand over her mouth. "You didn't, and we'd like to keep it that way, okay?" Eden nodded. "All right, then - we'll be around if you need us," and the agents returned to their duty stations.

"Definitely still on the job," Eden muttered as she looked around at her compatriots who still had their attention focused on her. "So Eli was sitting here thinking," her words drawing a chuckle from everyone else... even Eli who stood up and shoved her out of the way.

"Let me tell this." Eden stumbled theatrically and took her seat beside Jacob again, snuggling in slightly when he wrapped his arm around her once more. Eli looked at her with a cocked eyebrow. "Are you all settled? Can I talk now?"

"Please, Fearless Leader," Eden said with a magnanimous air. "Do tell on."

Eli snorted and shook her head. Whatever else, she could always count on Eden to have her back even if it was just to infuse a little humor into a situation. "In that case.... Eden wanted to know why I was brooding by myself while everyone else was reveling in their appointment to the Alpha team. I wasn't brooding actually - I was thinking. And while I know that sometimes they're the same things in my case," shrugging deprecatingly with a grin as the rest laughed, "in this instance it's not."

"So what were you thinking about so hard, Girlfriend?" Esther asked curiously. "Good thoughts?"

"Well, they certainly started out that way," Eli confessed. "I was thinking how wonderful it felt to be vindicated, you know? Like all the hard work I'd done all my life... and that we'd done together... had finally paid off." She smiled as all of them nodded their agreement. "Then I thought about my MaTb and how proud she and my clan would be, and how excited I would be to share this with them." Her eyes dropped to the floor for a moment and she sucked in a deep breath. "I miss them, and I'm looking forward to getting to spend some quality time with them before we leave."

"I think it's safe to say we're all on the same wavelength here, Eli," Titus assured her, missing the looks Danny and Eden cast Arianna's way. Arianna kept her attention on Eli though Eli's focus was turned completely away from her.

Eli shrugged, tucking her hair behind her ear as she looked up to meet his eyes. "But that's what got me to ruminating so deeply. As much as I want to go home to spend time with my family before we

leave, I don't think it's possible." She felt the laser-like intensity of the stares that locked onto her, and Eli made a point to meet each pair of eyes - even Arianna's though she saved her for last and didn't hold them very long before turning her attention back to the room in general.

"Okay," Isaac said slowly. "Why?"

Eli cocked her head at him. "I don't think it's in the timeline - I don't think it ever was... at least not for any length of time. The amount of time the Committee took to make their choice leaves us with less than two months before we are scheduled to leave. And because of the restrictions we lived under during the interview process, we weren't able to do any of the work that must be completed before launch when the mission officially begins. So in the time we have left, we have to make *all* the preparations for the trip, and given the fact that some sort of threat has been made against us and the program, are we *really* going to leave that for anyone else to take care of?" watching as understanding bloomed in their eyes.

"Well, that sucks," Eden muttered, pulling away from Jacob and crossing her arms over her chest. "My makuahine is gonna be very unhappy about that."

"Maybe we should look at it as practice for the real thing," Mordecai offered. "It's not like we will be able to be in regular communication with them once we leave here."

"We know that, Kai. But I think we were all expecting that last little bit of time with our families before we said goodbye," Eli replied gently.

"I suppose," he said with a shrug. "Maybe we could talk to Mary. She might be able to do... something."

"Has anyone else wondered about her?" Isaac spoke up before anyone could reply to Kai's words. Everyone's attention turned to him and he shrank back just a bit but didn't withdraw his question. He crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. "I mean is it possible that *she* might have something to do with us being threatened?"

Eli's brow furrowed. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, why not? I don't know what her motive would be, but she's certainly in a position to pull off this kind of thing successfully. She has the access and the ability to move us around without questions; she defied the Committee and is keeping us here despite the fact that she was removed from her position as security chief; and are we *really* certain a threat has been made against us? All we have is her word - she hasn't actually told us anything other than that we've been threatened."

Eli could see the doubt forming in several pairs of eyes at Isaac's accusations, but before she could refute his words, Arianna stepped into the breach.

"How dare you," she reproached him with a heated glare. "How dare you make indictments like that without a shred of proof! What gives you the right...?"

"I'm a scientist! I question everything. It's all just a little too convenient in my book."

"I don't believe you! After all she and her team... her *family*... have done for us. Where's your gratitude? Where's your trust??" Arianna looked at him with disgust a minute longer, then stormed

out of the living room, slamming the doors to the basement behind her a moment later. Isaac moved to follow her, but Eli shook her head.

"Let her be. She's got a point."

"So does he," Eden returned quietly, flinching when burning gray eyes turned her way.

"I don't believe you - any of you. What a bunch of ungrateful... You know what? Figure it out for yourselves. I'm done," she growled before leaving the room.

It was silent for a full minute following Eli's exit, then Eden sighed. "Well this is turning out to be a hell of a day," rubbing her forehead, then turning to glare at Isaac. "Is there a reason you brought this up beyond looking for a reaction?"

"It's a viable concern, Eden. Some of us were talking about it earlier; I just thought it should be brought up to the whole group since we're supposed to be a team and working together."

"Well, if nothing else, it might put Eli and Arianna on the same page for a change. Because they obviously agree with one another about this."

"What about you, Eden? What do you think?" Titus asked. "Because Isaac does have a point."

"I know he does," she replied softly, rubbing her forehead again. "But I just don't.... I wish Gay was here. She'd be able to tell. Personally I don't think Mary is our issue."

"Do you think the threat against us is real?"

Eden looked around the room at the expectant faces and sighed. This was why she liked being the second and not the boss - there was a lot less responsibility in the second chair. "I think that Mary believes it's real and that we should act accordingly. That isn't to say we shouldn't keep eyes and ears open for any information we can get," arching an eyebrow at Hannah and receiving a nod in response. "In the meantime, we need to start figuring out the preparations we need to make. We've got a lot of work to do, and not a lot of time to get it done."

"What about Eli and Arianna?"

Eden sighed. "If this gets them talking or better, then I can't say I'll regret the blow-up too much. But for right now, we're gonna leave them alone and let them cool off. I'll talk to them after that." Her black eyes met Danny's blue ones and he nodded subtly, understanding her unspoken request.

Esther just shook her head. "Glad it's not me," she confided.

"So are we stuck here in the meantime?" Jacob asked. "Since Arianna went downstairs and Eli undoubtedly disappeared outside again?"

"That's probably our best choice for now," Eden confirmed. "It's not like we can't start making our lists here. And if the silence goes on too long, I'll make sure they come in here so we can use the other areas as well."

Eden looked around as she spoke and saw the approving nods. She nodded back to them, and everyone returned their attention to the news and the preparations they needed to make.

Eli stormed through the kitchen, barely nodding at Joy as she snatched her coat from the hook and shoved her arms into it. Then she pushed open the door to the backyard and stomped out onto the porch, determined to put as much space and cold air between her and her teammates as she was allowed. Only when she reached the fence line did she realize she wasn't alone.

"Oh," she stopped short and gasped in surprise when she recognized Arianna's tiny form leaned up against an old oak tree. Eli took up a similar position against the far side of the same tree. Arianna didn't bother to glance her way and Eli returned the courtesy by keeping her gaze on the ground. "I thought...." Eli cleared her throat. "I thought you went downstairs to the lab."

Arianna snorted. "I was going to. Then I decided Mary and Joy would probably not appreciate it if I blew their home to my planet and back. Given my state of mind, it's not only within the realm of possibilities, but highly likely." She shrugged. "I slammed the door in frustration and came out here instead. You?"

"This was my first choice, actually - I've been in and out all day. I've missed being outdoors so much. I mean... at the compound we at least had the gardens and the conservatory, but here, we've had nothing but recycled, reconditioned air. It's wonderful to get out into actual atmosphere and just breathe... even if it's a little chilly. I find it refreshing."

"I find it frigid," Arianna replied with a shiver. "I do not understand how people live in these sorts of conditions for any length of time. I am fairly confident it would cause my death."

Eli snorted. "Only if you ran around in it wet and naked," feeling Arianna turned her head and glare. "It could definitely make you miserable until you adjusted to it though."

Arianna sighed. "What are we doing, Eli?" knowing Eli shifted until Arianna was in her line of sight.

"Commiserating about the weather?"

Arianna huffed. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

Now Eli sighed. "Just let it go and accept it for what it is."

"But what is it?" asked with frustration clear in her tone.

"Two people thrown together because they share an unpopular opinion."

"So you don't think Mary is behind all the upheaval?" shuddering as a light breeze blew by.

"Of course not! I spoke with her at some length the other morning, and I don't know how to explain it, but she just didn't come across as an individual with that kind of agenda. Besides, no one could completely hide treachery of that magnitude in close quarters - Gay would have sensed something disturbing without anything being projected."

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?" Arianna questioned softly. "Remember, I already believe in her innocence."

"As do I. I'm trying to marshal my arguments for the rest because you know eventually they're going to want answers. It's in their nature."

"Ours too," Arianna quipped.

Eli chuckled. "Ours too," she agreed. "Maybe I should just go straight to the source and ask."

"Do you think she would tell you? You don't think it would be dangerous to let her know what the others suspect?"

Eli shrugged. "If she is, by some stretch of the imagination, involved in some vast conspiracy designed to destroy us in some manner or other, we are already in serious jeopardy. As they say, knowledge is power and at least we would know the identity of our enemy and could try to find a way to defeat her together. If, however, she is innocent as you and I believe her to be, then she deserves the chance to defend herself."

"You know what bothers me the most?" Arianna said after a few minutes of silence passed thoughtfully, but surprisingly not awkwardly. She turned her head to find Eli regarding her and their eyes met briefly before they both looked away. "I can't figure what Isaac's angle is. He has to have one to make accusations like he did, but what is it? What was the point of bringing it up? And please don't blame it on scientific curiosity - that only goes so far, and not at all about something like this."

Eli shrugged. "I don't know. He said some of them had been talking, but who are the some? I know I wasn't included in that discussion."

"Nor was I," Arianna agreed with another shiver coursed through her body. She jumped when Eli gently clasped her elbow and pulled her away from the tree before dropping her hold and wrenching her head back towards the house.

"Come on. It's too cold out here for you to endure for the sake of your anger. It takes a while to acclimatize to something so drastically different than what your body is used to. Let's go see if we can find something warm to drink and when Mary is awake, we'll sit down and talk to her. Maybe she can make the rest see sense."

Arianna just nodded and followed her inside.

Joy greeted them with a warm cup of tea, but otherwise remained silent. She wondered at her mother's fortitude some days, because just one day of watching these two bounce between extremes in their interactions made her normally calm, collected self want to knock their heads together in an effort to get them to see the truth of them. And she knew Mary had been correct when she pointed out that they had to solve their issues for themselves even if it drove the rest of them crazy. Joy just hoped Mary really did have an idea to help them along like she'd implied she did to Eden. Otherwise she might be tempted to help them lock Eli and Arianna in that room together.

Looking at them now though - she wondered why they were even fighting what was so obviously there between them. Even sitting silently across from one another at the table with their attention focused solely on the cup of tea in front of them, their intensity almost singed her... and they were doing their best to ignore one another. She sighed. She was only a few years older than they were, but she suddenly felt ancient compared to them.

Joy slapped her hands against the table, causing them to jump in surprise, then glare at her in reaction. She bit her lips to hide her smile and met their eyes unflinchingly. "If you're going to hang out in my kitchen, you're going to be conscripted into kitchen duty."

"Cookies again?" Arianna asked with a hint of mirth and a twinkle in her eyes.

Joy snorted. "One track mind, I swear. Nothing so glamorous, I'm afraid. Peeling potatoes and making salad."

Eli stood and rolled up her sleeves. "I'll start peeling the potatoes."

Arianna snorted. "Only because you don't like dicing tomatoes. Or cucumbers. Or...."

"I get the point," Eli replied wryly as she accepted the potatoes from Joy. "And I see no reason to become proficient at something I can't abide to do if there is already a professional around to do it for me." She pointed the peeler in Arianna's direction. "Always delegate tasks to the person who can accomplish them best - it's the mark of a good leader."

Arianna rolled her eyes, while secretly cheering the banter. It had been too long since Eli had really spoken to her at all beyond anything work-related, much less so familiarly, and she was determined to relish it for as long as it lasted. It was as if some part of Eli *wanted* to be friends but she refused to risk the possibility with Arianna again. And every time she caught herself, she locked up tighter than before. So Arianna had no doubt circumstances would change again before morning, and she was determined to make the most of it now.

"More like the rest of us are marked with some sort of invisible ink proclaiming us to be the pushovers we actually are." Then she turned and accepted the knife and cutting board Joy thrust in her direction and set to work.

Chapter XVIII

Dinner was... awkward, to say the least. Aside from the three schools of thought prevalent - those who believed in Mary's guilt; those who had no opinion either way; and those who proclaimed her innocence - there was also the fact that they were sitting at Joy's table eating her food. Kind of crappy when they thought about it and it wasn't far from anyone's mind.

Joy exchanged concerned glances with the security team, but they just shrugged and shook their heads. They had heard everything that had been said, of course - it was their job and Sarah had been posted right outside the door keeping an eye on the team and the front door. But for now the agents were content to watch and wait and see how the team members would handle the disagreement.

Not that they didn't want to jump in and pummel Isaac and the rest that believed they and their boss were capable of such deceit. It had in fact been their first instinctive reaction. But cooler heads had quickly prevailed knowing Mary would be less than thrilled with that sort of rejoinder. So they settled in to remain in observation mode for the duration.

The only plus - at least as far as Eden could see - was that Eli and Arianna didn't seem to be quite on edge with each other anymore. It wasn't like they were besties again, but at least the tension level

between them was tolerable to the point of being almost non-existent. She wondered how long it would last, but for now it was enough. It was one less thing to have to worry about anyway.

Still, since Eli had helped Joy prepare dinner, she was the first done and immediately excused herself from the kitchen. She beat Arianna by a full five minutes, and she searched the room until she met Reuben's eyes. A slight nod of her head, and he followed her from the room without comment. The action garnered everyone's attention and frowns from several team members though they kept their comments to themselves.

Eli went up two flights of stairs with Reuben right behind her, both silent as they went. Only when they shut the door behind them when they reached the room Eli was bunking in did Reuben turn a questioning glance in Eli's direction.

"I need you to take me to Mary," watching his second eyebrow shoot up to join the first, but otherwise Reuben gave no indication he was surprised. "I'm sure you've already heard what happened downstairs this afternoon. She deserves to know. It will give her a chance to plan for the worst if things get nasty."

"Why?" he asked frankly, then held up his hand. "I know why the team is loyal - we've been through hell and high water together and Mary has never shirked from that. She's been right there in the thick of things with the rest of us. But you - why do you believe in us... in her?"

Eli shrugged. "She hasn't given me a reason not to and every reason to try. Besides, she reminds me very much of my own MaTb. I would like very much for them to have the opportunity to meet."

He considered her for a moment longer, then nodded once sharply. "But you have to promise that I can be there when you introduce those two. I would very much like to see for myself how much alike your mother and Mary really are."

Eli smiled. "You have a deal, Reuben."

He reached out to open the door, which opened slightly with a knock just as his hand touched the knob. He jerked it wider, nearly catapulting Arianna headfirst into the room. Only her grip on the doorframe kept her from stumbling into Eli. She gave him an evil glare before she could school her features into something more neutral and Eli had wiped the grin off her face by the time Arianna straightened. She cleared her throat awkwardly.

"Are we going to see Mary now?" Eli cocked an eyebrow at her and Arianna rolled her eyes. "Please, Eli... I'm not stupid. I want to be there. I know you want to warn her before the others can start demanding answers."

Reuben coughed. "Yeah, demanding from Mary won't get them anything but grief."

Eli chuckled. "Learned that the hard way, did you?"

"Only once," he confirmed. "But once was enough."

"Sometimes once is all it takes," Eli agreed. She turned to Arianna. "Why don't you let me handle this? There's no need to separate yourself any further from the rest - they've just welcomed you back into their company. They need you to be a part of them... especially now. You're a key component to this team, and...."

"And you're not?! Don't play games with me, Eli. I deserve better!"

Eli's gaze hardened at Arianna's words, but she closed her eyes and brought her head around to Reuben before opening them once more. "Come on, Reuben. We need to do this before the others go looking for her."

Rueben looked between them and then led the way out the door without another word.

Mary expected to sleep until someone or something woke her. So it was with more than a hint of surprise and aggravation that she found herself staring at the ceiling for no particular reason other than the fact that she was wide awake. She glanced at the clock, realizing dinner should either be in progress or commencing momentarily and sighed. She'd hoped to sleep a little later, but a person didn't always get what they wanted out of life.

Mary pushed herself upright, turning to fluff the pillows behind her before scratching her hands through her hair. She was confident it didn't help the look, but at least it was all going in mostly the same direction. Then she leaned over and grabbed her Pad, curious to know what she had missed in the few hours she been oblivious to the world.

There were several messages which made her frown - surely they didn't have that many emergencies crop up in the few hours she was sleeping - and she opened them up one by one.

The first couple were concerns that non-selected candidates had brought to their team leaders. The next was from Gideon asking for a conference as soon as she was awake and functioning. She appreciated the caveat - awake and functioning were two entirely different operations in her book.

The last though... the last was from Sarah and it made her blood boil hot enough that she wanted to storm next door and just... Mary closed her eyes and focused on the meditation techniques Edward had taught her a quarter-century before. She could hear his whisper in her ear as she went through the paces, and it made her smile.

When she felt relaxed again, she closed the Pad and tossed it back to the bedside table. Then Mary pushed the blankets aside and stretched before rising and stumbling towards the bathroom. A shower would make her functioning, and then she'd be ready to tackle her day... which in this case would be at night.

Eden watched Eli go, followed by Arianna a few minutes later. When she and Danny had gone searching for them earlier, they'd found them in the kitchen working side by side with Joy. A quick, whispered conversation had them deciding to leave well enough alone. As long as they were maintaining some semblance of pleasantness with one another, they would wait to step in.

After dinner though, since neither of them had dish duty, Danny and Eden silently agreed to try to find them. Not because they expected anything bad to have happened yet - though as volatile as the two of them were, it wasn't *completely* out of the realm of possibilities - but out of genuine concern.

Danny more than the rest knew how fragile Arianna actually was beneath the strength and bravado she showed the world, and he wanted to know for certain that she was all right. Eden wanted to know what Eli was thinking - about Mary; about Arianna; even about Isaac and the situation that was likely to develop because of his mouthing off.

So they searched the whole house except for the two locked rooms - Mary's office and Joy's bedroom - and concluded that they must be in private conference with Mary. They knocked on the office door, and when there was no response, they briefly considered breaking the code. Then Eden thought about her words and Arianna's about trusting Mary and she took Danny by the arm with a shake of her head. He pulled his arm from her grasp and looked at her askance, crossing his arms and waiting for an explanation. Eden tugged him towards the stairs again, and he reluctantly followed until they were out of hearing of Mary's office.

"Either we trust Mary or we don't, Danny. There's no middle ground here."

"So you don't think we need to be concerned?"

"I don't... not yet. Eli trusts her and that's enough for me. We'll look for them before we go to bed."

Danny nodded. "All right. I'm going to trust that we're not wrong about this and keep my fingers crossed. And I'm going to go down to the lab and play a little while."

Eden nodded and watched him down the second staircase before entering the bedroom and climbing into her bunk. She wasn't really that tired, but it felt good just to stretch out in total quiet for a few minutes. Maybe she'd just wait here until Eli returned.

Eli and Arianna exchanged glances, but didn't utter a word when Reuben led them up into the attic. He led them to a door on one end and turned to meet their gazes with serious intent. "I am trusting you," he instructed softly. "None of your number are supposed to be aware of this, but I feel your need is important enough to break protocol. Please don't betray my trust by sharing this secret with the others. There's a reason it's secret."

Eli nodded and Arianna followed her lead. Then Reuben turned back to the key panel and punched in the code for the door. After a moment, the door swung open and he motioned them through ahead of him so he could close it behind him. There was another locked door at the other end, and he scooted past them to open it as well. He stepped out first this time and gestured them towards the attic stairs. Then he led them down to stop in front of a closed door... and knocked.

Mary stepped out of the shower with a sigh of relief. Cold water certainly wasn't her first choice, but it would suffice. She was functioning... however slowly... and she could feel herself coming to life again. She pulled on a robe and grabbed a towel to dry her hair, intent on looking somewhat human when she talked to Gideon. She lit a few candles and grabbed her Pad from the table, but before she could expand it or call up Gideon's contact information, a knock sounded at the door.

Mary frowned - all her agents should be next door watching the now chosen members of the Alpha team. It must be some sort of an emergency for someone to be here... now... knocking on her door. She tucked the Pad into her robe and draped the towel around her neck as she threw open the door.

Mary met Reuben's apologetic eyes and clenched her jaw when she realized he wasn't alone. She took a deep breath and opened the door wider.

"Please... come in," she invited though her eyes warned him they would be discussing any number of things later. He nodded his acceptance and ushered Eli and Arianna into the room ahead of him.

"Chief, would you like me to stay or...?" Mary turned her attention to her guests.

"Would you prefer a witness to this discussion or would you like to keep it private?"

"We would like to keep this private," Arianna said before Eli could speak. "But please don't be upset with Reuben. This was the only way we could ensure we could speak to you expediently, and it was important enough to break a few rules for."

Mary tilted her head. "I will ultimately be the judge of that," she informed Arianna in no uncertain terms, making her face flush with embarrassed heat. "However, I'm certainly willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and hear you two out before passing sentence." She looked at Reuben. "I know your shift is almost over, but you should return to Joy's until it is. I'll make sure they get back safely."

"Thanks, Chief."

"Thank you, Reuben." Mary waited until the door was closed behind him, then turned her attention back to her unexpected guests. "I'm sorry I can't offer you any sort of hospitality or even much of a place to sit, but I would advise you to wrap up in a blanket and take the only seat available," gesturing to the bed which was the only furniture besides the table. "There's no heat in the building except for solar and the panels aren't finished being installed."

"Well, that explains why I feel so chilled," Arianna mumbled as she accepted the blanket Eli offered.

"It also explains why the ten of us are confined to two rooms at Joy's instead of being spread out into this building instead."

Mary nodded. "Had the work gone as planned, it would have been ready well before we needed it. But there have been a number of delays trying to bring it up to code without destroying the historical integrity of the building itself. However, I am confident that Reuben did not betray my trust so that we could discuss the reasons you have been sequestered in such small living quarters. What can I do for you ladies?"

Eli pulled her blanket tighter around her body and met Mary's eyes squarely in the flickering light. "First I want you to understand that Arianna and I do not believe this nonsense. I cannot speak for the rest because I walked out as soon as I called them out for their stupidity. Arianna actually walked out before I did." Mary nodded and motioned for her to continue even as she walked over to her carry bag and started pulling out clean clothes. Eli kept her eyes focused in front of her to afford Mary a modicum of privacy.

"Right; so you should know that at least some of the candi... I mean some members of the Alpha team are questioning your legitimacy. If there is really a threat against us and if it is possible that you might be behind it. We know that you were fired by the Committee as security chief and, well..." Eli shrugged, not sure how to end. "There are just a lot of questions going around over there and we wanted you to be prepared."

"And you think... what, exactly?"

"I think you have your reasons for bringing us here, and that you genuinely believe a threat has been made against us. I don't understand why - why you brought us here or what the threat is or why you're still protecting us after having been dismissed from service - but I do understand the honor that drives you and I trust that you have our best interests at heart."

"Why? Why do you think that? Why would you risk it? Because if you've guessed wrongly and trusted where none is warranted, you're risking your life and that of your team."

Eli nodded slowly. "This is true, but I've learned to trust my gut on most things and only very rarely has it ever let me down," not glancing in Arianna's direction. "My gut says you're someone to trust. The fact that you remind me very much of my MaTb helps."

Mary nodded and turned to Arianna, whose eyes remained locked on her lap. "And what of you, Arianna? Why do you trust me?"

"Because you've never given me a reason not to, and in fact have gone out of your way to protect me and the others on more than one occasion. The fact that you did nothing to call attention to this fact only cements that school of thought. Selfish people don't tend to risk themselves for others no matter what the reason is."

"Ms Wellesly, is there any way to share enough with the others to calm their doubts? Without causing a security breach?"

Mary walked back into the bathroom to hang up her robe and towel and grabbed her comb. She shivered as the comb pulled droplets of cold water across her scalp, but continued the movement in an effort to remove the tangles.

"I could," Mary replied easily. "But I'm not sure it's warranted or deserved. Trust is a two-way street, ladies, and if they don't trust me, how can I trust them?"

"Do you need to?" Arianna asked. Mary glared until she realized to Arianna it was a legitimate question.

"I do. Because if the details get out to the wrong people, it puts not only the Alpha team in jeopardy but all the candidates who are still here."

"And you think someone here would do that?"

"Perhaps not intentionally. But it only takes one wrong word to the wrong person for things to go haywire. However," she continued before they could pursue their line of questioning, "I will see what I can do to offer some reassurance to your doubting Thomas colleagues." She gave them a wry look. "Should I guess the ones who are having issues?"

"We only know of one for sure because he brought all this up."

"Isaac or Titus?"

"How did you...?" Arianna started, then glanced at Eli.

"It's her job," they replied in tandem with a snicker. They refocused their attention on Mary. "Do you know who else...?"

"Of the people in this house?" Mary asked, waiting for their nods. "They're my two biggest doubters. Mordecai, Esther and Hannah won't believe them without proof one way or the other; Eden and Danny don't want to believe, but have questions now; Jacob thinks everyone is a little nuts. That would be my guess anyway. No way to know for certain unless I talk to them."

"And will you? Talk to them, I mean?"

"If they bring their concerns to me, of course." Mary glanced at her chronometer and sighed, shoving her feet into shoes with a groan. "Come on - it's late and I need to get you back to Joy's." She trotted back to the bathroom to snatch her Pad from the pocket of her robe, then motioned them to the door. "You can take the blankets if you need to, but you shouldn't need them once we get into the passageway. Eli and Arianna shared a look, then scrambled out of the warmth and towards the door. Mary took the hint and hustled after them and up the stairs to the attic. The sooner she got them back to Joy's, the quicker they'd be in warmth.

The trip back was swift, and in moments they were standing in front of Mary's office door. She unlocked it before turning around to face them. "Is there anything else I can do for you ladies this evening?"

"No, Ms Wellesly. Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. And please don't be too hard on Reuben. He was just looking out for you... and us."

Mary nodded but made no promise. Instead she said, "Goodnight, ladies."

"Goodnight," they called as she stepped into the room and closed the door firmly behind her. Then they split up and headed to their rooms.

Mary opened the Pad as soon as the door was sealed and immediately brought up Gideon's information. A moment later, his face filled her screen and she could tell by his expression she wasn't going to like what he had to say. It was shaping up to be another long night.

Chapter XIX

"Are you sure about this, Gideon?" Mary asked as she rubbed her eyes. It was a futile attempt to keep the headache she could feel forming behind her eyes at bay. "I have to be able to back up any accusations I bring to the table. And this still doesn't tell me who infected Malcolm." He waited until she looked at him again before responding.

"We're still working on that bit, Chief. There are a lot of things we have yet to investigate in any depth as far as he's concerned. Because of the sexual proclivities of his culture, it's kind of slow going. As for the other, I'm as sure as I can be without having actually witnessed the agreements as they happened, yes. It's a cock-up any way you look at it, Chief."

"How did the Council miss this?? How did all the planetary governments involved miss this??"

"The same way we did, Chief - they weren't looking for treachery on this level... or of this magnitude. Because from what I can figure so far, they are each involved for a different reason." She cocked an eyebrow and he elaborated. "One for greed, one for ideology and one for principle."

"Do you think the kids are still in danger?"

"Until we know who infected Malcolm and why, I'd have to say yes. But from the others?" Gideon shrugged. "I don't think so. They want the program killed... I don't think they want people hurt."

Mary sighed. "I don't get paid enough for this."

Gideon snorted. "Given that we've been fired, Chief, I'd have to say you were right." She glared and he held up his hands in surrender. "Have you heard any more about that, by the way? Do we know why she did it?"

"Aside from making a power play?" Mary asked. "No. But with what we know now, I can make an educated guess."

"And that would be?"

"The Committee made the decision to fire me before I even talked to McMurtry. Remember, we had already removed the kids from the hotel by the time I talked to her and the Committee knew it. More than likely, one of our suspected perpetrators suggested it and the others supported the idea vehemently enough that the rest went along with it. Because to them, I'm the one in the wrong here. I acted without their authorization and I refused to produce the candidates on demand."

"So now what?"

Mary shrugged. "First we'll take care of moving the Alpha team to the transport area so they can begin their prep work. Then we have to get the candidates who weren't chosen back to their homes. Once that's taken care of, well... we've still got a few things left to do on this assignment before we can turn our attention elsewhere. You and Ruth keep digging on Malcolm. We need answers."

"Will do, Chief... as fast as we can."

"Thanks, Gideon. I'll be in touch." Mary switched off her Pad and rose from her seat, her grumbling stomach making clear its lack of satisfaction. Before she could get around the desk though, a knock sounded at her door. She dropped her head to her chest and sighed. Then she crossed to the portal and opened it to find Eden standing in front of her with a tray in her hands. Mary smiled.

"Is this like your regular assignment now, Eden?" Mary asked as she motioned her into the office. Eden went directly to the desk and set the tray down before returning to stand in front of it. "Making sure I get fed?"

Eden chuckled and took the seat Mary gestured her to as Mary stepped behind the desk once more. "You do seem to need a full-time assistant for that particular duty, don't you?" she returned with a light laugh of her own. "But in this instance, like yesterday, I volunteered so I could have a chance to talk to you privately."

"About?"

Eden frowned. "I was hoping you might share your idea with me - you know, to help Arianna and Eli get along better."

Mary tilted her head. "In fairness, someone already managed to utilize my initial idea."

"Which was...?"

"To give them a common focus. I wasn't necessarily aiming for them to bond over a perceived enemy, but I suppose beggars can't be choosers."

Eden shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "You heard about that already, huh?"

"From more than once source," Mary confirmed.

Eden sighed. "I don't think he *meant* to cause a problem because I can sort of see his point. It doesn't make him right, but..."

"But it did serve to unite Eli and Arianna... however unexpected or temporary."

"You don't think it will last?"

"I don't think it can," Mary said without hesitation. "Not for the sake of team dynamics," holding up a hand when Eden frowned at her and taking a long drink of milk before she continued. "As necessary as it is for Eli and Arianna to find a consistent way to interact with one another, it can't be done at the cost of someone else on the team. The whole 'team' concept kind of fails if there are factions within it." She shook her head. "It would have been better team-wise if they had agreed with him - if you all had."

"You want us to believe...?" Eden stared hard at Mary. "Is Isaac right?"

"No... not at all. But at least if you all felt I was guilty of that which I stood accused by him, you'd be working together to do something about it instead of fighting to prove which of you is right."

Eden leaned forward until her elbows were resting on her knees and ran her hands through her hair. "So what can we do? Isaac's accusations aside, it was nice to see Eli and Az... I mean, Arianna interacting almost friendly again. I'd like it to continue."

Mary wiped her mouth and leaned back in her chair as she picked up her glass again. "Is there anyone aside from the two of them that you trust completely? Someone you could share a secret with and know it would be held in confidence?"

Eden's brow furrowed. "Yeah... a couple people I guess. Why?"

"Do they want to see Eli and Arianna work things out?"

"Mary, we all want them to work things out just to create a more palatable atmosphere to live and work in." She sighed. "You have to understand - at first... at the compound... it was really awkward for all of us. I mean most of us tend to be the eggheads we are - living in our own heads and ignoring everything else around us. No one really knew anyone else, but we knew we had to try if we were going

to make this project work." Mary nodded, but said nothing. "Arianna... Arianna was difficult - more than most of us combined, actually, but Eli saw something in her that the rest of us didn't see until it was shown to us. And for those few months, we could have accomplished anything. Did you know that most of our discoveries were made during the time they were together? When they fell apart...."

"You lost your glue?"

Black eyes met brown when Eden caught Mary's glance. "Exactly. We lost our spark. So we *need* them to settle their differences if we're to have any hope of making this mission successful."

"All right," Mary conceded, "let me ask another way. Is there anyone on the Alpha team that doesn't want them to be a couple again? After all, it is conceivable that working out their differences means they would resume a professional only relationship."

Eden sighed. "There are a few that don't care how they resolve things either way as long as we don't have to continue to live with the tension of them being at odds with one another. But no one has indicated to me that they shouldn't be a couple." She bit her lip. "That being said," she drawled a little slower. Mary waited. "I don't know," Eden finally admitted.

"Fair enough. In that case, talk to the ones you trust - the ones who will keep a confidence *and* who want to see Eli and Arianna find happiness together again."

"That's important?"

"I think so, yes. By your own admission just now, they were the inspiration for creativity and discovery when they were happy together. It stands to follow that a resumption of that facet of their relationship will be beneficial to everyone."

"Got it. So what do you want me to talk to the others about?"

"Part of the problems between them stems from the fact that they still don't know one another... not like they should. You need to encourage them to acquire the knowledge they need."

Two black brows shot up into an equally dark hairline. "Encourage them how?"

"Talk - about yourselves, your planets, your customs. Share with them and have them share with you. It will be good for team dynamics as well. After all, shouldn't you know the people you'll be living with for the next few years?"

"We do... know one another, I mean. We did this when you first arrived at the desert facility."

"Really?" Mary replied dryly. "So if I asked you Gabriel's favorite color or the name of Esther's best friend or what deity Naomi's people worship - you could answer those things?"

"Um... no? But... Is that really necessary?"

Mary shrugged. "You tell me."

Eden sat pensively, reviewing what she knew about those who were part of the Alpha team, and remembering Arianna's recent curiosity about the sexual behavior of her teammates. Eden's shoulders slumped in realization.

"Crap," she mumbled, snorting at Mary's smirk. "Not helping," she complained. Mary wiped the smile off her face and donned a stoic expression.

"Sorry," she offered. "Better?"

Eden chuckled and shook her head. "No, not really. But that was a pretty cool trick."

"Three kids and years of practice," Mary assured her solemnly.

"That explains a lot, actually," Eden agreed. "So how would you suggest we do this? Because I think calling a meeting so we 'learn about each other' is a little too blatant. Eli would call foul before we even got a chance to start sharing things."

"That's where you're trusted compatriots come into play. First you need to sit down and decide what topics need to be discussed. Personally I'd work on the cultural aspect, but I'm not the one having to work this into casual conversation. Because that's what you need to do - be casual about it and make it part of the discussion you're having when they're around together. They don't even have to participate all the time as long as they're listening. And with a few of you to steer the dialogue, you can involve everyone in smaller groups without most of them being aware of any manipulation."

"You're a rather sneaky individual, Chief," Eden said with a grin.

Mary smirked. "It's my job."

Eden smiled and shook her head, then stood and shoved her hands in her pockets. "Can I ask...?" waiting for Mary's tacit accord. "What are you going to do about Isaac?"

"I'm going to wait for him to come to me."

"And then?"

Mary shrugged. "That's up to him." Eden nodded and turned towards the door before halting again when Mary called her name. "What do you think? About Isaac's accusations?"

"My first thought? I wondered where he got the idea. Don't get me wrong - Isaac is brilliant in his field. But he's not particularly observant out of it. And though he relates to people well enough I suppose, he doesn't really give them much thought, you know? If it's not laid out for him, he doesn't generally see things beyond the surface." Eden cleared her throat. "Still, he or whoever he was talking to made a pretty good argument. And looking at it from our angle, we ask questions and search for answers as a way of life. That's what science boils down to. And you are a mystery."

"I always have been as far as you kids are concerned. Until a few days ago, none of you even knew I had children older than a good portion of the candidates."

"True, but now we do, and that opened all kinds of curiosity on our part about you. The circumstances that brought us here just add to the confusion."

"So you think he's right?"

Eden tilted her head and let black eyes study brown for several long minutes. Mary didn't flinch or look away and Eden gave her a satisfied acknowledgment. "No, I really don't. I may be an idiot, but I trust Eli and Eli trusts you. And the truth is," she continued before Mary could interject, "it's a little too easy to make you out to be the villain here. I mean, if you were clever enough to get this far without anyone knowing, why would you break out into stupid now? No... not buying it. The clever part, yes - the stupid... not so much." She shrugged. "That's my take on things anyway."

Mary held her gaze a moment, then nodded. "I appreciate it... and your candor," she said as she stood. She placed her used dishes on the tray and scooped it from her desk. Eden immediately opened the door and passed Mary through before closing it behind them. "And I'll see what I can do to help with the dialogue as well. And I know my boys will help."

"I know they're twins, but even in the short time I met them, they really seemed nothing alike."

Mary chuckled and motioned Eden down the stairs in front of her. "I'll tell them you said that - they'll love hearing it. They worked very hard to cultivate their differences to be seen as individual people and not half of a set. The only thing they ever agreed on without argument was protecting their sister. And woe to the idiot that tried something against her."

"Sounds like you have stories," Eden said as they entered the kitchen.

"Stories about what, Mama?" Joy asked as she rose to take the tray. Mary gave her a look but relinquished her hold. Joy smiled in triumph and move to the sink. Eden leaned against the table and crossed her arms over her chest to observe the women who had obviously forgotten her presence.

"Your brothers," Mary replied as she picked up a towel to dry the dishes Joy was washing, "and their protective mentality towards you." She stumbled when Joy bumped into her and turned to glare. Joy just returned the look.

"Uh huh... and who gave them that mentality, hmm??" She looked at Eden who was covering her mouth with one hand. "I'm still afraid to bring anyone home for them to meet. I don't think anyone will survive that interrogation. And that's assuming they make it past Mama first."

"How lucky for you I've already given my approval then."

"Mama??" Joy whipped her head back towards Mary and queried with startlement making her voice squeak. Mary just shook her head and looked at Eden.

"Yes, I do have stories, and maybe after we get the Alpha team delivered safely to the transport station, I'll share some of them with you."

"Mama??"

"I'd like that, Chief," Eden said with a smile. "But for now, I suppose I should go find the others. There's no telling what I could have missed since dinner."

"I'll go with you," Mary said, hanging up her towel and edging her way towards the kitchen door. Joy slapped her hands on the counter in frustration.

"MAMA!!"

Mary turned and blew a kiss at Joy and headed towards the living room. Joy rubbed her forehead and left the kitchen with a huff, heading upstairs and hoping for a few minutes peace. She had a feeling she was going to need it. She never even noticed Ephraim in the corner of the kitchen watching the tableau with great interest... and a small smile.

When they left Mary at her office door, Eli and Arianna had walked towards their rooms without a word. It was only when they reached their doors that Arianna turned to Eli to speak. Eli held up a hand and shook her head, letting her gaze lock on the floor. "Please don't," she whispered. "I can't do this again... not with you." Eli took a deep breath. "Mary told me I had to choose a path so I tried to choose the warmer one. But I can't do this with you. I can't be your friend. I will do my best to be fair, but professional behavior is the best I can offer. It's all I've got left to give."

"Eli..."

"I'm sorry, Angel - I really am. But I can't go through this again. I won't. I wouldn't survive this a second time. Please, Arianna... just let me go."

"I can't, Eli. I can't. You can't just leave it like this. You can't!"

"I can. Even if I have to walk away."

"You'd leave the Alpha team to avoid being friends with me?"

Eli met Arianna's eyes, forcing herself not to wince at the pain so visible in the brown orbs. "If that's what it takes," she replied without flinching. "I don't want to - I think the team needs both of us to achieve its greatest success, but I cannot offer you more than professional courtesy. If you cannot do the same... if you can't be professional with me, I will remove myself from the project. The Committee can choose an alternate to take my place."

"You hate me so much??" tears flowing unhindered down tan cheeks.

"I don't hate you at all. But I refuse to be put into a situation that will destroy me. So you make your decision and you let me know, all right?" And without another word, Eli turned and headed down the stairs and out the kitchen door into the darkness.

Chapter XX

Michael was sitting at the front door now and he smiled when he saw Mary, then rose to greet her. "How're you doing, Chief? Did you get any sleep at all?"

She gave him a wry grimace. "Apparently all I needed. I woke up wide-awake. Just as well though from what I can gather."

"Well, it hasn't been dull around here, if that's what you're asking. For the kids' sakes, I hope things settle down soon, or it's gonna be rough going for them for some time to come. Things seem to be a little volatile. Maybe that has something to do with them being sequestered in such a confined space, but I'm telling you, Chief... something's gotta give."

"How are you guys doing?" Mary asked. "Martha and Reuben are next door already?"

"Shortly after dinner, Chief. Matthew and Sarah have another hour or so. Matt's downstairs with Dorcas and Sarah's out back. I think she needed to cool off again. She's still pretty hot about Klutz's accusations this afternoon."

"And the rest of you aren't?"

Michael shrugged. "We didn't actually have to listen to him spew and keep our game face on. Besides, we figure you're gonna put him in his place hard and fast, and none of us want to ruin that for you. They don't actually notice us, and that would bring attention that we don't want. Sarah told me she just needed a couple minutes to remind herself of that." He frowned, but Mary spoke before he could voice his concern.

"Have you seen Ephraim?"

"Yes, Chief. He was downstairs before dinner ended. He offered to stay in the kitchen to keep an eye on the door since no one is outside at this time of night."

Mary closed her eyes and nodded, wondering how she had missed him - and curious to know if he had spoken to her daughter. Though judging by Joy's reaction, he had yet to make a move. She scratched the back of her neck. "Anything else I need to know?"

"Yes ma'am, now that you ask - Sarah's been gone for the better part of fifteen minutes. You might want to have a looksee... make sure she's all right. I know she can handle herself, but it's just weird. And we don't need weird at this point."

"No, we don't. Thank you, Michael. I'll go find Sarah, then I'll be back. I need to go downstairs and see if I can clear things up before we start moving these kids tomorrow."

"So that's a definite go?"

"Yes. We can't deprive them of their prep time - they're going to need every minute they've got to be ready to launch on time. I will be talking to the Committee once we get the team settled, and the fallout from that should cause enough uproar to allow the Alpha team to proceed without injury." She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Besides, they're not going to be where most people expect them to go."

"So not to the transport site?"

"Not yet. That will happen unexpectedly."

Michael rubbed a hand over his beard. "I'm glad you're the boss, Chief. That kind of crap makes me crazy."

Mary waggled her eyebrows. "You could be like me then." He laughed and she turned back to the kitchen. "I'll be back with Sarah in a few." He saluted and she rolled her eyes before disappearing into the other room.

Ephraim was still sitting in the corner, though now his entire focus on what was taking place beyond the closed door. He'd been eating when Sarah rushed through the room and out the door without so much as a by-your-leave. He'd let her go without comment, knowing she wouldn't leave the yard and would be alert. Joy met his eyes, but he shook his head and shrugged.

The kids on clean-up duty finished the dishes and Joy thanked them and sent them on their way for the evening. Ephraim polished off the remainder of his meal and washed his dishes before Joy could argue. Instead she left to find out if any of the agents needed more coffee, knowing her mother would make fresh when she was ready for it. Ephraim resumed his seat and his watch.

When Eli came storming through, he nearly stopped her, but the look in her eyes informed him of just how bad a decision that would be - for her and for him. So he held the door open for her and she offered him a curt nod. Then he took his place again, keeping an eye on both women even when Mary and Eden crossed the threshold. He knew eventually Mary would learn what was going on and would be back. And hearing her tell Joy he had her blessing - even if Joy didn't know yet - made Ephraim smile.

He heard Mary enter the room and cross the floor to look out the door. "Who's with her?" she asked without removing her attention from the two figures she could just see near the fence line.

"Princess," Ephraim replied without hesitation. "She came storming through here a few minutes before you and Wonder came in. I only let her go because Sarah was already out there, Chief. And I've been keeping an eye on the two of them."

Mary pushed both hands into her hair, pulling almost painfully in an effort to keep from ranting and raving like a lunatic. She took one deep breath and then another, focusing on calming herself and feeling her heart rate slow. She hadn't gotten this frustrated when she'd heard Isaac's accusations. She wondered what had happened in the short time since she'd seen Eli and Arianna together focused on warning her about his allegations to send Eli for sanctuary.

"How did she seem?"

"Sarah or Princess?" asking for clarification. But before Mary could answer, he gave a response for both. "Sarah was flustered like she was angry. Princess? She was a little harder to read, Chief. She was... upset... or hurt - very unhappy."

Mary sighed. "All right," she said, snatching up her daughter's jacket and closing it as tightly as she could manage. "I'm going to see what's going on. Either Sarah or I will be back inside in a moment."

"I'll wait right here, Chief."

Mary nodded and slipped out the door.

Sarah had been leaning against the banister when Eli came tearing out of the house. She actually expected the door to slam behind her until she realized that Ephraim was holding it open. Their eyes met and she gave him the slightest nod. He bobbed his head in return and closed the door gently behind him. Sarah smiled when Ephraim took his seat, knowing he was in a perfect position to observe everything; then she turned her attention to the young woman who was leaning against the trees at the fence and followed her, taking a place close to Eli but not touching.

"You all right, Princess?" reaching out a hand, but stopping when Eli whirled on her and glared in her direction.

"Don't call me that!" she spat. "My name is Eli - use it!"

Sarah held out a placating hand, harnessing her previous anger and letting it bleed out beneath the swirl of emotions she could see in Eli's eyes. "All right, Eli - I'm sorry. We've always used codenames for all of you and we haven't actually been introduced. I'm Sarah." Eli nodded but didn't say anything, biting her lip and keeping her focus on something beyond sight. "Aside from leaving you alone, is there anything I can do for you, Eli?"

"No. Just please...."

Sarah nodded though she doubted Eli could see the action. But her silence said enough and she could feel Eli relax just a little. She wondered what had driven the young woman outside so late, then figured if it was her business, Eli would share. Sarah couldn't give Eli the physical privacy she sought, but she could respect her need for it and allow her to keep her own counsel.

Sarah pondered how long she'd been outdoors, knowing from the chill in her bones that it had been more than the few minutes she'd promised Michael. But she couldn't leave Eli alone out here even if Ephraim was watching. Sarah wasn't about to be the one to explain to Mary how something had happened on her watch.

She heard the door open and turned her head, slumping in relief when she saw Mary headed towards them in the darkness. A jerk of Mary's head had Sarah moving indoors, glad for the chance to warm up again before leaving the warmth of Joy's home to return to a frigid room.

Sarah turned once as she reached the top step, noting Mary had taken her exact spot and seemed to be looking up at the stars. Then she shook her head and went inside, thankful for the cup of coffee Ephraim held out to her as she crossed the threshold.

Eli stiffened when Mary approached, then relaxed slightly when she realized it wasn't Arianna. Still she didn't speak, and Mary seemed content to let her keep her peace. She felt Mary move closer than Sarah did before sliding down the tree trunk until she was sitting on the cold ground. Eli remained standing with her eyes focused on the heavens above.

Even as a child the stars had fascinated Eli. Though the stars she had gazed on at home were much different than the ones above her now, Eli felt a familiar comfort wrap itself around her as she stared at them. It was humbling to realize just how small and inconsequential each individual really was - that their lives and troubles really had no effect on the grand scheme of things. But despite that insignificance in the universe, everyone still had a role to play - their uniqueness important to *someone, somewhere*.

Eli breathed deeply and questioned why Mary had sent Sarah away if she was going to remain mute until she understood that Mary was waiting for her break the silence she had demanded from Sarah. She cleared her throat, but Mary didn't move, content to be still and wait for as long as necessary.

"I, um... I took your advice," Eli said in a whisper, the sound carrying through the stillness. "And I spoke to Arianna." She cleared her throat again, hoping to ease the tightness. "It is highly likely that I will be turning down my appointment to the Alpha team and returning home."

That garnered her Mary's piercing gaze when she turned her head to give Eli her full attention. "Should I plan for that eventuality then?"

Eli nodded slowly as she considered the question. "Yes... I believe you should. I have given Arianna the opportunity to make her choice, but if she cannot accomplish the task in a timely manner, I will simply submit my resignation on my own and go home in order to give the new member sufficient time to prepare."

Mary's eyebrows flew into her hairline, but she managed to curb her tone into something dispassionate when she spoke. "You asked Arianna to choose whether she goes or you do?"

Eli chuckled sadly and shook her head. "Nothing so extreme. I would walk away without a word before putting her in that position. No. I thought about what you said... about blowing hot and cold." She sucked in a breath and blew it out slowly, forming smoke rings with the vapor. "I come from a cold climate, you know - I'm quite comfortable in it. So making the choice I needed to in order to survive this ordeal means I will interact with Arianna in a professional capacity only. Anything more is simply out of the question for me. I can't burn like that again."

"So you told Arianna...?"

"That we can be colleagues but not friends. And if she couldn't manage to make that differentiation, then I would leave the project so she could remain."

"Harsh," Mary commented, but there was no accusation in her tone. Eli shrugged.

"Maybe. But it's all I know to do, Ms Wellesly. I will turn to cinder otherwise, and I've already proven that I'm not the Phoenix of lore."

"All right," Mary agreed. "But do you think we could take this inside now? I wasn't thoroughly warm to begin with, and now I'm just downright cold. And I can't leave you out here alone."

"Is it wrong that I'm looking forward to that?" Eli asked as she extended a hand down to help Mary stand. Mary cocked her head in question and Eli continued. "I am looking forward to being able to be alone again... no offense."

"None taken," Mary replied as they turned towards the house. "I of all people can appreciate that need - I have a locked room in my daughter's house for just that purpose." Mary shook her head. "Those ballet kids get up to some interesting parties sometimes."

Eli chuckled. "Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately yes," opening the door and letting Eli walk in ahead of her. "You can never be too sure about what's hidden beneath a tutu - that's all I'm saying." She moved to the coffee pot and held it up, but Eli shook her head. Though she had no illusions about sleeping tonight, she didn't think adding more caffeine to the mix would be her best choice of options.

"I should probably go upstairs. It's getting late and I don't want to wake the rest if everyone has settled down for the night. Goodnight, Ms Wellesly."

"Goodnight, Eli," Mary returned, then carried on. "And Eli?" waiting for gray eyes to focus her way. "I need a decision soon. We begin moving everyone tomorrow."

Eli bit her lip and nodded her comprehension slowly and thoughtfully. "I understand, Ms Wellesly. Thank you."

"Of course, Eli. Goodnight."

Eli waved and walked out the door, and Mary inhaled the aroma of her coffee deeply before taking her first, satisfying sip. Only once she swallowed and re-opened her eyes did Ephraim speak.

"Everything all right, Chief?"

Mary shook her head. "I'm sure it will be eventually. Has it been quiet otherwise?"

"Yes, Chief. Sarah resumed the post at the front door until Dorcas came up to relieve her when her shift ended. She and Matt have already gone next door. Most of the kids are still downstairs. I haven't heard anything so I don't think there's an issue."

Mary sighed. "It's my next stop so I'll let you know."

"Good luck, Chief."

She raised her cup to him and walked out the door. Dorcas glanced at her when she exited the kitchen and Mary called out to her. "Dorcas?"

"All good here, Chief. I left the door open," jerking her head towards the basement. "Since it's just us here."

"You think they would be that stupid?"

"I don't know," the dark-haired woman replied honestly. "But better safe, right? Besides, they made it clear they were waiting to talk to you."

Mary looked at her coffee cup and wished for something stronger. Then she sighed and shook her head. "Guess I'd better get down there and see what kind of trouble I can stir up tonight." Dorcas snorted but didn't deign to respond verbally. Mary just chuckled and headed downstairs.

Danny had gone back upstairs after only a little while in the lab. He couldn't focus on what he was doing, and he figured that would be the most likely place for Arianna to return to after speaking with Mary. Besides, his skin desperately needed lotion, and he sighed in relief as he rubbed it in. The climate on this planet was different enough from his own that his exposed skin tightened and dried at an alarming rate if he didn't moisturize regularly. So he took his time, so engrossed in his task that he jumped when the door slammed open and closed again almost instantly. He looked up to find the disturbance and immediately forgot his routine. Arianna stood curled into herself, arms wrapped tightly around her stomach as she bit her lip.

"Arianna? Sweetie?" his blue eyes meeting her brown ones and almost crumbling under the sadness that muddled them. "Oh, Honey... what's wrong?" crossing the room and pulling her into his arms. She fell into his embrace, staggering him unexpectedly even with her slight weight. He scooped her up and moved them to the bed. "Now tell me what's wrong, Sweetie."

"She hates me, Danny. She *hates* me."

Danny frowned. "Who, Arianna? Who hates you?"

"Eli," she wailed before tucking her face into his neck and letting the tears flow. He tightened his grip around her and let her cry, knowing she needed the release before he would be able to get any more answers out of her. Gently he rocked them and spoke soft nonsense into her ear. Finally he felt her tears slow and her clasp on him relax. Only then did he brush the hair away from her face and look down at her.

"You ready to talk to me now?" feeling her nod. "Good - why do you think Eli hates you? Because I happen to know without a doubt that she doesn't."

"You didn't hear her a few minutes ago, Danny." Arianna took a shuddering breath. "She can't be friends with me anymore - she won't even try. If I won't allow a purely professional relationship between us, she'll leave the project. She would rather give up the opportunity of a lifetime than be friends with me." She tilted her head to look into his eyes. "Am I really that horrible?"

"No, Sweetie - of course not! What did she say exactly?" Arianna repeated what Eli had said to her, her voice a whisper in an effort to not resume crying. When she was done, she looked at Danny expectantly. He kept his eyes on the far wall and bit his lip to keep from speaking too hastily or rashly. Finally he responded, keeping his voice soft and even. "She doesn't hate you, Arianna - she told you as much."

"Then why is she so willing...? What is so wrong with being friends with me?? Malcolm's not even an issue now. There's no reason we can't go back to being friends."

Danny sighed. He didn't want to have to be the one to enlighten Arianna, but if it had to be done, he certainly wasn't going to do it alone. He shifted Arianna from his lap and stood, extending a hand that she automatically accepted. He pulled her to her feet and tenderly wiped away the traces of her tears, then tugged her towards the door.

"C'mon," he invited. "We need to find Eden. Maybe between us, we can figure something out. Because none of us want to lose Eli from the oddball family we've become." Arianna nodded and followed him out the door.

Chapter XXI

Eden pinched the bridge of her nose and released a silent sigh. She'd been hoping to talk to Eli before she had to speak to anyone else, wanting to get a feel for exactly where Eli was in her mind about Arianna. She certainly hadn't expected to hear it from Arianna herself. But she'd known when the door opened and Danny and Arianna were standing there together - with Arianna looking broken - that not only was she going to find out, but it was probable she wasn't going to like the truth.

Now they sat looking at her expectantly - like she was some sort of deity with the answer to life. She glared at Danny briefly and he winced in reflex. He'd known the risk he was taking, bringing things to Eden with no warning and Arianna beside him, but he was at a loss. And it wasn't that Eden minded being in the loop; she preferred it actually. But she would have appreciated a private update. Having Arianna sitting here with hope in her eyes that Eden might know a way to fix this.... It was unnerving.

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath... willing herself to calm; then she released the bridge of her nose and turned her attention to them as she opened her eyes. "All right," she said steadily. "It's not an ideal situation by any means, but we can work with it. Eh!" She barked at Arianna, holding up a hand to keep her from interrupting. "This is not the time to argue with me."

"But...." Eden glowered at Arianna's word.

"No, Az... I'm serious. You want my help? Then you need to be quiet and listen. If you'd had any clue what to do about Eli, you would have already done something; you wouldn't have needed come to me and Danny in the first place." She held Arianna's brown eyes with black and waited for her to nod her agreement. "So the very first thing you're gonna do is agree to Eli's terms."

"WHAT??" Arianna shouted in a whisper. "That's your great idea," glaring when Eden slapped a hand over her mouth and kept it there. Eden returned the look evenly until she felt Arianna slump in defeat.

"Good. You ready to shut up and listen now?" Eden asked not unkindly. "Az, you have to give her what she wants. If Eli leaves, where does that leave us? Where does it leave you? If she's gone, there's not even a chance you'll be friends again. Because if she's willing to leave the project to avoid it.... You see where I'm going with this?" watching Arianna nod sadly. Eden patted her knee gently. "At least if you're in the same space, there's a possibility of things changing."

"I suppose," Arianna agreed with a shrug. "I just don't understand why we can't be friends again! Malcolm's gone!"

Eden gritted her teeth and sighed as she glanced at Danny. Surely someone as brilliant as Arianna couldn't possibly be that obtuse. A light touch on her shoulder caused her to clamp her lips together, and she rose to pace the small room. It was the best alternative she had to shaking some sense into Arianna's thick skull. Danny wrapped an arm around Arianna's slim shoulders.

"Is that what you really want, Sweetie?"

"I miss her, Danny. She's the first person who saw all of me. Is it wrong to want that back?"

"No," he assured her. "But you need to be clear on what you want this time... what you expect from her, and what she can expect from you. It's only fair - to you, to her and to us."

Arianna slammed her mouth shut. She wasn't sure how to explain anything to them. She didn't understand it herself. Eden watched the confusion swirl in brown eyes and pushed off the door she'd been leaning against. She squatted down in front of Arianna and covered her hands, not surprised when Arianna clenched them tightly.

"Az, look... we'll help you figure things out, okay? But the first thing you've got to do is agree to deal with Eli on a strictly professional basis. She deserves to be a part of this mission as much as you, and we need her."

"You promise you'll help, Eden?"

"We'll all help, Sweetie," Danny promised. "But you need to make sure Eli stays with the team, all right?"

Arianna looked between them, studying the sincerity in their demeanors. After a long moment, she nodded slowly. "Okay," she agreed. "Thank you... both."

Eden snorted and gave her a wicked little grin. "Don't thank us yet. You don't know the cookies this is gonna cost you," winking to lighten the atmosphere.

Arianna sniffed regally and affected a haughty air. "I can handle it," Arianna assured her.

"Good," Eden replied, before standing. "I'll start making my wish list. But in the meantime, let's go downstairs and see what's going on. It's too quiet up here, which makes me think that everyone else is partying in the basement. And I never miss a good party."

"You really think they're partying?"

"Why not? We did get chosen for the Alpha team today. Shouldn't we be celebrating?"

"Yes!" Arianna cheered, raising an arm into the air. But it was clearly done with faux enthusiasm and Eden and Danny exchanged stares before doing the same, hoping to get them all into the right spirit. So it was with much noise and clattering that they made their way down the stairs....

... only to encounter Eli coming from the kitchen as they rounded the banister. Arianna was in the lead, and she stutter-stopped, causing Danny and Eden to plow into her from behind. Only Eli's swift reaction kept them all from tumbling to the ground, and she retracted her touch before it registered. Arianna huffed and turned to meet Eden's glare briefly before focusing her attention on Eli who was trying to walk around the trio without acknowledgment. Arianna extended a hand, and Eli took a step back to avoid contact though she also stopped trying to get by them. Arianna let her hand drop to her side, slightly comforted when she felt Danny clasp it lightly. She cleared her throat.

"Eli, I just wanted you to know that I've thought about what you said. And though I disagree with your logic, I'm willing to agree to your terms. We will keep things between us strictly professional if that is what it will take for you to remain part of the Alpha team."

Eli forced herself to meet Arianna's eyes for a moment to assess her veracity before she nodded her acceptance. Then she made a move to scoot past them without a word, only to find her arm gripped and held by Eden. Eli looked at the hand pointedly and shifted her gaze to Eden's eyes. When she didn't let go, Eli raised a brow. Eden looked at Danny and jerked her head towards the stairs. He nodded and took Arianna by the arm, leading her downstairs without objection though she did keep her eyes on Eli and Eden until she and Danny disappeared out of sight. Once they were gone, Eden urged Eli to the living room.

Eli snatched her arm from Eden's grasp but continued into the room, crossing to stand at one side and turning to face Eden with crossed arms and a glower. Eden followed and perched on one end of the couch.

"You all right, Eli?" The glower became a glare and Eden held up her hands in surrender. "Sorry - after seeing the two of you together earlier, I was hoping...." watching Eli shake her head. "I guess not, huh?"

"No, Eden. I considered it. I even tried to...." She shook her head again. "I can't."

"Are you gonna be able to do this, Eli? Are you gonna be able to work with her; live with her; have her in the periphery of your life without actually being part of it again? Are you certain this course of action is for the best?"

"It's the only way, Eden. If she holds up her side of the bargain, I'll make it work. You may have to buffer for a while though."

Eden shrugged. "Nothing new there. You gonna come downstairs with the rest of us?"

Eli shook her head. "No. I'm going to go upstairs and get some sleep. This day has been weeks long for me already and Ms Wellesly told me earlier that we're moving tomorrow."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Progress at last," Eden said with a snort. "Are you telling the rest?" motioning towards the basement door. Eli shook her head.

"And spoil the Chief's fun?" Eli shook her head and chuckled. "Oh no... I don't think so. That's like tempting fate. Somehow I don't see that working out in my favor."

Eden smiled. "Yeah, I see your point." She pushed up and walked to the doorway. "I'm gonna go downstairs for a bit. You sure you don't wanna come?"

"Yes - thanks, Eden. I'm going to bed."

"I'll make sure the others know to be quiet when we come up," Eden assured her, then left the living room and headed downstairs. Eli strolled out and up the stairs, glad for the silence.

It was fairly quiet downstairs, Mary realized as she made her way silently down the steps. Quiet as she was being, her footsteps still sounded loudly in the stillness she walked into. The basement area was completely empty, save for Michael who sat near the open lock door for the lab. She raised an eyebrow at him and he just nodded and jerked his head. Mary patted his shoulder as she walked by, then entered the short hall that led to the lab.

She stopped at the doorway and observed those gathered there for just a moment. They didn't seem to be working; instead they were scattered around the room in smaller groups talking. If she was to

hazard a guess, Eden was already networking with Esther and Jacob on how she felt they could help her with Eli and Arianna.

Hannah was chatting with Danny and Arianna; Mordecai was seated with Isaac and Titus. Mary cleared her throat, drawing all eyes to her. Isaac darted from his seat, standing and bracing his legs defiantly in challenge. Mary smirked at him before letting her gaze roam around the rest of the room as she stepped fully inside.

"I just wanted to let you all know that we will be transporting you from here tomorrow to a number of sites so you can begin your final preparation work."

"So the threat to all of us is over?" Isaac asked with disdain. "How convenient."

"Not at all," Mary assured him with a smile. "The threat is still out there."

"So our safety isn't paramount now - is that what you're saying?"

"Is that what you heard me say, Isaac?"

"I'm not hearing much of anything, Ms Wellesly - except that you're not who you pretend to be."

Mary crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the wall, nodding her head at him. "Okay," she accepted equitably, noting the rest paying very strict attention to what was going on. Eden had even stepped up behind Arianna and placed a calming hand on her shoulder, keeping her from lashing out and letting Mary handle Isaac. "Who am I pretending to be?" biting her lip to keep from laughing at his flummoxed expression.

"What?? How should I know?"

"Isaac, if you don't believe I'm who I've purported myself to be, then you must have some idea of who you believe I actually am."

"Stop!" he demanded, holding up his hands. "I want to know what's really going on here."

"Ask specific questions and I will answer them, Isaac. But I'm not simply going to spill my guts to satisfy your curiosity. If you want to know something, ask."

"Who threatened us?"

Mary shook her head. "I can't tell you that because we are still looking for connections to tie everything together. I have several loose ends at the moment. The fact that a candidate was infected with the AIDS virus is proof enough that there is a threat."

"And you're sure he was infected - you have proof?"

"I do."

"And how can we be sure that this isn't some elaborate plot on your part to do... something? Destroy the program; eliminate us; create a worldwide panic; start a pandemic..." Mary felt the surge around her and held up a staying hand without allowing her eyes to stray from Isaac's. She snorted and watched his face harden.

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted or flattered," she said derisively. "Isaac, there's nothing I can say or do to sway your opinion because it's obvious that for whatever reason, you've decided not to trust me. That is certainly your prerogative. But it's going to make for a long few weeks for you."

"How do you figure?"

"Because if you're going to remain as part of the Alpha team, you're going to have to do what I tell you. It's the only way you're going to be able to get your preparations made."

Isaac stomped over and towered over her, poking a finger in her face. "Are you threatening me?"

Mary grasped his finger and twisted, making Isaac drop hard to his knees. He looked at her with disbelief and anger... an expression that morphed to pain when he tried to extract his finger from her grasp. "First of all, kindly do not step into my personal space. It makes me unhappy, and I tend to react swiftly and harshly," watching him nod fiercely. "Secondly, don't assume you can intimidate someone because of your size. You might be unpleasantly surprised," giving him an evil grin. "Third, I don't need to threaten - that is simply a fact. I'm sorry that I have to ask you to trust me - I know you prefer to have proof you can see and touch and feel, but that's not going to happen here. Not until I have the facts I can present to you. I can tell you what I do know."

Isaac nodded. "Please," he whimpered. Mary released his finger and he sank back on his heels but otherwise didn't move from the floor.

"What I do know is that there are factions at work, who for one reason or another do not want to see this project succeed. They have been around from the beginning, but they are merely whispers... nothing concrete. We are continuing to hunt for the source of them however, if only to eliminate the disruption the whispers are causing. What I do know is that a candidate was infected with a virus that could virtually destroy humanity on this planet and any other we are in contact with."

"They know, Mary," Arianna spoke quietly. "I told them."

Brown eyes met and Mary bobbed her acknowledgment of the confession before looking around the room at the others. "So you see why the process to discover the real threat is so slow going. And in the meantime, we need to get each of you to a location that will allow you to make the preparations you need to accomplish."

"But not the transport site?" Jacob asked.

"Not yet. That will happen closer to your departure. I want to have my guys go over everything there and at the ship itself to ensure nothing's been tampered with. Though we'll get you moved there as expediently as we can." She turned to Isaac. "You'll be among the first to go - with your mechanical knowledge, your expertise will be appreciated." His eyes widened in surprise. "I'm really not the bad guy here, Isaac," she assured him softly.

"Mary, what about our families?" Eden asked into the silence. "My makuahine is gonna be real unhappy if we don't get some time together before we leave."

"Arrangements are being made to bring them to you once we get you in place. Which reminds me - at some point tomorrow we'll enable your comm devices and you'll be able to contact them again... let them know you made the cut." Mary smiled at the cheers her words garnered. "Any other questions?" She

met Isaac's eyes. "Come talk to me first next time," waiting for his nod before looking around once more. "You guys don't stay up too late," she admonished, then turned and left the lab.

They waited until her footsteps faded to silence, then Jacob turned to Isaac with a look. "You satisfied now, bro?"

"Not really. There's still too many unanswered questions around her. But in deference to my fingers, I'll keep my thoughts to myself until I have some proof one way or another." He missed the rolling eyes and exchanged glances between most of the other team members.

"Do you need to have that checked out?" Arianna asked quietly, motioning to his hand. He caught the glare and slight shake of the head that several teammates gave him and he gave Arianna a crooked smile.

"No... it's all right, Arianna. She didn't break it - just got my attention with it." He struggled to his feet and sighed. "I think I'm just gonna go upstairs to bed. I have a feeling tomorrow is gonna be a madhouse around here."

"Well, be quiet. Eli has already gone to bed." He nodded and headed out the door. Titus followed him almost immediately, then Jacob took Arianna by the elbow and nudged her into a standing position.

"C'mon, Az," laughing when she wrinkled her nose and glared at Eden. "Let's go get some sleep."

Arianna yawned but looked at Danny. He nodded his head at her. "I'll be up shortly," he promised. "I need to clear my station," gesturing to the disarray on one of the worktables. She hadn't seen Eden's hand signal to him.

"Goodnight, everyone," Arianna bid, smiling when the others offered the same in return. Jacob waved and Esther unexpectedly came up on her other side. Immediately the trio was pushing and shoving its way laughing through the narrow corridor. Eden waited until she heard the basement door slam on their laughter before she turned to Danny, Hannah and Kai.

"All right, guys. I need your help," she said succinctly. They nodded and moved in closer, and Eden began laying out her concerns. In moments they were agreeing and discussing ways they could help. Eden sighed, feeling a weight roll off her shoulders. Maybe they could make things right again - with a little effort and elbow grease.

Chapter XXII

"Mama?"

"Yes, my son?" Mary asked with a smile as Ian's face appeared on her screen. She leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers in front of her lips. "What can I do for you, Stud Muffin?"

Ian colored a nice shade of brick and shook his head. "You realize Prue has picked up that nickname, thanks to you. I haven't heard the end of it since she said it in front of my squadron."

"The truth is a burden we all must bear sometimes, my son."

Ian snorted into laughter. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Why yes... yes, I do. I've had years to perfect my technique. But I'm confident that isn't why you contacted me at holy-crap-o'clock in the morning. So what's up?"

"You and me for starters," he quipped, then immediately turned serious. "We should be to you by breakfast. The departures are going like clockwork."

"No complaints about sneaking out in the middle of the night again?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I didn't say that. But most of the candidates understand the safety issue and the need to get them home as expeditiously as possible." He grinned. "Personally I think most of them find it exciting - like a thriller novel or something."

Mary rolled her eyes. A knock on the office door caused Mary to look up with a frown, and she held up a hand to silence Ian. "Come in?" she called out softly. The door opened slowly and Arianna stuck her head into the room. Mary motioned her forward and turned her attention back to the screen. "I'll let Joy know to expect you for breakfast. You should probably bring supplies with you. It will save your sister a little aggravation." She gestured Arianna to take a seat.

"Yes, Mama," Ian replied. "At least we won't be there very long."

"You know where to go when you arrive?"

"We do, Mama. I'll see you soon," knowing Mary had someone waiting to speak to her. "Love you."

"Love you too, my son." The screen went dark and Mary turned her attention to her visitor, cocking an eyebrow at her. "And why are you up wandering around the house so late, Arianna? Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

Arianna shrugged. "Probably. I just... have you ever have so many things going round and round in your mind that you can't seem to make it settle?"

Mary smirked and nodded. "Constantly," she confessed. "It's how I get a lot of my work done." She tilted her head to study Arianna's downcast face, then stood and moved from behind her desk. "C'mon," she invited, extending a hand. Arianna accepted and rose, following Mary from her office.

"Where are we going?"

"The kitchen," nodding at Michael and Dorcas as they reached the lower landing. They had agreed to remain on duty until Mary finished her business with the other team leaders. When she and Arianna crossed into the kitchen, Mary gave Ephraim a jerk of her head, and he exited immediately to relieve the other two from duty. Arianna watched him go before turning to Mary.

"Was it something I said?" she joked softly, taking the seat Mary proffered.

"No," Mary grinned. "Something I did. My guys recognize many forms of communication. It's imperative in our line of work."

"And so many people can't even understand one properly. What's this?" looking up as Mary put a glass of cold milk and a plate of cookies in front of her. "I mean," Arianna sputtered at Mary's raised eyebrow. "I know what it is, but why?"

"Because sometimes a little comfort food goes a long way in settling the mind. And conversation never hurt either. So tell me, Arianna - what are you thinking about? Maybe I can help."

"Probably not... no offense. At least not with most of it - those things I need to figure things out on my own. But there is something - I was wondering... is there a way to keep my parents from visiting me?" smiling sadly when Mary's brows shot into her hairline. "I know that probably sounds harsh to you. I've seen how you interact with your children... how you have interacted with me and I am not even a member of your family. But I cannot be with them right now."

"May I ask why?"

"Are you serious?" watching Mary nod. "You're asking me that knowing what you do about the entire situation?"

"It's not my place to presume. You may have reasons beyond what I know or understand."

"Somehow I doubt that," Arianna retorted wryly. "Still..." she shrugged after a long moment. She picked up a cookie and nibbled on it, marshaling her thoughts. Mary let her be, understanding the process. Instead she poured her own glass of milk and took a seat, waiting for Arianna's attention to return to her. "All right," Arianna said at last. "I have never been especially close to my parents - my papa always had impossible expectations and my mama was less than affectionate though I didn't really recognize that until I saw you with your kids." She let her gaze go inward. "I don't think she would have chosen to have children if it had not been her duty to do so. She never quite seemed to get the hang of being a mother - she tried to care for me, but I was an obligation more than anything."

Mary nodded. "I had that impression myself," she admitted. "You don't think the prestige of being chosen for the Alpha team would change their outlook?"

Arianna snorted. "I know it wouldn't. Nothing has changed their opinions in twenty-five years - nothing has ever been quite good enough. And now that I have managed to eliminate the suitor papa chose as my betrothed - thus erasing the agreement that was part of the betrothal agreement - any time I am forced to spend with them will be... unpleasant."

"You didn't eliminate Malcolm from contention. That was a cumulative effort... not the least of which was mine."

Arianna smirked. "Perhaps, but Papa won't see it that way. He will assign blame to Malcolm, of course, and to you. But the ultimate responsibility will be mine. Because I am the one the betrothal was broken for. No matter the reason behind it."

Mary frowned. "There is something inherently wrong with that logic."

Arianna swallowed the bite of cookie in her mouth and nodded before she picked up her glass and drained half of it. "There is. It doesn't change the truth behind it though."

"All right," Mary sighed. "You'll have to remain here for a little while after the others leave though. I need to make some alternate arrangements for you."

Arianna grinned. "Twist my arm... please. Any time spent with Joy learning her baking secrets is a bonus in my book. Maybe she would be willing to help me adapt them into something I can recreate once we leave here. It would be nice to have this sort of treat occasionally."

"Ask her," Mary said. "She's always liked a good challenge." She studied Arianna's face. It was more relaxed though there was still tension behind her eyes. "You feel like you could get a little rest now?"

"Actually yes. Knowing I won't have to try and appease my parents while I'm trying to get ready to leave is an immense relief. The snack was just a delightful extra." She lifted her glass and finished her milk. "Thank you, Mary."

"Anytime, Arianna. I'm glad I could help." She watched as Arianna took her plate and glass to the sink to wash them. She rose to do the same, not surprised when the glass was taken from her. Mary picked up a towel and dried the dishes, putting them away as Arianna dried her hands.

"Goodnight, Mary."

"Night, Kiddo. Happy dreams."

Arianna just shook her head and walked out the door. Mary sighed and followed behind her slowly. Ephraim rose from his spot by the front door.

"Everything all right, Chief?"

"I think so, Eph. The rest should start arriving shortly. Ian told me they expect to be here for breakfast. The other agents know to go next door, but I expect the boys will show up here first. It's been a while since they've seen their sister for longer than the fifteen minutes they got when she dropped them back at their safe houses."

"I'll keep an eye out."

Mary smirked. "Do. Because if they can sneak around you - here especially - they will never let you or Joy hear the end of it... especially if you're serious about your plans to court her. They'll expect you to be able to protect her from all comers... including them. Speaking of...."

"Not yet, Chief. But soon, I promise. I'd like to have her entire attention when I talk to her about... us, and that's kind of hard to manage right now. It's too important to me to rush."

"Understandable," Mary conceded. "All right. You want to stay out here or...?"

"If it's all the same, Chief, I like the kitchen better."

Mary smirked. "I'm sure you do, Sport. Go on. I'll let you know if I need you to watch out here again," pulling out her Pad. "I'm hoping the rest of the night will be fairly quiet."

Ephraim chuckled. "I suppose it doesn't hurt to hope, Chief. I'll fix some coffee in a few."

"Let me know when it's ready," Mary instructed. Ephraim nodded and walked back into the kitchen. Mary moved over to the chair by the front door and took a seat. There were still things that needed to be taken care of before she could start moving the kids under her watch, and the rest would be

arriving soon. It didn't take long for attention to be split between her Pad and the still world outside the window she could see in the darkness.

She'd seen the movement, of course, but each of the agents had checked in with Mary when they were within sight range. She'd acknowledged them and unlocked the appropriate door to allow them access into one building or the other. It was the darkest part of the night - just before the sky began its process of ushering in the dawn. Things had been quiet for some time, then she heard the sound of footsteps lightly trailing down the stairs. She looked up, expecting to see one of her team leaders coming over from one or the other of the neighboring buildings via the attic. What she found made her eyes widen slightly though there was no other visible reaction.

"Eli? Is everything all right? It's a little early to be up stirring around."

"Says the ultimate night owl," Eli offered with a chuckle as she leaned against a wall.

"Point taken," Mary conceded, "though it's actually in my job description. What's your excuse?"

Eli snorted. "I think I went to bed too early. I didn't even hear everyone else come upstairs last night. I closed my eyes and that was it."

"Well, Joy's not up yet, but I think there might still be a little coffee in the pot," nodding towards the kitchen. "Or Ephraim can make some fresh."

"Thanks," Eli said sincerely, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "But I was wondering if I could talk to you about something first."

"Of course, Eli. What can I do for you?"

Eli sighed and glanced down at her clasped hands before bringing gray eyes up to meet patient brown. "I was wondering - will you and your security team still be with us when our parents come to stay with us prior to our departure?"

"Short of some sort of cataclysmic event preventing our participation, yes. The plan is that we'll be with you until launch. Our last scheduled action in this mission is actually to return your families back to their home planets. Why?"

"I would like for you to meet my MaTb, and for her to meet you. I believe you would make great friends."

"And a person can never have too many of those." Eli nodded but didn't speak, waiting for Mary's answer. Mary kept her eyes on Eli, curious to know what really lay behind the request but intrigued regardless. Finally she nodded. "I think I'd like that," she admitted. "I'll make the appropriate arrangements. It will by necessity be close to launch time. Your preparations come first and I want to ensure you have as much time with your family as can be managed before your departure."

"MaTb will appreciate that. That has been her one big complaint about this whole process - and about the project itself."

"How does she feel about you being gone for so long then? Surely she knew it was a likelihood in your case."

Eli smirked. "After the second security visit? Yes... she knew. But that's different in her eyes. It's an expected hardship they are proud to shoulder in the name of scientific advancement. It is understood that we will be practically incommunicado as part of the rigors of the mission. Knowing that we are still close enough to communicate with on a daily basis and not being able to do so... well, you know how it is. You have the same issue with your children. The big difference is that yours have found their mates. And MaTb worries about that for me."

"So your mother doesn't know..."

"No," Eli replied sharply. "And she won't. That is not something she needs to know - now or ever." She gave Mary a stern look and Mary nodded her acquiescence.

"It's not my place to share that with her, Eli. But a word to the wise - she's going to know something's wrong when she sees you assuming she hasn't figured it out already. Your color is gone. I noticed it when you returned from the desert compound. It's why Dr. Morris checked you out immediately upon your arrival. We were afraid something..." Mary broke off and reconsidered her words. "Just don't be too surprised if your mother figures it out on her own."

"She already knows there's an issue with my color. She thinks it is due to the stress of the political game I have been forced to play and the fact that I've been stuck indoors for months on end... relatively speaking. I mean it hasn't been like it was at home where I was out all day, every day. And your sun is different than mine." Eli shrugged. "I only need her to believe for a few more weeks. After that, it won't matter. I'll be gone."

"Your heartbreak will always matter to her, Eli. You are her child, regardless of your age. Trust me - been there, done that... several times already."

"And her peace of mind matters more to me than her anger and outrage on my behalf does... especially since the situation is partly my fault for not ensuring she was acquainted with the mating rituals and customs of my people before we..." Eli broke off without mentioning Arianna by name. "This way, MaTb will just be concerned that I have no mate yet - not furious that I wasted my opportunity by choosing poorly."

Mary nodded. "I hope you can make her see that then. You should have that much peace."

"And you will meet her?"

"I'd be honored, Eli... truly."

"I have a favor to ask then." Mary cocked her head but didn't speak, so Eli went on. "I promised Reuben that he could be there when you met," coloring slightly when she saw Mary's eyebrow crawl up her hairline. "He really didn't want to bring her and me over to your room earlier until I explained why we needed to talk to you right then. He asked why I was willing to trust you and I told him you reminded me of MaTb. He agreed to bring us to you if I agreed to his being present when you met." She shrugged. "He wants to see the truth for himself, I guess."

"I'll see what I can do," Mary replied dryly. "Reuben is still at the top of my list at the moment." She paused briefly, debating on something before deciding to ask. "Do you know the name of the security agent that visited your family the second time?"

Eli shook her head. "MaTb didn't say. She only mentioned that she was a lovely young woman, and that she and OTeU were undergoing the secondary process because her boss - meaning you - was getting a head start on screening the families of those candidates that she felt would ultimately be chosen as part of the Alpha team in preparation of their visit here." Eli caught a look at the perplexed expression in Mary's eyes. "Why? Is there a problem?"

Mary blinked and returned her focus to Eli, all confusion erased from her features. "No," she assured Eli. "I'm just trying to remember who I sent." She looked down at the Pad in her lap. "Thankfully, I can just look it up." Eli yawned and Mary did the same. "Stop that!" Mary commanded. "I can't start doing that this early in my day."

"Another long one?"

"Aren't they all?" Mary asked wryly. "But yes - this one will probably go on into tomorrow. It depends on how successful we are at moving each of you. And at some point, I need to address the Committee."

"I am so sorry," Eli said sincerely. "Would a cup of coffee make it any better?"

Mary chuckled. "Well, it certainly couldn't hurt. Some days I'm not completely convinced that it isn't the nectar of life. Pretty sure if you checked, you'd find it running through my veins. And I know the boys are the same, if not worse. It's not called 'lifer juice' for nothing, you know."

"Lifer juice'?"

Mary laughed. "Yes... sorry. It's what those who make a career in the military here call coffee. I think they think it's the only thing that will get them through."

"Understandable. My people feel the same about БОДКА. It's gotten many a warrior through training... especially in the winter. However," she said as she pushed away from the wall, "it is much too early in the day and far too warm for anything that strong. So I'm going to go to the kitchen and see if Ephraim has that coffee ready yet." Eli started to walk away, then turned and looked back at Mary. "Thank you, Ms Wellesly."

Mary frowned. "I'm not sure what for, but you're welcome, Eli." She looked up at the sound of footsteps headed down the stairs again. "I'd suggest you hurry if you want that coffee though. I'm pretty sure that's my daughter headed down to start breakfast."

Eli's eyes widened and she wavered before turning and hustling to the kitchen. Mary turned her attention to her Pad. Something didn't add up, and she needed to figure it out quickly. They were going to have to shake things up more than she had anticipated.

Chapter XXIII

The agents who were accompanying the last five Alpha team members to Joy's were of course the final individuals to arrive. Since each team member was going to be assigned three agents on a permanent basis until launch, it was imperative that they be gathered in one place for Mary to make the assignments and hand out last-minute instructions. Of course, it made for a crowded, noisy household, but the greetings between the members of the Alpha team made the security agents smile.

They had to eat in shifts, and they cleaned as they went in an effort to not only expedite things, but also to make things as easy for Joy as possible. Arianna purposefully remained upstairs of her own accord - she wasn't going anywhere soon so there was no reason for her to be in the middle of the melee... until Abigail mentioned her absence. All eyes turned to Mary who motioned behind her.

"She's upstairs," Mary confessed. "Since she's not leaving for a while, she's trying to stay out of the commotion down here to keep from adding to it."

"Well, that's not fair," Abigail complained. "Why should she miss out on this excitement?? Besides, we should get to say goodbye to her too," giving Mary a hard look. Mary met her blue eyes for a long moment, then shrugged and jerked her head towards the stairs. Abigail squealed and clapped her hands. Then she headed upstairs to retrieve Arianna from her hiding place.

Mary met Eli's eyes. Eli nodded and put her fingers to her lips, her whistle piercing in tone and intensity. The Alpha team immediately fell silent and looked her way.

"I think we need to take this downstairs. We have more room to spread out, and I'm sure Joy would appreciate the break. Besides," she added with a grin, "we have something to show those of you who just arrived. It will help pass the time until it's time for us to leave." The others understood her intent and they took the newcomers by the hand and led them down to the basement. Mary felt sure she'd know the minute they discovered the lab.

Abigail and Arianna emerged from upstairs just in time to notice the group entering the basement. They followed along without a word. Only Eli remained behind, stayed by Mary's hand on her arm. She didn't quite shake it off though she did glance at it pointedly. Mary squeezed lightly and loosened her grasp on it.

"My apologies, Eli. I wanted you to know that you will be the first to leave." She looked at her chronometer. "In about fifteen minutes. If you want to say goodbye to everyone, you should do so now. Then join me in the office upstairs as soon as you have gathered your things."

A cheer from downstairs notified them that the team had either welcomed Arianna or they had discovered the lab, though judging by the location of the noise, Mary was banking on the Arianna aspect. She didn't release Eli's stare, and Eli held her gaze a moment longer, then nodded briskly.

"I'll be right back," she assured Mary, then disappeared down the basement stairs. Mary went into the kitchen. It was time to assemble her three-man teams.

"Hey, guys," Eli called out softly as she stepped into the basement. Another cheer went up all around and she couldn't stop the light blush that covered her face. This caused more raucous enthusiasm and an invitation for her to join them. Eli shook her head and held up a hand to ask for quiet, and they immediately fell silent. "I'm on my way out," she said bluntly. "I just wanted to wish everyone luck, and remind you that I'll be seeing you all shortly."

"You can't leave!" Abigail protested. "We just got here."

Eli smiled. "I know, Gay. But I have to - we all do."

"I don't like Mary very much right now," Abigail muttered. Isaac looked around at the others.

"See... I'm not the only one."

"We don't have to like her, Gay," Eli said, deliberately ignoring Isaac. "But she's looking out for us. We shouldn't make it difficult for her. Besides, we'll be together soon and then we won't be able to get rid of one another," added with a smirk.

Abigail pouted. "That's true." She paused and huffed, considering Eli for a long moment. "All right - you can go," she granted. "But you make sure you're on time getting to the transport site, okay? Because I'm going to miss you," throwing her arms around Eli's neck.

Eli froze for a moment; Abigail's action was unexpected, after all - then she returned the hug fervently albeit briefly. "I'll miss you too, Gay. But it won't be long, I promise. It can't be; we don't have that much time to get ready."

"I know!" Abigail exclaimed as she pulled back from the embrace. "I'm so excited."

"Me too, Gay. But I've got to leave now so I don't miss my spot, okay? Why don't you and the others go check out the lab Mary set up for us? It will give you all something to do until it's your turn to leave. We'll see each other soon."

Abigail choked Eli with another quick hug, then turned and grabbed Arianna and Eden by the hands and demanded they show her and the rest the lab Eli had just shared about. Eden gave Eli a backwards glance, but she simply nodded. She would make sure to get in touch with her second as soon as possible, but for now....

Most of the others followed behind the trio with a wave in Eli's direction, though she noted a few who didn't acknowledge her. Danny spared Eli a long glance and she smiled at him. He returned the look and disappeared into the corridor. Then it was only Jacob and Eli who were left in the main part of the basement. She quirked an eyebrow at him and he chuckled.

"Hard to put anything past you, Boss," he said with a grin. "You all right?"

Eli put a warm hand on Jacob's muscular arm. "I'm good, Jake. I'm actually glad to be the first to go - less waiting involved. We all know how good I am at that particular trait," she added with a smirk. "I'll be in touch though. Make sure Eden knows that too, all right?"

"You got it, Boss. Anything else I can do?"

"No, Jake... thanks." She reached up and hugged him and he lifted her off the ground, popping her spine all the way up to her neck. "Ow," she muttered, dropping her forehead to his shoulder.

"Feel better?" he asked into her nearest ear.

"You have no idea," she admitted, patting his chest lightly as he set her feet back on the floor. "Go be with the others. I'll see you soon."

He brushed a kiss over her cheek. "Later, Boss." Then he turned and walked into the lab hallway. Eli headed upstairs without looking back.

"Sorry I'm late, Chief," Eli offered breathlessly as she scrambled through the door Ian held open. "I got held up downstairs." Mary nodded and motioned her to take a seat in front of the desk.

"It's all right, Eli. I expected as much. It's one reason you were chosen to go first though certainly not the primary one. First - you know Reuben and Martha," gesturing to the two agents standing to one side of the desk. Eli acknowledged them with a nod. "Please meet my elder son, Ian." Ian stepped up beside her and extended a hand and Eli accepted it as she studied him. He returned her scrutiny for a moment then smiled, and she relaxed.

"It's nice to meet you, Ian," Eli said politely.

"And you as well, Princess," seeing Eli flinch before her face hardened. "I'm sorry. Would you prefer...?"

"... my name? Yes, I would if at all possible," turning her face towards Mary who nodded.

"Names are fine when addressing Eli directly. If you are broadcasting, please utilize the codenames." The agents and Eli nodded their compliance. Mary took a deep breath. "These three agents have been assigned to you for the duration of the project. One of them will be with you at all times until the ship is actually ready to launch. They won't be living quite in your hip pocket, but you'll probably think it's mighty close. They will endeavor to provide you with some measure of privacy, but try to remember that your safety is their paramount objective. And please feel free to employ their various talents to expedite your preparations - if you need help, ask."

"Umm... okay," Eli drawled slowly. "What about my comm unit? I still haven't received mine back to tell my MaTb about my appointment to the Alpha team."

Mary smiled. "I know. No one has." She reached forward and slid an object across the desk. "Each of you is receiving a new unit that will be provided each team member as they are brought here for their briefing. Now I know you're going to want to talk to your team - and you should... don't get me wrong. All your information has been transferred to the new unit in an effort to facilitate the process. All I ask is that you make it a point *not* to reveal your location to them."

Eli nodded. "I can do that."

"Excellent. Do you have any questions?"

"Not at the moment. Will it be possible to reach you if things come up that I need to discuss with you?"

"Of course," Mary agreed. "You have my number?" When Eli shook her head, Mary extended her hand for the comm unit. She added her information with a bio-scan of her thumbprint, then went into the

system and erased everything but her contact number. Then she handed it back to Eli. "You'll find me under 'Chief'," she said with a grin. Eli chuckled.

"Good to know, Ms Wellesly. Can you tell me where I'm going?"

"Not yet. But I promise you'll recognize it when you arrive." Mary motioned to her team, who headed for the door to wait for Mary to give Eli her final words. She came around the desk and extended a hand. Eli took the hand, and gripped Mary's arms with her other - as close to a hug as she gave most people. "Good luck," Mary said.

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly." Then the quartet walked out the door and headed downstairs to the vehicle that would take them to a transport station no one would look at them twice in. Mary closed the door behind them and resumed her place at the desk, absorbing the peace for a moment before the next set of agents arrived.

It was late afternoon before everyone had been sent on their way. The house seemed extraordinarily empty and quiet now that only Joy, Caleb, Ephraim, Sarah, Arianna and Mary were ensconced there.

"I don't like you going alone, Chief," Caleb objected. "We both know they're gunning for you."

"I can take care of myself, Caleb. I have been for a number of years. Besides, Tom is there and Stephen as well. I'll be all right. Your responsibility is Arianna."

Caleb nodded his acquiescence. "How long is she here for, Chief? Are we moving her?"

"Eventually yes. But she didn't want to spend time with her parents, so I'm having to make other arrangements for her. That takes a little time. I didn't have things set up like I did with the safe houses, and as long as Joy is okay with having people in the house, we may as well stay here as opposed to moving to one of the other houses. Arianna is comfortable here and she and Joy are getting along well. And I like seeing my daughter more than once every couple weeks."

"And it doesn't hurt that there might be a romance playing out here soon that you might like to be witness to."

Mary smiled and shrugged. "There is always that," she agreed. "He has to speak up first, though."

"He will," Caleb assured her. "He's already passed the hardest hurdles - you and the boys."

Mary laughed aloud. "You'd like to think that, wouldn't you, Old Man? Don't think that my daughter can't put her foot down hard and fast if he acts like she's already his for the claiming because he got my blessing and her brothers'. Joy is an independent woman, and she'll be the first to make sure he understands that if he tries."

"Does he know that?"

"Guess we'll find out after he talks to her. But for now, I need to go talk to the Committee and see just how many cages I can rattle."

"You get an obscene amount of pleasure from that, Chief."

"Yes, but I've learned to take my entertainment where I can find it. I'll be back."

"See that you are," Caleb commanded darkly. Mary gave him a wave and was gone.

"So Ms Wellesly," Chairman McMurtry greeted when Mary stepped into the conference room. "What's to stop us from arresting you right here and now?"

"The truth," Mary replied drolly. "At least a few of you are interested in hearing it, and the rest of you need to know what I know so you can decide on your next move."

"Are you insinuating...?"

"No Madame Chairman, in fact I am not. I'm not *insinuating* a thing. I am however stating it. There are members of this Committee - who for their own selfish reasons - would love to see this project fail even at this late date. And for that reason and several others, I'm not going to reveal the location of the Alpha team members."

"And what of the rest of the candidates?"

"I have already sent them home, Madame Chairman - where their friends and families are aware of the necessity of keeping an eye on them until we get things resolved."

"That's quite presumptuous of you, Ms Wellesly. How can we begin selecting candidates for the Beta and Gamma teams if the candidates are not here for us to..."

"Madame Chairman, please don't play that game with me. Just like you did for the Alpha team, you could choose the candidates you deemed fit for the Beta and Gamma teams based on the knowledge of them that you already possess. You don't need to interview them further."

"You do realize you're not exactly making friends and influencing people, don't you, Ms Wellesly?"

"You do realize I am beyond caring at this point, Madame Chairman. I stopped worrying about what this group of individuals thought of me the minute I discovered the treachery within your ranks."

"And you have proof of these allegations?"

"I have enough proof to keep the Alpha team in hiding for the time being, and enough suspicions to continue the investigation I have started into each of your lives. Imagine what the Council will think of some of the information I've already uncovered - information that shows your ties to the infected candidate: the whispers that surround some of you about some of your personal beliefs - beliefs that go contrary to the good of this project."

"You wouldn't dare," Yesu said flatly.

Mary chuckled. "Oh, I certainly would. And if you continue to threaten me, I will do so now and implicate every single one of you - because at the moment you are all in a precarious position. I haven't eliminated any of you from the list of suspects. So you either let me do my job and find out

which, if any, of you are actually guilty of interstellar treason or all of you will suffer the indignities of that suspicion."

"That's blackmail!"

"No, Member Mein - it's truth. It's also your choice," Mary added with a shrug.

"And if we don't agree?" from Member Bartolo. "If we choose to have you arrested for the things of which we stand accused by you, Ms Wellesly? What will you do then?"

"Well, for one thing I'll have a much better grasp on which of you are willing to destroy this project for greed or ideals or principles."

"But you won't fight us? You wouldn't cause a scene?"

Mary chuckled. "I won't have to. My guys know what to do with the information we already have and the information they are working to accumulate. Surely you don't think I walked in here without a plan to walk back out again."

"Why are you doing this, Ms Wellesly?" asked McMurtry. "Why do you insist on painting us as the enemy in this scenario?"

"Madame Chairman, I'm only here to present the facts as I know them to date. The fact is - several of the Committee Members appear to have an association with the infected candidate that goes beyond their need to do so. The fact is - there are several Committee Members who are rumored to be linked to several anti-project groups. And despite everything, the whispers persist. It is my duty to investigate them and find the truth whatever it might be. And Madame Chairman, the fact remains that the kids involved in this project - especially the Alpha team - have been threatened... at least covertly. The less people that know where there are, the better for them. And that is my primary concern. The Council knew that when they hired me for this assignment."

McMurtry sat back in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you really think the Members of this Committee are guilty of the things of which you have intimated they are?"

Mary met McMurtry's eyes squarely. "Madame Chairman, all I know for certain at the moment is the facts as I have presented them to you. Someone is determined to make this mission fail. Given the agenda necessary to accomplish such a feat, it is entirely likely that the culprit is in this room. But I cannot say for sure who or why... yet."

"And you're so certain you can keep the Alpha team safe until launch?"

"I am certain my team will do its utmost. And as long as we keep their location secret, we stand a better chance of accomplishing that objective."

McMurtry studied Mary for a long moment before nodding briskly. "Very well, Ms Wellesly. Despite the wishes of the majority of the Committee, I'm going to allow you to keep your own counsel on this. However, when you next appear in front of this Committee, you had best have more than accusations to present. And if anything happens to the Alpha team, the consequences will be on your head alone."

"Accepted, Madame Chairman," Mary replied curtly. "I will be in communication with you once I've obtained the proof you've demanded. Please don't contact me until then." With that directive, Mary

turned and left the conference room. The Committee sat stunned for several minutes before they broke out into a cacophony of accusations. They didn't notice that they weren't alone.

Chapter XXIV

"MaTb?" Eli whispered as she stepped from the transport. Now she understood why Ian had been so insistent that she don her jacket before they opened the hatch of the transport vehicle. She froze in place as she looked around at the home she hadn't seen in months - more than a year in standard time. Then Eli closed her eyes and took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the scent of *home*.

Another moment passed before Eli felt a light nudging from behind her, and she opened her eyes with the full intent of glaring at the individual that was rushing her homecoming. Then she caught sight of her expectant, waiting family and rushed down the short steps into the waiting arms of her kin.

The greetings were an exciting, jumbled mess and Eli laughed and cried as she was passed from one pair of arms to another. She hadn't realized how much she missed this - the love and support and *contact* of family until it was gone, and she was determined to soak up as much as she could while she was home. Finally she wound up in her mother's arms again, and Eve held on to her tightly before she pushed Eli to arms' length.

"Let me look at you, ДОЧЬ," running a critical eye over the daughter she had not touched in far too long. Eve brought her hand up to touch the thick hair, the soft skin, the strong musculature - assuring herself that things were as they should be. Eli held Eve's eyes, knowing that if she looked away, her mother would dig deeper... search harder. Finally Eve sighed. "You look good, ДОЧЬ - although your lack of color disturbs me greatly. How long are you here for?"

Eli's eyes widened. "I don't know, MaTb. Until I stood in the open transport hatch, I wasn't even aware I was coming home at all." She looked at Ian. He shrugged.

"We don't have a set return date yet. Mama is supposed to let us know in time enough to get to... wherever she is going to bring you to... probably the transport site. Or the space dock. We just know it will be less than six weeks if everything is running on schedule."

Eve frowned. "Six weeks isn't much time, but we'll do the best we can. Come," she said, tucking her hand into Eli's elbow. "Let's go home and celebrate with a feast, and you can introduce us to your new friends, ДОЧЬ." She turned to the three agents. "You are most welcome in our home. Please... join us."

They grabbed their respective bags and set off towards the homestead of Eli's clan.

"This was my eldest son's room," Eve said as she opened the door and motioned the agents inside. "I'm sorry we only have the one room, but we only learned of your presence this morning when Ms Wellesly contacted us. And she stressed the imperativeness of keeping you as close to my ДОЧЬ as possible."

Ian held up a hand. "It's fine, ma'am. We're used to doing with much less if necessary. We appreciate you allowing us to abide with your family."

Eve smiled. "You are protecting my Elizabeth. For that, her OTeU and I would do much. Now come - it is time to celebrate, and you must join us."

"We'd be delighted," he assured her, then turned to speak to Reuben and Martha. "Reuben, do you want to rest now since this is part of your scheduled off hours?" With three of them, they worked in eight-hour shifts, with someone coming on and going off every four hours - keeping two people with Eli at all times. Reuben shook his head.

"Not yet, Ian. I'd at least like to meet the family and eat. Yeah, it'll cut into my sleep, but I'll make it up eventually. Besides, we were all invited and I don't want to be rude."

Ian and Martha chuckled, and Eve cocked an eyebrow at them. Martha turned to her with a smile and interpreted. "He's starving and it smells *really* good."

Eve laughed. "Come then. I will not be accused of being a bad hostess even if you are not ordinary guests." They joined her laughter and dropped their bags in the room, then exited to be met by Eli leaning against the hallway wall opposite. Her arms were crossed over her chest.

"Elijah's room, MaTb?"

"Yes, ДОЧЬ. It is the only room we have to spare. You know as well as I that your СОБРАТ would have insisted were he here to do so." Eli held up a hand to keep Eve from continuing.

"It's fine, MaTb. It was simply unexpected. Now," taking Eve by the elbow, "can we go eat? I'm starving, and I'd be willing to bet my minders feel the same," smiling at the agents to show she really didn't resent their presence. "Besides," she went on before Eve could admonish her, "it has been *forever* since I've eaten at home, and I have missed it."

"We've missed you as well, ДОЧЬ. I expect you to sit up to the table and eat heartily." She glanced at the security team. "You as well," she said with a look that eerily reminded them a little too closely of Mary.

"Yes ma'am," the three replied in sync and Eve turned to Eli with a twinkle in her eye.

"I must meet your Ms Wellesly soon, Elizabeth. She must be a formidable woman to have such well-trained troops."

Eli chuckled. "She has promised to meet you before we leave, MaTb. I think you will make great friends." Then they stepped into the dining area and a cheer went up from the family gathered awaiting their arrival, and in only minutes the feasting and celebrating began.

"So tell us, ДОЧЬ - what are your teammates like?" Eli's father asked when the first rush of eating had subsided. "Do you think you will be happy sharing their lives for the next five standard cycles?"

Eli set her wine glass down with a chuckle, wiping at her lips as she considered her answer. She wasn't going to lie, but.... "I think it's going to be challenging, OTeU, much like it is in communities everywhere. There are always those we find easier to get along with more than others, and some who for whatever reason seem to stroke the fur to standing on end. The one advantage we have is that we

all know that each of us is necessary to the project's success and we all bring multiple skills to the table. We'll make the effort to get along to a certain degree."

"And will you be the leader again? As you were in the testing facility?"

Eli sighed. "That is uncertain. But it is likely, yes. I am good at it, after all, and we already have a hierarchy somewhat established. However, it will depend on the wishes of the group as a whole. I'm not going to force myself into a position of leadership."

"You do not care for the added responsibility?"

"I do not care to fight for it - it cuts into my research time. However, I will accept the position if it is agreed upon by all, but I will not pursue it."

Noah laughed. "Ah, my ДОЧЬ - it is gratifying to know you can drive your MaTb insane even when you are light years from us!" reaping laughter from around the table and a raised eyebrow and a smirk from Eve. Eli just covered her face with her hand.

"OTeU!!"

Noah shrugged. "What?? It is the truth. Always your MaTb has wished for you to be the leader she knows you to be, and even when it is thrust upon you - you do not acknowledge the achievement and honor it is."

"It's not the be all and end all for me, OTeU. I would much rather be left alone to work in the lab. But the role is a necessary one and something at which I am exceptional."

Eve snickered. "Well, at least you concede that point. It's a start."

Eli glared around the table at the laughing, smiling faces of her clansmen. "I feel as though I'm being picked upon," she stated wryly, then looked at Ian. "Why did Ms Wellesly think this was such a good idea?" crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue.

"Because Mama is quite brilliant... and she is a mama. That is reason enough in her book."

"I hate you," Eli muttered, garnering another round of laughter.

"I like this woman," Eve declared. "I very much look forward to our meeting." Eli dropped her head.

"I am so doomed."

The meal was over and Reuben had excused himself to get a few hours' sleep. The younger children had been released to the outdoors to run off the excess energy the day's excitement had created. The rest were gathered in the large great room - filling chairs and couches and spilling over onto the floor. Martha and Ian remained at the perimeter of the room - within view of the doorways and windows while still able to observe the family interactions. Ian was particularly interested as Mary had asked him to keep a special eye on Eli.

"So tell us about the other candidates... I mean - those that made the Alpha team with you," Samuel asked with a blush. "Are they interesting?"

Eli chuckled. "Well... I think so - about most of them, anyway. Let's see - there's Eden who is my best friend and second-in-command. She comes from a planet whose people are known for their strength and endurance. She has two hearts, you know."

"Wow... really?" Sarah questioned. Eli just nodded.

"It really is quite an eclectic mix of people. There's an empath who is an exquisite dancer, by the way - *never* play dance competition games with her; and there's someone who can hear whispers at a great distance. She would be amazing to take on a hunt. One of our team members is from a culture that punishes fighting with death and another is able to understand plants. He helped make the desert compound so successful because he could listen to the plants and relay their needs to us."

"Like they were human?"

Eli smiled. "Not exactly. They weren't cognizant or able to speak to him like we are talking to one another. But he could look at the leaves or the roots or the fruit and just *know* what was wrong. We didn't always find the right solution immediately, but Titus gave us the opportunity to correct our mistakes without killing the plants we needed to survive. It was one of the most fascinating things I witnessed while I was in the desert compound. I think even he was surprised by his hidden talent and his level of success with it."

"He didn't know about it before? The ability to talk to the plants, I mean?"

"Not to this degree, no. Though in fairness, I don't think he was ever called upon to utilize it like he was there. And of course he got much better the more he practiced."

"Now you sound like MaTb," Samuel complained. "Always with the practicing."

"Never doubt the wisdom of your MaTb, my son," Eve chided in a solemn tone. The rest smiled, but remained silent. Samuel sighed.

"Yes, MaTb." He looked back at Eli. "Are there others?"

"Yes, of course. We have a couple of members that come from a planet where their natural color is lavender. And when they are embarrassed, they become the color of the eggplant fruit. The first time it happened to Daniel, I thought he was going to collapse." Eli covered her face with her hand. "It was somewhat embarrassing for both of us, actually. But he was quite gracious about it, realizing I was simply acting out of concern." She looked around the room. "It was a pretty steep learning curve for most of us when we entered the compound, but we adjusted quickly. It's why we were successful - we learned to understand things about one another."

"It sounds like quite a mixed group," Noah commented. Eli nodded.

"It really is. And we cover every scientific discipline known. Almost everything was covered by more than one candidate when we arrived, and those things that weren't covered by multiple candidates at the start were learned by several as we had time to do so. Now almost every candidate - not just Alpha team members - has enough rudimentary knowledge to qualify as a field medic. Most comprehend the basics of fission and how it works. Near the end, a lot of us could tell if the mix was

off just by the sound of the core. Everyone became versed in living and mechanical sciences. Most of us could only figure out if there was a problem and wait for someone whose job it actually was to do something about it, but at least we learned to understand when there was a problem. I'm sure it will continue to be a learning process."

"We are very proud of you, ДОЧЬ," Eve commented. Everyone else in the room nodded their agreement and Eli blushed and let her head drop. Eve shifted until she could reach Eli, then gently lifted her chin until their eyes met. "No," she said sternly. "You have earned this. Take pride in your efforts, Elizabeth - and in your virtuosity. You have found your place in life. Own it."

"Yes, MaTb," Eli whispered. Tears filled her eyes but she refused to let them fall. Eve cupped her cheek and Eli leaned into the touch.

"Is it hard?" Sarah asked softly, not wanting to break the spell. Eli looked at her and frowned. Sarah saw her confusion and elaborated. "Being away from home - is it very hard?"

Eli drew a deep breath and brushed a kiss over Eve's fingertips before clasping the smooth, worn hand in her own. She met Eve's eyes and smiled, then turned back to Sarah. "Sometimes," she admitted. "On those days when nothing went right... when we were struggling to survive. That was more at the beginning of trying to live and work together. Fortunately those days grew fewer and farther between as we learned how to work together and make things work for us. But most of the time - when I was submerged in the science and technology we were developing and utilizing..." Sarah held up a hand and Eli looked at her askance.

"Please, Eli... we all know what happens when you become immersed in any kind of science. How many times did we have to pull you away to take care of the other responsibilities of the household?"

Eli shrugged. "Point taken," she agreed. And the room grew silent for a few minutes as they all remembered times long past. Then Eve removed her hand from Eli's grasp and slapped her hands on her knees.

"All right. Enough of this for now. Elizabeth... the rest of you - grab your jackets and let's go outside. We need to see if we can get some color back in these cheeks. Besides, I imagine the РЕБЯТА are ready for some playtime with their ТЕТКА. And it will be dark soon, so we must do this now. There will be time for more food and conversation later."

Everyone looked at each other and then back to Eve, who simply lifted an eyebrow at them. As one body they rose and scattered to the various rooms that held their outerwear. In moments they had congregated back in the great room, and when Eve was satisfied with everyone's clothing, they paraded out the door to play.

Ian and Martha had donned their coats but remained on the periphery of things, content to watch and observe. So far things had been quiet and uneventful, but that was the best reason not to let their guard down. Both agents knew it was when they grew lax that bad things tended to happen.

Not that they weren't entertained by the family interaction. It was obvious that Eli was much loved by her entire extended clan, and missed by even more than that. A number of people stopped to chat once they noticed her outdoors and Ian slid into place beside her as unobtrusively as possible. The neighbors looked at him suspiciously, but Eli took it in stride and Eve nodded her approval. Only as darkness approached did Ian take measures to usher Eli indoors, and the family followed his direction without question... even Eve.

As soon as they were inside again, Reuben emerged from the bedroom and Martha bid them goodnight. Eve tilted her head at the agents thoughtfully.

"You really are a well-oiled machine. Tell me of your training."

"Oh, MaTb," Eli cut in with a giggle before either man could respond. "I'm not at all certain you will want to hear this. I spoke to Ms Wellesly about it briefly before the Alpha team was chosen. Did you know her sons, at least, are trained to dance?"

Both brows shot into Eve's hairline. "Is this true?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am," Ian replied easily. "Nathaniel and I learned because Joy was training and it kept us occupied. But Mama had all her agents learn... to some degree anyway," Ian amended. "She couldn't ask them to do more than she could, and as graceful as Mama is, she has two left feet every time she tries to dance." Reuben nodded his affirmation.

"She asked that we at least try," Reuben added. "She felt it would make us more well-rounded, and in fact it actually did help most of us with our balance if nothing else. But it was also incorporated into our offensive and defensive training. It's quite useful. And of course my wife appreciates the fact that I don't crush her toes when we have the chance to be on the dance floor together."

"I told Ms Wellesly I would mention it. Our warriors are expected to be well-versed in all the arts - both from our cultures as well as those of our allies, and yet the ability to dance has never been a physical requirement. Perhaps we should consider adding it to the curriculum."

Eve nodded, her eyes locked on Ian. "Would you teach us?"

Ian nodded immediately. "If you'd like," he consented. "It would be a bare basics crash course unless you'd like me to arrange something with Mama where someone can be assigned here for a while."

Eve smiled. "Let's see what you can teach us while you are here. We'll discuss beyond that when the time comes." She caught Eli covering up a yawn and looked at her daughter. "It is getting late, Elizabeth. Perhaps we should table any more discussion until the morning."

Eli yawned again. "Would you mind terribly, MaTb? We've been going for a very long time today, and suddenly I am simply exhausted to my very bones." Eve gave Eli a look.

"Of course I do not mind, ДОЧЬ. We will have time to talk tomorrow - although I am confident every neighbor within a hundred kilometers will have business to conduct with me tomorrow... just for the chance to greet you. You've become quite the planetary hero, you know."

Eli groaned and dropped her head, covering her face with her hand. "I told Ms Wellesly that would happen," she muttered. Eve slapped her knee.

"Be proud, Elizabeth. You've brought great honor to us - your house, your clan, your planet. Now go - it is bedtime. We will talk more tomorrow... and all the tomorrows that remain of your time here." Eli nodded and stood.

"Goodnight, everyone. I'll see you in the morning." Her words got her hugs from everyone again, and she absorbed them greedily. When they were done, Eli turned to Ian and Reuben and bobbed her

head briefly. "Gentlemen." Then she eased down the hallway and slipped into her room, closing the door soundly behind her. Eve studied the two men who shifted to cover as much of the house as they could manage.

"So tell me more about your training," she demanded, and Ian proceeded to do so.

Chapter XXV

"Are you certain you don't mind me staying here, Joy?" Arianna asked as she sat in the kitchen with her hostess. She and Joy had come to an understanding about Arianna's need to be part of the household and help out, and now Arianna was peeling potatoes for dinner. "I know the situation was somewhat thrust upon you."

"I'm glad you're here, Arianna - that I could give you shelter from... well, Mama told me a little about your folks. It reminded me to be thankful for mine. Besides, I always wanted a younger sister and instead Mama and Daddy gave me twin terrors... <ahem> I mean brothers."

Arianna laughed. "And yet you love them... and they love you."

"Oh yes, of course. I don't know what I would have done without them. Although," Joy drawled thoughtfully as she concentrated on removing the seeds from a cucumber, "dating would probably have been a lot easier."

Arianna frowned. "I don't understand - how so?"

"My daddy was an old-fashioned man, and he instilled those same values in my brothers. It was almost impossible to find someone to date who met their criteria, and even fewer who were willing to endure their version of a gauntlet to go out with me." Joy shrugged. "On the other hand, it weeded out a lot of unappealing prospects that I never actually had to deal with."

"Wait - your suitors were given criteria to meet before you could date them?"

"Yes, of course. Mama and Daddy insisted. And I really didn't mind - my focus was on dancing. I didn't have time to waste on dating anyone."

"Wow," Arianna commented. "That is so different from how things work on my planet."

Joy snorted. "If it makes you feel better, my experiences are very different from how things generally work here too."

"Really? How so?"

"Well," Joy said as she rose and took the bowl of cucumber seeds to the counter. She grabbed the tomatoes and walked back to the table and took her seat beside Arianna. "I was being guarded, remember - protected from those who posed a peril to my well-being. Everyone I met was vetted first."

"Even your friends?"

"Them especially," Joy emphasized. "My friends were insiders; they had access to me in our home. Given some of the threats that had been made, it really wasn't all that unreasonable. And Mama kept it quiet. I didn't even know about it until I hit puberty." Joy chuckled and shook her head, and Arianna gave her a questioning glance. "I probably wouldn't have known about it then if I hadn't been acting like such a pain in the ass."

Dark brows flew into an equally dark hairline. "Really? Can you share?"

"Of course. It's embarrassing, but it's not a secret or anything." Joy propped her head on her hand and focused on a time in her past, trying to recall the details. "I guess I was about fifteen - just at that age where you think you know everything and your parents are just complete imbeciles, you know?" She caught a look at Arianna's confused expression and shook her head. "No, you probably don't. Let's just say I was full of myself, and there was this cool bad boy in my school - I had the biggest crush on him. Mama tried to tell me... tried to warn me, but I knew better. I didn't listen. I decided to sneak out to meet him."

"I take it that didn't go well?"

"It was humiliating. The boys followed me and Mama beat me to the rendezvous point. She was actually sitting there watching when I arrived, but I was so pleased with thinking I had gotten out of the house unnoticed that I didn't see her. And of course my brothers were like stealth ninjas or something. I never saw them until... I'm getting ahead of myself. Billy was cute and charming, I thought; the fact that he was a bad boy was just a bonus in my book, you know? He led us over to a sheltered alcove and Mama let it go until I told him no and pushed him away. When he tried the second time... well that is when I saw my brothers as they pushed past me and knocked Billy to the ground. That night Mama explained to me exactly how things were and why. I learned a lot about respect." Joy snorted. "So did Billy."

"What happened?"

"Well, let's just say that dating wasn't an issue for me for the rest of the school year after that. The story was around the school before the weekend was even over. Strangely, Billy had a harder time recovering from it than I did - the stories as well as the smack down."

"What about now?"

Joy looked up from where she'd turned her focus to facilitate her chopping. She frowned. "What about now, what? I don't understand."

"Does Mary and your brothers still vet your friends and suitors?"

Joy chuckled and nodded. "To some degree I believe they always will. It was second nature for so long, you know. But it's not like it was before I became an adult, and Mama tries not to interfere unless there is actually genuine physical danger involved."

"Does that still happen?"

"Only once," Joy confessed. "But Mama took care of it so quickly I wasn't aware there was a problem until it was over. That's one reason I was glad you got to stay here. Mama will make sure you're taken care of, and it will give me a chance to get to know you a little."

"Not really that interesting," Arianna mumbled. Joy arched a brow.

"Trust me - you won't think that by the time you leave here. You just have to be willing to be honest with me. You'll be surprised to learn how interesting you really are."

"I'll be honest if you will. Because I've never had someone treat me like you do."

"How's that, Arianna?"

"Like a member of the family. Like I matter because I'm Arianna and not because I'm the princess or the creator of fuission or a genius with an IQ off the scale and almost no real social skills."

Joy laughed. "I don't care about the princess part or the brilliant scientist part, and I can help with the social skills thing. But I should warn you - the family thing? Yeah... that's like... permanent in this family; so once you're in, you're stuck. That means Mama and my over-protective brothers become yours to share and bear with me."

Arianna's eyes were watery, but her smile was wide and bright. "That sounds wonderful," she confessed. "Are you certain Mary and your brothers won't mind the late addition to the family?"

Joy laughed. "The boys are going to be upset that they didn't think to do it first. Mama's going to ask me what took me so long to take care of getting it done. But a word to the wise, Little Sister? Make sure you call her Mama and not Mary... or Chief. That's all she's ever been called by us kids. Oh... wait - unless that would cause a problem for you with your other mama. If that's the case...."

"No," Arianna said, reaching out a hand to halt Joy's speech. "If Mary is okay with me calling her Mama like the rest of her children do, I'd like that."

"Good," Joy replied, catching Arianna's hand in her own. "But one request?" smiling when Arianna nodded enthusiastically. "I want to be there when you call her Mama for the first time. I want to see her expression." Arianna laughed. "Now," Joy said becoming serious. "How many potatoes do you have left to peel? It's time to get them on to boil." And their concentration turned towards dinner.

"You know something?" Arianna asked Joy as they sat down at the table. Dinner was cooking and they had a few minutes before it required their immediate attention again. "I think Ephraim really likes you. I mean the serious, been vetted by Mama and the boys kind of likes you."

Joy blushed but held Arianna's eyes. "Yeah? What makes you think so?"

"That he's serious?" Joy nodded. "He watches you. His eyes follow you when you're in a room together - or at least they do when I've seen him when you're around. And do you really think Mama would allow someone to work for her who didn't have enough character to speak to her about it... knowing that she built her company and reputation on protecting you? He may be quiet, but I don't think Mama would tolerate stupid."

Joy laughed. "You learn quickly, Little Sister. So what do you think of him?"

Arianna propped her chin in her hand and looked thoughtfully out the window that overlooked the now dark back yard. She couldn't really see anything, but it did help her focus. Caleb was currently the

agent on duty in the kitchen; Sarah was in the front of the brownstone. And yet he was so still that neither young woman took much notice of him... even when Arianna's gaze glanced over him as she brought her attention back to Joy.

"I think he is very quiet... well-mannered; he takes pride in his work and his appearance."

"Buuuuut?" Joy drawled out when Arianna stopped speaking. "You must have some opinion of the person he is."

Arianna shook her head. "Not really - I don't know him... only what I have observed of him in the few days I have been here. I never even noticed him before we arrived here though I believe that to be due in part to the fact that he was never around when I was awake."

"Okay... let me ask this then - would you date him?"

"I don't understand the question," holding up a hand before Joy could interrupt. "I don't think dating in your society means the same thing as it does in mine. For us, dating is our period of sexual awakening. We're not looking for a mate - we're developing our sexual prowess."

Joy blinked slowly. "Wait... what?"

"In my culture, once a person reaches the age of majority and consent, they become sexually active. Interest is indicated by a kiss, and if it is returned and both parties agree, then sex follows as a matter of course. The idea is to gain experience with a multitude of partners before marriage so that you and your mate will have the knowledge and skill to make one another happy during your union. It is believed to make marriage partners more faithful to one another."

"Ooookaaaaay," this drawl even longer than the first. "Then how do you find a life mate if not by dating different people until you find the one you want to spend your life with?"

Arianna sighed. "On my planet, the finding of one's mate is left to the parents of the individual because it is considered a contractual arrangement. The elder parent is expected to make the best deal he or she can with the most suitable partner available."

"Oh," Joy said flatly. "EW."

"Yes, I have come to expect that reaction." Arianna snorted and shook her head. "More and more that has become my reaction, and I grew up knowing it was my destiny."

"Is it a successful practice then?" Joy asked with a confused frown marring her features. Arianna scowled and shrugged.

"In most instances, yes - because the two being betrothed have usually grown up together and are generally known to one another if they are not actually friends. Most times, they are friends and have a number of things in common to build a relationship on."

"That wouldn't happen with you?"

"It *didn't* happen with me," Arianna corrected.

"Oh no!" Joy demanded as she jumped from her place and moved towards the old-fashioned stove. "You don't get to be betrothed in this family unless the rest of us approve."

Arianna chuckled and savored the warmth of belonging that washed through her veins. "Not a problem, Sister of Mine. Mama took care of it. I am a free woman... mostly anyway."

Joy scrunched up her face. "How are you mostly free? I thought either you were or you weren't."

Arianna snorted. "If only it was that simple," she replied. "I promise I'll explain, but not now. I have no desire to share this story with everyone, and they should be coming in soon to eat."

Joy looked into brown eyes swirling with so many emotions and nodded. "Very well," she agreed. "But you have to teach me the princess wave. And don't look at me like that - I know all princesses are taught a special way to wave to everyone when they're on display. I just figure as the older sister in this equation that I should at least be acquainted with the gesture."

Arianna laughed, but nodded her head. "Of course. I'll teach you after dinner. Shall I set the table while you dish up the food?"

"Please and thank you, Little Sister. See - Mama made sure I had royal manners too!" Their laughter filled the room and made the rest smile as they entered.

"Mama?" Arianna said as they were clearing off the table. She and Mary had agreed to share clean-up chores with Joy so they agents could keep their focus on Arianna.

"Yes, Daughter?" Mary responded without missing a beat.

"You do know that was me, correct... and not Joy?" placing a hand on Mary's arm.

"Of course, Arianna. But you called me Mama so I thought I'd acknowledge that. Now what can I do for you, Honey?" Arianna blinked and rushed into Mary's arms. Mary chuckled softly and hugged Arianna tightly, turning to look at Joy with a twinkle in her eyes. "Did you not explain to her what being part of this family meant?"

"I did, Mama, but I don't think she quite believed me," moving to be included in the embrace. After a moment, Mary and Joy pulled away and Arianna opened her eyes to smile at them.

"I think I'm starting to get the picture," laughing in pure happiness. She looked at Joy. "Did you know she would respond that way?" Joy smirked.

"Let's just say I had a sneaking suspicion. Besides... even though it's only been a couple days - didn't I tell you she was going to ask me what took me so long? She's been waiting for it." Arianna let her gaze bounce between the two women, then laughed again.

"So was there something you actually wanted to ask, Arianna?" Mary queried. "Or were you just going for the shock effect?"

"A little of both actually," she confessed while still smiling brightly. "Hopefully I will be more successful with the request because you were obviously not at all stunned with the news of adding another child to the family."

Mary shrugged. "Joy always wanted a sister and we needed another girl to balance things out. So I'm glad you decided to join the family. Now what can I do for you, Arianna?"

Arianna was surprised at how easily Mary played off the generosity of accepting her into the family while making it appear as though Arianna was actually doing them a favor by agreeing. She had never met people like the Welleslys before and counted her blessings she had done so now. An eyebrow raised in her direction made Arianna remember that Mary was waiting for her to speak and she blushed slightly.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I started thinking and I have a tendency to get lost in my own head when that happens. I was just wondering what I was supposed to do about getting my things together for the mission."

"I was waiting for you to ask," Mary admitted. "For your gear and stuff, we can take you into the city to shop if you'd like to go out. Or I can set you up an anonymous account from which you can order what you need and have it delivered - not here, of course, but somewhere that it can be picked up and brought back for you to inspect and go over." She paused and studied Arianna intently for a moment.

"What?"

"Is there anything you need from home? And clothes or mementoes or notes - anything at all that you want from your home planet to take with you?"

Arianna breathed out slowly through her nose as she bit her lip in thought. "There are a few things I wouldn't mind having," she confessed. "But nothing that is absolutely critical to the mission itself - certainly nothing that would influence its success."

"Would you like me to accompany you to retrieve them then, or would it be better if you just gave me a list and I went alone?"

"Oh Mama... I couldn't ask - you know how my papa is."

"I do, which is why I volunteered. So you're not asking - I'm willing. However, if you'd like to be able to say goodbye to your parents without allowing them the chance to make you miserable, Joy and I will go with you. Of course, that means your security team goes too though they would be covert in their coverage of you whenever possible."

"You believe I would need security on my home world?"

"Yes. It's why I sent security details with all the candidates. Arianna, they all went home to visit their families before I bring you all back together somewhere that you can finish up your last-minute preparations - you know... going over lists and double checking your equipment and things."

"Oh... I didn't realize...."

Mary smiled. "You weren't supposed to. I thought everyone would appreciate the opportunity to see their friends and extended families because you'll only be allowed two visitors to view the launch from

the space dock. So it's completely up to you, Arianna. If you'd like to say goodbye, then I'll take you home. If you'd rather I go alone," she grinned, "I don't think your daddy is going to say much to me. He doesn't like me, but he does respect me."

"Papa respects you?" her voice incredulous.

"Grudgingly, but yes."

Arianna blinked slowly. "I would almost like to be witness to that. Would it be cowardly of me to accept your offer?"

"Not at all. It would actually make things easier for both of us." Arianna tilted her head. "If you go, there will be a fight, because he will want you to be the Princess while you are there and I simply cannot allow that to happen. The only reason the Alpha team was allowed to return home is because their families promised to keep their whereabouts on the down low. Do you really think your father could do that given your royal position and the pride involved in your accomplishments?"

Arianna snorted. "Not at all."

"Exactly. So if you'll give me a list of what and where, I'll go in the morning. The less warning he has to prepare for me the better for all involved," drawing the laughter she was looking for. "Maybe you and Joy and your escorts can...."

"Don't worry, Mama," Joy cut in. "I've got it covered."

Mary nodded. "All right then, ladies. If we're set for tomorrow, I'm going to head to bed. I have a feeling I'm going to need all my faculties to deal with Fernando tomorrow," crossing her eyes and smiling when both younger women laughed. "Goodnight, girls."

"Night, Mama."

Chapter XXVI

"Hey, Eli! How's it hanging?" Eden asked exuberantly with a wide smile on her tanned face. Eli chuckled and shook her head. She had missed Eden's enthusiasm and sarcastic wit even in the few days they had been separated.

"It's not 'hanging' at all," Eli replied drolly. "But I am certainly happy to be where I am."

"Me too," Eden returned without hesitation. "It's been a little taste of heaven. Any idea how long it'll last?"

"Not a clue," Eli answered. "Not even Ian has been informed. Have you spoken to anyone else?"

"No. I figure if I'm here longer than a standard week, I'll make a few contacts, but for now I'm just happy to be where I am enjoying the perks this place has to offer."

"Understandable," Eli smiled. "I came to a similar conclusion myself."

"So to what do I owe the honor then?" Eden asked, her expression becoming more serious. "Problem?"

"Not that I've been alerted to," Eli stated calmly. "Jake gave you my message?"

"It's why I was expecting your communication."

"How did the exodus go?"

"Quite smoothly, all things considered. There were a few teary goodbyes - fortunately Mary sent Abigail out early in the process or I might still be drying my shirt. Honestly," Eden shook her head with a hint of impatience in her voice though her eyes sparkled with mirth. "The way she was acting, you'd have thought we were never going to see one another again."

"How was Isaac?"

"Surprisingly mellow. He seemed to take Mary's words to heart... at least enough to allow her to move him." Eden bit her lip. "You know, Eli - he *did* make some good points, but I thought Mary responded to his accusations much more graciously than I would have. I would have just kicked his ass."

Eli snorted. "I would almost pay to see that, Eden."

Eden smirked. "But what really bothers me is that he brought them up at all," snorting at the confusion on Eli's face. "Eli, for all his mechanical brilliance, Isaac is not that well-verse in human relations. He reminds me a lot of Az when we first got to the compound - the difference is he had no one to try and help him with his ineptitude," ignoring Eli's flinch at her mention of Arianna. "So where did all this come from, Eli? He couldn't have thought of it on his own."

"So you think someone on the team...."

"I think it will bear keeping an eye on."

"Agreed," Eli said with a sharp nod. "Anything else of interest happen?"

"Not really. It mostly seemed to go like clockwork. I think everyone was just ready to go anywhere at that point... if only so we didn't feel like a burden where we were, you know?" Eli heard a shout in the background just as Eden turned her head towards it. "Look, that's... I need to go," glad she hadn't inadvertently shared her location. Not that Eli didn't know, but on the off-chance someone picked up their communication, Eden hadn't broadcast it. "You want to try to get in touch again later in the week?"

Eli nodded. "Let's do that. I'll try to touch base with a few of the others as well. Maybe by then we'll have some idea of our timetable."

"Sounds good," Eden agreed before there was another yell. "I gotta...."

"Go," Eli commanded. "We'll talk again soon." The screen went dark and Eli leaned back in her chair. Despite how wonderful it felt to be home again, talking to Eden gave her a measure of peace. She almost wished she asked about... Eli let her thoughts trail off there. She had determined her course - now she had to stick with it. It was for the best.

Besides, even after just a few days at home, her skin and eyes had started to recover their natural luster... the faintest hue of spring green just visible in both skin tone and eye color. Bringing Arianna into the mix even in her thoughts was likely to ruin that, and that would make her mother start asking questions Eli had no desire to contemplate.

Forcing her mind to happier thoughts, she reviewed the time she had already spent with her family. Ian had cautioned her to pack up the things she wanted to take with her the morning after they arrived, stressing the need to be ready to move out at a moment's notice. So she was ready to leave when the time came, and found it much easier to relax and enjoy her time with friends and family knowing that was behind her.

She was smiling - reliving an epic snowball war that her team had won - when Samuel knocked on the door, interrupting her reverie. Eli turned her head and motioned him into Eve's office. Samuel crossed the threshold slowly. This wasn't a room where he had wanted to spend any time when he was younger as it meant there was punishment coming. Even now, on the cusp of adulthood, he hesitated. Eli chuckled and stretched to grab him by the arm to pull him to a chair.

"Don't worry, little СОБРАТ. МаТb is not here." She cocked an eyebrow. "Should I call her? Do you need to be punished for something?"

He snapped his head around, bright green eyes meeting her mostly gray ones. He scowled at her. "What?? NO! It's just... this has always been МаТb's space, and we always respected that. I've never had a reason to be in here unless I was in trouble for something."

Eli chuckled. "I understand," she informed him, rolling her eyes slightly. "It was a little strange for me too, but I needed the privacy and it is the quietest room in the house." She tilted her head at him. "Is something wrong, Samuel? Did you need me for something particular?"

He shrugged and glanced at the ground, blowing out a breath. Eli bided her time, knowing there was something on his mind that he would share when he was ready. In a moment, he looked up and met her eyes. "I want to know what is wrong with you," he stated boldly. Eli blinked.

"What makes you think anything is wrong?"

The look he gave her was scathing, but Eli forced herself to hold his gaze. After a moment, he huffed and dropped his stare. "I know it's not really my place," he said softly. "You are a grown woman - a successful warrior and scientist - and I haven't even entered warrior training yet. But I promised Elijah...." glancing up when he heard her sharp intake of breath.

"You promised him what?" Eli's words low and biting. Samuel took a deep breath and met her gaze steadily.

"When he was recalled into warrior service to help defend against the uprising - he asked me to look out for you... made me promise to do so. I think he knew...." Samuel broke off and shrugged, but he didn't lose her stare. He could feel the fury burning.

"So he went in my place, *knowing* he wouldn't be coming home to his family again??"

"That's not what I meant!"

"But it is what you think."

"NO!" Samuel ran his hands through his hair and stood up to pace the room. After a few minutes he returned to sit across from her, and he took her limp hand between his. "Eli knew the possibility was there, Ellie - we all do. I think he was afraid you would blame yourself."

"Rightly so, Sammy - he wouldn't have gone had I been here."

"Yes, he would have," Samuel contradicted her. "Eli would have followed as your second just like he always did. Then we would have lost you both, Ellie. That would have killed MaTb - that would have destroyed all of us. And even though you're leaving again and will be gone for a long time, we know you're doing the work you've been called to do - making a difference that no one else can."

"You're going to make me cry, Sammy." He shook his head violently.

"No... you can't cry, Ellie. If you cry, then I'll cry and then MaTb will want to know why I made you cry and I'll have to come back in here for punishment and no... just no. I am almost old enough to enlist in warrior training - I don't want to be punished like a child again." He snorted. "I would never hear the end of it, you know. And then you'd have to give up your mission and defend me against all comers and just no, Ellie. Just no."

He glanced up at her to find Eli regarding him with amusement. "Are you done?" she asked him with a hint of a smile. Samuel cleared his throat.

"Yes... yes, I am."

"All right then - let's go see what OTeU has prepared for lunch. I think we are hiking the park this afternoon. Are you going to join us?"

"Of course," Samuel replied as he held the door and motioned her in front of him. "That's better core training than pre-warrior exercises."

Eli nodded and shrugged. It was true. "You know how to eat then," she cautioned him, arching an eyebrow in his direction and Samuel nodded. Then they took their places at the table and settled down to eat.

"Hey, Eden!" Arianna greeted in surprise. She hadn't honestly expected to hear from any of her teammates until such time as they were physically reunited. "What a lovely surprise!" she greeted enthusiastically with a mega-watt smile. Eden returned the expression, touched by Arianna's happiness. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Hey Az! I just wanted to check on you. Everything good?"

"Oh, Eden... that's lovely of you. I'm wonderful actually. I feel like I have a real family here - it's the most amazing sensation."

"I'm glad, Az. You deserve better than what you got handed - not that you didn't handle it with aplomb," Eden added, only to be stopped by Arianna's laughter.

"Oh, I really didn't, Eden - we all know that. It's why all of you found me so annoying and off-putting when we first met. But I'm getting better and Joy is helping me."

"Well don't you go changing too much on us, Az. I'm not sure we'd know what to do with a perfectly mannered, socially graceful royal nerd."

Arianna laughed. "If it makes you feel better, Eden - I am confident in saying that not even a trained dancer like Joy could teach me to gracefully dance the Weird Egg or whatever that dance was that Gay was so fond of."

Eden laughed. "You mean the Funky Chicken?" laughing again when Arianna bobbed her agreement. "I don't think *anyone* can make that look graceful. But I'm glad you're there. You seem a little more settled... happier. I hope it sticks once you leave."

"So do I, Eden... thanks. Um, have you talked to Eli? I know I shouldn't ask, but...."

"She's fine, Az. She's somewhere she needs to be right now."

"I'm not sure that's going to help me reach her, though."

"Probably not," Eden replied bluntly. "But you have most of the rest of us on your side. It may take a while, but it'll work out if we have anything to do with it, all right?"

Arianna smiled and lifted a hand to wipe the tears that spilled from her eyes. "I wish I could convey to you what that means to me, Eden. No one has ever... not until this project - I mean, it's changed my world. It's given me real friends and family... people who care. And I know I should have talked to Eli before now... before this snarled into such a mess. I just... I've never.... I didn't recognize what I felt for her until she cut me from her life so completely."

Eden ran a hand through her hair, thankful for the fresh mai tai just out of view. She had a feeling she was going to need it before the conversation was over. "Do you know why she did that, Az? Do you know why she exorcised your existence from her life?"

Arianna sniffed deeply and took a deep breath as she shook her head. "I know she was angry about my betrothal to Malcolm - I was angry about my betrothal to Malcolm. I didn't even *like* Malcolm - my father forced me into a stunted relationship with him against my wishes. But she never talked to me about it so I could explain."

Eden sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Then she picked up her mai tai and took a deep swallow. "Az, will you do something for me?"

"If I can, Eden, of course."

"Thank you. I want you to do some investigating. Talk to Mary or do some research or whatever it takes for you to accomplish this task. But I want you to learn about Eli's culture - as many aspects as you can find... especially those parts you don't know about. And after you've done that I want you to call me, all right? Once you know everything you can about the way her culture works, we'll talk."

"It's that important?"

"Az, it's gonna explain so many things to you - things you should have known before; things you need to know now."

"Very well, Eden. I'll get right on that. But if I cannot complete this before we are together again?"

"We'll still talk, Az. We'll just have to find somewhere private to do so, okay?"

"Okay, Eden," not surprised when Eden took another long draught of her drink. "And Eden?" drawing those black eyes back to hers. "Thank you. I know you don't have to, but...."

"But it's in all our best interests, Az. And if it makes you and the Boss happy, well... bonus for me. Things seem to go a lot better when you are. Now," eyeballing her empty glass. "I need to go fix myself another drink and stretch out in the hammock for a little while and unwind. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

"Thanks, Eden."

"Anytime, Az," offering a salute before the screen went dark. Arianna leaned back against the wall and relaxed into the bed she was seated on. She remained that way for a few minutes thinking about everything Eden had said. Then she jumped up from her spot and placed her Pad on the bed before exiting her room. First she would talk to Mary before she left for Arianna's home world. She had a feeling if anyone could give her answers or at least a place to start, Mary would be her best bet.

It was time to take action to correct the situation between her and Eli.

Chapter XXVII

"Did they inquire about me at all?" Arianna asked when Mary walked into the kitchen two mornings later carrying a small suitcase. Mary placed the bag in front of her and squeezed her shoulder lightly before moving to accept the cup of coffee Ephraim had poured for her. She breathed in the aroma briefly, then lifted the cup to her lips for her first swallow. Only after it was gone did she take a seat beside Arianna.

"They did indeed. They were naturally proud to hear of your official appointment though they never expected anything else, of course. We were all quite civil and made it through the proceedings without bloodshed. Your mother expressed thankfulness that Malcolm was out of the picture as a suitor - apparently she wasn't fond of him either. A little too much like your father, I think."

Arianna snorted. "Of that I am almost certain," she agreed. "Although having given it some thought, I think Malcolm is more of a weasel and Papa more of an ass." Both women ducked when coffee sprayed over them and Ephraim glanced up with an embarrassed expression and both hands covering his mouth.

"I'm so sorry," he mumbled, his eyes watering from the heat that had traveled the wrong way up his sinus cavity. "I just... I never... I'm sorry."

Mary waved him off towards the door. "Go on upstairs and take care of that. Your shift is almost over anyway, and I can sit here with Arianna until Sarah arrives."

Ephraim shook his head and removed his hands, grabbing a dishtowel and wiping up the mess. "I just came on, Chief. This is my day for the morning shift."

Mary squinted her eyes at him and nodded. "All right. Do you need to go upstairs?" Ephraim looked down at himself and shook his head.

"No thank you, Chief. I'm good." He finished wiping up the mess and resumed his seat near the back door. Mary watched him a moment longer and turned back to Arianna.

"How about you? Did he get you?"

Arianna shook her head. "No, Mama... not at all. You pushed me down when you ducked - I think you caught the brunt of it."

Mary turned her head to glance at her coffee spattered shirt. "I think you're right. Well, I needed a shower anyway... not that coffee is ever my first choice for bathing in," smiling as she gave Ephraim a mock glare. "How's your research coming along?" turning back to Arianna.

"Frustratingly slow," Arianna complained. "Some of it Eli and I talked about, but so much of it.... I am still trying to understand the matriarchal lineage and how power passes in a democratic society." Arianna shook her head. "I feel like I'm drowning in details but Eden seemed to think it was important that I learn all these things."

Mary pinched her lip between her thumb and forefinger. Knowing what she did about the situation, she was pretty sure what Eden's intent was. But at the rate Arianna was going, Mary's great-grandchildren would be done with college before she figured it out. "May I offer you a piece of advice?"

Arianna nodded briskly. "Yes, Mama... please. If it will help me figure out what Eden wants me to learn, I'll take any advice I can get. Coming from you just makes it more reliable in my book."

"Okay then - tell me what you were talking to Eden about when she asked for this favor."

Arianna cleared her throat. "We were talking about Eli and how she reacted to my betrothal and...."

"Stop right there," Mary instructed, holding up a hand. "Given that the mating habits of your society was the discussion that brought up your need for research and knowledge of Eli's culture, what do you think you should be studying? Or at least studying first? I know Eden told you to learn everything you can, and I agree with her... to a point. You should learn everything you can about one another, but most of that needs to come from sharing those things with each other. For now, skip the histories and the biographies and the weird rituals you don't understand. Study the things that might be pertinent to her reaction to your betrothal."

"There is a section for that??"

"Check into their mating customs, Honey," Mary stated plainly. "It will explain a lot, I promise."

"Yes, Mama," Arianna replied and Mary grinned.

"You like that, don't you?"

"I do," she concurred. "Very much. It makes me feel like I belong."

"You do belong. You're family now and family is forever, remember?" Mary assured with a smile. "But you've got research to do, and I need a shower and some dry clothes. Come by the office later if you need more help, but I think you'll understand when you find it." Mary patted her arm and waved to Ephraim, then walked out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

Arianna picked the bag up and set it on the floor beside her chair. Then she slowly stood and looked at Ephraim. "Joy and I made cinnamon rolls last night. Can I tempt you?"

Ephraim looked around carefully, then lowered his voice. "Are you sure you won't get in trouble for messing around in her kitchen?" He glanced around again. "Are you sure you won't get me in trouble by messing around in her kitchen?"

Arianna laughed. "I'm sure, Ephraim. I wouldn't handicap your chances with Joy like that. I mean, I don't really know you, but what I do know I appreciate."

His eyes widened. "You know?"

Arianna shrugged. "I guessed. It wasn't hard." She smiled. "You're not particularly subtle in your admiration. But a piece of advice?" cocking an eyebrow and waiting for him to nod. "Talk to her. You're going to make her resent you otherwise." Arianna moved into the pantry and retrieved the cinnamon rolls, setting them on the table before turning to pull milk from the fridge. Ephraim rose from his place slowly and moved to stand beside Arianna, accepting the plate and glass she handed him.

"You really think so? That I am making her resent me?"

"I know you're driving her crazy, and eventually that's going to make her resent you, Ephraim. She's waiting for you to step up and do something... not just watch her longingly." She chuckled at his gobsmacked expression. "We've talked about you at some length this week," she added at his questioning look. "It's not like you're always where we are," said with a smirk. Ephraim chuckled.

"Point taken," he acknowledged. "So you think she would respond well if I spoke to her?"

"I think you have nothing to lose by trying."

Ephraim nodded thoughtfully and took his seat at the door once more. They sat quietly, eating their breakfast without saying another word. When Ephraim was finished, he stood and went to the sink, washing his dishes quickly. He put the milk and rolls away before he turned and sat down next to Arianna. She had been so deep in her own thoughts that he startled her with his action. She jerked her head up and Ephraim placed a calming hand in her wrist.

"I'm sorry, Angel... Arianna," correcting himself immediately at her uncomfortable expression. "Sorry," he repeated. "The Chief told us about... I forgot. And I didn't mean to startle you. I thought you heard me walk over."

Arianna shook her head and offered him a wan smile. "I was lost in my head. I don't notice much when that happens."

Ephraim smiled. "I have a brother who does the same thing. Although I used to find the heaviest object nearby, and drop it as close to him as I could manage from the highest point I could reach just

so I could watch him jump." Arianna arched an eyebrow and Ephraim laughed aloud. "I was the annoying younger brother; it was almost expected. It's how I became a track star in my province. It's amazing how motivated you can become when you're being chased by someone twice your size." Arianna burst into loud laughter, covering her mouth to try and contain her mirth. Ephraim reached up and removed her hand as he shook his head. "Let people hear your laughter, Arianna. It's infectious and there can never be too much laughter in the world... no matter what world you're on."

"Joy is a very lucky woman," she said after a few moments of silence. "Don't let her miss out. I think you'd make a wonderful addition to the family."

Ephraim smiled and covered the hand he still held. "I won't," he vowed. "Can I return the favor - as a possible older sibling then?"

Arianna tilted her head at him. "As long as you're not planning to drop anything on my head from a great height, of course," said with a smirk. Ephraim grinned.

"I know you've wondered why Joy hasn't made the first move - I have been around for some of those discussions, you know," smiling when her surprised expression became sheepish. "She's trying to respect my culture. On my planet, we have a caste system - nobility, warrior, clergy, professional, trader, workman and servant - and while it is acceptable to go out of one's class to marry, the first move must be made by the person from the higher class. So as a warrior, it's my responsibility to approach Joy with my intentions. After that, we are both expected to contribute to moving our relationship forward - we are equals."

Arianna frowned slightly. "Okay. Ephraim, I know I am not stupid, but I don't understand. What does that have to do with me... or Eli?"

"I hadn't actually gotten to my point yet - not the entire point anyway. Joy is waiting for me to make the first move as a way of showing her respect for my culture. Princess... sorry, Eli cutting you from her life was because of *her* cultural mandates."

"So you're saying it's not because of me personally, but because of some rule of her people?"

Ephraim sighed and shook his head. "Not at all - it has everything to do with you. Arianna, on her world, people mate for life," seeing brown eyes widen in horror. "When you returned to the compound betrothed to someone else..."

"But it wasn't my choice!!" Arianna protested.

"Perhaps not," Ephraim agreed, "but it doesn't change the truth for her. You are her one and only and you had someone else. She exorcised you from her life to maintain her sanity. It's why she can't be 'just friends' with you... no matter how hard she tries. She will always push you away because it's the only means she has of protecting herself."

"You're not making this up?"

"I wouldn't, Arianna. I don't consider myself to be a cruel man, and that would be heartless. What I'm telling you is the truth. I know this because my brother married into that society after a lot of soul-searching. He wanted to be sure that he could offer Leah everything she deserved in a commitment. They've been a family for almost ten years now and have two beautiful little girls."

"And he knew about this trait when they got involved - that mating was for life?"

"Oh yes. Even though we are from the warrior caste, he is by profession a historian. The study of different civilizations and their philosophies was part of his work."

Arianna's gaze went distant for a long moment, and when she pulled back to meet Ephraim's eyes, her own were full of anger and hurt. "So you're telling me that I'm being punished for something I wasn't even aware of??"

"I'm telling you why Eli is acting the way that she is towards you. The rest? That's for you to research and decide for yourself."

Arianna removed her hand from Ephraim's clasp and stood, reaching for the suitcase beside her and hefting it. "Thank you, Ephraim. You've given me much to consider... and more to think about. Will you please ask Joy to call me when it's time to prepare lunch? I believe I should go upstairs and get to work on my research." Ephraim nodded, sensing her fury. Arianna jerked her head in response and hurried out the door, clutching her suitcase to her chest. She never even saw Joy half-hidden while leaning against the outer doorjamb.

Only when Arianna was up the stairs and out of sight did Joy cross into the room. "That was a good thing you did, Ephraim," she commented as she poured out a cup of coffee. He shrugged.

"I had to do something. She's part of the family, right?"

"She is," Joy affirmed. "But you're not."

"Maybe not yet, but I'd like to be," meeting her eyes squarely. "Would you be willing to entertain my attention as a suitor? I have spoken to your mother and she has proffered her blessing. Your brothers have already threatened my manhood and well-being if I disrespect you or worse. However, the decision is yours, Joy. I would like the opportunity to 'date' you... in your vernacular... in an effort to get to know you and perhaps see if we can be something more together."

Joy smiled. "That has to be the most elaborate, formal dating request I have ever heard. But oddly I find it sweet and compelling."

"Does that mean yes?" Ephraim asked after several long moments of silence. Joy laughed.

"It does. But I have a request," seeing his eyebrows rise in question. "Could we wait to do anything serious about us until this assignment is over? I don't mean we can't do anything, but can we go slowly? It's only a few more weeks..." swallowing when Ephraim placed a gentle finger over her lips.

"That's fine, Joy - in fact, it's perfect. The Chief won't tolerate a lack of focus on my part for any reason... not with everything that is going on. And it will give us a chance to sit and talk without a lot of expectation beyond learning more about one another - like why you are so proprietary about your kitchen. Although that will have to wait until my off time. I can't afford to be distracted here - there's too much at stake for us to drop the ball now."

"I know," Joy said as she stepped into the pantry, then chuckled before sticking her head out. "You really do like Arianna, don't you?"

Ephraim had resumed his place by the door and crossed his arms over his chest. "What makes you say that?"

"You trusted her enough to eat the cinnamon rolls we made last night without me being present. You more than anyone else who has been in my kitchen in the last few weeks has respected that this is my space... although everyone has tried very hard to be respectful. But you - except for coffee, I don't think you've taken anything that I haven't offered to you first. Therefore you must really trust her to allow her to feed you."

"I do," he confirmed. "And the fact that you not only made her family but invited her to be part of your kitchen gave her credence."

"You're pretty smart," Joy said with a laugh as she exited the pantry with a cinnamon roll in hand. "Would you like another?"

"Would I like one? Yes. Am I going to have one? No. It would ruin my runner's figure," gesturing to his lithe frame. "But thank you for offering." Joy just nodded and sat at the table to enjoy her breakfast.

Arianna didn't run up the stairs to her room, but her pace was quite brisk and she just refrained from slamming the door behind her when she entered the room. She placed the bag she carried on one of the other beds carefully, not wanting to do damage to the contents. One would have expected her to be a little more curious. Though she knew what was in the case, she still hadn't seen the things inside it in months. But they were insignificant enough to have been left behind to begin with and at the moment, she had far greater concerns on her mind.

She dropped onto the bed and snatched up her Pad, punching her finger at the screen with impunity. Finally she was able to bring up the information she was searching for and started reading. For a long time Arianna read, absorbing information she had needed months' prior... information she should have been aware of before she became involved with Eli.

When Arianna was finished, she set the Pad aside and turned on her side facing the wall. She tucked her hands under her chin and curled her legs up until she was in a fetal position. Closing her eyes, she castigated herself for her ignorance. She didn't hear Joy knock on the door or notice her come in and sit on the bed. Only when Joy placed a gentle hand on her side did Arianna blink open her eyes and shift her body to lie on her back and meet Joy's eyes.

"You all right, Little Sister?"

"Aside from being a monumental idiot? I'm fantastic," she snarked, then faltered under Joy's compassionate gaze. "How could I have been so stupid? Why didn't I know this? Why didn't she tell me?"

"I don't know, Arianna - that's something you'll have to ask her. But that's not as important as what you're going to do about it," tilting her head in question. "So what are you going to do about it?"

Arianna snorted. "If I had the first idea, I'd already be doing it. I think we need to sit and talk... discuss everything that has ever been between us. But Ephraim was right - she can't be friends with

me, and she won't speak to me outside a professional capacity. I'm not sure how I am supposed to approach her if she runs the other direction every time she sees me headed towards her."

"Well, on the plus side, very soon she's not going to have anywhere to go to get away from you. That asteroid you're traveling to is only so big and the station you're building there is even smaller."

"Yes, but I can't disrupt team dynamics for my own selfish reasons."

"I can safely say from what I have personally witnessed, that for the most part your team believes the dynamic to work better when you and Eli are happy together. They're willing to help you recover that - for you and for them. Why not let them help?"

"And have them do what, Joy? Hold Eli down when I enter a room? Tie her to a chair so I can talk to her without her walking away from me? I'm open to suggestions because I can't think of anything that won't make this entire situation exponentially worse."

"Take a deep breath and calm down," pressing a finger to Arianna's lips to keep her from exploding. "Getting angry with... well, anyone at this point is completely non-productive. Instead focus that anger into finding a solution and call a round table of the people you think can help you. Like your friends Eden and Danny... Mama... me... maybe even Ephraim. I mean he is kind of like a big brother to you."

Arianna frowned and processed Joy's words, then sat up so quickly she almost clocked Joy in the chin. Only Joy's quick reflexes saved them both from bruising. Arianna grabbed her arms and grinned. "He did it? He spoke to you??"

"He did... after he talked to you. Thank you for kicking him in the butt. I think he needed it."

"I think I did too - so we're even."

Joy laughed. "All right, then - what do you say to going downstairs and having some lunch and then we'll call a conference? Maybe with enough minds, we can think of something."

For answer Arianna took Joy's proffered hand and let her pull her from the bed. Then they headed downstairs together.

Chapter XXVIII

"All I'm saying is that you're gonna have to keep your word to her, Az... at least for now. She needs that professionalism from you for her own peace of mind. We'll definitely work on changing how she thinks about you, but if you go after her all gung-ho now, determined to make her see your side of things, you'll ruin any chance you have to fix things with her. She'll quit the team. And before you say it, you can't do it when we leave here either - she'll resent you and all the rest of us because she'll be stuck with someone she'll categorize as a liar. You won't even get professional from her then."

"She has a point," Mary agreed. So far, all she had done during the conversation was run interference between Eden and Arianna... keeping things from getting too heated as each of them got more frustrated.

"If you knew all this already, why did you have me read those things? Why was it imperative that I know why she reacted the way she did?"

"Because with understanding comes wisdom, Grasshopper," Eden replied, sighing when a look of confusion spread over Arianna's face. "Now that you know why, we can work on taking steps to help her realize the truth - all of it... hers and yours. They'll need to be baby steps, but at least it will be progress. You're both at fault here, but it's not insurmountable."

Arianna ran her hands through her hair and looked away from the monitor as she covered her mouth and tried to regulate her breathing to keep the tears from spilling from her eyes. She had done enough crying; it was time to take some action. When she had her breathing under control, she removed her hand from her mouth and met Eden's compassionate gaze. "What am I supposed to do, Eden?"

"Right now? Exactly what you promised her. You're gonna be the cool, removed professional with her and the friendly, loveable dork the rest of us know and love. Most of the rest of us will work on slowly breaking her down, but you're gonna have to be patient and let us help."

Arianna huffed. "I hate this! I'm not sure if it's better to know why she hates me or to be left wondering why she does."

Eden snorted. "Don't you start having a pity party over there, or so help me I'll kick your ass the minute I see you. Don't!" she commanded when Arianna's mouth snapped open to retort. "I'm pretty sure if I asked the Chief, she'd pull out the big guns to get me there quicker."

"Mama would protect me." Arianna's eyes widened when she saw Eden's jaw drop. They hadn't really discussed the situation outside the family, and now....

"Mama?!?" Eden repeated, incredulity in her pitch. She got a look at Mary's expression as she was seated behind Arianna and softened her tone. "I told you I was glad you had found a family you deserved, Az, and I meant it. But I'm pretty sure the Chief would help me kick your ass if you start being stupid. Eli doesn't hate you - none of this would be an issue if she did. She would always be professional when you were working together and she'd ignore you otherwise. You should actually be kind of flattered by the level of screw-up this has become."

Arianna threw a questioning look at Mary before turning back to Eden. "I'm almost afraid to ask why."

Eden leaned back in her chair and folded her hands on her belly. "The way I've got it figured - the more she cares, the harder she tries to keep you out of her life. Given that you were non-existent to her for months and the only reason she spoke to you again was to set an example because she asked the rest of us to include you again.... Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"May I ask you something Eden?" waiting for Eden to cautiously nod her head. "If Eli hadn't asked the rest of you to start including me again - would you have done so on your own?"

Eden was shamed enough to drop her head briefly before looking Arianna straight in the eye. "As long as Malcolm was around? No," she replied honestly. "He made it impossible for anyone but Danny to have any contact with you, and even Danny was monitored. Without Malcolm? It probably would have taken us a little longer, and it would have been more sporadic and not so all-encompassing. Mostly, Eli reminded us of the truth of the big picture. Malcolm being removed when he was? That was simply fortuitous timing for us."

"Thank you, Eden."

Eden shrugged. "You deserved the truth, Az. Eli might have prompted us, but the responses were genuine. But do you understand what I meant about why you should be flattered?"

"You really think her feelings run that deeply?"

"You think they don't?"

Arianna hung her head. "I thought they did, but...."

"No buts. Her attitude is gonna be a pain in all our asses before all is said and done, but in the end it's a good sign for you. Just wish she wasn't so damned hardheaded stubborn."

Mary snorted. "You need that stubborn - you just need to refocus it."

"And how do we do that, Chief?" Eden asked without a hint of sarcasm. "We have to be able to talk her around, and if we piss her off enough she's not gonna listen to any of us."

"I'm still working on that," Mary confessed. "We know a lot of it will be focused on the mission once you leave here - it's what got you through training at the desert facility. But that is still several weeks away. Maybe it's time to...." She broke off and looked at Eden, who nodded her understanding.

"Whenever you're ready, Chief. And don't worry about that 'Mama' slip, Az. I think it's great you've got a family who'll look after you now, but it's not my place to share that news, all right? You do that in your own way and time."

"Thank you, Eden. It's not that I'm ashamed - they are a pretty amazing family to have. But I would really rather the rest don't get the wrong idea about this. It would be nice for a change *not* to be misunderstood before I can even explain things."

"And we are a bunch of gossipy old avialae, aren't we?"

Arianna snorted and nodded. "Sometime, yes. I'll see you soon?" she asked looking between Eden on the monitor and Mary behind her. Both nodded. "Be safe, Eden."

"Malama maika'i," she replied, and nodded to Mary. Then she reached forward and broke the connection, knowing Mary would be contacting her security team shortly.

"Mary?" Paul asked as she led him deeper into the underground enclosure she'd had the Alpha team brought to upon their return. She turned to arch an eyebrow at him and motioned for him to continue. "I was just wondering something. I get that you're trying to protect us by keeping us hidden and all, but what about our prep work? Won't people notice an influx of traffic and supplies to this place? And won't we eventually have to be moved somewhere - like the transport site or the space dock and launch site - that will make us a target anyway?"

"Yes," she agreed with a serious smile, "but if I control the aspect of how and when you get moved, it gives me a better measure of control in your protection."

"And you don't think bringing attention to the fact that we're here," gesturing to the former military facility surrounding him, "is a bad thing?"

Mary chuckled darkly. "I don't think anyone could find you here without a map and a homing beacon - but if they did, they'd be walking into an ambush."

"What about our gear? And all the things we need to take with us on this journey?"

"As much as can be managed has already been brought here for each of you to go over and check out. The things we couldn't bring - like the ship itself - I already have people on-site. And those of you who are actually involved in ship maintenance and upkeep will be in place in plenty of time to take care of your inspections well before launch." Mary examined Paul's horrified expression with compassion. "A little more than you bargained for?" she asked kindly.

Paul snorted. "I never expected to be part of some covert military type operation," he confessed. "I'm a scientist, you know. This sort of thing is unheard of in the scientific communities on my planet."

"If it makes you feel better, this kind of thing is my specialty. My team and I are going to do whatever it takes to see all of you safely on your way. After that? Well, you're on your own," she said as they stepped into a large space where several other members of the Alpha team called out a welcome to him. Paul waved and returned greetings, then looked at Mary again.

"Where is everyone else?"

"Not everyone has arrived yet, and of those who have, a few are in their quarters putting their things away." She continued through the cavernous room and out a door opposite the one they had entered and Paul followed as a matter of course. "It's not much, but at least each of you has your own room here, and it won't be for too long." She stopped in front of a door and handed him an old-fashioned key, showing him how to unlock the heavy door before handing it to him. "Don't lose this," she cautioned. "I don't have a spare to give you. That doesn't mean I can't jimmy the lock open in a pinch, but let's try not to let it come to that, shall we?"

Paul chuckled wryly. "You know what, Mary? You are one scary lady."

"Imagine how my kids felt about me when they were growing up." This time Paul laughed aloud, and Mary simply smirked at him. "There will be a team meeting after dinner in the dining hall - schematics have been sent to your Pad if you need them. Until then, you're on your own time. Enjoy it - because starting tomorrow, there won't be any free time until the holidays."

Paul nodded his understanding and hefted his bag, crossing the threshold into the room he'd been assigned. Mary turned and started walking the way they had come, when Paul stuck his head out the portal and called her name. She spun on her heel and waited silently for him to speak. "Thank you, Mary. I can't imagine...." He broke off and shook his head.

"You're welcome, Paul." She hesitated, then gave him a slight smile before she spun around and continued to head back down the corridor. He watched her go for a moment longer, then pulled his head back into the room and shut the door behind him. He had a few hours to acquaint himself with his new home before dinner, and he was looking forward to meeting up with his compatriots again.

"Are you sure about this, Mama?" Ian asked as he leaned against the open door of the office that Mary had escaped to earlier. The last of the team members had arrived in the bunker and would be gathering for dinner shortly. Mary studied her son, then beckoned him inside. He followed her directive, carefully shutting the door to guard their privacy.

"You doubt me, my son?"

"Not you, Mama. The plan? Maybe a little. It seems reckless for you - chancing everything on a single throw of the dice."

Mary smiled. "You know me better than that, Ian. But can you honestly give me a better idea? This is the most defensible hideaway we have." Ian scrubbed his hands over his face. Mary tilted her head at him. "Have you talked to your brothers about this?"

"No, Mama. This is my concern. I brought it directly to you."

Mary leaned back in her chair and smiled softly. "I appreciate that, Son. And I'm quite serious - if you have a suggestion to make, please... do so. I have gone over and over and over this until I started pulling my hair out. This was the best option I could come up with... especially since I know I have back-up watching out for us here. Ian, if we don't draw them out here, we run a real risk of starting an interstellar war."

"You don't think we're running that risk anyway?"

"To some degree we have been since the task force was formed to choose the Committee. And with the things Gideon has found out..." She let the thought lie and Ian nodded his agreement.

"And he's sure?"

"As certain as he can be without actually having been there to witness things himself. There are so many variables in place - we still can't pinpoint the true perpetrator. I don't think we'll be able to until we have the reason behind it... or visa versa, of course. But I do think it is going to come back to the Committee... at least one member. I believe it's entirely possible that several of them are involved, though they're not working together."

"How did the task force miss this? How could they allow such corruption to take place?"

Mary shrugged. "For that matter, how did we? How did I - whose livelihood is based on my ability to read people - how did I miss the venality of these people? Why was I not looking at them sooner? The first rule I learned was not to trust those I didn't know. I didn't choose the Committee."

"Exactly, Mama. Cut yourself a little slack. The task force is responsible for them. You have always been responsible for the candidates involved in the project. Let's focus on them."

"I still had to have missed something, Ian. I fully expect one or more of them to be in contact with the Committee to let them know what's going on. I am kind of counting on it. It's the only way this plan is going to do what I need it to completely."

"I thought you said..."

"I did... and I do. But for the plan to do *everything*, one of the Alpha team members is going to have to betray their fellows."

"Do you suppose it could be accidental? The sharing of information, I mean. Is it possible there is no malicious intent involved on their part?"

"I might be able to believe that if someone wasn't trying to get me removed from the security detail. Because as Eden so aptly pointed out - Isaac couldn't have come up with that on his own. He was being manipulated. The question is - by whom? A Committee member or a colleague? If it's the first, then yes... I think it's probably accidental. Isaac is not a social creature by nature, so for someone of a Committee member's theoretical stature to take the time to just talk to him? He wouldn't even think twice about sharing information with them. They're presumed to have his best interests at heart, right? If it's a colleague, however... another member of the Alpha team...."

"That could get unpleasant in a hurry."

Mary chuckled despite herself, shaking her head as she rose and met Ian's eyes. "You, my son, are a master of understatement."

He smirked. "I am, in fact, my mother's son," extending an arm to Mary as an offer of escort. She took his arm as she laughed aloud.

"Indeed," she agreed. They exited the office and closed the door firmly behind them.

"So we're just going to give them information?"

"Yes," Mary drawled. "But remember - we control the flow. They only know what we tell them. And none of them will have the whole picture and not all of them have gotten the truth. Ruth put trackers on all the Comm units we gave them and is monitoring their communications. Since they have to be channeled through the network to be able to leave the bunker, we have a record of their activity. Several made calls home as soon as they arrived. A couple called other team members who hadn't arrived yet. Otherwise?" Mary shrugged. "Gideon will let me know when a communiqué of interest goes out, and in the meantime, we'll be keeping eyes and ears open. Now, let's join the rest for dinner and see if we can set things in motion. It's time to be done with this."

Eden combed through the facility, hunting for Arianna. When she got near enough for the mouthwatering scent of dinner to start wafting in her direction, she figured she had to be close. She let her nose guide her, not surprised when it led her to the kitchen... and Arianna. What did surprise her was to find Joy with her, and she leaned against the doorjamb with her arms crossed over her chest just watching them work in tandem for a few minutes before she quietly cleared her throat.

Two dark heads swung around and pinned her with equally dark, piercing eyes. Eden held up her hands in surrender, and smiled to see them relax their stiff stances.

"Eden!" Arianna squealed, setting her spoon down and moving towards Eden with arms open and outstretched. Eden swallowed hard and allowed the embrace - a little uncomfortable but unwilling to turn Arianna away. "What are you doing here?" after a brief hug.

"Here in the bunker? I just arrived. Here in the kitchen? I came looking for you. Since it smelled like homemade cooking and fresh cookies, I thought I'd start with the obvious and work from there. Lucky for me, the obvious was satisfactory - I found you."

"You did. Now what?"

"Now you can tell me how you're doing? Have you seen any of the others yet?"

"I'm good, Eden. Really good. I haven't seen anyone yet as Joy and I have been busy in here most of the day. She's here to help out while we're here."

Eden smiled and looked at Joy. 'Makua bless you, Joy. I thought we were gonna be stuck eating those questionable packaged meals that's gonna be our only sustenance all too soon. Thank you for sparing us that indignity just yet. I'm not overly fond of those."

Joy laughed. "Neither are my brothers... which is kind of hysterical when you consider what their careers actually are. They are the main reason I'm here. They pled and cajoled with Mama until I think she gave in just to shut them up."

"Well, that and the fact that Mama kind of likes having all her kids around," Arianna piped up. "She told me that point blank."

"Go Mary!" Eden muttered though it was loud enough for the other two to hear and chuckle at. "Bonus for us, and good for you too, right Az?"

"Yes... definitely good for me. Being part of this family... even for the short time it's been a reality for me - Eden, it's changed my life."

"Good for you, Az. I'm glad. Now do you need to stay in here or can you wander around with me for a few? I know there are people who've missed you, and we should clue the rest in as to what's going on... at least as far as Eli is concerned."

"Do you need me to...?" Arianna asked Joy, who smiled and shook her head as she waved her off. Arianna slipped off her apron and kissed Joy's cheek. "Thank you."

"Go on. I'll see you both later." Eden and Arianna left the kitchen and headed out in search of their comrades.

Chapter XXIX

"Danny!" Arianna squealed when she caught sight of him in the big room. He smiled at her excitement, then turned bewildered eyes to Eden when Arianna rushed towards him with her arms outstretched. Eden motioned for him to go with it, so he opened his arms and stumbled back a step when Arianna leaped into his embrace, glad for Luke's hand bracing his lower back. He tightened his hold even as he searched Eden's gaze for answers. A signal promised him answers later, and he let his attention focus on the young woman enfolded in his arms while he returned the hug fervently.

"Sweetie? Is everything okay?" Arianna pulled back just enough to meet his gaze. There was a sheen of tears in her brown eyes, but he saw deep and sincere happiness swirling beneath them. Danny raised a hand to her face, cupping her cheek gently and smiling. "Arianna?"

"I'm good, Danny... promise. It's just so good to see you again. I missed you." She noticed Luke standing behind Danny trying to be as unobtrusive as possible without actually leaving. "You too, Luke."

Luke turned green eyes her way. "I missed you as well, pretty lady. Did you enjoy your visit home?"

Arianna shook her head and stepped out of Danny's arms. "I didn't go home," she replied quietly. "Instead I found a new family here." A light touch on her back made Arianna turn to see Eden standing behind her. Arianna cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Unless you'd like to make an announcement to the room at large, perhaps we should move to a more private location," Eden suggested, looking pointedly at Isaac who was watching the small group with unveiled interest. Arianna nodded.

"Come," she commanded, holding out a hand to Danny. "I have someone to introduce you to."

He didn't hesitate but accepted her hand. Luke proffered his arm to Eden who rolled her eyes, but took it for the courtesy he intended. Then they made their way out of the cavernous room and into the hallway, headed back the way they had come.

They rounded the corner into the kitchen area, and Joy looked up in concerned surprise. She hadn't expected to see Arianna again for a while. "Little Sister? Is everything all right?" crossing the room to size up the situation close up. Joy took Arianna by the arms, eyes examining her before allowing one hand to tuck a loose strand of dark hair behind an ear. "Arianna?"

Arianna permitted the cursory inspection, settling Joy's concerns and letting Danny and Luke wrap their minds around what had been said. When Joy's hand moved to cup her face, Arianna took her hand and turned them towards her patiently waiting friends.

"Joy, you know my friends - Eden, Danny and Luke. Guys, this is Joy... my big sister," smiling when Joy, small as she was, loosened their handhold and wrapped a protective arm around her waist instead. Eden stepped up to Arianna's other side and did the same. Danny's jaw dropped and Luke's eyes widened comically, but they recovered well after a mere moment.

"I'm so happy for you, Sweetie," Danny said, opening his arms again and waiting for Arianna to step into his embrace. He lifted her gently off her feet and rocked her. "Does this mean we get dibs on cookies?" smiling when she burst into laughter.

Meanwhile Luke stepped over to Joy and hugged her. "Thank you," he whispered. "She deserves a family like this."

Joy squeezed his neck then pulled away. "We were glad to do it." She cleared her throat. "Would you all like some cookies and milk?"

"Won't that mess up dinner?"

Joy smirked and shrugged. "Do you really mind? Besides, I won't tell Mama if you don't," causing all four scientists to laugh. Arianna moved over to where she knew the cookies were stored while Luke

stepped to the huge refrigeration unit to find the milk. In minutes the five of them had moved to one of the mess hall tables to eat and share conversation.

"So are we the first to arrive?" Danny asked, looking at Eden, then Arianna, then Joy. The three of them shrugged in tandem, eliciting more chuckles. Arianna cleared her throat.

"I think Eden was first, but I don't even know who else is here. I haven't really done any exploring since we arrived." She turned her gaze to Eden. "Is Eli here yet?"

"Az..."

"I know, Eden. I know I have to remain professional with her," said with a hint of defeat. "But I still need to know if she's here."

"I haven't seen her," Eden admitted. Danny and Luke remained silent.

"No," Joy interpolated, causing four sets of eyes to swing her way. "Mama told the boys she was saving Eli for last. Ian is with her. She refused to say why, and they know better than to ask." It didn't stop anyone from having suspicions, however, and the table went quiet while they concentrated on finishing their milk and cookies as their minds wandered over possibilities.

Eli walked the woods silently, bow drawn and arrow partially nocked. It had taken all she could do to convince Ian to allow her this last hunt before they returned to what she knew would be a trial for her. But unless she quit, it was something she would have to endure to be part of the Alpha team. She knew he was behind her keeping an eye out, but Ian remained respectful of her need to be alone for this and stayed out of her purview. For that courtesy she was more than a little grateful. She required the bit of peace this time would provide for her. She stopped moving, letting the silence settle around her. These were her woods... the woods in which she'd grown up - where she'd learned to hunt and fight and fly. It was a reconnection that was healing places in her soul that she hadn't realized were bruised and bleeding.

Without warning, a storm rolled in above her, the heavens opening up and releasing a chilling rain. Eli knew she should probably head back to the family compound, but she hadn't found what she was looking for. So she turned her attention back to the hunt, idly wondering if the weather would drive her escort away and leave her truly alone.

The rain went from shower to torrent without warning, and Eli lost any sense of her watcher as the deluge drowned out all sense of sound or sight beyond the downpour itself. She turned her face to the sky, closing her eyes and letting the rain wash everything away.

A sound beyond that of the falling rain somewhere to her left made her eyes pop open and her focus return to the hunt. Eli turned her head, squinting to see beyond the rivulets of water running down her face. Frustrated with her complete lack of vision and her inability to utilize her other senses, she slowly moved in the direction from which she'd heard the noise emanate.

It was a deliberate trek... a careful placement of each footstep. Even with her watchers in play, Eli could ill-afford to make a misstep at this point. A mistake like that could cost her everything.

She saw a blue blur out of the corner of her eye, but when she turned there was nothing there. She trod to the spot where she'd seen it, only to witness another blur from the other eye. Instead of moving towards it, she stood still... and waited.

It took several minutes before her patience was rewarded, but eventually there was movement again, and this time, it was slow enough for her to track.

Eli rotated her head in increments so as not to alert her prey to her presence. This should be a clean kill, and maybe with this success and an offering to the protectors of warriors and scientists, she would regain the peace that was missing from her life. She lifted her bow and sighted her target - then realized that it was a mama and two babies... not something she could kill. With a sigh she dropped her weapon and lowered her head, feeling the rain run down the back of her neck. She shivered and decided enough was enough; it was time to return home.

Except when she looked around, Eli didn't recognize where she was. All of her growing up years had been spent roaming these woods, and not once had she gotten lost. And now when it mattered - when she needed to get home and out of the weather - she had not the first clue where she was.

Eli turned in a tight circle, eyes searching for any sign of which way she'd come from. She noticed what appeared to be an unmarked trail and headed towards it. For the first time, she hoped Ian was staying close enough to assist her if she ran into real trouble.

The path took her into a thicket of trees and bushes and then surprisingly into a miniscule clearing just large enough to accommodate a tiny run-down shack. Eli blinked hard and wiped the water forcefully out of her eyes... especially when an old man with a skin color never seen on her planet before stepped out onto the rickety porch and waved her towards him.

Eli looked around, wondering if she was less alone than she had imagined, then pointed to herself when he waved again. The old man laughed and nodded, his teeth glowing white against the ebony of his skin. He waved her over for the third time and called out, "C'mon, girlie... 'fore you catch yer death."

A chill ran over her and she shivered, deciding that she could defend herself if need be, but knowing she needed to get in out of the soaking rain and into somewhere that was warm and dry. She could only hope Ian would follow. She didn't want to explain to Mary if anything happened to him.

The stairs were surprisingly sturdy despite their wobbly appearance, and Eli blew out a breath of relief when she was under the cover of the porch awning. Just the respite from the cold, driving rain made her feel warmer, and then the old man stepped forward with a thick, wool blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. It was itchy, but it smelled like sunshine and Eli sank into its warmth with gratitude. The old man motioned her to a chair and slipped inside the door before she could question him. When he returned a moment later, he did so with full hands, and Eli set her bow to one side to accept the gift he proffered to her.

In one hand was a cup of hot tea, its smell reminiscent of days long past in Eli's life. In the other, the old man held a bowl of thick, meaty stew and a hunk of meal bread. Though she hadn't eaten meat in more than a year - even her OTeU had been mindful of her new diet during her visit home - she dug into the food as if she hadn't had sustenance in years. The old man laughed at her enthusiasm and clapped her on the knee.

"Slow down there, missy. There be plenny more iffen ya be needin' it. But I don' need ya choking ta death on mah fron' porch. Bad mojo."

Eli forced herself to slow down, consciously chewing her food thoroughly before swallowing. Then she turned green eyes towards the old man. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't realize I was so hungry, and this is really very good. Thank you."

The old man smiled and patted her leg again. "Yer welcome, Eli," startling her with his use of her name. "You'da done the same fer me if things'da been switched 'round." Eli nodded, acknowledging his words while she continued to chew, and the old man bobbed his head. "So what brings ya out here ta me? I don' get many vis'ters."

Eli finished chewing and swallowed, then took a sip of her perfectly heated tea to help wash things down. When she was satisfied, she turned and met the old man's eyes, idly noting they were as black as Eden's and had the same kindness in them. "Accident," she replied succinctly, smiling softly when he raised an eyebrow at her in question. She shrugged. "I was out hunting," glancing at her bow, "and I got lost." She paused and a frown washed over her features. "I have hunted in these woods all my life and never once lost my way. Nor have I ever stumbled upon this place before," motioning at the tiny shack. "Did something happen to me?" she asked, meeting his eyes seriously. "Am I dead or dying and this is all my imagination?"

"Eli, if ya was dead er dyin', why would ya 'magine somethin' an' someone not even from yer world?" the old man asked kindly. "No, yer not dead er dyin'. But ya did fin' me fer a reason."

Eli stared at him skeptically. "You do realize that doesn't make the first bit of sense, don't you?"

The old man shrugged. "Doesn' change the truth. Can ya deny that full feelin' in yer belly er the warmth in yer body from the blanket?" He patted her knee again. "Can ya say ya don' feel the touch of mah han' or the sof' cushions and hard slats of the chair yer sittin' in?" He searched her eyes but Eli remained silent. The old man smiled again. "Some things jes' haveta be taken on faith, chile. I be one of those things."

"And how did you know my name? I never told you."

The old man laughed aloud, the sound bringing a smile to Eli's face. After a moment, he wiped a tear from his eye. "Eli, that was the easiest part of all this," gesturing around them. "Ya don' think knowin' yer name woulda been the firs' thing I learned when I's tol' 'bout this 'signment?"

"Wait... an assignment? From whom? Why?"

"Chile, even if I could 'splain it to ya, ya wouldn' unnerstan' it. Jes' 'cept that someone's lookin' out fer ya."

Eli frowned. "I have always looked out for myself."

The old man smiled. "I know. But there's no shame in havin' someone watchin' yer back. Thinka me as yer guardian angel."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"That's all right, Eli. I do, and that's enough fer now."

"So what are you guarding me from?"

"Yourself... other things," the old man stated enigmatically. Then he flicked his hand in the direction of the still blowing storm. "I's s'posed to bring ya in outta the storm... remin' ya that peace is yers fer the takin' an' show ya the way home."

"Old man, you're making no sense. How can you know what I came out here searching for?"

The old man rose and took the empty dishes from Eli's hands and walked to the door. "Forgive her and yourself, Eli. Happiness is yours for the claiming if you'll just take it." He nodded his head forward and to his left. "Yer way home's jes' through that stan' a trees. Go quick... 'fore yer watcher comes a lookin' fer ya." He opened the door and crossed the threshold. But before he could close the door, Eli stood and blocked his way.

"Wait... what did you mean?"

"Chile, yer not dumb. Ya'll figger it out."

"And if I need you again?"

The old man chuckled. "You won'. This be yer crossroads. Now git.... Ya gots other places ta be 'sides mah porch." With that he edged her out of the way and shut the door.

Eli stared at the closed door for a long moment, contemplating the possibility of breaking it in and demanding answers from the mysterious old man. Instead she picked up the scratchy blanket she'd dropped in her haste to catch him before he shut the door. She folded it neatly and placed it on the back of the chair she'd been seated in. Then she bent and retrieved her bow and jogged down the stairs into bright sunshine.

She blinked rapidly, momentarily blinded by the dazzling brilliance she was suddenly surrounded by. *When had it stopped raining? And how had she missed the cessation of such a massive storm?* Eli shook her head, glad when a bank of clouds rolled in and dimmed the brightness to something a little more bearable. It would make it easier to see on her return trip if she wasn't squinting. And she needed to get back to her family compound and change out of her wet clothes. If she caught her death out here, her MaTb would kill her slowly and painfully for being foolish enough to get caught unawares. Feeling a sense of urgency, she looked in the direction in which the old man had pointed her and met Ian's eyes at the edge of the thicket. She jogged over to where he waited.

"You all right, Eli?" he asked in concern. "How did you get wet?" letting his eyes rake her form dispassionately. He slid his pack from his shoulders and grabbed a cloak. "Here," he said, handing it to her. "It'll help you dry off and keep you warm til we can get you home."

"Thanks, Ian," she said softly. "How did you stay dry in that storm? Your boots aren't even wet."

Ian tilted his head at Eli and cocked an eyebrow. "What storm, Eli? The clouds that just moved in are the first we've had since we came out here this morning. Is something wrong that I need to check out? Eli, did something happen while you were in the clearing alone?"

At the word 'clearing', Eli slowly turned to look back in the direction she'd come. Where the shack had stood mere moments before there was now nothing but an empty plain. She cocked her head and

walked back to the center of the clearing - conscious of Ian's presence right beside her - not even seeing a depression in the grass to indicate there had ever been anything there.

"Eli?"

She took a deep breath and turned to face Ian's troubled expression. She reached out and lightly squeezed his bicep and offered him a small smile. "I'm all right, Ian. But I think I've had enough for the day. What do you say we go home and see what OTeU has prepared for the evening meal?" starting back at the bearing the old man had suggested while Ian dropped into step beside her.

"Actually I came to tell you that I heard from Mama. It's time to return. She's found a place to house everyone that we can defend if necessary."

"Do you think it will come to that?"

"I think Mama wants it to so the threat to the Alpha team can be eliminated before you all leave. It will be one less problem to take with you; pretty sure you will encounter plenty of other challenges out there without inviting any to go along for the ride."

Eli snorted. "Yes, I don't think we need to bring that sort of trouble with us if it can be avoided."

"Well if Mama can manage it, that at least will be left behind."

They walked on in silence for several moments, and Eli could feel Ian struggling with a dilemma beside her. Finally she grew tired of his indecision and grabbed his forearm, halting them both in their tracks. She urged him to face her and met his eyes. "What?" she asked him, her direct gaze compelling him to share.

"This is not common knowledge, and I don't know who it's been shared with, but you of all people deserve to know." He cleared his throat. "Arianna didn't go home like the rest of you. Given everything that's happened, she didn't think it would be pleasant for her. Instead she stayed with Joy and Mama so she's part of the family now."

Green eyes went gray at the news, but otherwise, Eli's expression never changed. "And that affects me how?"

Ian held her gaze but shrugged. "I just thought you should be aware. You are the leader of the Alpha team, are you not?"

Eli snorted. "Only by default. No one else is dumb enough to want the job. Come," she added as she started walking again, effectively dismissing the subject of Arianna. "We need to move quickly. I will not be responsible for disturbing Ms Wellesly's schedule. And I'd like the opportunity to say goodbye to my family before we leave."

"Gotcha covered, Eli. But sooner is always better," breaking into a light jog. Eli quickly caught up to him and tagged Ian in the back of the head, laughing aloud as she took off running. Ian squawked his indignation and gave chase. And it wasn't long before they were back in the compound saying their goodbyes and making ready to leave.

Chapter XXX

"ELI!" Abigail squealed when she saw their de facto leader cross the threshold into the large room most of the Alpha team was gathered in. Eli hardly had time to notice who else was present, dropping her personal effects to catch Abigail when she ran towards her with arms open wide. "I missed you."

Eli gave her a crooked smile. "I missed you too, Gay, but it was wonderful to go home for a little while. Did you have a good visit?"

"Oh yes!" Abigail exclaimed vivaciously. "And not once did máthair mention marriage and babies. I think she finally realizes it's going to be a while before that happens. How about you? You look...." Abigail tilted her head thoughtfully. "Not happy, but content, maybe? Rested, certainly."

"I am," Eli assured her. "And it was." A touch on her arm reminded her and Eli nodded without ever losing Abigail's gaze. "I need to go put my things away, Gay, but I'll be back, all right? After all - we'll have plenty of time to catch up."

Abigail smiled brightly. "Yes we will. I'm so excited."

Eli chuckled and bent down to heft her bags. "Really?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye. "I never would have known."

Abigail huffed and stood with arms akimbo, then laughed aloud. "See ya, Eli," twitching her fingers before flouncing back towards Esther and Naomi. Eli shook her head before following Mary to her quarters. When they reached her assigned room, Mary gave her the same spiel about the key situation before turning to leave Eli to her unpacking. A light green hand on her arm caused Mary to stop, and she looked into gray eyes speckled with the merest hints of green. She wondered what had happened to give Eli traces of her natural coloring back, and considered how long they would last now that she had once more been removed from her home world. The thought took a fraction of an instant and Mary raised her eyebrow in question. Eli removed her hand.

"Ian told me of your adopting... Arianna into your family." She cleared her throat and let her eyes drop to the floor. "Thank you for looking out for her, Ms Wellesly."

"So you don't mind...?"

Eli shrugged and looked up, before turning her back to Mary and unlocking the door to her room. "Ms Wellesly, I have never wished ill for her. And I believe her inclusion into your family unit can only be good for her. Maybe she'll be able to learn what unconditional love is."

"We only have a few weeks to teach her, but we'll do our best. Team meeting in the mess hall after dinner, which should be in about half an hour. I trust you can find your way back?"

"I can indeed, Ms Wellesly. Despite my recent difficulties, I do actually have an excellent sense of direction."

Mary's head whipped around. "Problem?"

"No. Just an off day." She shrugged, surprised that Mary wasn't already aware of what had happened the day before. Surely Ian had told his mother.... Then again, he didn't know the whole story either,

and she certainly wasn't planning to share it around any time in the near or distant future. "We all have them, and I suppose I was due."

"You know you can come to me, Eli - if something is wrong or if you simply need to talk with someone who is not your peer. I consider all of you to be like my children. Just because we took Arianna into our family doesn't mean...."

"Yes it does," Eli broke in. "Ms Wellesly, I respect that you genuinely care for everyone on the Alpha team - your actions to protect us are proof enough of that. You've put your own family in danger for us. And I believe that you would do your best to remain impartial in matters that would require it. But the fact remains that she is part of your family now. That by right means you would consider her needs first, as you should. But it also means you are incapable of complete objectivity where the rest of us - particularly myself - are concerned. I cannot fault you for that; I would do the same were I in your shoes. But I cannot trust you to have my best interests at heart either."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Eli, but I don't blame you for that outlook either. Still... the offer stands if you ever change your mind. And so you know - the secrets you have already shared with me will remain as such."

"I appreciate that, Ms Wellesly. Now if you'll excuse me," motioning to the door, "I believe we only have a few minutes before dinner begins, and I still need to put my things away and return to the cavern. We don't want Gay causing a scene." Eli smirked. "I understand she was among the first to leave to keep it from becoming too much of a trial."

Mary smiled. "Yes, well... as an empath, it was to be expected. *Everyone* was projecting their anxiety - I don't think anyone could prepare for that kind of onslaught. At least the emotions now are a little more stable."

"For which we are most truly thankful," Eli intoned.

"Amen," Mary replied in benediction. "I'll let you get to it. I think your second really wants to speak to you, and I need to see how dinner is progressing." Mary turned and walked away without a backwards glance and Eden slid smoothly into her place in front of the doorway.

"May I come in?"

Eli gestured her inside, then shut the door firmly behind them.

Jacob wrapped his arms around Arianna's middle from behind and lifted her into the air, causing her to squeal and the rest of the big room to laugh. He squeezed once, then released her, ducking to avoid her swing and laughing as he ran around to the other side of the table. Arianna stomped her foot and huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"JAKE!!"

He laughed, and beckoned her forward with both hands. "C'mon, Baby... come get me."

Arianna narrowed her eyes at him. "You're going to pay for this, Jacob."

He grinned and moved back around the table to stand in front of her just out of reach. He opened his arms and braced himself. "Looking forward to it, Sweetheart," not at all surprised when she launched herself into his embrace or by the punch to his shoulder. "You hit like a girl you know," he whispered as he tightened his hold briefly.

Arianna snorted. "Good thing I'm a girl then, hmm?" squeezing his neck before he lowered her back to the ground. "It's good to see you again, Jake. It was quiet around here without you."

Jake leaned back to look Arianna in the eyes. "You didn't go home?"

"I found another home here, Jake. And it's wonderful."

Jake smiled and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Awesome. How about we grab a beer and catch up? There is beer around here somewhere, right?"

Arianna chuckled. "We could probably find some if we looked hard enough," motioning to where Danny and Luke were sitting talking to Esther, Hannah and Mordecai. Before she could wonder what happened to Naomi and Abigail, Arianna felt a pair of long, warm arms encircle her waist gently. She leaned back to look up into Abigail's bright blue eyes.

"Hi, Gay!"

Abigail hugged her gently. "I didn't get a hug from you when I arrived," she proclaimed with a pout. Arianna tapped the arms holding her and when Abigail loosened her grip, she turned in the embrace and wrapped her arms around Abigail's neck.

"Hello, Abigail," Arianna murmured, hugging her tightly. "Welcome back!"

"Oh, it's so good to see you again, Arianna. I missed you," squeezing tightly enough to cause Arianna's bones to snap back into alignment and giggling just a little at her moan of relief. "I think you missed me as well," she added, feeling Arianna slump slightly in her arms and lean her forehead on Abigail's shoulder.

"I did," Arianna confessed, clutching slightly at Abigail's arms as she regained her footing. "And not just for that," she continued with a smile. "Did you have a good visit home?" extending one hand to Jacob and the other to Abigail. Then they walked together towards the friends that were patiently awaiting their arrival.

"Still waiting on that beer," Jacob grumbled.

"We'll have to go find them, and dinner should be called in a few minutes. Maybe we should wait until after Mary's meeting," Luke suggested.

"What's that all about anyway?" Danny asked, turning his attention to Arianna who was listening as Abigail related her adventures during her time home. When they realized everyone was looking at them, they broke off their conversation and returned their attention to the group of people gathered around them.

"What?" Abigail asked, then realized most of them were staring at Arianna. "What did we miss?" she pushed.

Danny shrugged. "We were just wondering what Mary called tonight's meeting about."

"Oh," Arianna drawled slowly, biting her lip in thought. "I don't know for certain, but I would assume it is to lay some ground rules and set up a work schedule. After all, we can't expect Joy to cook three meals a day for us by herself, and she's certainly not going to clean it all up alone."

"Joy is here?" Jacob asked with a smile that grew to a grin when Arianna nodded. "It's a good thing she's not going on this little expedition with us. The way she cooks none of us would be able to get through a hatchway in a few months."

"Would now be a good time to mention she's been teaching me?" Arianna asked with a smile, causing cheers to roll around the table.

"Is this a private party or can anyone join in?" Deb asked with Isaac and Titus in tow. Naomi and Paul followed right behind, and before anyone could formulate an answer, they took seats around the big table. "So what are we talking about?" Deb asked when they were settled.

"Washing dishes," Arianna replied without missing a beat. Deb looked at her skeptically.

"You were cheering about washing dishes?"

"We were cheering that we don't have to wash after every meal," Jacob neatly cut in. "With all of us and all of them," motioning to the members of the security team who were lurking around the perimeter of the room, "we shouldn't have to do it but every few days."

"As long as no one asks me to cook, I'm happy to help out washing a few dishes," Deb replied. All of them remembered her disasters in the kitchen at the compound, and they nodded their agreement. "So what else is going on?" she asked.

"We were just catching up mostly," Hannah said. "On what all we did while we were apart."

"I can't believe I'm gonna say this," Mordecai spoke softly, "but I've gotten so used to seeing you guys all the time that I kinda missed you while we were separated. Don't get me wrong - it was great to see my family again and spend some real quality time with them, but you guys are family too."

"Kai's right," Titus said as he stood up. "And I think I missed out on most of my hug greetings," he complained. "No one was here when I arrived, although I don't think I was the first. So I need to catch up on all the hugs I missed when I got here."

As if his words were a springboard, they all jumped to their feet and began moving around... collecting the hugs they had missed, and in some cases, getting in an extra embrace. It was into this scene that Eli and Eden walked, and they halted on the threshold to observe for a moment. Eden felt Eli tense beside her and saw that Arianna was in Isaac's arms.

She tucked her hand into Eli's elbow and gently tugged her towards the melee. Something was going to blow there sooner or later, and Eden wasn't sure which option she preferred at this point.

"You got a little color while you were home," Eden commented as Eli turned her focus to her bag of possessions. "It looks good on you."

Eli shrugged. "It won't remain, but it was good to go home again if only for a little while. How was your visit?"

Eden threw out her hands and grinned. "Can't you tell from my tan?? It was wonderful. Makuahine tried to fatten me up like some sort of sacrificial lamb and Makua kane spoiled me rotten. Nice while it lasted, but I'm glad to be here. It's time to get back to work and do this thing, you know?"

Eli smiled. "I do indeed, my friend. This has been a long, long time coming, and we are in the home stretch which is both gratifying and frustrating. I can see the goal and yet it remains out of reach."

"You can say that again, Sister," holding up a hand before Eli's lips could part. "But please don't." Eden glanced at the floor and cleared her throat. Then she looked up to meet Eli's eyes again. It was so nice to see the hints of green again, though she knew it wouldn't last - not as long as Eli and Arianna were at odds together. "Look - I just want you to know that I talked to Az. She's going to come to me with any problems or concerns she has and I'll bring anything that needs your attention to you directly. If she does have to interact with you, I'll try to be there to help keep everything professional between the two of you."

"Eden..."

"Eli, it's for the best. We need you both to make this project work. But she makes you miserable and uncomfortable and I can do something about that. So let me, okay? Let me bridge that gap until you both find a groove you're comfortable working in together without a mediator."

Eli sighed. "Thank you, Eden. I'm sorry to put you in such a position..."

Eden held up a hand. "You're not putting me anywhere. I volunteered for this, Boss... just like you did. You handle the big picture, and I'll watch your back." She glanced at her timepiece. "C'mon... we need to get back in there before that dinner bell rings. Joy is here cooking, and I don't wanna miss out."

"Joy? Why did Ms Wellesly bring her daughter here? I thought they were preparing for a fight."

Eden cocked an eyebrow at Eli as if to say *Really?* Eli held up her hands in surrender and Eden sighed. "Seriously, Eli? What happened to that warrior school of thought I know you've got running through that slick mind of yours all the time? Can you really think of a safer place to be than here with us and all these lovely security agents and her brothers watching over her?? Besides, the boys apparently begged Mary to let her come so we wouldn't all be stuck eating military rations for the next few weeks." Eden stuck out her tongue and made a face. "I'm not in any hurry to start eating those, thank you very much."

Eli winced. "Nor am I, truth be told. Come, then. Let's not be the reason dinner is delayed. If it tastes anywhere nearly as amazing as it smells, I don't want to miss out either. I wonder if she would share some of her recipes - surely we can adapt them...." trailing off when Eden held up a finger.

"Already covered, Boss. Az has been learning."

"Oh... well - good then," said as they reached the threshold to the vast room... only to find their comrades locked in a number of embraces. Eden felt Eli stiffen when her eyes landed on Arianna and Isaac, but she ignored it, knowing that reaction was more telling than Eli was aware of. With luck, situations just like this one would help catapult Eli back into Arianna's arms.

Abigail noticed them as they drew closer, and her excited cry brought attention to their entrance and the round of hugs started again. Arianna slipped out of the room almost unnoticed - only a pair of gray eyes and a pair of black eyes tracked her progress out the door. Caleb wasn't so discreet - he followed her out directly.

"Are you all right, Ang... Arianna?" he asked softly as soon as they were out of hearing range. He figured if he couldn't hear the Alpha team, they surely couldn't hear him. "Sorry," he mumbled. They were all getting better about addressing their charges by their given names, but sometimes the codenames still slipped in.

"It's all right, Caleb," reaching out a hand to him. "It's hard to break months of practice in such a short time. And I'm fine. I suspect Mama is about ready to call everyone to dinner and Joy could use some help moving things to the serving line. Could you...?" motioning towards the kitchen.

"I'd be honored to offer a hand, Arianna," beckoning two more agents with a jerk of his head. "This means we eat first, right?" he joked, causing her to chuckle.

"That sounds reasonable to me," Arianna replied as they entered the mess hall.

"What sounds reasonable, Little Sister?" Joy asked with an arched brow. "I've been exposed to some of your ideas of reasonable this week. It's only fair that you tell me what it is first."

"Where's the love?" Arianna exclaimed dramatically, throwing her arms wide. Joy snorted and Mary laughed. The guys just watched the proceeding with grins on their faces.

"C'mon, Drama Queen - you can help me get stuff to the line. The sooner we do that, the sooner we eat."

"And we get to go first, right?" Arianna asked slyly.

"I don't see why not... although I've sampled so much I'm kind of full. Aren't you?"

"Not really - I stopped sampling a while ago, remember. And that is what I said sounded reasonable - we should be first in line to eat."

Mary looked at the three men who had accompanied Arianna to the kitchen. "Well, that certainly explains why you had such a muscular escort coming here. C'mon, boys - time to earn your pay. You can start the heavy lifting. Joy's already done more than her share for the day."

Without comment, the three men followed Mary back into the kitchen and Joy came around and took Arianna in her arms. "You all right, Honey?"

Arianna held on and nodded. "Yes. It's just a lot harder than I expected it to be."

"Keep the faith, Sweetie. It may take a while and a lot of effort, but I think you'll get the results you want. Especially with all your friends helping out."

"I hope so, Joy. I never knew... never realized.... I want this to work. I want Eli more than anything... including a place on this project."

"Then be patient, Arianna. It'll be worth it, right?"

"Right." They heard grunting and groaning coming from the kitchen. "In the meantime, maybe we'd better go see if we can help. I'm hungry." Laughing, they wrapped their arms around each other and slipped into the kitchen to help.

Chapter XXXI

"Okay, so does everyone understand what's going on now?" Mary asked as she finished speaking. She looked around the room and found most of the participants nodding their heads. Deborah, however, was frowning, and Mary crossed to stand in front of her. "Is there a problem, Deborah?"

"Yeah - what if we don't like this assignment sheet? Wait," she demanded before Mary could respond. "I don't mind helping out - I expect to do my part. Like you said... *we're* responsible for ourselves here, so we need to take that responsibility and not expect someone else to do for us. But I *really* don't want to cook." She looked around at the others. "No *one* really wants me to cook. Bad things happen when I cook, and I'm guessing we only have one kitchen to destroy."

Mary's eyes widened despite the smirk on her face. "That bad?"

"YES!!" came the resounding answer from the entire Alpha team. Given the nose crinkling and the faces they were making when they replied, Mary could only imagine the vividness of the memories they were recalling.

Mary cleared her throat. "All righty then," she drawled slowly. "Let me take another look and see..." cutting herself off when Eli shook her head and stood.

"I'll take care of it, Ms Wellesly. I have a pretty good grasp on who should be doing what."

"Why you?" Deborah interrupted, standing to her feet as well and setting herself for a fight. "Why should you always be the one making the decisions for all of us?"

Arianna would have moved forward, but Eden's hand on one side and Jacob's on the other stopped her in her tracks. She looked between them and let her eyes settle on Eden's. Eden held her gaze. "This has been coming for a while, Az. They have to get things settled between them."

Arianna studied Eden's expression, then turned her attention to the standoff playing out in front of her. Even Mary had stepped away from the confrontation, recognizing the need for the team to establish a hierarchy within the ranks. Arianna glanced back at Eden and nodded, forcing herself to relax in her seat.

Eli held Deborah's gaze, then tossed her Pad on the table and shrugged. "You want the job, Deb? Please... be my guest. You seem to think it's some sort of power trip when all it really is, is a lot of extra work for me. So please... *please* take it. It will leave me more time to work in the lab." She turned and made her way to the door. "But you better be certain you have the support of the rest of the team - this job is not something you can do by yourself." With that she walked out the door, never looking back to see the gobsmacked faces she left behind.

Without a word, Arianna stood and glanced around the room. "I know who should be leading us," giving Deborah a pointed glare. Then she stormed out; not following Eli, but instead seeking out her family. Fortunately she knew where Joy would be, and she figured that the brothers wouldn't be far away. Eden waited until Arianna's footsteps faded in the distance, then she stood as well.

"I hope you're prepared for the responsibility, Deb." She headed towards the door.

"Would you support my bid for leadership then?"

"No," Eden said plainly. "Though I suppose you might be competent enough, I don't think you're the most qualified to lead. And that's what we need." She walked to the door, but before she could cross the threshold Deborah called out to her.

"I never said I *wanted* the job. I just want to know why we never get any input."

Eden snorted. "Really??" She shook her head. "Good luck, Deb. You're gonna need it." And with that she walked out the door without looking back. Then it was as if Eden's departure had opened the floodgates, and one by one the others left in a rush until only Deborah, Isaac and Titus remained in the mess hall with Mary, who pushed off the wall.

"Well, since my team has already taken care of their part of clean-up, I'd suggest the three of you get to work. Because Joy won't be cooking tomorrow if the kitchen is still a disaster area when she comes in." She looked at Deborah. "You can post the new schedule for the Alpha team tomorrow so everyone knows when they have duty and what it is. Good night." Then she left the room as well, leaving the three Alpha team members looking at one another.

"C'mon," Deborah grouched. "We may as well get started. I still have work to do. Wait... where are you guys going?" she asked as Isaac and Titus walked to the door.

"We're not on the schedule," Isaac said with a shrug.

Deborah's head dropped to her chin. "I know you're not; neither am I, but we need to get this cleaned up and I can't do this by myself. If you stay and help, I'll... I don't know, but I'll think of something."

"If we stay and help," Titus said, "you need to support Eli as our leader. She's good at what she does, Deb. She brings matters of importance to all of us to the table and listens to our concerns. Yes, she may end up making the final decision, but not without allowing us to contribute first. And frankly, I don't need input on every little decision she makes - I don't want it."

Deborah studied him seriously, then let her shoulders slump in defeat. "Fine," she muttered. "But can we get started? I still have to return Eli's Pad to her so she can take care of the rescheduling."

"And convince her to take the job back," Titus added.

"Dammit," Deborah muttered. "I'll wash."

"We'll dry and put away then."

"Whoa... whoa," Nathaniel said as he settled his hands on Arianna's hips before she could slam into him. "Where are you off to in such a hurry, Little Sister? We were just coming to find you." He jerked his head back at Joseph and Ian. "We think it's a little unfair that Joy's already gotten all this bonding time with you, and we've barely had the chance to say 'hello'."

Arianna grinned broadly and extended her hand, waiting for Nathaniel to accept it. "Would you believe me if I told you I was looking for you... all of you?"

"Really, now?" Joseph asked, offering her his arm and smiling when she tucked her other hand into the crook of his elbow. "Well then... I think that calls for a drink."

"As long as we don't have to go to the mess hall, I'm in," Arianna proclaimed. The three men looked at her fretfully.

"Is there a problem?" Ian asked.

Arianna shook her head. "Just a power play. I prefer to stay out of it."

"Good choice," Nathaniel commended. "So a drink then?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea. Something with vodka, perhaps?"

Joseph laughed. "No wonder Mama adopted you. You're a woman after her own heart." And with that, they headed down a section of corridor Arianna had yet to explore. "Now," he cautioned with a conspiratorial whisper, "you can't tell any of your friends about this. This area is supposed to be strictly for the people protecting the Alpha team. But since you're family, we're gonna make an exception for you, all right?" holding out his pinky finger.

"Okay," Arianna agreed with a hint of confusion in her tone as she studied his extended pinky. Nathaniel took pity on her and pulled them to a stop. Then he loosened his grasp on the hand he held, taking her pinky and linking it to Joseph's.

"It's a pinky swear," he explained. "It's a solemn promise."

"Oooh," Arianna replied as understanding dawned. "Okay - I pinky swear to keep this a secret," squeezing Joseph's pinky briefly before releasing it. She caused all three young men to chuckle at her seriousness, and it made her smile in response.

"It's going to be wonderful to have you in the family, Arianna," Ian welcomed. He glanced at his brothers. "Now we just have to figure out how to rig the comms to keep in touch while she's gone."

"I'm working on it," Joey grouched. "But in the meantime," tugging Arianna forward and forcing Nathaniel and Ian to move to keep up. "Let's go get that drink and get to know you a little better."

Arianna grinned and they headed down the corridor together.

Eli settled back into her bunk and closed her eyes. It was too early to go to sleep, but it felt so wonderful to simply stretch out and relax for a change. With Deborah assuming the leadership role, Eli felt a weight fall from her shoulders. Now it would be even easier to keep Arianna out of her

sphere because they would have very little reason to interact except in the few instances when their work overlapped.

She tucked her hands under her head as a wave of lethargy washed through her. She drifted into a twilight state and realized she could probably fall asleep if she was left alone for long enough. That thought, however, seemed to be enough to disrupt her paradise as just then a knock sounded at her door.

Eli sighed. She really was comfortable and no longer had the responsibility to respond to calls for her attention. Just as she had decided to ignore the hail, another knock sounded, followed by Eden's voice calling out to her.

"Eli? Are you in there?"

Eli sighed again. If it was anyone other than Eden, she'd simply ignore them and claim she was asleep if confronted about it later. But Eden was her best friend, and she couldn't treat her with that kind of disregard - not that Eden would ever let her get away with something like that.

"Eli?"

"Yes, Eden," Eli replied as she pushed herself up and off the bed. She shuffled to the door and pulled it open, not surprised to find Eden leaning against the doorjamb, but shocked to see the most of the remainder of the Alpha team standing behind her. Blonde eyebrows went into an equally blonde hairline and she looked around at everyone assembled in the hallway, observing the notable exceptions missing from the impromptu congregation. "Eden?"

"Can we come in?"

"Why? Eden, I'm not the leader of this merry little band any longer."

Eden straightened and crossed her arms over her chest. Jacob stepped up closer behind her, resting his hands on her hips in support and everyone else closed ranks behind them. "As far as we're concerned, you are. I don't know what Deb's issue is - we can worry about that later - but I do know that we're not willing to follow her."

"Eden, if she really wants the job..."

"No, Eli! Her wanting the job makes her even less qualified than my pukadog. No one in their right mind wants that kind of responsibility. And those that do are dangerous."

Eli exhaled slowly, trying to release the tension she could feel climbing back up her spine. She scratched the back of her head and shrugged. "I'm not certain I can accommodate everyone, but..." She shrugged and opened the door wider. "Please come in."

They filed in one at a time with Eden leading the way. She walked to the bed and pushed Eli's pillow against the wall so she could lean on it... only to find herself moved out of the way when Jacob took her place and pulled her down in front of him. Mordecai did the same with Hannah and Luke and Danny took the last bit of space on the bed together. Esther and Abigail took the chairs at the table while Naomi sat at the desk and Paul perched on a corner. That left Eli standing, and she looked around at those she counted as family.

"So what can I do for you guys?" Eli asked.

"You mean aside from setting Deb straight?" Jacob replied before Eden could speak. "C'mon, Eli... can you honestly say she's a good choice? I mean, would you follow her?"

Eli leaned against the door and crossed her feet at the ankles. She offered a small chuckle. "In case you hadn't noticed, Jake - I don't follow anyone particularly well. I have a tendency to simply take charge."

"So that's a no then," he stated. "Then why would you think we'd follow her?" gesturing to the others in the room. "Eli, we all want this project to succeed... even Deb, in her own warped way."

"Does anyone know what her problem is?" Danny asked.

"Besides being a 'ilio wahine?" Eden snarked. "Whaat?" she whined when Esther reached over and slapped her leg. Esther pointed to Abigail who pointed to Paul who pointed to Naomi who pointed at Eli. Eli just gave her a look - arms crossed and brow arched. Eden snorted. "That right there is why we need you, Eli," causing both eyebrows to crease into a frown. Eden rolled her eyes. "Do you really think anyone here would have risked passing on a smack to me from Deb?"

"She's got a point," Naomi agreed.

"That still doesn't answer my question," Danny said, leaning into Luke. "What exactly is Deb's issue? Is it personal against Eli or is she just looking for a power trip?"

"It is possible it's neither of those," Eli contributed, nibbling on her thumbnail. "Maybe she just wants to be heard."

"Then she needs to stop spewing crap," Eden replied. "No one wants to listen to that."

"Granted," Eli agreed. "But I am still not understanding exactly what it is you would have me do," looking around the room at her friends. "She wants the job."

"And you don't," Abigail said flatly.

Eli shook her head. "I never did. I took it because someone had to and I'm good at organization - which in this instance makes me good at being a leader."

A light rap on the door caused Eli to jump slightly and break off her speech. She looked around the room and sighed, knowing that whoever was on the other side was going to be someone she didn't really want to have to deal with. However, she had never been one to back away from anything - except Arianna - and with the friends who supported her watching her back... quite literally... Eli opened the door.

She wasn't surprised to find Deborah standing in front of her with Eli's Pad in her hands, but she was a little taken aback that Isaac and Titus were standing sentinel behind her. Eli cleared her throat and met Deborah's eyes.

"Yes?"

"May we come in?" Deborah asked in an abashed tone.

Eli surveyed them for a moment longer then opened the door wider to reveal her full quarters. "It's your choice," she offered, motioning them inside. Deborah hesitated a moment when she saw the crowded room, then crossed the threshold. Since they had argued in public, she decided it was only fair that they settle things in public as well. These people had a right to know what was going on and why she had challenged Eli's authority. But first she owed Eli an apology.

Deborah squeezed into the corner by the desk, giving her a view of everyone in the room. She sighed when she read the upset and discontent in the eyes facing her. Titus and Isaac took seats on the floor to keep from blocking everyone else's view, and Eli closed the door behind them before leaning against it once more. The entire Alpha team, sans Arianna, was present, and Eli didn't expect her to show up for any reason short of being summoned. Eli gestured to Deborah.

"The floor is yours, Deb."

Deborah nodded and cleared her throat. "First of all," looking up from the floor, "I owe you an apology, Eli. I didn't mean to throw everything into chaos, and I'm pretty sure I don't want your job either. Don't get me wrong," she continued, holding up a hand. "I thought I did, but what's the point of leading if no one follows? And even if everyone here did choose to accept me as the person in charge, I'm not really sure I want that responsibility."

"So why challenge me, Deb? What was the point?"

"I wanted to see if you'd fight for your place."

Eli snorted. "Deb, I don't want that place. Why would I fight for it?"

"For the greater good?" Deborah shrugged.

"I took it for that reason in the first place, Deb. But I'm not going to fight to keep it. I was serious earlier. If you believe you can do a better job... please don't let me stop you. I would much rather spend my time in the lab than in the office."

Deborah shook her head. "I really don't think I want the job. I just want..." She blew out a breath and looked down at the ground again. Eden's lips parted impatiently, but a hand from Eli stayed her words. Instead the room remained silent as they waited for Deborah to finish her thought. Finally Deborah took a deep breath and met Eli's eyes once again. "I'd like a little more input."

Eli frowned. "In what way, Deb? I already hold council sessions about anything important that will affect the group as a whole. And if I bring every single decision to all of you, we will never get anything remotely scientific done again. We will spend all of our time making mundane decisions about everyday things."

Deborah shrugged. "I'm really not sure, Eli. It just seems like sometimes we don't have any say in what happens to us. I mean - you even decide our menus."

"Can I make a suggestion on that?" Esther asked, waiting for Eli to acknowledge her before she resumed. "What if the person doing the cooking for the week makes up their own menu? Or in cases like Deb, who we *really* don't want in the kitchen," drawing laughter from everyone in the room. "She can make a menu for the person she's swapping clean-up duty with. That way she gets to choose a

menu too. We can turn them in early so we don't end up having the same things over and over, but it takes some of the burden off you and lets us be more involved."

Eli nodded her head. "I like it. Thoughts?" looking around at the rest of the team to find them in agreement. "All right. Each of you begin thinking about your menus. I know we will not be using them for a while, but thinking ahead is easier than catching up." She looked back at Deborah. "Better?"

"Yeah."

"Good. If you will come to me, or bring things up during team meetings, it will be easier to address each issue as it happens instead of leaving it to fester until something blows. We cannot afford to be fighting amongst ourselves when we leave here," seeing everyone nod their agreement again. "Is there anything else?"

Deborah handed Eli her Pad. "Yeah - we still need a kitchen duty schedule."

"All right," Eli said, accepting the Pad. "I will take care of it and will send it to each of you when it is complete. And Deb?" waiting for hazel eyes to meet her gray one. "Apology accepted. Now... everyone clear out, please. I've got work to do," Eli commanded with a smile. Deborah, being the closest to the door, exited first though the rest were quick to follow. Eden motioned for Jacob to wait for her in the hallway, then she closed the door and turned to Eli.

"Eden?"

"I just wanted to tell you I'll let Az know what happened here tonight. She left right after you did, but I don't know where she went. She wasn't in her quarters when the rest of us decided to come talk to you. Still she deserves to know."

Eli nodded. "Thank you, Eden. I appreciate it." She looked like she wanted to say more, but instead turned and picked up her Pad. Eden took her cue and left, closing the door behind her.

"C'mon, Jake. I need to find Az."

Chapter XXXII

More than a little frustrated, Eden headed to the room she knew Mary to be using as an office. If worse came to worst, she would ask one of the security agents on duty to contact Mary for her, but if at all possible, she wanted to keep this private.

She trudged up the stairs, exhausted from what had already been an exceedingly long day. Eden stopped when she reached the landing, admiring the view. The glass window overlooked the massive cavern, and only from this angle could she see the artwork carved into the walls. She jumped and grabbed the banister railing as she whirled around as a soft touch landed on the small of her back. Then she glared at Mary who just arched an eyebrow at her.

"Sorry, Eden, but I didn't exactly sneak up on you." She jerked her head at the window. "Pretty impressive, isn't it?"

Eden turned back around slowly and let her gaze roam over the room on the other side of the window. She nodded slowly after a few minutes' observation. "It really is. Where did they come from? Do you know?"

Mary shook her head. "Only what the legends say - that it was the military men and women who served in this facility centuries ago who wanted to leave their mark on the world so as not to be forgotten. I would like to know what meaning the carvings hold."

Eden leaned forward and squinted. "So would I. They remind me of the markings of my people - with meaning to the person who wears them. These look as though they were personal to individuals that put them in place." She sighed. "I suppose we'll never know."

"Not unless they left a journal somewhere for us to find, and after several hundred years...."

"Not very likely," Eden said.

"Not very likely," Mary agreed. "Come on in the office," heading back up the next flight of stairs. "I doubt you came here for the view... remarkable as it is." She motioned Eden to a seat and continued on behind the desk. "What can I do for you, Eden?"

"I was wondering if you knew where Az was? I checked her quarters, but she didn't answer the door. And considering how angry she was when she stormed out of the mess hall earlier...." She took a deep breath. "That's been settled, by the way. Eli is still the Alpha team leader."

"Is she happy about that?"

"More resigned, I would say. But about Az?"

"I have an idea." Mary lifted her comm unit to her lips and toggled the switch. "Ian, my son. Are you there? Over." It took a moment before there was a response, but when Ian came across the line, there was the sound of laughter in the background... one of which was distinctly Arianna's. "Well, that answers that question," she muttered to Eden before she spoke to Ian again. "Son, I can hear that Arianna is with you. Can you give me your location? Over."

"No, Mama. It's top secret. Is there a problem? Over."

"There will be if I have to come looking for you," Mary replied sternly. "I need you to bring Arianna to the office immediately. Eden needs to speak to her. Over."

The laughter ceased. "We'll be there momentarily," Ian responded. "Out."

"Mary, it's not critical. I was just concerned."

"I understand. And I appreciate that. But the curfew is in place for a reason, and I'm not starting out the final leg of this project fighting with my children about following the rules. They should be the first to follow them if only to set an example for the rest. Would you prefer to speak to her privately?"

"I can talk to her on the way back to our quarters. I just want to let her know what happened tonight so she's on the same page with the rest of us."

Mary nodded and motioned Arianna forward. "Come in, Daughter. You're not in trouble, nor are your brothers," seeing the three young men hovering in the background. "But it's almost curfew and Eden needs to speak with you." Arianna turned to Eden.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Az... of course. I just wanted to bring you up to speed on what happened after you stormed out of the mess hall tonight."

Arianna nodded and moved to hug Mary. "Goodnight, Mama." The boys stepped into the room and claimed their hugs as well, then Arianna took Eden's elbow. "Come - before we're late and our minders panic over our absence." They waved at the Wellesly family members and headed down the stairs. Only once they were out of sight and hearing did the boys turn to Mary.

"Sorry, Mama. We didn't realize how late it was. We were just trying to get acquainted with Arianna."

"It's all right, Joseph. I know you boys have been anxious to meet her. What did you think?"

"She fits right in, Mama," Nathaniel replied for them. "But I'm still a little confused on the relationship between her and Eli. Are they mates or aren't they?"

"Yes... and no," Mary replied, motioning them towards the conference room. Ian walked to the small wet bar she had set up, and began mixing martinis. Though he and his brothers preferred a strong scotch, he was well aware of Mary's penchant for a good martini after a hellish day. And given the look of exasperation on her face, she'd passed that point some time ago.

"Would you care to elucidate?" Ian asked when he set her drink in front of her. Joey and Nathaniel accepted their drinks with a nod of thanks, and Ian took a seat beside Mary. "Mama?"

Mary swallowed the alcohol in her mouth with a slow release of breath, then met the eyes of the young men she was proud to call 'son'. She sighed and nodded. "You need to know. Most of the Alpha team is subtly trying to get them back together."

"So they're not mated?"

"They are - by Eli's laws and customs, they are mates. And in Eli's case, they are mated for life. Arianna will be the only mate Eli will ever know."

"And Ria?" the nickname causing Mary's brows to fly into her hairline.

"Arianna's situation is much more complicated. Until just last week, she was unaware of the existence of life mates or that Eli's culture was based on the concept. Her society functions so much differently - differently enough that she was betrothed to someone else *after* she was mated to Eli."

"Her culture isn't monogamous?"

"It is, but that's not the point here."

"Is anyone else as confused as I feel?" Ian asked, looking at Joey and Nathaniel who nodded at him. Mary sighed and gulped the remainder of her drink.

"Okay, boys - try and keep up. Eli comes from a society where every individual only has one mate... for better or worse. They are incapable of mating with more than one person in their lifetime. Arianna and Eli were mated without Arianna's knowledge of this fact, and her father forced her into a betrothal after she and Eli consummated their relationship. That betrothal caused all kinds of issues, and was the catalyst that tore Eli and Arianna apart. The betrothal has since been broken, but the damage was done by that point. Although Arianna has since acknowledged her feelings for Eli and Eli is bound to Arianna for the remainder of her life, they are not together. Suffice it to say that Eli has determined that remaining alone is preferable to the risk that trusting Arianna again would be."

A minute of silence reigned over the table before Joey spoke. "That is seriously messed up, Mama."

She nodded. "It is indeed, Joseph. But repairing this situation is something Eli and Arianna both have to want for anything to change. It won't work otherwise. Although, as I said, the Alpha team is going to try and subtly nudge Eli into accepting the truth between her and Arianna."

"Can we help?"

"Besides being their friends?" Mary shrugged. "I don't know. I did my part by removing the obstacle of the betrothal. I have since tried to stay out of whatever goings on the Alpha team is involved in. Unless they ask for my help specifically, I am content to remain at the periphery of things. They have to learn to settle things on their own without any outside influence or interference."

"What about the other?" Ian asked. "I noticed security around here is running bare bones. Has the threat been removed?"

"Not at all," Mary responded. "If anything, we're at a higher threat level than we were before the kids went home. That's why it appears we are working with a skeleton crew only and that I'm relying on the defensibility of this secret location to provide adequate protection for the Alpha team. The truth, however, is that I am fairly confident about who is the menace to the Alpha team. And besides the units you're aware of, I have a few other surprises in reserve if they become necessary. Joseph, don't forget you leave for the ship in three standard hours. Ian, I'd like you to stick with Eli. Don't hover, but remain enough in her purview that she's aware of your presence. I'd like you to be there if she needs someone to talk to. Nathaniel...?"

"I know, Mama. I'll make sure they're briefed."

"Thank you, my son. Any questions?" The three shook their heads. "Then go. I'm sure you two want to say goodbye," gesturing between Nathaniel and Joseph, "and we could all use a few minutes sleep before tomorrow's madness begins." She stood and they stood with her. Mary exchanged hugs with her sons, saving Joseph for last. "Be careful," she cautioned, "and stay in touch. When things start moving, they should do so quickly."

"I will, Mama. Try to keep him out of trouble for me, will you?"

Mary snorted. "I've been trying for twenty-five years. If it hasn't worked by now...." She broke off and kissed his cheek. "Take care, my son."

"You too, Mama." Then she turned and left the room, and the boys headed back to their assigned quarters.

Joseph arrived at the space dock without fanfare, and immediately met with the other members of the security contingent that were there. They were the best at what they did, and by the time the Alpha team was ready to start arriving, they would have their work accomplished.

At the underground facility, a week passed as things settled into a routine. The schedules Eli had written up took care of the kitchen duties, work assignments and laundry details. Everything else she left up to the team members - trying not to micromanage anything she didn't have to. Ian always seemed to be nearby, mostly unobtrusively, and Eli decided she would miss his presence when they were finally underway.

She had managed to keep her interaction with Arianna to one occurrence, but she wasn't completely certain how she felt about it. From what she observed, Arianna was too busy to notice or even care, always surrounded by not only the rest of the Alpha team, but also those she now called family... and that hurt more than she cared to admit. It wasn't that Eli wasn't included when she chose to be a part, but more that she felt cut off from the intimacy they all shared. The words of the old man in the meadow haunted her thought processes, causing her to simply stop speaking in the middle of a sentence or halt work mid-step. Fortunately either Eden or Ian was usually close enough to prevent a catastrophe and jumpstart her brain back to whatever it had been focused on before.

It was becoming more of a problem than she wanted to admit, however, and after a week of confusion, Eli decided it was time to take matters into her own hands before someone got hurt because of her inattention. So it was that the night before the Holiday of Gratitude celebration, she found herself seeking Ian out for counsel after the days' work was done.

She wasn't surprised to find him in the mess hall kitchen. It seemed to be where almost everybody congregated during their time off - everyone except for Eli, of course. There was simply no way to avoid Arianna there - she and Joy were forever concocting up something new with mostly successful results. But Eli needed the ear of someone who would understand at least part of her story, and she only hoped Ian could be as unbiased as Mary believed she could have been.

The room was raucous and full of laughter when Eli crossed the threshold, only to fall silent when they recognized her. Eden rose to meet her, but Eli simply shook her head. Instead she met Ian's eyes and jerked her head at him. He understood and followed her from the mess hall with alacrity. Silence reigned in the room until long after their footsteps faded, and when the noise resumed, it was a bare murmur. Arianna met Eden's eyes, the look on her face heartbreaking. Jake stood and took her in his arms, rocking her while she cried softly. Nathaniel and Joy exchanged glances, then he went to find Mary.

Eli was waiting for Ian when he exited the mess hall and he fell into step beside her without a word. They walked that way for a while, doing a circuit of the parts of the facility where the Alpha team was allowed to go. The rest of it was locked out and Eli was too preoccupied to even question why so much of the area was off-limits or why there seemed to be echoes coming from behind locked hatchways. Ian made a note to let Mary know however even as his attention remained focused on Eli.

After the first few turns of their second go-round, Eli took a shuddering breath and began to speak. "Do you believe in guardian angels?" she asked so softly Ian had to strain to hear her.

"I do," he replied without hesitation.

"Have you ever seen one?"

At this his brow furrowed, and he shook his head. "No. But that doesn't make me believe any less. Why?"

Eli glanced at him, then resumed her study of their surroundings - nothing spectacular... they were in an underground military facility, after all. But one would have supposed they were encircled by ancient frescoes with the attention she was giving them. "I have," she finally whispered.

Ian waited, but when she didn't continue, he prompted. "You have?"

Eli nodded. "Do you remember the last day we spent at home - when I went out hunting?"

Ian nodded. He wasn't ever likely to forget that experience. He had nearly stopped breathing when he lost sight of her for almost two minutes. It was only when he stepped to the edge of the woods and saw her walking back towards him that his heart had resumed a furious beat. "Of course," he answered. "You scared the crap out of me."

Eli smirked briefly, then her expression fell and her gaze went distant again. "Sorry," she muttered. "What you saw and what I remember about that day aren't the same thing, and it's starting to interfere with... well, with everything."

"Is that why you've been... 'off' so much lately?" Eli nodded but didn't meet his eyes. "Tell me what happened to you out there, Eli. Maybe I can help."

Eli sighed. "I will, but I need you to try and be impartial. Can you forget that Arianna is part of your family for a little while and just hear me out?"

"Who?" he asked impishly, smiling broadly when Eli understood his intent. "As far as I'm concerned, Eli, you are my only priority. Talk to me."

So Eli told him everything that had happened - every word the old man had said. She even used his inflection; Ian didn't bat an eyelash. When she was finished she looked at him plaintively, but he didn't speak. Eli felt compelled to defend herself. "I know what I saw, Ian, and I know what I heard. I'm not making this up!"

Ian placed a calming hand on her arm, bringing them to a stop in the middle of yet another corridor. "I believe you, Eli. I don't think you're making this up at all. But how can I help? What do you want to do about it?"

Eli closed her eyes and blew out a breath. "I would like to forget it ever happened; just make it all go away so I can focus on my work again. I can't afford to be distracted by this, Ian, and yet it's all that's on my mind anymore."

"Have you considered following his advice? That maybe your hesitation to do so is the reason that you've lost your ability to focus on anything else?"

Eli shook her head vehemently. "I can't, Ian. I can't go through that again."

"Why do you think you will?" he asked with a puzzled expression.

Eli looked at the ceiling, scrunching her eyes closed against the brightness of the lights and the tears that wanted to flow. "She... Arianna - she doesn't care for me that way. She never did. I was just one of many to her, and she rubbed it in my face with her betrothal. I know that has since been dissolved, but she's not bound to me the way I am to her and she never will be. She's made that clear in the last week. The only way I can maintain is to keep my distance from her."

"Eli... have you talked to her about this? Because I can state unequivocally that you're wrong about a good many things where she's concerned."

"I cannot take that risk, Ian. I cannot expose myself to that kind of pain again."

"Can't? Or won't?"

Eli shrugged. "In the end it all boils down to the same thing." She started walking away from him. Ian ran to catch up to her, walking beside her in silence. When they reached the hallway that led to Eli's quarters, Ian stopped her progress with a light touch.

"Let me think about this, Eli. I'd still like to help if I can." He smiled at her. "You deserve to be happy."

Eli offered him a sad smile. "Goodnight, Ian," she said and turned and walked away. He watched her go, then turned to go find his siblings. It was time to put a plan into motion.

Chapter XXXIII

Ian and Nathaniel looked up and down the corridor before nodding at Joy. If Mama caught them wandering the halls this late... especially *this* hall... there would be hell and back to pay. But they had discussed it, and they all believed that it was worth the risk at this point. Joy nodded back at her brothers, and knocked on the door.

Even through the thick walls, they could hear the faint sounds of someone grumbling on the other side. The door opened with the pronouncement, "Somebody better be dying..." before the words died on Eden's lips as her eyes widened at the sight of them. She pulled the door back further and ushered them into her quarters, then shut the portal soundlessly behind them.

Eden blinked and rubbed her face, trying to force a semblance of wakefulness into her consciousness. Joy offered her the cup of coffee she carried and Eden accepted it with a relieved smile. They waited for her to savor her first swallow, then Ian cleared his throat.

"We want in."

Eden frowned and looked at the cup, wondering if there was enough caffeine in it to give clarity to Ian's words. She took another sip, then looked at all of them with tired eyes. "Okay, so it's like oh-holy-crap-o'clock in the morning, and I'm really not firing on all engines yet. Would you like to start over and bring me in at the beginning of this conversation?"

Nathaniel put a hand on Ian's arm and waited for his nod. Then he met Eden's eyes. "We know that at least most of the Alpha team are trying to get Eli and Ria... Arianna... back together again. We want in on it. We have some information that might help."

"Okay... why?"

Nathaniel frowned. "Why do we want to help? Or why do we have information?"

"Yes!" Eden barked impatiently, then sucked in a breath. "Sorry. It's been a hellishly long week... moreso than ever before. I'm afraid if we don't get this settled soon...."

"So let us help," Joy offered.

"It's not that I'm opposed to it," Eden informed them. "I'm just not sure what you can do. I'm not sure what any of us can do at this point." She sighed. "What kind of information do you have?"

"Eli's not going to be the one to make the first move - she can't. Losing Arianna like she did nearly destroyed her the first time. She refuses to allow that to happen again. And she's convinced that Ria doesn't feel for her the way that Eli does for Arianna. The last week has only reinforced that belief."

"Crap," Eden muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose to stave off the headache she felt blossoming behind her eyes. "Well isn't this becoming a cluster of mass proportions?" she griped, then looked around at her late night guests. "You better take a seat. This could take a while."

Without another word, Eden moved to the machine tucked into a corner of the table. "If you tell anyone about this, I'll have to kill you," she warned, "but I think we need it." In moments the scent of fresh coffee wafted through the room and three sets of eyes turned her way.

"Is that from...?" Joy started. Eden nodded.

"Yeah - now you know why this has to remain a secret. If word gets out I have this, *everybody's* gonna want some. And I won't have any left to take with me."

The three siblings mimicked zipping their lips and throwing away the key. Eden laughed at the absurdity of it all. Then she handed them each a cup of genuine freshly brewed coffee.

"So what's the deal?" Ian asked after his first taste. "Man, that's good stuff."

Eden grinned. "I know." Then her expression fell. "You say Eli won't make the first move. Well, Arianna can't. Eli effectively tied her hands... made her promise to keep things strictly professional if they were both to remain on the team. I told Az to show Eli what she was missing by doing just as she asked... by being professional with Eli and the dork we all grew to know and love - thanks to Eli - with the rest of us."

"So that's what she meant about Arianna not caring."

Eden nodded. "Yeah, probably. And it doesn't help that Isaac is a little too friendly with Az for Eli's tastes. She tenses up every time she sees them together even if they're across the room from each other."

"Is he doing it to rile her up on purpose? Is that part of your plan, I mean?" from Nathaniel.

"No - Isaac was never part of my plan," Eden replied, shaking her head. "We were just gonna show Eli what she was missing so she would accept Arianna as a friend again. If they could get to that stage, I'm convinced the rest would eventually fall into place. Unfortunately Eli's made it impossible for Arianna to be in her vicinity."

"Well I think Isaac is sincerely interested in developing more of a relationship with Arianna," Joy stated. "I've seen him trying to get her attention in ways that reminded me of...." She turned and looked at Ian. "Who was that girl you had a crush on in sixth grade?" She waved him off before he could answer. "Doesn't matter actually. But his actions around Arianna reminded me a lot of the adolescent boy you were then."

"But she's not interested in him that way," Eden said.

"We know that - but does he?" Ian asked solemnly.

"No," Eden said. "And he won't figure it out on his own. He'll have to be told... or shown. The problem is that Az isn't gonna tell him because she doesn't realize it. Since she doesn't care for Isaac beyond friendship, she sees her actions as simply being nice to someone who is as socially awkward and clumsy as she once was. She's trying to make him feel included by being friendly."

"And he thinks there's something more to it - that she cares for him... romantically."

"That's what it sounds like."

"Wow," Nathaniel mumbled. "This really IS a cluster."

"Um hmm," Eden agreed. "The question is - can we do anything about it?"

"Pray?" Joy suggested.

"Well, I have it on good authority that the mechanical engineers - you and Isaac and Paul - will be moving to the ship soon to begin your final systems checks and things. Maybe that will help. And we'll keep our eyes and ears open. If we're given an opening, we'll take it," Ian instructed.

"Agreed," the others said.

"I'm sorry we came in the middle of the night," Ian apologized, "but it seemed like the best way to keep this between us. Especially since we didn't know how much of your plan the rest of your team was aware of - particularly Eli and Arianna."

Eden yawned. "S'all right," she assured them. "Sleep is way overrated anyway," giving them a grin. "Besides, I have kitchen duty early tomorrow... probably peeling potatoes," crossing her eyes in Joy's direction. The woman simply laughed. "Why aren't you in bed anyway?"

"I had to put the birds in the oven. Some of us are still meat eaters, you know."

Eden laughed. "I know. I still miss it sometimes, but we all make sacrifices, right? Is there anything we can do now... you know, since I'm awake anyway?"

"Would you mind?" Joy asked. "There are a few things we could get done in advance, and then we could catch a nap while Arianna takes charge of the kitchen for a while. She's getting good at it."

"We certainly appreciate the effort," Eden replied. "The stories I could tell you about food disasters at the desert compound - talk about your learning curve," she said, shivering delicately. "Just let me go change into... not this," motioning to her pajamas. Ian and Nathaniel covered their mouths to hide their grins, but Joy just took it in stride and nodded. Eden snatched up a change of clothing and disappeared into the cubbyhole bathroom.

"You know what we need," Nathaniel said quietly when Eden had shut the door behind her. Ian and Joy turned questioning eyes in his direction. "We need a disaster... or something that puts Ria in danger. I suspect Eli's attitude would shift dramatically if Ria was threatened in some way. OW!" grasping the back of his head where both Ian's and Joy's hands had landed in a hard smack. "What the hell'd you do that for??"

Ian gave his twin a look that could have peeled paint. Joy was a little more direct. "Seriously Nat?? Have you ever heard the term 'tempting fate'? Do you want something to go wrong? Do you want to explain to Mama why it did??" Nathaniel's brown eyes widened comically and he shook his head with great vigor, slapping his hand over his mouth. Joy snorted. "Damage is done now, Little Brother. Better hope nothing happens to them... or you'll be the one explaining it to Mama."

Nathaniel's head dropped to his chest. "Tell Joey I loved him when he comes back for my funeral."

"You're dying??" Eden asked with alarm when she stepped from the bathroom.

Ian snorted. "No - he's being a drama queen. Marines are known for that, you know."

Eden cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at them, certain she had interrupted something important. They held her gaze without blinking and after a short standoff she shrugged. She was confident there was any number of things that were being kept from the Alpha team - for their own safety and otherwise. She held out a hand to Joy. "Shall we?"

Ian moved to the door first, cracking it open and studying the empty hallway. With a jerk of his head, he motioned the rest to exit ahead of him, closing the door soundlessly behind him as he entered the passageway. Joy and Eden headed directly for the mess hall while he and Nathaniel split up to circle around back to their quarters. When Ian reached the end of the corridor, he found Caleb watching him closely. They stared at one another for a long minute, then Caleb nodded and returned to his patrol. Ian sighed and continued his walk.

The meal was over with many compliments to the chef and Eli had volunteered for solo clean-up duty so the rest could enjoy the remainder of their holiday in peace. They would be pushing hard over the next three weeks to accomplish the rest of their tasks, so they would have time to spend with their family members while doing the interviews and things required of them before they finally departed.

Mary had done the same for her team, and though everyone had pitched in and brought the leftovers into the kitchen, she was slowly putting things away for later while Eli made a dent in the pile of dishes she was washing. They worked without speaking - words not necessary between them for their work to be accomplished. It was only when Mary picked up a towel to start drying that the silence between them was broken.

"How are things, Eli?" she asked kindly.

Eli startled at the sound and whipped her head around to meet Mary's gaze before she refocused her attention on the sink. She shrugged.

"You should know, Ms Wellesly," she said with a small smile. "You're at least as busy as I am. Is it really safe for them to go to the ship ahead of everyone else?"

Mary had announced earlier the imminent departure for Eden, Isaac and Paul. It had been greeted by excitement from most of the team, knowing this put them all one-step closer to leaving. Mary had noticed the stiffening of Eli's spine at the pronouncement.

"I've had a security contingent in place there since I moved you kids from the hotel," Mary replied. "My best seek-and-destroy team is there and has gone over that vessel inch by inch. They'll keep your friends safe."

Eli nodded. "Thank you, Ms Wellesly. It's more than about the mission, you know?" seeing Mary nod. "I never want to have to be the one to contact someone's family to inform them that their 'someone' on my team has died."

"It's the most difficult duty of a commanding officer. Certainly nothing I would ever wish on anyone... even my worst enemy."

"So you've done it?"

Mary nodded. "Twice. Once to parents and once to a widow. Both times it was heart wrenching."

"What happened?"

Mary sighed. "Assignments gone tragically wrong because someone didn't listen. In the first case, the individual being protected thought they knew better than the agent protecting them. They lived, but it cost my agent his life. In the second, someone was in the wrong place at the wrong time - my agent gave her life to protect an innocent child." She paused then turned to face Eli, who kept her eyes on the dish she was washing, though she slowed enough to show Mary she was listening. "I'm going to ask you something," Mary informed her. "You don't have to answer, but I'm curious."

"About?" Eli finally asked when Mary's silence went on too long.

"How are you doing... really?" She held up a hand and Eli nodded and handed her the clean dish before picking up another dirty one. Mary started drying and resumed speaking. "I know something is bothering you - has been since you returned from your home. I'm confident it has to do with Arianna, but.... Hear me out, please," Mary continued when Eli would have interrupted. "I understand why you feel the way you do. I don't necessarily agree, but I do get it. But there seems to be something more than just...."

"Ms Wellesly, please," Eli pled softly. Then she took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine. I can handle this on my own."

"If you're sure...."

"I am. But thank you."

Mary nodded and turned her attention back to the dish in her hands. She would talk to Ian. Nathaniel had said Eli had spoken to his twin. Maybe he could help.

Jacob found Eden in the vast open room, squinting up at the carvings he could barely make out at this angle. He made a mental note to see if he could get closer later and turned his focus back to Eden. She didn't flinch when he wrapped her arms around her middle; instead she clasped them tighter and leaned into his warmth. He smiled and rubbed his rough cheek against her smooth one.

"You all right?" he whispered in her ear. She nodded and sighed.

"Yeah. Looking forward to leaving tomorrow, and yet not really, you know?" He chuckled and nodded. "I need you to do something for me, Jake - I need you to keep an eye on Eli. I promised I'd be there for her, but I have to leave. So you need to be there in my place."

"No worries, Babe. I gotcha covered. We'll keep an eye on both of them and I'll keep in touch with you so you know what's going on."

Eden smiled and turned in his arms, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I kinda love you, you know."

Jacob waggled his eyebrows and gave Eden a rakish grin. "I know. I kinda love you too. What say you and me go spend your last night here together? A little wine, a little music...."

"A little reason to be thankful?"

Jacob smirked. "Lots of little reasons," he countered, releasing her from his embrace and taking Eden's hand. "My place or yours?" he asked as they exited the room. Her answer was lost as the door closed behind them.

Arianna stuck her head in the kitchen, biting her lip when she saw Eli stiffen at her presence. She squared her shoulders and ignored Eli, heading straight for Mary who offered her a smile and an arched eyebrow. "Yes, Honey?"

"Mama, is there any way I can go with the engineers tomorrow?"

Mary frowned. "Is there a problem, Daughter?"

"I hope not. I would just feel better if I could check on the fuission system myself. I don't think my absence would add too much to everyone's workload here. Most of my supplies have been checked, and those that haven't are already on the ship. I would just feel better if I oversaw that part personally. That is going to be our entire power supply once we land on the asteroid."

"I don't see why not, Arianna. Let me talk to Eli about it and make sure it won't cause problems for the team members staying behind, and I'll let you know shortly, okay?"

"Thank you, Mama," Arianna replied. She gave Eli's rigid posture a sad glance, then left the kitchen without another word. Mary waited until Arianna was gone to speak, but Eli held up a hand to stop her before Mary could utter a word.

"It shouldn't be a problem, Ms Wellesly. I'll oversee whatever remaining work she had left to complete here."

"You're sure?"

Eli turned and looked at Mary with eyes blazing. Mary blinked, having never seen the gray eyes be quite so green before. Then before her eyes the fire died and the green fell to gray once more. "I'm certain. She feels she needs to be there so we'll do what it takes to accomplish that." She turned back to the sink and cleared her throat. "I'll finish up in here if you'd like to give her the news."

Mary looked around and nodded. "Thank you, Eli," Mary offered, but the only response she got was Eli's continued washing. She decided to go find Arianna.

Chapter XXXIV

Eli glanced at Arianna when she walked into the room, then turned back to her work. They were supposed to have the day off, but Eli wasn't feeling particularly thankful and decided to put the time to good use. Arianna stood at the doorway and just watched for a moment, then cleared her throat. Eli finished her entry, then let gray eyes meet brown.

"What can I do for you?" Eli asked cordially without ever addressing Arianna specifically.

Arianna stood quietly, studying the shades of gray that Eli had become again, and her heart sank just a little. It was only when she noticed the cocked eyebrow that she colored slightly and cleared her throat. "Sorry... I was thinking and you know how that.... Anyway, I came to say thank you. Mama told me you specifically volunteered to take care of the remainder of my responsibilities here so I could leave for the ship with the others tomorrow."

Eli shrugged. "It's what is best for the team, right? And that is my job as the leader - to do what is best for the team," seeing Arianna's shoulders slump. She went back to her work, hyper-aware of Arianna's lingering presence. With a sigh, she turned to face Arianna again. "Was there something else?"

Arianna searched Eli's eyes, but they were completely shuttered against her. She blew out a breath. "Look, Eli... I know you agreed to do this because it puts some space between us and you need that. I get it... I do. But if I'm not here, that means you can reacquaint yourself with the rest of the team. Don't!" she commanded fiercely when Eli made a motion to argue. "You've cut yourself off from everyone in an effort to avoid me, and as hard as that is for everyone to accept, they've allowed it to help you find some peace. But it's killing you, Eli, and it's difficult for our friends as well. It's... I've watched your color fade from that beautiful green to a drab, almost translucent gray. And I know what that means for you." Arianna took a deep breath, but Eli's expression didn't change. "I'm sorry - I know I promised to keep things professional between us. But it's killing me watching you slip away by inches and knowing it's my fault... knowing it never should have come to this."

"Because you never would have mated with me? Would never have consummated a relationship with an animal that you didn't want to be committed to in the first place?" Eli asked bitterly.

"WHAT?!? Where did you get that idea??"

"Your father would never allow you to be with me in any capacity," Eli continued as though Arianna hadn't spoken. "Don't think I don't know what your people think of mine."

Arianna frowned. "What my people think about yours??" she repeated with a hint of confusion in her calm tone. "Eli, until this project my people weren't even aware of yours. How could they possibly have formed an opinion?"

"Because your father and the asshat you were betrothed to took it upon themselves to be certain I understood exactly what my position was in relation to you."

"When did you speak to my father?" Arianna growled low in her throat, causing Eli's hackles to rise. She risked a glance at Arianna and looked away quickly at the fury she could see radiating off her body.

"It doesn't matter. You chose the asshat over me. And your father gave me the reason."

"No, Eli... NO! I didn't *choose* anything. The betrothal was forced on me; arranged marriage is part of my culture. It's how things are done...."

"You *knew* that... and yet you let us...."

"You don't get to lay the blame for that solely upon me, Eli. You are equally culpable! If I had been aware of your customs and if you had known mine, things would have gone much differently for us."

"Really?? How do you figure? Your father still would have betrothed you to that asshat," Eli snorted. "And that would still put us in the position we're in now!"

"No - we would have made this work. I love...."

"NO!" Eli bellowed in a whisper that caused Arianna to flinch. Gray eyes met brown. "No," she repeated in a much calmer tone, her eyes shifting to some distant point. "You don't get to say that to me! Not now - not ever again!"

The words caused Arianna's ire to burn and she stepped right into Eli's personal space and poked a finger at her. "Oh. No. You. Don't," she decreed royally. "You don't get to tell me what I feel or how I feel or what I think!" She took a deep breath and closed her eyes before she stepped back. "Don't let your hatred of me destroy the relationships you have with the rest of the team. They need you... and you need them." Without another word, Arianna spun on her heel and left the room.

Eli stared at the empty doorway for a long time, then she took a deep breath and resumed her work.

"You all right, Girlfriend?" Esther asked as she and Abigail met Arianna in the hallway. Abigail gasped and put her hand to her chest, the other hand reaching blindly towards Esther. Arianna's head snapped up at the sound, and a look at Abigail's pale face convinced her to take action.

"Gay?" holding out her hands, and turning to Esther. "I'm going to find Danny and have him bring some water," she said, backing away. "I'm fairly confident that she's reacting to me right now, and a bit of distance from me would probably be a good thing for her." Before either woman could comment, Arianna turned and practically ran down the hall. She hadn't gone far before she ran into Ephraim. He caught her by the elbows before she could plow right over him.

"Hey, Little Sister!" bending down to catch her eyes. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

She clasped her hands over his forearms to steady herself and blinked. When she realized who was holding her, she gave him a shaky smile. "Hey, Ephraim - can you call one of the other agents and asked them to take some water to Gay? She's right down that corridor."

Ephraim frowned and immediately keyed his comm unit. "Is she all right?" wondering if he needed to call for med supplies as well.

Arianna nodded. "She just needs some space from me. I was projecting some pretty strong emotions when I ran into her, and it took her by surprise in a most unpleasant way." Ephraim nodded his head and lifted his unit to his lips. Almost instantly there was a response, and he gave Arianna a smile.

"All taken care of. Dorcas was nearby and apparently heard the altercation. She arrived almost as soon as you left." He tilted his head at her. "Would you like to join me?" he invited. "I'm going to meet the boys for some late afternoon recreation. Joy will be joining us later - she's still resting from what was apparently a long, fitful night last night."

Arianna patted his arms and released her grip, grateful that he kept a steady hand beneath her arms. "Maybe later," she replied. "I was just going to go lay down myself for a bit. I think I overdid today."

"Are you all right?" he asked with sincere concern as his eyes searched her face. She was a little flushed, but her eyes weren't dilated and she didn't feel warm where he was touching her.

She offered him a small smile. "I will be - nothing a little rest won't cure." Ephraim nodded and tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow before he turned and headed them towards her quarters. She walked with him, a puzzled look on his face. "What about the boys?"

"They'll understand. What kind of big brother would I be if I left you to fend for yourself? C'mon... we're almost there. I'll send Joy to check on you when she gets up - she would insist and you know it."

"She would," Arianna agreed. "Have I told you how lucky I think we both are to have been able to become part of this family?"

"No," Ephraim informed her with a smile. "But I'm inclined to agree with you." Before they could take another step, they found themselves face to face with another... situation.

Eli heard security rushing by outside the workroom and slipped down the hallway to find out what the excitement was about. She was still seething over her combat with Arianna, and only when she heard Abigail whimper did she realize how effortlessly she must be projecting the sentiments the encounter had stirred.

"I'm sorry, Gay," she whispered. "I'll just go..." Abigail nodded and gave her a grateful look. Danny and Luke stepped into the breach.

They each took a place on either side of Eli and lightly clasped an arm as they started treading down the corridor away from the others. "C'mon," they invited. "We were headed to the kitchen for another piece of pie. Why don't you join us?"

Eli looked like she wanted to argue, but a glance at their expectant faces made her swallow her refusal and give them a small smile. "I'd like that," she agreed. Their jaws dropped briefly at her unexpected agreement, then they gave her big smiles.

"Excellent," Luke commented. "We'd better hurry, though. I don't think we were the only ones with the idea and I'd really like a chance to try that one pie Joy mentioned," Luke stated. "What did she say it was?" he asked Danny, looking at him over Eli's head. They turned the corner....

... only to find Ephraim and Arianna in front of them with Isaac blocking the way. Titus and Paul stood behind him several meters away.

"This will be awesome, Arianna," Isaac commented with loud enthusiasm. Arianna cringed at the sound of Isaac's vocal excitement. "Now maybe we can get to know each other better," wrapping an awkward arm around her shoulders.

Arianna winced, and tried to remove herself from his grasp, only to have his arm tighten around her further. Danny and Luke just looked at one another in dismay. "I don't think there will be much time for socialization, Isaac. Our friendship will have to wait until we're not quite so busy."

"Friendship?" he demanded in an angry, petulant timbre. "This is more than just friendship, Arianna. WE are more than just friendship."

"This has all the makings of a disaster," Danny commented, feeling Eli stiffen beside him before easing out of his grasp.

"No, Isaac - we aren't, and we never will be," Arianna insisted.

They watched as Arianna physically lifted Isaac's arm from her body and walked around him to reach her room. Ephraim stayed with her and Isaac made to follow until Eli stepped in front of him.

"Let her be, Isaac." He narrowed his eyes at her and stepped into Eli's space to glare down at her.

"You don't get to tell me what to do - not about this. This is personal... between me and her."

Eli stepped in close enough to keep her voice to a whisper and her words between her and Isaac. "No, no, Isaac. This is personal between me and you - she's mine," Eli growled, her eyes glowing in her anger. "So back off... or personal will become painful for you. I promise." His nostrils flared in his rage and he clenched his fists until they shook with his fury but he nodded sharply once. Eli raised her voice so the rest could hear her words. "Let it go, Isaac. Arianna has made her feelings on the matter quite clear." Before Isaac could react in any way, Titus came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Give her some space, man. It's not like you can't talk to her later."

Isaac gave Eli a sour look. "Yeah... I can just find her later." Then he spun on his heel and stomped away. Titus and Paul gave the group an apologetic glance before following.

Eli met Arianna's gaze and something flared between them, but before Arianna could analyze it, Eli gave her a nod and walked away. Danny and Luke raced to flank her and they continued their trek to the kitchen. Arianna watched them go until they were out of sight, then she looked at Ephraim who had kept his body between her and the perceived threat that Isaac had become.

"Are you all right?" he asked solicitously, smiling when she grinned at him.

"I hope that is not going to become your standard greeting when you see me from now on, Ephraim. You might give me a complex."

He chuckled. "No, but hopefully we won't be walking into a new crisis every time we meet either. Now seriously... are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Ephraim... really. I should have seen that coming, I suppose. Because my life needs yet another complication," snorting when Ephraim chuckled at the disdain in her tone. "Now," motioning to the door she had just unlocked. "I am going to go crawl in the bed and get some rest. I'm going to be going hard and long for the next few weeks."

Ephraim snorted. "You're going to be going hard and long for the next few years," he corrected her with a light laugh.

"Good point," Arianna agreed. "Thank you for the escort, Ephraim."

"It was my pleasure, Arianna. Rest well."

She waved at him and closed the door, locking it firmly behind him. Then she shucked her clothes and crawled beneath the warm sheets and willed her mind to nothingness.

"I don't get it," Isaac grumbled as he grabbed a basketball from the bag by the door. "Who does that 婊子 think she is?? Why does she always seem to have a problem with me?"

"The truth?" Paul spoke up unexpectedly. "You try to bully with your size. It's kind of not cool of you."

"He's right," Titus agreed. "If you think about it, every time someone has stepped in, it's been to prevent you from threatening someone smaller than you - even though the person stepping in is generally smaller than you as well."

Isaac snorted. "Everyone is smaller than me. Practically everyone, anyway. So I'm supposed to let them push me around because I don't want to intimidate them with my size?? That's messed up."

Paul shrugged. "Maybe. But is Eli *really* a threat to you physically? Do you *need* to stand virtually on top of her to make a point?" He sighed. "Like it or not, Ike, Eli has accepted the mantle of leadership for this team, and she's a good one. Try to show a little respect, man."

"Why? Why should I respect her when she doesn't respect me... or anyone else for that matter? Otherwise she wouldn't always act so superior to the rest of us," not wanting to admit he was genuinely afraid she could somehow follow through on her threat against him.

"Her withdrawal from the rest of us has nothing to do with a lack of respect towards us, Ike. It's more about her desire to keep her demons private and personal."

Titus stole the ball from Isaac and threw it to Paul. "He's right, Isaac. You don't have to like her, but you do need to respect her. We need her."

"I thought we needed everyone on the team - that was kind of the reason we all got chosen," Isaac snarked as he waved his arms to keep them both away from the basket. Two on one wasn't necessarily equal, but it was as close as they could get when playing against Isaac. Even his natural clumsiness didn't hinder his size advantage.

Titus rolled his eyes and tried to maneuver around Isaac to push the ball into the net. Isaac knocked it away and went scrambling after it, trying not to trip as he ran. Paul snatched it up and threw it to him, glad when Isaac caught it.

"Of course we do," Titus agreed as Isaac started to dribble. "But each of us had plenty of replacements behind us. Eli and Arianna didn't. They were essentially walk-ons. No one else stepped up to assume the responsibility of leadership like Eli did and Arianna invented fuission. Pretty much a guarantee for both of them."

"So you're saying if someone else had led us, Eli would be out?"

"Not necessarily," Paul quipped. "She is a chemical engineer as well as a medical doctor. She has the scientific skills to have secured her place on the Alpha team. But her leadership skills - the skills that turned us into a working team and helped us all to survive at the desert compound - that's the reason she's as close to irreplaceable as you'll find. None of the rest of us can do that kind of magic. C'mon, Ike - you saw what happened when Deb tried."

Isaac tucked the ball up under his arm and bit his lip thoughtfully. "I guess you're right. I still don't get what Deb's point was if she really didn't want the job."

Titus popped the ball out from under Isaac's arm and grinned when Paul scooped it up. "I don't know what to tell you, man," he said as he ran towards the basket. A jump put it in the net and Titus and Paul exchanged high fives. "Maybe she didn't realize what a chore the job really was or that no one had confidence in her leadership abilities. Or maybe Deb was just looking to shake things up. She's always been something of an instigator." Titus wheezed when he hit the ground flat as Isaac ran over him to get to the basket.

"Maybe," Isaac agreed as he slammed the ball home then moved to extend a helping hand to Titus. "But I'm not gonna let Eli push me around. She doesn't get to decide things for me. She doesn't get to tell me to stay away from Arianna."

Paul cleared his throat. "Be careful, Isaac. There is something linking them you don't want to get involved with... something there you don't want to get between."

"Besides," Titus said as he leaned over with his hands on his knees. "Arianna was pretty clear as well. Don't be stupid, Isaac."

"I'm not stupid!" Isaac yelled, tossing the basketball against the far wall. He sighed and his shoulders dropped in defeat. "I just want her to like me."

"Maybe as a friend, Isaac. But you can't make her like you as something more. That has to happen naturally... or not at all. And if you push...."

"Whatever," Isaac shrugged. "I'll figure something out. Thanks for the game, guys," he added as he headed towards the gym doors.

"Hey... where are you going? We've got a game to finish."

Isaac shook his head. "I've got work to do." He waved goodbye and walked out of the gym. Titus and Paul looked at one another.

"I've got a bad, bad feeling," Paul said. Titus simply nodded his agreement as the two followed behind Isaac back to their quarters. Maybe it was time to talk to the others. Surely between all of them, they could find a way to get through to Isaac before it was too late.

Chapter XXXV

"Yeah, I'm coming," Eden called out as she slid her arms into a shirt. Jacob rolled out of the bed and walked into the bathroom, conscious of Eden's eyes roving over his naked body. It wasn't like the rest of the team didn't know he and Eden were involved, but they had no assurance that it was a teammate on the other side of the door. And this close to departure, they didn't want to give anyone a reason to disqualify them. He turned as he reached the door, wagging his eyebrows at the lust in her eyes, then closed the door partially shut so he could still hear the conversation. Eden reached the door just as another knock sounded and she yanked the door open....

... only to find Eli on the other side. She growled at her. "Eli! This had better be important, Eli," she groused as the shower came on to give them some privacy. Eli looked around at the disheveled bed and the 'just had great sex' satisfaction in Eden's eyes and blushed a shade that would have made Danny envious. She started to back out of the room.

"Oh Eden... I am so sorry. I'll just...." stopping when Eden latched onto her arm with an inflexible grip.

"You'll just come in and tell me what was so important you had to visit my room at oh-holy-crap o'clock in the morning. Though if you must know, you're not the first to come knocking on my door before daylight. It seems to be a trend for me here, and I'm hoping it doesn't follow me when we leave."

"Well, I am sorry," Eli said without meeting Eden's eyes. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Eden smirked. "You didn't, Boss. I wouldn't have opened the door if you had been," chuckling when Eli blushed again. "So what can I do for you that you came to see me so early?"

"Arianna is going to the ship with you this morning," watching something flash in Eden's black eyes. "She wants to check over the fuission components, and frankly I think that's a good idea given the threats that have been made against us apparently." She held up her hand and Eden sat back without voicing her thoughts. She motioned for Eli to continue. "The problem is Isaac."

Eden waited for Eli to elaborate, but when she remained silent, she leaned forward. "Would you like to clue me in, Eli? Isaac is awkward and clumsy and seems to have developed an attitude about Mary, but I'm not sure I see how that's a problem... especially since he's moving out of her purview."

Eli shook her head. "That's not the problem."

"Then...? C'mon, Eli. I haven't kick started my brain this morning. You're gonna have to give me more."

"He's decided he wants more than friendship with Arianna."

"And?" Eden asked after a long silence. "Eli..."

Eli stood and leaned so close to Eden, she could see green and gold flecks in her gray eyes. "She's. MINE. Eden. I do not share well with others."

"And does she know that, Eli - that she's yours, I mean? Have you talked to her about it?" Silence. "Eli..." Eden sighed and ran her hands through her hair. "You can't ask her to remain alone for the rest of her life."

"That's what she's done to me, Eden!!" her voice dropping to a whisper.

Eden shook her head. "No. No, Eli - this is what you've chosen... because you won't forgive yourself or her for rushing into something that would have happened eventually even if you *had* known about each other's cultures. There is something between you - there always has been. But you keep pushing her away. And eventually she's gonna stop trying. Now that she knows what it is to have intimacy with someone and not just sex, she craves it; if she can't have you, she'll look for someone else who will give her that."

"No."

"Yes, Eli. Just because you don't want her doesn't mean she's undesirable to everyone else." Eli dropped into her chair and covered her face with her hands. Eden stood and touched her hair. "Stay here, Eli. I'll be right back." Eden crossed to the bathroom and walked in, and a moment later the water was shut off. In a few minutes, Jacob walked out fully clothed. He clasped her shoulder and squeezed lightly before moving to the door with Eden right behind him.

"I'll let Mary know," he whispered. He glanced at Eli. "Good luck." He brushed her lips in a brief kiss, then she shut the door behind him. She went back over to the table and reseated herself, taking one of Eli's hands in hers and pulling it away from her face.

"Talk to me, Eli. What exactly is it you want me to do?"

"Talk to Arianna for me."

"No," seeing Eli's head snap up to meet her eyes. "I will help you in almost any way I can, Eli. But not that way. You need to be the one to talk to Arianna. You need to settle things between you - one way or another. I will, however, keep an eye on her while we're gone. I won't let Isaac make her uncomfortable, but I won't stop them from having a relationship if that's what they both want," wincing when Eli's hand clenched painfully around her own. "Eli... she thinks you hate her."

"I don't... I can't." She snorted. "It might be easier if I could." Eli looked at Eden and recognized the distress in her eyes, and realized she was hurting Eden. Immediately she dropped the hand she was crushing. "Oh Eden... I'm so sorry."

Eden flexed her fingers. "No harm, no foul. I'm all right," she said, giving Eli a smile. "At least it wasn't the other way around," referring to her strength. "I wouldn't want to have to explain to Mary why they needed to rebuild your hand."

Eli snorted. "Me either," she confessed. She looked around the messy room with sudden comprehension. "I'm making you late."

Eden shook her head. "Not at all. We have all the time we need. Now what do you need me to do - aside from looking out for Arianna?"

Eli shrugged. "I'm not certain there is anything you can do, Eden. And I don't know how to..." She shook her head. "Do you believe in guardian angels?"

"In theory?" Eden asked with a shrug. "I suppose so. It would certainly lend credence to some of the miracles that have occurred in my life. Why do you ask?"

"Can you hear over the shower? I don't want to make you any later." Eli didn't state the obvious - that what she needed to share was embarrassing for her, and though she needed to tell Eden she didn't want to have to face Eden while she did so. Eden understood.

"As long as you come in the bathroom with me." Minutes later, they were ensconced in the tiny room - Eden underneath the warm spray of water and Eli leaning against the sink. "So why the question about guardian angels? Did you meet one or something?" Eden asked with a chuckle.

"I think so, yes," Eli replied in all seriousness, causing Eden to stick her wet head out of the shower.

"Seriously?" watching Eli's gaze go inward as she nodded. "So what happened?" moving back under the water enough to be out of sight but still within hearing. Eli told Eden of her encounter, and Eden shut the water off before Eli finished. She stayed in the shower while she dried herself, offering Eli the most privacy she could for her confession. Only when Eli was done did Eden speak.

"Is something like this common in your culture, Eli?"

"I've never heard of anything like it," Eli replied.

"Do you believe?" Eden asked as she stepped from the shower stall.

"I know what I saw... what I heard."

"Then maybe you should listen," Eden commented as she dropped her towel and began dressing. "If your angel and I are giving you the same advice... without knowing about one another... maybe you should take it to heart, Boss. You know what scientific research says about independent theories colliding. There's got to be truth in it somewhere."

"I'm scared, Eden."

"Of what?" Eden asked as she started cleaning up her room. It wouldn't take much, but it needed to be done before she left... in case her family was brought here in her absence. She waved off Eli's offer of help and motioned for her to answer her question.

Eli sighed and began speaking softly. "When we take a mate, we give them everything we have... everything we are. It's what creates the bond between us that sustains us for all of our lifetime together. It actually makes death in our culture easier; both parties find comfort in their bond and it continues into the next realm... or so we have always been taught. And according to the sister who was my brother's wife - while of course she would prefer to have him with her still in the flesh, she can still feel him with her even though he has passed over."

Eden nodded and took a seat beside Eli. The cleaning could wait; she had the distinct impression she didn't need the distraction. "Okay - that's a good thing, right?"

"Of course," Eli assured her. "It gives us hope and comfort."

Eden's brow furrowed. "Okay... so?"

"That is only true if both partners are completely committed to one another. If they are not..." Eli shuddered and inhaled deeply before releasing the breath slowly. "I put everything I was into my relationship with... her..." She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. "With Arianna," she managed, and for the first time, Eden heard the agony in Eli's voice and not the cold anger she had believed Eli had always been projecting when she spoke of Arianna. "And she destroyed me with it. When I found out it was one-sided... Eden, I was devastated. I cannot go through that again. I can't risk it. It would kill me... literally." Eli gasped and clutched her hand to her chest, her face ashen and wan. "But I can't watch her be betrothed to another either. I am not strong enough to endure that again. It would be better to quit."

"No," Eden insisted fiercely. "I don't think so, Boss." Eden cupped Eli's face gently and let their eyes meet. "Do you trust me?"

"Only with my life," Eli responded without thought.

"Then trust me on this. Arianna feels the same way you do, but she is still learning how to show that part of herself to you. Or she was before you cut her from your life so spectacularly." Eden reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off the pounding headache she could feel forming. "Take the restriction away from her."

"Excuse me?"

Eden glared at Eli. "Take the interaction restriction away from her. Let her be more than professional with you. Let her be your friend. Start from the beginning and rebuild the friendship you knew, but this time - share *everything*... even the stupid stuff. Warrior up, Eli - stop being a po'okanaka."

Eli frowned. "I don't want to know what that means, do I?"

Eden snorted. "Your makuahine would disown you if she knew you'd become so spineless."

"Excuse me?" brow arching and face flushing with anger. "What did you just say?"

"You heard me. So I'll tell you what, *Boss*," Eden said with a sneer as she rose and began cleaning up once more. "You decide if you're smart enough to be brave - if you're brave enough to be smart. If you find your lady hua, the engineering team will be in the cavern in two hours. You come and say goodbye. If you call Arianna 'Angel', I'll know that you want to start over with her. If not...." Eden shrugged. "I'm sure Mary can get you out of here and send you back to your makuahine. She can probably even arrange it so you don't look like a po'o-kanaka too."

"You're deliberately trying to anger me," Eli accused.

Eden nodded. "Is it working? Because I'm tired of your moping. I want you to be fierce and brash and awesome again. We need that woman back, Eli... and so do you."

Eli rose and walked to the door, opening it without crossing the threshold. With her back still towards Eden, she spoke. "Thank you, Eden. I know you're angry with me, but you've never once been dishonest. And I value that characteristic greatly."

"Good luck, *Boss*."

Eli nodded and strode out the door, closing it softly behind her. Eden stared at the door a long moment, then with a shake of her head, she returned to her prep work... confident she would be having more company in five... four... three....

A knock on the door interrupted her count and Eden smirked. *So close*. Then she crossed the room and opened the door, not surprised to find Jacob and Mary waiting patiently for her on the other side. She simply opened the door wider, then shut it soundlessly behind them once they were safely inside.

"If he gives you any issue, Ria, you talk to Joey," cutting his eyes to where Isaac stood observing them with anger and frustration in his expression. "I don't like the way he's watching you, Little Sister. Joey won't hurt him, but Isaac will understand to leave you alone."

"I can handle Isaac, Nat - I'll be all right. But," she continued when Nathaniel opened his mouth to protest. "I promise I'll talk to Joey when I arrive. He can keep an eye on me - I'm used to that, you know. Besides, I expect Eden will be looking out for me as well."

Joy tilted her head to one side. "Why do you say that? I didn't think you were friends."

Arianna chuckled. "It's complicated. We're just now becoming friends, but she will watch over me as long as Eli is not around. She always has; I think it's become ingrained in her nature."

"She spies on you?" Ian asked. Arianna shook her head.

"No, no - nothing like that. It's.... When we first arrived at the compound and Eli befriended me, Eden and I had an uneasy alliance. I had never had too many real friends, and no one had ever given me the kind of chance Eli did after just one meeting. So I wanted to be selfish with Eli. I wanted her attention as often as I could have it. Eden, on the other hand, was concerned I was out to usurp her authority as Eli's second-in-command. So we mostly danced around one another without truly interacting. But anytime Eli was unavailable, Eden was always right there for me even if it was just to stop the others from making me uncomfortable."

"Does she know about Isaac?"

Arianna snorted. "If she doesn't, it's only because she hasn't left her room since the holiday meal yesterday. I'm pretty sure that made the rounds before I fell asleep yesterday afternoon. I love Danny, but he does have a tendency to talk."

"Can't keep a secret?" Ephraim asked with a smile.

"Not if his life depended on it," Arianna assured him. "We learned quickly not to tell him anything we didn't want shared with everyone. He doesn't do it to be malicious; he just likes to talk to everyone about everything." She looked around the room, noting the entire Alpha team was present with the exception of Eden and Eli. She scowled. "What's the delay? We were supposed to leave an hour ago. And where's Mama?"

"She's the reason for the delay," not wanting to put the blame on Eden in case the motive behind her request was secretive. "Something came up, and Mama didn't want to miss saying goodbye. All she told us was that the departure time was being pushed back to accommodate a scheduling issue."

"Am I late?" Eden asked as she breezed into the room.

"Not at all," Arianna said as Eden approached them and dropped her bag at her feet.

Eden blew a breath out, pushing her hair back from her forehead. "Good. I needed that extra hour."

Arianna smirked. "Saying goodbye to Jacob?" she asked coyly.

Eden smirked but couldn't stop the flush that crawled up her face. "Now, Az... I don't kiss and tell. You know that." She looked around, noting Mary's and Eli's absence. "What's the hold-up?"

"Mama. She had something to take care of, but she wanted to say goodbye so...."

At that moment, Mary and Eli stepped into the room together and every eye turned in their direction. Arianna broke the spell, opening her arms and heading into Mary's embrace. "Mama!" Mary returned the hug and Eli walked around them where Isaac and Paul stood waiting to leave.

"Good luck, gentlemen," she offered. Isaac nodded but otherwise didn't respond. Paul unexpectedly opened his arms for a hug and curious, Eli obliged him.

"I'll try to get him to understand, Boss," Paul whispered in her ear.

Eli pulled back and smiled at him. "Thanks, Paul." He squeezed her biceps, then released her. Eli crossed the room to claim a hug from her lieutenant.

"Thank you, Eden," she whispered in Eden's ear. "I needed that."

Eden leaned back and smirked. "I know. Why do you think I did it?"

Eli narrowed her eyes. "Some days you're simply too smart for your own good, Eden."

"True, but what would you do without me?" Eden asked, wagging her eyebrows. She jerked her head slightly. "I think someone is waiting to say goodbye."

"Be safe, my friend," Eli offered sincerely before releasing their embrace. Then Eli turned to find Arianna standing defiantly behind her, hand extended and jaw set in an effort to maintain her professionalism as she said goodbye. Eli captured Arianna's right hand in her left and tugged Arianna a little closer, twining their fingers together. Arianna's brow furrowed in confusion, and she looked at Eli with something akin to pain in her eyes. Eli gently cupped her cheek as gray eyes met and held brown. "I'm sorry, Angel," she said, not whispering but speaking only loud enough for the two of them to hear. "I have been unfair to you, and I'm sorry."

"Eli?"

"I know you have to go, but you should know I have been wrong about a great many things, Angel. I would ask that you take the time we are apart and consider if you would allow me another chance - a chance to forgive us both for the mistakes we made and an opportunity to start over... to rebuild our friendship and see where it leads."

"You would be willing...? But why?"

"Because with you I have the prospect of happiness and the possibility of forever."

"You've always had that, Eli. Why now?"

Eli shook her head. "You think about it and decide. And when you come back, I will share my reasons... even if you choose not to allow me to be part of your life again."

Arianna nodded slowly, and Eli brushed a kiss over her forehead before releasing her hold. "Be safe, Angel," she offered, then she turned and walked out of the room without a backwards glance. Eden nodded in satisfaction. She might have to talk to Arianna after all - just for research purposes of course. Then Mary was calling them together and giving them last-minute instructions. And in mere moments, they were gone.

Chapter XXXVI

"What did you say to her, Eden?" Arianna asked as they situated themselves on the transport. Isaac made like he was going to force himself between them, but thought better of it when both Eden and Arianna gave him a look that nearly peeled the skin from his body. Instead he took a seat near the back of the shuttle with a scowl and Arianna and Eden claimed the front for themselves.

Eden shrugged. "What did she say to you, Az?" Arianna squirmed in her seat, fidgeting until Eden put a hand on her arm. "Az?"

"She apologized to me, Eden. She apologized and asked me for a second chance. She was so dead-set against... everything to do with me, really. So something or someone must have changed her mind. I figured that was the real reason you and she were the last people to arrive in the big room."

Black eyes held brown as they studied one another. Finally Eden nodded. "She came to my room before breakfast this morning, Az. What she shared with me she'll have to tell you herself. What I told her was to lady up and grow a pair - that I was sick and tired of her spinelessness."

Arianna eyes widened in surprise. "Did you really?"

"I did," she nodded emphatically. "She doesn't get to have it both ways."

"I didn't realize she was... having it both ways, I mean."

"She was trying to. Arianna," Eden said seriously, her address garnering Arianna's close attention. "She never stopped loving you - she never will. That's what's been ripping her apart. She's afraid to trust that you feel the same." Eden held up a hand. "Get her to tell you about it when we get back. But Az..." staring into brown eyes. "If you forgive her... really forgive her and you're willing to give her a second chance - make sure you understand what that means... what you're getting into."

"You're afraid for her."

Eden nodded. "I'm afraid for you both. I know what this did to both of you; I don't want to see it happen again. So please be sure."

Arianna nodded slowly. "I will, Eden. And thank you... for caring."

Eden shrugged. "That's what friends do, right?"

"Right," Arianna replied with a bright smile. Then they turned their attention to the ship they were gradually approaching.

"Ms Wellesly?" the comm chirped and Mary's head dropped when she recognized the voice. "Ms Wellesly, this is Chairman McMurtry. Are you available for a video chat?"

"Madame Chairman," she greeted cordially, allowing the woman visual access. "Was there something unclear about my directive that you not contact me?"

McMurtry's features hardened. "Tread lightly, Ms Wellesly. You are still very much in trouble for the insubordination and disrespect you have shown to this Committee."

"And as you fired me, I don't even owe you the time of day, Madame Chairman. So why exactly do you think it was a good idea to contact me?" Mary maintained her stoic expression, but she couldn't stop the smirk she felt forming inside when the Chairman's jaw clenched in frustration.

"We need to know where you're keeping the Alpha team."

"No."

"Excuse me???"

"Which part of that was unclear, Madame Chairman? I'm not going to tell you where those kids are. That is privileged information and you don't need to know at this time."

"And why do you?" McMurtry sneered. "You're not their security detail anymore."

This time, Mary *did* smirk. "Not according to you, perhaps. But I answer to a higher authority."

She watched the color drain from McMurtry's face. "You work for the Council?"

"I do indeed. But Madame Chairman - you need to understand that I would still be safeguarding those kids even if I didn't. They should be the first priority."

"Why do you persist in believing that the Committee doesn't have their best interests at heart? After all... we've done everything we can to ensure the success of this project."

"Madame Chairman - no disrespect intended, but those are two completely different goals. And I'm not convinced everyone is after the same thing - not after the threats that have been made. Like it or not, the Alpha team is safest with no one aware of their actual whereabouts."

McMurtry grudgingly nodded. "Do you have an estimate on when we will be allowed to...?"

"You want your moment of glory?" Mary asked with a raised eyebrow. McMurtry frowned. "Madame Chairman, I'm sure the Committee will be part of the commissioning ceremonies. So you'll see them there if the situation has not resolved itself before then. And the interviews for the various interstellar press agencies are being handled as we speak." Mary paused. "Was there anything else?"

"No thank you, Ms Wellesly. You've been as helpful as always - although that's not saying much."

"I live to serve, Madame Chairman. I'll be in touch." Mary leaned forward and cut the connection before McMurtry could even think to reply. Then she leaned back in her chair and steepled her hands together thoughtfully. It was curious that the Chairman had contacted her, and Mary wondered what the purpose behind it had been. She decided it was time to move things forward, and sent out a memo to her team leaders. They needed to finalize their plans.

"I have to admit," Deborah commented to the rest of her teammates as they exited the conference room, "this has been the worst part of this whole process as far as I'm concerned." She took a long drink of water. "My throat is killing me; even my tongue hurts."

"I agree," Naomi nodded. "Do we really need to do separate interviews for every single interstellar news agency in the universe?? Why did Mary...?"

Eli shook her head. "I am fairly confident that Ms Wellesly had nothing to do with making the schedule. She's just sticking to what she was given. It's one of those not-worth-fighting-for things. Doing things this way - the way the Committee envisioned - makes everyone happy... relatively speaking. We just have to endure a little longer."

"Girlfriend, the way we've been enduring, we should all be fossilized by now," Esther commented. A number of heads nodded their agreement. "I'm thinking the actual mission is going to be a load of stress off of all of us."

"Even with the expectations that will be accompanying us?" Hannah asked. "Seems like that would make it worse."

"I don't think so," Mordecai responded before Esther could speak. "Here, we've been under intense scrutiny from everyone in the galaxy for a long time - always someone watching... anticipating results

or failure. Out there, it'll just be us - our success or our failure. Even though they will still be watching, it won't affect what we do and how we do it. They won't be there. I think the distance between will make it easier." He shrugged. "My opinion anyhow."

Esther pointed in Mordecai's direction. "What he said."

"Does anyone else ever get the feeling we're somehow jinxed?" The question brought all eyes to Luke's face, and he hurried to continue his thought. "It just seems like things never go quite right for us." He turned his attention to Eli and the rest followed suit. She held up a hand.

"Team meeting in my quarters after evening meal. Jake, you're with me." Without another word, she turned and left with Jacob hot on her heels. The others watched them go before Danny spoke up.

"You don't suppose...."

"She's more settled," Abigail offered. "She's more like the Eli we knew in the desert compound. There's a calmness... a sense of purpose to her again."

"So something *did* happen yesterday," Danny exclaimed.

"Oh... you bet it did," Hannah replied. "She called Arianna 'Angel' again." A cheer broke out among them and the security agent stationed in the hallway just smiled. It was good to see enthusiasm from these kids again. They deserved to celebrate.

"So what's up, Boss?" Jacob asked as she ushered him into her room and closed the door behind them. "Is everything okay?"

Eli snorted. "I am pretty sure everything is *not* okay, but it's definitely better than it has been. Are you keeping in touch with Eden?"

"As much as I can, I will, yeah," he nodded. "They are crazy busy up there already, but she says things are going good - they settled in immediately and got right to work. Isaac seems to be minding his business at the moment, and Az talked to that Joey guy as soon as they arrived. Eden said Mary's boys insisted." He shrugged. "I'm glad they've got someone watching their backs, you know?"

"Yes... I do know. Thank you, Jake. I appreciate...." He held up his hand.

"I'm glad to be able to do it, Eli. You know we're all pulling for you both, right?"

Eli smirked. "Well, most of you, anyway. And I have Eden to apply a swift strike to my posterior quarters should my head ever again become lodged in that particular cavity. However," she went on as he unraveled her colloquialism, "at this moment, I'm in need of your hacking skills."

Jacob crossed his arms over his chest and nodded at her seriously. "Name it, Boss."

"I need you to start doing some research on the Committee to begin with, and depending on what you find, I'll let you know how to proceed from there. Now that I've finally taken control of my life again, I realize that we should be doing something to eliminate the threat against us. Or at least learn as much as we can so we can try to prepare for any eventuality."

"So you think the Committee...?"

"I know that Mary is unhappy enough with them that she went around them to remove us from their purview without their knowledge or consent. And since they dismissed her from service, she has cut them from the information loop. As far as I am aware, they're not even aware of our location. That alone gives me reason enough for pause."

"All right," he nodded, cracking his fingers. "What am I looking for?"

"I'm not certain. If I knew...."

"... I wouldn't be looking," Jacob supplied. "We'd have our proof."

"Exactly," Eli agreed. "I'm sorry, Jacob. I wish I could tell you."

Jacob waved her off. "S'okay, Boss. It'll just take me a little while longer to find it since I'll have to make it a broader search. But when I figure out what's hinky, you'll be the first to know. Lemme go grab my Pad, then if it's okay with you, I'll hang here and work until everyone else gets here. I'll miss the meeting otherwise. You know how I get."

Eli chuckled softly. "I do indeed. Thank you, Jake. I can't tell you how much...."

"I'm so glad to have you back, Eli, that I'd be thrilled to do it even if it wasn't personal. But this? This is personal - this is about all of us. I'm just glad we're finally going proactive on it. Wish I'd thought to do it before, you know?"

Eli shrugged. "My fault. I've been so busy *reacting* that I lost sight of what it was to act first. Eden was right - my MaTb would be ashamed if she knew how spineless I'd allowed myself to become. Fortunately I've 'clued in', as she's so fond of saying. From now on we take charge of our own destiny."

"Are you gonna be the one to tell Mary?"

Eli smirked. "I'm confident I won't need to. She'll know." She motioned towards the door. "Go get your Pad and come back. I'll leave the door unlocked for you."

Jacob nodded and left without turning back. Eli shut the door and walked to the bathroom, closing that door firmly behind her. She just needed a minute or two to regroup. Then she and Jacob had work to do. She could only hope they wouldn't be too late to make a difference.

"Hey, Little Sister," Joey greeted as Arianna exited the shuttle. She ran into his arms and he returned her embrace with enthusiasm. "When Mama told me you were coming, I knew I had to come down and help you get settled in. If you ladies would follow me, I'll escort you to your quarters. Mike will show you guys where to go," he added to Isaac and Paul with a gesture towards the colleague waiting beside him.

Arianna and Eden followed Joseph out of the bay area and down a long corridor. Taking the lift, they reached the living area and allowed him to unlock their lodging. "You will of course be allowed to

choose your own living space once your other teammates arrive, but for now...." He spread his hands. "You don't mind sharing, do you?"

"I'd prefer it actually," Eden replied honestly. Arianna crossed her arms over her chest.

"Who told you?" She narrowed her eyes. "Don't try to deny it, Joey. All the living accommodations on the ship are on this level. There is no other reason to bring us separately to this sector and house us together unless someone has already contacted you about Isaac. So who was it?"

Joseph just raised an eyebrow. "Who do you think, Ria?"

"I told him I would handle it; I told him I would talk to you!"

"Then please... talk. All Nat told me was to separate you from him to ensure your privacy. Oh... and that Eden needed to be close by for Eli's sake."

Arianna closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Then she blew out a frustrated breath to will herself to calm before turning to Eden. "Will you please let Jake know we arrived? I know he's waiting to hear from you. I'll fill Joey in on all the details Nat somehow managed to miss in his communication. Then we can get to work."

"Sounds like a plan, Az. You have a preference?" motioning between the beds.

"Not really," tossing her bag on the bed closest to her. "Good enough?"

"Good enough."

Arianna nodded. "All right. Joey is going to escort me to the fission reactor so I can get started. Join us there?"

"I'll have someone come meet you," Joseph volunteered before Eden could reply. "I know you all have the schematics memorized, but we know some shortcuts that you might eventually find useful."

Eden nodded. "Give me ten standard minutes before someone arrives. I'm not sure where Jake is - he made need to go somewhere more private to take the communication."

Joseph proffered a slight bow. "It will be done," he promised, keying up his comm unit. He offered his other arm to Arianna. "C'mon, Little Sister. I'm a Navy man - I know how to walk and talk at the same time."

"That's not what I've heard," Arianna snorted, then laughed at Joseph's outraged expression. "Let's go, Joey - I've got work to do." And together they exited the room as Eden started tapping on her Pad.

"Mama?"

"Yes, my son? What is it?" Mary asked as she beckoned him into what was her office. She frowned at his expression. "Nathaniel? Is something wrong?"

"Yes, kind of... but nothing unexpected. The guys have been monitoring like you told them to."

"We finally have something?"

"We do, but not what we expected... nor from whom." He smiled at her cocked eyebrow and closed the door behind him as he stepped further into the room. "Jake has started hacking into a few databases. He appears to be doing research on the Committee. He's in Eli's quarters."

"And Eli? Don't tell me she is just sitting there twiddling her thumbs, Son. If she has finally become proactive enough that she has Jacob searching the Committee members, she must be working on something else."

Nathaniel nodded his acknowledgement. "She is digging into the candidates - well, she is looking at her teammates first, but she also appears to have bots running on all the candidates that were removed from the hotel for their protection. So what basically amounts to the Alpha, Beta and Gamma teams."

"Have they found anything?"

"Not that I have been notified - they've only just begun their search... relatively speaking."

"So your men are ready?"

"More than, Mama. We know why you've kept most of us hidden, but even with accommodations this nice, it gets wearing, you know? The waiting, I mean."

"I know, my son... only too well. And for the record, it doesn't get any easier as you get older. In fact, I feel confident in saying that I like waiting less and less as time goes on."

Nathaniel smiled. "Maybe, but we never see you sweat so none of us would ever know."

Mary snorted. "Lots and lots of practice." She leaned back and studied her youngest child for a long moment. "Keep me informed. We should have movement pretty quickly now. I have ensured that the Alpha teams' communications can be monitored by the less sophisticated equipment that is in the possession of the Committee. Now we find out if they are monitoring everyone, or just specific members. If someone is going to make a move, I want them to do so soon - while we are in a defensible position. It will be the easiest for us to control and will produce the least amount of casualties."

"I can honestly say we are less than concerned with their casualties. They messed with family," Nathaniel said darkly.

"They did indeed, my son. And they will learn the cost of that mistake."

Chapter XXXVII

"So what's the word, Eli?" Titus asked as the Alpha team filed into her room. "Why are we here?"

"Well, aside from the fact that we are overdue for a team meeting," Eli replied as she closed the door firmly behind him and turned to face everyone, "Luke mentioned something that kind of kick started my brain earlier. Because he's right - our luck in recent days has been a little worse for our wear."

"And you think we can change that?" Danny asked seriously. "I thought it was called 'luck' for a reason - like how it randomly seems to happen for good or bad."

"Perhaps," Eli conceded. "But I also think it can be influenced by outside factors. And I think in our case, those outside influences are what have caused things to turn against us lately."

"Do you have any proof?" Luke asked.

Eli shook her head. "Nothing solid - not yet anyway. But we have found some... peculiar occurrences."

"What kind of occurrences, Eli? Can you elaborate?"

She ran her hands through her blonde shock of hair, causing it to stand on end and give her the wild appearance they had become accustomed to in the desert. Eli looked around the room and noted their smiles. "What?" she asked with a frown. This made the others chuckle, and she turned to Jacob.

"You look like we remember you from our first days in the compound, Eli - all fierce and wild. It's kind of awesome, actually."

Eli blinked. That wasn't really the response she was looking for, but she knew Jacob was simply being honest. She cleared her throat. "Okay then... right. Um... time for truth between us. How many of you were in touch with your Committee representative on at least a semi-regular basis? And please don't lie to me - I already know the truth," Eli stressed, waiting for a show of hands. When everyone had raised a hand, Eli nodded in satisfaction. "Exactly," she commented.

"I don't get it," Naomi muttered.

"I don't think any of us do," Deborah replied. "But Eli does. And that's enough." She turned to look at Eli. "Does this have anything to do with you and Arianna? You know... the fact that you called her 'Angel' before she left yesterday?" scowling when Hannah slapped her. "What was that for?" Hannah just arched both eyebrows and glared at her.

"For the record, and before this meeting becomes physical," with a stern look at Deborah and Hannah, "yes, I called Arianna 'Angel' yesterday. However, nothing has changed between us - not yet anyway. *But,*" she continued with emphasis, "it did help me recognize a few truths. Not the least of which is that I have allowed myself to be distracted for too long. I have been so busy *reacting*, that I have forgotten how to *act*. But that changes... now."

"That is what has helped you find peace within yourself," Abigail commented. "You altered your intentions towards Arianna, and everything else is beginning to settle back into place in your life... including your leadership of us."

Eli nodded. "Essentially, yes."

"And if she rejects you again?" Abigail asked, ignoring the gasps of the others in the room. "Will you be able to maintain that focus? Because we need *this* leader - the one who is confident and bold and daring. The one who LEADS - not the one who waits for things to happen."

"I will do my utmost, Gay," Eli swore though her hands shook slightly. "Eden told me to find my lady ЯЙЦА so I would have the courage to act and talk to Arianna like I should. I'd like to think they and my spine will stick around regardless of what happens. Besides," she continued when it remained silent, "we all know that Eden will be more than happy to assume the responsibility for keeping me on track now that she has discovered the secret of how to do so." Eli smirked and her teammates laughed.

"Reassuring," Danny responded drolly. "And I personally have every faith that you and Arianna will work things out together. But we're also a little far afield from where we started. What does all this have to do with our Committee representatives? I don't know about the rest of you, but I was given strict instructions about maintaining communication with the member representing my planet before we advanced as a group to the desert compound. I was merely following the directive I was given."

"As I am certain most here were doing," Eli replied. "Even if you didn't seek them out, they came to you periodically to 'check on your progress'; to see how you were faring; if you needed anything they could provide within the constraints of the mission... correct?" seeing the heads around her nodding their agreement. "All right then - how many of you had contact with Committee Members not representing your home world... aside from the Chairman? She seems to have at least spoken to everyone on this team... if not everyone who made it into the interview round of the selection process."

"Why would we, Eli?" Mordecai asked with a frown. "We don't even know most of those people. Besides, Committee Members make me anxious."

Eli smiled. "I know, Kai. I think they do that to all of us. Except at least a few of them aside from Bartolo and the Chairman spoke to the asshat on more than one occasion. Why do you suppose that is? Why would anyone want to - especially people of their supposedly elevated status? We all know what a prick he was so why was he consorting with those who were deciding our fate? Why would they put up with him for any length of time? And why didn't they stop Ms Wellesly from removing him from the program?"

"Wait... what?" Titus demanded. "How do you know that little tidbit?"

"Ms Wellesly shared that with me." Eli held up her hands to end the cacophony of sound. "It doesn't matter why - only that she felt it was important for me to know."

"Do you know what happened? How she got him bounced?" Esther asked.

"No. I didn't ask for details and she didn't share them. It was enough to know she had him removed. *But,*" Eli continued, "I believe it had something to do with the condition she discovered Malcolm to possess - the illness that could have caused so much destruction had he shared it with the rest of us."

"You know," Titus interjected, "I know none of us liked him; personally I felt he was a waste of skin most of the time. But man... I wouldn't have wished that fate on anyone... even him."

"Yeah, I hated him, and I'm glad he's gone," Deborah stated. "But I hate that he was disqualified for something that shouldn't have been an issue in the first place. He should have been gone long before he contracted that virus." She looked around. "Did we ever find out how he was exposed? Or if any other candidates caught it?" Everyone looked at Eli.

"As far as I've heard," she answered, scratching her forehead, "everyone has been medically cleared by the Doc. I can't say about the other - I haven't been informed. Have any of you heard anything?"

They exchanged glances with one another and shrugged, shaking their heads when they turned their attention back to Eli. "I'll do some digging, boss," Jacob spoke up. "There's gotta be some records about this fiasco somewhere, right?"

"You'd think," Esther snorted. "But if Mary hasn't found it yet, I doubt we'll be able to. No offense, Jake."

He waved her off and grinned. "None taken. But I will accept the challenge you just threw down like a gauntlet in front of me." Everyone chuckled.

"What makes you think Mary hasn't found anything about who exposed the asshat to the virus?" Naomi asked. "I sure haven't heard anything about it... either way."

"Girlfriend, you don't think if Mary knew who had done this she wouldn't already have gone Mama Bear on somebody's ass? That action put not only us in danger, but also the entirety of this world including her kids. Pretty sure she would take that personal enough to do a take-down if she knew what or who to hit."

"That's an excellent point," Luke agreed. "And surely that kind of news would have made it back to us. That would have gone interstellar and our families would have shared if only to give us a little peace of mind."

"Well, I'm still gonna do a little digging of my own," Jacob said. "I got mad skillz - maybe I can find something Mary hasn't yet."

"Good luck with that," Eli said drolly with a smirk. Jake waggled his eyebrows.

"And in the meantime, what are we supposed to do about this Committee situation?" Danny asked. "Obviously Eli felt it was important enough to point it out to us. So what do we do with that information?"

"I don't think there is anything we can do at the moment," Abigail offered. "We should each take the time to consider our interactions with not only our own representatives, but any other Committee members we spoke to even in passing. Perhaps we should meet in here again tomorrow evening after dinner and discuss what we learned."

Eli nodded. "That sounds fair. Try not to make yourselves crazy over this. I haven't yet discovered what we can reasonably do with this information. But I felt it was important that you be informed of the oddities in play here. With all the brilliant minds in this room, we should be able to come up with some way to utilize this to our advantage." She yawned, and the rest began to follow behind, one after another. "And on that note...." Eli laughed.

They all rose and headed towards the door, each of them taking a moment to hug Eli and welcome her back to their company. She didn't understand the difference her change in attitude made until Abigail - the next-to-last person to leave - stopped and took Eli in her arms for a long moment.

"I can tell by the expression on your face that you don't really recognize the change in yourself yet that we already see so clearly. Just know that we are happy to have you back again, Eli. We've missed you."

Eli allowed the hug and the brush of Abigail's cheek against her own. Then Abigail left and only Jacob was standing with her.

"I'll work on this tomorrow, Boss. My checks are mostly done. We've moved into the double and triple check arena. So I can spare some time to devote to unraveling this little mystery. And the rest are ready to pitch in whenever and wherever you need them to - you have but to ask."

"Thank you, Jake. It's nice being involved like this again."

"Leading, you mean," Jacob corrected with a smirk. "Hey," he added when a faint blush crawled up her face. "Be glad. We're *thrilled* you're back to leading again. It means none of us have to try to walk in your shoes. And we'd follow anywhere you led, Eli - you're that kind of inspiration to us."

"I'm not certain I see that in me most of the time, but it comforts me to know that you all have that kind of faith even while it terrifies me to realize the responsibility that is."

"We're here when you need us, Boss. Don't forget that we support you all the way. Now," he said, stretching to his greatest height, "I'm gonna go see if I can catch Eden before bed. If she tells me anything worth sharing...."

"... you can tell me tomorrow unless it is urgent. I'm exhausted, Jake. I'm going to bed."

"Fair enough," he said with a smile as he walked across the threshold into the hallway. "Night, Eli."

"Goodnight, Jake."

"Hey, Baby!" Eden said when Jacob's smiling face graced her screen. "Hang on a second," looking up at Arianna who was gesticulating wildly in an effort to draw Eden's attention without giving away her presence to Jacob.

"I'm going to go to the galley. Can I bring you back something?"

"No... stay," Eden invited, pulling Arianna down beside her so Jacob could see them both. "I promise we'll keep it clean," chuckling when a blush colored Arianna's cheeks. "He's checking on both of us, you know."

Jacob scratched his hands through his hair and nodded. "She's right, Az. So how's it going? How does the ship look?"

"Fantastic, Jake. Although," Arianna continued, wrinkling her nose, "I can't say I'm completely enamored of the 'new ship' scent."

Jacob laughed. "Yeah, there's something to be said for the smell of new electronics - to say nothing of the way titanium and plaxium smell when they're being welded and soldered together." He shivered.

"It makes me want to sneeze just thinking about it." Eden and Arianna looked at one another, noticing that they were both wiggling their noses in reaction and laughed in response. "How is it otherwise?"

"It's a beautiful ship, Jake. We should be comfortable enough and the Committee seems to have taken Paulie's design to heart. We'll be able to dismantle it and use everything in the construction of our new home base once we arrive at the asteroid."

Jacob nodded. He had no illusions about that last part - construction rested mainly on his shoulders and he could make it work. But it was gratifying to know that he wouldn't be forced to rework the ship's components too much. "And how's Isaac behaving?" he asked bluntly, shooting the pink elephant in the room quite neatly.

"So far, so good," Eden replied. "Az had a talk with Joe and he'll be keeping an eye on things too. How are things there?"

Jacob looked directly at Arianna for a moment before shifting his gaze back to Eden. "I don't know what the two of you did or said to Eli, but way to go, guys! The boss is back!"

Eden pumped her fist and did a version of a happy dance without moving from her seat on the bed. Arianna's eyes widened and she covered her mouth with her hand. She met Jacob's smiling eyes and grinning mouth. "Jake? Are you sure?" her voice a mere whisper.

"Oh yeah, Princess - without a doubt. She called a team meeting earlier. When's the last time we had one of those, right? And she got me working on something - did you know something hinky is going on with the Committee?" He frowned when he saw the look of confusion on Arianna's face. "Weird... peculiar," he explained as comprehension dawned in her expression. She nodded.

"Hinky in what way, Jake?" she asked, using his word to show her understanding of it.

"Well, that's what we're not sure of yet. That's why I'm doing a little digging. Apparently the assh... <ahem> Malcolm was in contact with several Committee members."

Arianna smirked. "I know the team referred to him as an asshat, Jake. It was a well-deserved moniker... especially considering his attitude towards the rest of you. But why was he in touch with members of the Committee? I'm assuming you mean more than simply Member Bartolo from our home world because I could understand that to a degree. Bartolo made it a point to speak to me periodically, which I believed to be because of my station. Although I could see why he would want to keep apprised of the candidates he ostensibly represented."

"That's part of what I'm working on," Jake informed her. "According to revelations made in the meeting tonight, everyone kept in touch with their own representative member - most of us because we were directed to do so. Malcolm was the only one who seems to have connections beyond his home world representative."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Eden mumbled. Arianna nodded.

"Worth it though. It was kind of awesome to see the return of Eli the leader. She even did the wild hair thing."

"I wish I had seen that," Arianna mumbled.

"Me too," Eden agreed. "Maybe I should have kicked her ass sooner."

Jacob laughed. "She said you'd be more than happy to keep her in line now that you found a method to get her back on track."

"Yeah - don't let her forget that."

"You betcha," Jacob assured them. "So any other news?"

Eden snorted. "Jake, we've only been here a day. I'm pretty sure if we had news, you'd have already heard about it because you and I both know that the security agents here keep Mary informed of everything just like they do there. It's the best way they know to protect us."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they'd keep us in the loop."

"Maybe, but you'd know. You're kind of gifted that way, and you know how to find the answers you need to stay in the loop. Now that you know there is something to find...." Eden shrugged. "Although I kinda feel sorry for whoever's job it is on Mary's team. Because if you find what she's been looking for before they do...."

Arianna grimaced. "I wouldn't want to be them."

Eden snorted. "Not sure I'd want to be Jake either. Mary'll either want to keep him for her team or space him herself," meeting Jacob's eyes on the screen she held. They grinned at one another. Jacob laced his hands behind his head.

"She loves me - she'd never space me."

"Just make sure she doesn't try to keep you either. We need you."

"Aww... I love you too, Baby."

"That's my cue," Arianna declared as she rose from the bed. "Bye Jake," said over her shoulder as she sauntered towards the bathroom.

"My cue as well," Jacob said. "You'll let me know...?"

"You know it, Babe. Love you back."

"Be safe, Eden," he cautioned. She blew him a kiss and tapped the screen. Then she lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. The day had been years long, and she was ready for rest. Eden smiled. At least at the end of this one she could say it had been a good day.

Chapter XXXVIII

"Chief?"

"Come in, Caleb," Mary greeted with a smile. "I haven't seen you in a while. What troubles you, my friend?"

"Many things, Chief," Caleb replied somberly. "But today I'm concerned with the whispers I'm hearing from the Alpha team." He took the chair she indicated and accepted the water she offered as well. When he was settled, Mary leaned back in her seat and motioned for him to continue. "On the plus side, Princess seems to have finally recovered that part of her that is a leader. She has begun holding nightly team meetings and she appears to have galvanized the Alpha team into action."

"What sort of action?"

"Well, as you know, Stud is currently digging into the Committee at Princess' directive - they have figured out that the threat against them must be coming from inside. Given the Committee's actions with the Prick, I suppose it was natural that they begin their search there."

"Have they found anything?"

"No more than we have. Stud is as good as Gideon - maybe better. With the speed he's already accumulated information, I think he'll get there first if he has enough time. But that doesn't concern me as much as their desire to take action. If Stud discovers the perpetrator before we can flush them out and maneuver them here for a confrontation, they are planning to challenge them directly."

"How so? They can't possibly think they could escape the confines of this installation without us noticing their departure."

"Well, Chief - they are known for their resourcefulness as well as their brilliance. And they don't know about the squads of Marines you've had occupying the outer perimeter since before the Alpha team arrived."

Mary pinched the bridge of her nose. "Sometimes all that intelligence works against me, Caleb." She blew a raspberry and crossed her eyes; Caleb snorted his amusement. "Easy for you to say," she griped. "Good work, my friend. Keep your ears open. We need to be able to move ahead of them." He nodded. "Are things good otherwise?"

"Exceptional, I'd say, Chief. As I'm sure Joey has informed you, Stud is in touch with Wonder every night, and though Princess and Angel haven't spoken to one another directly since Angel's departure, they are keeping tabs on each other. The fact that Klutz hasn't created any sort of situation to cause Joey or Wonder to intervene is just a dividend I'm happy to accept for as long as it lasts."

"But you don't expect it to."

Caleb shook his head. "No... not with the intel Joey is sending back on a daily basis. Klutz is just waiting for what he believes will be his perfect opportunity. Joey has agreed not to interfere - to let Angel handle things in her own way for as long as she remains out of danger. The minute Klutz tries to put her in harm's way, however... all bets are off."

"Do you think he will... put Arianna in harm's way?"

"Not intentionally," Caleb responded instantly. "But I think he loses sight of the big picture when he finds something he wants. And that makes him careless."

"He may not have to worry about what Joseph will do to him - not if Eden gets to him first. She made a promise to Eli. And she's strong enough to do damage to him even with the size difference between them. Does she know that Arianna wants to handle Isaac herself?"

"She has agreed to give Angel the chance to talk to Isaac first. But I believe her exact words were - 'put him in his place, Az... or I will. And I'll make sure he doesn't forget.'"

"Any idea about how Arianna feels about it? She hasn't shared anything about the Isaac situation with me when I've spoken to her and I haven't pushed. She should be allowed to keep some of her own counsel."

Caleb smiled. "I think she's a little frustrated by the fact that everyone is trying to protect her because she would really like to handle Isaac by herself. As far as she's concerned, he's not a threat - more of a nuisance. But I think she is also a little bit...." He chewed his lip thoughtfully. "I wouldn't call it smug, but she's reveling in the fact that she finally has friends and family who are willing to stand up for her."

"Hopefully the rest will figure it out before they do something stupid."

"Eeeyeah - it may be too late for that, Chief." Mary cocked a brow at him. "There should be movement soon. He's been in touch with the Committee."

"All of them?"

"Hard to say. The signal went to the conference room they used as a group."

"Do we know what was said?"

"Gideon was working on unscrambling the contents when I came down here. I do find it just slightly amusing that he's bright enough to scramble the actual communication, but can't remember to do the same with the signal."

"He's not a professional, Caleb. We all had to learn."

"I know, Chief. But we trained until we learned to avoid giveaways like this."

"How lucky for us he was never trained. We planned for the giveaway."

Caleb stood. "Gideon will find you as soon as he has the translation. I let Nat know, and he's already moved the Marines into position. They'll remain there until and unless you order them to stand down."

"Thank you, Caleb."

"Later, Chief."

"Arianna? Could I talk to you?" Isaac asked. "Privately?" glaring directly at Eden before turning his attention back to Arianna's brown eyes for the moment they held his before she looked at Eden.

"It's all right, Eden."

Black eyes held brown for a long moment before Eden nodded and slowly rose from her seat. "I'll be right over there, Az," motioning to a table on the other side of the galley. It was the most privacy she could offer Arianna without actually leaving the room. "So just speak up if you need something, all right?"

Arianna smiled and caught Eden's hand. "I will, Eden. Thank you." Eden squeezed the fingers briefly, then released her grip and moved over to the far side of the room. Paul followed her and they sat together making sure Eden had a clear view of the proceedings. "Have a seat, Isaac," Arianna offered, watching Joseph alter his stance until he was halfway between Eden's table and Arianna's.

Isaac clasped his hands together. "Do you think we could take a walk instead? I'd really like to talk to you in private."

"Isaac, this is the most privacy we are going to get. If we leave this room, we will be leading a parade and cameras will be tracking us. Do you really think that would be better?"

Isaac huffed and dropped into a chair next to Arianna, not realizing he was giving Eden and Joseph a perfect view. Arianna wasn't about to bring it to his attention, knowing all the shifting around would quickly become chaotic and confusing. He clasped his big hands on the table and leaned forward in an effort to keep his voice down.

"Arianna? Why can't we be a couple? Why do you keep denying how good we are together... how happy we make one another?"

Arianna blinked. Whatever she had expected, this wasn't close. She took a moment and studied the man across from her - he wasn't unattractive, but he stirred nothing in her. There was no magnetism... no emotion... no spark. She did feel a bit of kinship towards him - after all, she knew what it was to be socially inept. And that made her feel sympathy and kindness. But his insistence that there was more - that *they* were more - was wearing on her... especially now. Especially since Eli had spoken to her - had apologized for her behavior and asked for a second chance. Possible with Eli was better than sure with Isaac any day of the week as far as Arianna was concerned. She didn't realize she had been staring until she felt Isaac's big hands cover hers as he called her name.

"Arianna? Are you even listening to me?"

"I'm sorry, Isaac. I was thinking."

"About us?"

Arianna sighed and shook her head. "Isaac, there is no us. I don't care for you in that way...."

"But you do care for me!" he shouted triumphantly.

"Not in the way you want to believe I do, Isaac and you don't care for me...."

"You don't get to tell me how I feel!" he growled, tightening his grip until he saw a look of pain pass through Arianna's eyes. He released his grip. "I'm sorry, Arianna. I didn't realize...."

She slipped her hands from underneath his and covered one of his with both of hers. "It's all right, Isaac," motioning Eden and Joseph back to their respective posts. "I know you didn't intend to hurt

me. I apologize for presuming to tell you what your feelings were; that was wrong of me. But Isaac - do you really love me or do you simply love the idea that I took time to be nice to you?"

"I don't understand, Arianna. Of course I love you. How can you doubt that... or me?"

"Okay then... what is my favorite color?" Silence. "What is my favorite food?"

"Oh, that one's easy," Isaac grinned. "Stringy squash - because it can be slathered in a variety of different sauces. You like the versatility it offers."

Arianna shook her head. "While I do appreciate its versatility, and it is one of the easiest foods we work with, it is actually not my favorite."

"What is then?" Isaac grumbled.

Arianna shook her head. "I'm not going to tell you, Isaac. Because the reason that it is my favorite is a very personal and private one. What is my favorite way to spend my free time... excluding the lab?"

"I dunno," Isaac griped. "Reading?"

"No, Isaac. It isn't reading." She turned to Eden who was leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed over her chest blatantly watching the tableau take place in front of her. "Eden," she asked, knowing she had been listening to their conversation. "What is my favorite color?"

"Hazel green," Eden replied without thought. Arianna nodded.

"Do you know my favorite food?"

"Yes, as well as the reason for it."

"How come she gets to know the reason if it's so private and personal?" Isaac sneered.

"Because though she wasn't directly involved, she was witness to what happened when I was introduced to it," Arianna answered kindly. She looked at Eden once more. "How do I prefer to spend my free time?"

"Singing," Eden said promptly. "On most of our worlds, you would be considered an artist much as Joy is here. But apparently that gift wasn't your destiny," added with a shrug.

"I still don't see why you won't give me a chance," Isaac whined. "Don't you see how good we could be together?"

Arianna removed her hands from his and rested them in her lap. Isaac made a move to chase after them, then thought better of it - choosing instead to lean back and let his hands fall to his thighs. "Isaac, even if I thought I could care for you as more than a friend - and I do *not*, let's be very clear about that - I would still never be someone who could love you as you deserve to be loved. Isaac, my heart belongs to another and has for some time."

"Malcolm?"

Arianna chuckled. "No, not Malcolm. Malcolm was Papa's choice for me... never mine. And had I been forced into that union, I would have been lonely and miserable for the remainder of my lifetime."

"So no us?"

"No us - not now... not ever. I would like to count you as a friend, though."

"I don't know how to do that," Isaac admitted.

"It's what I have been trying to do, Isaac. I've been where you are; I know what it feels like to be the social outcast and not know how to make it better."

"So that's why you were being nice to me? Not because you liked me?"

"Yes, Isaac. I only like you as a friend. And that won't change unless you force it to." At his confused look, Arianna continued. "Isaac, you need to accept the fact that we're just friends and only friends. There is no chance of us ever being more than friends. So you need to stop believing that we were meant to be together because we aren't ever going to be."

"And you'll still be my friend? You won't ignore me or stop talking to me?"

"What?? No... of course I won't." She held up her hands. "Yes, I will still be your friend. And no, I won't ignore you or stop talking to you as long as you remember that we're just friends. If you continue to push for something more intimate, I will walk away - I won't let you bully me like that. You're going to have to learn limits and boundaries. And maybe we can work on helping you make friends with the others so you have lots of friends, okay?"

Isaac nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. But will you put in an extra good word for me with Eden? She kinda scares me - I don't think she likes much of anyone."

"Actually," Eden said from right behind him, making Isaac jump in his seat. He turned and glared at her, then let his eyes skitter around the room. "I like most people. But Az was right - you need to learn boundaries and limits. We'll get to work on that tomorrow. For now, it's time for us to return to our domicile to recharge."

"Huh?"

Paul chuckled as he came up on Isaac's other side as Eden extended her hand to Arianna who accepted with alacrity and rose from her seat. They turned to watch Paul explain to Isaac.

"What she means, dude, is that it's time to go to bed and get some sleep so we can get up and do all this over again tomorrow."

"Why didn't she just say that?"

"She did."

"I did."

The three of them answered in tandem and then Eden took the reins. "I did, Isaac. Just sometimes I like to spice it up a little. Keeps everybody on their toes," said with a smirk. "Goodnight, guys."

Arianna gave them a wave and then allowed Eden to pull her from the galley and lead her to their room. Paul and Isaac watched them go before Paul nudged Isaac in the arm.

"C'mon, man," yawning and stretching prior to moving towards the door. "It's been a long day, and I'm tired. We can talk about this tomorrow."

"I dunno, Paulie. I'm not sure I'm ever gonna get girls, you know?"

Paul laughed aloud and clapped a hand on Isaac's back as they exited the mess hall. "My friend... no honest man - no matter the time period he lived in or the planet he came from - has ever been able to truthfully say that he 'got' women. I don't think they were meant to be understood... at least not by mere mortals like us. We just love them and appreciate them and treat them right. The rest will follow."

"I hope so. Machines are a lot easier to understand."

"So is science, Ike. But it's not nearly the experience that girls are." Then they shut the door to their room, and further conversation between them was lost.

"So are you satisfied?" Eden asked as they tucked themselves into their beds sometime later. Their chat with Jake had been fun and it hadn't taken them long to settle down for sleep when they were done. Arianna turned on her side to face Eden and propped her head on her hand. Eden mimicked her pose and waited for an answer.

"I am," Arianna admitted finally. "It could have gone wrong in so many ways - I know at one point you and Joey were ready to step in and thrash him. But he earned his place as part of this team. He just needs someone to show him how to be friendly without being overbearing - like you and Eli did for me in the desert compound."

"I don't understand how we missed his inability to interact with people. We caught onto you right away."

"Yes, but I was trying to insinuate myself into things. Isaac hid with his machines."

Eden rolled her eyes. "Whatever. We'll work on it. Meanwhile, we need some sleep. We've only got a couple more days here before we go back to the rest of the team, and then right after that, our families come in to spend a final holiday and say goodbye. It's all downhill from here."

"We can only hope," Arianna commented with a yawn. "Night, Eden."

"Goodnight, Az."

Chapter XXXIX

"Are you kidding me?" Mary asked with disbelief.

"No, Chief," Gideon said seriously. "Not now, and never about this."

"So now that we finally need him to be the rat fink traitor that he really is, he's decided to grow a conscience." She was still angry about having missed this... missed him.

Gideon's eyebrows went to his hairline at Mary's description, but he couldn't fault her frustration. Once they had narrowed down the candidates likely to be the mole, they had focused their efforts on keeping tabs on their communiqués even as Gideon continued his research. Now that they had their proof, it was time to catch him. And everything had been running smoothly on track... until their unwitting key component had decided to throw a wrench into the works.

"Bring him to me," she commanded darkly, and Ephraim almost saluted as he scrambled out of her office to find his prey. This was becoming some kind of mess.

"I hope Eli understands," Arianna muttered as they boarded the shuttle. "Two days isn't very much time." Eden snorted.

"Pretty sure she probably gets that better than the rest of us, and it's not like any of us are on the slow side of the curve. Explaining that beaut of a shiner should prove interesting though."

Arianna gave her a withering glance through her good eye. "You're not funny - did you know that?"

Eden shrugged. "I wasn't trying to be. But at least Eli can fix you up once we reach the installation again. If we'd had more time and equipment, or if Isaac wasn't as clumsy...."

Arianna sighed. "I know. But he's trying."

"A little too hard. But I think Paulie is setting him straight. I already spoke to Jake. He's gonna spread the word around to the rest of the team. Now that we know what the problem is, we can set about correcting it." Eden blew out an impatient breath. "We're just gonna have to pull out our reserves of patience to get it done."

"You don't know how much I appreciate it, Eden. I am not the teacher you and Eli are."

Eden patted Arianna's knee as the shuttle roared to life. "You're still learning too, Az. But we'll all get there eventually." A shadow crossed her vision, and she looked up to find a contrite Isaac standing beside her holding a cold pack. She arched an eyebrow at him even as she nudged Arianna's attention away from the window.

"I'm really sorry, Arianna," thrusting the packet towards her. Arianna jerked back instinctively, then reached forward to accept the offering. "Paulie said this might help until Eli can do her magic."

"Thank you, Isaac. That was very considerate of you. And it's all right - I know it was an accident."

"Yeah, it was, but I still feel bad about it, you know?"

Arianna flinched as the cold connected with her swollen flesh, then relaxed as the throbbing eased. "I know, Isaac. It's okay. You just need to learn to relax."

"Relax... right. I'm just gonna go sit down. I think we're almost to the transport site," motioning to the view outside the window. He sighed and walked back to sit beside Paul. And in another moment, the shuttle set down on the landing pad and they were whisked away to the transport zone.

He knocked on the door and stuck his head inside when a voice bade him enter. "Ms Wellesly? Ephraim said you wanted to see me."

"I do indeed," Mary replied, beckoning him into her office. "Please come in and have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine... thank you," taking the chair she proffered and settling back comfortably. He didn't notice Caleb and Ian standing in the back corners of the room, nor the fact that Ephraim had followed him in and closed the door silently behind them to stand sentinel in front of it. Mary relaxed back in her chair, wanting him to feel comfortable, but before she could speak, he beat her to it. "Ms Wellesly, I don't want to appear rude, but why exactly am I here?"

"You don't know?"

"Um... no? I mean Ephraim didn't really explain why. He just told me that you needed to speak to me urgently."

Mary nodded and tilted her head to study him. "How long?" she asked him at long last. "How long have you been a traitor?" watching him flinch and his eyes widen. "Not just to your team but to every candidate that participated in the selection process."

"Excuse me???"

"I have been trying to... excuse you, I mean - for a while now, if the truth be told. Trying to excuse you, trying to understand you, trying to figure out how I missed this. Even in hindsight - knowing the truth - it's not at all obvious. So please... enlighten me."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Ms Wellesly. What do you need me to enlighten you about?"

The look she gave him should have seared the skin from his body, but instead he simply met her gaze. After a moment she shrugged and stood, walking around the desk to lean on it in front of him. "All right," she agreed calmly. "How about I lay it out for you and then you can help me fill in the details? Does that sound like a fair deal?"

"I'm not sure what you think I can tell you, Ms Wellesly, but sure. That sounds fair."

"Excellent," she replied with a tight smile. "Let's get started, shall we?"

"Eli... take a deep breath. You don't want to hurl your guts in front of her the minute she arrives," Jacob offered, wrapping his arm around shoulders through which he could feel the nervous tremors shaking. Eli simply looked at him like he was speaking another language. Esther rolled her eyes.

"Girlfriend, you've got this. So settle down before you get sick all over Arianna as soon as you see her. That would be embarrassing and you're better than that."

"She's going to give you that chance, Eli," Abigail assured her. "Trust me. She cares too much not to."

"Thanks, Gay," Eli said with a tight smile, and then their formerly absent teammates strode through the door. First Paul, then Isaac - then Eden and Arianna together, and all Eli could see was the silver package held in place covering half of Arianna's face. Forgetting her fear and everything else, she shrugged out of Jacob's embrace and pushed through until she was standing in front of Arianna.

Gently Eli lifted Arianna's chin, letting her professional gaze roam over the parts of her face she could see while Arianna studied her. Eli placed her hand over Arianna's hand that was holding the cold pack. "May I?" she inquired softly. Arianna pulled the packet away, maintaining her hold on it as Eli raised hers to turn the bruised flesh to her examination. "What happened?" meeting Arianna's eye before glancing at Eden. Then she refocused her attention on Arianna, not noticing when Isaac stepped up behind her. "Angel?"

"It was my fault," he admitted. "I was... and then she... and my elbow...."

Eli let one hand rest on Arianna's neck, lightly kneading the muscles there as she turned to face Isaac. She held up her free hand to stop his words, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. When she felt a semblance of calm envelope her, she opened her eyes once more. "Take a minute, Isaac, and then try again... preferably in complete sentences this time," she instructed.

He huffed out a breath and twitched nervously, then nodded. "Right... yeah. It wouldn't have been quite so bad, except the medical supplies were all here, you know."

"I know, Isaac," Eli offered calmly, continuing her massage on Arianna's neck. "But what caused it? What happened to Arianna's face?"

"My elbow," he mumbled, forcing her to listen closely. "I was just trying to help, but I didn't know she was *right there*. And when I turned around I kind of, you know... with my elbow."

"I didn't move away quickly enough," Arianna interjected. "It isn't solely his responsibility."

Eli nodded. "All right. Let's get you to the medical bay so I can take care of this. Are you okay otherwise?"

"Aside from the screaming headache, you mean?" giving a wan smile. "I'm fine, Eli. I promise. And I'll be even better after you work your magic."

Eli nodded and pitched her voice to be heard throughout the room. "All right, everyone. We still have work to do so let's get back to it please. We'll meet up for lunch in an hour or so." The Alpha team started to disperse, and Isaac approached Arianna slowly, making sure she was aware of his presence.

"I'll take your bag to your room, Arianna? Eden can go with me."

Eden blinked in surprise before she nodded quickly. "Of course. I just need your key, Az." She held out her hand and Arianna shook her head once before wincing. Eden frowned. "Az?"

"The door's not locked, Eden. I didn't even think about it when we left."

"Do you have your key with you now? Because I'll lock it behind us when we leave." Arianna stuck her hand in her pocket and came up with the requested item. Eden nodded her head and jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Good enough. C'mon, Ike. We still need to put our stuff away before lunch and I think it's SOS in the mess hall today."

"I'm gonna miss that when we leave here," Eli and Arianna heard before the voices faded. Then the silence grew awkward as they realized they were alone with a lot of unresolved issues between them.

"Um... come with me," Eli directed as she let her hand drop from Arianna's neck. She moved towards the door, expecting Arianna to follow. "We'll get those bruises and the swelling taken care of and then I'll see what can be done about your headache."

"Eli...."

She stopped walking, but kept her back to Arianna. "Please, Angel - give me these last few minutes to help you before you turn me away. Let me pretend...."

"No," Arianna responded, feeling the tears well in her eyes when Eli's shoulders visibly drooped. "You're so certain I'll reject you."

"I am... because you should. No one deserves to be treated as I have treated you... especially not one who claims to love you the way I do. There is no excuse - there should be no forgiveness."

"Except you didn't really mistreat me, Eli. Oh, I'm not going to stand here and lie and pretend like your reaction didn't hurt my feelings because it certainly did. But I also know that you were protecting yourself the only way that you knew how, and I cannot fault you for that." Arianna sighed. "But love is all about forgiveness, Eli," wishing she could see Eli's expression. "You asked me for a second chance. Do you really want one?"

"More than anything," Eli whispered, hoping Arianna could hear her.

"Then you have to let me give you one, Amado. And you have to be willing to take it... with all the responsibilities that go with accepting it."

Eli spun on her heel and moved back into Arianna's personal space, cupping the uninjured side of her face and studying the single brown eye visible to her. "Angel... are you certain?"

"More than anything," Arianna replied. "Take me to the medical bay, Amado," she charged. "I want to tell you a story."

He sat silent for several long moments when Mary stopped speaking. Finally he looked at her and spoke. "How did you know? How did you discover me? I thought I had covered my tracks completely."

Mary gave him a tight smile. "You did quite well for someone who really wasn't trained for it." She held up a hand before he could interrupt. "If it's any consolation, we didn't start looking for you until very recently. But when we did, finding you wasn't that difficult." Mary paused a beat and met his eyes kindly. "Why did you do it?"

He looked down at his lap, twisting his hands together nervously as he gathered the courage to meet her eyes. "It wasn't supposed to be anything important, you know? I knew when I was chosen for the assignment - keeping tabs on the other candidates, not being a candidate myself;" he clarified, "that it was because I was mediocre at best. It wasn't hard to remain impartial - I had no real hope of being a part of this mission and I knew it. So why would I care who else made it?"

"Obviously *that's* not true," Mary said spreading her hands wide.

He nodded, a small smile crooking one side of his mouth. "It changed when we were at the desert facility. I discovered I was as special as some of the other candidates; I had a hidden talent that was necessary for not only success but possibly our very survival. It was highly likely I would get chosen to be part of the project."

"But you continued to be a mole."

"Well, yeah - I didn't want someone less worthy to take my place! Suddenly I had the right to be there on my own merit, and I wanted to stay!" His voice rose and then fell in the next instant. "I was finally special."

"So why try to torpedo the project? Why try to make the mission a failure?"

A look of confusion crossed his face. "Huh? What are you talking about? That's not what I did!"

"What did you do then?"

"My job was to report on the individual candidates - to alert the Committee to their strengths and weaknesses. To report on their interactions and personality quirks."

"And this didn't strike you as odd?"

"Ms Wellesly, nothing about this assignment was what you would consider normal. But no... it really didn't strike me as odd, nor did I see it as betrayal. I was an on-site evaluator, and I was good at what I did. But right in the middle of our stint in the desert, my objective changed. I realized I had a real shot at being chosen as an Alpha team member."

"So you changed the rules?"

"Not exactly. There was no reason to - there were still far too many candidates to choose from, and I wanted to be certain the best and right candidates got chosen."

"So you started influencing the Committee towards the candidates you felt could make a successful mission... people you wanted as teammates."

"Maybe a little," he shrugged. "But mostly I kept it honest. I had to. These people had to be able to perform on their own merit. The Committee was pretty adamant about that."

"So why the communication yesterday?" Mary asked. "I know they asked for your whereabouts and you refused. Why did you contact them?"

He sighed. "Look, they've been after me for a location on the team since we left the hotel. I only know that because of the messages waiting on my Pad when you returned them," he added at her

arched brow. Then he shrugged. "I didn't tell them because I figured if you wanted them to know, you would have told them."

"And in most cases, you'd be right."

"But not this time," he responded flatly.

"Not this time. You see, Titus, they've been using you... each for their own reasons. But the fact remains that you are a pawn in a much larger game, and now I need to use that fact to my advantage."

"I'm listening."

"If I tell you, Titus, you will be restricted to solitary in your quarters without a way to communicate with anyone but me and my agents until things are in motion and I am certain the danger is past. Are you willing to be kept as a prisoner in your room until I know it's safe?"

"For whom?"

"Everyone."

"How long?"

Mary shrugged. "I can't say for certain, but it will be over before you are all scheduled for departure."

"And what of my family? They are due here in two days with everyone else's to celebrate our last holiday together. Am I supposed to lose my final time with them?"

"That is your choice, Titus. If you really want to know *why* I need you to do this, then it is quite possible you will miss spending any time with your family. If, however, you're willing to take me on faith and trust that I am looking out for you and the rest of your team, you'll be free to continue going about your business including celebrating the holiday with your family." Mary held his gaze. "Aside from the men in this room and my researcher, Gideon, no one knows of your real involvement with the Committee. I plan to keep it that way. And I promise to tell you and your comrades the whole story if the opportunity presents itself before you leave here."

"What do you need me to do?"

"You told them that you couldn't tell them where you were because you didn't know. I want you to send another message - telling them you've been looking around the complex for any identifying markers, but there just aren't any. However, you do know that the walls appear to be solid rock; that there is a cavern with a platform and carvings on the walls; that there is a locked out elevator that shows a number of floors. That should be enough for them to figure out where you are. And then I just have to wait for them to come looking."

"You want them to find us."

"I do indeed. It's time to finish this. But Titus... if you betray me - if you betray the rest of these kids - I'll make certain hell is the least of your worries. Are we clear?"

"Yes ma'am. Shall I send the message now?" Mary nodded and the die was cast.

Chapter XL

Eli seated Arianna on one of the examination beds and gently removed the cold pack from her face. She contained her wince, though Arianna could see the sympathetic pain in her eyes, and this close, she could see more than a hint of green and gold in what had been flat gray eyes for the longest time. It caused a little thrill to chase up her spine, knowing she was the cause of that particular reaction. She missed Eli's hazel green eyes.

Arianna blinked when she realized Eli was staring at her with a charmingly shy smile and her head tilted in question, concern clearly written in her eyes. She flushed slightly and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry - I was thinking. Did you ask me something?"

Eli's smile grew exponentially larger, and she tenderly pushed the dark hair away from Arianna's face. "I did indeed," she replied. "I asked if you would share your story now."

"Of course," Arianna answered, though her smile tended more towards a grimace. "Um...." wincing and clutching at her head.

"Hold that thought a moment." Eli turned away from her, then plucked a syringe from the cabinet and held it up. "I'm glad we decided to pack up this room at the very last possible minute. Let me get rid of your headache first. It has obviously moved into 'hurts to breathe' territory." The hiss of air being released was the only indication the shot was taking effect, and Eli dropped the empty syringe on the table before clasping one of Arianna's hands. The other hand cradled the dark head and she looked into the single brown eye watching her every movement. "I am going to lay you down on the bed," she explained and Arianna shifted with her until she was lying flat. "Better?" Eli asked.

"Much. What did you give me?"

Eli chuckled. "The good stuff." It had become a running joke between them at the desert facility. For most non-emergency cases, Eli tended to stint on real painkillers, citing that if they could make due with basic pain medicine to take care of things, she could save the good stuff for *real* incidents. Everyone knew, however, that she also had no compunction about using the hard drugs if the situation warranted it. Most of them prayed that she never utilized the good stuff - it meant really bad things as far as they were concerned.

"Am I dying??" Arianna asked with some alarm.

"No, Sweetheart, no," Eli assured in a soothing voice. "I just didn't want to see you in pain any longer, and I can still restock anything I use here." She watched Arianna's eyes slowly unfocus and softly smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Lovely," Arianna replied with a goofy half-smile. "Sort of floaty... like when you took me flying...." A fingertip covered her lips.

"Our secret, remember?" waiting for Arianna to nod slowly. "Now let me see what I can do about the damage Isaac did. Because it looks like his elbow certainly did quite a number on your face."

"You should check out his elbow," Arianna said with a snicker. "I could have done serious damage with my face, you know."

Eli gave her a fond smile. "You really are feeling good."

"Ooooh yes," Arianna drawled slowly. "I like the good stuff."

"Close your eyes, Angel. And I promise when you open them again, you will feel brand new."

"Will you still be here or is this all a dream?"

"No dream, Angel. I'll be right here. You still owe me a story, remember?" Eli smiled and Arianna closed her eyes, confident that things would be better when she woke up again. Eli waited until she felt Arianna's body relax into deeper sleep. Then she got to work repairing the bruises.

"How is she, Boss?" Eden asked as she leaned against the doorjamb of the examination room. It hadn't been hard to figure where Eli was when she and Arianna didn't show up for lunch. Eli motioned Eden into the room.

"Sleeping comfortably. I gave her a shot of the good stuff and it took her under quickly."

Eden studied Arianna with apprehension. "Is she... did he do deeper damage than we thought?"

Eli shook her head. "No, no... nothing so dire. She had just reached a critical level of headache pain, and I saw no reason to let her continue to suffer. I can still replace anything I use here, so why not make her comfortable?" Eli shrugged nonchalantly, but her eyes told a different story.

"It's cool, Boss. I'd have done the same thing. Do you want something to eat?" Her stomach grumbled its answer, but Eli shook her head.

"No. I promised her I would be here when she woke up."

"I can bring you something."

"Please," the words slightly slurred. "All the growling is keeping me awake," Arianna teased sleepily from the bed as she gingerly stretched out her body. Eli and Eden both stepped closer on opposite sides of the bed.

"How do you feel?"

"Brand new... just like you promised." Her stomach rumbled. "And also hungry," she admitted sheepishly. The other two chuckled in sympathy and offered her a hand. She sat up swiftly and blinked. "Whoa... what a rush!" She took a deep breath then glanced between her companions. "Help me down?" she queried, smiling at the alacrity of their response. When she was steady on her feet, she turned to Eden. "Is everyone still in the mess hall?" Eden nodded and Arianna looked at Eli. "Shall we go have lunch with our friends?"

Eli shrugged and grabbed her field kit. Then she motioned them out of the treatment room and towards the entrance of the medical bay, delighted when Arianna linked their hands together even as she tucked her other hand into the crook of Eden's elbow.

"How's Isaac doing?"

"Despite our efforts to engage him, he's keeping his head down at the moment. I think he's waiting for you to show up and absolve him of guilt in front of the others because they all heard the conversation in the big room. And you know what happens when a scientist's curiosity goes unabated for too long."

"Yes," Eli said dryly. "You get into mischief."

Eden put her free hand on her chest and put on an appropriately affronted expression. "I'm certain I don't have the first idea what you're referring to, Boss. I have never gotten up to mischief in my life."

"And if I ask your MaTb? Will she say the same?"

"My makuahine believes me to be an angel - of course she would," said drolly with an innocent countenance... that she managed to maintain for five full seconds before giving in to the laughter she could no longer contain. The other two were quick to join in her mirth, and it was in this manner that they entered the galley, drawing every eye to them. Esther was the first to stand and greet them, walking over to take Arianna in a hug. Eli squeezed the hand linked with hers and then released her clasp with a nod towards the table where Isaac was ensconced. Arianna nodded and extended her free arm to accept Esther's embrace.

"Girlfriend, you look amazing. Guess Doc Eli got you all fixed up, hmm? So tell us what happened. Paulie and Eden refused saying it was your story and Isaac has been ignoring us. So what's the scoop?"

"Move aside, Es," Jake commanded with a gentle hip check. "The rest of us want our hugs too."

"Besides," Eden said as she patted the hand on her elbow as she slid from Arianna's grasp. "They need to eat. So get your hugs and let them sit down to eat." She turned to Arianna. "I'll get your plates - don't let her sneak out of here."

Arianna narrowed her eyes. "She wouldn't dare." Eden smirked and headed to the serving line, and Arianna turned back to the rest of her teammates welcoming her back.

Eli sat down next to Isaac and he cut his eyes at her before turning his attention back to his food. She reached for him and he jerked away, careful not to actually hit her with his motion. Eli sighed.

"Isaac, I'm not going to hurt you. I simply need to check your elbow. Arianna is concerned that she did damage to it with her face when you collided. And considering how hardheaded stubborn she is, it's a valid concern," offering him a smirk and getting the smallest smile in return.

He looked at her then, scrutinizing her for a long moment as she held his gaze. Then he nodded slowly. "You might wanna move back a little," he said, extending his arm with the slightest motion in her direction. Eli stood and let him stretch it out, then she grasped it in gentle hands.

"A little sore?" she asked, running her fingertips over the bone and smiling when he replied.

"Between you and me, she has some pretty thick bones... especially considering her size," he replied.

Eli snorted. "So that's a yes then." She opened her kit and pulled out the hand-held regen unit. She ran it over the area when she felt a slight warmth, and after a few minutes Isaac nodded his appreciation. "Thanks, Doc. I didn't realize...."

"I know, but given the damage to her face, it wasn't unexpected. You're welcome. I'm glad I could help." Eli moved to walk away, but Isaac grabbed her arm, careful not to exert too much pressure. She met his eyes and slowly sat down, and when he was convinced she was going to listen he released his grip. "Isaac?"

"You're the one, aren't you?" At her confused look, he hurried to explain. "With Arianna - you're the one her heart belongs to, aren't you?" When Eli remained silent, Isaac continued. "I... I talked to Arianna... when we were on the ship together. I know you claimed her... said she was yours, but she never said that so I thought I had a shot, you know? I thought you were just posturing." He shook his head. "I don't know. Because she was kind to me, I believed there was more between us. So despite your words... despite Titus and Paul trying to convince me otherwise, I decided to take what I felt was my golden opportunity."

Eli had clenched her hands together, but her expression remained neutral. She cleared her throat softly. "And how did that go for you, Isaac?"

He chuckled ruefully. "About like you'd expected it to - Eden and that Joey guy of Mary's were giving me the stink eye; Paul was trying not to be seen; and Arianna was not unkind... but she was steadfast in her insistence that we were friends only. She assured me that was all I could ever hope for because her heart belonged to another. That other is you, isn't it?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Eli, I know I tend to get lost in my own little world. Machines and science make sense to me - they're a lot easier to understand than most people I meet. But I saw how you reacted when you saw her this morning, and I heard how she spoke to you. I don't think that was posturing - I think that was you claiming each other. I know you were roommates for a while at the desert compound." He held up his hands. "I'm not asking for details. I mean... no. That is wrong on so many levels of wrong. But I'm not generally right about things like this because I don't pay attention like I should. Eden and Arianna said I needed start paying attention to the people and interactions that go on around me so I can learn how to have friends... how to be a friend. I just want to know if I got it right this time."

Eli examined his expression prudently, looking for little clues that might show he was lying to her. What she found was reassuring, and she nodded slowly. "It was... I am," she replied.

"Good," Isaac affirmed. "She deserves someone like you."

"I don't know about that."

"I do," he stated emphatically. "Just be good to her okay? She deserves everything."

"She does. And I plan to do my very best."

"Your very best what?" Arianna asked as she took a seat beside Eli, leaning around her to look at Isaac. "Hi, Isaac. How's the elbow?"

"Better thanks to the Doc here. I didn't even realize it hurt until it didn't any more."

Arianna leaned into Eli's arm. "Yes - she's pretty good at that. So what did we miss while we were gone?" she asked looking around at the friends and colleagues who had gathered around the table she and Eli were seated at. "And where is Titus?" glancing between Isaac and Paul.

"We haven't seen him."

"Ms Wellesly asked to speak to him after breakfast," Eli replied, a frown crossing her face. "I don't know the details, but I'm forced to wonder if there's a problem if he's still meeting with her."

"If there *is* a problem, we'll know about it soon enough," Eden assured her. "You know how it works. And in the meantime - what did we miss? Is everything on track for the holiday?" And the conversation turned to other things.

"You think that will get them here?" Ian asked when the door closed behind Titus. "Do you think he'll maintain his silence?"

Mary rubbed at the ache in her forehead. "It depends on how wrong I was about him. I expected him to be chosen for his affinity to grow beautiful, productive plants. Even before he became some sort of plant whisperer so to speak, he had the greenest thumb I had ever seen. But I never saw any inkling that he was the Committee's informant. I didn't actually expect it from any of these kids... not until recently anyway."

"Is it worth it?" Caleb asked. Ephraim remained silent at his post by the door.

Mary shook her head and blew out a frustrated breath. "I would like to think so. I think the project is; the politics? Not so much."

"What's the Council going to say? You are deliberately putting these kids in harm's way to protect them. I imagine there is going to be exception taken to your methods, Mama."

"I'm sure there will be, my son. But much will depend on the results we achieve, and these kids are safer here than almost anywhere else in the world. Your brother's Marine units are in place and when the time comes, we'll confine the Alpha team to a safe location. After that it will be a matter of closing the trap. Only once this is resolved will I notify the Council."

"Do you think we can do this without bloodshed?"

"Doubtful," Mary replied. "But I plan on most of the bloodshed being that of those coming after the Alpha team members. If they didn't support this mission, the Members should have resigned their posting to the Committee."

"Can't they do more damage from within than without?"

Mary sighed. "Of course. And yes, I do know that," pinching the bridge of her nose hard. "It just gripes me to no end to have to deal with that kind of selfish stupidity. If you don't like it, let it go and move on. It's better for everyone that way." She raked a hand through her hair. "I suppose I should be grateful that there were so many Members involved in the pushing and pulling in so many different directions. That's what ultimately gave them away and at least it ensured that the best candidates were chosen because none of the Committee members wanted their planets to be represented by less than the best minds they had to offer."

"So how long?"

"Depends. I'm waiting to hear they've started moving. Stephen is supposed to contact us."

"And Titus?"

"I think Titus was telling the truth. He was at best a mediocre researcher when he was chosen as the Committee's inside evaluator, and his green thumb ability isn't highly unusual on his planet though he was definitely one of the best botanists among the candidates. Discovering the gift of being able to communicate with plants was a game changer for him."

"So you don't think he will betray you? Even to the kids on the Alpha team?"

Ephraim chuckled. "Listen to the old man calling them kids." Mary and Caleb laughed and Ian crossed his arms over his chest and stuck out his tongue. Mary covered her mouth and breathed deeply through her nose until she no longer felt the urge to giggle. Then she looked at Ephraim. "Yes, you're going to fit into this family just fine."

Ian glared in his direction. "Remind me to teach you about the brothers' code." Ephraim snickered and nodded. Ian huffed impatiently and looked at Mary. "About my question...?"

"I don't think he will, no. He wants this - he wants to be a member of the Alpha team and have this project succeed. If he betrays us to the Committee, he destroys any chance for the mission to go ahead as planned. If he betrays us to the Alpha team, he is slitting his own throat. Do you really think they will want him to continue as part of them?"

"I suppose it depends on how he presents the story to them. If I was him, I'd make sure they knew that I was influential in their being chosen."

Mary shook her head. "That's a slippery slope and can very easily work against him." She cocked an eyebrow at his confused expression. "Ian, that's tantamount to telling them that they weren't good enough on their own merit - that they *needed* him to do it for them because they couldn't accomplish it without him."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"That's why she's the Chief," Caleb offered. A knock on the door interrupted Ian's retort, and they all looked towards it as Ephraim opened the portal at Mary's behest. Gideon stuck his head inside, but didn't enter.

"Chief, we just heard from Stephen. They're on the move."

"Headed this way?"

"Not yet; they appear to be gathering troops. Not the size of an army, but enough that the Marines will get a nice workout if they decide to be stupid. Stephen's supposed to keep an eye on things until they turn this way, and then he and the remainder will make haste to join us here."

"Good job, Gideon. Keep me posted." He nodded and exited the room. "All right - Caleb, let the rest of the Agents know where we're at. Ian, go notify your brother. Ephraim, you're with me. It's time to go talk to the Alpha team."

Chapter XLI

"So you look happier than I've seen you in a long time," Danny commented sotto voce to Arianna as he squeezed in beside her. The rest were taken with discussing the upcoming holiday and their excitement about introducing their families to each other. Eli had clasped the hand Arianna had wrapped around her arm, but they both seemed content to let the conversation flow around them. Now Arianna turned to Danny, her smile almost blinding in its intensity.

"I am," she agreed. "It feels... different this time. It feels real."

"It wasn't real before?" he asked with surprise clear in his voice. He turned to study her face and she met his eyes with a serious expression.

"It was, but not like this. This time we are already bound to one another, and yet we still have so much to discover about each other. It's like we know we have the time we need to become everything we are supposed to be together." She frowned. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes, Sweetie," he said with a grin, patting her free hand. "It makes perfect sense. Personally, I think it's wonderful and long overdue. But, um... do you really want to be public with it?" gesturing to their linked hands and intimate posture. "I mean... right before we leave. What would the Committee say? And what about your father?"

"Danny, first of all - I am not ashamed of my Amado and if you think I am going to hide this now that it is finally mine, you have another think coming. It's taken us too long to get to this point to even pretend differently. We've already been chosen to be members of the Alpha team, and it's been announced throughout the galaxy. What is the Committee reasonably going to do to us - remove us from the project less than two weeks from departure?" she scoffed.

He nodded, noticing that everyone's attention had turned their way... especially Eli's. "I suppose you're right, but what about your father?"

Arianna narrowed her eyes at him, understanding full well what he was getting at. She turned to meet Eli's eyes, reaching for her free hand and clasping both tightly. "I will give him back the crown before I'll allow him to separate us again. I didn't understand before, but I do now."

"But...."

"Shh... this is my choice. The only way that changes, Amado, is if you walk away from us." Eli blinked, wondering how such a private conversation had become the topic of discussion in such a public forum.

"Never, Angel," she said softly as if they were the only ones in the room. They stared at one another for a long moment, leaning closer together. But before their lips could meet, Jacob interrupted the tableau between them.

"Kiss 'er already!" he hollered, causing them to jump apart and Eden to reach over and smack him hard. "OW!" clutching the back of his head. "Whaddya go and do that for?" he asked, giving her a glare. Eden rolled her eyes and shook her head. Arianna and Eli exchanged glances and burst into laughter, which caused the rest to join in. It was this scene that Mary and Ephraim walked in on unnoticed. Arianna squeezed Eli's hands.

"That's all right - I want our first time together again to be just for us," she whispered. Eli's grin lit up the room, and the rest wondered what Arianna had said to return that long lost expression to Eli's countenance. Before anyone could broach the subject, Mary stepped forward, and instantly Eli's expression went serious.

"Ms Wellesly?"

"My apologies for disturbing your team-bonding."

"But...?"

"But something has developed, and it's time sensitive. Is everyone here?" looking around the room. "Where's Titus?"

"Last we heard, he was with you," Eden replied with pointed look. Mary met her gaze and Eden was the first to look away. Only then did Mary turn to Ephraim. He nodded.

"On it, Chief," he said as he disappeared back out the door. Mary looked at the others and motioned to the mess line.

"I know Joy's not happy to have her kitchen invaded, but you all might want to grab something to drink. This may take more than a few minutes."

They glanced around at each other, then they looked at Eli as a single entity, waiting for her nod. "You heard the Chief," she offered. "Are we meeting in here, Ms Wellesly?"

Mary looked around and shook her head. "No. You deserve to hear this in comfort and with a certain amount of privacy. There's a conference room attached to my office," seeing them all nod. "Meet there in fifteen minutes." Then she turned and left the mess hall, queuing her comm unit and giving Ephraim his instructions. She headed directly to the office, confident that the Alpha team would be there sooner rather than later.

Eden nudged Eli as soon as Mary walked out of the galley. "Go," she suggested with a jerk of her head towards the doorway. "I don't want to have to sit through the two of you mooning over one another for however long this meeting of importance takes. So go - Jake and I'll bring you both something to drink."

Eli didn't need any further prodding and pulled Arianna up with her as she stood. Arianna looked puzzled - not having heard the conversation between Eli and Eden - then she caught a glimpse of the

twinkle in Eli's gray-green eyes. Her confusion morphed into a bright smile, and she was suddenly leading them out of the mess hall.

A cheer went up from their colleagues, and they laughed as they ran all the way to their quarters.

"I kinda wish we'd gotten to see them kiss," Jake commented. "OW!!" clutching the back of his head and glaring at Eden. "Why do you keep *doing* that?? You're going to give me brain damage!"

"Honey, you'd need to have more than a lizard brain at work first," Danny snarked, causing the others in the room to titter. Jake narrowed his eyes, but couldn't really dispute the truth of Danny's words. So he smirked and shrugged.

"C'mon. Let's go find out what this is all about," walking into the galley and snagging two waters and two sodas from the fridge. Jake was pretty sure he was going to need his wits about him for this meeting, so that precluded any type of alcohol. Hands full he nodded at Danny. "Next," then he caught Eden's eye. A nod from her, and he left for the conference room, knowing she'd be bringing up the rear in Eli's absence.

Titus was already in the conference room when Jacob arrived, and he held up his hands in lieu of offering him a drink. Titus shook his head and held up his bottle of chocolate milk. "Thanks, though."

Jacob nodded and took a seat beside him. "Everything okay, man? We missed you at lunch."

"Yeah. There was a mix-up in some of my supplies, so I spent the morning straightening that out. I was just finishing up when Ephraim came to get me."

Jacob nudged him gently with an elbow. "You should have said something. We'd have all pitched in to help you out."

"I know, but I didn't want to take away from the homecoming. And besides, I needed a little space to think."

"You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah... I'm sure. I was thinking about saying goodbye to my family, you know. Them coming here - it makes it all real... like it really hasn't been before. A few more days together and a trip to the space dock and ship, and then we say goodbye for who knows how long. A lot can happen in five years - who knows if they'll all be alive when we'll return? And what's to say we'll all come back? We're walking into a lot of unknowns out there."

"You getting iced piddies?" Eden asked as the rest filed into the room as a group.

Titus shook his head. "No, not really. Cold feet would imply a reluctance to go, and I'm looking forward to sharing this mission with all of you. I expect it to be far beyond our wildest dreams and our greatest imaginings. But it's still sobering to realize that time won't stop for us while we're gone. Things will change, and we'll miss those changes."

"Hopefully," Luke said as he took a seat beside Danny, "most of the changes will be good ones."

At that moment the door closed and Mary looked around the table, noting the two obviously empty seats. She looked at Eden who just shook her head. "You gave us fifteen minutes. I wouldn't expect them one standard second before then."

Mary smirked. "On the bright side... at least things seem to be working out on that front."

"For which we are all devoutly grateful," Mordecai chanted and the rest intoned solemnly, "Amen."

Eli and Arianna were still laughing when they reached Eli's quarters, both of them too preoccupied to notice the empty hallways. Instead Eli fumbled with the key to get the door open and they stumbled in the door together. Only when the door was closed and they were alone did the laughter stop.

They looked at one another, examining one another with a closeness they hadn't shared in months. They noted the differences as well as the similarities, eyes tracing paths long denied and sorely missed. Eli lifted a hand to Arianna's face, gently rubbing the back of her hand against the smoothness of Arianna's cheek. When there was no objection, she turned her attention to Arianna's lips, sketching their fullness with the tips of sensitive fingers.

Arianna caught Eli's hand, bringing it to her lips and nibbling on it teasingly. Eli pulled in a sharp breath and forced her eyes from Arianna's mouth to her eyes. The invitation there was enough to make her whimper slightly, but she was still compelled to ask.

"Are you certain, Angel?"

Arianna didn't deign to respond verbally. Instead she sucked two fingers between her lips and began laving them with her tongue. Eli felt her heart stop for a timeless moment, then she eased her fingers from Arianna's mouth and replaced them with her lips and tongue.

There was no hesitation... no shyness. This was about claiming one another again - a reaffirmation of their bond and commitment to one another. They knew it couldn't be more than this single kiss... not now - there simply wasn't time. But the time they *did* have was spent melding the broken pieces of their lives and hearts into a single cohesive being.

There was much more that would need to be done of course - things still to talk about, plans to put into motion and love still to be made. But in this moment, their passion was contained in this single kiss, and for now... it was all they needed - it was enough.

"Speaking of missing pieces," Esther piped up, "where are our minders? I've gotten so used to having them around all the time, no matter *how* unobtrusively, that it's a little weird for it to be just us here. No offense," she offered to Mary with a smile. Mary laughed.

"None taken," she assured them all. "The fact is that they are needed elsewhere at the moment, taking care of some issues related to what I need to share with you. Besides I promised you privacy. This is the best that I can do in that regard." The sound of steps on the metal staircase caused her to look at her watch and smile. "Ah, ladies... so nice of you to join us," she said as Arianna and Eli appeared at the top of the stairs with happy smiles and light blushes. "And right on time too. Please... come in and take a seat."

Eli took the foot of the table - directly across from Mary on the other end - while Arianna took the seat to her right. They never lost contact, and only when they were seated did their attention turn to Mary.

"My apologies for the delay, Ms Wellesly. Please...." motioning for Mary to assume the reins of discussion. She nodded and rose to speak.

"Are you kidding me?" Isaac exploded when Mary was done. "Seriously??"

"Isaac, sit down," Eli commanded softly.

"But you heard her, Eli. She's planning on using all of us as bait. Doesn't that piss you off even just a little bit?? What about Arianna? Do you really want her put into harm's way like that??"

"Isaac," Eli said sternly as she stood. "Sit. Down." He measured her for a long minute before he slowly resumed his seat, his defiant expression wavering under her unyielding one. She held his gaze as she answered his accusations. "Isaac - we have always been targets... since long before we were chosen for the Alpha team. Using us as bait is not really that farfetched of an idea, and it implies that Mary has plans to secrete us elsewhere. Our rumored presence here is to draw those out who would seek to destroy us." Eli exhaled slowly and pivoted towards Mary, who was watching her with a serene expression.

"Where my problem lies," Eli stated emphatically, "is with the idea that we need to run away in the first place. I am a warrior, Ms Wellesly. We do not hide from conflict - we embrace the challenge of battle. And I resent your need to hide us in order to protect us. Why shouldn't we be allowed to participate in the upcoming fight? Why shouldn't we be allowed to defend ourselves? After all... we will be required to do so once we leave here. You will no longer be around to protect us."

"You are very much like your brother, aren't you, Eli?" Mary asked calmly, seeing the fire rage in very green eyes. She held up a hand. "I meant no disrespect. Your brother was a good warrior and he died fighting for a cause he believed in. But Eli - if you had been there, would you have let him go?"

Eli dropped her eyes from Mary's and shook her head. "No," she whispered, gratified when Arianna tightened the grip on her hand.

"Because it really wasn't his fight, was it?" Mary waited a moment, then continued. "Not everyone here is a warrior, Eli," with a glance at Arianna before her eyes returned to Eli's. "And this isn't your fight yet - it's mine, and that of the force I have lying in wait to take on those who would do all of you harm. It's still my job to protect you until you leave here. There is no weakness or shame to know when to let someone else fight a battle in your stead. Especially since those in this company are irreplaceable to the project."

"No one is irreplaceable, Ms Wellesly," Eli refuted quietly.

"Perhaps," Mary ceded with a nod of her head. "But as difficult as it would be for me personally, it would still be easier for me to replace a member of my team than it would be for the Council to replace any of you. It would delay the project for months."

"Mama," Arianna finally spoke up, allowing Eli to relax slightly as all attention focused on Arianna. "Why are they doing this? The Committee, I mean. And how did you let them find us? Because I am certain that you *let* them - they never would have done so on their own."

"Letting them find you was the easy part," Mary responded without a glance towards Titus. "I simply allowed a weak signal to escape the security net built around this place. With enough uses, they were able to figure things out... eventually. As to why they are doing this - well, that depends on the Committee member involved. Greed for some; disgust for others; pride for one or two. And I believe one thinks that we should not upset the balance of things as they are - that by establishing new colonies, we are disrupting the natural order of things."

"So why stay on the Committee?" Hannah asked. "If they hated the project so much, why not simply resign?"

"As my son and I discussed earlier, it is much easier to do damage from within than from without, and it is usually much more crippling. However, in this case, planetary pride was at stake. With Arianna being a practical shoo-in, no one else wanted to be represented by less than the best from their own planets. And in that regard, it gave us a 'dream team', if you will. The very best minds in their fields from all over the galaxy. However, in putting together a team of this caliber, it became clear that the dissenters would need to find another way to discredit or destroy this mission. That's when the threats began to emerge. That's when you became targets."

"That's just crazy," said Naomi.

"It's just something, all right," Deborah agreed. "I'm kind of on Eli's side in all this... about us fighting for ourselves, I mean. Mostly because I would dearly love to kick some serious Committee ass for making us jump through hoops for so long, only for them to try and eliminate us like some sort of pesky annoyance."

"Perhaps," Abigail agreed. "But I believe Mary is correct in this instance. Most of us in here are not warriors. We have all been trained to some degree - Mary saw to that. But it's not something we grew up doing. Remember, on Luke's planet, fighting is punishable by death. The only reason the restriction was waived for him to even train with us was because it was classified as exercise. And Mary is also correct about the mission being delayed if something was to happen to one of us."

"Why do you say that, Gay?" Paul asked. "We all know there were others qualified to do the jobs we do - people that will be part of either the beta or gamma teams when they are formed."

Abigail sighed. "There are, and they will be. But they are not 'family' like we are to one another. It would take time for them to transition into their new role within the Alpha team and time for us to accept their place in our family unit."

Eli nodded. "Gay is right. And we cannot afford to risk it." She looked back at Mary who was watching the scene unfold around her. "Very well, Ms Wellesly. What is it you'd have us do?"

"Take a seat, Eli. This won't take very long."

Chapter XLII

"You think this will work?" Eden asked Eli as they walked back towards their quarters. Arianna had stayed behind briefly to say goodbye to her family, and Eli had left her alone at her request. Eli knew it was because Arianna was well aware that her new family would want to put Eli through an inquisition they didn't have time for. But it still hurt a little to be excluded. She shrugged.

"I don't think we have much choice. Because if it does not, it leaves us completely vulnerable. And I cannot believe Mary would allow us to be put in such a position."

Eden sighed. "You know Arianna sent you away to protect you, don't you? Nathaniel and Ian are gonna play the older brother card, and that's without considering Joey and Ephraim. And should we even discuss Joy and Mary? She's looking out for you, Eli; you're not ready for that yet. Besides... you owe her some explanations before the family gets involved."

"I know. I just...."

"Talk to her, Eli. That's what got you into this mess to begin with." Eden patted Eli's shoulder. "Should we meet back here in ten?"

Eli checked her timepiece. "Yes. We need to make sure everyone is ready well before time."

"We'll get it done, Boss. We're too close to starting the biggest adventure of our lives to let some crackpot ruin things for us now. Like Deb, I still wouldn't mind kicking some Committee ass, but I think we're doing the right thing by leaving that to Mary and her team."

Eli nodded. "My head knows that, but...."

"Yeah... well," with a shrug. "C'mon. We've got places to be and not a lot of time to get there. See you in a few?" sticking the key into the lock and turning the knob. Eli nodded and did the same.

"Yes. It won't take me long."

"Me either." Then they entered their rooms and closed the doors behind them, immediately setting to work. They had things to do, and not much time left to do them.

"I think you hurt her feelings, Daughter," Mary said when the room was empty of everyone except her and Arianna. "Eli didn't expect you to send her away." Arianna nodded slowly.

"I believe that as well. But I wanted to speak to you privately as well as say goodbye to the boys and Joy. And Eli and I need to talk before I expose her to the interrogation you know the boys especially would put her through - and that's not mentioning you and Joy," said with a smile.

Mary chuckled. "Yes, Joy and I would probably be far worse in the long run than all four boys combined. And besides, Joey would never forgive you if we started without him. And I don't think he'd think participating via satellite would be the same."

Arianna snorted. "That's true. You surely weren't kidding when you told me about becoming part of this family."

"I did warn you," Mary replied, getting a nod of agreement from Arianna. Then she sobered and cocked her head towards Arianna. "So what did you need to speak to me about, Arianna? Is there something I can do for you?"

Arianna shrugged and she released a deep breath. "Do you think everything will be all right, Mama? I know there are no guarantees in life... about anything really. But I've never been in a situation like this before. We don't have warriors on my planet, and I don't understand...."

Mary held up a hand. When Arianna stopped speaking, she rose and offered her hand, pulling Arianna up beside her and walking them down the stairs. "There are no guarantees, Arianna - that's true. But we're going to do our very best to ensure that at the end of the day, everyone is safe and sound and the threat to you and your teammates are eliminated. And if we do this right, and we're *really* lucky, all of my team will remain safe and unharmed as well."

"Do you think that is even possible?"

"Possible? Yes - all things are possible. "Likely? No. But I'm going to do my damndest to minimize the casualties. And that means I need to move you kids before the threat to you arrives."

"You don't think they know that this is a trap for them?"

"I think they are desperate enough to risk the fact that it might not be." Mary tugged Arianna to a halt when they reached the bottom step, urging her around until they were facing one another. "What's this really about, Arianna?"

"I'm just... Mama, I just got Eli back, and despite... everything," blushing slightly at the memory of the kiss they had shared earlier, "we're not even close to resolving things between us." She sighed. "I told Danny earlier that it felt like things were really real between us this time because we were no longer on anyone else's timetable or agenda - that we had finally reached a place where we had all the time we needed to discover who and what we are to one another because we had made the choice to. We chose one another... despite everything."

"And now it feels like the rug is being yanked out from under you?"

"Yes! I want my chance with her, Mama. I want to make this work." Arianna dropped her eyes to the ground. "You know how my culture works. I would never have known the emotions she makes me feel - good and bad - had it not *been* for her. I want a lifetime of experiencing those things with her. Does that make me selfish and unreasonable?" raising dark brown eyes to meet equally dark brown eyes.

Mary cupped her cheek gently. "No Sweetheart - that makes you a woman in love. And knowing the woman you share that love with, that's a good thing in my book. Talk to her, Arianna. The sooner you get things settled between you, the better off you'll be - both of you."

"But do I have the time?"

"There's a saying here that goes something like - don't wait for tomorrow when you have today. Honey, you have today... right now. Utilize it. That way, once this mess is cleared up, you'll be ready to step into your future together with a fresh start."

Arianna reached up and hugged Mary around the neck firmly for a long moment. "Where have you been all my life?" she whispered into the nearby ear. Mary eased them apart slowly, finding a smile on Arianna's lips and tears in her eyes. Mary smiled and brushed a kiss over Arianna's forehead.

"Waiting for you to really need me, I guess. I'm glad we can be here for you now - because you're an amazing young woman, and I'm proud to be able to call you family."

"Me too, Mama."

"All right," gently yanking Arianna with her as she headed towards the Alpha team's corridor. "Let's get you packed up and moving. Because if your siblings don't have time to say goodbye, I'm going to be the one stuck listening to them gripe and moan over the unfairness of life and my mistreatment and abuse of them." She raised an eyebrow at Arianna's skeptical expression. "You don't believe me?"

"I think with your flair for dramatics, your name could have been as well known throughout the galaxy as Joy's is. That's what I think."

Mary narrowed her eyes. "I think you like living dangerously - that's what I think." She motioned to an almost empty hallway where Ian and Joy were waiting to say goodbye. They exchanged brief, heartfelt hugs and kisses, then Ian squeezed Arianna twice again.

"For Nat and Joey," he explained. Arianna smiled. "We'll see you soon, yeah?" And when she nodded, Ian brushed her cheek with the back of his hand and without another word disappeared down the corridor. Arianna turned to Joy.

"I'm headed home, so keep in touch with me for however long this takes, okay? This kind of crap makes me crazy every time I have to deal with it. I may as well enjoy having a sister to share the crazy with." Arianna chuckled and nodded. Joy took both Mary and Arianna in her arms for a quick group hug, then she headed to the transport room. Mary and Arianna resumed their trek towards the Alpha team's living quarters. They turned the corner into a hive of activity, and Arianna brushed a quick kiss over Mary's cheek.

"Thank you, Mama," she said as she skittered to her room. Mary looked around.

"Is everyone else ready?" seeing most of them nod. "Good. With any luck, this will just be a short-term precautionary measure," not too terribly surprised when Arianna reappeared almost instantly. She arched an eyebrow at her in question. "Had you even bothered to unpack?"

"Not exactly," Arianna shrugged. "It's not like I really had the time yet."

"Yeah - we should have stayed put," Isaac grumbled, frowning when the rest glared at him. "What?? I'm just saying the four of us could have remained on the ship and waited for the rest of you to join us if someone here knew what the blazes they were actually doing."

"Isaac!" Eli called out in a soft voice. "That's enough."

"No - he's right," Mary agreed. "If we'd known this morning how quickly things were going to move, we would have left the team members who were already on the ship in place. My apologies, Isaac. I know you're not markedly fond of the transport system. I wouldn't ask you to endure it again so quickly if there was any other way to facilitate your escape."

Isaac sighed and jerked his head sharply. "I... thank you. I'm sorry for taking my upset out on you. I really don't think you did this on purpose."

Mary grinned. "The only thing I do on purpose is go to the beach," she assured him. "Come on - let's get you kids out of here. We've got work to do before your families are scheduled in." They started down the hallway towards the transport room.

"Are they still coming?" Eden asked with a hint of alarm. "No offense, Chief, but I don't want my makuahine put into danger for the sake of ostensibly spending the holiday together. Especially if we're not even gonna be here to see them."

"Rest assured - Joy has offered to take them into her home. The additions should finally be finished, so there will be room for everyone."

"Is that where we're going then?" Naomi asked. "I thought we were going to the ship."

"We are," Jake replied before Mary could. "We're going to the ship and our families are going to Joy's to wait for us." He looked at Mary. "What happens if this isn't done by the holiday?"

Mary shrugged. "I will send your families to you. It will be a little crowded, but I'm guessing none of you will mind making do for the chance to spend the holiday together. But I am hoping for the best. I'd like to spend the holiday with my kids as well," she added. "All of them," with a pointed glance around the group. They walked into the transport room, and Mary went directly to the control panel and brought up the transport field. Without hesitation the first four team members closest to it crossed the barrier and faded from sight. The others stood back and waited.

"We've got them, Chief," came Reuben's voice from the comm link. "Send us the next batch."

"Like we're cookies or something," Eden snarked to Eli. Hannah chuckled as she walked towards the field. Mary smiled, having heard because of her proximity to Eden and Eli. When the second group was safe on the other side, three of the last seven stepped towards the field... hesitating when they realized they were not yet complete. They paused and looked back. Arianna was holding on to Eli for dear life and shaking her head no.

"Sweetheart," Eli murmured to Arianna. "You have to go. I'll be right behind you."

"Why can't I go with you?"

"Because I need to know you are safe. I am a warrior, remember? Wait for me - I will be there as quick as I can, I promise. You still owe me a story and I owe you...." Eli chuckled softly and looked down. "I owe you everything, Angel. And I never leave my debts unpaid."

"You swear you'll be right behind me?"

"As fast as Mary can get me there."

Arianna nodded slowly and tilted her head for a kiss, and Eli complied without thought for those in the room with them. In that moment there was only the two of them - they were all that mattered. A disembodied voice shattered the uneasy silence.

"Chief? Is there a problem? We still don't have anyone on this end."

"Just a slight delay, Reuben. They'll be there directly."

"Might want to put a little speed on, Chief. We've got incoming on the scanner."

"Ladies, I hate to put a fine point on things, but I need you to move... now," Mary commanded without raising her voice. They separated slowly and Arianna walked away from Eli slowly, leaving their hands connected until the last possible second. Only then did Arianna turn and walk into the light with her three teammates.

"We've got 'em, Chief. But you're gonna wanna hold off on the others. We've got incoming enemy fire and... ove... dercov... now... ain la..." Then there was nothing but silence. Three pairs of eyes turned to Mary who sighed and scrubbed a hand over her face.

"Can we get a standard translation for that last bit?" Eli asked calmly though Mary could see the panic in her eyes.

"They had to move undercover for now. We'll try again later. The good news is they got to the transport site safely. The bad news is you're stuck here with us until we can bring the field back up. Come on," she motioned, shutting the field off and motioning them out the door ahead of her. "We need to find somewhere safe for you to be." She keyed up her comm unit and spoke swiftly. "Michael... Ruth I need you to the transport room on the double. Rig the door to blow if anyone opens it from the other side."

"Yes, Chief."

"Caleb, I need you and Martha to meet me in the office. We have a problem."

"Right away, Chief."

"Of course, Chief."

"Mama, we've got incoming. You need to get to your post," Ian said. "They've already passed the outer perimeter guards, and Nat has started closing the pincer."

"Thank you, my son. Let's go, ladies and gentleman," leading the way up the stairs at a jog. Eli, Eden and Mordecai followed without comment. It had been a toss-up between him and Jacob, but one look at Arianna and Mordecai had motioned Jacob to go with her. They both know they would all be more comfortable with Jacob watching out for her until Eli could get there. And it was tacitly understood, that as their leader, Eli went last to ensure her team was safe first.

When they arrived at the office, Mary motioned them inside while she remained just inside the door. "Please... get comfortable and keep the door locked. I know you would really like to be part of this fight," meeting Eli's gaze, "but for my peace of mind - please... *please* remain in here. I don't want to have to explain to my daughter and your mate why I couldn't keep you safe. Especially since you promised to follow her as quickly as I could get you there. Don't ask me to do that, okay?"

Eli clenched her jaw and nodded sharply.

"And if they find us?" Eden asked. "If they come in here?"

Mary didn't falter. "Kill 'em all," she directed. "Then come and find me." Before she could tell them where she was supposed to be, she put a finger to her lips and motioned them back. They moved behind the desk and squatted down in an effort to hide themselves from whatever Mary had sensed. Mary padded surely and swiftly to a wall vault, removing a laser assault rifle and two extra battery packs and some standard ammunition. She silently placed an old-fashioned semi-automatic weapon on the desk and eased the door to the vault closed without shutting it completely, then slipped behind the closed door to wait.

"Bring it back!" Arianna commanded. "Reuben, bring the field back!" she demanded urgently. "Everyone's not here yet. Bring it back!"

"I know, Angel," he responded without thinking, causing tears to well in her eyes. "But there's nothing we can do about it right now. C'mon... I need to get you kids to safety. We'll try again when it's safer - the Chief'll let me know."

"NO." She turned to the man whose arm she was clutching. "Jacob, no - we can't just leave like this. She promised."

"I know, Az. And she'll be here - she'll keep that promise just as fast as she can. But right now, she's got no way to get here, and I promised her I'd keep you safe until she could be here to do it herself. You don't wanna make a liar outta ol' Jake now, do you? Do you know what she'd do to me if any harm came to you?" He shuddered dramatically.

Arianna fell into his arms. "I just want her here with me Jake."

"And she'll be here. Trust her. And trust that Mary will do whatever it takes to keep her safe."

Arianna looked up into Jake's eyes and smirked. "Almost makes me feel sorry for the idiots who started this whole cluster. Almost."

"Not me," Isaac said. "I hope she gives them everything they deserve for putting us all through this."

"And in the meantime, ladies and gentlemen," Reuben said with a hint of impatience on his voice, "I'd appreciate it if you'd move right along," gesturing to them with his free hand. "What Princess would do to anyone would be a cakewalk compared to what the Chief is gonna do to all of us if you don't stop mucking around and get somewhere safe for the duration."

"You really think she'd do something to us?" Jacob asked, trying to lighten the atmosphere. "We are grown, responsible adults after all." Reuben snickered.

"That's never mattered," he replied. "I saw that woman chase her grown man son around the yard with a switch in her hand for the way he announced to her his engagement to his fiancée. It wasn't like it was a surprise - Ian had been dating Prudence for nigh on two years by that point. But instead of telling the Chief about it before he did it, or even them telling her once the deed was done, Ian decided to be cute about it and start talking about wedding plans in front of her. Prudence tried to talk him out of it, but..." Reuben shook his head. "I think the only reason the Chief didn't catch him was because he's a foot taller with very long legs - even the added length of the switch wasn't quite enough to reach him. It sure was funny to watch though. That boy squealed like a girl every time the Chief got close. That was just a few months ago."

"I'd pay to see that," Jacob commented. Arianna snickered.

"Be careful it's not us she's chasing the next time. I'm pretty sure Mama can run faster than me."

"And me and him and him," Esther said as she pointed to each of them. "The only saving grace is she couldn't chase all four of us at once."

Reuben laughed. "Sure about that, are ya?" he cackled. Their eyes widened and they moved further under cover.

Chapter XLIII

They were almost silent - mercenaries tended to be pretty professional, after all. It was how they made their living - staying alive while they killed those they were hired to. But they had no way of knowing what squeaked or creaked or groaned in the facility; there had been no opportunity to do any reconnaissance before they undertook this assignment. So every noise was like a gunshot, and they stilled after each and every tiny sound.

It was more than a little disconcerting - the ease of their progress hitherto. More than one of them had wondered if they'd been given incorrect or false information because there was no sign of occupation thus far. The smells were old and stale; the lights, where they had them, were safety lights left on by the last person out; there was no sound, no movement. It was like a ghost town, and they were at the deepest level of the facility and they had yet to encounter any indication of recent activity. Still they were professional, and they would conduct the same thorough sweep of this level that they had in all the others to which they had been assigned.

It had occurred to them, of course, the likelihood that this was the level at which they would find their prey. After all, when people go to ground, they tend to hide as deeply as they could burrow. It kind of sucked that they were forced to maintain radio silence. It would be helpful to know what, if anything, the other units had found.

But orders were orders and mercenaries took orders as long as they were getting paid. So they went about their business, slowly creeping up the metal staircase towards what had once been the command center.

They slowed even further when they reached the top of the stairs. Here, for the first time, was a signal that they were indeed on the right trail. Everywhere they had traversed through til now had been saturated with an air of neglect and abandonment - dust inches thick on the floor; papers and furniture scattered haphazardly as though left in great haste; no form of power. They'd had to resort to walking down flight after flight of stairs.

Here, however, in the conference room just above the command center and right outside of what they had been informed was once the commanding officer's seat of authority was proof that someone had been here recently. The table was clean and dust free and the chairs were all fitted neatly under the table. The nearby recycle bin was full and going by the droplets of water on the tabletop, it had been filled very recently.

The point man glanced around, and with a few hand signals, managed to position his men around the perimeter of the room. He motioned for one group to go out the door on the far side of the conference room while the other stayed with him. If the plans he'd been given were accurate, they should meet up again somewhere on the other side of the office.

The second group nodded and slipped out the door, keeping both teams in the three-man staggered configuration to safely cover more ground. The first group remained still and silent until their six compatriots were all completely out of sight. Only then did the leader give the motion for them to move towards the office. What they found when they got there was completely unexpected.

Mary felt the shift in the air currents when the outer door to the conference room opened. She braced herself, knowing Caleb and Martha had no chance of arriving in time and that the lives and safety of the scientists behind her rested solely on her shoulders. She watched as the door opened inch by slow inch. She let the muzzle of the enemy's gun enter the room... then she opened fire like a woman scorned.

The first scream was immediate and satisfying, but she was too busy worrying about what was coming behind it to celebrate. She maintained fire; though they had staggered themselves at the doorway, three of them had been dead targets the minute Mary let loose with the shooting.

The first had gone down quickly, laser ripping through the center mass of his chest like a knife through hot butter. The second had been almost as quick - head almost severed at the neck by the intensity of the laser shot. The third took a little longer, and he got in a couple lucky shots of his own before his innards began to spill from the open belly wound her kneejerk reaction to being shot herself had caused.

It got quiet, and Mary reached up a hand to her head, wiping the trail of blood that wanted to drip into her eyes. *Bet that leaves a mark*, she thought. The thigh was going to be a little trickier to deal with until she could find a way to tie it off. She turned and glanced down at the three faces staring back at her.

"You guys okay?" she mouthed. They simply nodded. Then a noise drew Mary's attention away from them and back to the wide-open door in front of her once more. Mary was thankful to any number of beings for the thrill of adrenaline because she knew when it wore off she was going to be hurting like a bitch. That was all the time she had for thought because the second part of the first group decided to rush her and she was focused on their motion.

She almost missed it, but a slight movement from her left side meant more trouble. She kept firing the assault rifle at the door to discourage the mercenaries on the other side of the threshold even as she reached for the semi-automatic handgun...

... only to find it missing. She heard Eden yell something in her native tongue, and then shots rang out from behind her, causing her to flinch at their proximity. Mary heard the grunts from the door, and she wanted to praise her expert skills, but she was still busy trying to keep the others at bay.

Without warning, the pistol stopped firing, but before Mary could turn to discover the issue, she heard the sound of laser fire from outside the room. She could only hope it was Caleb and Martha coming to back her up because the sweat and blood running into her eyes was making it very difficult to see.

As soon as it had started it was over, and Mary smiled when she heard the shouts of Caleb and Martha letting her know they were entering the room - that it was safe to stop shooting. She kept the gun at the ready, but eased around to check on the kids....

... to find Eden laying on the floor with Eli and Mordecai crouched over her. Eli looked up at Mary with concern. "We got the bleeding slowed, but we need to get her to the medical bay. I can't do anything more for her without supplies, and she will die if I don't treat her soon."

Mary nodded, understanding the seriousness of the situation. She looked at Martha and motioned to her. "Can you manage him?" knowing the woman's strength rivaled Mordecai's though Mordecai's youth would give her a slight advantage if it came to it. Still Mordecai appeared to be in shock, and they didn't have time to wait for him to come out of his stupor. Martha nodded.

"No," Mordecai said surprisingly. "You're probably a better shot than me, and we'll need that to get to the med bay. I'll carry Eden."

"What about you, Chief?" Caleb asked, removing his earplugs and gesturing to her soaked pant leg. She held out her arm and Caleb grabbed the cuff of her shirt, yanking hard once and hearing the satisfying rip as the seams separated sleeve from body. He didn't hesitate, but slid it under the leg she lifted with both hands and tied it as tightly as he dared. She nodded her approval.

"I'll be all right for a little while," she assured them. "Adrenaline is a wonderful thing." She handed Eli the pistol Caleb had picked up from the floor. "Hang onto this... just in case. Not quite as graceful as your bow but just point and shoot. You'll hit what you aim for." Eli took the gun and nodded, her other hand keeping pressure on Eden's wound. Mary looked at the ragtag little band and nodded. "Caleb, take point. You'll hear them coming before any of us will."

"I'll cover the back, Chief," Martha volunteered and Mary nodded her thanks. Then they were out the door and stepping over bodies on their way to the stairs, headed towards the medical bay.

The trip to the infirmary was quick and mercenary free - which made an odd sort of sense. In order to cover such a huge installation with any kind of efficiency, they would have to split up and sweep each level in smaller patrols. But Mary knew their reprieve would be brief - each patrol would be working its way down to this level. And even though Nathaniel and his Marines were following to keep them from escaping, they had orders to try to keep them alive so they could be interrogated. They had no way of knowing how things had changed because the presence of the three scientists was a game changer. Their protection came first and if that meant every mercenary had to die, then so be it. Mary had sent Caleb out to find Dorcas - their medic - to give Eli a hand. Eden was going to need surgery. The mercs, unlike her team of security agents, were using a vile and horrific form of ammunition - designed for maximum damage. Where Mary and her team were using laser-based weapons - which tended to be more deadly and accurate, but also cauterized non-lethal wounds as they cut into a body - the mercenaries were utilizing shrapnel-filled projectiles. So the entry wound was only the beginning of damage done. Once the bullet hit its target, it shredded, allowing the shrapnel to mince anything and everything in its path.

Eden was lucky she possessed two hearts - it was what was keeping her alive. Mary was confident Eli's skill could do the rest if she had enough time.

Dorcas rushed into the med bay, took one look at Mary and headed to her side. Mary shook her head and pointed to the hastily erected surgical suite. "Eli needs your help. This will wait. Don't..." she commanded when Dorcas opened her mouth to object. "Dorcas, we still have three members of the Alpha team here to protect, and one of them is laying on that operating table fighting for her life. Go do what you do best and help Eli save her life."

Dorcas nodded and headed into the clean-up area to scrub in. Then she walked into the makeshift operating room and got to work. Mary watched them for a moment, smiling at the rhythm that she and Eli established between them - working in seamless tandem. A whisper of sound brought her attention back to her surroundings and she lifted her rifle as she heard Caleb's voice.

"Just me, Chief."

Mary blew out a breath and relaxed slightly. "Any luck?"

"Yes, but it's going to take time. They have to go back up and come back through the hatches. I still think they'll get here in plenty of time - how many weeks did they practice? But in the meantime, the rest of our guys have shifted to protect the med bay. They won't get near here without us knowing they're coming."

"Good job, Caleb," pressing her fingers into her eyes to ward off the headache pounding behind them.

"Can I get you something, Chief?" motioning towards the pharmaceutical area. They all had triage experience - combat tended to do that to a unit. Everyone had to know the basics.

"Yes - get me some antibiotics and something to dull the pain for now. I need to be fairly functional until we get this little situation resolved."

Caleb nodded and jogged to the storage boxes that were stacked neatly in rows. He scanned through them quickly to find what he needed, then slid back to Mary's side. He handed her one syringe while keeping the other, and almost simultaneously they stuck the needles into either side of the hole in her thigh.

"Holy crap, that hurts," Mary hissed. Caleb nodded and retrieved the empty vial from her, setting them both out of the way until he could dispose of them.

"So now we wait?"

Before Mary could reply, there was a huge explosion - loud enough to draw the attention of everyone working in the surgical suite - Eli, Dorcas, Mordecai and Martha - but not enough to do any damage where they were. Caleb uncovered his ears and looked at Mary.

"Do you suppose...?" he whispered, trying not to yell after what to him was a deafening explosion. Mary reverted to sign language to let his ears recover without needing to struggle to hear.

"I believe someone tried to use the transport room," she informed him silently. "Go bring me whoever is most senior outside this room, please."

Caleb nodded and rose to do her bidding, wishing not for the first time that he could control the sensitivity of his hearing. He stopped at the door, surveying the corridor until Sarah did the same from the other end, and he gestured for her to join him. Carefully, gun drawn and feet silent, Sarah

made her way to him, garnering attention only as she slipped by someone. She slipped into the doorway, and Caleb signed Mary's wishes. Sarah nodded and moved inside while Caleb maintained his watch of the hallway.

"You wanted to see me, Chief?"

"Yes, Sarah. I need you to take a small strike team down to the transport room. I'm pretty sure that explosion signaled the arrival of some more unwelcome guests."

"And if any of them are left alive?"

"Use your discretion, Sarah. Just remember that we have three members of the Alpha team here that must be protected at all costs. If that means you have to kill them...." Mary spread her hands and shrugged. Sarah nodded.

"Yes, Chief. We'll dispatch them quickly and return on the double." Without being dismissed, Sarah spun on her heel and made her way back to the doorway, signing her orders to Caleb, then slipping out as silently as she'd come. Caleb watched her gather her team and go, then signed to Samuel who was now the senior agent in the corridor. Sam nodded his understanding and Caleb returned to Mary's side. His ringing in his ears was slowly dissipating and Mary would need his legs to do her bidding as much as possible to save any further damage to her own.

She snickered when he sat down, and though he didn't hear the sound he recognized the expression on her face. He cocked an eyebrow in question. She shook her head and signed. "Nathaniel and I were talking about waiting for things to happen the other day. I told him it doesn't get easier with age." Caleb nodded. "I hate being right," she signed, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue. "Especially since I shouldn't be waiting right now."

"Sometimes the hardest part to being a leader is knowing when to delegate, Chief," Caleb signed. "And you know you trained us all right. We've got this."

"I know you do, my friend. But it doesn't make waiting for them any easier," Mary signed with a sad smile, gesturing towards the operating room.

"That will turn out all right too. Princess and Dorcas know their business."

"I hope so, Caleb."

"Arianna? What is it?" Joy asked as soon as she saw her face. It was clear *something* had upset Arianna, but Joy couldn't begin to imagine what could have happened in the hour they had been apart.

"I just needed to see a friendly face."

"Uh uh... no. Don't lie to me, Ria. I haven't been gone that long, and you're surrounded by friendly faces where you are. So what gives?"

"She's not here with me. She stayed behind to make certain everyone got through safely and the field shut down before she could come through."

"She... you mean Eli?" hearing Arianna's soft whimper as she nodded. "All right... that's enough!" Joy snapped, startling Arianna out of her tears and bringing her eyes up until they were looking at one another. "You're better than that - stronger than that. And don't forget she's with Mama. Do you *really think* Mama would let anything happen to her?"

"No but...."

"No buts. You've got a little time to figure out what you want to say to Eli when you're together again. It's a good thing - use it wisely." Arianna nodded.

"You're pretty smart, Joy."

"Yes, well... I had a good teacher. Which reminds me - are your folks coming for the holidays? Mama never said and I need to know how many rooms to prepare."

Arianna shook her head. "I didn't invite them. I didn't think we would need the drama they are likely to bring with them. Papa doesn't approve of Eli, and I will not allow him to separate us again even if it means giving up the throne." She sighed. "I've never really been that taken with the idea anyway."

"Of being a queen?"

Arianna shrugged. "Of ruling. It isn't something I excel at."

Joy scrunched up her face in a comical expression. "Pretty sure I wouldn't either, Little Sister. I'm great at demanding things... or giving orders. I grew up with two brothers, after all," getting a smile from Arianna. "But the details - that would make me crazy. I've never been good with the details. That has always been Mama's job. That's why I know everything will work out. She's never been one to leave things to chance."

"Tell me some stories," Arianna demanded. Joy looked at her in confusion. "Tell me some stories about Mama; about growing up with the boys; about dancing all your life. Talk to me, Joy - teach me about the family I want to know."

Joy smiled. "All right," she agreed. "But it works both ways. You have to share with me too - and it has to be the good stuff... the things no one else knows about."

"I can do that," Arianna said. "You have to promise not to laugh though. Some of it is embarrassing."

"I will only laugh if you do," Joy avowed. "I have to shift you to the tracker though. I've got to work while we talk. Even with plenty of room now, fourteen rooms is a lot to get ready in just a couple days. Hang on," tapping the pad of her comm unit. "You still there?"

"I am still here, but I think we lost the visual. My screen is black."

"Yes, I'm sure it is." Joy opened a door and suddenly Arianna could see her again. "Better?" seeing Arianna nod and smile back at her. "Good - the tracker was in the electronics closet. I switched over before I realized where it was. Sorry. So," Joy continued as she headed out of Mary's office, locking the door soundly behind her, "who would you like to hear about first?" waggling her eyebrows goofily as she made her way up the stairs.

"Tell me what it was like for you... growing up," Arianna requested, and Joy started in with her storytelling. It was a good way to spend some time together - permitting Joy to remember and allowing Arianna a way to forget.

Chapter XLIV

They both straightened as soon as they heard it and the motion brought Mary's eyes around to meet Caleb's. She quickly signed, "You heard that?"

He nodded and signed back. "If what I just heard was the sound of laser fire, then yes. The ringing is almost gone and my hearing has slowly returned." He paused. "It didn't last very long though. Wonder who or what Sarah found in the transport room." He tilted his head. "She's coming back this way - guess we'll know soon enough."

Mary nodded and sent him to the door. A glance towards the operating theatre showed Eli and Dorcas still hard at work and Martha busy assisting. She sent up a small prayer, then put both hands flat on the desk, pushing herself up to a standing position. Mary nearly lost her balance, her leg desperate to cave beneath her. She gritted her teeth and grabbed the desk, forcing herself to maintain her stance until the wave of vertigo washed over her.

"Chief???" Caleb hissed, drawing her attention to him. "What are you... where do you think you're going?"

Mary gave him a droll look. "Oh, I don't know - I thought I'd take a tour of the facility," she snarked. "Starting on this level and working my way up."

Caleb narrowed his eyes at her. "Has anyone ever told you just how not funny you are? Sit down before you injure yourself further." He rushed over and took her arm, reseating her gently but firmly. "Sarah is on her way and apparently she's bringing someone in alive. Bets on who it is?"

"A Committee member," Mary breathed. "Given what we've dug up on them, there are a couple I can think of that would want to be here for the denouement of what they believe to be my insubordination. If it is a Committee member, however, it means they are operating on a timetable and out of communication."

"A black op?"

Mary shrugged. "If I'm right. It could simply be reinforcement troops and she's bringing the leader in for interrogation."

"But you don't think that's it."

"No. Do you?"

Caleb shook his head. "Not really. Guess we'll know in a few minutes, though." A slight vibration from Mary's comm unit forced her attention to it, and Caleb followed her glance. "More news?"

"Ian - he says to expect company sooner rather than later and that the Marines are on their way." She looked up and met Caleb's eyes. "Go tell Sarah to shake a leg, please. It's not like I can meet her halfway at the moment."

"I'm on it, Chief," Caleb replied as he hustled to the door. A moment later, he returned to her side and Sarah was hustling a blindfolded individual none-to-gently through the door and into a chair across from Mary. Two of the agents took up posts in the back corners of the room, and the rest returned to their duty in the corridor to wait for the attack they all knew was headed their way. Sarah stood behind her prisoner while Caleb took his place behind Mary. Only then did Mary gesture for Sarah to remove the blindfold.

Eli could be heard mumbling beneath her breath, but none of them were close enough to understand a word of what she was saying. Mordecai had been hooked up directly to Eden to pump blood back into her veins, stopping just before it became dangerous for him as well - he was resting now. Martha was using the handheld scanner, searching for all the pieces of shrapnel that were scattered and hidden throughout Eden's body. Dorcas was carefully hunting for those self-same pieces - finding some on her own and following Martha's directions to identify the others. Eli, on the other hand, was working to repair the damage and close the gaping holes the metal fragments had caused.

She spared a glance at Mordecai. He had wheeled in a second gurney almost as soon as he had placed Eden on the first. Eli at first believed that he was doing so because he had a weak stomach, and the sight of so much mutilation made him nauseous. He had surprised her, however. Mordecai had placed the gurney as a 'T' top across the head of Eden's bed, then gone back to retrieve IV supplies - an old-fashioned recourse, but necessary as long as the rules of civilized war were overlooked by some. Eli shook her head - *as though there really *was* such a thing*. Still she was grateful she had prepared for this scenario... knowing so much was possible beyond the civilization they had all known to date.

Mordecai had hooked Eden up with the fluids that would help stabilize her somewhat until the medics could get things a little more under control. Then he inserted a needle and empty tubing directly into her vein, securing it carefully before easing his body onto the other cot. Without a word, he inserted the other needle into his vein and frantically pumped his fist in an attempt to stimulate the blood flow. When his efforts paid off, he simply laid back and closed his eye, content that he was doing the most important thing he could.

Eli had realized what he was doing almost immediately, but she didn't stop him, knowing that Eden needed the transfusion. They would utilize the fake stuff later, but for now this was best. And she would ensure they would stop it before Mordecai was put into mortal danger as well.

It had made a difference - Eden was much more stable, and they were doing well containing the destruction that had been done and repairing the injury as quickly as they could. With a little luck, they would have things under control soon enough, and then everything else would be up to Eden. She would need time and rest for her body to heal, but Eli was growing more confident by the minute that Eden would be allowed the circumstances she needed to make a full recovery.

An explosion rocked the world - though from where they were standing, it wasn't that detrimental. They heard the blast and felt a tiny tremor, causing them to glance up to try to evaluate what was happening outside their bubble. They briefly looked around, noting Mary seemed to be directing a bit of activity in the office just beyond the windows. Then they turned their attention back to Eden's open body on the table in front of them.

At that moment, Eden's eyes fluttered open, and black met gray-green. "M I gonn' live, doc?" she mumbled, the drugs running through her system make Eden slur like a drunk. Eli's eyes flooded with tears but she refused to allow them to fall, and she snorted in response.

"You don't think I'm going to leave you to lounge around down here while I'm up there breaking my posterior to make this project a success by myself, do you? You'll be better than new when I'm done, Eden. Are you in any pain?"

Eden scrunched up her eyes and gave Eli a drugged smirk. "Uh uh - you gave me th' goo' stuff. N'wunner Az was soooooo happy."

Eli chuckled and Eden grinned. "Good. Now close your eyes and go back to sleep so I can make you all pretty again - because Jake might love you inside and out, but you know how he reacts to real blood and guts despite those games he plays. When you wake up, all will be as it should be."

"You thin' mm pretty?"

"You're gorgeous, my friend. Now go to sleep."

"Kay... ni'nigh'."

Dorcas caught Eli's eye as Eden finally drifted back off. "Has that happened before?" Eli cocked an eyebrow. "Have you ever had a patient become conscious in the middle of a surgical procedure before?"

Eli shook her head. "No. But given the destruction done to Eden's body, it wasn't completely unexpected. We were unable to utilize the necessary amount of anesthesia to keep her completely sedated - it would have killed her before we could have even gotten started on repairing the wound. That is why I infused such a healthy dose of pain killer into her system - for that very possibility."

Dorcas nodded. "I had wondered. I'm not usually involved in actual surgery. My job as the team medic generally requires me to patch them up and get them to a medical facility as quickly as possible. Martha, how does it look?"

Martha had been continually scanning throughout the entire procedure and now she looked up and nodded. "I think we're all clear, Doc," she offered. "I haven't seen anything new for a while now."

Eli looked up from her work. "I'd like you to do one more complete scan - full body, top to bottom. We have no way of knowing if anything shifted when we moved her down here, and I don't want to assume anything. I can't afford to do so as it could cost Eden much if even a single scrap of metal remains in her body."

"Yes, Doctor," Martha replied. Dorcas moved around to stand beside Eli to give Martha plenty of space to work, closing the old manual blind that had been left behind as she walked by it. They didn't even look up when they heard Sarah push her prisoner into the room.

"Well... hello, Fernando," Mary greeted as the blindfold was removed. "Fancy seeing you here." She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Why are you here?" She leaned back in her chair and affected an air of nonchalance as she studied him.

He looked much the same as he had the first time she'd laid eyes on him - weeks ago in the Committee conference room - when he'd tried desperately to have her expelled from the project. It was more than a little odd - he was dressed as a personage of title and not as a covert operative. Obviously either he had missed a memo or she had.

"I don't owe you anything, Ms Wellesly... not even an explanation. Now I demand you unhand me at once! You have no right...."

"Oh, I have every right. You broke into a secure facility with the intent of destroying the most important components of this project - that is to say... the Alpha team. As it is currently my job to keep these kids safe from *everyone* who would do them harm, I have the right to use whatever measure I see fit to secure their safety... even from you."

"Now see here...."

Mary held up a hand and glared at him and Fernando's jaw snapped shut so quickly he bit his tongue. He winced, but otherwise gave no indication of what he had done as he waited for Mary to speak.

"I'm going to pretend you don't actually know what's going on; I'm going to explain the truth to you. And when I'm done, you can tell me your side of things."

The sound of gunfire startled everyone and their attention turned to the door. Only Mary remained fixed on Fernando. When he looked back at her, he smirked, thinking he had the upper hand now.

"You have to protect me, Ms Wellesly. I'm a head of state. It would be a shame for anything to happen to me on your watch, wouldn't it?"

"Except you're not supposed to be here, majesty - you're trespassing. And you broke into this facility using mercenary resources that were sent here to kill the Alpha team - a team that includes your only child. Do you really think anyone would question why you died?" Mary snorted softly. "I'm thinking they would be more likely to question why you are here. So don't try to play games with me, majesty. You should know by now that I play to win."

Fernando snarled but didn't deign to answer. Mary held his gaze for a moment longer, then nodded to her agents. "Go," she instructed them. "Caleb, keep me informed."

"Yes, Chief." He glanced at Fernando. "What about him?"

Mary sighed. What she wanted to do and what she was going to do were two different things. She jerked her head towards the wall behind her. "Bring him here. I can keep him safer if he is beside me."

"So you prefer to hide behind your troops when it's time to be a leader and do real battle," Fernando scoffed, glaring at Caleb when he was wrenched unceremoniously to his feet. "Be careful, Little Man, or I will show you what the power of the throne is."

Caleb spit in his direction though he was careful not to spit directly at Fernando. "Be careful who you insult around here, Little Man," Caleb returned softly. "Or we will teach you what the power of loyalty is like. Show some respect!" he demanded, locking the laser cuffs so Fernando's hands and arms were clenched tightly by his side. Then he walked him behind the desk, pulling around a chair and abruptly pushing Fernando into it, locking his upper body in place so he couldn't leave the chair. Then Caleb met Mary's eyes. "Anything else, Chief?"

"Thank you, Caleb. That's all for now." Caleb nodded and raced out the door.

Fernando studied Mary unabashedly for a moment, noting the head wound and the leg wound that had yet to be tended to. "So why did you kidnap the Alpha team, Ms Wellesly? Do you really believe there will be no consequences for your actions?"

"There are always consequences, majesty, whether they be from action or inaction. But in this case, there was no kidnapping. When the Council sees the evidence...."

"The Council?? Bah!! They are as useless as the Committee. Who do you think you are - keeping our children... our *assets* from us?? How dare you!!!"

Mary whirled on him, her face not betraying one iota of the pain that flashed through her body at the action. "How dare I, majesty?? How dare you!!" She drew in a deep breath in an effort to calm herself, but her eyes never left his. The hatred smoldering in his eyes was palpable. "Why did you come here, majesty?"

Fernando snorted. "You took my daughter... my *heir*... away from me. You waited until she was grown and civilized and had already proven her worth to the galaxy at large, and then you swooped in and proclaimed her family. Did you know that her mother and I have not spoken to her directly since your revelation in the Committee's conference room that day?"

"And that is my fault?"

"Yes! She refuses to acknowledge us - says she has a new family now... one that loves her and appreciates her for herself," he snarled.

"That's true - none of us has ever asked her to be more or less than who she truly is." Mary paused. "Majesty, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but Arianna is an adult and she can choose her family. And she has more than one new family now. My kids and I adopted her into our family because she needed one...."

"She HAS one!! Her mother and I...."

"... have never seen her as anything more than an *heir* and an *asset* - your words, majesty! With us, Arianna has people who want nothing more than that she be happy being herself. And with the kids on the Alpha team, she has also found love... and a home. They accept and respect her for who she is; but more than that, they love her. She's happy now - why would you want to come here to screw that up?" Mary narrowed her eyes at him. "That's why you're here isn't it? You lost control of her so you made a deal with the devil to take her away from here... from the people who have replaced you as her family." She shook her head in disbelief. "Did it occur to you that you could destroy her by removing her from those she loves? Did it occur that she could die at the hands of the mercenaries you climbed in bed with to get here?? Because let me tell you, majesty, they have their orders and those

orders have nothing to do with your objective. You and she would simply have become collateral damage in a much larger fight."

"Shut up," Fernando growled. "Shut up. Shut Up. Shut UP!!!" he shrieked, bringing up his foot and slamming it into her thigh. Mary screamed in agony as pain ripped through her body. Only the fact that she was sitting down kept her from completely crumpling - that and the fact that Fernando had pushed her beyond his range to reach her and could not follow up with a second strike.

Mary waited for her vision to clear, only to find Fernando smirking at her. She didn't even pause; she stood on her good leg and lifted up the butt of her gun, slamming it into the side of his head. "The rules are different here, majesty," she murmured to his unconscious form, then focused her attention on not puking her guts up all over the place.

"Where's Mama?" Ian hissed as Caleb raced to join them.

"Indisposed," Caleb replied succinctly. Ian cocked an eyebrow at him. Caleb held his gaze. Ian took the hint and grasped Caleb by the arm, pulling him aside so they could speak privately. "She really is indisposed, Ian. She's got a shredder embedded in her thigh, and Dorcas is helping Eli with Eden at the moment. Later... long story," Caleb added before Ian could demand an explanation. "Besides, she's got Fernando in there with her."

"Fernando?" Ian repeated. "You mean Arianna's...?"

"Yeah. The Chief wasn't particularly thrilled when she recognized him."

Ian nodded. He had a number of other questions, but there really wasn't time. "All right," gesturing back to where the other agents were waiting. "Nat and the Marines are driving them towards us. With any luck, they will see us and surrender." Someone snorted and Ian smirked. "Yes, I don't figure they are that smart either, but I live on hope. In any event, unless it becomes necessary to kill them, shoot to maim. We need people to interrogate. If it appears that they could put the scientists in danger, shoot to kill. These are hired guns - we want the ones who hired them. Questions?" Ian met each pair of eyes before nodding in satisfaction. "Good. Then let's do this, boys and girls. I don't want to be dealing with this over the holiday."

The sound of gunfire was much closer now, and Ian recognized the difference in the shredder bullets and the laser pulses as they were fired. A glance around showed him that the agents were all in place and he had time to be thankful for their training and professionalism before the first mercenary came around the corner.

She wasn't firing, and Ian passed the word to let her pass through until she was closer to him. Obviously she was a scout because right behind her came two more mercenaries, staggering their steps as they cleared the area. They were going through the corridor slowly, investigating every room as they went. He wasn't sure what alerted them, but he saw the woman on point stiffen slightly, and their movements slowed to an infinitesimal crawl. Ian could feel his tension ratchet up even higher and he wondered where the rest were. Then he heard his mama scream, and all hell broke loose.

The scouts melted further down the hallway, obviously searching for the source of the scream. Ian knew he couldn't let them reach the medical bay - not with the Alpha team members ensconced there - and he stepped into the corridor. His bold action stunned the mercenaries long enough for Caleb and

Ephraim to debilitate the attackers before they could strike, and Caleb took great pleasure in knocking them out. Then Ian met Caleb's eyes.

"Go check on Mama. She would never have given away her position like that unless something dreadful was wrong. We'll handle this."

Caleb nodded and headed back to the med bay at a near run. Because Ian had a point - Mary would never have risked those kids unless it was beyond her control.

Chapter XLV

Dorcas moved to go to Mary at the first sound when Eli shook her head. "You need to take some painkillers with you," she instructed. "Caleb gave her some, but obviously it wasn't enough."

"No - this was something beyond that," Dorcas informed her. "The Chief would never have screamed like that without serious provocation - not with you kids here. Something caught her off guard."

"Be careful. If they caught Ms Wellesly, they could very well catch any of us. Martha, go with her. I've got this," motioning to Eden's still body. "So go... and be careful."

Dorcas and Martha exchanged glances - no one, not even Caleb, issued direct orders to the team when Mary was in charge, and now Eli had done just that. The glance lasted only a second; they recognized Eli's leadership and her right to authorize any number of things at the moment. So they nodded their agreement and Dorcas took her service pistol from its holster and handed it to Mordecai.

"Keep an eye on things, Kai. Eli needs you to watch her back." Mordecai nodded his acceptance and took the weapon from her, easing into a sitting position so he could monitor the door. "Eli, I'm putting the pistol the Chief gave you on the tray so you can access it quickly if necessary. We'll be as quick as we can, all right?"

"Go," Eli replied with a glower. "I will not have anyone die on my watch." Without another word, Dorcas and Martha slipped out of the operating room and headed towards the office where they had last seen Mary.

Caleb skidded around the doorframe, idly noting that Mary didn't even glance in his direction. He spared a glance at Fernando and realized he was unconscious. The large red mark at his temple was a good clue to the reason, but Caleb couldn't make himself care. Then he dropped to his knees beside Mary, placing a hand on one of hers that was white-knuckling the arms of the chair. He recognized the measured breaths as the attempt it was to keep from retching or making another sound. The sweat beading on her forehead was rolling down the sides of her face, and he began scanning her person to find the cause of her pain. Because he knew the pain medicine he had given her should be working for hours yet. Then he got a good look at her leg... and growled.

"I'll kill him myself," starting to rise.

"No, Caleb," the whisper enough to catch his attention and bring his attention back to Mary. "What's happening out there?" she asked, hoping to focus both of them on something else. Because her

breathing was doing little towards keeping her nausea down, and despite her personal feelings for the man, she didn't want to be responsible for Fernando's death even peripherally. She didn't want to have to explain that to Arianna. The situation she had on her hands was going to be difficult enough.

"Nat is driving them to us slowly though I don't know how many there are. We had just encountered three scouts when you screamed and Ian sent me back to check on you. We knew something was wrong. So what can I do?"

"Move out of the way," Dorcas stated kindly and she walked up behind him. "Oh holy hell," she muttered when she got a good look at Mary's leg. "Chief... I don't think I can..."

"You can't," Mary agreed with a shake of her head. "This is going to need surgery, and we don't have the time or the knowledge for that."

"But I do," Eli commented from the doorway. "Eden is resting comfortably, and you can't even see where she was injured. After a little sleep, she'll be as good as new."

"You were able to repair her second heart?"

"Yes - better than new, though she has no need of that information. Kai is watching over her. So why don't you let me see what I can do for you?" Eli studied Mary for a moment. "Trust your people, Ms Wellesly - you trained them. They know their business. Let them tend it while we get you back on your feet. They can handle the fight - they'll need your skills for what follows."

Mary tilted her head and smirked slightly, her eyes twinkling with teasing. "You would make an exceptional politician."

Eli put her hands on her hips and glared. "There is no reason to insult me, Ms Wellesly. Especially since I'm effectively pulling rank on you." The cocked eyebrow was question enough and Eli's glare turned to a smirk, her own eyes twinkling. "Yes, I can and I do. As the senior doctor available, I'm pulling rank and telling you that you will allow me to repair the wound in your leg." She turned and met the agents' eyes. "Martha, Dorcas... I will require your assistance. Caleb, you may stay here if your orders stipulate that you protect the Chief."

They all looked at Mary to confirm that she was all right with Eli's directives. She gave them a short nod, then hissed at the sharp pain that lanced through her head. Eli met her eyes, and took the syringe from Dorcas' hand.

"Let me know when the pain eases," Eli instructed. "I can't put you under an anesthesia with your head wound, and I don't want to move you until your pain has subsided to a tolerable degree. Should I look at him while we wait?" motioning towards Arianna's unconscious father.

"NO!" came the response from three different voices, though Mary remained silent. Caleb stepped forward. "He will wait until the Chief is taken care of. What happened to him, he brought upon himself. He will suffer with the consequences." His tone brooked no argument, and Eli chanced to wonder what he had done to warrant such disregard from people who had shown nothing but caring and compassion to her and her colleagues since she'd met them. However, his presence here... now... was enough to make him the enemy, and she knew enough of the rules of war to know that one treated their own first. She would care for him... *after* Mary was stabilized.

"Very well," she agreed. "He will wait until I have cared for Ms Wellesly. Dorcas, will you please retrieve a gurney?" She looked at Mary. "Feeling any better?"

"I don't think I'm going to hurl my guts in the next few minutes, so yes. It's definitely a step in the right direction."

Eli smiled. "Good. We are going to need to move you to the gurney, and it is likely that the change in equilibrium will cause you to lose consciousness briefly. When you are cognizant again, I'll be right there." The sound of gunfire caught their attention again as Dorcas wheeled the gurney into the room, but they were too intent on moving Mary from her chair to pay it much mind. Once Mary was settled on the gurney, Caleb spoke.

"I'm gonna go see what is happening out there. That seemed a little close."

Dorcas and Martha nodded absently, already pushing the bed towards the operating theatre. Eli was fully engrossed in checking out the mutilation Mary's leg had become. A shredder projectile, walking to the med bay and whatever had caused her to scream had taken their toll and Eli wasn't as confident she could make this right as she had for Eden.

Still, she would do her best for this woman who had done so much for her... and for Arianna. She owed Mary for that if nothing else. They entered the suite and Dorcas shifted Eden's bed to one side to give them room to work. Mordecai went with her to keep watch. Then Eli cut away Mary's pant leg, and they settled in to work.

"It's an ambush!!" a mercenary screamed to his comrades as he came around the corner and spotted Mary's security agents moving the scouting party out of the corridor. He ducked when he realized he'd brought attention to himself, but there was literally no place for them to go. "Kill 'em all!!" he bellowed, hoping to rally his troops for a final assault.

The mercenaries met one another's eyes - they had known when they accepted the assignment that they were on their own once they reached the installation. There was no one to call - no one to save them. They had been paid a king's ransom, but their exceptional payday came with a price. Those who had arranged for their compensation would disavow any knowledge of their existence if they were caught. And they had no way to prove who had hired them - it had all been anonymously done.

They nodded all the way around. If they were going out, they were going to go in a blaze of glory. And if any of them were caught... well, they had a little surprise for their captors in that event. It would still allow them to claim success from the grave

Simultaneously they rose from their hiding places - some turning to the left; the others turning to the right. They were going to take as many of the sons of bitches with them as they could.

When Caleb entered the hallway, it was clear the mercenaries were dedicated to dying and killing as many agents and Marines as they could manage. It made no sense, and he wondered what was behind the choice. Even if Mary and her team were not required to follow the strict codes of military combat and warfare, the Marines and her Air Corps son were most certainly bound by them. So there had to be a reason they were so intent on dying.

Caleb crossed into the small alcove where the bodies of the three scouts remained motionless. He had been quite forceful when he knocked them out and he expected them to remain unconscious for a little while longer. He stood still gazing at them, noting the security of the bonds that held them. Then Caleb cocked his head - something was off. He deliberately closed his mind and hearing to the noise beyond the room he stood in, focusing his considerable hearing on his present location.

Slowly the noise became silence as he eliminated what he heard - his heartbeat... that of the three scouts; his breathing... their own; the blood moving through his veins; the ripple of muscle as they swallowed. Soon every sound had been eliminated that he could account for, and still there was something else beyond.

Caleb walked to the closest scout, rifle at the ready even as he leaned close enough to release the flak jacket that covered the torso of the individual in question. When he got it open, he sucked in a breath. This could be a bit of a problem.

Ian was shooting carefully, aiming for non-vital parts of the body as he endeavored to take the mercenary army down. He hadn't expected quite so many - a small strike force perhaps, but not... this. He noticed the others were following his lead - aiming for the legs if possible and disabling their opponents one at a time. The mercenaries, on the other hand, were obviously determined to kill as many as they could before giving up what was so clearly a losing fight - because shredder bullets were flying at a fast and furious pace.

He chanced to wonder idly as he lined up his next shot how a person fell into that line of work. And why they would be willing to give up everything to do it. Then he felt the breeze of a bullet fly past his head and decided he would be wise to keep his head in the game and his thoughts out of the clouds for the duration.

The mercs were growing desperate now - he could sense the change in the air around him, and knew from the expressions on the faces of the agents nearest him that they could feel it too. Before he could contact his brother and coordinate a final attack, Caleb slid into place next to him, a frantic expression on his face.

"Ian, we have a problem." Ian cocked his brow and looked so much like his mama that Caleb was forced to smile. That caused the second eyebrow to rise and Caleb shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Sorry. But we need an electronic wave pulse to flood this facility now."

"Caleb, if we flood this place with an energy pulse, it will knock out *everything*," giving Caleb a searing look.

"I am well aware of the consequences, Ian," Caleb replied wryly. "But we don't have a choice. If we don't do it and soon, it won't matter. There won't be anything left."

"I'm not following."

Caleb sighed. "I know. But we don't have time. Do you trust me?"

"Yes... of course."

"Then take these and send out that pulse," handing him two sets of Caleb's personal earplugs. With Caleb's hearing abilities, they dampened everyday sound to make them bearable for him. For a normal hearing human, it would protect him from the wave's energy that would otherwise disrupt his thought processes. "Get someone to help you. It needs to be done to disarm the mercenaries. They are wired for self-destruction."

"Holy crap!"

"Not my first thought," Caleb admitted, "but close enough."

"No, Caleb - you don't understand. We don't have the equipment here necessary to do that. I need to make my way back to the command center." Caleb gestured Ephraim over and Ian handed the other man a pair of earplugs. Ephraim didn't question - simply donned them and waited for further instruction. Ian gave him a couple hand signals, and they were off.

Caleb stood from his place and started firing randomly, hoping to throw the mercenaries off-guard long enough to allow Ian to do what he needed to do. The other agents didn't question - they merely followed his example and started creating chaos.

Nathaniel wondered what his brother was thinking by the sudden inexplicable change in tactics. But he had long ago learned to trust his brother and to trust his instincts. And they were both telling him to do what was necessary to keep his family safe while he worked his way around to discover what was going on with the change in strategies midstream.

Caleb continued shooting wildly, sometimes hitting a target, but mostly just keeping everyone off balance. Shredder bullets were coming far too close for his comfort, but he knew he only had to keep it up for a few more minutes. Then with a little luck, Ian and Ephraim could handle things. He felt it under his feet first, and he dropped to his knees and covered his ears, hoping this wouldn't destroy his hearing permanently. Then everything went dark and silent.

Ian and Ephraim ran - glad Mama had insisted they know the entire complex, top to bottom. Taking the emergency stairs might not have been the easiest way, but it would get them where they needed to be the quickest because it took them one floor up and around all the fighting. They would exit behind the fight and next to the command and control center Ian had set up away from the other active areas.

They were breathing hard by the time they reached the command room, and Ian eased an earplug from his ear and motioned for Ephraim to do the same. "We need to move swiftly," he instructed as they moved to the equipment. "I'm going to send out an energy wave pulse."

"But that will...."

"I know, but we don't have a choice. The mercs are wired to blow. I don't know how long we have - Caleb didn't say. But he wouldn't lie about something like this... especially with Mama in surgery right now. As soon as it passes, we need to go disarm them - remove whatever self-destruct devices they have and secure them. We don't want to risk them having another back-up plan."

"How long do we have?"

"About fifteen minutes before the electronics kick back in. It's different for every individual though. Some as little as ten minutes - some as long as two hours... in my experience anyway. So move as

quickly as you can. You ready?" Ian asked as he jammed the earplug back into his head. Ephraim nodded. Ian acknowledged his assent and hit the button.

The effect was instantaneous - even Ian and Ephraim felt reality slip a little before the pulse wave passed. When they opened their eyes, Ian removed his ear protection and heard Ephraim do the same in the darkness. Then they ran carefully out of the command center, grabbing a light to illuminate their way back to the hallway that had become a battleground.

They turned the corner into silence... and bodies scattered all over the ground. Without hesitating, they picked their way over to the area containing the mercenaries and set to work.

Eli was delicately removing the shrapnel embedded deep in the muscle tissue up and down Mary's leg. Because of all the movement, it was no longer confined to her thigh. Eli winced with every new piece that was found well outside of the shot radius. It only meant bad things later on because it compounded the mutilation that had already been committed.

She felt the hum in her feet and looked up to see Dorcas and Martha do the same. Then she felt searing pain in her head... then darkness.

She didn't know how long she was out, but Eli was less than happy when she regained consciousness. By the dim emergency lighting that was always maintained in the med bay, she could see Martha and Dorcas were still collapsed on the floor. Eden and Mordecai seemed relatively untouched, still resting on their beds, and Mary.... Eli focused on Mary's prone form. Mary was more than a little concerning.

The pulse had knocked her out - the one circumstance Eli really did not want to see. She hadn't been sure she could bring her out of anesthesia - hence the reason she had used a local dose during the procedure. This? This she wasn't sure the woman could recover from. And to make matters worse, it would take time they didn't have for the equipment to reboot. She would have to search for the remainder of the shrapnel blindly... and hope that she got it all.

It was truly too dark to see very well, and Eli's gifting wasn't extraordinary night vision. However, she did have better sight in the dark than most humans and she was going to have to rely on it until whoever sent the pulse could return the light to the infirmary. Until then she was on her own and in the dark. She closed her eyes... and prayed.

Almost immediately the emergency generator for the medical wing kicked on, and though not as bright as the normal working lights, it was much brighter than the blue emergency lighting had been. She let her eyes adjust, and turned her attention back to Mary's leg. She offered up a prayer of thanks and got back to work.

Martha was the first to recover and the first thing she did was grab a torch to give Eli that much more light. Dorcas did the same as soon as she was standing, followed quickly by Mordecai. Eden watched from her bed, still too tired to move but wanting to help.

"Eli?" waiting for gray-green eyes to meet hers in the dark. She smiled and jerked her head towards Mary. "You got this. If you can fix me, you can fix her, all right? You got this - piece of cake."

"Well, say a prayer for me, will you, Eden? I refuse to let anyone die today... not if I can help it."

"She's gonna be fine, Doc. She's in the best hands she could be, okay?" She held up the gun Dorcas had put beside her earlier. "You've got her back - I've got yours."

"Thank you, Eden. You don't know what that means to me."

"I do actually," Eden said with a flashing smile. "But we can discuss it with Mary later over cookies and milk, all right? Now stop your loitering and get back to work. 'Cause I'm hungry, and I've gotta wait for you before I can eat." Eli was going to make a retort, but Eden shook her head. "Uh uh - work now... talk later. Or I'm telling Mary on you."

Eli chuckled and shook her head. Then she returned her complete focus to her patient. There was still work to be done.

Chapter XLVI

"Are you sure we shouldn't check on her, Jake?" Abigail asked in a concerned tone. "Because I'm getting some weird vibes - she's projecting."

"Weird how, Gay?" Danny asked. Abigail shrugged.

"The fact that she is projecting so loudly is weird enough for me. Arianna has always been careful to keep things under wraps when I'm around as a matter of courtesy. But I sense a lot of confusion and anguish and frustration combined with a healthy dose of happiness and nervousness and lots of other emotions to a lesser degree." Abigail shrugged. "I'm not sure how else to describe it."

Jake looked around to find everyone else staring back at him and sighed. He hated this leadership gig that had dropped into his lap with Eden's and Eli's absence. He wasn't a leader, and he hated having the responsibility thrust upon him like this. It was something he would have a word with both of them about later. For now, he had to suck it up and act like he knew what he was doing. He shrugged.

"Let's go see if we can offer some kind of moral support then. I don't imagine it would be unwelcomed by Az or Joy." His eyebrows went up at their disbelieving looks. "What??" he whined. "Just because I don't want to lead doesn't mean I can't have a good idea or two occasionally. Besides, if we're antsy sitting here waiting, I can't begin to conceive how nerve-wracking it is for them. It's their family out there fighting for us."

"Ours too, Jake."

Jacob nodded. "Ours too," he agreed. "But differently... on a number of levels." He rose and stretched, then looked at the rest of his comrades. "C'mon then. Let's go see what's up."

"Do you ever hate being left out?" Arianna asked seriously. "I mean... the rest of the family is all together. Don't you wish you were with them?"

Joy shrugged. "I used to... a lot. Especially when I was a kid. I mean I took the same self-defense classes that the boys did, and I did well enough at it. I was never as good as they were because it wasn't my passion, but I did all right. I could split wood and crack concrete like the rest of the class,

but Nat and Ian? They shattered the wood and crumbled the concrete - they took it very seriously. And I eventually realized that they were doing it to protect me, and that the best way for me to protect them was to stay out of the way. It was better for them to know I was safe. And despite my grumbling and complaining, I love my brothers dearly. I never want to see anything happen to them - certainly not because of me."

"So when Mama sends you away...."

"I go without complaint, because I know it's what's best for me *and* for them. And then I sit here and worry my head off about them until I hear from them again that everything is all right." Joy snorted. "I fully expect to wake up one day with a head full of white hair."

Arianna tilted her head. "That could be quite an interesting phenomenon."

"Depends on your point of view," Joy returned dryly. "It would make for some sort of funky publicity, that's for sure. My agent would have a come apart. And to add insult to injury, we keep adding warriors to the family - first Joey, then Ephraim and now Eli," smiling when a blush raced across Arianna's tanned skin. "Am I wrong?"

Arianna shook her head. "No... you're not wrong. Eli is the best kind of warrior because she is a healer as well. It's just... I never really... this is all so new to me, Joy."

"Which part, Sweetie?"

Arianna smiled sadly and shrugged. "All of it, I guess. A family who really cares; a warrior of my own; friends who look out for me; love. I think that is the most surprising thing of all. This kind of love is not common in my society. It's an anomaly."

"Well, get used to it," Jake said as he stepped away from the doorway, followed by the rest of their colleagues. "We're your family, and that's just the way we roll."

Arianna gasped in surprise at their sudden appearance, then laughed. "I think I could learn to like that," she replied, then turned back to Joy. "What do you think, Joyfulness? Is Mama ready for a bigger family?" motioning to the Alpha team members that surrounded her. Joy chuckled.

"I think she already added them to the roster, Little Sister. The real question is - are they ready for Mama?" Her chuckles turned to cackles of laughter at the stunned expressions on the faces of the Alpha team and she turned her attention back to Arianna. "They may need a minute."

Arianna laughed again. "Or six," she retorted. "So tell me more about Mama's family."

"Lieutenant?" The petty officer walked closer and tapped Joey on the shoulder. "Lieutenant?" she repeated a little louder, waiting for his eyes to track to her. When they did, she snapped a salute and Joey returned it unconsciously.

"I'm sorry, Petty Officer. I was thinking."

"Yes sir. I've noticed it takes some that way, sir," smiling when he laughed. "Sir, the Admiral needs to see you right away."

"Lead the way, Petty Officer," he replied, following her out of the room and up to flag territory. When the Alpha team had arrived at their ship, he and the other members of the security team had been transported to a nearby carrier to keep watch from a distance. Most of the military members weren't particularly keen on being stuck in space dock to babysit, but orders were orders. So they kept their grumbling private and to a minimum - especially since word on the grapevine was that the Admiral herself had volunteered them for this duty as a favor to a friend.

Joseph and the petty officer reached the Admiral's office, and the petty officer rapped her knuckles once sharply on the door before opening it and announcing Joey's presence. She ushered him in without ceremony, then closed the door behind him. Joey walked in and saluted, wondering what he had done to garner flag attention.

"At ease, Lieutenant. Take a seat," the Admiral instructed, and Joey did as he was bidden. "I have news," she said, passing him a Pad. He accepted it and quickly read through it, his ramrod posture stiffening as he realized what he was reading.

"Is this accurate?"

She nodded. "I verified it myself. A few minutes ago, they lost their shielding from what appears to be an energy pulse wave from within the complex. That makes them extremely vulnerable right now. I've got my people keeping an eye on things, but I thought you might like to be aware so you can gather your team together and be ready to go at a moment's notice."

"Thank you, Admiral."

She nodded her head in acknowledgement. "I don't intend to let anything happen on my watch either, Lieutenant. I owe her as much or more than you ever could." She held his gaze momentarily then bobbed her head once sharply. "Now if you'd like to wait in the CnC for updates once your team is assembled, the way has been cleared for you to do so."

"Thank you, Admiral."

"What are you still doing here, Lieutenant? I expect you to protect them, Joseph, and you can't do that standing here."

"Yes ma'am... thank you ma'am," Joe responded, giving her a cursory salute before almost running out of the room. The Admiral could hear him on his comm unit before he cleared the doorway, calling his team to duty. She leaned back in her chair and resumed her monitoring of the situation below.

It was slower going than Ian would have liked, but they had to remove and contain the detonation devices as well as secure the mercenaries one at a time. And given the way they were wired, the explosives needed to be removed before they could be locked up. He was trying to keep an eye out for any movement, knowing those individuals needed to be taken care of first. Therefore he was unpleasantly surprised when a hand grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. Fortunately Nathaniel had fast reflexes and caught the expected punch that was thrown at his face.

"Whoa, Brother - it's me," Nathaniel commented, holding up his free hand. "What the hell?" motioning around in the darkness, knowing Ian would understand his question.

"Yeah... sorry. I didn't have time to let you know, and I don't have time to explain it now," turning back to the mercenary he was disarming. Nathaniel looked over his shoulder and his eyes widened.

"Got it," he responded. "How many are left?" he asked as he moved to the next mercenary.

Ian shrugged. "Too many. Eph and I are working as fast as we can, but...."

"I'm going to bind them. I know we can't remove their flak jackets with them cuffed, but we can always knock them out again one at a time to release them long enough to disconnect the explosives. We'll have better control that way."

Ian nodded and Nathaniel busied himself going through the mercenaries quickly, locking their arms in place behind them... just uncomfortable enough to keep them from moving around too much when they awakened. Then the lights flickered on, and he gave a sigh of relief. That should make things easier.

Eli sighed in relief when the lights brightened to their normal luminescence. It would make finding the bits of shrapnel easier, though it was still a nearly impossible task without the handheld scanner. Martha snapped off her light and moved back to the equipment, rebooting each piece manually - beginning with the scanner. Dorcas remained in place, the extra light aiding Eli in her search as they worked in tandem.

After a few minutes, Martha moved back to Mary's side and began running the scanner slowly from top to bottom, pointing out each piece of metal she found along the way.

Mordecai rose unsteadily to his feet at the sound of running footsteps, putting himself between those caring for Mary and whoever was approaching them so fast. He could feel the tension of the women working behind him, but everyone relaxed when Caleb crossed the threshold.

"How is she?" he demanded unceremoniously as he entered the room.

"Still working on it," Martha muttered in his direction. Eli glanced up from Mary's still form.

"She is unconscious, Caleb. The blast knocked her out."

"Well, yes - it did the same for everyone except Ian and Ephraim. That was part of the point."

"Perhaps," Eli concurred as she returned her concentration to the exploration in front of her. "But Caleb - I hadn't sedated her for a reason. With the injury done to her head, there was a possibility we wouldn't be able to revive her. Now she is beyond us without the aid of drugs - it is conceivable that she could remain in such a state for an indeterminate amount of time. Because there's nothing I can do to bring her out from such a circumstance. It will be entirely up to Ms Wellesly if and when she recovers from this circumstance."

"So you're saying...?"

"I'm saying she may not recover despite our best efforts. There's no way to know," Eli stated calmly, keeping her eyes on what she was doing.

"How can you be so unfeeling about this??" Caleb railed. "Standing there so calmly rattling off facts. There is a woman's life at stake - we're talking about the Chief, you heartless...."

"Bastard!" Eden yelled.

"That's enough, Caleb!" Martha chided forcefully.

"It's all right, Martha," Eli said softly.

"No, it's really not, Eli. He's being an idiot," Dorcas said with a glare in Caleb's direction. "Get out, Caleb. We've got work to do, and you're not helping." He didn't move. "Leave, now - or I'll have to waste time removing you. And the Chief doesn't have that luxury right now. So go."

His shoulders slumped, but Caleb recognized the truth in her words and left the operating room. He didn't go far, though. He wanted to be close, in case.... He refused to finish that thought, and moved into the office where Fernando was still bound and unconscious. Then he took the seat Mary had been using and turned his attention to the monarch, wondering what the real story was... about everything.

"He didn't mean anything," Martha said quietly. "He's just...."

"I know," Eli assured her sadly.

"Well, I don't," Eden complained. "Where does that jackass get off talking to Eli like that?? What the hell is his issue?"

Eli looked up and met Eden's eyes. "He loves her," she stated unequivocally before either Dorcas or Martha could reply. She shrugged and let her eyes return to Mary's body. "I have no way of knowing if she returns his regard, but he loves her. Were I in his shoes, I wouldn't be nearly so kind to the individual keeping Arianna from me."

Eden snorted, then covered her chest with her hand. "Ow... shouldn't have done that yet. That hurt."

"Do you need something for the pain?" Eli queried without looking up.

"No," Eden said. "But I was just thinking - you're the person who kept you from Az this time... ensuring her safety and that of the team ahead of your own. I'm really glad I'm not in your shoes right now."

Eli smirked, but she never looked up. "Would now be the time to remind you that you sent Jake ahead of you as well, and that he is the one keeping Arianna company at the moment? I believe things are going to go harder for you when we're all reunited once more... especially since you managed to intercept a bullet with your body."

"Hey! I did that to protect you. That should be worth a few points!"

"Maybe - I'm simply granting that we're both likely to find ourselves in hot water when we see them again, and that odds are your water will probably be hotter than mine."

"You're enjoying that thought a little too much, Eli," Eden said drolly.

"Perhaps," she conceded. "Martha, can you do another full body scan, please? I believe we have gotten them all but let us be sure. I do not want to risk the need to do this again. I'm not certain Ms Wellesly could handle the stress. How does it look to you, Dorcas?"

"Good. The bleeding is stopped and everything has been repaired. We need to regen her, of course, but she's doing remarkably well, all things considered. She'll need significant rest to finish healing."

"And the head wound?"

Dorcas shrugged. "It's been cleaned and repaired. But as you explained to Caleb, that part is up to her. There's nothing we can do to change the outcome."

Eli snorted and shook her head. "For all our advancements, there are still some things we cannot change. The reaction of the human brain to trauma would be at the top of that list for me." Eli finished closing the gaping wound on Mary's leg, and stepped to the sink to wash her hands. "We've done all we can; set up the regenerator for its broadest coverage. It will take more time, but it will allow the injury to heal as a single unit instead of in pieces."

"You got it, Doc," Dorcas replied. "Where are you going?"

"After I check on Eden?" she asked with a smile, crossing the room to stand beside Eden. She carefully looked at the healing lesion on her chest and gave Eden a nod of approval. "Looking good, my friend." Eli turned back to Dorcas. "I am going to check on the man in the office. Despite the fact that he *clearly* does not belong here - which marks him as an enemy - he does require medical attention. And I cannot in good conscience let him suffer longer than necessary."

Dorcas nodded and Eli patted Eden's hand before she turned and walked out the door. Martha looked at Dorcas. "Why didn't you tell her?"

"Tell her what?" Eden asked. Both agents tuned to meet her eyes.

"The man out there in the office? That's Arianna's father."

"She knows," Eden said softly. She knew it wouldn't change Eli's mind about helping the man, but it galled Eden to know that he would still despise Eli regardless of what she did for him. She took a deep breath and winced; Mordecai reached over and held her hand in support. They exchanged glances, but no words were spoken - none were needed between them.

She squeezed his hand and he nodded, then slipped from the room to keep an eye on Eli.

Caleb didn't look at her when she entered the room and for that Eli was thankful. She was running on reserves at the moment, and didn't have the energy for another confrontation. She knelt in front of the still unconscious man, wondering what he had done to necessitate what appeared to be the butt end of a rifle to the side of his head. Given the evidence though, she could guess and she'd have to admit he probably deserved it.

She opened the small med kit she'd brought with her and began tending him. Only to have Caleb's voice break into her thoughts.

"You know who that is, don't you?" She spared him a glance but continued her ministrations. "That, my dear doctor, is Arianna's father." He saw her fist clench but she continued working. "Doesn't that bother you?"

She whirled on him so quickly Caleb had no chance to move. Her gaze burned, and he flinched at its intensity. "Of course it does! And in any other situation, I would be more than happy to...." She growled her frustration. "But I cannot. The first rule of being a healer is to render aid where there is need." She turned back to Fernando and resumed her healing of him. "I knew who he was before I came in here to treat him."

Caleb remained silent and let Eli work in peace.

Chapter XLVII

Fernando came to with a groan, wondering just exactly what he'd been hit with. His ears were ringing from the force of the blow and it was making him more than a little nauseous. Then he opened his eyes and attempted to flail backwards away from the woman who was tending his wounds - a woman he had hoped... had *expected*... never to see again.

"You!" he bellowed, then flinched as nausea roiled through his belly. She gave him a perfunctory glance, then returned her attention to his injury. "What are you doing?? Get away from me!!"

Mordecai stepped from the doorway, but Caleb was faster. He put his hand around Fernando's neck firmly enough to be felt, but not hard enough to do damage... yet. "Majesty," he sneered. "I'd suggest you watch your tone. You're not very popular around here at the moment and the Doc volunteered to look after your wounds. But I have absolutely no compunction about adding to them if you don't learn some respect pretty quickly."

The irony of Caleb's words wasn't lost on Eli, but she remained silent. She had a sworn duty to uphold before she said her piece to this man who had caused her so much hurt and heartache. And if she didn't heal him first, she was liable to forget her oath.

"I'd rather suffer than allow an animal to treat me," Fernando scorned. Eli smirked.

"I know," she said, smiling darkly when he hissed at the sting of the liniment. She placed a bandage over the open cut and stepped back. "But I'm done, and you will live the rest of your life knowing two things, Fernando," not offering him the courtesy of his title. His eyes flared with rage, but before he could voice his protest, Eli spoke. "First is the fact that an animal saved your life." An exaggeration, but he would never be told differently. "And second... that the same animal you owe your life to? She will be your daughter's mate - by Arianna's choice. You no longer have the right to make that decision for her."

"She wouldn't DARE!" he spat, his fury turning his face an unfortunate shade of crimson. His head pounded in reaction and he closed his eyes in search of relief. Eli stepped back. She had rendered aid, and Fernando wasn't going to die... at the moment, anyway. But there was a dark part of her that wanted payback for what this man had done to her... to her Angel... and she wasn't beyond letting him suffer a little in return. She smirked at him.

"Really? Is that truly what you believe?" Eli leaned against the desk behind her and crossed her arms over her chest. "You really think she is going to continue to follow the mandates of your culture now that she has finally been released from them?" she scoffed. "I can't decide if that makes you stupid or just naïve."

"How dare you!!!"

"Oh, I dare very easily, Fernando. I let her go once because I thought it was what she wanted; I believed it was in her best interests. But no more!! She. Is. MINE! And I will never give her up again. So get used to it, Papa," she mocked. "Arianna and I are a package deal."

"I FORBID IT!" he screeched, then whimpered as another jolt of pain knifed its way through his skull. Eli stepped forward and gave him a half-dose of painkiller. She needed for him to have enough clarity to understand her words.

"You don't have a say in her life any longer, Old Man. It is her choice... her decision. You can live with it or lose her, and frankly I'm hoping you are smart enough and care enough to simply walk away and never look back. You're poison to her, and she deserves better than that - she has better now, no thanks to you."

Fernando closed his eyes, hoping to block her words. Eli didn't force the issue - she didn't need to. She had said what she needed to say. The rest was up to him... and Arianna.

"Arianna? Can I speak to you... privately?" Joseph asked from the doorway. All eyes, including Joy's turned to him and on one hand he questioned the wisdom of telling her the truth. On the other hand, she and Joy deserved to know what was going on. On yet another hand - and Joseph wondered when he'd started growing extra appendages - there was nothing they could do but worry more than they already were. On the final hand, they were likely to be angry with him for withholding information, but his was a totally different position in the scheme of things than theirs was. Arianna exchanged glances with Joy, and Joy motioned her in Joey's direction. Arianna rose and walked to him.

"What's wrong, Joey?" she asked, searching his face frantically. Her upset was tangible and he determined to keep her out of the loop for a little while longer. With luck, by then, things would be resolved.

"Nothing, Ria. It was so quiet I came to check on you. Is everything okay?"

Arianna shrugged. "All things being equal, I suppose it is as good as I can hope for. It helps that Joy has been willing to talk to me incessantly since we arrived. Thank the Holy Father for trackers. She's been able to prepare the whole house for holiday guests while we've been talking."

"So she's doing all right too? I would have called and broken into your conversation to check for myself, but I figured you guys might need a little 'girl bonding' time."

"She seems to be doing okay as far as I can tell, but you've known her longer. Would you like to talk to her and see for yourself?"

"Would you mind? I don't want to crash your party."

Arianna tucked her hand into the crook of Joey's elbow and tugged him forward. "It's not a party, Joey. It's a show of support. And by the way, you look quite dashing in your uniform. I assume you are back on regular military assignment?"

"I've been temporarily assigned to the carrier that is protecting this ship." He shrugged. "It keeps me out of trouble and gives me something to do. Hi Joyfulness!" he greeted as he reached the monitor. "How ya holding up?"

"With a piece of string and some duct tape," she replied wryly, and he laughed. It was the answer she gave any of them when parts of the family were out on a mission. "How's it feel to be back in the regular Navy?"

"A bit odd, but it beats sitting around waiting for news. How's the house? Are you ready for all the company that's headed your way?"

"I hope so," Joy said. "I don't think we've ever entertained like this before."

"Should be a great party. Is Prue there yet?"

Joy shook her head. "She arrives tomorrow, so I hope my brother finishes up this business pretty quick. He knows what happens when she and I get together, and I'm not sure his wallet can handle that much shopping therapy," she snarked, causing Joey to laugh.

"Probably not." Joey glanced at his watch. "I need to get back - duty calls and all. I just wanted to look in on you and Ria. Because we all know what will happen if Mama finds out I didn't take care of you two while she was gone."

"Oh man," Jake retorted. "It would so suck to be you."

Joey looked at him and smirked. "You have no idea," he replied. Then he gave a jaunty salute and exited the room without a backwards glance. Arianna's eyes met Joy's over the screen.

"Does he know something?" she asked suspiciously.

"Probably," Joy answered. "But you'd never get it out of him if he didn't want you to know." She huffed. "I love them all, but they make me crazy. I'm going to be certifiable one of these days."

Esther snorted. "Girlfriend, you'd fit right in with all of us in that case." The room exploded with laughter and the conversation turned to other things.

"You are a go for launch, Lieutenant," the petty officer sitting at the control board said. "But you need to go quickly. I don't know how long we can keep this window open."

Joey nodded. They had planned to simply observe the complex, making an appearance only if absolutely necessary since their duty was strictly to protect the research ship and its scientific occupants. The fact that three of the scientists were still below within the installation itself gave them a little leeway to bend their orders. Couple that with the realization that a window to the transport field was open yet no one was coming to the transport site was enough cause for concern that Joey and the strike team were headed in to what they hoped wasn't a trap. Joey knew Mary well

enough to know that she would have locked down access to the transport field had she been able. So something was very, very wrong.

He checked his gear one final time and readied himself to step into the field. Then he felt the transport activate and he suddenly found himself in the transport room of the mountain complex... mostly alone. There were several dead bodies on the floor and the door looked as if it had been blown to kingdom come, hanging from a single metal hinge. There was no sound, save his breathing, and no other indication of occupation nearby. He trod carefully to the door, looking out and determining his solitude. Then he contacted the transport shuttle, and his teammates began to arrive quickly.

When the last man arrived, he cut the field, locking it down with his own code. Then he motioned to the others, and they slowly began to make their way through the facility, trying to discover what was really going on.

There were agents and mercenaries still strewn across the floor - the results, he knew, due to the energy pulse that had swept through the complex. He noted that the mercenaries' hands and feet had been bound, and closer inspection revealed Nathaniel's signature laser knot. Joey wanted to laugh in release; instead he grinned like a maniac as relief washed through him. At least his husband was safe... or had been not long ago.

The strike team continued to make slow progress when a sound nearby startled them. They all turned their weapons in the direction of it, only to see Joey lower his as he recognized the face that came around the corner. Ephraim stopped as soon as he saw the number of laser rifles pointed his way, slowly raising his hands until he caught sight of Joey's face. Then he smiled and offered a hand, not surprised when Joey pulled him in for a brief hug before releasing him with a frown.

"Eph, what's going on?"

"Long story," Ephraim replied, waving him off. "What are you doing here?"

"We monitored the energy pulse, and when the shield went we found the transporter had an open window. We re-established the transport field and came down to shut it off since it didn't re-establish on this end and none of the missing Alpha team showed up at the transport site."

Ephraim's eyes widened. If the mercenaries had brought in more troops, he needed to send an alarm. They had only just gotten them all bound and had begun removing the remainder of the detonation devices. They didn't need more conscious enemy bodies up and walking around... especially not wired.

"I need to let Ian know. If there has been a second wave of mercenaries...."

Joey nodded his understanding. "We'll start sweeping the grid. But I don't think there was time for anyone to come through the window that was opened. We were watching pretty closely and snagged it as soon as it came up. We thought you were ready to send the remainder of the Alpha team through but a transport field was never established on this end." Joey shrugged. "We figured it needed looking into."

"We're happy for the added forces," Ephraim told him. "It's something of a cluster right now. Do you remember the layout of this level?" waiting for Joey to nod. "Good. Most of the action took place between the med bay and the mess hall so most of the mercs are contained there. If you and your team could work concentric circles to there, no one should be able to slip the net. But Joey... be careful. The mercs are all rigged for self-destruct," holding up one of the devices he had removed

from a mercenary Mary had killed in the office. "We're going through right now to deactivate them, and they're beginning to come to. Most of them are not happy about being caught... or disarmed. And it'll only take one blast down here to complicate things immeasurably."

Joey nodded and started issuing orders to his team, watching them break up into several smaller teams and begin combing the lower level centimeter by vigilant centimeter. He turned back to Ephraim. "If there is anyone who doesn't belong here running around, we'll find 'em. We'll meet you back near the med bay, so let the boys know we're here, all right? We don't want any reason to have to utilize that infirmary."

Joseph was gone before Ephraim had time to explain they had already more than utilized the medical wing of the facility. He figured Joseph would learn that soon enough. They were all still waiting on word about Mary. In the meantime, he had work to do. And he needed to notify Ian and Nathaniel to the presence of Joey and his strike team. They certainly didn't need the guilt of friendly fire injuries or worse to add to this cluster.

"You can't do this!" the woman yelled as she struggled in his grasp. "You have no right..." Nathaniel snorted and looked at Ian, a smirk clear on his face when he turned back to his captive.

"Imagine that, Brother. These people come in here - to a secret, secure facility that was rumored to have sheltered the famed Alpha team from unwanted visitors - uninvited and unannounced, and we have no right to detain them. Especially since they came armed and ready to destroy themselves and everyone in their path." He glanced at Ian who was doing his best not to laugh as he removed the explosive mechanism from the body in front of him that was fortunately, still out cold. Nathaniel snarled. "We have every right. And you're going to live long enough to feel the shame of knowing you failed." He pulled back his fist and slammed it into the woman's jaw, wincing and flexing his hand. "That was for Mama and those kids."

"You all right?" Ian asked steadily.

"Yes. The stupid involved here makes me crazy."

"Lots of things make you crazy, Little Brother. It's why you're a Marine," giving Nathaniel a cheeky grin.

"Watch it there, Fly Boy. You really want a crazy Marine going nuts on your sorry self? Pretty sure the Air Corps couldn't handle the fallout. And for the record, you don't have to be crazy to be a Marine, but it certainly helps."

Ian snorted. "I've missed you, Nat. Seems like forever since we've had time to talk."

"It has been. There's always some duty pulling us one way or another. Some days I just get so tired of it all." Nathaniel shook his head. "Don't get me wrong - I love being a Marine, and I'm good at what I do. But I wouldn't be adverse to doing something different for a change."

Ian moved to the next mercenary who was stirring but not quite cognizant yet. He pumped a shot of tranquilizer into the woman's neck and waited, tilting his head to study Nathaniel cautiously. "Like what?" he questioned with sincere interest.

"I don't know," he shrugged, and Ian waited. He had the distinct feeling Nathaniel did know but was embarrassed to admit it. "Fine!" Nathaniel blustered as he moved to the next mercenary - a man who was still wholly unconscious. "I'd love to be part of this mission - going somewhere new; dependent solely on myself and my team for survival; discovering new things; establishing a new colony...." He trailed off and shrugged.

"So why didn't you apply, Nat? You have the skills."

Nathaniel snorted. "The survival skills, yes. But not the scientific ones."

"Liar," Ian accused. "C'mon, Nat - you qualified in research and development before you went recon."

Nathaniel shrugged. "Maybe, but I don't have that extra something those kids do. It doesn't matter, Ian. I'm married, remember, and I'd never do that to Joey. I wouldn't want to leave him behind anyway. It's just sometimes I think it would have been nice to have been part of something like this. This is groundbreaking."

"It is," Ian agreed, tranquilizing the next mercenary before releasing his cuffs. He didn't know the man was playing possum, however and didn't allow quite enough time for the shot to take effect. Ian was caught unawares when the man slammed his forehead into his face and he screamed as he fell forward. Before the man could get to his feet, though, Nathaniel was on top of him. The first hit knocked him stupid and the second bounced his head against the concrete... hard enough to give him a concussion and certainly to knock him into oblivion.

Nathaniel ripped the flak jacket from his body, then wrenched his arms high enough up his back to arch his back even in unconsciousness. When he had the mercenary secured again, he turned to his brother who was wiping the blood from a cut on his forehead. "You all right, Brother?"

"Yeah," wincing when he brushed the bruise. "I gotta say, though - I'm really glad you're here. Thanks for having my back."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else," Nathaniel assured Ian. "Even though I do occasionally get wanderlust."

Ian snorted and flexed his face in an effort to force the pain from his mind. "I think we all do. Mama blames Dad for that. She may be right."

"You get tired of this too?"

Ian smirked. "You think I haven't wondered what it would be like to be part of this mission. It's history in the making, Nat. But then I realized *we are* part of this mission. Without us... without Mama... this mission would have gone haywire a long time ago. Those kids wouldn't even have the chance to make the history they are destined to."

Nathaniel nodded, but before he could make a response Ephraim came around the corner. His arms were full of deactivated explosives and he set down the crate he carried to collect the ones Nathaniel and Ian had already discarded.

"I have news," he said, feeling their eyes on him. He glanced at them briefly, then resumed his assembly of the devices. "Joey is here, and he brought a strike team with him. They are currently doing a sweep to make sure they are our only unexpected arrivals and he knows about the mercs. They'll meet up with us near the med bay when they finish their search. These are the last of the

mercs to be disarmed; the rest of the team is awake and has taken care of the others. We need to know where to move them to though. We figured you would want them confined."

Ian frowned. "Why didn't you ask Caleb? He is Mama's second."

"He is unavailable at the moment. He is with the scientists still here, and they are sitting with Mama. I figure that puts you in charge for the moment," Ephraim said to Ian. Ian nodded.

"In that case, put them in the vault. It's the most secure location on this level. It will be crowded, but that's not a concern at the moment. Maybe their discomfort will make them more cooperative."

"And these?" hefting the crate of explosives.

"Take them to the transport room. We'll signal the Admiral to send someone to collect them." Ian looked between Nathaniel and Ephraim. "C'mon. The sooner we're done here, the sooner we can go check on Mama."

Chapter XLVIII

"This is inhumane," one of the more alert mercenaries complained loudly as they dumped her into the vault where the rest of her compatriots were crammed. "We have rights by interstellar law!"

"You make sure you bring that up when you stand before the Council for treason and attempted murder and genocide. I'm sure they'll offer leniency for your treatment here." Ian said with a nasty smile.

"Genocide?? How do you figure??"

"Because the Alpha team is the beginning of a new colony - what amounts to a new race since each member is expected to contribute genetic material to any offspring that are conceived while they are gone. So see... you gave up any rights you might have had the minute you snuck into this installation with the intent of destroying everything here. So you get comfortable now, all right? You're going to be here a while." His turned to leave, then swung around, his smile feral. "Oh yeah... one more thing," he said with complete conviction. "If Mama dies, so do all of you. War is hell, you know."

Ian walked out without a backward glance, shutting the door and leaving the mercenaries in darkness.

"How is she?" Ian asked as he strode into the infirmary. He was glad Eli was caring for his mama; he knew she knew her business.

"Her leg is healing as well as can be expected. She is apt to have a limp for the rest of her life though. The shrapnel did a massive amount of damage, and it was exacerbated by the walking she did to get us all down here and what I believe to be a kick she sustained from our unwelcome guest," jerking her head towards where Fernando remained bound to the chair. "It's the head wound that concerns me more. The bullet only grazed her head, but it was enough to cause serious bruising and bleeding. I didn't put her under anesthetic for that very reason. Unfortunately...."

"When we sent out the energy pulse, it knocked her unconscious with everyone else."

Eli nodded. "And she has yet to wake from that. She may simply be using the forced blackout to recover. But I have no way of ascertaining that, and no way to pull her out of the coma. It's going to have to be something she does on her own... or not." Eli let her shoulders slump in defeat. "I'm sorry, Ian."

He opened his arms, and due to the rapport they had established on her home world, Eli stepped into his embrace... accepting the comfort he offered and tendering her own in return. A throat clearing nearby brought their attention back to the fact that they weren't alone in the room. They slowly separated as they turned to look at Nathaniel. Ian extended his arm and hugged his brother tightly, allowing Eli to slide out of the embrace.

"We have to let Joy and Ria know, Ian," Nathaniel commented softly. "If something happens - they need to be prepared for the worst."

"Nothing will happen to Mama, Nat. I fully believe that she is indestructible. But you're also right. They need to be informed. But we can't bring them here - not until we remove the mercs. There is too much danger. In fact..." He turned back to Eli. "Is your patient stable, Doc? Can we move you and your teammates to the ship for safekeeping?"

Eli looked at Eden, then exchanged glances with Mordecai who nodded his assent. "Kai can carry Eden through the transport field... especially if we can utilize the infirmary on the carrier. Our ship's medical bay is not yet stocked," motioning to the room around her. "Which, of course, was a blessing in disguise as it turned out."

"We'll send Joey with you. He can explain to the Admiral. I'm sure it won't be a problem."

Eli nodded slowly. "I do have a bit of problem leaving Ms Wellesly, however, and I would prefer not to move her yet."

"You're not staying here, Eli. I won't permit it; none of us will. Mama would have a conniption if she knew you were delaying on her account, and trust me... that isn't a pretty thing to watch. Dorcas knows enough to keep an eye on her. If it comes to it, we'll have the ship's doctor transport down. But if we can, we are going to get the three of you out of here and somewhere safer."

"He's right, Eli," Eden contributed as she sat up slowly. Mordecai reached over and offered her his arm to help steady her as her equilibrium shifted. "If we have the chance to leave, we need to take it. Mary would be the first to insist. And do you really want the Chief and Az ganging up on your ass? Pretty sure that between them they can out-stubborn you, and you *did* promise. Don't make me pull out the 'you owe me' card."

"Don't waste it," Mary whispered from her gurney, her voice so soft they nearly missed her words. "You might need it for something *really* important later. I've got this."

At her first words, everyone turned in Mary's direction, but they remained silent as she spoke. But the moment she was silent, the boys exclaimed together, "MAMA!" They moved in to embrace her, but Eli shook her head and motioned them back even as Caleb raced into the room.

"All of you - out," Eli commanded softly. "I need to check Ms Wellesly over, and she deserves the courtesy of privacy while that is done. Therefore you all need to remove yourself to a different

location until I'm finished unless your name is Dorcas... or Eden." She looked up to find no one moving. "Don't make me become unpleasant. Out... now."

Ian held her gaze for a long moment, then nodded, ushering everyone out in front of him. He turned at the door. "You'll let us know...?"

"You know I will. Now go - the sooner we do this, the sooner you can move forward with the things that need to be done." Eli let her gaze drop to Mary's closed eyes. "How do you feel, Ms Wellesly?"

Mary's smirk was the barest ghost of smile, but the effort caused an echoing one to resonate on both Eli's and Dorcas' face. "Like I got shot by a shredder and then kicked for good measure."

"Can you open your eyes for me?"

"I'd really rather not," she replied. "I'm trying very hard not to throw up. I'm pretty sure that would make the headache worse at this point, and I *really* don't want to that. I'm not sure my head would stay attached and I don't have the resources to keep up with it if it falls off."

"Dorcas, dim the lights and bring me a cocktail for nausea and pain. If we can relieve those, it will go a long way to making the Chief functional again. And I think that should probably be our short-term goal."

"You got it, Doc," Dorcas acknowledged even as she moved to take care of Eli's requests. Mary kept her eyes closed, but her smile grew.

"You're very good at that," she commented, sighing slightly when it got darker behind her eyelids.

"Lots of practice," Eli confessed. "Now try and open your eyes for me." She reached out a hand and accepted the syringe Dorcas had for her. "You're going to feel a slight pinching," she informed Mary even as she released the cocktail into her bloodstream with a hiss of pressure. "But you should also feel somewhat better almost immediately." Eli watched as Mary slowly released a breath and its accompanying tension. "Better?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now open your eyes for me. Dorcas, go back to the lights. We're gradually going to increase the light level, giving you a chance to adjust slowly, all right? Then we will check the rest of you over and make sure you're recovering as you should be. Once I'm satisfied, Eden, Kai and I will head out and leave you to whatever it is that you need to do."

"Once you are satisfied? And if you aren't?"

"Then I won't be going anywhere, Ms Wellesly. As your physician, I outrank you. And Dorcas has already conceded to my authority in this matter so don't even consider thinking about it."

This time Mary's grin was full and broad. "You know something, Eli? With you as the leader of this mission, you guys are going to be just fine." Then she blinked and started opening her eyes. The sooner she got herself together, the sooner she could get Eli and the rest of them where they belonged. Then it would be time to deal with the mercenaries... and Fernando.

"Has anyone seen Joey?" Arianna asked her friends some time later. Her conversation with Joy had been soothing and so good for her in so many ways. It was such a novel experience to have family to worry about and commiserate with. But she knew she couldn't forget the family she was going to be living with for the next five years either. She needed to know she could depend on them; just as they needed to know she was willing to rely on them to help her.

So after they'd all talked with Joy for a little while, they had said goodbye and turned to physical activity to keep their minds off their missing teammates and what could be happening. Jacob had dug up an ancient laser hunt game and they had split into two teams. The Admiral had given them access to one of the carrier's holo-rooms, and they had gone at it long and hard. It was quite entertaining and there was a lot of squealing and laughter involved. And when they finally exited the room, they were all pleasantly exhausted.

Now they were back on their own ship - freshly showered and sharing pizza and beer. Arianna's question startled them all into stillness and for a moment only their eyes moved as they looked at one another. Finally Danny spoke.

"Honey, you do know he's really assigned to that big carrier ship next door and not to us, right?"

Arianna gave him a look. "Yes - thank you for pointing that out, Daniel. But I'm also aware that Mama basically put him in charge of us. Wouldn't that mean he would check in with us periodically?"

"I suppose so," Esther drawled. "Unless he was busy taking care of military business. Let's face it - we've got a ship full of people watching over us at the moment. He may not be able to get away to do so personally."

"Or maybe I just needed to go and fetch the remainder of your team," he announced from the doorway. Silence fell for the split second it took for his words to register, but before they could move, Joseph held up a hand and walked further into the room. "There was some excitement while you were separated, and I'm sure your comrades will give you all the details." He looked at Jacob. "Won... Eden," he corrected, not wanting to confuse them with code names, "was hurt while she was defending herself and Eli and Kai. Eli made the necessary repairs and Eden has recovered nicely, but she still needs rest."

"Can I see her?"

"Eli is getting her settled on a hover bed as we speak. As soon as they can, they'll join you guys. I heard Eden grumbling about needing a beer and Eli forbidding it so it should make for an interesting evening," getting the relieved chuckles he was hoping for. He turned to Arianna. "Can I speak to you about a family matter?"

She motioned around the room. "This is my family as well, Joey, so it kind of makes them yours too. Anything you need to say to me you can say in front of them."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Ria. If you want to share it with them later...."

"Joseph," she said sternly, drawing forth the princess persona she only very rarely used. He held up his hands in surrender and shook his head.

"All right, Ria. But don't say I didn't warn you." He closed his eyes to compose himself and took a deep breath. "Mama was also shot, but due to extenuating circumstances, her injury was worse and much harder for Eli to repair than Eden's was. She is cognizant again, but her mobility is limited for the time being."

"What happened?"

Joseph shook his head. "That is part of their story to tell," motioning vaguely behind him. "I wasn't there so I only know the ending." He released another nervous breath and she tilted her head at him.

"What else?" she demanded. "I know there is something more, Joey. If what happened to Mama is Eli's story to tell, then there is another reason you wanted to speak to me privately. So what is it?"

Joe scratched the back of his neck and sighed. "Your father, Arianna. Fernando showed up at the facility behind the mercenaries." He watched her eyes widen as she covered her mouth with her hand. "I don't know why he was there, but the fact remains that he never should have been there. He had no business being there at all."

"And Mama thinks he hired the mercenaries?"

"That I don't know," Joey stated without hesitation. "She hadn't started questioning him when we left and I wasn't there when he arrived."

"Well, I hope Mary gives that man a lesson or two right up side his hard head," Esther said, garnering gasps from around the room. She rolled her eyes. "Oh pul-eeze," she drawled. "Like the rest of you weren't thinking it. Girlfriend here deserves better than him for a papa and the Chief is just the one to teach him that." She turned to Arianna. "We got your back, girl... no matter what."

Arianna dropped her hand from her mouth and shook her head rapidly. "Thank you. Esther. That means so much." She turned back to Joe. "So what happens now?"

"Right now? Not much aside from you celebrating the safe return of your teammates. Mama will let us know when she's done with whatever she needed to do. And then we'll have a better idea how to proceed. But I do think we'll all be celebrating the holiday at Joy's in a couple days."

"I hope so," Hannah said. "I'd like the chance to say goodbye to my family."

"Hannah!!"

"How insensitive!!"

"Kinda heartless, dude!"

"God, Hannah - think much?"

"Guys, that's enough," Arianna barked to be heard over the din they were creating in their outrage. "I know what she meant, and I don't blame her or any of you for feeling that way. I'm luckier than you guys. My family is already here," taking Joey's arm, "and here," reaching for Abigail's hand. "I don't have to say goodbye to most of you, and the other part of the family is working on how to streamline our communication so we can stay in touch."

Joseph jerked and turned to face her. "How did you...?"

"A woman never tells all her secrets, Joey," unwilling to remind him that he'd been the one to tell her about that project. "Now what do you guys say to finding the rest of our friends?"

"How about we join you instead?" said a voice from the doorway. Eden was standing with Mordecai bracing her on one side, and she gave them an exhausted, lopsided smile. They moved as one body to embrace them both, but Eden held up a hand. "Not yet, guys. I'm still a little sore and sensitive. But I refused to remain in bed like an invalid."

"Because admitting you need a little more rest would *kill* that macha image thing you have going for you," Eli said dryly from behind them. "Well, let's move this back inside, please. I need more than a beer after the day I have had," grinning at the glare that earned her from Eden. And then she wasn't seeing anything but the inside of her eyelids when her eyes slammed shut as Arianna attacked her.

Eli's arms lifted automatically - her body registering what was happening even though her brain would take a little longer to catch up - and caught Arianna as she jumped. She cradled Arianna's behind in her arms as long legs wrapped around Eli's waist and tanned arms snaked around her neck. Then their mouths met, and Eli forgot to breathe.

Arianna was vicious and hungry, pouring her anger and anxiety and frustration into the single melding of their lips. Her tongue was forceful as it explored every inch of Eli's mouth, and Eli wasn't shy about responding in kind. She didn't want this to become some sort of frenzied sex display, however, and she began soothing Arianna, reassuring her of her presence and her safety and her love. As Arianna's apprehension eased, the kisses became languid and sensual, and Eli could feel her knees buckling under the assault.

Finally, Arianna tangled her hands into blonde locks and tugged gently, just enough to allow them to separate for air though their lips remained in contact. They both crossed their eyes to be able to focus on one another and then they smiled.

"Hi," Arianna whispered.

"Hi," Eli whispered back.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too... so much. But I'm here now, just like I promised you. Although it was a good thing for Mary I was stranded. Dorcas couldn't have done the surgery she required."

"So she'll be all right?"

"She will. She needs rest, and she will probably always walk with a slight limp now, but she's fine. And the rest will be fine too. We'll get through it... together. But for now I suppose we should go join the rest of our friends. They're going to want to hear the whole story, and I don't want to tell it more than once. It was exhausting enough to live through the first time. I don't believe the telling will make it any less so." Eli released her arms and Arianna slid down her body until her feet touched the floor.

"Will you stay with me tonight?"

"And every night for as long as you will have me, Angel."

"That's a forever commitment. Amado." Eli smiled.

"Forever with you sounds perfect to me."

Chapter XLIX

"Break it up, you two!" Jacob hollered from inside the room, causing the two of them to laugh. "Eden says you don't want to make her have to get up to separate you." Eli and Arianna exchanged grins, and caught one another's hands.

"I'd like to see her try," Arianna proclaimed and she and Eli crossed the room to the sofa Eden was stretched across. Her head was in Jacob's lap and her feet rested on Mordecai's long legs. She had an arm flung over her eyes and Arianna dropped into a kneeling position beside her and lightly tugged on her hand until Eden had removed her arm. Arianna brushed dark hair from Eden's face, causing black eyes to blink open. "How are you, Eden?"

"Well, I wouldn't say it was a red-letter day, but we're all alive and together at the end of it, so I guess I can't complain. I wouldn't mind a beer though," glaring at Eli.

"No, Eden. We talked about this. You are already out of bed against medical advice. No beer or any other sort of recreational drug."

"But Eeeeeiiiiiii," Eden whined as she unbuttoned her shirt. "I'm almost healed. See?" pulling the shirt apart and revealing the pink of newly regenerated skin.

"On the outside, maybe," Eli replied, tapping the smooth skin and watching Eden flinch and wince in reflex. "But your insides need more time and rest." She knelt beside Arianna and met Eden's black eyes uncompromisingly. "Are you really willing to risk your health, your strength... your second heart... to prove you know better than I do about this? Come on, Eden - you are smarter than that. You know I'm right."

"Of course I do," Eden grumbled. "That's part of what makes me crazy."

"You want me to bring the board in here so we can take you back to the ship's infirmary?"

"No... please. I'll be all right if I just lie here for a while."

"Okay, but you need to tell me if anything changes."

"I will. But I wanna hear this story too. I know I missed parts of it... what with being unconscious and all. And I really wanna know what happened after we left the complex."

"Me too," Eli confessed. "Perhaps Ms Wellesly will share with us when it's all over."

"In the meantime, will you tell the rest of us what happened after we left? No one would tell us anything."

"Which is to be expected on a military ship, Titus," Mordecai replied, noting Joseph had left them alone again. "They're as secretive and need-to-know as the Committee. The difference is, they seem to be here for our protection...."

"... as opposed to the Committee whose sole objective was to drive us all crazy?" Naomi cut in with a laugh. "I know they are important to the project and they do serve a purpose, but there were some interview days that I just wanted to pull my hair out by the roots. Given how long it took mamãe to get the color right - that would have been very unhappy."

Jacob caught Eli's eye and raised his brow. Eli gave him a subtle nod that did not go unnoticed by both Eden and Arianna. But they determined to find out the truth later when they were alone.

"Be that as it is," Deborah said drolly, giving Naomi a look. "We're not getting any closer to hearing what happened when you guys got stranded. It was a little crazy around here, let me tell you."

"How so?" Eli asked as she shifted to sit on the floor against Jacob's knees. She tugged on Arianna's hand until she was sitting between Eli's outstretched legs.

"Wait," Isaac called out. "Before we get started, does anyone want a drink? Besides your beer," he said with a look at Eden. "Because Eli already said no." He went around the room, and Luke got up to help him, and soon they were all settled with drinks and Eli broke the silence that had settled.

"So what happened here?"

"Aside from your girl having a come apart at the seams?" Deborah snarked though her smile was tender and her eyes twinkled with mischief. "I mean honestly... you'd have thought Reuben collapsed the field just to mess with her," getting smiles from around the room.

"I was *not* that bad," Arianna muttered though she refused to look at anyone.

"Uh... yeah, Az - you were," Jacob commented. "But it was understandable..." he added, holding up a hand when she looked up and glared at him. "Especially since we lost communication with you guys immediately. Even the ship couldn't reach you for a while, and I know they tried once they blasted the threat back to the Stone Age."

"What was the threat? Was that ascertained?"

Jacob cleared his throat. "From what *I* could discover, it was some sort of drone," and Eli understood exactly what he was saying... and what he wasn't. She nodded. "There was a bit of a scramble - Reuben got us under cover, and as soon as the ship took care of the problem we were brought here by shuttle. So what happened with you guys?" he asked with a yawn, starting a chain reaction around the room. "Sorry... been forever since I've had decent sleep."

Eli waved him off. "I think that is true for a number of us... for more than one reason," squeezing Arianna to her unconsciously. Arianna patted Eli's hands and turned slightly... enough that their eyes met and held. It wasn't until Eden pushed Eli in the back of the head that they broke their stare and Eli turned to glare at Eden. "What did you do that for?"

Eden cocked an eyebrow at her. "Really, Eli?" She snorted. "Tell the story - you were the only one awake for the whole thing. THEN you and Az can go do nasty, wicked things to one another. But cool it til you can share what we all missed, all right?"

Eli narrowed her eyes at Eden, though she couldn't keep the flush from her skin. "You are so lucky I like you."

"And we all know that you like Az the best. So tell the story, Boss. I'd like to hear it before I need to go back to bed," waving her hand when Eli's expression immediately morphed into concern. "I'm all right, Eli. It's just been a *really* long day, you know?"

"Yes, I certainly do." She turned to look back at her patiently waiting teammates. Mordecai gave her a smile and the slightest nod of his head, and Eli released a sigh. "All right, but please feel free to add your own perspectives," she instructed Mordecai and Eden. When they nodded their agreement, Eli took a deep breath and started to weave her tale.

"Wait - you really helped my Papa... after all he did to you? After everything he put us through?" Arianna asked the question to which everyone in the room wanted to hear the answer. Eli was hyper-aware of the eyes and ears turned their way, but her only concern... her only focus... was Arianna. She shifted them just enough to cup Arianna's cheek and let their eyes meet.

"I did, Angel. I had to. My oath compels me to render aid to those in need... even my greatest enemy. Are you saying you would rather I had not?"

"No, Amado... no," her voice dropping to a whisper as she shook her head. "I would never ask you to be less than you are. I just... I didn't realize I could love you more than I already did. You have such a beautiful heart, Eli," covering the hand cupping her face. "I cannot say I would have done the same for him."

"I know I wouldn't have," several of them muttered under their breaths, but Arianna heard them and she looked away from Eli to study her friends.

"Why? Why would you say that? None of you even knew him; he did nothing to you." There was stillness while they communicated silently. Finally, Luke - who was considered the pacifist among them because of his planet's mandate against fighting - met Arianna's eyes and shrugged.

"But he *did* do something to you, Arianna. He hurt you; he hurt you and Eli... deliberately. And we take care of our own."

"And because we know that Eli is better than most of us," Jake added. "And she *would* care for him... because of her oath as a healer and because he's your dad. And despite everything - despite the fact that we can't stand him for the way he has treated you both - you still love him because he's your dad. And she would never let her personal feelings for him override either of those things."

Before Arianna or Eli could formulate a response, Joseph knocked on the doorjamb and peeked in the room. He didn't cross the threshold however, until he was invited inside. He walked to stand beside Eli and Arianna, but he met the eyes of everyone in the room before allowing them to rest on Eli's greenish ones. His expression didn't change, but he wondered at the difference he could see within her just over the last few hours. Joseph didn't even realize he was staring until Eli's eyebrow rose ever higher on her forehead and Arianna flushed a bright scarlet color. Then he cleared his throat and shook his head.

"I beg pardon. I wanted to let you all know that I briefly heard from Mama." smiling at their excited murmurs. "None of you will be permitted to return to the mountain facility. It has been deemed too dangerous. The security agents will pack up your belongings and will have them transported to the carrier where you will be able to pick them up and install them in your quarters here."

"What about the holiday?" Danny asked, getting several nods of agreement from the others in the room. Joseph held up his hands to stall further questions.

"That will go on as scheduled at Joy's. We'll leave tomorrow afternoon. We could all use some sleep and I know Mama wants some agents in place there before we move you."

"And she doesn't think that's an obvious target?" Isaac asked. "I mean, she *did* already move us from there once."

"No one knows where Joy lives. You were moved because you needed a staging area, and Joy deserved better than to have her home and her life disrupted that way. You saw how much room you needed to do your inventories and such," Joseph replied shortly. "But that part is over now. It will just be you and the two family members each of you invited."

"Is that why we were limited?" Hannah asked. "Because I had a very hard time choosing."

"That is one reason, yes. Mama had always planned to invite those who were chosen for the Alpha team to celebrate this holiday as a family. But the main reason is because of the security logistics involved. This assignment will stretch us to the limit."

"I'm looking forward to it," Abigail admitted. "I would like my máthair to know all of you. I think it would give her comfort and some peace to meet the people that will be part of my life for at least the next five years. And maybe it will help our families find friendship and support with one another like we have."

"One big happy family, Girlfriend?" Esther asked with a genuine smile.

"Why not? There are families who are born to each other and families who we choose. They are both still family to us. It makes sense that it would be good for everyone if they were to become family to each other as well."

"It will make for a fun and fascinating holiday anyway," Deborah snarked.

"Joe, what about my medical supplies?" Eli asked above the din of conversation taking place around them. "I still need to replenish...."

"I know. Mama said if you know what you used, you can give a list to the doctor aboard the carrier and he will replenish from his on-hand stock. Otherwise Dorcas can do an inventory before it is shipped up here and the Doc will supply you from that list."

"Can Dorcas do a quick inventory there and let me do a follow up when it arrives? I don't think I could possibly remember everything at the moment - my brain is pretty fried. But I'd like the opportunity to do a final check. It's ultimately my responsibility so I'd appreciate the chance to make certain everything is there."

"A trait Mama values highly," Joseph assured her. "I'll make sure she knows," turning to leave the room. Eli reached for his arm and he stopped with a questioning look.

"How is she, Joe? I know she escaped her bed the moment I was gone."

He snickered. "Yes, she did. But aside from being extremely tired, she appeared to be all right. Dorcas put her in a wheeled chair to keep her off her feet for the duration. Mama was issuing orders left and right while we talked, so she actually doesn't seem to be *doing* much. She is simply holding all the reins and riding herd on those who are."

Eli nodded slowly. "Thank you, Joe."

Before he could turn to leave, Arianna spoke up. "Joey, what about Papa?"

"That I don't know, Ria. Mama didn't share. I got the distinct impression she wanted to talk to you directly about that herself."

"That's fair," she agreed. She held up a hand, and Joseph accepted it as a matter of course. He pulled her to her feet; then Arianna reached down and did the same to Eli. When they were all standing, Arianna turned back to Joseph and wrapped her arms around him. He smiled and returned her embrace. "Thank you, Joey."

"I'm glad I could be here for you, Little Sister. Now why don't you take your mate," using the word he knew meant something to both of them, "and find somewhere to be alone for a little while? Things are liable to be hectic from here on in."

Eli snorted. "Like they haven't been already," muttered loud enough for both of them to hear him. Joseph laughed aloud.

"Exactly," he proclaimed. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I need some rack time as well. Go be good to each other - I'm off," he said with a jaunty salute. Then he was out the door without another word.

"I think he's got the right idea," Eden admitted exhaustedly. "But I don't think I can walk to my quarters."

Eli turned to Arianna. "Will you stay with her? Jacob can go with me to get a hover bed and the meds I need to give her to make her comfortable. Then I'm all yours... I promise."

"Of course," Arianna replied. "We'll be right here waiting for you to come back." Eli leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to Arianna's lips, smiling when it took a minute for brown eyes to reopen. She stroked the smooth skin of Arianna's cheek.

"Be right back," she promised. Then she and Jacob walked out the door.

"That was very clever," Arianna admitted quietly as she sank back to the floor beside Eden.

"It was," Eden admitted with a tired smile. "It was also true."

"Does it hurt very much then?" her question garnering the attention of the others. They waited for Eden to respond.

"It aches, but it doesn't really hurt. I'm just... I feel like I was rode hard and wrung out to dry. I could probably sleep for a week if I had the chance. I just might try it if I wouldn't miss my makuahine's visit - because that would make her worry, and I try not to do that. Worrying makes her unhappy, and no one is happy when makuahine is unhappy."

"That must be a universal axiom," Hannah said with a snort.

"Probably. You guys don't have to wait with me, you know," Eden said. "I know everyone here is tired and anxious to go to bed."

"It's not a problem, Eden," Danny said. "It would feel weird leaving you two here alone after everything. Besides, this way we can all say goodnight."

"Is it still night? I lost track at some point." They looked around and realized they had no way of actually knowing, and it caused them to laugh and begin remembering other moments of lost time. Eden and Arianna were content to sit back and listen as they waited for Eli and Jacob to return.

"So what's the word?" Eli asked as soon as the lift doors closed behind them, confident Hannah could no longer hear their conversation.

"Well, I'll tell you this - Fernando wasn't the one who hired the army to come in and take out the Alpha team. That was someone else. Fernando's agenda was to cause havoc for us. He was going to remove Arianna from the mission."

"You are sure of this?"

"Yeah - I broke into his files as soon as you told me to go looking. I found the communiqués he sent out looking for her."

"So why didn't you tell Ms Wellesly?"

"Because I didn't find them until I tapped into the ship's resources when we were shuttled up here. And then I had no way to reach her. He literally got instructions two minutes before he stepped into the transport field."

"So he was here on this planet? Do we know where?" Eli asked as they crossed into the infirmary of the carrier. She explained her request to the ranking medic in charge and he nodded. He'd been given explicit instructions about giving this woman what she needed from the med bay, and it wasn't worth his job to argue with her. In moments, they were out of the infirmary and headed back to the other ship.

"He was with the Committee," Jacob said softly in response to her earlier question. "From what I can figure, he returned here shortly after Mary's visit to his home world. He intended to have Az removed from the project in one way or the other. I'm thinking the attack was the other because they couldn't find her to convince her to leave voluntarily."

"Do you know who ordered the attack?"

"I have a pretty good idea," handing Eli his Pad. He watched as her eyes widened in surprise and nodded as he accepted the device back. "That's why I'd like for Mary to take a look at the evidence. We don't want to accuse without absolute proof to back it up." His ears perked up at the sound of laughter coming from the rec room. "C'mon. Or we may never get these guys to bed."

Eli smirked. "Would you care to bet?" Jacob burst into laughter and shook his head.

"No way," he said as they entered the room. "That's a sucker bet." The rest took that as their cue and cleared the room quickly. And Eli and Jacob lost the thread of conversation as their attention focused elsewhere.

Chapter L

"So what did Jacob want to share with you privately?" Arianna asked Eli as they made their way across the narrow passageway holding hands. They had followed Jacob as he guided Eden's hover bed towards her quarters just in case they were needed - and had helped get her settled comfortably before bidding them both goodnight. Eli doubted Eden would allow Jacob to remain... especially since his room was right next door, but she didn't want to get caught in the middle of what would probably turn into a lovers' quarrel.

"Caught that, did you?"

"I learned to pay attention, Amado. For a long time it was the closest I could come to knowing anything about you." They stopped in front of Arianna's door.

"About that...." Eli began as she rubbed the back of her neck with her free hand. Arianna grabbed the hand and held on as she shook her head.

"No apologies, Amado. I understand... I really do." Arianna took a deep breath. "I've watched you dying in front of me, so I know what it was doing to you - all of it. And we're both responsible for that. And with that in mind, I have a proposition for you."

Eli looked around and arched a brow as she smirked. "Here in the corridor, Angel? I'm intrigued. Do tell." Arianna blushed and jerked a hand away to slap at Eli's chest. Eli laughed and pulled Arianna in close to her, kissing the top of her head. "Come on, Sweetheart - let's go inside where we'll have a bit of privacy."

Arianna scanned her hand and waited for the door to fully open. Then she tugged Eli inside with her - away from prying eyes - and locked the door behind them.

Their eyes met and in that instant, they forgot about talking and conversation and discussions they needed to have. Instead they focused on the fact that they were alone together by choice for the first time in an eternity, and they came together in a rush of heat and lust.

Their mouths melded - tongues exploring and teasing even as hands mapped increasingly bare skin and fingers reacquainted themselves with pleasure points that caused one another to writhe and moan in ecstasy. It was only when slick, bare skin slid together that Arianna pulled back, breathing hard.

"Not here," she panted. "I can't stand up anymore and I don't want to end up on this cold, hard floor all night. Come to bed with me, Amado," extending her hand to Eli. "Talk will wait until tomorrow." Eli took Arianna's hand, tugging hard until they were pressed against one another. Then Eli put her hands on Arianna's hips, and groaned when wetness painted her belly as Arianna jumped into her arms. She crashed their lips together again and started walking... praying to any deity that would listen that she could get them to the bed without killing them first.

There were only a couple of minor mishaps and that just made them break off their kiss to laugh with each other. Then they reached the bed, and Arianna loosened her legs from around Eli's waist, pushing her foot against the bed with just enough force to spin them around and put Eli on the bottom as they fell.

"Oof!" was the only exclamation Eli had time for before Arianna claimed her with passion, tongues dueling in an open-mouthed kiss as Arianna rocked against her. Eli shifted her hands to guide Arianna harder against her to find her hands caught and raised above her head. She opened her eyes as she felt Arianna move away from her, chasing the lips she was nowhere near finished exploring. Arianna shook her head; Eli frowned and sat up, shivering in reaction when Arianna's wetness cooled as she slid down until their centers almost touched.

Arianna released one of the hands she held, not at all surprised when it landed on her waist and slid back to caress her ass. She bit back a moan and allowed her hand to smooth out the furrows on Eli's forehead, causing hazel green eyes to meet her nearly black ones.

"Angel...?"

"Shh, Amado. This is my time," covering pursed lips with her finger and shuddering when Eli's tongue slid from her mouth to lave it with thorough attention. "Eeeeeiiiiii," she moaned as her eyes slammed shut, getting a wicked smile from Eli before she felt a light kiss being pressed to her fingertip. Arianna felt Eli shift back away from her and she opened her eyes.

"What's wrong, Angel?"

"Nothing, Amado. Nothing at all. I just...." She broke off and Eli waited, knowing Arianna was organizing her thoughts. "Before... when we did this - when you claimed me as your mate...." Arianna blew out a frustrated breath and then automatically relaxed when Eli started running her hand up and down her back. She trailed her hand up Eli's chest and tangled it in blonde hair, scratching Eli's skull lightly and smiling at the purr it elicited. Arianna sighed. "When we were together before, you claimed me as your mate even though I wasn't aware of it at the time. I would like to claim you, Eli - to make you my mate as I am yours."

Eli studied Arianna's eyes so closely she could see the swirls in the brown rimming blown black irises. She brought their lips together for a brief, chaste kiss, then laid back with her hands raised above her head. "I am yours, Beloved - I always have been. It is time for you to own that fact... and me."

Arianna sucked in a trembling breath, relishing Eli's surrender before she leaned down and took possession of Eli's lips gently. She mapped them carefully, memorizing everything about Eli's mouth before moving her concentration elsewhere.

Arianna laved the smoothness of Eli's neck, delighting in the delicate green color Eli's skin flushed behind her attention. It was everything to literally watch the skin tone return to its normal, healthy

green. Arianna sat up again and lightly ran her fingertips over Eli's bare torso, savoring the goosebumps that sprang up in wake of her touch.

"Angellllll," Eli moaned, shivering uncontrollably as she arched into the stroke. Arianna looked up into bright emerald eyes and couldn't stop the grin that creased her lips... or the tears that flooded her eyes. For all her experience, she had never *felt* this except with Eli and never before to this intensity. She was startled when she felt the brush of Eli's hand on her cheek. Arianna caught the hand and held it, skimming a light kiss over the palm and watching another tremor shudder through Eli's body.

"I love you, Eli," she whispered. "So, so much. I never knew what it was to feel like this... until you."

Eli smiled, emerald eyes glowing and skin flushed a lovely shade of spring green. "I love you too, Arianna," she whispered, lifting her other hand to cradle Arianna's face. "You complete me."

Arianna leaned into the touch and allowed her head to be guided down until her lips touched Eli's. There was no rush in this kiss; instead there was passion and joy and love. And it went on and on for an eternity. Soon they were breathing harshly through their noses in an effort not to lose consciousness from lack of oxygen.

Eventually however, Arianna pulled back enough to meet Eli's eyes. "Mine," she growled, and shifted her attention from Eli's kiss-swollen lips. She moved down Eli's neck, marking her pulse point and celebrating the strong life beneath her.

Eli's breasts received greater attention... and much more teasing. Arianna's touch was feather light to begin with - just a gentle tracing around the perimeter of her breasts and a slow working inward in small, concentric circles. Eli arched her back, pushing into Arianna's fingers seeking a firmer touch. In response, Arianna tweaked a nipple once... hard enough to pull a groan from deep within Eli's chest and force her back to bow higher. Immediately Arianna leaned down and sucked the breast into her mouth, alternating licks and nips to the nipple until Eli was writhing beneath her. Then she shifted her focus to the other side, laving it with the same attention, smiling when she heard Eli start to beg.

"Please, Angel... Angel, please. Beloved, I need you."

Those were the words Arianna had been waiting to hear apparently as they served as the catalyst to lift her head from Eli's breasts and begin her decent down the centerline of Eli's body. She took a long moment to admire the smooth skin and strong musculature under her fingertips and lips, then swirled her tongue in Eli's bellybutton.

"God, Angel... don't tease me. I need you."

Then fingers, lips and tongue met wet heat and Arianna moaned at the taste and feel of Eli's obvious response to her. Her strokes were languid as she reacquainted herself with Eli's most intimate self; but soon her touch became strong and firm, wanting to feel Eli's wet warmth contract around her. Eli was soon soaring and shaking in release - not once, not twice, but three times Arianna brought her to orgasm. The first was almost immediate, as though Eli had been craving Arianna's touch forever. The second followed quickly on the heels of the first, brought to bear by the mere stroking of Arianna's tongue. The third, however - that was coaxed to fruition by both fingers and mouth and was drawn out until Eli was pulling Arianna up to lay on top of her. Their sweat-slicked skin slid together easily and they moaned in tandem at the ecstasy that sparked along their nerve endings.

"No more, Angel," she panted. "I can't."

Arianna smiled and curled into Eli's body, trembling when Eli wrapped her arms around Arianna as though she couldn't bear the thought of any space between them. She smoothed her hands over the quivering stomach muscles underneath her. "Mine," she whispered, her smile growing when Eli's embrace tightened around her.

"All yours, Angel," exhaustion clearly evident in her tone. Arianna brushed a kiss over Eli's breast.

"Sleep, Amado."

"But...."

"Shh," Arianna whispered as she snuggled further into Eli's body. "Sleep now. You can have your turn when you wake. I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

Arianna heart broke a little when she heard the whispered plea. "Swear," she replied, and felt Eli's arms tighten briefly again before she dropped into an exhausted slumber. Despite the unresolved sexual tension still running rampant through her frame, Arianna closed her eyes and let the sound of Eli's heartbeat relax her, never realizing when it lulled her into sleep.

Arianna woke with her body tingling to find Eli crouched over her, showering her neck and breasts with lavish attention. She wound her hands into short blonde hair, tugging just enough to bring Eli's attention to the fact that she was no longer sleeping. Eli grinned.

"My turn," she rumbled, sliding one hand down into Arianna's slick, wet heat. She was so wet Arianna had to wonder how long Eli had been awake loving her. Then she bent her back in response to the feeling of being unexpectedly filled by Eli's touch.

"Eeeeeeliiiiii," she drawled.

"Mine," Eli growled possessively, leaning down to mark Arianna's smooth skin. Arianna's hands clenched against Eli's scalp, and she moaned at the bite that followed.

"Yours, Amado - only yours. Please, Amado... I need your mouth... please Eli."

Eli took Arianna's words to heart, sliding down her body and adding her lips and tongue to the mix and smiling at the groan it drew from Arianna's depths. Her orgasm hit hard and Eli used both fingers and tongue to pull a second longer release from Arianna's body. Arianna was still trembling when she tugged on Eli's hair, eliciting a growl that set off another round of tremors.

"Oh, Holy Father," Arianna groaned. "Enough, Amado. I can't take anymore right now."

Eli shared one more intimate kiss with her, then slid up Arianna's body, spooning behind her before rubbing light circles over her belly. "Can I tell you something, Angel... and not have you laugh or think I'm a sentimental old fool?"

"Let's go with yes, and you tell me. But if it's actually funny, you have to laugh with me, all right?"

"Fair enough," Eli agreed, brushing her lips over Arianna's shoulder and grinning at the trail of goosebumps she left in her wake. "I've missed this," she confessed softly, continuing to trail her fingers up and down the middle of Arianna's torso. "Not the love making," wincing when Arianna jerked in her arms. "Not *just* the love making, I mean - because that intimacy and level of trust with you is something I treasure... and have obviously missed," feeling Arianna's silent chuckle under her fingertips. "But more than that, I missed *this*," tightening her arms. "*This* intimacy fills me in a way I can't explain, and I missed it so much when you weren't here. I ached for it, and that made me angry - that I wanted something so badly that I would never again be permitted to share."

Arianna turned in Eli's arms until she was lying flat on her back and looking up into hazel green eyes reflecting the ambient light in the room. "I think there will always be things we both regret about the way we did things... about the things we let happen between us," seeing Eli bite her bottom lip as she nodded her head and let her eyes shift to one side. Arianna cupped Eli's face with one hand and gently nudged her until they were looking at one another again. "We're both to blame, Amado... equally culpable. However, in an effort not to let our history repeat itself, I have a proposition for you."

Eli grinned rakishly. "I've decided I like being propositioned by you, Angel. The last time turned out pretty well for both of us, I think." She chuckled when Arianna swatted her.

"Keep it up, wise acre. We don't have to have those sort of propositions anymore for a while," smirking when Eli's eyes widened.

"I'm being quiet now," Eli commented, smashing her lips together tightly. Arianna laughed.

"I love you, you know... so much I can't even begin to tell you," Arianna replied, stroking the cheek she still held. "And I don't ever want to do without it again. I want to do things right this time - give us a real foundation we can live with and build on." Eli nodded. "So I was thinking - maybe we should talk about *everything*. Not just the things we find interesting or that we think will interest each other, but the wide-open truth about all aspects of our societies and cultures... our religions and faiths... our histories and families. For instance, did you know that if I hadn't been a princess, I would have pursued a career on stage like my several time removed great grandmamma did? She was quite famous on my world, you know - much like Joy is now."

Eli's eyes widened. "Really?? Even with your genius??"

Arianna shrugged. "Even then. I love science, don't get me wrong. There is something about its order and exactness that appeals to me in a very basic way. And I'm thrilled, of course, that fussion became what it is. But performance is something I do for me. The fact that I can share that talent with others and bring joy to them through my music is just a bonus in my book."

"I never would have guessed... even knowing how much pleasure you get out of singing."

Arianna nodded. "That's just what I mean. We need to know these things so they can't come between us and break us up ever again. Because I won't let you go without a fight, Eli... not now that I know that you want this too. And I have never been known to fight fair on anything I really wanted."

"I do, Angel... so much."

"So we talk about everything this time... good and bad?"

"Absolutely. Whatever it takes," Eli agreed with a yawn. Arianna yawned immediately afterwards and pushed Eli over. "Wha...?"

Arianna curled into Eli's side, tucking her dark head under the light green chin and curving one arm possessively over Eli's thin waist. "I know we still need to talk. I owe you a story, and you owe me one as well. And there are numerous other things we need to discuss... eventually. But right now, it is still oh-holy-crap-o'clock in the morning, and yesterday was an everlasting kind of day. We need some more sleep because I'd actually like to remember what we talk about when we start sharing all that stuff."

"That would probably be for the best," Eli commented.

"Right. So shh... it's sleeping time now, Amado. I love you."

Eli bent her head just enough to brush a light kiss over dark locks. "I love you, Beloved. Happy dreams, Angel." She felt Arianna smile against her skin.

"They already are, Elizabeth," feeling Eli's sharp intake of breath at the use of her full name. "I'm in your arms again, and I am never letting go," tightening her grip further as she drifted off to sleep.

"Goodnight, Angel."

"So who's going in there?" Esther asked as she looked around at the rest of the Alpha team congregated in front of Eli's accommodations. Everyone took a step back and her eyes widened as she shook her head. "Uh uh! Not me!" she proclaimed definitively. "I like living!"

Eden snorted and unwound herself from Jacob's embrace. She wasn't exhausted like she'd been twelve hours earlier, but she was still pretty drained. She could feel her body struggling to recover from the blood loss despite Mordecai's contribution. Though Eli had supplemented that with synthesized blood, the fake stuff was never as beneficial as the real McCoy and it took longer to integrate into her system. Still it was better than having to wait for her own body to produce enough blood to make her mobile again. She'd still be in a bed in the mountain complex if that was the case.

Now she stepped forward and turned to face the others. "You guys go ahead to the mess hall," knowing they had to go to the carrier to eat. "I'll take care of waking the newlyweds. We'll meet you over there shortly. We still need to find Joe."

"I'm right here," he commented from the back of the group, causing all heads to turn in his direction. "I came to see if you guys wanted to have some breakfast before we go back down to the planet."

"Can we eat at Joy's if we skip breakfast here?"

"She's not cooking if that's what you're asking," Joseph replied with a smile as he watched their demeanors fall. "I'd suggest eating here. It may be a while before you get to otherwise."

Everyone turned to Eden who shrugged at them. "Go ahead. We're not going anywhere without Az and Eli. And I still need to wake them."

"Why?" Arianna said as she exited her quarters holding Eli's hand. "Are we still sleeping?" she asked Eli. "Because if that's the case, I want to go back to my other dream. It was a lot more pleasant than this one."

"Mine too," Eli agreed with a smile. She squeezed Arianna's hand, then released it, moving to Eden's side and checking her over with the eye of a physician. "The rest of you go with Joseph, please," she said in dismissal, knowing she wouldn't get an honest answer from Eden as long as they had an audience. The other team members seemed to understand and left without argument. Eli waited until they were down the hall before she spoke.

"How do you feel?"

"Tired but I'll live, and that's the important thing, right?" Seeing Eli and Arianna both nod emphatically made her smile. "I'm also curious about the byplay between you two last night, but we can discuss that on the way to breakfast, right?" glancing between Eli and Jacob.

Eli shrugged. "I guess we can. Angel's been waiting to hear about that too since we were both a little preoccupied last night." Eden held up a hand.

"No over-sharing," she demanded. "I don't need to know those things about you two, all right? It's enough that I can see the difference in you both. Now tell me whatever it is that you and Jake were on about."

Eli exchanged a look with Arianna, then motioned her to walk ahead with Jacob. That way, she could talk softly and they would still be able to hear her. This wasn't something she wanted to be overheard. With a sigh, she tucked Eden's hand into the crook of her elbow and started talking.

Chapter LI

"So why hasn't Mary done something about this? Surely she knows...."

Jacob shook his head. "Not necessarily, Az. Personally though I know they've been looking, I'm convinced they *don't* have this information yet. The only reason I found what I did was because I tied into the ship's systems, which put me into the middle of all kinds of other interesting material. Frankly I'd still be digging if I had continued using standard hacker protocols."

"Does anyone else here appreciate the irony that something illegal like hacking has protocols to follow?" Eden asked with a grin. She turned to Jacob. "You're not afraid of them finding out?"

Jacob smirked at her. "Kinda puts them in a bad light if they make a big deal of it, right? Besides, I don't care about the other crap so it won't get leaked by me. My only concern was the stuff that affects us - the Committee and Az's old man and the mercenaries and all. I figure we can give what we have to Mary, and she and her team can take it from there. That's as close to using the proper channels as I can get."

"Is it wrong that I'm glad Papa didn't have anything to do with bringing those mercenaries to bear? I know him coming into a secure facility with the intent to basically kidnap me and destroy the Alpha team is bad, and he should certainly be taken to task for it. But I'm glad he didn't hire those people to kill everyone. I could never have forgiven him for that."

Jacob pursed his lips and frowned. "I'm pretty sure you wouldn't have been able to, Az. You wouldn't have been alive long enough. What I found shows we were all meant to have died in that attack anyway. The mercs had kamikaze orders - they were to destroy us or die in the attempt. You and your old man would have been collateral damage along with the rest of us." He flinched when Eden smacked him in the back of the head. "Ow! Dammit, Eden! Whaddya do that for??" She jerked her head towards Arianna who had stopped walking and had covered her mouth with her hand. "What's wrong, Az?" he asked with sincere concern, reaching out a hand to her.

Arianna shook her head and took a step back, her eyes locking onto Eli's. Eden sighed.

"C'mon, genius," she hissed as she took Jacob by the arm. "I'm gonna explain the finer points of tact to you." She glanced at Eli, whose eyes hadn't shifted from Arianna's. "We'll meet you in the mess hall, Boss." Eli raised a hand slightly to acknowledge her words, but otherwise she remained stock-still. "Let's go, Jake. I need something to eat."

He started to open his mouth to protest, still unsure what he had done that had caused Arianna such upset. A quick shake of Eden's head caused him to rethink, and he let her lead him from the lift and down the passageway towards the mess hall. When they reached the corner, they both looked back to find Arianna locked in Eli's fierce embrace. Then they moved on without another word.

As soon as Jake and Eden had moved two steps away, Eli opened her arms, and Arianna melted into the hug, savoring the feel and smell of Eli surrounding her. Eli gently rocked them together as tremors coursed through Arianna's body, shushing her and whispering nonsensical words into her ear. When she felt Arianna finally settle and tuck her head beneath Eli's chin, Eli leaned back enough to kiss her forehead and meet dark eyes swirling with a multitude of emotions.

"You all right?"

"I could so easily have lost you yesterday. I could have lost you before you were really mine."

Eli shook her head. "No way," she disagreed. "I had Ms Wellesly looking out for me and Eden watching my back. I was going to be with you again, Angel... no matter what."

Arianna pulled away, her face contorting in anger. "You can't *know* that, Eli! You were in harm's way, and all it would have taken was for one little thing.... Look at Eden!! She was injured defending you!"

"And I was there to heal her, Angel... and Ms Wellesly. I was where I was supposed to be."

"You don't really believe that," Arianna accused flatly, crossing her arms over her chest.

Eli pinched the bridge of her nose, wondering how thing could have gone so haywire in the space of about three standard minutes. "Given the situation, I *do* believe that, Angel. If someone had to be left in a battlefield scenario, better that it was me than almost anyone else. Not because I have a death wish or feel that I'm a disposable asset. But because of everyone on this team, I'm the one with the most viable warrior skill set to this set of circumstances."

"Would you have chosen that then?" huffing at Eli's confused expression. "If you had been given the choice, would you have risked everything... chosen to leave me and given us up for the chance to be some kind of hero?"

Eli could feel her ire rising and she blew out a frustrated breath. "Angel, you're looking at this all wrong."

"Answer the question, Eli," Arianna demanded.

"Even knowing what I know now? Yes, I would have risked everything! Because my skills were needed there," growling as she turned away from Arianna's stony countenance. "Eden would have bled out and Ms Wellesly would have likely lost her leg without my assistance. Angel... everything happens for a reason. I truly believe that. And while I would much rather that much of what has happened to us be different, I can't deny the outcome of us together because of those things."

Eli turned at Arianna's whimper and found she was tightly wrapped around herself as though to protect herself from the truth of Eli's words. Eli took a step forward, then halted when she felt Arianna stiffen. She sighed.

"Angel... this is who I am - a warrior and a healer. I can't change that; I really wouldn't want to." She sighed again when Arianna's expression didn't change. "I want you to think about something for me, Sweetheart. I know it scared the crap out of you for me to be in that compound without you... and moreso now that the reality of the danger we were in has been brought home in a very personal way. But think about this - there are so many things... so many decisions that could easily have kept us apart. What if you had never pursued science and discovered fuission? Or if you had chosen to follow your many times great-grandmamma to the stage? Or if Malcolm hadn't been infected with the AIDS virus? Or if I had followed my MaTb's desire for me to become the next leader of our clan? Or if I had gone on that fateful crusade with my brother... I could have died as well. There are so many things - single, solitary things - either of us could have done that would have prevented us from being together. Yet they didn't. We chose the right things; we made the right decisions - to bring us together now... here... in this place. I have to believe everything works out like it's supposed to... even if we don't understand it at the time. And Angel - I will *always* do what it takes to protect you.

"You can't protect me from you though, Amado. If something was to happen to you now... it would destroy me."

"Then I will take every precaution I can to prevent that from happening."

"Except walking away from danger," Arianna replied flatly.

"I will walk away when I can, Angel. Yesterday, I couldn't, and I wouldn't have even if had I known what was coming. Although I always try to have someone I trust watching my back, I'm a healer, Angel, as well as a warrior, and sometimes either of those things could put me in danger. Please don't ask me to be less than I am."

That brought Arianna's head up to meet Eli's face, and the anguish she could see in the hazel eyes made her rush into Eli's arms without hesitation. "No, Eli... never! That's not what... I didn't mean... I'm just... I'm selfish, Amado. I don't share very well, and I want you with me. The thought of someone or something taking you away from me..."

"I promise you, Arianna - I will do everything in my power to ensure that I never hurt you that way, all right? Angel, it's okay to be scared; it's even okay to be selfish sometimes. But my job... my responsibilities are also going to require that you share me with others sometimes... in a professional capacity only," she added with a grin. "I will always come home to you."

Arianna tightened her arms around Eli's waist, squeezing so tightly Eli was gasping for breath. "Let's just be clear about something," Arianna said as she loosened her grip, smiling as she felt Eli suck in a deep breath. "I'll share you when I have to, and I'll try not to get angry when you put yourself in danger... although you'll probably need to have this discussion with me more than once. I really am quite selfish. However," she said sternly, leaning back to meet Eli's eyes. "If you go and do something stupid and leave me by myself? I promise you I will find you in whatever afterlife your soul ascends to, and I will haunt you. You will wish you had never met me. Do we have an understanding?"

Eli chuckled and hugged Arianna to her snugly. "We do indeed, Angel. Now shall we go get breakfast before the rest believe we have gone back to our room to do some more of those nasty unspeakable things to one another Eden was so concerned with not hearing?"

Arianna laughed aloud, grabbing both of Eli's hands. "If I thought that was a legitimate proposal, I'd go with the second option. Breakfast will be there later, and I like doing wicked things with you."

"If the two of you don't stop talking right now and get in here for breakfast," Eden said as she leaned against the doorjamb of the dining hall, "the only unspeakable things you'll be doing together will involve being jettisoned out an airlock."

"Is that some kind of new kink fetish?" Arianna asked Eli with an earnest look though she couldn't disguise the twinkle in her eyes. "I don't believe we have that one on my home planet, and my people are considered to be among the most well-versed and versatile in the galaxy when it comes to sex play."

"ARGH!!" Eden roared. "I'm gonna go find some of Mary's silver adhesive tape if you don't stop talking. You'll just have to eat through a straw."

Arianna crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. "That's just mean, Eden. How am I supposed to eat anything good with a straw?" giving Eli a once over.

Eden smirked. "Not my problem, Az."

"It will be," Eli promised. "You know what happens when Angel and I are separated."

"Crap!" Eden muttered. "Fine... just stop *talking* about it, all right? I do *not* need to know what my best friends are doing to each other."

"Jealous?" Arianna teased.

"No... exhausted from trying to keep from hearing," Eden admitted, giving them a droll look. "Now c'mon," she said as she opened the door and ushered them inside to the cheers and greetings of their fellows. "Before Joe decides we need to leave right this very second."

Arianna frowned. "Why would he?" grabbing a tray and walking towards the serving line. "Are we suddenly on a timetable or something?"

"Probably a little bit of both," Eden said. "A timetable and something more," she clarified at Arianna's confused expression. "He was mumbling something about schedules and escorts and Mama when he hightailed it out of here a few minutes ago." She shrugged. "I don't know. I just told him I'd hurry you guys up."

Eli turned back to the door. "Is there a problem? Should I go...?" Eden caught her arm.

"You should sit down with your lady and eat some breakfast. I'm sure Joe will let us know what's going on soon enough. And if you're needed for something, you'll probably know sooner than that. But either way you're gonna need sustenance to get through the day so go sit down with Arianna and chew your food slowly before swallowing."

Eli snorted and burst into laughter. "Did you just channel my MaTb?"

Eden looked horrified. "Oh, gods... I think I just channeled *mine!*" That just made Eli laugh harder and she knew it was partly an emotional release from the upheaval of the last few days especially. But it was also just funny - she supposed that would happen to all of them at some point. It seemed to be universal... that moment when a person realized they had suddenly become their parents. She snorted through her laughter and met Arianna's laughing eyes only to realize Eden was mumbling to herself. Eden frowned hard at Eli and crossed her arms over herself. Eli fanned her face and wiped her eyes in an attempt to bring herself under control.

"What are you guys doing down there?" Isaac asked plaintively. "Share with the rest of the class."

Eli looked up at him, but her peripheral gaze caught both Eden sulking and Arianna covering her mouth to contain her hysterics and her laughter erupted again. The rest of the team was watching in amused concern - amusement because Eli had the kind of laugh that made people want to laugh with her; concern because she very rarely shared that aloud with them. Truthfully they were all too close to the edge emotionally after everything and this was probably the safest and most satisfying ways to vent some of that sentiment. Eli shook her head and fanned her face some more, indicating there was no way she was going to be able to relate the story to them any time soon.

Fortunately Hannah was quick on the uptake. "I can tell them, Boss if you don't mind me sharing?"

"Why should *she* mind?" Eden grumbled. "*She's* not the one going to be embarrassed."

"Oh, cheer up, Eden," Arianna said with a smile. "It could be *much* worse. You could've channeled my *madre* instead."

Eden cocked an eyebrow at her. "You're not talking about *Mary*, are you?"

"Certainly not," Arianna proclaimed. "*Mary* is *MAMA*, not to be confused with *madre*. I would be quite pleased to channel *Mama*."

"So what happened?" Isaac asked impatiently. The rest turned to him in disbelief, but Hannah gamely relayed Eden's moment of epiphany. Then she turned to Eden with a smile.

"Your *母* should be pretty happy with you, Eden. You recognized your milestone fairly young. My *母* told me that my sisters and I were nearly grown before she had hers. Apparently it really is a universal phenomenon."

"On the plus side, there are certainly worse people I could emulate besides my *makuahine*."

"Ooooooh, yes," Arianna chirped up. "Trust me. I hope for all our sakes we are old and gray before I have a moment like that."

"Is your máthair mean or crazy, Arianna? Or like your athair... your papa?" Abigail asked, her blue eyes wide in concern.

"What? Oh, no... my madre is normal enough, I suppose," Arianna replied with a shrug. "She's just very distant... kind of removed from being a parent. I think she thought her job was over once she gave birth to me."

"That's okay," Joseph said into the silence that followed. "You have a mama now who will treat you like her own until the day she dies. We're still taking bets on if she can manage to continue from beyond the grave."

"I wouldn't bet against her," Eli said as she swallowed the last of her juice. "So what's the plan, Joseph?" wiping her mouth and setting her napkin on top of her plate.

"Go pack up enough for four days. Mama will explain everything when we get to Joy's. Be quick - we'll be leaving in thirty standard minutes."

"What's the rush?" Luke asked as they all made their way to the disposal to take care of their dishes.

"The timetable's been pushed up considerably. Mama will explain everything. Come to the shuttle bay as soon as you're ready. If we can leave sooner, it's all to the better. Eli?" All eyes turned in her direction when Joseph called her by name, and Eli stopped and arched an eyebrow at him in question, her hand still clutching Arianna's. Joseph cleared his throat. "Dorcas finished your supply list this morning and sent it to me. If you will open your security wall on your Pad for me briefly, I'll pass it along immediately."

"Of course," she replied, pulling her Pad from her pocket and expanding it for use. In a moment, she was done typing and looked at him expectantly. "Satisfactory?"

Joseph nodded. "It should be in your box...." He stopped speaking when Eli nodded. "I love when technology works the way it's supposed to," he said with a grin. "That was all I needed. I wanted to get that taken care of before we got completely wrapped up in the holidays and it slipped my mind."

"Thank you, Joseph. We'll meet you in the shuttle bay shortly." And with a nod, Eli and Arianna moved to catch up with their compatriots headed back to the settlement ship.

"Wonder what that's all about?" Arianna whispered as they strolled through the narrow passageway leading back to their ship.

"Which part, Angel?"

"All of it actually," Arianna admitted. "Although I can understand Joey wanting to give you your list straightaway. As I have been given to understand, that is the way of military men and women from this planet. But moving up the schedule? I wonder what's happened to make Mama decide to do such a thing. Because I don't for a minute believe that she did it on a whim. There has to be a reason for her to have suddenly changed everything with no warning."

"I don't know, Beloved. I'm certain she had her reasons. Ms Wellesly has never struck me as frivolous."

"That's going to have to change you know," Arianna commented as they turned into their own corridor.

Eli frowned. "What is?"

"Ms Wellesly. She's Mama now," watching in amusement as Eli's eyes widened comically. "She adopted me into her family, Amado, making me her daughter and her my mama. Since we are now mates... even without a ceremony... she becomes part of your family as well, doesn't she?"

"Oh... crap," Eli muttered as she came to a complete halt in the middle of the hallway. "And I promised to introduce Ms Wellesly to my MaTb over the holiday. Angel...."

"Breathe, Amado," realizing Eli was actually distressed about the coming introduction. "We'll figure something out. Maybe you don't have to call her Mama right away. I'm sure Mama will be thrilled if you're finally comfortable enough to call her Mary. Go get your things packed. We don't have much time before we need to meet Joey and the others in the shuttle bay." She pushed Eli towards her room and opened her door.

"I love you, Angel."

"I know, Amado - I love you too."

Chapter LII

"So tell me about these kids," Prudence said to Joy as they sat down with a glass of wine and stretched out. Prudence had come a day earlier than planned at Joy's behest. She'd wanted the opportunity to bring Prue up to speed on what was going on with the family before they were inundated with all kinds of 'extended family' that neither of them had even met yet.

"Oh, ask me something simple, why don't you?" Joy groused after a swallow of wine.

Prudence smiled and shrugged. "Okay," she agreed amiably. "Why did you invite all these people you don't actually know into your home for the holiday?" sipping her own wine and sighing as she relaxed.

"That's actually a little easier to answer - Mama asked." Joy took in Prudence's gobsmacked expression and chuckled. "Which part is more stunning - that fact that Mama asked for something or the fact that I said yes?"

"The fact that Mama asked. Did she really ask you to host a holiday celebration for all these people?"

"Yes, she really did. Of course, circumstances have changed since she first made her request. I wasn't originally supposed to have *everyone* here except for the actual meal. The kids were going to come stay for a couple days; their family members were supposed to arrive on the holiday and share the meal, then they were all going off to the space dock to spend their final days together there before launch. Now," Joy continued after another sip of wine, "they are *all* going to spend a few days here before the scientists are removed to their ship to finish their launch preparations. I'm not sure what Mama plans for the families to do... whether they'll stay here or go to the space dock or what. I know there has been a lot of upheaval, and security has become a nightmare."

"Guess you'll be glad to get back to the ballet just for some time to relax," Prudence offered with a smile. Joy chuckled.

"I'll be glad to get back to the ballet because I've missed dancing. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad to have been a part of all this... mayhem, I guess you'd call it for lack of a better word. This is the first time I've ever been included as part of Mama's security venture when I wasn't the one being protected. It's actually been a wonderful experience. And the kids she's protecting...."

"So tell me about them," Prudence demanded. "I should know something about them when I meet them, right? I mean since at least one of them is part of the family now."

"If you asked Mama, they're *all* part of the family. But yes - she's taken special interest in Arianna... with good reason. You'll like her. You'll actually probably like all of them. They're all quite brilliant naturally, and their personalities...." Joy shook her head. "Well, I'll say that all of them living together for the next five years will make for some interesting times; I'm actually hoping at least one of them will write a book about the whole experience. But I'll tell you the little I know about them," pulling out her Pad and passing it over to Prudence. "This will help you put names to faces."

Prudence nodded and pulled up the file, flashing the first picture at Joy. Joy nodded. "That would be our new little sister, Arianna. She's something else."

"Tell me," Prudence instructed as she refilled their glasses.

"Wow," Prudence said quietly some time later. "They really are quite an interesting group of individuals."

"Um hmm It's one reason I wasn't adverse to Mama making this a safe house... or bringing them here for the holiday. Even with the added complication of their families coming in, I think it will still be worth it... for them and for us."

"Well, I'm looking forward to it," Prudence assured Joy with a smile. "What time are they supposed to be here?"

"The first security agents will be here before breakfast; I'm pretty sure my brothers will be among them. I reminded Ian that you were coming early and that us together unsupervised meant unlimited shopping opportunities."

Prudence laughed. "I'm surprised he didn't rush here immediately."

"I'm confident that he'd be a lot more concerned about Mama finding out he left his post than having his bank account lightened by a few credit chits," Joy sniggered.

Prudence laughed harder. "I would be too," she confessed. "I love your mama, Joy... but she scares me sometimes. She's very intense."

"I know - it's what makes her good at what she does."

"Joy, she's exceptional at what she does, and she's trained her agents well. You forget I've actually seen them train together and watched the boys teach at the Academies."

"They let you watch?"

Prudence laughed. "What they don't know won't hurt anyone," she cautioned. "Now what can I do to help you get things ready?"

"Hey, Baby!" Ian greeted as he stepped across the threshold of Joy's house and into Prudence's arms. He lifted her off the ground to bring their lips together, and just held her there for a long moment before releasing her. She cupped a hand to his face as her feet touched the ground once more.

"What's wrong, Darling?"

Ian chuckled wryly and shook his head. "Nat said you'd notice right away. C'mon," he encouraged, clasping her hand in his and tugging her towards the kitchen. "I need to tell you and Joy together so I don't have to repeat myself. And we've got a lot to do and not much time to get it done," he said as he glanced at his timepiece.

"Where's Nat? And Joey?" Prudence asked as they walked towards the kitchen.

"That's part of the story," Ian promised her as he reached out to hug his sister. Joy looked around pointedly.

"You came by yourself?"

"Just to fill you in on what's going on. The first group of agents should be here in about fifteen minutes." She arched her eyebrow at him and he motioned to the table. "Have a seat - I'll get the coffee. Trust me, Joy - you're gonna want to sit down for this."

"What happened??" she asked, recognizing his tone. "Who died??"

"No one, thanks to Eli."

"Eli?? What was she...? You better start from the beginning, Ian."

He nodded and did, starting with the evacuation and subsequent stranding of three members of the Alpha team. When he reached the point of Eli doing surgery on both Eden and Mary, Joy spoke again.

"How lucky for Mama that Eli was one of the ones left behind. Is she all right?"

Ian nodded. "She's going to have some difficulty walking for a while. Eli said Mama would likely have a limp for the rest of her life, but I'm not willing to bet against Mama. She's still very tired, but you know how Mama is. And Eli could only insist on so much before she was removed from the mountain facility with her comrades."

"What can we do?" Prudence asked.

"You're already doing it, I imagine," Ian responded. "The house and adjoining buildings are prepared for occupancy," seeing them nod together. "You've done the shopping that needs to be taken care of."

"And some that wasn't completely necessary," Joy added with a smirk. Ian's head dropped to his chest.

"Did you at least leave me with enough to have a last meal?"

"If you get a hamburger, yes. If you want prime rib, not so much," Prudence replied without missing a beat.

Ian raised an eyebrow at her. "Would now be the time to remind you, *Sweetheart*," growled with a smirk, "that we'll be sharing everything... including that hamburger - because that's all we're going to be able to afford?"

"Good thing for you I've got a great career to support us then, hmm?" Prudence answered fondly as she brushed the hair from Ian's forehead. She leaned down and kissed him, and they lost themselves in it until Joy cleared her throat loudly. Prudence chuckled; Ian glared.

"Just because you're missing Ephraim...." he chided. Prudence's eyes widened and she looked between them.

"Wait... what? What have I missed?" Her glance settled on Joy. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Because there's nothing to tell really... not yet," with a look at Ian. "Ephraim and I have talked, but we agreed it was best to hold off on anything serious until this whole Alpha team situation was taken care of. I won't be responsible for putting one of Mama's agents off their game... especially now. Too easy for too many things to go wrong, and someone could end up dead. We can wait a few weeks until this is over."

"You don't think the job will continue to come between you?" Prudence asked. "I mean - there's always going to be someone to protect; someone else to focus on."

"Yes, but probably not with the same sort of far-reaching consequences that dropping the ball on this assignment would have. And I doubt there will be another mission that entails using every single security team member Mama has so there will be times when he won't be working, and we can focus on us and what we want out of a relationship together."

"You've really thought about this."

"I have. I had to. As Arianna pointed out, Ephraim really wasn't very subtle in his attentions... to the point of obtaining both the boys' and Mama's permissions before he even spoke to me."

"And how do you feel about him?" Prudence asked seriously.

Joy shrugged. "What I know of him, I like. But I would like the chance to get to know him better."

"And what does our new little sister think?"

"She encouraged him to talk to me before I got angry enough to kick him to the curb... metaphorically speaking. She knew I was getting frustrated with his inaction, and even though she really didn't get why I didn't make the first move, she made sure Ephraim understood my upset."

"I really can't wait to meet this young woman."

Ian looked at his chronometer. "It won't be too long. The first set..." The chime of the doorbell interrupted his announcement. "That should be Mama and Nat. Caleb said he and Ben and Adam would stay behind until everyone else was here, and they'd take care of the details of shutting up shop."

"And Mama was okay with that?"

"We overruled her. Dorcas threatened to call Eli," smiling when Joy's eyebrows flew into her hairline.

"And that was effective?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," Ian responded as the chime sounded again. "C'mon. We don't want Nat busting in here with guns blazing. We really would need to contact Eli then. And she's intense enough that she stood up to Mama."

Joy would have asked for further clarification, but they had reached the open door where Prudence was greeting Mary and Nathaniel. Joy stood back a moment and observed - Ian had been right. Mama looked more than tired; she seemed drained. Joy accepted Nathaniel's hug perfunctorily, and he let it go, knowing her preoccupation was warranted. Besides, he would get a real hug later... after she was satisfied Mama would be all right.

Mary limped into Joy's arms having refused to use the wheeled chair Dorcas had insisted on in the mountain complex. Joy embraced her with gentle strength and rocked Mary ever so slightly. Mary just held on for a long moment, then leaned back and kissed Joy's forehead.

"How are you, Daughter?"

Joy laughed nervously and blinked the tears from her eyes. "Much better now that my family is here," extending an arm towards Nathaniel. "Not all of them yet, I know, but with you here, Mama, it's just a matter of time." Then she squealed - Nathaniel had lifted her up and was spinning her around. "NAT!!!" she screamed.

"Son, put your sister down before she throws up all over all of us, please," Mama instructed with a smile. "You know how she feels about that."

Nathaniel released Joy until her feet touched the ground again, then hugged her tightly enough to realign her spine noisily. "I don't get it," he whined. "You let the danseur noble spin you around on stage and you never threaten to puke on him."

"He's never tried to launch me into orbit by seeing how fast he could go either, Nat," Joy replied dryly. She turned back to Mary. "How are you, Mama?"

Mary put an arm around Joy's shoulders and squeezed. "Well I've had better days," she admitted, "But I've certainly had worse. And I'm here to spend my holiday with most of my family - with the rest coming along soon - I'd have to say I'm pretty good."

"Come on in the kitchen," Joy invited, moving slowly in support of Mary's limping gait. "Ian just made a fresh pot of coffee and Prue and I prepared coffee cake this morning. The boys can see to things for a little while. You know they'll keep you informed of what's going on."

"Does this mean I don't get coffee cake?" Nathaniel pouted... much to the amusement of his siblings and a smirk from Mary. Joy laughed.

"You can take that up with your boss," nodding towards Mary. "Prue and I fixed enough coffee cake for us... can't speak about the rest of you." Ian and Nat cut their eyes at each other, then dashed towards the kitchen, pushing and shoving each other out of the way to get there first.

"Would now be the time to tell them...?" Prudence stopped speaking when both young men returned to the door, stuffing coffee cake into their mouths as they leaned against opposite sides of the doorjamb.

"You made enough for everyone?" Mary questioned.

"No, but we did make enough for the family. We expected the boys to be among the first ones here." Joy turned back to her brothers. "Did you save any for Mama?"

"Um hmm," they both muttered with mouths full. They knew better than to try to talk. Mama had rules about talking with a mouth full. Prudence turned to Mary.

"Thank you," she said softly. "You ingrained that habit so well that he doesn't even try to talk to me until he's swallowed. It was one of the reasons I first agreed to go out with him, you know - I didn't have to try to figure out what he was saying. Now c'mon... while there's still some left and it's still warm. Everything is ready; we just have to wait for everyone to arrive."

"Yes, Mama," Ian agreed, having swallowed his last bite. "Nat and I'll take care of things. You enjoy your coffee cake." He turned to Joy. "That was exceptional, Joyfulness."

"And if there's any left, I'm calling dibs," Nathaniel said as he wiped the crumbs off his chest. He backhanded Ian. "C'mon. The next group of agents should be here shortly, and I need to put my stuff away."

"As do I. We'll be back," he said for the benefit of the three women now seated around the kitchen table. They waved and Nathaniel and Ian headed upstairs at a jog, needing to be in the attic to greet their comrades as they entered from the other two buildings. Mama didn't want the downstairs connection to be opened until the Alpha team and their families arrived.

"So I hear Eli threatened you, Mama," Joy said as she poured Mary a cup of coffee. "Do I want to know why? Or how she was able to get away with it?"

Mary gave Prudence a wry look. "Your fiancé has a big mouth that's going to get him into real trouble one day."

Prudence laughed. "It already has. He proposed to me, remember?"

Mary smirked. "So true... though I prefer to credit that to his brilliance. As for Eli," she continued, looking at Joy who had just taken her seat and picked up her cup. "She pulled the chain of command card, reminding me that as the attending physician, she could overrule any and all of us... including me. I made sure she had no reason to stay."

"And what did that bravado cost you?"

"A lot of exhaustion, mostly... and some pain. She's an exceptional doctor, Joy - well trained in her craft. But I needed her out of the mountain and on that ship where she was safe... or at least safer than she was with all the mercenaries we had in custody."

"What happened to them?" Prudence asked softly. "Will they go to trial?"

Mary shook her head. "No. They came in with orders to destroy and were caught red-handed - they failed. I got what I needed from them, and the day after tomorrow, I'll meet with the Council to present the evidence I have. After that...." She shrugged. "They will learn what happens when you mess with family."

"Speaking of," Joy said before the silence could become too painful. "When is Ria due in?"

"How did you all come up with Ria from Arianna?" Mary asked with a hint of impatience. "Her name is Arianna; it's a lovely name. Why don't you and your brothers use it?"

"Because she asked us not to. She said everyone else in the family had a nickname, so she should have one too if she was going to be part of us." Joy shrugged. "She picked it out actually," with a smirk. "Giving the things the boys were coming up with, it was the best choice."

Mary held her gaze for a moment, then nodded. "Fair enough." She looked at Prudence and then back to Joy. "So, did you leave Ian any credit chits?" Joy and Prudence exchanged glances and burst out laughing. Mary grinned and the discussion turned to their preparations.

Chapter LIII

"Mama?" Mary looked up from her desk at the closed office door surprised. She'd known the Alpha team had arrived, but she hadn't been expecting Arianna to seek her out immediately. "Mama?" repeated with a little more concern. "May we come in?" A light dawned in the back of Mary's mind. Of course Eli would come directly to see her - she was a conscientious physician after all and technically still Mary's doctor. With a sigh, she keyed the door latch from her place behind the desk, gratified when Arianna and Eli let themselves in without hesitation. It was only when Eli turned slightly to close the door behind her that Mary realized that their hands were joined. Her eyebrows rose, but she remained silent.

"Mama," Arianna began as she cleared her throat. "This is my mate, Eli," introducing them as though they were strangers. Mary tilted her head, wondering what was going on. "It's important for me that you know Eli as my mate... as my half. Because that makes her part of our family."

Mary's eyes widened as understanding dawned. "And does she know the rights and responsibilities of being brought into this family as well as those of being your mate?" Eli stepped forward, still clutching Arianna's hand tightly in her own.

"I know what it is to be Arianna's mate, and I am knowledgeable about the privilege and responsibility I bear as such. I am still learning about what it is to be part of your family though, Ms Well... Mar... um...."

"Eli, take a deep breath and relax. You can address me in whatever manner you're most comfortable with, though I truly hope one day you'll find the ability to be content calling me 'Mama' as the rest of the kids do. In the meantime, I would like to sit down with you and discuss the responsibility you have towards my daughter... and that she owes to you as well." She held up a hand before Arianna could protest. "You will go through much the same with Eli's MaTb, I'm sure."

"It's all right, Angel," Eli interrupted before Mary could say anything more. "I owe it to you... and to Ms Wellesly... to be clear about my intentions. She's watched me struggle with... everything, really. As your mama, she deserves to know how serious I am about this... about us."

"And what of your mama... your MaTb, Amado? How will I...?"

"You will be your lovely, charming self. All you need to remember is that MaTb is much like Ms Wellesly, and you will get along quite well. After all, Ms Wellesly claimed you as family. I believe MaTb will do much the same."

"Eli," Mary said, breaking the tableau in front of her. "I think you're going to fit into this family just fine. Ian is already on your side, you know... as is Joseph."

"So just over a third then. Not particularly good as numbers go, but better than none."

"Just over a third? Is your math off or is mine?" Mary asked with a smirk. "Two out of seven I figured as not quite a third."

"Actually," Eli replied with twinkling eyes as she raised Arianna's clasped hand to her lips. "It's three out of eight. And I have the most important one on my side already."

Mary laughed aloud. "Touché, Princess," said with an affection that made Eli smile. "Very well played."

"Wonderful. Now that we are done posturing - how do you feel?"

"Are you asking as a doctor?" waiting for Eli to nod. Mary let her mask slip slightly. "I'm still very tired, and there is some residual pain in my leg... especially in the thigh area where the shredder originally went into my flesh."

A light squeeze to the hand she held and Eli released Arianna to move around the desk. Mary didn't stop her, and Eli knelt down beside her. "May I?" she requested. Mary nodded and Eli pushed up the folds of her skirt, immediately understanding why that particular article of clothing had been chosen. Green eyes met brown, and for the first time, Mary recognized the fundamental change in Eli that Arianna had wrought with her acknowledgment of everything between them. But before she could comment on it, Eli spoke. "Angel, will you go find Dorcas and Martha and ask them to come here with a field kit and the hand scanner, please?"

"Of course, Amado. Is everything all right? Shall I retrieve your bag as well?"

"Please."

"Be right back."

Eli waited until Arianna was gone before she looked up into Mary's eyes once more. "This could potentially be very bad, you know."

"I know. But I don't think it is. It's not the shooting, burning pain I had when the metal was still embedded in my leg. It's more like... if I didn't know better, I'd say it was still healing."

"It very likely is. Mary, you need to understand that the damage done to your body, and your leg in particular, was massive. There was only so much I could do to contain it - so much the regen unit could do to heal it. It's why I believe you'll always walk with a limp... even one that is mostly undetectable." She sighed. "May I make a suggestion?"

Mary smirked. "Could I really stop you, Doc?"

"Now that you mention it," Eli grinned. Mary just rolled her eyes and Eli settled back down to work. "Let your team handle things for a little while. I'm going to do an examination - give you some more antibiotics and pain suppressant - then I'd like you to go to wherever in this suddenly humongous place your room is located and take it easy for a while... like until tomorrow. Your people know their jobs and the Alpha team is fine," Eli insisted before Mary could make an objection. "We'd certainly let you know otherwise. But, like it or not, Ms Wellesly, you're humanoid like the rest of us, and even your body needs time to recuperate from what was a severe trauma. We can try the regen unit again and you can get some much needed rest, although I do have some information that could keep you occupied if you prefer to keep your mind busy while your body heals."

"Oh?"

Eli nodded and placed a chip on Mary's desk. "You had your people digging; I had Jake looking as well. This is what he found when he went looking."

Mary cut her eyes in Eli's direction. "This is all a ploy to keep me from having 'the talk' with you isn't it?"

Eli laughed and Mary smiled. There had been so little laughter from Eli for so long that she cherished the sound now. "You found me out," she mock-confessed. "I did all of this just so I wouldn't have to face the gauntlet I'm sure you and the rest of the family are going to put me through. I figured I should get my payback at the beginning in case I didn't make it through to the end."

Mary narrowed her eyes at Eli, delighting in the sparkling green eyes peering back at her. "Cheeky child," she accused, then winced when Eli touched an acutely tender spot. "Ow."

"Sorry," Eli muttered as she continued her examination.

"It's all right, Doc. You have a very gentle touch. My skin is just a little more sensitive."

"For good reason, Chief," Dorcas pronounced from the door that Arianna had purposely left unlatched. "I've got the field kit, Doc. What do you need?"

"You remember the cocktail we mixed up at the mountain?" waiting for Dorcas to nod. "I need another one of those. I need to make sure things are healing and Ms Wellesly is already in a fair amount of pain. I see no reason to make it worse."

"You got it, Doc."

Martha followed almost immediately, and Arianna was just behind her. In moments Mary was relaxed and allowing Martha to run the hand scanner over her as Eli gently prodded the tender skin of her leg without incident. Dorcas moved back out of the way to stand beside Arianna.

"She's good people, you know?" Dorcas said as Eli continued her examination unaware of their scrutiny. "And she loves you so much. According to the Chief," Dorcas continued at Arianna's confused expression, "Eli minded her business because of you when they were under fire, trusting that the Chief would protect them despite her own desire to fight."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah... the Chief said she told Eli she didn't want to have to tell you that we couldn't protect her because she had to go play the hero. Of course the Doc got her own back once she had to take charge of the infirmary."

"Why did she?" Arianna asked. "Aren't you...?"

"I'm the team medic, not a doctor," Dorcas replied with a shake of her head. "I can do the basic stuff, and if they had been shot with lasers or standard ammunition, I would have been able to take care of things all right. But with a shredder..." She shook her head again. "My primary function in that regard is to patch 'em up and send 'em on for serious medical attention." Dorcas drew a deep breath. "Given the situation we were in, the Chief would have died had the Doc not been there to care for her wounds."

"Would she still have been wounded though? After all, the three Alpha team members wouldn't have been there for her to protect."

Dorcas bit her lips thoughtfully. "I think she would have, yes. They came in shooting; she would have been caught by them at one point or another. And from what she told me, Eden's actions were pretty timely as well."

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Mary asked waspishly.

"Healthcare, Chief," Dorcas replied without missing a beat. She held Mary's gaze without blinking.

"Uh huh," Mary said skeptically. "Well, if you're done with that titillating subject of discussion, can you please ask my children and Caleb to join us please? Caleb first."

"Of course, Chief. Doc, do you need anything while I'm out?"

"No thank you, Dorcas. I'm almost done here."

Dorcas nodded. "Be right back, Chief."

"Martha, go with her." Martha hesitated and glanced at Eli who nodded and accepted the scanner without comment. Mary huffed and glared, but they both ignored her. Before she could go off on a tangent, Arianna cleared her throat.

"Mama, do you want me to leave as well?"

"No, Arianna. Martha and Dorcas have other responsibilities to attend to. You can help Eli if she needs it. It probably wouldn't hurt for each member of the Alpha team to know field medicine."

"We do, Mama. And Luke is also a fully trained medical doctor; it's his secondary specialty. But Eli made sure we were all taught the basics of triage and emergency medicine just in case. Dorcas and I were trying to stay out of the way because of the limited amount of space and the fact that you despise hovering."

Before Mary could retort, Caleb knocked on the door and stuck his head into the room. "Chief? You wanted to see me?"

She waved him in. "I did indeed. Under the advice of my doctor," nodding towards Eli who sat up straighter for a moment so he could see her, "I'm going to take the day off." Caleb's eyes widened, but he held his tongue. "Of course I expect you to notify me if something catastrophic happens, but otherwise I need for you to handle the details. None of the family members are scheduled to arrive until tomorrow, so that shouldn't be an issue. Any questions?"

"Is everything all right, Chief?"

"Mostly," Mary replied with a shrug. "I'm in a fair amount of pain though, and Eli has suggested rest and regen for the day. Barring some sort of critical emergency, I'd like to try it. I'd really like to enjoy the holiday, and I'd like to be out of pain as much as possible while we have guests."

"Does that mean you want to be *in* pain when everyone leaves?" Eli asked with a smirk as she finished up her ministrations. "Is that any better?" she asked, serious once again.

"Much, thank you," Mary answered. "And no, to your first question. Though if I have to choose, I would choose to save the pain for once you all have gone. I do have some time off coming then."

"Well, I hope we can solve the pain problem before then so you can go out and have some fun."

"Any special instructions, Chief?" Caleb asked, breaking into the conversation.

"No. As long as the kids stay in the house or yard, they can do whatever they want... within reason of course. I have a couple things scheduled for the day after the holiday, but I plan to be up and moving by then. There are enough agents to watch that my presence shouldn't even be missed. And you know by now what is important enough to bother me for."

"Yes ma'am. I sure do."

"Good man. Pass the word along."

"Will do, Chief. Have a healing rest."

"I hope so, my friend," Mary replied with a wave before he stepped out of the office.

"He likes you, you know," Arianna said quietly.

"I know," Mary answered. "But I keep hoping...." She shook her head. "He deserves better."

"They don't come any better than you, Ms Wellesly," Eli commented as she rose from her spot on the floor and leaned against the desk facing Mary. Arianna moved to stand beside her, snuggling into Eli's body and sighing in contentment when long arms pulled her in tight.

Mary shrugged. "It's nice of you to say so, but in this instance...." She sighed. "When Edward and I were married, I gave him everything I had... everything I was. When he died...." She shrugged again. "Part of me died that day. Most of my passion is now funneled into my work, and the rest goes to my children. I don't have anything left to give... especially not *that* way. And Caleb deserves better than that. He deserves someone who will love him with everything that they have to give."

"Even though he wants you?"

"Even though," Mary said sadly. "It would be kinder of me to dismiss him... to give him a chance to find himself and someone else away from me. But I depend on him. He was Edward's best friend. I don't know what I would do without him."

"Maybe you should think about it. Because you're not being very fair to him."

"I know," said in a whisper. Then a knock sounded on the door and five grown children walked into the office. Ian got a good look at Mary's face and scowled.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm in a bit of pain," she confessed, not wanting to discuss Caleb or his affections with them. "So I'm taking the day off to rest and regenerate this leg. The Doc here is hoping it will help the healing process. I'm just hoping it will quit hurting. I'd rather not be miserable during the holiday especially with all our extra guests."

"We'll handle everything, Mama," Joy said with a look around at her siblings and extended siblings. "Prue and I already have some of the prep work done, and the kids have been asking how they can help. And the boys and your agents know their business. You just get the rest you need."

"I'll be available if there is an emergency, but...."

"Mama, the only way we'll bother you is if the apocalypse happens, and then it will only be to say goodbye," Nathaniel informed her with a grin, knowing she would have a retort. Mary arched an eyebrow at him and didn't disappoint.

"My son, if you wait to inform me of the apocalypse until the last minute and all you say is goodbye, you better be very sure it's actually going to happen. Because bad, *bad* things will befall you if it doesn't. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," said with a smirk.

"Excellent. I just wanted each of you to be aware of what was going on. OH!" she exclaimed. "One other thing. Eli is Arianna's mate, and therefore a member of this family with all the rights and privileges thereof. However," she held up her hand before they could cut in. "You are not allowed to interrogate her or question her intentions until such time as I am able to attend the family conclave. We're not going to put her through the family gauntlet more than once and as matriarch, I expect to be there. So make her welcome, but don't try to intimidate her. If she wants to talk to you, she will. Otherwise she is off-limits until I am up and about."

"You know, Mama - that's kind of like teasing."

"No, my son. That's fair warning. We did it with Joseph and with Prudence, and we'll do it with Ephraim as well. Although I'm pretty sure he already knows what to expect. He was around for both Joseph's and Prudence's baptism by fire."

"Okay... fine," Ian agreed. He looked at Arianna. "Well done, Little Sister." He turned to Eli. "Welcome to the family."

"You're so certain I'll pass through the gauntlet?"

Ian smirked. "I know you will. I stayed with your family for a week, remember? You've got this, Eli... easy-peasy."

"I've got to agree," Joey concurred. "You can lead the Alpha team and dictate to Mama? This will be a walk in the park."

"I'd like to reserve my judgment," Nathaniel said with a hint of irritation.

"I have plenty of questions," Joy admitted, "but I can see the difference you have made to one another. Welcome to the family, Eli."

Everyone turned to Prudence whose eyes widened in response. "Um... I really don't know either of you yet, but I'm looking forward to the chance. Maybe we could have lunch together and get to know one another... like friends first?"

Arianna and Eli exchanged glances and Eli shrugged and nodded. Arianna turned back to Prudence. "We'd like that. What about the rest of you? Will you join us once Eli has put Mama to bed?"

"Excuse me?" Mary broke in. "I've been taking care of that little chore by myself for quite a few years now."

"Perhaps," Eli agreed. "But not today. I want to make sure you settle in without fooling around and set up the regen unit to maximize your healing." She met Mary's brown eyes. "Please don't be difficult about this, Ms Wellesly. I can make it an order."

"We are so keeping her," Ian cackled and even Nathaniel chuckled. Mary gave them all the evil eye.

"Only because I know you are looking out for my best interests, Eli."

"Thank you. Now let's get you to... where is your room in all of this?" Eli asked as Mary slowly rose to her feet and pocketed the chip. Mary grinned.

"C'mon," she invited, then turned to look at her other kids. "You all go back to whatever it was Dorcas interrupted to get you here. Eli and Arianna will be back shortly and will join you in the kitchen." No one moved. "Go on now... shoo. We can handle this without an entourage."

The kids laughed and nodded, knowing Mary was embarrassed by all the attention. One by one they filed through the door until only Nathaniel was left. He looked Eli squarely in the eye. "I suppose if you can handle Mama so well, you can handle anything. But you probably better learn to call her

'Mama'. She doesn't answer to anything else from us kids. Welcome to the family," he finished with a grin as he escaped out the door. Mary sighed.

"Hallelujah! Can I go to bed now?"

Eli and Arianna just smiled at her and followed her out of the office.

Chapter LIV

"Okay, I know we're not supposed to interrogate you or anything," Prudence started as Mary's family sat down to eat lunch together. The other Alpha team members were conspicuously missing, and Eli wondered where they were and who had arranged their absence. "But I'm curious about something - about a lot of somethings, actually - but mostly I am curious about the term Mama used to describe the two of you. Does that hold some sort of cultural significance or something?"

"Why do you ask?" Arianna replied before Eli could respond. Eli turned to look at her, but Arianna merely squeezed the hand she held and motioned her attention back to their waiting audience. Everyone was focused on Prudence waiting for her answer.

"As I indicated," she said slowly, "it is mostly curiosity on my part. But also..." Prudence shrugged. "I got the feeling from the way Mama made a point to use that particular word that it might mean something special. Until they were married, Joey was introduced as Nat's partner - now they are husbands; I'm Ian's fiancée and will be his wife; Ephraim is currently Joy's suitor and if things proceed satisfactorily he will be her life companion according to his society. So what is the importance of being mates?"

Eli and Arianna exchanged glances. Eli didn't mind explaining her culture to others when they asked, but she wasn't sure about the vibe she was getting from Arianna. She cocked an eyebrow and whispered, "Angel?" well aware of the eyes around the table studying them both.

Arianna cupped a hand to Eli's cheek. "Are you comfortable with this, Amado? I am happy and proud to be your mate, but I don't want you to feel that you have to explain..."

Eli grinned and covered the hand on her face. "I don't mind, Angel. And they have a right to know. They are your family... *our* family. They should understand the truth that is us." Arianna studied green eyes carefully, then nodded. Eli smiled and looked back towards the rest to find them engaged in their own conversation in an effort to provide her and Arianna with some privacy. She cleared her throat slightly and conversation ceased as all eyes turned her way.

"In my culture," she began softly, "we mate for life. Consummation forms a bond that is not to be broken... even by death. It is more than sex and something beyond love. It is a mating of bodies and minds and souls."

"What happens if the bond is broken?"

Eli released a shuddering sigh and felt her hand clenched by Arianna. She turned to find Arianna grinding her jaw. Eli reached out her free hand and cupped Arianna's neck, pulling her forward until their foreheads were touching. "Angel?"

Arianna shook her head. "I'll be all right, Amado. Tell them. I think they should know. And I think I deserve to know the truth of what could have been. Complete disclosure, remember?" she asked with a shaky smile. Eli nodded and turned back to her waiting audience.

"Did we miss something?" Ian asked.

"Nothing I am comfortable sharing," Eli replied steadily. Ian nodded. "As for a broken bond," she continued without missing a beat, "it usually depends on what breaks it. In the case of death, mates can still feel one another." There were gasps around the table and Eli sighed. "It's kind of hard to explain. It's not a tangible thing - not something you can reach out and touch physically. It's more here," putting a hand over her heart; "And here," touching her forehead. "You feel comforted by them; you feel the love you shared in life."

"And the dead - they can feel it as well?"

Eli smirked. "Never actually been dead, I can't say for certain of course, but it is believed to be so. It is what we're taught."

"And what if the bond is broken another way? Because of... What would break a bond otherwise?" Prudence asked with a thoughtful scowl.

"First I want you to understand that bonds broken for reasons outside of death are extremely rare. Because we can only mate with one other in our lifetime, great care is given to the choice we make. Children are taught about this from a very young age because no one wants a broken bond - it is very painful and terribly lonely. So besides death, the two most common causes of broken bonds are infidelity and separation. Infidelity is a capital crime in my society; both parties are executed immediately. Separation is a little trickier. It's usually by choice because the parties involved can no longer live with one another for some reason - whether that is because of incompatibility or abuse or they simply grow apart."

"And if they separate by choice, that's it? No second chance?"

Eli nodded. "That's it. The rest of their lives will be spent alone - no bond, no mate. Death is preferable to separation. At least there is the comfort of a mate's presence in that instance."

"What happens if they try? Surely some who have had a mate pass on or a separation by choice have tried for another relationship," Joy commented.

"If they had a mate who died, Joy, they wouldn't want to try," Nathaniel stated. "At least I certainly wouldn't. Remember, the bond carries over into the next world."

Eli nodded. "That's correct. It would be... disastrous."

"And what of the others - those who choose to separate? Why can't they mate again?"

Eli shrugged. "It's hard to explain." She bit her lip. "It's a little like Ms Wellesly's situation."

Ian cocked his head. "What do you mean?" He looked at his siblings. "Did we know Mama had a situation?" The rest shook their heads and turned back to Eli. "Well?" he prompted.

"In the case of Mary and Edward, they married for life. And though their separations were a little different from the kind I'm talking about, they were separated at times due to Edward's job. Yet they always came back to one another. Since he died, she has remained faithful to him because she gave him all she had to give. Even if she was to find someone to spend the remainder of her life with, it wouldn't be the same as what she had with Edward. When two people mate in my society, they put everything they are into the relationship, and there's no way to get it back."

"Even if the relationship is bad?"

"Even if. Fortunately most aren't. We have a very low failure rate."

"Do they ever get back together? Those who have separated I mean," Joseph asked.

"Sometimes," Eli admitted. "Some with more success than others."

"So if you're mates, does that make you married?" Nathaniel asked. "I'm only curious because of the Committee's rules about married candidates."

"They aren't candidates anymore, Nat," Joseph offered. "They are full-fledged Alpha team members."

"Nitpicking, Joey. Technically...."

"Technically, we are dating exclusively," Arianna broke in heatedly. "We haven't undergone a ritual or a ceremony from any culture that binds us to one another. What we are to one another privately is no one else's business." She glared at Nathaniel who held up his hands in surrender.

"I'm not trying to start something," he protested, noting the disbelieving looks his family was giving him. "I'm *not*," he reiterated. "But Malcolm was disqualified from the program because of your betrothal which in *your* society," meeting Arianna's gaze, "equates to marriage. Being mated in Eli's is much the same - in her eyes and in the eyes of her people, you are married."

"No," Eli cut in. "Malcolm was disqualified for being infected with the AIDS virus," watching the horror rush over the faces of those listening. "The breaking of their betrothal was the excuse used to save face. As for Arianna and me - we are *mated*. That means we belong to one another exclusively. There will never be another for me... with or without marriage."

"Or for me," Arianna cut in decisively. "It may not be born in my blood, but it is true nevertheless."

"And how is that not the same thing?" Nathan asked belligerently. "How is being *mated* not the same as being *married*?"

"Nat, take a deep breath and step back a minute," Joy instructed firmly before anyone else could speak. "I don't know why you're being so adversarial about this, but you need to chill, Little Brother." She gave him a look and he held her gaze for a long moment before nodding.

"Maybe I should get some air," he said, half-rising from his seat before Eli's words stopped him.

"I don't know what we've done to upset you, Nathaniel, but being mated and being married are two different realities... at least for me."

Nathaniel blew out a breath and resumed his seat. "Can you explain it? I'd really like to understand."

Eli bit her lip. "Being mated is something that happens between two people who bond to one another. There isn't a vow pledged or an oath sworn when this happens. The bonding usually takes place slowly as we learn about one another, and it strengthens over time. It is sealed when the relationship is consummated - that is when we are mated to each other. Marriage is when we publicly avow our mating bond in front of friends and family, and it is followed by a great celebration."

"Thank you," Nathaniel replied softly. "That I understand." He cleared his throat. "But you do realize that either you're going to have to break the Committee's rules or you're going to be waiting a very long time to be married, right? Because if you think you're going to get married without the family and especially Mama present... well, I for one want to be there when you tell her."

"Can the Committee really do anything at this point?" Prudence asked. "I mean they've both already been selected for the Alpha team and they're scheduled to leave very soon. Do you really think the Committee would risk the negative publicity that would follow throwing one or both off them off the team to uphold that particular mandate?"

"I think the Committee is going to have far more to worry about than marriage protocol," Ian commented darkly. "Given the information Gideon dug up..."

"... and the things Jacob found," Joseph added. "I saw some of that," with a look at Eli. "You better hope Mama doesn't decide to snag him from your team to keep his hacking skills here."

Eli scowled. "She'll have a fight on her hands. We need him."

"Yes, and for that reason alone she won't touch him. But I'm pretty sure I heard her mumbling something about him showing Gideon where he found this stuff, and how to safely hack into some of the places he did."

"Jake would love that," Eli replied. "I think he's pretty proud of his hacking skills."

Arianna rolled her eyes. "You know he is. For him it's like one of those games you like to play. Risk and danger and very little chance he'll get hurt because he's good enough to not get caught."

"So you're not worried about the Committee?" Joy asked, bringing the question around to them again.

"No," Arianna answered. "What are they going to do at this late date?"

"Would it stop you if they threatened you with removal from the project?" Nathaniel asked.

"No," Arianna said without hesitation. "Do I think they need us? Yes. Will the project go better with both Eli and me on the team? Absolutely. Would I give it all up to stay with Eli? In a heartbeat. I learned the hard way what it is not to have her in my life, and I won't go back to that. She's worth everything to me... everything."

"Angel?"

"Everything, Amado... always."

"That is almost like a vow, you know."

"I know," Arianna smirked. "But even I'm not dumb enough to make it an official vow without Mama. I am very happy with my life now; I'm not going to mess that up by angering Mama."

"You're quicker than the boys were," Joy said with a grin. "And two of them grew up with her."

"Hey!!"

"No fair!!"

"Pbbbbbssssssstttttt." The last from Joey.

Joy shook her head. "Don't bother - I grew up with you too." She turned back to Eli and Arianna. "So what are you going to do about the whole marriage thing? Because Nat made a good point. If you don't do it now, it's going to be a very long time before you can. And everyone and their mother will be here tomorrow... literally. Maybe you should take advantage of that."

Eli's eyes widened and the light green color drained from her face leaving her deathly pale. Arianna turned and saw Eli's panic and felt a stinging pain flash through her. But she put that hurt feeling aside, determined to find the reason behind it before she reacted. Too much of their life together had already been wasted because of miscommunication or no communication at all. She wanted to know what was causing Eli's upset before she responded to it.

"Eli? Amado?" Arianna reached up both hands and cupped Eli's face, waiting for the still green eyes to track to hers. "Sweetheart? What's wrong?" Eli met Arianna's dark brown eyes, staring into them for long moments before closing hers and taking a deep breath. When she reopened them, Arianna could see the sense of panic fading as calm replaced it, and she smiled in encouragement. "Are you ready to talk to me now? Does the thought of marrying me terrify you so much?" she asked sadly.

"No, Angel, NO! The thought of being publicly committed to you is..." She broke off and gave Arianna a dazzling grin. "I can't tell you how amazing that makes me feel."

"You two are sickeningly sweet - you know that, right?" Nathaniel's dry voice broke the tableau between them. "Ow!" he complained, turning to glare at his husband. "Whaddy do that for?"

"They were having a moment," Joseph informed him drolly. "You were interrupting."

"I had to," Nathaniel whined. "They were making my teeth ache. Marines don't do 'moments'."

"You'll remember that when you're sleeping on the couch then," making the rest of the room titter and making Nathaniel squawk in outrage. "I'm sorry, ladies. Please continue."

"Maybe we should continue this privately," Arianna offered. Eli nodded amidst a sea of protests.

"Yes, but first...." She turned to Joy. "What can we do to help prepare for the holiday? And when are everyone's family members expected in?"

Joy waved them off. "The kids are downstairs now doing as much prep work as can be done out of the kitchen. You and Ria can help with the cooking once we get started. A lot of it will be done ahead and then reheated. And everyone's family is bringing a contribution or two to share as well. As for when they're coming in...." She looked at Ian.

"Most of them are coming in by ship tonight. They will start transporting in tomorrow at different times to different locations. We'll be picking them up and bringing them here much like we did you

guys when we brought you from the hotel - different routes and entrances so it will hopefully all go unnoticed by anyone significant."

"You really think you can hide the arrival of thirty different people? Especially to a place that has already had an influx of strangers and activity in the last few weeks?"

Nathaniel smiled. "Don't discount Mama's understanding of humanity and their absorption in their own lives. Most people don't see because they don't look. It's very easy to hide in plain sight when no one is looking."

"Besides," Prudence cut in, "a lot of people don't care. Let me explain," she added before anyone could protest. "They probably do think the whole mission concept is exciting or interesting, but they really don't have a personal interest in it, and it doesn't fashion their political opinions. They don't see it as having a direct effect on their lives at the moment so their attitude is somewhat lackadaisical. So if they were to meet you on the street, they might ask for an image with you assuming they even recognized you, but they'd be just as likely to ignore you and go about their own business."

"I could live with being ignored," Arianna quipped. "It's a nice change from forced attention."

"You mean like what the security team does?" Ian asked with a frown. Arianna shook her head.

"No. Your attention is on our surroundings... looking out for threats and whatnot. I'm talking about being forced to be in the spotlight - to be the focus of attention you don't want."

"Like your Princess thing," Eli said.

"Exactly - like my Princess thing."

Nathaniel smiled. "Well, in a few days you won't have to be a Princess for a very long time."

"And I am really looking forward to that. Now if you'll excuse us," Arianna said as she stood. "I think we need to go have that talk," extending a hand down and pulling Eli up to stand beside her. "Let us know when it's time to come help with things. And I promise if there is any news on the marriage front, well... you may not be the first to know, but we'll keep you in the loop."

"You better," Nathaniel growled. "If I have to sleep on the couch, I'd like to know my suffering is not in vain."

Eli looked at the others. "Is he always this dramatic?"

"YES!" came the resounding reply, followed by laughter. Nathaniel just folded his arms over his chest.

"I am *not* dramatic; I am simply misunderstood." But his brown eyes were twinkling and his lips twitched with the effort not to smile.

Joey and Ian exchanged eye rolls and Joy snickered. Eli bit her lip to keep her laughter a smile and shook her head. "And on that note.... Please let us know when and how we can help," she said to Joy. "And thank you for your suffering on our behalf," she said solemnly to Nathaniel. "We appreciate the sacrifice."

"You're mocking me," he grumbled.

"Maybe a little," she agreed. "But I have brothers too; I know how this works." Then she tugged on Arianna's hand and they headed outside without another word. The rest watched them go before turning back to Nathaniel.

"Satisfied?" Joey asked.

"Yes. They're going to fit right in just fine."

Chapter LV

"So why the panic, Sweetheart?" Arianna asked as they reached the old tree. Eli leaned against the trunk still holding Arianna's hand; Arianna did the same so they were facing one another. "If it wasn't fear of being married to me...."

"No fear on that count, Beloved. I'd marry you tomorrow if that's what you wanted. But we both know that's not possible."

Arianna frowned. "And why is that? As the family rightfully pointed out, it's likely to be our only opportunity for a very long time... Committee rules notwithstanding. And we'll never have a better chance to have everyone we want there to already be in one place."

"Yes and when MaTb sees you... sees us together... she's going to know. She's going to recognize you as my mate. And she's going to ask about a marriage ceremony. Because like Ms Well... Mama," clearing her throat and shaking her head at the unaccustomed address, "she's going to expect to be present for such a momentous occasion. And she won't accept that we're not able to swear our vows now - not since we are already mated."

Arianna stepped closer to Eli, taking both hands in hers and rubbing the backs of them with her thumb. She looked up at Eli through long, dark lashes, dark eyes sparkling in the sunshine. "Amado? I want you to pretend for a moment that I don't have a genius level IQ, and I want you to explain to me very simply what the problem here is exactly. Because I don't understand - I am obviously missing something very important."

Eli squeezed the hands she held and brought one to her lips. She brushed a kiss there and smiled at the bashful expression that crossed Arianna's face at the gesture. "Angel, is it fair to completely ignore your family and the customs of your planet when talking about marriage? I know you are not currently very fond of your OTeU... your papa. But what of your MaTb? And your people? They have done nothing to be treated with disregard, and isn't your marriage supposed to be a time of celebration for them?"

Arianna leaned up on tiptoe and gave Eli a hard, swift kiss. Before Eli could lean in to deepen it, Arianna had pulled back. Eli frowned; Arianna chuckled and loosened a hand to smooth the furrows on Eli's brow.

"I wasn't finished kissing you, you know," Eli complained with the barest hint of a pout.

Arianna cupped her face and ran a thumb over Eli's bottom lip. "When I start kissing you, I'm not going to stop at kissing, and we're not giving the world a show. I meant what I told Nat in there - what

we are and what we do with one another privately is no one else's business. And even though it seems like we're all alone out here, we both know that we're not."

Eli had the good grace to bite her lip and look chastised. "I suppose," she muttered. "So what did you kiss me for then?"

"Because you're kind of amazing - did you know that?"

Eli frowned again. "How do you figure?"

"Because despite everything - my father, Malcolm, me - you're still trying to do what's right by their ideals. Amado, assuming there is still a monarchy to return to and assuming that I am welcomed back as the Princess and heir, we can always have a ceremony for the people of my world upon our return from this mission. They aren't expecting anything from me at the moment beyond my successful participation in this project. My main job as far as they're concerned is to help make my planet a recognized leader in the galaxy by my contribution to this mission. They figure everyone will have to acknowledge us now because the success of the mission depends on my research."

"Well they're kind of right about that."

Arianna shrugged. "Maybe. But the important thing is they're not looking for a betrothal or marriage from me any time in the near future. When Malcolm and I were betrothed, they didn't expect a ceremony between us until the initial five standard years of the project were completed. Since the disillusion of that betrothal has already been announced, they have no expectations of a royal wedding for a long time to come."

"So does this mean you want us to marry?" Eli asked slowly.

"Do you?"

Eli gave an exasperated sigh. "I meant what I said, Angel. The thought of publicly committing myself to you... of us committing ourselves to one another so that everyone knows we belong to each other is amazing to me. I would absolutely do it tomorrow if that's what you wanted."

"So will you marry me, Amado? Will you marry me while all our friends and families are here to share our joy with us?"

"Yes, Beloved. In a heartbeat."

Arianna squealed and jumped into Eli's arms. Eli was grateful to be braced against the tree behind her as it was the only thing keeping them upright. Then she wasn't thinking at all. Her attention was totally consumed with the kiss Arianna was bestowing, and she gave herself over to the moment.

"So do you suppose there'll be wedding before they leave?" Prudence asked as they all moved back to the table and away from the window to give Eli and Arianna a bit of privacy.

"Only if they're as smart as they're purported to be," Nathaniel replied with a grin. "You think we ought to make some preparations?"

"I think we should wait and see what they want," Joy replied. "There's enough of us here to get done quickly once we have a clear idea of what they want to do. They need to let us know."

"So do you think we should tell everyone?" Arianna asked as she released Eli's lips enough to speak. She leaned her forehead into Eli's and closed her eyes, relishing the feel of Eli's rapid breaths against her face and the touch of Eli's lips against her own. The hands kneading her ass were making her grind into Eli's body and she whimpered at the pleasure it sent tingling through her body.

"I think," Eli started before she found her mouth captured by Arianna again, tongue plundering her mouth voraciously. "Oh, Angel...." groaned as they pulled apart and Arianna's teeth and lips laid claim to her neck. "Angel, if you don't stop we're going to give everyone a show... right here, right now."

Arianna giggled, but eased up on her attention until she could look into Eli's eyes. The green had morphed again, but instead of the flat gray of heartache and sadness, they were the full-blown black of passion and desire. She leaned forward once more to claim Eli's lips, but this kiss was gentle... meant to convey the depth of her love and the strength of that feeling. She felt Eli melt into her, the hands groping her ass gentling their touch until they were caressing the flesh they held. Arianna shivered and ended the kiss though she maintained their contact. "Well," she replied with a smile. "At least if we gave them a show we wouldn't need to make an announcement. However," she continued before Eli could protest. "I'm an only child - sharing has never been my strong suit."

"So we should take this inside maybe?" Eli asked in a hopeful tone.

"Oh we should definitely take this inside. But maybe before we take this to our room, we should talk to Mama. I think she should be the first to know... officially, I mean. Your MaTb won't be upset by that, will she?"

Eli shrugged. "Maybe a little. But forgiveness will go a long way if she is made to understand the rapidity of events involved in the culmination of our ceremony."

"So she won't mind as much if she knows the truth about our circumstances?"

"Exactly," frowning at the look of unease that flowed across Arianna's features. "Angel?"

"How much does she need to know, Amado?"

Eli blinked, her face suddenly clearing as understanding dawned. "Only that we recently mated and decided to take advantage of our circumstances and marry while surrounded by the family and friends who've gathered together to share the holiday with us. She has no need to know the details of what it took to get us to this place. That is for us, Angel."

"And you don't think the rest will give it away? Eli, they know what happened between us as well as we do - at least the basics. And I don't want your MaTb to hate me for what I put you through."

"What we went through, we went through together, Angel. And I'm as responsible for what happened as you are. Probably more so, if the truth be told. Because I knew I was entering into a lifelong commitment with you; I should have ensured you were aware of it as well." Eli lightly kissed Arianna's lips to keep her from arguing. "If it comes to it, I'll explain everything to her. She's going to love you... I promise."

"And how can you be sure? Eli, until you, most people *didn't* love me, especially at first meeting. Most barely even tolerated me and then only because of my title and position. They usually found me off-putting and irritating in the extreme."

"And how often were you yourself with them, Angel? How often were you Arianna instead a façade presented to uphold the dignity of your office?"

"How is it you just get me?"

"Because I love you, Angel." Any further answer was lost in the intensity of their kiss. Only the buckling of Eli's knees brought their attention back to the present... and their exposure to everyone and everything around them.

"Amado?"

Eli grinned. "We're going to end up on the ground in a minute, Beloved, because your kisses make me tremble and weak in the knees."

Arianna slid down Eli's body until her feet touched the ground again. "Just as well," she admitted with a whisper in Eli's ear. "Much longer and I would have come from the touch of your hands on my ass," smirking at the growl she felt reverberate in Eli's chest. Arianna watched as a speculative gleam entered Eli's gaze as she swallowed hard.

"Not here," Eli declared. "That is for me and me alone. Come," she commanded imperiously. "I need to see that happen in the privacy of our room," extending her hand and catching Arianna's in her own.

"Oh do you now? You *need* to see that."

Eli smirked. "Absolutely. We've moved past desire and into need - immediately if not sooner."

"Probably later," Arianna reminded her. "We have to go talk to Mama first."

Eli growled. "You certainly know how to kill a mood, Angel," as they reached the doorway.

Arianna chuckled and pulled Eli to a stop and pressing their bodies together tightly. "That's okay - I'm pretty sure I know how to start one as well." She wound her hand into Eli's hair and tugged until their lips met. "Better?" she asked smoothly when they separated several minutes later.

"Hmm?" Eli asked distractedly as her eyes roamed Arianna's face. Arianna's superior expression softened under the loving gaze and gentle touches as Eli's fingers traced the same path her eyes did. "You're so beautiful. Did you know that? Have I told you how beautiful you are?"

"Holy crap! You two are giving me hives!" Eden exclaimed, breaking them apart and causing twin glares to be directed her way. "What??" she whined. "Stop looking at me that way! I didn't do anything!"

Eli opened her mouth to retort sharply until Arianna twined their hands together. Eli took a deep breath to calm her anger, then dropped her physician's mask into place. "Are you all right, Eden? Is there something you need?"

"Nope. I'm fine. I was coming to find you guys. We figured you'd had plenty of time to eat lunch with the family so I came to find out what was taking you so long to join us downstairs." She looked between the two of them. "You're not coming downstairs anytime soon, are you?"

"No," Arianna replied. "We'll be down later, but we have some things to take care of upstairs first."

"I'll just bet you do," Eden muttered with a smirk. "I'll try to put everyone off for a while, but don't be all day, please. Sex goddesses or not, you need to be part of the preparations."

"Actually we're part of the kitchen crew," Eli replied shortly. "Joy has asked us to help putting the dishes together and cooking them. And if anyone has a problem with us spending some time alone, they can take it up with me. You don't need to be in the middle of this, Eden." She released Arianna's hand and stepped closer to Eden. "How are you... really?"

"I'm fine, Eli... really. I'm just tired still."

"You should take a nap today," Eli instructed, holding up a hand when Eden would have interrupted. "I did the same thing to Ms Wellesly. She's on bed rest with a regen unit to see if we can get some more healing done on that leg. More rest won't hurt you, Eden. It would be beneficial to your recovery."

"Shouldn't I be recovered by now?" Eden growled.

"You're actually remarkably recovered considering the damage that was done to you. Besides, don't you want to be as rested as possible before your MaTb makes her appearance?"

"Yeah, I guess. I sure don't want her wondering if this project is killing me before we even leave this planet."

"All right then... it's settled. You'll take a nap this afternoon. Doctor's orders." Eli smiled when she felt Eden relax with those words. Sometimes warrior pride had to take a backseat to common sense, but it was one of the hardest things to accomplish. If it made Eden feel better about appearing weak, Eli was comfortable relieving her of the responsibility of her pride for a little while.

"Thanks, Eli," she said softly.

Eli smiled. "My privilege," she replied. "How do things look downstairs?" she asked as she reached for the door. She was surprised when Reuben moved to open it for her. She had forgotten about his presence, and now she blushed slightly. She felt Arianna grasp her hand and she turned and offered her a smile before returning her gaze to Eden.

"Good. A lot of willing hands made the work go faster and easier, and everybody pitched in to help. We did keep the knives away from Isaac. You weren't there to patch him up and none of us were really up to the task of possible surgery."

"So you're done then?" Arianna asked as they walked through the kitchen.

"Pretty close unless Joy found more for us to do." They stopped at the stairs. "I'm gonna go tell Jake about my mandatory nap and let the rest know you'll both be downstairs later."

"Do you need us to wait for you and walk you to your room?"

Eden raised an eyebrow, then smiled at the genuine concern. "No, I'm good. Besides I imagine Jake will insist on walking with me."

"Make sure you get some rest."

"I will," Eden snapped, giving Eli a look. "Jake won't do anything more than hold my hand until you give the all clear. He already informed me of that." She blew out a frustrated breath. "Sorry. This is just taking forever to heal."

"Not really," Arianna replied quietly, flinching when Eden glared. "I'm sure it seems that way, though."

Eden sighed. "Yeah... sorry. I've never had something like this before, and I'll be happy to never have it again either. Patience isn't really my strong suit."

Eli chuckled. "I think that can probably be said for all of us in one regard or another. We need to go talk to Ms Wellesly. You're sure you don't want us to wait for you?"

"Yeah. Go on. But I expect to see you downstairs with the rest of us after dinner." Eden waved them off, then headed down the stairs into the basement. Eli and Arianna watched her until she disappeared, then took the steps up to the bedroom when Mary was currently ensconced.

A knock on the door made Mary frown. *Surely the world wasn't really ending*, she thought as she hitched herself a little higher on the bed. She wasn't really sitting, but she was no longer lying flat either. "Yes?" she called out. Her brows rose into her hairline when Eli stuck her head in the door followed immediately by Arianna's. "Is something wrong?" she blurted.

"No Mama, no," Arianna assured as they stepped into the room together and shut the door firmly behind them. "It's just we reached a decision and thought you needed to be the first to know."

"Would you like to share that decision with me?" she prompted after a long moment of silence.

Eli and Arianna exchanged glances and then Eli met Mary's gaze. "We've decided we want to marry while all our friends and family are already gathered together in one place. We'd like your blessing."

Mary motioned them closer and cleared her throat.

"Are you certain? This seems a little rushed to me."

"Not really, Mama. We are already mated and have been for longer than I realized," Arianna confessed. "This is just a public acknowledgement of our bond and a chance to celebrate with our friends and families while we're already in one place together. We're just taking advantage of the circumstances we've been offered. Like Nat pointed out to us at lunch - if we don't do it now, it will be a very long time before we get the chance to do it again, and who knows who might be missing in five years?"

"And what of the Committee rules about married candidates?"

"We're no longer candidates, Ms Wellesly. And we're already mated whether the Committee approves or not. If they want to disqualify us, then so be it. But I don't see a reason for them to know any of this until after we're gone either."

Mary snorted. "I don't see a reason for them to know at all." She looked between them. "All right - you have my blessing... contingent on a family discussion. Arianna, go round up your siblings. I'd like a few minutes alone with Eli."

Eli and Arianna traded glances, then Arianna slipped out the door; Eli turned her attention back to Mary.

Chapter LVI

Eli blinked her eyes open, trying to make them focus enough in the darkened room to read the clock that sat on the bedside table. She frowned when she noted the very early hour - it had been quite late before they'd made it to bed the previous evening. Eli closed her eyes and relaxed, wondering what had brought her out of her sound sleep. Then she felt Arianna's fingertips trailing up and down her torso, causing tingles to follow in their wake. Eli purred and pushed back into the body curved around her own; she felt Arianna's intake of breath and chuckled.

"Feeling a little anxious, Angel?" the smile on her face clear in her tone.

"More than a little, Amado," Arianna pouted. "I thought a proposal of marriage meant we'd get a chance to celebrate. I didn't realize it meant we had to spend hours and hours being interrogated by all and sundry."

"All and sundry?" Eli asked with a grin as she turned in Arianna's embrace, lying flat and pulling Arianna further onto her body. "You sound very much like Ms Wellesly."

"Practice," Arianna replied as she leaned down, capturing Eli's lips for a timeless moment before pulling back and tucking her head beneath her chin. "They have some interesting colloquialisms on this planet, and I was exposed to a number of them while the rest of you were visiting your homes and families."

Eli let one hand stroke Arianna's skin; her other clasped Arianna's hand over her heart. "What was that like?"

Arianna propped herself up slightly so she could meet Eli's green eyes. "Which part? Staying here or not going home?"

"There's a difference?"

"Of course," Arianna responded seriously. "Not going home didn't have to translate into staying here - that was my choice. I could have gone ahead to the... well, it ended up being the facility inside the mountain. But I didn't want to do that; I wanted to stay here and get to know Mama and Joy."

"So what was it like? Not like yesterday, I hope," talking about her getting-to-know-you experience. Though none of the family had been harsh, they had been extremely inquisitive and thorough in their curiosity. Eli had been more drained by speaking to the members of the Wellesly family for a few hours than she'd felt in months of interview sessions with the Committee. "I don't know where Ms

Wellesly and her family learned their interrogation techniques, but they could have given pointers to the Committee. We'd have been done with interviews a lot sooner, and they'd have known more about us. That was exhausting."

"But worth it?" Arianna asked with slight hesitation.

"Oh absolutely," Eli agreed with a smile. "I'd do it all again if it meant we were together like this at the end of the day. At least it's done now though."

"Um hmm," Arianna replied softly. "Although I don't think the Wellesly's were nearly as exhausting as the Alpha team was."

Eli snorted. "About the same for me," she stated. "They were all nosy - just focused on different things."

"Do you think they'll keep our secret?" Arianna asked, referring to the remainder of the Alpha team.

Eli shrugged, and Arianna resumed her place tucked under Eli's chin. "I don't know, Angel. I'd like to think so, but...."

"But I didn't expect the level of criticism about our flaunting the rules. That was unexpected."

"Was it really, Angel?" her words causing Arianna to lean back so they could look into one another's eyes. Arianna frowned and pursed her lips and Eden continued talking. "As far as they are concerned, we are putting ourselves and our desires above the good of the team. Because if we are removed from the Alpha team, where does that leave them exactly?"

"But it has nothing to do with them... not really. We'll be together whether we take vows now or later. It doesn't change our status except publicly."

"I know, Angel. And I think maybe that started to finally sink in last night." Eli shrugged and settled a little deeper into the pillows pulling Arianna further into her. "I think a lot of the reaction came from them being scared. I mean we've been a team almost from the beginning if you think about it. They were the ones we worked with the most; that we hung out with during our limited social time; that had the same goals and ideals going into this project. I think they're a little worried that our marriage will change things for them in some way. And if we were removed from the team, they'd be right in harboring that fear. But I don't think that's going to happen."

"What makes you say that, Amado?" letting her hand resume its motion against Eli's torso. Arianna smiled when Eli shivered and shifted closer to her touch.

"Given everything Ms Well... Mama has done for us so far, do you really suppose she'd allow the Committee to dictate something that important without a fight?"

"Except it's not really her purview - it's theirs. They are the ones responsible for choosing us."

"Exactly. They're not going to want to be seen as unable to make a decision and stick to it."

"I hope so," Arianna sighed. "I'll admit I was a little surprised the way the sides fell last night though."

"Which part? The ones who sided with us or the ones who sided against?"

Arianna snorted. "Both actually. Well, except for Eden. I'm not at all surprised she sided with us. She's always had your back, and I know she looked out for me, however grudgingly, when you and I were...."

"... at odds with one another?" Eli offered with a gentle smile.

Arianna chuckled. "Yes... exactly." She shook her head. "But for Isaac to stand for us while Danny and Jake went against us. That was completely unforeseen in my book. I thought Danny was my friend."

"He is. And I'd be willing to guess that his objection is on your behalf as much as it is about mocking the rules and the Committee. Because no matter how we explain it or how many times we go over it, none of them are going to fully grasp what we are to one another as mates unless they are mated in the same way we are. And all he sees is that we have been apart much longer than we've been together."

"And did he conveniently forget how miserable I was without you?"

Eli chuckled. "I believe at least some of your misery in that regard is being blamed on Malcolm. Because let's face it - he made *everyone* miserable."

This time Arianna released a genuine laugh. "That's true. He was very consistent in that regard." She bit her lip thoughtfully. "Has anyone heard what happened to him?"

"In relation to the virus, you mean?" Eli asked for clarification. Arianna nodded. "Not to my knowledge," she replied. "I know Ms Wellesly said they were going to vaccinate him and send him back to your planet, but other than that...?" She shrugged and turned her head slightly. "Why? Have you heard something?"

"Not a word," Arianna assured her. "That's what made me wonder."

"Well I'm sure if something bad had happened - like he had spread the virus or such, we'd have heard about it. After all, steps would have to be taken to contain the threat and eliminate the virus again, wouldn't it?"

"That would start quite a panic. I still want to know why."

"Why what, Angel?" Eli asked with a frown.

"Why did someone infect him? It couldn't be to destroy the monarchy because we were never intimate."

"Would you have been?"

Arianna shuddered. "No. Not until I had to be. Aside from the betrothal rules forbidding it, I found him... somewhat repulsive and lacking in appeal."

"But you would have been eventually if he hadn't been discovered to have had the virus."

"After our marriage, yes," cringing. "I wouldn't have had much choice. But that's a huge risk to take if your goal is to destroy the monarchy on my planet. Because he would have undergone a routine physical before our marriage and would have been discovered then. He was just lucky he found someone sympathetic to him while he was part of the selection process for the mission to have hidden it as long as he did." Eli was silent for so long, Arianna felt compelled to prod her just a little bit. "Amado, what are you thinking?"

Eli sighed. "Nothing good, Beloved." She smiled when Arianna reached up her fingertips to smooth out the furrows on her forehead.

"Share?"

Eli sighed again and bit her lip. Arianna waited patiently, knowing the expression meant Eli was organizing her thoughts. "If you weren't the direct target, then who wanted to annihilate your people? Given your culture, the odds are that it was meant to devastate the population of your world. Or because he was a candidate in contact with other races from other planets, was it meant to eliminate all of us in time?"

"I don't like where this is going."

"Neither do I, Angel. But it's something we need to consider."

Arianna stuck out her tongue. "How did we get on this morbid subject anyway?"

"Discussing our friends' reactions to our announcement of our impending nuptials."

"That certainly was an alarming little tangent then and kind of far afield of our original discussion. I'm a little put out with Jake, by the way. He's the biggest rule breaker of all of us, and he wants to be upset about the fact that we're bucking the system a little??"

Eli laughed at Arianna's phrasing as well as her outrage. "Maybe he thinks it's his role to fulfill and thinks we're moving in on his territory." She shrugged. "I imagine Eden had more than a word or two with him last night, and I won't be a bit surprised to discover he is rather sheepish and on our side this morning. But I think we should probably go face the music as far as our comrades are concerned. I'm hoping after having slept on it, some of those who were so vehemently against it last night will be a little more open-minded about it this morning."

"As long as those who supported us haven't had a change of heart as well," Arianna muttered as Eli shifted to move out from under her. "Hey... wait!! Where are you going?"

"To get ready to go downstairs?" Eli asked in confusion. "Angel, we don't have much time before family members start arriving, and I'd like to have things settled with our present family before that complication arrives."

"But I thought.... We didn't get to finish what we started yesterday," she pouted. Eli smiled.

"Still a bit frisky, are we?"

Arianna narrowed her eyes. "I don't know about you, but you did kind of leave me hanging. I certainly didn't realize that we were going to be surrounded by people until we were exhausted last night."

Eli smiled. When they had finally been released from Mama and the family, they had immediately been swept up in preparations for the holiday meal. And as soon as that and dinner were done, they'd been caught by their demanding teammates which had resulted in discussion and debate once they were informed of the wedding plans. By the time Eli and Arianna had finally made it to the room they had decided to share, they were just awake enough to brush their teeth and strip. When they fell into bed, they were immediately asleep.

Eli stood and held out her hand. "Join me in the shower then, and we'll see if we can take the edge off for you. We don't have time for much else though. We really do need to get things settled amongst ourselves now so it's not an issue later."

"But we'll have later?"

"We'll have later," Eli promised. "MaTb will understand." Arianna accepted her hand and they made their way to the bathroom together.

"I don't get you," Titus said to Isaac as he loaded food onto his plate. He'd gotten up early and along with Naomi and Luke had helped Joy prepare breakfast. The rest aside from Eli and Arianna had appeared randomly as they worked and now they were all sitting down around the living room. "I thought you of all people would've been angry about Eli and Arianna."

Isaac shrugged and shoveled a mouthful of eggs into his mouth as he pondered how to respond. "I'm not too thrilled about them risking their place on the team to get married," he confessed. "But they kind of fit. I can see them wanting to share that with their families."

"Then why did you go after Arianna?" Paul asked as he sipped at his juice. "You were determined..."

"That was before I understood."

"Understood what, Ike?" Danny asked after he wiped his mouth.

Isaac sighed. He really was on Eli's and Arianna's side. He just wasn't thrilled with having to explain his reasons to anyone. He chewed thoughtfully on a piece of toast. "I never really got Eli and Arianna. First they were friends; then they weren't. Arianna was engaged to the asshole and then she wasn't. And she had always been nice to me, and I thought that meant..." He shook his head. "Eli claimed her, but that meant nothing to me because they weren't together. Then Arianna and I had a talk and she told me point blank we would never be anything but friends."

"And you believed her?"

Isaac nodded his head. "Yeah, I did. I saw the look in her eyes when she was talking about Eli and then I saw them together when we got back to the mountain." He sighed. "You have to understand - Arianna was the first girl to ever be nice to me. On my world, that indicates interest. Otherwise people tend to stay buried in their work."

"So you are okay with them getting married even though it's explicitly against the Committee rules?"

Isaac shrugged and met Jacob's eyes. "Yeah. I think the Committee was wrong about a lot of things. I don't think the marriage rule was put in place for people like Eli and Arianna."

"Why not?"

"Because they belong to one another. And short of a disaster happening in the next few days, they're both gonna be on the Alpha team together for the next five years."

"So who do you think it was put in place for then?" Abigail asked.

"People like Arianna and the asshat. Let's face it - he would never have been chosen for the Alpha team without someone paying off the entire Committee to choose him. He was a worthless scientist and crappy humanoid. Any of us would have been glad to have shoved him out of an airlock." He smiled in embarrassment when chuckles went around the room at his frank appraisal. "So if he and Arianna had gotten married, they would have been separated for five years while she was gone. I'm not good at relationships, but it seems like that would probably kill one."

"So you think any of us should be able to get married?" Jacob asked.

Isaac shrugged. "If you're ready to make that commitment to one another, why not?" He sighed and set his fork down. "The Committee isn't gonna have a say in how we interact with one another once we leave here. And gods know we'll probably form all kinds of interesting bonds with each other over the next five years. Eli and Arianna already have a connection that will never be shared by the rest of us. Whether we object to their marriage or not, that bond is always gonna be there between them. Why not let them celebrate it with their friends and families - us - before we leave?"

Esther let out a squeal and moved to wrap her arms around Isaac's neck. He blushed in embarrassment but smiled broadly at her reaction. "That was awesome, Ike! I don't think I've ever heard you speak so eloquently before."

Eden nodded. "You did good, Ike. Eli and Arianna would have been proud."

"They're right, you know," Eli commented from the door. She and Arianna were wrapped casually around one another, grinning from ear to ear. "That was amazing. Thank you for speaking up for us."

Isaac shrugged. "Seemed like the right thing to do. 'Sides," he added as he picked up his fork to begin eating again. "I meant it."

"Well we appreciate it. Thank you."

"For what it's worth," Deborah said, "I think he's right." She'd been neutral the night before, remaining quiet while most of the rest argued quite vehemently about things. A handful of mutterings agreed with her.

Danny rose and went to stand beside Arianna. "Are you sure Az?"

"As sure as I am about breathing, Danny. This isn't about defying the Committee or flaunting the rules. She genuinely makes me happy."

"All right then - that's good enough for me."

Jacob stood and walked to the doorway to look them in the eye. "I was wrong," he stated plainly. "If you want to get married, then we'll back you all the way. Is there anything we can do to help get things ready?"

"We just need a place to stand," Eli replied. "And if the weather is nice, I thought we could do so outside beneath the old oak."

"I think that sounds fantastic," Eden said, looking around and seeing heads nod in agreement. "Leave it to us. We'll take care of everything."

Then the door opened and the first family members were arriving to begin their holiday celebration.

Chapter LVII

"Are you certain, Zachariah?"

"As much as we can be without actually being there, Chief."

Mary stared at the man on her monitor for a long moment before she heaved a great sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose. "All right, Zach," startling him with her use of a derivative of his name. "You've done all the good you can do there. Are you coming for holiday dinner?"

"Chief, when was the last time any of us turned down one of Joy's home cooked meals?"

She smirked at him. "Point taken. I'll see you shortly."

"Will do, Chief. See you soon."

Mary watched the connection go dark, then pressed her fingertips to her eyes. A knock on her door caused her to sigh and call out. "Yes?"

"Ms Wellesly? May I come in?" A touch on her desk unlocked the door and Eli stuck her head inside before entering and shutting the door firmly behind her. One look told her what she needed to know, and she crossed the room without hesitation and knelt at Mary's side. "Ms Wellesly? Caleb said you needed to see me. Is everything all right?"

Mary looked at Eli and offered her a tired smile. "Yes, Eli... thank you. I do need to speak to you. Please," motioning her to a seat. "I looked over the chip you gave me yesterday. If it wasn't for the fact that he's critical to your team, I'd steal Jacob away from you. He managed to fill in the blanks in Gideon's research. I finally have a complete picture."

"That's a good thing, right?"

"For us - yes; for you and the rest of the Alpha team, not so much. For the Committee... not in the least. But it's given me what I need to finish this once and for all."

Eli frowned and cocked her head. "How is that not good for the team?"

Mary sighed and rubbed her fingers across her forehead. "Because it means we need to move up the timetable again. It means cutting short the last bit of time with your families."

Green eyes widened. "You want us to leave immediately," she said in realization.

"Not exactly. I want you all to be able to share the holiday and have as much time together as we can afford to give you. But we probably need to move before morning. If we can get you out of here before they realize that you're gone, you'll have a better chance of not being sabotaged. But you know what that means, don't you?"

"You'll have to answer to the Council for our untimely disappearance?"

Mary chuckled wryly. "Among other things. I'm already scheduled to meet with the Council tomorrow. I'm sure I'll have to answer for a good many things. But that's not what I was referring to." Eli tilted her head and waited. "Eli, you won't be able to go to the asteroid. Every one of them knows where you're headed, and there is every likelihood that they will have someone waiting for you there since the mercenaries failed in their mission to destroy you here."

"That could be a problem."

"You are a master of understatement, Daughter," smiling when green eyes widened in surprise then crinkled in delight. "Zachariah has been doing some research into other possibilities. And Joseph is still working on a communications array that will allow us to stay in contact with you without alerting the others to your location. But you need to let the team know to be prepared to leave at a moment's notice as well as the possibility that you may be completely on your own without communication for a while. I'll do my best to make sure everyone has the chance to say goodbye, but...."

"No guarantees - I understand. I'll make sure the team is aware." Eli cleared her throat. "My MaTb should be here soon. I was hoping you would be downstairs with me to greet her."

"I'd be honored, Eli... truly."

"Thank you, Ms... Mary." Eli sighed. "Sorry. I am trying."

Mary smiled. "Despite what the other kids told you, I'm not going to kick you out of the family if you're not comfortable calling me Mama, Eli. That's not how this family works."

Eli laughed. "I'm sure. But it's important to them so it's important to me. I'll keep working at it; I'm sure Angel won't mind helping me learn."

"Probably not. Are you still planning to marry before you leave?"

"I'm pretty certain MaTb will insist as soon as she's introduced to Arianna."

"You think she'll know...?"

"No - I *know* she will. I've imprinted on her."

"Then perhaps we should make our way downstairs to meet her as soon as she arrives. I know Arianna needs to be introduced to her and Eve should certainly have the opportunity to speak to Arianna privately. But I'm not sure anyone wants that to be their introduction to each other... especially since

much has changed about you in the weeks since your mother last saw you." Mary rose slowly and Eli moved swiftly to stand at her side.

"Are you certain you're all right, Ms... Mary? You're moving much slower than I'd hoped you would be after regenerating yesterday."

"I'm fine, Eli," she replied as she limped slowly towards the door. "I think I may take a little time off after this mission is over to rest and recover a little bit." She gave Eli a wry smirk. "There is every likelihood that I may be forced to take time off."

Eli frowned. "You think the Council will punish your actions?"

"I think someone is going to have to be held accountable, and I'm the biggest target." She placed a hand on Eli's shoulder when Eli would have protested. "I knew the risk, Eli. I knew there would be consequences when I chose this course of action. Just remember that I expect great things from you kids. Grandchildren would be a bonus though." Eli's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. Mary laughed as she opened the door to her office.

"Um..."

"No pressure," Mary offered with a smile. "Just something to think about." She tilted her head and studied Eli's confused expression. "Surely the thought of having children is not a foreign concept."

Eli chewed her lip. "Not exactly foreign, but..." She sighed. "It's like life is suddenly moving at light speed. I had resigned myself to being alone for the rest of my life and now..."

"Everything is within the realm of possibilities again?"

"Something like that. Sometimes I wonder if I'm going to wake up and find that Arianna and the asshat are betrothed to one another again and we're still in the middle of Committee interviews."

"Despite everything that's happened?"

Eli nodded. "Yes. Because I can still feel what it was like to be without her and until I can get past that..." She met Mary's hand. "Does that make me insecure?"

Mary smiled compassionately and clasped Eli's forearm. "As you reminded me once, Eli - it makes you humanoid. Fortunately you have time and Arianna to help you accept it as truth."

Before Eli could formulate a response, Mordecai came running up the stairs. "Oh thank... Eli, Eden sent me. You need to get downstairs quick. Your μητέρα is here, and she's with Arianna."

Eli's eyes widened and she turned to Mary, then looked back at Mordecai. "Thank you, Kai. Will you stay with Ms Wellesly please and make sure she gets downstairs without issue? Don't give me that look, Ms Wellesly. As your physician, you're lucky I'm not ordering him to carry you. I just want him to walk beside you in case there's a problem all right?"

"All right, Doc. Go ahead and rescue your mate from your mama. Mordecai and I will be downstairs directly and you can introduce me to Eve."

"Thank you, Mama. See you shortly." Then Eli raced down the stairs. Mary turned to look at Mordecai who simply extended his arm and waited for her to latch on. She clutched his elbow and he covered her hand with his.

"Shall we?" he offered with a smile.

"We shall... slowly if you don't mind."

"You set the pace, Chief. I'm just here to help."

Mary smiled. "Your mama must be very proud of you, Mordecai."

"You can ask her," he said as they started down the stairs at a sedate pace. "She's already here. She's the one who saw Eden gesturing wildly at me when Eli's μητέρα zoned right in on Arianna the moment she arrived. I don't know how Eli's μητέρα knew who Arianna was, but Eden stayed to keep an eye on Arianna until I could fetch Eli."

"Well let's go see what's going on. It should make for a memorable holiday anyway."

Mordecai laughed and they continued their slow trek.

When Eli had gone upstairs at Sarah's instruction, Arianna had moved into a corner of the living room in an effort to stay out of the traffic of incoming family members. She would have just gone into the kitchen to hang out with Joy and help with dinner preparation except that Eden had caught her on the way out the door and asked her to wait so she could introduce Arianna to her mother. So Arianna moved out of the way to wait patiently for her introduction.

She didn't mind really. It was fascinating to watch the interaction of her teammates and their chosen visitors knowing this was the last time they would have together for years. Arianna found it quite telling and very revealing. She was so preoccupied she didn't realize she'd become the focus of a suddenly still and silent room until she was looking into eyes that were both familiar and strange. She blinked and cleared her throat.

"Excuse me?"

"Who are you to my дочь?"

Arianna's eyes widened. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Eden gesturing and Mordecai slipping from the room, but her focus never left the woman in front of her. To Arianna's diminutive stature, Eve was massive - taller than Eli by several inches and broader across the shoulders as well. But Arianna recognized the similarities as well. Eve's skin color was almost the same spring green - a little deeper perhaps but still familiar; her green eyes held gold flecks that were sparkling with mirth; but it was her smile that showed Arianna what Eli would look like in twenty-five years.

"Elizabeth is my Amado; I am her mate."

"Her mate?" Eve returned with a skeptical expression. "Do you know what it means to be her mate? Do you understand the responsibility and commitment required to be the mate of one such as my

ДОЧЬ?" Green eyes stared into brown and studied them intently. Arianna refused to flinch and held the gaze without hesitation.

"I do, MaTb," Arianna replied firmly, almost smiling when Eve's eyebrows flew into her hairline in surprise at her address. "She is mine and I am hers and not even death will separate us. What we have and who we are to one another is forever."

"And when is your ceremony? I expect there will be a marriage between you in front of your families to publically declare your relationship to one another before you leave this planet?"

Arianna opened her mouth to reply when Eli skidded into the room. She didn't even take notice of her mother; instead she moved directly to Arianna's side and wrapped her arms around the tiny waist. "Angel?" she said softly. "Is everything all right?"

Arianna stood on tiptoes and brushed a kiss over Eli's mouth, smiling when Eli chased her lips as she pulled back slightly. "Everything is fine, Amado. We were just establishing some truths between us. But perhaps you should introduce me to your MaTb. I'm certain she would actually like to greet you as well."

"Listen to your mate, ДОЧЬ. She seems to have a good grasp on things."

Eli held Arianna's eyes another brief moment, then took a deep breath and turned to face Eve. She realized they were still the center of attention and sighed. Certainly not the way she'd envisioned introducing her mother to her mate, but there was nothing to be done for it now.

"MaTb, OTeU - this is my mate Arianna. Angel, this is my MaTb Eve and my OTeU Noah." Noah grinned and opened his arms wide. Arianna spared a glance at Eli who gave her a nod, then stepped into Noah's embrace. He felt her shudder against him and looked down at her in concern before he turned his stare to Eli.

"What did I...? Did I hurt...?" Noah stopped speaking when he felt Arianna shake her head against his chest. She squeezed and he held on gently, letting her dictate the pace of the hug. In a moment he felt her exhale and ease back to meet his eyes.

"Thank you," she said softly.

Noah frowned. "You're welcome?" He turned to Eli. "What did I...?"

"You loved her, OTeU. You welcomed her without thought or hesitation."

"It means so much?"

"It means everything," Arianna responded. She turned to look at Eve. "As does your recognition of our bond. Eli told me you would know."

Eve smiled. "I would indeed. It is impossible to miss her imprint on you. And that was without seeing the change you have wrought in her." She laughed when Arianna's eyes widened and her eyebrows flew into her hairline. She turned to Eli. "I think we have much to discuss."

Eli nodded. "We do. But I need to speak to my team and I would like to introduce you to Ms Wellesly. You'll like her, MaTb. She is much like you, and she and her family have adopted Arianna into their family."

Eve nodded. "I'll look forward to it." She turned to Ian. "Is there something we can do to help with holiday preparations?"

"Sure. C'mon. I'll let Mama know where to find you when she gets downstairs."

Eve nodded and looked around the room at the other family members. "Come," she invited the rest of the family members whose attention was still focused her way. "Let's leave these youngsters to their business and see if we can help our hostess with preparations. I'm sure they'll come to help as soon as they're done."

Deborah's mother smiled and headed towards the doorway. "You're a leader among your people, aren't you?"

"You can tell?" Eve asked with a smirk, moving to meet her at the door.

"I'm old... not stupid. I recognize someone who gives orders and expects them to be followed without question." Whatever else was said was lost as all of the non-team members followed them out of the room, leaving only the Alpha team minus Mordecai in the living room. Paul closed the door to sequester them from the remainder of the house.

"So what's up, Boss?" he asked as all eyes went to Eli. She sighed and shared what Mary had revealed to her.

"I don't know when but expect to be gone by morning. Not just from Joy's but likely from the planet."

"So we're sneaking out?"

"Pretty much. And we'll be going out blind."

"This has all the earmarks of a disaster," Titus commented.

Eden shrugged. "Depends on your point of view. It makes it a lot more real because everything will depend on us and our performance. We can't expect help or rescue; it's up to us alone."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Surprisingly no. I think it will make us better knowing we have no backup."

"And Ms Wellesly and her team are working on a way to enable communication," Eli reminded them. "It won't be immediate, but it will happen." She saw slow nods of agreement from everyone as they glanced around at each other. "All right. Just be ready to go at a moment's notice, and expect it to be soon. We've come too far to let the Committee or anyone else keep us from success."

"We'll be ready, Eli."

"Hey Eli?" Abigail spoke up as the rest rose to go find their families. Everyone turned and waited for her to speak. Eli cocked her head in question. "Does this mean the wedding's off?"

"Not if MaTb has anything to say about it," Eli said wryly. She winced when Arianna elbowed her in the ribs and glared. Eli cleared her throat and rubbed the back of her neck. "I'm certain we will take a few minutes to do so; it's something we want to share and MaTb will insist on being witness to our vows before the day is over. But we don't expect any of you to give up time with your families."

"And if we want to?"

Arianna smiled. "You will all be welcome. But we should probably go rescue Joy from all the help in the kitchen before we end up with nothing for dinner." The Alpha team exchanged glances and rushed for the door.

Chapter LVIII

The introduction between Mary and Eve was completely anti-climactic. Eli had prepared them well, and they went in expecting to meet a friend and ally. With only a few words they were satisfied she'd been correct about them and decided to table their questions until after the kids were on their way - there would be plenty of time for discussion then.

The Alpha team had shared Eli's news with their families and they had spent the morning alternately helping with the preparations, talking quietly and sharing outrageous stories helping to lay the foundation for their family members to become the friends and support system they would ultimately need once their children were gone.

Eve noticed Arianna didn't seem to have any family that wasn't related to Mary, and she finally cornered Eli to find out the truth while Arianna chatted with Noah, Jacob, Eden and their families. "ДОЧЬ, why is your mate alone? Has she no family to bid farewell?"

"It's complicated, MaTb. The short version is that she did not desire their presence here for fear of causing an uproar. Her parents have caused her much grief and would make her departure an unpleasant one."

"This is why Mary Wellesly took Arianna into her family," Eve stated with certainty though she watched Eli's expression for confirmation.

"Yes, MaTb. I believe she would have done the same for any of us had the situation warranted it. But only Arianna needed such extreme measures."

Eve reached out and tucked a lock of blonde hair behind Eli's ear. "You really care for Arianna; she is the reason you came home looking so peaked. Were you mates then?" Eli nodded but held her mother's eyes, knowing to do less would put Eve on the offensive. Still Eve narrowed her eyes as she examined Eli's face. "Did she hurt you, ДОЧЬ?"

Eli sighed. She should have known her mother would see the truth. "We hurt one another, MaTb. But we have worked through it and become better for it."

Eve stiffened her jaw. "I believe I would speak to your mate, Elizabeth."

"MaTb...."

"It is my right and privilege to do so, **ДОЧЬ**. Had this happened on our world, I would have known and approved of Arianna long before you consummated your relationship with her. What's done is done - but that does not absolve my right or responsibility to give my approval of your union."

Eli nodded again but allowed her gaze to become firm. "I want you to understand something, MaTb," waiting for Eve to acknowledge her words. "What happened to us was *our* fault... both of us. Don't you try to lay the blame solely on Arianna's shoulders. There's a lot about the whole situation that you simply do not understand, and she doesn't need you to place a burden of guilt on her."

Eve studied Eli carefully, noting the fierce expression in her eyes and her aggressive body language. She smiled slightly. "Very well, Elizabeth. I promise to treat her as your mate and not as an apprenticeship candidate. Will that satisfy you?"

"It will, MaTb. Thank you." Eli headed towards Arianna when her mother's words made her stop in her tracks.

"Your OTeU has already given his blessing, **ДОЧЬ**."

Eli turned back to Eve and gave her a wry smile. "Yes, but we both know it is your blessing that counts, MaTb."

Eve grinned and nodded, then cupped Eli's face in her hand. "She makes you happy?"

Eli broke into a genuine smile and covered Eve's hand with her own as she nodded. "She loves me, MaTb."

Eve brushed a kiss over Eli's forehead. "Bring your mate to me, **ДОЧЬ**. It is time to make her part of the family."

Arianna had taken a deep breath when she saw Eli turn to approach her, confident that her reprieve from interrogation was nearly over. Eden covered her hand and she looked up to find compassionate black eyes smiling at her. "Eden?" tilting her head in question.

Eden let her lips curve into a smile as well. "Don't worry about it, Az. You've got this, and we've got your back, all right? Besides, this is mostly a formality. Eve's not going to forbid your marriage - you and Eli are already joined."

"She's right, you know," Noah added unexpectedly. "Eve would never forbid your union even if you weren't already mated to one another."

"Perhaps," Arianna ceded. "But she can withhold her blessing, and that would hurt Eli. She deserves better than that."

Noah smiled. "Trust Eve to recognize that fact. Eli is of her heart." Then Eli was there taking Arianna's hands in her own.

"MaTb would like to talk to you, Angel."

Arianna nodded shakily. "Yes, I expected as much. Will you stay with me?"

Eli squeezed the hands she held. "For as long as you need me, Angel. But I think MaTb would like a few minutes alone with you much as Ms Wellesly did with me."

"What did you talk about?" Arianna babbled nervously. "You never shared that with me."

"You never asked," Eli replied with a smile. "But she outlined my rights and responsibilities both as a member of her family and as your mate. And she asked my intentions towards you."

Arianna frowned. "But she already knew that. We had just asked her blessing on our marriage."

"My intentions towards you as your mate, Beloved."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

Eli chuckled. "Not at all, but we can discuss it later. MaTb is waiting."

Arianna risked a glimpse in Eve's direction, then took a deep breath and nodded her head. "I'm ready."

"Relax, Angel. She will like you for my sake, then love you for your own." Brown eyes stared into hazel, then Arianna smiled and tugged gently on Eli's hands.

"Take me to your MaTb, Amado."

Eve scrutinized Arianna's expression and body language when Eli went to fetch her. It was clear Arianna was uncomfortable with Eve's desire to speak to her, but Eve could also see her daughter and their friends rally around her. After another moment, Eli and Arianna turned and made their way back across the room hand in hand until they were standing in front of Eve. She took a minute to study them together, then she looked directly into Arianna's eyes and smiled gently.

"If I promise not to bite, will you sit and speak with me privately, Arianna?" Eve asked. "We don't have to leave the room so to ease my дочь's mind. She has always been a worrier about things that matter to her, you know, but I suspect with you it is probably acute. And I would not put any of us in that situation if it can be avoided." She extended her hand. "I just want to talk, Arianna. You've become the most important person in Elizabeth's life, and I know nothing of you."

Arianna tilted her head thoughtfully. "And that is important? That you know me and not that you simply accept what Eli and I are to each other?"

"Arianna, nothing I do or say can change what you and Elizabeth are to each other. It is encoded in her now, and I can see her imprint on you. But I have not had the opportunity to know you, and I would like to. I think it's important that family does, and this is going to be our only chance for a while." Eve offered her hand again and waited.

Arianna stared at her a moment longer, then turned and met Eli's green eyes, leaning forward to brush their lips together. "I'll go with your MaTb. Your OTeu is right - you are of her heart. She wants what is best for you."

"Are you certain, Angel?" holding her hand a little tighter and staring into Arianna's eyes to find the truth for herself.

"I am, Amado. Your MaTb deserves the chance to speak to me... no matter how it unnerves me. Besides I know you will be nearby, and Eden promised to have my back."

"Oh she did?" smiling when she saw Arianna nod. "Remind me to thank her later." Eli turned her attention to Eve. "Be kind, MaTb, and be gentle."

"As if she was my own, ДОЧЬ. Now leave us so I can share with your mate all the embarrassing stories of your childhood... like you shooting your OTeU in the buttocks."

Arianna's eyebrows shot into her hairline; Eli flushed bright red and covered her eyes with her hand. Arianna turned back to Eve and took the waiting hand. "I believe we have much to discuss, MaTb. Don't leave out any of the good stuff either," she added with an impish grin. Eli just groaned and watched them walk away by peeking through her fingers. Then she headed back to where her father and her friends waited.

"Here," Noah offered with a grin as he handed Eli a hot toddy. "You look like you need it." Eli accepted it without moving her eyes from the spot where Arianna and Eve sat across the room quietly chatting and laughing together. Then Eden punched Eli in the arm and almost made her spill the drink down the front of her. Immediately Eli's attention refocused itself on setting the glass carefully down before turning to glare at Eden.

"Eden? What the...?" She took a deep breath. "Is there a reason you tried to give me first degree burns?"

Noah snorted and Jacob coughed to cover his laughter. Eden just smirked and shrugged. "It got your attention off your makuahine and Az. Eli, they're going to be all right. They want to like each other - for your sake if for no other reason."

"I know," Eli replied with a sigh. "It's just...."

"Trust your MaTb, Little One," Noah instructed in his soft, deep voice. "She has a far better understanding of the situation than you realize." Eli cocked her head in a questioning manner, but Noah simply took a long draught of his beer and returned her regard. It wasn't his place to share.

"Arianna?" Eve questioned as they reached a lull in the conversation. Arianna met Eve's gaze and waited. She was feeling much more comfortable, but that was likely to change soon. Eve had yet to ask her any hard questions, and Arianna knew she deserved some answers. "May I ask why you did not wish your parents' presence here?" feeling the flinch run through Arianna's slight body. "I swear I will hold whatever you share with me in the confines of my heart, but I would like to understand. Family is so important to us. I can't imagine missing this time with Elizabeth however brief."

Arianna sighed. "Your culture and mine are so diverse, MaTb. We couldn't be more different if we made the effort to be so. We are vegetarians; you are meat eaters. We have no military; you are warriors by nature. We are...." She paused thoughtfully before forging on. "We are sexually

uninhibited while you seek a single individual to mate with for life. We simply hope to find someone compatible that we like and might come to eventually love." Arianna closed her eyes and released a deep breath, then continued. "I don't know what other families are like; I only had mine growing up, and I was a responsibility. My parents were required to produce an heir to maintain the royal line. I do believe they cared for me, but I was an obligation first. It was always that way."

"So you didn't want them here because they are cold and unfeeling towards you?"

Arianna shook her head. "No. I could manage that; I've put up with it most of my life. What I refused to tolerate was his contempt of my mate and his efforts to destroy us. That coupled with Mama's humiliation of him... well I'm sure you can see why I didn't want him here causing disruption for everyone else."

"And what of your MaTb?"

Arianna shook her head. "She would have been unpleasant for Papa's sake. Still not worth it."

Eve considered Arianna for a long moment then she opened her arms. "I know you have Ms Wellesly now as well as her children and their mates. Would you be willing to be our family as well?"

Arianna didn't hesitate. She fell into Eve's embrace and held on tightly. She wasn't a bit surprised to feel Eli behind her or Noah surrounding them all. The little girl who had grown up with few friends and very little real family interaction suddenly found her arms filled to overflowing. Arianna couldn't stop the happy tears that flowed down her cheeks. She felt Eve cup her face as they pulled away from one another.

"Tears, Little One?" Eve asked in concern.

"Tears of joy, MaTb. I promise."

"Those are the best kind," Eve assured her, then she looked around the room. "So shall we get the marriage taken care of so that we can start the celebration?"

"MaTb!!!" Eli shrieked while her teammates clapped and cheered. Then Arianna jumped into her arms and Eli forgot about everything else as they cheered even louder.

Everything came to a halt as everyone bundled up to go outside to witness the marriage ceremony. If Eve was surprised by the show of support from strangers it was never reflected in her face. Instead she invited them to share her joy, and they all tromped out into Joy's backyard laughing and holding hands.

When they reached the old oak, Noah took his place against the trunk. Arianna and Eli stood in front of him with linked hands and eyes only for each other. Eve positioned Mary and her family in a semi-circle behind Arianna, then realized she had no one besides herself to stand with Eli. Before she could ask, Eden, Jacob and most surprisingly Deborah echoed the Wellesly's stance behind Eli and Eve beckoned the others forward before taking her place opposite Mary. The rest of their friends and the families created a semi-circle in front of them, enclosing Eli and Arianna protectively. Ian leaned down and whispered to Mary who looked at him, then nodded her agreement. He stepped from his

place beside her and crossed behind Arianna, brushing a kiss on her head before moving to stand beside Eve. She looked at him askance. Ian shrugged.

"I promised Eli I would treat her like she belonged to us too," he said by way of explanation. Eve smiled and wiped a tear from her eye. Then she nodded at Noah, and the short, solemn ceremony began.

Dinner by contrast was a lively and entertaining affair though it was well past lunchtime but before dinner began by the time they sat down to eat. Eli and Arianna were seated in the middle of the center table, and everyone else filled in around them. Joy was never happier that the expansion work had been completed as she was when everyone gathered to eat. Even if she never needed the space again, it was wonderful to have it for this one occasion.

So now everyone sat around tables put together in a 'C' formation, allowing them the most contact with each other that could be managed. Eli rose and tapped on her glass, and everyone quieted down and turned their attention in her direction. She blushed and cleared her throat, then smiled and glanced down when Arianna clasped her hand and squeezed it lightly. The moment would have gone longer had Eden not lobbed a roll at Eli only to have her makuahine smack the back of her head much to everyone else's amusement.

Eden huffed. "Whaaaaaat??" she whined. "Makauhine, why did you hit me??" Her mother merely raised an eyebrow and Eden crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. "I'm hungry," she grumbled. "If we left it up to Eli, we'd be here until the food got cold and gross waiting for her to say something." She ducked when the hand went up again. "I'm not making this up!" she declared. "Ask anyone," motioning around the table and seeing a lot of agreement from her teammates including Eli and Arianna. "See?"

"You know better than to play with your food, Kaikamahine."

Eden sighed. "Yes, Makauhine."

"In fairness she was right," Eli said softly, drawing all eyes to her once more. "I have been known to lose myself in Arianna and the team has suffered through its share of cold meals because of it." She looked down briefly, then lifted her eyes to glance around the room. "I realize I'm not actually the hostess for today's celebration, but I asked Mary and Joy for the opportunity to address everyone and this seemed like the best time to do that. I don't know a good portion of the people sitting in this room, and that saddens me a little. But it makes my heart glad to have been able to share my joy... our happiness... with you today. I hope that each of you will look back on this holiday with fondness and delight. And though I know that many of you came for your own family, I'm thankful you were here to witness the public acknowledgment of our life and lives together."

Noah stood as Eli reseated herself and smiled. "In all things and in all ways, we give thanks."

"Amen," the rest intoned, then they dug into the feast that had been prepared.

"I had to do this on short notice," Joy said with a glare at Eli and Arianna who both had the grace to blush. Then she snickered and looked around the room. "And it was quite a challenge to make sure

there was enough for everyone with everything else going on. So it's a little rough to look at, but I hope the taste and the thought behind it will make it more palatable to the eye." With that Ian and Nathaniel brought out a sheet cake, followed by Caleb and Joseph with another. They weren't ugly, just very plain, and everyone stood to get a better glimpse as they were set in front of Eli and Arianna. Joy cleared her throat and continued. "On this planet when a couple marries, they share cake to symbolize good fortune and prosperity." She shrugged. "I thought it would be a nice way to send you off - into your new life as well as on your mission."

Eli and Arianna rose and embraced her from either side, hugging her tightly and muttering their thanks. Then Ian and Nathaniel presented them each with a knife, and they started cutting, thrilled to be able to share this tradition. It was turning into a hell of a send-off celebration.

Chapter LIX

The celebration that started with a mid-afternoon meal ran into evening. Each team member and their families were anxious to share their marriage traditions with Eli and Arianna, and it was both entertaining and educational. Some were fun - Luke blindfolding them and having them feed each other for instance. Some were scary - allowing Isaac to slice the palms of their hands and binding them together to symbolize their commitment as one. Some were a little dangerous - like requiring Eli and Arianna to drink from a singular glass while twined together, then stomp the glass into Joy's floor. A look from her got a nod from Jacob, assuring her that he would clear away the glass shards before the Alpha team left.

Probably the most memorable custom was the blessing offered by Abigail. It was traditional to her people, and not something normally shared outside her culture. The fact that she shared it with them in her native tongue made it doubly special. Then she offered it to them again in Standard so everyone could understand the blessing.

*May your mornings bring joy and your evenings bring peace.
May your troubles grow few as your blessings increase.
May the saddest day of your future
Be no worse than the happiest day of your past.
May your hands be forever clasped in friendship
And your hearts joined forever in love.
Your lives are very special,
God has touched you in many ways.
May his blessings rest upon you
And fill all your coming days.*

Then Abigail kissed their foreheads in benediction before removing her dishes from the table and making her way to the kitchen to begin cleaning up. The rest followed her example, and soon the large room was clean and empty. Everyone had retreated to their own rooms to spend the last few precious hours they had together, leaving Arianna and Eli alone with Eve, Noah and Mary's family. Mary rose slowly from her place causing each man in the room to rise as well.

"Ms... Mary?" Eli queried. "Is everything...?"

Mary waved her off and smiled. "I'm a little tired, Eli, but I'm good. I do have some work to do - a few things to take care of to ensure your safe departure shortly. Besides you and Arianna should

spend what time you have left with your folks. It's going to be some time before you have an opportunity like this again."

"Should you not remain as well?" Eve ask. "You are Arianna's family."

"We are. But we've had time together that you and Noah haven't been allowed. It only seems fair that you be given the opportunity to share your time together. We'll be back to say goodbye. After all, the boys and I have to make sure they get away safely don't we?" Mary reminded with a smile as she limped towards the door accompanied by her children and their significant others. They stopped at the door when Eve cleared her throat to speak, then turned and waited.

Eve nodded slowly. "I can see we're going to have much to discuss in the near future, Ms Wellesly. There is much I would understand from you."

Mary nodded. "After we've gotten the Alpha team on their way, I would like that very much. Now if you'll excuse us..." Then she turned and left the room followed silently by her family. Eve watched her go before looking back at Eli.

"Would you like us to go so you can celebrate your marriage in the traditional way?"

Arianna cocked an eyebrow and spoke before Eli could draw breath. "MaTb, Eli and I have been mates for quite some time already. And we will have many opportunities to privately celebrate our public commitment to one another over the next five years and throughout our lifetime together. We only have a few more hours to share with you before we leave. I think it's important that we spend them together."

Eve turned to Eli and held her gaze for a long moment. "I like your mate very much, дочь. You have my blessing on your union. We could not have chosen better for you; we could not have chosen as well."

"Thank you, MaTb," Eli said quietly. "That means..."

"... everything," Arianna finished, causing silence to fall around them.

"So why does Ms Wellesly limp?" Noah asked, deftly breaking the sappiness of the moment. All three women looked at him in disbelief and he looked back at them nonchalantly. "What? Her children's solicitousness suggests it's a recent injury and not a long handicap."

"Really, OTeU??" Eli asked giving him a fond smile. "We were having a moment."

Noah smirked. "I know. Moment over," ducking the expected swings from both wife and daughter. He chuckled and Arianna covered her mouth with her hand. Eve and Eli exchanged eye rolls and grins. "But seriously," Noah continued when his chuckles wound down. "What happened?"

Eli and Arianna looked at one another. Arianna arched an eyebrow and Eli shrugged slightly. Arianna nodded and turned back to Eli's parents who were watching their silent communication in fascination. Then Arianna opened her mouth, and they sat back to hear the story of what had happened since the Alpha team had been chosen.

"Mama? Are you okay? Is there something we can do?"

Mary patted Nathaniel's arm. "I'm fine, my son. Still tired, but at least we can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"Are you sure it's not a train, Mama?" Ian asked with a smile.

"Not at all," she snorted. "But at the speed we're heading into the station, we're just going to have to hope for the best. Joseph, I'd like you and Ian to take a team and go back to the ship and do a final check. Make sure...."

"We know what to do, Mama. We'll take care of it," Joseph assured her as he clapped Nathaniel on the shoulder before nodding at Ian. "We won't let you down."

"Thank you, my son." Both young men nodded and headed out the door.

"Is there something we can do for you, Mama?" Nathaniel asked.

"It would be nice if we could send the Alpha team off with some real food. They will need to start eating those dreadful dried food meals soon enough."

Joy snickered and stood. "We'll pack up the leftovers, Mama." Ephraim and Prudence nodded their agreement and followed her out. Only Nathaniel remained behind.

"Anything else, Mama? Otherwise I'll go help Joy. That's a lot of food to take care of. We're going to need a separate delivery if Joy delivers all the leftovers for those kids."

Mary smirked. "Kids? Nathaniel, those *kids* are your age. I don't think you can get away with referring to them as kids."

Nathaniel laughed. "Maybe. But since they're not here to refute it, and I know I'm a kid...." He shook his head. "All right. You've got Joey and Ian doing a final check on the ship. I assume the Admiral is keeping an eye on things?" Mary nodded. "Right. Joy, Eph and Prue are packing up the leftovers and readying them for transport. I'll let Ian know to expect them as soon as they're ready. Anything else?"

"Yes. I need to speak to Caleb. And I would like for you to do a walk through."

"Mama?"

She blinked at the confusion on his face. It had been a while since her sons had participated in the business, and they had never been included outside of anything that didn't involve their sister. Certainly they had never participated in an assignment the magnitude of this mission. She shook her head when Nathaniel frowned.

"I need you to go to each agent and get a status report and let them know that we will be moving sometime in the next six hours."

"So soon?" Mary cocked an eyebrow, but before she could voice her thought, Nathaniel continued speaking. "I knew we were moving tonight, but I thought it would be later... like the early hours of the morning tonight." Mary smirked and Nathaniel laughed. "Yeah, I know, but you know what I mean."

"I do. And that was my original intent."

"But...?"

"But my gut is telling me sooner is better than later. As much as I hate to cut the Alpha team's time short with their families, their safety is more important to me."

Nathaniel studied her for a long moment, then nodded and rose from his seat. "All right. I'll send Caleb to you first. Then I'll report back to you as soon as I'm done."

"Thank you, my son." Nathaniel walked behind the desk and brushed a kiss over Mary's hair, then headed out of Mary's office without a backwards glance. Mary leaned back in her chair, absently rubbing at the ache in her leg. Then she closed her eyes and waited for Caleb's knock.

"Chief?" Caleb asked as he stuck his head in the door that had been left open a crack. He frowned when he noted Mary sitting behind the desk with her eyes closed. He rapped his knuckles against the door as he pushed into the room. "Mary?"

Brown eyes blinked open and Mary motioned him into her office. "Close the door please, Caleb, and have a seat." He did as she bade him and leaned back in the chair comfortably. He clasped his hands over his stomach loosely and studied her as he waited for her to speak. He felt his exhaustion reflected in her eyes though there was no other indication of how she felt. When she cocked an eyebrow at him for staring, he raised his own and smirked.

"What's up, Chief?"

"There's going to be a lot of fallout tomorrow when I stand before the Council and explain exactly why I took it on myself to not only send the Alpha team off without the planned fanfare they were due for this mission, but that I directed them off the grid for their own safety."

"Regrets, Chief?"

"Not at all, my friend. This project is bigger than us; in some ways it's bigger than them, but they've been chosen to bear its mandates and their consequences. And we've done everything we could to give them a fair, fighting chance to be successful. I can't regret that."

"But...?"

"But there will be consequences for the things I've done and the choices I've made regardless of their intent, and I have to answer for them."

"You expect tomorrow to go against you then?"

"I expect that someone is going to have to be held responsible and I am the most likely candidate." She held up a hand before he could interrupt. "I know the Committee bears its own responsibility, and I can prove their culpability in the events that led me to making the decisions I did. But I'm the only one that can assume the responsibility for removing the Alpha team from everyone else's purview."

Caleb nodded slowly. He'd expected this on several levels. He released a slow breath. "So what do you want from me, Chief? What do you need me to do?"

Mary sighed deeply, releasing her breath slowly as she held Caleb's gaze taking his measure. After a moment she nodded to herself and gave him a brief smile. "Two things actually. I'd like you to stand as my second tomorrow - not to take part of the blame but to act as my witness."

"It would be my honor, Chief. I expected to be there regardless. Thank you for your faith in me."

"Ah, Caleb," Mary replied with a small, melancholy smile. "I have always had faith in you. You've been far better to me than I deserve. Don't please," she instructed, holding up a hand and cutting him off before he could protest. "We both know the truth. And perhaps if things had been different...."

He nodded his head, his eyes bright with sad understanding at what she was unable and unwilling to say aloud. "What else?" he asked kindly, redirecting the conversation, not wanting to see sympathy or pity in her gaze.

"In the event that things go especially badly for me tomorrow, I want you to take over the business. There are still people who need what we do. We owe it to them to continue to conduct business just as we always have."

"You think the Council will allow us to remain intact given everything...?"

"We did what we were supposed to do, Caleb. We protected those kids; *that* has always been our priority. I think they can be made to see that we fulfilled our contract to the letter. Perhaps not with the results they expected, but they will have no reason to take further action on the company. We did our job."

"And your kids?"

"The boys have to return to school to serve out the remainder of their teaching contracts, and they have another four years of service beyond that. Joy is going back to the ballet at the beginning of the year and she and Ephraim have made a tentative agreement to start seeing one another when this assignment is over. I'd like them to have a chance to discover what they could be together without all the crap going on we've had around here recently. Besides Ephraim isn't ready for the responsibility that running this business entails."

"And you think I am?" Caleb smirked.

"I think you could have struck out on your own years ago," Mary replied seriously. "But you stuck with me instead."

"I had to, Mary... for a number of reasons. I wouldn't trade it. We've been good together. And if I've wanted more...." He shrugged and met her gaze unflinchingly. "I'm the one who chose to stay, Mary. I never did anything I didn't really want to, okay?"

"I wish...." she started softly.

Caleb shook his head. "So do I. But I understand why you can't. So in answer to your question, yes. I'll hold onto the reins for you until you or the boys are able to resume command of the company if it comes to that. But we're going to try and make sure that it doesn't. Because I'm really not all that

thrilled with the idea of becoming some sort of ringmaster. That's not what I'm good at. There's a reason I served as Eddie's best marksman, you know."

Mary snorted. "I know. Thank you, Caleb." He nodded and she cleared her throat. Nathaniel has gone to do the walk through and Ian and Joseph are doing a final tour of the ship before we begin transporting the Alpha team."

"And Joy? Come on, Chief - I don't believe for one minute she's just sitting around waiting to say goodbye. She took on a good portion of the hardest part of the work keeping these kids and us fed."

"She's boxing up the leftovers so the Alpha team can at least start off with real food. Eden commented to me about her lack of enthusiasm for prepackaged military food."

Caleb chuckled. "Can't blame her, especially after tasting some of that food today. I need to remember to get some recipes before these folks leave. But um... do we have room for all that?"

"We'll send it up first. I want to give these kids every possible minute I can with their families, and as soon as they're on that ship, they're out of here. They need every advantage we can give them, and the longer their absence remains under the radar, the better for all concerned. The Admiral will escort them out of the solar system, but then they're on their own. They should be off the grid before I speak to the Council tomorrow."

Caleb rubbed a hand over his face. "Did you expect this to turn into such a cluster when you accepted this assignment?"

Mary leveled a glare at him that would have melted steel. "If I'd known then what I know now, it wouldn't be a cluster now. But I didn't and we can only go forward; we can't go back. But to answer your question - no. I expected a lot of things. I got a lot more."

"Like another daughter? You know that's liable to come back and bite you in the ass as well, Chief?"

"Maybe," Mary agreed with a shrug. "But what are they going to do once she's gone? And my other kids will fight to protect their newest little sister as hard as they would for each other. I can't regret that either."

"Mama?" Nathaniel called out as he knocked on the office door. "I've done the walk through."

"Come in, my son."

Nathaniel stepped into the office and closed the door, then he approached the desk but remained standing behind the chair next to the one Caleb was seated in. Mary cocked her eyebrow in question and Nathaniel smiled. "All the members of the Alpha team are ready to move when you say the word. And each agent is aware of their responsibilities in getting the team members to the ship."

"Mama?" Ian's voice spoke from the monitor and Mary turned her attention to him. "We've deployed the decoy at the launch site and moved the working ship to the belly of the carrier. It checked out clean and will be ready to go as soon as the team arrives."

"Thank you, Ian. You and Joseph remain in place for now. Joy will be arriving shortly with provisions to be added to the stock and once that's complete, we'll begin moving the Alpha team aboard."

He nodded. "Joey is on his way to inform the Admiral. The ship is running on a skeleton crew because of the holiday, which makes things easier for us. We'll be gone and back before most of them realize we've even left."

"Very well. I'll let you know when Joy is ready to begin transport, but it shouldn't be too long."

"Yes, Mama. We'll be waiting." He lifted his hand in goodbye and let the screen go dark. Mary turned to the comm device on her desk and keyed in the kitchen. After only a moment's pause Joy answered.

"Yes, Mama?"

"How you doing down there, Baby Girl?"

"If you'll send me a couple people to help, we can start loading the boxes in the vehicles to transport them to the ship. Shouldn't take but about fifteen minutes... twenty tops."

"Thank you, Daughter. Help is on its way." She clicked the connection off. "Caleb, grab a couple able bodies and go help Joy get that stuff loaded please. Nathaniel, you're driving it to the site?" waiting for him to nod. "All right. Take someone with you to help load it onto the transport and bring the vehicle back. You'll fly the transport to the ship and remain there."

"Yes Mama."

"All right, Gentlemen. Let's get this done. We're in the home stretch now."

Chapter LX

"Mama? This is Joy. We dropped Reuben off at the transport console and Eph and I are leaving the transport site. Nat just left for the ship. Ian should be on his way down to retrieve the Alpha team as soon as they arrive."

"Thank you, Joy. I'll begin moving them out immediately. How do things look there?"

"Quiet," Ephraim responded. "If there are eyes watching, Chief, they're doing so from a distance. Even the gate guard only gave a cursory glance to Nat's credentials. He didn't give the rest of us a second glance. Pretty sure he doesn't really care since it's a holiday."

"And no one's watching the transport field?"

"Not at all. They seem to think all the traffic is military and since it is...." Mary could hear the shrug in his voice and she smiled grimly.

"That could get a lot of people into a lot of trouble," she remarked. "But since it's going to work in our favor, I'm not going to complain." She sighed. "We'll see you both shortly. Don't dawdle if you want to say goodbye to Arianna and Eli. They'll be the last to leave, but it's not going to take too long to get everyone transported to the shuttle dock."

"We'll be there, Mama. See you in a few." With that Joy cut the connection and Mary rose to leave her office. It was time.

"All right," Mary addressed the Alpha team and their families in the large basement area below Joy's home. "I know this isn't how any of you expected to leave here, and it's certainly not the send-off you deserve. But more than anything we want you to have a real shot at making this project successful despite everything that's happened to bring us to this point. And if that means sneaking you out under everyone's noses, then so be it. Your safety is our first priority. So it's time to say your goodbyes. The quicker we get you to your ship, the farther away you'll be if and when someone goes looking for you."

"Do you think they will, Ms Wellesley?" Eve asked.

"I do. Despite the bungling their efforts have been to end this mission, too many people have too much invested not to... especially when they realize they have been compromised. And they're going to know that after tomorrow. We'll do our best to contain them of course, but I'd rather not take any risks we don't have to with the kids' safety or success."

"And you will explain this to us after our children are on their way?"

"Of course," Mary nodded. The parents all looked around at each other and nodded their agreement as a single group.

"Very well, Ms Wellesley," Eve replied, assuming the spokesperson role. "How long do we have?"

Mary released a deep breath. "About five minutes. Then I'm going to ask that you return upstairs and wait until I rejoin you."

"Acceptable," Eve said as she and Noah moved towards Eli and Arianna. Mary just stood back and waited for the storm to be over.

"There's so much to say and no time left to say it in," Eve complained as she cupped Eli's face in her hands. Eli gave her a tremulous smile and tightened her grip on Arianna's hand. Eve turned her attention to include Arianna as well. "Be good to one another and take care of each other through whatever comes your way. Love each other well and often and never go to bed angry. I expect you both to keep records of what happens while you're gone so we can know of your lives - your trials and successes. And news of grandchildren would be welcome at some point as well."

"MaTb!!" Eli screeched while turning deep green. Arianna just flushed beet red and covered her face. Noah chuckled and Eve shrugged.

"What??" she said diffidently. "I think it is good to go into this project knowing the expectations that rest on your shoulders."

"MaTb, we were just married. Surely we are entitled...."

Eve held up an imperious finger. "Do not play games with me, ДОЧЬ. I know you have been mated for longer than you wish me to be aware of. And I'm not saying grandchildren now; just grandchildren someday. The universe could do with more like the two of you. Now give us a hug and kiss."

They did so - first Arianna and then Eli; both young women wisely kept any comments about the universe not being ready for more just like them to themselves. Then Noah extended his hand to Eve and together they made their way upstairs. The rest took their cue and soon the basement only contained the Alpha team, Mary and her agents. She smiled sadly.

"Not much longer, guys. I'm going to send you out one at a time with your security detail in uneven increments. You won't be going out from the same transport stations, but you will be arriving at the same one to which you evacuated from the mountain. Reuben is there to keep the transport open and Ian is standing by with a shuttle. Board the shuttle as soon as you arrive, and once you're all accounted for he'll move you to the carrier. From there, you'll be taken to the edge of the solar system where your ship will be launched and you'll be on your own." She turned to Eli. "You've got all the information...?"

"Yes, Ma... Mama," Eli said with only the slightest hesitation and embarrassment. "And Hannah knows the frequencies to monitor for Joseph's signal. We'll disappear for as long as we need to; we've got this. We've trained for this and even successfully implemented it for a while. Not that we won't be thrilled to hear from him when he does get it worked out. Paul and Deb will be working on things from our end as well."

Mary nodded. "Good. I know you all know your business, but it's my prerogative to worry. I've been doing it for a while now where all of you are concerned."

The Alpha team chuckled and nodded their heads in agreement. "That's true," Eli concurred as she clapped her hands together. "So who goes first?"

In minutes Mary had them lined up with their security personnel ready to leave, saving Eli and Arianna for the last. A clattering on the stairs alerted them to Joy's arrival and Eli and Arianna turned to accept the hugs they knew were coming. Ephraim skirted around them and went directly into the lab. The rest turned away to allow them a few minutes of privacy to say their goodbyes. Caleb came up beside Mary and neatly removed her Pad from her hands before jerking his head in the direction of the quiet tableau taking place in the far corner of the room. "Go on," he whispered. "You won't have a better chance." Mary smiled and clasped his arm lightly, then moved to join her children for a brief goodbye.

"Thank you, Joy," Arianna whispered as she hugged Joy fiercely. "You'll never know...."

Joy leaned back enough to brush a kiss over Arianna's forehead. "I think I do, Little Sister. Take care of yourself and each other out there. I expect lots of stories when you return... or an invitation to visit if you decide to stay."

"You'll be among the first," Eli promised, squeezing the hand Joy had extended from her embrace of Arianna. Joy chuckled despite her tears.

"As long as we have that understood." She twitched her head in Mary's direction. "But you better say goodbye to Mama before you leave. Pretty sure she'd find a way to haunt you even without standard communication capabilities."

"Never underestimate the power of Mama?" Arianna asked with a light laugh.

"Something like that, yeah. I'll miss you both. Be seeing you?"

"Be seeing you, Joy." Joy gave them a smile and wiped the tears from her cheeks before she turned and made her way back upstairs without a backwards glance. Eli and Arianna turned to Mary and fell into her arms.

"Thank you... so much," Eli said. "You gave me the second chance I was certain would never actually be possible."

"Me too," Arianna chimed in. "We owe you...."

"Absolutely nothing," Mary assured them. "Except to be happy and love one another for the rest of your lives and beyond. I wouldn't say no to grandkids however," grinning when twin blushes raced up both faces. "Now go and be fabulous," kissing both foreheads before she pulled back and turning to walk away.

"Mama?" Arianna's address caused her to pause mid-step. Arianna and Eli moved closer and Mary spun to meet their eyes. "What about my papa?" She shook her head. "The rest of the team knows he came to the mountain, but we never got any more information."

"He is currently under guard at the mountain complex; he'll be part of the proceedings tomorrow. You'll be long gone before he's brought before the Council."

"What do you think they'll do to him? And Malcolm?"

Mary shrugged. "I think Malcolm is going to be seen as a victim in all this before all is said and done. But I also think he's going to end up being persona non grata anywhere he goes because your compatriots have shared with their families the truth of things. And I think they're going to make certain that the rest of the Alliance planets are aware as well." She sighed. "As for Fernando? At the very least he will be banned from active participation within the Alliance or with the Council. It is likely he will face criminal charges from some of the other planetary Alliance members. He did put every member of the Alpha team in danger. He's going to have to answer for that."

Arianna sighed and nodded slowly. "That's fair. I just wish...."

"I know you do, Daughter. I will do what I can for your sake, but he bears responsibility for his actions and they are devastatingly incriminating."

Arianna stepped forward and took Mary in her arms and held on tightly. "Thank you, Mama. I love you."

"Love you too, Beautiful Girl. Both of you," meeting first brown eyes and then green. "Now it's time for you to go and do incredible things. The boys will be with you until your ship is released from the carrier at the edge of the solar system. Please make sure you say goodbye to them before that happens. You *know* what drama queens they can be."

They snorted in laughter. Then Arianna and Eli kissed Mary goodbye. They clasped their hands together and went to join Caleb by the door. He motioned them towards the lab instead and though they were puzzled by his directive, they headed there. Just before they entered the corridor, they

turned together and offered a final wave to Mary. She lifted her hand in goodbye, then they disappeared from sight. Caleb stopped by Mary as he followed behind them.

"I'll take good care of them, Chief."

"I know you will, my friend. Be safe yourself. We're almost to the finish line."

"Will you be available...?"

"Until they're out of monitoring range," she nodded. "Just ping me if you need me. I'll have the Pad up and actively observing the entire process even while I am with our guests."

"You don't think they'll wonder...?"

"I'm sure that they will. I am equally certain that they will understand my need to see things through til the end. After all, I would be there myself if Eli hadn't firmly insisted.... Damn leg," she muttered, glaring at the offending appendage.

"Hey! We're all quite happy it was your damn leg and not something more critical, all right? Trust us, Chief - we're gonna finish this up right... for you and those kids. Now I've gotta go. We'll be back late, but I'll be ready to go first thing in the morning."

"Pretty sure I'll be waiting up, Caleb," Mary smiled. "Now go on. You're holding up the works and it's time to put paid to this assignment." Caleb snapped off a precise military salute, then escaped down the hallway before Mary could respond. She waited until she heard the hum of the transport field engage and release. Only then did she turn her steps back to the staircase and make her way up to the living room where the Alpha team's family members waited.

"It's a lot more real out here now, isn't it?" Arianna asked quietly as they cast a final glance at the planet receding behind the slow moving carrier. The rest of the Alpha team had immediately dispersed to their ship as soon as Ian had docked the shuttle in the huge carrier bay. Only Eli and Arianna had remained behind to say their final goodbyes to Ian, Nathaniel and Joseph. The boys knew not to take too long and Eli and Arianna had paused for a minute to look out the viewport before they crossed the deck to enter their ship.

"It is. When we were here before..." Eli shrugged. "I never saw this," motioning to the window. "Never took the time to look. I was too busy with preparations and..." She smiled shyly. "... other things," grinning when Arianna blushed. "I'm glad I got to share this with you now." She wrapped an arm around Arianna's middle and sighed in contentment when Arianna snuggled even closer into her.

"Me too," Arianna agreed with a smile before her expression became melancholy and her hold on Eli tightened. Eli frowned and looked down.

"Angel?"

Arianna shook her head. "I was just wishing things had been different. Not for us," she hastened before Eli could interrupt. "I wouldn't trade this for anything in the galaxy... known or otherwise. But I do wish things had been different where Malcolm and my papa are concerned. I'm pretty sure that going to cause Mama nothing but heartache."

"I think Mary and her team will be able to handle the fallout. Besides, MaTb won't let her stand alone, and I'm confident she will rally the others to stand behind her as well."

"Why? She doesn't even know Mama."

"No, but she does know the truth of what has happened on this project since day one... well, most of it anyway," Eli added with a hint of a blush. "She still doesn't know the whole truth of what happened between us and never will, but she has no need as that really has no bearing on the mission. Project details? I shared a number of things with her as I could and the rest I kept in a diary that I gave to her after we ate yesterday when we spoke alone."

"You think she'll read it before tomorrow?"

Eli nodded. "She already has. Remember that she left us alone with OeTU for a little while?" waiting for Arianna to acknowledge the event. "She skimmed through it then... enough to get a clear idea of what we knew anyway."

"Amado, she wasn't gone very long."

Eli smiled. "She didn't need to be. Who do you think I got my reading and comprehension skills from? MaTb is considered one of our greatest minds. She soaks in information like a sponge. I'm convinced MaTb spoke to the others while Ms... Mama was downstairs with the Alpha team."

Arianna sighed. "I'm going to miss them. I never knew what having a family could be and now...."

"Now you still have a family. Part of it is with you," gesturing towards their ship, "and part of it we had to leave behind for now," pointing out the viewport. "It's all part of growing up. But we'll keep working on our communications array and Joey will be doing the same, and with a little luck they won't be gone from us for too long."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed for sooner rather than later then," Arianna said as she yawned. Eli hugged her gently.

"Tired, Angel?"

"Very much." She turned in Eli's arms and wrapped her arms around the slim green neck. "Do you mean to tell me you're not?"

Eli chuckled. "I am and yet I'm not. Right now I'm running on adrenaline, I think. Between our wedding and seeing our families for the last time and sneaking out and actually finally *leaving* and beginning this mission, I'm buzzing along pretty well at the moment."

"Is that why you sent everyone but Jake to bed?"

Eli nodded. "Yes. We're going to have to work in shifts for a while and if everyone can be well-rested and alert, so much the better. I'll be fine for a little while. I thought we could stay up together, but perhaps...."

Arianna glowered at her. "Don't even think of finishing that sentence. I can stay up with you for a little while at least. If it becomes too much, I'll go to bed. But hopefully it will be peaceful to begin with - at least while we get our space legs under us."

"I'm pretty sure Ma...ma is going to cause enough havoc in her meeting with the Council to keep attention off of us for a while. With a little luck it will be too late to find any trace of us by the time they get a chance to look."

"And I think I have something that will make us even more difficult to find." Arianna dropped her arms from around Eli's neck and clasped her hand instead. "Come, Amado - it is time for us to begin our adventure." With brilliant smiles, they turned their backs to the viewport and their past and boldly walked towards their ship and the future.

Epilogue

Mary limped slowly into the Council chamber, aided by a stout cane and accompanied by her most trusted lieutenant. Her children had demanded their right to stand by her as well, but she had refuted their claims, citing her desire for them to return to their lives and careers unimpeded by the ugliness that would follow the hearing no matter what was decided. Only once Ian had spoken to Eve and received a number of reassurances did they relent though they did not intimate that circumstance to Mary or Caleb. They simply extracted promises that they would be informed regardless of the outcome before wishing their mama well and returning - not to their respective Academies - but to Joy's home to await the conclusion of the proceedings.

The Council was already seated on the higher dais with the Committee Members ensconced one level below them. No one rose or spoke as Mary and Caleb walked slowly to the Table of Inquiry, not entirely surprised when Mary simply sat on the tabletop as no chair had been provided. Caleb stood dutifully beside her and they remained silent as both Council and Committee studied them. Finally the Presiding Council motioned to one of the security aides stationed around the room and two chairs were brought and placed behind the table. Without a word, Mary rose and Caleb made certain she was comfortably seated before taking the second seat for himself.

"Well, Ms Wellesley," the Presiding Delegate spoke. "It seems you have caused quite a bit of discord and discontent among a number of Committee Members. What have you to say for yourself?" Before Mary could open her mouth to reply, a disturbance was heard in the back of the room. "I'm sorry," he said loud enough to be heard. "This is a closed proceeding. You're going to have to wait...."

Eve crossed the threshold with every attending family member of the Alpha team right behind her. "I do not believe that mandate applies to us, Presiding Council. If anyone should be present during this action, it should be the families of those whose children carry the future on their shoulders and in their hands. We have every right to hear what...."

Presiding Council waved his hands to stop Eve's tirade before it gained too much momentum. "Very well, Madame," he conceded. "I will ask that you let these proceedings move along without interruption."

"We will allow what we will allow, Presiding Council. After all, there is much you are not yet aware of. But please," she said as she smiled graciously and waved her hand in his general direction. "You first."

Mary and Caleb exchanged glances while the Council and Committee looked more than a little discombobulated at this sudden turn of events. The day was suddenly rife with possibilities.

THE END

03/12-10/12