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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 five of what is now a double trilogy - six parts total. - and immediately follows Beautiful Mess. This is to wrap up most of the unanswered questions left at the end of that story. The final story in the series - Caught in the Storm will focus on the Alpha Team and their adventures after setting off on their own.

The Storyteller's Cardinal Rule is in effect.

Favors of Fortune - Part Five Under the Gun

By D

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 chair for himself.

"Well, Ms Wellesly," 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.

Chapter I

"So what do you have to say for yourself, Ms Wellesly?" Presiding Council asked as the room settled into expectant silence once more.

"What would you like me to say, Presiding Council? You haven't actually given me anything to respond to aside from the accusation of causing discord and discontentment among the Members of the Committee. I'm quite certain you'll find that to be a fairly accurate statement. In fact I can almost guarantee you I've caused a number of Committee Members more than a little upset in the past few months, but I assure you my actions have been warranted. Perhaps if you read aloud the list of charges I know they presented to you earlier, I can address them one at a time."

"Presiding Council, I must protest," Chairman McMurtry objected from her center spot directly below the Presiding Council. He cocked his eyebrow.

"Exactly what are you protesting, Madame Chairman? Ms Wellesly has the right to know those things of which she stands accused as well as face her accusers while she defends herself. I know you know this, Madame Chairman. You were the one to point it out to His Majesty Fernando Zarita when he protested her removal of one of the candidates." Presiding Council turned back to Mary. "And don't think we don't want to hear about that as well."

"Then perhaps if someone will read the charges, we can move this little inquiry along."

Presiding Council raised both eyebrows at her audacity. "You don't think a little humility and respect might be in order, Ms Wellesly?"

"No, Presiding Council. I truly don't. Given what I know about the people in this room, cursory respect for the office is about the best you're going to get from me today."

"Well, then let us proceed with the reading of the charges and then we'll see if that changes."

"It won't. Because nothing you charge me with today will change what I did, and knowing what I know I wouldn't change what I did even if it meant I wouldn't be here. But please," motioning to him grandly, "continue. I'm quite ready to be done with this."

Presiding Council held Mary's eyes with his for a long moment, studying her and finding nothing but honesty in her gaze. He wondered what had brought them to this time and place. She was obviously exhausted and completely believed in whatever secrets she held. He looked to the bailiff and nodded his head. The young woman stepped forward and read the charges from the Pad she held.

"Mary Lorraine Wellesly, you stand charged of the following crimes: kidnapping - fifteen counts; endangerment of an irreplaceable resource - fifteen counts; insurrection; inciting a riot; committing an act of war; starting an interstellar incident; sedition and treason. Then there are the lesser charges...."

"I'd like to address these first, please if it's all the same to you," Mary broke in unexpectedly. The bailiff snapped her jaw shut and turned to the Presiding Council. He proceeded to look to either side of him to garner the approval of the rest of the Council. When he had it he turned back to the bailiff and waved her away. Then he gestured to the space in front of him.

"The floor is yours, Ms Wellesly."

Mary nodded graciously and rose slowly. Caleb moved much more swiftly and was beside her before she was fully upright. She gave him a small smile, then linked her arm with his and accepted his support as they walked around the table. Once in front of it again, she leaned against the table and opened up her Pad. "Please get comfortable, Ladies and Gentlemen. I have quite a lot to tell you. We're going to be here a little while."

"Instead of responding to these charges one at a time, I'd like to tell you a story. I believe it will more than satisfy the charges you have presented and will indeed answer questions you are as yet unaware of having."

"Very well, Ms Wellesly. You have our indulgence."

"Thank you, Presiding Council. Ladies and Gentlemen," looking around the room. "Once upon a time in the not-too-distant past of this planet's history, we discovered that we had to stop trying to kill one another before we made ourselves extinct. We learned to look beyond our differences and found common ground... common ground that would eventually lead us to reach for the stars. And that voyage would eventually bring us into the purview of other races that made their homes beyond our solar system. Some of these humanoids became friends and allies," gesturing to the gallery where the Alpha Team's family members were listening attentively. "Others were more aggressive and we had to prove out our right to be explorers and warriors among them."

"Ms Wellesly? Is this history lesson necessary? We're all very aware...."

"We'd like to hear it, Madame Chairman," Eve interrupted. McMurtry rolled her eyes but acquiesced without another word. Mary turned and offered Eve a bow of her head, biting her lip to keep her mien stoic when Eve smirked.

"I think it *is* necessary, Madame Chairman," Mary answered smoothly. "You see, history is crafted by the victor so little details get lost in the grand scheme of things; details that when put together present a very different picture than the self-righteous version propagated by the winner."

"And you have these details, Ms Wellesly?"

Mary smiled benevolently. "I do. It took some time and some *specialized* skills, but eventually we were able to put a number of things into perspective. Formed a rather interesting and revealing picture - nothing at all like what is currently being presented as the truth."

"If you were aware of this sooner, why are you just bringing this to us now? Do you believe yourself to be so infallible that you can afford to be judge and jury?"

"Not at all, Presiding Council. I am standing before you today to allow you and the Council to be judge and jury. I didn't have all my facts until just recently and my duty to those kids had to come first. They were my priority."

"Were? Ms Wellesly, where *exactly* is the Alpha Team?"

"I can't say, sir."

"Can't or won't."

"Can't. I cannot say because I don't know. As of approximately two a.m. standard time, they have been off the grid and on their own." The cacophony of sound that erupted from both Council and Committee was deafening and Mary leaned back and permitted the sound to wash over her. Eventually the Presiding Council was able to restore a semblance of order and glared at her balefully.

"Are you saying the Alpha Team has already departed for the asteroid?"

"No sir," watching the tension ease in the bodies seated on both levels of the dais. "I'm saying they are off the grid. They're not going to the asteroid. Given the effort made to eliminate them before the mission even started, they decided that was their best option."

"I suppose you had nothing to do with that decision," McMurtry scoffed.

"It wasn't my decision to make, Madame Chairman. But I was very upfront with those kids about what was going on and what I would do had I been in their position."

"And you *really* don't know where they are?"

"I really don't."

"Would you tell us if you did?" asked Committee Member Yesu.

"No, Member Yesu. I would not. My job here has always been about protecting those kids. And when you hear what I have to tell you in regards to that, I'm pretty sure most of you will be inclined to agree with my reasoning."

"Most of us?" from Member Brave Heart.

"Most of you," Mary concurred. "There are some in this room who are very afraid of what I have to say. Because when I'm done... well, secrets are secrets for a reason, aren't they?"

Presiding Council kept his eyes on Mary for a very long moment, but she didn't waver under his gaze. He gave her a brief nod and gestured with a single hand. "Very well, Ms Wellesly," he said softly. "I think it's safe to say you have everyone's undivided attention. Please continue."

"Thank you." Mary shifted slightly and grimaced. Caleb rose and moved her chair to the front of the table, setting it in such a way so Mary could lean her damaged leg on it and take the weight off her injury. She sighed in relief.

"Ms Wellesly?"

"My apologies, sir. I promise you will hear about it in due time, but it comes *much* later in our story."

"Are you well enough to continue?"

"I am, sir. I may eventually end up sitting for the telling of this tale, but for the moment this is sufficient."

"Then please... continue."

Mary nodded. "Once we left this planet in search of what was out there, talk began again about establishing colonies on other planets and terraforming asteroids for the purpose of expanding our resources and extending our scientific research. You must remember that the ideas of terraforming and establishing space colonies goes back to the twentieth century as far as this planet is concerned. So it's been talked about for centuries... even before it was a viable idea and well before the Alliance and the Alpha Team project. So it wasn't really unexpected for it to be bandied about as a possibility as soon as we achieved something beyond rudimentary space travel. And it shouldn't have come as a surprise that we started chatting it up among our new allies either. What better way to strengthen an Alliance, right? Coming together to create a new society that we built from the best of everyone? Not that it was universally accepted even then, but it was all just talk so no one really protested the idea either... at least not out loud. And what were the chances of success anyway? The idea had been around for *centuries* without accomplishing even the most basic of programs necessary for survival. Added to that - most of the Alliance came from war-like states; surely they would revert to fighting amongst themselves for supremacy if it came down to a realistic opportunity."

"Only that didn't happen," Councilman Clarke interjected. Mary looked slightly taken aback, but she smiled at him and nodded.

"Exactly. That didn't happen. Instead people were quite enthusiastic about the idea, but even the slowest among us knew that it was going to take time and effort and resources to work. And none of that could be rushed if there was going to be any real chance at success. Because we needed a form of energy that had yet to be conceived - something that was inexhaustible or at least infinitely renewable; something that was clean and non-polluting; something that would pay for itself in the long run. We needed new technology; new farming techniques; new plants that could adapt to a variety of climates. And of course we needed the minds of those who could make all the pieces work together. So the prevailing school of thought was that while it was a *fascinating* idea, there was no feasible solution to make it a *workable* one."

"But that changed," Committee Member Lafferty remarked.

Mary smiled and nodded again. It was much easier to tell her story without all the tension and suspicion that had been lingering in the room, and the participation of Committee and Council Members reduced those feelings significantly.

"It did, but the change was so slow and so gradual that it gave those who whispered time to organize and go underground. So that by the time I was brought into the picture, there were only whispers and hints - nothing concrete. And it wasn't until very recently that we were able to tap into any of that... in part thanks to Jacob Aryoch and his exceptional hacking skills." She chuckled and shook her head. "Honestly if that young man wasn't completely necessary to the success and survival of the Alpha Team and its mission, I would have pilfered him for my own team."

"Are you saying you approve of his illegal activities, Ms Wellesly?"

"I'm saying, Member Tortuna, that sometimes the ends do justify the means... especially if it protects those irreplaceable resources that were referenced earlier. Let's face it - if the bad guys played by the rules, the good guys would never have to bend them to win."

"So this is a game to you - good guys versus bad guys? Winning and losing?" asked Member Mein.

Mary's countenance hardened perceptibly. "Don't. You. Dare." Her words were harsh and bitten off. She continued before Member Mein could react. "Don't you presume to think that this has *ever* been a game to me. Don't you presume to think that this has *ever* been anything less than Deadly Serious to me, Member Mein."

"Ms Wellesly...."

"No, Presiding Council. I've allowed you to accuse me of any number of sundry crimes in an effort to show each of you - Council and Committee alike - exactly what's been going on."

"Allowed?"

Mary smirked. "Of course. You didn't think I came in here without a plan, did you, sir?"

Presiding Council sighed. "I suppose not."

"Good; glad we have that understood." Her gaze edged into something fierce. "However," turning her burning regard to each individual seated upon the dais. "Let me make one thing *perfectly* clear to each and every one of you before we go any further with these proceedings. At no time have I *ever* treated this like a game. This is and has always been deadly serious business to me since the beginning. And the beginning for me goes back *much* further for me and my team than it does for most of you. I have risked myself, my family and my team to keep those kids safe and am proud to call them family now. So don't you *dare* make light of things you don't understand."

"Maybe we should take a short break, Presiding Council?" McMurtry cut in after a prolonged awkward silence. The man in the center of the upper tier of the dais nodded fervently at her words.

"I think that is an excellent idea, Madame Chairman. We'll take fifteen standard minutes to give everyone a chance to.... Yes, well. We stand adjourned."

There was an obvious shift. Those on the dais exited the room as quickly as possible. Mary slumped on the table and Caleb was immediately at her side. The Alpha Team's family members rose as a singular body and moved forward until they were surrounding Mary and Caleb.

"Well, I have to say I haven't been this entertained in years," Deborah's mother Drusilla commented, drawing a number of surprised looks. "Oh please," she continued with a laugh. "Like you weren't all thinking the same thing. I just don't mind saying it aloud."

"She does kind of have a point," Noah agreed as he scratched behind his ear. "I've never seen anyone take on so many hostiles at once and turn the room around so quickly," looking at Mary with a hint of awe in his glance.

"Well, we're not there yet, but at least I have their attention."

"You've always been a hard one to ignore, Chief," his tone causing several of the family members to consider one another covertly. It would definitely bear more discussion when they were not involved in such a tense, convoluted situation.

"Thank you, Caleb."

"That's not always a compliment, you know."

Mary smirked. "I know. But in this company," gesturing towards the dais, "I'm definitely taking it as one."

The families laughed. "You're a smart woman, Mary Wellesly," Eve complimented. "Now what can we do to help?"

"You're doing all you can at the moment. I'm confident that just your presence has made them more willing to listen than perhaps they would have been otherwise."

"Then we will remain steadfast for now. We'll have our turn soon enough."

"That sounds... slightly ominous," Mary joked.

Eve arched her brow. "Only if you're sitting up there," jerking her thumb at the dais. "Until then we will continue to enjoy the show you're providing."

"Better take your seats then. It looks like we may be ready to start round two."

Chapter II

"Is everyone here?" Presiding Council asked as he remained standing behind his chair. He looked around the platform, silently counting the number of Councilmen and Committee Members present, then nodded his head in satisfaction. He shook out his robes and swept into his seat. "It appears we are." He motioned towards Mary. "Please continue, Ms Wellesly."

"Thank you, Presiding Council." She looked around the room. Most of the eyes regarding her were filled with interest and curiosity. But there were a few who looked at her with barely concealed

hatred or hints of unadulterated fear. She made note of those on her Pad and sent a note to Caleb even as she began addressing the room again. "As I was saying, colonization and terraforming wasn't a new idea, but it got the attention of the scientific communities across the Alliance." She snorted. "I never realized what a bunch of gossipy old hens scientists were until then," grinning when a number of Councilmen and Committee Members chuckled. Councilman Morton leaned forward.

"Why do you say that, Ms Wellesly? I thought scientists tended to keep to themselves."

"Yes, they've managed to perpetuate that stereotype very well, ma'am. And they've hidden behind it for so long, no one even questions its validity anymore."

"But you did."

"Not at first, honestly. Why would I? It had nothing to do with me. But as interest started to grow, the Council contacted me to begin compiling dossiers on them... the scientists, I mean. Not on their scientific ability of course - that went well beyond my scope. My job was to evaluate them as individuals."

"Ms Wellesly?" Eve broke in. Mary shifted slightly to bring the woman into her periphery. She nodded and Eve resumed her question. "The Council - it wasn't the present members was it?"

Mary turned her head back to the platform and observed the men and women currently assembled there. "Mostly, no. The Presiding Council and Councilman Tu'ttl have returned to service though they didn't serve together before this term. The rest are all first-time members in varied stages of their contracts."

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly," Eve replied before taking her seat again. Mary bobbed her head graciously and turned back to the dais.

"I was asked to observe any number of older, established scientists from a number of different worlds in a myriad of disciplines. All at the top of their field and all firmly entrenched in their positions. All their talk was just that... talk. None of them had the fortitude or the desire to pick up and start over from the beginning with nothing. They had no real ambition or thirst to make their mark with this idea. But more than that, they had no viable energy source, and not one of them was willing to accept the mantle of creating something for a project of this magnitude. So I told the Council they were going to have to try harder if they were serious about getting this mission off the ground. They were going to have to scour the young people from Alliance worlds to find minds and bodies who were up to and capable of the task."

"I remember that," Councilman Tu'ttl exclaimed. "You told us that we needed to give the young people of our worlds the chance to show what they could do. Because in addition to fresh ideas and nimble minds and bodies, they would be better equipped to deal with...." He scrunched up his face in memory before his face broke into a grin. "With whatever curveballs life threw at them." He shook his head. "I had to go look up that reference, you know."

Mary smiled. "Sorry about that. My boys were just starting Little League Baseball then, and I was being bombarded with all kinds of sports metaphors."

Tu'ttl chuckled. "I understand. I went through the same thing when my children started learning aavm gr'k. I'm almost certain my...." He paused again to make sure he translated the word correctly

into standard. "My wife was ready bury me in the dirt." His comment made almost everyone laugh and he preened just a little at the reaction.

"Can we get back on track, please?" Chairman McMurtry growled, drawing frowns from a number of her peers. A direct look from the Presiding Council caused her to blush and to tone down her harshness. "My apologies, Councilman Tu'ttl, Presiding Council," she said with much less heat. "I am just fairly certain from what I have observed that Ms Wellesly is already in a bit of pain and we don't want this dragging out for days if it doesn't have to."

"Ms Wellesly?" Presiding Council queried when he took a long look at her countenance.

"I'll be fine, sir, though I appreciate the Chairman's concern. Perhaps we could speed up the proceedings a bit...."

"By all means, Ms Wellesly. Whenever you're ready."

"Thank you. So a Committee was set up on every Alliance planet with the express directive to start combing their youth for the most brilliant scientific minds. They started looking at those who had reached their twelfth year, knowing that the process to find the best and brightest was a process that would take years. And then they realized that they needed to start even younger because a little eight-year-old girl had developed the theory of fuission and if it worked...." Mary paused and cleared her throat. "To my everlasting shame, I must admit I had no idea that her father was working her in the lab; we were under the impression that she was being tutored there. My people were not allowed inside the lab. It had been difficult enough to get them into the palace as part of her security detail."

"When did you find out?" Councilman Ipsen. "About her working instead of learning."

"Several months ago, ma'am. Arianna told me flat out; she stated it so plainly I was inclined to believe her. But I wanted to be sure before I accused her father of anything untoward in his treatment of his only child so I had my people check things out and it's been confirmed as truth. She was actually teaching them."

"Fascinating. Please go on."

"So I watched these kids - all these kids, not just the Alpha Team - grow up under the watchful eyes of their minders. Their minders were my team members from their planets and they kept me updated on their charges with regular progress reports."

"Can I ask...?" Member Brave Heart began haltingly. Mary looked at her and nodded. "How did you have team members from all the Alliance planets? I know it's not a huge amount relatively speaking, but it is significant. And I know you didn't begin your security agency until your daughter was seven. So how...?"

"It seems a little convenient, Member Brave Heart?" Mary asked kindly while gesturing to Caleb to remain in his seat. Brave Heart nodded slowly and Mary smiled kindly. "I commend you for your insight as well as your forthrightness. But if you had researched just a little deeper, you'd know the answer to your question. You see all of my original team - people who are still with me to this day, by the way - are people that served with my husband first. They were his friends... his family... and then they became friends and family to me as well." She sighed. "When Joy was first threatened, several of them were already on their way out of military service. Even those who served strictly as medical personnel or who went in after a conflict as peacekeepers wanted an opportunity to be part. They

came to me and offered to help in whatever capacity they could be utilized even though most of them weren't from this planet at all. But they helped Edward and me establish what has since become the premier security agency in the Alliance. And we were already well known in a number of important circles when this assignment came up. The fact that we had resources on all of the participating planets was just icing on the cake as far as the Council was concern."

"That's true," Tu'ttl agreed. "Ms Wellesly already had a reputation with several high profile clients. And no one else had access to the resources she did." He looked around slightly abashed. "My apologies, Ms Wellesly. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Quite all right, Councilman Tu'ttl. You simply gave added credence to my words." Mary turned to Member Brave Heart. "Satisfactory?"

"Yes. Thank you, Ms Wellesly."

Mary nodded. "I want you all to try and remember that this process was taking place over years and I still had regular clients to take care of in addition to coordinating all the surveillance necessary for each candidate. And during that time there were only vague whispers that would pop up at odd intervals; there was nothing concrete to go after... just rumors."

"Did you try?"

"Obviously not as diligently as we should have, Presiding Council, but at the time I didn't have the resources to go looking for the sources."

"Sources... plural?"

Mary nodded. "Yes. Because as I said - they were only whispers that we heard once in a while and they were rarely the same one twice." She turned to Caleb. "Did we actually hear the same rumor twice?"

"I don't think so, Chief. We got a couple that were similar but they were about two different things."

"What do you mean?" Member Bartolo asked. Caleb turned and met his eyes.

"We heard something about 'preserving the sanctity of the planet' and then months later we came across something touting the need to 'maintain the status quo'."

"And this led you to believe there was more than one source?"

"As time passed yes. But it was a while before we started putting it all together. The opposition was still buried pretty deeply underground."

Presiding Council looked at Mary. "I take it you've located these sources now?"

"I've located enough."

"Very well then... please continue."

"Our first true inkling that something might be amiss was at the desert compound." Mary paused when murmuring broke out across the platform and around the gallery. She exchanged a look with Caleb

who shrugged his shoulders. He handed her a tumbler of water and they settled back to wait for the initial reaction to die down. When it did Presiding Council drew himself up a little straighter.

"So long ago? Why are we just now hearing about this now?"

"What purpose would it have served, sir, had we told you then? We had no tangible proof as to who was behind things. And if you had shut the program down, you would simply have been playing right into the hands of those who were desperate to have this program fail."

"Ms Wellesly?" Mary turned her gaze to the gallery again. Obviously Eve was the designated spokesman for the group of family members clustered there because several of them were urging her to speak. She motioned for Eve to continue. Eve glanced at the dais before speaking. "We were just wondering - do you know *why* these people... those who dissented... do you know *why* they wanted our children to fail?"

Mary nodded. She had planned to bring this up eventually of course, but she wasn't about to turn down a golden opportunity to make people squirm a little. "I do. There are at least three reasons that we have discovered - greed, ideology and principle. It's part of my story and I promise to explain fully when I get there, all right?" Eve nodded and took her seat. Mary turned back to the Council and Committee Members. "You'll remember that I insisted on installing video monitors throughout the public areas of the complex once the construction work was done but before the kids arrived. When my guys got there to do their thing, they noticed some... oddities - things that didn't appear to be part of the blueprints."

"You don't believe they were simply oversights by the construction people?"

"I know they weren't, Member Lafferty. As soon as my guys contacted me, I got in touch with the people responsible for building the compound. Imagine my unhappiness when I saw the difference between their blueprints and mine."

"And you didn't think that those differences might represent an added layer of challenge for the candidates, Ms Wellesly?"

"If that had been true, Member Tortuna, I would have been notified of the changes if only to ensure that my team did nothing to disturb them when they went in to set up the monitors."

"So what were some of the problems?" Chairman McMurtry asked when the silence grew awkward.

"Several key joists were weak or installed improperly; some of the construction material was substandard. We found bits of support structure exposed and there was an inordinate amount of dust in the ventilation system." Mary shook her head. "Several of those issues weren't even meant to be found, and a lot of the problems could be blamed on the construction company. They probably would have had we not.... We tested the dust in the air ducts after the guys cleaned it out, and while it wasn't toxic, it's also not something I would consider safe over extended periods of time. And since they were using recycled air.... After the kids were brought here for the interview process, some of my team went back to the desert complex. We discovered the soil had been altered to make plant production difficult if not impossible." She smiled. "I don't think anyone expected Titus to possess the green thumb he does. Had he not figured out what was wrong in time, the candidates would have been extracted early and the whole idea written off as an idea whose time had not yet come."

"So you're saying you believe the soil was tampered with? And for that reason you believe the Alpha team was targeted?"

"No, Councilman Romanov. I am saying I *know* the soil was tampered with just as I know the compound was made deliberately unsafe."

Presiding Council self-consciously cleared his throat. "So you made the decision to let things move forward without consulting us?"

"I did. Because of the alteration to the blueprints it became obvious that there was at least one individual on the inside that was part of the conspiracy to make the project fail." The cacophony of sound that broke out then was raucous and overwhelming and Mary once again sat back and let it wash over her.

"Ms Wellesly, do you realize what you're implying?"

"Madame Chairman, I'm not *implying* anything. I am stating pure, unadulterated fact with impunity. Because I will prove out every accusation I bring before you today before we are finished here."

"There are others?"

"Oh yes, Presiding Council. There certainly are."

He sighed. "Very well, Ms Wellesly. Carry on."

She nodded her head. "To the bitter end, sir. I'd like to point out that I now believe the actions taken at the desert compound were made out of desperation. I don't think the opposition ever expected those kids to make the headway they did... especially Arianna."

"What do you mean, Ms Wellesly?" Member Mein asked as he leaned towards her.

"The Committee - or at least some Members of it - had a spy among the candidates... someone who was included for the sole purpose of observing the rest and reporting his findings back to the Committee. When the candidates were originally brought together from their home planets and put to work in the lab, his directive was to separate those candidates who were mediocre to slightly above average from those who excelled. It was my belief - and Titus confirmed - that he was supposed to secure information to guarantee the Committee chose less qualified candidates. People who could do the jobs they were qualified for but not well enough to bring about viable success."

"Why? Why waste everyone's time and resources like that??" Councilman Romanov asked.

"Because those behind the whispers really wanted the project stopped before it got off the ground. They just had one little problem."

"Her Highness, the Princess Arianna," Member Bartolo said with a smirk.

Mary cocked her eyebrow at him and returned his smirk. "Indeed, Member Bartolo. Because that little eight-year-old girl did more than *theorize* fusion, she *created* it. And it worked far better than anyone could have envisioned. And once *that* happened, members of the Committee began rethinking their desire to half-ass the project. If anyone was a shoo-in for the Alpha Team now,

Arianna was at the top of the list. And no one wanted their planet and their scientists to be seen as craptastic for choosing *less capable* representatives instead of *brilliantly capable* ones."

"And you say the spy... Titus?" waiting for her nod. "Titus told you this?"

"He did, Presiding Council. He stated what his original mission was and how and when it changed."

"And that was...?"

"After the kids were moved to the desert compound, he was instructed to cull the most gifted of the candidates and report on them with the idea that if questioned about it later, they could point to the other files to show they were simply giving everyone a fair shake. Remember... at this juncture they still expected for the construction and soil contamination to eliminate the program and the blame for that would fall on the contractor. "

"How do you know they weren't simply giving everyone a reasonable opportunity to prove themselves?"

"Because, Councilman Tu'ttl, I have the correspondence to prove it."

Gasps were heard around the chamber once more, and once more Mary settled back to watch the pandemonium take place around her. She absently rubbed her leg, wincing when she pushed too hard on a still tender area. Eve rose and slipped from the gallery until she was standing at the Table of Inquiry. The muttering grew even louder and the Presiding Council rose to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Madame, but you're not allowed beyond the gate during these proceedings."

Eve turned and looked at him with disdain. "As Ms Wellesly's primary physician, I am allowed to be where she is if I feel her health is endangered or if there is a need for me to render aid. I am calling for a short recess so that I can administer something to relieve her pain."

"You can't...." Presiding Council stopped and examined Mary and saw the sheen of sweat breaking out across her forehead. He nodded. "Very well. We need her testimony to be coherent, but do whatever is necessary to alleviate the obvious pain she is in... preferably something that will last for a while." He paused when he noticed the glare Eve was giving him. "Yes, well... do your best. Will fifteen standard minutes be sufficient?" Eve nodded. "Then we stand adjourned."

The dais cleared and Eve turned back to Mary. "We need to remove your pants enough so I can see how it looks."

"Aaaaand that's my cue," Caleb said as he stood quickly to his feet. "Can I bring you back anything Chief?"

"Pretty sure a vodka tonic is off the table," glancing at Eve's unrelenting countenance. "Right. Just some soda water please, Caleb."

"Right. I'll be back." And he left as did most of the family members. Only Drusilla and Eden's mother Ketura remained behind at Eve's request.

"C'mon, ladies," she beckoned. "We need to work quickly. We don't have much time."

Chapter III

"So you're my primary physician now?" Mary asked with a chuckle that turned to a grimace as Drusilla and Ketura lifted her from either side so Eve could lower her trousers. The three women gasped when the still healing wound came into sight. "Dammit!" Mary hissed. "I should have worn a skirt."

"Probably," Eve agreed absently as she gently prodded the healing wound, watching Mary wince in reflex. She reached for her responder's kit and began preparing the cocktail mixture her daughter had given her before the Alpha Team's departure. "And yes I am. You really think Elizabeth would have left a patient still under her care without making arrangements to continue treatment? This is going to sting a little," frowning when Mary hissed in reaction. "I'm sorry, Ms Wellesly. It's not my intention..." She trailed off when Mary shook her head.

"I know it's not. Still burns, though." She concentrated on breathing for a few moments, and finally seemed to relax as the pain tapered off. Mary blew out a breath and smiled. "Thanks, Doc."

"I'm glad I could help," motioning to the other two women to lift Mary up so she could balance on them as Eve raised and refastened her pants. Then she resumed her seat on the table and Drusilla and Ketura stepped back slightly.

"Thank you," Mary said sincerely. "I probably could have done that myself, but it sure was a lot easier and less painful that way."

"I'm a little concerned," Eve admitted with a glower. "It's not healing correctly and it seems to be giving you more pain than it should be after a few days of regeneration. There shouldn't even be a scar by now."

"Perhaps if it had been a normal shredder projectile," Mary conceded. "But I'm almost certain the mercenaries coated them in some sort of contaminant."

Eve's brow arched into her forehead. "And you didn't think that was pertinent information to share with your healer?"

"Knowing your daughter, Eve? No, I didn't. Because she would have taken it personally for not knowing to look for a poisonous substance. And she would have insisted on staying here and looking for an antidote had she known." Mary met her eyes squarely. "She deserved better than that and so did those kids."

"Why didn't you tell us as soon as they were gone?"

"Eve, realistically - what could you have done last night aside from taking me to a medical treatment facility? I used the regen unit to help alleviate some of the pain and I have an appointment with Tom as soon as these proceedings are over."

"We're coming with you," Ketura said. "When this is over with, we're coming with you to see Tom," arms akimbo and fierce black eyes meeting Mary's.

"Yeah," Drusilla agreed. "What she said," jerking her thumb at Ketura before crossing her arms over her chest.

Mary looked at Eve who was smirking just slightly and she arched a brow in question. "No comment from you, Doc?"

"Not at all. As your primary physician, he and I can discuss your health and wellbeing and create a treatment plan accordingly. So of course I will be there."

Mary laughed softly and shook her head. "It's a good thing my kids can't see me now." She met each woman's eyes briefly. "Thank you, ladies. I know you don't have to, but I appreciate the care."

"We're family now, are we not?" Eve asked.

Mary smirked. "Oh yeah. You bet we are." Caleb poked his head in the door slowly and Mary snorted when she realized he had his eyes closed just in case. "It's all right, Caleb. I'm decent."

Caleb pursed his lips in an effort to contain his laughter. "I'm not touching that one, Chief." He jerked his head towards the hallway and the family members started filing in through the door he held open. When everyone was inside, he closed the door and headed back to the front, stopping only when he reached the Table of Inquiry. He passed Mary a bottle of chilled soda water and produced a sliced lime. "It was the best I could do under short notice."

Mary smiled. "That's more than I expected, Caleb. Thank you."

He nodded and took his place behind the table. Eve, Drusilla and Ketura exchanged looks then turned to Mary. She finished pouring her drink and took a healthy swallow before finding them staring at her. She jumped slightly in surprise and scowled at them collectively. "What?"

"We'll talk later," Eve assured her. "Ladies, I think we should return to our seats in the gallery. I believe the procedures are nearly ready to resume. Ms Wellesly...."

Mary nodded absently, her mind already refocusing on presenting the next part of her case. "Thank you, ladies." The three bowed slightly and returned to the seats in the gallery.

"Ms Wellesly?" Presiding Council called out to be heard above the din of chatter around the room. She looked up at him and waited. "Are you all right? Do you feel ready to begin again?"

"At your discretion, Presiding Council."

He held her eyes for a long moment, and though there was still exhaustion and hints of pain, she appeared to be in a much better frame of mind than she had earlier. He bobbed his acknowledgment of her words. "Very well. Let us continue," waiting for the noise to drop into silence. "What's next, Ms Wellesly?"

"Well, Presiding Council, next would be Malcolm and the threat of the AIDS virus." A harsh stillness enveloped the room and finally Councilman Orbach spoke from his place at the far end of the curved dais.

"Excuse me, Ms Wellesly. Did you say the AIDS virus?"

"I did indeed, sir. Would you like to hear the story?"

"I can assure you, Ms Wellesly - we are all ears." Mary nodded and took a deep breath.

"I would like to preface this by saying that we've had to piece this together from the intel we've been gathering not only since we were brought into the project, but also from what we've scrambled to uncover since the discovery of the reemergence of the virus. Because this... this was something that we never expected would ever see the light of day again."

"So how complete is your information?"

"Complete enough to be damning, Member Puopolo." There was silence for a minute, then Mary cleared her throat. "We still don't know some rather pertinent details, but with a little luck we can get some of those things cleared up here."

"Do you really expect any of us to confess to the crimes of which you stand accused, Ms Wellesly?" Councilman Tu'ttl asked seriously.

"You won't have to, sir. Guilt will be shown beyond a doubt even as I clear my name."

"You have the floor," he conceded and leaned back to wait for her to begin again.

"When I was first notified of Malcolm's condition, I immediately put part of my team on determining when and who could possibly have infected him, going back five years as our starting point. And given the mandates of his culture, I'm sure you recognize what a nearly impossible task this was. Then Tom - Dr. Morris to you - reminded me that in the last strain - the mega strain that Malcolm had - the incubation period was only nine months to eighteen months. No more, no less. Given when it showed up, that meant Malcolm was infected while he was at the desert compound."

"Wait... doesn't that mean he was infected by one of the other candidates?"

"No, Madame Chairman, for two reasons. The first is that everyone and their belongings were checked on the way in. The candidates had a very strict list of what was and was not allowed in the compound and we were under orders to guarantee that no one brought in contraband."

"And the second?"

"The second is that the timing for the infection to be administered puts Malcolm on his home world. He was infected when he and Arianna were called home to be betrothed to one another. And almost without exception each of you was near him at some point during that time period."

"And you're certain of when it showed up, Ms Wellesly?"

"I am, Presiding Council. Nick knows the kind of trouble he's in for failing to report the reemergence of the virus as soon as it was discovered. I told him I would advocate for him when he came to judgment if he was up front with me about everything."

"And you believe him about this? You believe someone who would endanger whole worlds for the promise of monetary reward is trustworthy?"

The look Mary offered was droll in the extreme. "Well, since I wasn't actually born *yesterday*, no of course I didn't. But I did think someone who would endanger whole worlds for the sake of monetary gain was probably too much of a coward to want to suffer the worst punishment his actions would require. Besides, it wasn't *that* difficult to ascertain when he started inquiring after the antidote. The timing is right there."

"But why run the risk?" Drusilla spoke out unexpectedly and all heads turned in her direction.

"Madame," Presiding Council started to object to the interruption, but Drusilla shook her head.

"Allow me to finish," she demanded with a glare. He acquiesced with an abrupt nod and Drusilla resumed speaking. "We know why..." She looked at Mary who mouthed the name. "Thank you, Mary. We know why Nick did what he did - greed is a constant everywhere after all. But why would anyone in your position of power and authority risk destroying not only the project and the candidates, but billions of lives scattered across the planets and star systems of the Alliance? The odds of *not* being caught or killed are astronomically small."

"She's right, Ms Wellesly," Councilman Puopolo agreed. "Why would anyone risk it? What's the point of succeeding if you're not actually around to enjoy the fruits of your labor?"

"Unless you've changed the odds in your favor and the risk of getting caught or worse has become infinitesimally small."

"How is that even possible?"

"Let me elucidate."

"While the candidates were in the desert, the Committee members decided it would be a good time to visit the home worlds of those in highest contention for a place on the Alpha Team. I'd thought the timing to be a little strange - after all, the *candidates* were the important part of the project... not where they came from. But the Committee wasn't really part of my purview at the time so I let it go. I had too much legitimate work to take care of to watch those that were elected to choose the participants who would make up the Alpha Team. If I had given *any* thought to it at all, I would have looked into each of them then. But to my everlasting shame, I didn't. That's one reason we're here today."

"Was that your responsibility, Ms Wellesly? To investigate those whose obligation it was to choose the Alpha Team?"

"No, Councilman Morton. It wasn't. But one of the first things I learned in this business was to never accept someone else's judgment without reservation. And I missed the ball on this one. I assumed because of the importance of this program that the Council would be as thorough in their research as my team is. I was wrong."

"So you're saying *we're* to blame for this?" Presiding Council asked in a biting tone.

"Sir, I'm saying there is plenty of blame to go around. No one is going to get out of here scot-free. Because shit may roll downhill, but I assure you I'm standing at the bottom with the fan blowing on high."

"You do understand that the more you speak the less we like you, right?"

"How fortunate I didn't come here to win friends and influence people," Mary replied without missing a beat. "My sole purpose today is to reveal the truth as I have uncovered it. After that?" She shrugged. "That's going to depend on any number of things - not the least of which is what the family members decide to tell their own people about what's been going on here when they return home. I imagine all kinds of things could happen after that... especially if you fail in your duties here today in regards to taking appropriate action."

"Yes well... can we get back on track, please?"

"Certainly, sir. What you need to know here is what happened when the Committee got to Arianna's planet. You see Malcolm had been commissioned by Fernando to keep an eye on Arianna and report back anything of significance. And when Eli's name continued to come up, Fernando decided to nip that little dalliance right in the bud."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did he want to end Arianna's association with Eli?"

"A number of reasons - she was a meat eater; she was an alien; she was not royalty; she was a warrior. The list goes on ad infinitum. The fact of the matter is he did not want his daughter involved with someone not of his choosing... especially from another culture. And as his society allows the elder parent to arrange betrothal for the child, he set out to safeguard her virtue."

"How?"

"He invited the Committee to his planet and showed them great hospitality. He explained his concerns for her safety and welfare as she was the sole heir of a ruling head of state. He confessed his unwillingness to withdraw her from the project as it was something she had earned with her own accomplishments but asked if they would be willing to help him protect her instead. Then he made the agreement with the Committee that Malcolm would be installed as Arianna's security."

"An agreement they later reneged on," Councilman Tu'ttl remarked.

"I left them little choice, Councilman. And I did so without breaking any laws or causing an interstellar incident."

"Not for lack of trying," Chairman McMurtry joked with a smirk, trying to ratchet down the tension.

Mary laughed. "I'll try harder the next time, Madame Chairman," causing laughter to titter around the room. "But frankly I got the impression a number of Committee Members were relieved to be done with Fernando."

"You're under the right impression," McMurtry agreed, seeing a number of other Members nod their heads.

"And you believe Malcolm was infected then?"

Mary held up a hand. "After the agreement with the Committee was sealed, Malcolm and Arianna were called home to be betrothed. *That is when Malcolm was infected. It didn't take much - the prick of a needle that I'll bet he thought was an insect if he even noticed it at all. In all likelihood, he didn't feel anything until he developed a rash after they returned to the desert. But he was infected when they were betrothed and the Committee decided that this visit had been so successful and enlightening that they should visit the rest of the candidates' worlds.*"

"Did anything untoward happen on any of those other planets?"

"Not that we have found, Member Mein."

"Then why are you so certain...?"

"Because I have the evidence I need to back up my accusations."

"Then please continue, Ms Wellesly. We're all anxious to have this play out."

Mary nodded. "I think I should remind you at this point that there was more than one faction at work, and it's my belief that they were *not* working together. The only thing they seem to have in common is their desire to have the project fail. That's the best reason I can divine for so many aborted attempts to derail the project. And if you've noticed, some were more detrimental to the wellbeing of the candidates than others and some... the last one... had a specific target and a much broader scope of reach. *That would have impacted everyone at some point even though I don't think that was the intent behind it. I think the perpetrators ran into a string of bad luck.*"

"How so?"

"If Nick had followed proscribed procedure, he would have notified the Council as soon as he discovered the virus. That would likely have caused the program to be put on indefinite hiatus. It certainly would have removed Malcolm and Arianna from the program, and as an added bonus it would have gotten rid of Fernando who as a thorn in the Committee's side from day one had only grown more intolerable with their capitulation about Malcolm. It should have been a win/win because with Arianna gone, they could go back to choosing mediocre candidates."

"Except Nick didn't report the virus."

"Exactly, Member Lafferty. And then I managed to get Malcolm kicked off the candidate list without removing Fernando and while securing Arianna's place. So now we had one hell of a craptastic mess and the blocs of dissenters were getting desperate to stop the program by any means necessary. So they decided to step up their game. That's when things started to snowball."

Mary took a deep breath to continue, but before she could speak the doors to the gallery crashed open. Presiding Council rose to his feet in startlement and every security officer in the room including Mary and Caleb whirled in the direction of the door with a weapon raised.

"Who are you??" Presiding Council demanded. "State your business here."

The woman straightened to her full height and looked around the room regally. Her eyes acknowledged Mary briefly before returning to the dais. "I am Queen Aurora, mother to Princess Arianna. And I demand to be part of these proceedings."

Mary cut her eyes at Caleb who was looking between Aurora and the platform. "Oh boy," she muttered. He just bobbed his head in acknowledgment as the Presiding Council motioned everyone back to their places as he beckoned the Queen forward.

"This could get messy, Chief."

"Caleb, my friend, you are a true master of understatement," Mary retorted without a hint of sarcasm. Then she turned back to the dais as Caleb resumed his seat and they waited for the meeting to begin again.

Chapter IV

"May I ask how you knew of these proceedings, your majesty?" Presiding Council asked sharply with a baleful glare at Mary. "They are not common knowledge and closed to the public besides."

"Oh really?" Aurora asked with a pointed glance towards the gallery currently occupied by family members who were paying rapt attention to the tableau playing out in front of them.

"Really," Presiding Council replied though he had the grace to blush. "Long story," he added. "But that still doesn't tell us exactly why you are here or how you even knew where 'here' was."

"Late last evening I received a communiqué from my hija Arianna - wishing me a good holiday and telling me goodbye. You must understand, Presiding Council - I love my hija... my mija, I do. But I am not a very good mother; I never have been. It was my duty to produce an heir, but it wasn't something I necessarily wanted. And given my choice...." Aurora shrugged and shook her head. "So I didn't really blame Arianna for not wanting me and her father here at her moment of triumph. After all, we had missed so many other things...."

"Your majesty," Presiding Council tried to interrupt. Aurora just looked at him until he nodded for her to continue.

"Her father however was not nearly so understanding. He felt it was his due to be part of... everything. He felt her accolades were his as well, and he was furious when he was basically cut from Arianna's life - both at her request and by Ms Wellesly's machinations. He was determined to get her back by any means possible." Aurora took a deep breath. "He contacted me seven standard days ago, telling me to expect them home for the holiday. Except the holiday came and went and all I had to celebrate was the fact that my mija finally contacted me... even if it was only to say goodbye."

"So you know the Alpha Team has already departed for parts unknown?"

Aurora turned and met McMurtry's eyes. "No, Madame Chairman. I suspected the Alpha Team would be gone when I got here, but I had no way of knowing for certain. Arianna didn't say anything specifically about it. And what do you mean 'parts unknown'? I thought they had an approved destination."

"Apparently they decided it was in their best interests to strike out on their own. You can catch up on that bit later. We still need to know why you're here and how you knew to be here."

Before Aurora could respond, Eve stood up and interposed. "Presiding Council, we all appreciate the stress you and your fellow Councilmen as well as the Committee Members are under. And we understand the need for expediency. It would still behoove you to show a little respect. Not only is Queen Aurora the MaTb of a member of the Alpha Team, but she is also a titled head of state. She is therefore entitled to your courtesy and respect. I suggest you remember that."

There was dead silence in the room while everyone processed Eve's words. Aurora turned and offered her a small bow and Eve returned the gesture. When the Presiding Council cleared his throat all eyes looked his way. "My apologies, your majesty. I intended no disrespect. We have a very precarious situation at the moment and we need answers as quickly as possible."

"Apology accepted, Presiding Council. I am here because after I received my mija's letter, it became obvious to me that whatever Fernando had planned had not come to fruition. I contacted Minister Bartolo and he informed me of these proceedings. It was thought that even if I couldn't see my mija, I might be able to find some answers about Fernando here."

"I can give you the answers you seek, majesty," Mary said from her position behind Aurora. "But I don't think you're going to like them."

Aurora whirled in place until she met Mary's eyes. She tilted her head in question. "Are you all right, Ms Wellesly?"

Mary smiled tiredly. "I think it's safe to say I've had better days," she admitted. "But sometimes you just have to do what you have to do. If you would like to take a seat in the gallery with the rest of the family members," jerking her head behind her, "I think I can answer your questions and move things along here before anyone has a come apart up there," nodding at the platform.

"And you'll fill me in on the rest later?"

"You have my word, majesty," Mary promised.

Aurora studied her a moment. "Very well, Ms Wellesly. You have my permission. Please proceed." She moved to the gallery, graciously accepting the seat next to Eve. Then they all turned their attention back to the front of the room. Mary cleared her throat.

"As soon as I was made aware of the virus, I knew it was time to remove the candidates from the Committee's purview. After the incident in the desert and with the introduction of a pathogen that could wipe out entire civilizations, I was unwilling to run the risk of someone making another attempt against those kids. So I snuck them out in the dead of night. And was subsequently fired."

"Excuse me?" Councilman Romanov cut in. "You cannot *be* fired except by the Council. And to my knowledge we have never called for such - even at your most aggravating."

Mary smirked. "I know, Councilman. But the Committee felt my actions bordered on treasonous so they decided to demonstrate their outrage and exercise their authority by dismissing me from service."

"And your response?" Councilman Morton asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"I laughed," Mary confessed. "What could they do besides demand I return the kids I had removed for their protection? They had no leverage over me though on the plus side it did force them to name

the Alpha Team without any more lollygagging around. Once that was done I sent the kids home while my team set up what would be the staging ground for all the supplies the Alpha Team would require." She sobered and shook her head.

"What, Ms Wellesly?"

"I was just thinking. I believe this is when the fourth player was pulled into the game because no attempts were made against the Alpha Team or the rest of the candidates while they were home with their families. No one thought to look in the most obvious place and it made everyone panic to have them disappear. So I think the factions decided to try to pull together because someone else was being pulled into the scenario by blackmail."

"You have proof?"

"Of the blackmail?" Mary asked and waited for affirmation. "No," she answered. "But I have strong suspicions. What I do know is that the new element was more direct in their approach. They were determined to destroy the Alpha Team. No subtlety needed."

"What happened?"

"Someone hired a bunch of mercenary killers with the order to dispatch the Alpha Team by any means necessary... including suicide bombing. Each and every one of the mercenaries was wired to blow. Had Caleb here not been paying strict attention during the firefight - had he not heard the soft whirr of the incendiary devices the mercenaries wore strapped to their bodies, my team... my *family* would have been destroyed. Most of the kids would have been safe as they were transported to safety before the mercs arrived."

"Most, Ms Wellesly?"

"Most, Madame Chairman. The enemy sent out a pulse that temporarily disabled the entire network of transports pads. I missed that possibility." Mary shook her head. "Once Titus leaked his location to the Committee, I expected them to hit the pads close to the facility where the kids were housed. I *didn't* expect them to cripple the whole network and I paid the price for that assumption as did one of the Alpha Team. We were lucky."

"Excuse me?? Are you saying you endangered one of the scientists you were supposed to protect??" Councilman Tu'ttl demanded before anyone else could react.

"No sir. I endangered *three* of them."

Presiding Council cleared his throat. "Perhaps you'd like to explain?"

"Of course. We knew we were going to have to cut it close because Titus had to be the one to make the transmission and it had to be done from the mountain. Once that was done and we were certain the Committee Members knew where to find the Alpha Team, we started transporting them four at a time to the shuttle pad. There was some delay on my end, and the blast pulse knocked everything out before the final three members of the Alpha Team could cross the transport field."

"Who were they?"

"Excuse me?"

Member Tortuna rolled his eyes. "Please don't play stupid with us, Ms Wellesly. Which members of the Alpha Team were kept in harm's way?"

"Elizabeth Vasya, Eden Iolani and Mordecai Basilio."

"And how are they? Did they survive the attack?"

"They did. They left with the rest of the Alpha Team," Mary replied without elaborating. No one in the gallery made a sound. They knew what had happened - their children had told them the tale - but none of them were willing to share the details Mary was leaving out of her story.

It remained silent in the room for several long moments, but finally Presiding Council nodded his head. "So defending them is how you...?" motioning towards her leg.

"It is indeed. I was incredibly lucky that Eli was there. Dorcus will be the first to tell you I would have lost my leg or worse had she not been. In complete fairness I would have rather lost the leg than put those kids in danger like that. We got them out of there as quickly as we could."

"So right after the transport fields were reestablished?"

"No, Member Yesu. We were in the middle of a firefight when that occurred. It did bring us an unexpected visitor though."

"Really? Who?"

"Fernando," Mary replied shortly, not missing the gasp that came from the gallery behind her. "He showed up expecting to retrieve his daughter Arianna."

"Come again? Why would he...? How could he...? Ms Wellesly, perhaps you'd better explain because that sort of an accusation...."

"Is not an accusation if it's true and is no worse than anything else I've told you, Presiding Council. The difference is now you have a name to go with the accusation. And Fernando isn't just a name, but a ruling head of state from an Alliance planet who has a child participating in the program as the foremost member of the Alpha Team." Mary turned to the gallery. "Before anyone protests that description, she was acknowledged as such by her peers. They each recognized that it was her work and research that was the basis of all the progress that allowed them to excel in their chosen fields within the project." She turned back to the platform but before she could speak, Aurora spoke up.

"Ms Wellesly? Where is my husband?"

"Majesty, he is in my custody as he has been for the last several days. He'll be brought in shortly to corroborate the story I'm going to tell you, but first I want to tie things together so everyone understands what is going on. Because there are so many players in this little drama one almost needs a playbill to keep them all straight."

"Ms Wellesly?"

"Presiding Council, with your indulgence...." He looked around the room, noting those who agreed with alacrity and those who hesitated. After a moment he returned Mary's regard and nodded. She

offered him a little bow in rejoinder. "Thank you, sir. Ladies and gentlemen, you're now aware of the three factions we've uncovered - those motivated by greed; those influenced by ideology; those following principle. And you know how each of those motives played into the events that led to the Alpha Team leaving without fanfare or celebration."

"Wait, Ms Wellesly," Eve called out over the volley of whispers Mary's words had caused. "We've heard the motives given and you've told us about the episodes that led to our children's hasty, undercover departure. But we don't actually understand how those things are tied together. Would you mind explaining it?"

Mary saw the honest confusion on the faces of the families repeated in the expression of Committee and Council Members. She sighed, then nodded. "Of course, Eve," accepting the soda water Caleb extended to her. "Thank you, Caleb," she said when she was done. "As things go, I know greed seems like an unlikely motive when considering that failure was the desired outcome for this project. But those that wanted mediocre candidates chosen did so for greed. You see they wanted to profit from the exceptional minds that now comprise the Alpha Team and which will eventually include members of the Beta and Gamma Teams as well. By hoarding that brilliance, they hoped to sell them and their accomplishments to the highest bidder."

"I beg your pardon?? No one in the Alliance condones slavery or stealing!!"

"I am aware, Presiding Council. But there were some who only saw commodities and a way to make a profit."

"And they didn't think the candidates would object?"

Mary smiled grimly. "I'm certain it would have been put to the candidates in a much more palatable fashion, Councilman. After all, Arianna's discovery of fission could have made her the richest woman in the universe had she sold her technology instead of including it in the program. And wouldn't it be entirely feasible that she would be appointed to continue to further her scientific research... especially if that's where her interests lay? I mean that would be a win/win for everyone involved, right?"

"That's what they were planning to do?"

"That's what *this* faction was planning to do, Madame Chairman, because they had representatives from every Alliance planet among their ranks. They expected their Committee representative to guide the rest into choosing pedestrian candidates - those who would do all right but never well enough to make the project a true success. In the meantime they would commandeer the minds and the research of those that belonged to them and that *should* have been on the Alpha Team - each claiming the scientists from his own planet - and selling the knowledge and research to the highest bidder and then to everyone else including the Council if they were willing to ante up for the success of the program."

"That's absurd!!"

"Perhaps, but it would have worked had Member Bartolo not felt fondness and sympathy for the little girl who called him 'Uncle' once upon a time."

All eyes turned in his direction and Bartolo gave Mary a nod of his head and a shrug as he pulled at the smile on his lips. "How did you know, Ms Wellesly?" he asked calmly, ignoring the looks he garnered from the rest of the room.

"Which part, Member Bartolo?" Mary returned kindly. "Part of it I got from Arianna; part of it I got from Fernando. But the first inkling I got you gave me - on the day I had Malcolm dismissed from the program. You were actually quite happy about that, weren't you?"

"I was. He was never good enough for Little Arianna. And when you managed to get rid of his majesty as well, it meant I could finally ensure that the Princess got her chance to be everything she could be well away from the demands and influences of her father."

"So you were acting under orders from your king?"

"I was," he conceded with a nod of his head. "He thought... he *expected* wealth and recognition and prestige to be accorded him and our world with Arianna's discovery. He believed it would have a dramatic impact on our society and how we were received and perceived by our peers. He thought it would elevate our status into one of leadership and control."

"And when he realized differently...."

Bartolo shook his head. "That's when he demanded I guarantee that those less deserving be chosen for the Alpha Team. That way he would still have control of Arianna's work and could demand what he felt was his due. By the time he chose that route, it was much too late for that to be viable. It was clear that Arianna's work was going to be chosen as the basis for the project's work. So he got Malcolm involved - first as a spy; then as her 'security'; and finally as her betrothed. No one was happier than I was to see that ass hat go." He smiled. "That was really well done, you know."

Mary smiled. "I was a little bit proud of that myself," she admitted. "But mostly for Arianna's sake." She cleared her throat. "What of the rest of your faction? Those that wanted mediocre candidates chosen for the program?"

Bartolo shrugged. "I don't know if there was a *faction* as such, Ms Wellesly. To my knowledge none of the rest of the Committee Members was in my position. There are of course influential people on a number of Alliance planets that would have been *more* than happy to have marketed the new discoveries and technologies that this project developed along the road to fruition. But I cannot say that any of them did more than let it be known that they were in the market and willing to back such a proposition."

"So you and Fernando never discussed...?"

"Ms Wellesly, his majesty and I never *discussed* anything. He gave me directives and I was expected to follow them to the letter."

"And did you?"

Bartolo smirked and propped his chin in his hand. "Not exactly. After all, I did what I could to make sure Arianna got a chance to be happy and that was never his primary or even secondary concern." He shook his head again. "I wish I could have done more."

"You kept her secret didn't you?" He nodded and Mary smiled. "You did more than most, Member Bartolo. That made her happy."

"What secret, Ms Wellesly?"

"Nothing that affects the mission or the people in this room, Presiding Council," Mary replied brusquely, giving him a look. He was the first to turn away. "All right," Mary continued as the silence began to grow awkward. "Let's move on to the ideologists because they were the first to truly put the kids in danger. They were the ones who changed the blueprints for the desert compound dwelling."

"I'm not sure I understand how that correlates, Ms Wellesly."

"I know, Member Lafferty. But you will."

Chapter V

"These ideologists are individuals who want things to remain static... to never change... especially in regards to the environment and our natural resources. They believe we shouldn't do anything to change the nature of how things are. They want to take the concept of preservation to the extreme."

"Is that possible?" Lafferty asked. "I mean we're all concerned with conserving our natural resources and making things better for future generations. None of us want our home worlds to experience the nearly fatal decimation this planet did because of careless, wasteful expenditures."

Mary nodded her agreement. It was true - one of the things the Alliance had learned from the planet's near destruction was to take measures to ensure it wouldn't happen again. Still, what the extremists had in mind was a little beyond acceptable. "I'm sure, sir. From what we've been able to piece together, the most radical parts of this group doesn't want *any* change. Arianna's discovery of fission was a bad thing in their eyes because it doesn't occur in nature - the fact that it *saves* energy and actually puts more back into the planet doesn't matter. Titus' ability to create new breeds of plants by taking parts of several and combining them into something new is unacceptable because that isn't how plants grow naturally - it makes little difference that it uses parts of plants that would otherwise be composted or go to waste altogether. Even Eli's use of medicine is suspect because she doesn't just use it as her ancestors did but combines natural ingredients into new compounds."

"Are you serious?"

"Does it sound like I'm joking?" Mary held up a hand and blew out a frustrated breath. "My apologies, Councilman Morton. I shouldn't have snapped. Yes, I'm serious."

"But... but that's... that's one of the main purposes of the program - to advance our scientific knowledge and to develop new resources. And to have them actually *improve* our resources is...."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm aware. But there are those who believe we should only use what we have and do so responsibly; those who think we shouldn't change the shape of our future by changing the resources we use... only *how* we use them; those who believe we have advanced and adventured far enough. And while I agree that we should be responsible with the resources readily available to us, it is the only point of this ideology that I can even *vaguely* agree with." Many heads were nodding their agreement

and they muttered amongst themselves. Mary sighed and shifted as she let the sound roll around her. A nudge against her hip made her turn and meet Caleb's eyes.

"You all right, Chief?" he muttered under his breath. She nodded.

"Yes. Just tired. This is more exhausting than I expected it to be."

"At least they seem to be less hostile now."

Mary smirked. "Most of them anyway. Some of them though...." Caleb grinned and jerked his head towards the platform. Mary shifted until the Council and Committee Members were in her purview once again. The Presiding Council had risen to his feet and was signaling for silence.

"I think we can all agree that this is a most disturbing revelation. Perhaps we should let Ms Wellesly continue so we can understand how this ties in to what happened to the candidates?" glancing around both sides and both tiers of the arced dais. When he was satisfied everyone had settled down, he turned back to Mary. "Apologies, Ms Wellesly. Please continue. How does this correlate to what you've shared with us thus far?"

"Well, Presiding Council, this faction is the one responsible for altering the blueprints... for making the desert compound unsafe for extended occupation. I believe that part of it was intended to play out much as Member Tortuna suggested - that it would be seen as a challenge they needed to know how to overcome. The weak joists and exposed support structure could easily fall into that category. But the substandard components? Those weren't meant to be found - they were meant to collapse at some point to show what happens when we mess too much with our natural surroundings. Same thing with the dust we found in the air ducts. It was supposed to be a statement about what happens to people that try to alter the world too much."

"That Mother Nature will do what is necessary to preserve herself?"

"Something to that effect, yes."

"But that makes no sense," McMurtry interrupted. "Not if you know any part of your history... at least *our* history. Otherwise we wouldn't have nearly destroyed ourselves and the planet along with us."

"Really, Madame Chairman?" Member Brave Heart interposed. "You really think this planet didn't tell you for *years* that you were killing her?? Perhaps you should go reread your history again."

"I don't...."

Brave Heart scoffed. "Really?" her tone pure derision. "You don't think the increasingly violent hurricanes, the destructive earthquakes, the massive wildfires created by lightning strikes, the tsunamis and the droughts and the famines weren't meant to get your attention before it was too late??" She snorted. "People like you are the reason there is a need for Guardians."

"Like you, Member Brave Heart?" Mary asked quietly.

Brave Heart nodded her head vehemently. "Exactly like me, Ms Wellesly," she stated brazenly. "If this planet taught us anything it was to never underestimate the danger of too much knowledge... too

much change. Safeguards must be put in place to preserve what we have because nothing is limitless and if we don't take care of our homes, who will?"

"So this movement extends beyond the reaches of this planet? It has spilled throughout the Alliance?"

"I wouldn't say it has spread throughout the Alliance yet," Brave Heart replied forthrightly, "but it is certainly not confined to this world."

"Obviously not, ma'am, if you are part of it," Mary replied softly. "Tell me... did you *intend* for any of those kids to get hurt with your actions?"

"What?? NO!!" Brave Heart roared as though suddenly realizing to what she had been tacitly admitting. "How dare you...!"

"How dare I what, Member Brave Heart? Trick you? Coerce you? What exactly do you think I've done here that you didn't do to yourself first? All I did was ask a question - a question you answered of your own free will." She maintained her focus on Brave Heart and wasn't the first to look away. Mary nodded in satisfaction. "Please answer the question."

Brave Heart sighed tiredly. "What question was that, Ms Wellesly?"

"Did you intend for any of the candidates to be injured because of the actions of the Guardians?"

Brave Heart shook her head. "It has never been our intention to harm others, but we accepted that there was no way to guarantee everyone's complete safety."

"So what would have been an acceptable loss ratio?"

"I don't...."

"Oh come now, Member Brave Heart. You were a key component to ensuring the Guardians had a decent shot at eradicating the program. Surely there must have been *some* discussion among the lot of you over how many candidates might have to die to secure the end of the program."

"I don't.... It wasn't... it wasn't like that. That is why we applied as many disruptive variables as we did." Brave Heart sighed and pinched her nose with her fingers and Mary remained as silent as the rest of the room. For a long moment her eyes stayed closed and then she blew out an impatient breath and returned her gaze to Mary's patiently waiting eyes before looking around at the others. "I'll tell what I know, but I want no interruptions... from anyone," bringing her attention back to Mary.

"You have my word," Mary promised. Brave Heart nodded and straightened in her seat. If she was going down, she was going to own it. Then she took a deep breath and began to speak.

"Even though I didn't know that Member Bartolo was behind the push to choose ordinary candidates, I heard the whispers. We all did," gesturing around the lower level of the platform. "And quite frankly I was hoping for that to be successful method for ending the program. Even though it would have only delayed things, it would have done so for long enough that maybe we could have come up with another way to shut it down completely. Unfortunately, Princess Arianna was successful beyond anyone's

wildest imaginings and that meant no one was going to allow *their* planet's candidates to be less than stellar. And that meant the Guardians had to step up their efforts to stop the madness before it destroyed all of us.

The idea was to make it seem like an unworkable idea. As you pointed out, Ms Wellesly, the weak joists and exposed supports structure were meant to be seen as a test, and it would have accomplished a couple of things. It would have slowed down the initial establishment of the colony due to the repairs that would need to be made that by extension would have necessitated the need for further inspection of the entire facility. And it would have given the other elements time to work. The plan was for the dust in the ventilation system to start making a few of them sick. Between the sickness and the lack of progress in growing fresh produce because of the treated soil, it was hoped that the Committee Members would remove candidates and place the program on hiatus."

"And the substandard material? That would surely have caused a collapse."

"At some point it would have, Madame Chairman, but it was to be the final effort in our campaign. We were hoping for results before it got to that stage of our plan."

"And who exactly is 'we', Member Brave Heart?" Presiding Council asked. "We're going to need names."

Brave Heart nodded. "I know, sir, and I'll do what I can. But we weren't particularly known to one another in an effort to keep the cause and its proponents safe in case of a situation exactly like this one. This failure falls squarely on my shoulders and I'm expected to suffer the consequences."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Did you arrange for the blueprints?"

"To be drawn? No - I don't have the knowledge to ensure it was done properly. I did however make certain that the builder got them and utilized the ones with the defects built in."

"May I ask...?" All eyes turned to the gallery when Eve rose. Brave Heart nodded her head and motioned for Eve to continue. Eve stood and cleared her throat. "Why are you so willing to admit to all of this so freely? And why are you willing to accept sole responsibility? Surely you know that the consequences will be harsh at best."

"And excruciating at worst?" Brave Heart added with a sad smile as Eve nodded her acknowledgement. She shrugged. "I see no point in lying. If there is one thing I've learned since being introduced to Ms Wellesly, it's that she's meticulous and thorough in the performance of her duties. So I have no doubt that she has all the corroborating evidence she needs without my testimony. But I want everyone to know all the facts... not just the ones that prove my complicity. I knew what I was doing; I knew what the risks were when I accepted the assignment. But when you believe in something as wholeheartedly as I do in Guardian philosophy you take responsibility for *all* aspects of a plan... whether it works in your favor or not. It didn't this time, but next time?" She shrugged. "Maybe it will."

"Are you saying our children are still in danger?" Aurora asked heatedly as she rose to stand beside Eve.

"I cannot speak of your children specifically, your majesty. After all, they are gone and have been removed from our purview - whether by their choice or because of Ms Wellesly's influence. Either way, the members of the Alpha Team are safe from retaliation by the Guardians. They're beyond our reach."

"And what of the rest?" Tu'ttl demanded.

Brave Heart shrugged. "The Guardians still have an active, thriving underground and their purpose hasn't changed. This failure will certainly spur them to try again... perhaps more forcefully next time." She sighed and held up a hand when frenzied muttering rumbled throughout the room. "We don't wish ill-will on any of the candidates or team members. We just want them to stop changing everything. No race has proven to be steward enough of their own planet's resources to warrant continued exploration and colonization."

The silence that followed her pronouncement was deafening. Mary's eyes met the Presiding Council's and she bobbed her head slightly. His lips clenched in a thin line and gestured his security captain forward. "Please remove Member Brave Heart to a holding cell. She will require further interrogation and debriefing as soon as this hearing has concluded."

The man stepped forward and motioned to the woman. Brave Heart stood with great dignity and stepped from the platform. The captain snapped restraints on her wrists then took her elbow and escorted her from the room. Mary looked at Caleb and he rose and followed them out without a backwards glance.

"Ms Wellesly?"

"It's just a precaution, Presiding Council. Caleb will ensure Member Brave Heart makes it to the detention area without issue and will notify Dr. Morris to give her a thorough physical. We wouldn't want harm to come to her by her doing or anyone else's before we discover what little information she has, would we?"

"You make an excellent point."

"Do you really think she has so little information, Ms Wellesly?"

"I do, Madame Chairman," focusing her attention on the woman sitting directly below the Presiding Council. "Given the methods we had to employ to find information on these radical groups, I'm confident that most individual cells of each faction are very tiny groups - two or three members at most. They're kept segregated specifically to protect one another in the event they are detected."

"You know what I don't understand?" Drusilla submitted without moving from her seat. "I don't understand why they don't all just find a planet where they can live like they want - no technology; no science; no advancements or exploration. I mean seriously - what's stopping them?"

"I think they are," Mary said into the heavy silence. She sighed and shook her head. "Their core belief is the only thing that unites them - that we should leave well enough alone and take care of what we have. But that's *all* they have in common."

"I'm still not seeing how that would be a problem. Our kids are as different as can be and yet they're going to try to live together peacefully."

Mary chuckled. "I like that qualifier. Thank you, Drusilla." She sobered and shook her head. "Those kids - all of them, whether they were chosen for the Alpha Team or not - have many things in common. They are all scientists... all curious about what they can accomplish; about why lies beyond what we know now; about discovery and advancement. They're all artists in some form or fashion; they are friends to varying degrees though that took work and effort on their parts. But beyond all those things, they were *willing* to put aside the things that made them different to find the things that were the same for the good of the project and in doing so created a strong community. And that feeling was only enhanced when the Alpha Team was chosen. They're family now... by choice. Both by the choice the Committee made as well as by their own desire."

"And you don't think the Guardians could accomplish the same?"

"Perhaps," Mary replied slowly with a shrug of her shoulders. "I don't know that they'd be willing to make the compromises that such an endeavor would require."

"Why?"

Mary sighed again. She *really* didn't want to get into all this, but.... "Because their methods of protecting are so radically different. Some of the steps they took to put the project off-track were mild. They would have served to delay the program but not kill it, and no one would have really gotten hurt. The others things, however.... Had we not discovered the *hidden* fallacies - the substandard materials and the soil poisoning and the dust - bad, *bad* things could and likely *would* have happened to at least some if not all of the candidates in the compound. All things considered I think their compromise in this instance was simply that they allowed everyone who had an idea to move forward with it in the hopes that *one* of them would succeed."

"That's kind of...."

"Screwy? Yes, it is. Fortunately it's moot speculation at this point. The only way we'd ever know for certain would be to do as Drusilla suggested and move them all to their own planet and let them hash it out for themselves. And until and unless we can find them all...."

"You will continue searching for them, Ms Wellesly?"

"As I'm allowed to, Councilman Orbach. A lot depends on the outcome of this hearing obviously."

"So what happened next, Ms Wellesly? How does principle figure into this whole debacle?"

"How interesting you should choose that particular word, Presiding Council. Because that is certainly what I felt the whole process was becoming once I learned of the introduction of the AIDS virus to one of the candidates. The angle was a little harder to figure, and of course we were more interested in finding out the who, when and where of Malcolm's infection to begin with. It was only after we figured out the when and where that the who part of the equation started to emerge. Finding the motive behind the principle was fairly easy once we managed that."

"Well don't keep us in suspense, woman! Tell us!"

"Sit back, ladies and gentlemen. This could get a little complicated."

Chapter VI

"Before I say anything about what happened with the AIDS virus, I think it should be noted that one of the reasons the Alliance is so successful is because we learned to embrace our similarities and appreciate our differences. We may never necessarily agree with them completely *in principle*, but we've learned to respect one another's cultures and looked for ways to work together... or most of us have. But like everything else, there always has to be a few who want to try and ruin things for the rest of us."

"How do you mean, Ms Wellesly?"

"Well, Member Puopolo, on your planet fighting is considered a capital offense, yes?"

The woman nodded. "It is indeed, Ms Wellesly."

"And yet your planet sent candidates to be considered for this project even though they were required to participate in self-defense training; even though they were likely to end up serving with or even following the leadership of warriors."

"Of course. We recognized the need for all the participants to be able to defend themselves and their comrades from unknown threats. And it is highly likely that peacemakers and mediators will be as necessary a component to building a successful colony as warriors. We felt our candidates could make a significant contribution to those aspects of a new settlement."

"So you believe you maintained your principles with the compromise?"

"We think so, yes."

"Were there any on your planet who would judge the situation differently?"

Puopolo pursed her lips thoughtfully and the rest waited for her reply in respectful silence. She tilted her head and nodded slowly. "Perhaps. I know there was some initial opposition to compromising at all. After all, our society has existed for eons living by the peaceful principles we hold dear to our hearts. It was in fact the youth of our world who petitioned for the right to negotiate terms. They demanded the opportunity to show that defense was sometimes a necessary tactic for those who wish to live peacefully."

"So you compromised your principle," Member Mein cut in with a scathing tone.

"Maybe a little," Puopolo conceded. "But not our way of life. And not the rules of our society."

Mein snorted. "That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. Either you stick to your principles or you compromise them until they're not principles anymore."

"I don't think that's true at all," Noah called out from the gallery as he stood to be recognized. "In my society, women are the leaders and men are the providers. Our diet primarily consists of meat protein that the men hunt and prepare as it is recognized to provide the greatest strength to our warriors. Yet my **ДОЧЬ** changed her diet to be part of this program. She would gladly have walked away from the position of leadership accorded her by the others had someone more worthy stepped up to claim her place... regardless of that person's gender." He held up his hands at the murmurings his wording caused to trickle around the room. "All I'm saying is that for the sake of the project and its success,

our children - your candidates - chose to compromise. They didn't make demands of one another nor did they try to change our societies. They learned to accept the things about each other that made them unique while melding their sameness to make them a strong, cohesive unit."

"You're a fool," Mein spat.

"Perhaps," Noah agreed without hesitation. "But I know my **ДОЧЬ** and her companions are happy for the chance to compromise with one another. And in doing so, maybe they'll take the best of all of us and create something even better."

Presiding Council rose as he cleared his throat, purposefully drawing attention to himself to ratchet down the tension prevalent throughout the room. "Not to put a fine point on things, Ms Wellesly, but why exactly is this important to your information? Or are you simply trying *not* to cause an interstellar incident again?" He chuckled and gave her a crooked smile. Mary laughed aloud and the rest reacted in reflex. Presiding Council gave her a thankful nod of his head as he resumed his seat.

"Well sir, if you have to ask about an interstellar incident, I must not be doing *something* right," she joked with a smirk, feeling most of the hostility drain from the room with her quip. "As for why..." She sobered and looked around slowly. "It's imperative that you remember that a vast majority of beings on every Alliance world are happy to be part of the coalition. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves and they like the opportunity to learn about people who are different from them. They're the ones like the families that are seated in the gallery today; or like the scientists that were chosen to partake in the project as candidates. The problem lies with the fact that there are a few whose belief in their ideologies and principles are so stalwart that *anything* that goes against them is a threat that must be destroyed."

"Like Member Brave Heart's Guardians?"

"Exactly, Councilman Ipsen. There are a number of people that are concerned with the uses and conservation of our natural resources, but most think that we should not only conserve and use what we have wisely, but also look for ways to extend what we have. Only a small percentage of conservation advocates become Guardians, but their conviction was sufficient enough for them to take action against the candidates in a very forceful and potentially damning way."

"And what does this have to do with the introduction of the AIDS epidemic, Ms Wellesly? Because that could very easily have spread far beyond the candidates. It could have succeeded in wiping out the populations of entire planets and cultures."

"Because it's exactly the same fundamental belief in the righteousness of an ideology or principle that the Guardians function under - only on a much wider scale."

"That's insanity."

Mary shrugged and nodded. "It's also the truth. The Protectors are similar to the Guardians but with much less reverence for life... especially if the life in question is unlike their own. Like the Guardians, the Protectors are found on a number of different Alliance planets and they agree on one single mitigating factor - the preservation of *their* culture and societal rules. They don't believe in compromise and they despise the mixing of other races and cultures with their own."

"Ms Wellesly?" McMurtry queried, rubbing a hand over her forehead in an effort to stave off the headache she could feel pounding behind her eyes. Mary arched an eyebrow at her. "Two things

actually. Can you tell us where you found your information? And will you *please* explain how this ties in to the virus *and* the project? I'm a little confused."

"I understand, Madame Chairman. I've been where you are. Let me see if I can make this make sense for all of you." She sighed and reached her hand back towards Caleb. He handed her the Pad already expanded and opened to the information she needed. "Thank you, Caleb," she said with a smile. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have to be honest. I didn't find this information - no one on my team did. This is the information that Jacob Aryoch found during one of his hacking sessions. He was actually aboard the carrier *Storm Surge*."

"Wait... the carrier that was stationed in the space dock to protect the project ship *Outreach*? Why were the scientists on the carrier? When were they there?"

"When we moved them from the mountain facility we transported them to the *Outreach*. They used the carrier for practically everything but sleeping - meals, showers, medical needs were all provided by the carrier. Jacob tied into the 'net from the carrier. From there it was a piece of cake for him to find... everything."

"So a member of the Alpha Team did all of your dirty work?"

Mary snorted. "Um... NO. I'm pretty sure Gideon would be offended by your suggestion, Member Lafferty. And I *know* Jacob would take exception to it. Gideon already had a handle on a number of details. Jacob's information helped link them all together and fill in the blanks."

"And did you ask Candidate Aryoch to do this, Ms Wellesly?"

"No, Presiding Council, I didn't. Eli did."

"Excuse me?" the tone full of derision and mocking disbelief.

"For what, Councilman?" Mary baited. She was tired and Romanov was deliberately pushing. When she scowled at Mary's impudence, Mary cocked an eyebrow at her. "It's a fair question, Councilman. I didn't stutter so you obviously did something that needs excusing."

"You're walking a very fine line, Ms Wellesly," she growled.

"Since I took this assignment, Councilman. What's your point?"

"You'd be wise to show some respect."

"When you've earned it, ma'am," causing Romanov to rise from her seat and lean forward with a glare. Mary didn't flinch and met her eyes stare for stare. She huffed and returned to her seat, crossing her arms over her chest. "You're forgetting, Councilman, I *know* what's been going on. So please don't think intimidation is going to work on me. We are so far beyond that juncture. Are we clear?" Romanov merely looked at her and Mary stood on her one good leg. "Are. We. Clear?"

She kept her eyes trained on Mary's face, seeing exactly what it was costing her to defy her. And still she didn't flinch. Romanov nodded grudgingly. "We're clear, Ms Wellesly."

She nodded and slumped back to the table though her posture remained rigid. Caleb turned and looked at Eve who shook her head at him. He sighed and nodded and turned his attention back to

Mary who was studying the people on the dais. Finally she spoke, "What can I clarify for you, Councilman Romanov?"

"Did you imply that Candidate Vasya directed Candidate Aryoch to break into the planet's network to find...." Mary held up a hand and she stopped speaking.

"I'm not implying anything, Councilman. I'm stating it as unequivocal fact. Jacob told me Eli had him go digging. I don't know what she told him to look for - he didn't say and I didn't ask. Eli just handed me the results of his search and Gideon verified the veracity of the information they provided."

"And what information was that, Ms Wellesly?"

"Where the virus came from; what the mercenaries' *real* objective was; how everything got so convoluted. It was interesting reading."

"So...?"

Mary sighed. "The trail to who obtained the virus was long, but it was easier to discover than where the virus originally came from. We're still working on that part... unless of course Councilman Romanov or Member Mein would like to share that information?" Mary's eyes darted back and forth between them, watching as anger and embarrassment flushed both faces red.

"How dare you!!"

"You can't just accuse...!!"

"Actually, I can. And I dare very easily because I know what you did... both of you. And both of you are guilty of the crimes of which you stand accused - one by omission and the other by commission."

"Ms Wellesly?"

"Presiding Council, I know it sounds like a conundrum - after all, the way of life on both planets is vastly different from one another. But that didn't matter because the sole goal of the Protectors is to protect and maintain their way of life at any cost. Councilman Romanov was recruited into the ranks of the Protectors around the same time Member Mein was. They both believe that their culture and way of life is the only viable one in society so they were prime candidates for selection. Councilman Romanov found them to be a little too stringent for her tastes, however. She wants to maintain the status quo on her planet and keep brilliant minds like Eli home to make life better for their people, but she's not looking to destroy other cultures. Member Mein on the other hand...."

"You have no proof!!"

"That is in fact not true, sir. As I indicated, we followed the trail to whom obtained the virus. May I ask, sir - was it your idea or that of the leadership of the Protectors? To use the AIDS virus in such a manner I mean. Surely you realize how dangerous...."

"Stupid woman!" he growled. He thought of lunging in Mary's direction, but knew it for the lost cause it was. Aside from sitting near the middle of the lower platform, the Presiding Council had signaled his security team to stand at the ready. All had drawn their sidearms and were simply waiting for an indication to shoot.

"Some days more than others, Member Mein," Mary agreed with a sigh, rubbing absently at her leg again. "But this is your opportunity to speak... to tell your side of the story."

"And if I don't?"

Mary shrugged. "It makes no difference to me, sir. I will be happy to share the facts with everyone here. I am giving you the courtesy of speaking first."

"I wouldn't give you the satisfaction, you worthless piece of...."

"Member Mein...." both Presiding Council and Chairman McMurtry called out together only to be interrupted before they could continue.

"That's enough!!" Caleb roared as he stood. "You will watch your mouth, sir, or I will watch it for you... with my fists."

"Presiding Council," Mein complained. "I must protest."

"It would probably be better for you if you didn't," Eve commented from the gallery. A number of heads nodded their agreement to her statement. Presiding Council looked like he wanted to pull his hair out, but simply gave Eve a droll look before meeting Mein's eyes.

"Your protest is noted, Member Mein. However, you were completely out of line with your remarks. Please keep your opinions to yourself," holding Mein's stare until he looked away. "Caleb, please take your seat." Caleb met his stare deliberately, then turned to Mary for instruction. She bobbed her head briefly, squeezing his hand lightly. Caleb waited another moment, then slowly resumed his place. Presiding Council nodded in satisfaction as he returned his attention back to the silently fuming Committee Member. "Now Ms Wellesly has offered you the opportunity to speak for yourself, Member Mein. I suggest you avail yourself of the opportunity to present your side of the story."

"I wouldn't give you the satisfaction. I haven't done anything wrong," Mein replied diffidently.

Presiding Council shook his head. "Very well. Ms Wellesly? If you wouldn't mind clearing things up for us?"

"Of course sir. As I revealed, Councilman Romanov committed the crime of omission. She knew of the Protectors, yet did nothing to alert us to their presence or their plans."

"I had no knowledge of those, Ms Wellesly," Romanov protested.

"I have evidence that says otherwise, ma'am." Mary waited a full sixty heartbeats, but Councilman Romanov didn't interrupt again. "Member Mein, however.... He not only knew what was going on, but was in fact the instrument of destruction. He's the one who obtained the virus and shared it with Malcolm. He was hoping to destroy at least two cultures by doing so."

"Two?"

"Two, Member Tortuna. Both Arianna's and Eli's."

Bartolo frowned. "Why would he even think that was possible?"

Mary smiled sadly. "Because he didn't do his homework, sir. He expected Malcolm to infect Arianna and Arianna to infect Eli. And in doing so, he would remove not only the two most likely candidates from the project, but he would also eliminate two ways of life he abhorred. He didn't know of his error until I had Malcolm removed from the team. And by then it was too late."

"I don't understand," Noah commented as he stood once more. "Why would he be so repulsed by us? Or by Arianna's people?"

"Because, Noah - you're not like him." Mary shifted to meet his glance, then held up a hand before the thunderclouds gathering in Noah's eyes and on his countenance could release a storm they couldn't recover from. Noah looked like he wanted to protest, but Eve put a gentle hand on his back and offered him a pleading expression. He sighed and motioned for Mary to continue. "On Member Mein's planet, the men are in charge of everything - they're the providers and make the decisions and mete out the discipline. Women have no voice in anything - not in the government or in the household. The only purpose women have is to provide sex, maintain the home and raise the children."

Noah nodded. "Okay. I don't agree with it because it sounds like a master/slave system more than anything else, but they obviously met the criteria for Alliance membership. Still, just because I don't agree with it doesn't mean I want to destroy that way of life."

Mary smiled. "That's where you and Member Mein differ, my friend. He believes as all the Protectors do; that his way of life is the only *right* way. Your culture offends his sensibilities because of the position women hold in your society."

Noah turned his eyes to Mein. "You're a moron. Be thankful you didn't succeed or I would be demanding personal retribution."

"He's right," Bartolo chimed in, looking at Mein with contempt. "You're a moron."

Mein snorted. "If it had succeeded..."

"If it had succeeded, Member Mein, you'd have more than an interstellar incident on your hands," Mary declared decisively. "You would be facing a galactic war. And I think you'd find far fewer allies than you might expect to. Because even on *your* world the majority of men don't think like you do. They are happy to leave other cultures and societies to their own devices so long as your people are allowed to live in peace the lifestyle they have chosen to live."

"You can't know that," Mein spat.

Mary shrugged. "I can and I do. You walked out on a limb, sir and you're out there swaying in the breeze all by yourself." She held his gaze until he was the one to look away. Then she looked around at the people on the platform. What she mostly found was anger and frustration and disbelief - not in her words, but in the actions of some of those most trusted to secure the success of this mission. Presiding Council shook his head and sighed.

"This is so... There just aren't words at the moment. You've given us so much that needs to be addressed. Is there anything else we should be aware of, Ms Wellesly?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but there is. It involves the mercenaries and the attack at the mountain."

"Of course - I'd forgotten about that. Let's hear it then."

"As you wish, sir.

Chapter VII

"Member Mein didn't realize his plan was never going to be successful until the Committee meeting in which I had Malcolm removed from the candidate list. That was when he learned about the cultural mandates that made it impossible for either Arianna or Eli to become infected. So he and some of the other Protectors decided to step up their game and go all out. It didn't matter to them how it was accomplished or who was destroyed in the process. Their sole goal at this point was to kill the project by any means necessary. This is when they brought in an outside source to help them."

"An outside source?"

"Yes, Member Yesu. Someone who wasn't a Protector but had the connections essential to undertake the task that had been set forth."

"Ms Wellesly?"

"Yes, Councilman Romanov?"

"I would like to say something in my defense."

"Are you confessing to being the outside source?" Presiding Council asked with a frown.

"No, sir," she responded immediately. "I was in fact approached by the Protectors so I am guilty of collusion by omission. I really didn't think they were serious. Because although I do believe that our way is the right way, I was unwilling to put the brilliance that is Eli Vasya in any sort of perceived danger."

"Did you know she was one of Member Mein's targets?"

"If I had, I would have eliminated him myself," stated emphatically with a glare in his direction.

"So if Councilman Romanov was not the outside source that was conscripted to aid the Protectors, who is?" Member Danski inquired. Mary smiled.

"It's interesting that you should use that particular word, ma'am," she commented pleasantly. "As I believe that individual in question was coerced into service. Tell me, Madame Chairman," Mary invited as she turned her attention to McMurtry. "Were you coerced or conscripted?"

McMurtry held Mary's stare for a long moment as every eye in the room stared at her. Finally she blinked and lowered her gaze, looking at her linked hands before raising her face and meeting brown eyes that were surprisingly full of compassion and understanding. She shrugged slightly. "I guess you could say I was conscripted by coercion."

"Excuse me?? How is that even possible???"

"Presiding Council, please...." Mary said gently. He turned and looked at her, the rage in his expression clearly written in his features. "Please allow me to do this without interruption. I promise you'll get all the facts I have and perhaps some answers that I don't."

"Not if she knows what is good for her," Member Mein sneered.

Presiding Council motioned to his security captain and he and three other officers stepped forward. "Please remove Member Mein to a holding cell."

"You can't do that!! I'm entitled...."

"... to absolutely nothing, sir! You're not the one about whom this hearing was called. And your presence here is no longer wanted nor required. Sam, remove him."

The security captain nodded and Committee Members rose from their seats to get out of the way. Mein saw it as an opportunity - whether to escape or simply to cause chaos Mary never knew, but Caleb saw it as a chance to take out a little bit of pent-up anger on a deserving target.

Sam and one officer went to one end of the dais while the other two members of the security detail went to the other side... all intent on boxing Mein in and moving him off the platform with as little resistance as possible. What no one expected was for Mein to simply stand on his chair and use that as a launching pad for jumping over the table. He never saw Caleb coming, and when his feet touched solid ground, his face was met with a solid fist. Caleb only got the one punch - the security detail moved in almost immediately - but one was enough. Mein was knocked out flat on his back; Caleb stepped back to Mary's side as the security team surrounded Mein, binding him before they hefted him between them and headed out the door.

The room watched in still silence until the doors closed almost soundlessly behind the security escorts. The remainder of the contingent shifted to take up their positions once again, and the movement broke the tableau in the room. Presiding Council cleared his throat and zeroed his gaze in on Caleb.

"Do you feel better, Caleb?"

Caleb grinned widely. "Yes, thank you, sir."

"And your hand?" gesturing to the appendage Caleb was covertly flexing at his side.

"It's a little sore," he confessed. "But worth it."

Presiding Council snorted. "I can only imagine." He looked at Mary. "Ms Wellesly? Would you be amenable to another fifteen standard minute break? Perhaps Madame Vasya can look at Caleb's hand while the rest of us collect our scatter wits."

"I am at your disposal, sir. Whenever you're ready to proceed."

Presiding Council sketched her a half bow and motioned to the remainder of the security team. They instantly moved and took up positions on either side of McMurtry. The Council and Committee Members exited without a second's hesitation, and several people in the gallery followed them out as a matter of course. Eve, Noah, Ketura and Drusilla crossed through the gate as Mary simply lay back

atop the table, groaning as her spine popped when her head dipped below the edge of the table. Ketura and Drusilla leaned against the half wall, chuckling as they met Mary's upside down smile.

"Better?" Ketura asked.

Mary nodded and sighed. "You have *no* idea."

"Thankfully," Drusilla commented with a chuckle and their conversation moved forward quietly. Meanwhile Eve and Noah had approached Caleb who jerked his head as he stepped away from the table Mary was reclined on.

"Let me see," Eve commanded with calm authority. Caleb extended his hand and winced slightly when Eve started gently prodding and moving it. She hit a particularly tender area and he would have jerked away from her grasp had she not been holding his wrist in a firm grip.

"Sorry, Doc," he apologized. "I just...."

Eve shook her head. "I understand - truly, Caleb. We are a warrior culture as well," meeting his eyes. "I wish I had known this was going to be so exciting; I would have come a little better prepared." She nodded at Noah who opened her medical bag. "It's not broken but it's going to bruise quite beautifully. Apparently your bones are quite dense. I'm going to give you a shot to take the edge off the pain - just something local," she added before he could protest. "I wouldn't leave her unguarded at this point either."

"Thanks, Doc."

"Thank you, Caleb. Had you not stepped in when you did, I can say with absolute certainty that almost the entire gallery would have come over the wall. And I'm not sure *anything* could repair the damage that would have been done to the Alliance."

"Does that mean you think the damage that has already *been done* can still be overcome?" Caleb asked in an effort to take his mind off the injection she was preparing.

"I do," Eve reply without hesitation. "Because this is the work of a very small minority of people. I don't think the populations of the planets that are part of the Alliance will let it fall apart based on the actions of a select few."

"I imagine this will put people more firmly behind a strong Alliance," Noah contributed. "We want it to succeed because the Alliance has been beneficial to all of us."

"I hope everyone remembers that when all is said and done here," Caleb said softly.

"They will," Eve assured him. "We'll make sure of it." She walked over to the table where Mary was still reclined with her head hanging off the side. "How are you doing, Ms Wellesly?"

"All things considered, Doc, I'd have to say I'm doing pretty fine. That's not to say I'm not looking forward to kicking off my shoes and stretching out with a strong martini the end of the day."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Ketura agreed with a smile. "Though I'd prefer a mai tai myself."

Drusilla snorted. "Any kind of intoxicant would be acceptable after a day like today."

"Hear! Hear!"

"Yes!"

"Absolutely!"

The immediate agreement from everyone gathered around the table caused laughter to follow the pronouncement, and it was into this scene that several of the Committee Members and Councilmen returned. Presiding Council tilted his head and cocked an eyebrow in their direction. "Is everything all right, Ms Wellesly?"

"Yes sir," she answered without moving. "Just relaxing while I have the opportunity."

He smirked. "Well, you have a few more minutes so please enjoy yourself," said as he moved to resume his place on the dais. The rest followed him and the others turned back to Mary. Caleb extended his hand, nudging her gently. Mary lifted her head enough to glare at him, but did very little else. Noah eased Caleb aside and offered both hands, pulling her upright when she reluctantly grasped his arms.

"So do you think Joy would mind if we stayed an extra few days? We'll bring in groceries as well as an assortment of alcohol to aid everyone's relaxation."

Mary frowned slightly. "Joy has never been one to refuse hospitality, but why would you want to? Your children are gone."

"They are," Noah agreed with a smile. "But if we wouldn't be imposing, it would be nice if we could get to know one another a little more. After all, we're all family now, aren't we?"

Mary nodded her head slowly. "We are. Well, all of you are."

"So are you, Ms Wellesly - by your own admission, remember? Please don't discount your importance to us... or our kids. Besides, I would like to keep an eye on you for a few more days," Eve confessed. "When you are able to recommence communication with our children, I want to be able to honestly tell my **ДОЧЬ** that she left you in capable hands."

"She already knows she did, Eve."

"Nevertheless, there are still some issues that need to be resolved and I'd appreciate the opportunity to see them through to the end."

Mary studied the people surrounding her before allowing her eyes to stray to Caleb. She angled her head and he shrugged slightly before barely nodding his head. She kept her eyes locked on his another long minute before letting her shoulders relax minutely. Caleb smiled. "I'll let Joy know to expect company for a few more days," said just above a whisper.

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly," Eve said graciously. Mary chuckled.

"Guys, if we're all going to be family, you're going to have to start calling me Mary."

"I think we can manage that," Eve agreed. "But we should probably return to our seats. It looks like we're almost ready to begin again." She examined Mary carefully with her eyes. "Is there anything we can do for you right now?"

Mary shook her head. "No, Eve. It's just a matter of getting through this as quickly as possible. At least we're on the downside of things now."

"And will the last be as exciting as it has been so far?"

"Oh God, I hope not," Mary snarked, causing laughter to roll around the table. The sound of a throat clearing interrupted the clamor.

"Ms Wellesly?" Presiding Council called out. "Are we ready to begin again?"

She motioned to the rest to return to their seats and looked at him expectantly. "Of course, Presiding Council."

"Then please," motioning to the floor. She slid from the table, wincing when her foot touched the ground. After a deep breath, she retrieved her Pad and focused her attention on Chairman McMurtry.

"Madame Chairman, you were going to explain to us how you were conscripted by coercion."

"Ms Wellesly, I think it's safe to say I'm no longer chairman of anything. You can call me Rebecca."

"Very well, Rebecca. Can you tell us what you meant?"

"May I ask a question first?"

"Of course," Mary replied, holding up a hand before the murmuring could start. Silence held and Rebecca kept her eyes focused on Mary's for a long moment before giving a satisfied nod.

"Is there anything you wouldn't do to keep your children safe?"

Mary scowled. "I'm sure there are any number of things I haven't done. In fact lately I've put them in harms' way more often than not."

"Even Joy?" McMurtry held up a hand to stall Mary's response. "By your own admission, your security agency was started for Joy... because of the danger *she* was put in."

Mary crossed an arm over her stomach and propped her other arm on it, stroking her chin with her hand as she scrutinized Rebecca McMurtry. "Madame... Rebecca - what I did for Joy I did when she was truly a child. And even though I keep an eye on her as a matter of habit, the truth is that she was a huge part of keeping the Alpha Team safe." She tipped her head thoughtfully. "What does this have to do with your situation?"

McMurtry sighed and looked down at her clasped hands. "As many of you know, I only have one child - a child my wife and I struggled for years to conceive. Lyssa will only ever be an only child and she's... she's everything to us." Rebecca glanced into Mary's eyes. "When you were recommended to us, I did some research into you and your company. I wasn't at all surprised to discover you were a mother. You were so fierce in your defense of those kids; you even stood up to King Fernando for Malcolm's sake despite your feelings towards Malcolm. I admired that."

"And you wanted to do the same?" Mary asked with confusion. Rebecca shook her head.

"No. No, Ms Wellesly. I was quite content... very happy actually... to be part of the leadership team that was responsible for moving this project from idea to fruition. The Alpha Team - all the candidates really - they were so amazing to watch and study and learn about. So much enthusiasm for what they were doing; so much excitement about the possibilities in front of them."

"So what happened?"

"Lyssa was targeted."

"Excuse me?"

"My daughter, Lyssa - she was targeted." Rebecca rubbed a hand across her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. "Member Mein caught me alone after the meeting that got Malcolm booted from the team. He was...." She blew out a shaky breath. "It was peculiar. He radiated.... He was furious... practically livid, and yet his outer demeanor was the same calm, collected deportment he had maintained since the Committee had been appointed. It was unnerving."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing really... not physically. He simply told me that it was time to kill the project."

"You thought he was joking... much like Councilman Romanov."

"I did," McMurtry agreed. "I thought he was blowing off some frustration. I didn't blame him. As the deadline loomed closer and closer, the pressure was mounting at a tremendous rate. I just thought he meant we needed to kill the project to save our sanity."

"But he didn't."

"No. He was deadly serious. He informed me that the program was going to fail and I was going to help him take it down." She pulled in a sharp breath. "He told m-me... he told me Lyssa would s-suffer greatly before her d-death if I... if I refused."

"And you believed him?"

"Not at first. I shook my head and walked away from him. Then I got a message from my wife Elaine. She'd gotten a call from the school Lyssa attends - she'd gone missing. A little while later Elaine received images of our daughter in a place we didn't recognize."

"You couldn't track her?"

"We hadn't had her implanted," McMurtry confessed. "She was never away from us except at school and she was supposed to be safe there!" banging a fist against her knee. "She was supposed to be SAFE!"

"Why didn't you come to me?" Mary queried softly. "You knew what I did for my daughter... for these kids. Why didn't you tell me?"

"We couldn't risk it. Mein couldn't monitor *your* communications, but he could monitor *mine*. And he flat out told me what he would personally do to my little girl if I didn't get this project shut down."

"Did you plan for the Alpha Team to die in the mountain?"

"That was never part of my plan."

"Why don't you tell us what happened, Rebecca?"

Rebecca nodded and wiped her eyes, then looked at Mary and began to tell her the story directly.

Chapter VIII

"Elaine and I... we were at a loss. I couldn't shut down the project on my own even if I wanted to. I didn't have that kind of power. But to let something happen to our daughter...." McMurtry shook her head. "It was unthinkable," she whispered. "We were trying to figure out what to do... discussing our options when the school called us. Lyssa had been found locked in one of the small janitorial closets. They assumed she had wandered in mistakenly and the door locked behind her leaving her sealed inside in the darkness. They believed she had fallen asleep and that was why she didn't respond during their initial sweep."

"But you knew better."

"I did. I knew what I had seen."

"Why do you think he gave Lyssa back to you and Elaine? Surely you could have just disappeared to keep her safe."

McMurtry shook her head again. "No, we couldn't. It was obvious he was watching us; otherwise he wouldn't have been able to take Lyssa away *and return her* in broad daylight with no one the wiser. He gave her back to us *knowing* it was the only way to keep up appearances, and knowing we would do so to keep our daughter safe."

"And did it?"

"Keep her safe?" Mary nodded. "It did. But after today...."

"Chair... Rebecca, when I learned the truth a few days ago I dispatched agents to your residence. As soon as we convened this morning, Elaine and Lyssa were removed to a safe house and then transported to an undisclosed location."

"They're safe?"

"They are."

Rebecca covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh Ms Wellesly...." she breathed. "I can't...."

Mary held up a hand. "Tell us the rest."

McMurtry picked up her water glass and lifted it to her lips with shaking hands. She slurped noisily trying not to spill and Member Tortuna reached over and helped her reseal it carefully on the table.

McMurtry offered a grateful smile and Tortuna gave a nod before sitting back and waiting for Rebecca to begin speaking again. McMurtry sighed.

"You remember I contacted you demanding the return of the candidates? We were trying to get a fix on your location. Both Mein and I agreed that you would be where the most likely candidates - the ones you believed would be chosen for the Alpha Team - were ensconced. He believed that he would be able to pinpoint your location if we spoke."

"He was wrong."

"He was. He was incensed."

"So what happened?"

"Nothing right then. There was nothing we could do as long as the candidates remained lost to us."

"So you named the Alpha Team...."

"For two reasons actually. The first - because we *had* to; we were out of time. You were right; we had all the information we needed and had long since divided the candidates up into distinct classes by abilities. It was simply a matter of making it official. The other reason was it was hoped that naming the team would flush them out. After all, as you pointed out, they had massive amounts of work to do and relatively little time to accomplish it. We believed that by naming the team they would be brought back into our orbit and we could find a way to kill the project."

"Only that didn't happen."

McMurtry smirked sadly. "That didn't happen. We even lost communication with Titus, and that made Mein desperate which in turn made me desperate." She gave Mary a weak smile. "It was a very stressful time around here."

"When did you start talking to mercenaries?"

Rebecca shook her head. "It was nothing so simple, Ms Wellesly. The mercenaries were only one aspect in a number of possible contingency plans we were making."

"Really?? Do tell."

"To my knowledge, the mercenaries were part of Mein's plans all along. It was simply a matter of finding the best way to utilize them in a number of scenarios since we were just working with possibilities at that point." Rebecca sighed. "When you took the candidates and left, I expected to hear from Titus immediately to give me some idea of what was happening and where you were. Had we found you then, the plan was to send the mercs in to retrieve the Alpha Team. Well, any of the candidates actually but principally the Alpha Team. They were the priority of course because without them the mission would be scrubbed and the program put on indefinite hold."

"What were the mercenaries' orders? Had they found us, I mean."

"They were to recover the Alpha Team and hold them hostage. The bargaining chip was to be their safe return in exchange for the project's end."

Mary nodded. "And when that failed? When Titus failed to contact you?"

"My first priority was trying to locate you and persuade you to return. When that failed we started making plans based on likely developments."

"Such as?"

"We knew you would have to bring them out of hiding at some point. We expected to make a stand either at the transport site or on the ship. Except we couldn't figure which transport site was being employed and the ship...." She shook her head. "We couldn't even get close."

"So you saw Titus contacting you as fortuitous timing? You didn't consider that you were being set up?"

"I knew it was a possibility. How could I not? But I was desperate, Ms Wellesly. You need to understand that. Holding the Alpha Team for the ransom of the program ending was far preferable to some of the more radical ideas Mein was entertaining. I was willing to take the chance that Titus had finally found a way to contact us of his own free will. After all, he'd been working with us from the beginning by his own choice."

"So what was the plan?"

McMurtry frowned. "I told you...."

Mary held up a hand. "Let me tell you what I know - what I learned *after* the attack on the mountain facility. Then you can fill in any blanks I leave, all right?" Rebecca nodded though the confusion never left her expression. Mary cleared her throat. "Once Member Mein convinced you it was in your best interests to help him kill the program - because I do believe that he threatened Lyssa and Elaine - you got in touch with some old friends of your father's... people you knew wouldn't be adverse to doing this kind of dirty work as long as it added credits to their accounts. And as a bonus - as long as the credits were good they would follow whatever orders they were given and wouldn't ask questions so they'd never know it was you doing the asking. I do believe that originally you gave the orders for the mercenaries to kidnap the Alpha Team for ransom as a non-violent way to kill the program, but I believe as you grew more desperate, their orders became broader in scope. Tell me, Rebecca - what were you planning to do to the ship?"

"I don't understand."

Mary barely refrained from rolling her eyes. Instead she cocked an incredulous eyebrow at McMurtry. "Really? Okay, if you hadn't heard from Titus - if you'd been able to get onto the ship - what would you have done?"

Rebecca shrugged. "The plan was the same. We would have taken control of the ship, securing it and the hostages by any means necessary. Barring that, our last resort was to send mercenaries to the asteroid."

"Didn't you actually do that anyway? Just in case?"

"I didn't. I can't speak for Mein."

"Uh huh," Mary drawled slowly. She studied McMurtry until Rebecca squirmed under the scrutiny. "So you were glad to hear from Titus... especially when he confirmed they were indeed hidden at a military facility. Because that's where you expected them to be - tucked away somewhere safe."

"Exactly. It meant we could tap into the repository and access the old plans so that extraction would be swift and without casualties."

"And what of Fernando?"

"Excuse me?"

"Fernando. If the plan was to extract the Alpha Team swiftly and without casualties, why was Fernando allowed to transport in to retrieve his daughter? Why was the mercs' ammunition coated in some sort of vile substance that keeps wounds from healing properly?" rubbing at her still injured leg. "And why were the mercenaries wired for self-destruction?"

"Ms Wellesly...."

Mary shook her head. "I know, remember? Too little, too late, but I *know*... at least most of it. Mein did threaten you, using your daughter's life as leverage. But instead of coming to me, you decided to take him up on his offer, figuring you could protect those kids and still keep your own safe. No one would get hurt; the project would go away; you and Elaine could take Lyssa somewhere that put you beyond Mein's reach.

Getting in touch with the mercenaries was the first thing you did. You knew you'd need them in some capacity no matter what went down. The candidates disappearing put a kink into your plan so you shifted to hunting for them. Has Titus not contacted you when he did, the idea was to send someone to blow up the *Outreach* before it could leave the space dock - preferably without casualties to anyone... especially the candidates... but some loss would have been acceptable as long as the damage kept the ship from launching.

Fortunately you did hear from Titus and his information allowed you to send the mercenaries in. I think their instructions from you were to capture the Alpha Team first. Killing was only authorized if it looked like the hostages were going to escape - except in Fernando's case. He thought you were allowing him to recover Arianna without harm to make up for allowing me to make a fool of him. But their orders concerning Fernando were to shoot on sight, and if Arianna ended up as collateral damage, well that would just be a damn shame, wouldn't it?"

"None of the kids were supposed to be hurt... ever!" Rebecca muttered.

"See, that's the problem when there's more than one chief giving orders. It's hard to know who's in charge and whose orders to follow. You allowed Fernando to go into the middle of a firefight and the mercs orders were changed before they ever went into the mountain. Mein gave them targets - Fernando, Arianna, Eli - the rest were to be at least maimed. That coupled with the poison that coated their ammunition meant everything would grind to a halt. Blowing the ship would have been a bonus. It would have caused enough mayhem and terror in the masses to cancel the program. And with the Alpha Team so dramatically out of commission, it is very likely that no one would be willing to try again."

"I didn't want those kids hurt, Ms Wellesly... any of them. But you *have* to understand - I couldn't risk my daughter's wellbeing. I did the best I could."

"And Fernando?"

"What of him?" asked tiredly. McMurtry rubbed her eyes with her hands before meeting Mary's eyes.

"Why was he a target?"

Rebecca snorted derisively. "Ms Wellesly, just because I admire your convictions about rendering aid to an enemy doesn't mean I would be willing to do the same. Fernando was nothing but a pain in the ass from the time Arianna was sought out to participate in this program. I figured I'd give him a taste of his own medicine. I never told them to *kill* him."

"But you do agree that you told them to shoot him on sight?"

McMurtry shrugged. "Sure. What would be the point of lying about it now? I convinced Titus to help the Committee by reporting on his fellow candidates. I agreed to help Mein to keep my daughter safe. I hired the mercenaries using my father's contacts. And I told them to shoot Fernando if he ever showed up to claim Arianna. After all, he'd been barred from contacting her, and she deserved better than him for a father. However, I had nothing to do with Malcolm or the AIDS virus. I never knew of Mein's plans to bomb the ship. I *never* issued orders for anyone to be a casualty... only a hostage. And I never condoned the use of poison or self-destruct devices. I only wanted the program shut down to protect my family. I had no desire to destroy anyone else's."

Mary analyzed Rebecca's expression and posture for several long moments of silence and McMurtry held her gaze without flinching. Finally Mary took a deep breath. "What would you have done, Rebecca?" she asked softly, watching as confusion washed over McMurtry's countenance. "What would you have done if someone *had* been injured or killed because of your actions? What would you have done if there had been *collateral damage*? Because there very easily could have been. Not me," she said with a wave of her hand before McMurtry could comment. "It was my job to stand between those kids and whatever danger threatened them. But if any of them had been hurt or killed by your actions, how would you feel? How would you explain to your wife and daughter what you'd done?"

"I really don't know, Ms Wellesly," Rebecca replied quietly. "I've tried not to dwell on that possibility too much and instead chosen to focus on keeping my family out of harm's way."

"I want you to take a minute to think about it now. Your family is safe; your daughter is well out of harm's way. So I want you to consider it now and give an honest answer. The parents in the gallery deserve that much satisfaction."

It was eerily still and silent in the room as Rebecca McMurtry pondered Mary's words, and her face drained of blood and color as the implications of Mary's accusations sank into her conscious mind. "I... I'm n-not really...." She slammed her hands down on the table and glared at Mary. "No one was supposed to get hurt!"

"But someone did, Rebecca. Several someones if the truth be told. Some of it was more damaging than others, but people did get hurt because of your actions. Several of *those kids* got hurt because of what you chose to do."

"It's not my fault! No one was supposed to get hurt," she reiterated.

Mary reached for her cane and Caleb slid it into her grasp without missing a beat. She stood slowly from the table, wincing slightly when her weight shifted. Then she limped to the dais to stand directly in front of McMurtry. "People did get hurt, Rebecca. Fernando was - though I take responsibility for his injuries. I was shot; two of my team were grazed by bullets; a number of my team members were bruised and that's not even the worst of it because again... we expected to defend those kids. But despite all our efforts, you still managed to hurt the Alpha Team. Oh, not all of them and most not that severely. There was a little travel sickness and some bruising as a result of all the moving around they did in such a short period of time. But one of the team - Rebecca, one of the team members was shot during the firefight with the mercenaries, and it was only due to the bravery and actions of her two fellow team members that she survived."

McMurtry's pallor was so ghostly that Mary feared she might fall out of her chair. She lifted obviously shaking hands to push her hair from her face, then reached for her water glass before thinking better of it. Instead she forced a whisper from her dry throat. "How is she?"

"She'll live... probably better than new because of who her caregiver was." Mary turned and looked at Ketura and her husband then glanced at Eve and Noah before returning her gaze to Eden's parents. "Eli rebuilt Eden's second heart, and when her recovery is complete she'll be stronger and faster than she was before." She turned back to Rebecca. "So it turned out for the best, but people did get hurt because of your actions, Rebecca."

"I didn't mean.... I only wanted to protect my daughter."

"And you did. Too bad she will never know you growing up."

"Wait... what?? You can't...."

"I can," Mary replied gently. "But it will be left up to the Council. It's not my responsibility anymore."

"But you can't.... I only...."

"You made your choice, Rebecca. When you chose to help Mein."

"I had to!! I had to protect my daughter!! Don't you understand?? I had to protect Lyssa!!" McMurtry rose from her seat, leaning over the table to yell at Mary. "You can't do this!! You have to understand - you did the same thing!!" She didn't notice the Committee Members clearing out on either side of the platform or the security agents approaching her from either side. Her attention was solely focused on Mary who had straightened to her full height and glared at her accusation.

Mary took a deep breath and held Rebecca's gaze, allowing the agents to move in unseen as she reigned in her anger and gathered her composure. "I understand you wanted to protect your daughter, Rebecca. What I can't understand and will never accept is that you were willing to endanger the lives of others - someone else's children - for the sake of your own."

A wave of confusion washed over McMurtry's face. "But I...."

"No," Mary said kindly but emphatically. "We don't endanger innocents for any reason. We remove the threat."

"But I...."

Mary shook her head and transferred her attention to the Presiding Council. "Are you satisfied, sir?"

"Quite," motioning to his security captain. "Sam, if you don't mind...."

"Of course, sir," reaching for McMurtry's arm. "If you'll come with us, please." Rebecca considered him a moment, then nodded her head as her shoulders slumped. And the room remained silent until the doors closed behind them. Presiding Council blinked and shook his head.

"That was certainly unexpected."

"Presiding Council?"

"Yes, your majesty?" recognizing Aurora as she stood.

"What about my husband?"

Presiding Council turned to Mary. "Ms Wellesly?"

Mary nodded. "Let me tell you all a little story, and then we'll bring him in."

Chapter IX

"As I'm sure you all have noticed, Fernando is not a well-liked man. I can't say whether or not he is well-respected, but I know for certain that he isn't particularly well-liked... not by the Committee or those who might be considered his peers; not by those who served him; not even by the child he sired."

"And you, Ms Wellesly? How did you perceive him?"

Mary studied Aurora for a long moment. "Honestly, majesty?" seeing Aurora nod her consent. "I thought your husband was a craptastic example of a humanoid," not losing the eyes that reminded her of Arianna's when whispers and mutterings broke out around them. "He was entirely self-important and thought far too much of himself without regard to anyone else."

"And you based this opinion on...?"

"Years of observation and reports from my team members on their interaction with him."

"And you didn't consider that they might be biased in any way?"

"I did. And I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt... until Arianna told me plainly what he'd done. Then all bets were off."

"And you believed her without question?" This query came from the dais and Mary watched the ire flame in Aurora's brown eyes at the accusation, turning them almost golden. Mary held up a hand to keep her from responding even as Eve clasped her hand. Aurora tilted her head to look at Eve then at the other family members before squeezing the hand she held and resuming her seat. Only then did she nod to Mary who turned and looked at the platform. She met each pair of eyes, then spoke.

"I did," she confirmed. "For several reasons. My research and information verified what she said. But Fernando corroborated her words simply by being his obnoxious self."

"Ms Wellesly, I must caution you...."

"Don't bother, Presiding Council. I have zero respect for the man and as far as I'm concerned, he lost his right to the respect due his office when he became a criminal."

"That's a pretty serious charge."

"It's a very serious offense," Mary countered. "Aside from using his position to coerce a member of the Committee to 'throw the vote' so to speak, he demanded preferential treatment; flaunted the rules to suit him; and made a deal with a traitor to utilize mercenaries in an effort to kidnap his daughter. The last was done without regard to the consequences to either the Alpha Team or its mission. And as I said - their orders were to maim or destroy."

"You're certain."

The look Mary gave was as droll as her voice was dry. "Absolutely. They were wired for self-destruct. That's a little hard to play off when you're caught alive with them still strapped to you and counting down."

"And the maiming?"

"Presiding Council, have you ever been in a win or die situation?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"The mercenaries - they were paid a lot of money... enough credits to allow each of them to retire to their own little private island or space station. But the price for that many credits meant they had to succeed or die trying because no one was going to vouch for them or rescue them - they were on their own from the minute they were given their orders. So if they had to die, they were going to take as many of the enemy - my team and those kids - with them as could be managed. They had to. You with me so far?" He nodded and Mary sighed. "Good. The problem with that mentality is most humanoids - whether they're from this planet or one of our allies - all have a survival instinct. They want to live. This was especially true for these mercenaries. With the amount of money they'd been paid, they wanted to live to spend it. That desire, coupled with the conflicting orders they had - take the Team hostage or maim them - caused them to come in armed but not ready and not shooting to kill. So we were able to disable the self-destruct devices."

"And what of the mercenaries?"

"They were interrogated, then given the option of a trial or disposal. Most chose disposal."

"You had no right!!"

"I had every right! They were the enemy and they were casualties of war. They were entitled to choose. They knew the risks going in and this way their families can keep whatever ill-gotten gains they were given for their work. It was all documented. Caleb is sending the file to your Pads for later review."

"What about that survival instinct you were just talking about?"

"Councilman Tu'ttl, there comes a time when surrender is inevitable no matter what your instinct is. When you watch the interrogations, you'll see that the mercenaries fought until they were defeated. But once they accepted that there was no way to survive, most of them chose the more lucrative and, dare I say it, more humane option. At least by choosing disposal, they maintained control of their fate."

"And those that asked for trials?"

"They've been brought to a holding facility and placed into custody until such time as a trial is given."

Presiding Council pinched his bottom lip and nodded. "Very well. I for one am not markedly comfortable with your actions, but it seems you have followed the rules of war and engagement to the letter."

"I fully expect there to be an investigation, Presiding Council - for proprieties sake if for no other reason. But the truth is I'd do it all again if I was put into the same position with the same options and knowledge I had at the time. Hindsight is a wonderful thing."

He smirked. "Isn't it though?" he agreed sardonically. "However, we're pretty far afield of what we're supposed to be discussing. So why don't you tell us more about Fernando?"

Mary bowed her head in acknowledgement. "As I have already indicated, Fernando was an ass. He was attempting to manipulate the entire project to suit him and his greed. And despite how much we'd all like to think we're above it, we can all understand his greed to a point because everyone is guilty of being greedy about something in their lives at some juncture. The difference here is his greed was dangerous. First it jeopardized the program itself and then it jeopardized the Alpha Team." She cleared her throat and looked around the platform before turning and meeting Aurora's eyes. "I have a confession to make. The damage you'll see on him when he's brought in? I did that to him."

Aurora's eyes widened. "May I ask why?"

"Because he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be and he wanted to be an ass about it. So I knocked him unconscious to shut him up."

"That's not true," Caleb contradicted as he rose from his seat. "Not completely." He ignored the glare Mary was sending and bowed to the Council slightly before turning to face Aurora when the Presiding Council gave him leave with a wave of his hand.

"Caleb...."

"No, Chief," cutting his eyes at her. "You may have clocked him, but it was no more than the bastard deserved. And they deserve to know the truth... *all* the truth." Mary sighed but didn't speak and Caleb took that as his sign to continue. "First of all, I wasn't in the room when this happened. Had I been, he would have gotten much worse."

"Then how do you know...?"

"The Chief had vid filming everywhere so I saw it after the fact. But I heard her scream when it happened and I got there as fast as I could despite the fact that we were in the middle of a firefight

because I knew something was dreadfully wrong. The Chief would never, ever have given away her position otherwise - not with those kids to protect."

"What happened?"

"The Chief had taken a bullet to the thigh and still walked the three scientists who got left behind down into the medical bay. Prin... Eli was treating um... Eden and our two team medics - Dorcas and Martha - were assisting her. That's when Fernando showed up. He was escorted into the infirmary and I secured him to a chair. To my shame I only fastened his arms and waist, not his legs. While I was out with the rest of the team defending the corridor, Fernando kicked the Chief in her wound. That caused the scream."

"And she...?"

"Hit him with the butt end of her gun, sir. Knocked him out cold with one blow."

"I see." Presiding Council blew out a breath. "Is he here?" Mary turned and nodded. "Very well - bring him in, please."

It took a few moments; then the door opened and Fernando was escorted in surrounded by a wall of Mary's security team. Their presence made more than one set of eyebrows rise, but it was silent as they made their way through the gate. Fernando didn't spare Mary a glance, but chose to keep his eyes focused on his still unsteady feet. Only when the Presiding Council spoke to him directly did he raise his eyes and take in the platform and the people seated thereon. He didn't let himself glance behind him, but kept his gaze forward.

"Majesty, a number of charges have been leveled at you today. Is there anything you wish to say in your defense?"

Fernando sneered. "I've done nothing that needs defending. However I must insist that woman be arrested and charged with assault on a head of state."

"No." Aurora's voice made every eye in the room turn to her and Fernando's face flushed with his anger. "No, Fernando. You're my husband and the father of my mija; I care for you very much. But you've crossed too many lines."

"How dare you???"

"How dare I???" she countered. "Fernando, I'm not the one who morphed into something unrecognizable, formulating unreasonable demands and trying to make everything...." Aurora shook her head. "And that doesn't begin to address what you did to our hija - the danger you put her and those other children in; your willingness to destroy everything for your greed. No, Fernando. Enough is enough. You're not allowed to charge Ms Wellesly with anything - not when she was doing her job to protect those under her care when she hit you."

"You're taking her side?!?"

"It's not *her* side, Fernando. It's the *right* side. When we return home, you will no longer be a reigning monarch - Bartolo will begin proceedings to remove you from office." Aurora glanced at Bartolo and he nodded his understanding. She returned her attention to Fernando who stood stunned with his

eyes wide and his mouth open. "I am perfectly capable of reigning alone though maybe it's time to consider Arianna's wishes and look into a more democratic approach."

"You can't do that!! I'm the KING!"

"Perhaps you should have considered that *before* you started the quest to profit from your hija's brilliance because your greed brought us to this place. You're not above the law...."

"And *she is??*" he spat, glaring at Mary who had remained silent during the entire exchange.

"No," Aurora replied calmly. "But you're not in a position to pass judgment or bring charges against her. Every action she's taken against you has been in defense of someone. You weren't even supposed to be there."

"It was my right!"

"No sir, it wasn't," Presiding Council interrupted. "You had no rights to your daughter or her work or this program. You certainly didn't have the right to put others in danger. This body will be bringing charges against you for your actions."

Fernando spit on the ground. "And what of *her?* Does Ms Wellesly get a free pass for her actions as well?? She kidnapped the candidates and then again the members of the Alpha Team! She struck a reigning head of state!!"

"Without provocation, majesty? And before you reply, let me caution you that lying will simply make things worse for you."

"Really?"

"Yes. Because you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be - in the middle of a war zone - and what happened to you could certainly be considered a casualty of war. Quite frankly if you had died there, the only question anyone would be asking is why you were there in the first place."

"She kidnapped my hija! She turned her against me!"

"That is not true, sire. You did that on your own!"

Fernando turned his irate visage towards Bartolo and growled. "I have not given you permission to speak!"

"I don't need your permission here, sire. But the words I speak are true. You managed to turn Arianna against you all by yourself. She *chose* to exorcise your from her life when you refused to see who and what was important to her."

"It was my right...!!"

"Majesty, you keep talking about *your* rights, but what about *hers?* More importantly, what about her happiness?"

"What about her responsibilities, Ms Wellesly? Do you think she owes *nothing* to the people she is expected to lead?"

Mary smiled slightly. "If I thought for one minute you actually cared about that, I might deign to answer you. But you've proven time and again that you only care for yourself and what you can gain. Malcolm was a prime example of that."

"YOU DON'T GET TO...!!!"

"Majesty!!" Presiding Council roared, causing everyone in the room to still and drop to silence. "That is enough, sir! I think you need an opportunity to cool off and consider things. There is still evidence for us to review, and I believe you would do well to utilize that time in solitary meditation."

"I have the right to know the things of which I stand accused and hear any evidence against me!!"

"You do, sir. But you've shown yourself incapable of acting in a civilized manner."

"I beg your pardon!!"

"Perhaps it is due to the lingering wound on your face," Presiding Council mused aloud as though Fernando hadn't spoken. He turned his gaze to Mary. "Ms Wellesly, I assume he was treated?"

"He was, sir. Eli did what she could for him at the mountain facility before I sent her to the ship. But he hasn't been seen since... by his own demand as much as anything else." When the Presiding Council cocked an eyebrow at her, Mary just shook her head and smiled. "He demanded his personal doctor. I refused."

"Ah. Well, perhaps we could have Dr. Morris take a look. Maybe something for the pain and a little time with a regen unit would put him in a better frame of mind."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not standing RIGHT HERE!!"

"Fernando!! That's enough!" Aurora instructed from the gallery. "Ms Wellesly, these are your agents I assume?" smiling when Mary simply nodded. "Will you please have them take Fernando to the doctor that was mentioned? I believe that would help improve Fernando's disposition immensely."

"Aurora!"

"No, Fernando. You've had your chance. You'll do as I've instructed."

"Perhaps we should break for lunch," Presiding Council suggested. "That should give the doctor time enough to do his thing, and when we resume we'll be able to have a civil dialogue so we can wrap this up today. Ms Wellesly?"

"I'm amenable. Caleb, will you...?" motioning to Fernando and the swarm of agents surrounding him.

"Of course, Chief. I've already contacted Dr. Morris. We'll meet him in the infirmary here." He turned to Fernando and looked him dead in the eye, leaning forward and speaking directly into Fernando's ear in a bare whisper. "You don't do anything stupid and no one will get hurt. But you so much as twitch in the wrong direction, and all bets are off. You hurt her, and I'll never forgive you for that. Understand?" Fernando nodded and Caleb stared at him another moment before looking around at his teammates. "Come along, boys and girls. The sooner we take care of this, the sooner we can go home."

Adam snorted, breaking the tension in the room. "You just want to get back to Joy's because you know there's cookies waiting." The rest of the contingent laughed with him as the door closed behind them, cutting off the rest of the conversation.

"Well then - I guess we stand adjourned for... a standard hour?"

"That should be sufficient, sir," Mary agreed.

"Very well. These proceedings will resume in one standard hour. We're adjourned." He looked in the direction of the gallery, wondering at the protocol of inviting Aurora to lunch. Then he saw her and the rest of the family members surge through the gate and surround the table at which Mary still sat. With a smile, he followed the other Council and Committee Members from the room, leaving the family to their peace. He figured they would take care of each other... and Mary.

Chapter X

"So, Ms... Mary," Eve said as they congregated around the table. "Is there a place nearby that can accommodate all of us for midday meal in the allotted time?"

Mary scrunched up her brow in thought. "As long as no one is particularly concerned with atmosphere, yes," she replied after a long moment.

Aurora snorted. "I think atmosphere is the least of our concerns," watching as the rest agreed with smiles.

Mary chuckled. "All right. Give me a minute to get going and let me make a call, then we can head to the pub across the street." Heads nodded and most turned to make their way back through the gallery area and out into the hallway to wait. As Mary gathered her fortitude to slide from the table and begin her trek, a hand on her arm waylaid her progress. She glanced down at the tanned hand, then up into brown eyes. "Majesty?"

"Might I have a word privately, Ms Wellesly?"

Mary searched her gaze for a moment then nodded. Eve and Noah gave an acknowledgement in return and walked out the door. When it closed behind them, Mary cocked her head in question. "What can I do for you, majesty?"

"Please call me Aurora, Ms... Mary. I understand we're all part of a new family unit no matter how unusual I find it. I would like to be included in such a diverse group of people and to do that I need to be an equal."

Mary smiled slightly. "Very well, Aurora. What can I do for you?"

"I want to apologize."

Mary's eyebrows went into her hairline. "For? Maj... Aurora, you haven't done anything wrong... to me anyway. You've been quite cordial and hospitable despite...."

"Despite my husband?" Aurora continued with a sad smile.

Mary shrugged. "I was going to generalize - you know, despite *everything* - but...."

"But the truth is *everything* leads back to him. And he will never apologize for what he's done even if he *can* be made to see how wrong he was. He just isn't capable of admitting to being wrong. And you deserve to know that not all of us are of the same mindset as Fernando. You deserve some form of remorse being shown for the actions that were taken against you."

Mary shook her head. "Aurora, I understand the thought... I do. But you shouldn't apologize for him. It's his place to make amends... not yours. Not as his wife and certainly not as the queen." She sighed. "I will accept your apology if it will give you a measure of peace, but it really has no bearing on... well, anything really."

"Does this mean you can't forgive him?"

"He hasn't asked for forgiveness, Aurora. But if he asked, I could forgive him for what he did to me. I understand being the target of someone's anger and frustration, and in fairness, I put myself in that position. I taunted and antagonized him, knowing when he eventually reacted he would focus on me instead of Arianna or Eli. But," she added, her eyes darkening and her voice dropping to a growl. "I will *not* forgive him for what he did to those kids - not just to Arianna and Eli though they're at the top of the list - but for what he did to *all* those kids. He put them in danger and as a parent I find that deplorable. As the security chief on this assignment, his actions were unacceptable." Aurora nodded her head and Mary sighed again. "Do you love him, Aurora?"

"I care for him, Mary. Love never entered into the equation for us. But he's been a good husband if a less than ideal father, and until he lost his focus and all sense of reason when this project became serious a couple years ago, he was a good king." She exhaled slowly. "I understand what you meant about the apology, but I do want you to know I *am* sorry about what Fernando did."

"For what it's worth Aurora, I appreciate the sentiment." She slipped from the table and winced, blowing out a breath before snatching up her cane. "Come - before the rest decide to go ahead without us." Aurora extended an elbow and Mary curled her fingers around the bicep without hesitation. "Thank you, Aurora."

"Thank you for trusting me to help," she responded with a smile as they made slow progress up the aisle. Then they opened the door to find only Eve and Noah waiting. They both arched an eyebrow in question and Eve covered her mouth to keep from laughing aloud. Noah wasn't nearly so discreet.

"I'm sorry," Eve apologized with a grin. "I've never seen such a flawless unpracticed reaction. I sent the rest ahead to secure space for us. They've already placed their orders; they are just waiting for you and Mary to make your selections." She handed her comm unit to Aurora. "I imagine Mary is familiar with the fare they offer, but I thought you might want a chance to look at the menu."

"Thank you," Aurora replied. She keyed in her choice and offered it to Mary. Mary did the same before returning the device to Eve with a grateful smile. Only then did they begin to make their way out of the building and towards the restaurant.

"Will you tell us more about your culture, your majesty?" Eve finally asked as they reached the restaurant. "Since our children are now a family, we're making an effort to become one as well by trying to get to know one another. I believe that is especially important for us."

Aurora's brows furrowed. "Why?" holding up a hand before Eve could reply. "I also believe we should be creating a new family together as we're all in this together now. Which means no more 'majesty' or 'highness' or 'sire'. I'm just Aurora, all right?" glancing around the room where the family members were just being served. Everyone nodded their agreement and she turned back to Eve. "And to that end, I'll want to hear about each of you as well. I know at least some of it will be repetitive for you, but please bear in mind that it's all new to me. And that brings me back to my original question - why is it especially important for us to become family?" motioning between her and Eve.

Eve's eyes widened as she realized her faux pas, and she gazed at Mary. Mary sighed and rolled her eyes before she squeezed the arm she still held lightly. "Perhaps we could sit down, and I'll fill you in on some of the important things you missed. Then you can all start getting to know one another to your hearts' content."

Aurora nodded and they moved to the empty seats at the center of the tables that had been arranged for them. She seated Mary and took her own seat, noting that Eve and Noah filled in on Mary's other side. She waited for the server to place her meal in front of her, then gestured for Mary to begin her story.

"So you're telling me my mija actually took vows of fidelity and marriage? To the woman Fernando expressly forbade her to be with? The woman who indirectly forced a betrothal between my mija and that weasel Malcolm?"

"Now wait just a minute," Noah started to protest. Eve hushed him with a hand on his arm. "But..."

"No, Beloved," she chided softly. "Aurora does have a point. Had Elizabeth and Arianna not been together, it is possible Fernando would not have betrothed Arianna to Malcolm the way that he did. But either way, it's not your place to protest... not here."

Noah appeared chastened. "I know, Beloved. I'm sorry. It doesn't make me less protective of them, though... especially our ДОЧЬ."

"I understand, and I love you for it." She leaned her forehead into his for a long moment and let her eyes speak for her. Noah grinned sheepishly and shrugged. Eve turned back to Aurora. "Yes. As far as they and everyone on their team and in this room are concerned they are married - bonded to one another in this life and into the next. That knowledge however, will remain between us. It will be their choice when and if to announce it to the galaxy at large."

Aurora sat back. "Because they are ashamed of one another?"

Eve let Aurora see the anger in her eyes and Aurora flinched. Then she took a deep breath and willed herself to calm before she responded. "No," she replied firmly but quietly. "Because Arianna is hopeful for the chance to have Eli recognized as her mate on your planet - to the extent of having a royal wedding with all that entails."

"I wish she had told me."

"We all have regrets," Drusilla remarked. "The difference is what you do about them. At least you have a chance to do the right thing when they return."

Aurora chuckled wryly. "That's going to be *forever* from now," she whined, crossing her arms over her chest with a pout and garnering grins from around the room.

"Oh my," Keturah chuckled. "You sound like my Kaikamahine."

Mary snorted. "She sounds like *everyone's* kid."

Even Aurora joined in the laughter that went around the room at Mary's pronouncement. Then she sobered and turned serious eyes in Mary's direction. Everyone quieted down and waited, curious as to Aurora's quick change in demeanor. "Are they happy, Mary?"

Mary's smile was broad and genuine. "They're incredibly happy and very much in love. When we get done here, we'll go back to Joy's and you can see some of the images and vids that got taken. Pretty sure it'll put a smile on your face."

"I only ever wanted her to be happy. I just didn't know how...."

"We learn as we go," Eve assured her. "But for now we should eat. We don't want to be late getting back into session. I know I heard one of Mary's agents say something about cookies, and you seriously have not tasted love from the oven until you've had Joy's cookies."

"Really?" Aurora queried as she began eating. "Ms... Mary, tell us about Joy. And the rest of your family - a husband perhaps or other children."

Mary didn't even balk, knowing the question came from genuine curiosity and not malice. Besides, as an icebreaker she was probably the safest bet in the world to start with. She chuckled lightly. "All right - I can start, but don't blame me if I don't finish. We don't have that much time left of our lunch break."

"True, but it gives us a place to begin and we can pick up wherever you leave off later."

Mary grabbed her glass and leaned back in her chair, absently rubbing her leg as she decided where to start. Eve watched with a frown but remained silent, knowing better than to call attention to the action publicly. She would simply keep an eye on things for now.

Mary wasn't at all surprised to see the Council and Committee Members already seated on the dais when she and all the family members entered the room together. They weren't late - they were in fact two minutes early - but they were the last to enter the room. She saw Caleb's shoulders drop in relief as she hobbled through the gate and to the Table of Inquiry.

"You all right, Chief?" glancing briefly at her leg before meeting her eyes and offering her the Pad that sat on the table between them.

"All things being equal," she answered with a smirk. "Thanks, Caleb," taking the Pad and glancing down at it. Her eyes widened and she jerked her gaze to his, but before she could ask for further clarification, Presiding Council called for her attention.

"Ms Wellesly, are we ready to proceed?"

Mary situated herself on the table, handing Caleb the Pad before placing the cane behind her and feeling Caleb move it to one side so she wouldn't knock it off if she shifted. "At your discretion, sir."

"Very well. Bring in the prisoner."

Fernando was only accompanied by four agents this time, but he also seemed much calmer than he'd been during his previous appearance. Mary noticed that the remainder had interspersed themselves among the Council's security detail. Adam ushered Fernando to the chair that had been placed between the platform and the Table of Inquiry. Once again, Fernando ignored Mary's presence, keeping his eyes on his feet or the dais. Presiding Council cleared his throat.

"Are you feeling better, sir?"

"I am in considerably less pain, yes," Fernando replied calmly. "However I still wish to file charges against Ms Wellesly. It is entirely her fault that I'm currently in this position."

Every member of Mary's security team straightened though none of them moved a muscle otherwise. Everyone else leaned forward in anticipation - except Aurora who silently rose and crossed through the partition until she was standing beside Mary at the front of the table. Presiding Council didn't let his eyes wander but instead focused completely on Fernando.

"How do you figure, sir?"

"First of all, you will address me as majesty or King Fernando."

"No."

"Excuse me??" he demanded, rising to his feet and causing several security agents to close in on him. "I demand the respect I am due."

"Sir, by your own actions you have lost the right to be addressed by a title you can no longer claim. And I assure you that if we treat you with the respect you're due, you'll be more unhappy than you are right now. So why don't you simply tell us how Ms Wellesly put you in your current position - the position of not only having been removed as a head of state, but also being charged as a criminal because of your actions involving the Alpha Team... especially your daughter."

"Charges that have no meaning because Ms Wellesly was behind it all. I was simply responding in kind."

Presiding Council let his eyebrows hitch all the way into his hairline, then he turned and looked at the Councilmen seated along the dais on either side of him. Their expressions of disdain and revulsion caused him to nod to himself before he settled his attention on Fernando once more. "Let me assure you, sir, that Ms Wellesly is certainly not without blame here; some of her actions were questionable and suspect at best and she will have to deal with the consequences of the fallout. That being said, everything she did - right or wrong - was in keeping with the objectives she was given. She never deliberately set out to harm any of the candidates. You, on the other hand, did everything you possibly could to destroy not only the program but those within its purview... including your daughter. And while you're more than welcome to file any manner of charges, kindly remember that you have to be able to back them up with fact - not just hatred and malice."

"And you believe the charges that have been brought against me can be sustained by fact?? Mary Wellesly has had a vendetta against me from the very beginning!! How do you know the bitch isn't just making things up??"

"Sir!"

"Fernando!!"

Adam forced Fernando back into the chair. Mary didn't twitch except to reach a hand back to stay Caleb's movement before he could come over the table and into Fernando. Aurora was another story. She pushed off the table and stepped right up into Fernando's personal space.

"I don't care what your personal issues with Ms Wellesly are. You will keep a civil tongue in your head."

Fernando cut his eyes at her and sneered. "You're dead to me."

Aurora gasped but otherwise gave no indication of how his words had hurt. "Very well. But you will stand alone and answer for your crimes, Fernando. No quarter will be given and no mercy shown."

"I haven't done anything wrong!! It's a vendetta against me perpetuated by Mary Wellesly's hatred of me and our culture."

"That's not true," Mary finally spoke. "I meant what I told you during our meeting with the Committee. If I had a personal vendetta against you, sir, I would simply have made you disappear. This?" motioning around the room. "This is all your doing. And if you're very lucky, the Council will decide your fate and not leave it to the families of those to whom you tried to do harm."

"It was my right to...."

"Sir, you lost whatever rights you seem to think you're entitled to when Arianna reached majority and decided of her own accord to participate in the project. And contrary to your belief, I have facts and evidence to back up my claims. The Council and Committee are privy to them. You are guilty of putting not only your daughter but the entire Alpha Team in danger; of entering a war zone with the intent of kidnapping your daughter; of paying off a Member of the Committee to ensure damage was especially done to the woman Arianna calls 'mate'." She paused and gave him a glare. "Shall I continue?"

"I didn't put *anyone* in danger; I didn't kidnap them and hide them. I didn't leave them in a war zone. And you can't prove I paid anyone to do anything to anyone." Before Aurora could lift a hand to Fernando, Mary had removed her grasp of Caleb and he was moving to intercept Aurora's action. She glared at him and he simply turned his gaze to Mary. Aurora sighed at Mary's expression and allowed Caleb to lead her back to the table to stand beside Mary. Petulantly she crossed her arms over her chest but she remained silent and gave Mary a nod. Mary picked up her cane and slowly walked to stand in front of Fernando. She noticed Caleb kept pace with her, but she didn't stop him. She figured Fernando might show a little more respect with a little muscle behind her, and she was in enough pain to appreciate the backup. When she was in front of him but still out of reach, she stopped and looked at him. Only when he met her eyes did she speak.

"You're right - you *didn't* kidnap them nor did you leave them in a war zone. That responsibility rests solely on my shoulders and I will accept whatever penalty is meted out as punishment. However, you are also very, very wrong. You certainly did put them in danger - all of them, though mostly your daughter, her lover and the Alpha Team. And you were definitely in a war zone for a completely illegal reason. And I assure you I can prove everything." The smile Mary offered him was pure evil and

Fernando shivered in reflex. "If you're going to lie, cheat and steal, you need to make sure you can cover your tracks... from everyone. Too bad your expert was trying to hide from me. Between Gideon and Jacob I've got you *Dead. To. Rights.*"

Fernando remained silent but his hatred was clear in the daggers he was looking at Mary. She turned to the platform. "I have come into possession of some new information - information which I have not yet verified. But if it pans out to be the truth, further charges will have to be added to those Fernando is currently facing."

"Ms Wellesly?"

"Presiding Council, I don't have facts to back up this accusation - only the statement of one of the other conspirators. It has only just been made. We need time to discover the truth."

"What truth?"

"Mein has accused Fernando of being the source of the AIDS virus that Malcolm was infected with."

Chapter XI

The cacophony of sound that broke out around the room was deafening as almost everyone had a vicious vocal reaction. Only the members of both security details, Mary and Fernando remained silent and unmoved. A soft touch on her forearm brought Mary's eyes to Caleb's and he simply nodded towards the dais where Presiding Council was attempting to bring order back to the room. Unfortunately he seemed to be fighting a losing battle, unable to project his voice above the dissonance so prevalent throughout the chamber. Mary gave Caleb a look and she waited for him to cover his ears and step back a pace before she brought her fingers to her lips and let out a piercing whistle. Surprise as much as the sound itself brought the noise to a screeching halt and everyone stared in her direction. She cleared her throat self-consciously. "All yours. Presiding Council," she offered calmly though there was a slight blush in her cheeks. Presiding Council smiled.

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly. As always your methods seem somewhat unorthodox, but they appear to be effective in getting the job done." He turned to look back out around the room. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm going to have to ask that you settle down and let us go about our business - all of you," glaring at a couple of whispering Committee Members. "A very serious accusation has been made and it's up to us to determine where the truth lies. Ms Wellesly, where did this information come from?"

"Directly from Mein, I believe, sir," looking at Caleb who was nodding his head. She motioned him forward. Caleb sighed but walked to stand beside her with his back to Fernando anyway. He felt Ben step up and take the position facing Fernando at Caleb's back.

"He was being debriefed - quite unsuccessfully I might add - by one of your agents and one of us. When we took Fernando down to meet with Dr. Morris, he saw me with them and demanded to speak to me privately. I refused - I agreed to speak to him but not without witnesses."

"A wise decision, I'm sure."

"Given what he's done?" Caleb shrugged. "He's lucky I agreed to speak to him at all."

Presiding Council gave a motion of his hands that conceded the point. "And what did he share with you, Caleb?"

Caleb went back to the Table of Inquiry and lifted the Pad. He expanded it and fiddled with it for a couple of minutes; when he was done, a holo-image of Mein sat in the center of the Inquiry Court. "I recorded it, sir. I thought it best to let him say what he needed to say in his own words."

"Do you believe they are the truth?"

"I believe he wants us to think they are."

"So you think he is lying?"

"That's not at all what I said, sir. But he has every reason in the world to implicate as many people as he can possibly bring down with him. It's easier to stir up hatred and discontent when everyone is pointing fingers at everyone else... especially if no one is interested in discovering the truth."

"You don't think we want the truth here?" Presiding Council glowered at the inference.

"I think it would be very easy to let emotion overrule the truth. Because this whole situation is very volatile right now and people want a resolution that doesn't end in the bloodshed of a galactic war."

Presiding Council held Caleb's gaze for a long moment. Then he turned and met Mary's eyes. After another full minute of silence, he smiled. "I think I understand at least part of the reason you have known the success you have."

"And what is that, sir?" Mary asked guilelessly though with the tiniest hint of a smirk on her lips.

Presiding Council laughed aloud, startling the rest of the room that was still bathed in silence. "Because, my dear Ms Wellesly - you have the loyalty of those who are brilliant standing beside you."

"I do," she agreed. "And I've even learned to heed their words to me."

"In that case...." Presiding Council looked around the chamber. "I want everyone to keep in mind that we already possess substantial incriminating evidence against the individual making the accusation against Fernando and that the evidence has been partially corroborated by former Chairman McMurtry. Ms Wellesly will be in charge of ascertaining the truth of the facts behind the accusations and of course Fernando will be allowed a rebuttal."

"Gideon is already working on verifying the story's veracity, sir," Caleb commented. Mary nodded her approval of his initiative and Presiding Council accepted the pronouncement at face value.

"Excellent. Let's get to this recording then Fernando will have the opportunity to make his statement."

"I wish to protest," Fernando stated clearly into the silence. "How dare you take the word of someone who has admitted to being part of an organization bent on destroying this program over that of a reigning head of state?? Over someone who had much to lose if the Alpha Team was harmed??"

Mary waved Presiding Council back to his seat before he could speak and turned back to Fernando. He offered a mocking smirk but couldn't hold her eyes and when he looked away, she began to speak.

"First of all, we are *not* taking his word. We are merely entering his accusation into the record. We will absolutely investigate the authenticity of his claim, and if there is no evidence proving its validity, it will be removed from the record. Secondly, to my knowledge, Mein has not yet *admitted to anything* even though I have proof of his involvement in any number of actions made against the Alpha Team." She risked a glance at Caleb who just shook his head at her. "Right - this interview was about him accusing you of being the source of the AIDS virus. Surely you'd like to know that of which you stand accused so to better exonerate yourself of any charges. Thirdly, you are no longer a reigning head of state." Mary held up her hand before he could argue the point. "Member Bartolo may not have been able to execute the necessary steps to make it formal, but as far as anyone in this room is concerned you no longer have the rights and privileges or the responsibility of a monarch. You're just another humanoid like the rest of us," motioning around the room with a finger and watching the anger flush across his countenance. "And finally, sir, you were one of the *worst* perpetrators of harm against the Alpha Team, and I assure you, I *do* have proof of *that*."

"You can't - I. Didn't. Do. *Anything*. Wrong."

"Do you think if you keep repeating that phrase that the people in this room will finally start to believe you? Or are you trying to convince yourself?" Mary held his gaze and watched the hatred contort his expression. She leaned heavily on her cane and bent towards him slightly. "Tell me, Fernando - how do you sleep at night?"

Fernando lunged, but Caleb was in front of Mary before he made it off the seat, and Adam's firm hand on his shoulder forced him back into the chair rather vehemently. Fernando shrugged and shook off Adam's hand, then turned back to Mary. "Tell me, Ms Wellesly - what's it like to have everyone fooled into thinking you're a deity and incapable of any wrongdoing? What's it like to know you're going to get away with murder?" He looked around. "See how easy it is to make an accusation?" he said as he looked back to Mary. "Whether or not there's truth in my words or not, everyone in this room is now thinking about them and they will look at you differently until you prove otherwise." He shrugged and smirked. "Even then they may not see you the same way anymore... just because I made an accusation against you."

Mary placed a gentle hand against Caleb's back. It was the only reason he remained stock still in the face of Fernando's accusation. His words had caused a number of raised eyebrows around the room and Mary stepped up beside Caleb with a look of genuine curiosity across her features. "Your point is well made sir, if slightly dramatic. So since I'm not completely clear of what exactly you're accusing me, why don't you spell it out for everyone here? I'll answer your questions and then we can move forward and see what Mein has to say about you and your involvement with the AIDS virus, all right? Sound fair?"

Fernando snorted. "I'm confident fair doesn't work into any equation where you're involved, Ms Wellesly."

"Why is that?"

"Because *no one* is that good, MS Wellesly. Everyone has their own agenda and everyone loses."

"I never said I didn't have an agenda, Fernando. The difference is that my agenda generally coincides with my assignment. And the reason I don't lose is because of the people that surround me," gesturing to Caleb and the rest of her team. "They're as invested in winning as I am." She sighed. "Now why don't you explain to the nice folks here why you think I'm going to get away with murder? Aside from being a deity and incapable of wrongdoing of course," she last added with a smirk and a shake of her

head before she turned away. She walked to the lower level of the platform and leaned against the empty space left by Mein's and McMurtry's departure. She waved a hand at him. "Go ahead. We really don't have all day."

Fernando's glare was hard and unyielding, but Mary never lost her relaxed posture or demeanor. After a few minutes of silence, she swiveled and met Presiding Council's glance. She shrugged her shoulders and lifted her hands. Presiding Council rose and cleared his throat. "Sir, you need to explain your accusation of Ms Wellesly so she can address the charges."

"Why? You're all going to wonder if it's true or not as long as the question is out there. The moment she's given the opportunity to spin the facts to her advantage...." He smirked. "It's better for me if it remains an accusation."

"Not really," Drusilla piped up from the gallery, drawing all eyes to her. "I'm calling raw prawn," sighing when she saw the looks of confusion around the room. A touch on her arm caused her to meet the eyes belonging to Jacob's dad. She arched her eyebrow and he gestured her to lean down and when she did, he whispered something in her ear. "Seriously?" she asked aloud and when he nodded vigorously, she turned back to the platform. "I'm calling bullshit," she said with confidence, seeing comprehension blossom in a number of faces. "It's obvious you were trying to make a point about how false accusations can adversely affect an individual. Your point has been made, but that just means you were falsely accusing Mary in the hopes of stirring feelings of doubt and distrust, thereby making anything she learned about you suspect as well."

"The lady has a point," Presiding Council conceded. "So make your case against Ms Wellesly, sir, or we will move onto Mein's accusations of you."

"I have nothing to say," Fernando sneered. "It is obvious you're all highly prejudiced in her favor."

"This has nothing to do with prejudice, sir. This has to do with making a case against her with proven fact. We have evidence of your wrongdoing and Mein's and McMurtry's. And as highly irritating as everyone on this platform has found Ms Wellesly to be at one time or another, not once has any evidence been brought to light to show that she is either more or less than she claims."

"There are none so blind as those that refuse to see the truth in front of them."

Presiding Council stared at Fernando in disbelief for a long moment before he shook his head. "Ms Wellesly, can we perhaps see the recording Caleb made of his discussion with Mein? I doubt I'm the only one in the room who would like to see things brought to some sort of conclusion... today if at all possible."

Mary nodded and turned to Caleb, motioning for him to begin the recording. The holo-image flickered and fluttered briefly before Mein's likeness was brought to life. Caleb's voice could be heard though he was not seen as part of the hologram.

"What do you want, Mein?"

"I think a little respect...."

"Consider the fact that I haven't strung you up from the ceiling by your webbed feet as a sign of respect. Now what do you want?"

The look on Mein's face was disgruntled at best but he was obviously convinced of the seriousness of Caleb's words because he straightened and lost his cockiness. "I think you should know the truth."

"Um hmm. And what truth is that? Are you ready to confess to the crimes you've been accused of?"

"I'm not confessing to anything," snapped off in a huff. "No crime has been committed."

The sound of Caleb's eyes rolling was almost audible in his tone of voice. "Riiiiight. Then what truth are you trying to share with me, Mein? What was so important that you had to share this with me instead of the agents who were in here talking to you previously?"

Mein snorted. "Somehow I doubt they have Ms Wellesly's ear the way you do. And she needs to hear this. She needs to know."

"Know what?"

"Who obtained the AIDS virus that was given to the asshat." Mein chuckled. "You thought we didn't know the codename that was given to that waste of flesh? Please," he scoffed.

"Actually that wasn't his codename," Caleb informed with a smile in his tone. "That was how he was referred to among the candidates, but it's not what he was called officially."

Mein deflated slightly. "Oh... well. It was still an apt description."

"Perhaps," Caleb agreed. There was the sound of shifting material before he spoke again. "May I ask why this matters to you now? Ms Wellesly gave you the opportunity to speak in your own defense and you refused. You refused to say anything at all. So what changed?"

"First of all, I am not speaking in my defense. I've done nothing that needs defending - I was simply protecting my way of life by any means necessary and I'd do it again without hesitation." Mein's voice was heated and his eyes full of hatred and disdain. Caleb remained silent and there was a visible change in Mein's demeanor. He calmed considerably and his countenance became more neutral. With a deep breath, he became his Committee Member persona again. "However I realized that I might have been a bit rash in dismissing the opportunity to share a few facts that have come into my possession. After all, we wouldn't want an epidemic of galactic proportions to break out, would we? Not without giving credit where credit is due."

"And do you have proof of these facts?"

"Not that I am able to share at this time, no. But I am confident that Ms Wellesly and her incomparable team can find the evidence they need to prove out my words as truth." His tone wasn't quite mocking, but it was clear that Mein was less than thrilled about anything to do with Mary Wellesly and her team.

"Gideon will be touched by your confidence in him," Caleb replied sarcastically. Mein's eyes flashed but just as quickly faded to neutrality again. "Now would you like to tell me the story?"

Mein shrugged. "It's simple really. It wasn't hard to hear of Fernando's fury at his daughter's perversion - he made no secret of it."

"Perversion? You mean because she was with Eli?"

"Of course because she was with Eli!"

"Wait - he thought his daughter was perverted because Eli was a woman??"

"Don't be stupid. He thought his daughter was perverted because she was intimate with an animal. Though considering his society's casual and irresponsible approach to sexual relations and their willingness to follow the leadership of a woman, I'm not sure I understand why her sleeping with a woman from another planet was that big of a deal to him - even if she was an animal."

Caleb cleared his throat. "So what happened?"

Mein shrugged. "I don't have the details, but apparently Fernando had a scientist who stumbled across the virus while he was working on something else. As a reward, Fernando had the man and his family moved from the capital city to an isolation unit halfway around the planet despite the fact that the man's son and Fernando's daughter were friends. My understanding is that Fernando allowed the man to die a rather horrific death rather than search for a cure."

"Why?"

Mein shrugged again. "I do not know nor do I really care. Because he's a vindictive bastard? As punishment for some perceived wrongdoing? The option of germ warfare against those he despised if he ever raised an army? The possibilities are endless."

"Even though it's strictly disallowed by Alliance rules?"

Mein smirked. "Caleb, Fernando has never been concerned with rules. He believes himself to be above them. The fact is, I don't know what he was thinking or what he planned to do. It is just as likely that he was punishing the man for some unknown indiscretion as anything else. Frankly, I don't care. What concerns me here and now is the fact that Fernando was able to obtain a sample of the AIDS virus. And he was going to use it against Eli."

"Directly?"

"Yes."

"Was he unaware of the mating customs of her people?"

*"I don't know. I don't think it mattered to him. He wasn't interested in destroying her *society*... just *her*."*

"And you know this how?"

"He said so." Mein sighed and rolled his eyes in reaction to whatever Caleb had done out of sight of the viewer. "You don't have to like it; you don't even have to believe me. But I wasn't the only one that heard it. He hated Eli for what she had done to his daughter. He wanted her gone and he didn't care how. He knew the rules as well as everyone else. If we wouldn't remove Eli from the list, he wanted to ensure she would never approach Arianna again. It was one reason he was so insistent about Malcolm being made part of the Alpha Team despite being completely unqualified."

"And he wasn't concerned that Eli would pass on the disease to Arianna? After all, they were intimate."

"You'll have to ask him. Personally I'm convinced the man's only concern for his daughter was in how it impacted him and his standing in the galactic community."

There was silence for several moments while Mein held Caleb's gaze. Finally there was a sigh. "You realize all of this has to be confirmed."

Mein nodded. "As I said - I have complete faith that Ms Wellesly and her team will be able to cull the facts pertinent to the truth."

"And of it implicates you?"

"Well, we'll just have to deal with that when the time comes, won't we?" Mein folded his hands and placed them on the table. "In the meantime, don't you think you should bring Ms Wellesly up to date on your new information? I know Fernando is set to be heard from next. You wouldn't want to let him get away now would you, Caleb?" Mein's expression was that of a cat having eaten all the cream, but Caleb remained impassive. After a minute, Mein's countenance fell and Caleb smiled grimly. Then the recoding went black.

"That's it, Chief," Caleb said to Mary. Mary nodded and waited for Presiding Council to speak. Instead the sound of a harsh slap echoed around the room and Mary glanced over to find Aurora lightly wrapped in Ben's arms as Adam kept Fernando unmoving in his chair. Presiding Council just covered his eyes and shook his head.

Chapter XII

After a moment, Presiding Council raised his head from his hand and looked at Aurora. "Majesty...." She shifted, but Ben refused to release his grip, unsure what she had in mind. Aurora looked directly at Mary.

"Ms Wellesly?"

"Ben," Mary said softly, flicking her finger in a silent command. He waited and she nodded and only then did he withdraw his hold from Aurora's person. He offered Aurora a respectful nod, then turned to face Fernando once more. Her eyes followed him briefly before turning back to Mary.

"Thank you, Ms Wellesly. Presiding Council," she continued before he could say anything, "I don't know for certain what sort of evidence you need to prove out the accusations that vile man has made, but I can verify that at least part of it is true."

"Majesty?"

"AURORA!!!"

Fernando's bellow drowned out Presiding Council's question, but Aurora never turned away from the dais. Presiding Council raised his eyes to meet Fernando's and glared.

"Control yourself, sir or I'll have restraints put on your mouth along with the rest of you. It's not your time to speak yet and if you cannot maintain some sense of dignity within this chamber, I will certainly help you along with learning the necessary decorum. Do we understand one another?" Fernando merely nodded though his look should have turned the Presiding Council to ash. "Wonderful. Majesty, you said you had evidence to prove Mein's claim?"

"No. I said I could verify that at least part of his story is accurate. But you'll have to take my word for it... at least for now. Any real physical evidence is on my planet."

"Can you tell us where to locate said evidence, majesty?" Mary queried. "I have agents available who could retrieve it."

"Most of the evidence is a lot of seemingly unrelated little pieces of information buried in old records and coupled with knowledge of our planet and way of life." She held up a hand. "Let me explain, and we can go from there."

"Very well," Mary agreed, motioning to the floor as she resumed her place on the tabletop with a muffled groan and a sigh. Aurora looked at her with concern, but Mary just shook her head and gestured for her to continue.

"Right. Well, I can't speak to Fernando's intentions or deals he did or did not make with Mein. My information is solely about the man who created the virus."

"You're certain he created the virus, majesty?"

The look she gave was searing, but she nodded her head. "I am. Wait," she commanded before he could interrupt again. "Let me tell this my way. Then you can ask your questions." Presiding Council bowed his head and Aurora turned back to Mary.

"I've told you before that I'm not a good mother. It's true - I never have been. Mostly because I wasn't really sure how to be a mother, and instead of trying to figure it out, I let Fernando direct Arianna's life while her nannies did most of the rearing. But even though I was not fond of the idea of being a mama, I still loved my mija. And when she came to me crying one afternoon in the middle of her twelfth year, I knew I had to do something.

You see, my mija... my Arianna... she did not make friends easily. There were many factors that played into that issue - she was the princess; she was brilliant beyond understanding; she was socially awkward.... The list goes on. She attended public school in an effort to acquire some socialization skills among her peers, but to this day I doubt the wisdom of demanding such an action from her." Aurora shook her head and waved it off. "No matter now. I did what I thought was best for her and for a while...."

"Aurora?" Mary prompted when the silence dragged on uncomfortably as Aurora got lost in her thoughts of the past. Brown eyes met and one set went a little sheepish.

"My apologies, Ms Wellesly. Sometimes I just...."

"We all do, majesty. Can you continue?"

"Of course. There was one little boy - his name was Paul. They met when they were seven and Arianna? She was so happy. Paul didn't know or didn't care that she was the princess. He didn't care

that she was a genius or that she was awkward. She was his friend and he was hers. Now you need to understand that it wasn't a friendship in the standard sense of the word. They only saw each other during school hours. But that seemed to be enough for them."

"Did you ever make an effort to get them together more regularly?"

"No, Ms Wellesly. It simply wasn't feasible; with Arianna's schedule and responsibilities, doing anything outside of school with anyone *from* school was impossible. So they made use of the limited time they did have together and her instructors were fairly lenient with her about it. After all, they weren't actually teaching her anything she didn't already know and Arianna made certain Paul didn't fall behind. It bothered Fernando though - more than I realized at the time."

"How so?"

"You must understand that he felt schooling and socialization were a complete waste of her time and talent. He only capitulated because it meant so much to me. But he hated it... especially once Arianna drew up her fussion theory. But he allowed it because I asked and because it made Arianna more than willing to go into the lab and work when she got home from school every day. Then without warning, everything changed."

"In what way exactly?"

"My mija came home from school in tears - said Paul was gone. No warning, no goodbye. Just gone. Of course that set off a number of alarms in my head so I decided to talk to Fernando first. Surely he would know what had happened. After all, Paul's father had worked in the royal research laboratory for years."

"And what did he tell you?"

"He told me that Paul had started having inappropriate thoughts about our hija. Now I know you're wondering how that is possible giving the constructs of our free love society. But there are very strict rules in place governing that aspect of our culture, Ms Wellesly - rules whose consequences require execution if broken."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. A person *must* have reached the age of majority before they are able to participate in their sexual awakening. Anyone who breaks that rule by forcing themselves on someone unable to consent is subject to public flogging until dead. If two who are not yet of age indulge, they are put to sleep as you would a damaged animal. Creating life before being betrothed and wed comes with a term of hard labor to both parties as soon as the child is delivered. There is a zero survival rate to that punishment. Many choose to take their own lives rather than suffer that fate."

"I take it those things don't happen very often."

"They are indeed very rare." Aurora pinched her lip pensively in thought and Mary tilted her head in question.

"Majesty?"

"I was just thinking. Fernando was never considered a benevolent man, but he was considered just and fair. I believe that is why I was so anxious and willing to accept his version of events."

"Can you share?"

"I went to Fernando after Arianna went to bed that night. I believed he would know the truth of what happened if anyone would. There was sadness in his eyes as he told me that Paul had confessed to having inappropriate thoughts about our mija. He hadn't done anything, but he felt it might be prudent if he was removed from her sphere. For his honesty and genuine concern for doing the right thing where our mija was concerned as well as for his father's faithful service, Paul and his family were immediately relocated half a world away - somewhere that Arianna would not be able to find them even if she thought to go looking for them."

"And you told Arianna...?"

"Nothing. What could I say to her that wouldn't make things worse? Fernando told her it was time to let go of childhood and focus on the future that was fuission. It wasn't long before that had taken over her life almost completely and drove her deeper into her introverted identity. She only started coming out of her shell again as she reached the end of her public education experience."

"Majesty, records show that Paul's father was installed as the head of a premier, high-level security research facility in exchange for no further communication between Paul and Arianna. But my people couldn't get into said facility to confirm the truth." Mary stopped speaking and left the statement open for Aurora to comment.

"This is where the story gets interesting," Aurora replied and rubbed her forehead to ward off the headache she could feel creeping up her neck. Mary looked up at Presiding Council.

"Sir, could we take five minutes?"

He frowned but nodded at Mary's expression. "Of course. Everyone remain seated, please, while Ms Wellesly takes care of whatever it is that needs done. You have your five minutes, madam."

"Thank you, sir," Mary replied. She turned and met Eve's eyes, gesturing her forward. There was a whispered conversation across the gate, then Eve motioned to Noah who immediately retrieved her med kit and brought it to her. She brushed her nose along his cheek and he blushed and smiled before returning to his seat. Eve crossed the threshold and went directly to Aurora.

"Majesty," catching the smile that wanted to break out when Aurora jumped in surprise. "My apologies - I thought you heard me approach. May I offer you something to ease the pain in your head?"

"By the Holy Father - yes, please."

This time Eve did smile and in only a moment, she was injecting pain reliever straight into a vein in Aurora's neck. After a brief pause, their eyes met. "Better?" Eve asked kindly. She wrapped her fingers around Aurora's pulse point as a matter of course.

"So much," Aurora confessed. "You wouldn't believe."

The look Eve gave was droll in the extreme. "Six children - yes I would."

Aurora's eyes widened. "Oh my. We definitely have to talk."

Eve chuckled. "We will. But I think Mary's five minutes are about up. Are you certain you're all right?"

"Yes, thank you. I just want to get this over with."

"Fair enough. And for the record, we're all behind you. We think you're doing a great job."

Aurora clasped Eve's hands and squeezed. "Thank you. That means so much...." She turned to see Mary facing Caleb as they whispered together, absently rubbing her leg. "Perhaps you should check on Mary before we start up again. I'm a little concerned."

"So am I but she's not going to let me do anything surrounded by all these people. The sooner we get done and out of this place, the better for all involved, I think."

"I agree." She once more squeezed the hands she held before releasing them. "Thank you, Eve. I feel almost humanoid again."

"It was my privilege, Aurora," offering a slight bow of her head before she turned and headed back to the gallery. A transitory stop at the table to speak to Mary and Caleb, then Eve shook her head with a snort and walked back to her seat. Presiding Council waited until she was settled before clearing his throat.

"Ms Wellesly? Are we ready to begin again?"

"Majesty?"

"Of course."

"Very well, Majesty. Please continue."

She nodded and looked at Mary again. She found it much easier to tell this story if she was telling it to Mary alone, and by focusing solely on her, she could easily block out the remainder of the room... especially Fernando who was glaring daggers at her. Aurora took a deep breath and then spoke. "After talking to Fernando, I decided I would let things settle for a little while and wait and see how Arianna adapted to Paul being gone. After all, Paul had gone to great lengths to remove himself from her purview in an effort to protect both himself and her, and I certainly didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. If it appeared that Arianna had adjusted to Paul's disappearance, then there was no reason for me to involve myself further."

"But she didn't?"

Aurora tipped her head and squinted. "I actually thought she had. She didn't appear to be distraught - I mean aside from the one day she came home from school crying, there was no outward manifestation of grief. And she threw herself more fully into her work. I worried that she was isolating herself too much, but she seemed satisfied and was making significant progress on her theories. Fernando was definitely happy at the turn of events."

"So what happened?"

"I overheard a conversation she was having with one of the other scientists in the lab. By this point, the scientists in the laboratory with her were *her* research assistants because they were *learning from her*. There were only a very few that were accorded that privilege and only because of their length of service to the crown and their ability to understand her genius even if they didn't comprehend all that genius entailed."

"What did you overhear?"

"She told Phillipa how much she missed Paul's counsel and wisdom."

"Paul - her friend?"

"Paul the Elder - her friend Paul's father. He had been one of her first mentors in the laboratory."

"So you decided...?"

"I decided to see if I could find Paul the Elder. Surely it wouldn't be a problem for them to talk, right? It would make Arianna happy and younger Paul would never need to know. Paul the Elder would keep it a secret if I commanded him to do so. After all, he understood the need for discretion and neither of us wanted to put our children in harm's way."

"You thought letting younger Paul and Arianna talk would be putting them in harm's way?"

"Oh yes - since young Paul had asked for his family to be reassigned to remove him from the temptation Arianna was to him, it would absolutely have been putting him in harm's way to have allowed them contact."

"So you were as concerned with Paul's wellbeing as you were for Arianna's."

"I was. Paul was a lovely young man even as a child - very polite and well-spoken according to all I could discover about him when he first became known to us. I will confess to being a bit surprised at what Fernando told me about his inappropriate attraction to our mija, but I was quite touched by his maturity in recognizing the problem and taking steps on his own to solve it."

"Did you ever meet him?"

Aurora frowned. "No... why would we? As I explained earlier, Arianna didn't have time for socialization outside of school hours and children were not allowed in the castle or its laboratories for any reason. What I knew of him came from Paul the Elder and Arianna first, then the teachers and security people assigned to my mija."

"Thank you for clearing that up, majesty. What happened when you went looking for Paul the Elder?"

"I got... lost." Aurora held up a hand. "I know that sounds ridiculous, but it was incredibly confusing. I had the information Fernando had given me, and I had at least a basic idea of where Paul most likely was. I expected to be able to find him fairly quickly."

"I take it that didn't happen."

Aurora snorted inelegantly. "Not even vaguely. I looked in every research facility I knew of. I started with the most secret laboratories, assuming Fernando would place Paul somewhere that

Arianna would be less inclined to investigate. Then I moved on to more well-known places - still nothing. So I started digging through the records, knowing Fernando would chronicle everything even if was only for show. I found where Paul *should* have been...."

"Only he wasn't."

"Only he wasn't. At this point the search took on a life of its own and was as much for my sake as it was for Arianna's. I needed to know what had happened and find out why Fernando had lied to me."

"You found them?"

"I did eventually; it took a very long time... well over a year. Like Arianna, younger Paul had almost reached majority and he and his mother seemed to be living a quiet life in a small town. They both appeared sad and tired and resigned to... everything. Their neighbors spoke well enough of them, but no one really knew anything about them or where they had come from. Then I realized why - I found Paul the Elder at a sanitarium. By the time I tracked him down, he was in the final stages of a horrible, painfully destructive disease. I went to see him."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to know the truth, and I knew he would tell me. He was dying, Ms Wellesly. He had no reason to lie, and with a family to protect, he had every reason to tell the truth." Aurora pinched the bridge of her nose and this time Mary left her alone. After a moment, she took a deep breath and resumed speaking. "He told me of his accidental discovery; that he had been injected with the virus as a test subject; that Fernando had removed all traces of the virus from the lab; and that he and his family had been moved halfway around the planet 'for treatment' that never came. He had done the best research he could manage with the limited resources that he had, but he hadn't been able to make much progress against the disease." Aurora looked up and met Mary's eyes. "He begged me for absolution and asked that I take care of his wife and son when he died. He expected Fernando would do anything to eliminate any loose threads in regards to the virus and his family was one of the biggest liabilities Fernando had left. I had them moved off planet the very same day."

"TRAITOR!" Fernando bellowed.

"That's enough out of you, sir," Presiding Council instructed, nodding to Adam who applied just enough pressure on a nerve ending in Fernando's neck for him to get the hint. He glared at Aurora but kept his lips firmly clamped together. Presiding Council turned back to Aurora. "Is there anything else, majesty?"

"Not much. I cannot confirm what the disease was that Paul created then contracted. It went a little beyond my scope and he had no way to give me a formula even if he'd been able to refabricate the virus from memory. He died two days later and Fernando had already given instruction to have his body burned to ash. It wasn't long after that Arianna left our home world for the first time to begin her candidate process and my attention was taken with other things."

Presiding Council nodded his thanks and turned to Mary. She shook her head and he sighed. "Thank you, majesty," he said. "There will be a short recess before we hear Fernando's testimony." But before he could rise to dismiss everyone, several things occurred at once.

Chapter XIII

Fury lent strength to Fernando, and without warning he was free of Adam's hold and on his feet charging towards Aurora. Mary couldn't move fast enough to stop him and he landed on Aurora like a lead weight. He straddled her body, pinning her arms with his knees and reaching out his hands to wrap around her neck.

"I'll kill you!!!" he screamed. "I'll make you pay for destroying me!!! I'll...." And then he was dead weight on top of her and Aurora lay frozen, barely breathing and afraid to move. Within seconds, Fernando's body was jerked off of hers and Aurora looked up into kind blue eyes as Caleb knelt beside her and offered her a hand.

"Are you all right, majesty?"

She accepted his hand and let him ease her into a sitting position even as she reached for her throat. She rubbed it gently, wincing at the bruising she could feel but nodded at Caleb. "I appear to be," she rasped. "More startled than anything. A little bruised maybe."

He removed her hand from her neck. "Yes, that will likely be a nicely shaded bruise before the day is over." He shook his head. "How are your arms and your back?"

She grimaced slightly. "Sore. I think I should have insisted on a diet for Fernando years ago. I imagine they'll be a nice shade of ochre as well. I am going to be one big walking bruise until I can see a doctor and utilize a regen unit."

"I think between Doc Eve and Dr. Morris, that's not going to be a problem for very long," Caleb said as Eve knelt down beside them. He turned to Eve and gave her a quick rundown of his conversation with Aurora and Eve held up a scanning device.

"May I?"

"Of course," Aurora replied absently as she frowned in thought. "Caleb, where is Ms... Mary?"

Caleb gestured with a jerk of his head. "She's one of the reasons Dr. Morris got called in. She clocked that bastard with the end of her cane, but I'm pretty sure she managed to do significant damage to herself in the process. Sorry, majesty - I mean no disrespect to you, but your husband really is a...."

"I am discovering that, Caleb. You don't need to apologize for being honest about your feelings... especially after he tried to kill me."

"Fortunately he didn't succeed, majesty, though he did a spectacular job of bruising you all over more than anywhere else," Eve remarked as she put away her scanning device. "I'd like to recommend that you be placed on a regen unit as soon as possible. It will minimize the damage that needs healing and will make for a much speedier recovery."

Aurora nodded slowly, flinching a little at the pain that radiated across her head. "Ow. I like the suggestion, Eve. But I would prefer a little privacy for that."

"I believe that Presiding Council is going to adjourn for the day. Ms Wellesly is in no way able to continue in her current condition and Fernando...." Eve shook her head. "He's not going to be able to

do much for a day or two at the least; then again he may not need to testify. I think the Council and Committee have all the evidence and information they need to draw a conclusion."

"If they don't, they should probably be removed from the gene pool," Caleb muttered, drawing chuckles from both women. He blushed but didn't renounce his words. Eve patted him on the arm.

"Given everything we've learned and everything that has happened here today, I would be surprised if they gave their deliberations more than a cursory effort before they reach a verdict in Mary's favor." Caleb bit his lip and Eve frowned. She exchanged a worried glance with Aurora, then turned back to Caleb. "Caleb? You don't really think they will rule against Ms Wellesly for her actions in this matter, do you?"

"I think they will want to make an example of her - to show that no one is above the rules even when they are doing what had to be done. Like it or not, the Chief did go outside the rules to protect those kids. Some sort of punishment will need to be meted out if only to maintain balance and a semblance of order."

"And if we protest?"

"The Chief won't allow it. She walked in here knowing she was expendable and expecting to be held accountable for her actions. Someone has to take responsibility - she's the someone."

"We won't let them criminalize her, Caleb. What she did saved the lives of our children and all the other candidates. We'll go out of here and make sure everyone in the Alliance knows the truth if they...."

Caleb held up a hand, hoping to quell the tirade before Eve got angrier. "Doc, calm down and take a deep breath, all right? Do you really think any of us would let them destroy the Chief like that?" He smiled gently. "A little credit, please. The truth is we believe they will want her to step away from the responsibility of running the company for a while. That's one reason I am here - to accept that mantle if they ask her to remove it. And honestly, right now I'm kind of hoping they do." He glanced back over his shoulder at Mary who was currently laying on a gurney waiting to be transported from the room. "She's been at this a long time - she could use a break. And after that firefight in the mountain, she could use some recovery time. I've never seen anything affect her like this before."

"I don't think she was targeted specifically," Eve assured him. "I think this is a combination of a lot of mitigating factors, not the least of which is whatever material those people used to coat their ammunition in." She bit her lip thoughtfully. "I don't suppose it's possible to get a clean sample of the substance?"

Caleb tilted his head thoughtfully as he gazed at her with unseeing eyes. "We disarmed them all - gloved of course. The Chief didn't trust them."

"With good reason it seems," Aurora broke in.

"With good reason," Caleb agreed. He faced Eve. "I'll see what we can do for you, Doc... especially if it will help the Chief's recovery." Before either woman could comment, Caleb continued. "Let me go see where that other gurney is," rising to his feet and walking away.

"Oh but I...." Aurora glanced at Eve. "I am perfectly fine to walk."

"Better to be safe than sorry, Aurora. Besides, I think Caleb needed a little space."

"He loves her."

"I agree. But they are not together - not in any fashion as I understand a couple to be anyway. Mary depends on him, but...."

"I think we should wait and see," Aurora advised. "Maybe we can help him... if it would make Mary happy."

"Speaking of - how are you doing with all this?"

"I honestly don't know. I'm not sure my brain has engaged on that level yet. Or maybe I understand it here," rubbing her forehead, "but not here," touching her chest. "I think I may need a little time and distance to digest everything I've learned today."

"Understandable," Eve agreed, patting Aurora's hand. "And if you ever need to discuss it or just need someone to listen... well, I stand by my healer's oath beyond the confidence I would keep as family."

Aurora smiled. "Thank you, Eve. I think making you family was probably one of the most brilliant things my mija has ever done. If your mija is half the woman you are, Arianna is a very lucky young woman."

Eve blushed despite her smile. "Моя ДОЧЬ is so much more than I could ever hope to be, Aurora; your ДОЧЬ and mine are well-suited. They are both very lucky and very happy together."

"That more than anything makes everything that happened today and whatever comes next more bearable."

"Doc?" Caleb interrupted. "If you can slide out of the way, we can get the stretcher in place to move the Queen. Dr. Morris has agreed to bring some full-sized equipment to Joy's to accommodate the Chief's injuries and he said he would do the same for the Queen if that was what you desired."

"That would be greatly appreciated, Caleb," Aurora replied before Eve could respond. "I am looking forward to meeting Joy and tasting these cookies I keep hearing about."

Caleb chuckled. "Yes, she does have quite the reputation in that regard. If you'll allow me, majesty, I'll place you on the gurney and then we can go."

"I can manage...."

"No," Eve commanded sternly. "Not until I can do a more thorough scan. I'm not entirely comfortable with the fact that you're sitting up at the moment. I would prefer to keep further movement to a minimum."

Aurora studied the concern in Eve's eyes before she acquiesced and lay back down slowly. Then she turned her attention back to Caleb. "What about the Council and the Committee?"

Caleb shrugged. "They can go too, I guess. That's not up to me."

"I think she was asking if we needed to be dismissed before leaving. Officially we're still in session."

"Oh... of course. Sorry," Caleb answered, scrubbing his hands over his eyes. "I'm not sure where my mind is suddenly," missing the knowing look exchanged between Eve and Aurora. "Once we have everyone and everything squared away, Presiding Council has an announcement to make. I'm confident it is going to be to end today's assembly."

"Then let's get Aurora onto the gurney and make haste to leave this place. Would you like Noah to assist you, Caleb?"

"No ma'am. I've got this," scooping Aurora off the floor and onto the stretcher in the blink of an eye. It only took Caleb a moment to get Aurora settled and Eve another minute to prepare her for transport. When she was done, she gave Caleb a nod and he in turn nodded to the Presiding Council. The man cleared his throat loudly into what was relative silence and drew all eyes to him.

"In light of all the excitement we've had today and since Ms Wellesly assures me she has shared all the evidence she and her team have uncovered supporting the accusations she has made against the various Alliance members that were serving as Councilman and Committee Members, I believe it would be prudent to call for a recess of these proceedings. It will give us all," gesturing along the dais where the remaining Members were standing, "a chance to review the material Ms Wellesly has given us." He turned to Mary and waited for her brown eyes to meet his. It took a minute for her to focus and he chanced to wonder what kind of pain suppressant Dr. Morris had given her to have so dulled her senses. "Ms Wellesly, you said your people are working on confirming Mein's accusations?"

Mary nodded slowly and Caleb stepped forward to stand beside her stretcher. "Not that it should be necessary after the bastard's actions and confession," he growled, his very demeanor keeping Presiding Council from making a comment. "But yes - Gideon is already at work finding the proof you need to convict Fernando of treason. You will have it when we do."

Presiding Council shivered a little at the burning look in Caleb's eyes and bobbed his head in acknowledgment. "Thank you, Caleb. In that case, we stand..."

"WAIT!!" Everyone turned and looked at Mary who was doing her level best to sit up despite Tom Morris' hand against her breastbone. She glared, but he simply shrugged. She huffed and relaxed back into the gurney, sighing in relief.

"Ms Wellesly?" Presiding Council asked to give her a minute to collect her composure.

"What about the charges against me?" she asked in a breathy voice. Obviously her efforts to gain attention and stop the dismissal had been somewhat costly.

Presiding Council held her gaze for several moments before he turned his attention to each Councilman and Committee Member in turn, seeking their input without taking a long, drawn-out, formal vote. When he reached the end, he closed his eyes and nodded. "Given the information that was brought to our attention and the overwhelming evidence that seems to back up the charges you have offered against others, it is the judgment of these two ruling bodies that the charges against you be dropped - on the understanding that the charges can be reinstated at any time if we find your evidence lacking." There was cheering from the gallery though Mary's sole response was to close her eyes and give another sigh of relief. "However," he continued, holding up a hand and waiting for silence to settle once more. "We do find you guilty of operating outside of acceptable parameters - namely keeping us out of the loop. You are not infallible, Ms Wellesly and the Alliance is not a dictatorship where decisions of this magnitude are made by a single individual. You took far more responsibility

than was yours to bear, and for that you will be punished. Bearing in mind what you did and why you did it, and given the fact that things probably ended up far better than we could have reasonably expected had you not acted in the manner you did, it is the finding of this court that you be suspended from all missions and assignments for a period of.... Dr. Morris, what is her expected recovery time?"

Morris stroked his chin and exchanged a look with Eve. "A moment to confer with my colleague, sir?" Presiding Council gestured towards Eve graciously, and Eve and Morris moved together to hold a rapidly whispered conference. In another minute they were standing side by side once again. "Based on our best estimate and taking in a few mitigating factors that will play into the healing process, we believe it will take Ms Wellesly a minimum of six standard months with that possibility extending up to a year depending on what we discover about the pathogen that was utilized in the mountain attack."

"Very well," Presiding Council said with a nod. "Ms Wellesly, you are hereby sentenced to a suspension of all your duties for a term of twelve standard months. We will revisit the situation in six standard months - depending on the circumstances we find at that time, we may commute the remainder of your penalty. Satisfactory?"

"Thank you, Presiding Council," Mary offered quietly though her eyes stayed closed.

"Presiding Council?" Aurora broke in before he could speak again to dismiss the chamber. He turned to her and gestured for her to go ahead. "What of my hus.... What of Fernando?"

"Considering everything we have learned today and the evidence against him; given the accusations that have been made and his actions against you - once he recovers from the injuries Ms Wellesly delivered, we will give him the opportunity to offer his side of the story. But unless he can give some compelling evidence in his favor, we will be forced to keep him in a holding area with the rest of those who have been exposed as traitors to the Alliance until we have a chance to study the facts and can reach a consensus as to his fate. As soon as we have had the opportunity to review the evidence Ms Wellesly presented to us, he will be brought back into these chambers to be formally charged or released... depending of course on what we find. He will be treated humanely, majesty, but he will need to remain here until such time as we are able to make a decision."

Aurora nodded. "Any idea how long that will take, sir?"

"All things considered, probably two or three days, but certainly no longer than a standard week. We will move his case to the front of the queue in an effort to reach a swift resolution one way or another. We will keep you advised throughout the process, majesty."

"Thank you, Presiding Council. Your candor and your sensitivity to my position are appreciated."

Presiding Council nodded, but otherwise did not reply. Instead he cast a glance around the room, looking for any hint of things he had forgotten. Finally he spoke. "Is there anything else?" No one said anything aloud though a few shook their heads. When he was satisfied that they had done all they could do for the day, he sighed. "In that case, I declare these proceedings recessed and pronounce us adjourned." He looked at his fellow Members. "I do think it is best that we wait for those who need healing to go out ahead of us."

In response the other Members moved to stand closer to the dais as Mary then Aurora were guided out of the room and towards the waiting transport. Mary's security team followed, ushering the

family members from the gallery with them. When the room was empty save for Councilmen and Committee Members and their security contingent, they all turned to the Presiding Council.

"So now what?"

"Now we take the remainder of the day to relax and recover from the crap this day has been. Then we come together tomorrow and start reviewing the evidence Ms Wellesly has given us starting with the accusations made against Fernando because we can't afford to screw this up. It's going to be bad enough that we're going to have to indict and execute Committee Members and a Councilman. The whole 'head of state' thing is just going to throw chaos into the mix."

"You really think Wellesly's evidence will prove out?"

Presiding Council snorted. "You really think it *won't*?"

"One can always hope for a first time," Lafferty replied drolly.

"Maybe, but this isn't going to be it and we all know it. Just glancing through the material she shared with us, I can tell there is more than enough evidence to back up her claims and accusations. It's in our best interests to proceed as thoroughly and expeditiously as possible to bring this entire matter to a close."

"And you don't think Ms Wellesly's sentence is too light... especially given the magnitude of her arrogance? If she had been anyone else...."

"If she had been anyone else, the Alpha Team would never have survived. In all likelihood, *all* the candidates would have been in mortal jeopardy. I think when word gets out - and you *know* it will - there will be a call from many quarters to commute her sentence completely even though it was only issued in an effort to force her to take the time to heal from this assignment." Presiding Council looked around at his fellow members again. "I suggest everyone take a few minutes to read over this stuff tonight," waving his Pad at them. "There's no need to go in depth until we are all together tomorrow, but it might be nice if we could just get right to it tomorrow because everyone is familiar with what is being said and why. Any questions?"

"What time tomorrow?"

"Let's start early - say zero seven hundred standard hours. The sooner we start, the sooner we can go back to our respective homes and do other things besides assuring our people that this project has been successful and will continue to be so." When there was no dissent, Presiding Council ushered them out the door and soon they were headed to their individual chambers.

Epilogue

"So what's the word, Caleb?" Ian asked as Caleb and Noah returned from helping Eve and Dr. Morris get Mary and Aurora settled in Mary's room. He expected the two physicians to take quite a while longer getting the regen units and other medical equipment set up and the room was already crowded enough with four adult humanoids in the single room... even as large as Joy had made it. Caleb stopped on the third step and looked at Ian, noting his siblings flanking him on and everyone else waiting behind them.

"What did you hear?"

"Not much. We were late getting back and the Council had dampeners throughout the chamber to keep the proceedings private. Every time Joey got a fix on the signal, it would phase out and he'd have to start over."

"Is that as serious as it sounds?" Drusilla asked.

"Yes," Joseph responded before Caleb could answer. "It means they were determined to keep everything that happened in that room out of the public view. The fact that they allowed all of you to remain in the room is astounding."

"Allowed?"

"Allowed," Caleb confirmed. "None of you were supposed to know about that meeting; none of you were supposed to be there." He waved his hands to halt the murmuring before it could gather momentum. "That's a subject for another time. For now, in answer to Ian's question - Mary has been ordered to take some time off. Strictly speaking, it's her punishment for keeping the Council and, by extension, the Committee out of the loop in regards to the Alpha Team and the rest of the candidates. However, we still have the contracts we had, so I will be serving as the front man for the company until such time as her punishment has been served."

Joy frowned. "Not that I'm complaining, but that doesn't really seem like much of a punishment."

"It's not. It's a token at best," Nathaniel replied as he met Caleb's eyes. "Isn't it?"

Caleb nodded. "It is. It's mostly for show - to demonstrate that no one is above the law and that there is a price to pay for disregarding the chain of command."

"But...?"

"But it's mostly to give Mary a chance to rest and heal."

"Yeah... about that - what happened in that room today?" Nathaniel demanded. "C'mon, Caleb. We have a right to know."

Caleb studied the five sets of eyes studying him intently - five of the grown children Mary counted as hers that were currently under this roof that wanted answers. He turned his attention to the sixth - Ephraim... who was still only a possible suitor for Joy but a very good prospect for her potential mate. Ephraim had been in the chamber with the rest of the security force and knew the story, and Caleb knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he would give Mary's kids a play-by-play accounting of absolutely everything that went down in that room if Caleb didn't. With a sigh, Caleb motioned towards the basement stairs. "Let's go sit down and be comfortable. This is going to take more than a few minutes to tell, and I could really use some coffee," looking beseechingly at Joy.

She rolled her eyes at him, but smiled good-naturedly. "All right, but I'm going to need a few hands to volunteer to help me bring stuff from the kitchen. We don't do 'just coffee' around here, Caleb. You know that."

"I do," he agreed with a grin. "Why do you think I asked? Go on. I think you've got more than enough volunteers. I'll take everyone else downstairs and get them settled. Then I'll tell you about Mary's day in court."

"Wow," Ketura said softly into the silence. "I didn't realize how melodramatic all that would sound when told as a narrative."

"Yes - we definitely had our moments today," Drusilla concurred. "I'm not sure people wouldn't think we were just making up all sorts of theatrics for the sake of telling a spectacular story."

Caleb chuckled. "I don't think Mary would be at all happy to know she ended up in a production like that. She'd demand a rewrite." The room broke into laughter.

"What about Mama, Caleb? What happens now?"

Caleb smiled. "You *really* don't think Mary's going to let anything slow her down, do you, Ian? She's going to be up and back in charge behind the scenes in no time at all. I'm just a place holder until she's back to fighting strength."

"So what happens now, Caleb?" This from Noah.

He shrugged. "Mostly we're at a wait-and-see stage. The Council and Committee have to review the evidence and take testimony from the accused. Then a decision will need to be made as to their sentencing and punishment or release. Once everything that was touched upon in chambers today is wrapped up, the Committee will resume its work. The Beta and Gamma Teams still need to be chosen and once they are, they will begin training. They need the chance to try some of the ideas and experiments the Alpha Team didn't take with them on their mission. And unlike the Alpha Team, they will have much more preparation time - that much I'm fairly confident of."

"Why?"

"Because one of the downsides of being first means you get to make most of the mistakes. In this case, the Alpha Team could have used more time to train and prepare as a team. Beta and Gamma will benefit from that learning experience."

"And what of our children?"

"Your children are still the best and the brightest, madam. I'm certain they will succeed beyond even their wildest imagining. And in the meantime, Joseph is still trying to find a way to contact them, and when we find them again, they will tell us their stories of adventure and accomplishment."

"I'm looking forward to that," Ketura admitted. "Aside from just talking to my Eden, I can't wait to hear about all the things they will have seen and done when we are reunited again."

Caleb nodded. "I'll bet it will be an amazing tale."

THE END

03/13-05/13