

# VIRIAN CONUNDRUM



ROBIN KRIZAN

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## VIRIAN CONUNDRUM

**By Robin S. Krizan**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A digital drawing of two nude men lying tangled on a daybed covered with colorful silk throws. A man with white hair and tattoos looks comfortable lying on the other man's chest. The man with the dark brown hair embraces his companion as sunlight shines down on their relaxed forms.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Max (don't mind really but a typical earth name) is one of earth's best warriors. He doesn't understand why they (the other planet's people) picked him. He understands how important this alliance is. But he's a warrior, not a diplomat, and he's not gay. He would happily go as a bodyguard, if that's what they need, his muscles, but why does he have to marry the bloody prince? Plus, two guys can't have a baby. But he'll do it, a hole is a hole right. He's stuck it in enough, he can just picture one of them, and he only needs to do it once, right?*

Dear author,

I would love a sci-fi GFY romance. With M-preg! Please no BDSM or slave, dubious/non-con, just an arranged marriage or treaty.

Thank you,

*Sincerely,*

*Anna E*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** arranged marriage, gay for you, m-preg, mystery, aliens, military, royalty, interspecies, outdoor sex

**Content Warnings:** violence

**Word Count:** 45,293

*Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank the moderators and volunteers of the M/M Romance Group who make this event possible. Thank you to Anna E for the beautiful prompt. I hope you like where I took it. Extreme thanks to J. Johanis and Ren Stjerne for agreeing to beta. A.L. Boyd, thank you so much for editing my story and helping me smooth out this bumpy road.

I would like to dedicate this to my brother Keith: artist, genius, and the original nerd.

# **VIRIAN CONUNDRUM**

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## Prologue

*Then...*

Zhondr, the totalitarian leader of the planet Scheklkag, sent for his second in command. “Tystd, there’s still a whole set of planets in Sector three twenty-five A that haven’t been explored. Why not?”

Zhondr had taken over as leader ten years prior. With a life span of only thirty-five short years, he didn’t have time to waste. They needed to find a civilization advanced enough to have found the key to longer life. Hell, at this point he’d settle for cryonics until they found the technology.

The other half of the Scheklkag mission was opening the minds of alien races so that they might see that his God, The Highest of High Nektur, was their only saving grace. To save the masses from themselves, Zhondr and his people would allow the civilizations they encountered to convert. If they refused, they would die. It was the only way.

“We didn’t have the resources to spare, Majesty. None of the planets are shown to be conducive to life. The closest one possible, the big blue one that’s third back from the star, has too much nitrogen and not enough oxygen. The rest have either too much carbon dioxide, are too gassy in general or have no atmosphere.”

So far, none of the inhabited planets they’d found had the ability to even look at the building blocks of life. The most helpful planet out of them had been Kravacikan. The Kravacikans were born and raised for combat, which made them extremely aggressive but made conquering other planets a breeze. The key was to know how to control them. The beings that lived there had just mysteriously lost their dictator, so of course Zhondr stepped in to help them out. Lucky him.

“Send a probe ship anyway. Maybe some creatures found a way to survive on one of the planets.”

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*Years later...*

Zhechgar had just taken up the mantle passed down by his uncle. At twenty years old, he had little time to do what his uncle and all the others before him failed to: he would find a way to live past his thirty-fifth birthday.

The only thing standing in his way was those Earthlings. Just as the Scheklkag had *allied* planets, Earth had built up a following of those who refused to bow to the Scheklkag ways and decided to fight back. In the beginning, only a few of those planets had succeeded against the conquering army and word traveled fast. Those few planets buddied up and started trading protection to other planets for technology, food or whatever else they needed. Zhechgar didn't see the point in trading when you could just do as his people had always done: rule the planet and take what you needed.

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Alverio, king of Virian, paced his throne room. He was tempted to accept Earth's proposal for an exchange of technology for Earth's protection against a possible invasion. The problem was adding that last condition. His hesitance to bring it up stemmed from its personal nature, but it would cement the alliance between the two planets. If the people of Earth sent who he asked for, they would have something invested in seeing that no harm came to Virian.

He decided to go over the heads of the diplomats on his planet. He could smell Earth's desperation to get their hands on Virian technology, but he was just as desperate. The Scheklkag finally noticed the little tucked-away planet and was bearing down on their doorstep. Only they didn't want an alliance, they wanted to conquer.

Earth had defeated many an army and had become feared in the surrounding galaxies. No one in their right minds would attempt to attack them or anyone they declared protected. Not unless they wanted to be decimated in the process. Just as well, many planets had been vying for their attention to trade resources for something or other. He just figured out a way to kill two birds with one stone.

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## Chapter 1

Max had a bad feeling about this meeting. Not bad as in world ending, but unnerving all the same. He'd just returned to Earth from a two-year stint in some backward galaxy on the edge of nowhere. If not for the fighting, he might have actually gone mad. For the next month, he was supposed to be sitting and relaxing in the little shack he called home. Instead, he found himself on his way to speak to Commandant Clarissa Johnson, the head of the Verband, Earth's interplanetary organization. This was the one woman that, according to rumor, no one saw unless there's a threat of attack on them or one of the planets under Earth's protection. Yep... his little vacay just went to hell.

Initially a mix of the United States Marines and Air Force, bringing together the best in combat troops with the finest pilots, the job of the Verband was to protect the whole of Earth from extraterrestrial attack. Knowing the governments of other countries would want their fair say in operations, especially since they began sending over their best fighters and flyers for the cause, the US President at the time, gave up control of the organization to its first commandant, Commandant Richard Lewis. He also eventually gave up New Jersey and Delaware for the purposes of the budding organization. The mixture of different troop rankings from different nations was too convoluted, so they were nixed. New government, new military rankings, new rules. Commandant Lewis set a foundation that he hoped his successors could easily build off of and that would eventually make Earth unshakable.

Other than the fact that he was being called in against his will, Max loved the Verband. The best part was they let Max achieve a few of his goals already. Since he'd been little, he'd had dreams of flying one of the monster ships that took off from the base near the crappy orphanage he'd been thrown into when his parents died. He wanted to be one of the heroes that flew in space, explored and fought against evil. He was ecstatic when, as teenagers, a Verband general offered to pull him and his friend Liam, out of the dilapidated building and sent them to Delaware to begin training. Apparently, they had that something extra that fit right into the atmosphere the organization had built.

Apparently this mission was a rush job because after he stepped up to the security desk to check in, he was directed to the twentieth floor with instructions to ask for Amanda. The guard must have called ahead because he didn't get the chance to step off the lift before the petite woman was

introducing herself and showing him into a large corner office. With as fast as she was moving, he felt lucky that she restrained from physically pushing him down the hall.

“Captain Maxwell Jenkins reporting for duty, ma’am.” He stood at attention, waiting for the commandant to turn from the window. She had an amazing view of the city and lake, but her stance seemed stiff.

“As you know Captain, we don’t usually move fast to jump on an agreement with other planets. However, this deal flew to the front of the line, due to the importance of the conditions involved. What I’m about to reveal is not to be repeated. To anyone.”

Max was immediately suspicious. No treaty had taken less than two years to negotiate, and none were ever important enough to warrant the attention of the commandant herself. The Verband needed someone with a high-level rank to discuss terms with contacting planets, without tying up the top officers. A young man with expertise in contract law and first contact with non-Earth beings was appointed to lieutenant general, specifically to handle all the treaties, and out of the ones he received, no more than five a year were important enough to bump up to general. Something momentous must have happened for the commandant to take point on whatever negotiations she was about to share with him.

“Have you heard of Virian, Captain?”

He vaguely recalled the name. It was some little planet that one of their ships, the *Missourian*, had literally tripped over as they were running out of fuel on their way home. They landed... or more accurately, they crashed. Their massive stroke of good luck had them taking out a low orbit Kravacikan spy ship as they were falling. The native inhabitants were gracious enough to loan them a ship to get back.

“I believe so. They’re a small planet that’s not known for much.”

“It’s well known that we have no problem going to war. What’s not known, unless you’re in an office of power... what we’ve tried to keep hidden is that we not only need more ships but better ships.”

That was a gross understatement, and Max wanted to call her out on her bullshit. The ships were shot to shit. It was by some kind of miracle they weren’t falling out of the sky before they made it to orbit. This planet must have some impressive hardware if they pulled the commandant’s attention.

“We’ve been lucky so far as we force most battles to happen on a planet’s surface. But to end this stupid war, we have to rule the heavens too. This is why we have been looking to strike an agreement with Virian.”

Max kept a straight face. He refused to let his confusion show. He didn’t understand what this planet had to do with him if they weren’t attacking.

She sighed before continuing, “They’re not known because they are a peaceful planet. They haven’t advertised their assets because they were not looking to be pulled into this war, however inevitable that is.” Commandant Johnson allowed the silence to stretch and avoided looking at Max. In soldier speak that meant she was hiding something important, something vital that would make or break the deal.

“I understand the need for better ships, but what does Virian have to do with that? Why am I here?”

Commandant Johnson took a deep breath before speaking. “Virian has exactly the supplies we need to make our forces unbeatable, and they are willing to trade them in exchange for protection and a group of warriors to stay planetside. It’s the additional request that’s given us pause.”

Max thought about her first statement. Were they going to ask him to lead the team? This would be the big step up in ranks he was looking for. He had the years of experience and the know-how. There was no family left or even a group of friends tying him to Earth. He knew he was the right man for the job. In his internal excitement, it took him a moment to process her last statement. She was stalling again. Max forced himself to ask the question the commandant was obviously trying to avoid answering. “What are they requesting?”

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Sideon smothered a sigh. He had been told repeatedly since birth by Councilman Tadrak, that a prince does not sigh, along with a long list of other things. He and his younger brother, Prince Aireon, called Tadrak “the tadpole” in private because he was born with a stick up his ass. Sideon usually ignored the list of don’ts and played things his own way.

The transmission came through that morning that the leader of Earth had accepted his father’s terms for a treaty. He did not want his displeasure to be misinterpreted to mean that he was against the treaty. It was needed after they found the wreckage of an Earth ship in the forest. The humans on board were imprisoned when a spy ship for the Scheklkags fell out of the sky with them.

Father wanted to believe when their captain stated they were not associated with the plague that slowly swept across the cosmos. Their saving grace was that a village to the south reported seeing an explosion in space before the ships fell. A ship home for the accidental heroes proved fruitful. A while later and the peaceful people of Virian had someone to watch over them.

The treaty, that he was not against, had three basic terms. One of those “terms” was that he be provided with a consort. It was acceptable, it just... He didn’t want his hand forced. Which, in a way, it was not. It was more of a nudge in someone’s preferred direction. His father had given him an extra five years to find a consort, but no one had struck his fancy. He knew it was odd, but to him, the people of his planet were too tame for his tastes. He would speak to his father again after council, but what had been done, was done.

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## Chapter 2

What the hell was he thinking, agreeing to this? Max stepped onto the platform and felt himself be teleported to the *Horizon Space Station*. He found it funny that no matter how much technology advanced, they were still limited. Their ships could fly as fast as light. They could terraform planets. Hell, he could tap dance in space without a suit, just a face mask, if he wanted to. But their ability to transport remained limited. If someone attempted to travel anything longer than about sixty light minutes, they'd start leaving body parts behind. That left the closest space station to Earth about halfway between Pluto and Eris. Apparently, the best place to put a station was next to a planet called "The Great Disrupter." It hadn't come back to bite them in the ass just yet.

His ship, *Destiny*, would leave as soon as he was on board. He handpicked the twenty warriors that would be traveling with him and make up the beginnings of a new military on Virian. He wasn't told much about the whys, just that all his subordinates had to be male. The trip there would give him a week to go over the planet's rules, regulations and customs. There wasn't a massive amount of information so he was confident he could get through it and fit in quickly.

He was so excited, he thought he might pass out from high blood pressure, but to his crew members, he appeared to be about business as usual. He'd finally made progress. It was a seven-seat jump from captain on the front lines to general of an off-world base, and he wouldn't have to wait until he was sixty and unable to perform to get there. That's if he'd have gotten the position at all.

Of course, the one person who'd be able to see through his well put together façade would be his best friend, although anyone who met them would assume they were brothers because of their actions. They'd grown up together on Earth, joined and moved up the ranks of the Verband together, and when Max had been promoted to captain and therefore, gained control of his own ship, Liam jumped at the chance to be his first lieutenant so they could continue to serve together.

"Liam, can we get off the subject of my ass? It ain't gonna happen. I'm going to get him pregnant and then we're gonna focus on the war." The look on Liam's face annoyed him and he wanted to smack it off. He was trying to be serious and the guy couldn't stop joking, particularly when pregnancy was brought up. "Seriously, can you wipe that silly-ass grin off your face! I don't know why I brought you anyway."

“Well, seeing as I’ve always been your second-in-command, it was a given that I be chosen. Even if you didn’t ask, I wouldn’t have left you hanging in the wind with some prissy-ass replacement that couldn’t find his dick in the dark after you put it in his hand for him. Plus, I didn’t feel like breaking in another jackass captain.” His smirk said he knew he could get away with ribbing him and possibly murder too as long as they got the job done and done right. He felt lucky to have the guy stand by his side.

The fly in his soup was the fact that to get this promotion, he got a wife... no, wait... he got a husband. A man. He had never even contemplated looking at another man sexually, romantically or any other way other than a friend or brother in arms. He blamed it on the excitement of the promotion and the long list of titles that came with it. But there was the non-negotiable condition of an arranged marriage. On the plus side, the need for the materials to end this drawn-out war would be met. Then again, there was the want of an heir so badly that the king essentially asked for him by name. Hell, the fact that he felt so perfectly confident in his masculinity meant it wouldn’t matter who he slept with. It didn’t cross his mind to turn down the position. He would do this for himself, for humankind and for the fate of the cosmos. That is the only possible way to explain how he eagerly agreed to the marriage. If anyone asked, that’s what he’d tell them.

Of course, after he picked his jaw up off the floor, he asked the commandant some standard questions. Why him? Why not a diplomat already on the planet? Someone they already knew, like the current ambassador? Did he have to marry? Couldn’t he just be the bodyguard? Did she really expect two men to be able to have a baby? He wanted to make sure she didn’t just mean he could donate sperm and be done with it. She didn’t. She meant the whole enchilada.

As to his other questions, he’d have to get them answered when they landed. He got a whole bunch of nothing from Commandant Johnson. All she would say is that the correspondence stated the king of Virian specifically requested Earth’s best warrior, the one that won the battle for Baskllia, for marriage to his son and an heir to his line. Max got the feeling that was all she knew. But his gut told him there was something else behind this rush treaty.

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After spending the majority of the morning distracted on the bridge, Max had taken to pacing the halls of the ship. He wasn’t claustrophobic, he just couldn’t sit still. The crew was starting to give him strange looks when he passed them. Was he so rattled that they were picking up on it? The regulations



didn't take long to go over. It basically showed the order of who was in line to be king, who could sit in council and how certain occasions and ceremonies were handled. His commandant had easily sent three times as much information to the king, so they had pictures and information on all the members that would be accompanying him. He considered what he received light reading and thought directing the crew members would occupy his time until they arrived. However, he was struggling to concentrate on anything but mystery princes and how sex between men would work. Too bad he was officially married when the treaty was signed or he'd pull the ship over at the next space station to work off some steam with a lady friend.

The day before, Max thought it would be good to research gay sex. A few members of his squad were gay or bisexual, but other than knowing that, he was clueless on how the whole thing worked. He wasn't inclined to ask them either. Liam would just make crude jokes and Max would come away with a migraine and somehow less information than he went in with, so that option was out.

He'd never had a reason to be interested in caring about alternative types of sex before. Looking through the information and photos on the multiweb didn't do a thing for him. The one with the tentacles had him thanking God and any other deities he could think of that the Virians were humanoid. As far as he knew, the Virians weren't much different than humans. He was more indifferent and clinical than anything else about what he saw on the web. He thought of it as being just like learning a new skill. Only it looked like he could seriously injure the guy if he couldn't fake his way through this skill.

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Sideon was feeling what could possibly be described as anxious, not that he would admit it. His new husband would be landing any day now. They had already performed most of the ceremonies without the man. He had already been down to the falls for meditation, done the washing and fasting. He'd been relatively cut off from the world for the last week. It was driving him up a wall.

Everything that couldn't be performed without the bridegroom would be skipped due to special circumstances. All that would be left was the presentation. He was the first one to step up for change in the right direction, but his father never skipped steps in an important ritual. He pleaded with the spirits and Klavlak to overlook these slights and hoped this was not a sign of bad things to come.

Since he would remain confined to the small suite and bored until he obtained his leave, he needed a way to entertain himself. His first thought was to escape through meditation, but last time, his spirit half wouldn't let up about how the marriage was a bad idea but wouldn't share the reason why. He wouldn't stop mumbling to himself about how their problems would soon be solved. For an entity that was supposed to impart wisdom on how to maintain peace in their world, he never seemed to share much. Sideon wanted to ask his father about that. There were legends about rogue spirits that wreaked havoc in the physical world, but he didn't know how to bring it up without alarming his parents. His behavior was odd, but then again his spirit half had always been different from what others described theirs to be like.

Looking around the room for something to do, he thought about how he never liked the color in here. If he was stuck between these four walls, they should at least be pleasing to look at. The drab, and extremely ugly, olive plastering the walls was nothing like the beautifully lush, dark greens that he loved to see in Virian's forests. Sideon flicked his hand and vibrant reds, yellows, and blues began to swirl along the walls, merging as he willed them. The ceiling became a bright, clear blue, made perfect with the addition of a few fluffy white clouds, while the walls took on the image of the forest, complete with a rainbow, butterflies, and wild beasts. Another flick and the furniture began to move. He thought about anchoring the pieces to the ceiling, but it would take more energy than he was willing to expend at the moment. He decided to lie back and enjoy his pseudo-outdoor oasis while waiting for release from his temporary prison.

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### Chapter 3

Max stepped out of the cargo hold to be greeted. By absolutely no one. To say the least, he was miffed.

*Destiny* was a ship big enough for hyperspeed travel, but small enough to land on a planet, which was great as there were no space stations nearby. They'd been directed to land in a clearing twenty minutes from the king's mansion. Before landing, they flew over the area to get the general lay of the land. From the air, the royal home looked like a big X with an extended center where the lines crossed. There were buildings scattered near the rear and sides of the home that looked like residences and offices. Max found the height of the buildings to be odd. They all appeared to be only one story tall. There were a couple that had a second floor, but with the amount of natives in the area, he assumed their cities would be larger. He hoped they didn't build downwards toward the planet's center. His love of the sun was too great to be stuck underground.

Max assumed their flyover gave the host plenty of time to have someone waiting to welcome them. He expected a big reception because: 1) he was the big man on campus today, and 2) he figured they'd want to vet him and his crew before allowing them on the royal grounds. With no large reception and no transportation waiting, he guessed they were hoofing it.

As they stepped on the porch, the front doors flew open and a young man stumbled through. He looked flustered like he was late for a meeting. There really was no way to tell his age without asking, as apparently all the people here maintained the majority of their youthful appearance until death. He had no clue if this man was a college-aged boy or the king himself, so it would do no good to yell at him about the walk he just endured. He assumed after seeing a few of the people here, he'd be able to tell someone the king's age from a young man, but he didn't want to take any chances right now.

The man started when he noticed the warriors. When he looked at their service uniforms, recognition dawned on his face, right before all the blood drained from it. "I apologize for the lack of reception sirs. As you can understand, we are in the middle of preparations for the festivities. It was in no way intended to slight you. If you will follow me, I will show you to the throne room."

Max stepped through the double entry doors and was immediately taken aback. The one-story building was anything but small and ordinary. His gaze traveled up the grand staircase off to the right, up across the balcony and continued until somehow he was looking up at a ceiling at least three stories high above him. The small center of the X he'd seen from the air was long and wide. The supporting wall that should have made up the rear of the building was barely halfway through the room. Through the archway created there, he could clearly see what looked to be a large library with French doors leading out. If the Virian's could make expandable buildings, he could only imagine what they could do with the ships they promised. Max was starting to understand why Commandant Johnson jumped on the Virian train so fast. He smacked away the hand that grazed his chin before turning to his friend.

"Close your mouth, Ambassador, you're drooling." The sound of laughter from the warrior standing behind him jerked him into action. He growled and straightened his expression before turning back to the man who waited to show them to the king.

The young escort stood by patiently with a small smile on his face as the men took in the mysterious size of the room around them. When they came back to their senses and could follow without tripping over themselves, the men were led through the main building into the left rear wing. They ended up waiting down the hall from the throne room in the king's study while he finished entertaining a few citizens. They didn't get the chance to fully pull themselves out of their stupor and actually discuss that which was clearly impossible.

Two men entered the room and gave the group a once-over glance. The crown on the taller man was a dead giveaway. Max assumed the other gentleman was an assistant because of the information pad he carried. He had a regal air about him, but he did work with the king. He looked harmless so Max didn't give the man a second thought.

"I only need to speak with the ambassador. The rest of you may get settled. You will have the week to become familiar with the grounds and surrounding area before your service begins." The way this man moved and spoke exuded confidence and gave no room for argument. The statements sounded dismissive to Max and that instantly made him want to argue, albeit as politely as possible.

"I wish for Lieutenant General Liam Black to stay with me. And if possible, I'd like for at least two of my men to be shown around by a member of your

security team.” He matched the king’s stare and waited for his response. He would not be “put in his place” and compromise this mission because the king had an ego to look after. He was here not only as a consort, but as the head warrior for the entire planet. He knew the moment the king conceded to his requests. King Alverio’s eyes turned friendly and his lips twitched like he was trying to hold back a smile. The king nodded and stepped back into the hall glancing up and down until he spotted who he was looking for.

“Zashril! Could you please get a few stewards together and help the ambassador’s team settle in. I am sure they need to retrieve their belongings from their ship first.” Alverio turned back into the room and stepped aside. “Gentlemen if you would please.” Max gave a small nod for the men to follow the steward.

When the door closed after the last man, Max turned to King Alverio, speaking directly to him and ignoring the assistant. “Your Majesty, if you would allow me to present my credentials?” The king appeared to have retained his good humor, but he didn’t want to waste any time and accidentally piss the man off.

“Very well, I will accept them.” Max pulled the letter of credence from his inner pocket and handed it over. He couldn’t stop the tremble that went through him when their fingers brushed. The Virian’s hands were a tad cooler than his own. By accepting the letter, His Majesty officially recognized him as having diplomatic accreditation and regarded him as having taken up his duties on his planet. “When dealing with Earth matters or issues of security, I will speak directly to you or to your deputy, Lieutenant General Black. You will be working with Pechrelm, the head of the royal guard. He will provide everything you need in regards to our security. Will the previous diplomats be staying here with you?”

“Whether the five diplomats currently stationed here remain will be up to your discretion. If you do decide to let them stay, they will be very helpful for getting us up to speed with the administrative tasks.” His only answer was a short nod and a neutral expression. He couldn’t decipher what the king wanted from just that. He would have to speak with the diplomats and decide for himself whether to send them back to Earth. He just knew this was not going to be a walk in the park. Good thing he was up for the job.

Max thought it was odd that the king never introduced his assistant. The assistant that did absolutely zero assisting. He didn’t write any notes or offer

any information. He stood in the corner the entire time, analyzing him and Liam like a puzzle. He felt that the man was of some importance but couldn't figure out how or why. And he couldn't shake the feeling that the king was hiding something even more important than the identity of his assistant.

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“Zashril, please escort the ambassador and general to their quarters.”

“Gentlemen, if you would please follow me.” Max was led to the suite where he would be spending the rest of his life with his husband. He would have to wrap his head around that one. And he'd do that as soon as he figured out how he was climbing stairs in a single story building. “This wing belongs to the prince and yourself. Your attendants and guards have the ground floor while you are afforded the upper two floors. This stairway, as well as the one at the other end of the wing, leads all the way to the roof. All the suites are private so that you and the prince will not be disturbed.”

The suite was impossibly large. The men passed through a sitting room with a kitchen off to the right. He noticed two bedrooms and two offices on the first floor as they ascended. After everything he'd seen so far, he shouldn't have been shocked there was a separate sitting area connected to the master bedroom. As he explored the master bedroom, it didn't escape his attention that someone had already put away his clothing and placed his few pictures around the room. As far as unpacking went, his was sadly anticlimactic. He did notice the closet, his clothes were in was full and the clothing was in his size. The jeans were a thinner material, not the heavy, rugged stuff he was used to back home. The good thing was that his Earth clothes weren't too different, so he'd have no problem blending in.

“All of the members of the royal family have a personal steward. I will be serving you alongside Tavrel, who is the steward of the prince.”

“Where is the prince now?”

“He's at the summer home already, as the presentation will take place there. It's tradition that the grooms are not to meet until the ceremony begins. After the ceremony, there will be a great celebration in your honor. The summer house is already furnished for the newlyweds to retire for the evening.”

Max wandered the room as he listened to the attendant. “We're not coming back here tonight?”

Apparently the experts back home didn't have as much information on Virian's customs as they thought. His private, family members only, strictly on

paper, and for appearances marriage was turning into more. More like a Hollywood wedding with paparazzi everywhere. This didn't bother him though. He knew how to improvise for many an occasion.

“No, Your Excellency, you will be staying in the summer home for a week so that you and the prince may get better acquainted without interruptions. You will be well protected and cared for during your stay, but the home is large enough that you will not notice the help.”

Max highly doubted that. He had been trained to notice the help and anyone else, whether they wanted to remain hidden or not. He wandered over to the window and realized he could see the forest they walked through. Ah, the mysteries of the universe. He could see out, but anyone looking at the building would only see the windows looking into the first floor.

“The ceremony will begin an hour before dusk. I'll return for you in a while so that we may arrive on time. If you need anything at all before then, just ask for me. Please make yourself comfortable.”

Max turned to face Zashril. “Ask for you how?” There were no phones, televisions, or anything else in the room. The only things he did notice were the metal disks in the wall near the door and across from the bed. Zashril appeared to hesitate and possibly glow a little before replying. The glowing had to be his imagination, it was there and gone in a blink.

“Oh, well... I apologize, sir. We usually use our mental powers to activate devices.” Zashril demonstrated by flicking his hand towards the wall causing a hologram to pop out. “But if you prefer, you may activate them by hand just by touching one of the disks in the walls. The code to activate any in your suite is star-one-four-three.” His translator chip must have broken because what Zashril pointed out as a star was nowhere near close to resembling what it looked like on Earth.

The man turned to back to Liam. “General, if you will follow me to the third floor. You will share that floor with the prince's studio. There is room for a few of your men here downstairs. The rest will stay in the officer quarters.” The two men exited and left him with a little more time to do nothing but wander and think.

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King Consort Kusath was excited about this entire deal. His husband and the entire council had been constantly worried as of late. He, on the other hand, had a good feeling about this even before he just met the man that would take

his son's hand. Now he was completely sure that even though the ambassador came across as arrogant, he really wasn't that way on purpose. There were some deeper issues of insecurity that Kusath couldn't quite get a bead on. The council didn't understand how he could be so blasé about having a strange group of aliens on their planet, and Kusath tired of explaining that he had a hunch that it would work out. He was the odd man out because he could "read" things on a deeper level than most.

"That was fun, Al! Did you see the glances the general kept shooting at me? And the ambassador just ignored me outright. At least we know they do well under pressure of an unknown presence. You thought they would be all about death and destruction. They seem tamer than the multiweb made them out to be, so maybe they can be civilized." He couldn't pass up the chance to throw a taunt at Al. His husband had been second-guessing himself all week and it hurt to watch. Kusath could tell that Al wanted to take his word that everything would work out, but this was a big gamble they were making. In the end, he'd made the right decision with the information and options they had available.

"I didn't like that he ignored you. I couldn't tell if it was meant to be rude or if he was just trying to be professional and respectful to me."

"I don't think that he would purposely attempt to disrespect us or our people. He has to make this treaty work just like we do." And Kusath was sure that they would make it work. He'd help the human in any way he could because he knew this was the correct route.

"I suppose. Only time will tell his true nature."

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## Chapter 4

The summer home, as Zashril called it, was over an hour away from the castle and turned out to be a mansion itself. Just a smaller scale one. There were people rushing about with finishing touches, and he could already hear people gathering at the front of the building. He had the steward walk him through what he should expect during and after the presentation. The last thing he needed to do was insult someone his first day planetside. In actuality it wasn't much. He and the prince would enter the hall from separate side rooms and step out onto the balcony together as they were introduced. His only job was to hold hands and wave. Afterward, they would follow the king and his consort to the feast hall. All he had to do there was smile and make conversation. How hard could that be?

Max changed into his blue dress uniform, as the prince was wearing the royal purple. Zashril informed him the colors would complement better than his brown uniform. Stepping out into the wide hall, he was shocked to see a man about his height with shoulder-length white hair and deep purple eyes looking back at him from an elfin face. His skin seemed somewhat translucent but sandy compared to his own golden-brown. He assumed this was the prince as he was wearing lavender robes to match the dark-purple the king and consort were wearing. Max had only seen a glimpse of the couple as they stepped out onto the balcony, but it was enough to make sure he approached the right man. The robes were wrapped around the prince like a toga and the white pants underneath contrasted with his father's black ones. But he was sure the king had long black hair, and from what could see, so did his consort. So logically he was expecting their offspring to match them. He knew he probably shouldn't be staring so hard, but the only thing he could think was that this man was beautiful. He had never before thought that about a man. Hell, he didn't think that about ninety-eight percent of the women he slept with. What the hell was wrong with him? Just because he was technically married didn't mean he had to go all googly-eyed over the pretty man.

The panic rising inside him threatened to cause him to call the whole thing off now. This was suddenly becoming very real in his mind. The people gathered outside, his commandant on Earth, the king of Virian, and the prince in front of him were all expecting a wedding. He was expected to have sex with this man and raise a child. He needed to pull himself together and fast. He had a part to play for the sake of the galaxies.

Sideon chuckled at the man's wide-eyed shocked expression. He had expected a reaction because he knew he didn't look like his parents. He was born with white hair and no one could figure out how. The doctors even performed a paternity test to make sure he wasn't a switch. The symbols and designs that every royal was born with on their right shoulder, arm, and belly could be faked, but the purple eyes could not. The test was just reassurance.

The chuckle brought the man out of his stupor. He blinked and looked away, a lovely blush lighting up his dark cheeks. His steward, Tavrel, stepped forward interrupting his own bout of awkward staring. "The head council member is about ready to announce you after the king, Your Royal Highness."

Max stepped forward, bowed and offered his arm. "I'm Max, Your Royal Highness. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Sideon. I am sure that the pleasure is all mine." He placed his hand on Max's warm arm and couldn't help the shy smile that graced his face when the man gave a small shudder. If he was this much of a gentleman and continued to be so, this marriage might not be too bad. Sideon still didn't know what side of the fence to fall off in believing that this marriage wasn't just so Earth could obtain their technology.

Tavrel cleared his throat, drawing Sideon's attention again. He could see his fathers moving off to the right side of the balcony. Now that he focused on listening, he could hear Councilman Rolssay announce them. "I present to the people of Virian, Heir to His Majesty, King Alverio, and King Consort Kusath, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Virian, Sideon I'Briani, and His Royal Highness Crown Prince Consort, the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Earth, Maxwell Carmichael Jenkins." Sideon and Max stepped through the doorway and out onto the balcony overlooking hundreds of citizens. There were hover cameras and large screens set up so that all who traveled and those at home watching would be able to see the royal couple. As he raised his arm to smile and wave at his people, he noticed Maxwell didn't appear to have trouble with the attention. In fact, he seemed to eat it up. Like he had been gone and was receiving a welcome home. This attitude would be good as they would forever be in the spotlight until their heir took over his place as king.

Sideon's brother, Aireon, was standing on the balcony to the left of the doors. He had been teasing that the warrior would be grotesque-looking and full of himself. That Earth didn't mind happily sending him along because he was a

blight on society. Aireon was wrong, so very wrong. He was not hard to look on at all. If anything, he was handsome. They were about the same height, Max being just a couple inches taller than him, and he had a very nice build. Nice, wide shoulders to grab. Sid shook himself. This was not the time to daydream and he hoped later he would not need to. He gave his brother a wink before he turned his attention back to wave at the crowd down below.

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Max ate up the attention from the large crowd below him. Forget what he said about Hollywood weddings; he could get used to this. Living like a celebrity and being treated as a hero before he even did anything. He didn't need to have a purpose here besides being a trophy husband. Not that he planned to shirk his responsibilities. His goal still remained to keep the people of Virian safe from the Scheklkags and their followers.

After a few moments, King Alverio stepped forward to address and thank the masses, and the dark-haired assistant stepped up with him. That's when it dawned on Max that this *assistant* was King Consort Kusath. Was it that he purposely failed to introduce himself earlier because he wanted to observe the newcomers without revealing his true station? He felt a little slow for not catching that one, but at this point, it would probably be safer to assume that there was some type of hidden agenda from everyone involved here. He couldn't quite fault them as even he had an agenda. That's how he ended up here in the first place.

Following the king's short speech, Max and Sideon gave one last wave to the people gathered below and to the cameras before following the noble couple back into the hallway. The young man that he guessed was Aireon trailed after them. Max assumed he was the only family member wearing green because he was not yet attached to someone. Even his untrained eye could see how Aireon's outfit complemented the royal colors while apparently showing he was still on the market. He wondered if the king would still marry off the younger prince even though Sideon was now married and would hopefully be expecting an heir soon. It was possible there was no need unless the crown prince and heir were killed.

Turning away from the man behind him, he followed the kingly couple into a lavish banquet hall. He tried to keep his jaw from dropping over the size of the space. There was a long table placed down the center, which left room to comfortably mingle after dinner. Through the archways along the right wall, he

could see that the room held an excessively shiny dance floor with more chairs along the wall.

Max didn't know how the family usually sat down to eat, but the food already set out was definitely fit for a king. It was a good thing that the king's council, along with the lords and dukes from all over the planet, were dining with them. He assumed that since he and the prince were to have this massive place to themselves for a week, these important members would be set up in the main castle. He was sure they hadn't made that long journey just for a meal. The king did mention some festivities back at the main castle for the travelers.

He decided to try and take his cues from the king's consort. When the consort helped the king into his seat then sat to his left, Max pulled out the seat to the king's right. Sideon smiled up at him as he sat, which made his heart skip a beat. He must be more nervous than he thought if that smile made him feel unsteady. As he went to sit next to Sideon, a steward directed him to a seat on the other side of the table, in between the king's consort and one of the council members. Well, he wouldn't mind speaking to Kusath and learning more about him and this place. He didn't need to ask much. It was all about reading between the lines.

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## Chapter 5

Kusath followed his husband's gaze to see the new prince consort helping Sideon into his seat. They were aesthetically pleasing together, the way Sideon smiled as he sat. The seating arrangement worked to Kusath's advantage. He wanted to know more about the young man in his own words and be his first, but hopefully not his only ally, on the planet. Currently, Kusath was the only one convinced this arrangement would work out.

The file they'd received on Maxwell Jenkins stated he was in his early thirties, a little over six feet, and had captained his own ship, with his best friend by his side, for the last five years. Kusath remembered how sad he felt when he looked over the files. Training must start while the humans were still children. Max looked much too young to have led and won so many battles. Even now, Kusath's own children were still considered in their youth. Their lifespan was longer than the humans and they were yet to be affected by the rest of the galaxies' plights. He had a brief thought about possible gene therapy to extend the lives of the earthlings as he couldn't have his son grieving over his husband after only a short time together.

When Kusath provided the Earth commandant with information about the people of Virian, he was deliberately vague. The information they received back on the warriors coming to their planet was infinitely more than he expected and well appreciated. While he sensed the earthlings could be trusted, he didn't want to put himself in a bad spot if they couldn't. The council was not one-hundred-percent sure that Commandant Johnson would not try to trick them, and this would turn bad if they knew he gave them the keys to the kingdom.

The Virians needed someone with fresh ideas on how best to set up security against attackers. While his people were brilliant with building and manipulating advanced technology, their philosophy reminded them that all life is valuable. They would not take the life of another to save their own. Yet, instead of choosing to perish, they found a planet of life-forms that would do it for them. The coming threats would leave them completely unprotected and helpless without the young man, his team and his planet. Kusath was labeled naïve as usual, but as usual he knew he was going to be right. He had a good feeling about this.

He shook himself out of his thoughts as Max sat down and conversation around him began to pick up. Alverio stood, and after a short prayer thanking Klavlak and the spirits for the bounty and new marriage, everyone around the table began filling their plates. Kusath liked that Max jumped right in, showing him to be confident, but he took a measured amount of food, giving the impression that he was also cautious.

After he filled his plate, he turned to see Max hadn't touched his yet. He was staring at it with a crease in his brow. Kusath wanted to wait for Max to address him but, although he could fake it sometimes, patience was never his strong suit.

"Nervous, young man?" Kusath noticed the slight flinch, like Max had forgotten where he was, or just wasn't expecting anyone here to speak to him.

"No, Your Majesty, why do you ask?" He was sure that wasn't completely true, but the man had a great poker face and hid whatever he was feeling well. He could barely feel the nervous energies radiating off of him. That, and Kusath knew a little about how the youngling was feeling first hand. He was jumping headfirst into something so strange and permanent, his sense of duty and the need to not let the people around him down pushing him forward.

"You have not touched your food." Kusath chuckled. "Word of advice. Do not think so hard about what is to come, worry about it tomorrow. The night is still young. You should enjoy it."

Max briefly looked as if he were about to respond but turned back to his plate. When he finally spoke, it was to the plate of food in front of him. "Was your marriage arranged?"

"It was." Kusath tried not to smile. Max had skipped the lies about how he wasn't worrying and got straight to what he wanted to know.

"What made you agree to it?"

He took pity on the man and gave a complete and truthful answer. It was probably hard for Max to get that question out, considering the line of questioning might be rude where he was from. And the fact that he looked like he was admitting a weakness by asking. "I did not agree to it." That statement got him a captive audience.

"For some reason or another, Alverio's father was riding through the city I lived in. He said I caught his eye and I appeared to be perfect for his son. The way he spoke made it seem that he had met me before, but I knew this wasn't

true. For months my spirit guide showed me visions of moving and a marriage, but I didn't divulge them to anyone as I didn't want a husband then. I didn't put it together until later that the king may have been receiving messages as well and came to find me. So I learned that it didn't matter that I was attempting to run because destiny has a way of finding you."

"Well, that must have been nice knowing your destiny found you."

"No, the night before our presentation, I ran. I'm really not sure why. I had convinced myself that I wanted to be married in my own time, to the man that I picked, not one my father or anyone else had chosen. As you can see I didn't get far.

"I went to hide in a little alcove down at the river and decided to meditate on the situation. I felt there must be a special reason that the king had stopped for me when there were hundreds of men lined up at his door, requesting his son's hand. Even then, I believed that the visions were wrong. They only show possibilities, not certainties. What convinced me that this was meant to be was when Alverio found me. He'd snuck out of the palace also and realized that his favorite place to meditate was occupied by a runaway. We talked, realized we could make it work, and here we are today."

He turned to look at his husband and remembered how a few days after their marriage, they had their first fight. Max pulled his attention back when he let out a snort. He knew skeptical when he heard it. Max needed time to get used to the idea and he now had plenty of it stretched out before him.

"I know you don't believe me yet, but I have faith you two will make a powerful couple. It's going to be hard work, but if you two tackle your problems together you'll make it. If you have any questions or need any help, doesn't matter if it's marriage problem or otherwise, come find me."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I'll keep that in mind." He didn't want to point out that he knew Max's pride would get in the way the first couple of times.

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Max appreciated Kusath opening up to him. Of course he would be skeptical about being able to work through anything involving life or death decisions with a guy he'd just met. He was used to giving and receiving orders, not playing nice with a sleeping partner. None of his sexual relationships lasted longer than a night. He and Liam got along so well because they knew each other's buttons and when not to push them. This wasn't even like having a new subordinate where the job came first and learning about them came gradually.

He tried to shake off the conversation and his worries, finally giving his plate a second look. At least nothing on it was moving. The food did look edible and he was starving. It wouldn't hurt to taste it, especially since he loved trying new foods. And he'd have to get used to it sooner than later. He picked up his knife and fork ready to dive in. He'd rather know what it was first, but even after the personal turn their conversation had taken, he still felt like it would be too rude to ask. It wouldn't come out right and the king consort was on his side for now. Besides, Kusath was correct, he was worrying and now was not the time for that. He needed to calm the internal noise, get back to his center, and join in the festivities going on around him. Glad that Kusath changed the conversation, he bolstered his resolve and threw out his opinion on the possibility of building a new space station nearby.

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Usually couples did not have separate seating during meals, but customs for special occasions were to be followed. Sideon's father sat at the head of the long table, with those in line for the throne on his right and the consorts on his left. The council members took up the next seats on each side before the special guests, lords and dukes were seated. This meant that while Sideon couldn't converse with and learn more about either of the humans, he could still study the man sitting across from his brother.

He watched as Max had a short conversation with his sire and then went back to staring at his plate. The man was a puzzle already. He appeared confident on the balcony, but when they entered the dining hall, he took on a wary look. When he wasn't giving his food curious looks, he was constantly scanning the room. Even when he was giving the person he was speaking to his full attention, he was somehow still fully aware of his surroundings.

No matter what his father had told him before, Sideon knew this man was not an ordinary diplomat. He wasn't an ordinary bodyguard either. There was something in those brown eyes that made even Pechrelm seem timid compared to him. Sideon had met plenty of Earth's diplomats. They were soft and either looking for a way to get over in negotiations or timid like they had not been on the job long. They all had some type of ulterior motives, either for themselves or the people they worked for. He had suspicions that his father may have gotten more out of this than he was letting on because he finally decided to sign a treaty. The inhabitants of Virian had needed the protection before now, so something must have changed. Since there was no large fuss about it though, Sideon decided to take it at face value. That this was simply a good deal with the bonus of grandchildren.



As if Max could feel him staring, his head lifted and he locked eyes with him. Sideon couldn't help himself. He looked down at his own plate and realized he was glowing. He had to get himself under control before everyone at the table knew what he was thinking. He didn't know why it embarrassed him to get caught looking. Maybe it was all the naughty thoughts running through his head alongside the logical ones. That didn't stop him from making sure the coast was clear before taking back up his observation post. The chuckle beside him meant his brother saw. He did not look forward to that conversation later.

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Max was grateful he sat next to Councilman Nessiran. He had a great sense of humor although he could surely throw back the wine. After everyone had their fill with the salads, meats, soups, and drink that were laid out, fruits and desserts took their place on the table. Then the dancing and mingling began. The first dance was designated to the new couple with the fathers dancing alongside them. Then they would be passed between Sideon's fathers and then along to whomever else wanted to dance or speak with them. That meant they were allotted an entire three-minute song to get to know each other before possibly not speaking for the rest of the night. So of course Max wanted to break the little guy in.

"Did you like what you saw at dinner?"

"Whatever do you mean?" He liked how Sideon looked away, like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't have been.

"So you weren't staring at me over the... actually I'm not sure what that was on my plate."

"It was krugarigna, the customary first meal at all weddings."

"Krugri... yeah, you're going to have to tell me what that was again later. Hey, don't laugh." Sideon's laugh sounded like music and his eyes crinkled with amusement. This image made the weirdest thought cross Max's mind. This man really should spend all his time smiling. It suited him. "I don't have to be able to pronounce it to eat it. And so you know, it was tasty." Max hoped this lighthearted feeling lasted. They hadn't even gotten to the getting to know you stage. That was always the hardest part.

"That was the shortest three minutes ever. Will we get to dance again?"

"It is quite possible, if the—" Sideon was cut off as a new song started and the king pulled him away into the next dance.

He had mixed feelings on seeing Sideon passed around. Max felt awkward at holding and dancing with another man, yet at the same time, Sideon fit nicely in his arms. It was probably best not to let that thought take root in his mind. All it took was one time to get someone pregnant then they could sleep in separate beds. He put all of his attention into dancing with the lord currently in front of him. The guy had some great ideas on building a few small floating cities that could double as spacecraft. Being able to evacuate the planet without waiting to terraform a new planet was a plus.

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Sideon was grateful when the feast began to wind down.

He enjoyed mingling with his guests, but as usual, social interactions tired him out. Hopefully he would have time to recharge even with having a strange man traversing his home. He knew, with being the future king, he would have to conquer his introverted side, or at least continue to fake it well. He wouldn't always have time to slip away and think over a problem or find reflective time. But tonight, he had the perfect excuse to retreat from the festivities. Thankfully the hall was at the opposite end of the house from where they would be staying. No one would dare venture into the newlyweds' wing.

Sideon caught his steward's eye and gestured toward the main hallway. They'd done this enough times that Tavrel knew exactly where he wanted to go. As he stepped into the hall, he figured it wouldn't be plausible to leave without taking Max with him. He couldn't make heads or tails of him so far other than to know he was handsome and could tell a few jokes. He'd have tried harder to pull him aside, but it would have been rude to ignore his guests.

This was one of the many reasons he was against arranged marriages. He didn't want to be thrown into the mix with a man he had never met, didn't know from Klavlak, and be expected to just get on with it. He had no problem dealing with people in public and for shorter periods of time. Yet, when he lived with someone, they were in his personal space and he would rather know their mannerisms, habits, likes, and dislikes before the moving in. It could be that they could not stand to look at each other. He had a strong feeling this was going to be an uphill battle, both ways.

Still, Sideon was thinking of the man as well as himself when he sent Tavrel back in to tell Max and Zashril that he was leaving. That would give Max the excuse he needed to slip away, if he wished to. Sideon continued on to the master bedroom of his wing to change into something less... royal.

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## Chapter 6

It was going to take a while getting used to being called “Prince Consort” and “Your Excellency”. A few times he worried about offending someone because he didn’t realize they were speaking to him. Other than that he had a great time. He was more accustomed to the officers’ balls on Earth, being about kissing the asses of the higher-ups, so they would consider him for a promotion. He hated it and thought the parties a waste of time for someone with his talents. Last night had him in the spotlight. He shouldn’t let it go to his head though. Ha, what was he thinking that for? He was the man of the hour and needed to be worshiped for it. Sideon had sent his steward Tavrel back for him, but he was having fun, soaking up the sun.

Now he wondered how he should approach another guy for sex. He usually just made eyes with a female, gave the nod and they’d end up in a hotel room for an hour. Or five. Afterward they’d pretend to make excuses and hoped to never cross each other’s path. From what he picked up at the party, marriage here was a “till death do us part” affair, not the annulment after two days of marriage type of thing. So he didn’t think his modus operandi would fly with the man he was married to.

Good thing they were so exhausted the night before that he didn’t have to worry about faking an excuse for more time. They didn’t even make it to the same room before sleep hit. He’d changed into loose pants and shirt before he fell asleep on the couch in the middle of checking his e-mails. But now they had nothing but time. No pressing matters, no interruptions, nothing but time. The next week would be a test but he was sure it was nothing he couldn’t handle.

He found his way down to the kitchen and was rooting through what looked like the fridge when Zashril and Tavrel entered. Max didn’t mind helping, but the stewards would hear nothing of it, shooing him away. He ended up at the end of the counter watching, not even able to put in a word on making the coffee. He started asking the men questions about themselves, figuring if he couldn’t help, he could at least learn more about the men he’d be spending time with.

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Breakfast ended up being a battle in civility. Sideon was not a morning person. Never had been. Never would be. He could fake it for engagements he

couldn't get out of or push back until later in the day, but being up in the early morning was not his favorite thing to do. After rolling out of bed he needed time to wake up, relax and contemplate the coming day, life in general, or how he could stop Councilman Nessiran from drinking so much at festivals. It got harder for Sideon to be polite to him after the slurring started. The man couldn't hold his liquor, yet he insisted on drinking like a fish.

This morning, he needed to consider the fact that he woke up married without any knowledge of the offending party's whereabouts. Max missing from the suite should have worked in his favor. He was still tired from the party and needed time with a book or possibly some soft music to rejuvenate. Instead, what he got as he entered the kitchen was an undoubtedly alert and extremely chatty Max.

This man had obviously been up much earlier than necessary and was ready for the day, while Sideon was still in his sleepwear. He already recognized that this was not going to work out. It was scientifically proven by the amount of fights between him and his brother at unspiritual hours, that morning larks and night owls do not mix. Period. They would need ground rules immediately. Well, in a moment. He needed his morning pick-me-up immediately. Ever since they began importing coffee and then growing their own coffee plants, it had been hard to go without that jolt of energy. It beat out all the other pick-me-ups they had on planet.

Before he made it across the kitchen he got a very chipper, "Good morning!" It could only be that lark because everyone else knew not to breach the blast zone until at least an hour after the waking and caffeine boost. He turned, but could not quite change the grimace into a smile or muster more than a grunt in response. Thank Klavlak the coffee had already been brewed and the plant milk was already on the counter next to his mug.

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Max just knew that horrible look and noise was not directed at him. He didn't find himself particularly talkative in the morning but expected no less than a full and proper greeting from everyone he crossed. It was something ingrained in him after he joined the Verband. Not addressing the wrong hard-ass superior could get warriors in a tough spot, a.k.a. the brig. The prince may not be a morning person, but his behavior still came across as rude. Max was doing him a favor just by being here. He went to follow Sideon when he felt a tug on his arm.

“I wouldn’t approach him for at least an hour. He needs time to wake up.” Tavrel had a warning look in his eye. Max pulled away. “I’ve dealt with worse. I’m sure I can handle a little grouchy.” He took the plates of food from the counter and joined Sideon at the table. “Good morning, Prince! Did you sleep well?” If looks could kill, Max would have burst into flames. Max wanted to laugh at his expression but surely it would only make this situation worse.

He gave a tentative smile to show he was harmless and counted it as a win when Sideon cleared his throat and gave a halfhearted, “Morning,” along with a shrug.

“Breakfast? Tavrel and Zashril made crepes, and found fresh fruit.” He poured a glass of juice for them and made their plates up while Sideon continued to give him the side-eye. Everything else he’d thought about doing that morning flew out of his mind. His mission, at least for the next hour, turned into get to know his new husband. That’s what he told himself anyway. It was more like annoy the hell out of the sleepyhead. And all he had to do was talk about absolutely nothing.

He pushed Sideon’s plate forward and the man’s scowl got deeper. “What did you have planned today?”

“Nothing.”

“I was thinking about walking the grounds. I didn’t realize you all lived so close to the forests. Or is it that you only clear what you need?” The lack of a response didn’t faze him. “We don’t have to stay cooped up in the house the whole week, do we? Maybe you can show me around?”

“Sure.”

Max dug into his food and continued to ask mundane questions between bites. It’s not that the answers mattered. He wanted to see the prince before he put on his public face. He had no doubt he’d be seeing enough of that in the future, if royalty here was anything like it was on Earth. There was no room for a private life outside the house walls and sometimes within them.

“What do you usually do your days off? You know, for fun?”

“Depends.”

“On what?” There was that look again. When Max opened his mouth to repeat the question, Sideon stood with a sigh and strode out the room, taking his coffee with him.

After breakfast Max went to find Liam. He actually didn't mind Sideon walking out. The food was delicious and even with the one-word answers, Max learned a bit about Sideon. He barely had a chance to talk to Liam the night before while he was being passed around in a sea of men, and he couldn't wait to tell him about the grouch. He figured that Liam could walk the grounds with him instead and they could finally talk about the weird tech they'd seen so far. Max assumed there was more of it around, but he would wait until later that day to figure out what it was.

Liam had placed the major in charge of the group at the main house and insisted on staying at the summer home at least the first two days as Max's personal bodyguard. Since Sideon clearly needed space, Max could get to work a few days earlier than planned and worry about personal work matters later. They needed to get started with looking over floor plans and get a general idea of what other buildings and people were in the area. The team didn't take any photos during the flyover but he needed them now. And since he was confined to the summer home, per the king's orders, he needed Liam to do a preliminary meeting with Pechreilm.

Just thinking about all that needed to be done was getting his blood pumping. He felt more alive with this new level of power he had. Even as the captain of his own ship, his ideas were mostly ignored. No matter what his experience was on the front line with his men, the higher-ups continued to neglect the obvious. The enemy was adapting and the tide was starting to turn against them. Being able to make a real difference in the fight against the Scheklkags was one of the reasons he signed up with the Verband in the first place. And being asked to come to Virian was a large jump in the right direction.

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Sideon knew it was rude to walk away, but he just could not take any more of that incessant talking. The talking that went along with a smile that almost made being up this early worth it. Max's dark-brown eyes that lit up with humor the deeper his smile got. Usually a nice view made up for everything and he could drown out the background noise. But with the way Max spoke, it seemed more like an interrogation than a getting to know you session. He wanted to trust his father's judgment in picking this man, but if this was the way Max functioned, Sideon would go mad before the day was out. There was no hope of thinking they would make it to the end of the week. Maybe he could find a way out of this. He would still marry an earthling to uphold the treaty,

but maybe he could get some time to find one he knew he was compatible with. Ugh, that would not work. They already went through the presentation so there was no going back. He didn't like it, but he would grin and bear it. For now, he would go and hide.

Getting away was easy. The staff was more invisible than usual so he didn't have a hard time sneaking up onto the roof. When he got there, all he had to do was activate the anchor points to create a new room. Even though he made the room with all-glass walls and ceilings so he could see the sky and forest, no one could see into the room. For Sideon, the great thing about the spatial distorter remained that he could hide in plain sight. If there was an emergency, security could access the coordinates of all the rooms in the building and find him, but for now he could daydream about slamming into Max's perfectly shaped ass without interruption.

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## Chapter 7

The next couple of days were awkward. Sideon thought it would be easier to ignore someone in a building that size but it turned out to be like a never-ending date. One moment, he was lusting for Max to use all that physical power he clearly had to throw him down on a bed so they could fuck each other's brains out, the next he was wishing he could have the man's tongue cut out.

Sideon got up later because he could, and to avoid another breakfast blunder only to have to pass Max in the halls. The ambassador had yet to sleep in the same bed with him. He appreciated that the man appeared to take the hint that Sideon needed more time to think about what they were planning on doing and only gave him a polite smile and nod as he continued on. And think is what he did. He attempted to distract himself by thinking about a space station for their sector and the increased travel and, therefore, danger the tiny planet would receive. But none of that was holding his attention. His mind kept sliding to Max and that mischievous smile, the way his ass looked in his jeans, and how all that muscle might feel on top of him.

His lust took a turn into anxiety. He was concerned that if he didn't make a move soon then he wouldn't at all. He'd somehow push the ambassador away and they'd end up miserable with the man hating him for taking away his freedom to marry someone else. They'd be the loving couple in public but ready to kill each other in private. Besides, he didn't want to have to go back to his father with bad news. Sideon would one day be king and he needed to buck up. If he couldn't handle his consort, how could he handle a planet?

All he knew about Max so far was that he was too damn loud in the morning, was in charge of the Verband base on Virian, and was either extremely confident or arrogant. Possibly both. And that the man was not as unaffected as he pretended to be. When they somehow ended up in the same room for more than a few seconds, he caught Max staring at him when he thought Sideon wasn't looking. He started lingering a little longer instead of immediately leaving the room to give Sideon his space. There was a look of longing mixed with something darker, almost like disgust. Sideon knew the lust was for him but wondered what the disgust pertained to.

Needing a way to bring that lust to the surface, he considered taking Max down to the marketplace closest to the Tiumn River. They could spend a few hours together, Max could get the lay of the land and hopefully by the end of



the night, they'd end up in bed together. With a plan of attack in place, he was convinced he could have Max falling all over him. This would be just like making a new friend. A new friend he needed to sleep with immediately. He sighed and braced himself before going out in search of his consort.

Sideon found Max in the basement office with Liam. It sounded like they were going over building designs. The ambassador surely wasted no time in getting started. Sideon knocked and waited until the men looked up. Liam must have heard about the breakfast incident and the later attempts at avoidance because he moved to get up and give them the room. Sideon realized in his struggle to focus solely on avoiding Max, he hadn't really noticed the right-hand man. Liam was about Sideon's height with a dark amber complexion. His movements were smooth and radiated power. His look suggested he was just as dangerous against his enemies as Max appeared and Sideon shuddered at the thought of getting on this man's bad side. Sideon smiled and gave the man a small nod as he walked toward him.

"I'll give these to the men to look at, Your Royal Highness." He bowed to Sideon and left, closing the door behind him. The tension in the room was palpable and he waited a beat before breaking the silence. "I want to apologize for my behavior the other day. It wasn't necessary for me to be so rude. I don't truly have an excuse other than I'm not at my best in the mornings."

Apparently Max was not quite ready to forgive his rudeness or the resulting avoidance behavior. His laugh sounded unhappy and annoyed. "Yeah, I couldn't tell from how you stormed out. What can I help you with, Your Highness?"

What he wanted Max to do was smile again like he smiled at the people during the presentation. Like he smiled at him over breakfast. He tried to stay nonchalant as he spoke. "Please call me Sideon. And I wanted to make it up to you. I'd like for us to be able to get along, so I thought we could spend the day together and actually get to know each other. My father and the council expect us to sit in this house all week so this is against the rules, but nothing about this has been conventional so far. Maybe we could walk around the closest municipality. There's a large market, theaters, or we can take a trip along the river. We would have to bring Tavrel, Zashril, and a few guards along, but I am sure they would not mind."

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Max liked where this was going. He wasn't truly upset with Sideon; he only wanted to give the man a hard time after all of his attempts to avoid Max.

Besides, the extra time left him to pretend to build up his resolve to see the whole sex thing through. The more Sideon spoke, the more animated he became even though he was clearly trying to hold back. Maybe the other day was just a morning-after fluke and they could get along. Max found himself smiling and received a blinding smile in return. He relented, standing up to stretch. “All right Sidi. Let’s see this town of yours.”

“My name is Sideon. Put on some comfortable shoes and we will leave in about five minutes.”

Max just smiled wider. “Whatever you say.”

The short ride to the municipality was spent with Sideon trying to explain to Max how the cars worked just like the houses. Max understood the basic of the anchor points and coordinates that held the shape of the room, but he still couldn’t wrap his mind around the science behind the spatial distorter. It was matter existing inside other matter and he’d been taught that was impossible. When Sideon tried to explain the antimatter engine setup, his brain completely shut down. When he failed miserably in changing the subject, he concluded that the people of Virian were science geeks and Sideon was their nerdy leader. And he had tons of homework to do if he wanted to understand any of it.

The marketplace consisted of a strip in the middle of town, lined on both sides with covered booths. Anyone not able to set up in the prime real estate of the main street simply set up on one of the smaller side streets, yet it didn’t appear to hinder any of their sales. Young boys ran down the street, weaving through the patrons while playing some weird version of keep-away. The boy in the middle would try to pull the floating ball down toward him only to have it zip through the air to one of the other boys.

The place was bustling with activity and Sidi seemed to know almost everyone there. The guards were alert but gave him a good deal of space to maneuver. Max figured the wide berth must be to keep him from feeling smothered and force him to sneak out a great deal or this was just part of the way the government here worked. Sideon did have a certain charm about him that made him easy to be around after he was fully awake. Max was introduced to a couple of people who could “get anything he needed, even off planet” and he believed they could make it happen. Over the years he’d built up his own network of connections, but it never hurt to add a few more. Overall, the society seemed self-sufficient; the only thing they were missing was protection against the coming war.

When Sideon wasn't pointing something out, talking about his childhood and his family or explaining something that usually went over Max's head, he was asking Max about his planet. He wanted to know where Max grew up, about his family, human women, and books. "Everything circles back to books. You can learn the nature of a being from studying what he writes. I would still like to visit other planets. Interacting with a species is better than reading about them."

The walk about was enlightening for Max. He not only learned more about the people, but the man who would one day rule them. He also learned he had a hard time keeping his eyes off of Sideon. When the man brushed up against him, which Max was sure he did on purpose most of the time, he tried to convince himself that the zing of electricity he felt was nothing more than a reaction to the temperature of Sideon's skin. It had nothing to do with plump kissable lips, incredible eyes that made him want to give up all his secrets, or the feel of soft skin that made him want to touch more. He refused to let it be that because he was incapable of having any type of romantic or sexual feelings for another man.

They did eventually make it to the river in time to watch the sun setting. The boat was another wonder of the universe as it sat just on top of the water with some barrier underneath reacting with the water to propel it. As Max leaned to look over the edge of the little two-seater boat, something broke the surface. He thought it might have just been the sun's reflection until it split the surface again, this time jumping over the boat soaking them. He leaned into Sideon to get a closer look. "Was that a dolphin? Are they friendly here? I've never seen one so close before."

"They're celiniphaes but they are like your dolphins. They seem to prefer the fish that live in the river here. And yes they're friendly. Spraying us with water was his way of saying hello and inviting us to swim with him."

Max didn't realize how close he was until Sideon turned towards him and froze. He was close. Close enough to grab. Close enough to lean up and kiss. He licked his lips as Sideon leaned closer, his eyes sliding closed. Panicking, Max cleared his throat and jumped back, effectively killing the moment.

Seconds before he'd wanted to close the distance and see how soft Sideon's lips were. Slamming the door on that closet became the only option. But now he had to say something before the atmosphere slowly slid into awkward territory.

“Umm... do you think there are any more? Don't they travel in packs or something?” He hated sounding so nervous and hoped Sideon hadn't picked up on the tremor in his voice. Sideon gave a short answer that he didn't pick up as he was trying to find more space, and air, in the boat.

They stayed on the water for a while longer, but Max felt the day had lost some of its magic. If the temperatures of the previous days were the norm, he expected for the night to start cooling before long. He didn't want to be the one to end their trip, but he had a strong need to be back in his room. He needed to give himself a verbal lashing for all the undesired thoughts of the day. Max was grateful Sideon beat him to the punch.

“We should probably head back before we freeze in these wet clothes.” Sideon sounded disappointed but Max refused to meet his eye the entire way back. He couldn't believe he'd been about to kiss another man. It *had to be* the buildup of the day. From walking through the town, talking and eating like they were on a real date. The romantic sunset on the river didn't help. He shouldn't encourage this. This could never work out like the king wanted and they were all fooling themselves. He and Sideon were just roommates who had to sleep together just once while convincing everyone they were a happy couple. That's all this could be and the sooner it was done, the sooner they could do their own thing.

All he had to do was forget this whole day had ever happened. A selective memory would come in handy in this situation. Max could pretend he didn't now know that Sideon liked to sneak off and help in the main research and development department. That he had been reading since he could remember and that paranormal was his favorite. He spoke five different alien languages. Max could erase the image of the dimple in Sideon's left cheek when he smiled. He'd burn the memory of discovering Sideon's eyes were different shades of purple depending on how the light hit them. Yeah, he could pretend he didn't know all that and that he didn't see that Sideon was attracted to him. He could ignore the erection he sported in the boat and just call it a blood flow problem. He had no problem lying to himself if the ends justified the means.

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## Chapter 8

When they arrived back at the summer home, Max politely excused himself after Tavrel pulled Sideon aside to talk. On the way home he contemplated asking Liam for his opinion but quickly banished the thought. Max assumed his friend would already be planning on bugging him the next day. He had a super drama sniffer when it came to Max. What Max really needed to end the day was solitude and a shower before slipping into his warm bed.

His shower was not working its usual magic of relaxing him and allowing him to work out his problems. Max simply couldn't think straight. He'd been having inappropriate thoughts since first seeing Sideon at the presentation. How could he have been mere inches from kissing Sideon? Why was he thinking of him sexually or at all? He didn't do men. It had to be something in the air or the food. Or, more likely it happened because it had been almost a month since he'd last gotten laid. That served to confuse him more, because why was he only attracted to Sideon? Of course trying to figure out attraction led to thoughts of what those firm-looking muscles would feel like when he slid his hands over them.

He started to get hard thinking about what that man would feel like writhing underneath him. "That's enough!" He slammed the cold water on full force and the desired result was immediately received. His cock shriveled and his balls tried to run and hide. If Sideon was having this effect on him now, he wondered what would happen after they slept together. "It won't affect me at all. It'll be the same as sleeping with any of those women, just a hole to use and get off." He should just go ahead and quench the curiosity running through him by having his way with Sideon. He'd be sated, once again repulsed, and part of the mission would be complete. He went to bed, convinced he could keep everything in his head separated in the end.

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Tavrel wanted answers that Sideon didn't have yet. His steward and friend was watching when Max suddenly pulled back from him, easily ending the date and shutting Sideon down at the same time. Instead of having hot, sweaty sex with an equally hot guy, he was alone in the master suite bathroom trying to figure out what went wrong. There were no clues to provide insight into why Max became so distant on the trip back. It would be a lie to say the tall, sexy

man wasn't attracted to him. Sideon could clearly see the large bulge in Max's pants during their trip along the river. Maybe Max thought they were moving too fast. But they didn't need to know much, if anything, about each other to have sex. And the goal in this situation was to move fast. They could get to know each other after Sideon had an heir growing inside of him.

It started raining as they made their way back up the river and Sideon was sopping wet. He might have taken that as a message from the spirits but he considered himself stubborn and wanted Max in his bed. Sideon stripped out of his shirt and pants to step into the warm shower. He thought about Max doing the same in the spare room where he had been sleeping since the night of the feast. Better yet, he imagined lifting Max's shirt and running his hands up his sides. His hands rose further up those firm biceps as he pulled the shirt over Max's head. Sideon kissed his cheek, loving the way Max's beard scratched against his smooth chin. He wanted to explore him. He slowly traveled lower. His tongue flicked out against Max's hard nipple. He knew Max was as turned on as he was as his breathing started to change. He went further still, nipping and biting those dark rippling abs. He wanted to follow that treasure trail he saw earlier because he knew there was a pot of gold waiting at the end. He looked up and watched as Max licked his lips. He wanted to trace them with his own tongue. He decided he could do that while he opened his present. He stood back up and brought his lips to Max's while he unzipped his pants. He moaned when Max grabbed his ass and pulled him closer, pressing their erections together. There was too much fabric in the way. Sideon pulled back to lower Max's briefs, uncovering his gorgeous length and taking it in hand. Max felt so hard, yet so silky soft as he thrust in his hand.

His cock was painfully hard. He stroked himself faster, wishing it were Max running his thumb over his sensitive head. He couldn't prolong his fantasy anymore and came with a loud grunt. He was getting hard again already as he washed and rinsed off. He and Max had to get over whatever hurdle was in the way. He wanted to know what that man would feel like inside of him.

The next morning Sideon purposely went down to breakfast earlier so he could see Max. Even with the little snafu at the end of their evening, he sensed that they tore out a section of the wall between them. He didn't want there to be a chance of it going back up and making this harder. He was still wiping sleep from his eyes even after the shower, but fierce determination pushed him along. He wanted to show he was actually capable of being social before midday.

“Good morning, Tav and Zash. Good morning, Max. Did you sleep well?” Max turned, almost knocking a bowl off the counter. “Close your mouth, you are going to gather flies.” He smiled at being able to catch the guy off guard and went to pour some coffee. Breakfast was crepes and fruit again and he absently wondered if Max had put in a request. The guys never repeated a meal this soon unless asked. Either way, he was grateful for the light meal. He was slightly nervous. If this backfired and his consort didn’t want him, he couldn’t fathom the consequences.

“You feeling okay, Sidi? You’re up kind of early.” He’d corrected Max on the proper way to pronounce his name before but truthfully he liked the way it sounded coming from him. The only other people he allowed to shorten his name were his family and Tav. His brother insisted on calling him Si, short for “Sigh, what randomness are you speaking of now?” and Tav had been calling him Deon since they were babies. Sideon could feel Max’s eyes on him as he took a couple of crepes, then heaped on fruit and whipped cream. Sideon looked at him through his lashes, snickered and slowly took a sip of coffee. He wondered how long it would take to seduce the ambassador, hoping it wouldn’t be too hard to accomplish.

“Oh, I figured I missed enough breakfast this week. You know, it is the most important meal. Tav cooks a great kulovup. Maybe I can ask him to make some for tomorrow and you can keep me company.” Sideon slid his hand across the table, barely brushing against Max’s fingers. He felt a smile creep onto his face when Max didn’t pull his hand back and watched as Max’s eyes grew big and round. Clearly he was having the desired effect. Max looked like he was having a hard time thinking of something to say, if the way his mouth was working was any indication. Going for a look of innocence, he patiently waited for Max to get his stride back.

“Did you...” Max cleared his throat and Sideon barely kept the smile off his face. “Did you have something planned for today already? I would have liked to see more of the town but it’s still raining out.” That little hesitation was cute and he saw in his mind that with a little work, he could make the mountain that was Max crumble at his feet.

“I thought about watching the new Earth film with the car chases and explosions. I don’t know why all of your movies have to have something explode but I like them. Maybe...” Sideon cleared his throat. Now he was suddenly shy. “Maybe, you might watch it with me?” Going for nonchalant was much harder than it looked when the possibility of sex was involved.

“Sure. Umm... did you want to start it now? We could move breakfast into that screen room I saw.” Sidi nodded and tipped the chair over as he stood. He flicked his hand and caught it right before it crashed. Between that, and the nervous giggle he just let slip and the fact that he’d started turning pink, he was sure he would start to lose his charm. Hopefully, he could make it down the hall without embarrassing himself further.

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The movie could only hold Sideon’s attention for so long. Usually, he was engrossed in the imported films, but now he couldn’t stop glancing over at the dark-haired man sitting beside him. No one had ever made him actually glow with blush before. It had Sideon rethinking if his idea was the best route to take. His previous encounters were always about sex or giving the appearance that he was actually trying to find a consort. Sideon never had a relationship lasting longer than a month and this one needed to last for the rest of his life. He couldn’t afford to make a mistake. Luckily, Max seemed to be going along with it so far.

As they ate off the cart in front of them, Sideon made it a point to *accidentally* brush up against Max. Sideon didn’t know why Max seemed to tense the first few times, but eventually Sideon could tell Max loosened up a little giving him confidence to continue.

Sideon pushed his plate away and leaned back, right onto Max’s arm. Max had stretched his arm across the back of the couch and was sitting closer to Sideon. It was his turn to tense, not knowing if Max stretched out to get comfortable or if he didn’t mind being leaned on. Max must have felt his hesitation because he wrapped his hand around Sideon’s shoulder and pulled him closer. Sideon looked up in confusion. Max was staring back at him. His eyes darkened and his gaze darted down when Sideon licked his lips. Sideon wanted so much to draw Max closer, except he didn’t want to misjudge his response and get rebuffed again. He held himself still as Max leaned closer. He could feel Max’s breath on his face and his own breathing sped up.

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Max was as confused as ever, but he hadn’t gotten this far in life playing cautious. As much as he tried to think of this as just friends watching a movie together, he knew it was anything but. Max was too aware of Sideon moving around on the couch. With short-sleeved T-shirts on, his arms had no protection. It was like a jolt to his system every time Sideon slid his arm past



Max's. He was aroused just sitting here thinking about Sideon. And once again he realized he'd gotten close to Sideon without even trying.

He put down his fork and leaned back. Thinking about the situation was getting him nowhere. Max had thought about it the previous night and again when he got up that morning. He needed to channel that inner strength he used on the battlefield. Following his gut and letting a situation play out as necessary was what he did best. Sideon wasn't trying to kill him. Subconsciously his mind and body must want this. And there was that little clause in the treaty being the reason Max sat here having this internal debate in the first place. Max made up his mind to follow through with this no matter how uncomfortable he might get.

After his freak-out the day before in the boat, Max understood he would have to make the first move. He supposed that Sideon had opened himself up the day before and might be reluctant to do it again. Max knew his confidence would take a hit if he was shot down. Setting himself up for failure was not his idea of fun.

Feeling Sideon tense up against him, Max steeled his nerves and took a deep breath before pulling the smaller man closer. When Sideon turned to him, Max could see he made the right choice. The confusion that he saw was barely hiding the lust in Sideon's eyes. Max felt drawn in by those deep-purple eyes and couldn't help leaning closer.

Max stopped right before their lips touched. He really wanted to see if the man tasted as good as he smelled, like warm apples and cinnamon. Max reminded himself: no thinking, only acting. He closed the distance and watched Sideon's eyes slide closed as their lips brushed. His lips were so soft and Max decided he wanted more. Sideon didn't try to stop him, so he took this as permission to get closer. His hand traveled up into the hair that he already knew would be silky. Max tried to pull Sideon even closer then flicked his tongue out. He wanted full admittance and Sideon let him have it. Thought no longer possible, he had to let this play out. He had to get closer. Tentatively, Max slid his tongue along Sideon's. He tasted sweet like the strawberries they just ate. He felt Sideon's hand glide up his free arm and latch on to his shoulder to pull them even closer. He'd never been this turned on from a little kiss. His mind blanked and all he could think was how amazing this felt.

This felt like heaven and hell. Max was disappointed when Sideon broke the kiss, but ecstatic that this meant he could go in for another one. As he pulled Sideon back toward him, Max toyed with the hem of his shirt. He slid his hand

underneath and his palm met hard muscle. Sideon moaned at the contact. That sound turned him on more. Max slowly pushed him on his back, pressing their bodies together, rubbing his lips over the light stubble on Sideon's chin. He loved the prickly feeling on his cheek as he traveled up to his earlobe to nip there. He rubbed up against Sideon's thigh. He was blessed with another moan when his thigh grazed the other man's hard length. This felt right and he would give anything to continue.

As Max pushed Sideon's shirt higher, Sideon stopped him with a hand on his chest. "Wait. I am not sure we should do this yet. Are you okay with this? We still barely know each other." The labored breathing and clear lust in his eyes belied his words.

"We know enough so I'm one-hundred percent okay. Are you all right? Did you want to finish the movie first?" Max sat back and pulled Sideon up with a smirk.

"Movie?" Sideon looked like he'd completely forgotten where they were. Max would bet Sideon couldn't even tell him the name of the movie they had been pretending to watch.

"Oh, umm... no... I just... And truthfully, well, I'd rather take this to our wing. The last thing we need is someone walking in on us." Max knew Sideon was stalling but he was fine going along with him for now. He wanted to take his time and for their first time, which he knew would be awkward, to be in total private.

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## Chapter 9

Sideon hoped he hadn't killed the moment. The way Max laughed and pulled him out of the screening room and down the hall suggested he hadn't. He only delayed it. He told himself he stopped to give Max more time to be sure, when in truth he was the one that needed the pause.

Sideon was not a stranger to sex, but he had never bottomed before and always called the shots. This promised to be different. He was a nervous wreck. Max was not of his world and it was like his first time all over. He thought he might die of shame if this got anywhere close to the level of awkward that happened his first time. Maybe they should indulge in some drink first. Yeah... he would suggest they loosen up before using their bodies to get to know each other a little better. Sideon went into their in-suite kitchen to find the vodka and some juice while Max stepped into the bathroom.

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Max lost his center in the amount of time it took them to make it back to their suite. Now that he was thinking and not doing he didn't feel okay. Theory was one thing. Actually going into battle was another. This likened to going into war, an everyday battle for the rest of his life. "Pretend he's a woman." Thinking like that wouldn't help the situation. "Dammit Max, you can do this. It's a hole! Stick it in, pull it out, rinse and repeat." What happened to his confidence during that little walk to the master bedroom? Minutes ago, he was ready to have at the man in the open where anyone could walk in. Now, Max attempted to talk himself out of barricading the door. Ugh! Time to wing it! This little powwow with the bathroom mirror was not getting him any closer to being done. Or to convincing himself that this remained in the territory of just doing his duty.

He stepped out into an empty bedroom. Great, he'd semi-talked himself up again and the groom went missing. Max opened the door to the hall and almost ran Sideon over. "You all right there? I thought you changed your mind and ran off." To cover the sudden reappearance of his nerves, Max took the bottles out of Sidi's arms. Vodka, orange juice, pineapple juice, and cranberry juice. Sideon was a genius! He could go for a little liquid courage right now.

"I wouldn't do that. I was just thirsty."

Max was skeptical about that. He could have come back with just the juice. "So... vodka?"

Max wanted to drink the vodka straight but it wouldn't do to get hammered. He just needed a nice little buzz and he could outperform anyone around. They sat on the chaise, mirroring their positions in the screen room as they drank. Max had his arm on the back of the chaise and was drawing circles on Sideon's shoulder. Apparently he could deny the desire he had to touch Sideon when he was alone but it refused to be ignored when he was up close and personal like this.

"I figured you would get drunk and then I could have my way with you." Max gawked at him. "The way you were pawing at me downstairs made me want to return the favor." Sideon set his glass down, put his knee on the chaise and threw his other leg over Max so he was straddling him. "Where were we?" He grabbed Max's glass to set down behind him. Just like that, Max jumped back into the game. He wanted to finish what they started in the movie room. All other thoughts were fluttering so fast he couldn't catch one, and right then it didn't matter. Max grabbed Sideon's hips as he leaned in to kiss him. Max didn't hold back this time. Their mouths came together, tongues reaching out to dance.

Fingers grazed skin at the hem of Max's shirt. A whine hit the air as they broke the kiss long enough for Sideon to remove their shirts. Max let his hands glide over Sideon's muscular back then roam lower to cup his butt. He pulled Sideon forward and moaned when their crotches rubbed together. It felt amazing even through their pants. Max pulled back. "Need air."

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Who needed air? Sideon would have happily died kissing Max. But if they didn't suffocate they could do this again. Reluctantly, Sideon pulled back to let Max breathe and followed the path he imagined following the day before in the shower. He followed Max's thick beard up to his ear and nipped at it. That earned him a moan and he wanted to hear more. He started to kiss his way down Max's neck.

Sideon pulled one of Max's nipples into his mouth and sucked hard while rubbing Max through his jeans. He wanted this man out of his mind with need for him.

"Oh, God." That was more like it. Sideon chuckled as he kissed his way across Max's chest.

This was a thousand times better than the fantasy Sideon had in the shower. He had no plans of shooting his release before he got what he wanted. Max had

just the right amount of hair across his pecs, and Sideon knew that thin treasure trail would lead to something delicious. He slid to the floor and followed that path down to the top of Max's jeans. He looked up and smiled at Max as he opened the button and zipper. He had gone without underwear which was lovely. Sideon licked the head of Max's cock as he tugged on the jeans.

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This was something of a new experience for Max, as he never really participated in foreplay with the ladies he'd slept with. Most of the time they didn't have the luxury of drawing sex out. He didn't do the post-sex cuddling thing either. He never knew what he was missing out on.

Max heard another moan and realized it was him. He was making all those insane noises, but he couldn't care to be embarrassed about it. In a moment, he wanted it to be Sideon making those sex noises. Max's eyes slid closed and he tried not to thrust up. Just the vision of Sidi on his knees in front of him had him wanting to come. He couldn't keep his eyes closed for long though. He opened them in time to see Sideon's lips glide, oh so slowly, down his dick. He couldn't help it then. He thrust up into that amazingly warm heat. He almost lost it when Sideon came off the head of his dick with a popping sound.

They were moving so fast, yet so slow. And he wanted to touch Sideon more. Max pulled Sidi up through his knees to plant another kiss on those plump lips. He fumbled to unzip and open Sideon's jeans. "I need these off of you now." He watched as Sideon stood to remove his pants and boxer shorts; Max pushed his jeans over his knees to get them off. He kicked them to the side and Sideon came back to straddle him again. "You're gorgeous," he whispered into Sideon's ear, causing him to shiver. Sideon reached between them, grabbing Max's cock. He slid his hand up and down slowly, teasing Max. Max's heart rate sped up. He didn't think he could take this much longer.

They needed to get to the bed. "Grab hold of my neck." He grabbed Sideon's ass, pulling him closer as he stood. He felt hairs tickling his hips and back as Sideon wrapped his legs around, grinding his cock on Max's stomach. His hard cock bounced up, tapping Sideon's ass as he walked over to the bed. A low growl was pulled out of him from the sensations. It was almost too much but he wanted this, he needed this to last longer. To go on forever if possible. He couldn't explain the feeling of this man in his arms, so he wouldn't try.

Bending, he gently laid Sidi on the bed, where he immediately began arching into Max. Sideon's arms tightened around him when he tried to pull

back. He wanted another peek at this little prize he was about to claim. “Stay right there. I want to explore a little.” Sideon had a look of disappointment but unwound his arms and legs from around Max. He ran his hands up and down Sideon’s arms before slowly, lightly running his fingers over his chest and down his sides.

Max leaned down to bite at Sidi’s collarbone. He knew his beard probably tickled and was delighted that the more he rubbed his chin across Sidi’s chest, the more he moaned and the louder they got. Next time he had to remember that his nipples were so sensitive. The lower he went the harder he could hear Sideon’s breathing. He was having fun with this. Max explored everywhere but where Sideon wanted him to go.

“Max, please. I need you to do something. Please!”

Max chuckled against his thigh. “All right you beautiful, impatient man.” He looked around. “Don’t I need something so I don’t hurt you?”

“Oil. In the table drawer.” Sideon sounded like he would combust soon, and Max wanted to be in him when that happened. Max leaned over and plucked the oil from the drawer. Then he hesitated.

“Have you done this before?” Max had no clue what he was doing. He didn’t want to hurt Sideon but he didn’t know how they could slow it down now.

“I’ve been with a couple others before but no one has been inside me. Have you not been with any others?”

Max felt an unexplained pride at being Sideon’s first and last. Yet, he didn’t think this was the best time to explain that Sideon was the first man he would sleep with. “I have but not in this way.”

“Have your lovers been inside you?”

Max shivered at the thought. He had no intentions of letting anyone do anything near his ass. “No, they have not,” he growled.

“Good. I’d like to be the only one with that honor.” Max thought it best that he veer away from the topic of his ass by focusing on Sideon’s. He poured some oil onto his fingers, lifted Sideon’s leg and slowly slid a finger over his balls down onto his perineum. He paused there for a moment, watching Sideon struggle to stay still as he rubbed and pushed a little, mercilessly teasing Sideon more. Going lower, Max circled the little puckered hole.

This was it. “I don’t want to hurt you.” He pushed and felt a little give.

“Please stop teasing me. I trust that you won’t hurt me.” He pushed his finger all the way in and Sideon gasped. This just felt too right to be wrong. So Max threw all his doubts and fears into a closet in the back of his mind to be revisited later. Right now, he wanted this man.

Max was amazed at how tight and warm it felt. He pushed in further and worked his finger until Sideon gasped and arched up.

Max started to remove his finger. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... wrong. Do that again. Please.” Max went back in and rubbed his finger where he thought it was before. That couldn’t be right. There was another little opening where he pressed. That and Sideon definitely had a pink glow under his skin. Whatever it was didn’t matter now. The muscular man on the bed distracted him with the way his back bowed off the bed and the way he bit his lip to keep from screaming.

“That felt amazing! Max, I need more. Now!” He added a little more oil to his fingers and pushed a second in next to the first. Sideon started to try to rock himself on his fingers and the sight of that was bringing Max even closer to the edge.

“I want in you.” He pulled his fingers out, oiled up his cock and leaned forward to hover over Sideon. Sideon’s eyes were filled with lust; his face was flushed. Max couldn’t help the slow smile as he positioned himself at Sideon’s entrance.

“Come on, Earthman.” Max leaned over to kiss his little alien. They gasped into each other’s mouths as Max breached him. It was too tight. Too warm. He was going to lose it before they even began. Sideon had a pinched look on his face and his erection started to flag. Max did the only thing he could think of at that moment. He reached out and grabbed hold of Sideon’s dick. His hand was still slick with oil so he started jacking him like he would himself. It was odd holding a dick that wasn’t his own. He squeezed, hopefully not too tight, and pulled. That and another round of kissing worked to relax the man. The grip on his own cock relaxed a fraction and he started to move in again.

Sex had never been a production for Max; however, he wanted to turn it into one now. Sensations bombarded Max. This was more; different from what he knew sex to be.

Max fell forward, his hand still between them, to breathe harshly in Sideon’s ear. “I’m in.” That was all he was able to get out, but he wanted to say

so much more. He wanted to say this felt like the most natural thing in the world. It was like coming home.

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That first pinch of pain slowly turned into a pleasure that Sideon could not ever remember having before. He felt like his system was overloaded and one more sensation would make him break apart. But then it didn't. His grip on Max's shoulders kept him grounded and in one piece. He didn't think he'd be able to fit all of Max's thick cock. There was no more room.

Sideon knew there was a glow radiating just beneath the surface of his skin. Yet Max acted like he didn't notice. He probably didn't, considering Sideon was trying to keep him busy with his mouth and hands roaming everywhere they could reach. He'd explain after, but now Sideon was starting to adjust to the full feeling. It wasn't enough. Whatever hidden spot Max found inside of him throbbed. He needed Max to ease the fire in him. "Move, Max. Go slow, but do something. Please!"

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Max had no problem with slow. If he tried anything else, he had a feeling they'd both explode. He slid in and out a few times before Sideon started pushing back onto him. He didn't know how long he could hang on to his sanity.

"I'm almost there. I'm close," Sideon whispered.

"You feel so amazing. Just a little more. Hang on just a little more." Sideon sucked his bottom lip in and damn if that wasn't the hottest thing Max had ever seen.

"I lied. You can let go. Let go now." And Sideon did. He fell apart under Max. The grip on his dick tightened and he could feel Sideon's orgasm shoot through him, pulling him over the edge too. He'd never get the image of Sideon coming or the feel of his body out of his mind. He slowly came back to himself and caught a sated smile from Sideon. He didn't want to pull out just yet. He closed the distance and locked lips with his husband. He could finally concretely think of this man as his husband. He rolled to his side bringing Sideon with him, slipping out of him in the process.

"You look so beautiful when you come, Sidi. I would love to see that look again."



“And I, the expression on your face. I feel like a newling again, though. I’ve never come that fast or hard, not even in my youth. And will you call me by my given name which is Sideon, not Sidi.”

Max laughed. “But everyone calls you Sideon or prince or something other. You look more like a Sidi to me. Besides, that’s not important. Do you know that you glow?”

With a sigh, Sideon explained, “We haven’t figured out the reason yet aside from knowing very strong emotions cause us to glow. I’ve been trained to be able to smother the reaction, but apparently you make it so I can’t hide it.”

Max could see Sideon was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. He shifted and pulled Sideon so his head was resting on Max’s chest. Max pulled the cover over them and watched as Sideon gave in to sleep.

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Max lay listening to Sidi’s breathing slow as the shorter man fell asleep. He wished he could join him, but he couldn’t get his mind to slow down. All those worries broke down his rickety closet door and were dancing around in the open now.

Sidestepping the larger issues fighting for his attention, he cozied up to thoughts of whether Sideon could get pregnant that fast. There was the old adage that it only takes once, but that was an Earth saying. The way Commandant Johnson spoke, or just possibly the way he decided to interpret what she said, he was under the impression that this was a one-time romp in the sheets. Rumor was that Virians had no need for birth control because they could get pregnant at will. That meant no waiting for ovulation, no waiting for birth control to wear off, and no unwanted pregnancies. Say the word and nine or ten miracle-making months later there was a healthy heir to the Virian throne, thus satisfying one of the conditions of the treaty. He hoped that was true, and that his little swimmers did their job.

Taking up the next thought in his mental queue, he still needed to figure out what Sideon wanted and whether this was just a sham marriage. He knew it was a real marriage, complete with bed sharing, public affection, and everything else. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t verify that before he finally completely accepted that he was married. Sighing, he let his mind wander to the real issue he would need to overcome.

All roads led back to the big pink elephant in the corner. He just slept with a man. Granted, it was amazing but how could he continue with this? He wasn’t

gay; he wasn't even bisexual; he'd only ever had a love for women. Yet, looking down at the head of white hair lying on his chest made him feel something he couldn't describe. He felt oddly happy that the man would feel comfortable enough to let him into some place so sacred and private. For once in his life, he could consider having more than one night with someone.

Max started to doze off himself when someone knocked on the bedroom door. It must have been important as no one was supposed to bother them. Especially not entering their suite unannounced. He slowly slid from beneath Sideon, and went to open the door, standing behind it to shield himself. "Hey Liam, what's going on?"

"Sorry to bother you man, but there's something you need to know. We might want to talk in private, if that's okay."

Max found his clothes and redressed before slipping out the door.

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## Chapter 10

“I sent a couple of men down to the space docks with some of that high tech stuff the Virians have to snoop around and get to know a few people down there. The guys detected some unidentified explosive chemical on one of the ships as it was taking off. We got lucky though. They were able to get a few pictures. One of the ‘resident gossips’ spilled all the beans when he overheard Jason calling me. The ship has been a regular, every three months for the last almost two years. Apparently, the guys don’t usually drop off or pick up cargo here, so either they come here for vacation or it’s for an information exchange.”

“You said they don’t usually drop or pick up cargo. What happened this time?”

“This time they made a small drop right before they left. I took one of the scientists with me and we were able to retrieve a small wrist device. I think we should hire the gossip. He’s probably a plant from the royal guard with as much information as he had.

“That’s not the problem though. Before we got back, one of the royal guards found an incendiary device on one of the cars. Luckily the vehicle wasn’t in the rotation this week. It’s obvious that someone is trying to take out part of the royal family.”

Max was already heading toward the front door. They needed to figure out if the ship and the bomb were related, immediately. If the Scheklkag were sneaking their people onto the planet, then Max had a problem. If it wasn’t them, then there was an unwelcome guest at the party. “Why didn’t you call me before now?”

“I’ve been trying to call both you and the prince for over an hour now. At least his ionic communicator thing connects. I can’t even leave a message on yours. Did you break it already? And you know my jaw still hurts from where they put those little discs in for the damn thing.”

Max rolled his eyes. The discs were tiny and he barely felt them go in. He’d have to get it checked out though. It was dangerous to be separated from his crew with no contact. “Who else knows?”

“Just the king, his consort, and Pechrelm.”

“We need to keep it that way. We don’t need to cause a panic or alert whoever it is, that we’re on to them. Where’s your transport?” Liam pointed to

the last of the three cars parked out front. “Do you have one of those incendiary detectors? We need to start checking the vehicles every time we go somewhere. Call ahead and see if we can get a meeting with King Alverio right now. I want Pechreilm there as well. Zashril and Tavrel are here, but I need a couple of our men watching the house until I get back. And see about getting surveillance cameras to put up throughout the castle.” Max had one goal right now and it was to keep the royal family alive and safe. Everything else would have to wait.

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Sideon groaned and stretched, slowly coming back to consciousness. The warm body he fell asleep on had gone missing. He padded out, passing the empty spare bedroom on his way into the living room. There was no sign of life in the suite.

Something must have happened for Max to leave without waking him. He dressed and tried Max’s iconic communicator without success. It wasn’t even on. His computer alerted him that he had quite a few missed contact attempts from the general. As he went to find Tavrel he tried to get Liam instead.

“Computer, call General Liam.” He waited for Liam to answer only to hear, “Connection blocked by user.” The man had only contacted him a short while before and the amount of attempts made it seem urgent. He tried again and was instantly blocked.

Zashril was in the main kitchen fixing lunch with Tavrel, so Sideon assumed Max was still on the property as the stewards were usually never far from those they served.

“Your Highness, did you need help with something?”

“No, Tav. Thank you. Zashril, do you know what room Max might be in?” Sideon caught the uneasy look Zashril threw to Tavrel. They were usually better about hiding their thoughts, always keeping a neutral expression. “What is it?”

“He’s not in the house, Your Highness. He left with Liam about an hour ago. He required that I stay here to assist Tavrel.”

“You did inform him that—”

“Yes, I did but he wouldn’t be persuaded otherwise. He looked upset when he left.”

Sideon nodded absently, went to grab a pastry and headed in the direction of the front door. A sense of foreboding passed through him. He needed a walk.

And surely there was a pond nearby where he'd feel comfortable enough to meditate. His spirit half might have some news for him. As he entered the foyer he bumped right into one of Max's warriors.

"Please excuse me, Your Highness. I didn't mean to walk into you. I am glad I found you though." When Sideon looked confused, the man continued. "Captain Ryan Collins, sir. Ambassador Jenkins added my partner and me to your guard detail."

"And where is Ambassador Jenkins?"

"I wasn't given that information, sir."

"Very well. I am not sure where Pechrelm is, but Credril, the head of my guard, should be in the security house over the garage. You can ask him where you are to be placed. I'll be out for a walk. Can you make sure that someone contacts me when Max is back?"

Sideon proceeded toward the door again but was stopped when Collins stepped in front of him. "Your Highness, I'm assigned to you. I'm not to let you out of my sight. I'm also not... umm... you're not to leave the house until Ambassador Jenkins returns."

In the back of his mind, he knew something serious was happening. The whole reason for the warrior's presence was protection from otherworldly threats, but at that moment he was feeling a little put out. "So I can't leave the house, I can't be alone, I can't get in touch with my consort, and no one can give me the reason why." Collins had the decency to look embarrassed about that. He must not have been given information about that either. "I apologize. I don't know what came over me. We can retire to the library. There is a television there."

Sideon tried Liam's communicator again without luck. Was he being ignored?

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Max walked into the house and took off for the shower. They had taken care of what they could at the moment. The wrist device that they'd discovered was still a mystery five hours later. The scientists were able to determine that it was something powerful and while it wasn't an explosive device, he still got the impression that it could possibly destroy the planet if they opened it. The bomb, while from the same base technology as the wrist device, was simple and straightforward to dismantle.

King Alverio finally shared the reason that he wanted the warrior for his son's consort in addition to the Verband's military force. It didn't change anything on his end as he knew he was the bodyguard in addition to being husband, but it could change things for Sideon. Being the peaceful world that they were, he wasn't sure how Sideon would handle the news. Everything discussed in the meeting would stay between the king, his husband, and the three heads of security for now.

Max eventually let his mind wander back to that morning. He didn't have time to freak out about his little sexual adventure then. He kept it under wraps, not wanting to wake Sideon and then Liam showed up. Alone now, he could let a little of it out. Max thought it should have felt more clinical than it did. It should have been about two horny guys trying to get off. But it wasn't. He felt something more. Just thinking about that sexy naked man under him had him hard. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Tried to rationalize it with himself. Sideon came on to him. And since Max came there to get him pregnant, he didn't see the harm in letting Sideon "lure" him into the bedroom. It was his job, nothing more.

He could almost believe that was true, but how did he explain the fact that he had liked it? Had wanted to do it again. Sideon was tight and hot. The way his muscles bunched and he arched off the bed when his orgasm hit was beautiful. If he could frame that shit, he would. Max couldn't deny that he loved the feeling of Sideon against him.

His emotions were muddled. This couldn't be right. Max was straight, had always been so. He'd been with more women than he could count. More than he wanted to anyway. It didn't matter though because he was a warrior. He was gone from home too much to settle down and he hadn't thought he wanted to either. It would be better for him to pull back from Sideon and focus on his safety rather than any kind of romance or even sex between them. Emotions would compromise his mission. Or so he forced himself to believe.

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## Chapter 11

Sideon spent the day on his information pad trying to catch up on what was new in the research and development department. While he liked the science department as a whole, he loved having a hand in building the newer technologies. The king put Sideon in charge of the space station project citing, that he and Max could work together since, Max knew the layout of many different stations. Together they'd be able to determine what would work best for the sector.

The smell of dinner finally lured Sideon out of the library. He couldn't help but smile at thinking he'd see Max at dinner. Memories of their morning had been taking over his mind all day. He wanted to make sure everything was fine as he hadn't heard back from Max or Liam. So he was extremely disappointed when he ended up dining alone. When he arrived back to his suite, Captain Collins's partner, First Lieutenant Aiden Willcombe, accompanied him.

"Do you have to follow me into the bedroom, Lieutenant?" Sideon found himself discouraged with how the day turned out and he didn't like being watched like a youngling either.

"No, sir. I'll be at the end of the hall if you need me." With a nod Sideon retreated down the hall toward his bedroom. He'd noticed Max's shoes by the door and stopped by the spare bedroom. Opening the door, he saw the ambassador passed out on top of the covers. Max must have been tired to pass out like that and he didn't want to wake the man. Sideon simply pulled a throw off a nearby chair to drape over Max. He made his way to the master bedroom and followed Max's example.

Sideon had slept fitfully the night before and didn't feel at his best. He did want to catch Max, hopefully for a repeat performance of the previous day. When Sideon arrived, Max was leaving the kitchen and barely mumbled a greeting on his way out.

"Max?" Max turned but stayed silent and wouldn't meet his gaze. "Are you all right? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yeah. Um... naw, I'm just going down to the office for a bit."

That didn't tell him anything at all. "I missed you yesterday." Maybe that would draw some information out.

“Sorry. Something came up and I needed to be there to handle it.”

“Oh. Okay... well, okay then.” Sideon watched as Max turned and took off around the corner. He tried not to read anything into that, but it was odd behavior from what he’d seen so far. Since it didn’t appear that he’d be preoccupied with Max for the day, Sideon decided to start on plans for the space station.

The next morning when Sideon came down for breakfast, Tavrel was the only person in the room.

“Hey Tav, where is everyone?”

“Oh, good morning, Deon. I was about to come wake you. We’re packing up. The ambassador wants everyone back at the main house in a couple of hours. From the look on his face this morning, whatever’s going on is not good.”

Sideon had no clue what was happening in his home and he didn’t like it. They were leaving days earlier than planned, and Max had barely said two words to him the day before. Appetite lost, he wound his way down to the basement office Max was using. Thankfully the man was alone.

Knocking on the door, he waited. Max didn’t even look up to acknowledge him.

“Hey, Max. Is it possible to speak with you for a moment?”

“Sideon, can we talk later? I need to finish this.”

He kept his voice carefully neutral as he choked out, “Sure.” Sideon turned and left, his destination being the master suite until it was time to leave.

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Max didn’t mean to run from Sideon, but he was having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that he wanted to fall back into bed with Sideon. In the heat of the moment, he was certain he’d have no problem. Having an actual relationship was another story. Max couldn’t reconcile the man that slept with Sideon, to the man in the uniform who helped protect the universe. Knowing it was irrational to think of them as two separate people, didn’t rectify the situation. It only made him wish to ignore it and focus solely on the job.

He knew he could get Liam’s take on the situation, but that would be overlooking his goal of avoiding it. Besides, he had more important things to worry about. The second group of warriors from Earth were still a couple of



days out, it was becoming a hassle to go anywhere due to bomb scares, he had to figure out exactly what was needed for Earth's new ships, and he was convinced there was a third player in the war on Virian. The bomb technology wasn't from Virian, Scheklkag, or any of the enemy's colony planets.

Max did hate that in the few days they'd been back at the mansion, the friendly Sideon had changed into a Sideon that only spoke about business. The few conversations they had were about the planned space station, not about the short time they were at the summer home. If Sideon didn't want to talk about it, Max wouldn't bring up the subject either.

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Working away in the science lab helped Sideon relax. If only a little. Having guards hovering over him all day was annoying. At least Max was busy with gearing up supply trade with Earth and another nearby planet. He'd overheard that Max wasn't just in charge of Virian. Due to some other issues, Max was charged with coordinating protection for the entire sector his planet was in. Sideon didn't know how many other planets were within range, but he was aware that it kept Max occupied. Knowing that little bit of information was better than thinking the ambassador was avoiding him all the time. Which he was.

Sideon couldn't tell why he was so upset. Maybe it was guilt that he'd done something to push Max away. He shouldn't care however. Sideon wasn't keen on the marriage in the first place, but knew it was time to produce an heir. Max was there because of a treaty between their planets, not by his own choice. Max had done his duty and now there was no need to deal with Sideon. He'd felt abandoned when Max left him in bed alone, but now dismissed that line of thinking. There was nothing for Max or Sideon to abandon. That connection Sideon sensed between them was only lust, nothing more. Sideon was embarrassing himself by pushing when Max clearly wanted space. It was best to follow Max's example and go about business as well as he could.

Sideon didn't question when Max arranged for his things to be moved into the smaller bedroom. He didn't get upset when Max wouldn't answer his communication messages. He told himself it didn't matter when he had to locate Liam to find out where Max was. Playing telephone through the general was only needed a few times. The most important of these was to tell Max that he was certain the pregnancy took. When he eventually did catch the warrior for more than a few seconds, he couldn't think of anything to say to stop them

from heading in opposite directions. All Sideon could think to ask was that when they were out in public together they play the happy couple.

Although he tried to make it seem like he went along with Max's decision to not get closer to each other, Sideon got creative at finding reasons to see Max. A dinner party meant standing close together, holding hands or sometimes even kisses on the cheek. He'd take dinner down to the office under the guise of getting to know his husband. At the marketplace, Max took on the role of bodyguard. It allowed him to stare at Max without being obvious, but put a distance between them that he didn't want. He wanted to stare at Max up close and personal. When they arrived back home from a day trip, Sideon made himself scarce to avoid upsetting Max. It was slowly eating away at him while Max operated as if the world was still right side up.

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## Chapter 12

Sideon made his way down to the kitchen. He was starting to regret the whole pregnancy thing. Every day it seemed he had to figure out what foods he could and couldn't eat. One week he couldn't eat any dairy, the next he could only handle grains. This week the smell of onions made his stomach turn. He wanted to know whose great idea it was to be pregnant the majority of a year. He didn't think he could handle seven more months of this. His emotions were all over the place without any permission from him, he was tired all the time, and he was considering putting a cot in the bathroom since he was always in there. And from what he understood, this was probably the easiest part.

Sideon steeled himself to appear normal before walking into the kitchen and over to the coffee pot. He was determined to keep his morning coffee habit until the doctor forced him to stop. As expected, Max sat at the table reading some report and didn't look up until Sideon sat at the table.

“Good morning. Anything new?”

“No, the sector is all quiet. Although, the Verband did get one of the planets in the Palioxis Star System to join in the fight against the Scheklkags. That's a total of five colony planets the enemy has lost this week.”

“That's great news.” The news Sideon wanted didn't relate to planets. He wanted the lustful, yet sort of shy Max that he'd met back in his first week of marriage. It wouldn't do him any good to announce his thoughts. He wouldn't want the little time he did get with Max to suddenly disappear.

Sideon couldn't see any way out of the loop they'd been stuck in since arriving back at the mansion.

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Max hated this limbo he'd thrown himself in with Sideon. It was his own fault for pushing Sideon away, but Max didn't know how to tell Sideon what was going through his head. He didn't think it would exactly bode well if he told the man that he was married to and had slept with that he didn't like men. He wanted to beg Sideon to forgive him.

Time to think was abundant over the previous few months. Max finally caved in and accepted advice from Kusath on married life. Since Virian was populated entirely by men, Kusath was unable to help on the other issue. Liam,

having never been married, still had an opinion. He was of the mind that Max should just tell Sideon everything on his mind, including the information King Alverio had given them after the first bomb was found. Something about communication opening a path between them.

The conclusion that his sexuality was a moot point finally jumped out and thumped him in the head. It didn't matter who he'd had sex with before, only that he wanted a relationship with Sideon. Watching Sideon daily, even on the security cameras, pretending he agreed with only being near Sideon in public, not talking to him except for a few sentences in the morning and maybe a few more at night was torture. Max had never been one to subscribe to the idea of love at first sight, but now he knew what people meant when they said it. He'd been enamored with Sideon from day one, but only recently admitted that to himself.

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Virian guards and officer cadets were the perfect security detail for Sideon when he was going to the science building. It was less than a mile from the house. But Max insisted on personally escorting Sideon to the marketplace. It was the best part of his week and the only time he could openly stare at Sideon without seeming suspicious.

The marketplace here was set up much like the one by the summer home. It was a long wide covered road that looked like a pavilion set up between the buildings and was delegated to foot traffic only. Booths lined both sides of the street with merchants yelling out to entice shoppers with otherworldly items. The side streets were open, and instead of booths there were a few permanent shops where Virian residents made and sold goods. This left the side streets mostly clear as customers stepped down into cool buildings to look around.

Max stepped up security for these outings since the market was usually crowded. He knew Sideon didn't like the extra attention it drew, having been used to one or two members of the royal guard being enough. However, Max didn't plan on taking chances with the prince's life. They always took two cars, one at each end of the pavilion with drivers on standby. Max and Liam were on point with a few of his men and a few royal guards backing them up.

As they walked through the marketplace, Max had the urge to stay close to the prince. Looking around, everything appeared as it normally did. Shopkeepers were yelling for attention to sell their wares, kids ran through, occasionally bumping into people, and none of the security team looked alarmed. Liam might have seemed a little tense, but didn't say anything to give

credence to his suspicions. Max usually tried to stay a stall over and give Sideon some breathing room, but he couldn't shake the bad feeling he had, no matter how much he wanted to. The longer they stood around, the more Max sensed something was about to go wrong. His gut had never led him astray before. He moved to stand at the end of the stall Sideon was at and signaled for Liam to come closer.

As he was stepping up to the booth, he felt the air pulse and a woman appeared out of nowhere. His instincts kicked in even before he saw the flash of metal in her hand and he reached beside him to push Sideon out of the way as the woman lunged forward. Her weapon found only air where Sideon was standing seconds before. She swung her arm toward Max, narrowly missing him as he jumped back. She moved to position herself between Max and Sideon.

The woman's clothing suggested she was from Ranak'var, a planet of assassins. Which meant she probably had some new-age knife that could kill even if the actual stab wound wasn't fatal. Max couldn't let her get close enough to stab Sideon. He had to stop this before it turned into a drawn-out fight.

The air pulsed again but Max was focused on his opponent. The assassin lunged for him again and Max grabbed her wrist, using the woman's momentum to turn her into him so her back was to his chest. He kept her arm moving, bringing the knife up to her throat.

"Stop!" The woman wasn't listening and tried to elbow him. He tightened his hold around her middle. "Drop the knife!" He heard a buzz right before the assassin disappeared. The entire encounter was over in a heartbeat.

Max didn't have the luxury of going into shock when the woman disappeared. He had a charge to look after. Sideon was still on the ground so Max looked to see where the second assassin was. Liam had wrestled the man to the ground, had him bound and was already calling for backup from the embassy. He didn't even break a sweat doing it.

Max didn't see anyone who came across as a threat, but he wasn't taking chances. "I need to get Sideon out of here."

"Take one of the guards with you. I've got men coming out. Go!" Max knew Liam had the situation covered when he started stripping the bound man of his weapons and devices.

Sideon thought what happened had to be a dream. In his mind, it happened too fast so it couldn't be real. He was turning to see why Max was getting closer. Then there was a woman. He was pushed down and as he started to sit up, a fine dust fell over him. It was impossible... the woman was just gone. He reached out to see what fell to the ground and heard, "Don't touch that." Reflex had him pulling back. Even so, he could see the woman had dropped a knife. Was the woman there to hurt him? Maybe she had just pulled it out to show someone. Max overreacted. That had to be the explanation. Someone grabbed him and forced him to a car. It was all a dream. He knew this because he was clean and Max was touching him. The gray dust was just dirt from one of the stalls. And Max was still touching him.

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## Chapter 13

Liam called Max when he arrived back at the military base that was about a ten-minute drive from the castle. Unlike Max, Liam had been able to take his opponent by surprise and to subdue him. The warriors had stripped him of his belongings and were searching them at the moment. Max wanted to be there to interrogate the man, but he couldn't leave Sideon just yet. Because Sideon was still in shock.

“Are you okay?” Someone was shaking him? “Sideon? Can you hear me? Please answer me, Sidi.”

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Sideon's hand drifted up to his stomach. He was only just starting to show but it was becoming an automatic reaction. He was shocked at how smooth his stomach was. Then he slowly started to notice other things. He was naked and wet. Looking around, he recognized his bathroom. What really got his attention was that Max was in the same shower as him, just as naked and just as wet. Max stepped out to grab a towel, dried Sideon's hair then wrapped it around him. He then grabbed a towel for himself. Apparently he had missed the majority of the shower if they were already at this stage.

Side allowed himself to be pulled into the bedroom straight into the bed. He sobbed as Max pulled him into his chest. “Why? Why did you kill that woman? Why!”

“Sid—”

“No! Do not touch me! I do not want you in here!” Sideon jumped out of the bed and turned toward the window. His husband was a killer. This was not supposed to be real. He tried to tell himself the marriage to a warrior was just a political ploy to join the two worlds in case of trouble. He didn't think there would be any actual killing involved, at least not where he could see it. Even in his disbelief of earlier events he knew that idea was stupid. When he turned around, the room was empty.

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Max hesitated before grabbing his clothes and leaving the room. He didn't want to leave Sideon alone, but the man hadn't wanted him there the last two months and it was obvious he didn't want him there now. He went to his bedroom, calling to ask Tavrel to come sit with Sideon. The men seemed very

close, he assumed because they grew up together. Hopefully, Sideon would open up to Tavrel because he was obviously terrified. Meanwhile, Max would head out to base to see what progress was being made. The interrogation would have been going for at least twenty minutes at that point and he really wanted to know how the hell two people appeared out of thin air.

“Why are you here?” Liam was standing in the observation room, looking through the two-way glass at the man they apprehended.

“Nice to see you’re alive as well. Has he said anything?”

Liam sighed and shared what he knew. “We finally got a name out of him. Tani. And he keeps going on about how *some big bastard*, his words not mine, killed Ceani. Although you have to admit you are pretty huge.” Max turned his head to scowl at his friend. “Just saying, man.” He laughed. “But he won’t tell us what that device I got off his wrist does. He’s got to somehow be connected with that ship from a while back. That thing we picked up seems to be an upgraded version of his. That’s all we know so far. So again, why are you here?”

“Sidi yelled at me not to touch him and kicked me out. I’m sure all he can see is me grabbing that woman before she went poof. But I had to or he would be dead right now. Have you figured out how the hell she turned to ash yet?”

“Yeah, that knife she had was pretty damn sweet! As I’m sure you saw, it’s a regular knife with a regular blade. What you didn’t see was the switch that turned on the surprise.”

Liam paused and Max stared at him. He did it all the time to add suspense, but mostly it just annoyed Max. Especially right then, as he was anxious to find out what happened.

“Liam, just tell me wha—”

“Fine, party pooper. When you hit the switch, the charge in the knife caused antimatter to gather around the blade. On accident or purposely, it didn’t matter. Since it was touching her skin, she was a dead fish.”

“Great! The creepy assassins have new toys to play with. Can’t they just kill people the old-fashioned way?” He couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Can you put a call out? See if anyone knows anything about this hit?”

They stood there for a while listening to the ranting of their prisoner, Max going over ways to get the Ranak’vars and their deadly weapons on his side of the fence. It wasn’t long before his friend piped up about his personal life.



“You know man, that’s harsh what’s going on with you and Sideon. You gotta tell him what’s going on, whether his fathers want him to know or not. It will probably take time, but he’ll eventually see that when we kill someone, it’s a necessary evil. He might also forgive you for sleeping with him, then walking out.”

“Maybe. Most likely not.”

“I’m sorry man. I should have made you stop and go back in to wake him up. Tell him where you were going. He called me. I should have answered the phone, but we were in with the king. I—”

“None of this was your fault. It’s mine. I’m used to being alone. I couldn’t make my first and only ‘real’ relationship last more than a week. Now I’ve got a man crush. The next fifty years are going to be miserable.”

“I’m the last person to be giving relationship advice, but I don’t think it’s too late to fix anything. I will admit that you two are very good at hiding your emotions in public. But you should see the way he looks at you when he thinks no one’s looking. It’s the mirror image of how you look: like you’re dying inside.”

He didn’t really believe that, but Liam wouldn’t lie to him. Not about something like that. He actually felt like he was already dead, his heart ripped out of his chest before he was dragged over a bed of hot coals. So he was somewhat grateful he looked that good.

“Well, I trust your judgment. It’s a good thing too or you’d still be back on that blue marble.”

“You’d never leave me there. You couldn’t survive without me. And no one else would put up with your bullshit and bossiness.” Max could see Liam’s huge smile reflected in the glass.

Max knew he didn’t mean anything by his comment and it was true anyway. He’d never leave his only friend behind if he could help it. “I’m so not bossy,” he snorted and shook his head. “Call me if you find out anything else.”

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“Tav, that man is a murderer! I can’t have him here. I can’t have him touching me. We shouldn’t have brought them to our planet, into our home.”

“That is the exact reason we brought them here. So they would do what we couldn’t. You and your father knew who they were and what they did and you

agreed to it. And you saw that woman. She had a knife and tried to stab you! Max saved your life.” Tav pleaded with him to see the bigger picture.

“I don’t care—”

“What are you afraid of, Deon? Are you afraid that you like him and this is another excuse to push him away? Yes, he disappeared for a day or so, but did you actually talk to him about it? Ask him the reason why he left you in bed the way he did?”

“It doesn’t matter! He is a bastard and this was all just a ploy to get our technology. The only thing he was good for was to get me pregnant. Now that’s done and I want him gone. I will raise my heir by myself.”

“You know you don’t really believe that. He doesn’t seem the type to shirk his responsibilities. I still think there is a reason behind his abrupt departure.”

“No! What possible reason could there be for sneaking out after sleeping together? No good-bye, not even a note. He has to go.” Sideon was indignant and couldn’t stop pacing the room. “Are you on his side or mine?”

“Yours. I’ve always been on your side, even when you were as wrong as the star rising in the east.

“I’ve been your friend since we were babes. I chose to become your steward so you would always have someone you trusted nearby. And I want to see you happy and the more you push him away, the more you draw away from everyone else. You rarely go to the marketplace to chat anymore. And only Klavlak knows when the last time you went to the falls to meditate was.”

“Yes, but—”

“Yes, but nothing.” Sideon couldn’t believe Tav actually stomped his foot. If he weren’t so pissed he might have found it funny. “You need to talk to him and fix this. Maybe he wants off this rock but does not want to break the treaty. Maybe he is a murderer and just goes around stabbing people for fun. Or just maybe, he is just as miserable as you are, but doesn’t know what he did wrong or how to fix it. You are the prince and you are going to have to deal with much harder issues than this. So do something!

“Actually, never mind what I said. I don’t get what you see in him anyway.”

Sideon realized this was a trick but he couldn’t help himself. He played right into Tavrel’s hands.

“What do you mean? He’s funny, smart, and he likes the same movies as me. And I did tell you, I liked that thing he did to me in bed.” He couldn’t help but waggle his eyebrows at Tav who rolled his eyes and pretended to gag. “I don’t know why, even though I can’t touch him and barely know enough about him, I still want to be in the same room. It is irrational.”

“So basically, one night of sex turned into across the room lust and crush.”

“Yes! Exactly! That and also I’m blaming the baby hormones. Oh, Klavlak! I swear I cry over every little thing now.”

“Really? I want to see this. Let’s go watch one of those drama movies.”

“Tav, that’s just mean.”

“It is, but I’m living vicariously through you. If this is pregnancy, I don’t plan on having any offspring.”

His friend played dirty, but soon enough he was not so upset. His reasoning, previously knocked out by his overwhelming emotions, was returning. He was still mad but at least now he’d be able to hold a conversation with valid points instead of angry ones.

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Max hurried to the house with the intention of talking to Sideon whether the man wanted him to or not.

He’d take Liam’s advice and tell Sideon why his father pushed the marriage and asked for him specifically. Maybe once that was in the open, they could clear the air on some other things.

He stepped into the hallway as Tavrel came out of the bedroom. “Thanks for sitting with him Tavrel; I can take it from here.”

“I didn’t come for your benefit. Either way, he’s still in no mood to speak with you.” Tavrel sounded like he barely kept himself from growling and the words were clearly meant to dismiss him. Max was shocked because so far, Tavrel had been nothing but helpful and friendly towards him even though he was the cause of the rift between Sideon and himself.

“I’d just like to make amends for everything. I need to tell him what’s going on, and if he doesn’t want to speak to me afterward, I’ll respect his wishes.”

No matter how much Max tried to keep his face neutral, Tavrel must have seen something there because his own look softened. “Let me ask him.” Before he could turn, the door behind him opened a crack.

“It will be fine, Tav. Let me speak with him.” There wasn’t a hint of warmth in his tone. Max didn’t care. He’d take the chance presented to him. Max thanked Tavrel again, then slipped past him through the open door. By the time he closed the door and turned around, Sideon was already on the other side of the sitting room, standing in front of the daybed and the window above it. He stared out over the beautiful forest.

Max thought maybe Sideon would never be able to see beyond the killer in him. He was a warrior and protector. Killing came along with the territory. He wasn’t apologetic of who he was, who he’d always been, but he wanted Sideon to see him as something more. He wanted to be the consort that helped run a planet, the father that would help raise a child, and the protector that would keep the family, his family, safe. And since he caused the rift between them by pushing Sideon away in the first place, he had to be the one to mend it.

“Sideon, I’m sorry you had to see me do something like that, but it’s who I am. It’s the reason I’m on this planet. You’re obviously upset about it and I hope one day you can forgive me. But for now I’ll take solace in the fact that my act of violence meant that you could continue to live.”

After receiving only silence as a response, he continued, “I came to tell you about why that woman was here in the first place. She was an assassin and we think you were her target. Her companion is currently sitting in the detention center, hoping to get loose so he can finish the job. There’s a hit out on you, Sideon. Do you know why someone would want you dead?”

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Sideon couldn’t breathe. This day continued to slip into the depths of the Nether realm. Someone wanted him dead. What had he done to upset someone that much? Sideon shook his head in response to Max, but couldn’t think straight enough to form actual words. He was more focused on not passing out. He knew an abundance of people. The assassin was obviously not from Virian, but he’d never been off planet to piss anyone else off. Even if he had, the only way he would have pissed them off was by being too nice to them. He knew he would die eventually, but didn’t expect that until old age took him into the arms of Klavlak. Would he live long enough to see his child grow up? At this rate, would he live long enough to have a child? He started to get dizzy.

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Max heard Sideon’s breathing change into harsh shallow pants and rushed over to the daybed. Max wanted to touch his husband and calm him down but he didn’t think he could handle it if the man jerked away from him. “Sideon...

Sideon look at me.” When Sideon turned toward him, he asked, “Sideon, can I touch you?” He silently thanked God when the shorter man nodded in approval. He slowly moved into Sideon’s space and pulled him into his arms. Max thought he shouldn’t be this happy to be holding someone while that person was having a panic attack. Apparently his thoughts and feelings were ignoring each other because he was ecstatic. After two months, so many hours, and God knows how many minutes, he was able to hold the person he was slowly falling in love with from afar. He wanted to draw this moment out, but that would be cruel, so he began whispering comforting words into Sideon’s ear. He needed Sideon in a rational place so he knew what had happened and maybe he would have some clues as to who his enemy was. Then, and only then, they could work on them and being together.

Sideon eventually broke down and began sobbing in his arms. It was most likely the stress of the day. Almost getting killed takes a lot out of people, especially when the object doing the killing wasn’t the result of a freak accident. Max guided them into the bedroom and lay on the bed, pulling Sideon with him. “If you want to talk, I’ll listen. If you want to sleep, I’ll protect you. If you just want to lie here, I’ll give you whatever comfort you need.” Eventually, Sideon dozed off with Max following soon after.

Max woke with a start. The sun had finally set and Sideon was trying to gently extract himself from Max’s hold. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to hold so tight.”

Sideon sat up and spoke more to the bed than he did to Max. “Umm, no it is okay. I apologize for acting as I did earlier in the sitting room. I should have kept a better hold over my emotions.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I would have been more worried if you didn’t freak out.” He stood up to leave. “I can come back later to talk about things if you need time.” He didn’t want to give Sideon the option of putting him out. It hurt just to say but he didn’t want to cause any undue stress.

“Give me a moment to relieve myself and we can get this over with now.”

“All right.” Max could see the bricks as they slid into place to re-erect the wall between them. He looked away to hide his disappointment. While he was comforting Sideon, he was able to delude himself into thinking that this thing between them was more of a gentle mountain stream than the raging massive ocean it actually was. It was quite possible that this would be the last time he’d get to hold this man, and he’d spent most of it unconscious. He could kick himself for wasting that time.

Sideon stepped into the sitting room with a funny look on his face. Max opened his mouth to ask if he was feeling better, but was cut off as Sideon cleared his throat. “I’m ready. Tell me what I’m missing.”

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## Chapter 14

Sideon took up his post in front of the daybed as Max recounted what he'd been told. About a year prior there was a car explosion. Sideon and his brother Aireon were unharmed and nothing suspicious came out of the resulting investigation. But as Max spoke, Sideon saw that day in an entirely new light.

*Sideon wanted to go to the new play a few towns over, and then visit the market there in the morning. Aireon was on the fence about going and Sideon was tired of waiting for him to make up his mind. Since they were spending the night, everyone was making a production out of it. He honestly did not see the point of all the yammering. It wasn't like the time he'd spent three months in Lord Cylnal's area. The man kept pestering to get him to court his son, and if the cars weren't kept under such watchful eye he would have taken off for home. Sideon and Lord Cylnal's son no more belonged together than water and potassium did. Although he was nothing but polite during his stay, he was glad when that little stint was over.*

*That was the downside of being royalty... sometimes he couldn't just get up and leave. He snatched the key fob off the front table as he called out from the front door, "Anyone who is not in the vehicle when I get there is going to get left behind! That means you too, Credril."*

*His personal guard threw him a dirty look. "You wouldn't dare," he growled.*

*He guffawed at the little growl and unbelieving look. "Just try me." Then he continued on to the waiting vehicle. Halfway across the drive, he heard fast steps behind him. He turned just as his brother called out.*

*"Wait up, bro! How you gonna do me like that?"*

*"Oh, goodness. What mess have you been watching now?"*

*"Nothing as bad as what you have been watching. Would you rather I say 'Waitest up, O' brotheren of mine!' That's if you could hear it over all the explosions." He tended to think his own jokes supremely funny and this time was no different. He was doubled over laughing.*

*"Klavlak, no! That was horrible! I much prefer your normal speech. Have you decided to come see the play, brother? You can critique the music. You know you want to." He said this in a singsong voice, knowing how his brother loathed the slower pieces.*

*Sideon stepped into the vehicle. He was serious about not waiting around much longer. He laughed and shook his head at his brother, taking the driver's seat as Aireon slid the door closed.*

*"I knew you would come along. You can't pass up a great opportunity to be inspired by music much greater than your own." Aireon sneered at him but didn't get a chance to respond.*

*Sideon set the key fob into its slot and began the startup sequence. Since the car door was closed, the engine should have started immediately. Instead, red lights started flashing as a metal shield slid up in front of the windows, sealing the spatial distorter while the computer announced it had started emergency shutdown procedures. Sideon and Aireon were stuck in a random point in space, effectively cut off from everything until someone could find them. At least the beacon for the distorter anchor point was transmitting a signal.*

*A few hours later, Pechrelm was able to lock onto their beacon and open a portal for them to escape what remained of the car.*

Sideon understood the increase of guard activity and checking of vehicles from then on. If they had been outside near the car when the magnetic field around the antimatter engine failed, they would have ceased to exist, just like the shell of the car. What Sideon didn't put together was that afterward, his father immediately started making plans for an alliance with one of the protective planets, as they were called. And what better planet than the one that had recently knocked the Kravacikan spy ship out of their sky. He had wanted to believe something nefarious was going on, but Kusath assured him that Alverio just thought it was a great time to put the plans in motion considering the state of the cosmos.

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Max took a deep breath and continued on with the extra bit of information the king told him. "That explosion was no accident. The official report stated magnetic field failure, but the truth is someone tampered with the engine. When Pechrelm got you and your brother out of the anchor point, he was able to pull the information off of the computer as well. The magnetic field was set to expand and destroy the inner field around the spatial distorter when the car was started. You were lucky Sideon. With the antimatter causing the field to wobble, it wasn't able to expand to reach the inner field. By some miracle, it only ate away the car, and you were left with a pretty crater in the driveway.



“One of the guards thought he saw someone in the woods and a bright flash of light after the explosion. His words prompted the investigation and search of the surrounding area.” Max wanted to see Sideon’s face to know if he should continue talking, but the man was staring out the window. It really didn’t matter because whether or not it was too much information, Sideon needed to know that his life was in danger.

“There was another attempt the day we slept together.” He heard a gasp and looked up to see Sideon quickly turning back to the window. “I didn’t think to come back to wake you before I hightailed it out of here. For that, I’m so sorry. The safety of the royal family, of you, was my first priority.” He hoped Sideon could hear how sorry he was, but he didn’t want to push that issue now. “An explosive device was found on your main car, which was out of use because we were away. There was also a strange ship down at the space docks that left a device behind. That’s when your father told me about the incident with the car. He also made me swear to never tell you about any of this. But that was the reason for the extra security checks and guards.”

Sideon cut in though. “So you weren’t just ignoring me?”

“No, I wasn’t. There was an issue with my communicator. I ended up getting a new implant later. Then Liam and I spent the rest of the day in meetings, in the lab and down at the space docks.”

Sideon started sobbing, yet Max didn’t dare to step closer or attempt to comfort him. He assumed a mix of pregnancy hormones and the fact that he now knew his life was in danger and had been for a while caused the outburst of tears. The silence in the room seemed like a living thing pushing him towards the door. However, his need to know if there would be a future between the two of them kept his feet rooted.

“I knew I would never be able to get married for love, but from the first day something felt different. Getting to know you from across the room was better than getting to know someone else up close and personal. I thought maybe we would be able to tolerate each other and it would eventually grow into something more like Alverio and Kusath. But that day... Max, I felt abandoned and used.” It sounded like Sideon was trying to hold back another sob. This would be less painful if someone just ripped his heart out. In fact, if he asked, Max was willing to rip it out himself and offer it on a platter. Anything to make Sideon feel better.

“I was worried about having a killer in our midst. I was frantic about getting headquarters set up and gathering as much information as possible. And I was

mostly confused about wanting you like that. It seemed like the perfect excuse to continue to avoid the problem between us.”

“What do you mean ‘wanting me like that?’” Max didn’t feel any shock at the fact that out of all he just said about killers, bombs, and Sideon’s father lying, that he would decide to focus in on those four words.

Liam was right about Sideon needing to know about the bomb situation and he didn’t freak out too bad. He hoped the advice of sharing what’s going on transferred to this situation as well. He didn’t want to lose this man because he’d started this as an assignment and somewhere along the way thought it might be okay to have something more.

“It means I’m not gay.” Max thought it was adorable the way Sideon’s brows came together and he tilted his head, but thought it wise not to comment on that. He should be more worried about what he was admitting, what he desperately shouldn’t be admitting. “Before you I’ve never slept with a man, only women from Earth and a few other planets.”

Sideon whirled until they were fully facing each other. “What? So what am I? Some experiment? Did you come here to trick us out of technology then go back on your word? Or were you just prepared to have one of your Earth females on standby? You going to sneak off with her behind my back?”

“I can’t believe you would accuse me of any of that! I’m a man of my word and I came prepared to honor our treaty. Even if this marriage was just for show, I was willing to go through with it.”

Sideon’s look was hot enough to melt polar ice caps. “Do not tell me your lies,” he barked.

“No lie.” Max took the risk of stepping closer. “Being with you was amazing and so different from anything I’ve ever felt before.”

“Different how?” The heat in his face dropped a few degrees. That gave Max more confidence that he would be able to win this case.

“For one thing, you feel so different. So much better.” He stepped close enough for their chests to almost touch. “Women are soft and yielding. Your muscles.” He slid his hand up Sideon’s arm and across his back. “Your body is much more unforgiving. Your kiss is magnetizing.” He leaned in to demonstrate his point. Out of breath, he pulled back. “Your curves are sharper.” Grabbing Sideon’s ass, he pulled their groins together. He planted light kisses along Sideon’s jaw and whispered in his ear. “Your ass is so tight and much more inviting.”

“I’m mad at you.” Yet Sideon grasped Max to pull him closer.

“I know, but, my Sidi, please let me show you just how sorry I am. My mission here is to keep you safe, but I can’t let that be all that I think about. I can’t promise to tell you everything, but I’ll tell you as much as possible. I want this to work out between us. Please give me this chance.” He resumed his butterfly kisses attempting to push the wavering man over the edge.

“I’m still mad.” Sideon could be mad all he wanted, as long as he didn’t make Max leave.

“I know, sweet Sidi.”

Sideon’s breaths became shorter and Max knew he had won. “Show me.” Max’s lips quirked up and he pulled off Sideon’s T-shirt before going in for another bruising kiss. He’d waited two months for this and he didn’t know how gentle he could be or how long he’d be able to hold out. He ripped his own shirt off before pushing Sideon back the few steps towards the daybed. He’d rather be in the bedroom but it was farther than he was willing to travel at the moment.

Max pushed Sideon until he was lying back on the little bed. He took a deep breath, inhaling Sideon’s scent. That mixture of cinnamon and apples was just as delicious as he remembered. He wanted to go slow and worship Sideon’s body before he found himself buried in that intensely beautiful heat. Max nipped along Sideon’s jaw, making sure to stop every once in a while to tickle Sideon’s neck with his beard. It wasn’t long before his white-haired lover was moaning and squirming beneath him.

“Fast or slow?”

Sideon panted out, “Both.”

Oh, Max had no problem with both. He planned to have Sideon squirming under him all night. Max pushed up on his hands to hover as he ground up against his husband. Sideon pushed up against him just as hard and insistent.

“I can do both.” He chuckled. Max stood and tore off his shoes, pants and socks before stripping Sideon of his. He took in the sight before him. Sideon was mesmerizing against the backdrop of the purple silk sheets. He refused to let this beautiful man go again.

Sideon lifted his arms gesturing for Max to lie back down. “It’s been almost three whole months I haven’t been able to touch you. Please don’t make me wait any longer.” And how could Max resist when Sideon was damn near pleading for him.

Max hovered over Sideon, nibbling at his bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth. The way Sideon ground against him, Max knew neither of them would last long. He reached down between them, closing his hand around both of their lengths. He needed to bring them off so that he could actually take his time. He wanted to explore every inch of Sideon's body and he couldn't do that as distracted as he was. His hand sped up, encouraged by Sideon bucking up into him. He watched as Sideon shouted his release before falling off into his own.

When Max recovered, he used his shirt to clean them both. He wanted a clean slate before he went further. Straddling Sideon's hips, he smirked at the sated man, raking his hands down Sideon's chest before smoothing them down over his stomach. He felt the way those hard muscles slightly bowed out where his baby was growing. He regretted not being there for Sideon through the early part of the pregnancy, but he was more than willing to make up for lost time. "Now, I plan to have my way with you. Very, very slowly."

Max bent over and pulled Sideon into a consuming kiss. When Sideon turned his head, breaking the kiss, Max slowly tasted his way down his neck, across his pecs and down his abs. He was feeling bold and wanted to put what he'd been fantasizing about doing into action. Max dipped his tongue into Sideon's navel. He loved hearing the sound he dragged out of the man. Glancing down, Max saw that Sideon was just as hard as he was, ready to go again already. He'd have to wait just a little longer though. Max had plans.

Max worked his way around Sideon's length, biting at the sensitive skin in the crease of his hip. It was now or never. Max leaned over Sideon, catching his gaze before blowing over the head of his dick causing Sideon to cry out. "Max! Please, Max!"

Max reached out, licking up the clear pearl at the tip. He moaned, Sideon's flavor exploding on his tongue. He was surprised. Surprised at himself for actually doing this, surprised that he wanted more. He licked at Sideon's member again, laughing when it jumped like it was scared he might leave. He had no clue what he was doing but he forged ahead. Grabbing Sideon, he took the head into his mouth, making sure to try not to bite him. Sideon was big and he wasn't sure he could fit much more in his mouth. Sideon bucked up into Max's mouth, choking him.

"Sorry, Max. I can't... I need to... Klavlak, you're driving me crazy!"

He smiled, glad he could affect Sideon so much. "That's the point, Sidi." He decided to give them both a break. Max planned on having many more years to

learn every place that made his Sidi moan and squirm. Reaching up over Sideon, he fished in the side table and lucked out. The first thing he grabbed was a vial of oil.

Max took his time stretching Sideon, making the male beg until he was writhing in pleasure. He noticed the little opening he found their first time together was closed with something sponge-like. Pressing on that new little bundle of nerves had Sideon reaching up to grab the arm of the daybed.

“Max, please.” A little sob escaped Sideon as he gripped the arm tighter. Max slowly pulled his fingers out, teasing his opening before lining his cock up and sliding in to the hilt. It was like sliding home. He watched where the two of them were joined as he thrust into Sideon a few times before his hands slid up Sideon’s arms. Leaning down, he pulled Sideon’s arms around his neck. Somehow, even while they were separated, he’d fallen in love with this man. He slowly made love to his Sideon until they were both satisfied.

When they were done, Max used his shirt to clean them again and rolled so that Sideon was lying on top of him. He relaxed back on a throw pillow and the silk sheet he threw over them didn’t cover much more than Sideon’s ass. “Now that that’s out of the way.” He chuckled at Sideon’s glare. “Can I just lie here and hold you?” Sideon acquiesced and lay his head on Max’s chest. Max wasn’t confused at all this time. Max felt so right resting here with this weight on his chest and cradled between his legs. Sideon fit perfectly. He was a buffer between Sideon and the outside world, at least for the night. The daybed was really only meant for one person but he didn’t care. He never wanted to move from that spot. He’d happily stay there till the end of time.

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## Chapter 15

Sideon intended to resist the call to let Max touch him, to let him back into his thoughts, his body, and his heart. Max basically told him that he wouldn't have looked at Sideon twice if there wasn't an agreement between the planets. Did that make him a pawn in this grab to get what they needed? He had essentially done the same thing Max had: followed orders to get married and get goods or services in return.

Max had sounded so sincere in his apology. He sounded like he really did want Sideon, like he was really hurt by their time apart. He didn't like hearing Max sound hurt like that, like his heart was bleeding all over the floor. Maybe he could still be mad, but give them what they both wanted, what they both needed like air in the meantime. He let Max take him, let him hold him and protect him from his demons. He let the man show him what love could be like. He only hoped he wasn't making a mistake that would leave him ripped to shreds.

Sideon didn't want to move, perfectly comfortable where he lay. That was the best night's sleep he'd had in a while. He smiled as he felt an ache in all the right places. The warm body and steady heartbeat in his ear helped him keep the drama blocked out for a while longer. A light tapping of fingers along his spine had him getting hard. He rolled his hips forward, the tip of his cock hitting behind Max's sac. When the sexy man moaned, Sideon decided to take it a little further.

"Will you let me try something? Will you trust me to take care of you?" Max looked apprehensive but finally nodded. "I promise I'll go slowly."

Sideon wanted to get right to the matter before Max changed his mind, so he threw a leg out to balance and went right for the oil. That hard rod against his thigh started to get soft. "Oh, no you will not." Soft kisses turned into nibbles along Max's jaw and neck. Those led to sucking and biting along his chest. He wanted to mark the burly man up. While he was distracting Max, he was lubing up his fingers. Sideon had plans for that ass but he needed to warm Max up to the idea.

Max jumped as Sideon wrapped his hand around the man's hard length. He worked a hickey into his neck before whispering, "Don't tense up. I'll make you feel good," and nibbling on his ear. Max pulled Sideon's lips back to his

own as Sideon jacked him while their tongues dueled for dominance. Sideon sat up and knelt between Max's legs. Max bent his knees some to give him access. He thought he caught a bit of fear slide across Max's face, but it was gone before he could be sure. Sideon used his other hand to roll Max's balls before sliding farther to that sweet spot between balls and hole. He gently rubbed up and down in time with his other hand's slow strokes until Max relaxed beneath him.

Max rocked up, fucking his hand, but Sideon refused to tighten his grip yet. "More," he whined. Sideon slipped his fingers lower to circle the puckered hole. He leaned forward a bit to catch Max's eye. The small nod was all he needed to start to work a finger in. "Just relax." He wiggled his finger, trying to loosen the tight little space, never losing his rhythm on Max's large length. He kept still until Max started trying to push on him. He added a second finger and this time Max hissed. Sideon stopped, afraid he'd gone too fast.

"No... don't stop. It just burns a little. Please." That last word was stretched out and conveyed all kinds of need. He was in awe at how handsome and sexy this man looked. Max was quivering beneath him, making sounds that he was sure no one else had ever heard before, and Sideon was loving every second of it. The sounds were for him only, and his dick grew hard as steel. He didn't care about getting off right then. He focused only on making Max fly apart. Sideon pushed his fingers in, wiggling them to open Max up.

"Oh God! Right there!" Max bowed off the bed, his cock leaking more. He noticed that spot felt different and rubbed a little harder. Max's whine started to get louder and longer, so Sideon decided to have mercy. He sat back on his heels and tightened his grip on Max. "I want to watch you fall apart." Speeding up got him more of those delicious sounds that he didn't think he would ever get enough of. Max's hips began snapping harder before his rhythm stuttered. Watching Max's face screw up, his muscles tense and feeling his ass clench around his fingers was too much. He couldn't hold it in anymore. He hoped Max wouldn't hear him as he whispered, "I think I love you" then fell off the precipice and shot, his load mixing with Max's.

He collapsed before slowly pulling his fingers out. Using the already soiled shirt, he cleaned them both before returning to the spot he woke up in. Max looked boneless and only stared as he did this, but after Sideon was settled he heard the most amazing thing ever. In the quiet aftermath, there was a return whisper, "I think I love you too."

“Maybe we should shower to start the day.” Sideon was reluctant to move that far but was sure Max might need to stretch. He turned to stare up at Max.

“I’m sure we can stay here a little longer if you’d like. Pregnancy is a ‘get out of jail free card,’ and Liam locked me out of HQ until he learns something more. So no one’s expecting us for hours.” The right side of Max’s mouth slowly slid up. Sideon couldn’t do more than stare until Max leaned forward to ravage his mouth. “How’re you feeling? Up for another round?”

“If we start now, we’ll spend all day in bed.”

“Exactly!” Max burst out in an unexpected fit of laughter. “You got pregnant our first time together. What a surprise that would be if you popped out twins. Could you imagine two adorable little menaces to society running around?”

Sideon climbed off Max in a huff and headed to the bathroom. “I would maim you. One is quite enough to start.” Max’s deep laugh was finally drowned out when he started the shower.

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“We could have spent more time in there. I wasn’t quite done with you.” Max’s smile was cocky as he dried off and got dressed. Sideon was happy to see that smile again after it had been missing in action for so long. They still had some things to work out, but if they were able to repeat what happened in the last few hours he’d have no problems trudging through them.

“*We* were wasting too much water. You said it would be more convenient but that was the longest shower I’ve ever taken. It’s not very planet friendly.”

“You have to admit it would have been well worth a water shortage just this once. And it *was* convenient for me... being able to keep my hands on your body. I love seeing you glow with that full-body blush.”

Sideon tilted his head back, looking skyward for help as he felt his body light up. He never knew anyone who could affect him like Max could.

“See, that right there. That’s sexy. Why would I want to take my hands off you?”

He sidled up behind Max reaching his arms around and pulling Max back into his groin. He wished they’d taken longer to get dressed. Max didn’t seem to mind his fingers or him grinding against his ass. Maybe he could have talked Max into letting him inside.



Just as he opened his mouth to suggest ditching the clothes again, his stomach grumbled loudly.

Max turned around breaking Sideon's hold on his body. "Are you hungry, Sidi? Why didn't you say anything? It sounds like there's a baby alien in your stomach."

"Ha! What exactly does that sound like?"

Putting his hand up to his stomach, Max used two fingers to imitate the alien's head. "Rahr rahr rahr, rahr rahr-rahr. Do you speak aliennese or do you need a translator?"

Sideon waved a hand in his direction to humor him. "Translate please."

"He said, 'Feed me now, I'm starving.'" He threw his head back, exaggerating the last word and making Sideon smile harder. "I suggest we feed him before he starts chewing off his hand."

Out in the living room Sideon hesitated. Now that their little cocoon had been opened, Sideon didn't want to leave the relative safety of his suite. Out there was where women tried to stab him and unknown men left explosives on his vehicles. There were no protective walls and quick places to hide.

"Hey, Sidi, we good?" Max looked worried but he was sure it wasn't the same worry he was having.

He couldn't let anyone know he didn't want to step outside just yet, not even Max. From what he'd been told, he was one of the most affable leaders their planet ever had, but he'd also been known to disappear from public, and sometimes family, view for months at a time. So no one would suspect anything was bothering him if he used his pregnancy as an excuse to stay indoors for a while.

"Uh, yeah. I was just thinking why do we not eat in today? Like you said, no one will miss us."

"I'm fine with that." Max walked back to Sideon and pulled him into a crushing hug. "Everyone's probably busy anyway, so I'll go see what I can find." After the kiss Max planted on him, he was sure his lips were swollen. "That's so you won't forget me while I'm gone." Then Max was gone and Sideon was left dizzy and missing him already.

Max had been floating on air all morning. He was over trying to talk himself down with the fact that his little man whispered those special words right after sex. It didn't matter that it was too soon or that he'd never known what love was. He felt like they still barely knew each other, yet knew everything that mattered. All that mattered was three words and how he felt when Sideon said them.

Letting Sideon put his fingers inside of him was strange. The pinch of pain he felt quickly disappeared after Sideon found that bundle of nerves. Even before then, feeling those fingers sliding in and out was somehow erotic. Sideon had mentioned taking him before and now he contemplated letting him. He couldn't fathom having something as large as Sideon's dick in his ass. If his Sidi wanted to do it, he wondered if he could let him try.

Shuddering at the thought, Max entered the main kitchen to see quite a few stewards puttering about. He headed toward Tav and Zash, hoping to scrounge up something for Sideon. Tav spoke up first. "Good morning, Prince Consort. You look like the cat that ate the canary. So you have either made up or you have just finished burying the prince's body. Where is he so I can alert the guards?"

He knew it was a joke but he couldn't conceal his shock. "Do I look like I just buried a body?"

"Well, you do appear freshly clean, Your Excellency, so it was a logical conclusion to your solo appearance."

He heard snickering and turned to see Liam sitting at an island near them. He wanted to resort to the childhood tendency of sticking his tongue out, but that would be extremely immature. Oh, what the hell. He did it and responded to what would probably become a rumor before it started. "We made up." Catching Liam's eye, he added, "Multiple times." Turning back to address Tav, he noticed a few stewards close by stopped to listen in. "There's going to be scandal before the night is over," he muttered. Clearing his throat, he addressed the reason for being here in the first place. "I keep asking you two to please call me Max. Would it be possible to get a breakfast slash lunch spread? We'd like to eat in the suite." Liam finally doubled over in laughter. He could find an innuendo in everything. "Asshole."

"Thank you sir, but I would be remiss to ignore your title. I apologize but I cannot honor that wish."

“No, I’m sorry. Even now, I keep forgetting I’m not on Earth. I guess that’s a good thing huh.” He moved around to sit on the stool next to Liam. “Can you work with calling me General?”

Tav glanced at Zash before answering, “Yes, we can work with that, General. And we will have your food ready soon.”

Max nodded. “Thank you.” He truly liked the two men and knew they had just been protecting their prince until they were sure of him.

Liam leaned over and lowered his voice. “While you’re in a regretful mood, maybe you keep going and apologize for bringing me to a planet full of eye candy.”

Max caught when Liam’s eyes flickered to the men cooking, but he didn’t know which of the two men he was after. He took a guess on which man would be more Liam’s speed. Tapping on the table to get Liam’s attention back, he mouthed, “Tavrel?”

Max had to know this story. Liam was bisexual but also demiromantic. He was sexually attracted to men and women, but it took a special person for him to become emotionally invested. Tav must have something special going on in his noggin to have Liam crushing on him.

So of course Max couldn’t help his amusement when Liam lowered his head, not quite hiding the blush on his cheeks. But there was something else in there. Liam was assertive and though he didn’t exactly get around a lot, he had a near one hundred percent success rate in his sexual travels. So either Tavrel didn’t know Liam fancied him or he’d turned the softhearted man away. His bet was on door number two. Too bad now was not the time for twenty questions. He gave Liam a pat on the arm. “Tell me later?” Liam nodded and went back to admiring from afar.

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## Chapter 16

Sideon paced as he waited for Max to return. He debated on asking the posted guard to keep watch from the living room, but that would be overkill. He was sure Max's warriors knew what they were doing and if that was where he picked, then that's where he should be. He was being overly dramatic. It was all in his head. He was going to prove to himself that it was. He'd go find Max and they would eat in the dining room or kitchen, whichever he wanted. The problem was getting through the door. Every time he went to place his hand on the knob, he felt cold and his hand started badly shaking. It was just the land quaking. But none of the furniture was moving. "I am unable to even leave my room," he moaned to the empty space. He was getting antsy the longer Max took. After drawing all the curtains in the living room, he went back to pacing.

The attack took place during the day in the middle of the crowded market. If he was in danger then and if the villains could get into his garage without notice, what's saying they couldn't be roaming the house now? And it would be even worse at night when they could hide behind all manner of things. His best bet was to stay in here, hidden until the evildoers were caught.

Max pushed the door open, startling Sideon out of his thoughts. Now that he smelled the delicious aromas, he realized he was starving and remembered he'd skipped lunch and dinner the day before. His stomach had been in knots and he'd been in no mind to eat anyway. Max pushed the cart of food through into the dining area and started to spread it out on the table. Sideon couldn't wait till it was all prettified. He sat, using his telepathy to pull a plate off the cart and started piling up a plate.

"See, told you the little gremlin was hungry."

"Are you callin—"

"Well, I'm sure he's an adorable little gremlin if he looks like you." If Sideon wasn't so worried about the food, he'd pay more attention to Max's joking demeanor. As it was, he gave him the side-eye and continued to fill his plate.

Max laughed. "It's okay not to eat it all now. The guys made us a feast. Apparently they don't expect us to come out for a while." Great! Now he didn't have to face any issues outside the wing for a while. Sideon swore Tav and Zash were helpful even when they weren't trying to be.

Max knew something was wrong the minute Sideon wouldn't cross the threshold for food. He might not have been up close and personal the last couple of months, but he knew Sideon would mow down an army to eat. He decided to sit back and monitor him for a few days. As long as this was just Sideon dealing with the shock and drama, he wouldn't bring it up. But he wouldn't allow Sideon to turn into a recluse. As the future king, he needed to be able to handle anything and everything thrown at him. Unfortunately, that now meant knives and bullets just as much as paperwork.

The next couple of days had them getting overly acquainted in the bedroom. Max loved all the sex but he was also content just lying with Sideon. After pushing Sideon's hand away from his sensitive prick, he pulled the man on top of him. "Is this making up for the honeymoon we never had?" Sideon froze and his eyes widened. "I've put my foot in it again haven't I?"

"Umm... no. It is just I did not think you would ever want to speak of that week again."

"Why wouldn't I? Yes, I'm upset at myself for letting that happen. Yet, it's a part of who we are now and how we got here to this moment. And the pain suffered by all involved, because other people noticed, is a reminder to try not to let something like that happen again in the future."

"Long as you remember that if it does happen again you will need to get reacquainted with your hand. It will be easier for you to travel to the middle of the star, than it will be trying to get back into my pants."

"Well, I can't ever let that happen. I think if you ignored me again, I'd actually die from not being able to touch your salty, soft, sweet-smelling skin." He pulled Sideon down for a passionate kiss, and just like that, the discussion of that horrible two months apart was over.

He really should be careful of what he started. He hissed as Sideon grabbed him.

"No, I can't go again. You're wearing me out, young'un!"

"Young? If my calculations are correct, and you know they are, we're technically about the same age. I am probably a few years older than you."

"You know, that's not helping me feel better. You still look like a damn teenager." Sideon just rolled his eyes and to be ornery, his hips. Max bit his lip, unsuccessful in holding back his moan. "Tease." Sideon smiled, sure he could convince Max to go another round soon.

Just as he dozed off, his communicator beeped. Even after having it a few months, it still took him by surprise. He tried to focus on the hologram showing the face of his caller and failed. Picking up the call was the surefire way to know who was on the other end.

“We have a situation.” That was all Max got before the call was disconnected. Sighing, he turned toward Sideon.

“Was that Liam?” Sideon mumbled.

Something awful had to happen for Liam to bother him in the middle of the night, after kicking him out a few days before. “Yeah, I gotta go in to base for a while. I’m going to have a couple guys set up in the living room, so don’t come out naked, okay.” Max didn’t want to alarm Sideon with what he suspected, so staying vague would be the best way to go until he had all the facts. Lucky for him, Sideon was too tired for questions and already falling back under the sandman’s spell.

“Mmm.” He kissed Sideon on the forehead before standing and watching him turn over and doze back off.

On base everything looked calm, so maybe he overreacted to the call. Maybe they’d simply figured out a few things, like what the hell that gadget was, and Liam just wanted him there so the scientist wouldn’t have to repeat himself. Or maybe he was bullshitting himself. He found Liam in his office with the door open. He sat, whispering harshly into the phone. Max knocked before stepping in and closing the door behind him.

Liam hung up as he sat down in front of the desk. “Our prisoner, Tani? Yeah, he’s gone. Some guy poofed in, grabbed him up and poofed back out. Like a fairy fucking godfather. I’m sure they knew each other as Tani went without a fight. Even directed some gesture, which I’m assuming was meant to be rude, at the camera as he left.”

Max let the information sink in for a second. “Well, shit.”

“So you jumped to the same conclusion I did. They can get in and out of anywhere anytime, whether it’s secure or not. We need to know who they are and we need them on our side. I know a guy who knows a guy.” Liam grinned at this. “I’ll see if we can get some info on who put the hit out and what it would take to stop them. But right now, we’re all kinds of screwed.”

Max couldn’t do anything but agree. He figured they were reasonably safe for the next month or so. After that, all hell could break loose. The people of

Ranak'var were notorious for their patience even if the people who hired them were not. As long as they were within the timeline given for a person's demise, they were not to be rushed. Not knowing when or where they could be hit meant no amount of security would be enough. Like Liam said, they were screwed.

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"I will have Tav bring what I need and I will just work in the upstairs office." Max had to stop this now. All week Sideon tried to distract him by going full speed in the bedroom. And Max let him. Now he had to stop enabling him to hide from the world.

"What's going on, Sidi? First you skip out on trips to the kitchen, now you're having someone bring your work to you. You're avoiding leaving the suite, so I'm assuming this is about the day at the market then?"

In that instant, he watched all Sideon's walls crumble. "I am sorry. I thought I could hide it long enough to get over the fear. It is not safe out there. It has always been safe and it is not anymore." Max caught Sideon as he fell to his knees crying. "I have seen it on your films, but we are a mainly peaceful people so even as public figures, our family has never dealt with something like this before."

Watching Sideon break down like this, he knew there was no way he could tell him what happened that morning. The sole reason he had been called out of his warm bed and in to the base, increased security and was going to allow Sideon to get his way for a while. If Sideon was this afraid of leaving his rooms, knowing that Tani had escaped would scare him further. Knowing that anyone could get in at any time would break him. He could teach the frightened man some defense moves, but with his belly growing larger he wouldn't be able to defend himself for long. Even then, he probably would never use the moves because it went against everything they stood for.

Max remembered feeling panic like this after he signed up for the Verband. Being forced to go into battle before you were ready. At the end, you either learned how to cope, or you were dead. The second choice was not an option here. And the first choice only worked if it was healthy or at least didn't immediately lead to the second. For some it was smoking or drinking. For him it was sex. For Sideon it might be hiding, but they'd need to turn it into something positive. He thought it best not to push the issue right now, but Sideon wouldn't be able to hide forever.

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This pregnancy was getting ridiculously out of hand, incredibly fast. It was pitch-black out, but Sideon was up. He was exhausted, but sleep was eluding him at every turn. He figured he could take a warm shower and sit up in the recliner Max had gotten him. It was easier to get out of on his own and comfortable enough that he'd fallen asleep there plenty of times. Max had gotten in late from some special meeting with his Earth commander and would probably sleep through the noise, but he didn't want to take any chances. He quietly closed the master bedroom door behind him and headed towards the hall bathroom. The shower was just as large and he was already thinking of how the coolness of the stone seat and wall would help soothe his back. He slipped his robe off and froze.

It had only been a little over two months since the day at the market. Back then when he looked in the mirror, he had still loved what he saw. He'd had what he thought of as a slight bump, but his abs and pecs were still tight, even if his nipples were a little sensitive. He'd still been able to do his exercise routines too. Now, since starting modified exercises, it looked as if he was starting to let himself go. He'd gained almost twenty pounds already and maybe no one else could see it, but he could. His belly had gone from a cute little bump to a hard oddly shaped soccer ball. The side and back pain had already started up. His chest had started growing a little and his nipples had spread and turned a darker color. Even with his jeans unbuttoned they were starting to be too tight.

The doctor told him all this was normal, but his family had a history of difficult pregnancies, so he was going on the offensive with this one. Sideon already knew that the last couple months he'd most likely be on bed rest, if not earlier. That deadline was coming up too soon for Sideon. No coffee, no chocolate and he hadn't been able to stand the smell of garlic for the last two weeks.

Tears started streaking down his face. *Great, there goes the waterworks again*, he thought. To add injury to insult, his emotions decided to do whatever they wanted. Dramas and Disney movies were out because he ended up crying through the entire film. He'd already snapped at Max too many times to count over something inconsequential. The last time, it was because Max had put an extra ice cube in his water. He'd be happy when this whole thing was over. Who had ever thought this was a good idea? It was too late to matter now. All he knew was that the next few months were bound to get worse and he damn sure didn't plan on getting pregnant again.



Sideon was pulled back against a solid wall of muscle. “What the hell is happening to me?” He turned from the mirror into the warm embrace as his tears turned into a torrent.

“What do you mean sweetheart? Nothing bad is happening. You’re carrying our child. The doctor said—”

“I know what he said! But I’m hideous! And it’s supposed to get worse. I cannot do this!”

“You’ve got some real talent at being hideous then ’cus men and women would kill to look like you. Yes, your body is changing, but frankly I think you’re just as ravishing as the day we met. Your hair’s longer so it doesn’t stick out as much, but I still love running my fingers through it. Your belly has that cute little bump going and I’ll be damned if that’s not the sexiest thing ever, to know you’re carrying my child. I love holding you, the feel of you, and the smell of you. I wouldn’t change a damn thing about you.

“So you can do this. Do you know why?” Sideon didn’t look up, he only shook his head. When Max continued, Sideon could now hear the humor in his voice. “Because you’re carrying our love child. Our little gremlin is going to be so adorably cute because he’s going to look just like you. Then when he gets older, he’s going to be a little angelic-looking terror and we’re going to have to beat the masses off with sticks.” That actually caused him to chuckle. He felt a little better about his looks but now he was worried that he woke Max up again.

Max must have read his mind. “Don’t ever be afraid to wake me up if you need something, honey. We’ll get through this together, okay? You still want that shower?”

Sideon let himself be pulled onto the cool tile and that’s when he realized that Max was already naked. He must have guessed where Sideon was headed and forgone his pants. The next hour had Sideon forgetting all his worries and everything else, including his own name.

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## Chapter 17

Max excused the guard in the living room and went to find his husband. When he reached the third-floor studio, he realized he walked in on a private, but lovely scene. Sideon had some soft music on and was dancing around the room with his eyes closed. His white shirt and light-purple pants were loose and flowed behind him as he moved. It looked like some formal dance to Max, but then again, they all looked the same to him and right now it didn't matter anyway. He was entranced by the way the sunlight streamed through the open window and hit just right. Sideon looked like an angel gliding across the floor. He hadn't seen Sideon this relaxed in a while and he didn't want to break the moment. He stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, taking in all the lovely lines and smooth steps. You'd never know the man was carrying a child the way he moved around the room. He had his own little slice of heaven right here. In this moment, nothing could touch them.

When there was a break in the music, Max reluctantly stepped forward from his post in the doorway. He wanted to watch more, but the king had called a meeting. Afterward, he wanted to see if he could convince Sideon to join him in the private garden behind the house. It was hard as hell, but Max finally talked Sideon into walking over to their offices. He wanted to show his man off. Sideon was extremely sexy with a baby bump and he was just a tad upset that this whole time he hadn't been able to make anyone jealous that the hot man belonged to him. So maybe he had selfish motives, but it would be good for Sideon to get out also. Sitting up on the balcony was not the same as getting out and being able to walk around while interacting with people.

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Sideon was not happy that Max coaxed him into walking over to the wing where their offices and the throne room were. Max said he needed to speak with King Alverio, but wanted Sideon close by.

Sideon held Max's hand tightly the entire trip. Max squeezed his hand and used it to pull him a little closer. He was comforted by the gesture and slowly tried to take his mind off the fact that this was his first foray out of their wing since he went into hiding four months prior. When they arrived, Max asked that a few extra of the royal guards, as well as Verband guards, be posted in the room with Sideon until his return.

Sideon sat on the couch in his office, once again staring at space station designs. He had worked out the general areas needed, and appreciated Max's input about areas he liked from other stations, but now he was waiting on input from the council. After them, he was to send updated plans out to all the lords that watched the territories of the planet and sometimes acted in the king's stead. He honestly didn't mind all the input, but sometimes he felt there were too many hands in the pot, stretching out an already lengthy process and working to their own wants and needs.

He'd just settled into his work, getting a little more comfortable with being out and about, when the air in the room seemed to shimmer. A woman dressed in loose pants and a form-fitting hooded jacket appeared, slitting the throat of the guard to his left before disappearing. He felt the air move again as she emerged on the other side of the room. The sight of the second guard being cut down shocked Sideon to his feet and pushed him towards the door. He threw the door open and rushed toward the throne room at the end of the hall as the door slammed shut behind him.

Cursing his inability to waddle faster or even run, he yelled out trying to get help for the guards in his office. When his office door flew open again and slammed against the wall, he spun fearing the killer would be behind him. A Verband guard was pushed through the door right as his throat released a torrent of blood. But there was no one behind him when his body fell.

Sideon turned back towards the throne room and was pushed forward by the force of air as the assassin appeared right behind him. He twisted, trying to avoid landing on his stomach. A scream ripped its way out as Max burst through the throne room doors, his laser gun drawn. Liam and a couple more guards were behind him at the ready. The lady ignored them all, focusing only on Sideon. "Malverio sends his condolences." She raised her knife to strike as a shot rang out.

The knife clattered to the floor with a few drops of blood following. The assassin touched the device on her wrist before she vanished into thin air. Liam and his crew were already headed down the hall to check out his office as Max, yelling out orders, rushed over to Sideon. He turned to Sideon, but whatever he was about to say was cut off. He felt the air move but Max had already reacted. Max turned and threw a punch, striking the woman in the stomach just as she fully appeared. Sideon was able to tuck himself into an alcove just as Max went tumbling back from a kick. The pair seemed evenly matched, Max blocking her every move to keep her from getting to Sideon.

Sideon looked away to see Liam and the guards down the hall, guns still raised, but they looked hesitant to take a shot. The way Max and the assassin were going at it, they might hit the wrong target. He turned back in time to see Max flip her onto her back. She snatched her arm out of his grip and rolled down the hall a little before reaching to her wrist.

He screamed, “No!” But it was too late. She was gone. And he’d never be able to let down his guard. If someone could appear in his home, there was nowhere he could hide.

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*The assassin was wearing a scarf over her face so that only her eyes were visible, but that was enough. Sideon would never forget those eyes. He hated how she looked to catch his eye before slitting those guards’ throats. It was like she was toying with him, saving him for last. He couldn’t move fast enough, a sitting duck for whatever she wanted to do to him. He made it out to the hall but Max was nowhere to be found. He yelled, trying to get someone’s attention. The woman appeared behind him, pushing him forward onto his stomach. His baby! He rolled onto his side, his goal to get away, get them somewhere safe. Using his feet to kick out, he tried to scoot down the hall on his side but it was like moving through molasses. A sharp pain went through him as he was kicked in the stomach before being pushed on his back. She was going to hurt his baby. The assassin sneered at him before slicing his belly open, cutting out his unborn child before slitting his throat.*

That night he woke up screaming, the sheet soaked with his sweat.

Two days later, Sideon was back to pacing his living room while Max sat on the couch watching him. His back was killing him as usual and he was once again wishing for pain meds that his doctor wouldn’t allow. He thought about asking Max to give him another massage, or maybe he’d draw a bath later. He hated bothering Max when there was something he could do about it himself.

“Why did you not kill her? She is just going to try again!”

“We need her alive to find out who’s behind this. And it wouldn’t matter anyway. If she died there would just be another one to take her place. We need to get to the source.”

He was determined not to get upset or freak out. Deep breaths were needed here. Logical thinking too. “Fine... if you see it that way, I will help you. Did you notice the device on her wrist? It looked like an updated version of the one you all found at the docks and the marketplace guy had.”

He was convinced that he knew the name Malverio, but sleep deprivation was not helping him place it. He missed sleeping on his stomach. It didn't matter that he'd been trying to get used to sleeping on his sides. It was uncomfortable. Between that and the constant trips to the bathroom, he was sure he wouldn't make it the next three months. And Max had to be just as tired. Sleeping in the same bed meant his nightmares were Max's nightmares too. When he wasn't disturbing Max with his screaming, it was with his tossing and turning. It wasn't exactly easy for a beached whale to turn over or roll out of bed. He tried to focus back on the matter at hand.

“That's upsetting. The main scientist, Lidani, suspected that the thing could only be used twice, once to the destination, once for the return trip. I'll call Liam to get someone looking at the device again. Why don't you come sit with me, honey? We can watch a movie before dinner.” He debated before sitting next to Max. He was pulled closer and tried to relax against Max's chest as a romantic comedy started playing. By the end of the film, he felt much more relaxed. They'd somehow shifted so they were both lying on the oversized couch, Sideon on his side between Max's legs. For a muscular thigh, it made a great pillow. Max's fingers running through his hair had him in a trancelike state.

The trance... the meditative state... that's where he knew the name from. He hadn't been down to the falls to meditate since the week of his marriage. He could meditate anywhere, but the waterfalls were where he felt most comfortable, most able to let go. It made slipping in to speak with his spiritual side infinitely easier. He had to figure out why and how before he told his fathers and Max anything. It was probably going to sound insane to his fathers, but even more so to Max because humans didn't cross the spiritual plane like Virians did.

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## Chapter 18

Max's communicator beeped as the call connected. "Where are you? Where's Sideon?" He was proud of himself for keeping the panic out of his voice. He knew if something went wrong he would have gotten an emergency text per the new protocols. That didn't stop Murphy's Law from working though.

"We're down at the waterfalls, sir. I know you said not to leave the house without you, but he forced our hand. Said it was imperative that he come immediately and threatened to climb out the window since—"

Max cut off the babbling explanation. "What are the coordinates?" Max asked a few more questions, mostly about guard detail, as he climbed back in his vehicle to head out.

He found the men easily and reassured the head guard that he would not kill him for disappearing with his husband. Sideon had somehow gotten the men to give him a wide berth as long as he was in their line of sight. Max walked up to sit cross-legged beside him while taking in the beauty of the green forest and the rainbow created from the water. The midday sun filtered through the leaves of the enormous trees and cast a golden glow over the area. The falls was a set of three slow-moving rivers that merged in the small bowl at the bottom before flowing out to meet the ocean. The drop couldn't have been more than fifty feet and looked safe to jump from. He'd have to come back to try that one day.

Max started when he turned to find Sideon staring at him with a serene smile on his face. He'd been so taken in by the beauty and serenity that he forgot he'd come out here to give Sideon a piece of his mind. He didn't get a chance to do it either as Sideon's eyes darkened with lust before he attacked Max with his lips. Hell, they were as safe as they could be right then so Max let himself be ravished.

"I need to be inside you, Max. Right here, right now."

As much as Max liked the sound of that, he didn't think they should. This would be awkward with his belly in the way. "What about the baby?"

"Oh, he'll be fine. It is you and me I am worried about right now."

What started out as a halfhearted attempt at an argument turned into him giving in to his baser urges. He wanted to finally feel the long thick cock inside

of him. The most he'd had was Sideon's gorgeous fingers in him as he'd been fearful of more. But right now he was more curious than scared and extremely turned on by Sidi's show of strength.

Sideon pushed Max into the soft grass, then hovered over him, his belly resting on Max's abs. Max grabbed for the hem of Sidi's shirt, slowly working his hands first over his stomach, then reaching around, sliding up to his shoulders and pulling him down for another kiss. The moan he heard was pure sex, or it would be in a minute, but he couldn't tell whether it was him or Sideon. He finished pulling the top over Sideon's head before he got rid of his own. He would have looked to see if the guards turned their heads, but he honestly couldn't care right then. His goal was to end up impaled on that lovely hunk of meat. How had he gotten so hot and bothered so fast?

Working their way out of pants and boxers, Max lay back down, pulling Sideon into his side. The feel of the grass caressing his back was sensual. He was hard and aching. He already figured he might not last long, just knowing what was to come. Pulling back from the kiss for air, he had a stray thought about being in the water next time they came. "Please tell me you've got oil."

"Of course! Emergency sized in my pocket." Sideon grabbed Max's shaft and slowly slid his hand from root to tip, pressing just under the head before sliding his thumb up to press in the slit. His hips bucked. "Oh, shit." His thoughts failed him. He needed more before he burst. "Please." It came out more like a puff of air than an actual sound.

"Please what, Max?" Sideon looked cocky, but Max had climbed too far up the mountain of passion to care.

"Sidi. Please!" That time it was more of a moan. Dammit, he didn't need his voice for this. He needed Sideon to stop toying with him. He couldn't tackle the man without hurting the baby. He gave his best glare which he realized was probably kitten sized when Sideon laughed at him.

"Okay. Flip over." Max almost came from the rough sound of his voice. He scrambled to get into position on his knees before they both changed their minds. Sideon positioned himself between Max's spread legs, getting close enough to walk his fingers up his spine but no further. Max tried to push back and get closer but the belly bump stopped him. He huffed to let his frustration be known, but Sideon didn't take the hint until he turned around to glare. Sideon's lips were quirked up on the right. The man was playing with him. Well, two could play that game... eventually.

He thought he'd died and gone to heaven when he felt the slick fingers rub his hidden entrance. He wiggled, trying to rush Sideon again. "Remember to relax." He'd be able to relax if the feel of Sideon rubbing his spine, rubbing against his ass, slipping his finger into that forbidden place didn't have him strung tight as a guitar string. He just couldn't be quiet as another finger slipped in. He dropped his head down on his arms. He wasn't nervous this time, just impatient. He pushed back trying to get those fingers deeper.

"Do you like that? Like how that feels?"

"God, yes! Want to feel you inside me." He whimpered when those fingers slipped out, that delicious pressure gone. He wasn't upset long. Sideon wiggled closer. It was strangely erotic, having that belly resting on his buttocks. Feeling the blunt tip trying to push in, he wished he could see over his shoulder better. The stretch burned a little but felt so good.

They both groaned when Sideon's head popped in past his muscles. He put his hand back to stop Sideon when he tried to push in more. He needed a minute to take in the strange feelings. He was so much bigger than his fingers felt. It was almost too much.

Sideon couldn't hold his position and pushed in a little when he shifted. It felt amazing and had Max trying to push back again. Sideon groaned and took tighter hold of his hips, halting him this time.

"Don't move too fast. I don't want to hurt you." It sounded more like he was hurting not to move, which he understood. That first time he was in Sideon it felt so good, him squeezing around Max. He wanted to go slow but at the same time he wanted to slam into that tight heat. He felt ready and tried to push back again but didn't get far.

"Wait a second, hotness." He felt Sideon push his back lower and figured out what was in the way. He widened his legs to shift a little lower to give Sideon space to move. It took a moment but they were determined to make it work. Max let out another little gasp when Sideon slid home and started rubbing his back. He could feel the twitching inside him and swore Sideon had grown even more since they started.

He looked over his shoulder to see Sideon's eyes closed, his face scrunched up. "Sidi, are we just gonna sit here?" he rasped out. "I seriously need you to do something. Please tell me you did not just go into labor." That got him a weak laugh.



“No, I wouldn’t be mean and leave you hanging like that.” Max was relieved at the sound of that and the movement when Sideon pulled out to slide in a little faster.

The friction was like nothing else he’d ever felt. Max started pushing back, meeting his thrusts.

Sideon’s breathing got louder and harsher. “I’m getting close. I do not know how long I can last.” The urgency in his voice made Max grab his dick. He started stroking himself catching up to Sideon quickly.

“Oh, I’m gonna come. Sidi, baby, I can’t—”

Max shot, his brain shorting, his vision going white. He came back to himself, his head on the ground between his arms, as Sideon groaned, his dick throbbing as he came. His ass milked him before Sideon collapsed as much as he could on him. Max wished he could grab his baby daddy and pull him down for a kiss while Sideon was still inside him.

Sideon pulled out, sitting back on his heels. Max turned over and opened his arms, inviting the man to cuddle.

After some maneuvering, Sideon snuggled into him. “Want to go again?”

“Give me a minute here, big man. Not everyone can bounce right back up.”

“Speaking of everyone, maybe we should have asked the guards to turn around before you jumped me.”

“I believe I’m the wounded party here. If they didn’t decide to turn when you started stripping, then I hope they at least enjoyed the show. It was a really good show.” Sideon’s answering grin was brighter than the sun. It was great to see and he’d stay here all day just to see it a little longer.

Sideon’s energy started to wane so their second go-round didn’t last as long. It was still just as hot though. Max felt stretched and thoroughly taken. He could definitely see the appeal of having sex that way as he felt nerves fire that he’d never known his body had. If he didn’t already feel like his ass was going to be raw, he would have been up for a third round.

“What got into you?”

“I’m hot, horny, and have not had you inside me in what, almost two months? Never mind that. I think we should discuss what just got into you. Twice. Oh, and I figured out who’s trying to kill me, why, and how they set it up. We can stop this contract today.”

Max sat up so fast he got dizzy. “What? And you stopped for a baby-making session? Seriously?”

Sideon’s brows furrowed. “I thought your males couldn’t carry a child.”

“What? No... we can’t.” He shook his head. “That’s not the point. Get dressed. We need to get back to the house and get a meeting with your fathers so you can tell us everything at the same time.” He’d be glad to put that whole mess behind them. Hopefully, without having anyone else killed.

Sideon took the clothes Max handed him. “I was planning on telling you. I just needed to celebrate first.” He stepped close enough to press his already twitching cock against Max’s jean-clad thigh. “Are you saying it was not worth the wait?”

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## Chapter 19

Max called to have Liam meet him at the castle. Sideon pushed past and burst into the king's office when Max stopped. The last time Max walked in unannounced, the king and his consort were making out on the couch. Even though he'd gotten to know both of them better, he found himself very uncomfortable. Thankfully, this time, the couple was nowhere to be found.

Cidnal, Kusath's steward, stuck his head into the room. "His Majesty and Consort will be with you shortly."

Liam showed up with Major Alistair and Colonel John in tow. "Ambassador Jenkins, what's the news?"

"I want to wait until the king gets here, but apparently Sideon knows something about who hired the assassin."

"Really? That's great news! We can put this whole magically disappearing killer deal behind us. You've been nothing but drama since we got here." Sideon smiled in response to the wide grin on Liam's face. Good thing too. Max would have to beat his friend if he upset Sideon. The relieved look Liam shot at him said he knew it too. "So when is the king expected?"

A deep rumbling voice answered, "Right about now." Alistair and John shot up off the couch they'd perched on as the king strode in. "Gentlemen, please sit." He waved them back down as he headed towards Sideon and embraced him. "My son, I'm glad to see you out of your chambers. You look much better than last time, but you should visit your fathers more often. We are only on the other side of the building. Not so far away."

Sideon did indeed seem to be in higher spirits as he only smiled at his father. "My apologies, Father. I'll attempt to grace you with my presence more frequently."

"You should apologize. Depriving me of seeing your beautiful face. If you do this again, I shall be very upset. You're not too old to go over my knee." Kusath walked in the room, the door closing shut behind him. His smile belied the threat in his words. "What news have you brought us, son?"

"Fathers, gentlemen, I've recalled why the name Malverio is so familiar to me. He's my spiritual half."

He was prepared to explain as he knew the earthlings would be confused. He walked them through how when they meditated, they were able to speak

with and get guidance from their spiritual selves. Their entire purpose was to keep the Virians on their peaceful path and ensure the survival of the race. It had been known that many spirits received premonitions from their deity, Klavlak, and shared the information or sometimes the vision itself when relevant. Malverio had received such a vision.

“What Malverio saw led him to believe that I would be a danger to our planet if I were allowed to live. In the vision, he saw a man with white hair assisting an alien race in dominating and massacring our people. There was no way that man could not be me. At the time, he panicked, took over my body, and made for the path of least resistance by hiring a stranger to come to our home and make it look like an outside attack, knowing that my fathers would choose the route of forgiveness, not war.”

“I understand his assessment that the man was you. To my knowledge, you are the first to be born without raven-black hair in our entire family line. But what led to the change in character? And that is hard to believe as the last time a spirit being has taken over the physical form was over two hundred years ago!” King Alverio appeared shocked by Sideon’s revelations.

Max decided to chime in. “I think the important question is, what made him change his mind now?”

“He won’t share the answer to what he believes would push me to slaughter our people. Malverio stated it was due to conflicting visions and Max’s influence here that he decided to call it off. As he would be harming himself in the process by continuing, he decided taking this route was just as much for his sake as for mine.

“He actually changed his mind before now, but this was the first time I have been to meditate since before the wedding. He shared the first vision with me and I’m not willing to believe the man within is me as I am now. If it is me, I do not know the trigger that would cause me to turn on my people like that.

“He also shared a newer vision with me. In this one my face was clearly shown. I was happy with a dark-haired man holding a young boy by my side. He said it would be a disgrace to him if he did not allow that future to play out. I am grateful that he took that vision into consideration.” Sideon hung his head, turning slightly like he was trying to hide his face.

Max stepped over to Sideon, pulling him into his embrace. The way Sideon looked he assumed the man was probably feeling ashamed for an act he had yet

to commit. “I don’t believe you would ever do something to harm another. But just in case... I want you to swear to me that even if something were to happen to me in the coming war, you will not seek vengeance against another.” He wanted to, if something happened to their child also, but refused to plant that thought in Sideon’s mind. That was something too harsh to think about.

“I do, this day, swear so.”

“Thank you, love.” Max was overcome with emotion to think that his sweet Sideon could become someone to harm his own kind. He’d make sure, that even when the war reached them, and it would eventually, that he would keep himself safe, for Sideon’s sake.

But for now, they knew they were still safe from the threat of the Scheklkag army. And soon, he hoped Sideon and their child would be safe from the Ranak’varians.

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Max contacted the hired killer, Rucali, himself since he’d fought her and he was the highest-ranking officer on Virian. Not only that, but to spare Sideon from having to deal with this any further. Good thing he knew how to approach the situation. You didn’t exactly call an expert on pain and death and say, “Hey, I demand that you stop trying to kill this man immediately.” Hell, you couldn’t even call and ask nicely with sprinkles on top. There was a finesse needed to get what you wanted and not piss the person off more than they likely already were for missing their mark.

After getting through the “pleasantries” they got to the heart of the matter... how much money it would take to cancel the contract. Even having the passcode to cancel the hit was usually not enough to placate the hired party. He was willing to offer her double the rate she was charging to kill the crown prince. It was easier that this wasn’t a personal vendetta. No amount of money could change someone’s mind about getting revenge.

“How did the *great warrior Jenkins* end up as a bodyguard on that little backwoods planet anyway?” He couldn’t exactly tell at this point whether the fact that this badass woman had heard of him was a good thing or not. He prayed that he hadn’t slept with her, killed a family member, or insulted her mother. Although he knew he’d remember if he’d slept with Rucali, especially if she fucked as hard as she fought.

“I have an agreement with the people of the beautiful little backwoods planet. I’m hoping that I can come to a sort of agreement with you also.”

“There are lots of people begging to be killed and money can be made up anywhere. Our technology is just as advanced as Virian’s. Our people are trained and our planet is healthy. You have nothing that I want, Jenkins.”

“I humbly disagree, Rucali. We have a common enemy and I believe we could be of use to each other.”

“So my enemy’s enemy is my best friend if I don’t kill the crown prince or something along those lines?”

“Something like that.” He knew the Scheklkag were bearing down on her planet and was prepared to offer help. Just because her people were trained assassins didn’t mean they could take out the massive army and followers alone. But he would only offer the alliances in return for Sideon’s life and the help of the Ranak’varians to wipe out the entire race. With the Rucali and her planet on their side, they might just reach their goal of eradicating that asinine race and their followers sometime this century.

“I’ll think about your offer.” At least she was good at reading between the lines. “You have a reprieve for now. I’ll call back with my decision.” Rucali disconnected the call, leaving Max somewhat hopeful. It wasn’t a flat-out “No”. And a reprieve in Ranak’var time was at least six months. He and Sideon had a little breathing room now.

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## Chapter 20

The military base on Virian was settled, had order to it, and was running smoothly. They were in the process of vetting Virians who wanted to take a more active approach in protecting the planet. This would help him as he wanted to set up a couple of bases around the planet for faster access to more areas. His group was to get one of the first new ships built from the Virian technology that came off the assembly line. Max was sitting in the council meeting for Sideon this month. While he had been sitting at Sideon's side since he arrived, the council had only required his input if the matter was of a violent nature. They recently began to value him more, maybe because he was more familiar with their culture, or because he had a large hand in saving the prince or possibly just because of his outsider point of view.

Max was once again grateful that he was the boss and had people to delegate to. Apparently the little lovemaking session down at the falls caused some unwanted stress on the baby. The doctor forced Sideon into bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy. Max intended to stay with Sideon to make sure he was comfortable, a.k.a. make sure he obeyed the bed rest orders. No more sex, and he could only get out the bed for one hour a day, other than bathroom visits. Sideon appeared to be fine with the rest; it was the no sex he was having an issue with. The way he acted, people would think the doctor cut his precious not-so-little member off.

“Oh, Maxwell! Are you sure you cannot climb up here real quick? You can have control and the doctor will never be the wiser.”

With the way he batted his eyelashes, trying and failing to pull off an innocent look, Max wanted to give in and it was only the first week. He was doomed. It was so hard, but he had to turn his little man down. “Angel, you know we can't. If something happens to the baby, we'd never forgive ourselves. It's only a little while longer.”

“You know what, Max? This is all your fault! You at least still get to jack off. I've got two months of hopelessness. You know what else? I haven't seen my feet for weeks. For all I know, it's gotten very hairy down there. Why did you do this to me?” The whining was endearing. Max was trying very hard to hold back his smile.

“Me? I'm pretty sure I didn't do this alone! Matter of fact, I'm sure you've done about ninety-eight percent of the work. I just put my two cents in. By the

way, your feet are extremely sexy now. I love the hair.” He laughed and ducked out of the room as the remote went flying toward his head.

Max wasn't completely heartless. He loved spending time with Sideon and gave him all the heavy petting he wanted. They just couldn't do anything involving orgasms and he also tried to avoid getting Sideon too worked up in general. So he made a promise that he damn sure intended to keep. As soon as the doctor gave the all clear, they'd take a second honeymoon then he and Sideon could go to town as long and in as many ways as he wanted to. Sideon was quiet about sex for all of three days. He was probably imagining all the things they could do when he longer had a basketball in the way.

To take Sideon's mind off of being confined, Max found everything he could to distract the man. They downloaded new movies and books. Max asked questions about the scientific research, most of which went over his head at first. Sideon was very patient with his explanations and didn't mind repeating something when Max got stuck. One day, Max even snuck Sideon out of the house against doctor's orders. They'd been cooped up in that suite and both needed the break. Sideon was in a wheelchair so it made Max feel a little better about doing it, especially when he saw the mile-wide smile it put on his lover's face.

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Max lay on the couch with Sideon on his side between Max's legs. Max was once again indulging Sideon, who'd gotten tired of lying in the bed. He was feeling naughty, but wanted information at the same time. “Sidi, I've been meaning to ask about something but every time I remember, you distract me.”

“Distract you how?”

Max leaned down to whisper in Sideon's ear. “When I finally remember what I want, you ask me to stroke you harder and practically beg me to stick my dick in you.”

“You're an evil little man, you know that right?” Max knew but he couldn't help himself. He was just as sexually frustrated as Sideon. He and his right hand had been getting to know each other again, but it wasn't the same as having Sideon around him.

“You know what, Max... I'm ready to go back to bed.” Sideon stood up, took two steps and froze. “Uh-oh. I think my water just broke.”



“What!” Max jumped off the couch. They’d been preparing for this day, but now that it was actually here he had trouble remembering what they were going to do. “How do you know?”

“Trust me, I just know.”

Max stood staring at Sideon. He wasn’t ready for this. What if he was a horrible father? What if something else happened between him and Sideon? Why was he just now panicking about this?

“Max! What are you doing? Contact the doctor. Grab the bag. Get the car!” Sideon’s voice rose as he doubled over in pain.

“Yeah, breathe Max, breathe.” If he passed out, he couldn’t help Sideon.

“What do you mean ‘breathe Max’? You’re supposed to tell me to breathe.” Sideon flicked his hand, swinging the door to the suite open. “Guard? Can you get the car? I’m leaving Max here.” That spurred Max into motion. No way was Sideon going alone to have their child.

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Sideon lay on the table, legs spread under a sheet. The doctor stepped out to grab a nurse, fearing a difficult labor; otherwise, they would have done this at the house where Sideon was comfortable. All Max hoped for was that at the end of this ordeal, he had a healthy husband and a beautiful little healthy son.

“You about ready, babe?”

“About ready? I’ve been ready since you put him in there.” Sideon groaned loudly as another contraction hit. “Wait... I can’t do this yet! I need a little while longer.”

“Well, if you’d stayed in bed and hadn’t got the urge to go dancing, you might have been able to hold him in a couple more days.”

“Really! You want to play the blame game now? If you would have bought my water and trenavkers when I hollered for them the third time, I would not have needed to get out of the bed. And that was two days ago! That had nothing to do with you blowing in my ear today, practically forcing me off the couch.” The panting and groaning in between words really sounded painful. It was actually distracting Max from the argument. He would be forever grateful that he could not get pregnant if this was just the beginning of the birth process. “So it’s your fault I stood up so fast. Your fault I got distracted and walked up to the third floor. Your fault that the light was just right and enticed me to dance.

Your fault that I have this huge thing in me in the first place and I needed to be confined to a single room!”

Sideon’s voice was so loud and filled with pain by the end, Max was sure the baby was on his way and would shoot out across the room with the force. It just so happened that Max was holding Sideon’s hand when the contractions got stronger so he was able to share in as much of the pain as he was willing to. “I swear you just broke my finger. You know, I never found out? Where does the baby—”

Sideon growled at him. “You do not want to finish that question right now.” He was already in pain and sweating buckets, so Max cut him some slack. He’d need a cast later, but for now, he’d sit and provide comfort, even if his humor wasn’t wanted.

Besides, the doctor explained to Max early on how the birthing worked. The “entrance” Max felt the first time he had sex with Sideon was only the entryway for the sperm. The baby came out of an opening right behind the scrotum. It was only open long enough for the birth, which was why Max never noticed it before.

Doctor Tilou entered right in the middle of a scream. “Sounds like you’re about ready there.” Max just barely suppressed his laugh at the glare Sideon gave the doctor. It was enough to cause the smile to slide right off the doctor’s face. “So, yeah... let’s get him out of there.”

Dr. Tilou sat on a stool at the end of the bed and lifted the sheet. “You’re about there now. When I say, I want you to push.”

Max couldn’t wait till his son was old enough for him to tell the story of how Sideon was in labor for five hours only to have the munchkin fall out after three pushes.

Holding the baby up, Dr. Tilou turned to Max. “You want to cut the cord, Dad?”

“Boy, do I!” His face lit up, apparently pissing Sideon off.

“You don’t have to look so damn happy about it!” But he did. He never thought he’d be able to witness the birth of a child he helped create. Especially not with someone he loved.

Sideon looked tired and upset, but that changed to elation as his son was put in his arms. Max stared down at the little miracle and his husband. This was his family and he would never let them go.

*Three Years Later*

A little gremlin went tearing down the hall, through the living room, and out the open front door, giggling the entire time. The only problem was he was buck-ass naked. Sideon sat on the couch and watched him leave. A shirtless Max ran into the room a moment later. “Where’d he go?” Sideon was trying hard not to laugh and so he only pointed to the door. “Why didn’t you stop him?”

“Remember our deal... I carry him, you catch him!” He couldn’t contain his laughter anymore as he followed Max out of the suite. Between the wet footprints and the guards pointing the way, they were able to find Lucian quickly. He’d made his way to the main dining room and was sitting in King Consort Kusath’s lap with a napkin over him. For a three-year-old, he was fast.

“Awww, there are your daddies, Luke. Bath time not going so well I see?” Kusath looked up at Max and Sideon, humor plain as day in his eyes. Lucian was already grabbing fruit off his grandfather’s plate, shoving it into his little mouth.

This happened often enough that Alverio and Kusath were used to a naked visitor. Their guests, however, were not. The three council members and lords from the two closest territories were gathered at the table also. Councilman Nessiran was the only one who found the situation immediately funny, but he was probably knee-deep in the wine already. Tadrak went as far as staring at Max while shaking his head and clucking his tongue. That was the best he could do, without disrespecting anyone, to show his disapproval of the goings-on in the royal home. Max’s face and chest turned bright red as he went to retrieve his son.

It wasn’t often that Sideon had seen Max blush. He wished it happened more often because it was a beautiful and arousing sight. He tried not to get distracted or stare in front of the audience but he definitely had plans for Max’s ass after the munchkin was down for the night.

Something sounding like, “I’m not done,” was mumbled around tiny fingers as Max rushed from the room.

Sideon, being ever diplomatic, tried to smooth things over a little. “We apologize for the interruption, gentlemen. Please enjoy your meal and your night.” With a snicker, he turned and followed the path his family had taken.

He walked in to hear Max’s soft voice. “You’re s’posed to wait till you have clothes on before you go say good night to your Grampa Alverio and Grampa Kusath.”

The voice that answered back made him smile so wide his cheeks hurt. “But Gra’ Val said I could see him when I want and Gra’ Sal got froot!”

Max had Lucian back in the tub washing away juice and bits from said fruit. At least his sigh sounded amused. “I know honey, but clothes first, okay?”

“M’kay.”

Sideon sauntered up, wrapped his arms around Max, and leaned close to whisper in his ear, “Later, after the house is quiet, we can have our own clothing-optional fun.” He ground into Max’s ass loving the answering shiver.

“Can your parents watch the gremlin tonight?” His voice was husky.

“Nope, they had him last night.”

“We can ask Liam.”

Lucian let out a loud, “Untle LiLi!” at the sound of his uncle’s name.

Sideon nibbled on Max’s earlobe before letting out a breathy chuckle. “Try again. He has a date tonight. We can ask one of the guards.”

“A date! Isn’t he—”

“Yes, but they can still date, so maybe we can get—hell everyone has a date tonight. We’re going to have to do this ourselves. Do not worry. I’m still going to have you wide open by the end of the night.” The whimper that escaped from Max had Sideon hard, leaking and ready to go.

Apparently Lucian was clean, because as Sideon stood up, Max was already pulling their son out of the tub. The little guy had been going nonstop all day and skipped his nap. Hopefully, he’d tire himself out and fall asleep after just one bedtime story.

He was pulling out a pair of pajamas when Max stepped across the hall with the little, already half-asleep bundle. This was going to be a piece of cake. Sideon watched as his baby’s lids slowly hid deep-purple eyes speckled with bits of brown. Max had been right. He was an adorable little monster that was the perfect mix of both of them. He had a head full of black hair when he was born, but over the prior three years his hair color had changed. It now included streaks of white. At first they’d thought the highlights would be temporary or his hair would start growing white like Sideon’s, but after a few more added streaks it stayed constant.

By the time pajamas were on, the story was not needed. A kiss on the forehead and Sideon was swiftly pulled out of the room, down the hall and into

the master bedroom. Max was not wasting any time that night, but Sideon had plans to make him sweat.

“What was the evil chuckle for?”

“Oh, you will find out soon enough.” He pushed Max back onto the bed and went to work.

Lying tangled and sweaty in the aftermath of their lovemaking, there were no words needed. With a look, Sideon knew Max would keep his heart safe and protect him. And Sideon knew he would do everything in his power to do the same. Who knew his perfect match would come from a world away?

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Robin S. Krizan is a freelance writer and dream chaser who is embracing her weirdness.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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