



SOMEWHERE  
IN-BETWEEN

KENZIE CADE

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN

**By Kenzie Cade**

### 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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# SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN

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## Photo Description

Two men in a private moment embracing, both are bare above the waist. One stands with his back to the audience and the other with his face buried in the first's shoulder.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*The King is Dead. Long Live the King. This is the only private moment he is going to get to grieve his father before the entire kingdom/country/empire/province/whatever will expect him to be the perfect picture of their newly crowned king. I'm just glad I could be there for him. He is so dedicated to his duty and is well-loved for it by his populace, I am sure he will put everyone else's needs before his own. I've loved him since we were children, two sons of nobility trained and raised together. I think something more could be growing between us but we have to take it slowly as the whole kingdom, etc is watching how the new king is going to settle into his role. I am beginning to hope that our comfortable friendship could grow into sweet happily ever after, with me by his side forever.*

Sincerely,

Kathleen

P.S. This can be as fantasy, sci-fi, contemporary, etc as you like but the possibility of these two being openly together without tearing the kingdom apart is key. I am also good with any sexual orientation (gay, bi, pan...) that lets these two be together as well as cis, trans, or gender fluid/queer gender presentation. Plot and relationship are the most important things (better limited/no sex than too much sex). I would prefer no BDSM.

## Story Info

**Genre:** Science Fiction

**Tags:** friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, royalty, kidnapping, other world, politics

**Word Count:** 13,440

*Acknowledgements*

For Kathleen, thank you for this prompt. The picture and Dear Author letter are beautiful as is. I hope I did our guys justice. And for Gillian, you are a lifesaver. Thank you so much for everything.

# SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN

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Marcus stood with his head pressed to the frigid wood of the unforgiving door, his breathing barely even. What waited on the other side was beyond his comprehension. He wasn't sure he could handle it but he knew he had to. For Raaf.

"You can just go in," a deep voice rumbled somewhere behind him. Ji'i.

"I know," Marcus whispered. "I will. I just..."

"Can't move?"

"Yeah," he croaked. His best friend was experiencing the worst day of his entire life, and Marcus was being a coward.

Ji'i hummed a thoughtful sound. "You could always go back the way you came. Prince Raaf need never know you were here."

That had Marcus spinning around to face the Eidan. The incandescent glow from the white walls highlighted the mahogany hair covering the seven-foot-tall man. He narrowed his eyes. "Take your own advice, Gonad. I just need a moment."

Marcus had no doubt that under the layer of dense hair lay laughing eyes, only because the Eidan's full brown lips smirked at him. Everything about him was a contrast to the bright pathways of the palace. How did a species as big and overgrown in every way as the Eidan see through all of that hair? Marcus didn't know, but contemplating the conundrum was better than letting his eyes fall below the big guy's waist where his enormous balls hung down to just below his knees. *Gods*. Just the thought of them made Marcus narrow his stance. The knee-length kilt Ji'i wore displayed said anatomy proudly—as was common among the species. Eidans mated once every century, and when they did, they reproduced in multiples. Ergo, the massive testicles. Marcus just didn't want to make eye contact with them.

"Gonad?" He snorted, and Marcus imagined a pair of eyes rolling behind that fall of hair. "Original. You know, when an Eidan meets his mate, he only need to lay claim once."

"What are you—"



“Mate will remain true forever.”

Marcus’s head wasn’t in the right place to tell if the Eidan was trying to make a point, or if Ji’i was trying to piss him off. Probably a little bit of both. “All right, I’ll bite. How exactly do you claim a mate?”

“You tell him,” Ji’i said simply, and the words struck Marcus like a blow to the gut.

*You tell him.* That easy. Except it wasn’t. How Marcus wished it was though. To simply tell Raaf he loved him and have it mean more than any platonic platitude.

He shook his head. “Now’s not the time.”

“It’s always the time when you know your mate.” Ji’i sounded... satisfied. He probably was. He probably knew all Marcus’s doubts and secretly reveled in them. The jackass.

“But...” *He just lost his father.* Marcus felt selfish just thinking about it.

“You never need the one you love most until you have lost. It’s when you are in-between losses that the need is tested.”

Marcus hated when the guy got all philosophical and cryptic. “Okay, thanks for the talk.” He turned around and came face-to-face with the door again but didn’t advance. The damn thing was an obstacle he couldn’t think past.

“Have it your way, little Captain.”

He heard Ji’i chuckle as the heavy thud of his steps echoed down the hall. Marcus heaved an empty sigh. He truly was a coward. Though, he wasn’t sure how to be anything else in his current situation. When he was finished self-berating, Marcus quit wasting time and tapped at the center of the door with one knuckle. *Tap-tap.* Pause. *Tap.* Pause. *Tap-tap-tap.* A secret code only he and Raaf knew. Then he walked in.

It was a room Marcus knew well. Even in the pitch-black of night, the only light being Lunar Seven glowing lazily through the single window, Marcus was able to traverse the room. Walls of gray stone twenty feet high blocked in the elegant and masculine sitting area of Raaf’s apartment. The domed ceiling, several shades darker to match the stone floor, gave the area a spacious feel. But to Marcus it was a second home. A place he’d visited on numerous occasions, both as an adult and a child. It was his best friend’s home, so it had become Marcus’s refuge.

He wondered if that's how Raaf saw it.

Darkness didn't faze Thorians. Midnight had reigned over their planet since before its discovery some centuries ago when the first humans escaped Old Earth before the Great War of Worlds. Thoria had been their safe haven and had eventually become the hub of the Nero Prime galaxy, with its seven moons and rich, loamy grounds.

Marcus found Raaf—or rather Raaf's silhouette—standing in front of the room's one floor-to-ceiling window. He wasn't surprised to see him huddled into himself, a favorite thick knit tunic wrapped snugly around his shoulders. Marcus knew the top would be almost sweater-like in texture. A fiber rare to Riytana was the primary in its crafting. It had been procured by his father some years ago to keep Raaf warm while he studied in the courtyard, and it was one of Raaf's favorites. Marcus knew it to be a security blanket of sorts. He'd have been surprised if Raaf hadn't had it on.

As Lunar One, the gold moon, drifted lazily by, Raaf stood so tall the untrained eye would find it hard to glimpse the slight rounding of his shoulders and the tremble of his breathing. The Prince of Thoria, beloved and stalwart, had broken, and Marcus had been shattered as well. He walked forward until he stood but a few feet away.

“I knew you'd be the one to come.”

Raaf's voice in the silent room echoed like thunder to Marcus, though he'd barely spoken above a whisper.

“Where else would I be?” Marcus asked and felt pathetic as soon as the words left his mouth.

This close, Marcus could see the slight twitch of Raaf's lips in the glass. “Where else, indeed.” His voice cracked on the last word and his chin dropped to his chest.

Marcus couldn't take his eyes off him. Frozen seemed to be his natural state. He and Raaf had been friends since they were children, raised and taught together—Marcus of the House Valdor and Raaf, Prince of Thoria, cherished first and only son of King Sweo. Peas in a pod, Marcus's mother had referred to them as. Marcus had always known he loved his best friend, but that love had changed years ago into something new, fresh, and exciting. Scary.

Marcus knew his duty; to protect the royal family, uphold the values of the House Valdor and support the crown in all things, but also to keep the crown

firmly balanced and challenged. He took his duty seriously. For years, he'd put his personal feelings aside in exchange for honor. Lately, that burden had been more difficult to bear, to hide.

“Did you know, when I was eight, Father took me up in my first hovercraft?” Raaf sounded wistful and tear clogged. “It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. Thoria from a hovercraft is a must.”

Marcus agreed. The palace literally glowed under the stars and open space above.

“He said, ‘Raafie, one day this will be yours.’” Raaf hiccupped. “I was eight. It looked like a toy palace from that viewpoint. I didn't understand the vastness of the responsibility. I'm not sure I do now.”

The last was spoken so softly, Marcus wasn't sure he heard it, but the words, real or imagined, were enough to shake Marcus from his stasis. Two steps and he was pulling Raaf into his arms—Raaf's back to his chest—and wrapping him up. Raaf's entire frame trembled in his grasp, but he didn't let go. Instead, he tightened his hold.

“So—” Raaf inhaled shakily. “—every year from then on out, on my birthday, he would take me up. We would tour the planet. He would tell me stories, give me lessons.”

“I know,” Marcus whispered, stroking a thumb over the center of his chest. “I remember.”

Raaf choked out a single sob and then another. He sniffed. “But this year—” He took another deep breath, his dark head landing on Marcus's shoulder. “—this year there will be no tour. No reminiscing. No... nothing.”

Before Marcus could react, Raaf turned in his hold and buried his face in Marcus's shoulder. Raaf's tears scalded Marcus, leaving him speechless. Marcus held him, lending strength and support in the best way he knew how, in silence. He watched Lunar One continue its course, while Raaf shook against him and sobbed.

Finally, once Raaf had calmed a bit, his breathing evening out, Marcus cleared his throat. “So we make new memories—a new tradition—in his honor.”

Raaf stilled and Marcus worried he'd overstepped. When Raaf lifted his head, dark, red-rimmed eyes met his. Even with tearstains streaking his face, he was the most beautiful creature Marcus had seen. He blinked once, twice. “New traditions?” He sounded lost.

Marcus nodded, and when he spoke, Raaf's gaze fell to his lips. "Yes," Marcus answered. "Like mountain climbing and airlock jumping."

The corner of Raaf's lips twitched as he eyes shot back up to Marcus's, a brow lifted. "Airlock jumping?"

Marcus lifted his shoulders. "It's a thing," he said in a conversational tone. "I hear all the cool Zurullians are doing it."

"Zurullians? Are airlock jumping?" Finally, the briefest of grins flitted across Raaf's mouth.

It warmed Marcus. He'd put that look there.

He nodded soberly. "Of course. They're rule breakers. Always on the cusp of coolness."

"Just on the cusp?"

Teasing—it was a good sign Marcus thought. He rolled his eyes.

A wet sob-laugh fell from Raaf's mouth. He lifted a hand, cupping Marcus's face with it. Marcus fought not to close his eyes, not to lean into that touch.

"Thank you," Raaf whispered. "For everything."

Marcus didn't know why he didn't move away, why he didn't give Raaf space, but he didn't. His hold loosened, but he didn't step back. "Anything for you. You know that." It was a given.

"I know."

And Marcus didn't understand why those two little words sounded so conflicted. He parted his lips to ask, but his breath was stolen when Raaf's mouth covered his.

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It was a split-second decision. A moment of weakness. Though, if that were the case, he thought he might be okay with being weak. He'd dreamed of this moment for years—the taste of Marcus, the feel of Marcus surrendering to him. Raaf didn't know if it was what Marcus wanted. He could only hope. But he'd worry about that tomorrow. Tonight, however, Raaf needed this. He needed Marcus. He needed to... feel.

Just a press of lips—a scorching touch Raaf felt all the way down to his toes.

Before the kiss went any further, Marcus pulled back. Black pupils swallowed the intense blaze of his dark irises. His breath came in fast pants. He looked dazed. It made Raaf's mouth water. He moved in for another taste only to be evaded.

"Raaf," Marcus rasped, his brow furrowed.

"Don't, Marcus," Raaf pleaded, taking another step forward. "Please. Just... please don't."

This time Marcus didn't move away when Raaf walked into his arms. Tears welled in his eyes when his lips touched Marcus's. When he parted his lips, Marcus slipped his tongue inside, and Raaf met him there. His taste, his heat became Raaf's world. Strong hands gripped his hips, fingers digging in, like Marcus was trying to decide whether to pull him closer or push him away. Raaf made the decision for him, pressing his hips to Marcus's, sliding hardness against matching hardness. Marcus groaned, the sound sweeping over Raaf in a wave of reality and fantasy at the same time.

He kissed harder, pressed firmer, felt... more. Then a sob spilled from this throat. This time when Marcus ended the kiss, he didn't step back, instead crushing Raaf to his chest.

"Shh," he breathed into Raaf's ear. "C'mon. Let's get you to bed." He tugged Raaf along and through his bedroom door. Raaf barely saw the wood paneling of his walls or the muted colors of his bedding. The ancient four-poster bed and wall painting of the Thorian Palace hardly registered. His head felt fogged, hazy.

Marcus nudged him to sit down on the bed then went about undressing him. It felt so clinical, the way his touch moved measured and quickly. He unwrapped Raaf's top and slid it from his shoulders then the shoes from his feet.

Raaf felt the loss like a physical hole inside.

When Marcus pressed on his chest to lay him down, Raaf reached up and grasped his wrist. He waited until Marcus's much more amber gaze met his. A sweep of light-brown hair fell in front of his eyes but didn't cover the sadness Raaf glimpsed. He'd royally fucked this up and he had to fix it. But all that came out of his mouth when he opened it was a choked "Stay."

As Raaf watched, hope seemed to war with regret in his amber depths, and Raaf fought the need to turn away, to take it back. He just... he couldn't be alone. Not right now.

With a twitch of his lips but not a smile, Marcus nodded then moved away and stripped himself of his shoes and socks, but that was all. Fully clothed, he climbed into bed, lying on his back. Raaf lay down facing him and waited for Marcus to fall asleep. He didn't believe he'd sleep much anyway.

"Goodnight, my prince," Marcus whispered, and Raaf pretended the words meant something, let them tug at his heart so he could hope and remember this a little longer.

Marcus's breathing evened out, his face slack, his hands resting on his abdomen.

"Goodnight, my protector," Raaf said, unsure if any sound came out.

This man, his best friend, had been by his side for fifteen years. Through thick and thin. He wondered what Marcus would think if he knew Raaf's thoughts of him. His every day thoughts. Marcus didn't know, couldn't, but the king had made it clear several years back that if he'd been able to choose Raaf's consort, he'd choose Marcus for his son. Raaf and his father thought a lot alike. At least they used to.

Raaf slumped onto his back. His chest hurt. His father was gone, and it had been stupid and avoidable and so damn wrong. Mechanical failure. He'd been on his way back from a meeting of the Intergalactic Order. His hovercraft malfunctioned and collided with another craft. He'd been on Thoria where he should have been safe. All who knew King Sweo loved him. Especially Raaf. It shouldn't have happened, and Raaf didn't know how to go on without him.

Tears burned his eyes again and there was no holding them back. He didn't even try. He wished Marcus was still awake, that he would hold him until all of his hurt was gone. But Raaf didn't know if that was possible. He was pretty sure he'd hurt forever.

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"You've got to be kidding me."

Marcus heard the words before he saw the man. In fact, he'd heard the words through the door. He wondered if he was even supposed to hear them in the first place. Raaf had left him sleeping in his bed after all.

It had been three days since the kiss, two since the burial, and Marcus was still sleeping in Raaf's bed. Marcus was powerless to utter the word "no" when Raaf blinked up at him with his watery onyx eyes and asked him to stay. They hadn't kissed again since that first night, hadn't even spoken of it. Likely, there would be no more kissing.

Marcus was beginning to wonder if he'd dreamed it.

"No, son, I'm not joking." That was Raaf's mother, Queen Marde. "You know the laws as well as anyone."

Marcus would argue that Raaf likely knew the law better. He'd had his nose buried in a book since the day they'd met.

"I do." Raaf's answer was terse and hard. Marcus fought not to go out there to fix whatever it was that angered him. "But Father just died."

"You don't think I know that?" the queen choked out.

Marcus rested against the door again. This was family time and he shouldn't even be there, but there was no way out. So he waited. Raaf and his mother needed to be alone. Marcus knew they were a close family. He could only imagine the effect the king's death had on his queen.

"Yes, Mother," Raaf said, softer, chastised. "I'm sorry. But can we not put this off until... I don't know... a year or so. There's so much for me to do and choosing a consort is not what I need to be focusing on right now."

Marcus's world fell out from under him. A consort. Raaf. Oh gods, how could Marcus have forgotten? He'd known it was coming, but he'd avoided it for so long and with everything going on, he'd simply let it slip his mind. Raaf. His Raaf would be marrying, settling down soon. Without Marcus. The crack in his heart was enough to leave him breathless.

"I wish there were another way, darling." Even Marcus could hear the sorrow in her voice. "But you know the law. The Council of the Five Houses will assume total control of Thoria otherwise. There is no alternative. Either you choose a consort to help balance you—"

"That's what the council is for. They are the balance."

"They are the kingdom's balance. Thorian law states that a king must be balanced by his equal, someone willing to keep you in check."

Marcus didn't miss the mix of warmth and sorrow in her voice.

"I'm perfectly balanced," Raaf grumbled and Marcus had to hold back a laugh at his petulance. He was far from balanced. If left to his own devices, Raaf would lock himself away in his room or study and rule via vid screen.

"Oh, honey, you'd like to think that, wouldn't you?" The queen *tsked*. "If I may offer my advice?" She didn't wait for his assent before she said, "You are the calm before the storm, even and steady. It is a storm that you need, a man

willing to shake you up but not break you. You need a match and you only have days to find him.”

Tears sprang to Marcus’s eyes. He was that storm. He knew it. But how could he convince Raaf? Did he want to?

He knew the answer was a resounding yes.

“I can leave you with a list of names,” the queen offered, her mother voice exchanged for her business one. “I’ll have my assistant send them to you. If you do not choose before your birthday, I’m afraid I’ll be forced to choose for you. Your father trusted the council for the most part, but you and I both know that within that group of men lies corruption somewhere. I will not let your father’s hard work be destroyed by one or two bad seeds.”

Marcus heard a door open and click shut. He waited a few beats before emerging from the bedroom. The room glowed bright with silver light from the zaccazite mined from Lunar Three. Silver Moon—Marcus’s favorite. The entire palace glowed with it, like a massive night lamp.

As he stepped into the sitting area, he mentally thanked Raaf’s mother for the foresight of choosing a darker palette. With lights turned up, the dull throb pulsing behind his eyes that had begun when he’d woken to find himself in Raaf’s bed alone, then increased with the queen’s announcement, would have been his end in a room of pure white.

Raaf sprawled in the corner of a large sofa, his eyes closed. Marcus had almost made it to him when his eyes popped open and found him, his mouth dropped open in a perfect O.

Then he asked, “How much did you hear?”

“All of it,” Marcus answered immediately, no sense in lying.

Raaf huffed and dropped his head to the back of the sofa again, staring at the ceiling. “That’s a relief,” he sighed. “I would’ve hated to keep my family’s drama secret.”

Chuckling, Marcus made his way to Raaf’s side then squatted in front of him. “You’ve never been able to keep a secret from me.” Marcus’s inner voice reminded him that Marcus had done quite the job of keeping the most important one to himself though.

When Raaf lifted up his head to look down at him, Marcus saw something in his ebony eyes. Something he couldn’t quite name, but there were definite



dregs of regret. “You’re right.” His words were soft, his eyes warm. “My secrets do seem to be your burden.”

“You’re never a burden,” Marcus answered, automatically, because it was the truth.

“Tell that to my mother,” Raaf grumbled.

“She means well.”

Raaf nodded. “She does.”

“She only wants you to be happy.” The words felt like ash in his mouth.

“I know.”

Marcus placed a hand on Raaf’s knee, and Raaf’s gaze dropped to the point where they connected. “We’ll figure this out,” Marcus mumbled.

“We always do,” Raaf answered, his eyes not leaving the place where Marcus touched him.

Marcus hoped so. Losing control of the kingdom to a group of stodgy old men would be far worse than seeing Raaf married to someone who was not him.

*You tell him.*

Ji’i’s words echoed in his head. If only it were that easy.

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“What about this one?” Marcus tapped his personal vid screen and an image of a handsome Markili popped up on screen, his pale skin made to look even starker by the dark green of his hair and eyes. “Prince Zkaro.”

Raaf hummed his disinterest, the contents in his stomach roiling. He didn’t want to deal with new blood. He didn’t want to marry for convenience at all. He watched Marcus from the corner of his eye. Marcus’s broad shoulders and narrow waist were enough to make his mouth water. He’d woken up several times over the past few days to find himself wrapped around that strong body. His desire amped up at the memory of Marcus’s erection digging into his hip that very morning. Raaf wondered how he would have reacted if he’d woken up with Raaf’s mouth on him, and not in the desperate needy way of the kiss that had apparently been forgotten nearly a week ago. Of course, he still felt desperate and needy, but for completely different reasons that had nothing do to with sadness and everything to do with wanting his best friend.

If Marcus would give the slightest inkling of interest, Raaf would run with it. He knew he would. But instead, they were here, looking over potential suitors, narrowing down the pool of acceptable men. Well, Marcus was narrowing—Raaf was avoiding.

“Are you paying attention?” Marcus’s words pulled him back into the present.

“Not even a little bit,” Raaf grumbled. “Why are we doing this now?”

Marcus’s eyes narrowed into slits. “So that the council or your mother doesn’t take that decision away from you. Do you want to marry Azron?”

“Oh gods,” Raaf grouched and fell into his seat. Azron of all people. As the eldest of the House m’Fars, Azron would likely be his mother’s first choice. A man of noble blood and fierce loyalty to the throne. He was just so... boring. And that said a lot coming from Raaf, who preferred his books and peace to the adventure and troublemaking that Marcus preferred.

“Then focus.” Marcus’s orders were clipped out, but Raaf couldn’t help but hear the undertone in them. Was that hope?

“I am focused.” He was—on Marcus, but saying that wouldn’t earn him any favors, he didn’t think. “I just... These guys aren’t what I’m looking for.”

With a heavy sigh, Marcus placed his screen down on the desk. “Then what are you looking for?”

What a loaded question. “I don’t know.” And the look Marcus gave him was another of exasperation. “I need someone to keep me out of my head,” he said, closing his eyes because he couldn’t do this looking at his ideal. “Someone who forces me to look at things from a different perspective. Someone who has the balls to stand up to me when he thinks I’m wrong and apologize when he is. I need a partner who will be right beside me in all things, who is strong enough to take on the council without wavering, and let all the stresses of the day go when he climbs into bed with me. I need a partner not a pawn. I need someone like—” *you*. But he cut himself off before he made that mistake.

“Like what?” His voice was husky and closer than Raaf thought.

Raaf snapped his eyes open to find Marcus standing above him, his gaze stealing Raaf’s breath.

“Like what, Raaf?” He knelt and suddenly they were eye to eye. Nothing to hide the emotions flowing between them. And Raaf felt it like a physical presence—the anticipation and hope coursing from one to the other.

Raaf opened his mouth, unsure of what would come out. “Like—”

A sharp knock cut off his reply and Marcus stood as if he’d been burned. After blinking away his haze, Raaf checked the vid outside the door then pressed for entrance. The door slid open, and Timme, Raaf’s personal guard captain, stood in the opening.

“Your Highness,” he greeted with a nod to Raaf then a courteous glance to Marcus, “your mother has requested your presence in the grand hall.”

Raaf felt his brow furrow. “Why?” he blurted.

Timme—a part human, part Olean cyborg—rolled his eyes at Raaf. “I hardly know,” he replied. “But she seemed quite insistent. So if you wouldn’t mind”—he gestured as if motioning Raaf, who hadn’t budged from his seat, out of the room—“I’d like to keep my receptors intact.”

At his side, Marcus snorted, though it sounded a little shaky to Raaf’s ears.

Raaf stood and faced him, not wanting to leave with this... whatever it was unsaid between them. But he had no idea how to resolve it. Gods, his level of cowardice surprised even him. He stepped forward and Marcus’s eyes lit again. This time Raaf saw happiness and something else. His future? Hope bloomed deep inside him and it scared him at once.

“I...” He felt uncertain, like walking away from Marcus was the wrong choice, like a physical weight pressed him to stay. But... “I have to go.”

“Okay,” Marcus answered then moved to stand in front of him. “Then let’s go see what your mother wants.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Of course I don’t,” Marcus cut him off. “But you must admit it’s odd timing and not at all like your mother to call an unscheduled audience.”

Raaf’s thoughts exactly. Marcus was right. Even so, Raaf’s mother would not expect Marcus tagging along. Marcus seemed to have come to some conclusion and Raaf wished he felt as confident. Mostly, he wished he knew what was going through Marcus’s head.

“I’ll wait outside with Timme,” Marcus continued. “The grand hall? In the middle of the day?” Marcus raised an eyebrow at him as if he expected Raaf to argue.

Raaf didn’t. He wanted to bristle at Marcus’s need to protect him—or whatever this was—but after a lifetime of friendship, Raaf had become accustomed to this part of Marcus. Sometimes he even relied on it.

With a nod, Raaf brushed his hand down Marcus's arm. He needed the connection. "Let's go then."

The trek from the royal offices to the grand hall took them clear to the other side of the palace and down two floors. With one last glance over his shoulder at Marcus, who nodded encouragingly, Raaf pushed open the doors. When he entered the vacuous room, he found his mother and the heads of the Council of Five Houses seated at the end of the meeting table. Servants and assistants milled around, talking among themselves, but the entire room echoed silence when they noticed Raaf's presence.

Raaf took his time admiring the carvings in the walls—the stories of the first Thorians and the gods who saved and provided for them. The farthest wall from the door Raaf had entered held an exact replica of the Mountain of the Seven Gods carved into the deep, earthy veined marble. It was awe-inspiring to the least of Thoria, a true work of art. Every time Raaf saw it, he had a difficult time not bowing before it and reciting the prayers he'd learned as a child. He had a feeling he'd need the gods support for whatever this group had in store for him.

It was a small thing, but knowing Marcus stood outside the surprise meeting steeled Raaf's nerves and gave him the calm ability to approach seemingly undaunted.

"Mother," he said, his conversational tone strained. He fought not to show the frustration on his face at being ambushed. His pulse kicked up as he crossed the room. "What can I do for you?"

"Prince Raaf." The title was enough to bring him up short, though he didn't pause. She never used it. Never. Her smile was thin, her countenance calm. Raaf knew her anger when he saw it. And she was about to explode. He also knew she was hanging on by a thread. "The council has come across a... clause."

Raaf dropped a kiss on his mother's cheek and stood beside her, his hand resting on her shoulder. "What clause?" he asked, his gaze landing on each member at the table. Raaf didn't miss Azron's presence behind his father, but he didn't acknowledge it, though, Nilo m'Fars's smirk of satisfaction grated on his nerves.

Zeul Valdor, Marcus's father, stood. Raaf had always respected the man. He was kind and knowledgeable, a wise addition to the council. Right then, though, the look of irritation on his face did little to allay Raaf's fear.

“As head of the Council of Five Houses,” Zeul spoke in a monotone, “it is my duty to inform you that as heir apparent with no reigning monarch, you have three days to find a consort.”

*Three days?* He stood tall, his panic not noticeable on his features. “And if I do not?”

Zeul didn’t physically flinch, but Raaf could see the resignation in his eyes even when his tone held, strong and commanding. “If you refuse or fail to take a consort, the council will retain control of the kingdom of Thoria, its military, and its people.” He sat down, apparently unwilling to meet Raaf’s eyes.

The bottom fell out of his stomach and he felt his knees turn gelatinous. Had he not had hold of his mother, Raaf was certain he would have fallen to the floor. He struggled to maintain control of his features as he searched each face of the men before him. Only Nilo would meet him eye to eye and Raaf wanted to pound the man’s wrinkling face even as he opened his mouth.

“Majesty”—Nilo dipped his head in such a manner as to look respectful, though his beady eyes held nothing but disdain—“my son has accompanied me today. He would be honored to stand at your side.”

And Raaf had no doubt Nilo planned to use his son as the very kind of pawn Raaf detested. Azron was nice enough, but a puppet Raaf could do without.

“Thank you,” Raaf spoke quietly. His mother gasped, her gaze shooting up at him. He didn’t look at her. “But I already have a consort in mind.” With his heart pounding in his chest, Raaf swallowed audibly, praying to the gods that he would be forgiven.

“Who?” his mother gasped at the same time Leader m’Fars slammed his fist on the unyielding table, demanding the same.

As if perfectly choreographed, the entrance to the hall opened and Marcus marched in. Raaf couldn’t look away, knowing in his heart that Marcus had heard most, if not all, of the conversation. For a moment, Raaf’s heart ceased beating in his chest, then raced at the speed of light the next. Marcus’s amber eyes held his, unwavering.

With Marcus before him, lending him strength, Raaf stood straight, his chin raised. He spoke clearly so no one in the room would be mistaken. Especially Marcus. “I, Raaf Americ Winston Avalon, son of Sweo Vahn Avalon, King of Thoria, choose Marcus Asvek Valdor, son of Zeul Valdor of the House Valdor, as my consort and paired leader of Thoria.”

The acknowledgement fell smoothly from his lips, and when he was finished he blinked to find himself standing but feet away from Marcus. He didn't remember moving toward him though he'd lost himself in those eyes.

Marcus didn't falter when he stepped forward, grasping Raaf's wrist.

Raaf tried to smile but was certain he failed. "I..." he whispered. "I don't know... Is that okay?" he finally asked.

The lift at the corner of Marcus's lips seemed easy, warm, happy. "Better than," he told Raaf then raised his eyes to the group still gathered at the table behind Raaf. "I accept, by the way."

Raaf spun around to face them. He received a mixture of looks ranging from satisfied to shocked. The best of which was the grateful knowing smile on his mother's face.

She nodded gracefully, then stood. "Well done. I could not have chosen better for you."

Relief washed over him even as unease rested in his belly. Raaf's duty to Thoria, and to his family, had increased exponentially in the past several days. Adding into account a wedding and co-leadership of an entire planet was daunting. He worried that pulling Marcus into his mess would put a strain on their friendship, their relationship. *Relationship*. His heart fluttered in his chest as his mind warred with itself.

A touch of Marcus's warm palm grasping his silenced the maelstrom of frustration in his head.

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Raaf's unplanned presence before his mother in the grand hall had set off bells of warning in Marcus's head. Not to mention he was already strung tight after what had happened only moments before the knock.

What had happened? Marcus still wasn't certain. What he was sure of was that he was tired of fighting himself, tired of fighting his feelings. He was ready to bare it all for Raaf to see. And if Raaf rejected him... well, he didn't know. But at least it would've been out there and off Marcus's chest. Then that infernal knock had taken the chance away. For now. Marcus had made up his mind. He was ready to put his heart out there. Whether it would be rejected or not, had yet to be seen.

Timme smirked knowingly at Marcus from his position at the doorway. The Olean cyborg didn't question Marcus when he listened at the door. What he

waited for didn't take long to come to notice. The announcement, and ensuing offer to Raaf, left Marcus on edge, but it was the proclamation that Raaf was ready to name a consort that had Marcus moving.

Now they were on their way back to Raaf's personal quarters. He pulled Raaf along behind him, barely registering the words spoken to him. There were a few apologies and pleas for Marcus to talk to him. Normally Marcus wouldn't act so hastily, dragging Raaf behind him. Raaf would be crowned king in less than a month. But Marcus would be crowned consort—*consort*—to the man he'd loved from afar for so long. Manhandling could be forgiven.

The door had barely slid shut before Marcus had Raaf pinned to it.

"I-I'm sorry," Raaf was saying, his face flushed, eyes blinking rapidly. Stammering. "We'll fix this. I'll fix it."

He'd been so confident when he'd called Marcus's name out in the hall, when he'd claimed him for the leaders of Thoria to bear witness. It was the sexiest thing Marcus had ever seen. This quieter, more vulnerable side of Raaf, the side only Marcus got to see—Marcus found it equally delicious.

Fix it? Marcus had plans to fix it so that Raaf never doubted his desire again.

"I... I can—"

And Marcus cut him off with his lips on his. He slipped his hands into Raaf's silky, dark hair, holding him in place. When Raaf groaned into the kiss, Marcus slipped his tongue inside, warmth, spice, and Raaf flooding his taste buds. Marcus moaned back. Nothing had ever felt this good, this right. He wanted Raaf, craved him more with each passing breath.

It was different from their first, unforgotten kiss. This was all feeling with no confusion as to its purpose. Marcus poured every bit of his pent-up desire into it, telling without words what he felt. The suppressed need and fear he'd suffered, thinking Raaf would one day soon belong to another.

"I'm not," Marcus said, pulling his lips from Raaf.

"Not what?"

Marcus loved the dazed, confused look in his eyes.

"Not sorry," Marcus replied, nipping at Raaf's thick bottom lip and sucking it between his own.

Raaf blinked hard a couple of times. “How long?” Raaf asked, dropping his head back to the door with a thunk. He hooked a leg around Marcus’s hip, aligning their hard, clothing-covered cocks, drawing a growl from the back of Marcus’s throat.

Marcus nipped and licked at the exposed skin of his chin and neck, skimming his teeth up the sharp line of his jaw. He chuckled when Raaf took in a trembling breath. “How long what?” he mouthed into Raaf’s neck.

“This,” Raaf rasped. “How long have you felt this way?”

He got it—he did. There was no way he or Raaf had developed these feelings overnight, but “Do you really want to talk this out?” To emphasize his lack of desire to do exactly that, he thrust his hips against Raaf’s and Raaf whimpered, the most beautiful sound Marcus had ever heard. So he did it again. A wave of want fell over him.

Raaf shook his head, another whimper spilling from his lips, his fingers digging into Marcus’s back. Marcus looked forward to the marks of possession he would leave behind.

“I need you in bed,” he whispered into Raaf’s ear. “Under me. Around me.”

Raaf vibrated beneath his touch. Marcus turned his head, slanting his mouth over Raaf’s again. This time Raaf possessed Marcus. Marcus felt every bit of his passion and heat. His hips undulated against Marcus’s, and Marcus groaned at the sneak attack of sensation and power. He could get lost in it.

Marcus ripped his mouth away then pressed his forehead to Raaf’s. “If you don’t stop, I’ll take you against this door.”

“God, yes.” Raaf sounded drunk, his words slurred. Yet another aspect only Marcus had the honor of seeing. “Take me here,” Raaf demanded.

His straitlaced prince, normally so in control and focused, turned to putty beneath his hands. To be fair, the same was true of Marcus. He’d do anything, be anything for Raaf.

Marcus huffed out a laugh. “You have no idea what you do to me, do you?”

“Tell me.” The demand was soft and hesitant, as if it were something he needed to hear.

“You make me lose my mind,” Marcus whispered, brushing a kiss over his cheek. “You make me forget that you’re king.”

“And you’re the royal consort,” Raaf snuck in.



Another breathless laugh. “That’s going to take some getting used to.”

“I look forward to reminding you.”

Marcus lifted his head. The light in Raaf’s eyes was soft, aglow with warmth and the very emotion Marcus had always wanted to see there—maybe it had always been there—but was afraid to name. “I look forward to you reminding me too.”

They were so close. So... together. Marcus couldn’t see, couldn’t think outside of the realm of right here, right now. He felt Raaf’s hand brush his cheek, watched his pink tongue slip out and glide along his lower lip. Then he met Raaf’s blazing ebony gaze.

“I love you,” Marcus breathed.

Raaf stared at him, a mixture of surprise, and warmth, and something Marcus was afraid to examine too deeply.

“I think I always have.” Once he’d said it, the words spilled from his mouth. “I... I was afraid of everything—you, me, breaking us mostly. I didn’t—”

“It’s okay,” Raaf interrupted with soft words and a light brush of lips. “I know. I’ve probably known for as long as you have. There was just never... time.”

Marcus lifted a brow. “And you thought in front of the council was the time?”

With limited movement, Raaf moved his shoulders in what Marcus assumed was a shrug. “Better than what they had planned.”

Marcus’s heart skipped a beat at the memory of what the council had planned. He leaned in, kissing Raaf hard, claiming once again.

“I love you too,” Raaf whispered against his lips.

Tension he hadn’t known he’d been holding, unraveled in his chest at the declaration. With one final touch of lips, Marcus stepped back, drawing another shiver-inducing whimper from Raaf. “Do you really want Timme or Ji’i to hear us the first time?”

Color rushed to Raaf’s cheeks and Marcus chuckled. “I didn’t think so.”

As he pulled Raaf to the bedroom, his soon-to-be lover glanced back over his shoulder at the door. “There will be door sex though, right?”

Marcus threw his head back and laughed, unable to hold it back. “Yes, princeling, there will be door sex. Wall, table, shower and wherever else you’d

like it, if that's what you want." The sheepish grin and look of satisfaction he received in reply was enough for Marcus to make a list of his own.

In the bedroom, Marcus took his time undressing Raaf, sliding each item of clothing off with reverence as he worshiped Raaf, skating his hands over bare skin. Raaf was the most striking man Marcus had ever seen, a flawless canvas of porcelain skin stretched over his long, lean torso begging for Marcus's touch. Kneeling before Raaf, Marcus's mouth watered for a taste of the long hard cock in front of him. For a moment, Marcus marveled as he wrapped his hand around the base, feeling a combination of softness and strength beneath his palm. He felt Raaf's pulse race. He heard Raaf's breath hitch, and ran his gaze up over his flat abdomen, angular chest, and perked nipples before meeting Raaf's gaze. Raaf trapped him with that heated stare as he took the full, flared head of Raaf's cock between his lips.

They groaned at the same time. The taste of Raaf, all spice and musk, took over Marcus's senses. Addictive. He wanted more, wanted it all. Holding Raaf's gaze, he took him deeper, reveling when Raaf's mouth dropped open, his fingers weaving in Marcus's hair. He took Raaf in and out faster, then slower, need pooling in his own belly as Raaf panted. He sensed Raaf's need to move, the restraint he held himself back with. Marcus could hardly wait to peel back each stiffly controlled layer of his lover until Raaf lost it under, around, and inside him.

With a final hard suck that seemingly stole Raaf's ability to breathe, Marcus pulled off him with a wet pop. He stood, then pressed the center of Raaf's chest until he fell onto the bed. The feeling of Raaf's eyes on him as he took a step back was enough to spur him on. He slipped off his jacket and tunic and stepped out of his pants. He didn't remember moving forward, his focus fully entranced by Raaf, the long hard cock arching from his groin, and the fire in those dark eyes. Marcus could feel his gaze as certain as fingers gliding over his chest, his abdomen. When Raaf's warm hand finally made contact with Marcus's bare skin, he gasped, a buzz spreading out and through him from that one point of contact. It was all he could do to continue standing there, unmoving. Before he dropped gracelessly onto the ground, Marcus crawled onto the bed, draping himself over Raaf and taking his mouth once more.

"Forever," he whispered against Raaf's lips. "That's how long."

"Me too," Raaf replied. His hands passed in smooth circles over Marcus's back. "I've loved you forever."

Marcus closed his eyes against the breath-stealing power of those words. Then he said, "And I'll love you forever in return."

"Show me."

In complete opposition to the kiss at the door, Marcus slid away and took his time preparing Raaf. The bedside console provided him with the slick he needed. Inoculations and science had cured the need for such things as condoms some time ago. Though Marcus had never seen nor felt an intimate barrier, he'd never been more thankful such devices were rendered void. The anticipation to feel Raaf around him, to feel all of him, was awe-inspiring.

Raaf drew his knees to his chest and Marcus waited, poised at his entrance. He held Raaf's soft and confident gaze as he slipped past the ring of muscles, gripping him and pulling him into tight heat. "Gods, you feel good," he rasped when his hips met Raaf's. Raaf wrapped his long legs around Marcus, clutching him tight.

"You feel better." His breath stuttered when Marcus pulled out then slid smoothly back in. And again.

"Tell me," Marcus whispered, leaning down to take Raaf's mouth. "Tell me how it feels."

Raaf threw his head back, exposing his neck which Marcus dove into to taste. "Home." Raaf shuddered when Marcus bit down on a strained tendon. "Like home and everything that is right. Like I've found everything I was missing."

Marcus rocked his hips back then forward, picking up pace, his mouth never leaving Raaf's skin. "I always knew it would be like this."

Raaf reached between them and Marcus caught his hand.

"That's mine now." He slid both Raaf's hands above his head and gazed down at his lover. His pace never slowed as he straightened his arms, holding Raaf immobile. Raaf's breathing sped, fire ablaze in his ebony depths.

"Gods!" He met each of Marcus's thrust with a push of his hips, heels digging into Marcus's thighs. "Please, Marcus."

Marcus smirked down at him then widened his knees and changed the angle of each push. When Raaf gasped, he knew he'd found the right spot.

"O-oh, Marcus... Oh gods... You... You..." His hands balled into fists then spread out over and over again. His mouth moved wordlessly and his wide eyes

stared back at Marcus in wonder. Raaf gasped then finally cried out Marcus's name. When his channel clenched around Marcus, it gripped him like a vise as Raaf spilled hot ribbons of cum between them.

That was all it took to pull Marcus over the edge, his vision blurring. When he came back to himself, he was draped over his lover, Raaf holding him tight.

"Part of me wishes I could carry your child."

Raaf's words dropped him from his sated bliss. Confused, Marcus lifted his head to watch his lover. This was something he'd have to see. "What?"

Raaf was grinning down at him, a wicked look to be sure. "It's just... if I could carry your child, we could practice more often."

Marcus snorted then pressed his not yet soft erection into Raaf's hip, issuing a gasp from Raaf. He winked down at his lover. "I have a feeling we'll get plenty of practice in."

Raaf laughed and Marcus joined in.

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"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Raaf squinted at his vid screen, trying to figure out the meaning of the document that crossed his desk.

"Hm?" Marcus was leaning against the window, Lunar Six glowing violet behind him. The sight of him stilled Raaf's heart every time. He'd had to force himself to do some work. He could daydream all day of running his hands over the hard planes of Marcus's chest to his rolling abs, and thick-as-hell cock. Raaf swallowed hard. He wondered if he could talk Marcus into a break.

The twinkle in Marcus's eyes, smirk on his full pink lips, and the grace of his prowl as he made his way over, told Raaf he'd been caught. Marcus had always been able to read him. Still, he was pretty sure the break idea was still on the table. How had it been possible to deny himself this man for so long?

"Mind on work," Marcus rasped. "We can play later."

"How much later?" Raaf did not pout. He didn't. But if he did, it was only because the expression had worked to secure his own desires more than once.

Marcus leaned over and kissed him on the nose. "Later." He stood again, rounding to the back of Raaf's chair, his hands skimming over Raaf's shoulders.

He played dirty. Raaf suppressed the shiver as long as possible. But damn, Marcus's touch ignited something inside him. Blinking, Raaf lifted his screen

in the air then tapped the wrong buttons, throwing a picture of him and Marcus sparring as kids. Raaf loved that picture. Finally, he hit the right combination and the document transferred the display screen to the wall. “This,” he said.

Marcus chuckled “Looks like a trade agreement.”

“For plaallite.”

“Excuse me?” Marcus leaned forward, slightly over Raaf.

“You heard me,” he answered. “Plaallite.”

It came as a shock to Raaf too. For one, the mineral was supposedly depleted. Which was a good thing since it was highly flammable and unstable in its purest element. Mixed with the simplest of liquids, it became an irreversible poison to most species—Thorians included.

“Your father approved this?” Marcus sounded as incredulous as Raaf felt.

“The logs say he did,” Raaf told him. “But look.” A few more taps to the screen and he poised two documents side by side. Raaf lifted his hand and pointed. “Here. The signatures are similar but not the same.”

“A forgery,” Marcus echoed Raaf’s exact thoughts. “But why? Who in their right mind would want plaallite for any reason?”

It was as deadly in raw form as in liquid. More often than not, the handler of the mineral died a horribly painful death.

“I don’t know,” Raaf said exhausted by his own thoughts. “But I suspect we should find out sooner rather than later. The shipment is due in two days.”

“Your birthday?”

Raaf hadn’t thought of that. So much had gone on over the past two weeks, he’d let the date slip his mind. “Exactly my birthday,” he answered. “You don’t think...?”

“It’s suspicious.” Marcus’s hands gripped his shoulders firmer, comforting, and protective.

Raaf’s pulse picked up. The celebration was in exactly two days. His mother had planned it—down to the deluge of royalty greeting the new leader of Thoria. Raaf thought it ridiculous. He’d known most of the men and women since he was a child. They’d watched him grow up and play with their own children. But his mother assured him this was the way things were done. Not that Raaf would know. He’d never been present for the changing of rule.

As if he could read Raaf's mind—and why would Raaf think he couldn't as it had been that way between them since the beginning, if they didn't count the massive oversight when it came to unrequited love—Marcus carded fingers through his hair. "We'll figure this out."

"But—"

"But nothing," Marcus stopped him. "I'm not going to let anything ruin this for you."

Raaf tilted his head back and met his earnest amber gaze. "For us."

The hard lines of Marcus's jaw softened when he smiled. "For us."

As a majority of the council had been satisfied with Raaf's choice of consort—all but Nilo, who voiced his objection loud and clear—the queen had requested the mandated date of joining be postponed to Raaf's birthday. The guests would be arriving for that celebration already. No need in putting anyone out by asking them to arrive earlier than expected, she'd said.

To Raaf, his birthday meant very little without his father, and meeting the Nero Prime leaders barely registered on his radar. After all of this time, Raaf couldn't wait to officially make Marcus his. He'd be damned if he let a poorly disguised threat destroy that.

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Pouring over contracts and Intergalactic Order agreements was not Marcus's idea of a pre-joining celebration. His head hurt and his eyes were beginning to blur. Maybe a drink would help.

Marcus glanced at his newly minted assistant—a violet scaled Zurullian. The silver ridge circling the crown of his head marked his telepathic abilities. Marcus wondered if he'd need to find a ceplite stone to wear in order to keep Vlosyk out of his head.

"Only if you have something to hide," Vlosyk said conversationally without looking up from his vid.

"You're not helping your case." Marcus arched a brow at him.

"I have no reason to present a case. I assure you; I've done nothing wrong."

Marcus snorted. "That's what all the guilty say."

Finally, Vlosyk lifted his gaze and smirked—a gesture of sharp teeth and thin, hardly existent lips. The look was certain to scare the bravest of men,

although to Marcus, it was a show of humor, maybe even one of comfort. “I guess you’ll have to take me at my word then.”

Marcus felt himself returning the gesture. “I guess so,” he deadpanned. “Have you found anything?”

The ridge between Vlosyk’s yellow eyes furrowed. “I am not sure,” he answered. “Something strange to be certain.”

Rising from his seat, Marcus made his way to Vlosyk’s side. He leaned over the back of the chair to examine the screen.

“This”—Vlosyk pointed at a list—“is a satellite signal from Qailara.”

Marcus reeled back. “Qailara? Are you certain?”

“It’s difficult to tamper with a signal but it has been known to happen. Although the last known event happened three decades ago and involved a group of Oslions and a technopath Zurullian,” Vlosyk told him, matter-of-factly, as if he didn’t speak of his own species. “I have no ties to my planet or my people, Consort,” Vlosyk butted into his thoughts. “My loyalty lies with the crown of Thoria. More specifically, at this point, it lies with the Royal Consort of Thoria.”

Marcus sensed a story there but wouldn’t ask... today anyway.

“My point is,” Vlosyk went on, “the last known Zurullian technopath died thirteen years ago. It is virtually impossible to break encryption without such. So no, I don’t believe the satellite log has been tampered with, but I can continue to research.”

“Okay, okay.” Marcus began pacing. “So Qailara,” he said. “Why here? Why now?”

“I believe the answer is obvious,” Vlosyk replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Is it?” Marcus stopped his back and forth, eyes landing on the purple creature.

“Yes. With the death of one king and the rise of another, Thoria has become a target.”

“But the plaallite, why that?”

“Because you control Lunar mining.”

It made sense, yet seemed so insignificant.

Vlosyk sighed. “Lunar Seven,” he offered as if that answered all of Marcus’s questions. When Marcus didn’t reply, Vlosyk said, “Rubium. While Thoria only values it for trade, other planets value its ability to replenish what has been lost. Thoria has a generous history of supplying rubium to war-ravaged worlds. It not only strengthens and motivates the people, but in conjunction with a litany of other gases and minerals, it brings new life to broken land. Lands that would have to turn to Qailara for help otherwise.”

Qailara—once a prison planet—was battle ravaged by choice. A world of barbarians seeming to always look for the next planet to destroy and suck dry. Most Qailarans were hardened criminals. They left destruction and sorrow in their wake wherever they went. Their numbers relied on the planets they left destitute. Thoria long ago chose to give those planets another option.

The tension between Thorians and Qailarans was long-standing, but fighting had ended in a tentative truce two decades ago. Seemed to Marcus that the Qailarans were biding their time.

Something else occurred to Marcus. “Thoria has a traitor.”

“I agree,” Vlosyk answered. “Do you know of any connections to Qailara?”

Marcus felt his brow crease as he thought. He shook his head. “No, not off the top of my head.”

Vlosyk eyed him for a moment then stood. “I’ll check with my sources.”

Marcus’s eyes shot to his. “Sources?”

Head held high and hand stretched in greeting, Vlosyk approached him. “Captain Vlosyk Wy’v.”

Stunned, Marcus took the hand. “I don’t think I understand.”

Vlosyk—*Captain* Vlosyk—flashed a toothy smile at him. “King’s Peace.”

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Raaf faced Marcus, the room still and focused. He smiled up at his consort—his husband. The words had been spoken and vows exchanged. Zeul Valdor and Queen Marde Avalon stood side by side, smiles on their faces as they joined Marcus and Raaf. Over Raaf’s wrist, Zuel slid a silver cuff marked with the Valdor crest. And over Marcus’s, Queen Marde placed a matching cuff with the royal insignia. The cuffs symbolized their official joining.

Marcus beamed down at him and suddenly Raaf wanted nothing more than to be alone with his consort.

“I love you,” he whispered into the kiss Marcus dropped on his lips.



“Show me,” Marcus rumbled into his ear.

A shiver coursed through Raaf. “Behave,” he rasped.

What he wouldn’t give to sneak away for a while. Every night with Marcus since his announcement of consort had been memorable, but this one—this first night of joining—Raaf looked forward to beginning their lives together.

“Come on,” Marcus said. “Let’s greet your public.”

The grand hall was draped in navy and silver tapestries—the colors of both the House of Valdor and Thorian royalty. The celebration was full of warm greetings and sincere congratulations. It was an event not only for the royalty of Nero Prime, but for the people of Thoria, who had started their celebration earlier in the week, praising the prince and his consort. As always, Raaf felt humbled by the love of his people.

“Thank you for coming.” He felt like his face would crack with the permanent smile etched there, as he watched Riytana’s queen make her way through the crowd. “How much longer?” he asked no one in particular.

Marcus chuckled at his side. “At least another hour.”

“Hour?” he whined. “At least? Does that mean there might be more?”

“It does.” Marcus bent and brushed a kiss along his cheekbone. “I’ll make it worth your while after you’ve served your time.”

Raaf trembled with the heat in that promise.

Across the room, Vlosyk—the King’s Peace agent he’d assigned to assist Marcus—nodded toward them. The past few days had been spent researching records and intel from the King’s Peace—the Thorian underground intelligence network. Their work hadn’t been for naught—the shipment of plaallite had been intercepted by the Royal Navy, and the cargo ship’s crew was currently in custody for questioning. But the identity of the spy was harder to uncover. That’s where they’d hit the wall.

When Raaf looked back at the crowd, he saw his mother approaching with another of significant standing. “You go,” he said to Marcus. The intensity in the Zurullian’s eyes gave Raaf hope that whatever he’d discovered—if anything—would be the answers they’d been searching for.

“You sure?” Marcus watched him, a pensive look in his eyes, then, glanced back to the approaching queen.

“Yes, go. I’ll catch up with you when I can get away.”

With a kiss to his temple, Marcus excused himself, and Raaf watched him go. Three kings, two queens, and an emperor later, Raaf was making his way across the grand hall in the direction he'd seen Marcus and Vlosyk exit.

“Prince Raaf.”

Raaf sighed and plastered on the warmest smile he could muster, which didn't feel very warm, then turned around. A face he hadn't expected to see approached him.

“Azron,” Raaf greeted, “what can I do for you?”

Azron looked frazzled, but then again it was how Raaf felt so he couldn't blame the man. “It's the consort, Highness. He asked me to have you meet him in your study.”

He squinted in confusion, then nodded. Why Marcus would send Azron, he had no clue, but Raaf guessed if they were changing the meeting place, it would make sense to send a messenger. He followed Azron out of the hall with no interruption, knowing Timme followed, however discreetly. This was a night of celebration and Timme knew his place was to be on guard and not seen. He was the best at it.

Quietly they traversed the halls of the palace. When they turned the corner leading to the hall of royal offices, a gnawing in his belly told him something was off. Too late, he heard the second set of footsteps on his tail.

Before he could turn around, pain exploded at the back of his head and his world went black.

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“Do you know of a Keita Vorsmir?” Vlosyk asked quietly when they cleared the secure room next to the hall.

Marcus shook his head. “Never heard of him.”

“Her,” Vlosyk corrected. “She is the right hand to the leader of Qailara—Winvam Poli. She is also the great-aunt to your House m'Fars leader, Nilo.”

“Are you saying a member of the council is behind this?”

Vlosyk nodded. “I believe so.” He listened as Vlosyk outlined the evidence against the House m'Fars head—a mother who was half-Thorian, half-Qailaran. She apparently didn't tell her husband of her heritage until after she birthed her son, Nilo. After his father's mysterious death, Nilo and his mother kept secret their lineage in order to keep a seat in the Council of Five Houses. Vlosyk had

discovered satellite transmissions spanning back forty years. It looked as if Qailara was waiting patiently for the moment to strike.

Marcus didn't need to hear more. He rushed from the room and back into the hall. Whipping his head right to left and back again, Marcus scanned the room. No Raaf. Where was his husband? Then he saw Nilo entertaining his usual crowd, head thrown back, chortling loudly, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"I want him taken into custody," Marcus said to Vlosyk, who made a gesture. From the corner of his eye, he saw movement. Ji'i, the big Eidan, pushed through the crowd and captured Leader Nilo around the wrist, making no attempt at stealth in hauling the screeching man out of the hall.

"We need to find him." Marcus refocused. "We need to find Raaf."

"Where would he go? Why would he leave?" Vlosyk supplied.

"I don't know. The plan was to meet in the security quarters." Marcus's head spun. He couldn't think here. Raaf knew where to meet. Where would he have gone otherwise? And with whom? A thought came to him. He didn't know who he left with or why, but he knew how to find Raaf, and hopefully, whoever had him. "Let's go."

He raced through the throng of attendees without looking back. His husband needed him and Marcus wouldn't let him down.

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"Did you have to hit him so hard?"

The whiny voice was the first thing Raaf heard as he resurfaced from unconsciousness. The second thing he noticed was the grogginess and pounding of his head. The loamy scent of soil and new growth hit his senses. He was outside, travelling over the whiner's shoulder, each jolting step echoing through his brain matter. Raaf kept his eyes shut. He didn't want Azron—that's who the whine belonged to—and whoever he was with, to know he was awake. Not yet anyway.

"We had to secure his cooperation, *Nenga*." The woman's voice was gravelly, her accent foreign, one Raaf didn't recognize. "He is the key to your rule and Qailara's rights to your Lunar mining. Nero Prime will not accept a new king, and there is too much value in Thoria to take it by force. We've talked about this. You will rule by his side. You will give Qailara our new beginning."

“But Keita, he was just married. There is no way to join with him now.” That was Azron again.

“The new husband will be dealt with once we gain the prince’s agreement. I’m certain he will do anything to save his precious consort.”

Raaf hated the woman more with every word she uttered.

Discreetly, Raaf cracked an eye open. He could only see the woman’s back. Long, silver hair fell across shoulders so black they rivaled the Thorian sky. She was slender, but Raaf could see she held great power in her tiny frame. And cunning. He could tell that from the conversation.

A flash of color drew his attention. The edge of Moonlight forest and the palace gardens glowed subtly from the light of the reflected moons. But that flash of color hadn’t come from the forest. Someone was out there.

Raaf’s pulse skipped in relief. He had no doubt as to who followed.

“Ah, you’re awake,” the woman—Keita, Raaf thought Azron had called her—said.

The sudden halt rocked Raaf’s stomach. He was already nauseous from the rough travel and the hit to the head. He was pretty sure he was going to be sick. When Azron dropped him to the ground, the thought became reality. The woman laughed while he turned out the contents of his last meal.

“Such a weakling for a ruler,” she sneered. “You will be better. Stronger.”

Raaf didn’t have to look to know she spoke to Azron. “Yes, Keita,” he said even though Raaf heard the quaver in his voice.

“Why would you do this, Azron?” Raaf asked his voice strained but true. “Has this kingdom not supported and loved you?” Raaf knew his father did. King Sweo thought very highly of Azron. If he’d only known.

The Azron that gazed down at him was not the boy he’d known growing up. Something had changed. “Thoria, and those who rule, would not have welcomed me if they’d known my true lineage.”

“And that’s what? That you’re part Qailaran? Do you think so little of me that you thought all those years of friendship meant nothing to me?” Raaf countered. He saw the doubt in Azron’s eyes so he continued, “You know me. Do you think I would have turned my back on you for something so insignificant?”

“But my grandfather...” His wild eyes shot to Keita. “My father said...”

“That your grandfather rejected your family because of your heritage,” Keita spoke up. “Thorians will never accept a Qailaran among their leadership.”

“Except I will. I do,” Raaf cut in. This Qailaran, whoever she was, held a powerful leash around Azron. Truth was, even if Raaf could break the hold, he didn’t know how he would deal with Azron. He knew the law and he knew his heart. But he wasn’t sure how to work them together. That’s why Azron needed Raaf.

“Azron,” Raaf said. “We can work this out. You and I—we can fix this.”

Tears filled his eyes. “My father—he’ll be so disappointed if I turn back now. He... the things he did when you chose Valdor as your consort.” He shook his head.

“I will take care of your father.”

“Lies,” Keita spat, grabbing Azron by the shoulder and shaking him. “He lies and you listen.”

“I-I don’t know what to believe,” Azron finally hiccupped, eyes wide.

“You believe your family. We protect you. We protect our own.”

“But do they protect everyone else you love?” Raaf interjected.

As Raaf had hoped, it got Azron’s attention. His tearful gaze fell to where Raaf still sat on the ground. He shook his head again.

“Let me help you, Az. Let me fix this.” He would. He didn’t know how, but Raaf would fix this.

“Okay.” Azron stepped away from the Qailaran woman. “Okay.”

Raaf didn’t see it happen and hadn’t expected it, but the woman—Keita—pulled out a stunner, aimed at Azron. “I told your father you were not strong enough. Your Thorian blood and ties make you weak,” she taunted. “I will take care of it once and for all.”

A loud snap filled the otherwise silent clearing. The brightest light Raaf had ever seen filled the Thorian sky. Shouts and stunner beams shot above him, but Raaf had only one goal. He dove, knocking Azron to the ground with an *oof*. Azron landed with a thud below him. His arm was bleeding and he didn’t open his eyes.

Raaf smacked his face sharply. “Az,” he called, only faintly acknowledging the fade of fighting noises. Voices spoke around him, but he didn’t pay attention, couldn’t. Not until Azron opened his eyes. “Az, come on. Wake up.”

“He is fine.” A smooth voice Raaf recognized as Vlosyk’s spoke behind him.

Raaf spun his gaze to the Zurullian only to notice Keita, facedown and restrained, only feet away from them, unmoving. Her eyes were shut as if she were asleep.

“She’s been stunned,” Vlosyk informed him. “So has your traitor.”

“Friend,” Raaf corrected.

“That remains to be seen.”

Marcus emerged from behind Vlosyk, and suddenly all Raaf cared about was touching his husband, feeling him, holding him. Raaf jumped to his feet. Still lightheaded, he stumbled, but was caught by strong arms. Arms he knew from memory.

“You’re okay?” Marcus asked, his face buried in Raaf’s shoulder.

“I’m fine,” he answered. He wouldn’t tell Marcus about his headache just yet. He might actually kill Azron otherwise. “You came,” he said instead, unable to keep the relief from his voice.

“Of course I did. I’ll always find you.”

His answer was so final and confident, Raaf had to pull back to look at him. “How did you find me?”

A slow smile spread across Marcus’s face. “Timme,” he answered simply. “He deserves a raise by the way. Is he King’s Peace as well? If he’s not, then he should be.”

Raaf blinked up at him. He couldn’t help the giddy laughter that bubbled inside his chest. “Timme?”

Marcus shrugged. “When you told him to shadow you but stay out of sight, he took that to heart. He’s been following since you were led from the hall. His plans were to wait for an opening then attack. Lucky for him, and for us, I found him first.”

Relief, fear, and happiness filled Raaf to bursting. Tears sprang to his eyes and he pushed his face into Marcus’s chest. “Thank you,” he choked out. “For being here. For waiting for me. For loving me.”

“Forever”—Marcus wrapped him up in his arms, his hold tight and perfect—“to all of the above.”

“Keep your eyes closed,” Marcus ordered. It was all he could do to suppress a giggle, but this was too good.

“They’re closed,” Raaf answered. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a secret. Keep them closed—we’re almost there.”

It had been a long day, full of activity—the joining, the celebration... the kidnapping. But Marcus had one more surprise for Raaf, and it had to be done today before the clock struck twelve and a new day began.

New traditions. His and Raaf’s. That’s what this was about, and Marcus would uphold his promise from a couple weeks ago. Gods, it had seemed so long ago.

“Almost where?” Raaf asked, humor lacing his voice.

“Please tell me you didn’t think that would work,” Marcus laughed.

He felt Raaf shrug in his hold. “Worth a try.”

Marcus snorted and felt his energy level wane. Exhaustion weighed heavily on him. The Qailaran woman, Azron’s great-aunt, and Leader Nilo had been taken into custody and to the Intrepid, Thoria’s prison ship. From there they would be taken to Za’an, where the Intergalactic Order’s headquarters was located. They would be tried and sentenced from there.

As for Azron, Raaf and Marcus had not decided on a course of action for him. Law dictated that he should be sent to Za’an with the other members of his family—and Marcus was in full agreement on that—but Raaf had leeway as leader of Thoria. He believed Azron acted under duress. For Azron’s sake, Marcus hoped he was right, because if he hurt Marcus’s husband, there was nothing that would save him from his wrath.

As for Raaf, word had spread quickly within the celebration that he was not only a worthy ruler, but also a hero. As if Marcus hadn’t already known.

Marcus stepped into the clearing and pulled Raaf in front of him. Giddiness, like that of a schoolchild, built inside him. Marcus thought of the words spoken by the Eidan warrior (and apparent member of King’s Peace) regarding mates. *You tell him*, Ji’i had said.

“I have loved you for so long; I thought I was only meant to feel it from afar.”

Raaf sighed and leaned back into him, his eyes still closed.

“You were my unreachable star even though you were always within physical distance. With all of my heart, with all of the power of the stars, I love you and pledge my life, love, and happiness to you.” He kissed Raaf’s cheek when his husband parted his lips to reply. “Open your eyes, princeling.”

Raaf’s hand fell away and he blinked his eyes open slowly, recognition dawning immediately. He turned those dark eyes on Marcus, so full of love and gratefulness. “You... you did this?”

Marcus nodded. “For you. Our new tradition—in memory and in honor of your father.”

With a soft sob, Raaf threw his arms around Marcus’s neck. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Anything and everything for you, my love.”

“Except, let’s not make a habit of today’s... activities.”

“I don’t know,” Marcus teased. “Not all of today was bad.”

“You’re right. Most of it was amazing.” Raaf ran his thumb over Marcus’s cuff. Heat shot up Marcus’s spine.

“Maybe we should try for somewhere in-between,” Marcus offered, his voice breathy.

“Maybe you’re right. Something not too dull.”

“And not too dangerous.”

Raaf kissed him sweetly, and as much as Marcus wanted it to deepen, he pulled away. He had plans.

He smiled down at his husband. “Let’s take it up before it’s too late,” he said, and Raaf beamed up at him.

Tugging on his hand, Raaf pulled Marcus to the hovercraft—the one Marcus planned to fly to see all of Thoria with his husband. Their new tradition.

**The End**



## **Author Bio**

*Kenzie Cade was born and raised in the South where she spends her days in the field of private medicine observing interesting people and committing them to memory for later use. When she isn't reading, experimenting with recipes, or being distracted by social media, Kenzie spends time with her family, friends, and fur-babies who like to keep her company while she writes. Writing to keep the fictional voices at bay, Kenzie enjoys the journeys her characters travel to find their happy endings, and she loves the challenge of writing a great love story.*

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