

Lieutenant Chris Walker strode onto the bridge of the starship Excelsior with more than a little swagger in his step. The jackal was returning from commanding a very successful mission to a nearby trading planet. Chris and his team had foiled a criminal ring that was sabotaging merchant ships to steal the contents. The local council was enormously grateful and showered Chris with praise before he left. His pointy ears stood up proudly as he looked for Captain Clark.

Chris spotted the broad back and carefully groomed mane standing beside a terminal speaking quietly to the ensign stationed there. Chris felt his breath hitch in his throat and his tail involuntarily start to wag. His sleek black fur always covered up a blush but the damn tail gave him away every time. "Cool it, Walker," he muttered to himself.

After an unruly childhood with a hands-off single mom raising an exuberant litter of jackal pups, Chris had found his place at Space Fleet Academy. He was a smart kid, and physically impressive, who took to piloting and strategy like a natural.

Rowlifson Clark - who never used his first name - had been a lieutenant when Chris was assigned to the Excelsior upon graduating from the Academy, and was Chris's first commanding officer. The lion was a mentor to Chris, and largely responsible for Chris mostly sticking to the straight and narrow for the last 10 years. Chris also found the tall, muscular lion incredibly hot.

When Clark, by this point the captain, promoted Chris to lieutenant three years ago, it was by far the proudest day of the jackal's life.

"But I'm only 24!" Chris had stammered at the time, standing in front of Clark's desk. "I would be the youngest L.T. on the ship!"

"Someone has to be the youngest, Walker," Clark had said in his rumbly bass. "I made lieutenant when I was 23. You're ready." Clark had been kind enough to ignore Chris's maniacally wagging tail.

Chris would have jumped in front of live fire for Clark, and would have very gladly jumped in the lion's bed if the older man ever gave any indication that he was interested.

When Captain Clark instead became romantically involved with Dr. Orrick Lang, the tiger who served as the ship's Chief Medical Officer, Chris had not taken it well. A few nights after accidentally seeing Clark and Orrick kissing in a secluded part of the atrium, Chris got roaringly drunk and stumbled into the medical bay, hollering that Orrick had no business with the captain, was not nearly man enough for him, and that he should get off the ship. Orrick had pulled Chris into a private room and quickly administered an intravenous anti-intoxicant. While the medicine was taking effect, the tiger had stood very close to Chris and spoken quietly. "You don't know me. You don't know how I feel about him, and you certainly don't know how he feels about me. What you should know is that he will never - not ever - be romantically involved with a subordinate. You should also know that he cares very deeply for you as his protege. He cares about your career, and your future, and your happiness. I promise you that I will not tell him about this incident, but I would ask that you also care about his happiness. Whether that leads him to me or someone else, I would suggest that if you truly care for him, you will not get in the way of his happiness." Though Chris was stonily silent at the time, he had not given Orrick any further trouble, and had made an effort to keep his less appropriate feelings about Clark in check. When Clark and Orrick had wed in a small ceremony a few months later, Chris had tried to wish his mentor sincere congratulations.

"Hey, there's the local hero!" one of the officers on the bridge shouted on catching sight of Chris. The jackal turned to grin at his buddy and when he looked back at Clark, the captain was facing him.

Chris's jaw dropped. He had been gone for three months. Of course he knew Clark was pregnant. The captain and Orrick had taken a few weeks of shore leave on Calatos-4 for Clark

to have the surgery, and when they returned to the ship, the captain had already had a thickened midsection.

"Male bodies have nowhere for the womb to hide," Lieutenant Silba had explained to Chris. "Even though the embryos are still tiny, men get a belly as soon as they put the womb in."

Clark's pregnancy was easy enough to ignore for the first three months. The captain wore his uniforms a bit bigger and almost never mentioned his condition. There were, however, a few meetings and shifts on the bridge when Clark had left in haste without explanation.

"He's definitely puking," Silba had said.

"Shut up! That's the captain you're talking about!" Chris had admonished.

"That's a pregnant person in his first trimester I'm talking about," she replied.

By the time Chris left on his mission during Clark's third month of pregnancy it looked like the formerly fit and trim captain had developed a beer gut, but it was still easy enough to ignore.

Now it was undeniable. Clark casually rested a hand on top of a belly that had ballooned to a spherical mass the size of a beach ball. A part of Chris's brain registered that it was Clark's left hand, on which he wore his wedding ring.

Clark saw Chris's gobsmacked expression and chuckled as he stepped forward. "Welcome home, Lieutenant," Clark reached his right hand out to shake Chris's. Chris shook the proffered hand in a daze.

"Not only have I read your reports, but yesterday while you were en route, the local council contacted me to thank me for sending such a brilliant team to help them. You certainly left a good impression."

"Thank you, sir," Chris mumbled on autopilot.

"Commander Dreylin," Clark called, "you have the bridge."

"Aye, sir!"

Clark turned back to Chris. "Come to my office, son, I want the full debrief."

Chris did not think his eyes could get wider, but on 'son' they did. Clark looked momentarily chagrined then started to move towards his office off the bridge. It was not the first time Clark had called the young jackal 'son.' He tended to do it when he was particularly pleased with Chris's performance or when it seemed like Chris was getting too close to saying something romantic.

As Chris followed Clark to the office he couldn't help but notice that the lion's hips looked distinctly broad and he walked with a bit of a waddle. Once in the office, Chris watched with rapt attention as Clark gripped the arm of his chair with one hand and supported his underbelly with the other to slowly lower himself down. The captain huffed for a second and smoothed his shirt over his gravid middle before turning his attention back to Chris.

"Have a seat, Walker. I want to hear all about it."

"Yes, sir. I - uh..." Chris was mentally kicking himself. He had thought about this moment and rehearsed it in his head nonstop on the flight here: which details of the mission he would linger over and which Clark wouldn't be interested in. But now he just couldn't stop staring at Clark's swollen belly.

"I - um - sorry sir, but are you... due soon?"

Clark chuckled and made an effort to sit up straighter. "Lost track of time while you were on-world, Walker? I have three months left." Clark patted his belly. "This is nothing. I'm going to get a lot bigger."

"B-but how?!" Chris managed.

Clark laughed and sat back in his chair again, starting to massage the lower part of his belly with his fingertips. "You remember that I'm carrying twins, right? And ligers are always big. When these two are grown they'll probably tower over Orrick and me. Even the girl."

"You're having a girl?"

"And a boy - oof! Speak of the devils," Clark grunted and rubbed a spot on his belly.

Chris nearly jumped out of his seat, long ears quivering. "Sir! Are you ok?!"

Clark rolled his eyes. "Sit down, Walker. Sit. One of them just kicked my lung."

"But I - um - are you sure you're alright? I could get the doctor."

"Lieutenant," Clark said firmly, "do not do this. That's an order."

"Uh, what's the order, sir?"

"Do not freak out about my pregnancy. I'm fine. I am carrying two very healthy cubs who like to kick the shit out of my insides, which is normal. Occasionally it takes my breath away, which is also normal. The pregnancy is going very well."

"Um, uh, yes sir."

"I am running this ship as I always have, Lieutenant. The only differences are that I am seated more frequently and there's more of me. The only person on this ship permitted to fuss is Orrick because they are his cubs too and he's a medical doctor. Am I clear, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. Very clear, sir."

"Good. Now I know you'd rather be bragging about your brilliant mission than talking about my pregnancy, so get to it."

Chris managed to peel his eyes away from Clark's belly and remember the version of his escapade he had rehearsed. He had just gotten to the part where he and the team were lying in wait for the saboteurs when Clark's intercom plinged. Clark grimaced and tapped the screen.

"Yes?"

"Captain, we have the new course laid in and all preparations are complete," said the disembodied voice.

"Very good, ensign," Clark replied. "Proceed."

Chris frowned. "New course, sir?"

"Ah, something you missed, Walker," Clark said. "We're returning to Earth. We got the order a few weeks ago and now that you and the team are back, we can go."

Chris frowned. "We're not due for an Earth rotation yet."

"No," Clark said, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his belly, "but I want my children to be born on Earth, and I want to take my paternity leave there."

"You're not going to have the babies on the ship?" Chris asked.

Clark scoffed. "No. I want my husband holding my hand, not performing the surgery." Clark immediately looked embarrassed and cleared his throat. "Anyway. I thought Command would send another captain to fill in for me here while I'm out, but they decided instead to move up our Earth rotation so it coincides with my leave. Now when I return the ship will have had a full overhaul and you all will be caught up on your training and certifications." Clark paused, then smiled and spoke quietly. "And this way I get to have my crew take me home and I can remain in command instead of leaving in an anonymous shuttle two months early."

Chris smiled back, feeling his tail start to wag. "I'm really glad, sir."