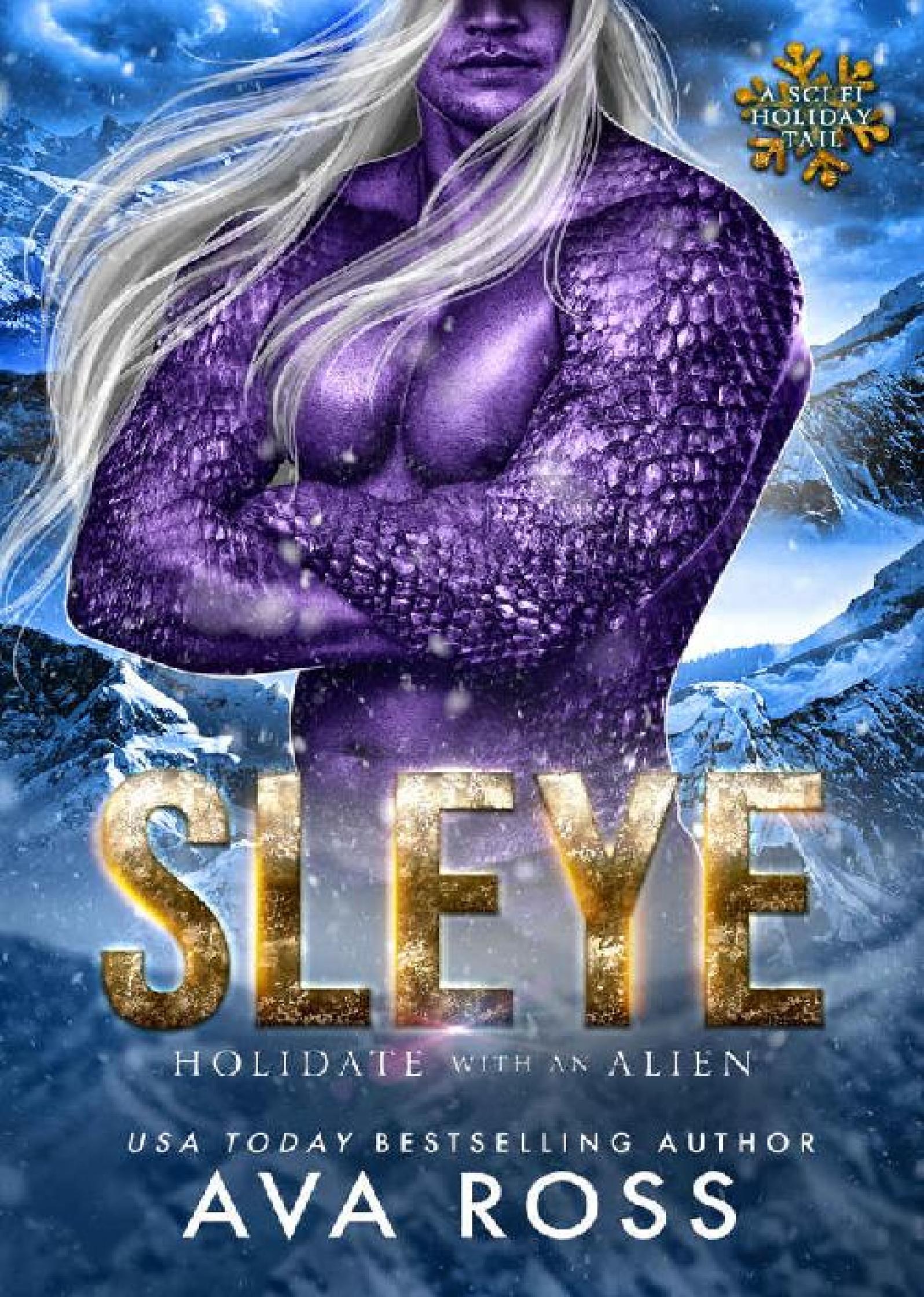




A SCI-FI
HOLIDAY
TALE



SLEIYEE

HOLIDATE WITH AN ALIEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AVA ROSS

SLEYE

HOLIDAY WITH AN ALIEN; A SCI-FI
HOLIDAY TAIL ROUND 2

AVA ROSS

ENCHANTED STAR PRESS

SLEYE

Holidate With An Alien,

A Sci-Fi Holiday Tail Round 2

A companion story in the Third Galaxy on the Left Series

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*For my own hero,
my husband, Rusty.*

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Fated Mates of the Ferlaern Warriors

Fated Mates of the Xilan Warriors

Holiday with a Cu'zod Warrior

Galaxy Games

Alien Warrior Abandoned

Beastly Alien Boss

Bride of the Fae

A Sci-Fi Holiday Tail

Monsterville, USA

Monster on Board

(co-written with Alana Khan)

Love at First Orc

Third Galaxy on the Left

Monster Mate Hunt

You can find her books on [Amazon](#).

SLEYE

I'm falling for an alien who's forbidden.

Does our interstellar love stand a chance?

The alien I'm crushing on has one destiny—to set up the computer tech division on the new colony before returning to his home planet. As for me, I'm supposed to make sure the aliens locked in stasis on the interstellar ship arrive on the planet ready to assume their duties. Then it's a one-way back to Earth for me.

I'm not supposed to wake one of them up from his long winter's nap.

I'm also not supposed to sneak Sleye out of the lab and whisk him off to the holiday party as my merry +1.

And I'm definitely not supposed to take him back to my cabin afterward and tuck him into my sugar plum bed.

Once word spreads through the cosmic grapevine about the heat growing between us, there will be caroling chaos for lightyears. You see, waking him from stasis early will cause an intergalactic incident. And our hookup puts me on the very naughty list.

The powers that be will terminate our love unless we can convince them that the magic between us will last for more than just a few holiday nights.

Sleye is a standalone romance and part of the *Holidate With An Alien* shared world. It's also a companion story in *Ava's Third Galaxy on the Left Series*.

Expect size difference, dating hijinks, a hero with no experience, and enough heat to warm up your mulled cider.

This sweet and steamy holiday tale is part of the *Holidate With an Alien* collection, a collaboration of authors telling holiday tales with a science fiction romance twist. Each book is a standalone, containing its own Happily Ever After. They can be read in any order.

CHAPTER I

TABITHA



As I stepped into the sprawling corridors of the interstellar colony ship *Galactic Dawn*, a sense of vastness and adventure washed over me.

Colonists from Earth and a few other nearby planets passed me as I made my way to the lab, their voices as bright as the red and green clothing they wore to celebrate the upcoming holiday.

Energy zipped through the air, and everyone I passed smiled, sharing their camaraderie and joy—a unity that had always eluded me. I wasn't a full colonist like them, but rather a scientist tasked with overseeing the alien beings who'd help us with the high-tech aspects of the new colony before they returned to their home planet.

"There you are," Justine called out, rushing up behind me. Realizing those other than me had heard her, she stiffened her spine and smoothed her face, nodding curtly to the colonists. Once they'd entered the large social lounge on our right, Justine reverted from captain of the vessel to my good friend, her sparkling green eyes meeting mine. "I've been looking for you everywhere." A frown filled her pretty face as she scanned my clothing. "Why are you still wearing your lab coat? It's time to partay!"

"You know I still have work to do."

"Not tonight. It's the start of our week-long holiday celebrations, and you need to let loose and have some fun." Leaning close, she lowered her voice as a group of the crew

approached us. “You said you’d have a few drinks and contemplate luring someone back to your cabin tonight.”

Her crewmembers’ stern gazes passed from her to me and back again. They saluted her way, though the gestures lost something when they were combined with their red, green, and white sweaters festooned with garlands and bows.

They entered the community room, joining the festive gathering.

I *had* told Justine I might consider having a few drinks, but sleeping with someone on the ship? Not happening.

For whatever reason, my thoughts shot to one of the Ir’ok aliens waiting for me in my lab. Okay, he wasn’t exactly waiting for *me*, since he was suspended in stasis with the rest of his people. He didn’t need me for anything other than making sure his nutrition pouch was full and his suspension liquid level remained where it should.

Sleye was totally droolworthy from his purple-skinned, muscular form to his long silver hair and very pale green eyes.

Leave it to a science prodigy like me to crush over an alien who didn’t know I existed. Sure, I’d sat by his side more often than I should, whispering about my past, my present, and the dreams I had for my supposedly glorious future. But it wasn’t like he could hear me or respond.

Sadly, he was the liveliest date I’d had in years. Justine was right when she said I needed to get out every now and then and *partay*.

Sleye was destined to set up the computer tech department at the new colony before he returned to his home. He was not on the ship to warm my bed.

“Come inside for a drink?” Justine took my hand and tried to drag—okay, *urge*—me into the lounge. When she opened the door, joyful voices rang out, everyone stumbling their way through a perky version of Jingle Bells.

“I just have to check on them one last time.” I tugged out of her grasp.

Her face scrunched. “You don’t need to tuck them into bed.”

“I know,” I groaned. “But I need to make sure their pods are functioning as they should before I can relax for the night.”

“That’s what you said last weekend when I invited you on a double date. And the weekend before that when I tried to fix you up with the hot Aerodon in Security. You’re not just a member of the crew. You’re one of us. It’s okay for you to date, kiss, or sleep with anyone you please.”

I didn’t actually feel that way. I’d been invited to remain at the colony after I made sure the Ir’oks were locked back in stasis and on their way to their home planet, but my family expected me to return to Earth on the shuttle after that.

Not wanting to disappoint my friend, however, I pressed a smile onto my face. “I won’t be long.” I just wanted to say goodnight to Sleye. “Pour us drinks, and I’ll be with you before you’ve drained yours.”

She pointed her finger playfully my way before smoothing her short, pink hair. “Show up soon, or I’ll come drag you out of that lab.”

I shook my head at her antics and left her, striding down the hall. Soon, the merriment faded, and I approached the room where we kept the Ir’oks in suspension pods, their preferred way to travel.

Inside the lab, I wove among the twelve stasis units housing these remarkable beings. Each one was a member of the elusive and highly intelligent Ir’ok species. Among them lay Sleye—the alien I crushed on when I shouldn’t.

I paused beside his pod, admiration mingling with a twinge of melancholy as I took in his buff form. Just like everyone traveling in stasis, he was naked other than a cup over his groin.

Purple skin coated his thick muscles, and who wouldn’t drool over his rippled chest?

With broad shoulders tapering into a narrow waist, he gave off an ethereal appeal. His strong horns jutting up over his

head roughed up his gorgeous image. I'd read in past generations, his species fought to win a mate with those horns. His people were known for their intelligence, cunning, and calm demeanor, making them the perfect choice to help set up the technical aspects at the new colony.

Only professional relationships were allowed between our species. Anyone caught mingling in a personal way would be shipped back to Earth. This was their rule, not ours, but we were determined to do everything we could not to cause an interstellar incident by being too friendly.

I sunk down on the stool I'd dragged over beside his pod months ago, not long after the interstellar cruiser took off after they'd loaded him and the other Ir'ok males in the lab.

"How's it going?" I whispered. No one could hear me, especially him. I was the only scientist assigned to this lab, though others could step into my place if I couldn't perform my duties. Not that anyone expected a pod to malfunction. None had for over a thousand years of Ir'ok travel.

Laughter echoed from the distant gathering.

"I wanted to stop by tonight to make sure you were still okay," I said, stroking my fingertips across the top of his clear pod.

"I know. I'm silly for coming here when everyone's celebrating our combined holidays. If you could speak, you'd probably chide me like Justine and tell me I should be having fun, not moping around in my lab."

Or talking to an alien who couldn't hear me. Great. Just lock me up now.

The low lights overhead made his smooth purple skin gleam. I hadn't exactly examined all of him—not too often. I mean, I was a red-blooded woman like every other, and this guy was a prime specimen of alien manhood from his chiseled jaw to his glorious pecs, to his muscular thighs, and to the thick shaft lying between them.

It twitched.

My breath caught. “Hold on. Where’s the cup?” It was all I could do to drag my gaze away from his magnificent cock.

“You’re imagining things, Tabitha. He ... isn’t getting an interstellar woody.” But he’d lost his cup, which was impossible. They didn’t move so it couldn’t be dislodged.

Where did it go?

His cock shifted, slowly rising to point at the top of the pod.

“Fuck,” I bellowed, scrambling backward so fast, I fell off my stool and on my ass.

Rising, I rubbed my eyes and smacked the side of my head, though not too hard. I liked my brain the way it was.

I must be dreaming.

I crept back over to stand beside his pod.

Damn, his cock was huge. It thrust against his decadent abs I ached to explore with my fingertips.

My mouth suddenly dry, I licked my lips, and dragged my gaze away from his cock.

His eyelids were open. His gaze locked on mine, and I swore he whispered my name, something that wasn’t possible with him still locked in Cryovita fluid.

A grumbling roar echoed in the chamber, and I peered around, wondering what the noise could be.

When I turned back to Sleye, all the fluid had drained from his unit.

He pressed a button on the inside, and the hatch spanning the top curled down along the back side of his pod.

He sat up and looked around with flinty green eyes.

Then he swung himself over the side of his unit and stood before me—woody intact—and with a wild look in his eyes.

CHAPTER 2

SLEYE



Confusion washed over me as I regained consciousness, my mind flickering to life with a surge of emotions unlike anything I'd ever felt before. It was as though the world around me had been transformed, revealing layers previously hidden from my awareness.

A voice spoke nearby and often, soft yet resonant with deep-seated yearning, creating a connection I hadn't anticipated when I agreed to travel to a distant colony to assist in the initial tech start-up.

Tabitha. That was her name. She'd whispered it one of the times she'd visited.

It wasn't possible to hear anyone while locked in stasis. Everyone knew this.

Yet I'd heard *her*.

Tabitha's presence commanded attention even within the sterile confines of the lab. What felt like months ago, she'd dragged a stool over and placed it beside my pod, then sat down. With a swirl of uncertainty in her eyes, she'd shared her life with me, telling me of her lonely existence on Earth, the high expectations of her family, and how she wished she could feel complete with the life she currently led. Sadly, the feeling eluded her. Science had been her one true passion but now, she longed for something more.

She'd captivated me instantly, and I began to long for the times when she'd sit beside me. I'd stir to consciousness as she shared her hopes and dreams.

Somehow, she'd awakened me from stasis, something that shouldn't be possible. From what she told me, her role was to maintain our nutrition bags and ensure our fluid levels remained where they should.

Could she be my ladiah mate?

Everything inside me insisted it wasn't possible. None of my species had bonded with a ladiah mate in thousands of years, not since my people transitioned to a genetically engineered society and stopped procreating in the physical way.

Why then, was my cock responding to her presence? It was embarrassing, something that had never happened. My species had learned to control our sexual urges long ago, and we no longer felt them.

The fluids drained away from around me, leaving me feeling chilled. Blasters dried my skin. When the hatch opened, I sat up.

Tabitha reeled away from me, her brown eyes wide with fright.

I whispered her name, but that didn't appear to soothe her.

"I ... Hello." My voice croaked, but that was to be expected when one was lifted from stasis.

Her gaze met mine with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. "You ... You're awake."

I swept my arm out and bowed, noting my cock remained pressed against my abs. Gripping it tightly, I tried to force it down to its natural position.

Tabitha watched, her lips quivering and her eyes widening further.

"I apologize," I said. "I'll soon make it stop."

"Morning woody, I guess." She slapped her hand over her mouth, speaking around her fingers. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's not natural for it to behave in this manner."

“Many would say it is.”

I lifted one eyebrow in her direction. “Not for Ir’oks.”

“Yes, that’s right. You don’t ... procreate like humans.”

“You’re correct. We don’t have sex.”

“Does that mean you’re a virgin?”

I cocked my head, mouthing the word, struggling to find a translation in my own language.

“It means you haven’t had sex before,” she said.

“Then yes, I am this *virgin*.”

“I’m not. A virgin, that is.”

“You’ve had sex for procreation?” How curious. If I asked, would she tell me what sensations it generated inside her? “Your species still creates new generations in the original way?”

“Yes, um, right. Although, people have sex for more than just procreation.”

“Why?”

“Because they enjoy it.”

“Do you?”

Color flooded her face. She glanced toward my pod. “Why have you awakened?”

“I assume you did something to make it happen.”

Her hands lifted. “All I’ve done is sit there.” She waved to the stool. “And talk. Too much talking, actually.”

“I enjoyed it.”

Color rose in her face. “Shit, you could hear me?”

“For some reason, yes.”

“Could all of the Ir’oks hear me?” Her voice lifted shrilly.

I studied the other pods. “I don’t believe so.”

“Then why could you?”

“Because ...” I huffed. “I don’t really know. This is unprecedented.”

“Your systems were programmed to keep you locked in stasis until I started the awakening sequence on our arrival at the new colony on Celestia. We won’t land there for the equivalent of seven more Earth days.”

“Not long, then.” I strode past her, my cock bobbing around like a partly uprooted pole. “I’ll take this time to prepare for our arrival.”

She caught up and passed me, turning to thrust her back against the exit door, her arms spread wide. “You can’t leave the lab. You have to get back inside your pod before I get into trouble.”

“Why would you get into trouble?”

She wrung her hands. “See, my job is to keep you guys fed and happy inside your pods. Not make you somehow wake up.”

“You’ll have to keep me fed and happy outside my pod. I’m afraid I cannot restart the process here. Once I’ve completed my assignment on Celestia, and it’s time for me to depart, I’ll begin the sequence.”

“Why can’t you restart the sequence now?”

I shook my head. “I’ll need the supplies we shipped ahead to the colony.”

At least my cock pointed straight out now and had stopped bobbing against my abs.

“Okay, um, well ... alright.” She sagged against the door. “I’ll hide you until we reach Celestia, then. If we’re lucky, no one will realize you’re awake before the others.”

“Very well.”

“You can stay here.” She nibbled on her lower lip, and my cock seemed to find the gesture ... What was the word?

Ah, yes, *arousing*.

“You’re arousing me,” I said, pointing to my cock now smacking against my abs.

She licked her upper lips, her gaze filling with panic. “I’m not doing anything.”

“I suspect you are, though inadvertently.”

“Isn’t that the story of my life?” she whispered.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. I didn’t say anything.”

“I believe you were going to tell me another story from your life, and I’d like to hear it. Not here, however. I don’t wish to remain in the pod chamber for seven Earth days.”

“Why not? All your friends are here.”

“Colleagues.”

“Whatever. The thing is, there’s no place else you can hide —”

Voices rang out in the hallway, and her stricken gaze met mine. “Quick, we’ve got to disguise you.” She yanked a lab coat off the back of the door and helped me tug my arms through it, though it wouldn’t stretch far enough to fasten. My arms jutted well past the white fabric, and it hung only part way down my abs.

“Can’t you control that thing?” she wailed, staring at my erect cock.

“I wish I could, but it appears to have been stirred by you.”

She scratched her head, dislodging her lovely brown hair secured in a loose knot at her nape. “I haven’t done anything to it.”

“But you have.” I was certain now, though I had no idea how I was supposed to handle the fact. “You’re my ladiah mate.” I took her arm and reached for the doorknob. “Take me to your quarters. I believe if we fuck, my cock will ejaculate and finally hang flaccid.”

CHAPTER 3

TABITHA



“I ’m not fucking you,” I barked.

How could I cover him up further? I couldn’t lead him through the hall barely dressed in one of my old lab coats with a ginormous erection bobbing against his abs.

Talk about ho-ho-ho.

I was a practical woman. A brilliant scientist. Surely something would occur to me.

Ignoring his ladijah mate comment, plus his big old cock poking itself toward me, I tugged off my lab coat and wrapped it around his waist, knotting the arms in the back. Only his ass was now exposed, and a nice ass it was, even if I was being clinical. I tugged off my fuzzy red and green sweater and tucked it down through the tied lab coat arms, covering his butt—a true crime right there.

“Come with me,” I barked, pinching my eyes shut for a second to get rid of the image of his cock tenting the front of my lab coat. I’d never look at it in the same way again.

“Of course, ladijah mate.” He shot me a soft smile. “I’m looking forward to the fucking. While my people have scorned the notion of sexual activities for thousands of years, I find myself strangely intrigued by the idea of partaking in the process. I welcome the chance to do hands on—or cock thrusting—experimentation on you as soon as possible.”

“We’re not going to fuck!” I backed against the door and scowled, an expression that was difficult to maintain when he looked so cute in my lab coats.

He looked eager to roll around in my bed. A tiny part of me wondered what it would be like to show this virgin what real sex was like. Would he return to his people and share with them what they were missing, or would they scorn him for giving in to his physical needs?

“I’m not going to find out,” I hissed.

He frowned but said nothing.

“I’m going to check the hall,” I said. “If there isn’t anyone there, we’re going to scurry to my room.”

“Yes.” His fingers stroked down my arm. “Why is your flesh prickling like this?”

I’d like to say because I was chilly now that he was using my sweater to cover his ass, but that would be lying. His nearness was making my core throb, and there wasn’t anything I could ethically do about it.

“It’s nothing,” I said, cracking the door and poking my head out. No one there. I reached back to take his hand, my fingers encountering his lab coat-covered cock. It thrust forward eagerly. “Stop it!”

He chuckled. “I’ve already explained how we can stop it. Lead away, mate, and I’ll follow you quite willingly.”

“I’m sure you will.” With my lips pinched together, I found his hand and tugged him out into the hall. We jogged down it and turned right at the intersection. Thankfully, we reached the lift without encountering anyone. They must all be at the holiday party.

Inside my room, I double locked the door. Not releasing his hand, I pulled him into my small bathroom.

“We’ll take care of my cock in here?” he asked with a frown, squinting at the human-sized sanitizer we used for a shower.

“*You’re* going to take care of your cock in here.”

His frown deepened.

“You can jerk off,” I said.

“I don’t know the meaning of this term.”

Untying the lab coat from around his waist and tugging away my sweater, tossing both aside, I pointed to his still-erect woody. “Stroke it. Play with it. I’m sure stuff like that comes natural with guys.”

He peered down at it. “Stroke it.” He ran his fingers up and down it. “That feels pleasant.”

Getting turned on by this was wrong, but I couldn’t seem to hold back my lust. He had a nice cock, big and thick and with a circular head that ... No, it couldn’t be turning independent of the shaft. How was that possible? I wasn’t sure, but my eyes couldn’t be deceiving me.

What would it feel like to have that spinning as he thrust inside me?

Don’t go there.

“Stroking it doesn’t seem to be doing much,” he finally said, his hand dropping to his side.

“You need to do it harder. Pinch it or something. I don’t know. I’m not exactly an expert on cocks.”

“You’re a scientist.”

“Not a sexologist.”

“Show me how to do it?” He looked at me with such pleading innocence, I couldn’t resist.

“I’ll show you how to get started, but then I’m leaving the room and letting you finish.”

“Very well.”

I wasn’t sure how I’d feel holding him in my hand and move my fingers up and down. I had a strong sexual appetite. Since there wasn’t anyone I wanted to exercise it with, I kept *things* around. I paused and opened the drawer beneath the sink, taking out the bottle of lube.

“This will help,” I said. My passage was dripping. No lube needed there. But rubbing him with a dry hand was going to

give him a rash or something. The least I could do was administer this humanely.

Administer. Humane. You could take the girl out of the lab, but you couldn't take the lab out of the girl.

I squirted a bunch on my palm, and he watched with fascination.

“What does this do?” he asked, my big brawny virgin.

“You'll see.” Feel. Whatever. “I'm going to show you briefly, and then I'm going to let you take care of the rest.”

“I look forward to your ministrations.”

Fuck, don't say that.

I tried to remain clinical as I ran my hand up and down his thick shaft, coating the length, but man, it sure wasn't easy. My clit pulsed with anticipation, and my underwear had soaked through.

“Like this.” I squeezed his cock and milked it, holding it tight as I glided my hand up and down. I picked up the pace, doing it faster. “Keep doing it and trust how it feels. If it's good, do it some more.”

When I ran my thumb over the spiraling tip, he hissed. Enjoying this too much, he leaned against the wall, his eyes closing.

Releasing him, I backed away. If I kept doing this, he'd come, and I was going to come along with him. Somehow, I sensed that would cross the line.

“You can finish, I believe.” I left the bottle of lube on the sink and stepped out into my room, closing the panel behind me.

Leaning against it, I couldn't stop myself from listening.

He groaned, and even through the door, I could hear him rubbing.

“It doesn't feel as good as when you did it,” he called out.

Double hell, no, I wasn't going to do it for him. I couldn't. Not without taking advantage of the situation.

"Keep trying," I said, leaning against the door, my ear flush against the surface. "It'll get better. I promise."

"You're sure about this?"

"I am."

His groans picked up, and all I could picture was him jerking away at his cock.

I slipped my fingers inside my skirt, spreading my legs and shoving my wet underwear out of the way.

While he moaned and the sounds he made grew louder in the bathroom, I pumped my fingers inside my passage and rubbed my clit.

"Something's happening," he called out, his voice hoarse. "Should I stop? I don't want to stop. Please, tell me what to do, Tabitha."

"Let go. Give into the wonderful feeling." Shit, I was so close. *So* close.

His breath caught, and he barked out a cry. It sent me tumbling over the side along with him, crashing through one orgasm after another and leaving me slumped against the door.

Silence reigned in the bathroom until I heard water running. I mostly used the upright sanitizer to bathe, but we did have water the ship we recycled.

I straightened my clothing and sunk down onto my small sofa before I collapsed on the floor.

The door opened and Sleye emerged, his cock hanging down between his thighs. He stopped in front of me, his cock at my eye level.

"Well," he said. "That was somewhat satisfying. I do believe it would be more pleasurable if I'd coated it with more of that slime and buried it within your vagina."

CHAPTER 4

SLEYE



“You can’t run around saying things like that to people,” Tabitha said. “And you shouldn’t run around naked either.” Rising, she scooted around me and strode over to the fabricator. “Fortunately, we can take care of that quickly.” A few beeps, and the front panel opened, revealing a tidy stack of clothing. She tugged them out and held them toward me. “Put these on.”

“I know I shouldn’t run around, as you say, without clothing. I may not understand the mechanics of cock action, but I do know how to interact with at least four thousand different societies.”

“I’m sorry.” Her shoulders curled forward. “You’ve just —”

“Stunned you.” Frankly, I was the one who was stunned. When she’d latched onto my cock and rubbed it, all I could think about was how beautiful she was and how much I wanted to touch her. Make her feel just as good. I knew nothing about how to pleasure a female however, and it was clear I barely knew how to pleasure myself. I was, as she said, a beergin.

No, a *virgin*.

“Yes, you stunned me. Here’s the deal.” She eased around me as I tugged on the pants, securing them at my waist. She glanced back, and I swore I read disappointment on her face before she masked it. Did she like seeing me naked? It was an intriguing thought. “I’m going to get into trouble if anyone

discovers I released you from stasis early. It's against the rules your government set forth when we picked up your pods."

The shirt in my hand, I sat on the sofa. "I can explain to my people."

She dropped down next to me. "How will you explain? I don't even know how I unfroze you early."

"I believe *I* know."

"I swear, I didn't touch anything but the smooth top of your hatch. I sat with you, spoke with you, but other than ensuring you had enough nutrition and cryofluid, I didn't do anything."

When I spoke, I didn't want to look at her, because I was worried I'd see disappointment on her face. Fingering the shirt, I contemplated the best way to say this. "You're my ladiah mate."

"You mentioned that term when you first woke up."

At least she wasn't bellowing. Or cringing away from me.

"None of my species has bonded with a ladiah mate for so long, I'm not sure when it last happened."

"I know what the term mate means."

Her voice had gone husky. A good sign?

"Ladiah means fated in my language." I held up my hand before she could speak. And, because she was listening and not fleeing, I turned to face her.

"Fated?" she whispered. Her gaze dropped from my eyes to my mouth, then to my naked chest. Her pink tongue slipped out to tease her upper lip, and my cock responded as if she'd licked it as well. Did females ever do such a thing? I didn't dare ask. At this point, I'd take her hand if she offered it to me.

"It's embarrassing," I said.

"Being fated to someone?" Her breath caught when she noticed my cock pressing against my pants. "Oh, you're embarrassed by your hard-on? That's natural."

“Not for my people. We don’t ...” I didn’t know how much she knew about us.

Before entering stasis, those of us going to Celestia were given a manual outlining the cultural norms and idiosyncrasies of the other species we’d encounter while working in the new colony. “Everyone throughout the universes experiences such a thing.” I waved to my infernal cock. “Except Ir’oks.”

She frowned and returned her focus to my eyes. “I learned a bit about your culture back on Earth. Ir’oks use generation pods to reproduce. You’re genetically engineered for intelligence.”

“That’s correct. Each time someone dies, another is generated to replace the loss. After we’re born, we remain within the growth center until we reach what you would call the teenage years.”

“You never know parents or what it’s like to have fun like kids do?”

Kid? Ah, yes, a child. “You don’t miss what you’ve never had. Once we’re mature enough, we attend school, though our minds have implants that educate us as we grow within the pod, and almost everything is wiped except the lessons we need to complete.”

“Do you dream?”

I frowned. “I’m not sure. I don’t remember.”

“That’s sad. Perhaps you have dreams, but they’re wiped as well.”

I shrugged. “I don’t feel the loss.”

“You can dream while you’re awake.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I dream of reaching the colony and setting up the lab there, though I won’t be remaining at the colony to use it. I’m supposed to return to Earth.”

“I’m expected to set up the computer system that will continue terraforming the area around the colony and

eventually, the entire planet, so it will be able to support life.”

She snorted. “That sounds like you read it from the manual.”

“I memorized it.”

“You’re kind of like a cyborg only you’re flesh and blood like me.” Her fingertip traced down my arm, and my skin quivered.

Yes, she was my ladiah mate.

The shy look she sent me made my lungs tighten.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t paw you whenever I feel like it.”

She had no paws, but her meaning translated.

“Since you’re my ladiah mate, you can touch me whenever you want.”

“I shouldn’t. It’s crossing boundaries. Frankly, I’m not sure I believe in fated anything. It’s not very scientific.”

“I’m embarrassed once more.”

Her gaze fell from mine. “I assume that means you’re about to let me down easy.”

Let her down ...?

“It means you’ll tell me you’re not interested in having a relationship with me, that you’re going to do something to break the bond.”

“I’m embarrassed because mating was bred out of us long ago. An erection shouldn’t be possible. Everyone would be horrified to learn they didn’t eliminate it from our genetic make-up.”

“Is it a bad thing to bond with someone?”

“I told you how we procreate. My people don’t have sex, and they never have these.” I waved to my cock jerking around inside my pants like a wild thing. “We pride ourselves on always being in full control. This shows a lack of control. *This* is embarrassing, not the thought of being with you.”

“Most guys find it embarrassing to get an erection in mixed company. If we were,” she sucked in a breath and it shot out, “if we were about to have sex, it would be welcome.”

“I see. Yet you don’t wish to have sex with me. You’re going to, as you say, let me down easy.”

“We just met. While I’m not opposed to others having a one-night stand, it’s not my thing to jump into bed with someone right away.”

“You speak in terms that weren’t explained in the manual.”

“I mean that if we dated a bit and we grew closer, then I might want to have sex with you.”

“I’ve read humans have sex when there’s attraction.” She was amazing. Beautiful. Infinitely desirable. I didn’t need this woodly—*woody*—to prove this to me.

“Maybe you’re mistaken and we’re not ladiah mates,” she said.

“In my heart.” I pressed my fist to my chest. “I know it’s true.”

“Can we stop it from going further?”

“Is that what you want?”

She shrugged. “I just met you. Despite carrying on a one-way conversation with you for months, we know next to nothing about each other.”

“I heard everything you said.” Her words were imprinted in my mind.

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. “Now I’m the one who’s embarrassed.”

“Why?”

“I shared things with you I’ve never told another soul, not even my best friend, Justine.”

“I’m honored.” I dipped forward in a bow.

“Anyway, mate or not, I either have to put you back inside the pod, which you said is impossible, or I have to hide you

until we reach Celestia.” Frowning, she tapped her chin. “Where should I hide you?”

“I could remain here in your cabin for the duration.”

“It only has one bed.”

I patted the cushion beside me. “I’ll sleep here.”

She nodded slowly. “We can try it out. If it doesn’t go well, we can come up with a different plan.”

I knew the schematic of this ship as well as the patterns on the palm of my hand. I’d memorized them before entering stasis, though it wasn’t a requirement of my job. I was interested in anything mechanical, and I enjoyed learning.

I’d studied the plans, and I could tell her right now that there wasn’t a spot on the ship that wasn’t already accounted for.

There would be no place other than her cabin to hide a mature Ir’ok for one week.

CHAPTER 5

TABITHA



Before I could contemplate what it would mean to share my cabin for a week with this hot Ir'ok male, my wrist com beeped.

“Hey, babycakes, where the hell are ya?” Justine cried through my com. “If you’re still hanging out in that lab all by yourself, I’m going to trot down there and drag you out. The party’s wonderful, and you need to join us!”

“Ugh,” I said, though I wasn’t truly irritated. Despite being a complete recluse, I’d looked forward to the party. Everyone needed to relax now and then. I rose from the sofa. “I have to go. We’re doing a series of holiday parties for the week before we arrive at the colony, and from what you just heard, Justine expects me to make an appearance at the one tonight.”

He couldn’t go with me.

Unless ...

My face cleared. “Would you like to come with me?” It wouldn’t be a real date. Well, it might be a *holidate*, but not a full-on, one-of-us-has-asked-the-other-out date.

“You said no one should know I’ve been released from the pod.” He held up his arm. “My skin’s not the same color as yours.”

No, his was a gorgeous purple. I adored it. All the time I sat beside him; I kept wondering what it would be like to touch it. Something totally inappropriate for a scientist to be thinking, but I was a woman first.

I missed sex, though I'd rarely had good sex other than what I could give myself.

"We can make you a disguise." Because he was right. His species were the only ones on board with lavender skin.

His head cocked, and I could tell he was considering the idea. Even more, that he trusted me to come up with a foolproof plan. I wasn't sure about the foolproof part, but a seed of a plan had sprouted inside me.

Rising, I strode over to the fabricator. The devices on board were simpler than the ones we had in storage for the colony. Those were capable of creating almost any item of clothing we might need. We were terraforming it to have seasons, and it would get cold in the summer and hot in the winter. No one wanted to freeze in the winter or bake in the summer.

After a few failed requests, I was able to generate something that just might work. I held it up, and his eyebrows rose all the way to his thick hairline.

"You think I'll remain hidden while wearing that?" he asked, getting up off the sofa and joining me beside the counter.

"The idea isn't for you to hide but to stand out in plain view. Wearing this." I held up the Santa suit, "Everyone will see you—"

"Certainly, they will."

"But they won't see past the suit. In my culture, Santa's a mythical figure who appears around the holidays. He delivers presents to children—"

"I don't have presents."

"Fabrication's a wonderful thing. The point is, when they see Santa, they won't see Sleye."

He fingered the fuzzy suit with white fluff around the cuffs, hemline, and collar, and lifted the hat, dropping it onto his head. His horns projected up around it, and damn, I'd

never seen a cuter Santa. It made me want to apply for the job of Mrs. Claus.

I was *definitely* on the naughty list.

When had I started thinking of me and Sleye as a possible couple? Probably long ago, when I started sharing my heart with the gorgeous alien lying in stasis.

Thoughts like that were dangerous. Despite the sexual attraction between us and him speculating that I could be his mate, we weren't a couple. I'd be wise to remember that.

"I'm willing to try," he said, grimacing as he lifted the red pants with white fluff around the bottom. "It will be a challenge to appear manly in this outfit."

This brawny guy would make me swoon no matter what he was wearing.

"We'll have to cover your face and hands with green makeup. Then you'll blend in with the other alien species onboard." I laid the suit over my arm and took his hand, urging him toward the bathroom. "First, I'll help you get dressed. I'll do your face and hands after that."

"While we're in the bathroom ..." He winced and looked down at his cock tenting the front of his pants. "I do apologize."

"Do you want to take care of it before we get you ready?" I asked brightly.

Fates help me, but I couldn't go ten minutes around him without my clit throbbing and my core getting wet.

Lifting a few strands of my hair that had come out of my messy bun, he fingered them. "Soft." He leaned close, sniffing. "You smell amazing. I crave *you*, ladiah mate."

"I'm not ... I can't ..."

Why wasn't I backing away, insisting he needed to go into the bathroom and let me know when he was finished?

Because I wanted to be the one giving him pleasure.

“No or yes, mate,” he said, all growly. Damn, but the sound of his voice made flames lick across my bones.

“I could, um, show you a different way to get off.”

“Alone or with you?”

Fuck, *definitely* with me.

We were going to be even later arriving at the party.

Taking his hand, I led him into the bathroom.

CHAPTER 6

SLEYE



Since I was a virgin alien being, I was going to allow her to take the lead in whatever we did together. Although, whenever I looked at her, all kinds of what one might call dirty thoughts clouded my mind. In many of them, *I* led.

“Do males lick females?” I asked as she shut the door with trembling hands.

“Sometimes.” Her voice came out husky, and she kept shooting me lust-filled looks that made my cock stiffen even further.

“All over?”

“If they wish.”

“I’d like to try that sometime.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“Now?”

Her groan ripped out. “We barely know each other.” Her fingers tugged at the tie at the top of my pants.

“This is a good way to get to know each other better.”

“One of these days, we’re going to have to sit and have a nice long conversation. I don’t know what your favorite color is. Your middle name, assuming you have one. Or even how old you are.” She tugged my pants down, freeing my engorged cock, gulping as she looked down at it. “I also don’t know if you’d fit inside me if we took things further.”

“Green, like your eyes. I’m Sleye Veskalon, no middle name. Twenty-eight-years-old in Earth terms. And I’m willing to try very hard to make it fit if you agree.”

“Not now.” Staring at my cock, she ran a fingertip down the length. “You’ve got tiny cocks above and below the main shaft.”

“I assume they serve a purpose.”

“Jeez, you’re built like a full buffet, and I’m a starving woman.” Lowering her head, she licked up my length. “Mmm.”

Heat shot through me. I sagged against the counter.

She took the end of my cock into her mouth, and when her tongue ran across the tip, I pretty much lost track of anything but what she was doing.

“I should be ...” My eyes rolled back, and that warm rush roared through me again like a fighter jet on a collision course with a wormhole.

Earlier, I’d shot seed into my hand, and while I’d like to do it again, Tabitha’s mouth felt infinitely better. Why in all the fates had my species decided they didn’t need sex?

My groans grew louder as she sucked on my cock. I was never going to get the image of her doing this out of my mind. If I asked nicely, would she do it again tomorrow and the day after that?

“Something’s happening,” I belted out, pumping toward her.

Her hand gripped my cock while she continued to run her tongue up and down the length. The smaller cocks she’d mentioned above and below my main shaft vibrated and secreted fluid. What was the purpose of the liquid and why did the smaller units quiver?

My body stiffened, and my bellows filled the small room.

Tabitha looked up at me, her eyes sparkling, and the realization that she was enjoying this as much as I was humbled me.

I exploded, and she swallowed my seed.

While I continued to lean against the counter, she gave my cock one last lick that made it twitch before releasing it and straightening.

She licked her lips and gave me a grin. “Maybe *later*, I’ll take a ride with Santa.”

CHAPTER 7

TABITHA



I was a very naughty girl, but Santa seemed pretty happy with me as we sauntered down the hall toward the party.

He looked comically cute in his red suit. Because he was big, tall, and broad, he filled out the suit nicely, but Santa was roly-poly and Sleye was made up of ripcord muscle. I mean, the guy had thighs I could scale like tree trunks and forearms that would be an outright sin to expose.

To compensate for his less-than-Santa belly, I'd stuffed a pillow inside the top.

He'd stared down at it a long time before laughing.

"You're supposed to say ho ho ho," I said, giggling, something I hadn't done since I was little. Sleye took an ordinary moment and made it amazing. He took joy in each second and the need to do the same was spreading to me.

As for his face, I'd coated it with green makeup, covering his hands too. We could wash it off later.

A feeling of satisfaction filled me, though my core ached for his touch. He'd had a great time in the bathroom, and there was nothing better than watching his face as he came. But my body still hummed with need. I wasn't sure what I should do about it. I barely knew him. We might be sharing my quarters tonight, but there was no way I could impale myself on him later, despite my tease in the bathroom.

Or I *shouldn't*.

“Have you ever kissed someone?” I asked as we entered the hallway leading to the main lounge where they were holding the party. Cheery music and bright voices reached us, and from out here, it sounded like everyone not on duty was joining in on the fun.

“I haven’t. Why would I?” His attention drilled in on my mouth. “Pressing lips against another’s sounds ... unsanitary.”

My laugh snorted out. “I guess people do share germs when they kiss, though that’s the farthest thing from my mind when I’m with someone.”

“You’re saying you enjoy kissing.”

“It feels good.”

Shifting his bag of presents to his other shoulder, he paused in the hall to stroke my face. “Perhaps you’ll show me later?”

I couldn’t imagine anything more fun than sitting on the sofa and making out with this guy.

Was it wrong of me to introduce him to sexual pleasure when it was forbidden by his people? He didn’t seem to think so, but I wasn’t convinced. I’d have to think about the ethics of it—later.

For now, everything I did with him felt good. I wasn’t sure I’d ever fully gotten into the holiday spirit, but with Sleye, that giddy feeling others described kept shooting through me. I wanted to belly up to the eggnog table and drink a couple of cups. Eat a bunch of holiday cookies. And belt out carols while swaying in his arms.

He kept saying I was his mate, and I was beginning to believe there was nothing I’d rather do than be with him. Mating implied a lifetime, however, and surely it was too soon to make a decision about something like that.

We paused outside the lounge, and I checked his appearance, making sure I hadn’t missed covering up any of his gorgeous purple skin.

“You’re not dressed as merrily as me,” he said smugly, tugging on the hem of his bright red suit.

“Are you implying you don’t like my sweater?” I looked down at the red, green, and white monstrosity. “They’re holding a contest to see who’s sweater is the ugliest.”

“Shouldn’t the contest be about whose sweater is the most beautiful?”

“Same thing.” Mine was adorned with alien space elves, complete with silver antennae bobbing across my boobs and alien legs that danced due to mechanical works I’d crafted myself and attached to the inside of the hem. “I think I’ve got a solid chance of winning.”

“Everyone’s perception of what’s beautiful and what might be ugly is different. For example, I have lavender skin, and some might say it’s not attractive.”

It was hella attractive to me. So smooth. The urge to lick him kept overwhelming me. I adored how his muscles rippled beneath his skin when I touched him.

“Others might find my purple skin amazing,” he added.

“That’s me. I’m in the latter crowd.” I tucked my arm through his. “Ready to join the party, Santa?”

He sent me a sultry grin. “My ho is ready.” Leaning close, he whispered by my ear. “I’ll be happy to ho your ho later if you ask nicely.”

My skin tingled, and all I wanted to do was drag him back to my cabin to get the ho-ing started. But we had a party to attend.

And for the first time in forever, I had a date.

CHAPTER 8

SLEYE



We held parties on my home planet, so I expected something like that when we entered the room.

Pausing inside, I took in how crowded it was with a majority of humans but also adults and young from blue- and green-skinned alien species. Everyone mingled, some chatting in small groups, others filling plates at a long table set up near the left wall. A male stood behind a table on our right serving drinks, and a few couples swayed to music near the back wall.

Everyone wore red and green sweaters similar to Tabitha's, and my eyes widened as I took them in. The colors were vibrant, and each sweater was uniquely special. How would anyone decide which was the best—or the worst, in this case?

What I also didn't expect was for the face of every child in the room—both alien and human—to light up when they saw me, or for them to rush over and clamber around us calling out *Santa*.

Tabitha backed away, giving me such a beautiful smile, it made my heart ache.

Ir'oks had relationships—platonic ones, that is—but few shared residences with others. There was no need to unless they chose to do so for the financial benefit.

I was beginning to suspect we'd tossed aside a wonderful thing when we chose to create our young with machines, and I wasn't only referring to the sex needed for procreation. What Tabitha did in her bathroom would remain a highlight of my life. But it was the warm way she gazed at me now as I opened

the sack full of presents to give to the children that touched me the most.

We'd lost something vital, and when I returned home, I'd tell everyone.

Although, in the past, a few of my people had spoken up, suggesting we should consider allowing procreation in the ancient way in addition to genetically enhanced fetuses, but those Ir'oks were quickly silenced. In fact, they disappeared, which was odd now that I thought about it.

Had they opted to move somewhere else? They could be living off-planet, happily having sex with chosen partners. If they had their sterilizations reversed, they could produce young like all other species in the galaxies.

Or had they been punished for suggesting we should be allowed to choose how we behaved with those we cared for? I'd investigate this later.

The children clambered around me, begging for treats.

I couldn't stop grinning, interspersing my smiles with *ho-ho-ho*. Their parents watched with indulgent grins. Tabitha had made a wise choice for my costume.

"I been good, Santa," a blue-skinned Dressalon girl chirped, gazing raptly up at me. "Can I has a present?"

I stroked her dark blue hair. Such a precious being. Since our young were raised in centers until they had nearly reached the age of fifteen, I'd rarely seen children and only those from other planets. Such big smiles. And so innocent, gazing at the lights with wonder.

"Of course you can, little one," I said. "Ho ho ho!" I threw the latter in again for good measure. Reaching into the bag, I pulled out a wrapped gift and gave it to her, and she scooted over to her parents.

"It's supposed to sit on your lap, Santa," a small boy said, tapping my thigh.

Someone dragged over a chair, and I sunk onto it, lifting the sweet child onto my leg. What was I supposed to do now?

I looked at Tabitha with panic tightening my throat.

“Tell Santa what you want for the holidays,” she said, stroking my shoulder. Did she realize how tenderly she touched me? “I’m sure Santa will tell you you’ve been a good boy, right Jimmy?”

He frowned at her. “I’ve been good. Really. I didn’t mean to sneak into the lab!”

“You didn’t disturb anything,” she said, her lips twitching with humor.

“When was this, Jimmy?” a woman who must be his mother asked. “I’m terribly sorry, Doctor Brenner. If I’d known ...”

“It’s not a problem at all,” Tabitha said. “Jimmy was just curious about the Ir’oks in stasis. I gave him a little tour, and he had the most insightful questions. He helped me check their vital signs and enter the data into my computer dash.”

“He has his own dash in our quarters,” Jimmy’s mother gushed. “He’s been working on what he calls a scientific paper for publication, would you believe, and now I know why. Thank you for taking the time to show him around. He’s loved anything science-related almost from the moment he could speak.”

“I was thinking of doing tours for children who have interest. I’ll have to gain permission from the capatiner, of course, but it would be a chance to help spark that interest in science that Jimmy already has.”

“You should speak with Leila. She’s one of the teachers. I was just chatting with her.” Jimmy’s mother peered around, then lifted her arm, waving. “Leila! Can you come over here for a second?”

“I’m bored,” Jimmy said.

“Tell me what you want Santa to bring you,” I said, taking the cue from what Tabitha had said earlier.

“I want a microscope and slides and some specimens,” he said, wiggling around on my lap. “Lots of yucky specimens.”

He peered up at me and tugged on the fake white beard Tabitha had secured to my chin. “Is this real?” He frowned and peered close. “It doesn’t look real.”

“I think someone else needs a chance to speak with Santa, Jimmy,” his mother said, lifting him off my lap. She backed up as a woman with auburn hair came over to stand with us.

“Leila,” Jimmy’s mother said in introduction. “This is ... Well, he’s Santa.”

“My first name is Sleye,” I said.

“Thought it was Kristopher,” Jimmy said with a frown.

“That’s my middle name.” I shot Tabitha a grin.

Jimmy’s mother lowered her voice to a whisper so her son wouldn’t overhear. “Sleye, when you think about it, is the perfect holiday name for Santa. Sleye. Sleigh. Get it?” Her grin made her cheeks stretch wide.

Jimmy was thankfully enraptured by Leila’s pet, a small black and white dog with brown tufted ears. It wore a bright green bow and was determined to lick every bit of Jimmy’s face while he laughed.

Other children waiting in line to talk to me called out greetings to Leila, and it was clear when she stooped down and spoke with them, giving each a hug, that she adored them as much as they did her.

I lifted the next child in line onto my lap and asked them what they wanted for the holiday. While the little girl recited a long list, I listened in on the other conversation.

“Dr. Brenner was just suggesting she could do tours through the lab for the schoolchildren,” Jimmy’s mom said. “I think it’s an amazing idea, and I thought I’d let you know so you two could coordinate your efforts.”

“Why don’t you reach out to me,” Tabitha said. “And we can schedule a date for each class? I’ll be happy to tailor their tour depending on their grade level. You could give them some introductory information, and I’ll build on that in class after their tour.”

“What an excellent idea,” Leila said, lifting her pet into her arms now that it was done ministering to Jimmy’s face.

Leila’s sweater was quite interesting, emblazoned with white puffy beings wearing top hats and, if I wasn’t mistaken, carrots for noses.

“I’ll be in touch,” Leila said before giving each child a nod and returning to the friends she’d been speaking with, taking her pet with her.

I gave out all the presents, thankful we’d fabricated enough that each child received one.

After leaving the empty bag with one of the staff, I strode over to where Tabitha spoke with a woman about her own age with short pink hair, green eyes, and a lush build.

“Well, if it isn’t Santa,” the woman said, winking at Tabitha. “I don’t believe I’ve met you before.” Her hand jutted toward me. “I’m Captain Justine Armond and you’re ...”

“He works in—” Tabitha shot a panicked look my way.

“Maintenance,” I said smoothly. “And my name’s Sleye.”

“I could swear I’d met all the maintenance crew.” Justine shook her head and shrugged. “I must’ve missed you.”

“Perhaps I was working inside a piece of machinery at the time you visited the machine shop.”

“Maybe.” Her face cleared. “It doesn’t matter. Nice to meet you now, Sleye.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

Her approving gaze slid down my front, but unlike when Tabitha looked at me, I felt nothing as a result of her perusal. I’d felt nothing whenever one of my species looked at me either.

Tabitha was definitely my ladiah mate. Just the thought of her made my pulse roar and my breathing pick up. If we were alone, my body would respond to her presence like it had earlier. I’d only read a bit about ladiah mates in passing. There

had been no need to study something that was a relic of our past and no part of our future.

I wished I'd paid more attention to what I'd read.

"Would you like to dance?" I asked Tabitha. Anything to hold her in my arms.

"Sure." She shot me a shy smile. "I don't dance well, however."

"I'll lead if you'd like."

Tabitha grinned and with a nod to Justine, I took her hand. I led her over to the open area where other couples swayed to someone singing about a winter wonderland.

My heart pounded in anticipation. The room was filled with laughter and cheerful music, creating a joyful atmosphere. My species had long since stopped celebrating religious holidays, and while I wasn't sure about what the lack of religion in my life might mean, I realized we were missing out on something fun by maintaining such an austere lifestyle.

As we stepped onto the dance floor, all else faded away; it seemed as though it was just us two—alone in our own world.

The music changed to a slow melody, the plaintive voice insisting all she wanted for Christmas was the person of her dreams.

I tugged Tabitha into my arms, and we melted together as if we were destined to be this way all along. I led, following the dance steps I'd voluntarily learned at the school I attended once I was released from the growth center, and our bodies swayed in perfect harmony to the tantalizing rhythm as if guided by some invisible force.

Every curve of her body pressed against mine, softness against strength. Warmth enveloped us like rays from a fire on a winter night. Her heady scent invaded my senses, making me intoxicated with every breath.

"You're good at this," she said softly, smiling up at me. "I should've asked you to dance sooner."

"When we were in the bathroom?"

Her low laugh rang out. “I believe we were too busy then, but maybe when we sat in the room before that.”

“I’m glad I could come to this party with you. And I’m grateful the fates woke me.”

Our movements were fluid yet firm—one flowing seamlessly into another without resistance or hesitation.

Her head tilted back, and she laughed as my fingers traced down her spine.

We spun and danced under the warm glow of twinkling lights, lost in an enchanting world of our own making. For a moment, time stood still as we swayed to the music—completely immersed in each other.

With each step we took, I felt myself falling deeper in love with her. I was captivated not just by her beauty but also by her radiant spirit that lit up every room she entered.

The song changed to one where the singer wished *Merry Christmas, darling*, and we continued to twirl and sway together across the floor.

Her light touch on my arm and around my back made me crave to take her to her quarters, lay her on the bed, and show her what I could do with *my* tongue.

“I’ve never enjoyed dancing, but with you, it’s fun,” she said.

Lifting her, I spun her around while she laughed.

Then, because she’d offered and I couldn’t stop thinking about how it might feel, I kissed her.

CHAPTER 9

TABITHA



Kissing Sleye was like touching a live wire. Electricity shot through me, centering in my core. Cupping his shoulders and holding on tight, I sunk into this moment, this wonder. No one and nothing was ever going to compare to this.

He groaned and pulled me tight against him, no longer moving. Our tongues continued dancing, stroking the other like I ached to stroke his body.

Clinging to him, I moaned. I pressed myself closer, needing so much more than this simple dance, this simple kiss.

His tongue teased across my lips, and I had a hard time believing he'd never done this before. For someone with no sexual experience, he picked things up fast, as if it was intuitive for him.

He'd insisted I was his ladiah mate, that we were fated to be together. It would be so easy to take his hand and lead him back to my room, but we'd just met. Could a lifetime of memories be built in a short period of time?

The music ended and a few people clapped. Others hooted, waking me from the world I'd slipped into where it was just me and Sleye.

Shit, we were still at the party.

I eased away from his mouth, and he gave me the sweetest smile. It sunk through me like the headiest wine, making my body melt all over again.

“Nothing beats our maintenance workers, huh?” Justine asked me from nearby where she danced with one of the crew. “Remember, kiddies are present, *Mrs. Claus*.”

Laughing, I slid down Sleye’s front, noting he had a hard-on again. Good thing his pillow torso extended over that area, covering him up.

He stroked my face and took my hand, leading me off the dance floor.

Before I could say anything, someone cleared their throat. “If I could have your attention.” The overhead system picked up Filadest’s words and amplified them.

We backed into the crowd gathering around the dance floor.

“It’s time for the ugly sweater contest.” Filadest held up a bright red bag the size of my head. “Whoever wins gets the prize donated by our illustrious chefs.”

“We have no chefs,” I whispered to Sleye. “I mean, there are staff working in the kitchen area who fabricate our meals from tubes of paste, but that’s not quite the same thing, is it?”

“This is one of the reasons we Ir’oks choose to travel in stasis.”

“Paste is?”

“We’re quite the food snobs. Everything we consume is freshly prepared from organically grown ingredients.”

“No wonder you’re such a big, strong male.”

His low laugh tickled down my spine. We were no longer kissing, but the heat he’d generated inside me continued to flare. How was I going to keep my hands off him later? “And no wonder you are such a tiny female.”

“Paste is stunting my growth?” I propped my fist on my hip in pretend irritation. “I’ll have you know the paste is certified and proven to provide all our nutritional needs.” However, I couldn’t wait to taste real food when we reached the colony. We’d grow and produce everything there.

“You’re perfect just as you are.”

“Who’d like to enter the ugly sweater competition?” Filadest asked, and fifteen or so colonists joined him on the dance floor. “No one else?”

“I thought you wanted to enter,” Sleye said.

“I’d rather stay here with you.”

CHAPTER 10

SLEYE



She gazed up at me sweetly, as if she thought I held the stars in my hands. If only I did; then I could present them to her one by one, jewels that sparkled as bright as her eyes.

Because I couldn't resist, I tugged her into my arms, holding her against my chest while we watched the others tease each other about their sweaters.

We took a vote, raising our hands, when each person was called.

"And the winner is Justine," Filadest cried, handing her the bag.

"Did she win because she's the captain?" I asked by Tabitha's ear.

She shook her head. "They wouldn't do that. Truly, her sweater is incredibly ugly."

I found the whole thing entertaining. Taste was subjective.

The party broke up, parents carrying sleepy children to their quarters to be put to bed.

Tabitha and I also left, strolling through the halls until we reached her cabin. I didn't want the night to end, but my mate kept yawning.

Inside, she crafted something in the fabricator. While the device hummed, she entered the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. When she emerged, she handed me a thin device with a small brush on the end. "Toothbrush. There's a solution you can use with it on the sink."

“I don’t understand.”

“Brush.” She made a back-and-forth movement in front of her bared teeth.

“Oh. It’s ok to place small sanitizers in their mouths twice a day. They do the brushing for us.”

“The thought of putting tiny things in my mouth when I’m about to go to bed sounds ...” She winced. “I’m not mocking what your species does to keep their teeth fresh and clean, but how do you sleep with something crawling around inside your mouth?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think about it.”

“What if you swallow them?”

“We do all the time. They’re gone by morning, either swallowed, as you point out, or dissolved.”

“Maybe tonight you can get by with only brushing.”

I couldn’t imagine manually cleaning my teeth, but I was willing to try.

She took clothing from the fabricator and handed it to me as well. “You can wear these pajamas to bed.”

“But I’m not going to lie in the bed,” I pointed out, holding up and frowning at the pee-jamas. “I plan to sleep on your sofa.”

“The sofa’s too small for you. I’ll sleep there. It’s already settled.”

It wasn’t, but she was right that it was much too small for me. My petite mate would fit, though the cushions weren’t as wide as those on her bed.

“We could share,” I said. When she frowned, I held up my hands. “My cock is subdued for now.”

“It’s the future of your cock I’m more worried about.”

“I would never do anything with you that you didn’t wish for.”

She nodded slowly. “I know that. It’s what *I* might do that’s bothering me the most.”

“I did enjoy your tongue on my cock.”

Her lips twisted, though with humor. “I’m sure you did.”

“You are welcome to place it there whenever you please.”

“We need to slow this down.”

“I believe you’re right.”

“What?” She gaped up at me. “I thought ...”

I traced my fingertip down her pretty cheek. “I want everything with you, mate, but I only want it when you feel the same.”

“This is all so sudden. This morning, I was a regular old scientist sitting in a chair beside your stasis pod. Now you’re here in my cabin, and I’m hiding you from the entire ship, and ...”

“What?”

“And I like you, Sleye. More than I ever thought possible.”

“To me, it’s simple. We’re ladiah mates. While my people have thrown away the notion of partnering with another, the idea is blooming inside me like a sliskel bud. But I want you as eager for our mating as me, and you’re not.”

“Not yet.” When she shifted her bare feet, the slip of a gown she wore brushed across her thighs. I couldn’t look away. Did she wear anything underneath the short gown? I ached to tease up the fabric with my teeth and find out.

“I can understand your hesitation,” I said. “Perhaps give this a little time before you make up your mind?”

“I’m not anywhere close to making up my mind.”

Good. Because I was going to do all I could to convince her she was meant to be mine.

CHAPTER II

TABITHA



I settled on the sofa, snuggling under the blankets I'd fabricated while trying not to think about Sleye brushing his teeth. Washing up.

Removing all his clothing.

He was a fully mature Ir'ok male, but in all things sexual, he was like a virgin teenager with his first crush. It would be completely unethical for me to take advantage of his feelings.

As long as I ignored all the ladiah mate stuff, I could buy us time to get to know each other. Like a newly hatched chick, he was exploring this world, testing his boundaries. If he took time to think about it, he'd realize he didn't want me. I was the first person he'd run into after his sexual awakening. If he'd encountered someone else first, he might be falling for them instead of me.

The thought made my belly hollow out, but there it was.

With the next few days taken over by holiday celebrations that would culminate in a final, big event, he would continue wearing makeup to cover his purple skin. It held up nicely tonight, and now that everyone had met him, and he'd told them he worked in maintenance, they wouldn't see him as anyone else, let alone an Ir'ok alien who should be lying snugly inside his stasis pod.

He left the bathroom and moved carefully across the living area in the dark, entering my small, attached bedroom.

The bed soon groaned from his weight.

There. I was grateful he hadn't argued again about where he should sleep. This would work out alright. Tomorrow, I'd take him to the lab with me. That would keep him busy.

Before students started trooping through the room, poking at pods and asking a billion wonderful questions, I needed to do something with his empty unit. Even a five-year-old would notice if one held no Ir'ok, and we couldn't have that.

Maybe I could delay Leila's visit.

Except we'd land on Celestia within the week, and she'd already told me she wasn't slowing her classes despite this being the holiday season.

I'd figure something out in the morning.

"TIME TO RISE, SWEETHEART," a chipper voice called out from nearby. "Is a morning kiss in your plans for the day?"

I cracked my eyelids to find Sleye kneeling beside the sofa, a bright smile on his gorgeous face. He'd dressed in snug pants that hugged his thighs and a t-shirt that stretched across his brawny chest.

Wait. *Kiss*.

"What did you just say?"

"Teasing." His grin widened. "Unless you'd like to take me up on my offer. You did mention popping my kissing cherry."

"We did that last night."

"Perhaps I need my memory refreshed."

"Where in the world did you hear the term cherry?"

He held up his wrist com. "I woke early, and I've been studying human mating customs. I found a long treatise about virginity on the ship's database. I've got a cherry. Did you know that? It says most lose their cherry before they reach the

age of twenty, so since I'm eight years older than that, I've got some catching up to do."

Sitting, I shoved my long hair off my face. "Back up a minute."

"To good morning, kissing, or popping all my cherries?" His sparkling eyes gave him away.

"You're incorrigible."

"Indeed. But I thought I'd toss it out there. When you're ready, that is. No pressure of course."

"My mouth tastes like a troncher stomped around in it all night."

"If you'd fabricated some sanitizers like I did, I'm sure a few would still linger in your mouth, keeping your breath fresh and your teeth clean."

"I'm going to pass on the tronchers." With a huff, I rose and strode toward the bathroom.

"Are you one of those females who's cranky in the morning?" he called out.

I paused in the doorway, peering back at him. "Are you one of those males who's unfailingly cheery in the morning?"

"Guilty as charged."

My grin surprised me. Damn, he was cute and much too hot. "I'll be right out." After peeing and brushing my teeth, plus splashing my face, combing my hair, and yanking it up in a ponytail high on the back of my head, I emerged from the bathroom.

I sat on the sofa next to him. "I'm not cranky in the morning."

"Of course you're not." His grin warmed me up in ways I didn't want to examine closely.

"Tell me more about this dating cherry thing."

"Humans are complex creatures."

"I won't deny it."

“And your dating rituals are utterly fascinating.”

“You don’t have dating rituals?” I shook my head, holding up my hand before he could speak. “Sorry. Of course you don’t. If you don’t have sex or partners or mates, why would you need to date?”

“We make many lasting friendships, and we pursue lengthy conversations, but you’re correct. Most of us live alone, and the only ones who live with others do so to share expenses. It never occurred to me that we should do anything else. Last night, I contemplated this. I believe my people have done us a grave wrong, and I plan to tell them this when I return home.”

Home. My heart froze with dismay. “There’s no chance for you to remain at the colony?”

“None of us are supposed to.” A frown scattered his cheery demeanor. “You know we intend to leave when our assignments are completed. I might reconsider, however.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

“What’s up with that gesture?” And why did I find it sexy? I swear, everything he did made heat blaze across my soul.

“After I rose early this morning, while you still slept, I watched many vids about human mating customs. You’d be surprised to see what’s available in the ship’s database. I also learned *this* gesture is highly appealing to females.” He leered, his gaze trickling down my body and ending at the juncture between my thighs.

“That’s a creepy gesture, not one many find attractive.” Although, with him, everything was attractive.

“Hmm. What about this one?” He loomed over me, licking his lower lip slowly.

I nudged him back onto the sofa cushion. “Some might find the lip-licking thing appealing.”

“What about you?”

I couldn’t tell him excitement sparked inside me when he did it, not if I was going to give us the distance we needed to

think about what we might want from this relationship. “I’m keeping you at arm’s length for now.”

“No kisses.” He nodded slowly. “I get it.”

“You get what?”

“You’re shooting me down gently. Telling me you’ll call me in the morning.”

“How old are those dating vids you watched? Because these lines sound like something people used hundreds of years ago.”

“They’re old, but customs don’t change.” His intent gaze met mine. “Know right now, mate. I intend to deploy all I’ve learned from the vids.”

CHAPTER 12

SLEYE



Tabitha huffed, calling me on my challenge. “I believe you’ll find I’m not so easily persuaded.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. I’ll woo you in traditional human ways, and after some time has passed, you’ll be eager to get inside my pants.”

“I’ll be what?” The grin she gave me made my pulse surge. My cock, too, but I wasn’t going to mention that. “What if I’m not eager to *get inside your pants?*”

“I’ll give up.” I doubted I could. Not unless she specifically told me she didn’t want me. Hold on. “Please tell me I’m not sexually harassing you.”

“Oh.” She shook her head. “Nope. I’m attracted to you; I can’t deny that. I just worry about where this can go between us. You plan to return to your home planet to lead the sexual revolution, and I’m supposed to return to Earth.”

“Would *you* consider staying at the colony?”

“I can if I want. Justine said I’m more than welcome. I’m only planning to go back to Earth because it’s what my family wants.”

“What does Tabitha want?”

She scrunched up her face. “I’m not sure yet.”

Then the option was open.

While I did feel my people needed to understand what they were missing out on sexually, I wasn’t that determined to leave

the colony, especially if Tabitha could be talked into remaining there with me. “Will you allow me to pursue you?”

“I see no harm in that.”

“Good.” I ran through the human dating customs I’d learned about from watching vids. “You remember who I am.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Why wouldn’t I?”

I stroked her pretty hair, enjoying how she’d bound it up, making the tips swing across her nape of her neck. “I don’t feel any blows to your head that could cause memory loss you’ll wake with each day.”

Her frown deepened. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“In one of the instructional vids, the female would wake each day unable to remember that she loved the male. He’d leave her a note asking her to watch a vid that showed her their life together. She’d find him after, and they’d kiss, restarting their lives together with shared memories.”

“You really want a kiss, don’t you?”

“Can you blame me? Since last night, it’s all I can think about.” Actually, I was thinking about a lot more than kisses, but I’d happily start there.

“I’ll give you a quick kiss.”

“How will something quick show me what I’ve been missing all these years?” I was thinking of the kiss she’d given my cock—when I should be avoiding the memory. If I couldn’t put it aside, I’d stride about with an erection all the time.

“You’ll have to taste it to find out.” She curled her finger, and I leaned toward her. With a grin, she traced her fingertips across my shoulder and to my nape, urging my face even closer. “One kiss coming right up.”

When she placed her lips against mine, my cock stood at attention. And when her tongue glided across my lips, I groaned, pressing harder against her. She fell back on the cushions, and I forgot all about vids and wooing techniques.

All I could focus on was how she clung to my shoulders and how amazing her mouth felt beneath mine.

She pumped her hips up toward me, and I wondered if touching her could be considered part of kissing. No harm in trying. She'd tell me if I took this too far.

While our tongues twisted together, I teased my fingertips up her thigh, squeezing the flesh of her ripe ass before gliding them around and between her legs.

Fuck, she wasn't wearing anything beneath her short dress.

I traced my thumb through her wetness, and I didn't need to be experienced to know this meant she wanted me.

I wasn't going to mention this to her, but I also watched vids called prawn. No, *porn*. And while most of the time, he pumped his cock into her while she moaned, or she sucked on his cock while he groaned, I suspected there should be more preparation other than her suggesting they "do it".

I explored the databanks some more, finding vids that discussed foreplay, which helped prepare both the mind and body for sex. Women wanted to be kissed, hugged, and caressed to create lubrication in the vagina, which would facilitate comfortable intercourse.

We hadn't hugged, but I was enjoying this kiss. From the way she kept moaning, she did as well. All that remained was to caress her to create lubrication, and the dating process would be over. We would "do it". She'd moan. I'd groan. And we'd both find sexual satisfaction—something I was looking forward to.

Friends with benefits, one of the vids called it, though I wanted more from my mate than just friendship.

I caressed her folds, sliding my finger within them, finding the source of her wetness. Yes, her vagina!

I pushed my finger up into her passage, and she wrenched her mouth from mine, barking out a groan.

"I'm the one who should groan," I pointed out. "You're supposed to moan."

Her gaze met mine, her blown pupils telling me I was doing well with my foreplay.

“Never mind,” I said, pushing a second finger inside her. I continued to tug them out and glide them back in, waiting for her to tell me it was time to “do it”.

“Touch my clit,” she whispered.

“Excuse me?”

“My clitoris.”

“I didn’t research anything called a clitoris.”

“Let me show you.” She took my other hand and guided it to a firm bud above where I continued to pump my fingers inside her. “This is a clit. If you rub it, exciting things will happen.”

“You’ll find sexual pleasure?”

“And then some.” Her smile lifted, twitching.

Was she trying not to laugh? No, she was taking this as seriously as me.

“Like this?” I pinched her clit and wiggled it.

Her eyes rolled back in her head, and when she moaned—not *groaned*—I knew I was doing this right.

Since the documents on foreplay stated cock penetration wasn’t necessary for full sexual enjoyment—on her part, that is—I opted to take this slowly as some of the dating vids suggested.

Shifting to sit on the sofa beside her to free both my arms, I plunged my fingers inside her faster, stroking and rubbing her clit at the same time. I was rewarded when she bucked and writhed beneath me, her breathing going ragged. She lifted her knees to give her heels leverage and thrust up against my hand.

Was this how she’d behave if I penetrated her with my cock instead of my fingers? I hoped my courtship rituals would allow me to find out.

With a gasp, she let loose, giving into her pleasure. I moved my fingers faster, pushing them deeply, and her passage spasmed around me.

My cock exploded in my pants, filling the inside with wetness, but I didn't give a damn. All that mattered was riding this out with my mate.

When she stopped shuddering and limped onto the cushions, I slowed the pace of my fingers. Little spasms consumed her, each telling me she was still enjoying my touch.

She grabbed my hand. "I ... Stop for a second."

"Ah, you're in the post-orgasmic period called the resolution phase."

She shook her head. "You're being too technical."

"I apologize."

"No problem. You just made me come nicely, and how can I complain after something like that?"

I tugged my fingers from inside her and couldn't resist licking them. "You taste sweet and spicy," I mumbled around the digits. "I want to suck on your clit when you're ready."

"You're going to completely corrupt me." Rising to sit on the cushions, she tugged her dress down around her thighs and leaned against my side. "But I'm not going to complain."

"I'll study more sexual techniques. I'm sure there's a vid in the database that discusses your clitoris and how best to satisfy it in other ways."

Something occurred to me. I typed a message into my com, and hers chirped when she received it.

With a frown, she read. The grin she shot me made my cock start to stiffen all over again. "What's this?"

"Sexting. I'm going to send you arousing messages, and when I've stimulated you enough, I'm going to practice some more with your clit."

CHAPTER 13

TABITHA



While Sleye ordered breakfast with the fabricator, I showered. Well, sanitized in the tube-like chamber inside the bathroom, but it was the same thing. We used water sparingly. Sanitizers might not feel the same, but they gave us the same result.

My bones still tingled from what we'd done on the sofa, and a warm, pleasant mood had sunk deep within me. There was nothing better than a solid orgasm to perk a girl up.

Dressed, I joined him, sitting at the tiny table across from him.

My wrist com chimed, and I read the message. *You can do anything you want with my body.*

Put that on hold, I replied. *For now.*

As you wish. He waved to the meal. "I did my best, but paste is not anything I'll ever get used to cooking with." He stared down at the lumps on his plate.

"What did you ask it to make?"

"Trillaberry cakes with crushed gerra nuts. I also asked for fresh butter." He poked the smaller, cream-colored lump. "This is nothing like butter."

"I stick to simple meals." I valiantly spread some of the "butter" on a "trillaberry cake" and bit into it. It was all I could not to spit it out.

"You don't enjoy my cooking," he said forlornly.

“It’s not you. It’s the device.”

“I wanted to impress you. In one of the vids, the male cooks a sumptuous meal for the woman, and she gushes as she eats it. Then she leans across the table and feeds him, and there was something sensual about that part of the vid. It made my heart ache to hold you, mate.”

Mine was crushing for him alone, and it was clear I wasn’t going to be able to hold myself back from him for long. “These are actually pretty good for your first attempt. Fabricators aren’t easy to use. It took me months before I could get the right calculation for sausages.” Rising, I went over to the fabricator. “Would you like to try my cooking? You gave me an incredible gift not long ago. It’s only fair I do the same for you.”

“I’d love to try your sausages.”

“That’s a loaded statement,” I said with a laugh.

“You’ve already tried mine.” He tossed the words back at me. “It’s only fair *I* do the same for *you*.”

His lips curled up on one corner, and like I’d been hit in the solar plexus, I lost my ability to breathe.

He might be innocent as far as sex went, but he was determined to learn how to please me as fast as he could.

Who wouldn’t fall in love with a guy like that?

CHAPTER 14

SLEYE



We consumed plate after plate of sausages, feeding each other and laughing. I was confident this could be considered a second date if last night at the party could be considered the first.

“Will you have free time today?” I asked. I’d hacked into the ship’s computer and discovered a few places I could take her that might also be considered dates.

“I have to go to the lab this morning and make sure the other Ir’oks are all set and figure out what to do with your pod.”

“Will anyone notice I’m missing?”

She shrugged. “I hope not. Few visit the lab.”

“The children will.”

“I’ll keep them busy adding feeding solution to the pods and checking the fluid pressure. And hide your pod while they’re there. I don’t think anyone will comment if one unit being is missing, and if they do, I’ll tell them it’s out of the room for maintenance.”

I grinned. “I imagine maintenance will work for almost anything.”

“I doubt anyone knows that if the pods need work, it’s done in the lab.”

We sanitized the dishes and fabricated a maintenance suit for me. After coating my exposed skin with makeup, we left

for the lab, taking back halls to avoid being seen. My makeup wouldn't hold up under much scrutiny.

I'd need to remain hidden until Tabitha activated the awakening sequence on the other pods on the ship's arrival to Celestia. I could pretend I'd just emerged when my co-workers awoke.

We didn't encounter anyone in the halls and slipped into the quiet lab.

"You work here alone?" I asked.

She nodded. "I've got backup if I need it, but it's an easy job. I could do it even if I was sick."

I helped her top off the feed solution and check the Cryovita fluid levels.

"I still haven't figured out how you woke up," she said as we finished with the last pod. "I didn't start the awakening sequence, and even if I mistakenly did, it should've taken you a full day to be coherent."

"I heard you speaking, mate. That's all it took."

"You still think I'm your ladiah mate?"

I pressed my fist to my chest. "In my heart, I know you are."

"How can this be possible?" She rested her palm on one of the pods. "I'm not Ir'okian."

"Species doesn't matter when it comes to love."

A frown filled her pretty face. "You love me?"

I could. For eternity. But I wouldn't risk scaring her away by naming it. "I like you very much. Learning about your clit was the highlight of my morning." Making her fall apart from my touch only heightened the moment.

She stroked my arm, and my skin flamed from her simple touch. "You're pretty special yourself."

"Special enough to go on a date with me now that we're finished in the lab?"

Her head tilted. “What kind of date are you talking about?”

“I made arrangements with my wrist com.”

“When?”

“While you were in the bathroom.”

Color filled her face. “Sure, I’d like to go on a date with you.”

I took her hand. “We’ll need to find a way to reach the second level without being seen.”

“That level’s mostly storage, isn’t it? Plus the garden center where they keep the vegetation we’ll plant at the colony.”

“That level also has the perfect place for a date.”

“I’m skeptical about that.” Her low laugh rang out. “Lead on, then.”

We poked our heads out into the hall, and when we were certain it would be empty for a moment or two, we darted down to the elevator, taking it to the second floor.

There, Tabitha held the elevator door open and peered out. “All clear. In what direction should we run?” Excitement made her cheeks pink and her eyes sparkle.

Maybe I should just lock us inside the elevator, and we could kiss some more. I’d love to touch her clit again.

My cock decided it would like her to suck on it and started rising.

“Ready?” Tabitha asked, holding out her hand to me.

How could I deny my mate a moment of fun? Sex could wait. I’d missed out on it my entire life; a few more days—or even weeks—wouldn’t make much of a difference. “Ready.”

We raced from the elevator and turned left, running all the way to the end, where I unlocked the door with my wrist com. I urged her inside.

“Storage?” she asked, shooting me a surprised look as I locked the door on the inside. “What kind of date will we have

in a storage hanger?”

“The best kind.” I tugged her around enormous crates full of materials for the new colony, and we jogged so fast, we kept bumping into each other. Soon, we were laughing, our bodies limp with joy.

I came to a stop beside the big box I’d identified when I studied the cargo list back in her room. She jogged a few more steps before stopping and looking back at me.

“I thought we came here for exercise,” she said. “Lots of people go for a run on dates.”

“Why?”

“To stay healthy.”

“I see.” I didn’t, but I’d look it up on my com later. “We’re entering this container.”

“Oh, hmm.” She leaned close to the label. “H.132.A.A. What does that mean?”

“First, I must mention that we have no chaperone.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I think it’s a little late for us to think about chaperones. Today, you discovered my clit. And last night, I gave you a blow job.”

“What kind of job includes blowing ...” I shook my head. “Human language astonishes me. As for a chaperone, they were usually an older female or servant who’d accompany the young woman during date-like events to make sure she wasn’t taken advantage of.

Since I needed to be serious about this, and my innards quaked from nervousness, I backed away and gave her a stately bow. “If my lady would be so kind as to accompany inside, I swear her virtue will remain safe with me despite the lack of a chaperone.”

She leaned close, grinning, the perfect response to my short speech. “You do know I lost my virtue ages ago.”

I pressed my palm to my chest, over my heart. “My lady epitomizes all that is virtuous and sweet to me.”

Her laugh snorted out, and she placed her hand in mine. “This is fun. Lead away, my good sir.”

I programmed the chamber and opened the door, urging her to step inside ahead of me. “The most courtly era was the High Middle Ages. Thus, my lady love, I will court you as one might during that gracious time.”

She frowned. “Wasn’t there a plague back then?”

“I assure you, there’s no plague where we’re going now.”

I followed her inside, closing the door.

“It’s dark in here,” she whispered.

“I’ll protect you, my lady.” I programmed what I wanted in the panel beside the door, and a low hum rang out as the device readied the room. “During this era, to show you how much I care, I might go on a long journey or undertake a perilous quest in your honor.”

“I’m not sure how endangering your precious self honors me.” She leaned into my side, and I put my arm around her while we waited.

“On this quest, I could seek to prove my love and devotion, and perhaps even bring back impressive spoils or trophies as symbols of my dedication.”

“You’re not going to stab a dragon, are you?”

“Injure another? Never,” I vowed. Although, if she was in grave danger, I’d thrust myself between her and the threat. “I could also compete in a chivalric tournament, aiming to win in order to honor and impress you. I could dedicate my victory to you and wear your favor on my armor.”

“Oh, you’re going to joust?”

“No jousting. This I swear.” I snapped my fingers, and the room lit up.

“Oh.” Tabitha cupped her cheeks. “Where are we?”

“As the sun’s golden rays kissed the meadow’s lush expanse, I guide my lady love to a secluded spot adorned with nature’s finest tapestry,” I said. The air whispered through the

vibrant leaves of ancient trees, while the soft perfume of wildflowers caressed our senses, creating the ethereal atmosphere I'd sought when I programmed the private holochamber. I had to admit, the device had done an amazing job.

Her breath caught as she looked down. "Whoa. What am I wearing?"

"A lovely gown fit for a princess or, in this case, my lady love." I'd dressed her in a flowing gown made from the finest silk. "You look resplendent, my lady, if I might be so bold as to say. Your eyes sparkle like diamonds, and your hair ..." I gave her what I hoped was a bright smile. "Your hair is like spun gold."

"It's mousy brown."

"Today, it is gold."

Frowning, she tugged on a spiral curl, studying it. "You don't say."

"I do say." I held out my arm.

One of her eyebrows lifted as she took in my pale blue tunic crafted from silk. "Your outfit is interesting." She picked at my sleeves that were long and luxuriously wide, gracefully cascaded down to my wrists. Strolling around me, her gown swishing around her ankles, she studied my ass. I hoped she did, that is. It was a decent ass. Not as lush and sumptuous as hers, but it suited the rest of me. "I wear a surcoat over my tunic," I pointed out. "Also called a cyclas."

"It looks like a vest."

"The embroidery is supposed to show artful expression."

"I see."

A glance over my shoulder showed she *was* gazing at my ass. "You'll note I also wear hose."

"They're hugging your butt."

"They emphasize my masculine form while allowing ease of movement."

“Will you be leaping about?”

“At your command.”

“I’m almost tempted to take you up on that offer.”

I took her hand and led her over to a weathered stone bench nestled beneath an oak’s sprawling branches. “Sit, my beloved one.”

She perched on the seat, and I settled beside her, lifting the lute resting on the ground nearby.

I’d never played a lute, but it couldn’t be that hard, now could it?

I strummed the strings.

She winced but maintained a polite smile.

After clearing my throat, I sang. “In yonder meadow, where blossoms dance, a fair maiden enchants with her graceful stance.”

“Nice,” she said smoothly, her pretty eyes sparkling.

I continued to strum the lute, hoping it harmonized with my voice. “Her eyes, like sapphires, pierce my soul—”

She pried her eyelids wide with her fingertips. “Brown. Not sapphire. You’re not a very devoted suitor if you haven’t noticed.”

“I notice everything, my dear.” I continued my song. “Oh, fair lady, with lips so softly sweet, with each breath you take, my heart skips and thunders.”

She peered toward the sky. “I hope it’s not going to rain.”

“No rain. Only sunshine and the sweet melody I’ll continue to sing to you, my love.”

I continued. “Your touch, a fire that sparks desire’s flame, leaving me captivated by love’s ecstatic game. In twilight’s embrace, our souls will weave, as we lose ourselves in a love divine.”

“That sounds steamy.”

An insect buzzed near, and she swatted at it, sending it away, before nodding to me once more.

“So let us, entwined in love’s enchanting spell, explore the realms where amazing tales dwell.”

The bug returned, and it brought friends. They swooped around us, and while I’d like to think they enjoyed my song, they appeared more agitated than friendly.

“We, um ...” She frowned down her nose as an insect buzzed in close. “Um ...”

“Perhaps we should not linger long in this realm,” I said.

She sent a wry look my way. “Ya think?”

I rushed out the rest of my song. “For your beauty, fair lady, has truly bewitched me, and thus, your love forever in my heart will be etched.”

While I flung away the lute, Tabitha sprang to her feet.

“Time to leave the thirteenth century, my darling suitor,” I shouted.

Holding hands, we raced to the door with a swarm of insects giving chase.

CHAPTER 15

TABITHA



“Well, that was entertaining,” I said, trying not to giggle. No harm, no foul, right? “Your song was adorable.” *He* was adorable. “I really loved seeing you in your tights.”

“Hose.” He slumped against the outer wall of the crate; his legs outstretched “I’m disappointed. I truly wanted to impress you, to court you.”

I sidled over and nudged his legs apart, stepping between them. “It was the best date I’ve ever been on, and I’ve been on many.”

“And see, there’s that. I’m a cherry, and you’re the ...”

“Whipped cream on top?” I grinned and stroked his chest through his shirt.

“I want you beneath me. On top of me.” He gazed at me so earnestly, my heart split down the middle. “Any way possible.”

It would be easy to fall in love with him. Hell, I’d half fallen in love with the person I thought he was when I sat beside him and told him all my secrets and dreams. I didn’t know who he was back then, but I did now. He was sweet, kind, and thoughtful. That, combined with his delicious bod and humor, made him infinitely appealing.

“It’s not bad being a virgin,” I said.

“So says the woman with experience.”

“Long ago, some would say me having experience was a bad thing.”

“You’re amazing, Tabitha,” he said. “Nothing about you is bad.”

“Nothing about you is bad either.”

“I can live with it, I suppose.” He bumped off the wall, bumping into *me*, and his arms went around my waist, holding me steady. “I watched a vid about a forty-year-old virgin. I do hope I’m not still a virgin when I reach that age.”

He took my hand, and we started weaving through the room toward the outer door.

“In the movie,” he said. “The male protagonist reveals his cherry status, and his co-workers try to help him lose it.”

I wasn’t sure what a movie was, but I assumed he meant a vid showing a fake story, nothing real. “What did they do to help?”

“He tried speed dating, which I assume means they walked very fast during their date.”

We reached the door and cracked it open, finding no one in the hallway outside. Entering it, he picked up his pace until I had to jog to keep up with him.

“They took him to social events,” he said. “And had his chest waxed, though I’m not even sure what that means or why it was vital to dating practices.”

I shrugged, clueless as well.

“And they took him to a prostitute.”

“Did he lose his virginity with the prostitute?”

“It didn’t work either.”

“I don’t think you should consider a prostitute. Your first experience should be special. With someone you care about.”

“I agree.” His intent gaze met mine, and his pace slowed. “Was your first time special?”

I cringed. “It was pretty horrible. He was my boyfriend, so you’d think that would’ve made it better. At least I liked him.

But he wasn't any more experienced than me, so it was fast, uncomfortable, and it made me wet."

"Getting you wet is part of the foreplay process." He held up his wrist com. "I read about it in the ship's databanks."

I was beginning to wonder how extensive these databanks were. "He didn't get me wet in that way."

"Ah, copious ejaculation. I understand that." The hot look he sent me made my heart flip over. "You were very wet when I conducted foreplay earlier. I can still hear the sounds your body made as I pumped my fingers inside you, and how slick your inner walls felt. You tasted amazing, though I only took a small sample from my fingers."

My head was spinning, and lust was consuming me. This guy was going to talk me out of my clothing within minutes.

We scooted toward the elevator, still speed dating, I supposed, since this was a date, and we were speeding.

Inside the elevator, he continued, "In the vid, they took the virgin to various social events, but we already saw that me dressing up as Santa did not help me lose my cherry."

"You got closer."

He pressed me against the elevator wall and lifted me to put us at eye level.

I naturally wrapped my legs around him, a position I was becoming quite fond of.

"You're beautiful when you orgasm, Tabitha," he said simply.

"So are you." I couldn't get the image out of my mind. As I sucked on his cock, his head tipped back, his eyes closed, and the groans he released had made my body weep for his touch.

"We should do it more often."

And he thought he wasn't good at this dating thing? The only reason he was a virgin was because his species never had

sex. If he'd lived on Earth, women would've been chasing him from the time he turned eighteen.

When his mouth claimed mine, all thoughts ceased. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and hung on, enjoying the ride of my life.

While his tongue worked magic with mine, he reached out and fumbled with the button to stop the lift, and it came to a shuddering halt. We tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs, and before I knew it, he'd slid my clothing down around my ankles and spread my thighs wide.

He crawled between them and looked up at me with a curl of his lips. His hair was disheveled, and his eyes gleamed with eagerness I sensed was generated by his wish to do anything to make me happy. "Can I suck on your clit? Please?"

Wasn't I supposed to remember my high ethics, my determination to keep him at arm's length, plus give him a chance to know me before we took things in a steamier direction?

"Please?" he said again. "I understand consent can be sexy."

Where had he heard that? It didn't matter.

I nodded, and to make sure he knew what I meant, I added one word. "Yes."

"Excellent. Let me see how my newly educate technique works, shall we?" He leaned close and ran his tongue from my opening to my clit. Focusing there, he licked it, flicking his tongue back and forth across it.

I pressed my palms against the elevator walls, clinging to keep from shooting right out through the roof. My body wouldn't stop until it had reached the stars.

He used his teeth and tongue to drive me to the edge. I shivered and shook as my orgasm rushed up to meet me.

When he plunged his fingers deep inside me, I shrieked.

"Good?" he mumbled around my overheated flesh.

“Ahh,” was all I could find the wits to say.

He sucked on my clit, nibbling with his teeth, and when he did something wildly creative with his tongue that kind of rolled my clit while stroking it at the same time, the world gave way.

I moaned and let my orgasm consume me.

He slowed the pace of his fingers and gave my clit a few more gentle licks while I continued to ride the shockwaves jolting through me.

When I untwisted my spine and slumped on the floor, he gave me a thoughtful look.

“You taste sweet and sucking on your clit makes my cock throb in a good way,” he said. “I should’ve done it sooner.”

“We just met a few days ago.”

“I should’ve done it the moment we met.”

I was beginning to think he was right.

CHAPTER 16

SLEYE



“Did the forty-year-old virgin lose his cherry?” Tabitha asked as we reached her room and went inside. We’d been lucky again, not running into anyone in the halls. They must be attending the latest holiday party, a snowball fight. I’d read about the event on my wrist com.

“You’re missing out on all the fun,” I said, leaning against the wall beside the door while she dropped onto the sofa.

“I think I just had *a lot* of fun.” Laughter bubbled up in her voice. “I’ve had more orgasms since I met you than I did over the past year.”

“I’m proud that I gave those to you.” I advanced toward her. Actually, I stalked toward her. “I could give you another right now.”

She held up her hand, but her smile held true. “Nope. Back off there, buddy. We still need to slow this down.”

“Then let’s go to the holiday celebration. If we stay here, I won’t be able to keep my hands off you.”

Rising from the couch, she strode over to stand in front of me. “Your makeup’s rubbed off in places. We should renew it first.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” Easing around her, I went to the fabricator and, using a program I’d found in the ship’s database, engaged the device. It pinged to signal completion within seconds, and I opened and removed the “skin” I’d asked it to create.

Tabitha joined me beside the device. “What’s that?”

I ripped off my shirt, tossing it aside.

She ogled my chest, and I savored her appreciation of my body. I hoped she’d soon agree we had something lasting.

The medium green head and torso I’d created was a challenge to put on. It sucked against my body, covering everything from my waist to the top of my head. I adjusted it to center the holes for my eyes, nostrils, and mouth.

“Wow.” Tabitha traced her fingertip across the top of the “skin,” that ended at my hairline. “Is it hot?”

“I programmed it with pores that allow my skin to breathe. Yes, it’ll be hot, because it’s like wearing a suit one might don for diving in cold water, but it covers me completely.”

She flipped my arm over. “Your fingertips are exposed.”

“I’ll keep my hands in a position where no one will see them.”

“Why not cover them as well?”

I traced one down her pretty cheek. “I want to feel you when I touch you.”

CHAPTER 17

TABITHA



Considering Sleye had never dated or even contemplated being with someone outside of friendship, he was making me swoon—a word appropriate for the fake thirteenth century date we’d recently been on.

Sleye tugged his shirt on over his reskinned torso, and I had to admit, his plan was ingenious. No one would realize he was an Ir’ok alien and not the maintenance guy he portrayed.

“Will you be my date at the snowball fight?” he asked, holding out his hand.

It was so easy to take it and walk with him through the halls to the central community area where everyone gathered for events.

Sleye not only made my pulse race, but he also made me feel like falling in love for the first time in my life. Did we have a future together?

Maybe if I relaxed and stopped trying to analyze this scientifically, we would.

“Hey, there you two are,” Justine cried out as we approached the community gathering room. “The tech crew has done an amazing job inside. Wait until you see!”

Sleye opened the door, urging us both inside.

As I stepped into the virtual reality snowball fight, my heart raced with anticipation. The chilly air was filled with excitement and laughter, as friends and crewmates clashed in the vibrant winter wonderland in front of me. Holographic

projectors had transformed the spaceship's empty space into a breathtaking snowy landscape, transporting us to a world of ice and playfulness.

Where had the dining tables and chairs gone? Hidden by the ship somehow, I supposed.

"I'll see you two later?" At my nod, Justine hurried across the room, aiming for an ice sculpture carving contest.

Sleye squeezed my hand, one of his fingertips tracing across mine, and my core throbbed. He'd given me an amazing orgasm not long ago. How could I ache for his touch again already?

The scenery was ethereal; evergreens dusted with delicate frost lined the outskirts of the arena, while fake, majestic, snow-capped mountains stood tall in the distance. A frozen lake sparkled under a brilliant silver lunar glow, adding a touch of magic to the already enchanting atmosphere. It felt like we were immersed in a fairytale, a place where dreams could come true.

As I glanced around, my eyes met Sleye's twinkling with mischief. Warmth spread through me as I intertwined my fingers with his.

"Want to make some memories, Tabitha?" he asked, his voice resonating with a rhythm that made shivers track across my limbs.

I nodded, smiling as we donned special gloves from a bin beside the door. The soft fabric caressed my skin, sending electrical tingles coursing through me. We were ready to enter a world where anything was possible, where moments were crafted from laughter and shared experiences.

I couldn't imagine spending this time with anyone but Sleye.

When we stepped into the virtual reality space, the gravity shifted, and my laugh barked out.

"I feel so light," I cried.

Sleye took my hand and leaped, tugging me along with him, and we seemed to travel forever before we landed in the fake snow partway into the room.

Holding each other, we twirled and jumped, the sensation of weightless flight heightening our connection. Sleye tossed me up into the air with expert grace, his strong arms enveloping me securely when I floated back down to him.

Excited laughter echoed around us, mingling with the muffled crunch of our shoes against the snow. Snowballs zipped through the air, weaving intricate arcs of glistening white against the backdrop of the fake icy landscape. The chill of the holographic snowflakes brushed against my face.

I laughed as Sleye backed away and playfully tossed a virtual snowball toward me. I dodged it, retaliating with a well-aimed throw that hit him square in the chest. His eyes sparkled as he dusted off created snowflakes, his gaze lingering on me with adoration.

“Is that how it’s going to be, my lovely scientist?” he teased, a magnetic smile lifting his lips.

My heart fluttered at the nickname, and our banter dissolved into laughter as we threw snowballs at each other.

I caught Sleye off guard, smirking with triumph as my snowball found its mark on his cheek. A surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins, mingling with the pulsating energy of our heated competitiveness.

Sleye leaped toward me, tackling me to the ground, laughter spilling from his throat like music.

As we lay entwined in the glistening virtual snow, everything around us faded away.

His eyes locked onto mine, burning with an intensity that words couldn’t express. In a moment that felt like pure destiny, he leaned in, his lips meeting mine in a tender kiss.

Surrounded by the magical world we’d stepped into together; I knew without a doubt that I was falling in love with Sleye.

CHAPTER 18

SLEYE



I was falling in love with Tabitha, and it was going to rip me apart because she may never feel the same.

When the snowball fight ended, we drank cyber hot cocoa, a piping brew that soothed my senses and made me feel silly. We finished our cups and let go of them, watching as they disappeared. Everything was part of the holoimage except the cocoa sloshing around in our bellies.

“Cookies?” Justine cried out as we were getting ready to leave. She held up small gaily decorated bags. “I baked some holiday cookies!”

As we passed her, we each took a bag. I thought of stuffing mine into my coat pocket, but when we left the room, our coats and mittens would disappear. My cookies would remain, but they’d fall on the floor.

We walked slowly through the hall, and I kept looking Tabitha’s way. She did the same.

“What?” she finally asked, a soft smile on her face. So sweet, it made my heart spasm.

“I had fun,” I said.

“I did too.” She pulled a cookie out of her bag and bit into it, speaking around the crumbs. “Do you have cold climates on your planet?”

“On the caps, it remains cold all year long. And in the mountains on the continent I lived on, I heard it sometimes snows.”

“You haven’t seen it?” She swallowed the rest of her cookie and dug out another.

“I lived in the city. My work kept me busy.”

“It’s a very old saying, but all work and no play makes Sleye a dull boy, which loses something when I use it now, but I think you know what I mean.”

“That if I spend all my time working, my life will be dull, boring, and completely lacking in happiness.”

She shrugged. “Some people find happiness in their jobs, so I’m not sure the saying truly fits. But I’m surprised you never traveled to the mountains if only to see the snow once. To touch it.” She smiled. “Maybe build a snowball and drink cocoa with your breath steaming the air around you.”

“There wasn’t time to do something like that.”

We reached her quarters and went inside, sitting on the sofa and kicking our feet up on the table in front of it.

“Didn’t you take vacations?” she asked.

“Rarely.”

“Why not?” She turned on the cushions to face me.

“We don’t need them.”

Her gaze held sadness. “Everyone needs a break.”

“It never occurred to me to travel to see the snow by myself.”

“You must’ve had friends who’d go with you.” The sadness deepened in her eyes.

“I suspect you’ll be even sorrier for me if I tell you I didn’t suggest traveling to my colleagues.”

“You’re right.” Taking my hands, she squeezed them. “I can’t imagine not having friends.”

“Most of my people live like me. We work for the betterment of society and in our free time, we relax in our quarters.”

“What do you do when you’re alone?”

“Eat fine food. I enjoy cooking. I play games on my wrist com. Study to make sure I keep up with the technology related to my field.”

“Do you read for pleasure?”

“You also won’t like to hear that the only things I read are related to my work.”

“No relationships or sex. No snow or reading. And no fun. I’m sorry, Sleye.”

“I believe my people have made a big mistake.” I said it softly, as if I didn’t want my fellow Ir’oks to hear me where they slumbered inside their statis pods in the lab.

“What can you do?”

I cracked a smile. “Find someone to pop my cherry.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ll tell them, but I’m not sure they’ll listen. If anything, they may lock me away where I can no longer share my message.”

“Why?”

“Our society was built on the groundwork laid many generations ago when my people decided love and sex led us in violent directions.”

She frowned. “I understand why they might feel that way, but that’s focusing on a few bad people and ignoring all the wonder and joy that comes from being with someone you care about.”

“Have you had sex with someone you love?”

Her sigh bled out. “As I said, my relationships have been sparse and unsatisfying for the most part.”

“Will you try again?”

Her gaze met mine, and the vulnerability shining there hit me like a fist to the chest. “I’d like to. With you, Sleye. You.”

CHAPTER 19

TABITHA



“What are you saying, Tabitha?” Sleye asked, his voice croaking.

“I like you a lot.” I swallowed the lump of fear in my throat. It was hard to put yourself out there, to expose your soul to another. “I’m falling in love with you.”

It was also hard to hold all this emotion inside. I had to let it out.

Maybe I was foolish to bare myself to him, but he wouldn’t hurt me. Hang out with me, pop his cherry with me, and be ultra sweet with me after, yes. But he’d be gentle when he ended it, which he would.

What other choice did he have?

He’d signed on for a short-term job at the colony. When it was finished, he’d return to his sterile lifestyle on his home planet where he might pretend it never happened. I sensed it was important to him that he fit in there, that he not make waves.

Sure, he’d tell a few of his *colleagues* that sex was fun—I hoped it would be fun for him—and that caring for someone was better than any wrist com game. But would anyone believe him? If they’d scorned love and sex for many generations, they would be set in their ways and might not consider anything else.

Who was I, or Sleye, for that matter, to interfere with something that had worked for the Ir’oks for so many years?

“You’re falling for me?” Sleye’s eyes bugged out, and he was so cute, I wanted to hug him. Kiss him. Drag him down on top of me on the sofa.

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

I didn’t expect that. “What do you mean?”

“I’m in love with you already. I know from reading about love and romance on my wrist com that you’ll suggest we haven’t known each other long enough to be sure about something like this, but I know my heart.” He pressed his palm against his chest. “You’re locked inside me, Tabitha, and I suspect that’s where you’re going to remain forever.”

“Is this the mate bond speaking?”

“Mating is one thing. Loving is another. It’s a wonderful feeling, better than touching my first snow, drinking cocoa, or singing thirteenth century sonnets to you, though all of that was wonderful, and I wouldn’t trade anything for the experience.”

He truly was intellectual even when approaching romance and love.

“You enjoy researching things,” I said.

“So much.”

“I do too, though I stick to science.”

“Then tell me, scientist, what should we do now that we’ve declared our feelings?”

Pop his cherry. But no, just because he was falling in love with me didn’t mean we should take our relationship in a physical direction.

He must’ve read the hesitation on my face.

“Why don’t we return to the hidden holodeck and follow through on another plan I’ve dreamed up?” he said.

“Please, no insects.”

He bowed. “This I promise.”

“Alright.”

He rose from the sofa, and taking my hand, urged me to the door. “Come on, love. I’ve got the best evening planned for you.”

I felt more carefree than I had in my life. And happy—also for one of the first times in my life. Love really did make everything glow brighter than it ever had before.

I hoped I never lost this feeling.

CHAPTER 20

SLEYE



This time, I made sure to program the device to exclude insects. I also asked it not to include snakes, predators of any kind, and anything it might consider dangerous, before telling the device to engage.

We stepped inside and were greeted with steam, a lush landscape and, in the distance, a beautiful series of tall mountains. Snow-capped, because she'd mentioned how pretty she found them.

Flowering plants released heady perfume into the air, and a calm settled feeling over my shoulders immediately.

"It's beautiful here," she said, looking up at me.

"In some Earth cultures, it's common practice to bring a potential mate to a spa to induce romance."

"I don't see a spa." Her pretty smile melted my heart.

"That's because we haven't looked hard enough yet." I led her through a grove of bamboo interspersed with numerous flowers of every color, and we emerged out into the open area full of pools of varying temperatures. A rocky landscape surrounded them. "In Japan, a country on Earth, there's a tradition called "yukata date" where couples dress in traditional yukata robes and enjoy activities together during summer festivals, which may include visiting hot springs or participating in outdoor baths."

"I've never heard of such a thing before."

“Since my culture doesn’t believe in romance, I can’t share examples from there. But Earth has many traditions. In Iceland, the natural geothermal hot springs called “hot pots” are popular among their people. There’s a notion called “hreppur,” where friends and families gather and enjoy hot pot bathing together, potentially including romantic interests.”

“Potentially.”

I grinned her way. “I believe the term for this situation is *go with it*.”

“I’m all in.”

“Then I believe we should remove our clothing and sink into one of the pools, don’t you?”

She teased her finger across my chest exposed at the top of my shirt. “Will you remove your green suit?”

“Of course. I hate it.”

Her smile fell. “Why? It hides you nicely.”

“It’s not me. I look forward to a time when I don’t need to remain hidden. When I can take your hand, kiss you, and share my feelings for you with those around us knowing who I am.”

“Are you ready for a declaration like that? It’s not part of your culture.”

“I want everyone to know I love you.”

“Sleye,” she sighed with joy. “You’re incredibly sweet.”

“Sweet enough to remove all your clothing and allow me to court you while we sit together in a steaming bath?”

“I’ve never taken a bath, steaming or otherwise.”

“You’ve missed out on something wonderful.”

“As you know, we use sanitizer stalls to cleanse our skin, not water.”

Something highly prized on a ship. “Sanitizers are wonderful when you’re traveling, but on Ir’ok, bathing with water is another thing we haven’t given up.”

“In some ways, your lifestyle sounds amazing. Real food and bathing in real water? I can’t imagine it.”

“And in other ways, our lifestyle sucks.”

Her laugh snorted out. “You said it, not me.”

I tugged her into my arms and gave her a kiss. “It really does suck, but mostly because my world doesn’t contain you.”

“You keep making my heart melt. Pretty soon, I’m going to be nothing but a puddle on the ground.”

“We can’t have that.”

When I started to kiss her, she stepped away from me, shaking her finger at me with a mischievous smile. “You promised me water, and I’m going to claim it.” A tug, and she lifted her shirt over her head, tossing it aside. She wore nothing but bits of cloth covering her breasts underneath.

My cock was on fire already. Was it like this for all males? If so, how in the world had we learned to suppress desire for so many years?

She shimmied out of her pants and tossed them with her shirt. In no time, she stood in front of me completely naked, and I’d never seen anyone as beautiful as Tabitha. “Are you going to stare at me all night, or do you plan to take off your clothing?”

I continued to gape. What would it be like to sink my cock into her, to hear her moans as I gave her pleasure, to release my seed deep within her? My seed was nullified—for now—but the feeling would still be there.

One day, we’d need to discuss reversing my sterilization. Would she want young?

That thought was for another time.

I ripped away my clothing and peeled the skin suit off my torso, tossing it aside.

“You’re gorgeous,” she said, sauntering closer.

When she took my cock in her hands, I nearly exploded.

Her hand stroked me, milking me in a way that made my balls bunch up and my pulse blast through the top of my head. “I love how hot you get for me.”

“I’m going to come soon if you keep doing that.”

“We wouldn’t want to waste it, now would we?” She released me and pivoted to tiptoe over to the first pool. “It’s amazing. I know it’s only a holoimage, but it looks so real.”

“It will feel the same as real.” I’d worked on programming like this, and to many, it seemed like a miracle. I was grateful I could share this with Tabitha.

I joined her at the edge of the pool and stroked my fingertip down her spine.

She shivered.

“You’re cold,” I said.

Turning to face me, she shook her head. “I know it’s harder for you to read arousal with me, but I want you as much as you do me. That’s why I’m shaking.”

“Then claim me, mate, and I’ll do the same.”

She tilted her head. “You think you’re ready for that? Truly?”

“I’ve been ready since the moment I met you.”

CHAPTER 21

TABITHA



Now that we were about to do it, I felt oddly shy. Maybe it was because being his first came with some expectations. I wanted him to enjoy it. It needed to be special. I didn't want him to be disappointed. I wasn't worried about me or my satisfaction.

"You told me to wait until I found someone I cared for before being intimate with them," he said. "That's you, Tabitha. Will you please pop my cherry?"

Because he was grinning, I couldn't help but laugh. "One pop coming up."

Holding hands, we stepped down into the first pool that was about eight feet across.

"Oh, wow," I sighed as I sat on a flat stone with water sloshing across my shoulders. "This is amazing. I've never felt anything like it before."

"Does it feel better than sex?"

Opening my eyes, I looked his way. He lounged against the back of the pool next to me, his arms splayed along the sides. His fingertips trailed deliciously across my nape.

"Sex can be good," I said. "Sometimes, it's not so good."

"You're about to tell me that my first time may not be satisfying."

Oh, he'd be satisfied. "You'll come—"

“Quickly, I bet. I freely admit I have no sexual control, though I’ve been reading about how to achieve that on the ship’s database.”

Really? I stroked my hand along his thigh. “What have you discovered?”

He recited what he’d learned as if he’d memorized it. “Experiencing sex for the first time as a male can evoke a wide range of emotions, both excitement and uncertainty. Every individual’s experience may vary, but it’s common for him to feel nervous.”

“Do you?” He looked pretty relaxed to me.

“Somewhat. It’s natural, I assume. From the literature, I understand I’m supposed to be concerned about my performance. The woman or man I’m with may have expectations about that.”

“I don’t. I just want you to enjoy it.”

He flashed me a smile. “I’m sure I will.” His smile faded and a hint of concern slanted across his face. “I’m more worried that *you* won’t enjoy it.”

“We can make sure I’m close to orgasming before you enter me. It won’t take much for me to spill over to the other side. Or I can take care of me after if it comes to that.”

He winced. “The database discussed the importance of making sure both partners enjoy the act, that it’s considered uncouth to leave the other unsatisfied. But I believe I can suck on your clit for a while after.”

I was getting turned on by this talk, but I had no idea why. Maybe because I knew he sat naked right next to me.

And why was he only *close* beside me?

I turned and climbed onto his lap, straddling his waist.

He adjusted his cock to fit between us, then wrapped his arms around me. “I like you here.”

“I like to be here.”

“I also read that exploring intimacy with a partner can be seen as a milestone and a thrilling new chapter in one’s life. During the act, as you called it, our bodies will respond in physical ways.”

“Like what?” I stroked his cock. It was big, thick, and it had an interesting head, almost ball-like. As I’d seen earlier, the top part slowly spun in a circle, something that shouldn’t be physically possible.

He also had two spurs that quivered.

“My pulse will accelerate.” He grinned, his fingers tracing down my chest to cup my breasts. He rolled the nipples, and I pretty much turned into a lust-filled puddle in his arms. “My heartrate *has* accelerated. And my cock has become hypersensitive.”

“Is it?” I continued to glide my hand up and down his length, loving how the top spur’s vibration picked up now that he was aroused.

“Most definitely.” His eyelids slid shut, but rather than get lost in what I was doing, he continued to tease one of my breasts while his other hand slid between my legs and expertly stroked my clit. “Anxiety is common during a first sexual experience. The fear of not being skilled or experienced enough can create pressure on either person. Some worry about maintaining an erection long enough to give the other equal pleasure.”

“Like I said, I’m not going to worry about being satisfied. We’ll get there together eventually. I want you to enjoy this.”

“Don’t worry about that.” He tucked two fingers inside me and twirled them around while his thumb continued stroking my clit.

A moan ripped up my throat, and I rocked against his hand, my eyelids sinking to half-mast.

“Tell me when you’re close to coming, lovely mate,” he growled, leaning over to nibble across my shoulder. When he reached my neck, he bit down hard enough to leave a mark,

though he didn't break the skin and it didn't hurt. The bite sent shockwaves to my core, and I nearly fell apart in an instant.

"Sleye, I'm so close." My voice came out in barely a whisper, but it was full of need and desire.

He increased the pressure of his fingers and thumb, moving faster and faster until I felt myself spiraling out of control.

His other hand found its way to my ass, squeezing and kneading as if to keep me grounded in the moment.

The sensations were overwhelming, and I could feel myself rushing toward blissful release. It was just out of reach. Sleye seemed to sense this too and increased the intensity of his touch, driving me so close to the edge, I was sure I'd fall down the other side.

The heat of the water surrounded us and mixed with the warmth radiating from our bodies as we rocked against each other in perfect harmony.

He slipped his fingers out of me, leaving me bereft and needing him more than I had anything else. Lifting me, he brought me down, impaling me on his cock. All the air left my lungs in a whoosh as I felt myself stretch around him. It was too much. Not enough. Everything.

Pleasure brightened his eyes as he watched me take all of him, sinking down until his spur slid across my clit. I gasped at the wonderful feel of him filling me completely. The head of his cock spun, and I'd never felt anything like it before. Amazing.

The intensity of his gaze seemed to touch—*stroke*—every inch of my body.

"I," he gasped. "Shit. Fuck."

His cock jerked deep and exploded inside me.

CHAPTER 22

SLEYE



Just like I'd read in the ship's database might happen, I'd ejaculated immediately after her hot sheath surrounded my cock.

How could I help it? She felt amazing as she wiggled on my lap, and her cry of joy when my cock was buried deep inside her drove all my emotions to the edge.

"You're wonderful," she said, rocking against me.

My spur continued to vibrate, thankfully, and when her fingernails bit into my arms and her hot passage started spasming, my cock started to stiffen once more.

She looked up at me. "You're ready again already? That's not possible."

I shrugged, though it was a bit rueful. "Maybe my body doesn't need a long recovery phase."

"Take me to your leader, because I'm ready to be abducted."

I had no idea what she meant, but it hardly mattered.

This time, I was going to make it last. She'd come before I'd allow myself to finish.

Focus on technical things, I told myself. Quantum equations and the steps needed to hardwire the controllers on a ship's bridge. Anything but how amazing she felt in my arms.

When I stood with her still locked within my embrace and my now stiff cock imbedded deep inside her, water sluiced

down our bodies.

I laid her on the broad side of the pool and braced myself over her.

My spur kept moving, vibrating against her clit, and tiny shudders kept taking over her frame.

Our gazes locked, and I started moving, pulling out of her and pistoning my hips to drive myself back inside.

She bucked up to meet me, the heat of her passion radiating around us.

The scent of her arousal filled my senses, and I could taste it on my tongue as I kissed her with hunger.

My hands moved over her body, exploring its curves while she continued to rise up to my thrusts.

“I’m doing this right,” I said with a hint of triumph.

“You sure are. Keep doing it.” A smile teased across her mouth.

I increased the intensity of my movement, pushing hard while my spur latched onto her clit and rolled it. Soon, we were both panting. Our bodies were slick with sweat and our hearts pounded in unison.

Her inner muscles contracted and released with my every drive, and I had to fight to keep from exploding inside her once more.

My heart thudded against my ribs, and I wanted nothing more than to push myself into her harder and faster until I lost track of everything but the sensation of her sheath sucking on my cock.

Her breath came in short gasps, and I felt a thrill of pleasure at knowing that I was the one making her feel this way.

The pressure built inside me until it seemed it would burst out of my skin, but still I held back, reciting the galaxies in the order they were discovered until Tabitha’s body started trembling beneath mine.

She cried out loudly as she came apart around me, and only then did I let go completely, moving quickly, driving myself toward the peak I craved.

Her body shuddered once more, and I kept going, though I slowed my drives to a gentle pace to allow her body to recover.

Only then did I give way, allowing wave after wave of pleasure to wash over me.

Her gaze locked on mine, and while I sensed I found a hint of vulnerability there, I also found the intense joy that was mirrored inside me.

Still connected to her, I sunk back into the water, holding her on my lap with her legs wrapped around me.

“You’re amazing,” she whispered, looking up at me. “When do you think you can do that again?”

CHAPTER 23

TABITHA



We lounged in the pools longer than we should have. When I sensed morning was approaching, I dragged myself off his soft cock—soft for now, that is. He’d never had sex, but he’d learned how to drive me to the edge very fast.

He’d proven his growing skill all through the night. He’d taken this to a level I’d never achieved with anyone else, and I was sure he’d be studying the ship’s database, researching positions and ways to prolong pleasure the moment we were apart.

“We should go,” I said, though with reluctance.

Couldn’t we stay here in the holosphere until the ship landed at the colony?

No, we couldn’t. Duty had made a claim on me from the time I was ten, and it wasn’t relinquishing its grip yet.

“I need to get to the lab and make sure everything’s alright,” I said. “Leila’s coming by this morning to talk about tours, and we still haven’t moved your stasis pod into the back closet.” Or someplace where no one would find it until he was supposed to emerge on our arrival at the colony.

“I’ll help you move the pod, then I’ll hide while she’s there.” He stepped out of the water behind me, his fingers lazily trailing down my spine.

“You can hang out in my quarters if you want,” I said. “Catch up on the sleep you missed during the night.”

“You didn’t sleep either.”

And I didn't regret the loss of that one bit.

He dried his body and straightened, tossing the cloth away. Before it could hit the ground, it disappeared.

As a scientist, I should understand how this worked, but I didn't. I'd long ago decided to just call it magic. That was easier than memorizing the complex programming it took to make it happen.

Sleye stepped close to me, his arms going around my back. He pulled me tight against his frame, and there was no place I'd rather be than locked in his arms.

After last night, I was going to walk gingerly for a few days, but how could I complain? I'd enjoyed every minute.

I backed away. As I dried my body, I peeked at him, watching as his cock stiffened, rising up to bump against his abs.

"You're an addiction, love," he said with a smirk. "I have no interest in breaking free. One look, and I know you want me."

I'd always want him.

I trailed my fingertip down his chest. "We *really* need to leave."

"Do you want to leave?" A snap of his fingers, and the pools disappeared. Another snap, and a big, squishy bed with a canopy and furs draped across the surface took the pools' place.

"Um ..." Heat poured through me, locking on my core and making me flame. "Maybe we can get to the lab later."

He took my hand and led me to the bed, boosting me up onto the ultra-soft surface.

I lay back, luxuriating in the feel of the holofurs beneath me. I still couldn't figure out how this felt so real, but I wasn't going to focus on it now. Not while Sleye was crawling all over me.

He kissed me, and I sunk into the pleasure he delivered. His tongue mimicked the motion he'd soon administer to my body. I clung to his shoulders and held on, eager for the upcoming ride.

He trailed his mouth down the column of my neck to my breasts, giving them equal attention before moving across my belly. Hitching my legs onto his shoulders, he grinned at me. "I haven't sucked on your clit in ages. I'm starving here, mate, so you'd better feed me."

How could him saying something so silly make my heart float across the galaxy?

Because Sleye was the one saying it to me. To him, phrasing like this was new and fresh.

There was no such thing as a cliché when it came to love.

CHAPTER 24

SLEYE



Eventually, we had to leave the holochamber. We strolled through the corridors to her quarters, where we ate. Each of us prepared a dish we loved, and we shared them.

Then we walked toward the lab, me wearing my skin suit I hated, though I was grateful that wearing it allowed me to travel through the ship without anyone guessing who I was.

Inside the lab, we unhooked my stasis pod from where it had been secured to the floor. Thankfully, wheels made it easy for workers—and now us—to move it around inside the ship.

We pushed it past the long row of stasis units and around to the back where we were able to tuck it into a storage closet after removing shelving and everything Tabitha had stored on the shelves.

“Eleven units left.” She frowned as she studied the other Ir’ok stasis pods. “Kids are good at counting.”

“We’ll tell them one of my people decided not to travel to Celestia, leaving only eleven.”

Her face cleared. “That’s a great idea.”

We made sure each unit had enough fluid and topped off the feeding devices before finishing. By then, it was close to lunchtime.

Leila knocked on the door, and we let her in.

“Hey there,” she said with a smile. “I thought we could discuss the tours. The kids are really excited. They’ve been studying space travel and stasis, and the thought of seeing real

people inside pods is making them bounce off the walls.” Her smile slid my way. “You’re ...” She frowned. “I think I heard you say you work in maintenance?”

“I do,” I said. “I was just assisting Tabitha with a ... maintenance issue in her lab.”

“Awesome. We want everything working when the kids take a tour.”

She followed us over to Tabitha’s desk in the corner, where we sat.

“The tours of the lab can be simple or extensive,” Tabitha told her, engaging her dash to take notes. A dash was a hovering computer that would respond to voice commands. The person directing it could ask it to record images or research its extensive database for information.

“Dash,” Tabitha said. “Take notes of the conversation starting now and send them to my private server when I tell you we’re finished.”

The device beeped.

“How many children can I expect on the tour?” she asked.

“Thirty,” Leila said, leaning forward in her chair. “Word has spread, and other classes are excited about the opportunity as well. The other teachers and I thought we could bring all three classes all at once, unless you’d prefer we broke them up. It would be thirty students total.”

“Thirty is too many at one time.” Tabitha studied the room. “It would be too crowded in the lab. I worry it might be overwhelming to supervise them all at once. They can touch the tops of the units, but we’ll need to keep them away from the feeding equipment or anything that might impact the pods’ vital functions.”

“Of course.” Leila tapped her chin, staring toward the units. “Perhaps three groups of ten each?”

“That would work. If you brought them first thing in the morning, some could help me add feed and add stabilizer liquid to the units.”

“What excites them the most is seeing people locked in stasis then having the chance to interact with them at the colony.” Leila’s brown eyes glowed. “If you can include some basic information about how stasis works, plus the steps you’ll take to bring the Ir’oks out of stasis when we arrive on Celestia, the kids will be thrilled. I’ll divide them into three groups based on age. Plan on one group of six-to-eight-year-olds, a second made up of nine- and ten-year-olds, and the last group, eleven-to-thirteen-year-olds.”

“Perfect,” Tabitha said, shooting me a smile. “Perhaps Sleye can help me with the tours. He has an intimate understanding of how the units work.”

“I’ll be happy to assist,” I said.

“We can split each group,” Tabitha said. “And I’ll interact with one while Sleye engages the rest. This will allow them to learn from each of us.”

“You know a lot about stasis pods?” Leila asked Sleye.

“Everything. I worked on them back on my home planet.” I actually had, though only in the periphery of the programming. In my case, the mate bond between Tabitha and I must’ve overridden the programming, which I found highly interesting. I couldn’t wait to share what happened with my fellow Ir’oks when they woke from stasis. Would any of them wish to seek their own ladijah mate at the colony or would they scorn me for reverting to archaic sexual practices?

“When would you like to bring the kids for tours?” Leila asked Tabitha.

“Let’s do two tours tomorrow and the third the day after that. Then they’ll be completed before we land on Celestia.”

“Awesome.” Leila nodded slowly. “Can you think of anything else we might need to discuss?”

“Would the kids like to take souvenirs with them when they leave?” Tabitha asked. “I could put together something both science- and holiday-related.”

“That would be awesome,” Leila exclaimed. “I appreciate you thinking of that. The littler ones in particular will be

talking about this for a very long time. I love using field trips like this to teach them. They absorb the information much easier than when I stand in front of them reciting technical details.” Her low chuckle rang out. “I appreciate you taking time from your busy day to see me today. Would nine for the first group and two for the second work well for you tomorrow?”

“Sure.” Tabitha nodded to me. “We’ll be here.”

CHAPTER 25

TABITHA



We finished up in the lab and walked back to my room.

“Any ideas for souvenirs for the kids?” I asked Sleye once we were inside. “For the littlest ones, I’d thought of fabricating some ornament kits shaped like Celestia. They can assemble them during class, making a keepsake of visiting the lab and their new planet.”

“I like that idea. I can incorporate computer chips that will allow for levitation. They could release them within their quarters, and the tiny Celestia planets can either dance to music or recite details about their new colony.”

“Amazing!” After he peeled off his fabricated skin, we settled on the sofa side by side, his arm around my shoulders. It was nice to see my lover in his original purple skin rather than the fake one.

“For the middle age group,” he said. “We could give them miniature snow globes depicting landscapes like the one the hologram created for us the other night.”

“How can we incorporate more science?”

“Hmm.” He frowned, and his fingers teased my hair. “I’ll access the ship’s database and look at the full holiday schedule they’ve participated in this week. I can program the globes to create a display highlighting each event upon command. For example, when they access the snowball fight, tiny snowballs will pelt the inside of the globe.”

“They’re going to be so excited when we give them our gifts.” I stroked his thigh, and his breath caught. We had one

more group to plan a souvenir for, and then I was going to claim a special souvenir from him. “For the oldest groups, we could give them kits to build mini robotic pets.”

“And program them with custom personalities. But how can we incorporate a holiday feel?”

“What if we include holiday-themed accessories for their pets?”

“Would the oldest age group enjoy something like that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t get out of my lab much, and when I do, I don’t interact with children often. They remain with their parents while we eat in the cafeteria, and honestly, I haven’t hung out with kids since I was their age. I would’ve enjoyed something like that, but I’m not sure about them.” I lifted my com. “Why don’t I run the ideas past Leila?”

It didn’t take long to send her a message, and my com pinged with her reply shortly after.

“She likes them,” I said with a grin, turning and climbing onto Sleye’s lap, facing him. “Looks like we’ve got tomorrow, and the next day planned. That’ll keep us in the lab and away from prying eyes who might notice your skin suit isn’t perfect.”

“Everything about me is perfect,” he said slyly, his fingertips tracing up and down my sides and then beneath my shirt.

“I think you’re going to have to prove this to me, mate.”

He shifted me around until I lay beneath him on the sofa. “I believe I have both the tech and the equipment to do so.”

He sure did.

CHAPTER 26

SLEYE



The first group arrived for a tour the next morning, and we split them up and took them to opposite ends of the room. I explained a bit about the Ir’ok culture and what my colleagues in stasis would do once we reached the colony.

“Why do they wanta ride in a pod fulla water?” a little girl asked. She had rich brown skin and dark hair, and for the first time other than during the snowball fight, I was seeing real, breathing children. I wasn’t sure what to think.

“They travel in stasis because they prefer not to interact with anyone but their own species.”

Her face scrunched up—so cute. “But it’s fun being wit friends and my grammie’s even travelin’ with us. We play cards and do puzzles.”

“Multigenerational families don’t exist on Ir’ok.”

A few kids frowned, so I explained the meaning of multigenerational.

“The Ir’oks keep children away from regular society until they’ve reached fifteen years, an age where they will—mostly—behave themselves,” I said. “Only then are they released from the centers where they’ve been living.”

“I know a few fifteen-year-olds,” Leila said with a laugh. “They’re definitely not old enough to take care of themselves.”

I nodded. “They’re assigned to mentors who guide them while they’re educated, assigned jobs, and settled in central

housing.”

“This is much different from the societies both I and these children came from,” she said. “See, children? Not everyone lives the way we do.”

The little girl with dark hair started crying. “They don’t live with grammies!”

“They have mentors,” I told them again.

“Do mentors love them?” Another child asked, his lower lip trembling. “My mom and dad love me.”

“I’m not sure.”

More children started crying. I was failing at this simple task. I looked at Tabitha, unsure what to say or do to make them behave in a cheerful manner once again.

She clapped her hands to draw their attention. “Hey, who’d like to help me feed the Ir’oks in stasis?”

They all cried out in excitement, and I was grateful to see their tears fade.

Tabitha explained how the stasis units functioned, and fortunately, the more technical lesson sucked away the rest of their sadness.

She let them take turns adding feed to each unit, plus stasis liquid where needed.

Leila beamed throughout this part of the tour, though she kept shooting me concerned looks. She and the students asked insightful questions, and when no one else cried, I breathed a sigh of relief.

As they left, we gave them their holiday surprises, and they squealed and leaped around with happiness.

“Thank you,” Leila said, the children chiming in with their thanks right after.

“Six- to eight-year-olds are quite a challenge,” I said after they’d left, leaning against the inner wall of the lab.

“You think that age group is tough?” Tabitha said. “Try toddlers.”

I frowned. “They’re basically babies, aren’t they? Unformed beings.”

“They’re fully formed, just much smaller. Toddlers are more mature than infants, and they have just enough independence to get into trouble.”

“I get into trouble myself, though I’m not a toddler.” Except when it came to relationships. I’d bumbled around there quite a bit already. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if they hadn’t stopped crying. I’ve never seen children that small, let alone interacted with them. I was excited by the opportunity, but now I feel as if I’ve failed.”

She wrapped her arms round me, giving me the hug I didn’t realize I needed. “It’s not a failure. You shared some details about your people, and I could tell they were interested in what you had to say. I’m sure the next tour will be much easier.”

In that, she was right. We split the group, and I kept my lesson to details about stasis and the high intelligence of my people, avoiding discussing how we were raised.

“I can handle a ten-to-twelve-year-old child,” I said with glee after the children had left.

“You did a great job.”

After making sure everything was settled in the lab, we walked toward Tabitha’s quarters to relax for the rest of the day.

“I should’ve considered mentoring,” I said. “I assume since the age group who most recently toured the lab are simpler to care for, the next group, who are even closer to the age where we release our young, would be even easier.”

“You’ll be surprised,” she said. “Teenagers can be a lot of fun, but they can also be a big challenge.”

“They’re nearly grown. What challenge could they provide?” I asked as we entered her quarters.

“Sometimes, they generate lots of drama or angst, and they’re all about challenging the world at that age. They’re eager to be independent, but they still need guidance.”

“Do they cry?”

She walked into the tiny kitchen area. “We all do, don’t we?”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever cried. Perhaps when I was young.”

“You remember those years, don’t you?” She programmed the synthesizer to make a snack.

“Not much before I was ten. As I mentioned, they use selective memory devices on us. We retain our education, but not much of anything else.”

“That’s sad. You probably don’t remember running around and playing, making friends. Sitting in your room and reading.”

I shook my head, not seeing why this was a problem. “Why should I?”

“Childhood can be tough for many kids, but when a child is reared in a loving home, it can be amazing.”

“I can’t imagine anything like that. None of the Ir’oks can.”

“Have you ever thought of having children yourself? Now that you’re having sex, you could get someone pregnant.”

“That’s forbidden, and we all have implants to prevent it from happening.” I only vaguely knew what a baby looked like. I’d examined images on the ship’s database, and they appeared intriguing, but I couldn’t quite picture how they might appear in person.

“Children are forbidden if you return to your planet. If you chose to remain on Celestia, I assume you could petition the Capatiner for permission to marry if you wanted and then have children if your partner also wanted them. Assuming your implant can be removed or neutralized.”

“It could be removed.” I studied her face, wondering where she was taking this conversation. “Would you ever contemplate having a child with me?”

She sent me such a sweet smile; it sucked the wind right from my lungs. “I already have.”

“You have an implant yourself, don’t you?”

“Yup.” Her smile held true. She waved for me to sit and placed plates of snacks in front of us, sitting opposite me. “If I choose to have children, it’ll be when I’m ready.”

I tried to imagine Tabitha holding our infant. Of raising a tiny person to be well-educated, but also making sure they had fun.

And I liked that picture.

THE NEXT MORNING, we arrived at the lab at the same time as the group of oldest children and escorted them inside.

As before, I walked them past the pods, explaining some lighthearted Ir’ok culture and answering questions. Like with the middle group, I didn’t delve too deeply into how Ir’ok children were born and raised. There would be no crying during my tour.

Like the earlier groups, this one was fascinated by the fact that we preferred this means of travel.

Answering their insightful and intelligent questions reinforced my earlier idea of mentoring newlings when—*if*—I decided to return to my home planet.

If was playing a large role in my thought process, because ...

Maybe I’d see if Tabitha wanted to remain on Celestia with me. I could picture us settling into a residence together, having sex all the time, and one day having our implants removed ...

“Why are your fingertips purple?” one of the boys asked, frowning at my hands.

I tucked them behind my back. “I was ... working with a solvent this morning.” Damn, I didn’t like telling an untruth. “And it faded my skin in that area.”

The child continued to frown. “Is that even possible?”

“Obviously, it must be,” Leila said in a breezy tone. “He’s explained why. Let’s move on, Derrick.”

Tabitha sent me a look of sympathy that I sucked in fast.

“If you will all follow me,” she called out. “I’m going to top off their feeding units and make sure there’s plenty of the solution they float in. The Ir’oks prefer Cryovita but there are other brands that work as well.”

They followed her to the pod at the farthest end of the room—and far from me.

I kept my hands pressed against my sides and sauntered around to the back of the room.

Derrick paid more attention to me than Tabitha’s lesson, which was quite disrespectful.

Perhaps I wouldn’t want to mentor after all.

We were giving them their holiday gifts as they were departing when Derrick left the group and strode over to me. He stopped and stared at my hands.

“I’ve figured out why your fingertips are purple,” he said.

“Derrick.” Leila rolled her eyes. “Please. Sleye already explained. You’re being disrespectful.”

“I think it’s time for everyone to leave,” Tabitha half-shouted. “The morning’s over, and we need to tidy up the lab so we can return to our quarters for lunch.”

“His fingertips are purple because all of him is purple.” Derrick jumped up and poked the edge of my suit at the neckline where a fraction of my skin showed through the crease. I’d noted it myself in the bathroom earlier and thought

of creating a new skin but decided to do it later. “I don’t know what kind of suit you’re wearing, but it’s fake.”

I coughed. “I assure you, it’s not—”

“This guy’s faking it,” Derrick crowed. “He’s a purple Ir’ok like the other people lying in stasis.”

CHAPTER 27

TABITHA



It was bad enough Derrick was calling us on our ruse. The Capatiner happened to be passing by in the hall—while the door was open for them to leave—when Derrick spoke.

Justine darted into the room as if on a mission, striding right up to Sleye. “I kept thinking something was odd about you. This child has named it. You’re Ir’ok!”

“He’s a Trilon maintenance worker, nothing else,” I said, essentially shoving the kids and Leila out into the hall. I shut and locked the door behind them and turned to face Justine. “He’s not purple. Can’t you see? His skin is the same color as all the other Trilons.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” Justine said, also poking the imperfection in Sleye’s skin suit Derrick had identified.

Why hadn’t we made him a new one this morning? Maybe because we’d lingered in bed and were running late.

I’d ruined this for him.

“I suspect if I demand he remove this outer layer,” Justine said, shooting me a thin-lipped look. “We’ll find purple underneath.”

Sleye shot me a sad look. “You’re correct. I’m Ir’ok.”

Justine’s eyes widened, and she backed away from us. “There’s no way that’s possible. The Ir’oks are supposed to remain in stasis until we reach Celestia.” Her gaze traveled across the pods, and I could see her counting. “Fuck. There are only eleven. Where’s the twelfth pod?” She sent me a look full

of accusation. “Please tell me you didn’t thaw one of them early.”

I cringed and fell back into my usual geeky me. “They’re not *truly* frozen. I assure you, they’re suspended in Cryovita solution, not ice. And their food supply is a particular substance called—”

“You know what I mean,” Justine snapped. She smacked both of her palms against her cheeks. “This is going to create an intergalactic incident. We’ve broken the very strict treaty we made with the Ir’oks. They don’t want any of them interacting with us until we’re at the colony and only then, in a strictly limited capacity. They cannot be subjected to our heathenish ways. I’ll point out that this was their term, not ours, but that part doesn’t matter.” She looked Sleye up and down. “You’ve been tainted.”

He laughed, and I couldn’t imagine why he wasn’t fleeing. Hiding. Going somewhere until I could convince Justine she hadn’t seen him.

“I haven’t been tainted,” he said. “I’ve just fallen in love and it’s the most wonderful feeling in all the galaxies.” He held a hand out to me, and when I took it, he tugged me against his side. “Allow me to introduce you to my ladiah mate, your lab supervisor, Doctor Brenner.”

“What’s a ladiah mate?” Justine asked, her frown deepening as she studied us. “Please give me a valid explanation I can use when I notify the Ir’ok government about this breach.”

“There’ve been no ladiah mates on my planet for thousands of years,” Sleye said.

Justine groaned. “That’s not helping.”

“I only sat beside his pod and talked to him,” I said softly. “I’ll admit, I kind of developed a crush on him, though I wasn’t sure why. Days ago, he suddenly woke up.”

“*You* woke him,” she said, though I read disappointment, not anger, in her voice.

“I truly didn’t.”

“She didn’t,” Sleye chimed in at the same time. “I woke because my heart heard my ladiah mate speaking directly to me. Then I emerged from stasis.”

“How is that possible?” Justine sighed. “There’s a sequence, and it takes time. It’s not that easy.”

I shrugged. “It happened. I can’t explain why.”

“I can’t tell your government something like that. They’re going to need a technical reason like a pod failed or ... I don’t know.” She sent me a pleading look. “There must be something scientific I can tell them that they’ll believe. Not only believe, but excuse. We have to avoid an intergalactic incident.”

“Don’t tell him he woke up,” I said.

“You want me to lie?” Justine said, her cheeks pinkening. “I can’t do that.”

“Don’t reach out to them,” Sleye said. “Then there will be no need to lie. We’re arriving on Celestia within days. No one but us needs to know.”

“It’s still a lie.” She pinched her eyes shut and opened them again.

“We’ll keep him hidden in my quarters,” I rushed in to say. “The tours are over, and I’m sure Leila can be sworn to secrecy.”

“What about Derrick?” Justine asked. “You know teenagers. He may have told the entire ship by now.”

“Will anyone believe him?” I shook my head. “I can’t imagine they will.”

Justine sighed. “I really don’t know.”

“I doubt it.” I frowned. “But just in case, let’s bring your pod back out into the open and ...” My smile grew the more I thought about it. “I think I know how we can convince anyone with doubts that Derrick was mistaken.”

CHAPTER 28

SLEYE



It took some time to fabricate everything we needed, but by early evening, my pod was back in its original position, full of Cryovita. The feeding tube was engaged, and a crafted plexi being who vaguely resembled me was lying inside in stasis.

Just in time, too.

A knock rang out on the door. Before Tabitha could open it, I slunk into the back of the room and hid inside the storage unit where we'd place my pod. I cracked the panel open enough that I could watch without being seen.

"See, Dad?" Derrick rushed into the room when Tabitha opened the door, dragging an older male inside with him. The male must be his father. "One of the Ir'oks was thawed out early."

They paused beside the pods, ticking them off with a finger.

"Excuse me," Tabitha said sternly, leaving the outer door open. "I was about to leave for the evening. You don't belong here. The Ir'oks have strict guidelines for who can view them while they travel in stasis. The children were permitted a tour for educational purposes only." Her scowl deepened. "You must leave this instant. This is not a freak show put on for your entertainment."

"I can't believe you dragged me here, Derrick, for such a silly reason," the young male's father said, his voice tainted with disappointment. "Look. Twelve pods. Twelve Ir'oks. You were mistaken earlier." He turned to Tabitha. "I apologize,

Doctor Brenner. Come along Derrick.” He latched onto his son’s arm. “You and I are going to have a long talk about this when we return to our quarters.”

“Please don’t be hard on him.” Tabitha gave Derrick a soft smile. “He’s wonderfully curious, and that’s a strong trait to carry to the new colony. Have you ever thought of studying science, Derrick? Perhaps you’ll consider an internship when we reach the colony.”

“I want to be an interstellar cop,” the boy said, his jaw tightening.

“Then your investigative skills need work,” his father said as they walked out into the hall. The older male turned back. “Thank you. I apologize again, but you’re right. Curiosity is one thing we don’t want to punish. I’ll speak with him about boundaries, but I won’t come down on him too hard.”

“Thank you. Goodnight!” Tabitha started to shut the door behind them, but Justine nudged it open and stepped inside.

Tabitha locked it behind her.

“Well, how did it go?” she asked.

Tabitha explained, and Justine’s tight posture loosened.

I eased the cabinet door the rest of the way open and strode over to join them.

We walked over to stand beside my stasis pod.

“Do I truly look like that?” I asked with a wince, staring down into the unit.

“You were so cute,” Tabitha said, leaning into my side. “I think I half fell in love with you even back then.”

“You didn’t know me.”

“In my heart, I did.”

“You two,” Justine said, beaming at us both. “I don’t like this, but I’m going to go along with it and not because I can’t handle myself with the Ir’ok government. You two deserve to be together, and I’m not going to do anything that could break

you apart.” She tucked her arm through Tabitha’s. “We’re friends. Why didn’t you tell me right away?”

“Because you’re also the Capatiner of the ship,” Tabitha said. “I didn’t want to put you in an awkward position.”

“I won’t be able to lie if the Ir’ok government calls and asks me outright,” she said.

“Why would they?” I asked. “They have no reason to. They’ll assume I wake up with the others when we arrive, and in a short time, I’ll reach out to them to tell them that I’ve bonded with my ladiah mate, and I’m remaining on Celestia.” I sent Tabitha a hopeful grin. “Assuming you’ll take me as your forever mate, my love.”

Her smile sunk into my bones and there wasn’t a better feeling than that. “There’s no one I’d rather spend the rest of my life with but you, Sleye. Only you.”

I tightened my arms around her. “I feel the same.”

CHAPTER 29

EPILOGUE I

TABITHA



“Have you been a good girl?” Sleye asked from behind me. I’d just stepped out of the sanitizer and started drying my naked body.

My skin tingled at his words. He’d been testing out various sexual techniques with me while we hid in my room, and I’d discovered I had a praise kink.

It was all I could do to drag myself away from him twice a day to visit the lab.

I’d start the awakening process for the other Ir’oks tomorrow as we approached Celestia. Sleye had only shared a bit of how he planned to tell his government that he wasn’t returning once his job was finished. He said it wouldn’t be easy, but that he trusted things would come out as they should.

As for my praise kink, he’d discovered he adored calling me his good girl and marking me with tiny bites, something he’d started when we lounged in the hot pools inside the holochamber.

I got a thrill from his nibbles too.

While we’d missed out on the rest of the holiday celebrations, we’d spent our alone time making a few new traditions of our own.

I tossed the drying cloth aside, quivering while his gaze slid slowly down my body.

“What exactly do you mean by have I been a good girl?” I asked in a throaty voice.

“If you’ve been a good girl, I’m going to lick your clit. As you might know, I thoroughly enjoy performing cunnilingus. If you promise to be an *especially* good girl and do exactly as I say, I’m going to lick your clit for at least an hour.”

My knees nearly gave out. “An hour?”

“I’ve continued my studies with the sexual content on the ship’s database, and I believe I’ve discovered a way to prolong your pleasure. I may be willing to allow you an orgasm. Or two or three, actually, but I’d like to test out the techniques suggested in the database to see if I can prolong your pre-orgasm phase before I allow you to give in.” He held out his hand. “With your permission, of course.”

I placed my hand in his. “I’ve been *very* good. And as you may be aware, I’ve also been studying the sexual content on the ship’s database.” Two could play this exciting game. I continued to use his words. “I thoroughly enjoy performing fellatio on you. I believe I’ve discovered a few ways to prolong *your* pleasure.”

He groaned while I grinned. “Why don’t we test out our new theories?” He led me into the bedroom and lifted me up, lowering me gently onto the blankets. “Since I asked first, prepare yourself for at least an hour of me sucking on your clit.”

I put my arms around his shoulders, more than ready to get this game underway. There was something about him that sparked my inner fire 24/7. It could come from the bond, or it might just be us. Did it really matter as long as we were happy together?

He kissed me hard, his tongue gliding into my mouth and teasing across mine.

His mouth left my lips, and he feathered kisses across my jaw and down my neck while his hand stroked my sides and hips.

My lover had become quite the expert. We learned from each other—and the ship’s database—and it was all I could do

while I sat at my desk in the lab to keep from returning to my cabin for more.

He sucked on each of my nipples until I was writhing beneath him. His hands roamed across my body, teasing me as he explored every inch of my quivering skin. I gasped in pleasure as his fingers found my most sensitive spots and caressed them with a precision that sent waves of heat coursing through me.

He continued to lavish attention on my breasts while his other hand slipped between my legs, stroking through my wet folds until I was pleading for more.

He didn't make me wait. His mouth found my belly and trailed kisses farther down until he reached the juncture between my legs. He teased my clit with his tongue, flicking back and forth across the sensitive bud until I was panting and about to explode.

Each time I drew closer to complete bliss, he backed away, gliding his tongue through my slick folds and teasing my entrance while I cooled down.

Again, he brought me to the peak before denying me that joy.

I clung to his horns, and my whimpers of need filled the room.

After flashing me a grin, he spread my thighs wider, giving him better access to the most intimate parts of me. His tongue licked and sucked in all the right places, sending intense waves of pleasure crashing through me. Low moans escaped my lips.

He continued to work his magic, alternating between gentle strokes and more intense pressure as he brought me closer and closer to orgasm before stopping. I gasped as he slid one finger inside me, teasing my G-spot and causing my whole body to shudder with excitement.

I thrashed on the bed, crying his name, but he withheld the intense release I sought. An hour? Two? I couldn't tell, and I no longer cared. All I could focus on was him. His mouth. And the tension coiling inside me.

His mouth moved faster, pushing me ever closer to the edge again until I couldn't hold back any longer.

"Take it, good girl. You deserve it," he whispered.

When his mouth returned to my engorged flesh, I let go with an explosive jerk of my body that left me trembling from head to toe. He held on tight, stroking my clit, his finger delving deep within me until the last wave had passed.

"You're incredible, mate," he said slyly. "Would you like more?"

I might feel completely worn out, but this wasn't over. With a curl of my finger, I urged him to lie beside me.

"Have you been a good boy?" I asked in a sultry voice.

"I have, wouldn't you agree?"

Amazing, actually.

"Would you like your reward?" I teased a fingertip down his stiff cock. Then I eased myself lower and sucked him into my mouth, beginning to show him what *I'd* learned in the ship's database.

As the ship approached Celestia, I brought him to orgasm, and he did the same with me once more.

I couldn't wait to start my new life with Sleye at the new colony.

We didn't need anything else but each other.

CHAPTER 30

EPILOGUE 2

SLEYE



Two Weeks Later

Growling, I sat back in my office chair in the small room inside me and Tabitha's new quarters on the colony.

My supervisors had not been pleased. It was bad enough I wanted to remain on Celestia, but mating?

Justine hadn't caused an intergalactic incident, but I just might.

Still, it was over. They'd tried to persuade me to return to my home planet for reprogramming. Like I was one of the computers I worked with. People were not devices to be manipulated, and I wanted to remain on Celestia with Tabitha.

With a nod at my wrist com, I rose and left my office, finding my mate pacing in the living area. Our new home was cute, with one bedroom, a tiny kitchen, a bathroom, and this living area, but we'd expand it when our young were on the way.

"How did it go?" Worry threaded through her voice. She rounded the sofa and took my hands, looking up at me.

"As well as could be expected. You're now looking at a fired computer scientist."

Her eyes widened. "They *fired* you?"

"They weren't happy with me."

Releasing my hands, she started pacing again. “That’s egregious. You should be allowed to love someone, to have a relationship.”

“Not according to my people. I fear the others will shun me until they depart in one week’s time. They won’t want the taint of loving someone to rub off on them.”

“Sleye.” Her voice broke, and her shoulders curled forward. “I’m sorry.”

I held out my arms, and she stepped into them, looking up at me with so much sadness, I couldn’t help but kiss her. All I wanted was to make her feel better.

“It’s alright,” I finally said. “This is what I want. Probably what I’ve always wanted. I just didn’t realize you were in my future. I wouldn’t trade one instant with you for a chance to forget.”

“We’ll build a new life together here. You already know I told my family I’m not returning to Earth. Justine will make sure you have a job like she did with me.” She scoffed and irritation darkened her cheeks. “Did they think your skills weren’t in hot demand? Foolish Ir’oks to scorn my mate.”

“I love how fiercely you defend me, how you love me.”

“I always will, Sleye.”

I kissed her once more before stepping out of her embrace. “Why don’t we go find the others? I heard they’re planning a final holiday celebration in the community center, and everyone’s invited. Even those who were already settled at the colony will be there. You can introduce me to your friends as your mate. And then ...” I winked at her. “We’ll come back here, and I’ll be your special Santa.”

I hope you enjoyed Tabitha & Sleye’s holiday story
as much as I did writing it!

In case you didn’t know,

this isn't my first holiday sci-fi romance.

You can find the others here:

[Snowed in with an Alien](#)

[Falling for an Alien Elf](#)

[Frost](#)

Check out the first chapter of Frost now ...

FROST

Snowed in with an alien in enemy territory, I may not reach the orphanage before Christmas. Can Frost help me deliver my presents on time?

I need to deliver a shipload of presents to a colony orphanage before Christmas. After my parents died in the Evarian-Human War, I grew up in this orphanage. They gave me a home and a new start on life. Now I fly supply runs from one planet to another, donating the credits I earn to ensure other orphans get everything they need.

But when my ship crashes during a snowstorm in an alien forest, an Evarian warrior, Frost, saves me. He's a gruff guy with a heart as lonely as mine. We ride out the storm together, and by the time the sky clears, I'm falling hard for someone I used to consider my enemy.

Frost promises he'll get me to the orphanage before Christmas. But once we've delivered the presents, will I be able to tell him goodbye?

Frost is part of the Stranded with an Alien shared world and has a happy ending. This story is for those who enjoy spice in their eggnog.

CHAPTER I

ALINA

With my feet propped on my ship's dashboard, I dreamed of the gaily wrapped presents I'd soon deliver to the colony orphanage where I'd grown up.

A screech woke me. My eyes popped open, and I stared around wildly.

Debris shower ahead. Taking evasive maneuvers, the computer's mechanical voice blasted from the dash. *Debris shower ahead.*

I slammed my boots onto the metal floor and hunched forward, grabbing the control stick. A flick of the switch, and I'd taken the ship out of autopilot. With my heart racing up into my throat, I carefully controlled the ship's trajectory, trying to guide it through the sudden storm.

Chunks of what looked like rock shot past my ship, and I rocked the stick left and right, up and down, seeking a way out of the mess my autopilot had put me in.

A huge piece of silicon and heavy metals blasted past me, nicking my left wing. I leaned to the right in my captain's chair on the bridge, though my body's position didn't matter, and tucked the stick to the right to keep the rest from taking out my main blasters at the rear of the craft.

Scrapes rang out overhead, and I cringed while watching the ceiling. Would a jagged edge rip through the hull?

After my parents were killed in the Evarian-human war when I was eight, I lived on my own for two yaros. I convinced myself no one could watch my back better than me.

I'd lived on the streets of a space colony until someone caught me sneaking into a store to buy something. Really. Despite the accusations the storekeeper rained down on my head, I was no thief.

Rather than release me, the authorities shipped me off to the human-Evarian orphanage on Evaria, where I'd remained until I left for flight school.

Without the orphanage and the lovely females who cared for scared kids like me, I would've had no one to love and no place to call home after my parents died. They'd supported me when I learned how to fly and gave me a place to stay between missions.

The kids were all that mattered, plus the presents packed in the ship's hold I would soon deliver.

Just call me a space Santa, the feminine—and best—kind.

With each run I made, delivering supplies to distant planets with my bandaged-together Evarian ship, I put some credits aside. Most, I donated to the orphanage right away, though I saved the rest to buy gifts for the kids, from tiny dolls to rockets and hoverboards. I wrapped each present carefully and delivered them on Christmas eve, hoping to bring a smile to each child's face.

Hoping to make the difference the orphanage had in my life.

Even a debris storm wouldn't stop me from arriving at the orphanage by Christmas Eve.

I vaguely spied Evaria ahead. I was so close; I could almost reach through the plexi holding back the storm and touch it. Its vast, deep purple seas crested pale blue shores. The shores gradually gave way to broad mountain ranges with the prettiest trees and flowers I'd seen in my life.

My Santa suit waited in my quarters on the ship. In three days, I'd don it along with a fake beard and a jolly ho-ho-ho.

All I needed to do was get through this debris cluster and it would be clear sailing. I'd land near the colony and visit with the ladies who ran the orphanage, Aunt Beatrice and Aunt

Trialona, catching up on what happened over the past yaro. On Christmas eve, I'd deliver a big sack of joy to the little ones waiting around the tree.

Evarian and human kids were brought here from all over the galaxy. Orphans like me.

After a long, bitter war, the Evarians and humans had agreed to a truce. As part of the treaty, they'd granted territory on this planet for a colony. The border was strictly controlled. Evarians could not pass into the human part of the continent, and vice versa. We all obeyed; no one wanted to endanger the treaty.

I guided my ship through the debris field and was thrilled when I spied clear skies ahead. Just one more cluster of rocks to get past, and I could safely fly to the colony.

I'd make it long before Christmas.

With a careful hand, I steered my rickety ship past the last clump of boulders.

A grin split my face, and it stung, telling me I didn't make the gesture often enough. It would sting some more once I landed, because I'd be smiling until I had to depart in five days.

My ship soared through the last of the debris, and I smoothed out my craft's trajectory.

I could picture the kids now. Each sought love, and the aunts did their best to provide a caring environment before placing each youngling in a forever home with parents who'd love them for a lifetime.

I didn't begrudge kids having what was denied to me. Nope, I smiled when I saw their eyes light up, when they realized they didn't have to be sad or afraid any longer.

Evaria grew larger in my viewscreen. After breaking through the outer atmosphere, I coasted the ship above the Evarian part of the continent, aiming for the colony on the northeast side.

I carefully flew my ship along the mountain range that served as the border, frowning when I spied a wall of white ahead. A freak snowstorm had sprung up, and clumps of white stuff smacked against the plexi.

Alarms blasted through the ship. *Hull breach. Hull breach. Prepare to land immediately.*

What? No way. My ship had made it through the debris field unscathed, hadn't it? The alarms suggested otherwise.

Prepare to land, the ship's computer blasted again.

I couldn't land here. I was still within Evarian territory. I'd risk everything—even my life—if I put down here.

The craft shuddered.

Hull breach. Land immediately.

I gripped the steer stick tight, leaning forward to squint through plexi viewscreen.

A glance at the dash showed my split rudder was malfunctioning. I couldn't fix it from inside and certainly not while the ship was going down.

I'd have to land and get to the colony to buy parts for repairs then sneak back across the border.

Lights bloomed through the snow, telling me a few buildings had been constructed in the mountains.

If I landed here, I'd have to avoid being caught. The Evarians would throw together a hasty trial and convict me of trespassing.

I pulled back on the steer stick, trying to coast the craft over the peaks. The colony waited on the other side. Maybe I could coast down the other side and make it home after all.

This might sound silly when I was about to crash, but I hated that the kids would miss out on their Christmas presents.

But when I tried to ease the craft over the final mountain, something failed. The ship spiraled, heading downward. I tweaked the stick and brought it level, but I couldn't get the craft to soar up and over the mountains.

A small, solitary light straight ahead on the hillside caught my eye, and I tried to drag the craft away from that location. Lights meant Evarians, and I had to avoid detection.

But my ship had other plans. It plummeted down, smacking against the rocky surface. It skimmed along the snowy landscape, severing trees and catapulting over boulders.

The ship came to a shuddering halt against an Evarian-made structure.

I jolted forward, and my forehead smacked into the plexi viewscreen.

Despair caught my heart and pinched it tight. I'd failed.

The orphans would not open the gifts I'd brought them for Christmas.

[Get Frost Now!](#)